

TENDING

The dream involves dumb, dependent
barn animals. Usually it's goats. But sometimes
I am burdened with an aging horse, a cow and calf.
This much is certain: the animals are dying.

I have confined them in a huge barn.
I don't need to enter to see
ragged spider webs fettering a hay wagon,
trimming small-paned windows.
There are swallows diving
like startled schools of tropical fish.
Powdery hay is lofted in high corners.
Underfoot, buckets and empty grain bags,
the tines of a harrow.

Why are the animals still here
where no one works? When all that's left to chew
are the ropes that tether them? Why
did I forget?

Outside, acres of green, green meadow.
The river is high and generous.
I know they can hear it run
from their damp stalls, can smell it.

Dreams are secrets. Even I do not know
whether I stepped over the rotting sill
into the barn's half light
hands full of oats and molasses,
or if I loosed my animals, or why
I kept them there in the first place,
the covenant betrayed.

TENDING

The dream involves dumb, dependent barn animals.
Usually it's goats, but sometimes I am burdened
with an ageing horse, a cow and calf.
This much is certain: the animals are dying.

I have confined them in a huge barn.
Ragged spider webs fetter a hay wagon,
trim small-paned windows.
There are swallows diving like startled schools of fish.
Powdery hay is lofted in high corners. Underfoot
buckets and empty grain bags, the tines of a harrow.

Why are the animals still here where no one works,
when all that's left to chew
are the ropes that tether them? How
did I forget?
Outside, acres of green, green meadow.
The river is high and generous. I know they can hear it run,
smell it from their damp stalls.

Dreams are secrets. Even I do not know
whether I stepped over the rotting sill
into the barn's half light,
carrying water and oats.

Tending

This is a dream that involves dumb, dependent
barn animals. Usually it's goats. But sometimes
I am burdened with an aging horse, a cow and calf.
This much is certain: the animals are dying.

I have confined them in a huge barn.
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the ragged spider webs fettering a hay wagon,
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There are swallows diving
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did I forget?

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The river is high and generous.
I know they can hear it run
from their damp stalls, can smell it.

Dreams are secrets.
Even I will not know whether I stepped
over the rotting sill
into the cool shadow
hands full of grain and molasses,
or if I loosed my animals, or why
I kept them there in the first place,
the covenant betrayed.

Tending
~~The Eighth Day~~

This

is a dream that involves dumb, dependent
barn animals. Usually it's goats. But sometimes
I am burdened with an aging horse, a cow and calf.
This much is certain: the animals are dying.

I have confined them in a huge barn.
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the ragged spider webs fettering a hay wagon,
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Dreams are secrets.
Even I will not know whether I stepped
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into the cool shadow
hands full of grain and molasses,
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I kept them there in the first place,
the covenant betrayed.

Thank You Note: Twenty Years Later

for Non on her ninetieth birthday

A pair of turkey vultures hangs over the woods,
heavy and languid as the August air,
and I watch them for long, long minutes
happy to name them
more than 'birds'
or 'large, dark, finger-winged birds,'
~~and the name tells me home~~
and habit.

You gave me those first, strange names
to put to the masked gulls that quarreled
above the harbor, to the long-legged creatures
that dashed at the ruffled edges of the Gulf
like great-grandchildren searching for sharks' teeth.

And gave me the book I still thumb,
needing to separate one warbler
from another yellow-green warbler
in the flickering oak shadows.

But it was not the book of names,
~~was~~ your gift to me, rather
a seventh sense,
a way of being anywhere,
perhaps alone
or lonely,
and knowing that new and buoyant life
is close--pecking in cobbled streets,
flashing among palms, crowded on a wire
or floating in the high silences--
like turkey vultures, laughing gulls.

Thirst

I awoke from a dream medley
(in which figured a misshapen poet,
an eavesdropping child--party
to a private fantasy-- a group of peddlers
mining a misty swamp
for clams,) ~~there were no clams~~

thirsty. The thirst
forced me out of bed and down
a set of hazardous stairs
to the porcelain tap marked 'C'.

I drank until my stomach would take no more
and still my mouth and tongue wanted water.

Can you imagine
what it might be like to feel that thirst
all day and into your dreams?

THOUGHTS AT THE SOLSTICE

Even our voices have gone
into hibernation.
With the frog
and the tulip bulb
we have accepted this purgatory
of silence
and darkness
so complete
it is almost impossible
to imagine light
sufficient to rouse
the croak and bloom
of another season
on earth.

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the croak and bloom
of another season
on earth.

Marie Harris
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THOUGHTS AT THE SOLSTICE

Even our voices have gone
into hibernation.
With the frog
and the lily bulb
we have accepted this purgatory
of silence
and darkness
so complete
it is almost impossible
to imagine light
sufficient to rouse
the croak and bloom
of another season
on earth.

(14)

Under the St. Moon -

One day I see you
in an apple tree, a vast,
~~the~~ ^{pale} blossom
freed & floating up . . .

J.P.

Deciding to be named
is an act of unity.

like seeing the moon
as ^a pale blossom

or a busy anchored pear on the

making a space channel

~~or~~ or a huge burnished coin
dropping thru a cloud slot

into evening.

Having imagined, now

you can tune your lives together
by roots & harvests & blossoming

a month at a time
beginning bright
under a storkery awn.

June 3, 1919.

UNDERTOW

One friend is in recovery, as though it were a place,
a white-and-stainless-steel-room and the only sound
the low hum of an air conditioner, where the excesses
of her very interesting life ^{after} ~~are~~ ^{have been} surgically
removed. One friend is conversationally unraveling the
cable stitches of her affair with an internationally
famous person while we walk, jostling each other ~~hip~~ ^{companionably}
to hip, hands touching or describing the air like
gulls--along a boardwalk that threads the buzzing
marsh on a strip of dune off a southern stretch of
Long Island. There is ^{also} a missing friend (~~in our~~
~~quartet~~) and of course we speak of her. What did you
say about me? she's sure to ask when next we talk on
the phone. We've been together so long-- plotting in
convent corridors, being wicked at ~~deadly~~ tea dances,
or silent and determined in the paneled waiting rooms
of (clandestine) ^{doctors} abortionists--that talk is just spume
off our waves. We've kept our secrets from mothers and
~~people who will not understand~~, and keep them still as
we oil these stolen hours with laughter and a shared
passion for risk, the new adventure. Tonight we will
walk ~~thigh~~ deep into the pulsing ocean, feel the suck
of waves retreating.

→ husbands

VACATIONS

1

Cross Country

It was called a "Fair Lady," that Datsun sportscar with the removable foldable top. There was me, my husband (imagine yourself 21; now say 'my husband') and little Matt who fit perfectly on the back shelf.

When the car broke down in the Rockies, and we had to spend the night waiting for Japanese parts, we were given the bridal suite. I filled the sink with shaved ice to keep the formula cold and we spent the night in pointless argument.

There wasn't very much to remember about that trip except the time I almost dropped the baby out the window getting him over my right shoulder and onto my lap, or when we lost the brakes just before the George Washington and continued on home to New Haven anyhow.

(We tasted some nice wines at the Christian Bros.)

2

Yucatan

For this trip, I spent most of a North Carolina summer in a classroom learning Spanish. I was going abroad, sort of, with Another Couple.

In a pinch
it's the nouns and pronouns that surface
like life preservers, and several verbs

in the present. I am. I have. I want.
A new language
makes the questions simple. Who
did I marry? Is this the bus to Chichen Itza?
Where--donde--will this turtle take me
if I do not let go of its planing shell?
Is it necessary to explain why
I am riding a sea turtle?

The Other Couple has retreated to their room
to turn their quarrel into a storm.
My husband--still a boy--declares he loves me
eighty-seven percent.

At Chichen Itza there's a pyramid
within a pyramid
at the top of which
sits a stone jaguar with a red eye.
It's very strange
to climb to an interior summit.

We come home
and later the pictures arrive
and you can't tell
that I could speak a little Spanish
or that something has changed.

VALENTINE

The month is ordinary, tedious
as Lent. The daily communicants
have dwindled to a handful
of gray and brown birds
fidgeting in winter's empty pews.
We are running out of stovewood
and things to talk about.
If I tell you I love you today,
it's nothing
out of the ordinary,
no more than noting
that there are constellations
in the pond's black ice,
that the woodpecker's head
is a most extraordinary shade of red.

VANTAGE

Braced against a rib of a hip of a roof--
great spinnaker of a roof!--
aluminum rungs under my arches,
I can see to the pond
where a heron makes a pass over water
like a blown cloud,
and see back to the steady ladders
of those afternoons
when my feet found purchase
on the smallest limb.

Now I remember something...
here, hammer at my hip,
apron full of 16 penny nails
...something about being left
to my own devices.

People are calling me down.
The wind tangles their words.
It is difficult to make out who
or patch together why
from the shreds of their voices.

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VESPERS

Ground fog limns the meadow
under Equinox. Two dark horses
haunt the margin
drinking the damp light.

How seldom we are together,
mother and daughter, inside
one still moment
with time to watch autumn
nudging summer into the chill
river of evening.



MARRIAGE
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WALKING WITH DOGS

October leaves, fading to shades of fall-warbler yellow, cushioned the woods path, damping our footfalls as we explored, my son and I, the maze of an old conversation, still trying the locks on subjects distant as grade school grammar, when his brown dog, having abandoned us to our continuous present, returned in the company of another dog and its companion. The woman drew abreast, abruptly pulled up on her pied dog's leash and demanded of my son the meaning of green. (What was it? Green Man? Green secret?) He spoke to her dog by name. Again she asked the green question. But I saw only the wild eye, and intervened, raked up any old words meant to reassure...no, really to distract. She swung to face me, took all my subterfuges into that eye and, before turning back to him, said firmly: "I'm sorry, ma'am, you're wearing the wrong color."

Marie Harris



WARMTH

from INTERSTATE

jaw fused like thermalpane glass
heart soft and out of condition
I am not prepared

for your house
with the equilibrium of a painting
turned upside down

your broccoli and pork
your banked fire

not prepared
by another single moment
for you

I am flying
and staying put
like a tree

When I first came to this place it was March. We parked the truck at the end of the driveway and walked in, breaking through the crusted snow. A moon lit the path. The silence was threaded with the sounds of thaw: water running under the crust, heavy snow slipping in small avalanches from the pine boughs, soft wind. And then the house... tucked into an apron of rock, set into a hill. The windows glowed a yellow-orange. Smoke drifted into the blue-black sky.

My ^{new} husband had prepared a late meal and it was warming on the cookstove when we arrived. The house--all one room-- was an amazement. Kitchen sink of cast iron set into a single, long slab of pine. The bedroom a shelf above the kitchen: foam mattress on pine boards. A kerosene lamp. Another stove, burning slowly, the main heat once the cookstove dies out. A tree as ^a ~~the~~ post in this post and beam building. Huge windows salvaged from a UNH renovation project, reflecting the angles and lights of the warm house back

2,
at us. Although the lights we used to eat the dinner of home-raised pork and vegetables were fueled by kerosene, there was electricity for the fridge and (lights). My husband told me he'd decided to go electric because he missed music. The appliances were an afterthought.

After the meal we washed dishes in hot water from the kettles on the stove, tempered by well water brought up from the pump outdoors in a bucket.

I suppose, looking back on the first year I spent here, I thought it was an adventure. I was too busy learning the rudiments of this new life to consider myself put upon, inconvenienced or deprived.

Since that time we have built up the driveway so we can drive all the way in. We acquired a freezer. A telephone. We had a shallow well dug and a pump. Now one can turn a tap and summon quantities of water. We built a shower. A solar greenhouse which is designed to return heated air to the house. In short, we have joined the upwardly mobile American middle class (albeit at the lower end of the spectrum). Or have we? We still have an outhouse. Our hand pump still operates as well as it ever did. We still heat our house--a house that has grown in pieces over the years--with wood alone. We grow our vegetables and raise some of our meat. Which causes me to consider what I think is a central question in the matter of living a life and sustaining it. This question has little to do, at its heart, with economics, though that factor might well become increasingly relevant. It has little to do with fashion, and even less to do with upbringing and training. The question has to do with the matter of paying attention to how one chooses to live on this planet and what relationship one has with the forces which operate, which cooperate in allowing

all of us to survive. How we survive and at what cost is the subject of my consideration.

Clearly, there is no immediate necessity to abandon the fruits of the industrial and electronic revolutions and return to the ways of our ancestors. It does ^{not} even bear repeating that the technological advances of the last 50 years have given us a level of affluence and 'leisure' almost unknown to two thirds of the world. It is not necessary to list the pleasures and advantages resultant from _____

But it might be interesting to consider those things that we've forgotten. Thing, in fact, that some of us never knew in the first place.

~~Warmth~~: Heat. Food. Shelter. Air. Water. Earth that produces. Friends who nourish. And the relationship of any human being to those things. Aren't they basic to our lives? Do we have any idea whatsoever of how to achieve them? By ourselves? With a little help from our friends?

I certainly didn't. I was an annual flower in a carefully tended (often by hired help) suburban garden. I grew up blissfully ignorant of and oblivious to anything that had to do with making a living, a life. It's strange, now that I think of it, that my own great-great grandparents lived in thatched-roofed houses, grew potatoes, milked cows. They were, I think, anxious to forget, eager to do better in a new world. In three short generations the simplest arts--sewing, growing, building, heating-- were lost to us. We were "rich". We were comfortable. We never concerned ourselves with the underpinnings of our very easy lives. Buttons. Switches. Phone calls. And money. That's all it took to remove us from having to think.

(And so it continued, through a first marriage and two children. The point was, as it had always been, to work at a job to make the money to buy everything we needed to keep going. Slowly the situation changed. I left the marriage and most of the security it provided. The "oil crisis" hit. Working at a job became a more complex matter, with children to raise and their money buying less and less. I began to learn a few things by necessity and each endeavor introduced the possibility of another. For instance, when I began to raise chickens I started paying attention to kitchen scraps that used to get thrown out. Growing

~~xxxxxx~~ vegetables provided another use for kitchen garbage.

At that point I hadn't learned to cut wood, but I did buy it and fill up my first, leaky, temperamental old box stove. And, like everyone else who ~~was~~ lived in an old house in the mid-seventies, I began to caulk and weatherstrip and insulate. Certain patterns of self sufficiency began to emerge. But I hadn't given a thought to a more radical approach. Until I met my husband

~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~

He brought me to this house that he'd built himself. It was the first structure he'd ever built, and, before he had electricity, much of the work was done with hand tools. That fact alone hammered the last nail in a conviction I'd had since I was a kid: that I could do anything. If he could build a house I could build a house. If he could cut and split wood, so could I. And I joined him in a project that has revolutionized my attitudes.

It began with reassessing the concept of "need". What, in fact, did we "need" to live and live well? Heat. Food. Shelter. Air. Water. Earth. And ~~xxxxxx~~ an important element: Time. Time of our own. How much of what we needed could we produce ourselves? How little did we have to depend on making money?

I can work the hours I choose. I can ~~change~~ ^{change} jobs. I can take time off or choose to do my wage-earning at noon, in the evening. In the best of times, when business is going well, we ~~I~~ might buy the winter's wood. In the worst of times (and we have had, as a country, only a glimpse of those) ~~I~~ ^{we are not forced} ~~to~~ scramble to make more money... simply spend more time providing for ourselves.

This brings me back to ~~a~~ the central question Cooperation. ~~Thisxxxxxxx~~ of how we choose to live on the planet. For cutting one's own wood or hammering at one's own house are only ~~one~~ facets of the prism, and the prism casts a wide spectrum of light as it's turned.

We share this land with our neighbors, which reminds me how all of us share the land with each other. What we do affects our neighbors, ~~whether it be the building of a new road,~~ ^{whether it be the building of a new road,} ~~the placement~~ the placement of a garden, or the raising of a rafter. And, more than that, what we do requires our neighbors. None of our houses has gone up without the aid and advice of others. No pig in its pen gets moved to clean ground without the help of one or two folks who can take a break from their Sunday afternoon chores. No turkeys get slaughtered, cleaned and wrapped for the freezer without it being a group event. No land gets cleared or _____ without consultation. Further, since our wood is not in infinite supply and since our water must continue to flow clean and uncontaminated ~~if~~ ^{if} we are to continue tapping it, we must cooperate with the earth that provides them. [^]Platitudes that every fourth grader learns to mouth on Earth Day? Probably. But how many of us experience the realities? We're aware of the precariousness of the balance-- we read about it in every newspaper, watch passively as it is demonstrated to us on TV every time a propane ~~car~~ ^{tank car} is

derailed or another industry dumps its toxic waste into a river. We're aware but ignorant. We feel that we are too small to do anything. We feel powerless, even over the simplest forces in our own lives. And worse, we have grown soft, accustomed to being waited on ~~//ever~~ by giant servants who produce ~~xxxx~~ satisfaction on demand. All it takes is money.

In the years I've lived here I've begun to learn not to take ^{much} for granted. ~~xxxxxxx~~ After hauling that water bucket up the path day after day in winter, I think my reaction to running water out of a tap ~~xxxxxxx~~ must have resembled my grandmother's awe at seeing her first motor car. After a year of bathing in a tin tub, our shower gave me more pleasure than any gift I'd ever received. A freezer beats canning everything. A real road beats trudging down a path with the groceries on a sled. The difference between me growing up in a suburb and me now is not that I don't welcome the modern conveniences, but that I no longer need ~~kk~~ ^{them.} I need the skills I've learned. I need my friends. I need the land.

There's one thing about this place that hasn't changed. It stays not only because it makes sense in terms of the way we feel about the land and its water, but, I sometimes imagine, as a small, cedar-shingled, ^{south-facing, glass-doored} symbol of defiance: our outhouse.

WARMTH

Jaw fused like thermalpane glass,
heart soft and out of condition,
I am not prepared

for your house
with the equilibrium of a painting
turned upside down,
your meal of broccoli and pork,
your banked fire;

not prepared
by another single moment
for you.

I am flying
and staying put
like a tree.

When I first came to this place it was March. We parked the truck at the end of the road and walked in, breaking through the crusted snow. A moon lit the path. The silence was threaded with sounds of thaw: water running under the crust, heavy snow slipping in haphazard avalanches from pine boughs, soft wind. And then the house: tucked into an apron of rock, set into a hill. The windows glowed orange. Smoke drifted into the blue-black sky.

My new husband had prepared a late meal which was warming on the cookstove when we arrived. The house--all one room--was an amazement. The kitchen counter was a long slab of pine into which was set a cast iron sink. The bedroom was a large shelf above the kitchen, a foam mattress on pine boards. A second stove burned slowly, the main source of heat once the Crawford Anniversary Special died out. In the center of the room, a tree trunk rose twelve feet to the ridgepole. Huge old windows reflected the angles of the warm house. Though the

lamps were glowing with kerosene light, there was electricity which my husband had installed primarily to hear music. The appliances were an afterthought. We ate his home cooked dinner and washed the dishes in hot water from the kettle, water brought up from the outdoor hand pump.

I suppose, looking back on the first winter I spent here--lugging water, trimming lamps, stacking wood, heating water--that I saw it as an adventure. I was in love, and too busy learning the rudiments of this new life to consider myself put upon, inconvenienced or deprived. And, though it seemd we spent a lot of time dealing with the question of heat, I chose to consider the whole process not simply as heat, but as warmth, with its wider implications of good work, peace of mind and friends.

Since that time we have built a driveway so we can bring the car all the way in. We have acquired a telephone, a freezer, a well and a pump, a shower and a little bathroom instead of the outhouse. The house has grown larger in the fine tradition of New Eglannd connected architecture. But there are many elements of our lives that have not changed since those first, simpler days.

We still heat entirely with wood. We grow our own vegetables and raise some of our meat. How we live has little to do with economics, though that factor may become increasingly relevant, little to do with fashion, and even less with upbringing and training. It is more a matter of paying attention to how we choose to live on this planet and what relationship we have with the forces which operate and cooperate in allowing all of us to survive.

While there's no immediate necessity to abandon the fruits of the industrial and electronic revolutions and return to the ways of our forebears, or to forego the pleasures and advantages that many modern Americans enjoy, living close to the environment that natures us has taught me lessons I never learned growing up.

I was like an annual flower in a carefully tended (usually by a gardener) suburban garden. I grew up ignorant of and oblivious to anything that had to do with making a living. It's strange to remember that my Irish great-great-grandparents lived in thatched roofed houses, grew food, milked cows. Their children must have been

very anxious to forget, eager to do better in a new world. In only three generations the simplest arts--sewing, growing, building, heating--were lost to me and my siblings. We were comfortable and we did not concern ourselves with the underpinnings of our easy lives. Buttons. Switches. They were all we needed. And throughout the years of my first marriage and the raising of two sons, I asked few questions. Even as my life changed and my circumstances became more straitened, I did not consider another approach. Until I met my husband.

He brought me to the house he'd built himself with hand tools, the first structure he'd ever built. That hammered a last nail into a suspicion I had had as a child: I could do anything. If he could build a house, I could. If he could cut and split wood, so could I. And I joined him in a project that has changed my life.

It began with a reassessment of the concept of "need." What did we need to live well? Shelter. Food. Heat. Water. And, most importantly, time. Time of our own.

We started growing our own food and putting it by for the winter. We extended the growing season with cold frames and a greenhouse. We raised hens for eggs and a pig and a few turkeys for many months' supply of meat. Our forest supplied wood and maple sap. And we started a small business that we could run from home.

Year by year I have become a better gardener. I have come to understand the requirements of raising animals for food. I can rescue damp turkey chicks with the judicious application of a blow dryer and kill those same turkeys when it's time. I can split wood, shingle a roof, tape sheetrock, drive a tractor, use tools. Of course the question lingers in the minds of many of my friends and family: why? I have an education. Our small business could easily grow bigger and warrant an office and employees. I could sell my writing skills to any number of industries. Why bother struggling with plywood and roofing nails and tomato hornworms? (My oldest son informed me one summer that he had discovered this wonderful building called a supermarket with bins of vegetables and shelves filled with eggs and meat!).

My answer to "why" is "because I am freer." I pay neither

mortgage nor rent, work the hours I choose, eat food I have raised without chemicals. And, most importantly, I am not afraid. In the worst of times we have the wherewithal to sustain our own lives, independent of power companies and banks. It is as though we have, in an odd way, outgrown our need to be like children waited on by industrial servants.

We share this land in a cooperative agreement with several other families. What we do affects all of us, whether it's the building of a new road, the placement of a garden, the raising of a rafter. And what we do often requires all of us. Our houses have gone up with the muscle and encouragement of others. We take time to help a friend mow a field or tow a car out of a drift. We've built a community house for our gatherings and a small dock for our pond.

In the time I've lived here I've learned not to take too much for granted. After having hauled that water bucket up the path day after day in winter, I think my reaction to water from a tap must resemble my grandmother's awe at seeing her first motor car. After a year of bathing in a tin tub, our shower gives me more pleasure than any gift I've ever received. A freezer beats canning. A real road beats trudging down a path with the groceries on a sled. I welcome the modern conveniences. And I do depend on them for my present level of comfort. But I need them less than I need the land, clean water, basic skills and friends.

It's winter again. My husband is thawing this summer's snow peas for a stir fry. Birch wood snaps in the cookstove and a few snowflakes are sticking to the windowpane. A neighbor drops by to borrow ice skates. Tomorrow we'll cut up the old elm that blew down in a storm. It will make wonderful warmth.

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When I first came to this place it was March. We parked the truck at the end of the road and walked in, breaking through the crusted snow. A moon lit the path. The silence was threaded with the sounds of thaw: water running under the crust, heavy snow slipping in haphazard avalanches from pine boughs, soft wind. And then the house... tucked into an apron of rock, set into a hill. The windows glowed orange. Smoke drifted into the blue-black sky.

My new husband had prepared a late meal and it was warming on the cookstove when we arrived. The house--all one room--was an amazement. Kitchen sink of cast iron set into a single, long slab of pine. The bedroom a large shelf above the kitchen: foam mattress on pine boards. A kerosene lamp. Another stove, burning slowly, the main source of heat once the Crawford Anniversary Special died out. A tree for one of the posts that stood twelve feet to the ridgepole. Huge windows salvaged from a UNH renovation project, reflecting the angles and

lights of the warm house back at us. Though the lamps were kerosene, there was electricity in the house. My husband told me he'd decided to go electric because he missed music. The appliances were an afterthought.

After the meal we washed dishes in hot water from the kettles on the stove, water tempered by cold well water brought up from the outdoor pump.

I suppose, looking back on the first year I spent here-- lugging water, trimming lamps, stacking wood, heating water-- that I saw it as an adventure. I was too busy learning the rudiments of this new life to consider myself put upon, inconvenienced or deprived. And, though it seemed that we spent a lot of time dealing with the question of heat--cutting trees in spring and summer, stacking and splitting in the fall-- I chose to consider the whole process not as simply heat, but as warmth, with its wider implications of friends and peace of mind.

Since that time we have built a driveway so we can bring a car all the way in. We acquired a freezer. A telephone. We had a shallow well dug and installed a pump. We built a shower. A solar greenhouse designed to return heated air to the house. In short, we have joined the upwardly mobile American middle class. Or have we? We still have an outhouse. Our hand pump still pulls water up through the driven point. We still heat our house--a house that has grown in pieces over the years--with wood alone. We grow our vegetables and raise some of our meat. Which causes me to consider what I think is a central question in the matter of living a life and sustaining it. This question has little to do, at its heart, with economics, though that factor might become increasingly relevant. It has little to do with fashion, and even less with upbringing and training. The question addresses the matter of

paying attention to how one chooses to live on this planet and what relationship one has with the forces which operate, which cooperate in allowing all of us to survive. How we survive and at what cost is, then, my subject.

Clearly, there is no immediate necessity to abandon the fruits of the industrial and electronic revolutions and return to the ways of our ancestors. It does not even bear repeating that the technological advances of the last 50 years have given us a level of affluence and 'leisure' almost unknown to two thirds of the world. It is not necessary to list the pleasures and advantages that modern Americans enjoy. But it might be interesting to consider those things that we've forgotten; things, in fact, that some of us never knew in the first place.

Heat. Food. Shelter. Air. Water. Earth that produces. Friends who nourish. And the relationship of any human being to those things. Aren't they basic to our lives? Do we have any idea whatsoever of how to achieve them? By ourselves? With a little help from our friends?

I certainly didn't. I was an annual flower in a carefully tended (usually by hired help) suburban garden. I grew up ignorant of and oblivious to anything that had to do with making a living, a life. It's strange to remember that my own great-great-grandparents lived in thatched roofed houses, grew potatoes, milked cows. They must have been very anxious to forget, eager to 'do better' in a new world. In only three generations the simplest arts--sewing, growing, building, heating--were lost to us. We were "rich." We ~~were~~ comfortable. We never concerned ourselves with the underpinnings of our easy lives. Buttons, Switches. Phone calls to solve problems. And money. That's all it took to remove us from the necessity of thinking.

Throughout the years of my first marriage and the raising of two sons, I asked few questions. Even as my life changed and my circumstances became more straitened, I never considered a more radical approach. Until I met my husband.

He brought me to this house he'd built himself. It was the first structure he'd ever built, and, before he had electricity, much of the work was done with hand tools. That fact alone hammered the last nail in a suspicion I'd had since I was a kid: that I could do anything. If he could build a house, I could build a house. If he could cut and split wood, so could I. And I joined him in a project that has changed my life and revolutionized my attitudes.

It began with a reassessing of the concept of "need." What did we "need" to live and live well? Heat. Food. Shelter. Water. Earth. And an important element: Time. Time of our own. How much of what we needed could we produce ourselves? How little did we have to depend on making money?

Certain alternatives were obvious. We could grow our own food and put it by for the winter. We could extend our growing season with cold frames or by building a greenhouse. Hens for our eggs. A pig and ten turkeys for many months' supply of meat. A forest around us for wood. And a job, maybe part time, maybe in-house, for the money to buy coffee and wine and gas and books...

Year by year I become a better gardener. I have come to understand the requirements of raising animals for food. I can save soaked turkey chicks by the judicious application of a blow dryer and kill those same turkeys when it's time. I can split wood and build a fire. Shingle a roof. Tape sheetrock. Use tools. But the question remains--certainly in the minds of some of my friends--why? I have an education. I am trained as a writer and make a reasonable living with that skill. Why bother struggling with plywood and

roofing nails and recalcitrant tomatoes that refuse to turn pink? (My oldest son keeps telling me, as though I'd somehow missed the information, that the supermarkets are filled with vegetables and modern science has long perfected baseboard heating and the flush toilet!)

Perhaps the clearest way to answer that question is to see it in terms of freedom and cooperation (as opposed to the 40-hour-work-week-with-two-weeks-off-a-year and isolation in an increasingly hostile world).

Freedom. If I can harvest wood I will not be dependent on oil prices. If I can raise food, pump water, repair a pipe... if, in short, I can do things for myself, I am less afraid. Because we pay neither mortgage nor rent, because no bank has possession of what we own and use, because we can sustain a level of comfort that often feels like luxury, I am free to take risks and not fear the consequences. I can work the hours I choose, as many or as few. In the best of times, when our advertising business is going well, I might buy the winter's wood. In the worst of times (and we have had, as a country, only a glimpse of those), we are not forced to scramble to keep our jobs or make more money... we must only spend more time providing for ourselves.

Cooperation. This brings me back to the central question of how we choose to live on this planet, for cutting one's own wood or sawing one's own two by fours are only facets of the prism, and the prism casts a wide spectrum of light as it's turned.

We share this land with our neighbors, reminding me of how all of us share the earth with each other. What we do affects our neighbors, whether it be the building of a new road, the placement of a garden, or the raising of a rafter. And, more than that, what we do requires our neighbors. None of our houses has gone up without

the aid and advice of others. No pig in its pen gets moved to clean ground without the help of one or two folks who can take a break from their Sunday chores. No turkeys get slaughtered, cleaned and wrapped for the freezer without it being a group event. Further, since our wood is not in infinite supply and since our water must continue to flow clean and uncontaminated if we are to keep tapping it, we must cooperate with the earth that provides them. Platitudes that every fourth grader has learned to mouthe on Earth Day? Probably. But how many of us experience the realities? We're aware of the precariousness of the balance--we read about threats to the balance in every newspaper, watch passively as it is demonstrated to us on TV every time a tank car filled with propane is derailed or another industry dumps its toxic waste into a river. We're aware but ignorant. As if we were too small and powerless to eat vegetables that have no chemicals in them. As if we couldn't possibly taste meat that wasn't injected and colored. As if we were unable to put our own roof over our own heads. As if we had all become children waited on by industrial servants, paying for our simplest wants with paper money.

In the years I've lived here I've begun to learn not to take much for granted. After hauling that water bucket up the path day after day in winter, I think my reaction to running water out of a tap must have resembled my grandmother's awe at seeing her first motor car. After a year of bathing in a tin tub, our shower gave me more pleasure than any gift I'd ever received. A freezer beats canning everything. A real road beats trudging down a path with the groceries on a sled. The difference between me growing up in a suburb and me now is ~~that~~ that I don't welcome the modern conveniences, but that I no longer need them or depend on them. I need the skills I've learned. I need my friends. I need the land.

There's one thing about this place that hasn't changed. We still use an outhouse. It stays not only because it makes sense in terms of the way we feel about the land and its water, but, I sometimes imagine, as a small, south facing, cedar shingled, glass doored symbol of defiance.

Marie Harris is a partner in Isinglass Studio and the author of several books of poetry.

Western Grebe

Aechmophorous occidentalis
Sun-setting spear-bearer

On any one of his long-strided walks
near the Mandan settlement that first fall,
Meriwether Lewis encountered all manner of shorebirds
and ducks plying the sloughs.
Naturalist, explorer, he shot one of each.
Taxidermist, he sent specimens back East.
Diarist, he described each one shot to the last pin feather.

I write in my journal
(a letter to you from the West)

*...the wind that flattens the tall grass prairie
and keeps blackbirds and meadowlarks low,
deafens foraging waterfowl
to my slow advance.*

I am seeing for the first time

for the first time! imagine!

*long-legged, blue-legged avocets
giddily spinning phalaropes
the thin-necked grebe with its sharp bill and red eye*

So would you, reader,
be my correspondent,
my accomplice?

My Jefferson.

Western Grebe

Aechmophorous occidentalis
Sun-setting spear-bearer

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near the Mandan settlement that first fall,
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*...the wind that flattens the tall grass prairie
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deafens foraging waterfowl
to my slow advance.*

I am seeing for the first time

For the first time! imagine! ↪

↪
✓ *long-legged, blue-legged avocets
giddily spinning phalaropes
the thin-necked grebe with its sharp bill and red eye* ↪

129. { So would you, reader,
be my correspondent
my accomplice? *companion.*

My Jefferson.

MH
06/20/05

WHITE

The book is of blue leather, embossed in gold: Marie Murray Harris. Gotham Ball. November 23, 1961. The first picture is of a young girl mounting carpeted stairs. She is wearing a white taffeta gown, her long neck set off by a scoop of tight pleats. White kid gloves reach above her elbows. On her wrist, a thick gold bracelet. She wears a gardenia at her waist and a young man on her arm.

Whereas my mother remembers her white moments fondly, tells them to us much as she would tell us a story--her attention wholly fixed on those fairytale events, her eyes and voice bright with the memories--I look back on the times I was white-garbed as times of defeat. It was difficult enough for my mother and grandmothers to get me into a dress, never mind into a white one. And, once in the garment, it was all they could do to entice me to smile, to perform according to the moment's appropriate gospel. The wonder is, now, as I turn the album pages backward, that I did struggle into all those white dresses, that I did manage to live up all the pride and expectation, that I smiled and smiled through the rituals of womanly passage. I even had, if the photographs are to be believed, an air of presence, as though I were to this strange manner born.

And, of course, in many ways I was. Look at the baby picture. My happy face fills the frame. My fat chin nestles in the puckers and tucks of a fine, white chemise. The photograph is browning, but the frame still gleams. It's a baroque affair, thick with silver storks and songbirds nesting in silver marsh marigolds and roses. At the top is engraved: MARIE. At the bottom the words: ARRIVED November 7, 1943. WEIGHT 7 lbs. 14 oz. Flanking the statistics are a tiny silver scale and a miniature clock with its hands fixed at ten past eight. The frame is hacked with thin, green marble. This is an early portrait

of the first daughter of a first daughter of Marie. This is a portrait of the third Marie in an Irish American succession. She will have, like a baptismal gift or a spell from a fairy godmother, a priveleged and happy childhood.

From this perspective, half my life was a series of presentations, all of which required me to wear white. I was baptised in a long white gown, all lace. I was wrestled out of my sneakers and muddy pants to don the white of a First Communion dress. Not the dress, nor the cuffed socks and shiny shoes, nor the manufactured curls designed to last the morning, nor the tulle veil fixed to my head with elastic could camoflage the scabbed knee or scarred lip. But I was lost in a sea of white suds--one spring blossom on an overblown apple tree, as perfect and as bruised as most of the others. The photos are charming. I was confirmed in white, with a red sash to symbolize blood. The blood of the Redeemer and the martyrs and soldiers of Christ. I took the name of Saint Agnes, though I'd have preferred (for this was a time of zeal and romantic missionary fervor) to name my alter ego for Maria Goretti who gave her life to preserve her virginity from a crazed, knife-wielding field hand. But my name was already Marie. So it was Agnes whom I chose when it was my turn--late in the game because I was very tall and the line was arranged according to size--to be slapped on each cheek by the Bishop. I can't remember why Agnes was made a saint.

My convent education called for white on many occasions. Although we wore heavy houndstooth wool uniforms with high blue socks, oxfords and long sleeved shirts demurely buttoned at the wrists and neck, there were ample occasions for The White Dress. The Feast of the Immaculate Conception. Reverend Mother's Feast Day. May Day. Graduation. Among others. All the processions! All the presentations!

Only now, as I observe the rituals of fall woodcutting and battening, of winter fire-tending and shoveling, of spring planning

and planting, of summer labors in garden and chicken house and pigpen and forest... only now do I realize that my whole life has been ritual.

The next picture in the blue leather book shows me smiling in a line of smiling debs. Susan Hannon looks uncomfortable. She usually does. Our fathers stand behind us like grooms. Our Catholic escorts will come and take us into the ballroom. Mine are named Andy Corbett and Dick Kelly. The three of us have very little use for each other.

Now we dance. First with our fathers. Then with our escorts. My slip is showing in this picture. I am smiling and dancing perfectly. Now I am seated at Table 11. In front of me the table fairly groans under the china and silver, the candles and linen, the flowers. I imagine that the meal was many-coursed, that it was interrupted over and over by foxtrots. I danced with my father. I danced with other people's fathers. Marina Forstmann's brother cut in. Marina's father ~~is~~ dead. My escorts bore me and I them. Lester Lanin is unruffled.

Now the Cardinal. Now we add a cascade of red roses to our white gowns. We greet him. We smile. We kiss his ring, one by one. This picture is in color. White with red. Are we still virgins?

There are more photos besides the one in the silver frame or the ones in the blue leather book. Most of them I have in boxes. They curl at the corners, and bear the marks of scotch tape. Here's one with me and Shawn McWeeney on swings at school. We ~~were~~^{are} pumping high on imaginary horses, one white and one black, and trying to push our swings over the top of the bar. Here's one where me and Mady and Diane are arm in arm... plotting something. The three of us ~~were~~^{are} always plotting. And here are brothers and sisters, nine of them, growing up. And here's my mother, always beautiful, and my father, always handsome. And me on a pony. And me at the beach. And me on a sailboat. And me in a tree. At a dance. At a ballgame. A wedding. An ordination.

A baptism. That baby is in my arms. That man is not my escort but my husband. We are all smiling.

The last two pictures in the blue book show me smiling and chalk white between two Nice Catholic Boys, between two black garbed parents. It ~~was~~^{is} not the last time I ~~was~~^{am} to struggle into a fine, white dress and be admired and photographed. It ~~was~~^{is} not the last time I ~~would~~^{will} dance and pose and smile. It ~~was~~^{is} not the last time that grown-ups ~~would~~^{will} nudge me into the molds they ~~had~~^{have} so lovingly crafted. But it ~~was~~^{is} the beginning of the end of it all.

One afternnon--a steamy southern afternoon in a close, unfriendly apartment building--I took all the albums and boxes to the incinerator. All the smiles and the friends, the baby books, the schooldays, the trips went into the fire. I saved some things. The book of the debutante. The book of the wife. Assorted snapshots of family and friends. But the bulk of the record disappeared that day. And I began to write in earnest.

There is a portrait tacked to an unfinished wall. It is September, 1981. The woman is pressed against a background of shedding trees and rocky ground. Her cheekbone is streaked with dirt. She is dressed in jeans and probably has a scab on her knee. Her shirt is white. At her neck she wears the arm of her companion like a makeshift decoration. She is not smiling, but her eyes have an antic light.

Now there is this portrait, tacked to an unfinished wall: it is September, 1981. The woman is pressed against a fall background of shedding trees and rocky ground. Her cheekbone is streaked with dirt. At her neck she wears the arm of her companion like a makeshift decoration. Her shirt is white. She is not smiling, but her eyes have an antic gleam.

From one perspective, half my life was a series of presentations and all required white. I was baptised in white. I was wrestled out of my sneakers and muddy pants to don the white of a First Communion dress. Not the dress, nor the folded socks and shiny shoes, nor the manufactured curls designed to last the morning, nor the tulle veil held with elastic could camouflage the scabbed knee or the cut lip. But I was lost in a sea of white suds, one spring blossom on an overblown apple tree, as perfect, as bruised as all the others. The photos are charming.

Next came the Confirmation. By a Bishop. White again, with a red sash to symbolize blood. The blood of the martyrs and soldiers of Christ. I took the name of Saint Agnes, though I'd have preferred, in my newly found zeal, to name my alter-ego Maria for Maria Goretti who gave her life to preserve her virginity. Her death by the knife wielded by a crazed field hand held a strange, romantic fascination. I'm not at all sure that I was clear about the meaning of virginity. Anyway, my name was already Marie. I have forgotten why Agnes was a saint. Or why the Bishop slapped us.

to the Village. She took us to Church, to the beach, to the City, the circus, the ice capades, the movies, and to stores... shoe stores and school uniform stores and dress stores and hat stores and toy stores and grocery stores and meat markets and fish markets. She sat with us in dentists' waiting rooms and orthodontists' waiting rooms and hospital emergency rooms, in lobbies, on lines. She shared us with a succession of Nurses--Cummie and Rita and Hoppie and Anne and Birgit-- schooled us with the aid of a succession of nuns.

The second house sat like a dowager at the end of a long, tree-lined drive. It was there that I grew up, learning to ride a horse, beginning to seek the solitude of my own room, ~~xxxxxxx~~ reading bike-basketfuls of books, sailing with my father whom I was beginning to envy.

My father spent most of his hours away, being a doctor out of a small office in the Village. I still remember that telephone number from a time when you could pick up the phone and hear "Operator". My father had jumped out of planes and ~~xxx~~ even flown them. My father raced sailboats. My father was handsome and he made people laugh. My father ran his own life, or so it seemed. And I wanted that. I had no interest in little children ~~xxxx~~ ~~xx~~ or dolls. My dreams ran to high adventure, travel, I imagined myself a journalist. A skipper. A crusader in a dangerous world. Even during my sternly religious stage, I was a Maryknoll nun with rolled up sleeves toiling in a hot and merciless clime, equal to any challenge.

WHITE

The baby's face fills the frame. Her eyes are lit with recognition. She is smiling, almost laughing, and her fat chin nestles in the puckers and tucks of a fine, white chemise. The photograph is browning, but the silver frame still gleams. It's a baroque affair, thick with silver storks and songbirds nesting in silver marsh marigolds and roses. At the top is engraved: MARIE. At the bottom, the words: ARRIVED November 7, 1943. WEIGHT 7 lbs. 14 oz. Flanking those words are a tiny silver scale and a miniature clock with its hands fixed at ten past eight. The frame is backed with thin, green marble. This is an early portrait of the first child of Marie and Basil. The first daughter of a first daughter. The third Marie in a succession of Irish Maries. She will have, like a baptismal gift, a privileged and happy childhood.

The book is blue leather, embossed in gold. Marie Harris. Gotham Ball. November 23, 1961. The first picture is of a young girl mounting carpeted stairs. She is wearing a white taffeta gown, her long neck set off by a scoop of tight pleats. White kid gloves reach above her elbows. There is a thick gold bracelet on her wrist, a gardenia at her waist, and a young man on her arm.

And in the green leather book, the same young woman... May, 1963... again decked out in white, Her mother's cream white wedding dress sewn with tiny waxen orange blossoms at the neck, and falling in graceful folds to a gathered hem. Again the long gloves. The smile. Page after page shows her standing, arriving, greeting, receiving, dancing, and smiling, always smiling.

Then our house burned down, and shortly we moved again, to the sprawling and graceful home of my grandmother. She had died, leaving us to occupy the place with our music and shouting. And still the days seemed blessed. We were denied nothing.

Bren
I

She (how can I help but see myself at the third person distance, glittering like crystal?) arrives at a landing and takes ^{my} her place among ^{my} her white companions. There are many ceremonies to go through tonight. Lines of escorts. Lines of parents and relatives. Each debutante is framed by a father. White on black. Smile on smile. We are ^{spotless} lilies in the vases of paternal pride. ~~Spotless~~.

Dick Kelly and ^{Andy} Bill Corbett were not my first choices as dates for this event. I really wanted to invite Bill Matthews, with whom I was completely and ^{hopeless} irrevocably ^{infatrated} in love, but he wasn't A Catholic and thus was barred from participation. ^{So} Thus, Dick and ^{Andy} Bill were, in my mind, stand-ins. Handsome enough. Even moderately good dancers, which counted for something considering one had to prance and dip in public. But we had a mutual

understanding: this was only for show, not serious, not to be counted. We were at a party together, for whatever reasons, and that was the end of that. I cannot, even now, begin to imagine why they accepted my embarrassed invitation to join me in the ceremony. Perhaps they ^{thought} ~~imagined~~ they might meet their own true loves. Perhaps they did. Still, it was easy. We owed each other nothing. We were free. Or almost free. They had to watch ^{ed} while we, the white ladies, danced to the music of Lester Lanin with our fathers. They had to pull out chairs over and over. They had to ^{make well-bred} ~~make~~ conversation with strangers. And we, the white ladies, followed a pattern of ups and downs and smiles and two-steps with fathers and escorts and all the men who cut in.

Susan Hannon looks terribly uncomfortable. Marina Forstmann looks right at home. Diane Rice has a ^{an antique gleam} ~~strange, evil~~ look in her eyes.

I am seated at Table #11. There's a two-tiered silver mint dish as a centerpiece, hung with tiny candles. The matchbooks are white, engraved with the date, the occasion. The table is set with silver and glass and white china. I don't remember what we ate, or how many courses were interrupted by foxtrots. ^{Or what we talked about} ~~What did any of us talk about? What were we~~

My private-girls'-school-convent-education called for white on many occasions. Although we wore heavy houndstooth wool uniforms with high socks, oxfords and long-sleeved shirts demurely buttoned at the wrists and neck, there were times for white. The Feast of the Immaculate Conception. Reverend Mother's Feast Day. May Day. Graduation. Among others. All the processions. All the presentations.

Only now, as I observe the rituals of fall wood-cutting and battening, of winter fire-tending and shoveling, of spring tidying and planning and planting, of summer labors in garden and chicken house and pig pen and forest... only now do I I remember that my whole life was a ritual: pre-ordained, strict, ~~whitex~~

The forms of my presentation were various. For instance, there was the mixed doubles round-robin tennis match. On the face of it, a tennis match might not be considered a debut. But look again. The contestants wear white uniforms. They meet on a marked field to do ritual battle. The young ladies are game, but vanquishable. Brave, ~~yet~~ vulnerable. They never win. They are cheered nonetheless. Now and then they are on the winning side. They relinquish the credit. I never learned to play net.

Or the sailing regatta. White sails on a blue field.

The baby's face fills the frame. Her eyes are lit with the recognition of a person out of the picture. She is smiling, almost laughing, and her fat chin nestles in the puckers and tucks of a fine, white chemise. The photograph is browning, but the silver frame still gleams. It's a baroque affair, thick with silver storks and songbirds nesting in silver marsh marigolds and roses. At the top is engraved simply: Marie. At the bottom, the words: ARRIVED November 7, 1943. WEIGHT 7 lbs. 14 oz. Flanking those words are a tiny silver scale and a miniature clock with its hands fixed at 8:10. The photograph is held between this silver frame and its thin marble back. This is the first child of Marie and Basil Harris. The first of ten. The first daughter of a first daughter. The third ^{Marie} in a line of Irish Catholic Maries. She will be, as though decreed by a fairy godmother or a bending guardian angel, very happy for 16 years.

The book is blue leather, embossed in gold. Marie Harris. Gotham Ball. November 23, 1961. The first, large photograph is of a young girl mounting carpeted stairs, framed by a large gilt mirror behind her. She is wearing a white taffeta gown, her long neck set off by a scoop of tight pleats. Her white kid gloves reach well above her elbows. There is a thick gold bracelet on her wrist, studded with precious stones. A gardenia at her waist. Richard Kelly on her arm.

But underneath the wide smile, like the garters and strapless bra, girdle and frayed slip, is the confusion, the beginnings of an anger of a young woman who is being presented to and emerging from a brittle, brave society of immigrants. She is decked out-- even beautiful-- to receive the approval of parents, to satisfy the scrutiny of suitors. She is female. Catholic. Of an age. Ready.

Spell out
the name

51

I am obviously wilting. The carnation is browning at the edges like a picture in the rotogravure. I am ^{carrying} given a new spary of flowers. Red. ^{Blood red.} The blood. The sacrifice. The beginning.

Francis Cardinal Spellman has arrived. The photogrpahs show him beaming at my ^{city} Grandmother, as well he should, given the amounts of money she has bestowed upon his church. We are lined up again (~~who was orchestrating this spectacle?~~), beaming, in our turn, at him. Now we are arrayed on a stage, like so many bouquets on an altar. One by one we descend. A color photo catches me on one knee, kissing the proffered ring. Baptised. Confirmed. Confessed. Brought out. Approved. Blessed. Me and Susan Hannon and Marina Forstmann and Diane Rice and all the white ladies of the season. Does anyone make a pagan, fertile connection? Does anyone dare extrapolate?

Lester Lanin swings into a rhumba and the ~~image~~ dissolves.

I can dance to the music of any Lester Lanin.

It is 1961 and something is terribly wrong. I would be lying if I said I knew what it was. I only sensed it. What I put into words disturbed everyone around me. Which is what they get if they allow females to read books.

The last photograph in the blue leather book has me posed between my parents, ~~father~~ elegant father and beautiful mother wearing a long, black velvet gown. I am white and confident, possessed of many arcane skills. I can ride a horse, sail a boat, return a backhand, water ski on one leg, play field hockey, choose the right fork, dance a waltz with any older man, ride a chair lift, read a French menu, ~~king~~ grace the arm of a youth in a tuxedo.

There are more pictures besides the one in the silver frame or the ones in the blue book. In some, I am again dressed in white, smiling, smiling. There are boxes of snapshots that curl at the corners. At first one can find pictures of babies, yards, beaches, golden retrievers.

4 photos

WHITE

a silver frame with a marble back: MARIE

Arrived November 7, 1943 8:10 p.m.
weight 7 lbs. 14 oz.

The frame: the smiling, toothless, bald baby flanked by two marsh storks. Embellished with marsh marigolds and fat song birds. The photo is browning, but the baby's eyes, focused at a pleasing person to the right, are supremely happy. *white dress.*

*Orchestra
no WPM III
The Future
fox trot
'63
wedding*

A blue leather book, gold embossed: Marie Harris
Gotham Ball November 23, 1961

MH mounts carpeted stairs (huge gilt mirror in the background) in white taffeta, the neck of the gown deeply scooped and ruffled (tight pleats) accompanied by Richard Kelly, white gloves in left hand. Black tux, white tie and vest (rented?)

Gardenia corsage at waist. Wide gold bracelet on left wrist, studded with precious stones. Gloves to elbow. Slippers. Ragged hem of slip showing. (Girdle? garter belt? bra?)

On line beside Susan Hannon. Fathers lined up behind each daughter.

Flanked by Kelly and ~~XXXXXXXX~~ William Corbett Handsome

Dancing with father. *The Neckers.*

At table. #11 two tiered mint dish (silver), hung with squat candles. Matchbooks. Hard rolls. Much silver and glass.

Parents' table. Same set up. Mother is beautiful. Recognize the Rice's.

More dancing. Recognize Marina's back. With brother (father dead). And, yes, Diane's hair.

Reception line. Red flowers. Cardinal S. Many vapid grins. He looks at us on display.

Color photo. Ring kissing. Next: a speech. Us on the draped stage. Escorts at respectful distance. Recognize Shawn, Diane, Susan,

Grandma & Mother & people on flowered balcony.

Grandma & parents chatting with Cardinal S. More of same, one by one.

Finale: MH flanked by escorts. MH flanked by proud parents. Draped alcove.

1963 - wedding

1981: MH & CW. Jeans. Dirty fingernails. Half finished house. Tough. Proud. white shirt silver ring

~~wrong.~~ See p. 6

Twenty years later, in 1981, I look at a photo, tacked up on sheetrock that's been (taped) but not painted, of me and Charter Weeks. We're pressed against a late spring landscape of bare trees and naked ground. Faces and arms streaked with the mud of spring and the labor of lugging sap buckets to the fire. We're stern for the photographer. Primitive. I'm wearing a white t-shirt. Husband and wife. Children of nobody's dream.

He's in a country uniform: jeans, boots.

We met after almost half our lives were through, after we'd lived out the torn expectations, the broken promises, the lies.

WHITE

The book is of blue leather, embossed in gold: Marie Murray Harris. Gotham Ball. November 23, 1961. The first picture is of a young girl mounting carpeted stairs. She is wearing a white taffeta gown, her long neck set off by a scoop of tight pleats. White kid gloves reach above her elbows. On her wrist, a thick gold bracelet. She wears a gardenia at her waist and a young man on her arm.

Whereas my mother remembers her white moments fondly, tells them to us much as she would tell us a story--her attention wholly fixed on those fairytale events, her eyes and voice bright with the memories--I look back on the times I was white-garbed as times of defeat. It was difficult enough for my mother and grandmothers to get me into a dress, never mind into a white one. And, once in the garment, it was all they could do to entice me to smile, to perform according to the moment's appropriate gospel. The wonder is, now, as I turn the album pages backward, that I did struggle into all those white dresses, that I did manage to live up all the pride and expectation, that I smiled and smiled through the rituals of womanly passage. I even had, if the photographs are to be believed, an air of presence, as though I were to this strange manner born.

And, of course, in many ways I was. Look at the baby picture. My happy face fills the frame. My fat chin nestles in the puckers and tucks of a fine, white chemise. The photograph is browning, but the frame still gleams. It's a baroque affair, thick with silver storks and songbirds nesting in silver marsh marigolds and roses. At the top is engraved: MARIE. At the bottom the words: ARRIVED November 7, 1943. WEIGHT 7 lbs. 14 oz. Flanking the statistics are a tiny silver scale and a miniature clock with its hands fixed at ten past eight. The frame is backed with thin, green marble. This is an early portrait

of the first daughter of a first daughter of Marie. This is a portrait of the third Marie in an Irish American succession. She will have, like a baptismal gift or a spell from a fairy godmother, a priveleged and happy childhood.

From this perspective, half my life was a series of presentations, all of which required me to wear white. I was baptised in a long white gown, all lace. I was wrestled out of my sneakers and muddy pants to don the white of a First Communion dress. Not the dress, nor the cuffed socks and shiny shoes, nor the manufactured curls designed to last the morning, nor the tulle veil fixed to my head with elastic could camouflage the scabbed knee or scarred lip. But I was lost in a sea of white suds--one spring blossom on an overblown apple tree, as perfect and as bruised as most of the others. The photos are charming. I was confirmed in white, with a red sash to symbolize blood. The blood of the Redeemer and the martyrs and soldiers of Christ. I took the name of Saint Agnes, though I'd have preferred (for this was a time of zeal and romantic missionary fervor) to name my alter ego for Maria Goretti who gave her life to preserve her virginity from a crazed, knife-wielding field hand. But my name was already Marie. So it was Agnes whom I chose when it was my turn--late in the game because I was very tall and the line was arranged according to size--to be slapped on each cheek by the Bishop. I can't remember why Agnes was made a saint.

My convent education called for white on many occasions. Although we wore heavy houndstooth wool uniforms with high blue socks, oxfords and long sleeved shirts demurely buttoned at the wrists and neck, there were ample occasions for The White Dress. The Feast of the Immaculate Conception. Reverend Mother's Feast Day. May Day. Graduation. Among others. All the processions! All the presentations!

Only now, as I observe the rituals of fall woodcutting and battening, of winter fire-tending and shoveling, of spring planning

and planting, of summer labors in garden and chicken house and pigpen and forest... only now do I realize that my whole life has been ritual.

The next picture in the blue leather book shows me smiling in a line of smiling debs. Susan Hannon looks uncomfortable. She usually does. Our fathers stand behind us like grooms. Our Catholic escorts will come and take us into the ballroom. Mine are named Andy Corbett and Dick Kelly. The three of us have very little use for each other.

Now we dance. First with our fathers. Then with our escorts. My slip is showing in this picture. I am smiling and dancing perfectly. Now I am seated at Table 11. In front of me the table fairly groans under the china and silver, the candles and linen, the flowers. I imagine that the meal was many-coursed, that it was interrupted over and over by foxtrots. I danced with my father. I danced with other people's fathers. Marina Forstmann's brother cut in. Marina's father is dead. My escorts bore me and I them. Lester Lanin is unruffled.

Now the Cardinal. Now we add a cascade of red roses to our white gowns. We greet him. We smile. We kiss his ring, one by one. This picture is in color. White with red. Are we still virgins?

There are more photos besides the one in the silver frame or the ones in the blue leather book. Most of them I have in boxes. They curl at the corners, and bear the marks of scotch tape. Here's one with me and Shawn McWeeney on swings at school. We ~~were~~^{are} pumping high on imaginary horses, one white and one black, and trying to push our swings over the top of the bar. Here's one where me and Mady and Diane are arm in arm... plotting something. The three of us ~~were~~^{are} always plotting. And here are brothers and sisters, nine of them, growing up. And here's my mother, always beautiful, and my father, always handsome. And me on a pony. And me at the beach. And me on a sailboat. And me in a tree. At a dance. At a ballgame. A wedding. An ordination.

A baptism. That baby is in my arms. That man is not my escort but my husband. We are all smiling.

The last two pictures in the blue book show me smiling and chalk white between two Nice Catholic Boys, between two black garbed parents. It ~~was~~^{is} not the last time I ~~was~~^{am} to struggle into a fine, white dress and be admired and photographed. It ~~was~~^{is} not the last time I ~~would~~^{will} dance and pose and smile. It ~~was~~^{is} not the last time that grown-ups ~~would~~^{will} nudge me into the molds they ~~had~~^{have} so lovingly crafted. But it ~~was~~^{is} the beginning of the end of it all.

One afternnon--a steamy southern afternoon in a close, unfriendly apartment building--I took all the albums and boxes to the incinerator. All the smiles and the friends, the baby books, the schooldays, the trips went into the fire. I saved some things. The book of the debutante. The book of the wife. Assorted snapshots of family and friends. But the bulk of the record disappeared that day. And I began to write in earnest.

There is a portrait tacked to an unfinished wall. It is September, 1981. The woman is pressed against a background of shedding trees and rocky ground. Her cheekbone is streaked with dirt. She is dressed in jeans and probably has a scab on her knee. Her shirt is white. At her neck she wears the arm of her companion like a makeshift decoration. She is not smiling, but her eyes have an antic light.

WHITE

Marie Harris
RFD #2
Barrington, NH 03825

... Marie Murray ...
... the first picture is of a young girl ...
... she is wearing ...
... On her wrist, a thick gold ...
... tells them to ...
... her eyes and voice bright with the memories--

45 YEARS AGO 1937

Miss Marie Brady Murray, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas E. Murray, Jr. was presented to society at a large dinner dance Saturday at "Wickapogue", their ocean front residence. Miss Murray received the guests gowned in a bouffant evening frock of white tulle. She carried orchids and 600 guests were present for dinner and 200 more came in for the dancing, music for which was furnished by Meyer Davis and his orchestra. Another orchestra, an Hawaiian group, played at the swimming pool which was brilliantly lit both by floodlights and under-water lights. Apertifs were served under a satin marquee. Water clowns and dancers performed at the pool. Fireworks climaxed the evening, ending with Miss Murray's picture and name done in lights.

Southampton Press; October, 1982

The book is blue leather, embossed in gold: Marie Murray Harris. Gotham Ball. November 23, 1961. The first picture is of a young girl mounting the carpeted stairs of an elegant New York hotel. She is wearing a white taffeta gown, her long neck set off by a scoop of tight pleats. White kid gloves reach above her elbows. On her wrist, a thick gold bracelet. She wears a white gardenia at her waist and a young man on her arm.

Whereas my mother remembers her white moments fondly, tells them to me much as she would tell me a story--her attention wholly fixed on those fairytale events, her eyes and voice bright with the memories-- I look back on the times I was white-garbed as times of defeat. It was difficult enough for my mother to get me into a dress at all, never mind a white one. And, once in the garment, it was all she could do to entice me to smile, to perform according to the moment's appropriate gospel. The wonder is, now, as I turn the album pages, that I did struggle into all those white dresses, that I did manage to live up to all the pride and expectation, that I smiled and smiled through the rituals of womanly passage. I even had, if the photographs are to be believed, an air of presence as though I were to this manner born.

And of course in many ways I was. Look at the baby picture. My happy face fills the frame. My fat chin nestles in the puckers and tucks of a fine, white chemise. The photograph is browning, but the frame still gleams. It's a baroque affair, thick with silver storks and songbirds nesting in silver marsh marigolds and roses. At the top is engraved: MARIE. At the bottom the words: ARRIVED November 7, 1943. WEIGHT 7 lbs.14 oz. Flanking the statistics are a tiny silver scale and a miniature clock with its hands fixed at ten past eight. The frame is backed with thin, green marble. This is an early portrait of the first daughter of the first daughter: the third Marie in an Irish-American succession. She will have, like a baptismal gift or a spell from a guardian angel, a privileged and contented childhood.

My life was a series of presentations, all of which required white. I was baptised in a long white gown, all lace. I was wrestled out of my sneakers and muddy pants into the white of my First Communion dress. Not the dress, nor the cuffed socks and shiny shoes, nor the manufactured curls designed to last the morning, nor the tulle veil fixed to my head with elastic could camouflage the scabbed knee or the scarred lip. But I was lost in a sea of white suds foaming down the aisle of the Church of the Resurrection, one spring blossom on an overblown apple tree. I was confirmed in white, with a red sash to symbolize the blood of the Redeemer, the martyrs. I took the name of Saint Agnes, though I'd have preferred (for this was my time of zeal and romantic missionary fervor) to name my alter ego for Maria Goretti who gave her life to preserve her virginity from a crazed, knife-wielding field hand. But my name was already Marie so it was Agnes whom I chose when at last I stepped up to the Bishop to be ceremonially slapped on each cheek.

My convent education called for white on many occasions. But for most of my long school days I wore the heavy houndstooth wool uniform with high blue socks, brown oxfords and a long sleeved shirt demurely buttoned at the wrists and neck. In this pedestrian garb I pursued my studies in English and Latin and Theology, French, science of a very rudimentary sort, physical education, art and speech and singing. Dressed like a proletarian worker, forbidden make-up or bodily ornamentation, I was curiously free to imagine my future as an explorer or doctor or professor or writer. Almost, then, to remind me of my intended destiny, came the feasts. The Feast of the Immaculate Conception. Reverend Mother's Feast Day. The May Procession. And a series of minor occasions when we all donned white dresses and veils, nylon stockings and high heeled shoes. There were flowers. And music. We made our singing way down aisles, often carrying flowers, and presented our white selves to beaming nuns, nodding priests, draped altars and approving statues. Over and over we practiced.

Over and over we mimed the ultimate ceremony.

The next picture in the blue leather book shows me smiling in a line of smiling debutantes. Our fathers stand behind us like grooms. Mothers and grandmothers whisper just outside the frame. They must be proud to see their girls arrayed like lilies decorating the mezzanine, awaiting their presentation to society, albeit a small, self-conscious society of newly wealthy Catholics. Still, some of us will appear in tomorrow's papers. Some of us will make better matches than our parents.

Our escorts arrive to take us from our fathers and lead us onto the vast ballroom floor. My two are tall, meeting my basic criterion. They are both Catholic boys--one blond, one dark-- and so meet the requirements of the occasion. Otherwise, we have little use for one another. But we make a handsome trio and we know our parts.

Now I am dancing with my father. Perhaps a foxtrot. Now with each of my escorts. Lester Lanin determines our patterns as surely as did the nuns. It is out of my hands what happens next.

This picture has me seated at Table 11, in front of me layers of linen and china, silver, candles, flowers. I imagine that the meal was many-coursed. That it was interrupted again and again by foxtrots. That I danced with other people's fathers and other people's escorts. Maybe I fell in love. It should have been wonderful.

The Cardinal arrives. My mother and father and grandmother greet him with warmth and affection. He loves them.

This photograph is in color. I am carrying a spray of the reddest flowers. I crumple gracefully at the Cardinal's feet, my gloved hand in his, my lips upon his ring.

The dancing resumes. We never tire. The blue book closes well after midnight.

All the rehearsals, the presentations, the slow and stately processions have led at last to the white reward. Open the green leather

album. On every page a photograph with Marie at its center, tall and white, wrapped in yards of satin like an elaborate gift. This is the last picture in a tableau; the reality does not matter. She is an elaborate gift, central to the piece. She is surrounded by white china, white cloths and linens, white towels, vases filled with white flowers, white candles, the white book of names, white sheets. She speaks bleached words over the white noise of her admirers. She is given to everyone like slices of white, white cake.

She is smiling. This is an early portrait of the first daughter of the first daughter of the first daughter: Marie. She will have, as a baptismal gift or a spell from a guardian angel, a privileged and happy childhood.

It was almost as though white was the emblem of my mother's expectation. A happy woman herself, she intended to raise me in her image, not, I believe, out of possessiveness or self-aggrandizement, but out of her unshakable conviction that the life of the devout Catholic woman was, in all its manifestations, a sublimely perfect one. Thus, I would kneel at her shrines, dressed in spotless garb, and I would attain, as she did, the rewards attendant upon (accorded to) women who

I am posed in front of a small table in front of a house either just before or just after the event. Not the layered First Communion dress, nor the cuffed socks and shiny shoes, nor the curls designed to last the morning, nor the tulle well fixed to my head with elastic can camouflage the scabbed knee or the healing scar just above my lip. I am clutching a tiny missal and a bunch of flowers. It is a together likely that I am also clutching a skate key, though this does not appear in the snapshot. Had I been asked, I could have recited perfectly every Baltimore Catechism answer--and question--in random order. For this I received a gold watch with a Speldel band.

*Lightly
over
over*

ixmnnixnxyxwxyxyxxyxpiessxexxyxalbxxy

She must have picked me out: Her bubble in the sea of white girls that foamed down the center aisle of the Church of the Resurrection. Her spotless soul. Her beauty.

women

Often, now, I ask ~~xxxxx~~ how old they are in their minds. Almost everyone has an answer. My answer is eleven or so. Remember eleven? You were allowed to climb trees or take off on your bike for a whole afternoon. You could wear anything as long as you were warm enough. You preferred sneakers and long pants. You tied back your unruly hair with a headband or a couple of barrettes. Your responsibilities were limited to leaving your bed made in the morning and coming home in time for dinner. And the world! The world was endless and friendly and continuously amazing. You could talk to whomever you chose. You could explore any woods or golf course or swimming hole. You probably had a dog in whom you confided, and a best friend. My best friend was Chrissy Downey and her father was a Republican and a Presbyterian and hung out a huge flag on Memorial Day. I was not allowed to go to her church, but when she spent Saturday night at my house, she could come with us to Mass. Chrissy and I made up a whole dance to match "The Waltz of the Flowers" and performed it best on a certain rug that had large, gray and brown patterns suited to our choreographic purposes. My mother used to ask me why I didn't play with that nice little Shawn, but Shawn was involved in dolls and of passing interest. Eleven. Free. Independent. Ignorant of distinctions between boys and girls. Eleven. The time to climb and ride and explore and dare. And win.

The WHITE piece focuses on:

the white occasions
the white expectations/symbolisms
the business of being female and having those expectations
put upon one internalized?

Baptism
First Communion
Confirmation
School Feast Days
Debut
Wedding

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Southampton Press; October, 1982

"The whole point of being a deb is to have fun."

Cornelia Guest/ NY Times; Wed., Oct.13,1982
(ad for PEOPLE magazine)

"She's been honored at fetes (attracting the likes of Brooke Shields and Gerry Cooney (in a satin jogging suit)), has breakfast at 1 p.m., is learning how to give dinners, and is deliciously happy. Also, "I'm interested in some of the diseases," she says, referring to what she sees as the serious business of debutantes--charity work.

WHITE ISLAND LIGHT

6/03
NA Lighthouse week

**It was at sunset in autumn that we were set ashore on the loneliest, lovely rock, where the lighthouse looked down on us like some tall, black-capped giant...*

Once or twice every year came the black, lumbering old "oil schooner" that brought supplies for the lighthouse, and the inspector, who gravely examined everything, to see if all was in order. He left stacks of clear red and white glass chimneys for the lamps, and several doe-skins for polishing the great, silver-lined copper reflectors, large bundles of wicks, and various pairs of scissors for trimming them, heavy black casks of ill-perfumed whale oil, and other things, which were all stowed in the round, dimly-lit rooms of the tower.

About ten years ago that old white lighthouse was taken away, and a new, perpendicular brick tower built in its place. The lantern, with its fifteen lamps, ten golden and five red, gave place to Fresnel's powerful singer burner, or, rather, three burners in one, enclosed in its case of prisms. The old lighthouse was by far the most picturesque; but perhaps the new one is more effective, the light being, undoubtedly, more powerful.

During a storm in 1839, while living at White Island, we were started by the heavy booming of guns through the roar of a tempest,--a sound that drew nearer and nearer, till at last, through a sudden break in the mist and spray, we saw the heavily rolling hull of a large vessel driving by, to her sure destruction, toward the coast. It was as if the wind had torn the vapor apart on our purpose to allow us this piteous sight; and I well remember the hand on my shoulder which held me firmly, shuddering child that I was, and forced me to look in spite of myself. What a day of pain it was!! how dreadful the sound of those signal guns, and how much more dreadful the certainty, when they ceased, that it was all over! We learned afterwards that it was the brig Pocahontas, homeward bound from Spain, and that the vessel and all her crew were lost.

**Celia Thaxter; Among the Isles of Shoals
1873*

As at the helm of brig or schooner
more than a century past

still now at the wheels and tillers of small sailing vessels
blown about these isles like gannets, gulls and terns

the sailor tunes an ear to the deep warning call
booming above the surf,
turns an eye to that one pulsing beam.

The light's foundation--battered and battering rock--is fear;
as long as it stands it warns us off
while still it guides us home.

Marie Harris June 11, 2003

WHITE ISLAND LIGHT

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Marie Harris June 11, 2003

FOG

In a fog. That's where you are when you can't get your bearings. In a fog implies a state somewhere between head-in-the-clouds and feet-on-the-ground. A mild, harmless limbo where you are greeted with expressions of perpetual indulgence. But fog really does look like pea soup: gray-greenish, opaque and slightly lumpy. Not only can you hardly see your hand in front of your face, you might actually put it there--your hand--as proof. As you alternate your gaze from compass to bow to the horizonless sea, there's the suggestion of a striped lobster buoy, a ghosting sloop, a bobbing gull or punctuating cormorant. You see other things in a fog too: a fully loaded tanker, say, bearing silently down on you out of the invisible northeast. Or a tugboat towing a barge, running lights nothing but pastel diffusions of green and red, and you caught between them, wanting to shout a warning. But shouting's useless in a fog. You cannot determine whence the answering noise might emanate; you don't even know where your own voice is coming from. Or going. Or what anyone could possibly do with information received this way.

PORTHOLES

*

Hail hammers the deck.
Green leaf-rags fly by.
Framed: a bleacher of gulls
on shore, hunched,
waiting it out like loyal fans.

*

Bow nudging into a northwest wind.
In the port porthole: sunset's outrageous oranges.
Framed In the starboard port,
a sky-ground of pinks,
soft blues and grays,
and the Barley Moon...
celestial STOP at the end
of a corduroy road of yellow light.

*

Dawn washes the glass with pale light.
Nothing stirring. No need to stir.

*

September afternoon. Glimpse
of winter. Departing terns.
Silver chips on a dark cumulus field.

*

Moored in the river
tonight, alongside a river
of highway, upriver
of bridges and buildings,
there is only light.
Without sound.
Without consequence.

*

Below, I glance up
from rinsing a tea mug and spoon
as an incoming tanker slides its length
in rusty segments across the glass oval,
close enough for me to see a sailor turn
and start back toward the deckhouse
four stories high. A common sight.

Then the Coast Guard boat. Flashing blue light. Siren.
Uniformed young men with guns.

*Please stand off! Please maintain
(what is he shouting? how many yards?)
distance from the incoming vessel!
Are you the owner of the boat?*

Yes. This is our own small craft
riding a fair wind on a slack tide
in the Piscataqua,
approaching White Island Light
on the afternoon of September 12th.

*Sorry to bother you.
Have a nice day, Skipper.*

WHITE ISLAND LIGHT

**It was at sunset in autumn that we were set ashore
on the loneliest, lovely rock, where the lighthouse looked down
on us like some tall, black-capped giant...*

As at the helm of brig or schooner
more than a century past...

*Once or twice every year came the black, lumbering old "oil schooner" that brought supplies for
the lighthouse, and the inspector, who gravely examined everything, to see if all was in order. He
left stacks of clear red and white glass chimneys for the lamps, and several doe-skins for
polishing the great, silver-lined copper reflectors, large bundles of wicks, and various pairs of
scissors for trimming them, heavy black casks of ill-perfumed whale oil, and other things, which
were all stowed in the round, dimly-lit rooms of the tower.*

...still now at the wheels and tillers of small sailing vessels
blown about these isles like gannets, gulls and terns...

*About ten years ago that old white lighthouse was taken away, and a new, perpendicular brick
tower built in its place. The lantern, with its fifteen lamps, ten golden and five red, gave place to
Fresnel's powerful singer burner, or, rather, three burners in one, enclosed in its case of prisms.
The old lighthouse was by far the most picturesque; but perhaps the new one is more effective,
the light being, undoubtedly, more powerful.*

...the sailor tunes an ear to the deep warning call
booming above the surf,
turns an eye to that one pulsing beam.

The light's foundation--battered and battering rock--is fear;
as long as it stands it warns us off
while still it guides us home.

**Celia Thaxter; Among the Isles of Shoals
1873*

From a boat, with a good pair of binoculars, you can see the cracks spidering across the outside of the 1859 structure. New Hampshire's only offshore lighthouse is built of brick on granite and painted white. Inside the ancient cylinder the fissures are as thick as a man's thumb and the sky and sea are visible through the aging wall seven bricks thick at the base. Each year the gaps widen and spread, split by the relentless action of wind, salt, sunshine, ice and water.

It's a funny kind of park because almost no one goes there. The rocky island is hard to access even in a boat. Build a dock and Nature washes it away. Early keepers slid boats from a boathouse down a 100-foot wooden railway and winched it back up. But the boathouse and the rails are gone. There is no well for water, no electricity. There is no sewage system. Storms wash away everything that isn't tied down. In the 1840s a storm carried off Celia Thaxter's hen house. In 1984 a three-ton boulder broke into the cottage. Hurricane Bob stole a chunk of the 1820s walkway and tossed an old cement signal tower into the sea.

It was at sunset in autumn that we were set ashore on the loneliest, lovely rock, where the lighthouse looked down on us like some tall, black-capped giant...

Celia Thaxter; Among the Isles of Shoals

About ten years ago that old white lighthouse was taken away, and a new, perpendicular brick tower built in its place.... The old lighthouse was by far the most picturesque; but perhaps the new one is more effective, the light being, undoubtedly, more powerful.*

*(1863)

LIGHTHOUSE, ISLES OF SHOALS

White tower rising
on a foundation of fear:
rock solid,
impenetrable as fog.
We mariners, now
as then, strain to hear
the monotonous lowing,
squint to see
the pricks of light
pulsing in the gray-dark air
at once warning us off,
beckoning us safely home.

©Marie Harris
for White Island Light
April, 2003

LIGHTHOUSE, ISLES OF SHOALS

White tower rising
like a silo over the breakers
on a rocky foundation
of danger and fear:

we mariners, now
as then, strain to hear
its monotonous lowing,
squint through fog to see
the pricks of light
pulsing in the gray-dark air
at once warning us off,
beckoning us safely home.

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for White Island Light
April, 2003

HOW TO BUILD A LIGHTHOUSE

The foundation is fear
solid as glacial rock
impenetrable as fog.

We all know rock
so let's look at fog
from the cockpit of a small boat
on its way from, say,
Portland to Portsmouth.
There's nothing
to see nothing
to hear that makes any sense

and what we need is something
to see something
to hear something
to assure us that we will not die
today, battered on rocks
we didn't see by waves
we didn't hear.

And this is where
the lighthouse comes in.
We can paint it white,
striped, give it
a caretaker's cottage
and a small garden...anything.
All we ask is that it return
our tentative cry, answer
with a voice that could be
our father or someone like him
calling us safely home.

Marie Harris

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"Lines from a Log Written
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I am warned, and warned well.
The light gleams a good mile off port,
sure of its circle, and I fear for us all
should we drift within. Our craft is anchored
beyond the swell, sails folded
a week or more if this wind persists.
At home, my wife must be by the bay window,
eyes searching the storm for a mast and lights.

Nowhere lonelier than on a ship just out of sight
of loved ones, and nowhere more dangerous
than at that fingertip that beckons
the tired, the weeks untouched.
How many ships foundered here in white water,
splinters siphoned to the bland shores,
dead floating face up on green skin?

If they find this log, they'll know I was afraid.
I draw my cabin's curtain and sit again
to the lamp, bent over curling ink:
my quill's beam has scratched the pages

with measurements, depths,
hope for safe waters.
I cast desperate thoughts to harbour

and homecomings: children running
from the houses, pointing out to sea,
warding off with screams of delight
the fleeting shapes of fatherless nights.

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WOODS

Women towing small children
walk in the woods, past my house
to the houses of women with small children.
The traffic is heavy on these paths.
I wave to them, but am invisible
behind glass, having found
the perfect disguise.

Sometimes, when I walk these paths,
I see a bright thing
among wintergreen--a blue
teething ring, its rubber worn
like river rock. The babies
are playing Hansel and Gretel
or the mothers are walking away
dropping plastic clues
that will never decompose.

WOODS

Women towing small children
walk in the woods, past my house
to the houses of women with small children.
The traffic is heavy on these paths.

Sometimes when I take a walk
I see a bright thing
among wintergreen--a blue
teething ring for instance,
its rubber worn smooth like river rock.
The babies are playing Hansel & Gretel,
or the mothers are walking away
dropping clues
that will never decompose.

Woods

Women towing small children
walk in the woods, past my house
to the houses of women with small children.
The traffic is heavy
on these paths.
I wave to them, but am invisible
behind glass, having found
the perfect disguise.

Sometimes, when I walk these paths,
I see a bright thing
among wintergreen--a blue
teething ring, its rubber worn
like river rock. The babies
are playing Hansel and Gretel
or the mothers are walking away
dropping plastic clues
that will never decompose.

YARDSALE

Lilac marks the cellarhole:
the deeper the color, the older the family.

Everything is going.
Molting poppies.
Roses from an old country
and the rocks they grew over.
Phlox in their single, wild shade.
Mockorange and the sour kitchen smell it masked.
Naturalized daffodils growing shorter every year.
Dog-toothed violets.
Wisteria.

Honk the horn
if there's no one around.

The Year with no Summer

Winter Nuclear Winter

~~In the night of our times
we need the soft and continuous light~~

For the brilliance of thermonuclear explosions are so short lived and blinding that when their radiance has been absorbed by the surrounding darkness, the latter seems more black--and our very capacity to see seems impaired.
(pp.69-70)

It becomes difficult
to stay curled on a couch
watching the first snow
soften the sharp edges
of the barren garden (the wintering parsnips)
the chicken yard
the pointed spade and the pitchfork
make sculpture of every leaf pile
every neglected summer tool...

like some interminable eclipse

snow on the corn
snow on the lilies
snow on the

the lovely part of this winter thing
is its feeling of pause
hesitation after the glut of autumn garden
before the clamorous spring

winter a colon
punctuating the incredible largesse
of the bursting earth

✓ a simple season

✓ a pause

an afternoon nap

possible to see
inches of light
more each afternoon
swelling