Navigating Disaster

> I lost two cities, lovely ones.
> --Elizabeth Bishop

> In the middle of the journey of our life I came to myself within a dark wood for the straight way was lost.
> --Dante Alighieri

While the floods of Katrina were rising, while my mother and sister, uncles, aunts, nieces and nephews were evacuating to parts north and east, my nineteen-year-old son was on a three-day bus trip west, to California, where he planned to live. He did not have a phone, and as he sat on the bus and looked out at the changing landscape and imagined the freedom and beauty of where he would live, he would have had little reason to be thinking about New Orleans and family there. With no access to television, his ears filled with the music from his iPod, he would not learn of Katrina until he arrived in California. He had decided, in an explosive moment a few months earlier, that he would cut me out of his life, that he would no longer think of himself as my son. Although I was used to his explosions and accusations, a recurring pattern of his teenage years, this last felt real in ways I could hardly articulate. An emptiness throbbed where once my heart had seemed to reside. His disappearance at almost the exact moment my birth city would flood left me stunned. It seemed I had lost two

worlds. Estranged from my only child, I staggered through those early days in a haze of disbelief as the situation in New Orleans grew worse day by day and the reality of Gray's leaving sunk in. I felt helpless; there was nothing I could do about either situation from my home in Pittsburgh, where I had moved to take a new job two weeks before Katrina hit.

At the time, I perceived the loss of New Orleans and the loss of Gray as synonymous, although literally they had nothing to do with each other. Both, I imagined, would be utterly changed if they did come back, so there was something about the loss of both that felt, in some way, irrevocable. Cities and sons were not supposed to be lost. Homes and children represent both our past and our future, two of the things that say we have lived, that we mattered.

Bishop writes, in "One Art" that some things are filled with the intent to be lost, and to look at the sad history of the care of the environment and levee system in New Orleans, one can only come to the conclusion that at least some of those in power in the city, unconsciously, perhaps, *wanted* to be lost, in the same way at some point one might say an alcoholic drinks to be lost. Hell, let's just live in a drunken haze and not think about the future. My son, too, wanted to be lost, had been trying to lose himself to me for years. It was only with this final trip to California, though, that I began to feel him as utterly lost the way, in those early days after Katrina, the city seemed lost. After years of not giving up, I finally gave in to Gray's lostness during Katrina. After years of trying to find a language to speak to him, I gave up hope that I would ever find that language, the way you give up on a crossword puzzle that is just too hard, that you realize you will never solve because you just don't understand the tricky language of the

clues, or you flat-out don't know the answers. The meaning of "New Orleans," too, after Katrina, seemed written in a language I might never fully comprehend.

How do we come to grips with disaster, with losses so huge they seem to take up all there is of consciousness? First, we remember. We remember, even though our memories betray us. Good things, happy memories, for this is what we really want to remember: our neighborhoods as happy and safe, not drug-and-crime-ridden. We want to remember the festivals, the carnivals, the music and food of an extraordinary city, not the racism, pathetic educational system, corrupt politics. We want to remember a son laughing, playing guitar, enjoying a book or some music you'd given him, a son hugging you. Not a son high on cough syrup or buzzing on Adderall, not a son so drunk police have to wait two days for him to sober up before he can see the judge for sentencing.

And then we rant and rave, we want politicians to die, we want to smash their faces and bury them along with our dead. We want to shake our child and say *you idiot*, we want our love alone to save our child. We are not rational. We do not wish to be rational.

And then, maybe, if you're like me, you write about it. The drowning of a city, the near death of a son. It doesn't help assuage the emptiness. The writing is like a drink you take to be able to bear the remembering.

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In May of 2005, the spring before Katrina, I traveled to *A Studio in the Woods,* an artists' retreat nestled on the forested peninsula of coastal Algiers

across the Mississippi from urban New Orleans. A former sugar plantation, the studio lies tucked amidst what is now a small tract of bottomland hardwood forest at the end of a dead end road that arcs and bends for several miles, following the movement of the Mississippi.

Now a project of Tulane University, *A Studio in the Woods* began as the homestead and studios of artists Joe and Lucianne Carmichael. For 30 years they lived in passionate intimacy with the forest, creating ceramics, wood and metal sculptures and furniture inspired by the natural world. The studio now focuses on nurturing other artists, especially Louisiana artists, and on restoring that forest. It is the only environmentally based artist's residency in the South.

I had come to the studio depleted by personal tragedies that had sapped my spirit, heart and mind. For the last year it had seemed to me as if my own life had been toppled as sure as New Orleans would be by the winds and floods of a hurricane for which it was poorly prepared. Nine months earlier, in the fall of 2004, the man who had been my boyfriend off and on for several years trespassed my home while I was away and attacked Gray, who was then 18. The boyfriend—let's call him R—was arrested and charged with assault and trespassing. Both my son and R had been drinking the night in question and both were arrested after the event—R for serious assault and Gray for insulting a police officer. Two long and painful trials followed, one public and one on the university campus where R and I both taught, and where I also filed a harassment charge against him. Restraining orders and no-contact orders were put in place and sometimes broken by R. Gray, whose face had been beaten

badly in the attack, and who was damaged in other ways by it, had to be hospitalized.

This complex drama and ensuing multi-layered grief consumed me for almost a year and was still deep in me, like a parasite, when I arrived at *A Studio in the Woods.* The charismatic personality of the Louisiana landscape got hold of me almost as soon as I entered the forest that makes up the studio, though. I would feel Louisiana reentering me, skin, eyes and mouth. Memories of a childhood lived close to the natural world would wash over me like a blessing. I had moved away from Louisiana years earlier and could no longer call it my home, but the familiar trees, plants, animals and insects, the sweep of the low-lying ground, the swelling of the levees and the slow, sexy movement of the Mississippi, the rich, yeasty air and humidity echoed, as it always did, with me, offering a rhyming for my own spirit. I was *home,* in the landscape I loved, and I felt safe, something I hadn't felt in a long time.

During my time at the studio I would seek to find respite and insight in the midst of the chaos of my life in the ways I always had: by paying attention to the natural world. As a young girl I had spent summers on the banks of Lake Pontchartrain, just three blocks from our home in Kenner, a small city just outside of New Orleans, looking at the polluted waters of the lake and wondering how catfish and crabs seemed to thrive in that pollution and on the dead, putrid meat I knew they scavenged from the lake floor. I knew how white and sweet their meat was. What mystery of alchemy did their bodies perform, I wondered as a young girl, to turn the detritus they fed on in those stinky waters into something good to eat? Whatever it was, I knew it was a trick I needed to

learn in order to survive the murky waters of my own family, which included a drunk for a father who would die in his fifties of cirrhosis, and a brother headed for prison and death in his twenties by drug overdose. And now it seemed my son had inherited their passion for self-destruction.

And so, it would seem to me in a few months, had New Orleans.

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David Baker, the environmental curator at *A Studio in the Woods*, takes me on a walk in the woods during my time there. His main project is to protect the forest from Chinese privet, also known as ligustrum, an invasive plant introduced to America around 1850, and now one of the top two invasive species in Louisiana. Joe and Lucianne hadn't noticed it on the property until the early seventies, and then just around the edges, in patches. Within 25 years, though, it would come to dominate the entire forest system. According to David the forest understory should be filled with diverse species like palmetto and fern, dogwood, various bulbs, but instead it's almost utterly dominated by the privet.

"This tree with the spatulated leaf," he says during our walk, pointing to a small one ahead, about chin high, "is a water oak. Water oaks have a kind of 'wait and see' strategy. This one, a juvenile, is probably about 10 or 15 years old. If there's no opening in the canopy, it doesn't grow, it just hangs out. Then when an opening occurs, it bolts."

He points out a couple of branches off the main trunk that have bolted and, it looks like to me, stopped dead in their tracks.

"Here's where it tried to grow and it hit the understory of privet and stopped. Again and again, because the privet grows faster." He's silent for a minute. "I actually don't know how many times a juvenile oak can bolt like this and survive."

David walks through the forest briskly, pointing out rare bulbs and ferns and trees there should be more of, if not for the privet. A camphor tree, a few persimmons, a few black cherries, one sweet pecan, a couple of red maples, a box elder, a few roughleaf dogwoods, one American elm.

And then the privet. We reach end of the area where he's cleared, and the end of the area where one can safely walk through the forest without getting lost in the privet. A ditch marks this southernmost border of the property. On the other side of the ditch, an unbroken wall of white flowering shrubs and a sickly sweet smell, a little bit like gardenias and honeysuckle mixed together. All you can see for as far as you can see are white flowering shrubs. I look at David.

"Privet?"

"Privet," he says.

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I will wind up spending much of my time at the studio writing essays and poems about the invasions of my own life—the way, for example, I let a violent man into my life, again and again, allowed him to take over my life and my son's. The struggle between the forest and the privet will give me a way to think about my own struggles and those of my son. But insights into that struggle are not all the forest offered.

Almost every evening I walked a part of the woods that had been cleared of privet and, according to David, looked the way it might have looked a hundred years ago. This particular part of the forest had never been cut down for sugar cane, so some very old trees dominated the canopy. Leaves, branches and vines shut out any light or color from the sky. Vines, ropy and twisted, ran up the huge trunks of oaks, hackberries and sweetgums. Some of the vines hung from the canopy, gnarled and warty, yet they seemed beautiful to me, survivors that wore their wisdom and wounds like scars. From the top branches of oaks a hundred feet high, they swayed with the slightest breeze. The diversity in such a small area was astonishing: hackberry, sweetgum, camphor, red maple, persimmon, water oak, live oak.

Spider lilies skirted the ditch at the far end of this patch of forest. It was almost shocking to come upon them, as if one had discovered a rare orchid after slogging for days in a dark swamp. They illuminated the forest floor the way a shaft of light from the canopy might. From afar, they looked like giant albino spiders, just a touch of creamy yellow at their abdomens, hugging the ditch in clusters, reflected and doubled in the ditch water, which was black as chicory coffee. Weird flowers, they announced that you were in a different place—no sunny-faced daises or happy sunflowers here. The spider lilies reminded me again that beauty can be born from putrification: these stagnant ditch waters. They remind me of the catfish and crabs of my youth; of how beauty can thrive in the midst of what may seem, to the untrained eye, to be chaos and darkness.

Perhaps, I thought at the time, this is a thing I need to relearn: how to see and remember beauty, loveliness. The reclaimed, privet-less part of the forest

restored in me a sense of hope. I began to think of how to clear away the mess in my own head, how to clear away the thoughts of R that crowded my brain like so much privet. I should focus on healing myself and reaching out to my son, I thought as I walked through the forest. David hasn't given up on this forest, and I shouldn't give up on my son. *I can be like that young oak*, I think. *I can wait like that. I can.*

The last evening I'm at the studio I dress as if I am going to visit a friend, and in a way, I am. Until then I had followed the recommendations of David and Lucianne to use bug spray, to wear closed-toed shoes, long-sleeves and long pants to protect against bugs, mosquitoes poison ivy, snakes. This time, though, I walk in my sandals and long, sleeveless white linen dress, vulnerable to the forest, no bug spray.

I bring a glass of wine with me. There's a slight onion perfume to the air because the wild onion in the meadow near this part of the forest has been recently mowed. The occasional tiny flag David has put up, pink, red or orange, reminds me this is a forest that's still healing. I don't know it at the time, but this will be the last time I will ever see this forest in this state. Most of the trees begin to feel close to by the time of my leaving will be toppled in a few months by the winds of Katrina.

I sit down, leaning against the trunk of a huge live oak. I set my wine glass on the ground, lean it next to a crawfish chimney to steady it. I take out my journal and begin to write. I want to see in a different way. I want to see individuals, not just the forest system. I want to see what Lucianne sees when she walks here, I want to know each tree as intimately as she, though I know it

will take years to get to that level of intimacy. *The lovely towers of oak trees,* I write, *the star leaves of the sweetgum, live oak, magnolia, the dwarf palmettos, even the poison ivy.* I write: *Shield Fern, Mosquito Fern, Resurrection Fern, Swamp Lily, Spider lily, Lizard Tail, Dragon's Tail, Stinging Nettle, Virginia Creeper, Hackberry, Giant Blue Iris, Southern Blue Flag*. I write: *Muscatine vines, trumpet vines, passionflower vine, black pepper vines, I want to touch them all.* Vines connect everything here, nothing is not touched by a vine. It's what marks this as a southern landscape, a landscape where things never die, they just hold on.

Saying the names, writing them, makes me happy. I'm pleased to know a little of this forest, to recognize plants and trees, their names. It seems important, though I'm not sure why. Maybe it's a way of honoring them that gives me pleasure. Maybe it's because I can be sure of their names in the way I can't be sure of much else in my recent past. I take a sip of the wine. I will drink with the forest. I pour a bit of wine on the floor of the forest floor and watch it darken the soil and soak into the earth.

Directly in front of the oak I'm lying against is a large sweet gum, cracked in the middle by lightening, suitable for climbing and sitting. It's the wound, the crack, that makes it a good sitting tree. Some catastrophe early on in its life caused it to grow like this. It's a strong, vigorous tree, only slightly deformed by its wound. I get up and walk around. The other side of this tree is split straight through to the ground. I don't know how it stands, but it does, a hundred feet tall, leaning, cut, wounded, but clearly one of the tallest, most vigorous trees here.

David sees the trees with the eyes of a botanist; there is knowledge in his seeing. But Lucianne loves them. I want both, knowledge and love. I want to look at my son with those eyes too. To see the system of the thing that makes him unhealthy, but to look with love as well.

Here is the Hollowed out One, and here's the Tall One That Leans to the Left then Curves and Snakes up to Sky. I try to draw what I'm seeing in my journal. Here's the One Split in Two. Here are the Two Grown so Close that They Kiss at the Top. I stop when I come to the Wide One, the one whose trunk is about thirty feet in diameter. Almost the whole canopy of the forest on this side is this tree, which must be five hundred years old.

As the sun slips below the tops of the trees I hear the jazz of owl and crow, the boats on the Mississippi, the crunch of the forest under my feet, the blues of the forest twilight. It's dark now, and I find my way, slowly, out of the forest, letting the cobwebs and vines and branches brush and pull at my hair and even draw blood.

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Eight weeks after my stay at the studio Katrina struck and, with the help of poorly engineered levees, subsequently crippled New Orleans. My family evacuated and was displaced for about a month. Floods destroyed my brother's home, two of my uncle's homes, and caused damage to my mother's (our childhood) home in Kenner. The structures of *A Studio in the Woods* also suffered damage, and the forest Lucianne, Joe and David had worked to protect and

preserve was drastically altered, the canopy split open. Lucianne and Joe will have to evacuate.

I returned to Louisiana in September to help with clean-up efforts. I arrived just in time for Rita, whose winds would eventually rip off the tarp I struggled to put up on my mother's almost shingle-less roof and would make the electrical poles in her front yard wobble back and forth, but caused no further damage to her home. I helped get rid of the stinky mess that was left in her freezer and refrigerator after a month with no electricity. I learned to use a chain saw to cut up all the fallen branches and toppled trees in her yard. I wondered, as I worked, how the studio's trees had fared. I wouldn't have the courage to call Lucianne for another month or so to find out.

In the spring of 2006, while Gray was still in California and still not speaking to me, I returned to Louisiana for about the fourth time since the flood. This time I wanted to visit the studio. By this time I had spoken with Lucianne and knew what to expect. She said they had decided not to move anything, to leave all the trees where they'd fallen.

Dave took me on a walk again through the forest, with Lucianne. As we walked into the forest that looked nothing like the forest I had come to know, downed trees all around us, light from the broken illuminating the destruction, he recited facts and figures I struggled to absorb: *less than 9% of the older trees went down, but 65% of the canopy is gone. Trees that have survived are loving the extra light. Some have put on five to six feet in height in the months since the hurricane.* My

heart was breaking to see all the ancient ones fallen, but David's voice was so matter-of-fact that it was hard to be too sad.

In fact, at a certain point I realized David didn't seem to be upset at all about what had happened to the forest. It occurred to me that the breaking open of the canopy might have made his job a little easier. It meant a more open playing field for the flora of the forest: the privet would have to work just a bit harder to dominate it, and would find more competitors now that there was so much light.

We stop somewhere the middle of the woods. "Several things can happen if you're a tree in a situation of high winds," David says. "First, you could be tipped up with your roots exposed. These trees probably won't survive. Water oak is particularly susceptible because it doesn't have deep roots. None of the cypress, which do have deep roots, were tipped up. The trees with the biggest canopies, usually the oldest ones, are the ones that fall most readily. The bigger you are the more likely you'll fall, and the more likely you'll die when you fall." He points out a large tree that's fallen into the pond near the studio building.

"You could also have your crown ripped off, which would make it difficult, but not impossible to survive. You could be snapped in two, but you could still resprout. You could be leaning, you could have lost a lot of branches, or you could be pinned to the ground. Just look." He points to a young oak pinned down by a larger one that has fallen on it.

"The thing is, that house over there," he gestures back to the studio, "it can't fix itself. We can't fix our bodies much either; we can't grow new arms if

they get lopped off. But trees can. Even trees that have fallen and will probably die may resprout before they die. "

"From the forest's point of view," he continues, "this 'catastrophic event' was not a disaster but an opportunity. The *disaster* occurred because of the built world, and because those engineers of the built world didn't pay enough attention to the laws of the natural world."

At this point Lucianne interrupts to tell the story of what happened when they returned to the studio after having evacuated for a month.

"When we drove in," she begins, "we saw the canopy was gone in many places, wounded in others. It was October, and I was shocked to see the Japanese magnolia Joe and I had planted years ago blooming. It's not supposed to bloom until spring. All we could see was devastation everywhere, bodies of huge pecans, hackberries, oaks, and yet here, in the middle, was this magnolia, *blooming*, blooming out of season. It seemed crazy, and I wondered what had gone wrong, what could have caused the magnolia to become so . . . confused."

Dave takes over. "It's the drive to create seed, a rush of seeds," he says, "to propagate more magnolias, to save the species after a disaster. If you don't get your leaves out there you don't get any energy. Trees," he finishes, smiling gently at Lucianne, "are never confused."

The last thing Dave points out is the young oak tree he'd shown me the previous year, the one that had tried over and over to reach the canopy but had failed because the privet had prevented it, the one that was possibly fifteen years old or more, but hadn't managed to grow over about four feet tall. I remembered

Dave joking at the time that oaks are like people in a way, they can hang out for a while in a dark place, like a bar, but eventually they have to have light.

The oak, now in a broken part of the canopy, had doubled its height in eight months: it was almost ten feet tall.

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I leave Louisiana this last time nurtured most by the visit to this forest, comforted by the knowledge that nature knows how to respond and even thrive in times humans understand as catastrophic. I leave Louisiana most deeply moved by the young oak that is thriving because of Katrina, the oak that might have died had the canopy not been broken open. There's something about that small water oak struggling to survive, something about the profuse blooming of the Japanese magnolia, something about the myriad ways the forest has set about healing and growing, finding ways to suckle what our human eyes can only see as disastrous change, that feels like the most sacred knowledge. Dave would say it's all about science; maybe he might concede calling this ability to rebound and thrive a kind of intelligence, the intelligence of botanical memory.

For myself, I have come to think of that oak as a familiar, a figure at once intimate and archetypal: a *navigator*, one who knows the way. I am sad for the loss of the big trees of this forest. But the forest reminds us that life is about change, and that any event that causes grief and death for a community can inspire life and rebirth within that same community. The clearing away of the canopy in the forest has created space for ones that were oppressed to thrive for a time, at least until the next changing of the guard.

What will grow now in the forest will not be the same as what would have grown had the canopy not been broken open, but growth there will be. In this way will the forest take in the hurricane and be mated to and marked by it. It will owe most of its shape, in fifty years, to this hurricane that broke open the light and allowed seeds and plants and bulbs that had been waiting so long in the dark their opportunity to reach out to sun.

And so goes my hope for New Orleans itself. New Orleans was the fastest growing city in the United States last year, although the population is still at about half of what it was before Katrina. The explosion of Katrina-inspired music, art, story, poetry and song that has erupted in New Orleans is staggering, and suggests that culture follows nature in its response to disaster. We are producing our own rush of seeds.

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My son finally wrote to me, almost a year after Katrina, the week our Uncle Larry died.

Thin, hipster, diabetic Uncle Larry, my mother's brother, had disappeared from our lives for many years, but reappeared about six weeks after Katrina, knocking on my mother's back door to see if she needed anything, as if they hadn't been estranged for many years, a silent knot in my mother's chest against him for some wrong he had done the family in the past. Wearing a straw hat and the only clothes he owned, he carried stories of Katrina that he told over and over to anyone who would listen. He had been trapped in his home, the water

rising, he had to make a boat out of a refrigerator to get to his neighbor's house where he knew there was a real boat, he commandeered that boat to get to a pharmacy where he broke in to get insulin. A racist, he found himself trapped with two Black gangs, and had to beg one for protection against the other. *That's what I'm talking about.* No food, no water. Finally navigating his way to safety, he lost everything: his garden and the house he was so proud of, and all—*all*—of his possessions. He watched his horses and dogs drown.

And so he just shows up one day, without calling, in my mother's backyard, bearing gifts of furniture others had thrown away, perfectly good furniture, or so he thought, that my mother could use. No matter that my mother had refused to speak to him for so many years we'd lost count. She opens the door and lets him in. She does not bring up the unspeakable thing, the thing that she still has not forgiven him for, and neither does he.

I see him when I next visit my mother, and he tells us the whole saga of his escape during the flood. He is hopeful; he and his wife, Margie, have bought a new house, he is putting in a new garden. My mother takes a photo of us all. He has his straw hat on, the one he wears when he gardens.

Larry's heart gives up a few months later; it was probably genetic as the men in our family have weak hearts, but Margie says he was never the same after Katrina, that he never got over the trauma of being trapped in his flooding house, watching his animals drown, watching all of his possessions, everything he owned, destroyed. She uses the photo my mother took of him in the straw hat for the death announcement since all of their other photographs have been destroyed.

I'm sad that Uncle Larry is dead, but I'm glad that Katrina brought my mother and him together before he died. I think she's happy about this too, although it's still too sensitive to talk about; the wound she kept ever fresh for so long is just healing over. Maybe that is one thing that huge disasters teach us: that the dark things we held onto for so long, the anger, the hurt, are nothing compared to these larger, almost unimaginable ones.

My son wrote to say he was sorry about Uncle Larry's death, although he does not remember him much. It is a good letter. He is sorry about a lot of things. He is doing well, he writes. I read the sentences over and over. I am so happy I am crying, and my tears are washing away his words, so I put the letter away.

Today, two years later, as I sit at my desk putting the finishing touches on this essay, Gray is visiting for the summer, and lies sleeping in the third floor bedroom of my house in Pittsburgh. I moved away from Iowa three years ago to get away from R, whose roots were too deep in that place, the place too small for us both to thrive. I have not forgiven him, but Katrina also shocked me into focusing my attention elsewhere, though I carry the wound of him with me, and probably always will, as the ancient sweetgum split by lightening carried that wound with it for the span of its life.

Gray and I spent the day yesterday white-water rafting on the Yough, a wild river just outside of Pittsburgh. He's not out of his own woods yet, but I can see growth, and desire for stability. He is writing music and has an electro band that's getting some attention and, more importantly, giving him something to live for. We have, over the last year, inched our way back, very slowly,

together. The son I have now is not the son I had fifteen years ago. Neither is the forest I came to love in Algiers the same I came to love. And I do not think New Orleans will ever again be the city my mother and I grew up in. There will be a city, but it will not be the city that nurtured me.

And perhaps that is as it should be. Only gods do not change.

Because the forest was, after Katrina, so changed as to be unrecognizable, I see this essay, in part, as elegy for it, my own jazz funeral for a place that provided succor and inspiration for me and many others, and played a large part in the beginning of a process of healing for me.

This forest was, for a short time, my mother, teacher and muse. I felt protected under its canopy, moved by its pathos and beauty, given insight by its own struggles and those of the humans trying to protect it. I would bring with me this forest when I left, and when the narrative with R ended, when the canopy of what we were was finally, and utterly, broken open, I would use whatever light had entered to grow the good in me that had been waiting all those dark months. When I closed my eyes at night those weeks after I left the studio, the weeks before Katrina, I would hold in my mind the image of the young oak, the one that kept trying to grow, kept sending forth shoots only to be stopped by the privet, but did not give up. *I don't know how many times a juvenile oak can do this,* David had said, *before dying.* Many, I hoped.

I look out my window at a beautiful summer day. Everything the sun touches seems stunning, precious, caught in the warmth of this rare, caressing

light. It is like the gaze of beloved on beloved, that gaze in which we appear most fully revealed, most beautiful, most loved. The sky is so blue it almost hurts. There is nothing ironic about this kind of sky; it's like a child showing you some vibrant picture he's colored, smiling and proud *pay attention!* — For just this moment I'm fully present in what is now, the summer day calling me away from the past and into this world where, right now, anything at all seems possible, a world where I know I can call upon visions of split, cracked, towering trees and the startling light of swamp lilies.