

MARC NIESON

Every December

There is a moment in the movie *Field of Dreams* when several figures first emerge from the edge of a cornfield—that handful of banned ballplayers from the notorious World Series of 1919. They step out like ghosts from between the rows of shimmering stalks, still out-fitted in their old uniforms and dated haircuts. At first their movements are slow and disoriented, their eyes squinting at the outfield's sudden light. As the soundtrack jokes, what they walk out onto isn't heaven but only Iowa. Yet these athletes do ultimately receive a kind of redemption on that rural ball field; a chance to replay and undo their past. A chance at resolution.

In the summer of 1991, I similarly arrived in Iowa as if out of left field. I'd driven in straight from my native New York, and while my past wasn't necessarily criminal, it was a bit spotted. Ostensibly I'd come to attend graduate school, yet behind me lay a growing list of aimless vocations and false starts, a virtual diploma's worth of detours and detachments. Foremost in my mind was a long on-again-off-again relationship whose end I couldn't seem to bear. Sybil and I parted ways on a Lexington Avenue sidewalk, once again without coming to any spoken conclusions. In truth, I couldn't say whether I left running toward or from resolutions.

En route to the Midwest, however, I resolved to change all that. Driving through mile after mile of lush young cornstalks can bolster one's sense of new beginnings. I crossed the Mississippi River at the very spot Joliet and Marquette first documented three hundred years earlier, beyond which stood a bright road sign reading "IOWA: A Place To Grow." There and then I made a vow to live in the country. To really try and make a fresh and committed start.

After registering at the university, I started searching for a place to live outside of town. I drove down every gravel and back road I could find, but quickly learned rural rentals weren't all that easy to come by. No easier than an apartment in Manhattan. Still, I kept combing the county and knocking on doors until finally I heard about an old one-room schoolhouse on a plot called Redbird Farm.

Upon arriving, my knees nearly buckled. The schoolhouse looked like some picture postcard—square and squat with clapboard the color of worn work shoes and a green ivy clinging to its stone chimney. Inside, the living space was spare yet its four walls vaulted a full twelve feet to the ceiling with more windows than you could count, and each one framing what was truly the building's grandest feature—its views. The schoolhouse perched atop a hillside overlooking some five hundred acres of Redbird's rolling woodlands and pasture. Heaven *was* in Iowa after all.

I spent the first couple of months giddy as an unleashed puppy, exploring every curve of crag and creek and timber in my new backyard. Each morning I'd set out to diligently map one section of the property, but invariably got sidetracked. The texture of some leaf bottom, the coo of a bird, the scent of musk—everything and anything bore investigation. At night I'd lie awake in my loft bed and memorize the precise names of these foreign flora and fauna. It was as if I was learning a new language, grafting a new identity.

5 December. Sitting here before the fireplace, the whole room flickering with the slow dance of shadow and flame. My back's killing me, but it felt good to split my own firewood. Slight break in the weather earlier today. A thaw. Woodswalk muddy between patches of snow. Hopping from one to the next, just me and my islands...

Drove to Kalona's grocery for bulk grains today. Found peach preserves and sorghum, too. Saw Amish draft horses turned out to graze on corn stubble, children's boots on the stoop outside their schoolhouse. Pulled over to catch dismissal. Kids walking the muddy roads, some in buggies. Books in arm and wide brimmed hats and bonnets. Once they all left, stole a peek in the school window. One-room like mine, yet still crowded with desks and a squat woodstove in one corner. On the blackboard, arithmetic and bible verses. Across the road, a young boy stood staring at me. Hands deep in his pockets, suspenders taut. Beyond him dresses fluttered on the laundry line—all black, blue, or grey. Dishtowels, corsets.

That next week, I shifted my research indoors. My schoolhouse must have its own history, I thought. As it turned out, the State Historical Society was located nearby in Iowa City, not Des Moines,

a holdover from pre-statehood days. While in town one afternoon for classes, I stopped in at its library.

I soon learned the Iowa Territory's first one-room schoolhouse dated back to a log cabin in 1830, built by eager residents of a young settlement that only lasted three years. The abandoned building was subsequently squatted in, then eventually cut up for firewood. By 1858, the new and growing state passed legislation requiring each township to open its own schools and provide free elementary education. Soon one-room schoolhouses were sprouting up across the land. At the turn of the twentieth century, Iowa led the nation in rural schools, boasting nearly 14,000. Now I just needed to find my schoolhouse.

With the help of a librarian I was led to a topographical map of Johnson County, dated 1900 and divided into its twenty townships. I ran my fingers over the map's grid west of Iowa City until I found a familiar-looking road. At that time, it was dubbed Old Man's Creek Road, and the road followed the creek and the creek branched to the north amid a cluster of ridges and trees, the same as it did near Redbird Farm today. That point on the map was nestled in the southwest corner of Union Township.

From there I went to the microfilms, scanning county superintendent records. I felt like I was in a detective novel, rummaging through dusty files and shelves for any lead or clue. One roll referenced "Teachers' Annual Reports." I asked the librarian.

"Oh, we've got the originals of those," she said. "Back over here."

We walked to the rear of the library and she climbed a stepladder toward a high shelf.

"How far back do you want?"

"I don't know," I said, "as far back as you've got."

One by one, she pulled down five cumbersome ledgers and lay them out on a wooden table. Each was tied with twine and bound in faded soft leather. Some of their corners had worn through, raw threads of cloth peeking out. I felt hesitant to touch them, yet slid the most recent book toward me and undid the brown knot. Lifting its cover, I almost expected moths to float up into the air. What I found instead were yellowed pages, hundreds of them.

I flipped to the sections marked Union Township, then back through the years until in 1956 I found a name I recognized—Jim Walters, a friend I'd met through bird-watching. The page listed

him as eight years old, his sister Julie, aged ten, on the line above. There were thirteen students in all that year, ranging from ages five to thirteen. The preceding page recorded their teacher's signature and the school's heading. My schoolhouse had a name after all: Union No. 9!

Near the bottom of the page was a space for suggestions concerning supplies. The teacher, perhaps not yet knowing 1956 would be Union No. 9's last year of classes, wrote:

- 4-6 new chairs to fit the height of our recitation table
- a hectograph
- some cement or gravel around door
- less mice!

I continued paging backwards, checking the Walters' progress through previous years and ledgers. Their names soon disappeared into other names, the records sifting back through the Second World War, the Depression, WWI. With each successive ledger the schoolmarms' calligraphy grew more and more flowery, their names murmuring like music—Ila Wade and Dorothy Driscoll, Luella and Consolata, Daisy, Grace. Meanwhile, the pages themselves became more and more brittle, separating from bindings, fading, crumbling. In 1911, all the names gave out. I turned the page forward again.

January 8, 1912. Union No. 9 is born into history.

I closed my eyes and tried to imagine the day. January 8th—must have been the dead of winter. Probably well below zero, with wind chill. Leaning into that wind comes Anna Rohret, the new teacher, arriving at the schoolhouse just past dawn to start a fire and haul water from the creek for the children's washbasin. She sets down the bowl and the bucket, pauses, then reaches for the broom. Though she'd come and anxiously swept the floor last evening, she does so again—so many mice droppings. She sits and stokes the stove, quietly watching her breath in the air, trying to melt the snow from her skirt bottoms. She is thinking about her forenoon lessons. Thinking about what she'll do with her \$42 pay come the end of the month.

At 8:50, she glimpses Maynard and Hazel Thomas making their way up the road, all bundled up and holding hands, their red mittens standing out against the snow. She jumps up and writes her

name clearly on the blackboard. She steps back, then adds Miss, and the date. When the children finish kicking their boots against the stoop, she shows them in to the cloakroom and where to set their dinner pails. At five minutes past nine her other two students, the Halstead children, still haven't arrived. She glances out the window one last time and decides to begin. She clears her throat and says, "All right children, this is your new Jones Reader. Now turn to—"

"—wake up. Wake up," said the librarian.

"Huh?"

"It's closing time."

Slowly I gathered my pen and papers then drove home in darkness. By the time I rounded the last bend toward the schoolhouse, flurries were falling in the cast of headlights. Once inside, I hung my coat on a hook and turned up the thermostat. Too cold now for just the fireplace. I pulled over a chair near the floor grating and warmed my toes. The floor joists creaked with the heat. The wind outside, pressing against the walls.

13 December. Snow again. Three days in a row. What the hell am I doing out here? And yesterday, the start of second shotgun season! Two neighbors, boys really, flushed and wounded a buck near dusk, but it forded the creek's north branch onto Redbird and they lost the deer's trail in the dark. This morning, an early knock on the schoolhouse door—my landlady and the two boys. We split up into pairs in the 60-acre woods, thrashing through the multiflora and snow drifts for well over an hour, following spare blood trails that only lead us in circles. Finally heard two shotgun blasts—a signal. Down near the gate we found the other boy waiting. The buck's severed head lay in his truck's bed. "Only thing worth salvaging," he said. "Coyotes."

I couldn't stop thinking about the deer, and later that day went back out to search the creek banks. The surrounding floodplain was frozen hard. Just walking made my knees ache. Here and there I soon noted splashes of red coloring the snow. They reminded me of all the cardinals, who hadn't left for winter. My landlady told me that was how the farm got its name. Back on a cold and snowy January morning in 1964, she and her then-husband bought its first parcel and were walking the land noticing puffed red birds in the bare branches, decorating each tree like Christmas ornaments.

She also told me it wasn't unusual for deer to circle back to their territory, even if shot there. The pull of home, she called it. At the curve in the creek where the buck had crossed onto Redbird, the water ran swift, its banks barely frozen. I tried to gauge the width and icy depth, the panic that propelled the deer across it. By the time he returned, he must have lacked the strength to re-cross and lay down to catch his breath. And on this bank he remained, a few feet shy of the water, beneath a leaning mulberry.

I stood beside that spot, beside what remained of the buck. Overnight the coyotes had eaten most of his hind quarters, a few splintered ribs poking through the torn muscle. One exposed femur showed signs of a smaller animal's gnawing and there were also fresh bird prints amongst the strewn hair. The chain of scavengers was already defined and clearly urgent in winter. I felt dizzy and sat back on a tree stump to catch my breath. I watched the drifting clouds overhead, the circling crows, and wondered whether the coyotes had arrived before or after the buck expired. Glancing back at the creek's dark waters, I wondered what was still pulling me back to New York. About that spot on Lexington Avenue.

15 December. Sunrise at 7:40 this morning, and no further south along the ridge than last week. Still between the ninth and tenth pine tree. Sometimes it's like time really can stand still out here . . . The dusks already lengthening, though. The solstice nearly upon us.

Jim Walters was the logical place for me to start tapping some oral history on the schoolhouse. He still lived only four or so miles away, by now with his own family. I drove over and found his front yard littered with projects-in-progress: half-finished birdhouses, garden trays stockpiled with acorns and oak saplings, outcroppings of salvaged wood and discarded radials. His flagpole's halyard chimed in the wind beneath a Greenpeace flag, the family dog wagging its tail by the front door. Inside, the house smelled sweet with yeast and baking. It was only midmorning, yet Jim had been up working since 5 a.m. His flannel shirt blanched with sifted flour.

"You sure you got the time?" I asked.

"Oh, yeah. Want some tea?"

"Sure."

I spread photocopies of the Annual Teachers' Reports on the dining room table while Jim fetched two mugs. He poured the hot water, then leaned over the reports.

"Oh my, look at that. 1956—Mrs. Smalley. There's Karla and Grace, Emery. Yep, there I am. Huh, a C in Geography."

"Department too," I pointed.

"Yeah, well . . ."

He sat down and ran his freckled fingers over the old records.

"So what was the schoolhouse like back then?"

"Well, as you can see there were only five or six families worth of kids at most. Nothing like today's schools. No buses. No cafeterias. We'd walk to school and carry our own lunch pails."

"And the classes?"

"The teacher would work with one age group at a time, but of course we were all picked up bits and pieces. I remember there was a lot of self-study time."

"So the older kids helped you."

"Sometimes. Mostly they'd just terrorize us. Oh you know, with stories. Snakes in the privy. Teachers with warts. Stuff like that." He paused for a sip of tea. When he lowered the mug, tiny crystals of honey glistened on his bushy red mustache. "I remember we had to get polio shots round about then. '55, '56. They told us the needles were so big they'd go in one side of our arm and come out the other."

"Anyone get polio?"

"No, and there weren't any snakes either. At least not in the outhouse."

"What about toilet paper?"

"Hmm, seems likely but I don't recall. Maybe we used hickory leaves or the wish book."

"Huh?"

"The catalogue, from Sears," he said standing up. "Excuse me a sec." He walked back through the kitchen and out the door. I could hear tins banging out on the porch where he kept his oven. He baked sourdough for the food co-op in town, the best they offered. When he re-entered there was a fresh loaf in his mitt.

"Apple butter on this?"

"Yours?" I said. "You bet."

He brought a Ball jar and knife to the table and broke off a piece of bread with his hand. Steam rose in the air, the aroma alone thick enough to swallow. We buttered our slices and ate in silence. On the mantel behind him spread photographs of his wife and son.

Jim scanned the old reports, smiling. "Of course the best part of school was recess. Catching ground squirrels and going on the swings, sledding in winter. Oh, and helping tend the Yoder kids' horse. They came to school in a buggy. We'd each take turns feeding and watering her. She was a great old horse."

"The kids drove themselves?"

"You know those Amish, they do everything themselves. And do it right, too. Clean living. Clean farming. Forty to eighty acres tops, not like the rest of these chemical farmers. Did you know the DNR did a study a few years back and Old Man's Creek rated the highest concentrations of insecticide in the whole state? We tried to pass a bill that would restrict spraying, but not a single farmer would give even twenty feet of crop for their children's sake."

He was on his feet again, moving back toward the kitchen.

"If you told anyone ten years ago that they'd be drinking bottled water today, they'd have laughed at you. Here, in America?! Naw, that's only in places like France or Italy."

I followed him out to the enclosed porch, where he pulled out another loaf of perfectly golden bread.

"Internal clock," he said pointing to his head.

All around me were stacked sacks of flour and dusty seed trays. In the spring, Jim planted annuals for a local golf course, and in autumn harvested his own pumpkins and potatoes. Baking was his winter's work, and he did everything by hand from mixing and kneading to bagging and delivery.

"Yeah, those Amish, they've got it right. They're the ones you should be talking to. Still using one-room schools. Had to go all the way to the Supreme Court to resist consolidation. You know, that's this country's biggest problem, not family values or crime, but mobility. The average person moves every three years now, and not just across the street but across the country. So of course there's no sense of community or accountability. There's no damn commitment."

Jim's voice had started to rise, cracking almost. I averted my gaze, as his sermon could well have been for me.

“Oh hell, now you’ve got me up on my soapbox,” he said. “Here, why don’t you bag some of those.”

I set down my pad and reached for a loaf. Its crust was still warm yet firm, its shape filling my palms. Something solid and simple you could count on, sustenance. I slid the bread into the bag and set it on the table. Nearby, Jim bent over his formed dough, gently scoring, then sprinkling them with well water.

17 December. Last night, a sudden warm front swept through the bottoms. It was like the whole world was married to ice today, and me here on this hillside, frozen in some capsule of time. Hiding . . . 11 degrees without wind chill tonite. Out splitting more firewood beneath the moon. The logs shattering apart. Commitment? I can hardly even spell it.

19 December. Met with Marcia Smalley today—Union #9’s last teacher, 1954–56. Told me some more tidbits, like how today’s fireplace wall was once all blackboards. How the kids would raise one finger to talk, two to go to the outhouse. And how “every other Yoder child had curly hair.” Her husband was home, too. He himself a student back in the 30s. Remembered Maynard Thomas, one of those first four students from 1912. Said he farmed nearby for years then retired to pump gas in Iowa City. Used to wipe bird shit off the car windshields saying, “Damn glad cows can’t fly.” Evidently his widow’s still alive and living just down the road from here. Got to interview her!

As it panned out, Maynard’s widow wasn’t much help. Sweet and spry for her ninety-three years, unfortunately her memories played out like tape loops, repeating themselves every twenty minutes or so. From what I could gather, her griefs outnumbered her gratu- tudes. Nowadays she was housebound and relied on neighbors to bring her groceries every Thursday. She served me juice and cookies and together we thumbed through some old photographs.

She kept picking up one of her husband, in which he stood beside their barn door. Kept tracing the outline of his hat and shoulders. The photograph’s hues had long worn to grey, one of its corners torn. Then she’d gaze out the window at the dusk, as if expecting him in from chores any moment.

Among my bookshelves at the schoolhouse was wedged an envelope. Inside lay a number of photographs—all of Sybil. Sybil at Coney Island or in Central Park. In Italy and Corfu, Oslo, the Outer Banks. From time to time I'd pull them out, mostly late at night. Sybil, still standing beside me as beautiful as ever with her dark untamable hair, her earrings still dangling. This spare handful of our shared days, these frozen moments. And yet, we were together for years. Years.

At the Johnson County Recorder's Office, I found more clothbound ledgers from the past. Huge tomes so heavy they were stored on shelves made with built-in rollers to help slide them in and out. Aptly labeled "transfer books," they listed past transfers of land titles. I located the pertinent volumes and began trying to reconstruct the puzzle of past grantors and grantees of what was now Redbird Farm. Beside me flitted young law clerks and real estate agents, eagerly flipping through the stacks to photocopy current deeds, then rushing out again. Meanwhile, I remained for days, methodically turning pages and watching acreage shift hands and shapes back through history. What precisely I was looking for I couldn't say, but I kept digging.

One deed I unearthed, dated the 6th of July 1911, marked the very sale of land for the schoolhouse's construction—"8 x 10 rods conceded to the school board in consideration of the sum of \$50." Other still older handwritten deeds were sealed March 4th, 1874, January 12th, 1869. Transcribing the successive landholders' names confirmed how I'd heard the Old Man's Creek valley was settled—the Germans grabbing the rich bottomland first, the Irish arriving later and fanning out. Prior to 1860, all land transfer records disappeared. Courthouse fire, said the entry.

Perhaps my most exciting find was a small leather surveyor's journal, of which the Recorder's Office staff seemed only marginally aware. Its soft cover was vanilla brown and rimmed with faded gold stenciling, its surface smelling like barn dust. Inside lay a trove of beautifully hand-scripted field notes and sketched plats. Most of the surveyor's reference points were trees: ash and elm, birch, twin white oaks, a couple of posts in the prairie, wood culverts, a slough. I'd seen photographs of such men at the Historical Society; out in

the field with their Vernier compasses and thick coats, tiny icicles in their beards.

I stood there in that office with its mauve carpeting and Venetian blinds, the steady hum of its Xerox machine behind me. All the sundry clerks were busy in their own little cubicles, typing or scribbling away, tearing off receipts, cross-referencing. All their actions so small and seemingly banal, yet here were the modern caretakers of history. Balancing the books. Taking account.

20 December. More snow came during the night. Only a couple inches, says the radio, but surfaces can be deceiving. Morning drifts outside the window. Everything stark and deep. Eleven horses on the opposite hillside, all facing East...

Earlis Rohret was a neighbor who farmed a mile west of the schoolhouse. I'd heard he had a history book of his own—a thick family genealogy compiled by a distant cousin. He showed it to me one day when I came inquiring after Union No. 9's first teacher, Anna Rohret. Among the varied pages of his family branches, we found references to several Annas, only two of whom were distinct possibilities. One was married, which by 1912 wouldn't have necessarily excluded her. In the 1800s, schoolmarms were typically forbidden from marriage, from even dancing at socials. Women rarely even taught school until the Civil War made it a necessity.

With noted pride, Earlis recounted how Rohrets were some of the first to settle this Old Man's Creek valley. His great-great-grandfather, Wolfgang Bauer Röhrert, was one of few Bavarian soldiers under Napoleon to have survived the Russian campaign of 1812. Determined thereafter to depart Europe, he and his wife landed at Baltimore on Rosary Sunday in October 1840, and by November 11th trudged through three feet of snow up the fertile Old Man's Creek bottoms. As the family book tells it, Wolfgang asked his wife, "What do you think of the place?" to which she replied, "Well, there is wood and there is water, and where there is wood and water we can always get along."

Their sons went on to fell and split the timber that framed the first state capitol in Iowa City, most probably hauling it along the gravel road due north of the schoolhouse that still bears the Rohret name. Today, however, Earlis's only son worked with computers in

another state, and though Earlis didn't admit it aloud, I could sense that being the last in a long line of farmers weighed heavily on his old shoulders. What would become of the land? Who would be its titleholders and caretakers?

Yet in truth, who's to say the Rohrets had right to their land to begin with? At the time Wolfgang Röhrert first staked his claim, the valley was still technically tribal land. In fact, I'd learned "Old Man's Creek" derived from the native name "Push-i-to-nock see-po." According to legend, nearby Sauk villages along the Iowa River would send old men, women, and children up creek to hide in times of imminent danger. George Catlin's maps of 1840 attribute most of the Iowa Territory to either Sauk & Fox or Ouisconsin Indians, though varied tribes had made "Iowa" their home ground—the Potawatomi, the Mesquakie (the preferred name for the Fox), the Ottawa, Sioux, Ioway, and Winnebago. Of them, only the Mesquakie had the prescience to pool resources and purchase land for a settlement that remains today near Tama, Iowa. All the rest were forced elsewhere by treaties serving westward expansion.

Like any given day in the woods, the natural flow of history is also in part about predation, about coyotes. The dispossessed, if not outright swallowed, eventually get written out. Plowed under. Buried. Yet the past, howsoever muffled, still strives to be heard.

There is a story I've been told about my father. That for the first two and a half years of his life he never uttered a word. His family had already nicknamed him *de shtimmer* (Yiddish for "the mute"), when one day he suddenly spoke. A complete sentence, in fact. "Mr. Edelman, the iceman, is here," he said, and then without any ceremony, continued to converse like the rest of the world.

Decades later, by then married and a father, he began suffering from chronic depressions. He'd spend weeks, sometimes months silently sitting on couches; to me, something of a cipher, a sphinx. As a family, we would similarly keep quiet about his illnesses, keeping them safely closeted within the house.

Some years after he died, I learned a truth about his father—my grandfather. It seems he didn't die of a heart attack as I'd always been told, but one morning went into his hat factory and hanged himself from the rafters. Whatever his reasons, he chose to choke back the words. Perhaps it had something to do with why he first

ran away to America. Or perhaps with silences his father, or even his father's father, chose to carry. Of these, I can only wonder. All such secrets lay safely buried with them across the ocean.

Still, I don't doubt the natural flow and loss of history, both personal and collective, are equal parts denial as well. We are all of us descendants of ice.

21 December. Sybil's birthday. Somewhere in New York, perhaps at this very moment, she is walking down some sidewalk. Perhaps even on Lexington Avenue, wearing a dark dress and heels, or, more likely, warm tights and boots. Her coat pulled tight, her cheeks flush. Maybe I should call. I could, just pick up the phone and dial. Nothing's stopping me. Just a simple call to say happy birthday and . . . and what? What could I possibly say now? I'm sorry? Goodbye? Hello? And anyway, who would I be calling for—her or me?

Later. Had to somehow get away today, so drove to the Indian mounds near Amana for solstice. But couldn't even locate them among the snowdrifts. Finally I just wandered back to the car. Too damn cold.

Still later. Nighttime and candlelight now. The wax dripping beside this journal. The moon above finally falling west. This long day will pass. This longest of nights. This longing. No, I will not take out that envelope. Not tonight.

Geology shows that North America's last great glacial advance drifted only halfway down into what is now central Iowa, retreating completely by 10,000 BC. Over the next several thousands years, the spare conifers that migrated down with the ice were gradually replaced by oaks, then prairie grasses. While no evidence of Paleo-Indians has surfaced near Redbird Farm, food-grinding implements some 5,000 years old have been unearthed elsewhere in Iowa.

One afternoon, however, I found an intriguing relic in my Redbird mailbox. Jim Walters's older sister sent me copy of a black and white photograph she'd taken within the schoolhouse in the early spring of 1956—during those last couple months of that final class of Union No. 9.

Back uphill and indoors, I held the square photograph at its edges and scanned its silvered surface. Spanning the upper frame was a

segment of the alphabet, the letters J-U stenciled in upper and lower case, block and cursive. Beneath them hung a string of paper-doll snowmen and a small American flag. There was even a snippet of assigned homework chalked on the blackboard's slate:

1. Tell how each of the following factors resulted in destruction of fur bearing animals:
 - a. People in Europe wanted furs
 - b. Early settlers cleared land
 - c. Early settlers needed food and clothing

Yet what drew my attention most was in the foreground, where the children stood all bunched and posed. On the picture's flip side, penciled in a schoolchild's slanted scrawl, were the names of the Yoder children, Mrs. Smalley, and all the other students save for one little boy. Perhaps he was sick that day.

I spent a lot of time flipping that photograph over and back, matching faces with the names of classmates I felt I'd come to know. Children who till then were only names now stood before me, forever frozen in time yet so alive: the light glancing off Mary's eyeglasses, Grace with a finger in her mouth, Helen crossing her thin arms. I counted three forced smiles, a pair of eyes looking askance, and several scuffed knees. Behind them all towered Mrs. Smalley, her lipstick dark and precise.

For days I studied their faces, trying to spot clues in their young cheekbones as to how their lives had taken shape and where they had wound up. Something telltale in each gaze that might augur the choices that had become careers or divorces or children of their own. The kind of choices we all come to celebrate or regret.

Around this same time I revisited the site of that fallen buck under the mulberry tree. By now the deer's remaining ligaments had dried like hemp, its hide frozen stiff within the ebb and flow of snow and scavenger. I'd been duly documenting this gradual decay, but that day I just stood there and wept. Look closely at any skeleton and you'll learn a fundamental lesson—bones don't lie. Pick one up and you hold thousands of years of evolution in your palm. Every curve and indentation, every strut line or spur or scar, all chapters in an ongoing story of adaptation and survival, trial and error.

But bones don't tell all either. Like most remnants, they're only skeletons of the truth, which of course can never be wholly reconstructed. More and more, I sensed history was not like a detective novel after all, with its perfectly plotted clues and culprits, its pat resolution. Along the way there were more denials than confessions, more repressions than revelations. If anything, history was more like a great glacier—unyielding, unfathomable, and, in all truth, sinking a little deeper day by day.

So then, should I now expect you to bear some neatly wrapped-up Hollywood ending to this narrative? A pristine cutaway to Jim Walters, patiently awaiting the spring thaw to press tiny acorns into the still cold ground. Or a deftly inserted final scene wherein I'd find the courage to return to New York and somehow bump into Sybil on Lexington Avenue. The flutter of snowflakes over our heads and some lilting soundtrack fading into a perfectly scripted dialogue between us, in which all would be spoken and forgiven.

No. No more alibis or last-minute redemptions here. It was high time I take responsibility for the cold facts about my running away to Iowa—that my not making a choice was in itself a choice. And that the consequences for one's actions, or inactions, are all too often shouldered and shivered in silence.

24 December. Christmas Eve. The windows coated with crystals tonight. Like looking through a veil. Will it always be like this? Our inheritance destined to be our legacy?