

I have been at an awkward pause betwixt stages—in the interstices, *spaces that intervene between things*. As an example, the overalls I purchased when I moved here in 2004 now repose as remnants in the rag cupboard while my newest replacement pair still marches to its own factory-programmed drumbeat, which is clearly out of synch with my own and therefore cause for cussing and chafing and run-on sentences.

Just yesterday I was between a rock and a hard place, attempting to pound fence posts into the obdurate ground of these hills. I vacillated between chiding and congratulating the ground for its resistance, the very quality that so effectively deflected the plow.



In the last five months I have hung suspended between any number of poles: ice and fire; reading books and writing books; drought and flood; torpor and restlessness; strangeness and familiarity; salty snacks and sweet; learning and teaching; a paucity of brown eggs and a surplus thereof; solitude and hospitality.

I dangled for several months between autumn and spring, waiting for a winter that half-heartedly showed up in December, but had not packed for an extended visit. A small valise containing two light snows and a few nights worth of sub-zero temperatures is not the luggage of a guest intending to stay long.

*How is it*, I have asked myself repeatedly, *that an easy winter could be so hard?* I expect drama out of the cold season: hardships, extremities, tales that don't require exaggeration in order to be tall in the telling. I expect to be driven to shelter by the weather, therein to take refuge for guiltless sleeping, prodigious eating, knitting up the loose ends of the year, and digesting the fodder of the busier seasons (mixing a fair number of metaphors in my spare time, of which I typically expect to have a-plenty in the cold months).

Our neighbor in the hermitage down by Little Cedar Creek said it best: *I feel cheated*. Yes, cheated in the way one feels after picking up a hefty and promising book at the library—intriguing cover, clever title, scintillating back-jacket blurbs by reputable writers—only to discover that after the first rousing chapter (in this metaphor, the month of December) the writer lost momentum or nerve or apparently remembered that the so-called *average reader* does not prefer complex sentences and muscular words and decided abruptly to write the rest of the book (January through March) in a vastly diluted and over-sugared style.

The rest of our winter, after a promising December, was not in the least like a rich book crammed with complex sentences composed of multipartite words guaranteed to require dictionary consultation—in other words, it was not challenging in the least. Our winter, instead of reading like a William Faulkner novel, read like something by Erich Segal (love means never having to say *Bababadalgharaghtakamminarronkonnbronntonnerronntuonnthunntrovarrhounawnskawntoohoo-hoordenenthurnuk*, as James Joyce, by contrast, dared to on the first page of *Finnegans Wake*).

You can see it yourself, can't you? I'm in between being qualified to address an audience and serving a prolonged sentence in solitary confinement, talking only to myself and my Muse.

This winter, instead of resting, I was wrested repeatedly from my suspended animation by bright, mild days that demanded that I be out and doing. I felt like a disgruntled bear forced to survive on a series of interrupted naps when what I really craved was prolonged hibernation.

On my birthday—January 3—the high for the day was 64°. Ironically, I received a Scottish wool sweater, high-tech micro-fiber long underwear, clever glove liners, and some spiky contraptions you strap on your shoes when you need to navigate on ice. I did not get to use any of my new cold-weather gear this winter.



If foul conditions had chased me indoors as anticipated, perhaps I would have written a story to go with a picture I took of an egg's fate when allowed to freeze in the henhouse. I might have composed a Latin lullaby from the names of sleeping prairie plants and woven you a textual tapestry depicting their secret life underground.

*Perhaps I would...I might*—I didn't. And to be fair, my recent silence cannot be wholly blamed on the weather. Something else has mysteriously altered.

I've had a thousand ideas in the last five months, but been stuck in the cleft between loquacity and silence, between expectation and reality, between old definitions and new understanding. I have been tangled, it seems, in a knitting bag full of brightly-colored skeins of conceptual yarn and cannot for the life of me extract a single image or idea without also fishing out a complex snarl of interwoven strands.

My recent reading list has in no way simplified the tangle of interconnections—*Earth Community, Earth Ethics; The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos; The Dream of the Earth; The Universe Story; The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*.

Precious little seems straightforward any longer.

When I first began collecting impressions here on this matchless prairie, each appeared to me as a solitary thread of simple brilliance, which I blithely set about weaving into the fabric of story.

*Write about it while you can*, I remember Jane saying, *because you won't always see it this way*. I'd heard a similar caution before, and as I recall it had to do with being in love: *Enjoy it while you can; the feeling won't last*.

These cautions reminded me of an aphorism—you only get one chance to make a first impression—of which I note that the reverse is equally true: *you only get one chance to be impressed for the first time*. After that, new filaments and layers of information and emotion begin accumulating between you and the object of your attention. The impression changes—it is no less deep, but it is infinitely more detailed and fraught with ambivalence.

This is the pearl of truth forming 'round the grit of discomfiture in my recent interstices. After two years on the prairie, I have crossed an invisible demarcation line or threshold, for I suddenly recognize that I am no longer what I was. But what am I becoming instead?

These related themes of *interstice*, *border* and *threshold* call to mind the word *liminal*, which has much to do with transitional stages. *Limen* is Latin for threshold. Liminality connotes a sense of being temporarily suspended between worlds. Perceptions of time, space and other boundaries become gauzy. Old assumptions and rules fall away; new possibilities tease (or torture) the senses. Liminality also implies the stripping away of status or self-definition: poised on the threshold, you are no longer who you were; you are not yet who you will be. Birth and death are the two most notable and dramatic universal experiences of liminality.

Jean Shinoda Bolen compares the liminal state with what occurs inside a cocoon. The caterpillar must be completely dissolved before resolving into a butterfly; for a time it is neither a caterpillar nor yet a butterfly, but instead, a fertile slurry of possibility.

For the last two years I have been incrementally dissolving. I was no longer a Communications Director and not yet a rancher. I was neither an urbanite nor a full-fledged member of the rural culture. No longer a Missourian, not quite a Kansan. Etcetera. For a time, I felt that my great gift was as a bridge across these divides, but as the dissolution process advanced, my bridge more or less collapsed into the liminal river that ran between what I had been and what I would eventually become.

I am attempting here to trace the course of an interior process that I may well have no business trying to document. And yet, by endeavoring to articulate such a mysterious progression, I am mimicking what goes on within the shadowy recesses of the chrysalis: I am crystallizing the raw materials of my metamorphosis into some version of a butterfly.

Until I started writing this, I did not understand the nature of the preceding five month's silence. I had not explored the geography of the interstices. Upon reflection, however, I can now look back and see where I missed the fleeting shadows on the grass—my unfurling wings interposing themselves between the sun and the earth.

I ought to have noticed my wings one morning this spring as I watched a cow and thought to myself (seamlessly integrating my patiently-acquired knowledge with my newly-blossoming instinct) *I wouldn't be surprised if she calved by tomorrow*. And there at her side the next day was the new calf I had anticipated.

My nascent wings were unfolding one afternoon in April as I took the measure of a vagrant prairie fire and concentrated all of my being on *thinking like fire* so that I could stay one step ahead in a deceptively dangerous ballet in the grass. And I knew (I suddenly *knew*) how to dance with fire.

Like a sailor whose every inclination is attuned to the tides, this newly-emerging version of my self is aligned to the light of the seasons, to the departures and returns, to the annual deaths and resurrections. I am no longer just an observer and recorder of the signs, but a participant in the cycles—a co-creator in the life of a place that has dissolved, absorbed and transformed me.

