

Deep Roots

DEBORAH SEILER

WRITER'S COMMENT: For my travel writing class (ENL 100NF), Jamie Jensen told us to write about a place that held great significance to us. Immediately, I thought of the place that had been constantly on my mind: my family's living room, where my mother had been spending most of her time for the past six months, when not in hospitals, during the rapid progression of her brain cancer. I was initially reluctant to use the topic, wondering if my living room could even qualify as travel writing. But Jamie emphasized how broad the genre was, and that its only common goal is to convey a sense of place by observing what we see and experience in a location as intimately as possible in order to bring it to life—something no two people can do exactly the same way. I realized that tying a deeply emotional experience to such a limited location would be a creative way to emphasize the significance of both. The end result is that I can elevate something as mundane as my living room to convey themes everyone can relate to, of changing generations and the pain of such change. I wrote this piece two months before my mother passed away in early March, and I'd like to thank Mr. Jensen and my classmates for their understanding during that time. Most of all I thank, for everything in general, my mother Judy, my first and favorite editor.

—Deborah Seiler

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: It's a clear sign of her talent that when I found out Deborah Seiler had won a *Prized Writing* award I had to ask: for which piece? In her many fine essays, each week she took our ENL 100NF travel writing class to a different place and experience. Early on, for an assignment to write about where she comes from, Deborah wrote an evocative story about an unexpected topic: swimming pools, and what they mean from the point-of-view of a competitive UCD swimmer. The next week, in recounting a summer trip to study the rainforests of Panama, she leavened her observations of exotic flora and fauna with insightful and frequently funny impressions of the strange things people get up to in such a fertile, cross-cultural environment. Midway through the course she submitted this prize-winning piece, which is among the most heart-rending stories I've read anywhere. Asked for this assignment to set aside narrative drive and concentrate on describing a significant scene or setting, Deborah wrote in intensely personal detail about the living room of her family home. With unflinching honesty, she places a familiar inventory of treasured objects, mementoes, and the moments they remember against a devastating backdrop: the impending loss of her mother to cancer. It's a moving and poignant piece, and a vivid reminder of the power of non-fiction prose.

—Jamie Jensen, English Department

OUR HOME is in the middle of a valley, which is in the middle of Auburn. The living room is the center of our home, and my mother is the center of the living room.

It is a fairly typical living room. There is a blue loveseat, a fat leather easy chair and a high-backed wooden rocker. There is a bookshelf in one corner stacked with my father's references on gardening and naval history. A large portrait of my great-grandmother as a young woman hangs next to the bookshelf. She wears a heavy coat with a fur collar and a small hat, and stares calmly sideways out of the frame at the leaping cast iron fish that serve as bookends. Her profile looks like mine: the same curve of her nose, same small ear, same long cheek, and even the need for glasses. She went on from that photograph's moment to marry an English-American Quaker and raise nine children on a farm in Minnesota. My grandfather was the only child with blue eyes; even his twin sister's were brown. Strangers and lovers alike compliment me on the family's hand-me-down dark blue eyes.

A large window behind the loveseat looks onto our front porch and lawn, but most of the daylight filters in from a white French door on the adjacent wall. This door has been kept locked since last winter (or was it the winter before?), as it opens onto a meter's drop of empty space. There used to be a deck there, albeit a rickety one. I had to watch the cracked gray boards carefully when I placed sun tea on its edge in the summer. A few boards had warped upward and pried out their rusty nails. They would slam down and spring up if I stepped across them, and I worried whether any boards might decide their support beams weren't reason enough to remain horizontal.

The deck was demolished when the old oak sprouting through its center was uprooted and thrust aside by a fierce windstorm. That was the same winter a 100-foot tulip tree behind our house was blown over, but I was more surprised at the oak's fall. The oaks of the Sierra Nevada set their roots deep below the parched clay—not so the alien east coast garden ornament, which spreads its roots fast and greedily to support its flight towards the sun. The tulip tree was sawed back down to a tall stump and pushed upright with a neighbor's bulldozer to sprout again. But the oak was lost and reduced to firewood.

Our old upright brown piano dominates the wall to the right of our entertainment center. Its keys are dusty with disuse due to my residence in Davis; a few rejected music books remain on the bench, unobtrusively reserving my presence in the room with Chopin's etudes and a yellowed book of Clementi sonatinas that is scribbled over with instructions by both my mother's childhood teacher and my own. An ancient accordion and tiny, brittle bible that belonged to my Hungarian great-grandfather gather slow dust on the top of one corner. The center of the piano holds a jumbled cluster of my younger brother's plaque awards for swimming: Championship High Point Award; Sierra Marlins Swim Team Most Motivational; Sierra Nevada Swimmer of the Year. I don't remember what they all are anymore. At my last trip home, a couple of silver medals, an Australia T-shirt with Olympian autographs, and a boomerang waited on the bench to be reclaimed as David reorganized after his return from a competition with the USA Junior National Team. The medals read 400-meter medley relay and 200-meter butterfly. I don't want to know who he had to beat to get those. But my favorite item atop the piano is an old red hurricane lamp. My mother accidentally broke its twin as a child and felt guilty enough to mention it 40 years later, but I like its loneliness. It reminds me she broke things too. It makes me feel better about accidentally snapping her old homecoming queen crown when I was eight.

There is a hutch next to the doorway where all the black-and-white photographs of my dead ancestors lie in state. There is a stiff wedding picture of my Quaker great-grandparents, an informal photograph of my Finnish great-grandparents on their farm, and the postwar wedding picture of my maternal grandparents (progeny of the farms). My grandmother is blond and round-faced like a bombshell 40's movie star. My grandfather wears his military uniform. There are also small, stony-faced photographs of my German great-grandparents, set oddly as paperweights. When my ex-boyfriend and I had an "old west" sepia portrait done last Valentine's Day, my mother placed the photograph on the hutch to match the colors, but only for a moment. We both said, "No, that doesn't belong there," and she took it down. That hutch is for people who built their lives together. The boy in my photograph was gone by April, a sudden victim of relationship fear so strong that he was not

even willing to pray with me that terrible week they first told me my mother was going to die. Young love is the tulip tree—rising and crashing fantastically, then recovering again. My mother is the oak: seeming to have immortal strength, but taken unexpectedly, leaving empty space beneath our feet.

My mother, long the heart of our home, became bodily the center of it. “Brain tumor” was the first news I got off the plane from study abroad in late July. My mother had lost 15 pounds in two weeks from nausea. She would get dizzy and weak, she began to have seizures, and I was not strong enough to hold her up. I drove her home from work the last half-day she bothered to try. I have since watched in shock as my mother aged 30 years in 6 months, plunging from superwoman to mindless and dependent. We moved an adjustable hospital bed alongside the French door last fall to spare her movement as the debilitating effects of chemotherapy and brain tumors took hold. There are adult diapers under the bed, and an oxygen machine behind the side table to help her breathe. There is a wood and cloth screen in one corner, with a portable toilet behind it, to which we support her slow and labored steps. Our coffee table was shoved into my room to make room for her wheelchair.

I have known every object in the room but these since childhood. The room reflects the living of my past and present family, and now it is also a room for dying. It is strange that the iron fish leap just as incorrigibly in the gray January rain over my mother’s sleeping form, her limbs wasted and her belly and face swollen, as they did when she sang her way through a Saturday afternoon’s chores. She sleeps because cancer, drugs, radiation, chemotherapy have taken her body. She sleeps because the tumors have stolen her mind. But she has a heart strong enough for ten ordinary men. She forgets everything, but not my voice. Even as she sinks farther and farther into silence, her face still lights up at mine. And she is our center. She is the oak.

I GO BACK to this room every weekend, but for the rest of the week I stay in Davis finishing what she gave me the opportunity to start. There is a note over my computer that I brought back from home. It is written on a scrap of notepaper in cursive confused with extra

loops and letters. It reads, “Dear Debbie—Off course we love you verry muucch and hope you will itl hornpkle. Love, Mom & & Dead.” I don’t know when she wrote it, but it must have been a few months ago, before she entirely lost the ability to piece together letters. I found it in my bedroom, and wish I knew why and when she wrote it, and what hornpkle was supposed to mean. There’s no way to learn that now, but I’ll keep it forever all the same.