



Sway

BY LIZ BLOOD

A creative writing exercise in the Vermont hills fires a memory of wind, home, and family.

ISAT SLEEPILY in the back of an old chapel as a creative writing professor lectured about being emotional on the page. My elbows rested on my knees as I alternated between listening and daydreaming. We were in Vermont, in the foothills of the Green Mountains—a far cry from the Oklahoma plains that surround my hometown.

Mild midsummer Vermont required no air conditioning, and nights were cool enough to call for a jacket outside and a thick quilt if you slept near an open window. Some 1,600 miles behind me, I had left a stifling heat so pervasive it penetrated the walls of my house. It's a scene all Oklahomans know well: grass turning to straw; sweat beading instantly on your forehead as you step outside; dogs in a perpetual, sluggish pant.

Downhill from the campus was the rest of sleepy little Montpelier, the capital of the state and the epitome of a New England town. The neighborhoods are set in steep hills, the Victorian homes painted in pastels. On the Fourth of July, everyone hangs bunting and carries tiny Old Glories, and men march in the town parade dressed like Thomas Jefferson and George Washington. The place is decidedly not southwestern.

As my attention drifted between the professor's words and the shapes of

clouds lolling over the lush lawn outside, my professor asked, "What are your immortal wounds?"

I snapped to.

He explained that the term comes from a Robert Frost quote: "The right reader of a good poem can tell the moment it strikes him that he has taken an immortal wound—that he will never get over it."

We were given a few moments to inventory these touchstones. As I put pen to paper, I was again twelve years old and in the back seat of my mother's silver minivan as we made our way home from her father's funeral in Lawton. It had been a typically windy day in southwestern Oklahoma, and my eyes still stung from the sand and dirt blowing around the grave site.

Wind ripped across the highway and buffeted our car down Interstate 44 in the direction of Oklahoma City. I stared out the window at lonesome trees on bare farms, their branches bending. I alternated between watching the trees, the band of gold hugging the highway, and my mother's face in the rearview mirror.

I had yet to witness the sweep of a life, how slowly and quickly it seems to go in retrospect. I tried to glean some kernel of knowledge from the unspoken hurt in my mother's eyes.

Occasionally, the relentless gusts pushed our van into the other lane, and each time, she corrected the steering wheel. Every sway on the windy highway felt like a swell of emotion. My mother's hands were steady, her eyes broken.

I was afraid to look too long at her face. I was more afraid to speak to her, anxious about her pain and my inability to ease it. I sensed, maybe for the first time, what it is to feel your heart torn between two places. I wanted both to stay in the car and comfort my mother and to escape to the world outside my window. My mind held my heart ransom while the landscape let it be.

On that day, I received a threefold immortal wound later recalled in that chapel on a Vermont hill: the silent tears that, for eighty-seven miles, fell from my mother's eyes; my powerlessness in the face of them and death and the wind; and the slow-rolling landscape that witnessed her grief and soothed mine.

LATER IN THE week after the lecture at school, my mother took me and a few classmates to dinner in a nearby mountain town to celebrate our graduation. We rode together, her behind the wheel, me in the back seat.

My eyes swept back and forth between her eyes in the mirror and the forested hills that wrapped our course. It was impossible to see anything past the next bend in the narrow road.

Were there storm clouds on the horizon, just there through the trees? Or only a lone, meandering cloud passing through a sherbet-bright sky?

I knew kaleidoscopic skies and foundation-shaking storms waited for me in Oklahoma, where I hurt, heal, grow, and change. On those winding roads, I understood that in the final sunset of my life, and my mother's, the land would hold me again. 🐾

ILLUSTRATION BY J.J. RITCHIEY