

Just as each fingerprint is unique, everyone has a personal story. These stories are usually told as though they are true. But since they change, they only lead to more stories, while their source—the underlying presence that is common to each of them—is where truth is found.

My story begins in the wilderness, where I lived with my family in total seclusion. Neither my mother nor my father could hear or speak. Though my two brothers and I could hear, we never uttered a sound. Within that silence, where not a word is found, our parents taught us how to communicate with one another. Because I first heard my younger brother long before he was born, I assumed we were taught the skill while we were still in the womb.

By stilling my mind and directing my attention into the silence, I could hear my family members within a subtle vibration that stirred within my chest that was distinctly audible to me. The communication between us was so fluent that we seldom supplemented it with gestures. My father's manner of expressing himself was purposeful and my mother's, though almost incessant, was comforting. My younger brother's was whimsical and impetuous, whereas my elder brother seldom communicated, but when he did, his manner was succinct. I had no way of keeping secrets unless I diverted my concentration from my family. Yet when directed elsewhere,

my attention could be easily mustered by their calls.

Our home was a shelf carved into the side of the tallest mountain in the region. The rectangular area stretched about twenty paces from the mountain's rising face to the shelf's brink and forty paces along its width. It sat just above the treetops that rose from the valley floor.

During the coldest part of the year, we slept in a cave just above the west side of our home. Inside the cave, along its farthest wall, my father had dug a crypt in the earthen floor in which we stored dried food. Each year he made the hole a little deeper to accommodate the needs of his growing family.

Though the cave provided ample space for all of us, my father could sit upright without having to bend his neck only in its central area. I would often sleep along the face of the cave where small ventilation holes allowed air in from outside. Even so, after we slept together through the night, the enclosure would become so stuffy that the bitter, cold morning air outside was surprisingly enticing. The narrow passageway of the cave, through which we had to enter sideways, would have restricted my mother's entry when she was almost due to deliver my younger brother. Fortunately, he was born during the warm season when we all slept outside.

The sky was the ceiling of our home on the shelf and was furnished with an assortment of boulders and logs that sometimes served as tools and other times as tables or stools. An asymmetrical row of orchard trees—three yielding nuts and two bearing fruit—grew along the perimeter of its southern face. I imagined that my parents had planted them because they were not to be found elsewhere in the forest, and they required watering as the weather warmed. The orchard trees shaded our home during the hot weather and invited heat from the winter sun by shedding their leaves.

A creek that was fed by a perennial spring bordered our home on the east side. We grew herbs and some vegetables on its banks and used its water for drinking and cooking.

Our home was indistinguishable from its surroundings. Even the orchard trees appeared to have adopted the characteristics of the native flora. As guests of the wilderness, my family lived in accordance with its ever-changing designs.

Pit

*Burning embers of desire
Dazzle with titillating allure
Yet swiftly fade to ashen dust*

A combination fire pit, stove and oven had been sculpted into the mountain face bordering our home. Boulders, clay and rock slabs formed alcoves, making the pit look more like a craggy outcropping than a multifunctional cooking device. It provided places to set things, such as roots for roasting, a pot for boiling water and grain loaves for baking. Smoke and heat circulated throughout its interior chambers before dissipating through a chimney, which was affixed to the embankment. Coals that smoldered throughout the night allowed us to resurrect the fire in the early morning by adding only a few sticks.

Each day we reverently tended the fire and cleaned its abode. My brothers and I wandered far in search of a particular gnarly shrub that had dense wood with just enough oil to make hot, long-lasting fires. After gathering dead branches from the shrubs, we placed them in random disorder near the fire pit.

One exceptionally cold morning, my family huddled around the fire to keep warm. It was so cold that I could not even feel the sunrays touching my back through the icy

wind. My younger brother, who had just learned to crawl, positioned himself at the edge of the pit and reached toward the coals before turning away. We watched him but remained motionless. Though sensing our concern, he innocently faced the fire again and grabbed a burning coal. Shocked by the sensation, he dropped it and turned to us. Tears streamed down his cheeks as he searched our eyes for understanding. Suddenly, a grin enlivened his face, and he began waving his arms vigorously in the air. Within moments, he was smiling so broadly that his ears wiggled.

Following his rite of passage, my younger brother was more apt to heed our advice and displayed a greater sense of caution with new encounters. Even the root he teethed on to relieve the soreness of his gums was respectfully examined before he drew it to his mouth. Also, when he looked into the fire pit at the start of each day, he would flash a quirky grin toward it in the same way he acknowledged one of us.

Clay

Where all is provided

Soft and warm

The newly feathered chick

Flees its nest

Never to return

Until my younger brother could stand upright by himself, he was never out of arm's reach of my parents. Once he began walking, however, he was free to roam to places he had previously been denied, such as the cliff marking the edge of our home. We each took turns accompanying him to wherever his whims called. I always looked forward to my watch because, as inquisitive as he was about his environ-

ment, I was equally curious about his reactions to it.

Once he placed a fuzzy caterpillar on his hand and smiled as it crawled up his arm. He then placed it on his nose, delighting when it moved toward his mouth. Setting it on his tongue, he became even more amused. When he placed the caterpillar on my face, he watched it crawl into one of my nostrils. From the glint in his eyes, I imagined he was enjoying the sensation as much as I.

We did not interfere with his explorations and made sure that food and water were always within his reach. Often his clumsiness challenged my impulse to run to his aid. If I saw that he was about to slip off a rock or walk into a thorny bush, I restrained myself because I had seen how quickly he learned from his bruises. Yet when he came to me for solace, I never denied him.

One afternoon my brother was playing in a mud hole in which our father had mixed rock dust, clay and water to make pots. My brother soon became covered with mud. As the day progressed, the sun baked it into his hair and onto his skin. Noticing his predicament, our father rubbed mud onto his own face while continuing to make pots. When the hardening clay began to irritate my brother, our father filled a large basin with water and sportively began washing himself. My brother copied him by splashing and dunking his head in the basin. After our father replenished the water several times, the clay had softened on my brother's skin and rinsed off.

Without our father's direct assistance, my brother had washed himself except for several clay clumps that remained tangled in his long hair. However, he seemed to enjoy the sensation they made whenever he turned his head from side to side. Several days later, after the last clumps of clay had crumbled from his hair, he returned to the mud hole and replaced them with more.

Inspired by her son's discovery, our mother formed chains of symmetrical clay balls on single strands of her hair. Her ornaments caught the interest of my younger brother, who soon learned how to form clay balls in his own hair.

Feet

Darkness concedes to light

Becoming what always was

Just before the sun dipped below the farthest mountain range, my family would gather together at home. Squatting, kneeling or sitting in a circle, my parents and elder brother gazed steadily into the undefined space between them, becoming so still that our silent dialogue ceased altogether.

Before my younger brother was born, I would lie down and sleep at the feet of my mother or father shortly after the evening ritual began, since it held little interest for me. But as I grew older, I sat up for progressively longer periods. Occasionally, I would glance into my father's luminous eyes that I imagined could see my innermost being.

In the late afternoon of one auspicious summer solstice, the quality of light brought clarity to the surrounding forms, exposing their subtlest hues. This surreal occurrence, which took place only once or twice each year, gave me the impression that space between objects did not exist. That afternoon, a lavender moon began its heavenly ascent well before the sun had set. Aside from the distant sound of the river in the valley below, the wilderness was still, devoid of the usual buzzing of insects and whispering of trees.

When we gathered that evening, I followed a yearning to remain steadfast within my father's gaze. I wondered if he had influenced my desire because he appeared to be waiting

for me. Shortly after first looking into his eyes, I realized that what previously captivated me was not so much their intensity, but the disconcerting reflection they cast of me to be one who was controlled by his senses.

Suddenly, I felt that I was being thrust toward and consumed by a formless presence, like a waft of smoke dissipating into the infinite sky. Losing the sense of my physical being, I was terrified, yet I had no desire to retreat from his gaze. A tingling arose just to the right of the center of my chest as I became aware that I was not a separate consciousness, but part of one that was shared with all beings. What I formerly presumed was myself had merged with everything that I perceived as other than me.

Reflecting on the experience in the days that followed, I did not feel as though I had gained anything new. Rather, an obstruction had been lifted that revealed my fundamental nature of uninterrupted happiness that was markedly different from the temporary happiness offered by my senses. Though the awakening overwhelmed me, I had an unquenchable thirst to deepen my experience of it.

Shovel

Thoughts form within silence

Forms arise within emptiness

Movement flows through stillness

All that comes and goes I am not

Leaft nodes and flower buds were beginning to swell in stride with the lengthening days as I followed my father down a spongy path that still held reserves of winter moisture. Squirrels raced through the trees, birds were busily building their nests and an occasional bee circled our heads. Because I was walking as close to my father as his

shadow, our feet intertwined when his pace changed even slightly, causing us to stumble into each other.

Carrying several rudimentary tools and a pouch of seeds, we were on our way to the riverbank to plant a vegetable garden. The river had recently receded, exposing fertile soil along its banks. My father laid the tools and pouch on a boulder before selecting an area for the garden and tracing a pattern of furrows on the ground with a stick. When he took a wooden shovel to begin working the soil, I grabbed a similar tool and followed him. Though my assistance was clumsy and sometimes hampered his progress, we finished the job together. I eagerly fetched the pouch but tripped while running back to him, causing the seeds to scatter far from their intended destination.

My father ambled toward me and squatted by my side. When I looked into his eyes, I watched a reflection of my troubled self vanish the instant I faced it with full awareness. Relieved, I joined him in picking the seeds out of the soil. Barely had we begun though, when he realized that many of them were too small to recover. After he assessed the situation, his expression lifted as he methodically cleared the area of debris. Then he covered the scattered seeds with a thin layer of soil.

Since the seedbed was in a dry location as opposed to the one originally intended, we would need to return each day to water it. After the first day, I took on the task by myself. Shortly after the seeds had sprouted, I noticed that my tendency to cling to my father was gone. In its place, a feeling of devotion had taken root in which I did not feel separate from him, even in his absence.

When the seedlings were the size of a grasshopper, he transplanted them into the furrows that we had initially prepared. Curiously, the crop planted along the riverbank that year was more prolific than ever before. After the river re-

ceded the following year, I was not surprised when my father repeated the technique of transplanting seedlings rather than sowing seeds directly in furrows on the riverbank.

Hand

*He mistook the flesh to be his truth
Forgetting the babe he had been
And the corpse yet to be*

On days when the moon was at its fullest, the life force of every living thing seemed to be similarly at its peak. Each member of my family would prepare a special food on those mornings to share at the midday meal. When the sun was halfway through its journey across the sky, we sat in a circle around the food and joined hands. My mother initiated the ceremony by kissing each hand that she was holding. Then, one after another, we imitated her. After picking up a bowl of food, she took a small portion before passing it. Correspondingly, each of us ate from the bowls and continued passing them until they were emptied.

These feasts satisfied me, except for one offering that my father often prepared. It gave me indigestion accompanied by foul-smelling gas. But since it was our custom to accept whatever was offered, I would take the food along with its consequences. My family would not realize my discomfort, however, because I distracted my attention away from them, holding it on the sensations taking place in my stomach.

After feasting, we went our separate ways. But before the sun touched the horizon, we rejoined to erect a shrine in the center of our home. Loosely constructed of branches and rocks, our shrines were often adorned with flowers and encircled with patterns made by sprinkling white ash, powdered red clay and minuscule black seeds. Within the

patterns, my mother would place clay pots filled with smoldering cedar coals covered with sweet-smelling twigs. Once, after completing a shrine almost twice the size of my father, we noticed that it resembled a standing bear. Curiously, a constellation of similar form appeared directly overhead in the sky that night.

I often became so engrossed in creating patterns around the shrine that I would be last to begin transforming my appearance, which was part of the ceremony. We stained our skin using plant pigments, reshaped our facial features with mixtures of sap and clay, and braided our hair or altered its appearance in some other way.

Though the masquerade was entertaining, its purpose was to redirect our attention from what was familiar to us to that which was unknown. The physical appearance of my family members was familiar to me, whereas my own was only an indistinct reflection cast on the surface of the water.

Once disguised, we danced around the shrine, often imitating the movement of our furry neighbors. Even when clouds concealed the moonlight, those evenings were electrifying.

When the ceremony ended, I would gaze beyond the starry universe until sunrise and feel exhilarated for days after.

Berry

What we are

We never lose

What we lose

We never were

Except when the moon was full, my family seldom ate together. Our appetites and eating patterns were different. We gathered or grew some staples, such as honey and beans, but most of our food was taken daily from plants in