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### In the Beginning, There Was the Sky

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## **In the Beginning, There Was the Sky**

### ***Leaving Home Skies***

There was always the sky, even back before I had words, between the apartment buildings and long arms of the trees reaching for where they ended and the blue began.

Growing up in Brooklyn on narrow streets, and later, on wide suburban lanes in central New Jersey, I was always looking for sky. This was especially true all those Saturdays and holidays I spent in my dad's underground store in the Nassau-Fulton subway arcade of lower Manhattan. I would emerge up those blackened cement steps as the heat from the subway below poured upward, always smelling like home to me, to look for some semblance of sky. There it was in the slits and slants I could make out between tops of tall buildings. I loved the city, which I wandered on my own as a ten-year-old, but I loved the sky more.

Without knowing any farmers or farms beyond the apple orchards where we bought pies, I dreamt of living on a farm. The dream didn't include actual farming, which was as foreign to me as becoming an astronaut; instead, it was rooted in having big space, especially expanses of weather and light.

It's no wonder that I ended up in Kansas where we're nothing if not sky. How I ended up here was both serendipitous and unlikely even if, according to Papa, my maternal grandfather, I proclaimed loudly to him, "I'm going to live in Kansas," when I was five years old. I didn't remember this, but he reminded me every time we talked, decades later, when I did live in Kansas.

What propelled me here—beyond the usual mix of karma, fate, randomness, genetic propensities, highways and airplanes—was my calling to be a writer and my noisy, clanging mind that hungered for big skies to calm and contain me. I needed unimpeded views. I also needed distance from my controlling and difficult father and all the ways my life had thus far played out to reinforce that I

didn't belong where I was. Plus, my father had already told me that as a poet, I had only two choices to pay the bills: go into advertising or journalism. I chose journalism.

So at age 19—thinking I was just pausing my plans to marry my boyfriend, live on the Jersey shore, and write for the *Asbury Park Press*—I packed a dozen boxes and suitcases and headed west with Kathy, a high school friend already enrolled in journalist school at the University of Missouri-Columbia. Of course, there was a blizzard and long delays in various airports, then in the middle of the night, an interminable bus ride from St. Louis with Kathy and our collective mountain of luggage. We arrived in the dark.

But the next day, I was amazed by the depth of the snow and of the deep blue of the winter sky, a different hue than the paler blue I'd left. The evenings dazzled me more, especially in spring and summer when the twilight sky could turn blue, teal, and turquoise until it was dark enough that an infinity of stars spilled out.

By April, the slow motion accumulation of loving these skies tilted my thoughts toward one word: home. It wasn't so much that Columbia, Missouri was my home but that I was already so much more at peace in this part of the country than I knew was possible. "I'm not going back" would slip into my thoughts no matter how many times I argued with it that staying wasn't part of the plan.

But I ended up leaving the J-School just three credits short of a degree and instead getting my BA in history while minoring in poetry. Mostly, I studied and immersed myself in grassroots organizing and agitating, eating bad pizza late at night, bicycling around town in the wee hours in the rain, and potlucking it with new friends who also were looking toward their own new horizons.

I had an inkling my horizon was further west, which came true when I accepted a job one course short of my history degree and moved to Kansas City to be a cub reporter for a labor newspaper. It was a tumultuous time, and after three months, I became an intake officer for a human right

organization, then a coordinator of an energy conservation non-profit, the latter propelling me further west, which is how I found the sky where I belonged.

### ***Finding My Sky***

Ira, who felt like an old friend minutes after we met, and I were driving west, leaving Kansas City for the Kansas Area Watershed Council, happening at a now-defunct YMCA camp between Lawrence and Topeka. The furthest west I had been was to Kansas City, Kansas, and for a while it didn't seem like we would get beyond that. We were talking so much that we missed the exit from I-35 to I-70 four times.

Eventually, we were barreling down I-70 in Ira's rusting car. When we saw the first exit for Lawrence, he turned right, saying there was a concert happening there of a band he loved, so why not stop here first? Soon we were in South Park listening to one of the final concerts of the legendary Tofu Teddy.

After hours of dancing, we were hungry, so Mexican food. Then we were tired, so we decided to stay at a friend of a friend of Ira's in an empty bungalow somewhere in East Lawrence. Walking up the stairs to the porch of that bungalow, I sensed someone there. I turned and saw no one and nothing, but I felt a voice over my right shoulder saying, "This is your home for the rest of your life."

The next day, I met Ken, the man I would marry, and many people who became long-life friends. It was 1982, and I was falling fast for these people and Kansas skies that clicked me in place.

### ***Finding Home***

Finding our place in the world isn't a one-click maneuver for many of us but a continual conversation between there and here, inside and outside, body and soul, self and other. It entails

chatting up the sky about what's going to happen without knowing, then watching it unfold, each such experience another angle of light that makes up the larger mosaic of homing in.

It started with a lost wallet, Ken's of course as he is famous for losing whatever occupies his pockets. But this brown wallet was lost in acres of rows he just plowed on the eastern side of the family farm. It was unusually warm, but enough past chigger season that we could walk without fear hunting for the wallet which I found with ease, the first of hundreds of wallets, sets of keys, screwdrivers, slips of paper and phones I would find for him thanks to a surprise super power.

It was also the first time I walked the land that had been in Ken's family for 150 years. Ken mostly grew up here after his family built a steel house designed by his grandfather, William H. Wells, a famous aviator and inventor. Grandpa Wells would go on to leave five acres to Ken, who had helped manage the land since he was a teen, and the rest of the land to his five daughter, who he abandoned when they were growing up. By the time I set foot on the farm, Grandpa Wells had already donated 13 acres at the top of the hill to Douglas County for Wells Overlook Park.

Marrying Ken in 1985 meant marrying the farm too. We had already been planning the house we would one day build here, and after buying an old general store in North Lawrence—a perfect place to live downstairs for a decade on a dime while collecting rent from the upstairs—we were ready to start.

First, we wandered the land, initially planning on a home nestled against the woods on the east side of the hill. But when we along its western flank of the hill on our way back to the car, we found another place called to us. Close to the woods, it faced southwest to whatever weather was parading through in its violent gymnastics or calming strolls through this place to some place else. We sat on the grass and watched the sky, telling each other this was obviously where we were meant to be.

Building the house we designed—passive solar, angled to work in concert with the sky—was one dream but there was a bigger dream that held the house. When we got married we vowed to also

one day we would buy or otherwise find a way to protect this land which, excluding the county park and Ken's parents' home, was about 130 acres. Seemingly beyond our reach, this dream compelled us as something we had to do against the odds no matter how long it took.

It turned out that the quote we used in our wedding ceremony from Wendell Berry would also be the story of marrying this land:

The meaning of marriage begins in the giving of words. We cannot join ourselves to one another without giving our word. And this must be an unconditional giving, for in joining ourselves to another we join ourselves to the unknown. We can join one another only by joining the unknown. We must not be misled by the procedures of experimental thought: in life, in the world, we are never given two known results to choose between, but only one result that we choose without knowing what it is.

Another way of saying this: we couldn't know what we were getting into, but we were heart-bent on going this direction.

### ***The Land That Meets the Sky***

A Gordian Knot, from the Alexander the Great legend of Phrygian Gordium, symbolizes an intractable problem that can only be solved by finding a solution so far out of the box that it often eludes humans. Maybe someone finds a lynchpin or a way, a la Shakespeare's reference, to cut the knot, but for the most part, untying it is impossible.

The farm ownership and future tangled itself into a Gordian Knot. The complexity of the trust that protected its ownership and owners, plus the family history and personal stories of loss, abandonment, and heartbreak, blocked the protection of this place as a family legacy and ecological sanctuary. Then again, it also kept the farm in a state of somewhat protective inertia.

For 35 years, we puzzled over, dreamt up, strategized late into the night about how to save this land around us from being plowed under into a housing development or worse. We also talked to everyone in the family connected to the future of the land, especially Ken's mom and aunts, about what could be done. We wrote letters and emails, made phone calls, met with people, proposed dozens of approaches to move ahead, and in recent years, made offers to buy some or all of the farm—all to no avail. Being only a short drive from a college town, Lawrence, meant that housing developments and rising land prices outpaced us in all directions.

Meanwhile, we were acting as if this land was already safe and saved. Ken actively stewarded this land, and our kids, especially our oldest son Daniel, and I worked alongside him at times. Spring burns and sometimes winter ones too for the 25 acres in the valleys on the east and west sides of the farm. Trails made and remade in the woods. An endless circuit of invasive honeysuckle and sericea lespedeza removal. Mowing the edges of the fields. Dozens of oak acorns Ken collected from other places, then babied along in outside pots until he could replant them in the woods. Doing all we could to make and keep this place as part of a wildlife corridor between Clinton Lake to the west and the wetlands to the north.

I talked to the land through my poems and other writing, and the land was and is so vibrantly its own entity to us that at one point we even went to therapy with the farm, a visible part of our marriage and psyches. "What do you want to say to the land?" the therapist asked us. Ken explained while starting to cry that he saw the land as a small child in the middle of a busy highway with cars and trucks zipping by at high speed, and there was nothing we could do to save that child.

Or so it seemed. "There's nothing stronger than the power of no," a family member told us, but I replied, "Yes, there is. It's the power of continuing on until you get to yes." Our plan was to keep on keeping on until we found a way to protect this land. We would have been happy to have seen the land ushered into a conservation easement to forbid further development, even if we didn't own it, but we

realized that was unlikely. After Ken’s mom, who was trying to buy and protect the land in her final years, died, it seemed both more possible and challenging for us to buy this farm.

We took our plea to the sheltering sky, for decades walking outside in the dark and cold, and asking the land, its more-than-human species, and any ancestors hanging around to help us see next where to step, what to do, how to proceed. We reassured ourselves that the sky kept answering us, giving us signs through sudden owls swooping over or katydids calling to us in the dark or a certain deer or turkey that reappeared regularly for a stretch. Magical thinking, some people might say, and it was magical enough to keep us in the game.

Then, against all the odds and in a way beyond what we could imagine, someone found the lynchpin that enabled us to buy our farm. Goethe says, “Be bold and mighty forces will come to your aid,” and that’s pretty much what happened, thanks to some loving and visionary family members, legal intervention, and our invention of a Rube Goldberg-esque contraption of funding our purchase of the land. On the drive back from signing the contract at the title company, we saw a stag in the road, pausing to look into our eyes, then an owl on a power line, and a great blue heron sailing toward our home. That night I dreamt of a bear protecting the land just as we planned to do.

In mid-December, 2020, at the end of the pandemic year—a time of such loss and suffering, but also a time when the veil is thinner than usual, and miracles can happen—we closed on the farm. Then we walked out into the big, blank sky with some chocolate from the title company in our mouths, both stunned and giggling.

### ***In the End, There is the Sky***

When I was a teenager, I fell in love with poetry, going from my gateway poet, Rod McKuen, to what seemed to me a married couple of the canon: T.S. Eliot and e.e. cummings. I especially loved



Eliot's long poem, "Burnt Norton," in which he wrote: "And the end and the beginning were always there/ Before the beginning and after the end./ And all is always now."

We are now at the end of buying this land and the beginning of all the work ahead to seek a conversation easement to protect it into perpetuity. But we're also in the constant now of taking care of us and letting it take care of us.

I fell for the sky and let that love move me along until I found home, each hue of weather, each tone of wind another click into where I belong. I write this from a chair looking south out the windows on a December day, our mortgage payments for this land starting in a month, and the old dog sleeping in the slants of sun on the wooden floor. The winter light, angled through our house to reach deeply across these rooms, holds me. The powder blue sky holds the bare branches of Cottonwood Mel, named for my late father.

I live in place where I don't need to look up to see the sky, only out. Or in. As Tibetan Buddhist nun Pema Chodron says, "You are the sky. Everything else is just weather." While I acknowledge a real sky beyond the sky of my mind, I get what she means about how we can choose to acknowledge our challenges and changes, diva-size emotions and petty thoughts, bright air and blizzard all as weather, moving through the open space we inhabit and that inhabits us.

All is always now, Eliot remind us, a time composed of endings and beginnings, but let us not forget what e.e. cummings writes about "the deepest secret nobody knows":

(here is the root of the root and the bud of the bud  
and the sky of the sky of a tree called life; which grows  
higher than soul can hope or mind can hide)  
and this is the wonder that's keeping the stars apart

i carry your heart(i carry it in my heart)

I carry my love for the sky of the sky in my heart, and the sky carries me into the next beginning, and the next. All these moments of homecoming rising over the next horizon to show us where we are in the bluest day or darkest night. This is my gratitude. This is my prayer.