

# Shoulder Season

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All of one's faculties are brought to bear in an effort to become fully incorporated into the landscape.



—Barry Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 199

Walking to the barn, I navigate ruts and ice. The uneven terrain is a consequence of last week's thaw and then this morning's freeze. Last week, frost lurched from the ground with rising temperatures and rain ran off the snowbanks and pooled outside horse stalls, and the snow compacted to a thick crust. This morning, the maples bend in the wind, and small branches litter the ground. The woods snap and crackle. The ground is slick and unforgiving. I tread with care to the barn to feed my horses. This is March, the shoulder season, a vacillation of thaw and freeze, as we stagger into the next season. We will have at least two months of slip and slide, mud and snow, sleet and rain, that we call mud season before we land in spring. We all feel the limitation, the grey skies, the roads frozen in ruts, and small packed islands within the difficult to penetrate crust. We bump up against the limitation, ready to tip into something new, but the world surrounding isn't ready to receive us.

*My mother had lost motivation to change before driving us to school in the morning.*" My oldest daughter remembers me in a way that makes me wince when I read her words. In her story, I am disheveled and distracted. Living

in flannel pajamas and muttering. She remembers me in the way that I am frozen. Her memory shifts my focus from her father's disappearance to my emotional absence. I slip from holding it together to see how I was falling apart.

I came to know this vision of me when she took a creative writing class her sophomore year in college, and she sent me the story about her father's five-day disappearance, the grand finale binge before he sobered up. She was in fifth grade at the time. Only she remembers her father's drinking and disappearances. Her younger siblings, although younger only by a few years, do not remember. They did not tally the days in their journals that he was missing. They did not lie awake in bed watching for headlights to travel the long driveway to the house.

My daughter remembers me within the absence of her father. How two suddenly became less than one. She had her first ever dance during that time. She remembers the skirt she wore, the macarena, the boy who reached for her hand. She remembers standing in the driveway watching the neighbor's red taillights fade as she delayed entering the house, prolonging the fullness and kindness of her night, before entering the quiet house with a newly hollow mother. I would be waiting, *"still in her pajamas from the night before, and ask me how it went. Neither of us would mention his absence and I wouldn't ask, not wanting to breach the unspoken-ness, not wanting her to know that I stayed up every night, hoping to catch his headlights as they descended the final curve in our driveway."*

I don't remember the dance. The gold skirt still hangs in our cedar closet. I do remember taking the dress to a friend's mother to have it altered for the dance. Randi added a thin organza orange ribbon to the hem "to add some pop" to the seriousness of the gold. When I picked it up, I walked down her stone path to the car, holding the golden skirt, gingerly aloft.

Above, the noon sun is high in the blue sky. The driveway has softened. There are gradations of thaw: soft ice, slush, soft earth, mud. I ride my horse down our driveway, buoyant with moisture. There is a spring to his step on the spongy road, and I decide to venture into the snow. His hoof penetrates the crust with a faltering drop until finally punching through and then sinking rapidly through the granular layer below. He pulls his leg from the rigid,

narrow hole, and lurches forward for two strides. He is not willing to walk, and the stilted motion is not why I ride. I ride to move swiftly over the earth.

We trot down the road. Pebbles struck by his hoof fly before us. A spot of road, a frost heave, collapses under hoof. I study the footing to take the best course. I stay loose and go with his movement when he stumbles. The road undulates under hoof. A dog barks from a neighbor's house. His ear pivots to detect a sound. I look in that direction. I shift the lens through which I view the world, from mine to my horse. I blur the boundaries; we move as one. The heightened sense is part of the allure of riding, so is the ease of movement, and the companionship. I am elevated above the daily to-do list. I shift my attentions on navigating the ride, communicating with him in the manner he understands, in finding our way safely forward. My horse does the work of carrying my load.

My daughter remembers, I took them to a big box store to buy gifts for their father's birthday, which was a few days away, a day on which he would still be missing. The kids were wildly excited because I had never done this before. It was like a forbidden kingdom: rows of colorful books and games, and big cushions for reading areas. They ran the aisles and they snuggled on bean bag chairs. It was boisterous compared to the quiet small spaces of our usual book haunt. She remembers this as a threshold—entering the boycotted store was also entering a single-parent household.

It did mark a departure. Why did I do that? Was I seeking anonymity? Choosing to be among strangers with benign questions and avoiding anything more intimate. Avoiding contact with a familiar person who might ask how I was, to my vacant expression, darting eyes, my total lack of humor. Or ask about my husband, and possibly mention, as they had a few days earlier at the general store, that they haven't seen him in a while. *Neither have I. I haven't seen him in days. I hope he's not dead in the river. It's been known to happen before.* I couldn't ask for help; I didn't know how long he would be missing, or if he would return, or what we were facing. Nothing in my daily surroundings could tell me if there was danger ahead.

Or maybe I just wanted to distract my children from their father's disappearance, and my flannel pajamas. My grief had settled deep under a crust of indifference. I wanted to give them something playful, to feel some joy

instead of my despondency, to escape the cycle we were caught in of sober weeks followed by days of disappearance. A cycle launched in January with a New Year's pledge to stop drinking that was broken with a 24-hour absence on the 26th, to refrain again in February for three weeks and then gone two days, and the pattern continuing every month, with progressively longer disappearances, until we were in April, in a box store bookstore, on the fourth day gone. The gifts were a wish that this birthday would be like every year before, "*He would come home to streamers and white cake and butter pecan ice cream—because that was his favorite.*"

But he did not return as predicted, "*I came downstairs, pigtails in place, to find this sixth morning exactly like the five that preceded it. So, standing alone in that kitchen looking for something, someone, that didn't seem to want to be found, I crumbled.*" Only she told me it wasn't her father's absence, but a homework assignment. I said I would talk to the teacher; I didn't talk about her still-missing father. I remember a week later, after he returned, I went and spoke to the teacher. *Our family is in crisis*, I said, closing the door to his classroom. I recall the alarmed look on his face when the door shut, and I turned to him alone in the quiet of the classroom. *My husband is an alcoholic; we are getting help*. Although now I realize that help didn't include the children. They did not come to family night at the clinic. They stayed home with their grandparents, cutting carrots for dinner, while we went off to counseling. While we worked on a new way to listen to each other.

I see who I was then, twelve years ago, in the eyes of my child, and I am brittle. The pain crackles like the stiff branches of the maple in the wind. Only bending so much before pieces, small twigs and branches, break and scatter across the surface of the snow-covered pasture and skate across the surface. Only I didn't break. I drove them to school—silent and frozen. Encountering this memory now, all these years later, I ask, how did I thaw and move forward?

He returned home on the night of his birthday, all the children asleep upstairs in their beds. It was the last day of April. The snow would have melted. The roads would be damp but no longer mired in mud. The trees would be forcing buds. The daffodils gone by. The horses in their stalls eating hay. He committed to sobriety that night and so we entered the season of sobriety.

She writes: "*I don't remember . . . the apology but what I do remember is that any confusion or resentment that had been building simply evaporated. It vanished with the promise of pancakes in the morning and soccer in the backyard,*

*his ears to play victim to my stories and songs and anything but questions of the absence because that was over and he was here and although remorse is silver so is happiness because it is the color of age and wisdom, the grey car that's back in the garage, and the moon on nights when it illuminates his face leaning down to kiss mine."*

For her, yes, it seems, there was a threshold crossed. Not me, I staggered into the next season, but I did manage to get out of my pajamas. I dressed and drove to school, and rode my horse, and went to work. I did not thaw suddenly. Each pancake and school lunch, each practice he coached and permission slip he remembered, each evening the car was parked in the garage, each note left on the kitchen counter that related an errand and not an absence, increased the divide from the unpredictable life we had with alcoholism to two parents together sharing the load.

My middle child, the one who competed horses with me all through her high school years, doesn't remember her father's disappearances. Sometimes this is a blessing but sometimes it's my greatest fear. She has read my stories, and her sister's. Having taken another year off from college due to Covid, she is living with friends in a house near campus and has a new job at a wine tasting room. In the family group chat, her brother gives a thumbs up to her employee benefit of half-price cases of wine. I comment, *I don't like the direction this is going*. She may not remember the disappearances, but she may remember me stumbling through a few high school conversations on long rides to horse competitions about no good choices are made when you are drinking. Her father liked to say, nothing good happens after midnight. I say, pay attention to your drinking patterns because your father is an alcoholic and this is in you too. Have I said (enough) to her: you have to get off your habits, quit coffee for a month, don't always eat when you're sad, examine how you soothe yourself when you don't want to feel the pain. Are you feeling, or are you frozen? Frozen makes you brittle. Be present to your surroundings and to yourself. Please, I think, please I don't want to travel this road again. Please, children, please learn from us. Please don't be absent. Please, anticipate the dangers. Please, listen.

I hear wind through the trees and the dry leaves hop across the snow crust. I walk out to the field with my dogs to assess the conditions. The dogs race over the smooth surface creating a false sense of security. Magda races to chase a squirrel and then suddenly her hind end breaks through the crust and her chin slams to the snow. She claws out of the hole and she is back on top. Her paws spread wide to create more surface area to improve her chances. But the horse will punch through on every stride. We cannot yet venture into the woods. Instead, I will ski on top of the crust, and move over land in the company of my dogs. I will witness their total glee, as they race through the woods. As Magda smells something under the surface and digs wildly through the snow. We come across the soft down of a rabbit, pieces everywhere but no sign of death, not a hawk target, but perhaps a bunny territorial fight. I can only guess what happens in the woods—or in the minds of children.

When Kent disappeared, I rode every day, even for twenty minutes, even in small circles with my children playing with trucks around us. My fingers tangled in my horse's mane, my seat swinging with the ease of his stride, we left the riding ring and walked through the hollows in the woods filled with snow melt. His left hind hoof slipped as we traversed the mucky seasonal stream. Spring beauties pushed up through brown leaves. Small tight buds on trees were ready to unfurl. Lithe and full of grace, we glided over the April ground bursting with new life.

It's a time Kent barely remembers, but he will never forget the shame. Especially when we keep reminding him. Both my daughter and I have now had stories published about that final disappearance. When will all the good years eclipse those months marked by disappearances? Our adult children, two of whom are legal drinking age, only remember a dad making breakfast, coaching teams, driving carpools. Really, I alone hold onto a pain that no one else cares about. I keep some part of myself frozen that needs to thaw. After all, we have enjoyed a long season of sobriety. What still lingers from all those years ago? The memory. A memory informs the present: pay attention, look for signs, anticipate danger. *This could happen again.*

This archaic affinity for the land, I believe, is an antidote to the loneliness that in our own culture we associate with individual estrangement and despair.

—Barry Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 266

My son, now twenty, invites his friends over to drink in our basement. We collect keys. We think this way we are part of the conversation, part of talking about how to learn how to drink responsibly. I tell him, don't celebrate all the victories with beer. Don't have every gathering involve alcohol. Think how you cope with good experiences and the bad. Feel the losses. Don't forget, this is in your nature. *Have I talked to you about drinking?* I say. *Tell me, mom,* he replies. He is independent of me. I can be a force of words, but he is the action. I can listen and tell him stories. He doesn't ever remember his father absent; he knows his father as present. Is there a danger I anticipate? Is it mine to avoid?

Riding, I meet the world with my whole life: my hearing, my smell, my vision, my heart, my mind. In mud, the earth breathes to life, and growth stirs no matter what. Children grow up. I can't control what they remember. I can impose myself on the horse of course, apply force, but ultimately to succeed I have to listen, and move with consensus. I have to have a language we both understand.

I don't know how people can live in a snowy landscape and not love winter. It would be like resisting your own nature. I ride and I ski. I ski down the trails I can't ride right now. Small twigs from yesterday's wind riddle the trail. Lichen, shorn from trees, dusts the snow. Tracks, possibly a fox, and not the coyote I hear at night, meander and the dogs engage with the scent. On its own time, the snow will melt, and the land will mire, and the mire promises change. I trust seasons, and I arrange myself around these patterns, of the freeze, the thaw, the melt, to guide my activity. I can steer the horse; I cannot steer memory.

On my horse, I am a part of something bigger than myself. I accept the reduction. How the place humbles me. I like who I am in these moments. I am receptive and listening. I am engaged in a deep act of paying attention. I lose a sense of time and timetables. Unlike searching out the smell of alcohol on my husband, or feeling the pain of my child, where I seek to detect the danger and salve the pains, instead I am traveling the trails of the woods on skis in a silence that offers only the wind and the sound of snow fracturing under my weight. Listening, I try to understand what comes next, and by next, I mean the next footfall. I am present. The sacred of the place, noted by the glimpses of the wild animal or the blooming tree, whatever the season offers up, blends with the mundane of our footsteps trotting along. There is a reverence for all

life, and my life too. I forgive what I have failed to accomplish; I forgive the mother in pajamas. I close the divide within myself. These parts comingle like the seasons. I am both the freeze and the thaw, absent and present, the memory and this moment. There is an order to the woods, and it is calming.

My husband skis every day with the dogs. Upon his return I always ask him: Where did you go? He answers vaguely, with an undertone of annoyance, as if I am asking him to quantify where he is going, as if he might disappear. Maybe it echoes too closely the question: Have you been drinking? Perhaps my question harkens back to my counting the days of his sobriety as if the days could add up to security. I stopped counting his days when, after four years, six months, and three weeks of sobriety, I got a whiff of alcohol. He admitted he had a drink, or three, that he thought he could control it, and that I wouldn't notice. I noticed. I smelled the old alcohol on the sheen of his skin; I saw his darting look and lack of eye contact; I heard his more cheerful demeanor as if he was hiding something. I felt my stomach twist. *We are not back where we were*, he pledged. It was a slip, a day, a part of the slippery transition. It has been over fourteen years now since that slip. How many years, how much eye contact, until the good days eclipse the bad times? For my children, that had happened upon his return. I know I cannot erase the past, the drinking and **disappearance**, the mother in her pajamas, the memory, but I can hope it will soften.

When I ask where he went in the woods, I am reaching for a new experience between us. Had a branch blown down? Did he see a deer? Did the snow break under his weight? Did snow stick to his skis? Was he able to get an edge and turn on the downhill? Is there still enough snow in the woods to ski, now that the fields are bare? Did a tree fall? How deep is the water in the hollow? Is the stream running or iced? What was his experience of the woods? I want to be transported to something simpler and tangible. I am reaching for awe, and to find ourselves within it. *Avoid heartbreak hill*, he tells me, and *go off trail*. *You can't turn on the crust, but you can get a gradual descent through the woods*.

That night a powerful, warm wind blows, a chinook wind, a new force to elicit a new outcome. The wind dries the ground. The next day the temperature jumps to fifty degrees. As I walk to the barn, I sink in the soft earth. Snow melt puddles in the driveway and outside the stall doors, and water runs in channels that we widen to drain the small pools. The earth breaths and belches moisture. I get on my horse. We leave hoofprints down the center



of the driveway. I decide to test the snow. Still, there is a delay as he breaks through the crust and then he sinks through the softer snow below: punch, delay, sink. After five steps he stops, we sit in the sun. He is happy to spin and retrace his steps back to the barn. Too soon. We don't have to ride in this. It's too much efforting and too little gain. We are not settlers on a journey. There is no destination; this is a practice. I follow the pattern of the season; I can wait.

The next morning, I look out the window to see a dusting of snow. It makes the whole world clean. The oasis of manure island is covered. The crabapples trees and delicate hyacinth branches are outlined by snow. I walk to the barn and the dusting makes it so I can't tell what's underfoot: ice or frozen mud. The dog prints forge ahead and give me no clues. I step slowly, working off memory of where the ice patches were, and where there was dirt. I hold my coffee cup up high. Why, I have no idea, some kind of strategy for when I hit the ground. I look for the mottled snow revealing the frozen prints that will provide some traction. The ice within the hoof prints crackles under foot. When I leave the barn, I slip on the ice, and my coffee sloshes up my arm. Suddenly it's snowing, and it's all monochrome of white earth, grey trees, and snowflakes thick across the gray sky. By mid morning, the snow stops, and a wind picks up and blows snow off branches to swirl across hayfields. Blue cracks the gray sky. The fresh snow on the roof melts and drips from the eaves. Then the sky closes up, a snow squall, the wind, a chill, and weather shifts like moods, like memory.

It will be at least another month of this vacillation: blue sky days and melt, snowflakes and chill, temperatures rise and fall, variations on mud, the slip and slide of the shoulder season until spring gains enough traction to stand firmly in a new season. The dialogue between freeze and thaw, the moment and the memory, will continue for months, years. Even in late May, when the apple trees blossom, the bulbs have gone by, the lilacs bloom, the pasture greens up, there is a chance of snow. In the slippery transition, I walk out to the field to assess the landscape. The field is bare, except for our packed ski tracks across the brown earth. Our hardened tracks will be the last to melt.

The land gets inside of us; and we must decide one way or another what this means, what we will do about it.— 

—Barry Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, 411