

Ordinary Losses
Naming the Graces that Shape Us

by Elisa Stanford

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Introduction

At night before sleep, my sister and I tossed words to each other, one saying a word and the other responding with the first word that came into her mind: Straw led to hay led to farm led to barn led to red, back and forth across the beds until the images in our minds were far from where we had started. When one of us called “reverse,” we went back through where we’d been, trying to remember what made us think of red, what made us say barn. We won the game when we arrived at the first word without missing any words along the way and without being silenced by a parent from the hallway.

Perhaps this is also how we find our way home from loss, going back through the stories we’ve dropped behind us like words as we’ve lived. We trace through what we know to find who we are—to find the word that first started us.

We often think of loss as belonging to later life, but in truth loss shapes us from the time we are born. We lose, without being asked, our safety, our silence, our trust. We lose the earliest forms of our helplessness, our hunger, our thrashing wishes. Many of these losses are celebrated, as change thrusts us through life, but in some slivers of time—waking in the night, feeling Christmas come, eyeing the anger of a friend—we sense that much is incomplete, much is yet to come. We realize that sometimes the greatest griefs are for what we never had.

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I have always been tender toward what never was or never will be. I experience mornings, conversations, prayers in the space of what is missing, often feeling what is absent more than what is present. Yet the incompleteness offers hope, offers a longing that shapes itself to what might still be.

As a college student I discovered a Bible passage in the book of Ezra that named for me my own rhythm of joy and grief. As the Israelites rebuilt the temple that had been destroyed, “all the people gave a great shout of praise to the Lord.” But many of the older people who had seen the former temple “wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid.” In the pulse of emotion surrounding the new foundation, “no one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away.”

I am young to great sorrows, to the wisdom and history that magnified the older Israelites’ grief. But I love this passage because my life is full of shouts of joy as well as weeping, and the noise is great and indistinguishable in my soul. Every day is filled with both tearing down and building up. Pain and joy press in on me like ice and fire, each feeling twinges of the other, and to understand the fullness of both, I need to name them.

This book is about recognizing the losses that tear down so that more life might be built. It is about forming a faith out of hymns and onion-paper pages and then wondering, in an unexpected moment during a worship service, if God is worth trusting. It is about watching a friendship, once birthed in an unknown cave of beginnings, slip into the waters without a grasp to save it. It is about the catch in the soul when the sun slants toward us on an ordinary afternoon

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and it feels so new we wonder how long ago we last felt it.

These are the losses we never bury and rarely mourn—the absences that grow so slowly we barely notice the void they leave. We remember them out of order, if at all, and when we piece them together, we see ourselves. As memory and hope build and fall “no one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping.”

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This book, these stories, are about the past, or how I dream the past might have been. It is about what I long for and want to create, what I remember once hoping for when promises were real, just beyond my vision.

It is through loss that we become hardened to childlikeness and through loss that we return again to childhood stories, to the imagination that lets one word lead to another. This is grace, to allow the same cry that tears us down to bring life.

In the end, I will stand in the silence of what once spoke so loudly. There I will hear, like a word whispered before sleep, my secret, wild name.

Chapter One

All I Can Remember: Home

One of my first experiences will also be one of my last: I am waiting for home. It was the summer of my fourth birthday, and I had requested a purple cake with orange roses. I asked my parents every day when this cake would come, and also when we would pack our car and drive away from our New Hampshire house, as I had been told we would. I understood that these events would happen close together and that I had to be patient.

Did I know for weeks or for months that we would be going to live in Wisconsin? Each day was a wide expanse of waiting; I saw no reason why we couldn't leave right now. “Are we moving today?” is one of the first things I remember saying—the question muddled now in my mind with an image of purple icing.

When we finally got into our station wagon and drove west, it may have been before or after my birthday. I remember the cake, the way the roses melted into the smear of the other frosting, but whether I picture the cake itself or my wanting of it, I don't know. In any case, I was relieved when the day of travel came. I did not know enough to be attached to a building or a people, I did not have a school to visit one more time. All distance was the same to me, so I observed my family's grief at the move with curiosity—I had no vocabulary for good-bye.

This would change in the land to which we traveled. If my questions in New Hampshire were the murmurings of a dream, the moment I discovered memory rooted in time was in the back of our station wagon—the “way back” we called it, perhaps all families did—hiding between our suitcases as my dad pulled up to a gas station. My mother was tired and my sister quiet, the windows of our car open to sticky June air. When my dad got back in the car, we drove the

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remaining mile to our new house. There I would learn that life can be more waiting than celebration, but that it is always a cadence of both, and that we are made to love a home so much we never want to leave it.

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Anyone who has roots in New England carries for a lifetime a love for New England trees. Even I, who remember little more than the color of the carpets in our old house, miss the canopy of trees over me along the tight roads of New Hampshire, the way the year swivels on October weeks of reddening glory. So when our first fall in Madison rose brown and dry, my parents were reminded of where we were not, reminded that home is a long wait. When my mom noticed a patch of maples off the beltline, the first trees to turn that year, she pointed them out every time we drove past. Soon the rest of the city spoke of patched color. We trampled orange on the way to school, watched green turn rust, even red, even yellow that bowed to a lake we learned was the size of the Sea of Galilee.

Those trees by the beltline were the first to turn every year. A chain-link fence held them back from us, but still they were colored, still they assured that God will offer life for the beauty of it. To my mom those trees were the first sign that where we were was becoming home. My parents, who grew up, met, and married on the East Coast, continued to talk about New England with fondness. I tried to picture them somewhere other than with me, but their past seemed a dim and tender fog. In my mind, our house in Madison was where life happened. All that went on before was a build-up to right now, and all that would happen after was too far away to believe.

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When I went away to college, I decided with a desperate missing that home was where my family lived, wherever that was. On the way back to Madison at the end of my junior year, I talked so long and hard to my parents that I literally lost my voice. Home was where I could let out all my words.

When does staying become home, part of an unconscious list of things we can count on? My parents moved to another city soon after I graduated from college, and my childhood roots were flung open and raw, as the house I grew up in became the possession of someone who had no memory of it.

Even my most sensitive friends couldn't understand why I felt displaced, but others, like my tough Italian neighbor, melted when I lamented the move. "Aw, that's hard," Paul told me with a toothpick in his mouth and arms folded across his chest. "My parents sold my childhood house a few years ago, and, man, it was tough." He shook his head, remembering.

As my parents settled into a new house, I fell into a restless season. In my basement apartment I realized that we can live years in a place without ever coming home to it. I did not change the curtains, I did not hang pictures. I am in-between, I will not stay here. I am ready to go.

Now I live where trees themselves—not just colored leaves—are scarce. God is generous in where He places color, and Colorado finds almost all its color in the sky. For a brief week or two in the fall, though, the aspens turn, and the state population scurries to the high country with SUVs and water bottles. Driving up mountain roads, we hear the leaves pour themselves like silent gold. And so this, too, is home.

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At a business lunch recently, I asked someone where he was from. “Well, I’ve lived in San Diego for ten years, which is longer than I’ve lived anywhere else. I’m starting to say I’m from there. I guess it’s home.” I live here, but I’m not at home here, we seem to say. I want you to know that this is not the place I will always be, and it is definitely not the place where I began to become someone. The question itself is revealing. “Where are you from?” means “Where did you become who you are? What made you choose to leave or stay?”

Now I search for the rootedness I knew as I wove my bike through neighborhood streets and explored backyard bushes without fear. I want to hide again between suitcases while someone strong carries me down new roads and assures me I will soon know them. Instead I plant my garden and marry and have children and hang sacred pictures on walls I’m told are mine, but I know that I will be leaving soon for sturdier shelters. I lean toward the leaving; I wait for it as my feet sink into the ground beneath me.

For though I did find home here, red-rock bright, I still feel the need to tell people that I come from somewhere else. I speak of past homes, reminding myself of what land has shaped me and telling myself that I can return to that place. Perhaps speaking of the past is acknowledging that God will one day bring me again to a place I know. So I live between the just-coming-from and the just-going-to, and I reach forward every morning in case a new, truer home should appear.

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Since I’ve had my own home, I’ve thought more about Jesus’ words, “I go to prepare a place for you.” As I put out towels and think of what guests would like to eat, I realize that this is what my mom has done for years, readying a place in the shadow of the preparation Jesus does for us. I think of the times she got the house ready for my sister or for me to come home from college, from trips, from first years of marriage or motherhood. She prepared for us out of what she knew of us, and she delighted to prepare.

I think of friends who create homes for me, not just in their physical houses but in their conversation and questions. I have prepared a place for you in this friendship; I have set the table and I’m ready for you to come sit by me. I discover the presence of relational homes, homes that can bend as we move spiritually and geographically. I see this in my expanding family, understanding that we will never be able to fit in a Ford station wagon again.

Last year I traveled back East to visit my grandparents for the first time in several years. They live in a retirement community in Pennsylvania, not far from the row house where they made their home for almost fifty years of marriage. The sky reminds me of spring breaks with them, Easter mornings scrambling down their living room stairs.

On my second morning there, my friend Miriam, who lives in the area, gave me a ride to my grandparents’ home. Miriam lives in the house her grandfather built fifty years ago. Her little-girl house was once surrounded by forty acres of family property. Now most of the property has been sold off and other houses have risen up around what is left. The house stands, but the home is being threatened.

Miriam tells me, as we drive through small Pennsylvania towns, that one Saturday that spring her family had an “arbor day.” They planted five trees—pear trees and poplars, already seven or eight feet tall. The trees line one side of the house; later arbor days will fill in more space. Her family works to surround themselves with beauty; to let life take care of what time

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takes away.

I think of this as I watch the land around me, my grandparents' and great-grandparents' land, my dad's land. Later, I will watch my grandmother take my grandfather's hand, as she has at many dinner tables, for evening walks, for thousands of prayers. I will watch my grandfather smile when she speaks, though his eyes cannot see her anymore. And I too want to plant trees around me. Trees that say, This is where I come from. From this land anything can grow.

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Every fall my husband and I hike up to "The Craggs," about an hour from our house. The path is not long, but it is steep in places, and every time we hike there, I think I'm not going to make it to the top. The walk takes us through a mix of forest and prairie, and we stop often to rest at well-placed logs. The last push to the top is barren, a sharp incline of stone leading to a reward of flat boulders and a giant view of the world. We sit and feel our bodies more fully than we did before the climb, spray water down our throats and quiet our breathing.

We are near the treeline, so most of the life around us is an enduring brown and green. Only the aspens we can see below are bright. In front of us, the sky is tall against the land. If we turn around, we see the rest of the mountain—the strength of all we will not climb—made up of evergreens reaching straight out of their rocky beds.

After one of our walks, when we turn back to the face of the mountain, we see an aspen in the midst of the pine above us. A shock of yellow among the darkness. "It's just up there, doin' its thing," a hiker next to me says.

As we start back down the mountain, I think of how in a few days or a few weeks that aspen's leaves will fall and feathery branches will highlight the green around them. Not many people will even notice the tree is standing. I think about how I enjoy knowing one path up one mountain in this state and what aspens look like in winter—more than I knew three years ago. I also enjoy carrying New Hampshire autumns, though they somehow slip away when I try to remember the shape of the leaves in our yard. I look again at the aspen higher and higher above me and let the yellow remind me of my mom driving past her beltline of trees and of the way color is one of the first things we know. I feel strong rock hold up my feet as I watch a single tree that has found its home reach for sky.

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