

February
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Saturday wasn't very beautiful when it comes to standards of weather, the sky an overcast sheet of gray. It wasn't a rolling mass of clouds either. They just lay there, threatening to impose their stubbornness.

As I got out of the car, the Rock Island Nature Preserve looked dormant. A wooden sign with painted gold letters introduced the preserve and made a humble request: *Take only pictures and leave only footprints*. I saw a few charred logs on a nearby rise. No one had been there that day. It wasn't warm enough for the snow to be melting but it recently had been. The existing footprints had softened edges, palimpsestic impressions in the white carpet of snow. Animal tracks were beginning to fade. Tree branches weren't snow-capped. There was no life in sight. I was the only one imposed upon by the dismal sky.

There weren't many trails plotted out. I wasn't wearing hiking boots, so I opted to stay where others had tread before. Walking was troublesome because of the snow. I thought about my feet more than I thought about nature.

Groves of trees and cultures of prairie grass divided the land. I walked up a small hill on the right, following a trail that curved and headed back down. Looking forward over the rise, I stopped at the sight of an evergreen grove just beyond a second small hill. High Dunsinane.

There is something about the sound of Dunsinane that makes it roll off the tongue. That's one of the only details I remember from reading *MacBeth* in high school. That was the first time I ever bought *Cliff's Notes*. I had to. I was missing class for band and the teacher was strict about understanding the material and staying caught up. The perfect, ironed-in creases of her slacks reflected her stiffness. She was plain and dreary. Her personality rubbed off on her classroom, located in the northwest corner of the fourth floor. The room was always dark, even when the sky was brilliant and the shades were open. The institutional yellow walls were bare save for a corkboard near the door on which

two grade sheets were stapled. The classroom was spacious, but austere, much like today's scene, actually.

The grove wasn't huge, but each tree was full and looming. I could have gone up the hill, but decided the path downward looked cleaner and less slippery.

I held my footing by stepping on the patches of dirt that had begun to peek from the snow covering the rest of the preserve. I found myself in a narrow aisle surrounded by bare trees whose branches whipped at my face. A willow tree stood on the right side of the path, hanging over the trail. The branches of the *Salix babylonica* reached down like arthritic fingers, tired, dangling loosely in the afternoon stillness. The bark on the trunk was a pattern of uncrossed A's, pointing up toward the sky where the branches didn't. There were several deer tracks. My feet crunched loudly on the snow, sinking down half an inch or so with every step. I thought about winters when I was younger and could walk on top of the snow without making an impression.

The zigzag pattern from the soles of my lavender rain boots trailed behind, following me down the un-shoveled sidewalks of Jackson Street. In third grade my mother purchased those boots "with room to grow." I wore them with ugly gray boot socks of Eric's that I would remove in the coat room with the light off so the other children wouldn't see me as I stuffed the socks deep into my burgundy L.L. Bean backpack. For six blocks I was the queen of winter as I walked on top of the snow, unlike my husky brother who broke through the white crust and little Lis's bird legs that poked through as she tried to keep up with Eric and me. When I got to school I would no longer be winter's queen, or even princess. All the other kids had goulashes and snow boots. Not me. For two winters I made due with those lavender rain boots and ugly socks, secretly peeling them off in the dark coatroom. I hope no one ever knew.

I wish I could have been as sneaky today, walking on top of the snow, standing on top of the world for that matter, so no one would ever know I had been here. But my footprints would give me away to the next visitor, fresh, crisp and deep in the stiff snow. The space around me was quiet. I was an impolite intruder.

I hadn't walked far when the path stopped. The sticks that claimed to be trees in the summertime grew too close for me to walk between them. Even the animal tracks stopped suddenly. Less snow covered the ground. I stopped and stood in the small opening that led nowhere. It was completely silent, except for the distant pop of hunting rifles. I looked up and saw the blankness of the sky. "Yep. This is it," the sky said meekly. "It's all I've got for you today Make what you can of it." I didn't really want to talk to her anymore if she was going to be like that.

I looked around. There was nothing but lifeless sticks, erect in the still air. I looked up. The branches that formed a shading canopy in the summertime didn't look promising. The vegetation of the forest floor was denser than the layers above. I breathed out and caught a glimpse of the chill in the air. I put my hands in my pockets and felt my gloves; the fuchsia pink pair Grandma Betty gave me for Christmas two years ago. I wanted to put them on but I really didn't need them. I was taking a walk to experience nature. I didn't feel much being offered. Besides, I had to take what I could get. Cold is part of the experience, I thought as I dug my hands deeper into my pockets. I stood for a few minutes taking in the stillness, then turned back the way I had entered the dead-end labyrinth in the trees.

I returned to where the path split. To the left, up the hill, was High Dunsinane. To the right were my tracks leading back to the car.

I could cruise down the interstate by myself at this moment, the stereo pounding louder than my thoughts, not concerned about which exit to take, just driving. I would go anywhere but here. I'd stop for gas if I had to. I could go to Canada. I've never been there.

I went left, climbing up the hill. Below was a field, open and covered with snow. I followed the path as it led to the left, around the perimeter of the field. In front of me was waist-high prairie grass, faded and stiff with coldness. I shivered and paused to zip my coat closer to my chin. Intermingled with the grass were flowers whose pods were dry and leaves curled, like my hands clenched against the crisp air before I tucked them back into my pockets. I

followed the perimeter, walking about 25 yards from the trees that had first greeted me. They weren't as full up close, the branches spaced and empty, green their only addition to the blandness of the preserve.

My parents bought a new Christmas tree this year to replace the old bottlebrush spruce they've had for twenty years. For a while they haven't been able to put out all the ornaments for fear the tree would collapse. Only the lightest and newest ornaments are chosen. The painted clay ornaments from preschool and Scouts are stored in Christmas tins and placed under the tree. Over the years, the gaps between the branches had grown larger and the molded plastic trunk of the tree had grown weaker. It stood on display for five weeks each year before it was stuffed back into its dilapidated box that read "Christmas Spruce—6 feet" and stored in the attic closet. After being squashed back so many times, it didn't expand to more than 5'5" last year.

All the other vegetation surrounding me had lost its vitality, subdued by winter. On the rise to the right were again the charred logs, poised, their ends smooth, the bark gone. The burn had been intentional, but controlled and limited to the field. Walking around the logs I brushed prairie grass. A circle where the snow had melted away surrounded each tall blade. I could not see where it met the soil beneath, but thought of the life that would radiate from the field in the spring. The grass was getting ready, pushing away the winter, giving away its warmth. Life still exists in the cold.

The ground near the gate was moist and blackened as winter seeped in. I reached toward the ground and picked up a handful of snow, forcefully breaking through the icy crust. My hands were cold; I didn't feel the chill of the snow, just wetness. I squeezed it, compressing the fragile crystals with my strength, melting them with my warmth. I stood and took one last look behind me. Nothing. I felt nothing. Maybe it was tranquility. Maybe indifference. I had been there and I was leaving.

I left the field and stepped onto the loose clay of the parking lot, reaching into my pockets for my gloves. It was okay to put them on now, I decided. It was cold and I was heading home. February had shown itself to me. I had left

my traction-less shoeprints in the snow. I had seen what I needed to see and left, wondering when spring would arrive and if I might return to see it.