No Man's Land

by Eula Biss

ON THE PRAIRIE

"What is it about water that always affects a person?" Laura Ingalls Wilder wrote in her 1894 diary. "I never see a great river or lake but I think how I would like to see a world made and watch it through all its changes."

Forty years later, she would reflect that she had "seen the whole frontier, the woods, the Indian country of the great plains, the frontier towns, the building of the railroads in wild unsettled country, homesteading and farmers coming in to take possession." She realized, she said, that she "had seen and lived it all…."

It was a world made and unmade. And it was not without some ambivalence, not without some sense of loss, that the writer watched the Indians, as many as she could see in either direction, ride out of the Kansas of her imagination. Her fictional self, the Laura of *Little House on the Prairie,* sobbed as they left.

Like my sister, like my cousin, like so many other girls, I was captivated, in my childhood, by that Laura. I was given a bonnet, and I wore it earnestly for quite some time. But when I return to *Little House on the Prairie* now as an adult, I find that it is not the book I thought it was. It is not the gauzy frontier fantasy I made of it as a child. It is not a naïve celebration of the American pioneer. It is the document of a woman interrogating her legacy. It is, as the scholar Ann Romines has called it, "one of our most disturbing and ambitious narratives about failures and experiments of acculturation in the American West."

In that place and time where one world was ending and another was beginning, in that borderland between conflicting claims, the fictional Laura, the child of the frontier, struggles through her story. She hides, she cowers, she rages, she cries. She asks, "Will the government make these Indians go west?" and she asks, "Won't it make the Indians mad to have to—" but then she is cut off and told to go to sleep. She falls ill and wakes from a fever to find a black doctor attending her. She picks up beads at an abandoned Indian camp and strings them for her sister. The real Laura grows up riding back and forth in covered wagons across the Middle West, passing through immigrant towns and towns where she notes in her diary seeing "a great many colored people." She marries a farmer named Almanzo and settles, finally, in the Ozarks.

Laura Ingalls Wilder loved the land enough to know exactly what had been stolen to make her world. "If I had been the Indians," she wrote in her 1894 diary, as she looked out over a river and some bluffs in South Dakota, "I would have scalped more white folks before I ever would have left it."

ON THE BORDER

Shortly after we married, my husband and I moved to a part of Chicago that was once known as "No-Man's-Land." At the turn of the century, when Chicago had already burned and been rebuilt again, this was still a sandy forest of birch and oak trees. It was the barely populated place between the city of Chicago and the city of Evanston, the place just north of the boundary that once designated Indian Territory, a place where the streets were unpaved and unlit.

Now this neighborhood is called Rogers Park, and the city blocks of Chicago, all paved and lit, run directly into the city blocks of Evanston, with only a cemetery to mark the boundary between the two municipalities. The Chicago trains end here, and the tracks turn back in a giant loop around the gravel yard where idle trains are docked. Seven blocks to the east of the train station is the shore of Lake Michigan, which rolls and crashes past the horizon, reminding us, with its winds and spray, that we are on the edge of something vast.

There are a dozen empty storefronts on Howard Street between the lake and the train station—a closed Chinese restaurant, a closed dry cleaner, a closed thrift shop, a closed hot dog place. There is an open Jamaican restaurant, a Caribbean American bakery, a liquor store, a shoe store, and several little grocery markets. Women push baby carriages here, little boys eat bags of chips in front of the markets, and men smoke outside the train station while the trains rattle the air.

We moved to Chicago because I was hired to teach at the university in Evanston, which is within walking distance of Rogers Park. Walking to campus along the lakeshore for the first time, I passed the cemetery, and then a block of brick apartment buildings much like the ones on my block, and then I began to pass houses with gables and turrets and stone walls and copper gutters and huge bay windows and manicured lawns and circular drives. I passed beaches where sailboats were pulled up on the sand, where canoes and kayaks were stacked; I passed fountains, I passed parks with willow trees, I passed through one block that was gated at both ends. I passed signs that read PRIVATE ROAD, NO ACCESS, POLICE ENFORCED.

Evanston was still an officially segregated city in 1958 when Martin Luther King Jr. spoke there about the Greek concept of agapē, love for all humanity. On my first visit to Evanston, after my job interview, I experienced a moment of panic during which I stood with the big cool stone buildings of the university and its lawns and trees behind me while I called my sister to tell her that I was afraid this might not be the life for me. I was afraid, I told her, that if I became a professor I would be forever cloistered here, forever insulated from the rest of the world. My sister, who is herself training to be a professor, was not moved. There are, she reminded me, worse fates.

Of the seventy-seven official "community areas" of Chicago, twenty-four are populated by more than 90 percent of one race, and only twelve have no racial majority. Rogers Park is one of those few. It is celebrated as the most diverse neighborhood in a hypersegregated city. By the time I moved to Rogers Park, quite a few people had already warned me about the place. Two of them were my colleagues at the university, who both made mention of gangs. Others were near strangers, like my sister's roommate's mother, who asked her daughter to call me on the day I was packing my moving truck to share her suspicion that I might be moving somewhere dangerous. And then there was my mother, who grew up in a western suburb of Chicago but has, for almost twenty years now, lived in an old farmhouse in rural New York. She told me that she had heard from someone that the neighborhood I was moving to might not be safe, that there were gangs there. "Ma," I said to her, "what do you know about gangs?" And she said, "I know enough—I know that they're out there." Which is about as much as I know, and about as much as most white folks who talk about gangs seem to know, which is to say, nothing.

IN THE IMAGINATION

Gangs are real, but they are also conceptual. The word *gang* is frequently used to avoid using the word *black* in a way that might be offensive. For instance, by pairing it with a suggestion of fear.

My cousin recently traveled to South Africa, where someone with her background would typically be considered neither white nor black, but colored, a distinct racial group in South Africa. Her skin is light enough so that she was most often taken to be white, which was something she was prepared for, having traveled in other parts of Africa. But she was not prepared for what it meant to be white in South Africa, which was to be reminded, at every possible opportunity, that she was not safe, and that she must be afraid. And she was not prepared for how seductive that fear would become, how omnipresent it would be, so that she spent most of her time there in taxis, and in hotels, and in "safe" places where she was surrounded by white people. When she returned home she told me, "I realized this is what white people do to each other—they cultivate each other's fear. It's very violent."

We are afraid, my husband suggests, because we have guilty consciences. We secretly suspect that we might have more than we deserve. We know that white folks have reaped some ill-gotten gains in this country. And so, privately, quietly, as a result of our own complicated guilt, we believe that we deserve to be hated, to be hurt, and to be killed.

But, for the most part, we are not. Most victims of violent crimes are not white. This is particularly true for "hate" crimes. We are far more likely to be hurt by the food we eat, the cars we drive, or the bicycles we ride than by the people we live among. This may be lost on us in part because we are surrounded by a lot of noise that suggests otherwise. Within the past month, for example, the *Chicago Tribune* reported an "unprovoked stabbing spree," a "one-man crime wave," a boy who was beaten in a park, and a bartender who was beaten behind her bar, the story being, again and again, that none of us are safe in this city.

IN THE CITY

In the spring of 2006, the *New York Times* published an analysis of all the murders that had been committed in New York City during the previous three years—a total of 1,662 murders. The article revealed one trend: people who were murdered tended to be murdered by other people like them. Most of the killers were men and boys (a disturbing 93 percent—a number that, if we weren't so accustomed to thinking of men as "naturally" violent, might strike us as the symptom of an alarming mass pathology), and most killed other men and boys. The majority of children were killed by a parent, and in more than half of all the cases, the victim and the killer knew each other. In over three fourths of the killings, the killer and the victim were of the same race, and less than 13 percent of the victims were white or Asian.

Even as it made this point, the article undid its own message by detailing a series of stranger-murders. There was the serial murderer who shot shopkeepers, the KFC customer who stabbed a cashier, the man who offered a ride to a group of strangers and was then murdered for his car. These are the murders we find most compelling, of course, because these are the murders that allow us to be afraid of the people we want to be afraid of.

In a similar layering of popular fantasy with true information, the article went on to mention specific precincts in Brooklyn, the Bronx, and Harlem where murders were concentrated, and then quoted Andrew Karmen, an expert in victimology, who explained, "The problem of crime and violence is rooted in neighborhood conditions—high rates of poverty, family disruption, failing schools, lack of recreational opportunities, active recruitment by street gangs, drug markets. People forced to reside under those conditions are at a greater risk of getting caught up in violence, as victims or as perpetrators." In other words, particular neighborhoods are not as dangerous as the conditions within those neighborhoods. It's a fine line, but an important one, because if you don't live in those conditions, you aren't very likely to get killed. Not driving through, not walking through, not even renting an apartment.

I worked, during my first year in New York, in some of the city's most notorious neighborhoods: in Bed-Stuy, in East New York, in East Harlem, in Washington Heights. That was before I knew the language of the city, and the codes, so I had no sense that these places were considered dangerous. I was hired by the Parks Department to inspect community gardens, and I traveled all over the city, on train and on bus and on foot, wearing khaki shorts and hiking boots, carrying a clipboard and a Polaroid camera.

I did not understand then that those city blocks on which most of the lots were empty or full of the rubble of collapsed buildings would be read, by many New Yorkers, as an indication of danger. I understood that these places were poverty stricken, and ripe with ambient desperation, but I did not suspect that they were any more dangerous than anywhere else in the city. I was accustomed to the semirural poverty and postindustrial decay of upstate New York. There, by the highways, yards were piled with broken plastic and rusting metal, tarps were tacked on in place of walls, roof beams were slowly rotting through. And in the small cities, in Troy and Watervliet, in Schenectady and Niskayuna, in Amsterdam and in parts of Albany, old brick buildings crumbled, brownstones stood vacant, and factories with huge windows waited to be gutted and razed.

Beyond the rumor that the old hot-dog factory was haunted, I don't remember any mythology of danger clinging to the urban landscape of upstate New York. And the only true horror story I had ever heard about New York City before I moved there was the story of my grandmother's brother, a farm boy who had gone to the city and died of gangrene after cutting his bare foot on some dirty glass. "Please," my grandmother begged me with tears in her eyes before I moved to New York, "always wear your shoes."

And I did. But by the time I learned what I was really supposed to be afraid of in New York, I knew better—which isn't to say that there was nothing to be afraid of, because, as all of us know, there are always dangers, everywhere.

But even now, at a much more wary and guarded age, what I feel when I am told that my neighborhood is dangerous is not fear but anger at the extent to which so many of us have agreed to live within a delusion—namely that we will be spared the dangers that others suffer only if we move within certain very restricted spheres, and that insularity is a fair price to pay for safety.

Fear is isolating for those that fear. And I have come to believe that fear is a cruelty to those who are feared. I once met a man of pro-football-size proportions who saw something in my body language

when I shook his hand that inspired him to tell me he was pained by the way small women looked at him when he passed them on the street—pained by the fear in their eyes, pained by the way they drew away—and as he told me this he actually began to cry.

One evening not long after we moved to Rogers Park, my husband and I met a group of black boys riding their bikes on the sidewalk across the street from our apartment building. The boys were weaving down the sidewalk, yelling for the sake of hearing their own voices, and drinking from forty-ounce bottles of beer. As we stepped off the sidewalk and began crossing the street toward our apartment, one boy yelled, "Don't be afraid of us!" I looked back over my shoulder as I stepped into the street and the boy passed on his bike so that I saw him looking back at me also, and then he yelled again, directly at me, "Don't be afraid of us!"

I wanted to yell back, "Don't worry, we aren't!" but I was, in fact, afraid to engage the boys, afraid to draw attention to my husband and myself, afraid of how my claim not to be afraid might be misunderstood as bravado begging a challenge, so I simply let my eyes meet the boy's eyes before I turned, disturbed, toward the tall iron gate in front of my apartment building, a gate that gives the appearance of being locked but is in fact always open.

IN THE WATER

My love of swimming in open water, in lakes and oceans, is tempered only by my fear of what I cannot see beneath those waters. My mind imagines into the depths a nightmare landscape of grabbing hands and spinning metal blades and dark sucking voids into which I will be pulled and not return. As a charm against my terror of the unseen I have, for many years now, always entered the water silently repeating to myself this command: *Trust the water.* And for some time after an incident in which one of my feet brushed the other and I swam for shore frantically in a gasping panic, breathing water in the process and choking painfully, I added: *Don't be afraid of your own feet.*

I am accustomed to being warned away from the water, to being told that it is too cold, too deep, too rocky, that the current is too strong and the waves are too powerful. Until recently, what I learned from these warnings was only that I could safely defy them all. But then I was humbled by a rough beach in Northern California where I was slammed to the bottom by the surf and dragged to shore so forcefully that sand was embedded in the skin of my palms and my knees. That beach happened to have had a sign that read how to survive this beach, which made me laugh when I first arrived, the first item in the numbered list being do not go within 500 feet of the water.

It is only since I have discovered that some warnings are legitimate that my fears of open water have become powerful enough to fight my confidence in my own strength. I tend to stay closer to shore now, and I am always vigilant, although for what, exactly, I do not know. It is difficult to know what to be afraid of and how cautious to be when there are so many imagined dangers in the world, so many killer sharks, and so many creatures from the Black Lagoon.

Now that we share a bookshelf, I am in possession of my husband's dog-eared, underlined copy of Barry Glassner's *The Culture of Fear.* Every society is threatened by a nearly infinite number of dangers, Glassner writes, but societies differ in what they choose to fear. Americans, interestingly, tend to be most preoccupied with those dangers that are among the least likely to cause us harm, while we

ignore the problems that are hurting the greatest number of people. We suffer from a national confusion between true threats and imagined threats.

And our imagined threats, Glassner argues, very often serve to mask true threats. Quite a bit of noise, for example, is made about the minuscule risk that our children might be molested by strange pedophiles, while in reality most children who are sexually molested are molested by close relatives in their own homes. The greatest risk factor for these children is not the proximity of a pedophile or a pervert but the poverty in which they tend to live. And the sensationalism around our "war" on illegal drugs has obscured the fact that legal drugs, the kind of drugs that are advertised on television, are more widely abused and cause more deaths than illegal drugs. Worse than this, we allow our misplaced, illogical fears to stigmatize our own people. "Fear Mongers," Glassner writes, "project onto black men precisely what slavery, poverty, educational deprivation, and discrimination have ensured that they do not have—great power and influence."

Although I do not pretend to understand the full complexity of local economies, I suspect that fear is one of the reasons that I can afford to live where I live, in an apartment across the street from a beach, with a view of the lake and space enough for both my husband and me to have rooms in which to write. "Our lake home," we sometimes call it, with a wink to the fact that this apartment is far better than we ever believed two writers with student loan debt and one income could hope for. As one Chicago real estate magazine puts it: "For decades, a low rate of owner occupancy, a lack of commercial development… and problems with crime have kept prices lower in East Rogers Park than in many North Side neighborhoods." And so my feelings about fear are somewhat ambivalent, because fear is why I can afford to swim every day now.

One of the paradoxes of our time is that the War on Terror has served mainly to reinforce a collective belief that maintaining the right amount of fear and suspicion will earn one safety. Fear is promoted by the government as a kind of policy. Fear is accepted, even among the best-educated people in this country, even among the professors with whom I work, as a kind of intelligence. And inspiring fear in others is often seen as neighborly and kindly, instead of being regarded as what my cousin recognized it for—a violence.

On my first day in Rogers Park, my downstairs neighbors, a family of European immigrants whom I met on my way out to swim, warned me that a boy had drowned by the breakwater not too long ago. I was in my bathing suit when they told me this, holding a towel. And, they told me, another neighbor walking his dog on the beach had recently found a human arm. It was part of the body of a boy who had been killed in gang warfare, and then cut up with a tree saw. The torso was found later, they told me, farther up the shore, but the head was never found.

I went for my swim, avoiding the breakwater and pressing back a new terror of heads with open mouths at the bottom of the lake. When I retold the neighbors' story to my husband later, he laughed. "A tree saw?" he asked, still laughing.

ON THE FRONTIER

When the Irish immigrant Phillip Rogers built a log cabin nine miles north of the Chicago courthouse in 1834, there were still some

small Indian villages there. He built his home on the wooded ridges along the north shore after noticing that this is where the Native Americans wintered.

Rogers built just south of the Northern Indian Boundary Line, which was the result of an 1816 treaty designating safe passage for whites within a twenty-mile-wide tract of land that ran from Lake Michigan to the Mississippi River, a treaty that was rendered meaningless by the Indian Removal Act of 1830, which dictated that all of the land east of the Mississippi would be open to white settlement. The Northern Indian Boundary Line, which was originally an Indian trail, would eventually become Rogers Avenue. And my apartment building would be built on the north corner of Rogers Avenue, just within the former Indian Territory.

During my first weeks in Rogers Park, I was surprised by how often I heard the word *pioneer.* I heard it first from the white owner of an antiques shop with signs in the windows that read WARNING, YOU ARE BEING WATCHED AND RECORDED. When I stopped off in his shop, he welcomed me to the neighborhood warmly and delivered an introductory speech dense with code. This was a "pioneering neighborhood," he told me, and it needed "more people like you." He and other "people like us" were gradually "lifting it up."

And then there was the neighbor across the street, a white man whom my husband met while I was swimming. He told my husband that he had lived here for twenty years, and asked how we liked it. "Oh, we love it," my husband said. "We've been enjoying Clark Street." The tone of the conversation shifted with the mention of Clark Street, our closest shopping street, which is lined with taquerias and Mexican groceries. "Well," the man said, in obvious disapproval, "we're pioneers here."

The word *pioneer* betrays a disturbing willingness to repeat the worst mistake of the pioneers of the American West—the mistake of considering an inhabited place uninhabited. To imagine oneself as a pioneer in a place as densely populated as Chicago is either to deny the existence of your neighbors or to cast them as natives who must be displaced. Either way, it is a hostile fantasy.

My landlord, who grew up in this apartment building, the building his grandfather built, is a tattooed Harley-riding man who fought in Vietnam and has a string of plastic skulls decorating the entrance to his apartment. When I ask him about the history of this neighborhood he speaks so evasively that I don't learn anything except that he once felt much safer here than he does now. "We never used to have any of this," he says, gesturing toward the back gate and the newly bricked wall that now protects the courtyard of this building from the alley. "We never even used to lock our doors even—I used to come home from school and let myself in without a key."

For some time, the front door of the little house that Laura's pa built on the prairie was covered with only a quilt, but when Pa built a door, he designed it so that the latch-string could be pulled in at night and no one could enter the house from outside. Pa padlocked the stable as soon as it was built, and then, after some Indians stopped by and asked Ma to give them her cornmeal, Pa padlocked the cupboards in the kitchen. These padlocks now strike me as quite remarkable, considering that Pa did not even have nails with which to construct the little house, but used wooden pegs instead.

In one scene of *Little House,* the house is ringed by howling wolves; in another, a roaring prairie fire sweeps around the house; in another a panther screams an eerie scream and the girls are kept

inside. And then there are the Indians. The Indians who ride by silently, the Indians who occasionally come to the door of the house and demand food or tobacco, the Indians who are rumored—falsely, as Pa reveals—to have started the prairie fire to drive out the settlers. Toward the end of the book, the Indians hold a "jamboree," singing and chanting all night so that the family cannot sleep. Pa stays up late making bullets, and Laura wakes to see Pa sitting on a chair by the door with his gun across his knees.

This is our inheritance, those of us who imagine ourselves as pioneers. We don't seem to have retained the frugality of the original pioneers, or their resourcefulness, but we have inherited a ring of wolves around a door covered only by a quilt. And we have inherited padlocks on our pantries. That we carry with us a residue of the pioneer experience is my best explanation for the fact that my white neighbors seem to feel besieged in this neighborhood. Because that feeling cannot be explained by anything else that I know to be true about our lives here.

The adult characters in *Little House,* all of them except for Pa, are fond of saying, "The only good Indian is a dead Indian." And for this reason some people don't want their children reading the book. It may be true that *Little House* is not, after all, a children's book, but it is a book that does not fail to interrogate racism. And although Laura is guilty of fearing the Indians, she is among the chief interrogators:

"Why don't you like Indians, Ma?" Laura asked, and she caught a drip of molasses with her tongue.

"I just don't like them; and don't lick your fingers, Laura," said Ma.

"This is Indian country, isn't it?" Laura said. "What did we come to their country for, if you don't like them?"

With the benefit of sixty years of hindsight, Laura Ingalls Wilder knew, by the time she wrote *Little House,* that the pioneers who had so feared Native Americans had been afraid of a people whom they were in the process of nearly exterminating. And so as a writer she took care, for instance, to point out that the ribs of the Indians were showing, a reminder that they came, frighteningly, into the house for food not because they were thieves but because they were starving. They were starving because the pioneers were killing all their game. If anyone had a claim on fear, on terror, in the American frontier, it was obviously the Indians, who could not legally own or buy the land they lived on, and so were gradually being driven out of their lives.

Near the very end of *Little House,* after the nights of whooping and chanting that had been terrifying the Ingalls family, and after many repetitions of the phrase "the only good Indian is a dead Indian," Pa meets an Indian in the woods, the first Indian he has met who speaks English, and he learns from him that the tall Indian who recently came into the house and ate some food and smoked silently with Pa has saved their lives. Several tribes came together for a conference and decided to kill the settlers, but this tall Indian refused, thus destroying a federation of tribes and saving the settlers. On reporting the news to his family, Pa declares, "That's one good Indian."

This turn of events has the advantage of offering a lesson and also of being a fairly accurate account of what took place in Kansas in 1869. Because Laura Ingalls Wilder was actually only a toddler during the time her family lived in Kansas, she did quite a bit of

research for *Little House,* traveling back to Kansas with her daughter and writing to historians, in the process discovering the story of the tall Indian, Soldat du Chene.

And so Wilder, the writer and the researcher, knows that the land the Ingalls have made their home on in *Little House* is part of the Osage Diminished Reserve. It is unclear whether Pa knows this, but it is clear that he knows he is in Indian Territory. He goes into Indian Territory on speculation, because he has heard that the government is about to open it up to settlers. At the end of the book, he gets word from his neighbors that the government has decided to uphold its treaty with the Indians, and soldiers will be coming to move the settlers off the land.

"If some blasted politicians in Washington hadn't sent out word it would be all right to settle here, I'd never have been three miles over the line into Indian Territory," Pa admits, in a rare moment of anger and frustration. "But I'll not wait for the soldiers to take us out. We're going now!"

The Ingalls family did indeed leave their home in Kansas under these circumstances. But the possibility the book suggests, by ending where it does, is that the settlers left Indian Territory to the Indians. "It's a great country, Caroline," Pa says, as they ride off in their covered wagon. "But there will be wild Indians and wolves here for many a long day."

This is how it could have been, Laura Ingalls Wilder seems to be proposing. The government could have enforced a fair policy. The settlers could have left and stayed away. But, as it happened, the government revoked its treaty with the Plains tribes within what one historian estimates was a few weeks after the Ingalls family abandoned their house in Kansas.

Laura Ingalls Wilder does not tell us this. She tells us, instead, that Pa digs up the potatoes he just planted and they eat them for dinner. The next day they get back into their covered wagon, leaving the plow in the field and leaving their new glass windows, leaving their house and their stable, and leaving the crop they have just planted. This is the end of the book, and this, I believe, is the moral of the story.

ON THE LAKE

Leaving my apartment one morning, I found a piece of paper on the sidewalk that read, "Help! We have no hot water." This message was printed in pink ink above an address that I recognized as nearby, but farther inland from the lake. The paper was carried by the wind to the water's edge, I imagined, as a reminder of the everyday inconveniences, the absent landlords and the delayed buses and the check-cashing fees, of the world beyond.

"Everyone who lives in a neighborhood belongs to it, is part of it," Geoff Dyer writes in *Out of Sheer Rage.* "The only way to opt out of a neighborhood is to move out…." But this does not seem to hold true of the thin sliver of Rogers Park bordering the lake, which many of our white neighbors drive in and out of without ever touching the rest of the neighborhood. They do not walk down Howard to the train station, do not visit the corner store for milk or beer, do not buy vegetables in the little markets, do not, as one neighbor admitted to me, even park farther inland than one block from the lake, no matter how long it takes to find a spot.

Between my apartment building and the lake there is a small park with a stony beach and some cracked tennis courts where people like to let their dogs run loose. In the winter, the only people in the park are people with dogs, people who stand in the tennis courts holding bags of shit while their dogs run around in circles and sniff each other. In the summer, the park fills with people. Spanish-speaking families make picnics on the grass and Indian families have games of cricket and fathers dip their babies in the lake and groups of black teenagers sit on the benches and young men play volleyball in great clouds of dust until dusk. "The warm weather," my landlord observed to me not long after I moved in, "brings out the riffraff."

When my landlord said this, I was standing on the sidewalk in front of our building in my bathing suit, still dripping from the lake, and a boy leaving the park asked if I had a quarter. I laughed and told the boy that I don't typically carry change in my bathing suit, but he remained blank-faced, as uninterested as a toll collector. His request, I suspect, had very little to do with any money I may have had, or any money he may have needed. The exchange was intended to be, like so many of my exchanges with my neighbors, a ritual offering. When I walk from my apartment to the train I am asked for money by all variety of people—old men and young boys and women with babies. Their manner of request is always different, but they are always black and I am always white. Sometimes I give money and sometimes I do not, but I do not feel good about it either way, and the transaction never fails to be complicated. I do not know whether my neighbors believe, like I do, that I am paying paltry reparations, but I understand that the quarters and dollars I am asked for are a kind of tax on my presence here. A tax that, although I resent it, is more than fair.

One day in the late summer after we moved to Rogers Park, my husband came home from the fruit market with a bag of tomatoes and a large watermelon he had carried the half mile from the market to our house, stopping once to let some children feel how heavy it was. He was flushed from the sun and as he split the melon, still warm, my husband mused, "I hope more white people don't move here." My husband isn't prone to sentimentality of any kind, or to worrying about white people, so I asked him why and he said, "Because kids were playing basketball by the school, and they had cheerleaders cheering them on, and black men say hello to me on the street, and I love our little fruit market, and I don't want this place to change."

But this place probably will change, if only because this is not a city where integrated neighborhoods last very long. And we are the people for whom the new coffee shop has opened. And the pet grooming store. "You know your neighborhood is gentrifying," my sister observes, "when the pet grooming store arrives." *Gentrification* is a word that agitates my husband. It bothers him because he thinks that the people who tend to use the word negatively, white artists and academics, people like me, are exactly the people who benefit from the process of gentrification. "I think you should define the word *gentrification,*" my husband tells me now. I ask him what he would say it means and he pauses for a long moment. "It means that an area is generally improved," he says finally, "but in such a way that everything worthwhile about it is destroyed."

My dictionary defines *gentrification* as meaning "to renovate or improve (esp. a house or district) so that it conforms to middle-class taste." There is definitely the sense among the middle-class people in this neighborhood that they are improving the place. New

condos fly banners that read luxury! The coffee shop and pet grooming store have been billed as a "revitalization." And if some people lose their neighborhood in the process, there is bound to be someone like Mrs. Scott of *Little House* who will say, "Land knows, they'd never do anything with this country themselves. All they do is roam around over it like wild animals. Treaties or no treaties, the land belongs to folk that'll farm it. That's only common sense and justice."

Meanwhile, when I walk home from the train station at night, I watch unmarked cars pull up in front of black teenagers who are patted down quickly and wordlessly. Some of the teenagers, my husband observes, carry their IDs in clear cases hanging from their belts for easy access. One evening, I watch the police interrogate two boys who have set a large bottle of Tide down on the sidewalk next to them, and I cannot forget this detail, the bottle of Tide, and the mundane tasks of living that it evokes. I consider going to one of the monthly beat meetings the police hold for each neighborhood and making some kind of complaint, but month after month I do not go.

Walking down Clark Street, I pass a poster on an empty storefront inviting entrepreneurs to start businesses in Rogers Park, "Chicago's most diverse neighborhood."

It takes me some time, standing in front of this poster, to understand why the word *diverse* strikes me as so false in this context, so disingenuous. It is not because this neighborhood is not full of many different kinds of people, but because that word implies some easy version of this difficult reality, some version that is not full of sparks and averted eyes and police cars. But still, I'd like to believe in the promise of that word. Not the sun-shininess of it, or the quota-making politics of it, but the real complexity of it.

ON THE COAST

There are three of us here on the beach, with Lake Michigan stretching out in front of us. We are strangers, but we have the kind of intimacy that can exist between people who are lying on the same deserted beach. Aisha, a young black woman, sits on one side of me, and Andre, a middle-aged Polish immigrant, sits on the other.

We bury our feet in the sand and talk of the places we have lived. Aisha is from Chicago, and she has never, in her twenty-one years, lived anywhere else. Andre left Poland when he was seventeen, looking for more opportunities. Now, he says, he isn't entirely sure that he didn't make a mistake. We all fall silent after this confession.

This beach is a kind of no-man's-land. To the south are the last city blocks of Chicago, where the beaches are free but rocky and plagued with chunks of concrete. To the north are the first city blocks of Evanston, where the beaches are expansive and sandy but require a fee of seven dollars. To the west, beyond the wall of rocks directly behind us, is the cemetery that separates Chicago from Evanston, and a sign that forbids entry to this stretch of beach. To the east is an endless prairie of water.

When I mention that yesterday a lifeguard from Evanston came down in a boat while I was swimming and informed me that it was illegal to be here and that I had to leave because this land belongs to Evanston, Aisha rolls her eyes and says, gesturing back toward the cemetery, "This land belongs to the dead people." Andre, the

immigrant, the pioneer, looks out across the water and says, “This land belongs to God.”