

Great Grandchild

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ENG 317: Environmental Writing: Great Lakes Literature
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At age twenty-four, a college student writes a letter to his future great grandchild, relating his own personal experiences to his thoughts and opinions about human's relationship with nature, and the inevitable need for a great change.

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Signed,

Joseph Rybarczyk

English 317: Environmental Writing

August 20, 2010

Great Grandchild,

This letter is for you, and if you'd like, for your own children as well. Perhaps much of what I say now is inconsequential. Time changes many things, and it seems to be doing so at an increasingly fast rate. On this day, August 20 of 2010, I am 24 years old. Perhaps you will best understand this letter if you read it at the same age. It is difficult reaching through time, more difficult than I initially thought when the idea of this letter first came to me. It would be much easier, I think, to write a letter to the past. I look forward to receiving one from you.

I wanted to give you an account of the world in 2010 through a personal letter. It's something that I wish I would have had from my own great grandfather or great grandmother, as I'm certain their lives were much different than mine, and the idea of connecting to someone you will never meet through time has always intrigued me. The reason I am writing this letter is because I feel that a great change is going to happen soon. Perhaps you are now in the midst of that change, or the change has happened already. If that is the case, you may want to know what my generation was doing to bring about this change, or to keep it from happening. Perhaps this change will begin in my own lifetime. It seems as though it must. Whatever the case, I hope that you might get something from this letter. Even if it is only to realize what a crazy old fool your great grandfather was.

When I was much younger, I knew very little about the world. To clarify, I would say I still know very little, but I like to think I know something more. I was born in Detroit in 1986, and spent about the first 10 years of my life there. Living in such a large city, I can't remember ever really experiencing nature firsthand. Everything I knew was urban and suburban paved streets, house after house of basically the same design, or buildings, like big gray concrete giants lining the gray concrete highways where cars and trucks and vans of varying colors moved to and fro with incredible speed and anger. The only "nature" I experienced was lawns, cut at perfect right angles, brought in curious strips and laid like carpet in between the concrete, with the occasional tree planted here and there. Of course, there were parks that had a few more trees, and occasionally a small pond, but I was not encouraged to stay there. Rather, I was to stay safe, out in the open field, or on the playground, where my grandparents could look over me. It's hard to remember what I thought about in that world, my young brain soaking in the environment I was born into, unknowing, and basically uncaring for that with which I was unacquainted. My siblings and I would play occasionally outside in the small front yard, but more frequently in the safety behind the fence in the back yard, on the driveway leading into the garage, or on the small patch of grass beside it. The summer before my 4th grade year in elementary school, my grandparents decided to move us up to northern Michigan, to escape both the increasing price of living, and the increasing crime in Detroit. This was a difficult decision, as they were leaving not only their homes and their friends, but most of our family as well. I didn't mind moving. I was relatively isolated and without many friends.

Alpena, Michigan. It isn't much more than your average blue collar small town. But to me, and I think to my sister and brother, and my grandparents too, it was magical. Suddenly the world seemed much more manageable. Our new house was near the dead end of a dirt road next to a small forested area, and only a block away from a park and a beach that sat on the eastern shore of Lake Huron. From my new bedroom window upstairs, I could see the lake, like an ocean compared to anything I'd ever seen before. There were two massive weeping willow trees, one in the front yard, and one in the back. Everywhere there were trees of various size and shape, and wildflowers sprung up on every patch of grass. Here, there were no fences to contain our ambitions. The first day we moved in, we saw a toad hopping around in our front yard. My grandpa encouraged me to catch it, but I was afraid. It was slimy and gross, and what if it bit me? He picked it up himself and showed me how it just sat in his hand, harmless. He handed it to me, and I held it. A wonderfully squishy creature. It jumped out of my hands and I jumped back. I was excited to live here.

I stayed in Alpena until I graduated from High School. I made a lot of friends while I was there, most of whom I am still close to now. If not physically, than in the sense that we trust each other, and seem to think of each other more as a family than as only friends. My grandparents always tell me that they never regret moving there because they believe it is where I opened myself up, and let the world in. I think that I agree with them. When I lived in Detroit, the world seemed unkind, unwelcoming, and uninterested in my enthusiastic willingness to explore it. Alpena, on the other hand, seemed alive and inviting; the forests near my house were almost

as excited to play with me as I was to play with them. I would run through them for hours, climbing the giant limbs of the willow trees, hanging upside down from the lower branches, and testing my confidence in the higher ones. With my sister and brother, I'd play tag and hide and seek behind the tall grass hills, and run through the adjacent low lying swamps, unconcerned with how wet or cold my feet became. And at night, I'd admire the moon and the stars, and wonder why they hid from me all those years. These days, I thank them for being there for me whenever I needed them.

My siblings, Sarah and Devon and I moved in with my grandparents when I was about 7 years old. Before that, we lived with our single mother, Lisa. She was beautiful, tall and thin, with crimson red brown hair, and an energetic spirit. But, she was also lost—alone, desperate, and easily taken advantage of. She would be away often, and we were constantly moving from house to house, school to school, never able to make long-lasting friendships or feel at home in one place. She would drift between jobs, and eventually became addicted to drugs. Though she loved us, she was unable to devote herself to taking care of children, so our grandparents took us in. I wish I knew more about what she was like; she visited us occasionally, but I was too young then to understand her state of mind, her motivations, or her sense of pain. All I knew was that she was sick, mommy was sick—and I wanted her to get better.

We had been living in Alpena for two years when our mother died. At first I was shocked. I didn't know what to do, or what to feel. I wasn't even sure what death meant. I knew it meant she was gone, and wouldn't be coming back. I had seen

dead things before—my great grandmother, some taxidermy animals, and those on the side of the road. But my own mother, this was different, something I hadn't considered. Suddenly, my one closest connection to the earth was gone. My origin—exactly half of who I am—was now only a body lying in a box, looking very unlike herself. I felt her skin, touched her hands, and tried to recognize her smell, but I couldn't. Who was I seeing in that casket? I realized then that this wasn't her. It was her body only, but her person, and her essence was gone forever. At twelve years old, I believe this was the moment I understood the permanence of death. Weeks after the funeral, I would look at my own hands, my own fingers. In the mirror, I would examine my face, my hair, my eyes, my lips. I knew that some day, I too would have to die. My muscles would cease to move, my heart cease to beat, my eyes cease to see. What will happen to *me* though? I wondered.

Many nights I would walk to the park alone, asking myself these questions. For a long time, I thought I would never find the answers. Well, the truth is I still haven't. But I have found a peace with it, an adequate admiration for the intricacies and the beauty in life and in death. I would lay on picnic tables and stare at the moon, pretending to be on the moon, staring down at the bay, seeing myself laying on the picnic table. The willow trees would shiver with me, and assure me that all is well. The waves would lap the shore, and cover my toes with love. Most of all, the stars, like glitter tossed across the dark sky, shone onto me, blinking and burning mercilessly through the night, and they reminded me that even in the darkest and loneliest places in the universe, there is the promise of illumination.

After high school, I couldn't have been more excited to leave Alpena for the big city. My friends and I would complain about how dead of a town it was, with nothing to offer us. So I moved to Lansing with two of my friends. When I arrived there, my eyes were aglow with projections of going to college, meeting new people, getting a great job, and of course, just having fun. I couldn't wait to be an adult.

However, after a while, I began to feel like something was missing. Every day I would wake up, drive to school, drive back home, drive to work, spend the rest of the day at work, and drive back home at night. As this reality of "adulthood" dawned on me, the landscape began to change, or perhaps more than that, my perception. I realized that Lansing is a terribly great example of the American dream, surrendered to the American reality. A city, in parts quite beautiful, but in others, forgotten and forsaken, like a concrete desert. The cracked streets stretch for miles, passing abandoned automobile plants, abandoned houses, and abandoned dreams. Old restaurants and strip malls, stripped of their former glory. A gas station on every corner, though many of them no longer in service, their windows broken and covered with cardboard. I wondered where all the people had gone. Had they followed their dream elsewhere? Or were they like me, wide eyed, still hopeful, zipping their bodies from one place to another in search of something they didn't fully understand? And all too quickly, and too distracted to notice what was happening in front of their eyes.

I remember one particular time; I had already been scheduled to work a full work week, at 40 hours. I agreed to take the shifts of a couple of employees who couldn't make it to work for one reason or another. On my last day of work for the

week, I worked 3 shifts in a row, for a total of around 60 hours. After the end of my final shift, I walked out of the restaurant exhausted, my thoughts clouded with reflections of the day, and the days before, which all seemed to melt into one long stream of memories.

“What happened to the time?” I asked myself. It was near the end of the day, and I lamented, for the millionth time that week, that I had wasted the entire day inside that shit hole of a restaurant. The sun was drifting into sleep, slipping quietly below the horizon. I watched as, with one final effort, before the night could blanket the sky in darkness, the sun exhaled, and its light, like paint, spilled out from its surface and soaked the sky in reds, oranges, purples and pinks. It spilled from the edges of the clouds, the tips of every leaf, and from the wings of the birds who flew above me, overflowing and falling from the sky in droplets like rain; onto the blades of grass, tic-tacking rooftops, soaking my hair, and flowing over my face. I tilted my head up and closed my eyes. I pleaded with the sun,

“Don’t go away! I barely saw you today!” But I knew, and watched, as the colors hung in the sky, fading slowly like a memory, and then the blue, like a deep cold ocean, washed away the light. I drove home, and the strings of headlights racing from place to place were the stars that night, as they are every night in the city.

The problem with living in an artificial world, is that after a while, you start to believe that world is real. Yes, it is real because it exists, it is physically there, but that is where the reality ends. In manmade environments, there is nothing new that can be learned; when everything around us is built by us, then we are the masters of that environment—perhaps that is why we like cities so much. We know, at least

collectively, all there is to know about that world. Therefore, man is surrounded only by himself, representations of himself, extensions of himself. On the other hand, in nature, there is much that man does not know and does not yet understand; therein lies unlimited potential, unlimited knowledge, hidden in every organism. Nature offers knowledge to us, free of charge. All it asks in return is its preservation, that we treat it with respect. Nature *is* us, we find ourselves in it, and we are part of it. When we isolate ourselves from it, sever ourselves from it, try to conquer it, we suffer, and inevitably, we destroy ourselves. Likewise, nature suffers, and perhaps if we are not careful, it is destroyed as well, and must start all over again.

I have chosen to write you this letter now because I have been inspired. I decided about a year ago to take courses in the program in the environment at my university. In the first course I took for the program, I was introduced to the university's biological station in Pellston, Michigan, only about 15 minutes south of the Mackinac Bridge. Since nature has had a profound effect on me throughout my life, I decided to take some courses there. My experience at the biological station opened my eyes to things in nature that I never knew existed. In my forest ecosystems course, we were expected to learn over 100 plants, their scientific names, their common names, and their families. We visited incredibly rare ecosystems such as an alvar plain, a place where 10 million year old limestone bedrock rests, exposed at the surface of the ground, looking much like an abandoned parking lot, with rare plants growing inside the cracks. I saw bogs, fens, swamps, sand dunes, and some of the only old growth forests in Michigan. I learned about the Passenger Pigeon, a bird that was once the most abundant on Earth, but that man's

greed brought to extinction in only a few short years. I learned about colonial expansion, and the logging industry that devastated the forests of this country, and destroyed thousands of years of forest succession and evolution, which, in many cases, will never recover. I learned about invasive species that threaten our native ecosystems, and thus, the biodiversity and stability of the entire planet. I learned of other plants, and animals that are threatened with extinction if we, all of us in the world, don't change the way we live. Yet, from all that I learned during my two months of studying the natural world, there is one thing that I found most important; that wilderness is awareness, and to be aware is to be alive.

At the beginning of this letter, I told you that I thought a great change was coming. The word "great" can mean one of two things. In both cases, it means this change is unprecedented in human history. If the change is a positive one, it will be a revolution of ideas, of morals, of the philosophy which governs how our species lives on this planet. If it is a negative one, its greatness will be in the powerful and irreversible consequences that we will face. Our presence on this planet has never been so influential as it is now. For a long time, we saw the world as a vast and abundant place, where any human action would be miniscule in comparison. Now we realize that everything we're doing to the earth is having a profound and lasting impact. Our agriculture and factory farms are destroying rainforests and leading to desertification, our profit-driven fishing industries are killing our oceans, and our energy-hungry societies are poisoning our land, water, and air. As conservationist John Muir once said, "When one tugs at a single thing in nature, he finds it attached to the rest of the world."

I see in our midst, a fork in the road; we may choose to continue as we are, down the dark path, short-sighted, fearful of nature, as we have been in the past during times of great ignorance and great suffering, exploiting and raping the earth for temporary economic benefits, or we may live with nature, and care for it as if our lives depended on it (and they do). If we choose this path, I believe an equilibrium will be reached, where we may continue indefinitely, and all the while become ever more enlightened, both intellectually and spiritually, as the dark and mysterious world of our past fades away, and we reach a new level of understanding. This is the change I see on the horizon, and the time to make the decision is closer now than ever before. It is today. I hope that by reading this, you will understand that not all of us were blind to this reality. The path we chose to take, I'm afraid, I cannot yet say.

Great Grandfather,

Thank you so much for your letter. Somehow, our family has kept it safe for me through all these years. I plan on giving it to my daughter to read as well some day. The world is so different now, making it difficult to know where to begin.