**The last home**

Who’s to say what pulls you back to a piece of land? For 20 years, my husband and I have returned to a small meadow we call Dream Farm overlooking the bay in Inverness.

Dream Farm. The name almost a poem.

We first saw the land on a windy day when we were just beginning our love affair. We liked it because it reminded him of Ireland, I liked it because it was introspective.

Everywhere motion. A great wind stirred the upper branches of the trees. White chevrons of waves crossed the bay, a cacophony of falling leaves.

I sat down on a log, hugged my knees. Though noisy with the chatter of leaves and pine needles, an immense stillness existed here, something beyond anything human. I reach for his hand. If only for a few seconds I belonged to the world, nameless, blazing, pure.

I didn’t know then what I know now, that nature, both tender and brutal, was already marching toward us. Behind his beautiful green eyes, invading his bones, virulent cancer cells were already multiplying.

We made an offer for the land. Some kind of tangle between the partners and it was rejected: we were almost relieved. Between us we had four kids. They had to finish high school. We would soon adopt another boy.

One after the other, the years fell away, but pulled by some mysterious force, we returned to Dream Farm over and over again. Just to sit, to be.

And then a savage year. He had a backache that would not end and finally he got an MRI. A phone call that night; multiple myeloma, his bones eaten by cancer, a blood disease that never leaves your body. We had to show up for emergency surgery the very next morning.

A year of dark, still days. Needing to belong to a world of color and wind, I dragged my fear and sorrow to Dream Farm. It felt like my own private church, the only place where I could be fully here. Just as I had many years ago, I would sit on a log in the middle of the meadow, watch leaves in the tall trees shake hallelujahs against the sky, lose myself in the movement of long grass. Whitecaps like knuckles curled inside of white gloves moved rapidly across the surface of the bay, smashed the far shore.

Gradually—a good doctor, the right medicine—he became one of the lucky ones. With his cancer under control, the years moved rapidly on. Now we were in our 60s. Financially fit, children grown up and moved out, our last about to leave for college. Our house, like a tangerine in a baggie skin, was suddenly too large.

And once again Dream Farm is up for sale.

Trying to decide whether to buy it, we visit on a warm summer evening. I walk the familiar sweet blurred land through shadows as soft as feelings. It was so hot the air was a brandy of heat-steeped berries.

A woman in a straw hat approached and told us she lived down the road. We said we were thinking of buying the land. “Let me tell you about this place,” she said and then, as though she were a hostess at a party, she introduced us to every single plant, every tree, by their Latin names. Childlike, I followed her as she interpreted this complicated ecosystem.

I loved the idea of living next to someone who knew the plants as well as her human neighbors. We made an offer and it was accepted.

Soon we were working with an architect who composes songs on his mandolin from Yeats poems. “Do you think Dream Farm is a Rilke poem or a Yeats poem?” I asked him one day. He smiled, studied a giant oak that stands like a stooped curator at the edge of the property. A moment of silence, then he began to sing in a sweet, rough voice. “I went down to the Hazelwood, because a fire was in my head.”

Yeats.

And now story poles are going up, gleaming in the late-afternoon sun.

I have never lived so dizzyingly close to the edge of the continent. No barrier, no soft arm defining safety between home and horizon, this land is so close to water it is as if the bay is another room. I will taste salt on my lips the first thing in the morning. My sleep will be spoken to by waves, I will come to know water’s many complexities.

Sometimes building this house is more vivid, more audacious, than writing a novel, one’s choices on display. The closest thing I can compare it to is the autobiography of a face, the way we wear our years.

I have always inherited the places where I have lived, and I’ve never nurtured something or someone from the ground up. Even my two adopted children were made elsewhere. I have never started with something not there before.

This home will be the final summation of what I’ve learned, what I love, the underlining of all the parts: these rooms will enclose family, solitude, my long marriage. What bulbs will I plant here? Where will I build shelves to hold my books, my collections of antiques inherited from my parents and their parents?

As I watch the story poles going up, sketching the outlines of rooms, I feel almost as if the pieces of wood are defining the inhabitation of self. These rooms will hold both my belonging and my aloneness. It is here that I will negotiate the chafe between.

There is no longer a galloping-free quality to our happiness; each day is more precious than the last. Bodies aging, Mike with bone cancer, we are simply biology. It is here I will become an old woman: Dream Farm’s tall trees will sweep the years beyond me.

Living here, will I become I be less afraid?

M.F.K. Fisher designed a house at the end of her life that she called “Last House.” This too will be our last house. In this small meadow, past, present and the future will mix. My grandchildren will carry into the years beyond me the sound of this wind sloughing through the trees. The waves at Shell Beach will fill tiny bowls left by their feet. They will come to know nights here, sleep under the same ancient constellations as the Miwoks who lived here before. At Heart’s Desire they will pick blackberries larger than their thumbs.

And it is here, caressed by time’s ceaseless movement, where they will learn about impermanence, learn that what they love is perishable. On the shores of Limantour Beach they will unravel the calligraphy of kelp, look up to see whales migrating far out at sea. “Look,” they will say, pointing with small fingers, but a moment later the whales will be gone, the space where they were terrifying in its absence.

And one day they will point, and I too will be gone.