

FALLING LIGHT AND WATERS TURNING

ADVENTURES IN BEING HUMAN
IN WORD AND IMAGE

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Preface

For years I had been telling stories of my childhood to anyone who would listen. They started coming back, as stories often do, battered and bent. I should write them, I thought, so my children will know what really happened. The effort became the work of a lifetime. *Falling Light and Waters Turning: Adventures in Being Human* is the journey of one mind's eye, commenced in a childhood close to the earth, ordained by parents dedicated to living the good old virtues of their Puritan ancestors. Childhood leaves me with mysterious unease.

Through one kind of adventure after another, the questing eye searches, vaguely aware of need for something, anything, that might clear the fog of bewilderment.

I study biology, love every minute of it, delight that I am learning much, but some obstruction is standing in my way.

I marry and have children. I know from biology that growth occurs from within, yet I'm feeling I ought to be "growing" my children, like garden beans and peas.

Unease turns into crisis. In desperate search for clarity I return to school, this time to study photography seriously.

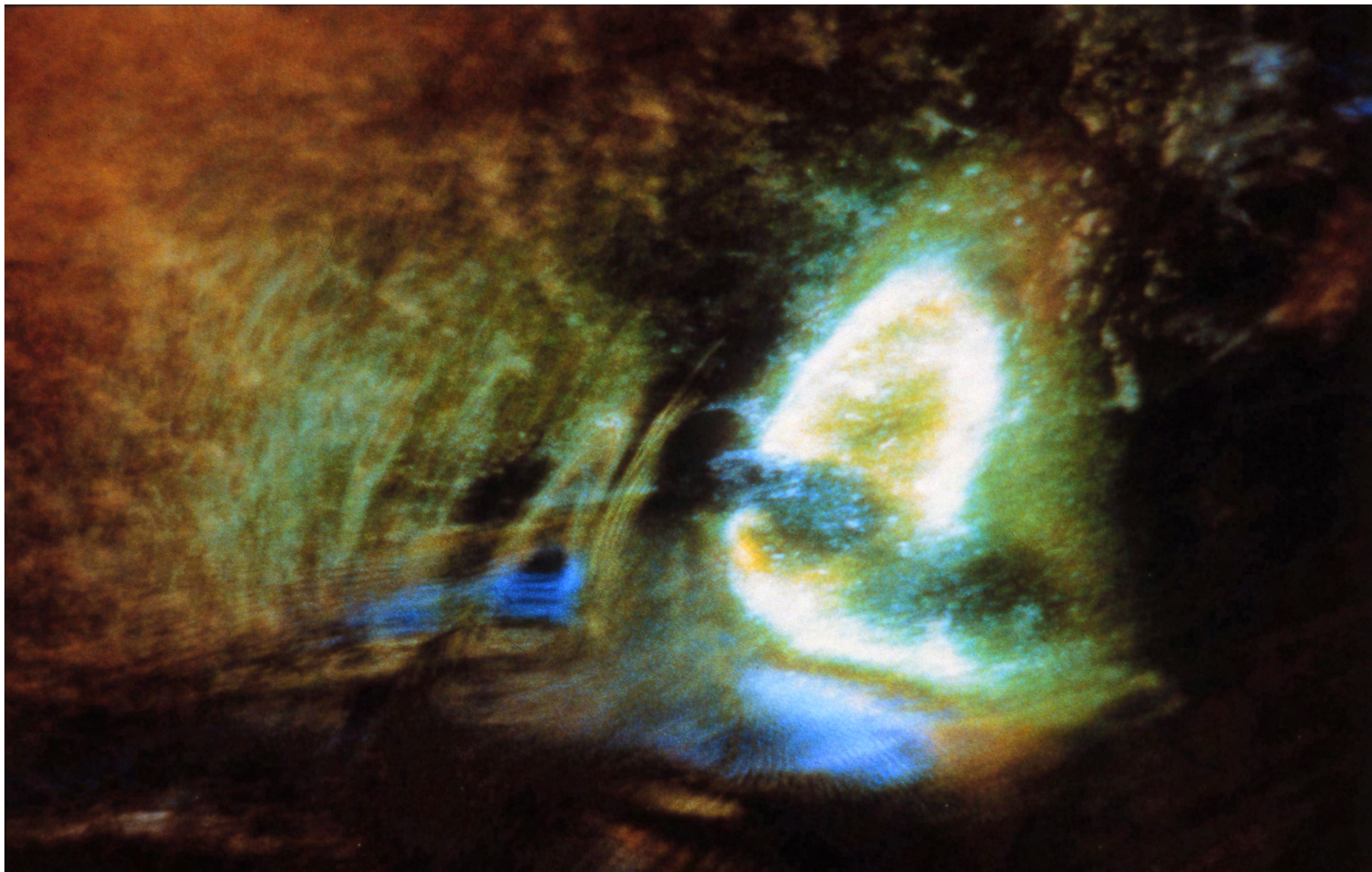
Photograph-as-Metaphor opens a channel. In light/shadow mutuality, mind's eye starts finding clues, goes probing into color interactions. The mystery remains.

Passing age eighty, arriving in the dimension of old age, I become acutely aware of the significance of changes across time, changing relations within place, human history, planet, the entire world we call our own, changing requirements of what we call mind.

The child slowly emerging as person, survives into old age where the long view reconsiders all. What started as memoir becomes creative non-fiction. Is it ever possible to know what "really happened"?

The living of a human life might be the greatest Adventure of all.

Mary North Allen
Madison, Wisconsin
Circa 2007



THE FIRST ADVENTURE

Father Was a Member of the Explorers Club



Chapter One

“Bright Edge of the World”

—Willa Cather

Death Comes for the Archbishop



*I was born on a wooded hillside
of a family who raised sheep
read aloud
and walked journeys in far distant lands.*



Original North family home in Walton, NY

I was born at home,
my four-year-old brother standing over my basket,
giving me a proper welcome,
eager to set me straight.
“Now, Mary, I don’t want you to grow up to be a flapper.
Flappers are girls who wear their arctics unbuckled.
and they bob their hair and they wear short skirts.
and they do all sorts of terrible things.”

Robert arrived just as the Great War was beginning,
I just after its end.
It was called “The War to Make the World Safe for Democracy.”
It was called “The War to End All Wars.”
Two big political issues were in the air,
whether alcoholic beverage should be legal for commerce,
whether women should be granted the right to vote

Mother was a near tee-totaler.
Father liked an occasional small glass of wine.
Father always said he never could see the point of women’s suffrage,
It would simply double the vote on both sides.

Robert knew all these things, and more
(There isn’t any Santa Claus,
Mother and Father decorate the tree and put things under it.)
because when he was supposed to be asleep,
he liked to creep out of bed and peer down through the grating in the floor
where the heat might be rising
to see what the grown ups were doing
and listen to what they were talking about.

Robert knew it was his duty to warn me
No Flappers
No Suffragettes
would be welcome in the North family.

And he was Right.



Irene Davenport North with Robert Carver North and Mary Remsen North, circa 1920

I am learning to be a little homing pigeon.

Every day I shoulder my shortened .22 for target practice,
Father standing over me.

NEVER point a gun at a person.

NEVER point a stick at a person, pretending it's a gun.

NEVER point a finger at a person, pretending it's a gun.

Guns are not toys.

Gun accidents happen to people who do not know how to handle guns.

No toy guns in our house.

I practiced until my arms were tired.

I practiced until I could hit a bull's eye nine times out of ten.

Some day we would need to shoot game for food.

Sometimes Father takes Robert and me up the hill
so we can learn to build a fire with one match.

Then Father shows how to cook flapjacks or biscuits
over the open flame.

Of course, Argonne comes along.



In my garden, at the edge of the meadow,
I look across the meadow and up to the mountain.

*It's a bit like Von Gogh (not Monet),
meadow of wildflowers,
but it's not the south of France.*

My garden is mine own,
where I played with the big collie who took me as his responsibility,
the woods,
pathways through the pasture grasses,
the brook, where the waters were clean and sweet to drink,
the summer I turned six
before I started school
(there was no kindergarten).



Sometimes I walked down the hill to the meadow,
crossed the brook on the footbridge,
a plank Father had anchored upon some stones,
so I could climb the bank on the other side
to play with my friend Elizabeth.

Sometimes I played with Miriam Miller.
Her father looked like an ordinary man,
save only his backward collar.
Mr. Miller, dressed up in his Sunday robes,
raised his arms, looked at the ceiling,
and asked God to bless us, sitting down below.

Mr. Miller is talking to God!
He must send his messages
in that little cylinder
that travels on an overhead trolley in Henderson's store,
carrying our dollar bills
to the woman in the cage on the mezzanine
who sends it scooting back with our change.

Mr. Miller, why do you ask God to bless us and not yourself?

*

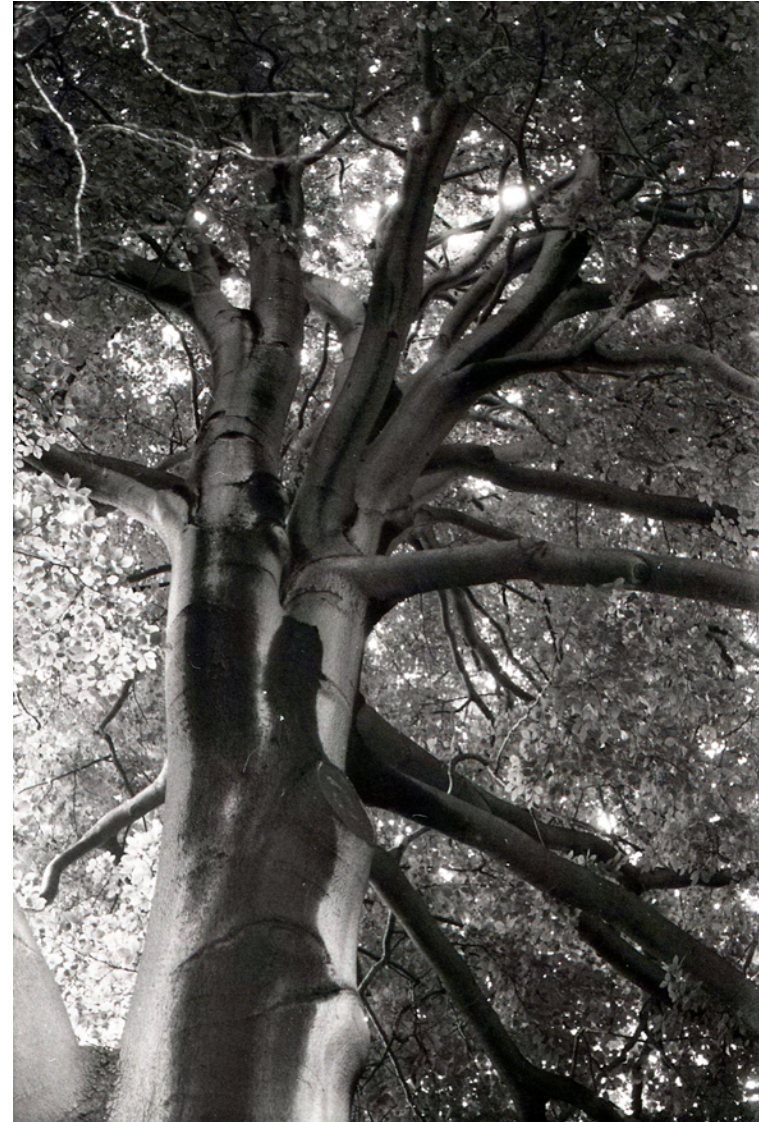
What I like best
is climbing trees.

From the top of a pine that stands alone in the pasture
I can fly the Atlantic with Lindbergh,
fight the Spanish Armada with Drake,
unfurl the Skull and Crossbones and shout,
"Fifteen Men on a Deadman's Chest"

at the very top of my lungs.
Pirates are lucky,
and buccaneers.

They don't have to take cod liver oil.

They don't have to eat cooked carrots.
They don't have to take baths in winter.
Nobody ever washes their hair.
They can go adventuring any time they want to.
What I like best
is climbing trees.



Chapter Two

Family Explorations



We—
two parents, one family friend, one ten-year-old girl and a dog—
put rowboat into the Colorado River
in Black Canyon,
upstream from Boulder Canyon,
where engineers were surveying for a new dam.

In my notes that day I wrote:

“Fifteen minutes of two, Thursday afternoon, February 13, 1930.

The river is muddy and

Boy! it is running fast.”

For three weeks we rowed,

floated, and rowed

downstream.

Sometimes there was nothing ahead

but towering rock wall.

Then a bend,

an opening,

a slit,

narrowly we passed through

out of one canyon into the next,

in and out of shadows cast by canyon walls,

out into open country,

to Yuma.

*

Some of the rock was gray, shading to black.

Mojave Canyon and Aubrey Canyon walls

were wondrous shades of reddish-brown turning orange,

in craggy shapes.

I knew no names for such colors,

nor how to describe such abrupt shapes.

Sun from east peeking over the rim,

rising to straight above,

shining straight down on us,

then falling beyond west rim,

cast shadows,

changing colors into mysterious, deep purple,

into green-going-black,

illuminating high caves in rock walls where birds were roosting,

grasses waving on ledges for leaping wild goats.

The walls looked miles high.

The river—swift and deep and very big.

We were small.

I was afraid of the disapproval of my parents

but I had no fear of the natural world.



Site of the Boulder Dam

We all had supper together.
Mother made a rabbit stew with dehydrated potatoes and onions.
They gave us roasted cactus heart.
Like sweet potato baked with pineapple,
it was juicy and fresh and slightly sweet, and tasted especially good
after the functional dry rations of the trail.



"The Kaliwas—Josefa and Vincente—with Mary."

Old Vicente, the grandfather, walked on with us for a while.
He looked old to me then,
today I would say ageless.
He was barefoot.
When he stepped on a cactus thorn
he reached down, pulled it out,
and went on walking.

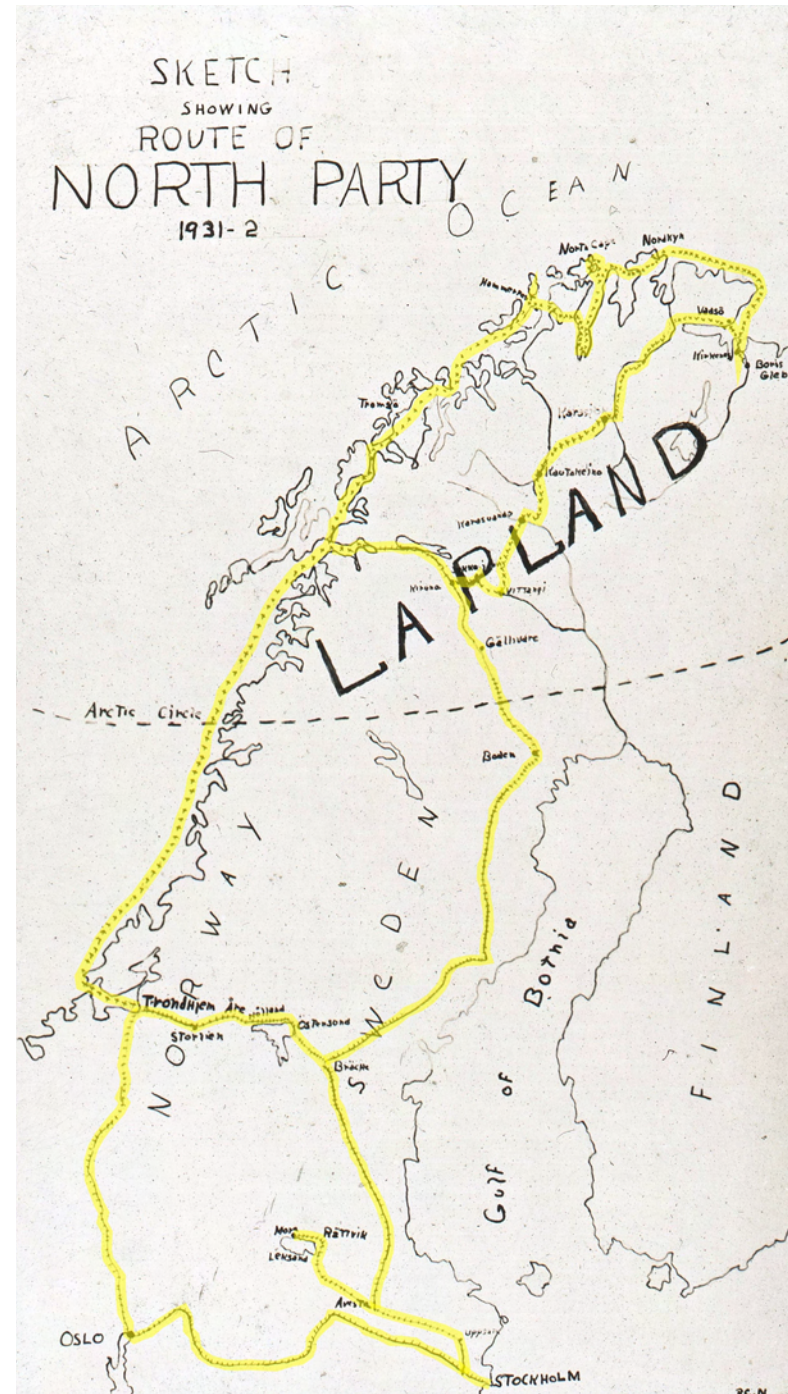
Together we walked along the desert floor,
then westward, up a canyon, up into a mountain meadow.
As we gained altitude,
snow came.

That night as we settled into our tent,
snow was still falling.
I saw Vicente sitting on the other side of the campfire,
a blanket over his shoulders.
I whispered to Mother,
 "We could make room for Vicente in the tent,
 why doesn't Father ask him to join us?"
Father had already asked.
Vicente had declined.
Vicente knew that night will not last forever
nor will snow.



We crossed the Atlantic
and went up the Norwegian coast by boat
to spend the winter in Lapland.

When (because of introductions)
Father got passes, we traveled First Class.
Thus: Norwegian American SS Company—1st class,
Norwegian Railroad—3rd class,
Swedish Railroad—1st class.



In winter north of the Arctic Circle
it's dark all day, but not pitch-dark.

Shooting stars
leave bright trails behind them.
Stunted birches,
hungry for light,
stand black against the snow.
Twigs edged with frost
twinkle crimson,
catching afterglow

from hidden sun
lighting more temperate regions
far below the horizon.
Long streamers
burst out from the north,
pastel colors leaping southward,
pulsating,
brightening, fading,
brightening again,
changing shape,
twirling like whirlpools.



"Riding behind reindeer in a pulke is the greatest sport."

In the summer of 1935, we went to Mexico.
Before leaving, we had to get typhoid shots,
I remember our sore arms and fevers.



North's car and workmen on the road in Chiapas

By car we drove south through Laredo,
Monterrey, Ciudad Victoria.
Beyond pavement there would be some miles of gravel,
Pan-American Highway, someday to connect Argentina to Alaska,
Tamazunchale,
under construction through the mountains to Jacala.
On to Mexico City,
pyramid, floating gardens.
Father speaks to someone at Chapultepec,
who turns out to be an old college classmate, philosopher,
author of *The Great Chain of Being*.

Southward in heavy rain, getting dark,
we pull to the side of the road and sleep,

War over,
we moved to Wisconsin where Paul joined the faculty
of the Botany Department at the University.
Faculty, staff, and students converging on Madison,
thanks to the GI bill that made it possible
for a whole generation to be educated.
I wondered how I could possibly live in such a flat place.
Just as I had found the East and West coasts
to be different subcultures,
here was another.



Paul James Allen, early 1960s

But absence of war is not all peace and quiet.
The world always seems to have some demagogue
to stir up hatred and fear,
eager to exploit for personal gain and political power.
Wisconsin was home to Senator Joe McCarthy.
Like thousands of others, I could not live with myself
unless I made some effort to unseat him.
Volunteers all,
we addressed envelopes, stuffed, stamped, and sealed envelopes,
walked miles distributing literature door to door,
drove miles around the countryside putting up posters.
I think Fran Rose who ran the office was the only paid staff.
I learned about the LaFollette tradition
and the “Wisconsin Idea.”
I was too naive to know
what a remarkable political effort I was part of,
led by so many people deeply dedicated to freedom and honesty
in conduct of public service.
Nor did it occur to me that I was meeting people
I would otherwise have never known,
and making friends in a part of the country
neither Paul, who had come from rural New Hampshire,
nor I had ever been in before.

In college I had heard Alice Ehler on the harpsichord,
had heard Ezio Pinza,
Pierre Monteux conducting the San Francisco Symphony.
Now I heard
The Mozarteum of Salzburg
playing the Bassoon Concerto.
I floated through the ceiling
right out into the stars.

We bought a small house in a neighborhood called Crestwood,
the first cooperative housing community in America,
lots of young families,
lots of children, including three of our own.



Family picnic in Italy, 1954

I didn't want to subject my children
to the rigidity I had known as a child.
On the one hand,
I felt that I had to grow them up,
on the other,
I knew from biology
that growth occurs from within.

How can my parents have been so certain
that what they believed was right?
There's something important here
that I don't understand.

When the children were all in school,
I was ready to continue my education.
In what?
Biology had progressed so much in 15 years
it seemed I would have to start over.
As a faculty wife I did not think I should be taking courses
in my husband's domain.
I had enjoyed Latin in high school and college—
it gave me grammar and the origin of so many English words.
Now I read Lucretius in Latin
and found that I still had so much trouble translating
that the literature escaped me.
I took a course in History of Science,
wrote what felt like a terrible paper
on "Circulation of the Blood, from Galen to Harvey."

I thought of getting a teaching credential,
but the School of Education seemed sadly lacking in excitement,
or love of learning.

We moved out of the city
into an old farmhouse on seventy acres of Wisconsin farmland,
complete with barn, pig house,
corn crib, granary,
and silo.

Chapter Four

Crisis

“Nothing happened.
You’re imagining things.”

jangle

jangle

every cell in my body jangling

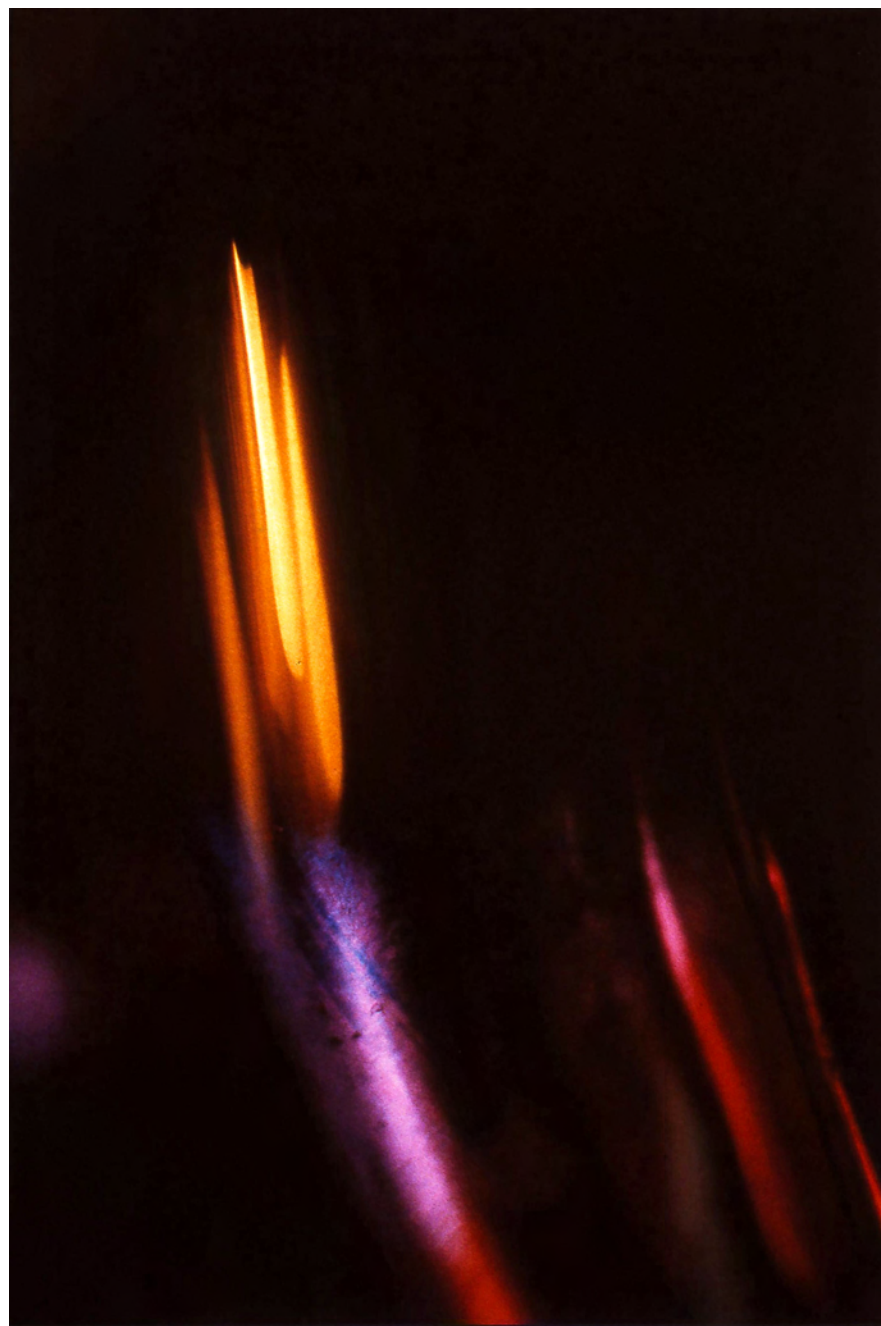
jangle

jangle

jangle

there's something I need to do

but I don't know what it is



one red rose floating in a glass bowl, from Merry
standing ready, Janet
when I needed to talk whatever nonsense was in my head

Helen, always Helen
years later I learned she had fed my family dinner
every evening
all those weeks I was in the hospital

Marie, and Dorothy, and Betty and Helen S.
handful of women standing with me

It's a kind of love

such a love is possible?
to be lovable, a person doesn't have to be free of flaws?



Women standing by me



Not pictured: Helen S. and Betty S.

How can I ever repay them?
But wait, think again.
They must have done it because they wanted to.
They must think I am worthy of being.
They must have done it because what happens to me
matters to them.

To think repay
is to miss the point.

The day President Kennedy was assassinated,
Tom, who was in school in Mt. Horeb, was bussed home early.
Tom was distressed because he had a part in a school play
that was due to open that evening.
They had been told to report back on time.
The cast were in no frame of mind for a performance.
I called the play director.

“The play must go on,” he said.

He was the history teacher who moonlighted as a plumber.
We had had some experience with his plumbing.
I called the principal, who said the same.
I was getting a bit angry.

“Mr. Kobs, do you know that in that play
somebody points a gun at somebody?
I think it would be highly inappropriate
to present that play this evening.”

Fifteen minutes later the party line telephone was ringing.
Community message.

“The play is cancelled for tonight.”

First time, ever in my life, somebody actually listened.

*

A letter came from a law firm in New York.

A lifelong friend of my father had died
and left my brother and me each \$500.

I put the money in the bank and looked at the world in wonder.
I thought I should never expect anything for myself.

Never had I had two nickels to spend as I might choose.

This would not pay for doctor bills.
This would not pay for children’s shoes.
This would make possible
something I could not otherwise do.

Something that might help—
what might that be?

Chancing by a camera store, I stood looking in the window.
My old camera had given out.
I could buy a new camera
and have something left toward a darkroom.

*

One day, in my makeshift darkroom,
watching a print come up in the developer,
suddenly a thought,

“This is so much fun

I’d like to learn all I can about it.

Why don’t I do that

instead of continuing to wait for Duty to Demand?”

What an astonishing thought!

What a delicious idea!

I took a big deep breath and let it out slowly.

I breathed some more.



Chapter Five

Where There Is No One Right Answer

In an era when anyone over thirty was “over the hill,”
I was past forty.
Photography was accessible,
Art was far, far beyond the No Trespassing Signs,
yet, here I was,
approaching the University Department of Art.

I half expected them to say,
“You foolish old woman, we don’t want you.”

Professor French looked at my prints,
listened,
then said,
“You’ll never know unless you try,”
signed the papers, and let me in.

I was in a prison
in some strange place
where I could not speak the language.
The cell was small and dark.
Once a day a keeper
opened a slot in the door
thrust in a bowl of inedible food.
My space was pitch dark.

The only light
came through a narrow slit
a crack in the door.
I set myself a problem
to photograph the light from that slit
once each day
each day I must make a different picture.



Chapter Six

Falling Light: Metaphor

With dogs and camera I walk in the woods,
No trail,
I like to find the places where light comes falling
All the way down to touch the earth.

How does a tree stand up?
How does it keep its balance?
Tree, with your roots going deep into darkness,
While your leaves go the other way for light,
Do you ever feel stretched, divided?
Your roots know a different world from your leaves—
But that, of course, is your life.

The dark, the light,
The roots and the leaves of the tree.

The dark, the light,
The green, green, green of the tree.

The dark, the light.
The living, living, living of the tree.

The Tree in the Biblical Garden,
The Tree in the Virgin Forest,
The Old Plum Tree that stands by the kitchen door.



A frog sits
Waiting for the light/shadow pattern
To change.

Such change is a frog signal
That something has happened
Which might be of significance in frog world
Such as the coming of a fly
Which is good to eat
If you are a frog.

A frog cannot see
A fly which does not move.

Like all other creatures
We see what we need
For the world we live in.
But what kind of world do WE live in?
Not just earth and trees and rivers and sky
We live in a mysterious world
Made of the symbol systems we have invented
An invisible world.

*In this symbolic world we have built
How learn to "see"
How learn to find our way?*

[end special formatting]



“Snow crystals”

[chapter number]Chapter Eight

[chapter title] Water Turning: A Different Kind of Photograph

For long I've been wanting to make a different kind of photograph
That would address some mystery of motion and change.

[Insert photo 03.08.02 submerged rock #13 color, ¾ page]



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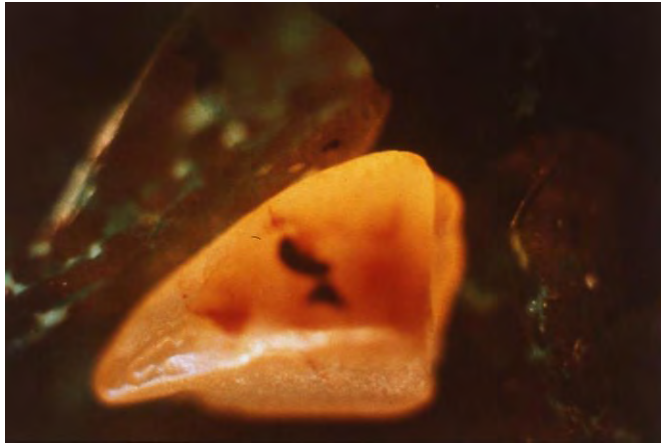
*I tried to ride a lightwave
Tried leaping from crest to crest
Fell all the way down a rainbow
Started climbing climbing
 Ever climbing the shadow's edge.*

[end special formatting]



“Snow with Leaf”

[Insert photo: 03.09.19 orange shell]



I have known the fiery essence of the silence of the wild,
Spoken to a salamander, held it in my hand.
I've smelled the flowers opening into color-singing bloom,
Rain drops in desert air.

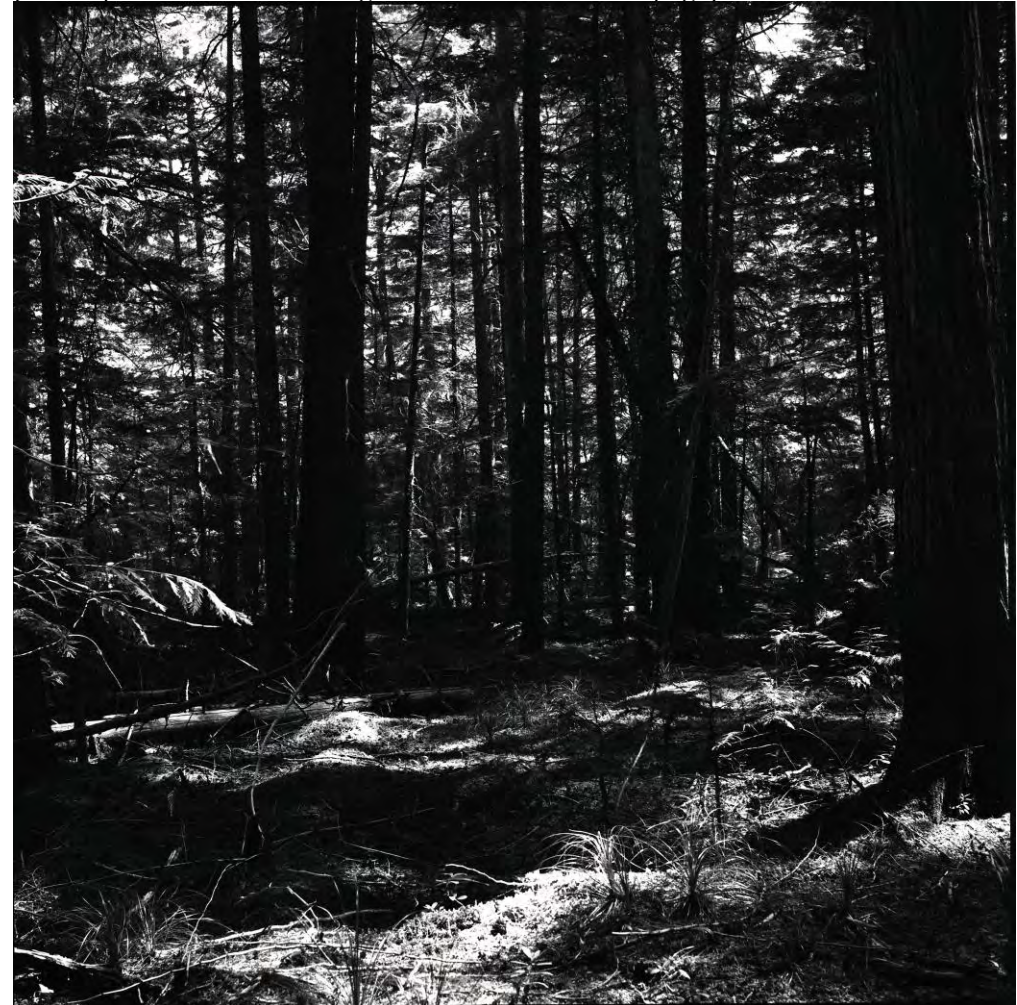
I have known the fiery essence of the arctic winter night,
Running with the reindeer, antlers riding high,
Gliding on the river wide, packed deep with ice and snow,
In the silence of the northern light.

I have known the fiery essence of the solitude of wild,
Shining motes of sun, breaking through old treetops high, Brightening needles golden
upon the forest floor,
Brightening light in my deepest heart.

I have known the pain of knowing I was afraid to speak.

I have known the pain of falling into a shadow's nest,
Fumbling in the dark at the sharp of shadow's edge,
Lacerated and bleeding, waking up to find
courage to speak in my own defense.

[Insert photo 03.09.20 Sunlight on Forest Floor, 1/2 page]



Beloved companions of the trail, one by one, pass on,
Children, grandchildren, young and younger friends walk with me
Few or many miles,
 Journeys, each our own.

In the wondrous space of the fitting place,
The terrors of the heart have lost their venom.

Squashed tight between ancient ethos and present compelling need,
Squashed tight between ought to be and is,
 All You Feelings who had no name,
 You feelings I banished and betrayed,
 Welcome home,

[end special formatting]

[Insert photo 04.10.02 trail opening between boulders, 1 / 2 page]

