Sean Prentiss Non-Fiction

Riverblood

Yesterday, I traveled to Pennsylvania from Idaho for a weeklong visit. With time off for summer break, I returned to the river of my youth to celebrate my thirty-third birthday tomorrow with my family. With my mother out buying a birthday cake, I walk from our family's cabin to the Delaware River that serves as our front yard. Normally this time of year—early June, the river runs calm, riverweed stretches toward the sun, and a few canoes float lazily past. But today, the 285-foot wide Delaware runs high and rough and muddy from heavy rains.

The river's high water reminds me of a fact I only recently learned. In 1972—the year of my birth—the Delaware River surged with the third largest amount of water in its recorded history. The day I was born, June 8, the Delaware gushed at 13,700 cfs, which is not flood level, but with that much water, Oliver's Beach—where I spent childhood summer days—and McElany Island, which sits thirty feet south of me, would have been submerged. On the day of my birth, no one could have stood where I now stand. They would have had to swim.

With the river murky and my birthday a day away, a John Kotre quote springs to mind: "Our first memories are like the creation stories that humans have always told [...]. The individual self [...] selects its earliest memories to say, This is who I am because this is how I began." I think about how my earliest memories are of summers on this river, days spent at the cabin, but my true beginning—my birth—begins in a sterile suburban hospital on Long Island, New York.

Earlier this morning as Mom and I were eating breakfast, she said, "Seanie, the last two weeks have been nothing but rain. You're so lucky it's nice today. I hope it's sunny for your birthday."

After a year away, I don't care whether today is rainy or sunny. I just want to remove my boots and feel the small chunks of shale wedged into the sand like I did every summer for the first eighteen years of my life, feel the cool June waters slip over my feet, my Carhartts wet. All I want is to pull on a swimsuit and dive into this river. But with all the rains, the river runs cold. If I dive in now, I'll surface shivering and have to return to the cabin to get warm. I am not ready to leave this river.

I pick up a sliver of slate and think about the river I now live near—Idaho's Snake. Last summer I dug trail alongside its arid banks. When I swung a hazel hoe into dry soil, I remembered building drip-castles in the Delaware's sand. In early morning, wisps of fog rose off the Snake like autumn dawns on the Delaware. Afternoons, I sat beside whitewater and wrote in my journal about new rivers and how they tie me to my past. At night, the Snake's rapids lulled me to sleep, and even in slumber I wanted the Snake to feel like home.

But, the Snake's rapids were too loud, and though I loved that roar, it wasn't the hush of my Delaware. For me, the Snake is a place to dig trail and build log bridges, to wakeboard and search for petroglyphs, to backpack beside in November when rattlesnakes hide from the cold, to rock climb and cliff jump on summer days. But the Snake isn't a part of my being—though I wish it were, because I live near it now and want to sink roots in Idaho.

I roll the slate in my hand before throwing it. It skips two, three, four times across the choppy river before sinking. Though I cannot see, I know it swishes and sways fifteen feet to the silty floor.

Standing on the riverbank, waiting for Mom to return, I let me mind wander to thoughts of home and Idaho and New York and Pennsylvania. Slowly I realize I want to figure out my connection to the Delaware because I was born in New York, spent thirteen years there (except for summers spent along the Delaware) before finally moving to the Delaware permanently. New York should feel like home—or maybe Idaho's Snake that I've lived near for six years—but neither feels anything like it. Only the Delaware does.

Lately these thoughts have taken on urgency as my relations die—my maternal grandfather, Daddy Dick, is buried five miles from here in the Stone Church cemetery. My maternal grandmother, Mommy Jo, is eighty-seven and no longer chases after her grandkids and great-grandkids. Instead we sit beside her on the cabin's brown couch and lay our arms in her lap. She tickles our forearms with her fingernails and tells stories of coming over from Austria eighty-some-odd years ago, of marrying Daddy Dick, of making the Delaware River as much her home as Daddy Dick's, even though it was his family that has lived along the Delaware since 1752.

To begin exploring my connections to the Delaware, I return to June 8, 1972. As I grew up, no one ever spoke of my birthday other than to tell me that I was nearly born in the backseat of my family's car as my dad raced my mom to a Long Island hospital. Besides that, I have no stories. And I've never asked questions. It never seemed important. Now as I search for a way to tie myself to this river, the silence about my birthday feels strange, seems a puzzle piece that I need to find.

During my youth, Daddy Dick, wearing a flannel shirt and blue swim trunks, would tell his grandkids stories. Maybe I was four, six, or nine, and in his stories he was sixteen, *There was a Labor Day party on the lawn and all of us would play horseshoes and quoits all day.*

Or he was twenty-four and pointing at my mom, *Your mother, just a toddler half your size, crossed the road and headed for the river like she could just hop in and swim by herself. She always loved that river.* Then he'd smile and pull me onto his lap and tickle me. His dentures rubbing his low lip as we both shook with belly laughs.

In one dream-memory I am thirteen and it is after Daddy Dick's strokes and heart attacks, after the useless surgeries, after his funeral. Though I am small for my age, I am too big to climb into Daddy Dick's lap. I stand next to him on a late August morning as he leans his soft stomach against the porch and stares at river fog rising. *Seanie, the river's losing its heat,* Daddy Dick says as he pulls his flannel tight against his body then musses my bowl haircut. *Not many more river days.*

In my imagination, I smile up at him. *Daddy Dick, was it like this the day I was born?*

What was that, kiddo?

The day I was born, what was it like? the ghost of Daddy Dick smiles and smiles, but he never answers my question.

Last night, Mom picked me up from the airport after my long flight in from Idaho and drove me to the cabin. Mommy Jo shuffled through the kitchen and cleaned up messes from her eleven grandkids and twenty-five great-grandkids, most of whom live within thirty miles of the river and this green old cabin. She drew a rag over the cabin's deep brown kitchen table.

While she cleaned up, I asked, "Mommy Jo, tell me about some of the Delaware floods, the old ones." I looked at the river running high and muddy, and its roiling made me want to know about the big floods we've experienced.

Mommy Jo rubbed her hands over blue polyester pants, "They called the flood of 1903 the Pumpkin Flood because it was October and pumpkins and just about everything else floated downriver." The river rose thirty-five feet above normal level.

As Mommy Jo spoke, I imagined my great-grandmother Grace Searles (a woman I've never met) standing beside Belvidere's covered bridge and watching the boiling and rolling river. Whitecaps pounding at the stone and cement base.

The bridge groans (once and then again—like an old man close to death).

There is a snap.

Someone from the crowd yells, *It's going. It's going.*

Everyone steps back as the bridge collapses. The roof, the walls, the elevated roadway fall into the Delaware. Splintered wood bobs in the whitewater until everything disappears.

Mommy Jo ran her hands through her white-gray hair and told of how in 1955 Hurricanes Diane and Connie raised the river

forty-four feet (flood level is twenty-two feet). She said, "The river climbed all eleven porch steps," as she pointed at the top cabin step. "Had it come up another two feet, the river would have swept the cabin down Foul Rift. Just thinking about it gets my heart going." When I asked Mommy Jo if anyone died, she frowned. "Upriver, almost fifty people drowned at a summer camp. Lots of children. Terrible."

Standing on the riverbank, waiting for Mom, I remember those old Daddy Dick stories and learning about the old floods, but I know nothing of my birthday. No one, not Mom, Mommy Jo, or Daddy Dick, ever said, "We didn't swim in the river once the year you were born," or "It was like we lived underwater from all the rain."

With no stories to call my own, I imagine and invent the year of my birth.

It is a cold, sodden January in 1972. Layers of snow crust the Pennsylvania ground. Near the cabin, heifers huddle in frosted pastures, creating pockets of warmth, and their hooves churn the snow, creating mud bogs. Come spring, this snow will melt, flooding the Delaware's tributaries—the Mongaup, the Pequest, the Lehigh, and all the others.

At the cabin, Mom turns up the kerosene stove, and slate-gray smoke snakes from the chimney. The kitchen warms first, so the family gathers here. Bow-legged Kristin runs in diapers. Jay crawls across the red linoleum floor. Dad yanks the pull tab off a beer. Mom looks out the large window at the river thirty feet away. Blocks of ice float downstream. She wonders, *Will the river ever go down?*

By March, the days are blanketed by clouds expectant with moisture.

During April's arrival, broad leaves bloom on the birches and sycamores, veiling the banks. At night, thunder echoes through the nighttime hollows, and Kristin and Jay hide inside the cabin beside Dad. Mom, with white-blond hair flowing over her shoulders, leans against the porch (where seventeen years before, during the Flood of '55, water lapped). She listens to the rain patter the shale hillside, the tarred roof, the river. Droplets splatter off the railing and dampen the shirt that clings to her pregnant belly.

May arrives and the weather rarely clears. Weekends, Mom stares out the cabin's windows, questioning when she'll get in the river. The canoe rests upside down behind the cabin. The motorboat tarped. The rowboat—rainwater to the oarlocks.

As my birth nears, my family stays on Long Island near Mom's doctor. With all this rain, there is little reason to spend summer days at the cabin.

And then imagination confluences with fact.

In the earliest morning of June 8, 1972, Mom goes into labor. Dad speeds through rain-wet suburbia to the hospital. At 5 a.m., I am birthed, their third and final child. My birthday is a day heavy with showers pattering the Delaware, ringlets where rain hits river. Inside hospitals, no one hears the falling rain.

Five weeks ago, in late April, I drove to Idaho's Snake River. It was too early to swim at Buffalo Eddy, but I wanted to be near water. Whitecaps broke over rocks near where I walked among Indian paintbrush, mullin, and granite boulders. With the sun high overhead I searched for Nez Perce petroglyphs carved hundreds of years ago into the boulders. When the sun shone at the perfect angle, rock etchings of antelopes, snakes, bighorn sheep, and broad-shouldered men leapt from the rock.

Across the Snake River, sat hunched a cabin that looked a wilder version of my cabin. As I stared at it, I grew jealous, thinking of a family calling it home. I wanted to have grown up downriver from Hells Canyon Wilderness, swimming beside sturgeon taller than me by double.

In afternoon, I drove home. As I meandered downriver, the Snake changed from a rift-filled river to the stillwaters of a reservoir. The riverbanks resembled the rings in a bathtub—no sage or rabbitgrass growing because of the artificially controlled water

level. Just dirt and river rock. A dammed river is an almost dead river.

I want to learn to call the Snake home. But the Snake isn't and never will be because I haven't known it and swam in it for thirty-three years. I don't understand its currents, fish, or dams. I don't understand the way it eats at its arid banks or know the story of the Buffalo Eddy petroglyphs. I did not hear its stories all my life from Mommy Jo and Daddy Dick and Mom.

As I drove home from Buffalo Eddy, I thought about how a few years ago, I studied my genealogy to learn how and when my relatives created a home along the Delaware. I asked Mom-my Jo questions. Mom, researching her past so she could join the Daughters of the American Revolution, sent genealogical charts from Daddy Dick's side of the family (since his past grows deepest from these hills) to me in Idaho. I now have deep files filled with my familial history.

When I pieced all the stories and research together, this is what I discovered: Ten generations ago, the first of my European relatives, my six-time great-grandfather, forty-seven-year-old Johannes Georg Beck and his fifteen-year-old son, John Jacob George Beck, sailed from their home along the Enz River in Germany to England. In England, they boarded the Richard and Mary and crossed the Atlantic. They landed in the new world in Philadelphia on September 26, 1752. From Philadelphia, Johannes and John Jacob traveled north to northeastern Pennsylvania, to what was then wild frontier—Bangor. There Johannes and John Jacob homesteaded ten miles upriver from where my cabin now stands. Within the year, Johannes's wife, Anna Maria, arrived with the rest of their nine children (Anna Marie, Elizabeth, Margaret, Jacob, Barbara, Regina, Christina, and Hieronymus).

By 1775, Johannes had died and was buried in a grave in the Old Beck Family Cemetery (eight miles upriver from the cabin). His marker is the oldest in the cemetery. The next year, we had our first Delaware River birth when on October 11, 1776, Catherine Beck was born to John Jacob and his wife Anna. Then that is it; that is all I know of those first American relatives. There are no more stories, no myths, no more graves, just names on a genealogical chart.

In order to understand those Becks and to come to know their lost stories, I dream-vision to October 1767 as Johannes and John Jacob work a rocky field. They pile glacial stones onto a cart and walk a horse to the edge of the field where they build stone rows so next spring they can plant corn in rock-free soil. As sweat drips from their brows and beards, Johannes and John Jacob roll up linen shirtsleeve and look forward to the cooling of evening.

A new neighbor canters a horse across the field. As this man dismounts before them, Johannes extends a calloused hand. With a German lithe, the neighbor introduces himself as Bernhart Mullar. "Nice to meet you, sirs. Where are you from?" Bernhart asks.

Before Johannes can reply in broken English, "We are from the Enz River," before he can think that no matter how long he lives along the Delaware, the Enz will always be home, John Jacob steps forward and with a dialect that has lost almost all traces of its German past, says, "We are from here, Mount Bethel. Fifteen years. You? Germany?"

On the day before my thirty-third birthday, I crouch along the shore of the river until my butt almost rests on the wet sand. I rest my arms across my knees. A week ago, in Idaho, a friend and I wakeboarded the Snake River. After both our arms grew tired, we floated up-reservoir of the huge cement walls of Little Goose Dam. "Where'd the dam get its name?" I asked my friend, "How'd the Snake get its name?"

She shrugged.

I am not used to dams spanning rivers. The Delaware is the longest undammed main-stem river in America.

And I am not used to not knowing the story of how a river got its name. The Lenape called the Delaware "Lenapewisipu"—the Lenape River or "Wihituck." In 1610, Captain Samuel Argall, an English admiral who never made it above Delaware Bay (and never saw the river proper), named the river in honor of Lord

De La War, the governor of the Jamestown colony. Since then the name Lenapewisipu has been lost to all but a few Lenape and aged history books.

These stories aren't enough—knowing the naming of the river isn't enough. I need more. Maybe to understand my relationship to this riparian-scape, I need to begin further back than my birth or my family's Pennsylvania beginning. Maybe I need to start with the Lenape, and the land they named "Lenapehoking"—Land of the Lenape.

The Lenape's creation begins, if I remember my stepfather's stories and the old history books, when the creator, Kishelemukong, looked around his world and saw nothing—no stars, moon, or earth. Kishelemukong had a vision of what this emptiness could become so he brought forth the Spirits of Rock, Fire, Wind, and Water to assist in forming a new world, a watery earth, but even with those, it still felt barren so Kishelemukong raised a turtle from the depths of the ocean.

I close my eyes and dream up a turtle no larger than my two palms ascending through the water. Its etched shell rises, and, as it does, it grows larger. Larger than me, larger than the cabin, larger than the river, larger than the Kittatinnies. By the time the turtle breaks the surface, it has transformed into a continent, North America. Time passes (a day or a thousand years), and on top of this turtle-continent grows a tree, its branches reaching for the sun. Acorns fall to the banks of the Delaware, and from these acorns sprout the Lenni Lenape.

When I read about the books my stepfather Gus gave me, I began to see ways in which I resemble them (though I am just one man and they were a nation and I stand on their land, land that my Becks probably stole). Still, the Lenape and I are similar in that neither the Lenape nor I are endemic to this region. The Lenape migrated from the Mississippi River Valley; I was born on Long Island. And though we are from elsewhere, we call this region home.

Also, the Lenape practiced matrilocality—a husband moved in with his wife's family after marriage. In 1987, after a life spent near his birthplace on Long Island, my dad moved our family so we could live near my mom's parents, Mommy Jo and Daddy Dick. We moved within miles of the Beck's homestead and miles from Johannes and John Jacob's grave.

Finally, the Lenape and I are both mostly gone from our Lenapehoking homes. I left for college and only return for these short vacations. The Lenape, as a nation, disappeared from Lenapehoking because Europeans bought most of the Mid-Atlantic from the Lenape, a nation with no concept of individual property ownership. In 1758, the Lenape signed the Treaty of Easton just fifteen miles downriver from here, sending them to New Jersey's only reservation. By 1801, the Lenape sold its land and dispersed like deer into fields of autumn-brittle corn.

Almost thirty-three years after my birth, I pick up another shard of slate. Held horizontally, it might resemble the turtle-island that Kishelemukong raised. But it's just a blue-black rock that if it were flint, chert, or shale could have been knapped into an arrowhead by the Lenape. It is slate so it's used for blackboards, pool tables, roofs, and skipping.

As I skip this flake six times across the water, the tributary narratives of my Long Island birth, my generational family, and the Lenape merge into a single main-stem story. But a branch is missing—the Delaware's geological beginning, a fifty-million-year-old story of plate tectonics and the erosive forces of wind and rain.

To understand this geological past, I close my eyes, spread my arms, and flap, flap, flap them (up and down and up and down and up) until my arm-wings lift me from the ground. Like a heron, I pull my neck in tight and spread my wings until I rise above the elms and sycamores, above the shale cliffs, above the Kittatinny Mountains. On a thermal, I climb, and the higher I rise, the further back in time I go until it is forty million years ago.

Beneath me, three rivers meander across a wide valley. One courses north. Another starts above future-Trenton, New Jersey and runs to the Atlantic. The third begins south of future-Trenton and also currents to the ocean. These are the ancestral Delaware Rivers.

Beating my arm-wings faster, geological time speeds for-

ward until, in a blur, these rivers erode toward each other. Over tens of millions of years, passing in mere moments, they form one river—the Lenapewisipu, which chews into the Kittatinny Mountains. After centuries, the river breaks through, creating the Delaware Water Gap, a 1,200-foot-high and two-mile-long cleave through gray sandstone, limestone, and shale.

As I soar, time moves forward until it is the modern era and the Lenape begin their migration from the Mississippi to the Delaware.

A few thousand years pass in a beat of my arm-wings, and the Beck's settle Mount Bethel, displacing the Lenape.

A few hundred years pass in a beat of my arm-wings and Daddy Dick is born.

Another beat and my mother is born.

Finally, I am born.

I quit beating my wings and land gently on thin dream-legs alongside the Delaware, a day before my birthday, a birthday which would be just another birthday except this is the first birthday in a decade that I've been along the Delaware.

Canada geese with black necks, white cheeks, and soot-gray bodies fly upriver in V-formation—the shape of returning home. The geese and their plaintive honks fade as they turn at Buttermilk Rapids, half a mile north of here.

My childhood movements perpendiculared the north-south migration of these geese. From birth through seventh grade, I spent three seasons a year on Long Island. But summers and weekends, Mom, Dad, Jay, Krik, and I drove two hours west to the cabin, which sits on a stretch of land snuggled between the river and the gentle Kittatinnies, which is a Lenape word that means *Big Mountain*. The word deceives. The Kittatinnies are hills that bleed into hillocks that leach into knolls that trickle into the expansive Lehigh Valley to the south.

I glance at where the geese disappeared and think about how they travel between two homes. But for me, I claim only one. When someone asks where I am from, I never mention those thirteen years on Long Island. I don't think of six years in Idaho. I claim only the Lenapewisipu.

Yet I was born on Long Island and I live in Idaho.

And I've broken from the genealogical story of my family. Ten generations of my family have lived along the Delaware. I moved from the river and have been gone fifteen years.

Also I am not Lenape. I know little of their history other than what I've researched. I have never met a Lenape and was not raised with their beliefs. I do not own their story.

Because I've broken almost all that binds me to this region—except a love of a river and a family—I search for what can forever make this riverscape home, which leads me to remember a Robin Hemley quote that has been haunting me: "We have to keep going over histories, our own and histories of others, constantly revising. There is no single truth."

I think about how thousands of years ago, the Lenni Lenape (which mean *We the People*) moved here from the Mississippi. Still, their creation story births them from the Delaware's landscape, as if they never lived along another river, as if by creating a new story they could erase an older past.

How many years had the Lenape lived along the Delaware before their Middle America story disappeared? Did it take generations?

Standing beside my river I realize that like the Lenape and John Jacob George Beck, I can erase my past and create a truer story. Like Kotre, I can choose an earliest memory "to say, this is who I am because this is how I began." So I do.

I expunge my Long Island hospital birth and begin anew. I steal from my truths and wants, pilfer from my familial stories and genealogical charts, plagiarize from books and geological beginnings, and rob from the Lenape and the river.

With closed eyes, I create this story: Millions of years ago a box turtle swam from the depths of the great Delaware. When the turtle broke the surface, it realized that this stretch of land from Buttermilk Rapids to Foul Rift was the most beautiful place in the world. The turtle dug its feet into the riverbed and over the millennia sediment gathered on and then over the turtle until the turtle

became McElany Island, the small island that rests just thirty feet south of me.

In that unknown past, a tree sprouted from McElany Island's rich soil. As it grew, its roots sucked in long draws of riverwater that coursed into the tree's heartwood. By 1776, this tree acorned Catherine Beck, the first of my ancestors born along the Delaware. Over the next 230 years, riverwater flowed into all my relations born from this tree. Seven generations after that first birth, I was born from that singular tree with riverwater in my arteries.

And though I now live near the Snake and not the Delaware, this is the myth that I will pass on to my future children—we are of the Delaware, down to our riverblood.

Mom's car pulls into the driveway as I remember another Kotre quote: "A myth is not a falsehood but a comprehensive view of reality. It's a story that speaks to the heart as well as the mind, seeking to generate conviction about what it thinks is true." I wonder how many generations I can pass my new reality on to. How many years of falling leaves until this version blows away. I want my story to meander ten generations of Prentisses, but my roots, like Johannes and Anna Maria in Germany, like the last generation of Mississippi River Valley Lenape, hold loose in these Delaware River soils.

As I prepare to head up to Mom, I think about how I'll probably never permanently return to Pennsylvania. Home has changed so much that I search for what it used to be rather than what it is. The Becks moved here when Pennsylvania was the frontier. I lived here when roads were quiet, when the hollows were filled with farms. Maybe that is why the Becks left the old country, why the Lenape migrated east from the Mississippi. Because of changes, big and small, to landscapes. The alterations leave only memories and my new creation story on the banks of this river. For me, those changes are enough reason to leave the Delaware forever.

Or maybe I am more like John Jacob George Beck, and though neither of us was born in Pennsylvania, it has become home. And thought the river has changed, it hasn't changed so much to keep me from calling it forever home.

And these two thoughts—never being able to return while always calling it home—may seem dichotomies, but they aren't. Or if they are, they are the best I have. So I accept them for what they are—my life, my realities.

Mom's car door slams.

Before heading up to give her a hug, I kneel in the sand and draw a rudimentary map of America. On it, the Delaware and the Snake flow a world apart. I think about future children and how if they grow up in Idaho, their ties to the Delaware will be tenuous. They won't spend summers along its banks, carving waterfalls out of Oliver's sandy beach. After constructing falls, bridges, and reservoirs, I would run into the river with a five-gallon bucket, half-filled it, and drag it fifteen feet to the top of Oliver's. I poured the water. Too slowly and the water seeped into the sand, too fast and it burst through thin banks destroying everything. Just right and I created a temporary tributary to the Delaware.

Other days, when I was twelve, fourteen, or eighteen, I canoed beside McElany Island. Leaning over the gunwales, I gazed at the river bottom. Moss clung to round stones. Minnows darted from safety to safety. And deep in the water a box turtle ascended, breathed a gulp of air, descended, and disappeared. My future children, they will have none of that, no temporary tributaries, no daily canoe trips, no witnessing turtles rising.

Without all those moments, how long can I expect my future-children to connect to the Delaware? How long until my grandchildren or great-grandchildren forsake this story for a new one, maybe one that holds the Snake, not the Lenapewisipu, at its core? What then will happen to this myth? What will happen to the creation of me?

I wipe the map from the sand and walk up the bank to Mom, to the stories she will tell.

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