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ENVIRONMENTAL TRUTHS THROUGH FICTION: WATER, STEWARDSHIP,  
AND THE SARATOGA LAKE WATERSHED

By

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A SENIOR CAPSTONE PROJECT IN ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES

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## ABSTRACT

### ENVIRONMENTAL TRUTHS THROUGH FICTION: WATER, STEWARDSHIP, AND THE SARATOGA LAKE WATERSHED

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This project used fiction as a medium to present different perspectives on water in the Saratoga Lake Watershed. Drawing upon a wide array of literary sources, from regional media, to famous works of environmental writing, to modern works of environmental fiction, to environmental impacts statements and stakeholder analysis, this project encapsulated congruent themes and perspectives on water and the natural world. The project itself is composed of three fiction stories based upon “truths” uncovered within the Saratoga Lake watershed. Each story aims to take on a unique perspective based upon real people and their preferences for potential sources of water in Saratoga Springs. Overall, environmental themes uncovered in all sources of research and literature, such as stewardship and interconnectedness of humans to nature are also inherently found in each story. The ultimate aim of this project was to provide an insightful and innovative means to explore water issues and perspectives within the Saratoga Lake watershed and environmental studies.

## Environmental Fiction

Fiction, as a discipline of writing, would seem naturally at odds within the realm of social and natural sciences. As a result, on a surface level, the writing of this project appears to be incongruous with typical works of environmental studies. However, it is essential to note that although the research and contents of this project take the forms of fictional stories, the inherent aims of the project are still grounded with the same intent as any other environmental studies capstone project: an exploration and presentation of water issues within the Saratoga Lake watershed. Social science and natural science projects inherently tell their own stories about the natural world. The difference of this project is simple: it literally tells three.

The “conclusions” or “results” of this project are not as straightforward as they might be if they were to come from one of natural or social science. However, one of the arguments for the validity of the work presented is that there are alternative ways to portray truths about environmental issues besides scientific reporting and historical analysis. Presenting “truths” through fiction is a technique that this project aimed to encapsulate. These “truths” consisted of different perspectives on water, as well as environmental themes that were prevalent in all areas of research. In each of the three stories written, an attempt was made to portray a unique perspective on the issue of potential future water sources for Saratoga Springs. Just as the perspectives and points of view of the protagonists in each story were for the most part, distinctly different from any others, each of the stories also aimed to encapsulate particular environmental themes that pertained to its plot and characters. Unlike the perspectives on water however, similar themes were interwoven throughout all of the stories. This is due to the fact that the

fictional characters that were based upon real people all expressed similar environmental sympathies pertaining to these thematic ideals.

My background in fiction and creative writing was initially a useful tool when structuring and planning my project. From a plethora of sources including personal interviews, transcribed interviews, newspaper articles, a nature journal, a stake holder analysis, and immersion into nature, I hoped to gain insight into the perspectives on drinking water in the region and subsequently, inspiration. Yet, as the project progressed, it became apparent that it would be essential to make a distinction between traditional fiction and environmental fiction and incorporate that distinction into my writing. Through exploring the works of both famous and lesser known nature writers, I was able to draw upon congruous themes I'd found in my primary sources of research. Though not all the nature writing I read was fiction, almost all of the works, including the non-fictional, were instrumental in helping me understand the distinction I needed to make between environmental versus traditional fiction. The first elemental difference (and inherent theme) I realized had to be incorporated into my writing was that my stories and characters had to have a strong sense of stewardship, no matter their perspective. The theme of stewardship was not only prevalent in many of the primary sources of research for Saratoga Springs that I examined, but also quite prevalent in many of the social and natural science projects of my classmates. Stewardship was arguably the cornerstone in nearly all the works of nature writing I read; from John Muir's "The Windstorm" to Aldo Leopold's "The Land Ethic" to Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring", leading me to also make stewardship the thematic cornerstone of my project.

The second element of environmental fiction which was necessary to include in my stories was that of an environmental agenda. Arguably, an environmental agenda is already inherent in any form of environmental writing; the goal of each work, to depict an environmental issue. Though this was to be the aim of my project, because environmental fiction was something relatively new to me and any previous capstone project, it was important that this theme was effectively balanced with a natural flow of a traditional fiction story. In a good work of environmental fiction, environmental agenda and issues will not take away from the progression of story but conversely, entice any readers even further into the work. Though non-fiction, Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring" was again an extremely important reference and example for me when attempting to include this thematic element into my stories.

The third most important and related element of environmental fiction that I aimed to include in my project was that of environmental sympathies. Typically in a work of fiction, a writer will aim to place sympathies with the main character of a story. The idea of this being to grasp the attention of the reader and keep them interested in the development and subsequent outcome of the character(s). From works such as William Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" and Henry David Thoreau's "Walden", I was able to realize the value of not only having my sympathies placed within my characters, but also in having those sympathies echo throughout the greater environmental themes in my works such as the interconnectedness of humans to water, and the delicate intricacies of its natural processes.

This project began as a seemingly unrelated jumble of combinations. Its sources and inspirations for example, coming from two almost entirely different groupings: a

mixture of media, interviews, and scientific documents on one side, published works of nature writing, many by renowned authors on the other. My project combined fiction, a discipline relatively alien to the natural world, with a strong influence of environmental issues and perspectives. In the true sense of interdisciplinary and creative thought, it is my hope that readers of my project will get as much from my stories as they otherwise would from a natural science or social science project with the same inherent goal of telling a vibrant story about our natural world.

## **The Politicians**

City Hall was red brick, true red brick, muted and warm; predictably classic yet comfortingly familiar. Built the way a real American city hall, a small-town city hall, was supposed to look: simple, welcoming, humble. Where the bottom step and the sidewalk met, a muddy mound of ever-darkening snow persisted, one final remnant of a once mighty blizzard. Its remaining snowflakes huddled together for want of cold, the frozen fragments of water keeping one another just cool enough to remain solid, yet only delaying the inevitability of the hydrologic cycle. With every melting snowflake, precious cold would be lost, and the shrinking mound would become ever more susceptible to the warming days ahead. Eventually, very soon in fact, all of the muddy little snowflakes would melt away for good, the unique crystalline configurations of each to be lost forever...most, never to have been seen at all. That's not to say that the melting of the snowflakes is a tale of untimely ends; rather, it's one of natural changes, essential changes – the flowing tale of liquid water. It's a tale that's been told by the clouds, and the seas, and the oceans, and the streams, long before it was told by politicians in red brick buildings. The tale continues today, as every muddy little snowflake, in the muddy little mound, at the bottom step by the red brick building, melts, and collects anew, and flows into the great watershed, and into the homes of Saratoga Springs, New York.

Inside the red brick building, a room was filled with people. Its walls and floors were wood: deep, and dark, and historic. At the front of the room, two men stood – brothers. Their compact jaws were chiseled aggressively, confidently, like bulldogs, with personalities to match. They were stoic pillars, stout foundations supporting the thick paper fort that continued to methodically grow before them. To the onlookers seated

amongst the pews, the two adeptly performed a calculated political play. While the younger man spoke, the older constructed the paper dam of data, a barrier mitigating any potential flooding of questions directed at the younger. “Whump!” thudded the first green binder, “thwack!” resounded the next, the succession of four dull thuds just intimidating enough to ensure that no questions were asked until the fortifications were complete. “Politicians, not professionals” was the coined phrase, the fan-favorite, a general consensus for describing the twain. Yet “Professional politicians” may truly have been more fitting.

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The gray-haired man was the Commissioner of Public Works, an elected official, the real power in Saratoga Springs; he’d held the position for decades with an iron grip. He was a Democrat staying afloat amidst a sea of Republicans, waiting out any political storm until his fellow party members could retake the majority. In the political kingdom of Saratoga, this man was arguably king. “Ceremonial mayor, weak mayor, and strong public works commissioner” were not uncommon quotes to find in newspaper articles quoting other local politicians.

“Saratoga Lake is our best choice,” the Commissioner insisted to the crowd, pausing to add, “our only realistic choice”.

“And we’ve got the data to back it up, right here,” supported the younger, brown-haired man as he pointed to the barrier of green binders, the distinct line now separating the two men from the twenty-three other people in the small room. This man was the Director of Public Works, a “voluntary” position. He was often described as the “everyday man” by his brother, as “a man seeking only to work for the benefit of

Saratogians.”, protecting their best interests, a steward for their needs. The Director opened his arms over the paper fort in front of him, then his smile, as if to proclaim his utmost confidence in the factual accuracy of the reports. It was a gesture inviting any skeptics to take a look at the research, the Draft Environmental Impact Statements of new potential water sources for Saratoga Springs. “*Just try to prove us wrong.*” said the wry smile.

Inside the binders, beneath their green plastic exteriors and onto their vast seas of pages, were the words of many: a “development of new water supply sources to meet the long-term and emergency water supply needs of Saratoga Springs”...to say the least. Some of the content was simple, readable, yet at other points it appeared technical and complicated, confounding those actively looking to refute the claims within the heavy green tomes. These fortifications of science, data, and fact worked not only as a shield against critics but likewise as a sword, a weapon used to strike down the claims of Saratoga Lake naysayers, opponents of the brotherly duo. And when in the hands of those two men – the two who had commissioned its creation – the sword was especially sharp. With seemingly instinctual behavior, the brothers continued their fervent play for their group, the mouth of the younger consistently opening just as the mouth of the older would close; another dam against interruptions; an ingenious flood of their own words; ideally, an impenetrable defense against critics.

“The math is there, the science is there, and you can’t argue the economics of the thing. Not with what we got.” stressed the older. “Dollar thirty-five per thousand gallons with Saratoga Lake, dollar ninety-five if we go with The Hudson. Now which do you think we want for our taxpayers? Both are Class A drinking sources but with Saratoga

Lake, there's no risk of PCBs. And it's true that either way we're gonna need a pipeline, but imagine a pipeline all the way down from the Hudson – a fourteen mile monstrosity...with demons of development not far behind. You build a pipeline like that, let private businesses piggyback onto it, and you'll see the price of that water skyrocket by the time it gets to us."

Seated in a pew at the far right corner of the room, a young man shifted slightly in his seat, perhaps suppressing agitation or disagreement. Yet if he had something to say, he held his tongue, waiting to hear the brothers out, wanting to hear all of their claims and positions before he could find a way to squeeze through their words to strike back.

"Saratoga Lake is closer, cheaper, and higher quality," supported the Director, as the drip of facts began to gush from the faucet. "Saratoga Lake can provide the city with up to 11 million gallons a day, more than enough, even in the dry months. The plan we want covers the city for the next 30 years, mind you. And don't get uppity about lake levels neither, folks. Wouldn't be more'n a half inch drop during the dry months and most other times wouldn't be but a negligible decline."

The man in the back shifted again, this time with an audible cough. Like all others present, he continued to drink in the scene passively and had kept quiet as the brothers continued to paint their side of the watery issue. Yet unlike the others, he did not maintain his silence from intimidation but rather from patience. He believed there was too much at stake in letting Saratoga Lake become the drinking source for Saratoga Springs for him to remain silent forever. Though it was apparent that he was becoming eager to say his piece, if the brothers noticed his discomforted shuffles, they certainly didn't show it, and continued talking.

“Local control,” stated the Commissioner. “Local control,” he stated again, as the Director nodded emphatically at his sibling. “The city of Saratoga gets local control, and we don’t worry about the county messin’ around with our water, raising the prices, limiting our use, none of that. Now, you go ahead with the Hudson plan, and you get stuck with county control, you get uncertainty. Over the next ten years the price of that water would soar. The people of Saratoga deserve better’n that. The people of Saratoga deserve water security. They deserve the best choice economically, environmentally, and ethically; they deserve Saratoga Lake.”

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The door to the small wooden room was closed tightly, leaving the room separated from the adjoining corridor. The corridor was long and bright, and sunshine streamed through glass doors and windows, bathing the polished floor in a Saratogian sun. The halls were empty, quiet, almost silent. Most others in City Hall were themselves tucked away, busy in their own far corners, their own small offices, their minds locked far away in their own political worlds. Muffled ramblings echoed slightly in the hallway, resonating from the little wooden room – the brothers’ words to be sure; the exactness of each, inaudible. Yet another sound rippled through the cavernous hall: it was resonating, it was telling, it was pure.

\*Drip\*

The sound echoed again in the stillness of the corridor.

\*Drip\*

It came from a dull faucet in a porcelain sink. White and compact, it hung from a wall in a tiled bathroom at the other end of the corridor. Perhaps someone had not turned

the handle tightly enough after washing their hands, or perhaps the water simply was leaking on its own. No matter the cause, the water was speaking, echoes struggling without success to penetrate the door of the wooden room across the corridor in order to have their say. Whatever words the drips might speak, whatever influence they might have in the debate, they would inevitably be lost in the crashing waves of the politicians. The drops came from Loughberry Lake, the historic aquatic lifeblood for generations of Saratogians past. The time for using the hallowed water dripping from the faucet was almost at an end. Soon, water from Saratoga Lake or the Hudson River would replace the forlorn drops forever; those bodies of water to flow through the city's metal pipes evermore. Loughberry Lake no longer had enough volume to support the burgeoning population of the city. Perhaps the lake knew the end was near as it dripped tears of its foreseeable demise through the dull metal faucet. Perhaps each drop forced its way through, a desperate plight to remain noticed, remain needed, or simply to remain. Yet perhaps the lake was resigned to its fate, proud of the prominent role it had played in the shaping of the great city, and perhaps it had simply come to say goodbye.

Only a few miles from the small wooden room in the red brick building, the waters of Loughberry Lake stood still. The water body was not actually a true lake but instead, a reservoir, originally designed, built, and used to fulfill the needs of humans. Saratoga Lake and the Hudson River, on the other hand, had been formed by millions of years of natural processes, thus supporting plants and animals long before they were used by people. This was not the case with Loughberry Lake, where the animals and plants that abounded in its depths and on its shores were squatters, secondary residents, though soon enough it seemed they would have the "reservoir" all to themselves. All that

remained on the lake from a frigid winter was a thin layer of ice, barely thick enough to support any weight, and covering less and less surface each day. Down the road from the reservoir was the Saratoga Springs Water Treatment Plant, a necessity for any source of clean drinking water. The building was brick like City Hall, but darker, larger, almost mansion-like, as if, like the lake, it was not originally built to be what it now was or would soon become. Water that flowed through any faucet, showerhead, hose, or pipe in Saratoga Springs, first had to flow through the filters of the building's purification system. Like Loughberry Lake, the building was old, and faced the possibility of demise with a new water source. The men and women who worked to purify the water for the city worried about losing their jobs should the plant no longer be needed. Yet, where as the lake might find itself out of a job, there was still hope for the plant.

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"We're saying goodbye to Loughberry Lake," said the Commissioner, back in the small wooden room. "But we're not saying goodbye to control. If we get our water from Saratoga Lake, we can go right ahead and use the treatment plant we've already got to filter it, and filter it even more effectively with a new state-of-the-art UV filter. I can guarantee you all, and conclude by saying to all residents who might be concerned with impact on Saratoga Lake, that pumping water from the lake will have no measurable impacts on the lake, on recreation, or on our very livelihoods at all."

All at once, the factual faucet was shut off. It was as if the brothers had exhausted all they had wanted to say. Their defenses were now impenetrable, their motivations clear. In the sudden silence, not wanting to miss his chance, the young man seated at the back of the room stood up, and addressed the two men.

“Lies!” he insisted, unabashed. “The Hudson would not have any PCBs because the pipe will be too far upstream. It’s actually a higher quality source than Saratoga Lake. I’ve lived on Saratoga Lake my entire life, if we’re going to drain as much water as you say, there is going to be a significant drop in lake levels, and recreation is going to be affected, possibly quite drastically. The Hudson is a continuously flowing limitless supply. You two say that you want the best choice for the citizens of Saratoga Springs, well so do I, and it’s the mighty Hudson River.

The Commissioner and Director looked at the younger man speaking to them. They knew him well. William Kay. He was a member of the Saratoga Lake Association, a group that supported the Hudson as a drinking water source rather than Saratoga Lake. They knew his side of the issue, the strong ties he had with Saratoga Lake. They’d figured he or one of his representatives would be at the meeting, and had decided in advance how to counter whatever arguments they might make. They were letting him have his chance, but would keep it short just to make a show of it. The Commissioner spoke up again before William could continue, halting his own stream of his facts.

“William,” said the Commissioner. “First let me say that your concerns are welcomed, though unwarranted. Everything that is worrying you is remedied and explained in what you see before you.” He pointed to the green binders.

“You would consider yourself a steward of sorts for Saratoga Lake, would you not?” mirrored the Director. “Aiming to protect its natural components, its historic components, and the interests of those who use it? That, in a nutshell, is what the Saratoga Lake Association is, correct?”

“Well, relatively speaking, yes, very much so,” echoed William cautiously.

“We aim to do the same thing,” concluded the Commissioner, yet not only for a lake, but for all the people of Saratoga Springs – stewards protecting their greatest interests, historically, economically, ethically, and environmentally. Saratoga Lake is the best choice, simply put. We can give you our facts, refute yours, try to convince you, and calm your worries. And you can refuse us, tell us what you believe is right, but when it comes down to it...the best steward is an informed steward, one who truly understands and comprehends all the facts of an issue. So let us do you a favor.” He picked up one of the massive green binders before him and held it out towards William Kay. “Here’s some light reading for you to catch up on.”

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The meeting was over. Thomas McGowan the Commissioner of Public Works stood over porcelain sink in the bathroom of City Hall eyeing himself in the mirror. The huffs of his slow deep breaths were accompanied only by the occasional drop of water from a dull metal faucet in the sink below him. The drips flowed into a cooling rush as he released the stream, letting the gushing water trickle into his cupped hands. Leaning his head down, he splashed the historic water onto his face, water he might cease to feel again in the coming years. Slowly, he lifted his dripping gaze back to the mirror before him. A face seemingly chiseled from stone stared back. It was hard and weathered; deep lines spoke of experience and years of civil service that it had endured; the innumerable political decisions had been influenced by its stoic gaze. The gaze had purpose, one of utter devotion to the city of Saratoga Springs. In decades past, the decisions of the McGowan brothers had helped to revitalize the city; today, perhaps,

they would help to plan for its future. Like the decisions of all men, Thomas McGowan's were not always perfect: but few could question their ever-benevolent intent.

## The Boy

His senses were heightened, alerted, yet malfunctioning; he was going to die. His vision was blurred, unseeing in the depths of blue darkness. His skin was numb, unfeeling, smothered by cold. His tongue tasted nothing, though his mouth and throat were full. Muted vibrations reverberated through his ears, muffled ripples of his own panicked flailing. His nose was worthless: a sense of smell is never much use underwater. Up was down or down was up. The boy could not put thoughts together. Adrenaline and instinct had taken over. "Air!" they screamed at his lungs: "Air! Air! AIR!" But the frigid cold soon turned to warmth, and it felt good to the boy, comforting and safe. "It would be okay to let go now," he thought to himself. His instinctual screams had become naught but a whisper: "air..." they whimpered unheard, "air...". And the boy sank deeper into the lake, no longer fighting with the water but letting himself flow peacefully downward in the gentle pull of the currents. In his last moments of consciousness, the boy smiled, feeling pure joy; everything around him was beautiful, he thought, meaningful. His whole life suddenly seemed insignificant, small, he had become an intricate part of something bigger, something elemental, something eternal: water. Years later, grown up, he would not remember the ice cracking under his feet or his plunge into the watery depths. He would even fail to remember the entirety of the day that preceded his fateful trip to the lake. Yet the thoughts he had on the brink of death, his oneness with the water, the unworldly immersion, those were feelings that would stay with him the rest of his life.

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“My name is William Kay,” the man began. “and when I was ten years old I drowned in Saratoga Lake.”

A girl doodling on the corner of her desk dropped her pen and looked at the man as if for the first time; as if she hadn’t seen him before, hadn’t heard him being introduced by Mrs. McCarthy just a minute earlier. Two students snickering in the back immediately stopped at the sound of his words, locking their eyes intently upon the man. A collective stiffening of postures seemed to take place all at once in the classroom as the students realized that this would be no ordinary guest lecture.

The man who stood before the class was young, thirty-three. Though youthful in age, he had a maturity about him that was older than his years. It was his manner, or his posture, or the words he chose that aged him, or maybe it simply physical. On his right hand only two fingers remained: index and middle. When talking or blinking it looked as if some of the muscles in his face resisted the movements, or couldn’t move, as if something was still frozen. Yet he was no ogre, no monstrosity inside or out: in fact, he was always quick to flash a small smile. If anything was yet warm within him, it was most certainly his love of water.

“I’m from Saratoga Springs, like most of you,” he began. “I’ve lived on the edge of Saratoga Lake my whole life: it has very much influenced who I have become, and it’s one of the main reasons I’ve come to talk with all of you today. I’d like to start you all off with a quick question. Let’s see, show of hands – how many of you have ever been to Saratoga Lake?”

Seven hands out of twenty-eight drifted into the air. The man nodded knowingly, expecting these results.

“Okay, let’s try something a bit different. How many of you have ever been to any lake?”

The man noted each hand as it rose into the air, counting the numbers in whispers; his head bobbed with each numeral.

“Eighteen! Ah, much better!” he exclaimed. “And would those who raised their hands say they enjoyed those lakes?”

A collective and unenthusiastic “Yeah” was audible from most of the students; others just nodded their heads.

The man’s expression then changed; his face hadn’t become angry but stern, more serious, revealing something of a motivation.

“And what was it about being at those lakes that you enjoyed so much?” he asked thoughtfully. “Or to anyone who hasn’t been to a lake before, what do you like about an ocean, a pond, a river? Yes, you in the orange sweatshirt.”

“I like swimming in my pool behind my house in summer,” said the girl. “Especially when it’s hot and sticky out.”

“Okay, that’s a good start. What would you say is best about it?”

The girl paused, thinking, but was unable to articulate further under the stares of the rest of the class. “I dunno,” she smiled shyly.

“That’s okay,” said the man. “We’ve taken a good first step. Anyone else have something? Yeah, you, go ahead.”

“Sometimes my family goes to SPAC for picnics,” piped another girl. “Me and my little brother make rock castles in the stream there. Does that count?”

“Definitely. What do you think you like about it so much?”

"I dunno," the girl said. "Maybe like, being in nature and the trees...it's just really relaxing, just comforting. I can't describe it really."

"Well, you've certainly hit on something," said the man. "We're getting closer to what I want to talk about. Maybe just one more. Yeah, you in the Yankees hat."

"When my family visits my uncle at his house on Lake George, sometimes he takes us fishing," said the boy.

The man took a sip of his coffee, nodding emphatically. "So what about you, then? What would you say is your favorite thing about being on the lake...a shining sun, a soft breeze, that glittering water?" he added, egging the boy on.

"Yeah, I think I just like all the stuff you're saying. I don't know, it's just really different from most of the stuff that I get to do all the time at home. It's kind of like I forget it's even there until we visit my uncle again, and then I'm glad it still is."

"Glad it's still there..." echoed the man. "Glad it's still there...now we've hit on something big."

\* \* \*

When he was eight, animals were his everything. First it had been dinosaurs: tyrannosaurus rex, triceratops, brontosaurus, pterodactyl, a Jurassic obsession. Every trip to the toy store resulted in a new, green, spiky addition to his plastic reptilian collection. Live animals weren't in the picture yet, but they would be coming soon.

On hot summer Saturdays it was down to the lake with his parents and Sarah. On the shore his mother would rub sunscreen up and down his arms and down his skinny legs. She'd hold him still while she covered his back and chest, and would scoff at his complaints when it was time to cover his face; he detested the gloppy feeling of

sunscreen on his nose and would whine and squeal with every application. Finally, released from her grasp with floaties attached, he would scurry down the imported sand beach and splash without pause into the shining water, running in as deep as his legs would carry him until the water was too high to run into any further. His jubilant run would end as he fell with a smacking splash with his huffing father following not far behind.

The surface of the water glinted brightly under the Saratogian sun, and the boy would duck his head below to escape into a darker, murkier world. First he noticed the small and striped minnows. They swam in near perfect synchronization, hovering near the shore, and scattering in a burst of speed if he paddled too close. They darted in and out of focus, swimming between the thin streams of sun that penetrated the surface of the water like spotlights upon a stage with no boundaries.

His father told him not to feed the ducks, insisting that they needed to find food for themselves; the way nature intended it. But it was too hard for the boy to resist saving the crust from his peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. He relished any chance to get close to the quietly quacking ducks. They waddled awkwardly onto dry land when his bread throws didn't quite reach the water. He laughed with delight at having the birds follow him around, waiting for any morsels he might have left. When his rations ran out, they would return to the lake, back in the water, their movements becoming as graceful as any bird.

One Saturday, the boy's mother gave him a pair of plastic goggles with lenses rimmed in green. At first he refused to wear them – the tightness hurt his eyes he said, felt uncomfortable, it was too different. But after seeing little sister Sarah in her new blue

pair, he decided to give them another shot. Even when looking through a tightened pair of goggles, sometimes the lake was too murky, and all he would see was brown water full of mud. He might still see his hand if he held it close enough to his face, but not much beyond that. On some days, though, in the right location, the mud would be settled and he might catch a glimpse of a bigger fish. His father told him that the shapes he was seeing were trout, a delicious fish, and explained that they were “stocked” by people into the lake.

“But why would people put new fish in the lake, daddy?”

“To fish them back out again, silly!” said his father as he tousled the boy’s hair.

That didn’t seem very logical to the boy, but he didn’t press the issue; it was a grownup thing anyway. He had more to explore.

A full summer at the lake and the boy had lost interest in his once beloved dinosaurs, replaced by a fixation on animals with real moving parts. His room became devoid of their presence, the dinosaurs themselves being relegated to a cardboard box at the bottom of his closet. It seemed that the boy sought to bring home what he saw outside.

“Fish I can watch and play with, mommy, like the minnows and trouts in the lake! Can I have some fishes, mommy, pleaseee pleaseeee pleaseeeee?”

Two days later, a glass tank bubbled and hummed next to a window that faced the lake. Often in a midday sun, as the boy looked though the tank, he could see glinting ripples of Saratoga Lake streaming through the filtered waters in his own room.

\* \* \*

To say that William was enjoying his time with the fifth graders at Lake Avenue Elementary more than his time at last Tuesday's city meeting was an understatement. He'd felt frustrated with the two men who had been running the show, the Commissioner and Director of Public Works: The McGowan brothers. Saratoga Springs was facing an unprecedented period of change; a proposition for a new drinking water source. The McGowan brothers, whom everyone knew held much of the sway in city politics, fervently advocated using Saratoga Lake as a new drinking source rather than the Hudson River, and had done so for years. William was himself a member of The Saratoga Lake Association, and accordingly was at odds over drinking water issues with the brothers and most of the newly elected Democrats in the city. During the meeting, the brothers had barely given him or anyone else a chance to speak, a chance to present other sides of the issue, an advocacy for the Hudson. Instead they'd held the floor almost entirely for themselves, laying brick after brick of fact to support their own political goal: Saratoga Lake. When William could finally wait no longer to have his say, the brothers had dismissed his claims, arguing that he in fact was misinformed and needed to read the "real facts." They accused him of interpreting some facts to meet his own political ends. Funny, he felt the same way about the McGowan's.

\* \* \*

"Sorry, what's your name?"

"James," said the boy.

"James has hit exactly on the thing I want to talk about. James, can you repeat the last thing you just said for the class?"

“You mean about me being glad that the lake is still there every time I go back?”

“Absolutely, James. Now that is a powerful statement. It’s something I think about every day in my job. What I do is help to preserve and protect a part of our local environment: Saratoga Lake. I work for a group that wants to see Saratoga Lake protected as a home for wild plants and animals and as a place where people like us can go to have fun, relax, boat, and fish, just like James when he goes to Lake George, or Jenny and building a rock castle, or even like my friend over here with the orange sweatshirt and her backyard pool.”

William paused for a moment, considering his next words.

“Just wondering, does anyone know what body of water Saratoga Springs currently gets its drinking water from? Here’s a hint, it rhymes with cherry.”

“Ohhh, ohhh! Loughberry Lake,” shouted an excited boy, unable to hold back.

William partially stifled a smile. “Try not to call out, but that’s right, Loughberry Lake. Did anyone else know that?”

A small collective rendition of the mumbling “Yeah” returned, but most of the class remained silent this time.

William had not expected the kids to know much, if anything, about the pressing issue of drinking water in Saratoga Springs. He had not come to the school today to sway a group of ten-year-olds to his side of the issue. Instead, he hoped to impress upon them the importance of environmental stewardship, and the respect that nature should demand – something he had learned the hard way. As these children grew up, they would become the future stewards of his beloved Saratoga Lake, whether it became the source of drinking water for Saratoga Springs or not. But the debate would likely still rage for

some time, the balances continually seeming to tip. The best he could do now at least for the region and its future residents was to start them on the right path.

\* \* \*

The boy's parents had to switch his room with Sarah's so his view would no longer face the lake. The fish tank was kept in what was now Sarah's room but further additions were no longer made. After the last of his fish had died, the tank was cleaned and shoved into the bottom of the closet next to the dusty box of toy dinosaurs. The boy was eleven now – a year after he'd drowned in the lake. Though he remembered little of the incident, he'd developed an absolute phobia of bodies of water and was forever reminded of his accident from the frostbitten scars and injuries to his hand and face. He shunned baths, taking only showers, lathering up beforehand to spend as little time as possible under any sort of immersion. He even proclaimed that he disliked the taste of water, and would only drink flavored beverages, anything that was distinctly different from the cold bland liquid that had filled his mouth and throat a year ago.

The family was ice fishing that fateful day he'd fallen under the ice. With the ice shanty up and the ice holes prepared, everyone was bundled for a cold morning as they prepared to move inside the portable enclosure. Always, it seemed, at this time of year, the ice was deemed thick enough for weight. Ice fishers could even drive their pickup trucks or station wagons onto the lake, saving themselves the energy of carrying their gear by foot. Yet inexplicably, almost unheard of, on an unfortunate or fateful patch of frozen water, the ice below little William Kay had given way that one December day. In blind haste, his father ran to his equipment and pulled out a thin rope. He unwisely but bravely tied it to his waist, giving the other end to his wife, he took breath, and jumped in

after his son. When he hit the water, the shock of the cold was so strong it knocked the breath from his lungs and he had to surface, gasping for another. Back under the ice he was frantic; the cold stung his eyes so much that he had to keep them to a squint. He was forced to rely on a sense of touch that was becoming more numb by the second. If he was going to find William, it would have to be in a matter of seconds or hypothermia could kill them both. Suddenly: hope. His right leg hit something as it thrashed through the water: his boy. Hugging his son and breathing into the boy's lungs what air he had left, William's father struggled to pull himself back to the top of the lake, where life awaited with little time left. As he splashed near the surface, his wife, daughter, and two other men fishing nearby who had come running after hearing screams, pulled the rope until the boy and the man flopped onto the surface. The man lay exhausted and shivering, the boy unconscious, his skin colored a deepest hue of blue. While the mother performed first aid on the boy, one of the men dragged the father inside the ice shack, covering him with blankets and stripping him of his wet clothes. Ambulances arrived and the vehicles carried the four family members off towards a darkening future. As the sound of sirens dimmed, the two men now standing alone turned to one other; still shocked, they stood in silence. They were particularly disturbed by the image of the unconscious boy, though they were not likely to mention it until one could stand it no longer.

"Did you see that boy?" one man finally asked the other. "Boy was as blue as the water itself..."

\* \* \*

"I have a homework assignment for everyone."

“Awwwww,” came the collective whine.

“Now hold on a second, it’s not as bad as you might think. You get to be outside. All I want you guys to do is take a fifteen minute walk somewhere, anywhere. Go with your parents, your friends, or even by yourselves. The catch is, try not to think about anything at all during the walk except the things around you, the things you consider to be ‘nature.’ When you get home, if you can, just jot it down, all the birds, grass, trees, streams – anything you come across so you don’t forget. Then ask yourselves this question: What if all these things were gone, or even one of them? Think about it. Don’t even write about it, just think about it, and really think. Any of these things that you might take for granted, could gone if we aren’t careful enough to protect them.”

William wasn’t sure himself how many of the kids would actually go home and do his assignment. He was pretty sure that when he was their age, anything that was not required was likely to go in one ear and out the other. Yet at the same time he knew the importance of imparting the ideal of environmental stewardship at a young age. It was something that he had almost lost as a result of his accident in the Lake, something he had only recovered by forcing himself back into water; at an age when his fear of water had begun to recede, the memory of his interconnectedness with nature and the lake had begun to return.

\* \* \*

At fourteen, there was little to do during the summers that did not have to do with water. His friends boated and fished on the lake, swam in the Kayaderos, ran through the sprinklers on their lawns. Each time, through it all, the boy would edge closer and closer to his friends, closer to the water they were immersing themselves within. He’d

see them through a window and come outside to talk to them, still staying at a distance far enough to avoid any spray. If they were going to swim in the lake for the day he might go with them, but stay far up on shore. One particular day, he found himself at a watering hole in the creek. A thick but fraying rope was tied to a tree overhanging the hole. Each time one of his friends would grab the rope and swing forward to plunge into the water, the boy would suck in air sharply and flex the two fingers of his right hand. He looked at the smiling faces of his friends as they'd surface. He heard the sounds of their laughter. They experienced pure joy from their watery immersion, something he recognized and desperately wanted to be a part of again. It was suddenly enough for the boy and he stood up from the rock he'd been sitting on. He kicked off his shoes, and threw his shirt to the wayside. He sucked in a breath as the two fingers on his right opened and closed. He found himself walking to the edge of the water, feeling the cold mud gush between his toes. As he closed his eyes, the yells of encouragement from his friends were silenced. He smelled nothing, tasted nothing, only felt the cool water as it continued to rise around him with each step he took into the creek. All of a sudden, his head was underwater. The coolness turned to warmth, and it felt good to the boy, comforting and safe. He opened his eyes and saw a school of minnows; they circled around him as they danced in spotlights of sun that broke through the shining surface.

## The Farmer

First he placed the seeds. Deep into dark soils were they laid, these small and hearty seeds. The seeds became sprouts, and were given water to drink and they drank and grew strong. Into the land he placed the nutrient and the sprouts blossomed into plants and grew tall and cast shadows. The stalks forever grew under a Saratogian sun, reaching evermore towards a shining sky. In the soft breeze they swayed in unison, a towering wave of green like one from the ocean blue. The field was long, and wide, and kempt, and the land around an open valley; far sights for all to see. Soon the stalks were grown full and were harvested. They became bundles, bundles became bales, and bales were fed to cows of black and white and brown. With bellies full, the cows gave their milk; dairy, lifeblood for The Farmer. Beneath the fields of crops, the pastures of cows, and the house built of aged wood, the lifeblood of the farm itself briskly flowed: water. It ran through wells drilled deep into the earth, ready to be pumped to the surface for most every use. The Farmer knew that he and all that was his was nothing without it; a farm without water is a farm without function.

\* \* \*

The droplets of rain were sharp, and painfully pricked at skin and hide. Cows huddled for refuge under wooden shelters at the pasture's edge. The moon and stars were replaced by dark clouds that wept their biting rain across The Farmer's land. Warm and dry, The Farmer slept in his house of aged wood, oblivious to the deluge outside. He was rapped in a desert of a dream, a nightmare, one that had crept into his mind from the troubles of his waking life. Under heavy lids his eyes darted back and forth; so deep was his sleep. His incoherent mumbblings grew louder, and he began to shiver, even under the

warmth of his woolen quilt. His wife awoke from the cold touch of his damp feet upon her thigh. She shook him awake, asking if everything was okay. He opened his eyes to the night and told her everything was fine: an unconvincing smile would have betrayed his worry but for the darkness of the room. He turned his head away from hers, towards the rain pounding on the bedroom window and pretended to fall back asleep. After a time, calmed by her rhythmic breathing, The Farmer closed his own eyes once more, hoping to avoid reentering the darkening nightmare that had begun to stalk him: the nightmare that seemed to flow effortlessly from his dreams to his waking life and back again.

\* \* \*

People were arguing. A young man stood alone on the bank of a mighty river. Two others floated in a boat upon a crystal lake. They were yelling angrily at one another, words flowing incomprehensibly through time and space, through the bounds of The Farmer's dream. Each man did not hear his opponent: each only hearing the echoes of his words. It was a debate The Farmer had heard before: Two sides struggling over a choice for the future, a choice for water: a choice for river or lake. One to supply the burgeoning water needs of a city, the other never to flow through Saratogian pipes and systems. Yet he cared naught for the words of these men, he himself had little at stake with the decision. His water came from his wells: and within their depths, his concerns were adrift. Slowly, passively, he floated away from the arguing men, finding himself on what looked to once have been his farm, but entirely changed, entirely wrong. With eyes cast downward at his naked feet, he saw that a small crack in the dry ground between his toes had appeared. His pasture was barren, stricken with wilted brown grass and cows

with thin skin and protruding bones; dry as the ground they stood upon. The crack below him began to lengthen, its jagged body creeping with frightful speed; rendering the ground evermore asunder as it crossed the field in eerie silence. He opened his mouth to scream, to cry for help, to frighten the crack into stopping, yet he found his throat and tongue to be parched and covered in dirt; he could utter no sounds. The crack reached the end of the field and moved beyond his line of sight; the entire landscape of the dying farm now split in twain. The earth below him had become a gaping crevasse. He could hear the faint echoes of rushing water from somewhere deep within it but only for a moment. Soon the gushes turned to trickles, then to drops, then to naught. He floated above it all, an objective and powerless observer, peeking through hands that covered his face in horror, unable to stop to the trail of cows that now silently marched and plunged into the waterless and blackening depths below.

\* \* \*

For generations past, seeds, nutrients, and water had been put into the land and the crops were sown, sustaining The Farmer, his father, and his father's father before him. Yet these mundane essentials were not all that had been given to the soils over the generations. The blood, sweat, and tears of the very men who lived upon the land had been bestowed within it as well. And the land had become irrevocably tied to the family's history; having seen births and deaths from four generations, fathers, sons, mothers, daughters, all. Like his father and grandfather, The Farmer felt undying attachment to the land, having lived upon it his whole life; gaining a priceless understanding of how it had sustained his family and the value of sustaining it in return. Yet despite the generations of stewardship, the careful intricacies of land conservation

hat had become more prevalent over time, the land had begun to show signs of its own age and limitations of resources. Below the fields of green and the pastures of cows, the water that the land held in its cavernous aquifers had begun to flow thin. The wells that had been drilled deep into the earth supplied less water each year. More wells had been drilled with seemingly little avail and The Farmer worried that if quantities continued to decline he would have but one solution: one that would leave his children as a generation without a farm.

\* \* \*

There was nothing, no sound, no breeze, only emptiness, the black of the crevasse, and the dry barren land that had once been whole. The Farmer could feel himself wasting away; with a finger he traced lines on his chest where his ribs now protruded. He felt weak, utterly thirsty, drained, barely able to keep his eyes open, yet unable to shut them for they were already closed in sleep. He could see his own children as they began to fade, wilting like blades of grass, their skin becoming pale, thin, and dry as the land that should have been green.

Something stirred in the crevasse. Suddenly, from the blackness, a hand clawed its way out, then an arm, then another, and a man in a black suit pulled himself onto the surface of the field. He stretched and yawned, then dusted himself off and smiled with the whitest teeth The Farmer had ever seen. In his left hand he held a briefcase, with his right he opened it and thrust the contents at The Farmer. The money glowed more brightly than the sun, whispering promises into The Farmer's ear. The Farmer reached out to touch the smooth leather briefcase, inhaling the scent of its freshly minted bills. He felt his thirst begin to subside, his ribs became fuller, color began to come back into

the faces of his children. The smile on the man in the black suit grew even wider, brighter, and The Farmer could see that his teeth were not calcareous white but made of glimmering gold. In a golden flash, The Farmer was blinded as the smile glinted menacingly under the dark yellow sun. When his vision returned his field was gone, changed, covered. Where his wooden house once was, a massive apartment building of gray concrete now stood. A strip mall had replaced his hayfields; a parking lot covered his pastures. The crevasse had been almost entirely filled in with cement and the man in the black suit with his golden smile was nowhere in sight. A tear welled in The Farmer's eye and ran down his face, racing back towards the earth. Once, it would have been soaked up by the land, blurring the line between Farmer and earth evermore. Yet now it was denied this historic passage, as it splashed off a surface of impenetrable stone.

\* \* \*

The clock flashed 3:32 am, he should not have been awake, it was still too early, even for a farmer. But his eyes were open, awoken once again from his recurring nightmare. The rain had slowed to a drizzle, the mist had lifted, and some of the cows had ventured back out to the grass from their protective sheds. He stood at the bedroom window, peering through the glass panes covered in water droplets that raced downwards, down to the window's edge, down the side of the house into the awaiting earth. He contemplated the moonlit landscape of his damp pastures and fields, and squinted at the lights beyond them. When he was a boy, it was impossible to see anything but the rolling fields and pastures of neighboring farms. Yet this night, his pupils shrank under the glare of yellow lights emanating from brown and gray buildings; massive structures that stood on the fields and pastures of the farms of yesterday; farms no more. On increasing

occasions, on nights like this. The Farmer had stood by his bedroom window, watching as the lights with their warm and piercing glows seemed to shine more brightly and ever nearer to his farm, scattering the shadows that the stalks of corn wrought under the moon.

He had grown up with men upon whose farms the ghostly buildings now stood; his father had grown up with their fathers. He had seen the men weeping their tears into their land for the last time as they signed their livelihoods away, signed away a piece of themselves, the lineage of their ancestors. Yet to survive, it had been the only choice: a farmer has little material use for land that has no water, a land that has become dry and barren. A farmer cannot compete against bigger corporate farms, farms that can consume the market for dairy and feed. A farmer cannot afford his mortgages when he is taxed with fees for ever-growing regulations and technologies. To sell his farm and move to another line of work is the only choice a farmer has left for himself and his family.

The Farmer told himself he had already made his choice; turning away the suitors that that hailed from banks of brick, banks that had bought out his counterparts. Men adorned in black suits and white smiles had come, offering to buy the farm for more and more, again and again, even as its crops and cows yielded less and less. For a time, The Farmer believed himself, believed that the choice he had made was permanent, and that the land of his ancestors would become the land of his children. Yet tonight when he looked upon his land, he saw that the moon that once illuminated his fields had a fading beauty: it was overpowered by electric lights radiating an ominous yellow future; and all at once he knew he couldn't pretend to believe in his decision any longer.

\* \* \*

The Farmer was lowered from the air to the ground. With sullen steps he walked through the development that now covered his land: the apartments, the stripmalls, the parking lots. He squinted through dusty eyes for any remainders, anything left, any hint of that which once was his. His path was the fading lines of the mighty crevasse, now closed tightly and filled with cement; soon to be paved over to make another black road to another oasis of human consumption. His steps soon hit a wall, the land's boundary, a spot where the fence of his farm once stood. Everything beyond was white, blank as a page, irrelevant; it was area beyond this world that no longer under his control. At the very edge of the landscape, between his naked toes, The Farmer heard the rush of flowing water through an unfilled hole in the crevasse the size of a thumb. He bent over and put his ear to the ground, closing his eyes and enjoying the liquid melody the bubbled forth for one last time. He whispered into the ground, thanking the water that had flowed beneath him, sustaining him, his father, his family, and his ancestors. A shadow began to pass over him and he begged final forgiveness of the land. The bubbling water turned to drips, then, to nothing. He looked up as the shadow engulfed him entirely; it was cast by the man in the black suit with a golden smile; shining more brightly than ever. In his left hand he held a deed, in his right, a pen with a drop of black ink bubbling eagerly from the tip. The Farmer took the deed and pen and slowly scribbled his name on a line marked "X" at the bottom of the otherwise blank white page. Still smiling, the man in the suit took the pen and paper from The Farmer's quaking hands. The Farmer began to float back into the air, drifting farther away from the land that once was his. As everything faded to white, he saw the man in the black suit kick a mound of dirt into the thumb-sized hole, closing it; forever silencing any drops that might have remained deep in the earth.

\* \* \*

The farmer awoke, drenched. Wiping his eyes from sweat or tears he looked at his clock that flashed 9:34 am. He had slept through his alarm; overslept. He never overslept. He tried to dress quickly, ignoring panicked thoughts about the vivid new depths to which his recurring nightmare had taken him. He roused his wife as he laced up his boots. Pulling a wool sweater over his head, he chanced a peek through the bedroom window and saw that a biting rain and strong winds had forced the cows back to their shelters. He leaned closer to the glass panes, wiping away the fog of his breath. An unfamiliar car was parked at the edge of his driveway; a man was getting out of it. The man shut the door and walked briskly up the path towards the house. He grimaced with a perfectly white smile as the wind chilled him through the dark fabric of his jacket. In his left hand he carried a black umbrella, shielding his body from the water's touch. In his right hand, his knuckles turned white as they tightened their grip on the handle of a black leather briefcase.

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