PANDO: THE SECRET LIFE OF TREES

Terresa Wellborn

Pando extends, a network of aspen one mile south of Fish Lake in central Utah. At eighty thousand years, it is one of the oldest and heaviest living organisms on the planet. Pando has survived despite competing conifers, climate shifts, encroaching roads. In the face of fire, this grove has kept root underground, persisting, sending up new growth post-blaze. It has withstood the freight of life and continued expanding until now. It is dying.

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I am mired midlife, buried beneath acres of earth and time. Connected but atrophied. I haven't yet become the writer I thought I would be. I am not yet the wife, the mother, the daughter, the sister I thought I would become. So I persist in small ways: I remember birthdays, bake cookies, write poetry.

> No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief,
> More pangs will, schooled at forepangs, wilder wring.
> Comforter, where, where is your comforting?
> —Gerard Manley Hopkins[1]

Where, indeed. The Comforter's promise exists, absolutely, but for me it's rare, when life's cacophony has ground down and I'm quiet. I reel in crisis: mid-career, mid-marriage, mid-mothering. Mid-self, mid-becoming, mid-aware. I must change my life, but how?

1. Gerard Manley Hopkins, "No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief," in *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Poems and Prose* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1985), 61, available at https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44398/no-worst-there-is-none-pitched-past-pitch-of-grief.

I write this sitting at Fish Lake, not in Pando's lap or at the alpine water's edge but sequestered inside a rental cabin reeking of bleach and stale bread. My day's chore? Unpack wilting Romas and romaine, prep a taco salad dinner for twelve. Yet I lag, spent from the drive, Highway 89 a ribbon of asphalt, the indigo sky marbled with clouds. Fresh from a sister-fight. Heartsick, homesick, sister sick, I pushed past Bryce Canyon and Big Rock Candy Mountain up to Richfield for gas and groceries then onto Fish Lake. Poor cell service, keening skies, a sister now mute. I wonder at the length of a grudge. A day? A month? A year? As Philippe Jaccottet suggests, "I should pull words out of my body, only in pain, or in fear, packed together like stones in the mountains."[2] I want to undo what we've said, unpack the pain. Or hide as Pando, then push up white stems as truce later. Instead I grab five minutes to write and avoid confrontation.

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Fish Lake's distractions dominate Pando: of course there's the lake, the boat marina, the extravagant mountains, square dancing at the lodge. Enough to forget the self, at least for a while. For me, Pando remains an enigma. I'm curious, so I stalk the information desk at the lodge. Afternoon light pools through the windows, an octogenarian volunteer unfolds his arms at the back desk as I approach. I'm the only interested party for now. When I ask about Pando, he takes a pull on his oxygen tank and replies, "People come to visit the aspens from everywhere. Pando is something. Just last week a couple from New York came to see it." His ancient desk offers two slick, laminated pages on the trees. I snap pictures of them with my iPhone. Nearby, dusty magnets shout cheerily, PANDO: Oldest Greatest Largest Living Organism alongside matching metal Christmas ornaments for only $12.99. Pando is the hors d'oeuvre, the warm-up act before Fish Lake. We came here to fish, as most do, but perhaps Pando is the reason I'm here.

2. Philippe Jaccottet, *Seedtime: Notebooks, 1954–79*, translated by Tess Lewis (London: Seagull Books, 2013).

Kit Carson didn't discover Pando, university-bred botanists did in the late 1960s. The United States Postal Service created a stamp to honor it as one of the forty "Wonders of America" in 2006. Pando covers 106 acres and weighs thirteen million pounds. Its inception began at the end of the last ice age. Today anyone can Google Pando or climb Highway 25, the desolate two-lane road sans guardrail, and drive right through the grove, witnessing the phenomenon at nearly nine thousand feet. But visitors are few.

I prefer the idea of Pando and the lake outside my window to the reality, which might explain why I live far from family; the idea of their love for me is perfect. I see them once a year, anything is possible. The reality? After weeks together in the same cabin, our nerves turn savage, tempers flare. I fail at many things, patience and tact are two of them. My family relationships, once lucid, now darkle. Pando is darkling, too. Pretty on postcards but in reality dying. Scientists cite recent lack of regeneration, drought, bark beetles, over-grazing. Heart rot and root rot are also possible reasons for its decline. The Forest Service asserts that aspens regenerate with fire and disturbance, without it they die.

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My father grew up in rural southern Utah, his dad a rancher and the town drunk. My dad was the first college graduate in his family and later, a successful politician, CEO, brigadier general, and LDS bishop. We, his five children, have yet to match his feats. These days my father suffers from skin cancer, diabetes, deafness. He's a doer not a listener, and now, midlife, my relationship with him stutters still. I don't know how to reach him. My mother recently had emergency surgery. She was dehydrated, her kidneys almost shut down. She doesn't visit much anymore. I've taken this personally, as daughters do. We are at midday, they are in the gloaming. Nothing prepares us for aging and loss, how it changes you. Perhaps this trip to Fish Lake will bring clarity, resolve.

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The more I study Pando, the more I want to know. I linger at the information desk despite an uncomfortable silence until the volunteer offers more. "Pando lives as a clone organism. If part of it dies, it all dies," he says, stretching his hands wide as if to demonstrate the gravity of this idea. "Researchers from the university are splitting it, trying to regrow some aspens in an area adjacent to Fish Lake. But, as life and experiments go, anything is possible. No one knows yet if it will work." I understand. In some ways, my family is a clone organism, too. Despite a reservoir of years, we still feel each other's pain en masse.

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On our second day at Fish Lake we finally visit Pando. As I grab my backpack and sunscreen, my kids shout over each other to their cousins, "C'mon!" and "Are you coming with us to see the trees?"

"Aspens," I say, shouldering the door. Too late to rein my kids in, the invitation stands. My sister nods stiffly, gathers her kids, and joins us. I'm surprised. We're still not talking much but seem to have agreed wordlessly, as sisters do, to do this one thing together. We caravan over, park on gravel just off the highway. The nondescript signs states, *Aspen regeneration project*. The bright earth greets us. A simple wire fence encloses the aspen colony, accompanied by riotous clouds that appear as a down comforter, then a string of pearls. Quiet pervades Pando. Random doe dot the green. No billboards, no fanfare. Silence falls felted, nearly tangible, until a truck passes, pontoon in tow, rushing to catch the next record-breaking mackinaw. I expected a magnificent field of mile-high trees. But they were ordinary aspens, nothing more, just a multitude. We looked, we took pictures, we left.

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Ten years ago, I never considered midlife, I was busy living. Now having arrived, toes edged to cliff, I have a choice, I suppose, to whorl toward

heights or fall. Like Pando, I, too, need firm footing and light to live. "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known" (1 Corinthians 13:12). I want to remove my mortal mask and find God, wisdom, *heimat*, not the crags of my life. I want revelation, not free fall.

Back from Pando, I pick up a trifold flyer on my pine dresser entitled, *Explore & Experience Fish Lake: Adventures for Everyone*, by the United States Department of Agriculture. I learn the lake was created over several million years when fault lines dropped along two mountain tops, Mytoge Mountain and Fish Lake Hightop, forming a graben, a basin that trapped water and created the lake. In some places its depth reaches one hundred and seventy feet. Pando is not once mentioned. I look out my cabin room window to the lake and wonder at the fissures that deepened there, the fermata of air between earth, the shifting of sand. I question the quotidian fault lines running between myself and my sister, my family, and my dreams. I'm the one sibling out of five who lives out of state; they'll never live far from home. I've resented every move my husband's catalyzed. I've shared deep grief with my children, forced them out of Eden too soon. I haven't convinced them life could be beautiful.

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My midlife graben hit two years ago when we moved to Dallas, a metroplex of over seven million people. I felt, like poet Katia Kapovich, "invisible, like a tree among trees."[3] In Texas, our landscape shifted and with it our everything. I only saw fault lines, death drops: a friend's son died of leukemia, age ten. Another friend left her husband and four kids to live on an Alabama goat farm and teach yoga. Suddenly I had three

3. Katia Kapovich, "A Change of Wind," in *Cossacks and Bandits* (Cambridge, UK: Salt Publishing, 2007), available at https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/57924/a-change-of-wind.

teenagers and a tween I didn't know. My daughter became suicidal. My brother endured a brutal divorce. My father fell twice. My mother called less. My husband constantly flew away on business. I suffered otherwise: chiggers, plantar fasciitis, hot flashes, mother guilt, periodic self-loathing, depression.

> My hands are bloody from digging.
> I lift them, hold them open in the wind,
> so they can branch like a tree.
> —Rainer Maria Rilke[4]

Lakeside this week I'm not sure how to let go or grow as Rilke suggests, so instead I study the pink photocopied lodge menu while our children run to the lake's lip. Evening pushes toward dinner, and I'm grateful for the distraction. My mouth waters. The mountaintop diner boasts an expansive menu and everything sounds good. Then I remember the rainbow trout my dad and sons caught and gutted. Tonight it's a fish fry—enough to feed us all. My sister and I small talk, "Where's the flour?" and "Can you set the table?"—every word measured between us. The tiny kitchen fills, my mother and sister trim and prepare the fish, I tend to dishes and table setting, opening windows to let out the sizzle.

After dinner I sneak out for a walk, the night sky knit with light. Scent of pine. Trunks the color of dark honey. Down a pebbled slope to the one-hundred-year-old lodge. It nearly melts into the lake, a sagging half-shingled, half-tin roof with gloriously thick wood and stone walls, parkitecture like that of the Grand Canyon North Rim Lodge. It stretches beside the water like an aging cat: unruffled and whole despite its scuffs. The eras it's seen, the lives lived, the seasons shed, and still it maintains a sense of humor, grace, tact. It is beautiful. President Hinckley once said, "[We] must do more than go along with what [we] find.

4. Rainer Maria Rilke, in *Rilke's Book of Hours: Love Poems to God*, translated by Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), 34.

[We] must lift the world."[5] But how to lift when all I want to do is shrink? To straighten, to forgive, to become takes effort. Perhaps more than I have.

There is something to be learned from Fish Lake: it's always becoming. Each year it regenerates despite the aspens losing leaves, the lodge losing tourists, summer losing to fall. At this moment in late summer it's effulgent, reminiscent of landscapes from Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. I'm not a prize-winning author. I have debts; I have duties. At present I cannot spend a year in a remote cabin, study moths aflame, write my life's celestial work. I am living quite the opposite. I flame full splendor like Annie's moth but inhabit a different world crammed with every fulgid thing—a trundled marriage, advanced degrees, aging parents, a sputtering career, iPhone teens, an unfinished manuscript, unpruned fruit trees, a terrier that sheds. I want another chance to become, to begin again. To root, to fly, to green treely.

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When we lived in Texas, place became synonymous with failure. I joined the cult of defeat. Once I met depression, I found it everywhere. Life beggared before me. Instead of God I found baseball-sized hail, suffocating humidity, fire ants, grackles. Joy felt impossible, love foreign. I became misanthropic. Life became unmappable, the geography of self chaotic. I felt irrevocably riven. I had lost sight of Jesus' counsel, "Walk while ye have the light, lest darkness come upon you: for he that walketh in darkness knoweth not whither he goeth" (John 12:35). It's hard to champion light when we cannot see it. After thirteen moves in twenty years, I walked blind.

5. Gordon B. Hinckley, "Behold Your Little Ones," Oct. 1978, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1978/10/behold-your-little-ones?lang=eng.

On December 26, 2015 everything changed. From our safe room we tracked tornadoes pummeling past us. They hit a neighboring suburb: apartment buildings demolished as if by a giant's hand, uprooted trees punched through car windows, homes crushed but with a central bathroom still intact, a white refrigerator on end. Nine tornadoes confirmed, eleven dead, hundreds without homes. Tornadoes, like God, are no respecters of persons (Acts 10:34). As poet Caroline Bergvall once stated, "I had to be unhomed, or to accept my own unhoming, in order to make myself a home."[6] Eyeballing death and destruction creates a capillary change, indelible humility, helps us see. In the face of death, I had to decide how to live. The next week we drove to Garland and Rowlett to offer our assistance in the massive cleanup. It was then I began to realize that home is not an address; it exists wherever we are. Like Adam and Eve, we too must navigate our own lone and dreary worlds. Home is internal, eternal. We came to this earth not to stagnate or stay safe in Eden but to leave, learn, move, wrench, flame. *Heimat* is each other, *heimat* is God.

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This morning I spied a wooden bench while trail running along Fish Lake. I passed it, touched the hem of Pando, and circled back. Worried I wouldn't find the bench again in the verdant maze, relieved when I did. I sat, silent. Less than one month removed from Dallas. I recalled Edmond Jabès words, "Between one tree and another, there is all the thirst of the earth."[7] I felt that thirst then and the Holy Ghost

6. Caroline Bergvall, "Caroline Bergvall: Propelled to the Edges of Language's Freedom, and to the Depths of Its Collective Traumas," interview by Eva Heisler, *Asymptote*, Jan. 2016, https://www.asymptotejournal.com/visual/eva-heisler-caroline-bergvall-propelled-to-the-edges-of-a-languages-freedom/.

7. Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions, Vol. 1*, translated by Rosmarie Waldrop (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1991), 26.

there with me at my makeshift temple, a holy of holies. And at my feet, a tumult of white trillium. Ineffable joy. My cell phone didn't work. No one knew where I was. It was delicious. I loved my sister again. I loved my husband, my children, my parents. I loved myself. In that moment of ecstatic solitude, I loved all my losses, my faltering career I've struggled not to regret, the homes we've renovated and inhabited and inhaled their dust only to sell and empty and never return. I didn't mind the missteps: the books I've left unwritten, the faith I've neglected, the friendships I've let slide.

It was then I wondered at Pando and the secret life of trees, so easily unknown, disregarded, or forgotten yet yoked to all of life. Essential. Entwined with growth and goodness, soil and time. The most magnificent thing about visiting Pando wasn't the aspens at all but learning about its resilience and root system tying countless trees together, roots invisible and undetected to the passerby. Maybe like my relationships to self, family, God. We experience strife but continue growing, inexplicably linked. God's grace exists, whether or not we see it, and the love of our loved ones may be more than we realize. "Yet, a great deal of light falls on everything,"[8] as Van Gogh once observed. Light falls on us, we are stained with it; we liken ourselves to God when we create. As with the aspen grove, when I am the creator, when I pull on Heavenly Mother's robes, does it matter who reads what I write?

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Later that night in my room, I searched the scriptures for references to light. I found this in Doctrine and Covenants 88:13:

> The light which is in all things, which giveth life to all things . . . by which all things are governed, even the power of God who sitteth upon his throne, who is in the bosom of eternity, who is in the midst of all things.

8. Vincent van Gogh in a letter to his brother Theo van Gogh, Oct. 15, 1882.

It is not that Christ withdraws when tornadoes hit or grabens form. He and his light are in all things, incandescent and immutable, as constant as the sun. Eternal and inextinguishable. It is us, burdened with the weight of our temporal trials, who forget to see. I've forgotten who my sister is, her good heart. My baby sister who I used to pull around our cul-de-sac in a little red wagon and later in college, surprise her with a visit home. Years later when we became mothers, we raised our children together enjoying play dates, Easter egg hunts, and cabin trips. I need to mend things with her, I'm just not sure how.

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In the end, our decision to leave Texas hinged on many things: employment, deferred dreams, the health of our marriage, homesickness. My fearful imaginings. Our extended family lived 1,300 miles away and regular visits weren't an option. FOMO became a regular occurrence, not just a millennial phenomenon. I didn't want to cut ties and become a Texan. I didn't like the South, couldn't stand the drawls and *y'alls*, I didn't want to be buried there someday.

Despite the wake-up call from the tornado a year prior, I quickly fell back into old habits—negativity, homesickness, panic disorders. One Sunday after church, an older lady stopped me in the foyer and said, "You know what your problem is? You're not here, you're still in Utah. You need to leave Utah behind and just be a Texan." She smiled, Texan born and Texas proud, and walked away. I stood there and cried.

I agree with Ellen Meloy, "How our perceptions are our only internal map of the world, how there are places that claim you and places that warn you away. How you can fall in love with the light."[9] Like the

9. Ellen Meloy, *The Anthropology of Turquoise: Meditations on Landscape, Art, and Spirit* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2002).

pillar of light that saved Joseph Smith from his despair in the Sacred Grove, I know a little of that darkness, that destructive power and black fear. At last, a month before we left Dallas, I felt warned away from my own dark depths and claimed by God. The least likely thing pulled me out of my misery and self-deprecation: the necessity to paint my house.

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The last day at Fish Lake we skirted the water's edge, my sister and I and our children here and there, each our own planet in our own sphere. The kids skipped rocks, some deftly, others with a *thwunk*. My son Zack, one of the youngest, picked up a flat, palm-sized rock and threw it with an expert wrist-flick. The rock skipped easy and light several times across the lake's mirrored surface. "Zack!" I asked, "How did you learn that? When? . . ."

"It's easy mom, let me show you," he replied, walking over to my side. I didn't have to worry about an audience—the rest of the kids had already scattered, and my sister appeared a small speck along the shoreline, the sun sinking behind the mountains casting shadows in the amber glow.

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Before moving back to Utah, I needed to paint a large portion of our 3,000-square-foot house. The sad truth? It screamed 1980s floral and no one wanted to rent it. Much to our realtor's chagrin, instead of hiring professional painters, I threw my inhibitions aside and asked my church group for help. I established painting as a focal point: I had a specific goal and motivation. I could do this. We spent weeks mixing paint and climbing ladders. With all the energy of a barn raising, DIYers of all ages rang my doorbell, women I didn't even know texted me, "Where are you? I'm here to help paint!" This time I was grateful. It didn't matter

that summer had just begun and instead of a Disney World trip, I handed my kids paint brushes. We had work to do.

My children learned how to change roller brushes and use blue painter's tape to cover wainscoting and crown molding. It felt good to see progress, room after room painted, finished, done. And feeling good felt good, better than feeling homesick and defeated all the time. I began to sublimate the negative, see life anew—past wear and smudge. Sure, we made a lot of mistakes: paint spilled, I ruined my favorite shirt, we painted three unnecessary coats in the master bathroom (the paint we'd bought was a two-in-one basecoat and topcoat). We didn't know what we were doing half the time but kept learning and adjusting. Each brush stroke brought new color, new life. Wall by wall, room by room, I came to accept imperfection while accepting infinite possibility. I felt a brighter future forthcoming.

My husband had moved back to Salt Lake City to work and find a house, so after we finished painting, it was my job to rally the kids to the next task: packing. Everything we owned needed to be accounted for, wrapped, placed in a box, sealed, and labeled. Every spoon, sock, shoelace. There wasn't time to whine. Sometimes after sealing a cardboard box with tape, I'd fret: did our Mikasa wedding china need more foam cushioning? It didn't matter we rarely used it, I wanted to keep it whole. But there were no guarantees; everything seemed crushable. After a dozen moves I still didn't consider myself an expert, so when in doubt I'd double the bubble wrap. I scurried like an ant carrying crumbs, forgetting that, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me" (Philippians 4:13). It was then I remembered the meaning of Mikasa, it's a Malagasy word meaning *resolve*.

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The last night at Fish Lake, my dad called us together to hear Jacob Squared—stories of Jacob Micah Truman (our pioneer ancestor) and

Jacob Hamblin, early Mormon frontiersman and diplomat to the southwestern Native Americans. As a young girl I listened to my dad share so many stories my skin itched from sitting so long, struggling to be attentive. As we settled into couches that night, I felt that old itch along my spine. Every cell in my body rebelled. I didn't want to sit and listen to a variation of Sunday School on a Friday night. I wanted to run along the lake barefoot, the moon as my guide.

Dad cracked open his weathered Jacob Hamblin hardback, the same one he read aloud from when my sister and I were girls. With pale blue eyes and cracking voice, he pulled us into the world of grizzly bears and gold mines, blanket trading and bows and arrows, rarely glancing at the page, knowing each story by heart. One by one kids snuck off with excuses to grab a snack or get some water. No doubt they had their own stories to share with one another while others, heads propped on pillows, began to doze. Mom left to make brownies. In time, only my sister and I listened while dad continued.

"Do you know my favorite Jacob Hamblin story?" dad asked. He didn't wait for us to respond. "It was when Jacob was under fire from the Native Americans in a narrow pass. His gun jammed. Arrow after arrow sailed his way, hitting his gun, his hat, and almost hitting his head. The fourth arrow almost hit his heart. That day the Holy Ghost guided Jacob to spare the Native Americans and become a messenger of peace. He learned that if he honored their lives, they would honor him too, and he would live a long life." Dad paused and looked from my sister to myself.

"That's a good story, dad," I said. Yawning inside, I thought it sounded a lot like a Wild West version of the Golden Rule. I studied my fingernails, not sure how much dad knew of our sister drama or my own doubts about any of the Jacob Squared stories. My dad had the uncanny ability to read people without saying a single word. I looked up to find him studying me.

"Yeah, is it true?" my sister asked.

"What?" dad cocked his head and then paused to adjust his hearing aids. After fitting them back into each ear he answered, "Sure it's true. Jacob Hamblin learned the Native Americans' language and spent time with them. He loved them. Remember," dad quieted, leaning forward, "Jacob had great paradoxes in his life. He was called to help displace Native Americans in order to establish Mormon settlements. But he was a friend to all. He helped both groups of people and was always, always kind, honest, and peaceful."

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A year and a half after the Dallas tornadoes, we left Texas for good. House painted and packed, we moved back west. Slowly, I began to emerge from the chrysalis of our trials. If my life was a tree, our time in Texas was just a small branch, part of a much larger whole. Despite Dallas, our refiner's fire pushed us forward, eventually to new growth and a deeper understanding of self, other, God. Because everyone has trials, everyone has something. Among other things, I'd kept Christ far from me. Part of my healing required accepting him into my heart again. I began to look at my choices, deficiencies, and paradigms, reconsidering them or abandoning them, and moving on. My mother urged me, "Look forward." I began.

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Like a stone skipping across Fish Lake, some experiences have entered my life and similarly changed it: going to college, serving a mission, finishing graduate school, getting married, starting a career, and becoming a mother. One of the most recent stones thrown was our sister fight, the worst we've ever had. I railed a litany of criticisms against her, told her how to live, that she needed to change. Now, a week later, I realize

the person needing to change is me. As sisters we are rooted together through blood and childhood, love and time. Whatever bitter soil we encounter, we must push on.

Other stones in my life are my dad's stories, his passions. None of us children can escape them. While he's achieved great success in politics and community, his family relationships have atrophied. He's so persistently pushed the gospel, Jacob Squared, and all of his other interests, he's lost sight of us. I'm not sure he knows us, his children: who we are, what we dream. But I know he loves us, wants the best for us. And he tries in his own way—his hugs and birthday song phone calls and frequent texts tell me so.

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I pack my suitcase and zip it shut and wonder at Pando. Will it continue living? If so, how? Just as Pando can regenerate with fire and disturbance . . . I pause. *Without it, it dies.* The connection becomes obvious—I have felt fire, I know disturbance—Dallas and my myriad failings. I can choose to love, grow, and reconnect with my sister and my father. I don't have to focus on the splinters between us. I can move forward and forgive. I can't fix their imperfections, but I can work on mine, letting God know my heart. "And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:7).

As I roll my suitcase out the door, my heart stops. *What do I say? What if I bungle things again?* Before I lose my nerve, I call to my sister, "Hey, Niki! Do you have a minute?"

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The air smells of damp leaves and autumn. Just weeks after Fish Lake, my sister-fight mended and Dallas now a few months behind us, we

find ourselves at the crux of yet another move. Life piled upon life. Bewilderment, perhaps, but also hope. I carry a handful of white trillium still.

> It is no surprise
> that danger and suffering surround us.
> What astonishes is the singing.
> —Jack Gilbert[10]

We suffer faults, failed expectations, family discord; Christ brings us to singing. If I forgive every offense, what is left? As Christ appeared transfigured to his disciples in the New Testament, I, too, welcome change, transfiguration. To become like Heavenly Mother, beyond anything imaginable.

Only after leaving Pando did I discover its significance. Scientists named it *Pando* for a Latin word that means, *I spread out*. Because it came from a single seed springing into an unfathomable network of roots and stems, spreading in time to over forty thousand trees. The proof of what one seed can do. To experiment then, ourselves, in coming to know truth and self, God and light: planting a seed in our heart, nurturing it with faith and patience, until it blooms precious (Alma 32). A call to grow and continue growing.

I stand now, not on the banks of Fish Lake nor at the feet of Pando, but in the brilliant, flicker-flash pearl of memory like the shining wet stones we pulled from the shore one day. A gilded moment like the first rock I skipped, the rock my son Zack held in his hand and showed me how before he placed it in mine. I flung and let go. Shining like that, beyond the temporal. I'm asking questions beyond, *Who am I, where do I belong?* to, *What can I bring to this life?* I am relearning faith, I am refinding Christ.

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10. Jack Gilbert, "Horses at Midnight Without a Moon," in *Collected Poems* (New York: Knopf, 2012), 273, available at https://poets.org/poem/horses-midnight-without-moon.

How does one calculate a life well lived? It is too messy, too extravagant. Digressions abound. There exists no perfect map, no absolute algorithm to the authentic self. To move, to stay, to turn, to exit. I tried prayer and it doesn't always give you all the answers. It's not meant to.

While at Fish Lake my cabin window framed both water and pine. Like Pando, without trials of fire and living water, we shrink. We're meant to tread water, find the divine through life's slag and sediment, and survive to testify that the sublime is near despite its near invisibility. Our life's work is not forgotten. I am flawed but refuse to shrink. I stand, an aspen in a field, on the surface alone yet deeply rooted to all those around me—my children and husband, parents and siblings, friends and future. And to Christ. We must seek him still, in order to see. "I stand in wonder. O the great stars."[11] Oh, that God knows me.

11. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Uncollected Poems*, translated by Edward A. Snow (New York: North Point Press, 1996), 55.

TERRESA WELLBORN {terresaw@gmail.com} has been published in various journals including *BYU Studies* and *Otis Nebula* and several anthologies including *Fire in the Pasture* and *Dove Song*. Former associate poetry editor and submissions editor for *Segullah*, she now serves on their poetry board. She has degrees in English literature and library science. A bricoleur, her trademarks are red lipstick, running, and covert accordion playing. When not on a mountaintop, she dwells in possibility. She blogs at thechocolatechipwaffle.blogspot.com.