


PAPER TRAIL

E S S A Y S

Michael
Dorris

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Other books by Michael Dorris

Working Men

(stories)

Rooms in the House of Stone

The Broken Cord

Morning Girl

(young adult)

A Yellow Raft in Blue Water

The Crown of Columbus

(with Louise Erdrich)

Native Americans: Five Hundred Years After

(with photographs by Joseph Farber)

A Guide to Research on North American Indians

(with Mary Lou Byler and Arlene Hirschfelder)

For Louise:

*Absent by name
from most of these pages
only because
you are so everywhere
within them*

In addition to those men and women who contributed to this collection by inspiring the essays in which they appear, my special thanks and gratitude go to this book's editors, Nancy Nicholas and Susan Moldow, and to the editors of the various periodicals and books in which these pieces were originally published. As ever, I am also indebted to the keen eye of Charles Rembar and to the extraordinary intelligence and oversight of Louise Erdrich.

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PACKING UP

What do we take? What do we leave? What do we stack in the front yard and invite strangers to disparage? We never meant to hoard possessions, never intended to sully our nest with unnecessary stuff, but somehow over the years it silently stockpiled, filling corners, drawers, attics, garages. Impulse items. Terrible gifts kept for sentimental reasons. Outgrown clothes, which we expect to fit into again after the diet. *National Geographics* from which we may someday cull the perfect isle to visit, *Consumer Reports* issues that we'll surely need the next time we have to replace our toaster or decide to get serious about choosing the most economical brand of dishwasher soap. Letters from those we've loved. Stationery and matchbooks from disparate motels: the Wrangler (Mobridge, South Dakota), the Top of the World (Barrow, Alaska), the Sequoia (Fredericton, New Brunswick), the Ramada Inn of Montvale, New Jersey. Dinner plates with a chip along the circumference. Good boots our children have outgrown. Pages torn from newspapers because one of the articles (which one?) seemed particularly cogent and worth remembering. Books we promise ourselves we'll read. Wedding presents still in their boxes.

Within that last category, we received an invention called a Shish-ke-bobber. It probably cost a lot of money, and who knows—whoever bought this gizmo for us might show up and rightfully expect skewered hors d'oeuvres. Several times I've thought of actually assembling and trying out the device, but when I read the instructions on the side of the carton, I realize how hard the thing would be to wash once it's dirty and so I lose my appetite for seared mushroom caps.

The Shish-ke-bobber, still full of potential, confronted me from its perch in the laundry room as we packed up to move this August. If I were a pharaoh, I expect I'd be buried with it, just in case I wanted to go to the trouble to concoct tiny little snacks in the afterlife. But will it fit into the already crowded trunk of the Subaru?

Relocation necessarily brings such dilemmas, for it is an experience prescient of death. It forces you to confront what you've forgotten, to attend to the fact that the passage of time alters the relative value and usefulness of objects and keepsakes that once seemed so important. It's a formalized sort of leave-taking, an erupting volcano of decisions that you have previously avoided. Somewhere between the two extreme reactions (take everything and pretend continuity, take nothing and make a fresh start) there's a murky gray area of insecure transition. Before you can completely look forward, you must review, sometimes let go.

Of course that process happens constantly in life, but usually not all at once. Most change is incremental, imper-

ceptible. In the normal scheme of things, once you've established the basic contours, priorities are grooved as gently as rocks carved by a year-round stream or as a face resolving into its natural seams and lines. You're lulled with the intimation of permanence.

"Dream on," says a hatchback trunk with limited space. Already it contains cartons hastily sealed and banded with masking tape labels: Kentucky, Montana, FAS research, Dartmouth, Girls' Clothes. Now I stand with a box of children's school projects and souvenirs from the 1970s—Christmas tree garlands (some cut from poster paper and others concocted of pine cones sprinkled with glitter), handwritten essays stapled to Manila folders, report cards, letters from camp, apologies. Even the box itself is a relic carefully transported from a trip my older children and I took halfway around the world: *Fresh Rarotonga Paw Paws from the Cook Islands for Turners and Growers Ltd.*, reads the bright orange-and-blue lettering. Memories encased in memories.

Time collapses and warps, folding over and over itself into a condensed bundle. The collected evidence of my first sons' and daughter's childhoods—and, by extension, of my youth—demands to be relevant still, to warrant a place in the future, if only as articles of record.

I contemplate the box, and I wonder: will any item endure beyond the backward cast of my wife's memory or mine? Distillation is forever in process. It takes many maples' worth of running sap and a blazing fire to make a

pint of syrup, and only a few stacks of pancakes to use that up. What was once much is by evaporation reduced to a little, and then, by consumption, to a single drop—before disappearing altogether from the earth's recall.

The box is loaded with the chaos of experience, the culled highlights. Praise and recrimination, worry and relief, intimations—ultimately proven true or false, or both—of what was in store for all of us. Promising starts that led nowhere. Early warnings unheeded. Viewed in the bright light of retrospect, the assemblage makes only one kind of sense, reveals only a single, inevitable set of inter-linked events, but during the course of its accumulation, who knew that? Who could pin down, amid all the seeming digressions of talent or interest or shortcoming, the central path each son and daughter would follow? Who knows the story, even now, as we wait in worry for their next letter or telephone call?

My illusion in saving things has been that the past is redemptive, that its monument constructed of kindnesses and accomplishment can, when needed, balance, infuse optimism into a current period of sorrow or doubt. Our older children's lives have not developed as we and they had expected. They struggle with problems not of their own making, with the consequences of years of poor judgments, with a world that does not remember them sweetly as we do. The artifacts of their innocence, herewith exhibits A to Z, are inadmissible because we are the only witnesses, and our testimony is suspect.

I designate the Shish-ke-bobber as a housewarming gift for the next tenant. I donate the *National Geographics* to the town library, throw away the newspapers, and sell the dinner plates for a nickel apiece.

But I take the box along. I make room for it in the trunk, in the new house's closet of necessary gear. Airtight and secure, it waits like a time capsule to be discovered. Memory forgotten eventually becomes surprise. The past exists in its own continuum, valuable, if not to its creators, at least to its appreciative audience—distinct from its sequela. I keep the box because its contents mattered, and therefore matter. I keep it for perspective and because, when it doesn't make me sad, it makes me smile. I keep it because I can't leave it behind.

Hungry Mind Review

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FAMILY OCCASIONS
