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### ***Deep Roots Link Heart and Home***

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Columnist

The view from thousands of feet above ground is fields, streams, rock quarries and one prodigious, whirling river. The sky is dusty blue, the early evening sun high and conquering. Each section of earth below is distinct in color and geometry. Squares, pentagons and isosceles triangles, snaking lines and bone-straight trajectories across the city's edge.

The shading over there is mossy green. And here, sludge brown. Farther on, vegetation and trees give off a graded fluorescence. Their layered shadings evoke images of June bugs, captured and tethered to sewing thread. The June bugs' wings fan out as they are whipped round and around, helpless against the speed. Dizzy, dizzy, squashed dead in a game of child's play.

I remember that wickedness while my forehead is smashed against the windowpane of seat 16A as the plane descends. My eyes are on land below that I claim as my own.

I know I am almost home when, in the distance, I trace a line of red dirt. Diluted with water and stirred with a stick, dirt is the chief ingredient of mud pies after rain falls. On a dry day, you can rub two hands in it, lift gritty palms to lips and, salivating, lick those hands clean. Arkansas dirt was delectable, full of minerals, and perhaps toxins, when I was a girl rolling in it.

The land of my birth adopted "The Natural State" as a tourism-inducing slogan long ago. My early attachments to that lush terrain are, in part, tactile. As a child, I walked the railroad tracks with adventuring friends. We chucked rocks at water moccasins hiding from human intrusion in between railroad ties, and made bauxite stones skip across Fourche Creek.

When I am away from home and trying to conjure its sweeter parts, I, a woman now, wear a quartz charm purchased from nice pagans in their Hot Springs gift shop. Older and clearer about a few things, I am more profoundly connected to home. The link is psychological and spiritual, a comfort of memory and what my senses still can see, hear, smell, touch, taste.

On take-offs and landings by plane, especially when Arkansas topography shines in the summer sun, this deeper knowing makes me weep. Invariably and without control. The tears are unbound articulations of the heart. They are love, devotion, habit and hope, a transcendent mother tongue.

Agnolia Gay (pronounced like magnolia, minus the M) is a fellow Arkansas native who spent six years in L.A. trying without success to make a living as an actor. She shares this knowing.

"Every time I drove home, when I crossed the line where the sign says 'Welcome to Arkansas,' I would just lose it," said my forever friend, now a drama teacher at Central High in Little Rock and performer on the local arts circuit. "I can't help it. I am a country girl. I love me some Arkansas."

Usually, if I am in my hometown on a Sunday morning, as I was for my September birthday, I sit next to Agnolia at St. Mark's Baptist Church. Sometimes Iglorida Conley flanks me on the other side. I met the two of them in fourth grade. They form a wedge of safety around me in the pew at St. Mark's, and I am glad they are still mine. We clap and dance and praise in the tradition of our testifying mothers. One or the other of us cries, eyes closed, head high in wanting or gratitude. We pat that person's thighs or embrace a shoulder, and search a pocketbook for something to wipe the tears away.

"Why do you cry every time you come home?" my nephew, a fabulous man of 28, asked once when I was spending the night at his new house.

We'd just returned from dinner on the town. We always share a meal the night before I leave Little Rock for New York, which has kindly hosted me for almost as many years as I resided in my hometown. In the parking lot after dinner, I started acting a fool, testifying, shouting and laughing like I didn't care who was watching. My nephew had been in trouble as a kid, cussed out one cop and assaulted another. Instead of arresting him - or worse - the white police officers ferried that black boy to a hospital.

"Oh, hallelujah," I hollered, loud and silly in that after-dinner parking lot.

And, though I hadn't intended, I started crying. "You all right, Ain-tee?" asked my startled nephew, Robert Jr.

"Yes. Just glad to be home, that's all," I said, taking in my unmaimed, upright, right-living nephew, physical proof that grace is a real, reckoning force.

On that September plane's descent, through tears - with the dislocated from Louisiana and Mississippi harbored four blocks from my childhood home on the state fairgrounds - I consider these things.

I try to guess at which trees in those thickets down on the ground are maple, magnolia, willow. The pine that was a sapling in the sideyard of our house, my sister Chrystal guesses, is 40 feet tall now. I hope it stands as long as my kinfolk and I are able to. I hope it is not downed by chainsaw or bulldozer. Neither cyclone wind nor raging water, I pray, will be its undoing.

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