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Recognizing Ever-Changing Landscapes

Anne Ohman Youngs

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RECOGNIZING EVER-CHANGING LANDSCAPES

A child standing in the dining car aisle tilts his head back and holds his breath. Several of the diners put their forks down and watch until, red-faced, he howls and sits down. Curious now, I almost want to hold my breath, see how close I can come to that split second between life and death.

When I was 12, I decided to be saved at the "Chains are Broken 'Hot Soup' Ministry" like my best friend, David, who said he wasn't afraid of anything after that, not even the dark inner-city streets. So I raised my hand when a visiting preacher called for sinners to come forward, then knelt in the choir room begging forgiveness and confessing to the black-robed choir members how I hated Marlene because she had big breasts, and because the boy I liked, liked her.

The revivalist left convinced we were saved—him with new stars in his crown, and me with my name in the Book of Life that I erased with vodka and boys.

Gilman, Rantoul, Champaign-Urbana, Mattoon, Effingham...some days, I want my legs to grow like rivers and my breasts to flatten like ponds so I'll be remembered with a metal sign and stand for something else like the way "Lincoln" stands for almost anything desirable.

The train stops, and I raise my shade to orange streetlights and a boy standing at the edge of the roof of a low building, his friends on the ground chanting, "Jump! Jump!"

I know I can't be the only one who wants and doesn't want to see this. Someone else who can't sleep must be looking out his window for a lighted billboard that tells him something he doesn't know about his life—like the boy, having lived only about one-fourth of his 2.33 billion seconds, doesn't know he'd rather die in his sleep; or like David, that night he bet he could swim naked across Gooseneck Lake again, and lost.

Shivering and beautiful, the boy spread his arms and jumped. His legs folded, but his arms stayed wide like a scream. All this in see-through, 3-dimensional graphics, his heart thick and maroon from lungs full of air breathed too far in and held.