

## Excerpt from *Dune Dying*

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When I tell my husband I want to call a lawyer, inquire how to get it in writing, legally binding that, should he outlive me, he must take me to the Lake Michigan shore to die, he's going to think I mean to the Charlevoix Hospital in northern lower Michigan where I was born, with its rooms a hundred yards from the water and big picture windows overlooking it. So I'll spell it out to the lawyer, to him: I want to die *on* the shore, fingers in the sand. And not the sand a stone's throw from the hospital in Charlevoix. I want to die some two hundred shoreline miles south of my hometown, and on top of a dune, one particular dune, between Holland and Saugatuck.

I was there yesterday. It's what geologists call a "parabolic dune," a huge crescent-shaped mound of sand, its arms reaching toward the lake. Over two hundred feet high, it is one of the tallest in a ridge of parabolic dunes stretching along Lake Michigan's southeastern shore, the largest assemblage of freshwater coastal dunes in the world, visible from a spacecraft orbiting the earth. Roughly four thousand years ago, when swarms of slaves were finishing the pyramids in Egypt's desert as burial palaces for her pharaohs, strong westerly winds were heaping sand up into these hills, sand that retreating glaciers left after gouging out the Great Lakes, sand washed to the coast when lake water rose – thirty, forty feet higher than levels we know today – and eroded the land.

Only in the last twenty-five years have we begun to step back and see the bigger earth story, to see the dunes as unique and precious and, for all their girth, fragile, and to enact laws to protect them. The laws on the statute books mostly try to protect the dunes against sand mining; whole dunes – like Pigeon Hill, measured at 217 feet in 1907 and named for the flocks of now-extinct passenger pigeons that rested there on their north-south migration – have been leveled, nature's pyramids four thousand years in the making hauled away and fed to the automotive industry.

Climbing is not, so far as I know, a punishable crime. Still, signs at the base of the dune where I repeatedly go ask me not to ... But I can't resist. It will feed my passion for the dunes, and my activism on their behalf, to climb – or so I justify. And so each time I'm there, I climb.

After fifteen yards or so of upright, it's down-on-all-fours climbing, heaving upward against the press of gravity and the centrifugal pull of sand. Up, push up. I let myself breathe out loud and loudly, from the belly – like in childbirth. It helps the push. The muscles in my thighs and buttocks and calves feel like they're doing what they were made to do. Also like in childbirth. I resist the temptation to stop climbing and look up, look down, measure how far. Keep going, steady pace, feel each reach and breath, each push and pull, keep going, so that the crest comes almost by surprise –

though there's the smell of it coming, summit air – and it comes in a gush, a whoosh of sweet relief. *I'm here.*

Here. On hands and knees, chest heaving now I feel like the one birthed. Scrambling to my feet and gulping air, I see I am enveloped in blues and greens, I think of the view of earth from space, that delicate *blue-green* sphere, held up somehow in the void.

I am here, but *I* am lost. Vast waves of deep green – miles of treetops – undulate out away from me to the east, as far as I can see, and to the south and north too. On a September morning this dunetop seems earth's summit, a gentle Everest of sand. Far below, the lake is a swath of variegated blue silk spread smooth to the west edge of earth's table ...

After a time, sensations congeal into a dominant thought: *There's nothing I need ...* [Not even] the people I love and who love me – friends, some loyal over decades; my sister and brother, mother and father. My husband and two young sons? ...