

DARK

MATTER

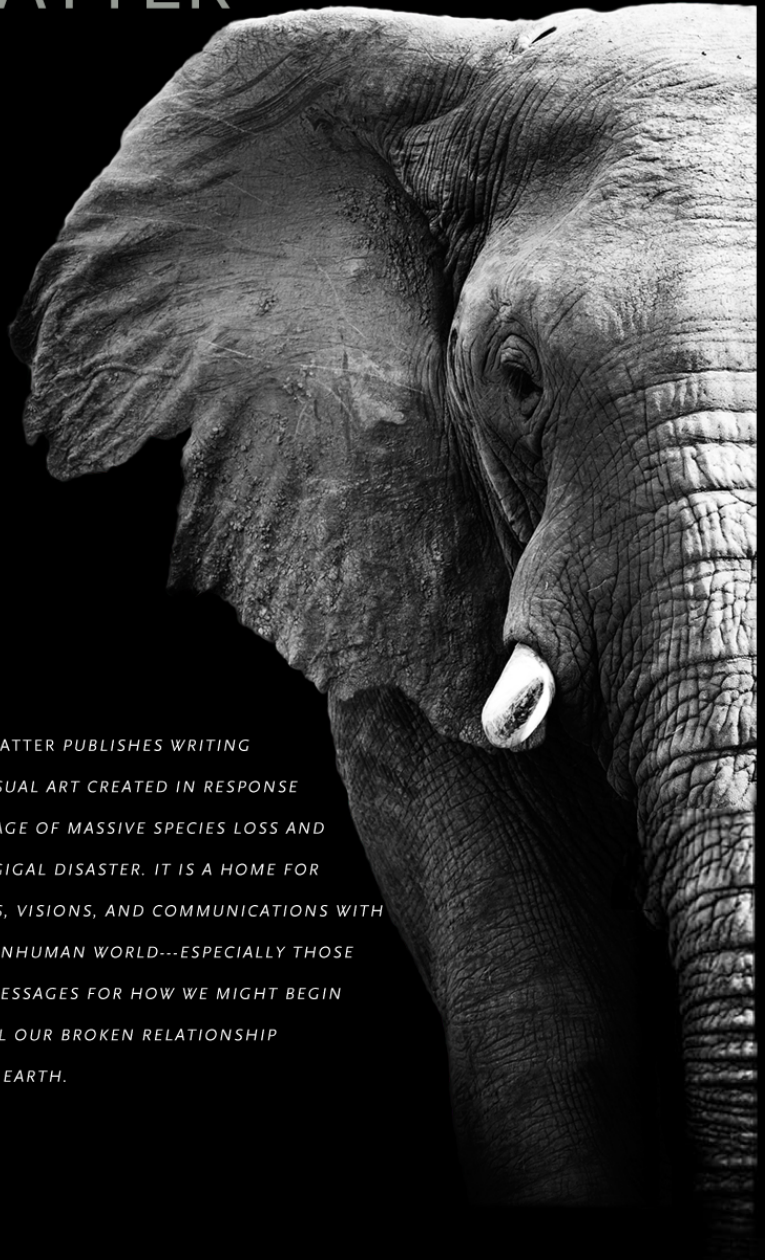
APRIL 2015, ISSUE #2
FRAGILE ONGOING



WOMEN WITNESSING

DARK MATTER PUBLISHES WRITING
AND VISUAL ART CREATED IN RESPONSE
TO AN AGE OF MASSIVE SPECIES LOSS AND
ECOLOGICAL DISASTER. IT IS A HOME FOR
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DARK MATTER: WOMEN WITNESSING #2, *FRAGILE ONGOING*

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LISE WEIL, EDITORIAL

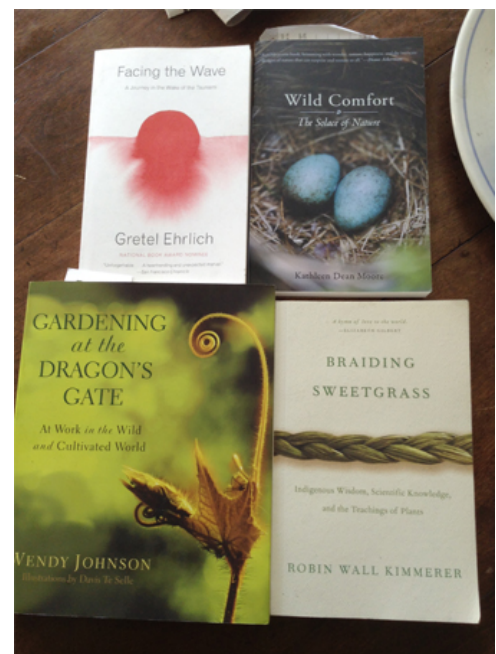
Issue #2. Fragile Ongoing

We are about to destroy each other, and the world, because of profound mistakes made in Bronze Age patriarchal ontology—mistakes about the nature of being, about the nature of human being in the world. Evolution itself is a time-process, seemingly a relentlessly linear unfolding. But biology also dreams, and in its dreams and waking visions it outleaps time, as well as space. It experiences prevision, clairvoyance, telepathy, synchronicity. Thus we have what has been called a magical capacity built into our genes....To evolve...—to save ourselves from species extinction—we can activate our genetic capacity for magic.

Barbara Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother*

Welcome to issue #2 of *Dark Matter: Women Witnessing*—“Fragile Ongoing.” The stage for this issue is set by Jan Clausen’s “‘In this Moment the World Continues’: Under the Sign of Species Suicide,” originally a keynote address, which exposes the dark matter underlying all artistic endeavors in this time. “The experience of a type of collective insecurity never known before in our history as a species is the contemporary context for all writers’ inventions, whether or not we acknowledge it,” Clausen contends. In “When Earth Becomes an ‘It,’” Robin Kimmerer puts it even more starkly: “We ... stand at the edge, with the ground crumbling beneath our feet.” How else to go on but with, to use Clausen words, “an open balance of unbearable danger and tender possibility.”

Kimmerer’s piece, and Kathleen Moore’s “The Rules of Rivers,” are excerpted from opening addresses they gave at the “Geography of Hope” conference I attended in mid-March. I’d been attracted to this conference by the focus, “Women and the Land,” and the roster of extraordinary writers (ptreyesbooks.com/goh). Admittedly, at the end of a long winter in Montreal, the location—Point Reyes, California—was also a factor. I did have some reservations about a conference called “Geography of Hope” (I’ve since learned they’re the last words of Wallace Stegner’s “Wilderness



Letter,” written in 1960), imagining regular injections of uplifting, morale-boosting rhetoric. But there was nothing of the kind. In the opening panel, Gretel Ehrlich choked back tears as she spoke of her hope—which she said comes and goes like the ice sheet in Greenland she has been visiting regularly since 1993¹ “We are falling into another world,” she said; “We are in a new climate land. I’m like a metronome oscillating between laughing and crying all day long...” Kathleen Moore sounded a similar note: “Yes, we are caught up in a river rushing toward a hot, stormy, and dangerous planet. The river is powered by huge amounts of money invested in mistakes that are dug into the very structure of the land, a tangled braid of fearful politicians, preoccupied consumers, reckless corporations, and bewildered children – everyone, in some odd way, feeling helpless. Of course, we despair. As a philosopher, however, Moore also spoke in favor of a moral abdication of both hope and despair.” “Matching our ways of living with our deepest values,” she said, “is way better than hope.” “Hope,” in other words, was not something any of the opening speakers seemed to be able or willing to confidently embrace.



But it is hard to feel gloomy in Point Reyes when the sun is shining and the coastal headlands are deep green and there are red-tailed hawks soaring and gray whales breaching and elephant seals lolling on the sand. On the first day of the conference—one of many clever moves on the part of the organizers (the conference is sponsored and coordinated by Point Reyes Books)—all participants were sent

outdoors on field trips. We were dispatched in groups of fifteen, each with a resident expert, to farms, beach, wetlands, riverbeds, dairy ranch—in the case of my group, to the marine headlands, where fog lifted just as we reached our look-out (enabling me to see my first whales ever). In other words, we were thrust into communion with some small part of the land before taking our seats on folding chairs indoors to listen to talks about the land. We returned from our forays bonded with the flora and fauna of this place, flushed and shimmering and full of stories about what we’d seen and felt and heard. To

¹ See Ehrlich’s “Rotten Ice: Traveling by dogsled in the melting Arctic”, in the April 2015 edition of Harper’s Magazine. The most moving and the most terrifying report I have read from the front lines of climate change.

be among women who know and love the land deeply and intimately was itself one of the great gifts of this conference.



“Aren’t there other ways to live, and how do we invent them?” Clausen asks in her talk. The question goes to the heart of this issue of *Dark Matter*. A grammar of animacy is something every piece in this issue could be said to be aspiring to, if not enacting (quite literally so in Alexandra Merrill’s “Homage to Bees”).

Humans in these pages carry on eloquent and instructive conversations with earth intelligences of every kind: with the rain, with a wolf, with dragonflies, with bees, with squirrels, with cardinals. “After all that has happened, we are still connected,” writes Joan Kresich in her letter of apology to a Yellowstone wolf.

In our first issue, elephants came in a dream to teach us about grieving ([Issue#1 Grieving With the Elephants - Kristen Flyntz](#)), and here they are teaching us again, in both “trinkets” and “The Music of Grief.” In “Dreaming the Future,” Valerie Wolf points out that “The plants have been on this planet more than 450 million years, the animals have lived here more than 350 million years. Humans, in their current form as *homo sapiens*, have only dwelt here for 220 thousand years. Who should know more about what works here?” It is understood by the writers here that we have everything to learn from these other intelligences. (And, as Kimmerer points out, “We could use teachers.”)

There’s an intricate pattern of rhymings and concordances in the material gathered here that should perhaps not have surprised me. It was striking, for example, how many of the pieces were either a meditation on or an outcry of grief, if not both. And in just as many, a call is being answered—from a dream, from spirits, ancestors, or animals—a call that shows the writer where she needs to go, and

often leads her somewhere unexpected. But there is call and response within the issue itself, most obviously in the anguished longing for ceremony for roadkill in Gillian Goslinga's "To Witness" which is answered so concretely and beautifully in Carolyn Flynn's "Grandmother Squirrel." The Mourning Feasts Cynthia Travis hosted for grieving communities in post-civil-war Liberia are echoed in Ruth Wallen's "Cascading Memorials," installations that enable public, communal mourning for the landscapes we are losing.

Though the writing in this issue seemed to constellate around the categories of "Grieving" and "Guided," that's not to say there is not plenty of grief in the "Guided" pieces, and vice versa. And, as more than one of the writers here points out, grief itself can be a guide. Travis writes: "Proper grieving is one of the key indigenous technologies that open the doors between worlds." I'm sure I'm not the only one to have noticed that when I fall on my knees and ask for help—not always, but often—it miraculously comes, though not necessarily in the form I expected. It's worth noting that the women in Deena Metzger's dream in "Dreaming Another Language: She Will not Kill" come to her because she's been been praying for rain—because she's been asking, on her knees, "what is to be done, what is to be done, what is to be done?"

Kristin Flyntz, whose expert copy-editing skills have been applied to most of the pieces collected here, wrote to me once she'd gone through the bulk of them to say that it felt to her as if "the intelligences, the teachers and the knowing that we desperately need have deliberately gathered in this issue, both in their human form (the writers) and in those who are working through them. Perhaps we are being shown, collectively, where we need to go in order to live in alliance with all life..." Reading these words I felt, it is so! Just as all of the writing here is informed by the understanding that our continuation on this earth hangs in the balance, all of it can be read as a response to the questions: "Are there other ways to live?" and "What is to be done?"

Barbara Mor, a friend and collaborator of many years and author of the epigraph above, drawn from her landmark ecofeminist book *The Great Cosmic Mother*, died unexpectedly in January of this year at the age of seventy-nine. In the fall, I had an exchange with Barbara about this journal-to-be. Initially I'd written to ask her permission to use the title, since I discovered, only after I had decided on it, that she had a blog called *Dark Matter/Walls*. Barbara gave me her blessing for "Dark Matter," but in October,

when I sent her the link to our website, she wrote to me with misgivings: "Post GCM (*The Great Cosmic Mother*)," she wrote, I had enough of those NewAge women who were immersing in their version of dreams & visions to escape (in my opinion) the disciplines of history & the chaos of politics. I think our dreams & visions need to be grounded in the horrors of ancient & current realities; & that it is time to retrieve the polemical Fist, if not my version then someone's somewhere." Barbara's uncompromising fury on behalf of women and the earth has been a touchstone for me all these years; she has always embodied the kind of fierce protectiveness Laura Bellmay, in "A Call from the Edge," says we urgently need. So I took these words of Barbara's to heart, and do even more so now that she's an ancestor.

There is no question that all the dreams and visions in this journal have been and are grounded in "the horrors of ancient and current realities," and I hope that rage, and outrage, will always be seething not far from the surface on this site. (Interestingly, the cause of rage was taken up at the "Geography of Hope" conference most adroitly by longtime Buddhist practitioner Wendy Johnson, who spoke of anger as the "refiner's fire" and cautioned us: "Don't be too nice, it's overrated. And there isn't time.") As for retrieving the polemical fist...well, our version may not be quite as antagonistic as Barbara would have liked, but the fist is there. Perhaps it's tempered by the recognition of our fragility. And also by an understanding that the fist, like the heart, does also need to open, even when we're confronted with atrocities. A Liberian peacebuilder who worked with child soldiers and warlords in Liberia's civil war advises Travis: "...We must deliberately move into the field and lavish love on those incapable of loving." And to the violent young man in her dream in "Dreaming the Future," Valerie Wolf says, "A part of me wants to lean in and help you change."

At the end of Wolf's piece, a dancing girl in her dream creates a magical pathway to the spirits. It's one of many instances of dancing in this issue. Judy Grahn's dragonflies dance. So does Deena Metzger's rain. Even trauma, at the end of "The Music of Grief," gets up and dances. Despite the horrors of ancient and current realities. And *because* of them. This dancing Barbara Mor would have understood, and applauded. "...the universe...is the first dancer," she writes in *The Great Cosmic Mother*, where she

reminds us of “the first circling dances of molecules, of atoms, of quarks around the cosmic spiral.” Dance takes us “back to an original communion with sheer evolutionary energy.”²

Barbara’s fist was raised, always, in the name of communion, connection: “We must *remember* the chemical connections between our cells and the stars, between the beginning and now.” Are there other ways to live? What is to be done? I give Barbara Mor the last word in this editorial, as I did the first one. “We must remember and reactivate the primal consciousness of oneness between all living things. We must return to that time, in our genetic memory, in our dreams, when we were one species born to live together on earth, as her magic children.”³

Lise Weil

Montreal, April 2015

² Barbara Mor and Monica Sjoo, *The Great Cosmic Mother: Rediscovering the Religion of the Earth*. (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991), p. 84

³ Ibid., p. 424.

I. OPENING REMARKS

"This Moment the World Continues": Writing Under the Sign of Species Suicide⁴

Jan Clausen

Premise: "The Writer" is not a special kind of human being, but an ordinary kind of human being for whom Language is a primary medium for engaging with the riddle of Necessity and Invention that is at the core of all of human life, and arguably of Life itself.

For the writer, many sorts of Necessity are key. There is the unending pressure of material necessity, summed up for all time in Herman Melville's famous plaint: "Dollars damn me." There are the social bonds, the tugs and pulls of family, friendship, community--a mesh of gift and obligation that may feed the writer even as it keeps her from her desk, a paradox memorably explored by recent generations of mother-writers in such books as Tillie Olsen's *Silences: When Writers Don't Write*, Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*, Jane Lazarre's *The Mother Knot*, and Reiko Rizzuto's *Hiroshima in the Morning*. There are the necessities, the givens, of Language itself--what the poet George Oppen called the Materials—including the histories of literary forms.

Today I am going to focus on another register of Necessity, the one having to do with the threshold our species has crossed, entering on an era in which a heedless exercise of our collective technical ingenuity has brought us to the point of rendering extinct not only a vast range of non-human life forms, but our own much-touted "higher intelligence." To put it a bit more starkly, for some time now we have had no choice but to proceed "under the sign of species suicide," a circumstance requiring a vast, unprecedented effort of *social* re-invention-- and hence a monumental effort to revise how we imagine and depict reality. In this effort, I believe, writers have a great role to play.

In the following brief extracts from my journal of recent months, you can see me groping—as I always am—for some access to this inscrutable Necessity that calls on all our powers of Invention.

⁴ Adapted from a keynote address given at the summer 2014 Goddard College Master of Fine Arts in Writing Program residency, commenting on the residency theme, "Necessity/Invention"

March 29 [2014]

Newspaper article about Bangladesh [and] low-lying islands doomed by rising seas. The calm tone of it: this will happen, displacing millions. Why. How is it acceptable to say: this is happening, these things will happen.

From George Oppen's "The Image of the Engine":

Endlessly, endlessly,/The definition of mortality//The image of the engine//That stops.//We cannot live on that./I know that no one would live out/thirty years, fifty years if the world were ending/With his life.

April 2

Everything, suddenly, about "wreck" or "ruin." Obvious why. Bhanu Kapil's blurb to Bea Gates's new poetry book *Dos* describes it as a "wrecked, shimmering pilgrimage." Would we *feel* so much wreck if we hadn't so much *stuff*; so much info?

April 4

Precipice Studies: Examination of the thinking and behavior of a self-conscious species on the brink of self-extinction.

April 15

Let's get this straight: UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change says drastically reduce carbon emissions now. U.S. and China are principal offenders and must act for the global reduction to work. Article in today's Times details how U.S. politics [make this unlikely]. So, the world is supposed to be killed b/c a few powerful Americans and Chinese don't want to interrupt their short-term plans and narrow advantages?

April 27

"At a time of cultural devastation, the reality a courageous person has to face up to is that one has to face up to reality in new ways."--Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural*

Devastation, a meditation on the life and testimony of the Crow Indian leader Plenty Coups (1848-1932).

April 30

In an essay on George Oppen, Rachel Blau du Plessis quotes from a speech given by Paul Celan, accepting a literary prize after the launch of the first satellite, Sputnik, in 1958: "...the efforts of someone who, overarced by stars that are human handiwork, and who, shelterless in this till now undreamed-of sense and thus most uncannily in the open, goes with his very being to language, stricken by and seeking reality." (from *Thinking Poetics: Essays on George Oppen*)

May 1

On the one hand: everything that matters: everything that has made itself, over the millennia.

On the other hand: money.

May 5

Read interview with a leftist immigration activist in *Independent*. Two million people have been deported since start of Obama administration. The activist argues that political expediency and old-fashioned racism are not enough to explain the wall-building and border-securing frenzy; it can only be explained by expectations of mass migration from south to north, in response to climate change.

May 13

NYT headline: "Scientists Warn of Rising Oceans from Polar Melt": "Today we present observational evidence that a large section of the West Antarctic Ice Sheet has gone into irreversible retreat."

May 20

After driving, one sees with car eyes. The mirrory phallus of the new Trade Center building standing up over the city skyline.

I keep thinking of Leslie Marmon Silko's short story "Yellow Woman," whose protagonist wants to insist that the modern, urbanized world is the *only* world: "...I am not Yellow Woman. Because she is from

out of time past and I live now and I've been to school and there are highways and pickup trucks that Yellow Woman Never saw." Isn't this...what so many of us feel...looking at the "life" of our cities and suburbs (really, the "life" of our economic system): there it is--Life Itself! Who can doubt it? Isn't it *more real* than the lives of salamanders or obscure crustaceans? So long as highways and skies are filled with transportation (with evidence of commerce), our god lives!

May 27

A 2007 quote from Jonathan Schell: "When I wrote *The Fate of the Earth* in 1982, I said that, first and foremost, nuclear weapons were an ecological danger. It wasn't that our species could be directly wiped out by nuclear war down to the last person. That would only happen through the destruction to the underpinnings of life, through nuclear winter, radiation, ozone loss. There has been an oddity of timing, because when nuclear weapons were invented, people didn't even use the word 'environment' or 'ecosphere.'...So in a certain sense the most urgent ecological threat of them all was born before you could understand it. The present larger ecological crisis is that context."

So, this is the realm of Necessity that preoccupies me these days, both as writer and reader. What I *must* know, what I'm writing to find out is: what is it like to *go on*, consciously, under the sign of species suicide? Why has our history come down to this? Aren't there other ways to live, and how do we invent them, and who *is* this vast "we" that somehow has to make that choice?

I leave aside for now the question of the practical activity required to institute a desperately needed harm reduction program for our species and planet, a task that belongs to everyone and not just to writers. I submit to you that the experience of a type of collective insecurity never known before in our history as a species *is* the contemporary context for all writers' inventions, whether or not we acknowledge it. It would be more than absurd for me to offer prescriptions for meeting this challenge, but because I am struck by our slowness to take up the task--after all, given the signal triumphs of technologies of destruction in the first half of the 20th century alone, one would expect Precipice Studies to be far advanced by now!--I want instead to address some of the barriers to so doing.

1. The question of humanity's future on the planet—the question of “the planet’s” future—the question of what we even mean by saying “the planet”—our disorientation and grief before the

wrenching alterations to the poet's supposed eternal preoccupations (Marilyn Hacker's "love, death, and the *changing of the seasons*")—all of this is so *big*, so intimidating, so complex as to offer us a perfect excuse for throwing up our hands and retreating to more familiar writing territory.

2. The guilt factor. It is difficult to think honestly about the vast damage that the human species is currently inflicting on the biosphere and its own survival prospects without feeling acute if thoroughly useless guilt about one's own inevitable failure to "make a difference."

3. (In other words)? Acknowledging this level of necessity flies in the face of a utilitarian culture that emphasizes practical solutions, fixes, formulas, "the power of positive thinking." Americans disdain "losers," and you might start to look like one if you focus too intently on the level of loss inevitably flowing from our planetary predicament.

4. There's little or no "market" for writing about this stuff. It's not entertaining. It's not "relatable." In fact, it risks discarding the capitalistic premise that "the market" offers the ultimate measure of value. You will not be trending on Twitter. Your Amazon numbers will tank.

5. Writing honestly in a time when our dominant social and technological structures--the very "inventions" meant to support and sustain the human project--have become acutely toxic for the present and future of that project is not simply a matter of facing difficult *content*. It challenges us intensely on the level of form, inviting us to scrutinize some of the most basic assumptions underpinning our literary traditions. We need to question the role of the individual hero or heroine, asking how we might envision a sort of collective protagonist arising from the countless ill-assorted motives, acts, and accidents that combine to determine our species fate. Narrative order, the satisfactions of well-made plot--how do these serve a confrontation with realities that are multiple, interlocking, endlessly complex, under nobody's control? How might we approach a literature in which humanity itself may be no longer at the center? Among other things, we need to question automatic assumptions that the conventions of "apocalyptic" narrative, with their obsessive emphasis on ending, offer us much that is useful in coming to grips with our strange situation.

We need, instead, to take another look at writers who have pondered the problem of *going on under the sign of species suicide*, as George Oppen did in the passage I quoted from "The Image of the Engine," or as Audre Lorde did when she composed the tartly witty warning with which she ends

"Between Our Selves":

if we do not stop killing
the other
in ourselves
the self that we hate
in others
soon we shall all lie
in the same direction
and Eshidale's priests will be very busy
they who alone can bury
all those who seek their own death
by jumping up from the ground
and landing upon their heads.

And then there is Linda Hogan, whose beautifully measured lines insisting on an open balance of unbearable danger and tender possibility have stayed with me since I first read them over thirty years ago. From her poem "Disappearances":

I remember how the Japanese women
turned to go home
and were lost
in the disappearances
that touched their innocent lives
as easily as they touched small teacups
rattling away
on shelves.

These are the lessons of old women
whose eyes are entire cities,

iron dark lattice work
they saw and became.
In their eyes
there is silence,
red ash and stormclouds.
The quiet surprise of space
carrying the familiar shape of what it held.

This moment the world continues.

In undertaking such a reconsideration, I believe, we are going to discover that a “literature of fragile ongoing” has been long in formation, generally unrecognized as such but now available to us as inspiration for the further inventions--both literary and practical--that we must urgently attempt.

Jan Clausen’s most recent poetry title, *Veiled Spill: A Sequence*, has just been issued by GenPop Books. Her publications include five earlier volumes of poetry; the memoir *Apples and Oranges: My Journey Through Sexual Identity* (Houghton Mifflin); and the novels *Sinking, Stealing* and *The Prosperine Papers* (Crossing Press [U.S.] and The Women’s Press, Ltd. [U.K.]). Her short fiction and poems have appeared widely in journals and anthologies such as *AGNI*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Bloom*, *Drunken Boat*, *Fence*, *Hanging Loose*, *Hotel Amerika*, *H.O.W. Journal*, *Kenyon Review*, the Library of America volume *Poems from the Women’s Movement*, *Obsession: Sestinas for the 21st Century*, *Ploughshares*, and *Tarpaulin Sky*. Book reviews and literary journalism appear in *Boston Review*, *Ms.*, *The Nation*, *Poets and Writers*, and *The Women’s Review of Books*. From 1989 to 2010, Clausen taught writing at Eugene Lang College, the New School (New York City). The recipient of fellowships from the NEA and the New York Foundation for the Arts, she currently teaches in the Goddard College MFA in Writing Program and at New York University.



Photo credit: Joanna Eldredge Morrissey

When Earth Becomes an “It”⁵

Robin W. Kimmerer

Let us begin with gratitude, for we are showered every day with the gifts of the Earth. *Megwech* to one another as people, for the privilege of being in one another's company, for this beautiful day, for being whole and healthy and surrounded by the companionship of oaks and grasses, butterflies and fog. Gratitude for the Coast Miwok people in whose homelands we meet. And for the gifts, the everyday miracles with which we are showered every day.

At a literary conference, it is important to honor together the deep roots of the oral tradition and so let me start with a story, an old story.

In the beginning, there was the Skyworld, where people lived much as they do here on Earth, raising their families, raising their gardens, walking in the forest. And in that forest grew the great Tree of Life, on which grew all kinds of fruits and berries and medicines on a single tree. One day, a great windstorm blew down the tree and opened at its base a huge hole in the ground where its roots had pulled up. Being curious like all of us, a beautiful young woman whom we call Gizhkokwe, or Skywoman, went over to have a look. She stood at the edge and looked down, but could see nothing for it was entirely dark below, so she stepped a little farther and the edge of the hole began to crumble beneath her feet. She reached out to stop herself by grabbing on to the fallen tree, but the branch broke off in her hand. She fell like a maple seed pirouetting on an autumn breeze. A column of light streamed from a hole in the Skyworld, marking her path where only darkness had been before. But in that emptiness there were many gazing up at the sudden shaft of light. They saw there a small object, a mere dust mote in the beam. As it grew closer, they could see that it was a woman, arms outstretched, long black hair billowing behind as she spiraled toward them.

⁵ Keynote address, *Geography of Hope* conference, March 2015. A portion of this talk was published in the Spring 2015 issue of *YES! Magazine*. See also Robin Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 2013), pp. 3-10 and pp. 48-59

The geese nodded at one another and rose as one from the water, in a wave of goose music. She felt the beat of their wings as they flew beneath and broke her fall. Far from the only home she'd ever known, she caught her breath at the warm embrace of soft feathers.

And so it began. From the beginning of time, we are told that the very first encounter between humans and other beings of the earth was marked by care and responsibility, borne on the strong wings of geese. The world at that time was covered entirely by water.

The geese could not hold Skywoman much longer, so they called a council of all beings to decide what to do—loons, otters, swans, beavers, fish of all kinds. A great turtle floated in the watery gathering, and he offered to let her rest upon his back and so, gratefully she stepped from the goose wings onto the dome of the Turtle. The others understood that she needed land for her home. The deep divers among them had heard of mud at the bottom of the water and agreed to retrieve some. The loon dove to get a beakful, but the distance was too far and after a long while he surfaced with nothing to show for his efforts. One by one, the other animals offered to help, the otter, the beaver, the sturgeon. But the depth, the darkness and the pressure were too great for even these strongest of swimmers who came up gasping for air and their heads ringing. Soon only the muskrat was left, the weakest diver of all. He volunteered to go while the others looked on doubtfully. His little legs flailed as he worked his way downward. He was gone a very long time. They waited and waited for him to return, fearing the worst for their relative. Before long, a stream of bubbles rose from the water and the small limp body of muskrat floated upward. He had given his life to aid this helpless human. But the others noticed that his paw was tightly clenched and when they opened it, there was a small handful of mud. Turtle said, "Here, put it on my back and I will hold it."

Skywoman bent and spread the mud across the shell of the turtle. Moved by gratitude for the gifts of the animals, she sang in thanksgiving and then began to dance, her feet caressing the earth with love. As she danced her thanks, the land grew and grew from the dab of mud on Turtle's back. And so, the earth was made. Not by one alone, but from the alchemy of the animals' gifts and human gratitude. Together they created what we know today as Turtle Island.

This is a fragment of the creation story told by both Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe people in my homelands. Our oldest teachings remind us that reciprocity is the thread that binds us together. The

animals were Skywoman's life raft at the beginning of the world, and now, so much closer to the end, we must be theirs.

Whether her name is Skywoman or Spider Woman or Changing Woman, the Goddess Ki or Gaia or Eve, our origin stories, the stories of who we are in the world and how it is we might live, often have a cast of characters which includes women and the land. The bond is deep and enduring. We know these stories, for isn't the world shifting under our feet, too? Aren't we all at some time falling into a new place? And trying to make a home?

In an era of accelerating climate change and the Sixth Extinction, we know we too stand at the edge, with the ground crumbling beneath our feet. Like Skywoman, we ask: what can we grab onto to stop the fall? What gifts do we carry to make a new home? How do we care for the beings who have cared for us from the beginning of time?

This time we live in—one of great change and great choices—has been spoken of by our ancestors, in the teachings of the prophecies of the seventh fire, and I will share just a tiny fragment this morning. After the long migration of our Anishinaabe people, after the arrival of the newcomers and after all the losses—of land, of language, of sacred ways, of each other—the prophecy and history converge. It is said that the people will find themselves in a time where you can no longer fill a cup from the streams and drink, when the air is too thick to breathe and when the plants and animals will turn their faces away from us. It is said in that time, which we will know as the time of the seventh fire, that all the worlds' peoples will stand at a fork in the road. One of the paths is soft and green and spangled with dew. You could walk barefoot there. And one of the paths is black and burnt, made of cinders that would cut your feet.

We know which path we want. The prophecy tells us that we must make a choice between the path of materialism and greed that will destroy the earth or the spiritual path of care and compassion, of *bmaadiziwin*, of the good life. And we are told that before we can choose that soft green path we can't just walk forward. The people of the seventh fire must instead walk backwards and pick up what was left for us along the ancestors' path: the stories, the teachings, the songs, each other, our more-than-human relatives who were lost along the way—and our language. Only when we have found these

once again and placed in our bundles the things that will heal us—the things that we love—can we walk forward on that green path, all the worlds' people, together...

These are the questions we face today at the crossroads. What do we find along the ancestors' path that will heal us and bring us back to balance? What do we love too much to lose that we will carry it through the narrows of climate change, safely to the other side? For there is another side. The prophecy of the seventh fire teaches that the people of the seventh fire will need great courage and creativity and wisdom, but that they will lead us to the lighting of the eighth fire. It is said that we are the people of the seventh fire. You and I.... As writers, we mark that path with our stories, we mark the path with our words...

Our Potawatomi stories tell that a long time ago, when Turtle Island was young, the people and all the plants and animals spoke the same language and conversed freely with one another. But as our dominance has grown, we have become more isolated, more lonely on the planet and we can no longer call our neighbors by name. If we are to manifest the values of the Skywoman story, we have to learn once again to call each other by name. And by name, to call on each other for help. It is said that Skywoman went back to the sky, and looked over the land with the visage of Grandmother Moon. It is said that she left our teachers behind us, the plants. In this time of the Sixth Extinction, of coming climate chaos, we could use teachers.

We don't have to figure everything out for ourselves.

Singing whales, talking trees, dancing bees, birds who make art, fish who navigate, plants who learn and remember. We've forgotten that we are surrounded by intelligences other than our own, by feathered people and people with leaves. There are many forces arrayed to help us forget. Even the language we speak, the beautiful English language, makes us forget, through a simple grammatical error that has grave consequences for us all.

Let me share with you a poem by one of my heroes of women and the land, the Cherokee writer Marilou Awiakta:

When Earth Becomes an “It”

When the people call the Earth “Mother,”
They take with love
And with love give back
So that all may live.

When the people call Earth “it,”
They use her
Consume her strength. Then the people die.

Already the sun is hot
Out of season.
Our Mother’s breast
Is going dry.
She is taking all green
Into her heart
And will not turn back
Until we call her
By her name.

I’m a beginning student of my native Anishinaabe language, trying to reclaim what was washed from the mouths of children in the Indian Boarding schools. Children like my grandfather. So I’m paying a lot of attention to grammar lately. Grammar is how we chart relationships through language, including our relationship with the Earth.

Imagine your grandmother standing at the stove in her apron and someone says, “Look, it is making soup. It has gray hair.” We might snicker at such a mistake, at the same time that we recoil. In English, we never refer to a person as “it.” Such a grammatical error would be a profound act of disrespect. “It” robs a person of selfhood and kinship, reducing a person to a thing.

And yet in English, we speak of our beloved Grandmother Earth in exactly that way, as “it.” The language allows no form of respect for the more-than-human beings with whom we share the Earth. In English, a being is either a human or an “it.”

Objectification of the natural world reinforces the notion that our species is somehow more deserving of the gifts of the world than the other 8.7 million species with whom we share the planet. Using “it” absolves us of moral responsibility and opens the door to exploitation. When Sugar Maple is an “it” we give ourselves permission to pick up the saw. “It” means it doesn’t matter.

But in Anishinaabe and many other indigenous languages, it’s impossible to speak of Maple as “it.” In our language there is no “it” for birds or berries. The language does not divide the world into him and her, but into animate and inanimate. And the grammar of animacy is applied to all that lives: sturgeon, mayflies, blueberries, boulders and rivers. We refer to other members of the living world with the same language that we use for our family. Because they are our family.

What would it feel like to be part of a family that includes birches and beavers and butterflies? We’d be less lonely. We’d feel like we belonged. We’d be smarter.

In indigenous ways of knowing, other species are recognized not only as persons, but also as teachers who can inspire how we might live. We can learn a new solar economy from plants, medicines from mycelia, and architecture from the ants. By learning from other species, we might even learn humility. Colonization, we know, attempts to replace indigenous cultures with the culture of the settler. One of its tools is linguistic imperialism, or the overwriting of language and names. Among the many examples of linguistic imperialism, perhaps none is more pernicious than the replacement of the language of nature as subject with the language of nature as object. We can see the consequences all around us as we enter an age of extinction precipitated by how we think and how we live.

So here, today—among a community of writers and readers, of storymakers—let me make a modest proposal. Just a small thing: the transformation of the English language. Let me invite you to join an experiment, for a kind of reverse linguistic imperialism, a shift in worldview through the humble work of the pronoun. Might the soft green path to sustainability be marked by grammar?

Language has always been changeable and adaptive. We lose words we don't need anymore and invent the ones we need. We don't need a worldview of earth beings as objects anymore. That thinking has led us to the precipice of climate chaos and mass extinction. We need a new language that reflects the life-affirming world we want. A new language, with its roots in an ancient way of thinking.

To consider whether animacy might be shared with English, I sought the wisdom of my elders. English is a secular language, to which words are added at will. But Anishinaabe is different. Fluent speaker and spiritual teacher Stewart King reminds us that the language is sacred, a gift to the people to care for one another and for the Creation. It grows and adapts too, but through a careful protocol that respects the sanctity of the language. If sharing is to happen, it has to be done right, with mutual respect.

I was pointedly reminded that our language carries no responsibility to heal the dominant society that systematically sought to exterminate it. At the same time, other elders have taught that "the reason we have held on to our traditional teachings is because one day, the whole world will need them." It's a complicated path to navigate.

Stewart King suggested that the proper Anishinaabe word for the beings of the living earth would be *Bemaadiziiiaaki*. I wanted to run through the woods and along the river saying it out loud, so grateful that there was such a word in the world.

But I recognize that this beautiful word would not find its way easily into English to do its work of transformation, to take the place of "it." We need a new English word to carry the meaning offered by the indigenous one. I wonder if that final syllable, *ki*, might be the key. Inspired by the concept of animacy, and with full recognition of its roots in *Bemaadiziiiaaki*, might a new English pronoun come into use?

"*Ki* " to signify a being of the living earth. Not "he" or "she," but "*ki*." So that when we speak of the Sugar Maple, we say, "Oh, that beautiful tree, *ki* is giving us sap again this spring." And we'll need a plural pronoun, too, for those earth beings. English already has the right word. Let's make that new

pronoun “*kin*.” So we can now refer to birds and trees not as things, but as our earthly relatives. On a crisp October morning we can look up at the geese and say, “Look, *kin* are flying south for the winter. Come back soon.”

Language can be a tool for cultural transformation. Make no mistake: “*Ki*” and “*kin*” are revolutionary pronouns. Words have power to shape our thoughts and our actions. On behalf of the living world, let us learn the grammar of animacy. We can keep “it” to speak of bulldozers and paperclips, but every time we say “*ki*” let our words reaffirm our respect and kinship with the more-than-human world. Let us speak of the beings of the earth as the “*kin*” they are...

We are gathered here to tell a new story, to imagine how writers, as people of the seventh fire, can mark the path, the many paths. To ask, as women, the descendants of Skywoman, how can we use our gifts to tip the world back into balance? In a new world, how shall we make a home?

In the face of our fears, we will ask ourselves: what do we love too much to lose? And answer each other: what will I do to protect kin? For in the words of the respected Onondaga Nation Clan Mother Audrey Shenandoah, who would have so loved this gathering: “Being born as humans to this earth is a very sacred trust. We have a sacred responsibility because of the special gift we have, which is beyond the fine gifts of the plant life, the fish, the woodlands, the birds and all the other living things on earth. We are able to take care of them.”

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The Rules of Rivers⁶

Kathleen Dean Moore

At midnight on the Toklat River in the Alaska Range, the thermometer recorded 93 degrees. The sun, dragging anchor in the northwest sky, fired rounds of heat against the cabin. I was lying naked on the bunk, slapping mosquitos. Next to the wall, my husband lay completely covered by a white sheet, as still and dismayed as a corpse. He would rather be hot than bitten, and I would rather be bitten than hot.

I had come to the Toklat River to think about global warming, and it wasn't going well. The week's heat was breaking all-time records, drawing a new spike on the graph of jaggedly rising temperatures in Alaska. The average day is now four degrees warmer than just a few decades ago, and seven degrees warmer in winter. The Arctic is heating twice as fast as the rest of the world.

Furious and despairing, I had no chance of falling asleep that night. So I pulled on clothes and walked to the bank of the river. On a spruce bench gnawed by bears, I sat and watched the river churn.

The Toklat is a shallow river that braids across a good half mile of gravel beds, dried stream courses and deep-dug channels. Sloshing with meltwater, it clatters along through islands and willow thickets. Banging rocks on cobblestones, surging into confused swells, the grey currents looked unpredictable and chaotic. But there were patterns.

A hydrologist once explained the rules of rivers as we walked a river-path. The processes of a river are manifestations of energy, he said. A fast, high-energy river will carry particles – the faster the river, the bigger the particle. But when it loses energy and slows, the river drops what it carries. So anything that slows a river can make a new landscape. It could be a stick lodged against a stone or the ribcage of a calf moose drowned at high water. Where the water piles against the obstacle, it drops its load, and

⁶ Excerpt from keynote address, *Geography of Hope* conference, March 2015. It first appeared in *Orion* as a "Lay of the Land" feature, October 2014

an island begins to form. The island – in fact, any deposition -- reshapes the current. As water curls around the obstacle, the current's own force turns it upstream. Around one small change, the energy reorganizes itself entirely.

And here's the point: No one pattern continues indefinitely; it always gives way to another. When there are so many obstacles and islands that a channel can no longer carry all its water and sediment, it crosses a stability threshold and the current carves a new direction. The change is usually sudden, often dramatic, the hydrologist said, a process called an 'avulsion.'

On the Toklat that night, the physics of the river played out right in front of me. A chunk of dirt and roots toppled from the bank upstream, tumbled past me, and jammed against a mid-river stone. The current, dividing itself around the rootball, wrinkled sideways and turned upstream. It curled into pocket-eddies behind the roots. Even as I watched, the pockets filled with gravel and sand. A willow could grow there, and its roots could divide and slow the river further, gathering more gravel, creating a place where new life could take root.

I shoved a rock into the river. The sudden curl of current made me grin.

Yes, we are caught up in a river rushing toward a hot, stormy, and dangerous planet. The river is powered by huge amounts of money invested in mistakes that are dug into the very structure of the land, a tangled braid of fearful politicians, preoccupied consumers, reckless corporations, and bewildered children – everyone, in some odd way, feeling helpless. Of course, we despair. How will we ever dam this flood?

But we don't have to stop the river. Our work and the work of every person who loves this world – this one – is to make one small deflection in complacency, a small obstruction to profits, a blockage to business-as-usual, then another, and another, to change the energy of the flood. As it swirls around these snags and subversions, the current will slow, lose power, eddy in new directions, and create new systems and structures that change its course forever. On these small islands, new ideas will grow, creating thickets of living things and life-ways we haven't yet imagined. Those disruptions can turn destructive energy into a new dynamic that finally reverses the forces that would wreck the world.

This is the work of creative disruption. This is the work of radical imagination. This is the work of witness. This is the steadfast, conscientious refusal to let a hell-bent economy force us to row its boat. This is much better than stewing in the night.



Kathleen Dean Moore is an environmental philosopher and writer whose recent work focuses on the moral urgency of climate action. Her co-edited book, *Moral Ground: Ethical Action for a Planet in Peril*, gathers testimony from the world's moral leaders about our obligations to future generations. Other books celebrate cultural and spiritual connections to wet, wild places—*Wild Comfort*, *Pine Island Paradox*, *Holdfast*, and *Riverwalking*. She is co-editor of essay collections about Rachel Carson, Apache philosopher Viola Cordova, and Mount

St. Helens. Her work has appeared in *Orion*, *Sun*, *Utne Reader*, *New York Times Magazine*, *Conservation Biology*, *Audubon*, *Discover*, and many other journals.

Moore is the co-founder of the Spring Creek Project for Ideas, Nature, and the Written Word at Oregon State University, where she now serves as a Senior Fellow. She recently left her position as Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at OSU in order to work full-time on the climate emergency.

II. GRIEVING

THE MUSIC OF GRIEF

Cynthia Travis

“Our bodies are the texts that carry the memories and therefore remembering is no less than reincarnation.”

- Katie Cannon (in *The Body Keeps the Score* by Bessel van der Kolk, MD)

In January 1999, I attended a peacebuilding course at Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, Virginia. I was a fish out of water—a Jewish mediator come to learn about conflict transformation from a group of innovative, intrepid churchgoers. Harrisonburg is a small town studded with contrasts. To get there, one flies into Washington, DC and drives south and west through famous Civil War battlefields. Once there, it is common to pull up at a stoplight alongside a horse and buggy driven by Mennonites in top hats and tails, long dresses and lace caps. The folks that run the Conflict Transformation Program there are modern pacifists with a history of volunteering in disaster relief and what they call ‘accompaniment’ in places around the world where there is great suffering. After WWII, they decided that there must be something they could do before disaster struck. Pro-active peacebuilding was born.

My roommate Jean, and her husband had been missionaries in what was then called the Congo. We both arrived late at night, weary from our long journeys, I from New Mexico she from Minnesota. Explaining that she wanted to take a bath, Jean stepped into our shared bathroom to run the water. I remember how the steam billowed up into the cold night air, and the thrumming of the water as it poured into the old porcelain tub. The bathroom was accessed from a tiny, low-ceilinged hallway that linked our two bedrooms. Across from the bathroom door was a cubby with a black plastic dial phone, where I sat waiting for a call from my boyfriend. I felt awkward and trapped, intrigued in spite of myself as Jean stood in the doorway, steam rising behind her, and began to speak. Her husband was a church elder whose job included receiving war-weary local church dignitaries and listening to their stories. Sometimes Jean served tea or sat quietly nearby. I remember the adrenalin surge of my dislike of missionaries (still have it, but softer now) and my impatience with her gentle equanimity. Perhaps I sensed something ominous taking shape. Too late, the story was pouring out of her, so I listened.

Most afternoons, she and her husband would sit outside in the shade with their Congolese church guests, at a low formica table with broken chairs. One by one the men told their stories and began to weep. As they spoke, their tears became so copious they flooded the tabletop. Tears sheeted into their laps and poured onto the ground. As her husband leaned in to listen, Jean would wipe the table and wring out the towel. When Jean finished the story she shrugged. We may have hugged, I don't remember. I sat, stunned, as she went into the bathroom, turned off the faucet, and closed the door.

During the next several years, I returned frequently to Eastern Mennonite for their Summer Peacebuilding Institute, where grassroots peacebuilders from more than fifty countries gather to teach and learn the art of building peace: In South Africa, Mennonite peacebuilders worked behind the scenes to build 'human safety nets' because they anticipated – correctly – that the fragile negotiations between Mandela and de Klerk would likely fall apart. In the US, peacebuilders from EMU helped sensitize both prosecution and defense lawyers in high-profile capital cases so that victims and their families were not re-traumatized. Liberian peacebuilder S. G. Doe explained his work with child soldiers and warlords in the civil war that was still raging when I met him. He told me, "...We must deliberately move into the field and lavish love on those incapable of loving." I realized that, as I slept, someone on the other side of the world was awake and working for peace.

In late 1999, as a result of meeting some of these extraordinary ordinary people, I founded the non-profit *everyday gandhis*⁷ in hopes of making their stories more widely known. Five years later, I found myself in Liberia, in the wake of the civil war that had just ended there. I was soon to learn that even the best ideas born of the human mind benefit from collaboration with unseen sources. On the eve of that trip I dreamed that the dead from the war were asking to be properly buried and mourned.

I am standing with two colleagues on the banks of an underground river. On the landing where we stand, near the water, I see three small suitcases that become three coffins that turn into three wooden boats. On the other side of the river is a burning tower, like the Tower card in the Tarot. In front of the tower is a Liberian friend whose name is Roosevelt. He stands quietly, holding a shaft of gray light. Ours eyes meet. He says, "Everything is ready."

⁷ <http://www.everydaygandhis.org>; name suggested by Bill Goldberg in conversations at Eastern Mennonite University

A few months later, I dreamed again:

I am on the battlefield of Gallipoli, walking through heavy artillery fire. I seem to be in a parallel reality. Bombs explode around me, clumps of earth and gore are bursting at my feet. Bullets whiz past, zinging right next to my ears. I walk, safe from injury, witnessing everything in slow motion. As I watch, a circle of women appears. One by one, they step onto the battlefield. Each of them claims a fallen soldier - a husband, a brother, a son tenderly kneeling by the corpse, lifting him into her arms, caressing his face as she weeps. Each of them is singing her lament. A beautiful, terrible keening rises up, columns of wailing and grief.

These dreams and others led to *everyday gandhis* hosting Liberia's first post-war traditional Mourning Feast. During a Mourning Feast, the extended family and community of a deceased person gather to resolve their differences and put any lingering conflicts to rest with the dead, who are then sent 'across the river' with drumming and dancing, taking the community's conflicts with them. The ceremony concludes with a communal feast during which the act of eating from the common bowl is an oath of reconciliation. (I found out two years later that local dreamers had dreamed that the dead had told them: *We, the Dead, have come together. We are united. It is time for you, the living, to do the same.*)

As in most traditional/indigenous cultures, in Liberia it is well understood that if it weren't for our ancestors, we wouldn't be alive today. Therefore it is our pleasure and our obligation to honor them. But, since the war that consumed the country from 1989-2004, over 250,000 bodies were left scattered helter-skelter across the land. These rites had not been performed and the deaths had not been grieved, leaving the country in the lingering paralysis of unhealed trauma and unexpressed grief along with the anguish of failing to honor their dead.



'Our' Mourning Feast was peacefully attended by more than 5,000 people. And it catalyzed the community to continue with many, smaller feasts – for children, women, healers, the land, the forests, the animals, the birds and the water. One man, a traditional herbalist who cannot read or write and has never traveled beyond Liberia's capital, Monrovia, dreamed that a goat was to be sacrificed at a particular stream in a particular village so that the blessings of peace (carried by the blood of the animal as it mixed with the water) would flow to Europe and the United States. After the ceremony, I was able to trace the stream on a map – barely a trickle at the site of the offering—and saw that, indeed, it flows into the Atlantic Ocean.

In Liberia, as in much of Africa, animal sacrifices reflect a deep and conscious covenant with the natural world – not unlike the spiritual partnership of traditional hunters, in which the animals 'agree' to give their lives to feed the human community in exchange for mutual respect and devotion. In Liberia, the

blood of the animal that is offered is understood to be a potent conduit for human prayers to reach the Other World (similar to the rising smoke of sacred herbs in Native America such as sage and tobacco). Suffering in the human realm is understood as evidence of imbalance in the unseen world. Therefore, the ritual work that restores balance in and with the Other World is the foundation for peace in this one.

Throughout Africa, the peacemaking process is a time when apologies are offered and accepted. It is considered a serious affront to the community and to the spirits to refuse a sincere apology because this perpetuates a state of imbalance.

These activities engender an exchange of respect and humility, creating tangible results in daily life, as can be seen in the way the Mourning Feasts inspired the community and released pent-up grief. More importantly, these rites create a dialogue with the Other World and among human beings in ways that acknowledge and engage with Nature and the spirit realm as the primary nexus of those relationships, seen and unseen, that establish peace through heartfelt exchange and mutual accountability.

Nature responds. Often, Nature initiates the communication, through dreaming and synchronicities – inexplicable coincidences too numerous to be attributed to mere chance, too timely to ignore, and cohering into a clear message or discernable pattern. It is our responsibility to learn how to pay attention and how to interpret the signs. Master General, a rebel commander who considers himself to be a traditional man and is also an Imam and a Pentecostal preacher, told us that, according to traditional understanding, elephants are considered to be a sign that peace is coming. Three months prior to the ceasefire that finally ended Liberia's civil war, Master General and his troops were on their way to attack Monrovia. In the forest, he saw a mother elephant and her calf. "I knew that God had spoken," he told us. "No more war in Liberia!" He commanded his men to lay down their arms on the spot, and decreed that anyone using a weapon from that moment forward would face a firing squad.

"How many men were with you that day?" we wanted to know. "How many men laid down their guns because of the elephants?"

Master General thought for a moment. “Thirty-six thousand.”⁸

By following the dreams and listening to the community, a huge wave of creative energy and local wisdom was unleashed and successfully acted upon in ways that laid the groundwork for growth and development in the ‘tangible’ realm. One unexpected result was the profound and life-changing training that my colleagues and I have received over the years. It is intriguing to consider that Nature and the Other World seem to have undertaken (ha) the radical project of seeding change where it is arguably most needed: among westerners. This is accomplished, in part, by recruiting the least likely among us into experiences that broach no doubt whatever as to the luminous agency of the spirit world. Go to any bookstore and you will find shelves of books filled with the stories of unwitting westerners who have stumbled into sacred indigenous teachings.

Last week, I met a man who will soon come to a circle being offered by my community here in the U.S. to speak the stories that haunt him from his time as a volunteer fireman – the water-swollen corpses he has pulled from rivers and ocean, the charred remains trapped in burnedout buildings, the mangled bodies of young drivers in wrecked cars. He is bursting to tell his stories into the container of the circle. He has had nowhere to put them. His sense of isolation as pushed him to the brink of a nervous breakdown. His first question about the people in our circle: *Do they do any drumming?* It turns out that neuroscientists are discovering what the Ancients knew, what Indigenous people have always known, and what our broken hearts tell us if we will listen: that storytelling, theater, collective ceremony, rhythmic sound and movement heal trauma. This knowing is instinctive, primal.⁹

At one time, our interactions with the natural world were also instinctive and primal. In the world of animal tracking, there is something known as ‘baseline gait’. It is the relaxed, unhurried movement of a contented animal moving through its environment, looking, listening, gathering the information it needs to thrive. This gait is visible in its tracks. But we humans, with our unrelenting electronic assaults on our nervous systems and the chemical assaults on our physical bodies; our shoes and our concrete; our computers and our planes and our cars, have lost our baseline gait. Our brains compensate by taking a zillion snapshots of the world around us, frantically cobbling together a partial but distorted

⁸ Elephants also mourn their dead. They have specific burial rites and can remember the exact location of their loved ones’ remains. Dolphins, chimps, dogs, sea lions, geese and many other animals mourn as well.

⁹ *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, Bessel van der Kolk, MD, Viking, 2014

composite picture of reality in a desperate one attempt to inform us of where we are, what is going on and what we must respond to. From this fragmented hodge-podge, we make our decisions and plans. To this scramble we add trauma and unmetabolized grief. Perhaps this scramble *is* trauma and unmetabolized grief.

Proper grieving is one of the key indigenous technologies that open the doors between the worlds. The willingness to grieve engenders an emptying that creates space to listen and to hear. Grief, the dictionary tells us, is: “Deep sorrow, misery, sadness, anguish, pain, distress, heartache, heartbreak, agony, torment, affliction, suffering, woe, desolation, dejection, and despair.” It’s odd that we have so many words for something we tend to so little. Strange, too, that the word loss is not included, for grief is fundamentally about the loss of someone or something we love. Untended grief is cumulative, immobilizing. Traumatic. And what, exactly, is trauma? The dictionary says it’s, “A deeply distressing or disturbing experience.” I would add: ... *that permanently alters our lives for the worse, such that the world we once knew, and ourselves within it, become unrecognizable*. It is this rupture of meaning that makes trauma so potent.

If not addressed, trauma hitchhikes from generation to generation, our constant companion, co-author of our lives. It will have its say, invited or not, whether or not we choose to hear its message. As a case in point Liberia was founded in the 1820s by freed slaves sent to colonize the land from which their forebears had been torn. The civil war there, similar to wars elsewhere, may have been the inevitable implosion of multi-generational trauma stemming from slavery, abduction, displacement, repression, colonization and exploitation.

Trauma is stored in our bodies and in specific parts of our brains.¹⁰ In response to trauma, our bodies try to protect us. We become numb in that part of our brain that allows us to feel, to think clearly, to put things in perspective, to make life-enhancing choices. Everything bends to the will of trauma. It is as unmistakable and as uncompromising as, say, a pedophile, a torturer, or a terrorist with a bomb. Chances are, the people driven to these extremes are, themselves, victims of severe trauma and so the cycle continues and escalates.

¹⁰ *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, Bessel van der Kolk, MD, Viking, 2014

In addition to the assaults on our bodies and our nervous systems, the renaming or misnaming of what we know to be true makes us crazy. Whether we call it 'spin,' or marketing or rewritten history, the result is the same. Our felt experience is the cornerstone of identity and meaning; when we are told that what happened didn't happen, that we aren't who we know ourselves to be, that our voices do not count – that corporations are people – our sense of reality crumbles. Remember that, in addition to stealing and renaming the land that was kin, one of the key strategies in the genocide of indigenous North American culture was to forcibly remove children from their families and send them to residential schools where they were given western names and forbidden to speak their own languages.



Like each of us as individuals, collective global culture arises from the history that formed it. The sedimentary layers of ancestral anguish have been sealed and fossilized, but are clearly visible when we drill down or when a disaster exposes a cross-section of its layers. Like us, it seeks to cope as individuals and families do, repressing painful memories, self-medicating, lashing out at the slightest provocation or seeking to 'soldier through' by focusing on routine or revenge. Perhaps the collective trauma we are carrying dates from the ascendancy of the church and feudal kings (likely already traumatized themselves) and their desire to amass 'power over' rather than 'power with', pointedly expressed in unrelenting attacks on nature, women and indigenous ways.

Who's to say how much heartbreak or trauma will push a person to violence, or a culture to collective madness? It could be as straightforward, as complex, as insidious as the 'christening' of unimaginably large tracts of ancient indigenous home terrain with names that bear no relation to those by which these places were originally known - names that expressed an intimacy, a depth of relationship unimaginable to those who imposed the labels. Dehumanization is a potent provocation. To be abused, 'othered', or ignored is to become invisible, non-existent, debatable. We are chopped down, becoming the trees that silently fall in the forest.

My Pakistani friend Hassan is a profound peacebuilder. I met him at Eastern Mennonite, too. It was his practice to go to remote villages where tribal violence had broken out. He would camp at the edge of a field, fly a white flag, and invite farmers and warlords alike (sometimes they were one and the same) to come tell their stories. He once told me, 'Violence, too, is a form of communication.' It is the communication of last resort.

As with what cannot be spoken, what we cannot hear matters a great deal, and not only in the human realm, where the silence of exclusion is already overwhelming. "There is an information density...of between one and ten million bits per half hour of whale song – which is the approximate amount of information contained in Homer's *Odyssey*. In other words, whales are communicating *each half hour* the same amount of information as that in an entire book that would take us hours or days to read."¹¹ (And, because of their size, and the fact that they traverse the ocean from surface to depths and along their epic migrations, whales distribute vital nutrients across vast liquid expanses. In recent years, the ever-increasing traffic of container ships and super tankers is killing whales at alarming rates.) The cacophony of modern life is devastating animals whose mating calls and echolocation signals cannot be heard above the human din, interrupting vital life-sustaining systems, and depriving us of essential, encyclopedic realms of magic and connection. We find ourselves living a new and terrifying creation story whose divine authorship has been supplanted by machines. The trauma of separation from which we suffer globally is not God's banishment. It is our man-made exile from the Garden of the Earth in all her resplendent, thriving, complexity. Grief is the key that unlocks the gate to reveal the path that leads us home. Home is our place within the entirety of Life.

¹¹ Stephen Harrod Buhner, *Plant Intelligence and the Imaginal Realm: Into the Dreaming of Earth*, Bear & Co., 2014

We are disconnected from our bodies, encased in our cars and offices and cities of cement. Like rats in a cage, we exercise on our treadmills and stationary bicycles; we spend our days in mindless, repetitive motion on assembly lines, or frantically buying and selling and making deals in offices high above the ground. At the opposite extreme are those trapped in the backbreaking labor of subsistence or drowning in the floods of displacement. In mechanized cultures, we sit and stare at our numbing screens, connected primarily by social media (friends: really? tweets: *really* ?). As a society we are doing exactly what a traumatized individual does: engage in superficial, promiscuous false connection or edit, isolate and shut down until we snap.

It seems that the sheer volume of heartache pouring in has caused it to stop pouring out. The escalation of atrocities made possible by the sudden, depersonalized, mechanical efficiency of modern warfare has replaced the undeniable reality of hand-to-hand combat and its strangely personal code of honor. Colonization, the slave trade, the holocaust, the nuclear bombs, the killing fields, the genocides, the clear cutting, species extinction and now the impending collapse of the global ecosystem have reshaped our shared landscape and our responses to it. We are at sea in a toxic soup and trauma is at the helm.

When we face our demons together, they begin to shrink and transform. In time, they can become our allies, and we theirs. American teacher of Tibetan Buddhism, Lama Tsultrim Allione has revived the ancient *Dance of Chöd* , originally pioneered by an eleventh-century Buddhist teacher – a woman named Machig Labdrön.¹² In this practice, we invite our demons to take physical form. We enter into dialogue with them, eventually changing places with them, and asking them what they want from us. We listen until we have heard them fully. Then we dissolve ourselves to become the exact food they crave. We melt into the nectar that feeds them most deeply, and they feast until they are sated. When this happens, they often transform from a demon into an ally. It is an ancient practice, so powerful that in earlier times even epidemics could be stopped when monks agreed to feed the community's demons in this way, so that the energetic patterns that gave rise to the illness – ie, that forced it into a corner from which it could only snarl and attack – were addressed with kindness and generosity.

¹² Feeding Your Demons: Ancient Wisdom for Resolving Inner Conflict, Tsultrim Allione; Little, Brown & Co., 2008

I often wonder what would happen if we could spark a global campaign of apology, of taking responsibility for and grieving the outcomes of our earlier decisions and those of our predecessors - likely made from that reactive, traumatized state that seeks self-protection or self-medication above all else. Who would we become as we gazed into each other's eyes and atoned, together, for the world we have made, for what we have done and undone? I am reminded of the dream that came to a dear friend, a single phrase: *Not enough tears*.

American author, teacher and peacemaker, the late Fran Peavey, traveled the world, sitting on public benches with a sign that read, *American willing to listen*.¹³ When did we stop listening? Are we willing to listen now? If so, perhaps we will hear the sounds of our ancestors weeping, and recognize that weeping as our own. Perhaps we will hear the weeping of Creation herself.

Trauma is suspicious of love and impervious to reason. It refuses to negotiate. It has been cheated before and so it is wary and slow to trust. But if we begin to dance, to sway our bodies and tap our feet, it will dance with us. When we are moving together, trust will grow. The rusty hinges of the heart creak open. Memory returns. At this late hour, as the Ebola of greed devours us, I believe that all of it – all of it—is traceable to the reservoir of trauma and unexpressed grief pooling beneath us. When reference points (both internal and external) disappear, what can bring us back into meaning's embrace? Because trauma can render individual meaning unreliable, meaning that is communally embodied and expressed is required. Because grieving is pro-active, it lifts us out of the immobilizing torpor of trauma. If we truly want to change the world, we must tend to our grief and, literally, return to our senses. These are the modern, ancient tools of radical transformation. Do we have the courage to grieve deeply enough to unwind trauma's spiral?

My friend and colleague, Bill Saa, lost his brother Raymond during the Liberian civil war. Raymond was tortured to death - his body hacked away piece by piece until he died. He was then buried in a shallow roadside grave. For several years, Bill worked to learn the circumstances of Raymond's death, to locate the makeshift grave, and to find Raymond's killer. When he had found the grave, Bill met with the local elders of the nearby village, then gathered friends and family, including people from the community, to help unearth the body so that they could bring Raymond back to the family compound, bury him there

¹³ Fran Peavey, *Heart Politics*, Black Rose Books, 1985

and hold the requisite Mourning Feast. Though the grave was a shallow one, the exhumation stalled. They were unable to pull the remains from the ground. A local elder recognized the problem. He cut a branch from a nearby tree and offered it to the earth in exchange for Raymond's bones. Speaking to the earth, he explained that the people understood that after so many years, the earth did not wish to relinquish her son, but that the people wished to return the body to his human mother and father so they could bury him properly in the family compound. The elder then offered the branch in exchange for Raymond's remains. When the prayers were complete and a libation offered the body came free. The following day, they arrived at the family compound with Raymond's bones and shreds of clothing. A great, deafening cry rose up from the waiting crowd, a chaos of shrieking and shouting and anguished wailing that lasted far into the night.

Meanwhile, another brother, Nat, plotted to kill the murderer. A few of us from the US happened to be in Liberia when Nat dreamed that he had found Raymond's executioner and was on his way to kill him. In the dream, Bill put his arm on Nat's shoulder and told him, "Please don't do it." Nat vehemently affirmed his plan. But later that day, he had a change of heart. He joyfully phoned everyone in the family to tell them the news that he now wished to join Bill in forgiving Raymond's killer. A few weeks later, Nat and Bill met with the killer and told him, "You deprived us of our brother and our parents' son. Therefore you must take his place in the family." From shared grief compassion is born. Deep grieving makes room for miracles.

Last night a friend told me a story of a poisonous plant he found growing in a pot, in the corner of a room, in a home he was renting. The plant had been left behind by previous tenants. (He left it, too, when he moved out.) One day as he sat meditating, he felt his attention being repeatedly pulled to the plant. At last he turned to face it, and began to listen. He heard the plant say, "That's better. Now we can have a conversation."

"What would you like to tell me?" asked my friend.

The plant said, "You humans are so very, very sensitive. Your bodies are designed so that you can feel and hear and sense so many tiny, exquisite things. But your ways of living now have caused your receptors to become congested. You can no longer feel these things, or hear or sense them. You have lost this capacity that is your birthright, and so you have lost yourselves."

“What can we do to open ourselves again?” asked the man.

“Grieve,” said the plant.

It happened that someone had lent my friend an elephant tooth. He spent the next three days sitting with the plant, cleaning that tooth, and weeping.



Cynthia Travis is a writer and documentary filmmaker, and is Founder & President of the non-profit peacebuilding organization everyday gandhis (www.everydaygandhis.org). Since 2004, peacebuilders from everyday gandhis have been working with traditional communities, women and ex-combatants in Liberia, West Africa, and with selected schools and communities in the US. All projects arise from dreams and community dialogue. She recently launched the new blog, Borders and Edges (www.borders-and-edges.blogspot.com). In a former life she was a teacher and mediation trainer for children in California and New Mexico. She lives in a small intentional community on the Mendocino Coast.

Pacific

Megan Hollingsworth

This my dear friends is utter sorrow
all that is at the bottom of the well
now rises to the surface
of a dying ocean and I am done weeping
I am cried out
I have given all my tears to the billion dollar boy
who on his 20th birthday treated 20,000 guests
to a party and of these a special 2 to the aerial
massacre of more than 20 elephants.
All the tears I have cried and those still to come
for the babes washing ashore
I give to these 3 who in amusement
killed the lovers, enough tears to wash them safely down river
where the ocean waits with open arms, wailing waves
to consume them. The boy, his friends,
the numbers, they are fiction. Yet
I am cried out, at last
resting in a patch of sunlight
long hidden

I use numerals in this poem to call out the strangeness of determining an appropriate response to loss based on numbers

Note:

There comes a point when the body is through experiencing sorrow induced by seeing others in pain. At this stage, the body is free to channel this potent energy directly to its creative expression in word or image. My body reached this freedom after more than a decade of chronic depression (cleared through African grief ritual in February 2007) followed by several years of debilitating sorrow that

visited in steady waves when stories and images of loss from around the world came through various media channels. That my body is done convulsing does not mean that I am no longer affected by the pain of others; it means that I am free of processing it as if it were my own. *Pacific* recalls a point of witness to my own emotional evolution as I read a fabricated story about the billionaire boy's birthday extravaganza in an online magazine that mocks true current events with such extremes. The obscenity of today's world is such that this event is not too far from the truth as elephants endure the faces of their loved ones hacked off in mass for ivory.

Curiously, it was not the time spent with elephants and their grief in July 2014 as part of my monthly witness practice that punched a hole in the bottom of my well, but this tall tale of a rich boy's senselessness. At the beginning of July, as I was clearing my desk to begin fresh, I asked out loud whether I could be present with the elephants' pain. . Immediately after I spoke, I found myself heaving in a ball on the floor, my gut convulsing. The body's response lasted through a hot bath and to its exhaustion. I wanted merely to recoil into poem then. The body felt done, but it wasn't. It was not until the felt experience of the rich boy's

numbness that my own being was liberated from the pain. I now experience a state of stillness like placid water when painful images cross my desk. Only the face cringes into a weeping smile. The head bows. Deep breath into the chest follows. My well now drains in a steady pulse of words arising from the pain that is bound to escalate even if the growing wails from land and sea are felt and heeded by the many.

Inspired initially in fall 2014 by the tall tale, *Pacific* came to completion in February 2015 when a friend who works with the Marine Mammal Center of Marin County, California shared images of abandoned



Photo: Copyright © Marine Mammal Center

For the third year in a row, unusual numbers of sea lion pups are washing up on California shores. This year, sea lion pups are stranding earlier than ever before. Photo copyright The Marine Mammal Center
<http://eepurl.com/bfgzjH>

and starving sea lion babes landing like a flood on the Pacific coast long before any stranded babes would typically be seen. Even at the peak of the rescue season, the Marine Mammal Center has never experienced anything near to this record number of orphaned sea lions. I am a mother. To see these starving sea lion babes strikes a chord of sacred rage in me so real and deep it is ludicrous to describe this feeling in words. My hand, the hand that wrote *Pacific*, is fueled by this sacred rage rooted in the awareness that human negligence drives the famine.

The Pacific Ocean is near death, starved of oxygen and highly acidic, as close to death as any person gets who may have hope of revival. Summer 2013 saw millions of North Pacific krill washed up along the shores of Northern California and Oregon in the largest death event ever recorded in the region for this species of tiny crustacean, a crucial piece in the ocean's food cycle. Sardines, a major source of sustenance for many animals, are frighteningly scarce. The population assessment of Pacific sardines (released in March 2014) revealed a 74% decline in the last seven years; the population is now at its lowest biomass in twenty years, and there are no signs of recovery. (<http://oceana.org/news-media/press-center/press-releases/federal-fishery-managers-vote-to-increase-sardine-harvest-despite-fishery-collapse>). In addition to sea lion babes, families of whales are washing ashore along with seabirds. The loss is not merely a consequence of global human population increase, but of mass extraction and production activity that sustains the lives of only a segment of the human population. The loss is a consequence of lifestyle, my own included.

What is left but an immediate response as if this matters, as if I am responsible, as if there is just enough time in this moment of no- time- left? Because I am swept away by the grief of the whole world, my devotion, beyond keeping check on my own consumption, is my work for ex-tinc-tion wit-ness, <http://www.extinctionwitness.org> . The revolving monthly witness keeps me as close as possible to the pain experienced by starving sea lion babes and by their mothers forced to abandon them because they are also hungry; as close as possible to the hunger of human refugees now counted in the tens of millions; and as close as possible to the grief of elephants who witness their beloveds' faces hacked off for ivory. The witness allows me to remember what it means to be remembered in a time of need, so that I may truly love.



Photo: Copyright © Chris Jordan

Poachers hack off the faces of male elephants to retrieve the whole tusk. The process takes hours with axes and is done while the elephant is still alive, because gunfire would attract attention. The tusks are literally worth more than their weight in gold and become more valuable as the elephants near extinction. 2014 was the largest elephant kill in history, not because there is a huge demand for ivory, but because individuals who trade in ivory are attempting to make elephants extinct, at which point ivory will go up in value tenfold. Elephant extinction is an intentional operation led by sophisticated Asian businessmen who are stockpiling the tusks. The extinction trade is one of the darkest things happening in the world.

Photos copyright Chris Jordan

<http://www.chrisjordan.com/gallery/ushirikiano/-elephcarcasspano>



Photo: Copyright © Chris Jordan



Megan Hollingsworth, MS, is a mother, poet, dancer, and compassion activist. She is founder and creative director at ex-tinc-tion wit-ness, a collaborative art project offering creative witness for large groups being and becoming extinct. The work exemplifies, and encourages the felt experience and expression of sorrow commensurate with the loss of an estimated 200 species per day and the intolerably violent deaths so many endure.

See www.extinctionwitness.org and www.meganhollingsworth.com

Cascading Memorials: Public Places to Mourn

Ruth Wallen

We used to get a lot of rattlesnakes. Now you don't see rattlesnakes and you don't see deer. You still get coyotes, and plenty of rabbits and squirrels.

I miss the frogs, too. Unless we get a pretty good rain that brings them all out, you don't hear them at all.

The other thing we had years ago was horned toads. I haven't seen one in years. I remember that my youngest boy had a horned toad in an aquarium. He hand fed it for six months with red ants and then let it go. When the development came, the red ants got overtaken by black Argentinean ants. —RS and HW



Carmel Mountain Chaparral in April 42"x16"

The statements shared above are from residents of Arroyo Sorrento, San Diego, a small enclave just north of the University of California, San Diego and east of the coastal community of Del Mar. This is the place I first visited upon moving to San Diego thirty years ago. I've been coming back here, and to the wild mesa pictured above, misleadingly called Carmel Mountain, ever since. I imagine that similar recollections could be elicited from many parts of the continent, although more readily here in southern California where the human population has grown so rapidly. A hundred years ago there

were well under a hundred thousand people populating this large country. Now there are over 3.2 million.

We used to look all of the way to Black Mountain and just see coastal sage. East of Del Mar, it was like a big national park. —TR

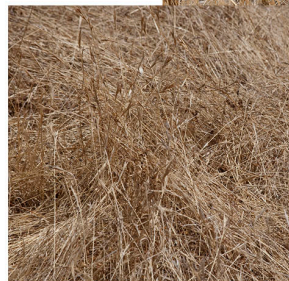
Such rapid change means that most adult residents moved to San Diego from somewhere else. For each new arrival, what they find as they settle into their new home becomes a baseline. It is hard for newcomers to imagine that only ten or twenty years ago the local ecology was radically different. While the lack of collective historical memory may be more extreme in areas of the country with rapid growth, it is characteristic of our times as a whole, with frequent migration common throughout the continent.



Imagine how this area might have looked when the Spaniards first arrived. Drawings and written records provide clues.



Evidence shows that considerable type-conversion has occurred, a change from native vegetation to non-native grasses.



Grazing, accompanied by introduction of non-native grasses, excessive fire, development, and water and air pollution are all contributing factors. Such changes affect insects and wildlife adapted to indigenous plants. Native peoples may have burned chaparral to encourage growth of native grasses. Can one type of vegetation be considered more "natural" than another?

Sketchbook page from Mission Gorge Memorial, 9"x12"

Even for those who have stayed in one place, the changes that have occurred in San Diego County just since the turn of the twenty-first century are hard to fathom. Fifteen percent of the land area of the county, primarily back country, burned in 2003, and another fifteen percent burned again in 2007, overlapping the earlier fire in some places. Most of the conifers in the high country burned. I can only hope that they grow back in my daughter's lifetime.

Similar stories can be heard elsewhere. Wildfires, drought and bark beetles have ravaged western forests. Frogs are disappearing throughout the world; bats are dying by the tens of thousands. Whether one listens to the news from around the continent, or pays close attention to one place, the multiplicity of stories about environmental degradation are startling.



Middle Peak, Cuyamaca Forest, San Diego County several years after 2003 fire, 24"x40"

Now is a time not only to pay close attention, to bear witness, to remember—but to grieve. Cascading Memorials is an ongoing project to provide spaces for public memory, places to share stories, and places to mourn. It began in my community as a gallery exhibition, then moved to exhibitions elsewhere, with plans for an interactive web site and outdoor public installations. The work calls viewers/participants to attentiveness and to appreciation and gratitude for their surroundings. It

provides a space to share in the wisdom of scientists and fellow citizens, and to grieve the rapid loss of the environments in which we live.

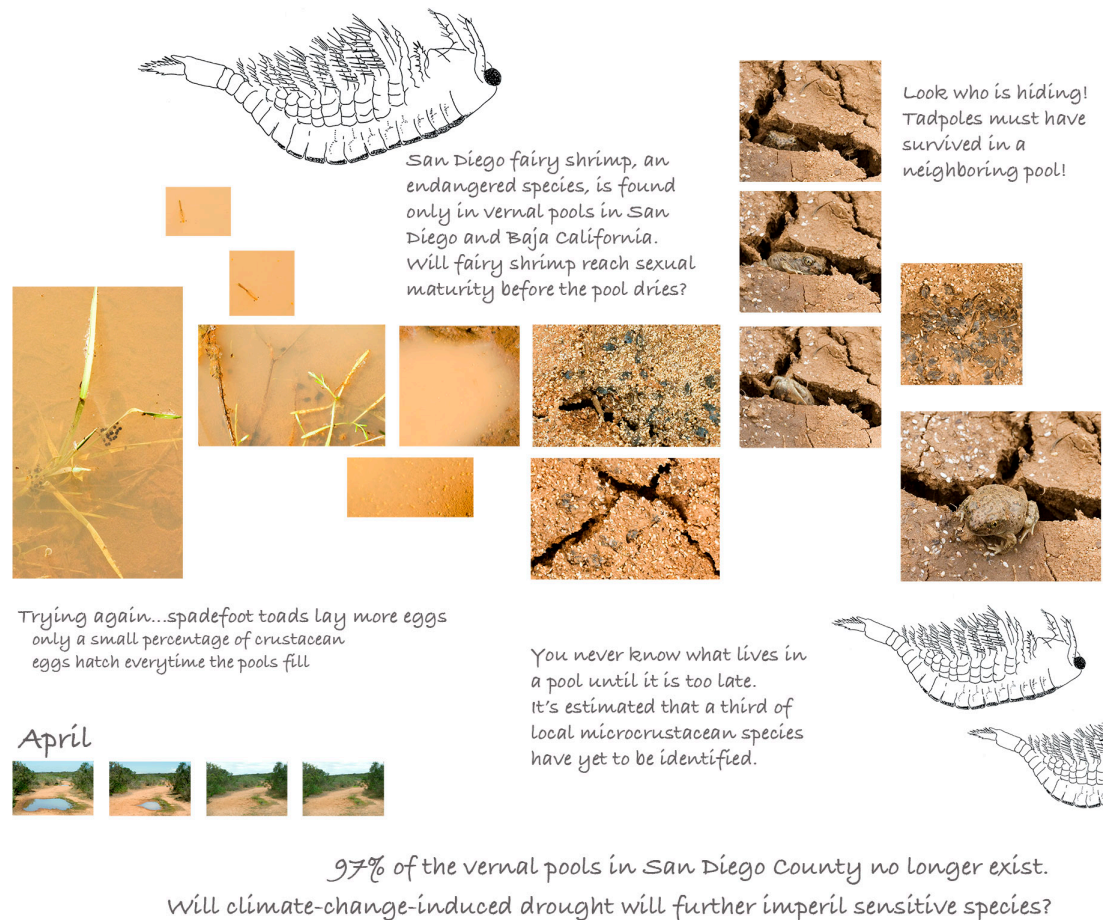


Cascading Memorials: Urbanization and Climate Change in San Diego County, Athenaeum Music and Arts Library, San Diego 2012

I have begun to create memorials to specific places that are undergoing rapid change. I focus on specific sites so that I can get to know them intimately. I return to each place frequently to photograph. Instead of the heroic sublime so frequently invoked in landscape photography, which distances the viewer, I present a fragmented, layered perspective of dynamic systems undergoing unusually rapid change. Carefully stitching together photographs is for me an act of reverence, respect. I try to convey a sense of my gratitude, the wonder of the experience of being in a particular place. Accompanying the photomontages in gallery exhibitions, a single poetic question on the wall ignites viewers' curiosity. Sketchbook pages allow for more detailed exploration, combining text, drawings and photographs to provide scientific and historical context, and raise further questions.

Continually returning to the same places provides the opportunity to look closely. It was only after years of walking on Carmel Mountain that I realized that the puddles along the path were actually

vernal pools, ephemeral pools that are home to tadpoles, insect larvae and a host of invertebrates that live nowhere else. Ninety-seven percent of the vernal pools in San Diego have been destroyed by urban development. It is estimated that at least a third of the micro-crustacean species in California vernal pools have yet to be identified.



Sketchbook page from Carmel Mountain memorial

When a truck drove through a vernal pool that my daughter and I visit frequently, destroying the contour of the pool and crushing the inhabitants, we were both outraged and heartbroken. As Aldo Leopold observes, "We can only grieve for what we know."¹⁴ When we develop a relationship with a place, loss becomes palpable. Ecological degradation is no longer a myriad of statistics or abstract facts.

¹⁴ Aldo Leopold, Sand County Almanac, quoted in Douglas Burton-Christie, "The Gift of Tears: Morning and the Work of Ecological Restoration," Worldviews 15 (2011) pp 29-46.

You knew that you were living in a place and you knew who your company was. There were no fences between the homes. Owls behind the house. Hawks in the sky. Deer. Coyotes howling. I still see so clearly the mama quail and all the little baby quail with their heads bobbing up and down. There were often many families of them.

--Helen Meyer Harrison

In every public installation of this project, I not only share memorials to sites with which I have an intimate connection, but I ask viewers/participants to share their stories of animals, plants and places they have loved that have disappeared or are changing irreparably. Aldo Leopold writes that the consequence of ecological awareness is living “alone in a world of wounds.”¹⁵ Collective sharing, not only of loss, but gratitude for the places that we have known and loved, breaks this isolation.

When I first visited the Dawson-Los Monos Canyon Reserve, long before I dreamed that I would become its manager, I used to drive across the agricultural fields to the south, and down a little canyon in the landscape to reach the main meadow of the reserve. Along the way I passed through an open valley with grand oaks and chaparral, as well as wet meadows and seeps, very different from the Los Monos Canyon just over the ridge to the north. When they started to bulldoze the area for commercial development (much of which stood empty for 15 or more years) I had to stop the car because the tears made it impossible to see to drive. I finally got out of the car and screamed and screamed and screamed.....

--Isabelle Kay

Unfortunately, rituals for public mourning of any kind have been largely discontinued. Between 1880-1920, public mourning, including mourning clothes and accouterments, gradually vanished from view to the point that Philippe Aries declared that in “industrialized, urbanized and technologically advanced areas of the Western world...except for the death of statesmen, society has banished death.” What is lost when a society has the hubris to deny impermanence, attempting to banish death from public

¹⁵ Aldo Leopold, *Round River* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). p 165.

consciousness? Consider that in the *Sutra of Buddha Teaching the Seven Daughters* the Buddha says, “If one knows that what is born will end in death, then there will be love.”¹⁶

It is not grief, but the fear of feeling, the absence of sadness or rage, which leads to paralysis, despair and psychic numbing. In a widely circulated op-ed piece in the¹⁷ *Los Angeles Times*, Richard Anderson asserts: “the alternative [to grieving] is a sorrow deeper still: the loss of meaning.”ⁱ Judith Butler argues, “Without the capacity to mourn, we lose the keen sense of life we need in order to oppose violence.”¹⁸ That includes, I would add, the violence of ecological destruction.

When we avoid grief, according to Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands, we live in a state of suspended melancholia, where grief is internalized and objects of loss are fetishized. She contends that this process of displacement gives rise to “nature-nostalgia,” manifesting in such activities as ecotourism or even campaigns to preserve a particular species or wilderness area. Such practices, although well-meaning, reflect a mythic or idyllic view of a natural world separate from humanity. Nature becomes a commoditized fantasy. Environmental destruction becomes incorporated “into the ongoing workings of commodity capitalism.”¹⁹

Instead of idealizing a mythic wild, can we dare to love the world in which we live? As we witness loss—whether family homes, childhood haunts, the croaking of frogs, or stately old oaks and pines—can we dare to feel the pain of loss? Public grieving is an essential step. In communal moments of grief, when the flow of life is temporarily halted, when the ache of losing that which was loved feels unbearable, hearts open. Sense perceptions are heightened. One is touched by the full poignancy of the living world. From these feelings compassion arises. In this heart-opening, the vital interconnectedness of the living world is palpable.

¹⁶ Quoted in Jeremy Hayward. *Warrior-King of Shambhala: Remembering Chogyam Trungpa* (Somerville, MA, Wisdom Publications, 2008) p 390.

¹⁷ Richard Anderson, “The World Is Dying—and So Are You,” *Los Angeles Times*. Jan 07, 2001.

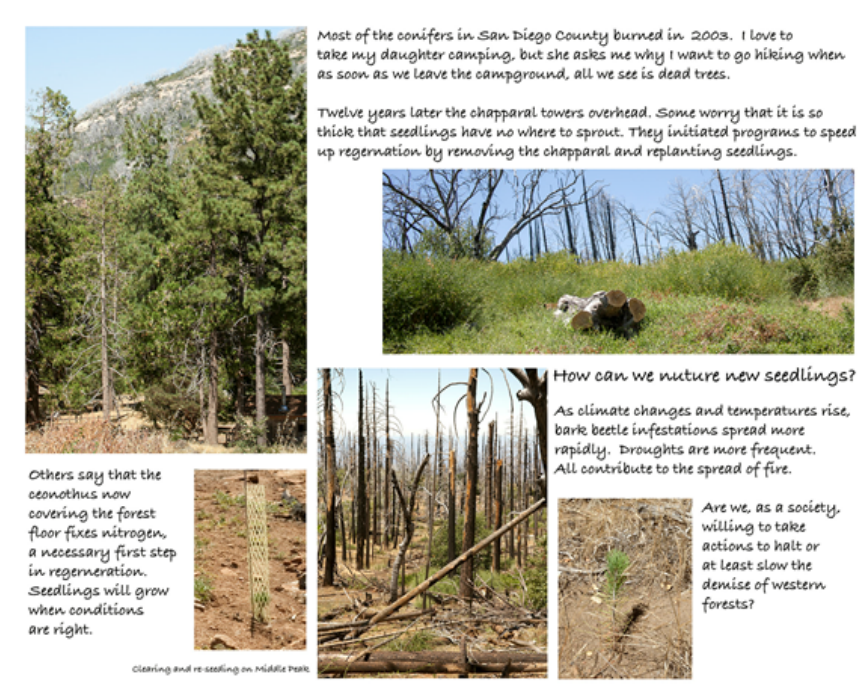
¹⁸ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York:Verso, 2004), p xvii.

¹⁹ Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands, Catriona, “Melancholy Natures, Queer Ecologies,” *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*. Eds. Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010) p333. Print.



Tecate Cypress in arroyo several years after fire, 15" x 56"

Hearing testimony as many bear witness prompts not only sadness and outrage, but also a desire for explanation, for autopsies. Any answer prompts more questions, and increasing awareness of the complexity of ecological systems. As such, each explanation leads to the reestablishment of the network of ecological connections. In this heightened sense of interconnectivity with those with whom we grieve, and with a wider sense of self integrally intertwined with the environments in which we live, we can find strength.



Sketchbook page to accompany Cuyamaca memorial (make last text block bigger)

Tears are cleansing. Grief allows us to see with new eyes, eyes that demand accountability, responsibility to make meaning or sense of the loss and take action. As Joanna Macy reframes this, we can understand "pain for the world as a call to adventure."²⁰

²⁰ Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone, *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in without Going Crazy* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2012), p 81.

Working on this project, I have noticed that as we bear witness to the immensity of change in our communities, climate change becomes less of an abstraction. Whether it is flooding or fire, deep freeze or searing heat and drought, increasingly many of us have stories to share.

It is fear of change, fear of grief, fear of the implications of grief that is immobilizing us, hardening our hearts. Let us face the dark, bear witness, and share our stories. Let us dare to imagine anew, recognizing that as in any relationship, if we love the environments in which we live, we must give back as well as take. Let the tears flow, let us howl in anguish and rage, and let us act.



Ruth Wallen is a multi-media artist and writer with training in environmental science whose work is dedicated to encouraging dialogue about ecological issues and social justice. She has had innumerable solo and group exhibitions as well as created several web sites and outdoor interactive “nature walks.” Her work is currently on display at the Exploratorium in San Francisco. She has published critical essays in journals such as *Leonardo*, *Exposure*, *High Performance*, *The Communication Review*, *Tikkun*, and *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, as well as two anthologies. She is on the faculty of the MFA in Interdisciplinary Arts Program at Goddard College and was a Fulbright lecturer at the Autonomous University of

Baja California, Tijuana. Web site www.ruthwallen.net.

"This Letter to a Yellowstone Wolf February 2014

Joan Kresich

I felt I needed to write to let you know our meeting wasn't what I would have wished. It's true I've been imprinted with the classic images: you in a ruffled granny cap salivating through slick teeth, or closing in on Jack London's northwoods fire. But I never took those to heart.

I would have wanted an encounter of equals, two creatures passing in the copse of vulnerability, pared down to sinew and synapse, the copper wires of our wits holding the whole thing together. One of those meetings where energy and mass trade places in a flash of eyes. A meeting where everything funnels and explodes in the same moment.

But the way you paused and turned your lowered head to look back at us made me think you felt pursued. Why did you stick to the ribbon of road? We never saw where you came from, just rounded the bend and there you were. We slowed the car and waited for you to take off across the snow, but you kept loping along the pavement. A few cars passed you going the other way, and you just moved over, and kept to the road. We could see the gleeful faces when they passed us.

So this was our meeting: you loping ahead, us rolling along in our bubble of amazement. We had time to wonder: were you banished from a pack? Was there a fight? You seemed fatigued, and yet you kept going, never rested. Why?

You have your history, and we ours. When was it we parted? Once, we inhabited the same land, the same territory. In that time, I would have understood the bargains you made to stay alive. Ribs undulating across your flanks would ignite a flash of recognition and kinship in me. Cold bursting in upon my lungs would remind me how the same cold was shocking yours. My empty stomach would tell me how hunger massed the last resources of your body to search for food and how it kept you riveted to your prey.

You weren't wearing a collar like some of your Yellowstone kin. Every pack is named, every wolf numbered. (I have to admit this numbering makes me think of other human counting schemes: digits

shelled out to prisoners, tattooed on wrists-- if those are dehumanizing, what is this?) I saw the reams of data on the internet, every detail of wolf movements, kinship, pairings, quarrels, deaths. Some people write to complain about helicopters descending on wolves, and photos of researchers proudly posed behind drugged-out wolves, their tongues lolling. I could see their point. I've seen a similar expression before, in the old safari photos. It says: *This is my story*.

And why was I on the internet? I wanted something there to tell me where you were going, why you were alone. But once inside that mess of sticky facts, I got a trapped feeling. I'd flown into a spider's web, and she was making her way down the silk. I turned off the computer, and walked away. For a long time I sat thinking of dominion.

Yours is a tiny population, and one clever virus could take you out. Of course, we could be the ones to go. But being human, I can indulge a fantasy: maybe you are making your way across a single narrow plank into the future, an unrehearsed time without tranquilizing darts and renderings about whether you get one last chance to stay away from sheep. In that future, your life and death will no longer be in human hands. It will rest in the same invisible hands that once kept salmon thrashing upriver, bats billowing into starlight, bees hauling their garlands from field to field. Life dancing long into the night, beads of sweat flying everywhere like a thousand seeds, and awakening at dawn to the first breath of primordial light.

Even though I didn't see you in your prime, you sent a bolt of your power into my chest, and it's still there. Sometimes, before I drift into sleep, I see you loping, and that gives me a strange feeling, a small wet hope just opening its eyes. After all that has happened, we are still connected.

I wish you well, Yellowstone wolf. I wish you well.

Yours Truly,
Joan Kresich

Joan Kresich is a poet who attempts to pare the words down to the moment they heat up, a sort of alchemy of language. She is a long-time educator, with many years teaching in public schools. She currently works to bring restorative practices to humans and



ecosystems in her communities in Livingston, Montana and Berkeley, California; in one place listening to the cries of wild geese, and in the other, to the intriguing mix of dialects spilling onto urban streets. She is the author of *Picturing Restorative Justice*. Her work has appeared in *CounterPunch*, *Adanna Literary Journal*, *Chrysalis*, and *Albatross Poetry Journal*, among others.

Elegy for the Cranes

Susan Marsh

Reed grass sloughs, coverts of cottonwood and ash
Buffaloberry embroidering a ditch with threads of crimson fruit:
October spreads its wings, yearning for the sky's embrace.
Land flattens under cumulus and light,
Blood-red line of sunrise broadens to a ruddy streak.

By noon the wind has turned, strong and from the north.
Primeval music tumbles from the vacant blue
And all at once the sky holds columns of grace,
Dozens of cranes calling as they climb
The invisible staircase of the North Dakota sky.
One, at the far tip of a long vee of birds,
Is white. Its wings ply the air like canvas sails,
Their hems dipped in the blackest ink.

Sunset lingers, empty. The prairie sky was made
For their millions, its silence meant for their cries.
Twilight's fading violet shrouds loss,
Forgotten pathways of light.
Tomorrow the sunrise will bleed again,
The midday sky will wait
The only way it knows—
Arms open, ardent, filled with light.



Sandhill cranes in migration, Teton Range, Wyoming

Notes:

This poem was written in response to paintings in the collection of the National Museum of Wildlife Art in Jackson, Wyoming. I was one of two poets who organized a public reading of ekphrasis – poems responding to art – in 2009. In looking at the many pictures displayed in the museum’s gallery, I was drawn to those that felt like eulogies for what was lost and I wrote about the deep grief they brought out in me. This poem was informed not only by a painting by John James Audubon, but by several trips I took with my husband to North Dakota. The last time we went, we saw one whooping crane among hundreds of sandhills, the only wild whooper I have ever seen.

THE HUNTERS

Where will the redtails hunt
A-hover on the summer wind
When all this broken country
Grows cul-de-sacs, not hay?
And where will falcons stoop
Shadows splash on rough breaks
When the rusted scythe teeth
Have cut their final row?

The ribcage of a coyote hangs
On a singing barbed-wire gate
The wind has long since taken
What the coyote might have robbed.
Out here in these clay-hard hills
Real estate is king
Scavenging from dying farms
What sweat could not persuade:
A living from the land.

The hunters are the first to hear
The coyotes and the hawks
Their shadows pass, swift and gone
Like a songbird in the falcon's eye.



Coyote pausing to sniff the air.

Notes:

I wrote this poem many years ago while living in Montana, where a real-estate boom was making quick work of the remaining prairie and farms fields surrounding Bozeman. Witnessing the destruction of a remnant ecosystem broke my heart.

Susan Marsh is an award-winning writer living in Jackson, Wyoming. She worked for the U.S. Forest Service for over thirty years. Her poetry and essays have appeared in *Orion*, *North American Review*, and *Fourth Genre*, among others, and numerous anthologies. Her books include *Stories of the Wild*, *The Wild Wyoming Range*, *War Creek* and *A Hunger for High Country*.

Author's photo credit: Barbara Herrnstein



Karla Linn Merrifield

William Bartram Triptych
Late 18th-century American naturalist

I. Postcard to Bartram



Dear Willy,

You old, romantic son-of-a-gun, you!

Seducing me as you once did

Coleridge and Wordsworth,

laying it on thick with

your eighteenth-century charm.

How florid of you to woo me

with visions of lustrous Florida, to lure me with lavish exotic tongue.

I swoon to your streams of Latin,
your luscious prose.

This plain is mostly a forest
of long-leaved pine, *P. palustris*,
interspersed with an infinite variety
of herbaceous plants, and embellished
with extensive savannas, always green,
sparkling with ponds of water,
ornamented with clumps of evergreen,
and other trees and shrubs, as
Magnolia grandiflora, *Magnolia glauca*,
Gordonia, *Illex aquifolium*...*

Thus, I read your *Travels*,
Dover Edition, © 1928.
I confess: I fall in love.

Yours truly, kindly,

K.

XO* p. 52

II. Missive to Bartram



Hark, Puc Puggy! My dearest Flower Hunter,

How apt the name the Alachua gave you!
Ere you stride across the centuries to Florida,
to me, with stave in hand to fend off
wolves and panthers on my behalf,
I feel compelled to scrawl these warning lines.

Fear not for wolves—your *Canus lupus* is
long gone, extirpated. Your subtropical feline
of the *coryii* subspecies is not gone, but going;
seventy, at most eighty, now exist.
What an elysium it is, you wrote. Not so, friend.
The woeful truth is: We count your myriad creatures;
we put their names and populations on a list
labeled Endangered; we display their images
on posters emblazoned Extinct.

That *tortoise called gopher*? Endangered.
That *species of jay...of azure blue color*,
my heart throb of a scrub jay? Also endangered.

Your *open forest of stately pines (Pinus palustris)*—
reduced to scattered remnants,
pinpoints on forest service survey maps.
And your *watery nations* and *finny tribes*?
Overfished, poisoned, silted in, in waters
drawn as faded red streams on river charts
like a cadaver's arteries post autopsy.

All cheerful and gay all nature appears.
Sweet William, the Sunshine State is
a locus moribund; your *universal vibration of life*
but a northbound jet screaming above
your savanna, what we call Paynes Prairie,
a vast preserved grassland, alas dying of thirst.

Because you mayn't wish to see Florida deflowered,
my Willy, please to not feel obligated
to prosecute your journey. I will understand.
I am loathe to disappoint, or worse.

With utmost affectionate concern, I remain,

Your devoted K.

III. Telegram to Bartram

OK. Come TMRW.

Can promise *P palustris*.

W/ luck *Picoides borealis*.

Grove @ confluence:

Ochlockonee & Dead R.

6 mi inland fr. Forgotten Coast.

Bring unabridged ms.

Have publisher 4 U.

Combo deal—

my poems + our story.

Unexpurgated.

I await.

Notes:

If we are to survive, we must commune
with the dead, whether human or

nonhuman. We can hear them if we just listen. This poem is a communion with one of my saints, William Bartram, the great late-18th-century American naturalist who left a record of the coastal south from Georgia into Florida to show us exactly what we have lost. Using three forms of communication, a postcard, a missive, and a telegram, I write “Willy” in anticipation of our reunion across time and the life-death continuum. I foreground the natural environment which he and I share (I reside half-time in Florida).

An eight-time Pushcart-Prize nominee and National Park Artist-in-Residence, **Karla Linn Merrifield** has had some 450 poems appear in dozens of journals and anthologies. She has ten books to her credit, the newest of which are *Lithic Scatter and Other Poems* (Mercury Heartlink) and



Attaining Canopy: Amazon Poems (FootHills Publishing). Forthcoming from Salmon Poetry is *Athabaskan Fractal and Other Poems of the Far North*. Her *Godwit: Poems of Canada* (FootHills) received the Eiseman Award for Poetry and she recently received the Dr. Sherwin Howard Award for the best poetry published in *Weber — The Contemporary West*. She has edited three anthologies, including *The Dire Elegies: 59 Poets on Endangered Species of North America* (FootHills). She is assistant editor and poetry book reviewer for *The Centrifugal Eye* (www.centrifugaleye.com), a member of the board of directors of Just Poets (Rochester, NY), and a member of the New Mexico State Poetry Society, the Florida State Poetry Society, and TallGrass Writers Guild. Visit her blog, *Vagabond Poet*, at <http://karlalinn.blogspot.com>

Trinkets

Dana Anastasia

they don't grieve for their dead, she murmured.

i shifted in my seat. felt something hard pressing on the side of my tailbone. pulled a thin slice of obsidian out of my back pocket.

what did you say?

they don't grieve for their dead. they just bury them like tulip bulbs and walk away.

i thought about what she was saying. *what does it mean to grieve?* i wondered. what does it look like? streaked faces and puffy eyes? lips lined with broken capillaries, chapped and cracking like a dry pond? do we turn muddy with our grief? skin crawling with primeval creatures as we sink into the silt of our sadness? do mourners dissolve into the soils of burial grounds, lining the edges of the ditches with the fecundity of heartbreak?

elephants grieve for their dead, you know. but we're killing all the elephants. poaching them for ivory to sell on the side of the street. who's going to grieve once all of the elephants are dead, huh?

i imagined some old woman somewhere clutching an ivory totem, sitting in front of the TV. the headline: *last elephant dies.*

her heart clenches. her palm sweats into the hard furrows of her trinket.

Note:

It has long been said that elephants are some of the only creatures besides humans who experience grief. Perhaps their capacity for grief is directly linked to their ability to remember so far into the past. The elephant here is a symbol of the need for humans (particularly those living in denatured,

consumerist, fast-paced cultures) to relearn and remember how to mourn the ecological diversity we are so rapidly losing. If we don't, who will? If not now, when?

Inevitably, confronting the reality of species loss and environmental destruction requires that we confront our own complicity. Like the woman in the poem, we find ourselves clinging to little things, small comforts that seem impossible for us to give up.

Dana Anastasia is a writer, musician, photographer, and herbalist from the Cascade foothills of Washington State. Her poetry has been featured or is forthcoming in *Enigma Rag*, *InkSpeak*, *Extract(s)*, and the *Lucid Moose Lit* anthology, *Like a Girl: Perspectives on Feminine Identity*. In 2013, her first chapbook, *Songs from the Hollow Alder*, was published by the Black Dog Arts Coalition. Through her work, Dana aspires to help bridge the gap between the tangible world of “objective reality” and the ephemeral world of mystery and myth.



To Witness

By Gillian Goslinga

Fragility

I am driving along a scenic road in Sedona County, Arizona, its famed red rocks flanking the winding road on either side and in the distance. A sign announces the beauty ahead, inviting drivers to raise their eyes above the road to look about. Wisps of yellow grass brighten the slopes up to the awesome rock formations around me, the yellow broken by dark green junipers and pines, fanciful clusters of purple cacti, and rich deep ochre earth. I am enchanted.

Around a curve, the mangled corpse of a hare on the road makes me swerve. Around another curve, further down, another corpse, a coyote this time, its skull crushed and jaw lying flat on the pavement, its body contorted by impact, like a gruesome trophy carpet. I swerve again, feeling a pang in my belly. I count a third little nondescript creature crushed further down these five miles of scenic views.

But what a rush the landscape gives! All I have to do is raise my eyes to the horizon to be enchanted again. I imagine that other drivers feel this same hypnotic elation too, eyes and hearts raised beyond our windshields to the sublime on this God-given corner of Mother Earth. The corpses of the animals who didn't make it across the road fast enough jar these good feelings, if you see them at all. Maybe you swerve to avoid crushing the bodies a second time, as I just did, thinking yourself lucky that it wasn't you that crushed them in the first place. If you have a heart, you feel a pang of pity.

On mornings like this, when one corpse after another greets me on the tarmac, I ache to do ceremony for these fellow creatures whom we call, with sick humor, "road kill." I have many times imagined erecting little crosses along the roads, bright with flowers and the recognition of death, as is done for human victims of accidents, who incidentally are never called "road kill." I always say a prayer for their souls' safe journey home. But are prayers enough?

Next day, same hour, same scenic stretch.

The road is picture-perfect again. All three corpses have vanished, leaving not a trace of blood or bone or fur. Courtesy of the Sedona municipality and our tax dollars, the red rock vistas can again rejoice the vision and hearts of drivers from behind the looking glass of a car's windshield, without stain of death. All is forgotten.

I think: if all the corpses of road kill on that scenic road were to be piled up along the side of the road, they would surely rise higher on each side of the tarmac than the graceful yellow grasses that delight with their movement and wispy color. Would a forest of crosses bright with flowers do these deaths' justice? What kind of witnessing would this be, truly? Are pangs of pity and gazes of recognition enough?

To witness

I want to turn the concept of witness on its head.

I have prided myself on being a witness to these road-kill with my prayers and my thoughts of ceremony. The harsher truth is that I have not once stopped to honor the dead ones.

The wanton corpses of creatures killed as they travel the tracks of their lives are witnesses to the wanton narcissism of my breed of humans. To privatize my sorrow - I have a heart thank God! - is to re-enact the very narcissism that built this scenic road that cuts through the land and the tracks of others without consideration or respect. The pang of grief I feel is not only my own; it is the pain of a covenant that has been broken.

I have read in Deborah Bird Rose's *Reports from A Wild Country* that a band of Victoria River Australian Aboriginals camp "on the blood and bones of their people that had been murdered" at Kinbarra by colonizers at the turn of the 19th century (2004:56). The camping is neither protest nor memorialization. The band keeps their murdered ancestors company during daily living and remembers them, because they loved their kin and their kin loved them, and that is what those

unjustly killed need most, the company of loved ones. Camping on the bones is not proof of a greater humanity, Bird Rose insists, but is an action that repairs what was violently torn asunder in the matrix that is country, the place where one is born and dies in the company of others. She explains, “If people decided to cease to tell the stories of what happened, the implication could be that the deaths and the pain no longer matter” (57). Wrongful death doesn’t want to be memorialized. It wants to be kept company with.

To be called into relationship

In her most recent book *Wild Dog Dreaming* (2011), Deborah Bird Rose writes about what it takes to call us humans into relationship with our Earth’s others. She says that we must locate “an ethical call-and-response *within* the living reality of life” (29, emphasis mine) rather than in the abstract spaces of the mind, or of a heart that has been made abstract by narcissism.

This has been my point so far: An emotional witnessing of the suffering of others can be as ineffective as thought no matter how intense or sincere the felt emotion. Unless I am honestly present with what has transpired – roads that cut through the tracks of others without respect or consideration - I will not know how to

respond in kind, in a way that repairs what has been breached. Love, in Deborah Bird Rose’s account, is what sparks in us the ability to respond in kind to the presence and needs of others. Love is what awakens us to the life-worthiness of others in death and in life and calls us into right relationship with



It’s hard to look at a photo like this without feeling rude and voyeuristic. In *Wild Dog Dreaming*, Bird Rose describes how she comes to a tree along a road on which dead Dingos – all poisoned – are hung like Christmas ornaments. After the initial shock and horror – “God, where are you here?” she hears herself cry out – she just looks, reaching beyond feelings of shame and guilt. Something transforms in her, beyond the horror and the anguish. She takes each animal in, an honoring. There is something respectful in looking this way. We don’t know how to do it. Certainly don’t know how to sit with death and especially not with gruesome death in quiet dignity.

them. This kind of love is rooted in knowing how to keep company with. This kind of love is the antidote to narcissism.

I wonder what I would come to know if I did stop and keep company with the dead on the scenic road out of love rather than pity. I wonder what I would come to know about what they need. I wonder what I would feel sitting next to them as cars drove by and drivers stared at us.

I think: Being in right relationship with has to be the first step of ceremony. Listening to what the other needs, in death as in life. Let ceremony begin from that listening. Let all witnessing begin in the here-now of keeping company with.

To keep company with

The tyranny of narcissism is a disconnection so profound that one cannot see the other as it presents itself, in its living fullness, as kin. A long European civilizational history has turned our animal kin into surfaces for our narcissism. This history has twisted the meanings of reciprocity so much that the ground for being kin has slipped away. I remember when this ground was restored for me, in a way that I could fully comprehend. Here is the story:

Hank was a horse bought at auction. I met him at the Mitchell Ranch in Watsonville, CA, where I had taken refuge in the aftermath of a nasty divorce. He was big and handsome, a Percheron Thoroughbred mix, bay in color with a thick black mane and a single white sock on his left hind leg. A beautiful horse by any standard. I liked him immediately. One morning I came upon him in a new paddock. The paddock was long and narrow with two apple trees in its enclosure. Hank stood at the far end looking at me inquisitively, his head lowered. I was suddenly overwhelmed with the desire to enter the paddock and climb on his back. “You’re crazy,” I thought to myself. Four weeks earlier I had been bucked off a mare I did not know well and had broken a rib. But the feeling persisted, strong and



clear and urgent. The feeling was a picture, too, of me straddling his bare back. I looked around for his halter and rope but could see none. "You're really crazy," I thought to myself as I stepped into his paddock, empty-handed.

Hank slowly and deliberately walked up towards me and then swerved to stand alongside the railing as if to say: "This is how you can get on top of me." With butterflies in my stomach, I climbed the railing and slipped on top of him, straddling him bareback just as I'd seen in my mind's eye. I grabbed his mane, nervously. Hank moved away from the fence and walked up to one of the apple trees. Dangling within arm's reach was a cluster of bright red apples that he could not reach on his own.

I burst out laughing, relaxing all the way down to my toes. My overwhelming desire to enter into his paddock and climb on top of him had been *his* idea! A communication. Hank had needed me to pick the apples he couldn't reach on his own. I happily obliged, plucking one apple after another, and reaching down to feed them to him. Then one big, fat apple fell from my hand to the ground, rolling under the tree. Hank went to fetch it and, panic surging through my body again, I found myself getting tangled in the branches, my feet coming up along his face to his ears as I was forced to lie back, a recipe for disaster.

But Hank grew still, listening to my panic. Slowly he lowered himself and stepped aside and back, allowing me to grab a branch and slip off his back, and then to the ground, safely. I turned around to face him in amazement. He was facing me, too, looking me straight in the eye, softly. My heart skipped a beat as he playfully stepped towards me, making me step back with his lowered head. He took another step forward and I took another step backwards, and then still another. Losing my footing, I looked down to see where to put my feet on the bog. Perched between us in perfect formation was a crow's feather, pointing straight from me to him, as if placed on the bog by an invisible hand. Tears welled up in my eyes and I felt such a seizing of my heart that I knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that this horse was deeply kindred to me, a long- lost friend. My Feather Spirit.

To know oneself kin is to share an intimacy that is personable, right- sized, where the other, whatever its form, in life or in death, is its own singular being. I want to say that this intimacy, this kindred-ness, this being called into relationship and keeping company with, is the space of witnessing.

Another story: In 2009 I went on a vision quest on Mount Shasta at 6000 feet. I was allowed only a tarp and a sleeping bag and water from the mountain's spring. I chose to set up camp in the hollow of a cluster of trees where the slope of the mountain had evened enough for my body to lay flat. I froze the first night. The second night I found myself cold again as the sun lowered in the sky. I slipped into my sleeping bag to keep warm, thinking it a shame that I would have to spend the whole evening bundled up like this.

My face was level with the edge of the forest and my gaze level with a very long dead tree trunk lying in the clearing between forest and my camp. As I thought my despondent thoughts about the cold, a ground squirrel darted out of the woods into the clearing. The little creature leapt onto the fallen tree and, settling into a sunny spot, rounded and stretched its furry back precisely to the setting sun, soaking in the last rays. We locked eyes. A flash of understanding washed over me. To keep warm I was to pile on my clothes and round my back to the sun in the warmest spot I could find on the slope, just as my little friend was showing me to do. I put on all the clothes I had, found a sunny spot of my own, and, rounding my back, I soaked in the warmth of the sun until it went down. And that evening I wasn't cold, or the next.

I had other encounters with ground squirrels the four days of the vision quest. Each time they communicated something of vital importance to my well being. To listen I had to trust the flash of understanding that washed over me and take their actions at face value. I had to be willing to mimic them. A ground squirrel hanging out with me at the mountain spring two days in a row when I refilled my water gourds warned me one afternoon of the impending arrival of a group of rambunctious male hikers by scurrying away after catching my gaze as the squirrel on the log had. I too scurried away, just in time to avoid their loud and jarring arrival at the spring and noisy joking about conquering the summit. I was filled with humble gratitude and a feeling of solidarity with these Earth Others who had shown themselves to be in solidarity with me.

My four days on the mountain were filled with gracious and unexpected reciprocity with many creatures besides ground squirrels, as my tracks crossed with theirs and theirs with mine. Just as Feather Spirit had called me into relationship with him, each of these creatures called me into relationship with them, and kept company with me when I was willing to listen. Only good came from keeping company like this.

Reparation

I have yet to stop along the scenic road to honor and keep company with the dead. I want to. But I think reparation before the fact would be a better idea. I have heard that in the Dakotas, courtesy of taxpayer dollars, tunnels are now being dug beneath highways and roads at regular intervals to ensure the safe crossing of animals large and small for whom the Dakotas are also home. This is reparation that matters, where the human witnessed the needs of fellow creatures and learned to keep company with them in life.

Gillian Goslinga is a cultural anthropologist and a critical humanities scholar. She teaches at a liberal arts school on the East Coast and is friends with a mare, Luna, in addition to Feather Spirit. The last six years have seen her struggle with a parade of environmental illnesses: chronic Lyme and mold neurotoxicity to begin with, and as her nervous system degenerated, multiple chemical sensitivities (MCS) and electro-magnetic frequencies sensitivities (EMFS). Finding safe housing and working spaces has been an ongoing challenge. These illnesses affect the frontal cortex and limbic system, and so scramble at times her capacity for language, recall, and meta-cognition. At



those times, Gillian turns to painting. “Eye” is what she painted as she reached a point of not being able to work on her piece for this volume. The eye that painted itself in the image is the Eye of the Storm but also the Eye That Witnesses, that simply takes in what is, with calm. Gillian wishes to thank Lise Weil for walking with her every step of the way as this piece got written, and especially for holding space for its clarity and coherence.

III. GUIDED

Dreaming Another Language: She Will Not Kill

Deena Metzger

It is raining. I am listening to rain on the roof and skylights. A rain I have not heard in four years. This is not the heavy rain that is still predicted. This is the “light rain” – it intensifies now, as I write these words. It precedes, we hope, the “heavy rain” that could reach down to the very tips of the deepest roots of the tallest trees to restore the aquifer and the future. I am writing in rhythm with the rain, and it is setting up a path of communication between us. Between the rain and myself after such a long time. A communication in another language.

I have been speaking to, praying for the rain, this rain, for almost four years. Praying as I watched the land parch, watched the animals of the wild desperately seek food and water, watched even as the drought tolerant purple sage withered and browned. There are animals in these mountains who have never seen rain. We keep a large pail of water filled for mountain lion, bobcat, coyote and deer – they all have to learn to drink together, and so live together in the feral orchard.

We put down bales of alfalfa in the driest winters for the deer and other non-predators. But the animals have to be safe there — we can’t lay a trap for prey, or an opportunity for the predators. And so it is.

For more than four years, I have been listening for a Literature of Restoration. Simultaneously, I have been listening for a dialogue with the elementals. I began by praying that the rain would come. But I knew we do not deserve it. So then I prayed for the rain. On behalf of the rain and the other elementals. Such prayers require another language.

Indigenous peoples sing to the elementals, the ancestors, the spirits. For most peoples and religions, songs and prayer are one. In many indigenous languages, prayer and honoring the spirits are embedded in, intrinsic to, each word of the language. To recreate such prayer and honoring is intrinsic to the Language of Restoration.

Beauty is also an essential element of The Language and The Literature of Restoration, but it does not exist if its other face, Truth, is not present. Beauty and Truth become Integrity, and Integrity requires Responsibility. What we say, and how we live and act, must be one. The Literature of Restoration demands this.

I am not writing in a straight line. I am writing in a circle. If you write in a circle then there is a field within it. The field is the earth and the future. A Literature of Restoration holds the earth and its future in its arms.

Here comes the rain. I must speak about the rain in a time of drought. I must speak about the rage and anger of rain. I must speak about the rain as it returns as one who has been in prison or in exile. I could not call for the rain to return, I could only pray for its welfare wherever it had sequestered itself, wherever it was hiding. I could only pray for the soul of the rain, wherever it was confined or held captive.

What needs to be offered, so the rain can be free to be itself?

We must change for the land to be free. In order for the rain to be free to come to the land that requires it, we must change- We must change entirely. We must change so that we do not live against the earth and we do not live against the rain. We must give our lives to the rain.

I give my life.

This is what the dream requires through its language from another world. It is a sacred message from Spirit. The dream comes in its own language to remind us that we have to find, remember, learn and develop this Language so we will understand. Understand the dream. Understand what we are being called to set right. Understand what we are being called to create: She will not kill.

Here is the dream.

The dream came in another language. That is, it came in a rhythm from another language and, therefore, spoke of another world than the one we inhabit when we speak English. An unknown world.

I am, or she is, holding the photo and speaking to him, or he is the face in the photo. I am, or she is, saying, "No, you will not kill." He, as a revolutionary, or they, together, they will do what they must, what they have been doing, what has been necessary, but they are here in this country, this Spain of the Imagination, and they will leave without killing. Killing will not be the last act. Killing is not sanctioned. I am, or she is, adamant.

But now I am the Mother in a Spain of the Imagination and I am going to the Teacher. I open the door. I tell her that I am here on my knees. I fall to my knees before her. One can only fall to one's knees before someone one trusts implicitly. We are women in a Spain of the Imagination. We have dark hair, our faces are strong and clear, we wear black skirts and white blouses. But if we wore only black you would not be surprised.

I tell her that I have come about my daughter. She is sixteen or eighteen. She is the Daughter. She will not kill. I will not allow it. It is not to protect the victim; it is to protect my daughter. She is a revolutionary, as we all are, as we must be. But, I tell the teacher with whom I am now collaborating, who understands everything, I will send the daughter away. She will go to another country. I cannot send her to the United States. It is not a country of such women as we are or we have become. It is not a country that forbids killing.

That young man will go to another country, too. That young man who is her partner, in the way the man was my partner earlier, when I held the photo and knew that he must not, and so would not kill. He/they will not kill.

I speak this to the Teacher. I am on my knees, and she is seated on the single wood chair by the windows in a classroom empty of children. I fall to my knees and then I rise up. It is possible that I am also the teacher. It is possible that there is only one person in this dream and it is myself and I am playing all the roles. No, I am not playing roles. I am everyone in the dream as I must be, because it is a dream and that is how the dream teaches us as there are no others in a dream; there is only what we know or what is being told to us by the dream—which, ultimately, knows what needs to be known.

This is the dream. A dream from a world of the imagination that birthed me when I was a young girl or a young woman, and when killing (despite Guernica, despite World War II, despite Hiroshima and Nagasaki) was not killing a person, but an act that created another world. In such dreams of language, killing was a word, not an act. It was a word that led to another world, an act that had to end in a dream of Life, of words come to life, like justice or freedom. A dream of a world in which killing was not ever to have to kill a body that could not understand the horror of killing. To kill and not to kill were the same, because they created the world we had to create so that the killing would be over.

It was a world I recognized in an imaginary literature of Spain where I have never been. It was a world I was born into through dreams I do not remember that have rhythms that might be flamenco and which I found again in the rhythms of the poetry and the literature of Latin America.

In these dreams that are not dreams so much as patterns in other worlds, the women know what they have to know, though their mothers wore veils and were silent and sequestered behind walls in cities called the Alameda or Alhambra, the Red. In the languages of these worlds, the men told the stories of what the women were not to know...The men who told the stories did not know what the women knew and were passing on to the daughters, the daughters who come to me now at this time in my life in my dream. The daughters who are straight and tall,

who are revolutionaries in black skirts, who have red lips and carry red roses and will not kill. The women who will not kill, so killing is forbidden. That is how strong they are.

The women say, "This is what we taught you in dreams you have forgotten you dreamed in your childhood, the dreams that formed you and surface now at this time in your life when you are asking what is to be done, what is to be done, what is to be done?"

This is the photo of the man who, at the end of what he is to do, is not to kill. The photo is not of the man who is to be killed. The photo is of a man, who ultimately, because he is the revolutionary—the one who brings justice like the sunlight or the rain— will not kill. The woman says so and so it is so. That is what the dream says. And it says that all of this, the story, the strength not to kill, the strength that ends killing is in language, in the rhythm of the words, and this is what we have forgotten. Earth, rhythm, language, light—they were to have come together in a poetry from which the future might have arisen if we had listened and learned to speak that language, its rhythms and images, its absolute poetry.

But then we forgot or yielded to the trance, to the relentless noise from which our cities dull as old metal and gray egg cartons arise in the fluorescent lights of super markets and endless parking lots and deluded malls which have no music to them and so are not the languages that we had been given to heal the world.

And because of this, because it may not be too late, the dream comes and the woman says, adamantly, "The man, my lover, the woman, my daughter, her lover, we will not kill. At the end of the dream, at the end of the dreams, we will not kill."

The dream comes in another language, a language that emerged from a Literature, or a Literature that emerged from a Language that, despite war, blood, prisons, cruelty, iron bars, sequestered women, had a poetry beneath it that was a river of life, even when life was forbidden.

• • •

The rain is here again like the tap of the heels of a woman who is dancing flamenco. She is dancing her life and her death to the music of the guitar whose chord slides down from heaven to earth, from her wild black hair into her pulsing groin, the bud of her clitoris within her red rose. Arpeggio. Crescendo.

This is why she will not kill. She will prohibit killing. She is like the rain. She returns. She persists. And so the earth will be restored by the insistent and persistent rhythm of her dancing heels, one phrase after another, in her secret Language of Restoration.

I am waiting for the rain to come to see if I can send this dream to you. The rain is here. We are on our knees. It is a hard rain. Flood, its other face, is possible, but now we welcome the rain and we pray in another language.



Deena Metzger is a poet, novelist, essayist, storyteller, teacher, healer, and medicine woman. She has taught and convened community for many years. Story is her medicine. She is the author of many books, including most recently, the novels *La Negra y Blanca* (2012 PEN Oakland Josephine Miles Award for Excellence in Literature), *Feral*; *Ruin and Beauty: New and Selected Poems*; *From Grief Into Vision: A Council*; *Doors: A fiction for Jazz Horn*; *Entering the Ghost River*:

Meditations on the Theory and Practice of Healing; *The Other Hand*; *What Dinah Thought, Tree: Essays and Pieces*; *The Woman Who Slept With Men to Take the War Out of Them*, and *Writing For Your Life*.

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HOMAGE TO BEES

Alexandra Merrill

In September 2007, while walking with friends, single file through the ancient Arc of Appalachia, countless swarming bees appear among us. We keep walking, casually and stupidly, brushing them away. Suddenly their focus centers in on my body and I am under the siege of their collective strike. Severely allergic to bee venom, I realize I must get to a safe house. I walk there and lie down on the floor of a quiet room. I slide quickly into an anaphylactic shock state from which, with help of friends and emergency medicine, I will later return.

For now, I offer my attempt to bring image and words to the impact of that collaborative journey of mutual affliction, to the wise teachings from the bees as well as I can translate them, and then finally, to my gratitude for the honor of bearing witness to their suffering and our complicity in creating their struggle.

A maternity of bees: the story of my journey into and out of anaphylactic shock

Still hearing my own words as a tail wind, “a good day to die,” I wing up, weightless to where nothing is broken apart, where all that has been long broken is waiting to be made whole by being told. Here, I am torn and whole, folded into patchwork clouds, untethered from time, reviewing a summer afternoon of 1944 and we are at war and I am 6 and busy, killing garden bees with Grandma’s red DDT sprayer gun. I will spray them until they’re dead because I love her and she told me to use the gun. Squirting the smelly sprayer barrel over and over until they’re all down in the dirt under the roses, I am ashamed to enjoy watching the bees falling down dead. I loved the little bees when they used to come sit here on my chubby fingers.

My eyes are down in shame. I can take a deep breath away from shame. Now I am sliding down into an old stump hole. Here, a full-bellied honeycomb, glowing in her own dark luster hums an endless prayer for all the wrongful deaths. Curling my cloud self around the waxy prayer body and inhaling honey scent, I am forgiving my small heart and Grandma’s old one. Shame is weakening. I breathe again, in and then out, more easily this time.

An outside hammer force punches my lungs to gasp toward air. Wild wrath rises to counter the uninvited foreign volts. I oppose, fail, relent, accept and crash back down onto this cold table, to these humans, these men and women, under cold white lights. I float out and back, too weak to go far. This time I accept the breath as my breath. Countless tiny bees buzz all over my stinky, sticky self, licking me warm and clean into clock time. A maternity of bees reminds me to remember what I must now know and do.

Back Under the Lights in the Emergency Room

For a time, I am noticing the dry blinking of my eyes, and a cataract blur of shapes leaning in toward me under the dead cold light above us. I am sad to be losing the delicious sensation of all- over bee-licking as it fades off my body and as my eyes attach to the Emergency Room clock and my ears turn to the anxious buzzing of human voices around the repair table where I have been deposited. Bereft. Bereft is the word that helps my emotions crash onto the sterile benevolence of this clinical slab. They are caring for me. I accept.

In the next days, I am homesick, forlorn, aggrieved. I can't remember my assignment anymore. I pray to remember it. As I learn to pray to the bees, asking them to help me remember, it occurs to me that I have acquired a secretarial capacity. I begin to notice a rhythmic buzzing in my ears. Standard tinnitus is not a sufficient explanation. The licking sensation returns each time I bring attention to the sounds in my ears. At first there is nothing to write down.

Soon I understand that images precede the words. So I begin to paint the first in this series of 8 x 8 inch images. With no interest in their meaning, I copy onto the paper. When one image is done, I know because I get the licking feeling on my skin. At that point, a rather monotone neutral voice drops a statement down into my ears and the buzzing stops as I write down the text. All the little messages arrive in the same capsule form without much tonal inflection—as if they are being droned in a medieval chapel, or as if I am a nun transcribing manuscripts with quill onto parchment miniatures. In all of these messages, one voice is speaking both AS the collective and for the collective to an invisible (perhaps human) audience.



I am obviously not the queen bee. Our hive-bound queen only breeds us and uses the venom to kill her rivals until they kill her. She is pale, ungainly and awkward inside her bulk while I am lean, lithe and agile. I fly free, am devoted to her and the hive. I work to sustain our culture, as do all workers. Workers are all female and our drones are male. Workers collect the nectar wherever we are living and bring it directly back to the waxy cells to store. We all work hard.

Animals and humans often attack us so each of us has to carry a survival portion of venom. When I have to sting, I do it discreetly and precisely. When I sting, all of us receive the message immediately and come immediately to multiply the dosage by our number. If one is challenged, all arrive. Our venom has always been mighty: wounding, killing, and occasionally curing.

Currently, all of our colonies are endangered and at risk of collapsing. Insecticides. We are all at risk together. We'll have to collaborate with humans to save all our communities. I know I speak bluntly. No time left for imprecision: it is better to speak blunt truth than to play nice. You pay a price either way, bee or person.



A swarm of us isn't necessarily a hostile force. Most often, we are either acting in legitimate self-defense or traveling together to a new location. The woman who trespassed on our well-hidden hive that day didn't know she was stepping on marked territory and wasn't prepared for our response. She was blindly following the lead of a man who appeared to know everything about the forest. He didn't. It

was an accident, you might say. But from our perspective, it was not at all an accident. As we kept stinging her, we heard her say out loud to the forest

“Well, this would be a good day to die.”

That is the very moment we knew to stop, satisfied with her response. We left her to her own conclusions. Those of us who hadn't died stinging flew down under our ground with the day's collection. We knew that our dosage had been precise and correct. We thought she'd be back, working for us. We were right. We can see through time because of the structure of our eyes. We see behind and ahead, all at once. And we know humans don't yet have that capacity.



When we all sting down into her, she is not afraid. She walks slowly and deliberately as if she has been waiting for us, almost offering to receive us. She gets as far as the edge of the woods and lies down in

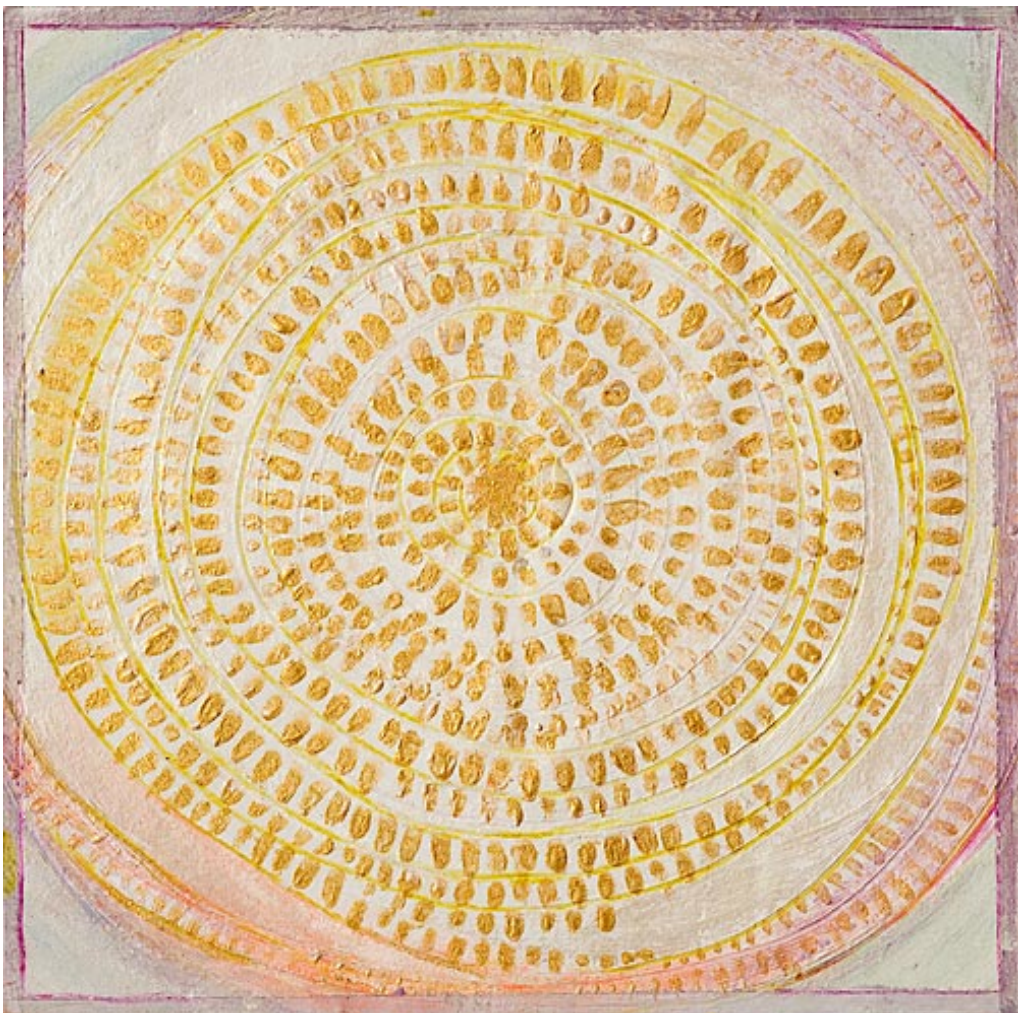
the little house to let her heart go gently. A few of us are buzzing around, up above in the shadows, watching the people who arrive and beg her to stay here. Please stay,” they say.

“Stop calling me. I am busy learning” is what we hear her thinking as they call her back. They can’t hear her thoughts but we do. We know she’d be happy to leave and she knows it is in the hands of the Mother, not her mind.

She returns to her people eventually, healed by our venom, and permanently connected to us by a constant internal buzzing resolve, the long-term after-effect of our medicine. She can speak and sting when necessary. And, of course she pays the high price every time—predictable shunning, exile, accusations of meanness. Workers and drones, we all understand this. She will learn to live with the loneliness of working leadership. And she has no desire to be the queen, anyone’s queen, except her own.



Our waxy cells, in no way prisons,
are strongholds for our medicine.
The old queen lives inside
with the cells for her whole lifetime.
She will breed us, birth us and wait
inside her chamber to fulfill her time
killing her rivals until one kills her--
and becomes our new queen.
Such is our way, the law of our community.
The young always come along and we always leave.
We have no problem with this.



h.o.w.w.e.

s.e.e.

w.e.s.e.e.a.l.l.a.t.o.n.c.e.

w.e.d.o.n.o.t

b.r.e.a.k.u.p.

e.x.p.e.r.i.e.n.c.e.i.n.t.o.

b.i.t.s.a.n.d.p.i.e.c.e.s

s.o.

w.e.a.r.e.a.l.l.o.n.e

a.n.d.w.e.a.r.e.a.l.l.h.e.r.e.

a.l.w.a.y.s.a.n.d.n.o.w.

a.u.n.i.f.i.e.d.f.i.e.l.d.

o.f.a.w.a.r.e.n.e.s.s.

i.n.r.e.a.l.t.i.m.e.a.n.d.s.p.a.c.e

a.n.d.s.o.a.r.e.y.o.u.

i.f.y.o.u.w.i.s.h.t.o.b.e.

j.u.s.t.c.h.a.n.g.e.y.o.u.r.

p.o.i.n.t.o.f.v.i.e.w.t.o.

b.e.w.i.t.h.u.s.

y.o.u.a.r.e.w.e.l.c.o.m.e.

Seven years to the day after the day I was stung, in September 2014, my dear neighbor here in coastal Maine is walking in our woods with her dog on this land where I still live. Directed by her dog's bark to look up into a beech tree, she sees the elegant hanging palace of nine golden combs, covered with countless honey bees who have travelled with their queen to this winter palace. Knowing that I owe them, I ask family, neighbors and local bee-keepers to help create a suitable winter home for the immigrant colony. I feed them the fluids they need as they prepare for winter. They are gentle, busy and receptive. I hope they make it through the long, stark cold of our Maine winter.



“Our signals from the past are very weak, and our means for recovering their meaning still are most imperfect...The beginnings are much hazier than the endings, where at least the catastrophic action of external events can be determined...Now and in the past, most of the time, the majority of people live by borrowed ideas and upon traditional accumulations, yet at every moment the fabric is being undone and a new one woven to replace the old, while from time to time, the whole pattern shakes and quivers, settling into new shapes and figures. The processes of change are all mysterious uncharted regions where the traveler soon loses direction and stumbles in darkness.”

George Kubler, *The Shape of Time*
Yale University Press, 1963

Aftershock Notes:

In my decades of experience working with large hive-like groups of women on leadership development, I have often needed to stand tall in my own authority, as the queen of my own hard-earned authority, while a fine younger woman leader and sometimes a group of less experienced

challengers make what I experience as a swarm attack on my designated leadership and authority. I now see the challenge as a deep and natural human need to match strength and competence in order to claim our own personal authority. I have learned to welcome these strong challenges as younger strength testing itself. At several moments in my work life, this natural challenge has been laden with the toxic sting of unconscious misogyny, both mine and theirs. Having come to understand this universal venom, I do not take these moments as mean-spirited stings from a reactive hive but rather as the sign of a residual toxic disorder in our species. To take these poisoned moments personally is not a useful response.

I'm a woman leader who is aging. Instead of clinging to my long-held position of acknowledged leadership, I have to discern when it is time to let go and move aside. This is different from disappearing myself. My wish is to make time and space to support the emerging competence of new leaders. Their time has come and mine is going. If I take the lesson of the hive, I accept this dynamic just as I learned to accept my own earlier need to separate from my mother, my sisters and my teachers in order to learn to mother and sister myself. This way, I can continue to have my own internal authority while supporting others' growth-in -community, a benevolent long-term function of human hive life and an antidote to collective global misogyny, one of the most lethal of our human colony's collapse disorders.

A physiological benefit of the episodic tinnitus symptom of buzzing in my ear is that I have been fully relieved of the progressive and crippling arthritic pain in my hands, a legacy inherited from my father. As a result, through my own hands, I feel a spirit level connection with my dear father who suffered long and hard with the degenerative arthritis pain in his big bony hands. My big, bony hands have heat and a buzz but no pain.

Another benefit of the buzzing is that it has become an invitation to turn inward to listen to my own knowing. When I do that, the buzzing disappears and I hear myself way more accurately. Once again I know what I know and must do about the problem at hand.

Learning to live in collaboration with the benevolent bees as neighbors and allies in our blended community helps me experience the interdependence of all forms of life. My tiny practice of

awareness is as small as one tiny bee, smaller, even. My little prayers for peace between all species, the invisible thought forms that float up the hill to the bees, all this new practice keeps me a more mindful participant in the joys and sorrows of our beautiful and troubled world.

There is a multi-faceted healing power in the bee venom. It is my good fortune to have been treated by an extremely potent and benevolent remedy from the colony of Appalachian bees to whom I offer this grateful bow.

Alexandra Merrill has been living and working in Maine since the 1980s. Her long-term focus has been on creating experiential education models to support the development of women's leadership. Along with these replicable models, she has developed retreat models for the internal work needed for leadership in our complex world. Currently involved in linking her group dynamics theory to specific practices and her program content to healthy process, she is working on integrating this information into a workbook for group leaders who are looking for a model inclusive of all our human diversities, especially around our increasingly fluid understanding of gender.

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Sheila Murray

Infiltration

I invite the river to pray itself inside me
into the flow of my bones
through the spiraled chambers of my perception

I want my bed lined with moss and stones tonight
my dreams drenched in the wet reflection of stars
so that when I rise in the morning
the river has re-membered me

Before I dress myself for clock time
I press wet black feathers and sticky golden catkins
against my torso to encircle me

The slim ungulate pelvis rising from the mud
becomes my own

I move into the right angles of the workplace
with the grace of insistent leisure
my breathing an eddy of quiet revolution

As I tap the keyboard
tiny pinhead violets from the water's edge
blossom under my wrists

My fingers smear silt on the medical records
as vagabond seeds fall from my cuffs
into manila folders
to incubate in the intermittent midnight
of file cabinets

My night-damp footprints sprout mushrooms
in the pale carpet of the dayroom

I speak in birdsong and confuse the program

Notes:

Each evening I walk next to the river in order to ground and nourish myself. I sense the healing presence of this wild strip of land that holds the water, and want to carry that presence within me, onto the locked psychiatric unit where I work. My desire is to sow seeds of wildness in a setting that often equates conformity and compliance with healing. This piece arrived through allowing the myriad voices of the river corridor to speak through my imagination. It is equal parts waking dream and manifesto.

Prey

There is a silent music

A thrumming twine
of fear and desire
that calls the hunter
to stalk the wolf

To eclipse her body
with the moon of his scope

Unaware

That he will stitch himself
to her with his bullet

Pull her red voice
into the story of his dreams
where she will unearth him
from himself

Reverse the hunt
to let him be the prey
and follow his own
blood trail

Over new snow
deeper into woods
that are the winter
of his rib cage

His frozen house
of breath and bones
that aches with the thaw

And beats with the furnace
of a four-chambered drum

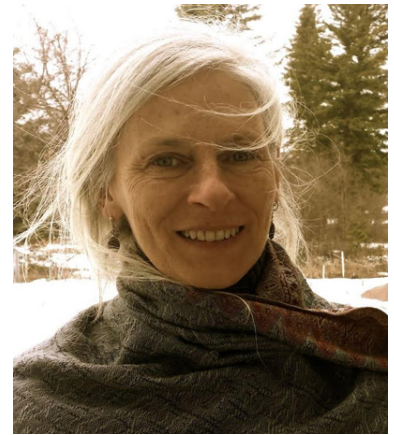
A red ocean music
rising up
from the underground root
of his own howl.

Notes:

This piece arose as a response to the news that the alpha female of Teanaway Washington's federally protected wolf pack was shot and killed. Her death occurred during hunting season, and at the time I began writing, a suspect had been identified.

Each gesture, creative or destructive, is communication, an opening into conversation with the living world. In indigenous cultures the hunt has been a conscious conversation of sacred reciprocity, the prey animals dreamed, honored and thanked. In this piece I imagine the wolf's response to being shot at a distance, with a high-powered rifle, without meeting the eyes of the hunter. Perhaps beneath the projections and mistaken beliefs, the killer unconsciously seeks connection, with the wild, with an exiled part of himself. Yet, to claim full kinship with the nonhuman others would be to open himself to the grief and vulnerability of living in an animal body, to being prey, to being poisoned, marginalized, cast out and attacked. So he reaches out through the wounded language of violence, fearful of giving up the false security of his stance of separation. As one who has hunted, killed, and listened closely to the non-human others, I know in my bones that the living world desires intimacy with humans, that it responds to our clumsy and mistaken attempts at conversation with grace and power. This poem is an offering to the clawed, feathered, scaled and human others who are hungry for connection.

Sheila Murray grew up in New England and New Jersey, and was called to the west by the twin sirens of imagination and desire. She earned a master's degree in depth psychology from Pacifica Graduate Institute, and recently completed a yearlong Soulcraft intensive with Animas Valley Institute. Sheila continues to explore the mysteries of nature and psyche from her home in the Flathead Valley of Montana.



DRAGONFLY DANCES

By Judy Grahm

As a child without television, phone, or any electronic distractions, in complete freedom during the long summer days when my parents were at work, I asked questions of wild life. I lay on the ground eye-to-eye with fighting beetles and clashing pairs of praying mantis. I knew where the black widow spiders, the horned toads, and the crawdads all lived. I brought fearsome red fire ants home in a jar of sand to watch them replicate their home tunnels, to gape at their amazing labor of moving and hauling, building and cooperating. I watched them clean out their house and carry their dead above ground. I also knew how dangerous they could be; a toddler had to be hospitalized after getting trapped on one of their big sprawling mounds in a lot near our home. I had dropped my Levis to the ground more than once, shrieking with the pain of a red ant stinging my knee. But living close to them as they were safely encased in the glass jar, I was learning to love them, as well.

Asking questions is how I came to closely watch Mollie, the wild cat in our neighborhood, in her hunt for the grasshoppers and mice that fed her. I saw how she swallowed a mouse until only the tail dripped down her chin and then allowed it to slowly slither into her slender inexorable maw. My nine-year-old self laughed until my sides hurt over this sight of the tail dripping out of her mouth.



As I trailed around behind wild Mollie, wanting to know her habits, I also wanted her to reach out to me. She never did this, though she did give presents to a neighbor dog. A medium-sized young collie had been tied to a wire clothesline by neighbors who owned him. He could run up and down the yard, his leash sliding along the line as he barked angrily at everything that came into his view. Not much did, on those long hot nearly silent days. The first indication I had that animals reason and have compassion came from watching how the little grey cat lurked around the building near the collie's confinement, with a dead mouse in her mouth. She would wait until the dog was at the other end of the big yard,

and then would trot over to drop one of her extra catches under the clothesline so the dog could reach it. While I thought this might have been coincidence the first time, I saw Mollie do this several times, and saw also that the dog found each little body and joyfully played with it for the better part of his otherwise monotonous days.

The little wild cat had reached across to the dog, with every appearance of empathy and decision-making. Perhaps this was the germinal moment of my desire to experience creatures reaching across species lines, and of longing for them to communicate with me, not pet to owner, but creature to creature. I wanted to know them, and didn't know how to initiate the dialogue. Would any of them reach across to me? Could I learn to reach across to them?

As I entered college and in 1961 attended a year of medical laboratory school and then college again, my educational experiences sharply distanced me from creatures, as well as from the human body. Medical language was constructed in 17th-century Latin-based syllables expressly to achieve this distancing, to ensure the emotional stillness necessary to cut someone open and work on fixing their internal organs. "Cardiac" is so different (in meaning) from "heart." However, the specialized distancing necessary for science and its preoccupations then became part of a broad Western philosophy about the nature of reality, and of nonhuman beings. Nature was mechanistic, this view said, and fishermen echoed: "fish don't have feelings." Creatures don't think, this view insisted; they operate solely on "instinct," imagined as a set of pre-existing internal settings that somehow came about through evolution without intention or volition, without interaction and culture.

Despite all this, my path kept returning to the open curiosity and affection of my childhood. I conquered an irrational terror of wasps by giving them water, and learning to remove them from my house with a piece of paper and an empty glass. And I continue to cherish those life moments when I can still my incessant human activity enough to just be with another species long enough to learn something.

The cleverness of their communication system came clear when with a friend in India, I watched a group of ants—a medium-sized light red variety. Their task was to insert the body of a long, slender-winged beetle into a crack about three feet up a wall. The group had posted four overseers that

formed a square on the wall about six inches above and below the crack site. A work crew held the body, twisting it this way and that, getting the front part way in, then backing out, rearranging from radically different positions, trying again. The beetle was longer than the crack opening so this operation didn't look possible to our eyes, yet to theirs it obviously did, as they spent twenty minutes on the maneuvering. The oversight crew appeared to signal with their antennae between each attempt, as though conveying logistical information, and eventually the crew succeeded, vanishing with their prize into the wall opening, followed by the four members of the talkative oversight crew.

People who study ants closely say they communicate through smell, sending out pheromones from glands in their bodies, detected through their antennae. But what of the ant-movers on the wall? Did their out-posted lookouts have pheromones that could tell the work group, "Try again from a steeper angle girls, and turn the body on the bias." What would be the signal language for, "Try 90-degree angle, try from the left, try turning the body upright, a certain portion out from the wall"? However they do it, the instructions eventually enabled the ultra-strong worker ants to hold the long body of the beetle in defiance of gravity, then slide it like a letter into the envelope slot in the wall.

Insects talk to each other, but do they also attempt to talk to us? One day, I looked down at my arm to find a small brown ant vigorously touching its antennae to the fine hairs on the back of my wrist. I watched this one-sided interaction for a long time—minutes of my time, hours of ant time—and had a strong impression of witnessing someone trying to engage a conversation. Was this ant attempting to detect intelligent life on planet human? Having no way to consciously manipulate my arm hairs, I could not respond in any way, watching helplessly until the patient creature finally gave up. I can only wonder, and hope some clever naturalist devises antennae-like linguistic devices through which we can connect to these marvelous beings.

One day in 1995 my childhood desire to have a personal interaction with an insect—this time a dragonfly—was fulfilled. An encounter with a dragonfly is an encounter with a gatekeeper of spirit, according to the lore of some indigenous people of the North American continent. The connection, usually initiated by the creature, indicates a major change in one's consciousness and therefore one's life.

My very personal dragonfly encounter took place summer of 1995, and lasted over an hour. Kris and I were playing golf with our friend Ruth, on the Willow Park course in Castro Valley. Ruth's ball had gone into the creek that runs the length of the course and keeps it both challenging and life-filled. From TV images, golf courses seem like human-only territory, but the municipal courses my friends and I play in the Bay Area are full of wild creatures. A blue heron lives along Willow Creek, as do hawks and snakes, rabbits and foxes, turkeys and coyotes; once, we saw a mountain lion on



a nearby hill. So when I went over to help Ruth look for her ball I wasn't surprised to see something moving in the thick scum of algae growth covering the water at this particular spot. An insect about three inches long was persistently, if weakly, moving. I called Ruth to come with her long aluminum ball retriever, and she got the cup of it under what we now recognized as a dragonfly. The rescue immediately looked like a cruel exercise in futility as we saw that the body of the creature was completely enmeshed in webs of slime, a mossy growth of algae in long thin intersecting lines that made a netlike cocoon around the struggling body. The largest dragonfly I had ever seen now lay helpless in the palm of my hand. Gingerly, I began to strip off the binding strands of slime. There were dozens of them. Would the dragonfly let me help? My fingers looked huge compared to the vulnerable, exhausted body in my hand.

We still had a golf game to play, and golf etiquette requires keeping up the pace, so we treated the creature as we walked along, at first taking turns holding it while we hit our shots. The creek area where we had found the dragonfly was the fourth hole, less than half way through our game, which is about a mile and a half in length. By the fifth hole she—I call her she because she was so large, and often among flying creatures the larger ones are female—was riding on Kris' shoulder, clinging with

well-developed hooked ankles and feet to the cotton cloth of her tee shirt. Because my fingers are small I was best qualified to softly, softly unfurl the stubborn shroud of muck from the fragile body. Holding my breath I peeled layer after layer until I could see the structures of form, a long brown body, large dark eyes, two pairs of magnificent, delicately netted wings, now crumpled and stiff.

After I had stripped away most of the filaments binding her legs and the first of several layers of fiber from her wings, the still-encumbered creature made an attempt to fly. The flight consisted of a yard long head-over-heels somersault to the ground, testifying to the fact that the second layer of muck, which had dried by now on the wings, was weighting them down and had caused their usually transparent fabric to crinkle into what amounted to an aerodynamic crisis. The dragonfly raised not the slightest protest when Kris picked up her upside down body and placed her again on her own broadly human left shoulder.

I went back to my restoration work, aware that drastic measures were indicated (to solve?) for the crinkled, disabled wings. I pulled another layer or two from the body, and tenderly worked a few more strands from under the wings, of which she had two pairs. The coating on top of the usually transparent wings had now completely dried and looked to be a permanent cement, rippling their thin surfaces like bent airplane propellers.

I set aside my fears that I would tear the fragile, brilliant instruments of flight and remembered the bottle of water always tucked into the pocket of my golf bag, along with extra balls, an old glove and a bag of raisins that had petrified in the heat. In a hurry, I raised the water bottle over the wing, aware of watchful dragonfly eyes, The sight of the bottle's metal form looming overhead immediately set off a creature alarm and her second attempt to fly. Again, flight was a breath-taking failure as the dragonfly catapulted head-over-transom onto the dry California earth. Again, Kris leaned down and picked her up, and again, the shoulder was solace and hope, as hooked feet dug in.

Now I became cognizant of a strong current of awareness beaming toward my eyes, and emanating from what looked like a little square organ on the dragonfly's head. I became certain that she was in touch with me, was thinking, and not only thinking, contacting me somehow with her thinking.

Smarter now and more patient, I wet my fingers first then slid them ever so lightly over the wings, first the two on the left, the most encrusted. The water dissolved the stiffened filaments, and allowed me to roll them. Now she was far from being in a state of panic; the dragonfly was acting as though she knew exactly what I was doing to help, as I could tell from her body language. She seemed to be making very conscious motions, turning and lifting her wings one by one, separating the upper and lower pairs so as to allow the needed access for my wet fingers, and enhancing the process of my tender work. Could this be true?

Giving up the golf game, I stayed completely in the moment as I rolled and rolled until the slime fell off each wing, which as it did, immediately straightened. Elation! And our conscious connection was not my imagination— the dragonfly *was* turning to engage my wet fingers, was guiding me into the next step and the next, turning to present her other side, and the undersides as well as the tops of each of her four wings, and also her wire-like legs. We were working together! Delicacy of timing in joint effort did not fail us, and by the end of the sixth hole, the slime was off. One wing remained a little wrinkled, but the game of recovery was won, and this was clear to all of us. We relaxed. She would live.

With her long body as brown as the recently released mud, the dragonfly stayed still on Kris' shoulder. "Resting," I heard clearly as I stared at the head box between her large eyes, that appeared to emanate toward my mind, and now emitted a golden glow that opened my heart as well, a distinctive sensation that I experienced physically, as well as emotionally. The insect foot-clutch on cotton cloth was confident, even as Kris hit her shots off the tee and fairway. When the golfer's left shoulder dipped, the dragonfly dipped with it, as though on a slender bough in the wind.



On the seventh hole, I noticed the change. It began as an underglow in various sections of her body, so at first I wondered if it had been there all along and I simply hadn't noticed. Then the blue color

became more evident, then startling, deep and luminous as summer sky. “Look,” I said breathlessly to my companions, “She’s a *blue* dragonfly.” The blue was that sparkling clean lake-water shade beloved of race car drivers and motorcyclists, and it spread until the whole body had it, except for the dark eyes and the darker box, that intriguing communicating shape that I could feel as well as see between her eyes, on top of her head. Then, amidst the blue, dazzling gold appeared as well, as though a whimsical, good-humored and patient painter had put golden trim on a particularly treasured model. We were all in love by then. Ruth and I continued to exclaim our pleasure, and Kris glowed as she craned her neck to check on the condition of the creature that rode her like the most stable of horses across this winding course.

Each hole on a golf course takes about fifteen minutes to play, so we had been with her for almost an hour. As we left the seventh hole, the dragonfly turned her body around into the late afternoon wind and we sensed another change. “She’s getting ready to leave,” Kris predicted. I tried to keep my attention riveted so I wouldn’t miss the take off, but as we walked up onto the eighth tee box, my sight wandered and didn’t see till Kris called out. The blue dragonfly had launched and was already high above Ruth. Stopping still about thirty feet in the air, she performed a steep downward spiral dance, directly over Ruth’s head, before twirling left and disappearing into the upper branches of the nearest tree.

My rational mind, always clicking away in its sometimes cynical fashion, said into my ear: “Probably a practice spiral, not necessarily a dance of gratitude and fare- thee-well.” But none of us believed that, especially because we were left in a happy state that lasted days afterwards, as happens from a visit with persons one loves intensely.

Rational mind is frequently wrong about these fine interactional moments, so I was surprised but not skeptical at our next encounter, which took place about a month later. That much time had passed before the three of us again played golf on the Willow Park course. As we approached the fourth hole we were recalling that this was the place where we found the creature that had spent such a long time in our care. Deliberately, I had worn the same hat and shirt I had on then, and my companions had on similar clothing.

The air directly above the tee box was swarming with dragonflies as we arrived, at least fifty of them, most of their bodies in the brown state, though a few of the larger ones were blue. Had they been gathering there for days? Were they gathered there on this day because of some food source or because every year at that time they gathered there? Or, as our lifting hearts told us, were they gathered there because we had been recognized and they wanted to perform a group acknowledgement? A dance for us. One, a particularly large blue one, came very near and looked into my face—and I could sense a connection. Once again, I felt the heart emanation from the head area, straight toward my own opening heart.

According to anatomical drawings, a dragonfly has an organ called an “occipital triangle” just in back of, or between, the large compound eyes; perhaps this was the source of the emanations I felt.

A year following our first encounter with the blue dragonfly, we played again on the same golf course. I wore the same tan golf hat. And once again, at the fourth hole, a dragonfly approached me. She was brown-bodied, large like the one we had rescued, and she hung in the air about five feet in front of me, looking directly at my face. She flew higher and did a little downward spiral dance, twice. The encounter took only about a quarter of a minute but was very intense. After she left, I felt a burning sensation in the



lower left quadrant of my face, spreading to my heart, flooding me with goodwill. I have come to recognize this from my travels in India as a shaktipat, a sensual experience of eros, heart-opening

spiritual love with extreme joy given as a darshan, a blessing. It is both physical and emotional, and I am unable to conjure it from my imagination, or from inside myself, alone. The sensation of intense heart-open love following my encounter with the dancing dragonfly lasted about five minutes before fading.

Fortunate encounters with insects, moments of wonder, of rescue and recognition, of communication and camaraderie, of intense love and long memory, remind me that we are not alone here on earth, abandoned on a burning stone whirling mutely in space. We are connected in relationships of diversity, human with human, human with insects and plants, creatures and spirits, requiring only that we pay attention and stay still enough to think/feel the connection, and accept that we have been recognized, sent a vital communication, given a gift.

Judy Grahn is a poet, writer, and purveyor of embodied philosophy (Metaformic Consciousness). Her work has been part of a number of social movements, which have enabled certain changes, so she is an optimist. She recently finished, and Aunt Lute Press published, a memoir of the first half of her life, *A Simple Revolution: the Making of an Activist Poet*. The book tells stories about her childhood and people who lived



through various social justice movements with her, some of whom she interviewed and quoted. For her next collection, she wants to tell a very different set of stories, about times in her life that spirit, or one of the variety of minds within nature, has reached out and said “hello,” or “help” or “stop” or has redirected her. And also, times the reach-across has failed. “Dragons Dancing” is part of that exploration.

Laura D. Bellmay

A Call from the Edge

September 12, 2014

When I see herds of animals running towards me, I do not care what will happen to me. The animals come from a single direction as if a predator is pursuing them or they know a cataclysm is imminent. There are many different kinds of animals and they squish together as they pushing up against one another as they run for their lives. Their hooves fling tufts of earth into a smoke of dust and dirt. They are frantic to escape. I feel their collective panic and fear in the bottom of my stomach. I am afraid for them and feel helpless. Though I think I will be killed by the stampede of all these animals, I remain unafraid of the animals. Then they all turn to the right of me as they continue to run for refuge leaving behind a massive cloud of dust.

In my arms, I am holding a baby creature no larger than a medium-sized cat. I do not know if this small creature is a human baby or not, or even a bit of both. It doesn't matter. All I know is that I must protect this infant.

I am heading toward a hill of white immediately in front of me. As I get closer to it, I understand why all the other animals have run away. Down this huge white hill, that I now see is an unbroken sheet of white ice, a frantic, starving four-legged cat--a pure black cougar--runs after the animals that have run away.

The cougar is ferocious because it is starving. As the cougar rampages down the ice hill towards me, I hunch my body over my fur-baby making us both small. With my right shoulder I burrow into the ice hill in an effort to protect us. I let go of any worry that the cougar will kill us for food. The cougar runs by us.

Sporadically, throughout my life, I've had lucid dreams. However, up until the first diagnosis of breast cancer, I had little insight into what gifts dreams were—for me and—for community. Upon that

diagnosis, I became aware of a heightened level of instruction from my dreams. Most of the time the dreams were epic and yet when I awoke I could recall them in exquisite detail—writing their images down for pages. Although there has been an ebb and flow to my remembering them, my gratitude for dreams like the one above, is profound.

Before my mastectomy in 2001, in between the first diagnosis of cancer in 1996 and the second in 2001, I had dreams so powerful that they'd wake me up. I'd scream aloud and be crying or shaking. In one dream, there were only words of instruction: "Learn everything you can before you die." Sometimes I had dreams that were complete but were only sensations. In one, I felt someone—some spirit—breathing over me. In another, a presence spooned behind me in my bed beneath the covers. More than once, I awoke to the sight of a dark, footless spirit hovering menacingly by the side of my bed. I began to pay attention.

This dream that came to me the night after another September 11 anniversary symbolizes both present-day and ancestral trauma that I believe is universal.

When September 11, 2001 occurred, when the Trade Towers were bombed in New York, I was halfway through an eleven-month course of chemotherapy for a recurrence of breast cancer. I was doing my best to recover from the mastectomy. I was in Zimbabwe, having traveled there five months after the mastectomy to undergo initiation with an indigenous healer and six other individuals. On September 11, at 3:30PM, I was circumambulating the fertility tower in the 13C ruins of the Shona Empire in Greater Zimbabwe. At the exact moment when the plane hit the first Tower in New York, 8,000 miles away, I had the following visions:

In the first, I saw blood and pillaging. People were running with calfskins on their bodies and spears in their arms. Men's dark, naked bodies were covered in blood from being impaled by spears. They were decapitated. Innocent women and children were also victimized and desecrated.

When the second tower was bombed, I saw a woman suspended in the dark heavens, giving birth to a new Earth. She struggled to push the Earth out from between her legs with such anguish that her cries filled the cosmos and reverberated in a way no spirit, being, or galaxy could ignore. All energy, beings,

stars, spatial wormholes and unborn planets, heard her screams and moans. They knew what she was suffering through, and why she was willing to do so.

In Zimbabwe, I was not afraid. In preparing to go there, I became willing to free myself from the bondage of everything I knew. I was required to take a leap of faith into a new way of behaving in the world no matter what the personal consequences would be. I had to let go of everything familiar. I could no longer spend my time on anything not aligned with healing. I had to let go of control, numbing domesticity, friends, family, and a marriage that was not serving the needs of my soul. I was required to let go of the illusion that I might live and embrace the fact that everything—including me—was impermanent.

I had no idea when I said yes to go to South Africa that I'd be irrevocably dismantled. Nothing familiar remained. My body, now surgically altered, was the least of the changes. It was as if I were dissolved down to my bones. This transformation was necessary to equip me with clear vision to walk—less encumbered—to meet the future. After September 11, I wasn't sure there would even be a future. Old assumptions and a former order all had to be replaced, but with what?

This is the call of the dream. It reminds me—us—that we need to question everything we've taken for granted: all non-essential activities. Everything that seduces us away from following a sacred order needs to be thrown away. I think the dream reminds me of this while also being a warning that what we once knew and depended upon is no more. We need to prepare.

What I think I know now reviewing this dream is that it is a warning—a clear warning—that the end of this world is imminent. It's as if the breath taken in immediately before the trauma is the world's last. It's a big breath and the entire body of the earth reverberates with it. Its exhale will be the next Tsunami. The last gasp here is both environmental and social. Everything is disintegrating—our world, our families and, ineluctably, the future. We are in the last inhale. The cataclysm is about to happen.

The animals know this. They are trying to tell us.

What I also know is that a fierce protectiveness is being called out in each of us. We must stand, unafraid, in the direct trajectory of harm to preserve the gifts of this earth. If we do nothing to protect them for the future—if we do not heed the call of the innocent in our arms--there will be nothing and no one left to protect. What is most close to our hearts, in this moment, will be gone in the next. This is the impassioned plea being made by the animals.

In a workshop in the late 1990's, Deena Metzger, a spiritual teacher for many, shared her belief that "Everything we love can be saved." Fierceness is required to save it. There is no time to lose.

Laura D. Bellmay: A retired fundraising and development consultant, Laura began writing for the love of the craft after her first cancer diagnosis in 1996. The Collinsville Axe Factory Players hosted a reading of "Holy Communion", her essay about growing up Catholic in 1950s "baby boomer" housing in Foxon, Connecticut. Laura was featured in a series of articles in *The Uxbridge Times* in 2006. She lives in Collinsville, Connecticut on a stretch of The Farmington River protected as "wild and scenic." She has learned, gratefully, how to live in harmony with breast cancer.



Grandmother Squirrel

Carolyn Brigit Flynn

There was a time, perhaps when I was seven or eight years old, when I talked to the sky and chattered with birds. I lay in grasses tickling my cheeks; the lush green shoots were a chorus telling me stories. The earth smelled good, so I ate it. I lived in a leafy urban neighborhood, and everything in our yard was friend: the tall linden tree, the hydrangea bushes, the honeysuckle, the dandelions. Then I grew up.

I have been trying to grow back down for many years. Growing up was effortless: every person around me cheered as I learned to write school papers, eschew play, preen my appearance and slowly but utterly relinquish the outdoors. By the time I was in college I was a brainy girl at a university in leather boots and turtlenecks who wanted to live a life of the mind. I followed this to its logical conclusion at 28 years old and began a Ph.D. program in American History at Stanford University. I was set to become a college professor and walk the streets knowing I was smart and pithy. Then a random traffic accident severely ruptured two lumbar discs in my lower back. I was disabled for eighteen months. Classes, papers and academic work spun to a halt. With my outer life taken away, my inner life shattered. Familiar things that had kept me focused and very busy were gone. In the emptiness, I feared there was no solid essence within me. In great need, I explored meditation, deep tissue massage, mystical poetry, Eastern religions—and the outdoors.

By the time my back injury had healed, I had become a more physically active person, and also more settled in my skin. I looked at my pile of history books and then at my poetry volumes and spiritual texts. I wrote to Stanford University and relinquished their scholarship. I did not know where the path would lead, but at thirty years old I did know I wanted it to be wild, creative and unplanned.

That was twenty-five years ago. Ever since, one might say that I have been trying to grow back down to the girl who knew how to talk to the sky. It is said that the famous psychiatrist Carl Jung concluded as a middle-aged adult that he did not know anything as valuable as when he was an eleven-year-old boy building forts. The small boy still had *life*, he realized—a creative and mythic life he lacked. He began to

spend afternoons building castles and forts with stones. This time, he wrote later, became a turning point in his fate.

When I first read Jung's memoir, I'd just thrown off a potentially lucrative and successful career for an unknown path. I did not think of my own life as mythic or even significant—but I did know I wanted an existence where the younger self could have some voice and authority.

Over time I looked for guides: poets, nature writers, indigenous teachers, mystics, the spiritual writing of the ages. But the best teachers were found in the earth intelligences around me: animals, trees, clouds, rivers, all the living beings who did not use words or walk with two legs, but still flowed, cried, called, communicated, rejoiced, feared, lived and died. At times all that accompanies us—songbirds, whales, thousand-year-old redwood trees, the daily miracle of plants eating light and then feeding the world—overwhelmed me with its beauty. How could such a world—one that is at once both useful *and* beautiful—have become itself? What were the currencies that held such a world together?

On the day I first thought about the squirrels, a virus had moved into my neck and I could not raise my left arm without pain. Still I decided to proceed with a medicine walk of thirty-six hours of silence in the Sierra Mountain wilderness. Two hours after leaving home I saw a furred creature in a lane next to a Taco Bell. I have long been broken-hearted with the raw ugliness of road kill. I pulled over and parked the car.

In the brief moments it took to reach the body, the animal was hit and dismembered two or three more times. A limb, a tail, a paw, flew across the lane. I darted into the lane and pulled what was left of the body to the side of the road with my one good arm. Oh, creature. I could not tell what it was: a domestic cat, a raccoon, a fox? I moved the ravaged remains into grasses by the road. At least he would not be dismembered by machines any longer, a flattened splat in the road. At least he would be given to the earth, to the wild birds and insects who transform the dead into soil and loam. I sat with him for a few minutes, tired, my shoulder aching.

The sun set across the highway, lighting the Starbucks, Taco Bell and Staples, the strip mall, storefronts and parking lots: the unbeautiful world we have created for ourselves. And I understood. What we do to the animals we are ultimately capable of doing to ourselves. When we left our communion with the other living creatures of the earth, we began the process of leaving communion with each other, and with the sacred. Somewhere in us, we know we are animal. We know they suffer and dream and attach to each other, sometimes for life. We know they feel pain. And we look away. As we so often look away from each other's pain.

The following dawn, the teacher who was leading the medicine walk, a mixed-blood Irish and American Indian teacher named Valerie Wolf, woke us with a prayer song. We were at a lodge in Sequoia National Forest. I loaded my car and began a fifteen minute drive, in order to walk among a majestic stand of giant redwood trees. Within moments I saw a dead squirrel in the road. A slight thing, a baby.

At birth in early spring, infant squirrels have no fur and are blind. They stay with their mothers for several weeks, nursing, curled into little balls, eyes closed. Then they venture forth; just a few months later in midwinter they are grown and prepared to mate. That is, if they survive their number one cause of death. Not owls, snakes, hawks, or mountain lions, though all of these are squirrels' natural predators. And not directly humans, though we have hunted, skinned and eaten squirrels for millennia. The primary danger to squirrels is our vehicles. We slaughter them repeatedly, on our way to something else. The body is not eaten, gathered up, skinned. No one keeps or uses any part of the creature. Like all the dead birds and animals along our roads and highways, they end up road kill. Public trash.

There is one other way in which humans threaten the existence of squirrels, along with so many other wild animals: we obliterate their homes. Where there used to be woodlands, forests and meadows there is now the landscape of our human life: cement, brick and steel.

The body of the baby squirrel was tiny and lovely—still warm. I had pulled over, and realized that a car just before me must have hit her. Here in a primordial forest, I was able to do more than move the brutalized animal into the grasses out of the road. I found leaves, pine needles, sticks and forest duff to cover her.

My heart broke at the sight of her—beautiful, innocent and soft. *I am so sorry*, I said, brimming with unexpected emotion. The girl in me remembered what it was to be wounded by an overwhelming force—the invading hands of adults upon whom I depended. Oh wee one, my heart said to the little squirrel, I am so sorry. I know what it is to suffer, to have others avert their eyes from the mess of (looking at)? you.

I sat on a rock, the baby squirrel covered now—and put my hand above the little mound. A soft song rose in me, and I hummed a melody over her body. I wished the spirit of the little squirrel ease. To the extent I knew how, I offered my heart to her soul. I prayed that she relinquish her life in peace. I apologized for the excesses of my kind, and the brutal manner of her death. I prayed that the fabric of love around her be mended.

As I prepared to leave, I notice two large, beautiful pinecones sitting by the grave. I positioned them atop the little mound to form a great V, pointing upwards, open to the sky. The open chalice, the pubic triangle. A decorated grave. Now one last small bow. And the act was done.

Rising sunlight streamed through the trees thirty minutes later as I walked through a majestic grove of giant sequoias, many over a thousand years old. The trees were massive—200 feet tall and thirty feet in diameter. I was within the hallowed quiet of a cathedral. I nestled myself within two giant sequoias coupled together. I wanted to look, just look. Above me, ravens and a circling hawk. A tiny spider crawled on my sleeve. Touching the bark of an ancient living being, I offered my heart. I entered the web.

I was startled out of this reverie when a baby squirrel ran towards me, chirping and running fast. She skittered straight towards my lap, then veered up one of the twin sequoias, turned, looked at me, then skittered across to a nearby tree. There she stopped and turned and looked straight at me. My teacher had urged us to pay attention to the wild to animals who came towards us. I sat up. The baby squirrel stayed still as a statue, and looked at me searchingly.

And I understood then, all in a moment, and irrevocably. She was expressing gratitude. She was thanking me for burying her kin.

The squirrel was urgent with it. *Gratitude*. This was, I suddenly saw, an essential currency of all the beings in this forest. Gratitude—it is abundant, urgent, and necessary as breath. I sat back and looked at the baby squirrel, precisely like the one I pulled from the road just an hour before.

You're welcome, I whispered.

The squirrel sat with me for a time before skittering on. I stayed nestled within the two sequoias for an hour or more, listening to the songs and birdcalls of the forest.

Deep mounds of snow covered much of the ground along the banks of the Kauah River where I walked later that afternoon. White-blue waters roared down from white-capped mountains of the Sierras. The river was full with recent rains, everything pulsing with the giddy sense of spring. I settled on a dry spot under a tree, and sat by the river. Eyes closed, I set my head down on my backpack to rest and dream. I offered prayers for my family and for the other women on the Medicine Walk. I sat in silence with the river, who frothed and tumbled like a wild thing. Inside I was at ease. I had touched something quiet at the base of my heart.

Then, impossibly, it happened again. A baby squirrel startled me, skittering towards my lap, chirping and squawking. Then he scurried up a nearby tree. Only ten feet away, he turned and looked directly

to me. Our eyes met. He chirped, his tail swished behind him—his whole body pulsed with urgent communication.

And I understood. I was again being thanked for my small act of burial that morning. But this perhaps was something more. It was generosity. A completely generous acknowledgement of my broken heart on their behalf.

The young squirrel looked at me, chirping loudly.

You're welcome, I said. Now he chirped again, his tail swished, and again, the urgent look.

I smiled. *You're welcome*, I said again. Again and again I said, *You're welcome*, as he continued to stare at me and chirp. Nine times through, this sweet and urgent currency was exchanged.

I bowed at the generosity of his offering. *Namaste*, I said, speaking aloud the ancient Hindu greeting, *I greet the god in thee*. At that he ran further up the tree, turned and looked one last time. And scurried out of sight.

In that moment I looked around the forest, stunned. Around me, the pines, sequoias and white firs had witnessed the entire unfolding between myself and the squirrel. They were glad. It was apparent and plain. I turned around in a circle and exchanged something, I cannot say what, with each tree. It was a living embrace.

If you can talk to squirrels and speak to trees, it seems to me you are saved. In that moment, my heart was redeemed. What I had done wrong could be made right. What I had forgotten could be remembered. What I had lost I could learn again.

Within me and all around, I knew: not only the forest but also an essential energy of nature existed within an ongoing flow of gratitude and generosity. That is why the earth has evolved such beauty. The trees are generous and provide shelter and food to all the creatures around them. (And they are beautiful.) The animals live in interdependent kinship with the trees, expressing gratitude. (And they

are beautiful.) Flowers blossom, offering nectar; now come the butterflies and bees, who feast, and pollinate. Giving and receiving. Any being, I came to see, who adopts the currency of gratitude and generosity as a way of life will, by definition, be beautiful. Regardless of whether the world is ugly or beautiful around them, they will be beautiful.

This was my birthright: a way of being so deep within the energetic flow of the planet that I did not have to spend years learning it. I only had to remember; to sink within something that not only already existed in nature, but also within humans, for we are all of the earth. This currency is familiar to us. When we are within it, we feel *right*.

After a time, a crow flew by. I picked up my backpack and walked slowly down the river path to my car. I had taken no drugs, no mind-altering substances. I'd eaten plainly for several days. But my hands on the steering wheel were transformed. I saw the wrinkles, the aging lines. I saw myself, a woman of graying hair. My movements were calm. I smiled at children as if they were my own. The beings I saw—humans, trees, river, even machines—were not alien to me. Nothing was made of anything that was different than what I am made of. No thing on the earth was the same as it had been before. My eyes were undimmed. I had become bright.

The next morning I spoke the strange tale of the squirrels to our gathered circle. Valerie was silent for a moment. She was a woman with extraordinary understanding, and I'd come to trust her instincts. Still, her next words astonished me. She said she'd just been told my medicine name. She stood and put her hands on my shoulders. She said that the squirrels have been with me a long time. And that the spirits were telling her that my medicine name was Grandmother Squirrel.

Well, no. It had never occurred to me to want a medicine name. I was not a shaman. I did not want to misuse someone else's tradition. I was here simply to break down the walls in myself. But there was Valerie, eyes shining. She said that in the name was my long-relinquished kinship with the kind and beautiful creatures who had reached me in the woods.

I do not understand, I said.

It's all right, she told me. This name is your path. It will take you years to walk it.

I remembered the squirrels of my childhood from a long distance away. It was like looking through a portal into a time warp. I saw myself young and pudgy, rolling in grasses, singing in trees, whispering stories to the lovely little brown squirrels, with their bushy, enigmatic, delightful tails, their chattering stories.

Too many blissful mountain experiences are followed by the jolt of returning to the killing fields of America's highways. I drove through the foothills and into the towns, my shoulder greatly improved, a calm lightness in my heart. Barely out of the mountains I saw a bobcat lifeless at the side of a far lane. I pulled off at the next exit, turned around, and stopped across from him. As it happened, as I got out of the car there was a tattered roadkill squirrel directly at my feet.

The freeway in the mountain foothills was clear enough. I waited for a few barreling cars and trucks to pass, then ran across the lanes to the bobcat. She was frozen on her back, thick with rigor mortis, claws like daggers. Her teeth were bared. She'd attacked the monster that claimed her life, and died in that moment. Her eyes were open and fierce. I used a paper towel to pull her to brown grasses and reeds at the side of the freeway. I found myself humming one of Valerie's prayer songs as I covered the creature with wisps of grass. I covered and prayed for the tattered remnants of the squirrel. It was right action and also a sad, strange, pitiful offering.

As I drove home I prayed for each dead creature I saw along the roads. There were far too many, and the freeways too dangerous, to stop for each one. Most were squirrels, but there was also a deer, a raccoon, a skunk. Seeing the violent end of their lives was a burden, and also a grace. Acknowledging the death and sending a prayer each time meant that I was in prayer my entire journey home.

On an empty road closer to home, I saw yet another dead squirrel in the middle of the lane. I pulled my car over. The squirrel's body was warm as I carried her out of the road. I could feel her body pulsing. I choked with grief, then walked away for a moment. I looked for a place to lay her, checking for leaves, brush, sticks and grasses for a ritual burial. The paved asphalt touched a wall at someone's land or



home. There was only cement and dust all around me. I returned to the squirrel. It appeared for a moment that she was breathing. Of course it was impossible: I had just pulled her lifeless body from the road, and the blood trail that followed her led to a great red gash in her side. But from where she lay, peacefully now, out of the thrall of cars, she could appear whole.

I looked around again. She could not remain here, where cars would only come again and again until she was annihilated.

I wrapped her in paper towels and put her in a small box in my car. When I brought her inside later that evening, the paper towels were covered with bright red blood, like a woman's menstrual napkin. She was still bleeding slightly as I laid her upon a cloth in my room. By instinct I surrounded her with redwood cones, pine needles and acorns. The squirrel was immediately restful—and beautiful. I gazed at the little ears, the whiskers, the elegant paws. Her eyes were half-closed. She was full-grown, mature, her tail long and full. I was aware of the honor to be so close to this creature, to be allowed to gaze upon her beautiful lashes and soft fur, the perfection of her physiology, how entirely suited she was to her life.

Again, it seemed she was breathing. I had laid her out on her untouched side, where there was no massive gash from a car. It was undeniable that the pulse of life was still with her. She was still relinquishing her life. The next afternoon, my wife Jean returned home from teaching school to find

that I had not yet buried the squirrel—who was, even then, lying in ritual state up in my room. Jean knelt by the table.

“Strange,” she said. “It seems like it’s breathing.”

When I woke the next morning, the squirrel was ready. Her body had flattened in the night. She had completed her dying. I took sequoia needles and pine cones and placed them over her body. I lay an acorn over her eyes. Now on my table she wore the energy of the restful dead.

I dug a grave in our garden and cleaned out leaves and twigs. Just before the burial, I considered keeping some part of the squirrel with me as remembrance. I knew that humans have used parts of animals for millennia, as we obviously still do now for the leather shoes and gloves I wear. Still I was unsure. I asked permission, and felt an assent. With a small knife I cut her tail and two paws. It was gritty, but familiar and ancient.

I found myself softly humming a prayer as I placed her still-soft body in the earth and surrounded her with acorns and pine needles from oak, eucalyptus and sequoia trees. I sprinkled holy water from the sacred well of Brigit in Ireland. I closed the grave, and the earth took her. For a marker I put a colorful mosaic stepping stone an artist friend made years ago.

I sat in the garden by her grave. Just sat, looking at apple blossoms and a honeybee. I looked at the sky, and the birch tree. I looked. The entire earth was strung together. I could feel it; I was of it. This was the field of love, mended. This was what was possible.

The squirrel buried in my garden must have been a grandmother many times over. Squirrels mate and bear young the first year of their lives. If she lived her life expectancy of about five years, there were four generations behind her. I wonder about her paws and tail in my room. I know this is an ancient human practice, yet there was nothing in my experience, or my urban childhood, which spoke of this.

As a girl I was told that squirrels didn't matter, neither did crows, hummingbirds or the bright red cardinals in our yard. They were decoration, background. The natural world was lovely, but it was also angry and rough; it had no actual soul. Only God lived and was sacred, somewhere in the sky. The stuff around us was landscape, or resource. The animals, trees and plants were there for the taking. We needed food, wood, fur skins. Feathers for blankets. Leather for shoes and coats. Steaks for our plates at dinnertime. These things had no spirit to them, no ancestors, no soul life. Use what you wish and make no thanks.

Did keeping the paws and tail enhance the sacredness of her life, or degrade her in some way? What does it mean to keep the hair or teeth or bone of a creature? Of someone we love? Instead of burying Grandmother Squirrel, what if I had done as our human ancestors have done since time immemorial, and skinned and eaten her?

I know a woman who has lived in the redwood forest for forty years. She built her small cabin with redwood from the nearby trees, who are her long-time companions. Two living trees literally hold up one end of her small house. When I asked her about this, she smiled and said that trees wish to be of use. They do not wish to be overused or taken without gratitude. But when done with thanks and for good purposes, yes, she said, trees wish to be of use. As I considered it, this was not so selfless really. In the end, isn't this what we all want? We want our lives to be of use, to have made a contribution.

Generosity. The wish to be of use. *Gratitude.* The urge to offer thanks. That is the energetic flow at the core of the earth that the squirrels and the forest showed me. This is what humans have somehow lost in relation to the earth. When the indigenous peoples of America hunted animals, it was done within a circle of giving and receiving—generosity and gratitude—wherein humans made offerings and gave thanks to the animal herd that provided the very sustenance of their lives. When modern life came to America, animals began to be killed in a soulless way. Today billions of animals die each year in factory farms. It goes without saying that these creatures and their life force—that they suffer and love, bond with others and feel pain—are not honored or even acknowledged as real. Yet most of us depend upon these animals for our own vitality and growth.

I come from that great wave of light-skinned Europeans who journeyed to North America and began the end of one way of living with this land and the beginning of another. Still, the ancient way of human communion with animals was once lived by all of our ancestral kin, on every continent. In the long history of the Earth, *homo sapiens* lived not very long ago within the open savannah, among other animals, in the world of the hunter and the hunted—that is, the eater and the eaten. Humans, like all the other animals on the planet, know in our deepest cells what it is to be prey. We have clawed our way to the top of the food chain, but is it so awful, really, to give oneself over to someone else's life? Is it not true that what is eaten is taken into the body, and in that way continues to live? (If I am buried in the ground in a plain wooden box, which is my wish, my body will be eaten by microscopic creatures who will turn me into loam and rich soil. Isn't this the essence of the Catholic sacrament of Holy Communion, an act that was adopted by my Irish ancestors and part of my own family upbringing? Does not the eaten *become* the eater—literally the stuff of which cell, skin and bone are made? Is there any way to truly name the end of the chain?)

Somewhere deep in the bones of each human lay the remnants of our shared life with the great tribe of earth animals. This epic relationship has been lived over many millennia of human evolution. It is too deeply indigenous to humanity to be entirely wiped out. Squirrels long predate humans on the earth, and are among the more ancient of any species. They have occupied the earth in their current form for 13 million years. Humans have been here in something close to our current form for 4 million years. These generous and intelligent squirrels are much, much older than we are. They have known this earth a very long time. Now the tail and tiny furred paws sit quietly on an altar in my study. I did not eat her, as my human kin have done for millennia, though some part of me wishes I'd had the simple knowledge of my ancestors to skin her, bless her, and take her all the way in.

I'm grown up now, but over the years I have also grown a little down. That girl who knew that there was no separation between herself and the rest of nature still lives. It was she who sat in the forest and felt the living ensouled beings around her. It was she who could touch for a moment the currencies of the natural world: generosity (nature's tendency to share, to give food and to offer

shelter) and gratitude (the reciprocal urge to offer back, to acknowledge that we depend upon each other to live and grow).

Carl Jung once said that the meaning of his existence was that life had addressed a question to him, and that he must answer it or risk having it answered for him. In the forest that day, the question of my life began to be formed: how to become such a self, generous of body and heart, grateful of being and action? How to live with the rest of the non-human world as kin?

The question is always with me now. Like the name I was given, it is a path. It echoes like a prayer. In my very holding of this question, there lives an answering call. I see the generosity of the bee in my garden, spreading pollen which keeps the plants flowering—which is also the bee's own feeding, its communion, and its need. The currencies are a cycle, like alternating currents. Generosity becomes gratitude, hunger becomes offering, taking can simultaneously become giving. Such is the hum at the center of our world.

Somewhere, someone named Grandmother Squirrel nods and smiles. Deep within, a small girl turns. She is lying in the grass, talking to bees. She thinks the name I was given is simply a very good name. I go outside and touch the earth. I reach into the soil and plant seeds. Some of these seeds the birds will eat. Some will become my dinner. I bow my head. I say *Thank you*.



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Fleshing the Hide

Nora L. Jamieson

Home now. Or was that home? And what did I carry home from New Hampshire beside the dried and unworked hide now tacked to the board, the yearling doe hide, who was flesh, who was a fawn, who was a wet and gangly newborn, who was carried and loved, who was the meeting of an egg and a sperm, who was a longing, who was a possibility. No more.

Who was sighted, shot, skinned, quartered, or bled out to age the meat, whose skin under my hands was fleshed and grained and soaked and smoked and will be stretched again and again over the coming winter, my hands raw and bleeding. Whose lovely head might be one of many in a large vat of heads that will feed Chickadee and vulture and coyote.

I enter after the kill, after the hunter's early rising, the coffee and eggs, the toast at the local diner before filling up the thermos, heading out to the woods, before climbing up into the tree stand. Before the waiting, before the sighting, before the shot. I arrive after the soft crumple, the violent spasm, the instant death, the slow one.

I arrive after the tents have been pitched, the food delivered to the kitchen, the smoke house fires lit, the selection of the hide carefully saved out for me. After the morning prayers and coffee and smokes, I arrive into the temporary village, too gentle a term for all that has happened before me. Children run about. Dogs prance showing off the prized legs of deer or wait hopefully for bits of fat to fall to the ground.

Like a paper doll inserted into a scene, I arrived to that small village of men and women hunched over fleshing beams, the dull crescent-moon blades working the hides in deep concentration so as not to tear the thin places, perhaps knowing the debt owed to the hide that might just as much have yearned to return to earth.

How do we justify, understand what we do? That wise fool of a man once said the holy life, the sanctified life, is not one without trespass, it is knowing the debt we owe. And how do I carry that debt and all the debts owing to one small act of fleshing a hide on a snow squall morning in New Hampshire?

It could make a woman crazy trying to keep count of all the ways she is indebted to that one morning and all the elements that came together to weave it. So many threads on that loom. The sun thought it a good idea to meet the earth as she again graciously, even at such cost now, turned her face to him who some call Grandfather. Wind joined in, swirling snow around us as we remembered with longing the old iron stove in the barn that someone thought to light with trees taken to keep us warm. Everyone is somebody's child, the tree the child of the seed, the iron extracted from earth's core, forged with fire and that fire fed too. So many debts.

And the dead, I know, walked among us. And within us. Awakened by the aroma, this feast of the old ways, seeing through the plastic, the fleece and thermal space age gear, taking their place in the circle of women, holding a large hide between them, stretching and working it, bouncing a child in the center. The dead entering the hands of the women kneading the fibers apart like they did then. This is how, this is the motion, this is the way.

Yes, I'm sure the dead were there. Perhaps it was their idea, *let's give them a taste of how it used to be before thinsulate, before plastic and prefab houses. Before the lie was told that the gods are dead. Let's make them hungry for us.*

And so I fleshed, up and down, listening to the conversations among the young around me yearning to find a way to live that makes sense. But I cannot remember a single word. Just the motion, the debt, the hides, and the sturdy blond woman walking the November field, playing the wailing bagpipes and the men singing the high pitched keening at the Mother Drum.

Perhaps this is how remembering works.

Do this. Up and down, back and forth. *Now. You remember.*

Nora L. Jamieson lives in Northwest Connecticut where she writes, holds councils with women, and unsuccessfully tracks coyote. She lives with her spouse Allan Johnson, their young and soulful dog, Roxie, and with the sorrowful and joyful memory of four beloved goats and three dogs. Her book *Deranged* is forthcoming from Weeping Coyote Press.

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Cardinals at the Crossroads

Sara Wright

Three days before All Hallows, the night my father called to tell me about his cancer, I found a decapitated heron at the edge of the stream. Four days later, on the morning my father died, I dreamed he had turned into a beaver. The next day at dawn, a pure white dove flew down to the ground outside my window and pecked at the birdseed I'd scattered, only to vanish at sunset like a ghostly apparition. That night during a phone conversation with my uncle, we exchanged dove stories in disbelief; he had just bitten into some pasta and pulled a tiny white stone dove from his mouth. The next morning, the sight of two cardinals at my feeding place stunned me; in thirty five years of bird feeding, they had never come before. The male's brilliant vermillion color seemed to bleed into the white snow, reflecting my fiery loss in a visceral way. The next day, these birds disappeared as mysteriously as they had come. Surely something was at work here, but I had no idea what.

Unfortunately, at the time of his death, my father and I had never managed to repair our fragile father-daughter relationship. As a result, my loss was tinged with a child's fierce longing to be loved; I felt that I had been orphaned by Chaos. Everything felt disordered; there was no funeral for a man who desperately needed approval, no acknowledgment or respect for a life lived in decency, albeit explosively and without much awareness. His only two grandchildren and his wife, my mother, would not attend the Memorial service that my uncle and I were planning, a fact that, frankly, horrified me.



Two months later, on the day of the service, I entered a church so staggeringly beautiful that my breath caught in my throat. The marbled floor and altar provided a back drop for hundreds of magnificent deep scarlet poinsettias and a shining crimson altar cloth. Even the stained windows bled

ruby shards of cracked glass into the Gothic arches over my head. Myriad evergreen sprays of pine, hemlock and fir provided sharp contrast and adorned every corner of the church. This display of riotous color acknowledged and honored my father's life on a level that I couldn't comprehend in a rational way — much the way the sight of the male cardinal, dressed in his scarlet coat and cap, had affected me by appearing after my father's death.

A year later, at the end of October, another crisis struck; I was forbidden to see my only grandchild, a thirteen-month old baby I adored. Stunned by the cruelty, I fought back. To allow our difficult — and to me, baffling — mother-son issues to poison a third generation felt ethically unjust; I took my oldest son to court in order to gain visitation rights. On the night the court date was set for the following May, I received news that a second grandson would be born in a couple of months. The next day, a male cardinal briefly materialized at dawn; I was struck by the appearance of another of these “red” birds at the family crossroads of life and death.

On the February day that Cameron was born, a buck still wearing his antlers appeared in the field, walked over to a large fir tree, and lay down beneath it. I stared as a blossoming white moon cast her silver shadows around him and the tree. The biblical words “and the lion shall lay down with the lamb” materialized in the air, and it seemed to me at that moment that the snow bled cardinal red.

The day before I lost the court case, I heard the melodious whistle of the male cardinal singing to his mate. As I rushed out the door to locate the bird, a heron flew towards me from out of the swamp, stopping me in my tracks. Then came another and another; so many of these normally solitary herons flew over my house that day that I lost count of them. How could I forget the decapitated heron I had found just before my father died? I never did see the cardinals, and their song ceased abruptly. My youngest son testified against me. I dimly recognized that I had been cast in the same role as my father, that of the unworthy parent. I didn't know it then, but I would be forbidden to see either of my grandchildren for almost twenty years. By responding to injustice with a court case, I gave my children and their grandmother (my mother) all the ammunition they needed to expel me from my own family, which they did promptly, using the sword of silence as the weapon of betrayal.

After the trial, I was buried in an avalanche of grief. Depression froze feeling in place as I began a twenty-year journey through a psychic wilderness that contrasted sharply with the magnificent wilderness and mountains that surrounded me. I wrote my way through death with words, turning to Nature for comfort, and although I didn't recognize it yet, birds, animals, plants, trees and stars had already become my Guides.

I never spoke of my losses; I was too ashamed of what my children had done. I went to graduate school and became a teacher. I became a more passionate naturalist, whose comfort came on the wings of a hawk, an owl, a hummingbird, the sight of a deer and black bear; these became my adopted family, allowing me to lean into them through the haze of grief. Although I no longer had a human family in any meaningful sense of the word, the Spirit of Nature had not deserted me. She was always there, ready to communicate with me through one of her creatures. All I had to do was to pay attention.



A few years passed and one fall, a male cardinal unexpectedly appeared at my feeder. I had a bewildering insight during his visit: my "fate" was inexorably attached to the same pattern of loss that had dominated my father's life. My dad had unknowingly surrendered both his children to his wife and her maternal family through his absence and rage. My mother, a very clever woman, played the role of stoic, but never missed an opportunity to ridicule or denigrate my father, as did her relatives. All believed that my father, a first-generation Italian immigrant,

was beneath them. As children, my brother and I learned to dismiss our father without understanding why. My father's long work-related absences and his explosive emotional nature left us confused and resentful. Watching the cardinal, I suddenly understood that after my brother's suicide, I had unwittingly repeated my father's pattern by emotionally surrendering my children to my parents out of survivor's guilt.

After finishing graduate school, I built a small cabin on the patch of woods, field and stream that I 'owned' and in December, the day after I moved in, two male cardinals and a female emerged from under the two pines whose boughs created a sheltered spot just outside my door. Crimson drops once again bled into white snow. Each evening at dusk, I involuntarily held my breath as I waited for the birds to appear.

That spring, the second male disappeared, but the couple raised two chicks here, choosing a densely branched balsam tree down by the brook for their nesting place. At dusk, I sat on the porch, waiting for them to come to feed. The adults always announced their presence with staccato-like clicks. I loved watching the two young mottled nestlings eagerly taking seed out of their parents' broad beaks, impatiently flapping their wings as they hopped about under the safety of the pine boughs. The parents and I communicated wordlessly; they watched me as intently as I watched them, and I sensed the deep bond growing between us.

During the next few years, the cardinals' presence helped me deal with the depression that had gradually become chronic. Each time I heard one whistle or witnessed the parents raising another brood, I was catapulted into the present moment. I relaxed my vigil around these birds. By this time, my involvement with birds and animals had more depth and was more intimate than any relationship I had experienced with humans, with the exception of my children and grandchildren. I also felt brief moments of what it would be like to experience hope as a possible way of being in the present, acknowledging sorrow but not drowning in it--living each day in gratitude and simplicity.

During a walk one lush blue and gold summer afternoon, I saw a fledgling male cardinal sitting on the lowest branch of a crabapple tree. One wing hung down uselessly. My beautiful coon cat Zoe was poised to strike again. I screamed in horror, scaring the two adult cardinals out of the nearby pines where they had been helplessly watching the scene unfold.

Leaping towards the crabapple, I swept the chick into my hands and began to weep, screaming at the cat between sobs. Both parents, having flown into the upper branches of the crabapple, kept a sharp eye on me. I got the cat inside and sat down on the steps to assess the damage to the chick. There was

blood, so Zoe had bitten him. His wing was mangled. I knew that the bacteria from a cat bite could kill a bird slowly and painfully in a matter of days. The parents watched anxiously, and I finally decided to leave him to their care. Beneath the shelter of the pine boughs, I placed him on the ground with food and water. That night, the three huddled together, but the next morning the parents flew away and this time, they didn't return. I couldn't bear it and brought the little bird into the house.

I set the badly broken wing knowing in my heart that "little red" would never again take flight. He lived for two more days, gazing at me with increasingly dull, listless eyes. When he took his final breath, I wept. I buried him under my favorite crabapple, and once again the world went black. The parents still came to feed at dusk, but I had unintentionally broken a sacred trust between us. This place was no longer a safe haven for them. A week later, the cardinals vanished.

Soon after, I flew to the mountains of Mexico to stay with colleagues. One day we went to the outdoor market and there to my horror were three young cardinals stuffed into a six-inch square cage. I burst into uncontrollable weeping, shocking my two friends. I had to set those cardinals free. My spending money would only cover the release of one cardinal, and I was forced to make an impossible choice. Handing over all of my money, I bought a young male who was given to me stuffed in a small paper bag. His wings beat frantically. My friends obliged me by driving around until I found a place near water with good leafy green cover. Tears rolling down my face, I got out of the car, gently held the bird's wings clasped to his body, and then I set him free. He disappeared instantly into the emerald green landscape. I stood frozen in time. Suddenly out of the copse of trees and tangled vines, I heard the clearest cardinal whistle. He sang to me twice.

When I returned from my trip, a new pair of cardinals was nesting in the pines outside my bedroom window. With deep gratitude, I listened to their magnificent love songs each dawn. They raised a single female chick who seemed especially attached to her parents. Every night under the pines, they took turns feeding her sunflower seed, even long after she was as big as they were.

This was the last summer cardinals would nest or raise their young in my patch of woods and stream. The youngster moved away in the fall, but the adults still visited their feeding station under the pines each evening. Then one night in November, the male appeared alone.

Because cardinals mate for life, the missing female alerted me to the possibility of her untimely death. After three nights spent anxiously awaiting a glimpse of her, I had to accept that she was gone. Heartbroken for the male, I waited for him to appear each evening. When he did, he would shine one beady eye in my direction as he ate. There was no question in my mind that he and I were grieving our loss together.

In April, he began his poignant mating whistle from the pines. For a few days the calls were strong and clear, but they went unanswered. One morning he stopped singing. The next day, he was gone.

Although I sometimes heard male cardinals singing in the distance as I walked my dog, I never saw any. During these years, every attempt to make contact with my mother and sons was met with a resistance that was mirrored by dreams, in which I climbed endless snow-capped mountains alone.

Then one April, my mother died. The very next day, I heard a male cardinal's signature mating call. For a brief moment, I wondered if my mother's death might open the door to reconciliation with my two sons, but it was not meant to be. After a few months of heartbreak, I concluded that somehow I had to let go of hope with respect to family. I wondered how I could continue to survive, even as I went to work teaching, cared for my beloved dog, gardened, wrote, fed wild animals, gave workshops on Native American culture, studied medicine plants in Peru, and continued my research on black bears. At least I was still functional.

A year ago last November, a solitary female cardinal appeared under the pines, and remained here all winter. I watched her through binoculars, marveling at how beautiful she was in her russet coat flushed in rose. I was reconciled to the loss of continuous cardinal presence, so her visit seemed like a gift, and when she vanished in the spring, I accepted it. However, I wondered at the string of solitary cardinals, first males and now a female, that blinked



in and out of my life like fireflies in the night. The males ushered in family loss, and the cardinals' families helped me deal with those losses, but what might it mean to have a female cardinal in my life? I had no idea.

This fall when I heard the clear, repetitive clicking of a cardinal, I was delighted. The staccato sound came from my grapevine, now stripped of its leaves by November's north wind. When I looked out, there she was, perched near some frozen grapes. I promptly opened the front door, scattered some seed under the pines, and watched from the window until I saw her drop to the ground to feed. Examining her through binoculars, I decided this was not the female that visited last winter. A bittersweet beak set off the subtle smudged olive feathers of her coat; her beaded eyes and tufted peak brought tears to my eyes.

Each morning I leapt out of bed to give her some seed as she clicked from the grapevine. When it became apparent she was alone, I was astonished; she had been calling out to me to bring her seed. Soon, she began clicking during odd times of the day for her meager ration of seed. Amazingly, she always seemed to sense which room I was in.

She also chirped at me when I was outside, sometimes following me into the overgrown field strewn with white pines when I walked or snow-shoed down the paths. One day she chirped with such exuberance that I sang back to her a little song that I made up on the spot, having no idea what it meant. "I'm a little cardinal sitting in a tree, I can be the bridge you need me to be." She eyed me from her perch with what appeared to be genuine affection, then excitedly chirped back. A thunderbolt struck: I realized this little bird was bridging me to hope, and I felt light flood my body. No wonder I had fallen in love with her. Just as the male had once ushered in profound loss with its all its fire, chaos and loss of familial blood, she seemed to embody a message of hope I could *feel*.

The day after Christmas, I had a visit from my grandsons, Drew and Cameron. They wanted to learn more about me, the grandmother they were denied until adulthood, and to know more about their Italian heritage. Our future together depends upon us, we decided, and includes the dream of a trip to Italy. Our planning for the future manifested in the giant bulb they brought me as a gift. A bulb aptly named "Desire."

Desire, I mused after my grandsons' visit, is a double-edged sword. Desire, want, and need constellate the fear of more loss. The only way to deal with fear is to let go of the outcome, to accept the cycles as they come and go. I think this is another lesson that the cardinals have been trying to teach me through their presence and absence over the last twenty years. Today I do my best not to project into the future with respect to cardinals or grandsons. I take the gifts offered, understanding that as with any act of grace from Nature, there is always a cresting of feeling, awe with its accompanying "high," and then a letting go.



Sara Wright is a naturalist and a writer. She lives in a little log cabin in the woods by a brook with two small dogs and two doves. She writes stories about the animals and plants that live here on her property in the western mountains of Maine and publishes them regularly in local paper's nature column. She is also an independent black bear researcher who uses "trust-based" research to study the bears that have visited there. Since 2000, she has been exploring interspecies communication in collaboration with Rupert Sheldrake. She has Passamaquoddy roots, which may or may not be why she has dedicated her life to speaking out on behalf of the slaughtered trees, dying plants and disappearing animals. This is the only work that matters to her.

Dreaming the Future

Valerie Wolf

In 2007, I undertook a solo vision quest on Joseph Mountain in the beautiful Wallowa Valley of eastern Oregon, having felt intuitively called by my spirits to seek guidance in protecting the earth and securing a better future for all who dwell here. As one who has walked the shamanic path for twenty-two years, as an Earthkeeper, someone who attempts to discern what is best for the earth and all beings here and live accordingly, I was now being paged by my spirit team to receive messages on this topic. The spirits have appeared to indigenous people for centuries, and had been coming to me for more than twenty years in dream and vision, as well as to many of my students and clients, bringing profound insights and healing for us and our communities. I had a sense that I was making this journey on behalf of the Earth and my spiritual communities, as well as myself. Too many humans did not know how to live here properly; far too many seemed oblivious to the evidence that we were destroying our planet. I did not know what it would take to stop this. How could I do more, what were the right actions that could heal the planet's suffering? I hoped a spirit would come to me in vision, and offer something I could bring back to my community that might make a difference.

I was not in the best shape to make such an arduous journey, being fifty-four and with my backpacking days more than twenty years behind me. The climb would be seven miles up a steep rocky trail with a pack and water to a peak just under ten thousand feet. I would have no companions as a safety net. I called my spiritual mentor before I headed up the trail, to let her know my intentions, and she agreed to hold me spiritually, even though her wolf was dying at the time. Quests are unpredictable, and can be grueling. As I moved into the Spirit World, I wanted a human anchor here, to support me in facing whatever might come.

As I steadily hiked the trail, I felt in every being around me— every tree, stone, cloud, chipmunk, spring — a loving consciousness, and a sense that they were all on this pilgrimage with me. It was as if the quest itself had awakened the spirits of this land, and they were gladly supporting my journey. I had experienced the same profound love on my first vision quest in 1994 in Joshua Tree, a flow of it that had emerged from the earth at the moment of vision after questing all night. Here it was again, at the

beginning of this spiritual trek, love holding me, encouraging me, guiding me. I was honestly terrified to make this journey, for I was in bear, mountain lion and rattlesnake country. Yet I also trusted the Spirits entirely. This flow of love was a reassuring balm. If trouble or injury awaited me on the high peaks, I accepted the necessity of it. I had lived and worked long enough with the Spirit World to know my ancestors and spirits would keep me safe in every way they could.

The upward hike was even more grueling than I had imagined. A high waterfall required hurtling myself across a five-foot stream at its base where it tumbled down a steep drop-off. I just barely made the jump, my feet sliding and staggering on the muddy edge of the fast-moving stream before they found safety. When I turned to look back, I discovered a couple at the fall's edge debating worriedly whether to go forward, having observed my bold, precarious leap. Smiling ruefully, they shouted that they were turning around here, as the falls seemed too dangerous to cross, and headed back down the trail.

Within an hour, I had to climb over several downed trees whose trunk widths were taller than me. The angled slope made this just as treacherous as the slippery falls, but after tossing my pack over first, I was able to scramble over each challenging barrier. A few miles more brought me to a spring where I soaked my swollen feet and sponged my aching knees, and listened to a friendly fly inform me that my boots weren't tied tightly enough, that my joints needed the support of a firmer fit. Thank you, Fly!



Joseph Mountain, Oregon. Photo by the author

After a full seven hours of hiking, I stumbled into a meadow at the top of Joseph Mountain, and stood among tall pines gazing out over the five-mile stretch of Wallowa Lake and the green forests below. I dropped down to the earth, just resting and observing the open meadow with its sprawl of scrub sage and the rocky peaks rising up before me. I noticed a young pine broken in half in between two tall

mature ones. Although the top of this pine was split and hanging, the tree was healthy and vibrant. I

marveled that a being so severely injured could still thrive, and felt as if the Elder trees were watching over her. I felt broken too, felt that all of us humans here were deeply wounded in our hearts and minds. The spirits were watching over us, it seemed to me, and were *our* elders. Perhaps we too could still thrive with proper tutelage.

An old man and his dog arrived briefly, and we chatted. He asked if I would be camping here, and I evasively answered I had not decided yet. I did not trust men in the wild, particularly not men who would know I was alone here in the shadowy night that was fast approaching. But he seemed kind enough, and I did not feel in danger. I asked if there were any bear troubles up here, and he said he had never encountered one on the mountaintop, and that he did this hike three times a week. I had traveled through a long series of switchbacks as I climbed the seven-mile trail but he told me there was a two-mile path he used that went pretty much straight up and down, and only took two hours. He confessed he had met with mountain lions on a few occasions, but they had never threatened him, just followed him with what he felt was curiosity more than predatory intentions. I felt my heart stall a bit at this information, imagining myself stalked by lions. I quickly tuned back into the lovingness that was still there floating around me, and my anxiety eased. The man waved goodbye and hiked briskly back down the mountain. A part of me wished I was going down too, before the light ended, down the straighter, easier path, not alone, and not having to spend a solitary night in hours of darkness with no tent. But I stayed, committed to the feeling in my body that said I belonged here now, whatever might come.

I created my medicine wheel out of a few small grey stones, made tobacco offerings, then set up my blue sleeping bag in a circle of small sage plants. I watched the sun pull the light off the lake, and the shadows drop into everything. I offered four rounds of prayer, one each half hour, as guided by my spirit council. A vast silence seemed to hold everything in expectation, and I settled into the long quiet that I have come to love on quests. After an hour or so, the spirits encouraged me to rest, as there would be work to do later. I slept briefly, dreaming that I was explaining to one of my students that when a deer comes in a dream we must observe the deer's behavior so we will know what message it brings. Suddenly the sound of drums awakened me, an ancient Native American four-beat rhythm. Had Native people arrived below in the campground at the base of the mountain, or perhaps someone who knew this powwow rhythm? I was deeply moved that drummers were here *now*, felt the hunger within

me for this ancient song pounding through the forest. This strengthened my resolve to hold steady here, despite the waves of fear that sometimes washed over me like a small tsunami. The drums took away all fear that I was a fool on a fool's errand. My ancestors were letting me know that I was welcome here.

As the stars offered their focused beacons in the charcoal sky, I felt their presence, how alive they were. They too kept company with me, embracing me in the same abiding love I had treasured coming up the trail. I felt I was *in* the stars, had never been so close to them, so fully *with* them. Tears of awe opened my tender worried-about-the-earth heart, and my own affection flowed out to everything around me. I loved this earth so much! How lucky I was to be here, in the forested wild with my beloved earth mother. I felt so grateful for this mountain solitude peopled by spirits. I hunkered down into my sleeping bag as a chilling wind picked up, and lay down to simply gaze at my ancestors, the stars.

Hours and hours passed as I lay awake on the dark earth. Spirits arrived and offered personal messages on my own growth and healing, which I greatly appreciated. But for the bigger question, of how to help the earth, I waited patiently, knowing the spirits work in their own time and ways, and that one cannot rush or force contact. The night was calm now, except for the sound of running hooves at one point, which made me wonder if a deer was being chased by a mountain lion. I was glad it was too dark to tell.

The vision that I was seeking arrived shortly before sunrise.

A spirit made of smoke floats in the air before me. I sit up to see him more clearly, and he leaps from sky to earth, and now stands in front of me. He is larger than me, looks almost like a lion, or a griffin, a bit shape-shifty and not clearly definable. I am given information by my spirits that he is one of the guardians of the earth. After sitting a moment in respectful silence, I ask: what is our future and what can we humans do to meet it? How can we bring healing to our poisoned planet? He responds in the voice of an oracle. "You have destroyed the precious waters of the earth." I think of our human-made chemicals, oil spills, pesticides, pharmaceuticals, all leaking into the aquifers, rivers, lakes, and seas. Have we destroyed them entirely already or is he talking of the future here?

Again his resonant voice echoes through the surrounding forest. "See now what will come."

He opens his great mouth in a mighty roar and fire pours out; flames spread across the earth destroying forests, homes, people and animals. A second blast of his voice and a fierce wind births tornadoes and hurricanes that spin across the land, shattering everything in their path. The griffin calls out a third time and great floods sweep away whole towns and their inhabitants. With his last roar, stones roll from his huge mouth, and avalanches, earthquakes, and volcanoes crush and bury everything around them.

I am shocked by these violent, deadly scenes and cry out, "Is there nothing we can do to stop this future from coming?"

"No."

Grief-stricken, I struggle inwardly, searching my own mind for some way these disasters can still be prevented. "Shall I speak of this to others, warn them, so that perhaps the humans will change?" I suggest hopefully.

"Not yet. They need to learn the consequences of their actions first."

Distraught, I plead one last time for a reprieve.

"Is there nothing to be done by the humans that can alter this fate?"

"If the humans were to cry tears of compassion, for the earth, for all the beings they have harmed, for themselves in their foolishness, these tears would replenish and heal the waters."

But humans would not cry such tears yet, I believed, for we were still too arrogant, too greedy, too ignorant of the full consequences of our behavior. My own tears surged now. Broken-hearted, angry that our reckless, thoughtless human ways had led us to this place, I watched as the griffin disappeared, his grey smoke form turning to black ash, a dark snow drifting down to the hard, dry land.

I was stunned and disheartened by the griffin's fierce message. It was not what I had expected or hoped for. I was wary too, initially, for I had never met a spirit quite like this before. I did not want to believe that what he said would come true. Yet a part of me already knew, what my own spirits now gently confirmed: the griffin was no trickster spirit, teaching with pranks and lies, but one of the truth-tellers.

I finished out the night with a sacred song calling on the ancestors for guidance in how to meet so bleak a future. Environmentalists and indigenous people had been fighting for years with our governments and corporations trying to stop the poisoning and warming of the earth. Might these efforts save us from such a devastating future? If not, what else would it take? And how many years would we wait before the humans would come to that tender-hearted place of remorse for all the harm that we have done here, all the injustice we have inflicted upon other species, the lands, the waters, one another?

When dawn came, I placed my Pendleton Circle of Life blanket on my shoulders and sang a welcome to the returning light. I left an offering of a turtle necklace on the blasted tree, with one last prayer for healing for us all. Then I descended the mountain uneasily, knowing I did not have enough water for the trip, and that my body was still battered from the hard climb the day before. I hiked the direct, steeper trail down, hoping to save time, but it was equally grueling, every step a jolt to my agonized joints and ravaged muscles. The last hour of the trek I cried most of the way, due to the pain in my body, and the grief of my vision. But there was also a moment when the spirits made up a silly song, with the words "Walk like a Bear" which we sang over and over to distract me from the terrible knives in my joints. I laughed then, grateful that the spirits were keeping me going when I wanted to give up. By the time I staggered to the trail's end, I had so much rampant inflammation I begged two middle-aged campers to give me a ride from the lake's edge back to my car at the trailhead. They glanced at me suspiciously, but when I explained how much agony I was in from my four-hour hike down the mountain, they kindly provided a lift. Afterwards I drove to the lake, knowing I needed ice for all the swelling and the lake would provide it. I gratefully soaked in the river-chilled waters and my suffering eased. What I didn't know yet was that these were not mere muscle and joint aches of over-exertion but the first flare-up of the rheumatoid arthritis that would shatter my life within the next few years,

and teach me that human contamination of the earth, waters and air was rapidly increasing autoimmune diseases. Our human bodies were poisoned too, unavoidably, and the most sensitive among us were already paying a painful price.

I was allowed by the griffin to share this vision with my mentor, but several years would pass before I was given permission to speak of these prophecies with a few of my students in my shamanic training program. Only now am I requested to share it publicly with a wider audience, now when so much of it has come to pass. We humans are destroying our home, this beautiful earth being, our mother. We know we are doing it and yet we cannot seem to stop, cannot make the changes quickly enough. Each day there is more climate chaos, blizzards and hurricanes caused by global warming, earthquakes caused by fracking, dying sea lions and other creatures whose territories can no longer provide enough food due to damaged and diminished ecosystems. Many creatures, like the bees, are wasting from diseases caused by the deadly chemicals we have poured upon the plants. Oil spills are frequent; radiation is steadily leaking into the sea, air and land from nuclear power plants. The horror of our current reality has more than matched the griffin's prophecy.

As the truth of the griffin's predictions unfolded across the globe, I continued to ask for dreams to help us know how to transform this fate. In 2013, I received this dream.

A young man has been harming others. I firmly move him away from his girlfriend, and tell him we will not allow him to hurt her ever again. He sneers angrily — "Oh, yeah?" — daring me to stop him. I move closer to him and stare fiercely into his hostile eyes to show him how serious I am. He yells at me to get away from him.

"There's a part of me that would like to," I confess, "but another part wants to lean in and help you change. As it stands now, you are not even fully human yet."

"Do no harm." I speak these words to him slowly and emphatically. "Do you know why the native people say this?" He shrugs sullenly, as if he could care less about anything I might say. "Because we are all family here, we are here to protect one another, to help one another." He looks away, still feigning indifference, but I sense he is now listening.

“If you allow us to help you, we might be able to turn you into a true human being.” I say this in a half-joking manner, but I am serious. This community of people who know how to take care of the earth, who have learned not to do any unnecessary harm, are his best hope for healing his angry, wounded heart.

My understanding of our global culture at this time is that it is predominantly shaped and controlled by an immature wounded masculine energy. We humans are not grown up yet, do not know how to live wisely and compassionately with our resources and one another. Some people know more about what might be possible than others, and much of this knowledge seems to be held by certain elders and communities who are committed to guarding the earth. Communities can do what individuals cannot, as this dream suggests. Communities can heal individuals who are doing harm to others due to their own unhealed trauma. Communities can stop fracking and block the Keystone pipeline. Communities can heal our poisoned waters, lands and air, by holding companies accountable for the effects of their actions, by refusing to allow them to continue environmentally unsound practices. Communities can stop our politicians from sacrificing our long-term future for short-term benefits for the extremely wealthy minority.

I also believe that the spirits, who have been with us since the very beginning of our human journey, offering to teach us how to live in right relationship to our ecosystems and other species, are essential to whatever possibilities might emerge. Corrective visions, such as the one I had on Joseph Mountain, have come for centuries to communities and their seers, shamans, and medicine people, when people were no longer living in right relationship to the earth. Black Elk, the famed Lakota medicine man, shared such a vision from his time about how European life practices would destroy indigenous ways of living harmoniously with the plants and animals.

There once was a Lakota holy man, called Drinks Water, who dreamed what was to be; this was long before the coming of the Wasichus (Europeans). He dreamed that the four-leggeds were going back into the earth and that a strange race had woven a spider web all around the Lakotas. And he said: “When this happens, you shall live in square gray houses, in a barren land, and beside those square

gray houses you shall starve.²¹ They say he went back to Mother Earth soon after he saw this vision, and it was sorrow that killed him. You can look about you now and see that he meant these dirt-roofed houses we are living in, and that all the rest was true. Sometimes dreams are wiser than waking.

Sadly, the animals *are* leaving the earth; more than fifty percent of the population has been devastated by destructive human activities in the last forty years alone. The waters *are* poisoned, as the griffin foretold on the mountain, as the leak at Fukushima guaranteed would happen. Looking around now, we must bear witness to the harm humans have done to so many beings, and to one another. Drinks Water was killed by the sorrow of his vision, and I sometimes wonder if I developed rheumatoid arthritis in part because of the grief at what I witnessed of our broken human future. But I have not given up hope, because of the many dreams and visions that are still coming, that have encouraged me and others to learn to live in healthier and more balanced ways.

In the high desert of Joshua Tree a few months ago, I quested once more upon the land, this time only briefly, as that is all my health allowed. I asked the griffin to come once more and offer guidance for humans. I smoked the peace pipe I have used for many years as I prayed for help. And then he appeared before me.

The griffin floats in the air, hovering over the huge golden boulders of Joshua Tree. "Clean up your mess," he says curtly. "Then learn to take care of the earth. That is what you are primarily here for, you see."

I was so grateful that the griffin had returned, and for his words. His response made me believe that healing the earth and our own broken hearts and minds is still possible. But only if we open once more to the spirits and the ancestors, to the Mystery itself, and return to their sane and thoughtful ways. The plants have been on this planet more than 450 million years, the animals have lived here more than 350 million years. Humans, in their current form as homo sapiens, have only dwelt here for 220 thousand years. Who should know more about what works here? The plants and animals are *our*

²¹ Neihardt, John G. *Black Elk Speaks*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1932. Print.

Elders. These and other helpful spirits can bring humans back into the knowledge that we are all family here, all one being, here to take care of the earth and one another, as the griffin reminds us.

Many have forgotten how to connect to the spirits, how to hear them, see them, believe in them. Yet it is not a hard thing to do, as the following dream from December 30, 2014, suggests.

I am watching a young girl, perhaps seven years old, standing in a kitchen, keeping an eye on a pot on the stove. Suddenly she dances, raising her arms up and down like a butterfly, twirling and hopping and dipping flamboyantly. As she moves, I observe that a translucent tunnel has formed around her, linking this world to the spirit world. The tube rises high into the sky, I can see it pierce the roof and keep moving. I marvel at this young child's capacity to create this connection to the spirit realm and think that I should tell her mother what a gift she has for magic. I wonder how to tell her in a way that would make both the child's ability to do this, and my capacity to see it, acceptable. Shall I say it was in a dream? I fear she will consider such a vision with suspicion.

The graceful girl has stopped her fluttering dance, and is standing quietly now. The tunnel dissolves. I realize she is the one I should tell about her unusual gift. I step forward and greet her, and describe what I witnessed as she danced. "Wow!" she exclaims. "That is amazing! You should do this more often!"

I realize she thinks that I created this magical path to the spirits. I correct her, explain that she is the one who created the passageway through her full-hearted dancing. My gift is to see what is often invisible to others. "You are the amazing one!" I insist, and she offers a wide, delighted smile.

Dancing is one of the most ancient traditions for entering the Spirit World, or bringing the spirits down to us, sometimes even into our own bodies. But there are so many ways to make this essential connection. We can send a part of our spirit into the spirit realms with proper training in shamanic journeying. We can create artwork and masks that invite particular spirits into our lives. Meditating, dreaming, singing, writing are all time-tested forms for communicating with the spirits, simply opening our hearts and minds to their teachings as we engage these forms. The spirits will come, will speak, will teach, if we ask them to, if we receive them humbly and warmly, as our ancestors once did. They have

not given up on us yet. Once, early in my shamanic training, the spirits said to me: “Be not ashamed to follow.” We are the youngest beings on this planet. If we seek help, if we follow the guidance of the spirits, change and healing is still possible. Then we can say thank you, bless you, and start again.

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