

DARK

MATTER

DECEMBER 2015, ISSUE #3  
EXTINCTION/DEVOTION

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  
DREAMS, VISIONS, AND COMMUNICATIONS WITH  
THE NONHUMAN WORLD---ESPECIALLY THOSE  
WITH MESSAGES FOR HOW WE MIGHT BEGIN  
TO HEAL OUR BROKEN RELATIONSHIP  
TO THE EARTH.

## **DARK MATTER: WOMEN WITNESSING #3**

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Kristin Flyntz

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## Editorial Issue #3. EXTINCTION/DEVOTION

“The last one was killed in 1959, but there was no funeral and no one cried. I don’t know where his tomb is to put flowers on it. I can only wail and mourn his passing in my own way.”

– Naeemeh Naeemaei

For this issue of *Dark Matter*, we put out a call for material focusing on “devotion”—and yet much of what’s here also revolves around the theme of “extinction.” The paintings of Iranian artist Naeemeh Naeemaei are a stunning case in point. Other striking examples: Beverly Naidus’ extinction altars, Megan Hollingsworth’s work with *ex•tinc•tion wit•ness*, Sara Wright’s witnessing of her beloved trees in “Tree Holocaust.” In fact, extinction could be said to haunt most of the material in this issue—perhaps not surprising considering the journal’s mission, but also, as I came to realize, the intimate relationship between extinction and devotion, the way they are braided, the way one tends to nourish, inspire, give birth to the other. After all, this journal itself, which has been very much a devotional practice for its editors, was birthed by awareness of extinction. Installation artist Lily Yeh, interviewed in this issue, puts it this way: “...the beauty that moves comes from the broken dark places.” All this is to say that though we’ve divided the issue into two parts, “extinction” and “devotion,” almost every piece in it could go in either one.

The words in the epigraph above refer to the Caspian Tiger, depicted in Naeemaei’s series *Dreams of Extinction* which appears in this issue. Her tiger is surrounded by weeping women who are giving him the proper ceremonial farewell he deserves. There’s an interesting parallel in Nora Jamieson’s recently published *Deranged*, reviewed in this issue, where a woman holds a funeral service for a coyote who was poisoned by her neighbour. She even puts an obituary notice in the paper: “Eastern Grey Coyote died on February 10th from an acute illness after suffering excruciating convulsions and suffocation....She will be dearly missed by those she leaves behind, her family pack and Anna Holmes of Mountain Road who is holding calling hours on February 12<sup>th</sup> from 9p.m. to midnight.”

I read somewhere that death rituals and ceremonies are what distinguish human from non-human animals. But to say this is to ignore the fact that there are also categories of human beings whose deaths go unacknowledged—by ritual, ceremony, or even markers. In “Ghost Dance: the Poetics of Loss,” also featured in this issue, Melissa Kwasny writes of the obscene disrespect for sites of Indian genocide in the U.S. “A bus driver smokes a cigarette in the parking lot at Sand Creek. The effect is devastating. The lack of monuments, plaques, or any sign of public recognition in some of these places bears witness to a total disregard for what happened, as well as to the people involved.” And in poems that for this reader evoke the almost 1,200 missing and murdered indigenous women here in Canada, until very recently stubbornly ignored by our government, Debra Earling writes of the disappearing of

native women: “No one speaks about the woman/dying in the frail rising of a killing day./A woman hard-frozen in the field...”

This journal arose in part out of my own distress over the horrific unprecedented loss of animal and plant life on this earth due to human activity. However the question of human extinction has never been far from my mind.\* Two days after launching the first issue I was on a plane to Poland to spend five days in Auschwitz-Birkenau bearing witness with Zen peacemakers. On both of my trips to Auschwitz (this was my second) I met Palestinians who'd braved objections and sometimes rejection by friends and family to come and bear witness with us. I remember one of them saying he could no longer face these ruins every day, they were too much like the landscape he awoke to every morning at home (Palestinian poet Lena Khalaf Tuffaha writes in this issue that what Palestinians have endured for decades is “a project of erasure that leaves no human being, olive tree, or square meter of land unscathed”). On one of the last days of this second trip to Auschwitz, I asked a young Palestinian woman what she would take home from this experience. She said: “At home we have no museums no monuments no archives, no way to remember our dead. I will create memorials.”

The poems of Tuffaha and Naomi Shihab Nye in this issue are both asking questions about the politics of perception. Who gets seen? Acknowledged? “What does it mean,” Nye writes in “Netanyahu,” “when one person thinks/others deserve nothing? What is that called? If you know what it is called why keep/doing it?”

In an interview in the [Huffington Post](#) about her recently published book *Dark Matter and the Dinosaurs*, theoretical physicist Lisa Randall says something similar about the implications of dark matter for the nature of human perception. Though dark matter is not visible to the human eye, she writes, it's “essential to the structure and formation of the universe.” This fact helps “to illuminate the gap between our limited observations and the many barely perceived phenomena that permeate our reality...Race and class differences call for empathy largely because of our difficulties in understanding what we can't experience or see, including the often hidden cultural forces that animate other people and their communities.” The “Black Lives Matter” movement had been in existence two years when *Dark Matter* was launched last November and it seemed to me at the time there was a strong subliminal connection between the two. Randall's words make that connection explicit.

In recognition of the fact that when it comes to erasure and extinction, the line between the human and the nonhuman animal is not always easy to draw, that there are categories of humans who are still treated like nonhuman animals (see Tuffaha's poem “Arrest”), our focus broadens with this issue to include extinction in the human realm. Our primary dedication, however, continues to be to the more-than-human world that is bearing the brunt of our civilization's industrial and technological success—a

fact that tends to be ignored by humans, even spiritually developed humans dedicated to social justice. In Auschwitz, my attempts to bring up the parallels to ecocide that kept presenting themselves to me were often met with indifference, if not resentment. (Which is why I was so happy to learn of Buddhist nuns who have taken on the issue of humans' warped relationship to the earth – see my interview with Ayya Santacitta in “Listening to Natural Law.”) The astonishing inattention of the rest of the world is the driver of George Monbiot's article in [The Guardian](#) about the “eco-apocalyptic fires” that have been raging across Indonesia since July: “The fires are destroying treasures as precious and irreplaceable as the archaeological remains being levelled by Isis, clouded leopards, sun bears, gibbons, the Sumatran rhinoceros and Sumatran tiger...” Monbiot writes that there are thousands or possibly millions more threatened species being driven from their habitat. The title of his article is “Nothing to See Here.”

## II.

“...aching for—seeking a word, some word(s) that might bear what we are knowing, and what we are yet desperate for. Desperate for safety? For peace? For better memories? Of course. What word will make our lives safe? I'm trying, as you are—to find it.”

– Margo Berdeshevsky

The above words are from notes to the poem-collage “Our Safe Word” which appears in this issue. They, and the poem, were written by a poet who lives in Paris— and they were written *before* the Paris attacks in November. Often, the most important part of our knowing, as human beings, is not conscious. Is dark matter. Even consciously, it seems we all know a whole lot more than we did just over a year ago when the first issue of this journal came out—and much of “what we are knowing” often seems difficult if not impossible to bear. Some days that knowledge seems to be pouring in, like the refugees at our gates, who also remind us at what cost we in the industrialized West have lived and continue to live the way we do.\*\* For anyone willing to look, the dots are being connected. Here in Canada the just-released final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission determined that the residential school system established in the late 1880s caused the deaths of over 3,000 aboriginal children and the loss of countless languages, amounting to a “century of cultural genocide” whose legacy continues today. In the U.S., greed, racism and xenophobia have erupted to the surface like an angry boil. And, in reporting on the recent Paris climate summit, even mainstream sources were not denying that “Her Body is Burning.” (See Mary Sutton's piece in this issue for a harrowing account of the way cultural disease can take up residence in a human body.)

Knowing what we know, how do we live? (“Knowledge and understanding are not remedy, we came to understand...” writes Deena Metzger in “Our Radiant Lives.”) This more than anything was the question that gave rise to this journal. Sharon English asks the question another way in her review of Taiaiake

Alfred's *Wasáse*. "How do we non-indigenous, who have no cultural connections outside of an imperialist system and thinking, recover an indigenous consciousness? What does it even mean for us to *come home* to this land? To root?" As if in answer to her question, Anne Bergeron writes, in "Calling out the Names": "...saying all the names of the things I love is the beginning of breaking a deafening silence and rooting myself in my home, the earth."

There are so many beautiful responses in this issue, so many forms of offering: setting out food, sitting in silence, singing, waterwalking, dancing, carrying story. Paying attention. "There are," Cynthia Travis writes, "endless ways to show gratitude, or to notify the Spirits of our heartfelt commitment to live in active alliance with the natural or unseen world." Most of these ways involve surrendering to what we don't know: to dreams, to nonhuman intelligences. To dark matter. Even, in the case of Nora Jamieson in "I am Nothing Without my Dead," to the voice of the "pitted earth": "...the test pits, the uranium pit, the mined earth gouged with our longing. Out of the throat of the keening woman comes everything you did not know you longed for. Out of the throat of the keening woman comes everything we destroyed in our innocent desire for a good life."

"Who is prepared to walk into darkness?" asks Lily Yeh. She is speaking most especially of Rwanda, where she built a genocide memorial. "There is unknown. You don't know what's lurking there. One doesn't know whether one has the capacity to deal with the unknown...Yet when we are guided by our heart, when life beckons us, and when we are sensitive to the inner voice, and when we are brave enough to follow life's calling, then wonders happen. Things unfold..." Ayya Santacitta and Megan Hollingsworth, in their interviews, also speak of leaving comfort behind, and safety, of entering the unknown. And of following their heart.

"When you're lost," Yeh says, "there are birds talking to you. There are animals pointing directions. There are people along the way helping us. We just have to be brave enough to listen to our heart, which has that wisdom, intuition, that evolved through millions of years. Nature's evolution. A lot of time we don't pay attention. We lose touch with that."

How do we know? How do we live? In this issue, as has been so in every issue of *Dark Matter* so far, there are animals pointing directions. Perhaps nowhere more beautifully than in the only piece in this issue with a nonhuman narrator (Mei Mei Sanford's "Serach bat Ascher speaks"): "We are so big and we touch each others' mouths so gently with our trunks, we touch the songs in each others' mouths."

Lise Weil  
Montreal December 2015

With this issue of *Dark Matter*, **Kristin Flyntz** steps into the role of *Dark Matter*'s editor. Some of you know her as the author of "Grieving with the Elephants," which appeared in our first issue. In what follows she makes her editorial debut, writing of extinction and devotion and what this journal has meant to her.

July, 29, 2015

*It is night and a gusty wind blows. I am on my front porch, trying to get into the house, but the small silver key I use doesn't fit the lock. I look behind me and up. Above the tops of the tallest pine trees, an elephant trunk waves against the night sky. I cannot see the elephant, only its trunk, but the elephant must be enormous for its trunk to reach so high. Simultaneously, to the left of the elephant's trunk, there are pictures/images in the sky, as if a film is being projected onto the backdrop of darkness. The ground shakes... something huge is coming. I am taken by the sight of the trunk. My stomach clenches at the trembling of the earth. I see a small stack of books wrapped in waxy brown paper and string; they have an "old" feeling about them.*

The next evening, I saw a Facebook post announcing that on August 1, images of endangered species would be projected onto the Empire State Building as part of a project called [Racing Extinction](#). The creators hoped the scale of the event would raise awareness about the illegal animal trade, which is driving many species to the brink of extinction. It would take place during a week when the world responded in outrage and grief to the unconscionable murder of Cecil, a beloved African lion, by an American dentist. In Kenya, President Obama had spoken out against the illegal ivory trade that is decimating elephant populations.

After a day of anticipation, I watched the event via live-stream on my computer. Cecil's image lit up the south side of the building, and was followed by numerous others: elephant, tiger, whale, snow leopard; birds whose names I do not know, frog, insect, coral bloom; creatures of land, sea and sky. Caught in a roving spotlight, an ape, reminiscent of the iconic scene in the film, "King Kong", climbed the building and set off a psychedelic display of light and color in which the painted faces of indigenous people seemed to shapeshift and dissolve into animal visages. It was audacious, in its way, and a spectacular technical feat. Yet it left me unmoved, really, but for my gratitude for what its creators were trying to accomplish on behalf of the animals.

The next day, I told the dream to friends, and said I believed it was connected to the event in NYC. Animals often come to me in my dreams, and it is not unheard-of for me to “get the news” in my dreams before I receive it in waking life. I believe the animals want us to know what is happening—to them, to all life. I spoke of the small, simple bundle of books in the dream, bound in brown paper and with string. Books used to be our source of knowledge and wisdom, and now we employ high-tech, computer-generated, visual feasts for the eyes (“weapons of mass instruction,” according to the event's creators) to engage and expand our minds. How things have changed.

Later, I thought again about the bundle of books, and replayed the dream in my mind. It occurred to me that long before we learned from books, our wisdom came from being in and of the real world, the natural world, with all its teachers and lessons seen and unseen—with its dreams, signs and experiences, lived and felt. And then there was the key that would not grant me entry to the house, mandating that I stay out in the night and wind. Only outside could I see the enormity of the elephant, which was not part of the “projection,” but the *real thing*, larger than life. A friend with whom I shared the dream said her first reaction was to the key, which she saw not as a key to the house, but “to the kingdom”—the wild kingdom, the domain of all creatures great and small.

What does it say, or mean, that in order to capture collective attention and raise awareness of what is at stake, we must resort to tactics such as a digital display on the Empire State Building? Is not the reality, which seems to find new and more horrific ways to express itself every day, profound enough? The exhibit's images were powerful, but they were *representations* of the endangered animals, flat and one-dimensional, shot through with interior lights from the building's offices, taken out of their natural context, and dimmed by the ambient glow of an overpopulated city powered by fossil fuels. They were largely viewed through the lenses of cell phones and cameras that further distance us from the animals and our complicity in their jeopardy, as well as our own.

What might we feel if we were to witness the lone silhouette of a real elephant, a great giant, trumpeting against the night sky—whether out of grief or pride or love for his mate—and know, *really know*, that he is one of the last of his kind? What would it be to stand with our bare feet on the earth, and feel the ground tremble with the heaviness of each step as he walks away forever into the fog of our memories? How long would it be, in our current world and our current minds, before we forgot him entirely? What reverberations would be caused by his loss? Can we even begin to imagine? I cannot.

Elephants can communicate with each other across many miles, through vibrations that travel through the earth. Underground. They can feel each other, speak to each other, even if they can't see each other.

This is what *Dark Matter* is to me—the essential, visceral, heartfelt connection that was missing from the display on the Empire State Building. It is a pulsing, underground communication, an energetic resonance—the signal of a movement, an affirmation of life and lives moving toward the possibility of restoration—and they are not all human. It is an ear to the ground, nostrils flared to catch a wind-borne scent, a full-throated cry into the night sky seeking someone or something to receive it. It is the cellular memory of whale song, the darkness that makes visible the light of the full blue moon, a smouldering ground fire that torches illusion and ignites remembering, a wind that carries stories like seeds and sows them in unforeseen places under the cover of night.

I pray that the elephants and all our kin know we are listening for them—and for each other—in all the ways we know to do, and in hopes of learning other ways, perhaps with their help. Even as my heart breaks, again and again, for the state of the world, it is full of gratitude for the inspired vision and sacred offering that is *Dark Matter*. I am equally grateful to and for the women who are bringing such difficult and beautiful contributions to the circle that has been cast. I read them as they come in, and marvel at the tapestry of voices, images and stories they weave. It is also a web, a web threaded with stunning and terrible truths, grief and love—a web that can help to hold all that needs holding. It is certainly holding me.

Kristin Flyntz  
West Granby, CT

## **I. EXTINCTION**



**Debra Magpie Earling**  
**from *The Lost Journals of Sacajewea***

**in the fog-brutal days when backs of buffalo scab with ice**

and the weak calves

fall to attendant wolves.

Lewis and Clark are shooting game

gray clouds tumble birds

falling from the gun-hazy sky---

Fawns mewl in the frosted grasslands

Red guts steam snow and the

Hooves of deer and antelope

click in the trees

slaughter-hung where wolves cannot reach them.

The woods are haunted by the silver eyes of dead animals.

But these things are always and survival and

these white men have not cached the summer berries

haven't split the rye grass to seeds or twisted the black moss

to chewing ropes for winter hungry days.

Now a blood scent rises in the bowl of sleep.

No one speaks about the woman

dying in the frail rising of a killing day.

A woman hard-frozen in the field

Her trail marked by the blood of the hundred pounds of buffalo

she carried.

And the sleek footed wolves trailed her,

~~wove~~ weaved\* a tight trail around her sniffing

the bitter wind she carried.

The razor snarl of their teeth chewed the meat off her back

down to the column of her bones.

But her life was so powerful

even in death she is still

standing. Her rigid spine

sparkles in the steam of river light.  
Her eyes glitter at the swooping birds.

Men weight their wives with venison antelope buffalo meat  
make them walk for miles  
for one small favor from the white man  
a trinket  
a handful of beads  
a promise of plenty  
dying in the shrill wind.

In the deep burr of sealing snow  
women are struggling  
their bones  
quaking  
the rattle of leaves falling forever  
skittering over  
ice.  
They are not the beautiful women  
men fight over.

The white men don't see the wives who are hidden  
in the lodges at the edges of lost  
the women who carried the small-pox dead  
to scaffolds  
losing their fingers  
in purging fires  
of children  
or women who gather bundles of sticks  
in the frost-bitten winters of fever.  
They are witches  
who crawl hump-backed  
~~their~~ hands only palms/~~the~~ webbed feet of ducks/work dogs to carry  
meat.

This is the life left to unfortunate women.

Infection a quick blessing.

Fingers of weeds

scuffle

point to sky

above them.

Blind days of men.

But the beautiful women are running

running

the banks of the black river

begging

the white men

are laughing.

York\*\* weeps ~~wheezes~~

hiding in the gray timber grass. Even the faces of trees

turn toward him.

The white men ~~mistake~~ believe

they are desirable.

\*I used strike-outs on the manuscript in an attempt to say and not say the things Sacagawea may have thought to say (or not say). I also used the strike-outs as a device to get at the idea of cross-cultural interpretation and misinterpretation on the page. I believe--although history tells a different story--that she spoke English and understood nuanced language and the power of words better than any other in her company. As an interpreter I think she would have struggled to grasp the right word or words and would have cast them out as shimmering ghosts of the whole idea she wished to convey. Words obscured but evident. As a traditional woman I think she saw words as living things, not so easily dismissed or discarded.

\*\*York was William Clark's slave on the expedition. He fully participated in the expedition. I have often wondered what he thought of the whole thing. I believe for the first time in his life he experienced power, a rare and certain power that went to his

head—I imagine he was dizzy with the attention he received from all the Indians along the Missouri. Instead of a slave they saw a man of great power and might and wished for their women to sleep with him in order to retrieve his power for their own.

### **Traps —They are Trapping the Animals**

Lewis and Clark are sending fox to the great white father.

They have trapped a spirit fox, a fox that carries the weighted soul of a man possessed by bad spirits.

Meriwether places the caged fox at the edge of camp every day because his cage is foul as pig's blood, he says.

But I know Meriwether is afraid.

Every night the caged fox moves

when night fastens

the moon-heavy water

to spirits

when light sifts

down in dark currents

and the river

begins chanting.

Do not look

there

at the bottom

there

along the lip of shore

water channeling the thing-not-named

the dim sky water carries is older than time

older than blood

bigger

In the deepest still place of the river

fox is chanting

sparkling scales of fish scattering silt  
beaver slick currents

fox conjures

sparks of waves      smoothing stones

fox gnashes his teeth  
his black mouth open  
his teeth so white  
I chatter in sleep

They can't  
put his cage  
far enough  
away from me

In the dark he is the thing moving

I wake

his rattling cage beside me  
fox whispering  
a harsh wind low

I have opened the cage door  
he remains

Fox blood is sour  
his small head wounded

I am afraid of his teeth,  
his grim shining eyes  
mostly  
I am afraid  
of his voice

He could kill me with his stories

*I bludgeoned my wife he tells me-----*

*I broke*

*the blood of her flesh----*

*I broke*

*the thin bones of her fingers for touching another man----*

*I branded*

*her ribs with fists.*

*I stabbed her*

*with a fire stick blazing*

*to sear her*

*to me.*

*She turned*

*so many colors the sky could no longer please me.*

Who is she? I ask.

*Wife for Dark Nights, he answers-----Wife for Dark Nights Wife for Dark Nights Wife  
for Dark nights Wife for dark nights wife for dark nights*

## **Notes**

November 13, 2015\*

I woke up around 3 in the morning and in the staticky light saw a woman standing next to my bed. She had a cage at her feet. I couldn't make out her face but I saw that she wasn't very tall and that her hair was in braids. I turned on my light and the apparition disappeared. But I began to scribble something down on the notepad I keep by my bed.

The next morning my mother phoned to ask me if I had heard the news. Apparently the Smithsonian had announced the return of a sacred fox to its rightful place and people. The sacred fox had been removed from its traditional homeland by Lewis & Clark over two hundred years ago. I cannot remember the tribe but when I hung up the phone I picked up the notepad and was stunned by what I had written. An odd coincidence? I am not sure. But the story of Sacagawea is so powerful, it haunts me.

I see Sacagawea as a very young woman, so young we would consider her a child in this day and age. There is dispute about who she was, her name, her origin, but the fact that she was a traditional native woman has never been disputed. She knew the sacred ways, the old ways and when I think of her, I also think of all the native women who have disappeared in recent years. Sacagawea is powerful because she refuses to disappear. Her knowledge of the old ways is a lifeline to memory, a light that continues to shine. She continues to be reinvented, revised, re-envisioned.

After reading the journals I was struck by the references to the ferocity of the time. Women were strapped with a hundred pounds of buffalo to carry to the corp in deepest snow. Women had to attend to the small pox sick, the dead and dying. In writing *The Lost Journals of Sacajewea* I tried to capture, perhaps illuminate, native women's longstanding struggle and desire for freedom.

Because her name is also in dispute I wrote her name phonetically--the way I remember it pronounced as a child hoping perhaps people would once again feel comfortable talking about her. The revisionist thinking in the pronunciation of her name--even if correct--is another lens that removes us from her story. When people become uncomfortable attempting to pronounce her name, they become silent, and little by little the story becomes lost to us. Remember how often you used to hear of her. Now I have people correcting my pronunciation and insisting on a glottal stop—but how can that be—when the Lemhi Shoshone still call her Sacagawea? I fear it is another way to make native women disappear.

Oh, and I don't call these pieces poems. I don't consider myself a poet. I used line breaks to accomplish a pattern of image that I call shattered prose but feel uncomfortable with the term poet.

\*From personal correspondence (ed.)

**About the Author:**

Debra Magpie Earling is Bitterroot Salish and a member of the Flathead Nation. She is the author of the novel *Perma Red*, and *The Lost Journals of Sacajewea*. She has been a recipient of an NEA grant and a Guggenheim Fellowship. She teaches at the University of Montana.





**from Ghost Dance: The Poetics of Loss**

**(DebraEarling)\***

Melissa Kwasny

"And so it was all over," the great visionary Black Elk says in his account of the Wounded Knee Massacre of 1890. "I did not know then how much was ended."<sup>1</sup> Wounded Knee, where the United States Seventh Cavalry killed 150 noncombatant Sioux men, women and children, was, of course, not the only massacre in the four hundred year history of the white-Indian wars. It was only one of the last in the legacy of violent conquest and attempted genocide, both physical and cultural, that haunts any real understanding of what it means to be an American. As historian Patricia Nelson Limerick writes, in an essay entitled "Haunted America," it is the foundation that "our presence on this continent rests on."<sup>2</sup>

Every inch of earth, after forty thousand years of occupation, is probably a site haunted by human violence. "Maybe there are no fields other than battlefields," writes Wislawa Szymborska in her poem "Reality Demands," "those still remembered, / and those long forgotten, / birch woods and cedar woods, / snow and sands, iridescent swamps, / and ravines of dark defeat."<sup>3</sup> In a profound book, *Sweet Medicine: Sites of Indian Massacres, Battlefields, and Treaties*, one which could serve as a metaphor for Americans' perhaps willfull blindness to this haunting, contemporary photographer Drex Brooks presents black and white photographs of abandoned fields, ditches, and shopping malls where major events in the years of the conflicts occurred. Some sites have been paved over for mini malls; the burnt out stump of the famous council tree at Horse Creek in Nebraska lies at the roadless edge of a cornfield; a worn footpath winds through debris next to a highway. A bus driver smokes a cigarette in the parking lot at Sand Creek. The effect is devastating. The lack of monuments, plaques, or any sign of public recognition in some of these places bears witness to a total disregard for what happened, as

well as to the people involved.

Rebecca Solnit, in her book *Storming the Gates of Paradise*, writes, "Such erasure is the foundation of the amnesiac landscape that is the United States. Because the United States is in many ways a country without a past, it seems, at first imagining, to be a country without ruins. But it is rich in ruins, though not always as imagined, for it is without a past only in the sense that it does not own its past, or own up to it. It does not remember officially and in its media and mainstream, though many subsets of Americans remember passionately."<sup>4</sup> One of the paradoxes of living in the West is that the palimpsest is more visible. Many white people grew up on farms bought when Indian country was carved into allotments, an ingenious method of forcing poverty-stricken Indians to sell their lands. Many people live in reservation border towns, and there is much inter-marriage. But more importantly, I think, is that one actually knows people who have been directly involved, whose grandparents or great grandparents survived or didn't survive Sand Creek, whose ancestors starved waiting for food at Fort Robinson, whose mother or father was kidnapped while camping and sent far from his family to boarding schools. To lose one's language, loved ones, culture, land, and religion is, according to Richard E. Littlebear, to "dislodge[d] us from the 'very ground of coherence." He says, "It forced us out of our minds."<sup>5</sup>

Those who have so recently lost languages, landscapes, ancestors, even the remains of their ancestors, often in the most horrendous ways possible, have, in effect, lost a world. Those who have survived with great strength and intelligence to inhabit a nation given over to values and rapaciousness contrary to their closest spiritual beliefs—these are people who have something to say to all of us. How to write the enormity of such loss? And just importantly, how to move forward afterwards? We are now confronting an equally drastic apocalypse: the disappearance of coasts and icecaps, the extinction of other species at a rate of at least 10,000 a year, the warming of the planet, the frequency of destructive storms. War, and its atrocities, seems to be the matter of the day. Scientists speak now of a sixth

extinction. Our world is going to change, is changing, might disappear, and we might disappear with it, as we seem unable to stop the relentless and destructive direction we are heading.

American Indian writing, particularly poetry, seems increasingly crucial to me, as an expression of our deeply troubled history, and as one which has much to say about grief and cultural survival. And there is something else. In the photographs in *Sweet Medicine* of the massacre site though they may be obscured, there is, in each of them, an uncanny sense of human presence. As if they were ghosted: as if something remained to stare back at us. The ability to see past what most of us are taught to see is one definition of the visionary. The visionary poems in the most recent book of American Indian author Debra Magpie Earling, a member of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Indian Reservation, provides answers to the questions I have proposed: how to meet the challenge of writing the enormity of loss, whether cultural, environmental, or personal, and how writing can provide us with visionary paths to go forward.

Proposed as a counter response to Montana's bicentennial celebration of the Lewis and Clark expedition of 1804-1806, *The Lost Journals of Sacajewea* is a collaboration between fine printmaker Peter Rudledge Koch and Salish poet and novelist Debra Earling.<sup>6</sup> Originally published in a limited edition, bound with buffalo hide and trimmed with trade beads, the "photo adaptations" and Earling's book-length poem are a revelatory—one is tempted to say clairvoyant—channeling of the voice not only of a woman but a people, not only a people but a distant, almost inaccessible vision. The expedition, charged by President Thomas Jefferson with finding a water route from the Mississippi west to the Pacific Ocean, notably "for purposes of commerce," is one of the most romanticized myths of the American West and its "discovery." The flood of white settlers, railroad men, buffalo hunters, fur traders, and the military campaigns it ushered in accelerated the end of a way of life for millions of indigenous people. In fact, as Cheyenne visual artist Bentley Spang notes, Native Americans are still struggling with their "Recovery from Discovery."

Crazy Horse, Sitting Bull, Chief Joseph: most Americans know only the most famous leaders of the tribes. Very few could name any women. Muskogee Creek poet Joy Harjo writes, "Historically, there are no female voices, and especially no female Native voices. The only two who appear are Pocahontas, and she has no direct voice but remains as an image, as a colonized figure in her English clothes. And there's Sacajawea, who has a voice because of her link to two white explorers, Lewis and Clark. We don't hear her voice."<sup>7</sup> Sacajawea has been an enigmatic figure from the start: no one really knows how old she was when she joined the expedition, when or where she died, or how much or little real power she had during the journey, given that both leaders were dismissive of Indian women in general. Historians disagree as to how to spell or pronounce her name. As Earling notes in a personal correspondence, she deliberately spelled Sacajawea's name the way she grew up pronouncing it: "There is such an element of controversy in the pronunciation of her name and I think it has done much to silence her and remove her even more from the idea of personhood—a person, not an idea. She has become so many things to so many different people and there are so many legendary tales about her that the simple recollection of her name is in dispute. *In essence she is torn apart, lay claim to like a land divided into countries and we have lost her to myth.* [italics mine]"

How to recover the sound of the name of a word? Of course, there are no lost journals of Sacajawea's. She was, as were most Indian women of that time, illiterate in her native Shoshone language and her husband's French and English, though she served as translator in their encounters with many different tribes. During the journey, she would have had no time to write anything down, even if she could. She gave birth to a son within a few weeks of meeting up with Lewis and Clark. She traveled at the pace of men. She had her duties as the wife of the translator, Charbonneau. She was deathly sick a number of times. And yet the *possibility* of a found journal, recoverable after two hundred years, written by a woman with the unique vantage of having lived in the old Medicine World and traveling now with the new, insider and outsider, Indian with the whites, woman among the men, is irresistible. It is the perfect

form and a forum for Earling to attempt the rescue and recovery of this missing person *and missing point of view*, as well as to powerfully investigate the nature of loss itself.

A journal is a record of a journey, whether temporal or geographic. It typically consists of daily observations, usually of weather, transactions, and major events, sometimes listing items one has seen or bought or eaten. Unlike the famous and public journals of Lewis and Clark's, few women have been assigned them. As wife, mother, and Indian, Sacajewea had no voice in the journey, or the journals. Her *point of view* was something no one would expect existed, as the point of view of the fox or the deer would not exist, nor was it something anyone in the party would seem curious about. Yet, like most captive outsiders, one can imagine her observing carefully, stealthily. To imagine that the speechless finally have a voice, albeit a secret one, has always both frightened and intrigued us. It is our intrigue with hermetic histories, suicide notes, and the psychics who claim they can talk to animals, and with anything that has been irrevocably lost. Her journals, like the diaries kept by many pioneer women—who recorded births and deaths, the lack of food and the crazy-making prairie winds—might serve as a shadow enterprise to official histories, counterpart to the famous journals of Lewis and Clark, their viewpoint conditioned by their western education, their way of seeing Indian and white alike, their convenient assumption that they are civilized and the people they meet are savages. Who else but Sacajewea could tell us?

Earling maintains the conventions of the journal: each day is named, events are recorded, the voice is first-person but not necessarily personal. The speaker is observant, alone, watching others. She notes the weather. But there are crucial differences in Sacajewea's version, ones that serve to distinguish and highlight the vast gulf between world views, and, knowing as we do how the story turns out, illustrate the profound nature of what has been lost.

Day of the Aching Moon in the Year of Their Lord

In my dark sleep the moon hair is split and the rain falls. Days find the lowest point of the channel and move slowly, not wise, and the world is wicked.

*All day they have been collecting animals.*

Sacajewea names the days not in white man's terms, using the Gregorian calendar, but in the traditional way, by the moon and the seasons: Strawberry Moon, Corn Planting Moon, Moon of the Strong Cold. In her journal, even the tribal names are abandoned; instead, she creates strange new names that speak of her alienation: Day of Not One Knows My Name, Day of the Crying Animals. Under each date is an entry, which contains only a few sentences. The effect is to sense how careful and quiet, even dangerous, is her watch, not filled with duties, though she must have had many, but judgments and her registering of horror. One can almost hear her whispering to herself: *They act wickedly*. They are wicked because they have been collecting animals for their specimens. She sees them killing things without eating them, without proper regard.

#### Day of the Crying Animals

Last night the wind creaked through the trees and [spent] spat the last breath of Indians. The only thing I look forward to seeing is the red light that lines the meadows, the brassy light of kettle fire, sleep.

Kidnapped by the Hidatsa when she was just a girl, forced to travel east hundreds of miles across the plains far from her home, and then sold to what many have speculated was a brutal man, Sacajewea had already suffered trauma by the time Lewis and Clark arrived in her Hidatsa village on the banks of the Missouri river in 1804. One can imagine her fear and confusion as she watched them—as many other native people there must have watched them—as they prepared to build a fort at which to spend

the winter before braving the tall mountains to the west. It is here that Sacajewea's journal begins:

### Building Mandan Camp

There is no fever  
like the fever of white men building  
the sound of trees falling  
hissing  
the branches of bones snapping/cracking/dying.

### Building

they are building their houses.

One day their buildings will devour the sky.

Point of view is possibly more clear-cut in a journal or diary than any other form of writing. One records in a journal what one sees, but also what one chooses to exclude. What one sees and excludes is most often determined by one's culture. Sacajewea immediately establishes the difference: they are white men, unlike her. They *build* their homes, unlike her people, who are nomadic. What they see and hear, she also notices, is different. It is apparent to her in their capacity for violence and in their complete disregard for the pain and destruction they are causing the plants and animals to suffer. She hears the remaining trees, "gathered shoulder to shoulder / shuddering loss," but the men do not.

On a day named "Two Suns Dull the Thick Clouds," one can sense Sacajewea watching in the old way, one keenly observant of the weather, faint changes in the light, and the movement of animals, signs on which her people, living intimately in nature, were dependent:

In the waking hour when all animals turn the color of dust,  
the hour of first feeding  
a faint glimmer of light at the edge of [branding,] [blunt,] blue snow calls.

My blood returns stinging.

One imagines her alone, in her world, not the world of the whites, no one there but herself and her baby, who has woken her to feed, just as the animals have awoken to feed outside. It is no longer six a.m. but the "waking hour," pre-dawn, when animals are colorless. For Lewis and Clark, this hour changes throughout the year, but she is precise in her language. This hour does not change.

Sacajewea ushers us into a different world, one that is timeless. Cheyenne historian Linwood Tall Bull writes that Indians are experts at body language because of their many centuries of watching animals.<sup>8</sup>

Sacajewea hears the prairie dog trapped, crying in its specimen cage. She feels the other animals hiding in their response to hearing it. At dawn, in winter, her sense of her own blood "returns stinging." She uses her own body's response, in turn, to make her decisions:

I must gather  
myself as many  
[Particles, cottonwood down in cinder light].  
My spirit shivers over the river.

Her extreme attention provokes a response, which results in her own set of instructions. Carried further, it becomes an uncanny act of prophesy: "We will leave this place soon," she concludes. It is a resonant world Sacajewea lives in, one in which all beings she encounters speak and listen to each other, a way of being that ecological studies with their emphasis on the importance of biodiversity

seek to explain but which might also be described as a visionary one.

The "journal" does not cover the entire two years of the expedition. It begins with the building of the camp at Mandan and ends with Sacajewea's vision of the buffalo gone: "Buffalo haunt the sky." One speculates that pages or volumes might have been lost or damaged by weather like the fragments of Sappho's. Or perhaps her work was interrupted or she wrote sporadically, not daily. Perhaps she lost heart. Earling doesn't say. It is clear, though, that Sacajewea, and hence her people, had a different sense of time. There are entries which speak vividly of events in the past: the rage of a stampeding buffalo herd rampaging a village, for instance:

Sometimes the ground rolls and the great houses shake.

Tassels of corn rain pollen. For on the shelf of the earth the buffalo riot.

Skulls of their hooves

dent/mark/cut

the land.

Often, one doesn't know whether she is recounting an experience, recalling a memory, or repeating a story she was told, or if, in passing through a place, she is seeing what occurred there in the past. "For me, memory isn't situated in the past, but moves about freely," Harjo writes. "We can catch hold of it. And some of it is born within us, probably located somewhere in that DNA spiral."<sup>9</sup>

Sacajewea knows that her stories are different. "This is the story Lewis and Clark won't be writing down," she says. Lewis and Clark couldn't possibly tell her story of the buffalo trampling the village because it contains all those things—the destruction of the village of the past, her exhilaration at the hunts of her youth, the buffalos' future obliteration, even their haunting us now—as her experience of time does.

One harsh winter day, the kind of weather when "the weak [buffalo] calves fall to attendant wolves," she begins a horrifying story of a woman, burdened with buffalo hides on her back, falling prey to the cold and then being devoured by wolves. "No one speaks about the woman / dying in the frail rising of a killing day," she writes. Lewis and Clark are out hunting. Again, it isn't clear whether the thought of wolves has jogged her memory of this story of a woman's sad fate, whether she is witnessing it, or if she has seen a ghost. Sacajewea tell us that, though the woman is dead, she sees her still: "Her rigid spine /sparkles in the steam of river light. /Her eyes glitter at the swooping birds." Her death is embedded in the land she passed from. But, there is something more. Just as Lewis and Clark can't hear the cries of the animals, or see the dead lying around them, they are also incapable of seeing the suffering wrought upon Indian women, a blindness they share, she implies, with Indian men. "The white men don't see the wives who are hidden / in the lodges at the edges of lost," she writes. This is hardly a romanticized depiction of pre-contact life. Women are sent by their men to trade buffalo meat "for one small favor from the white men." Women who are poor, unbeautiful, "unfortunate," hump-backed and broken, those with small pox, or dying children, are outside everyone's range of vision, she complains. "They are not the beautiful women / men fight over." She says, "We have passed the graves of a thousand women in a single day."

John Berger, in "Twelve Theses on the Economy of the Dead," claims that the dead and the alive exist as a whole together: "The dead surround the living. The living are the core of the dead. In this core are the dimensions of time and space. What surrounds the core is timelessness." He continues: "Between the core and its surroundings there are exchanges, which are not usually clear. All religions have been concerned with making them clearer."<sup>10</sup> When there is any kind of transmission, from core to periphery or periphery to core, something is invariably lost in the translation. One senses this as mystery and feels it in all that Sacajewea doesn't explain. We sense it also in the technique Earling uses of redaction.

Lines within brackets are those that are crossed out:

A child stands so close [~~to fire~~] his hair [~~singes~~] smokes.

If we suspend our disbelief that the journal was found, that it is being translated by someone who speaks and reads Shoshone, the redactions convey the inability of the translator to bridge the gaps in language, in time, and in the cultural and world views between contemporary American culture and that of nineteenth-century American Indians. There might be no words in English for certain objects or experiences. In some places the words are crossed out until the right one appears, as if the initial translation weren't successful. In some, the redaction functions as a correction, as in this devastating explanation of the rape of Indian women: "The white men [~~mistake~~] believe / they are desirable."

There are also a few explanatory addendums, placed, as an editor might place them, in brackets, such as when, after Sacajewea's lovely description, "I must gather / myself / as many," used in preparation for the coming bad weather, she gives us an image of what that might look like: "[Particles, cottonwood down in cinder light.]" There is a double sense that these could also be Sacajewea's corrections, given that she is a translator in her own right, a medium through which the past and future seem to move fluidly. In either case, the technique works to give us the sense of words and images coming from across great distances to emerge stuttering, straining for the light, the way we might try to recall the figures in a dream.

Throughout the journal, Sacajewea sees behind, but she also sees ahead. She sees Meriwether's suicide, which occurred in 1809, long after the expedition ended. "Meriwether will lift a musket to his head and feel the spruce-feathered crack of his skull, his cold brain./ Dusk will haunt the rusty sky. He'll live for days in his last hours. He'll see the dead he has killed." She has foreseen the building of houses everywhere, the disappearance of the buffalo and the

prairie. "They can only take so much," she writes in a revolving and revelatory sequence of syntax. "Only they can take so much. / They can only take so much." The lines move through connotations of hope that the whites will not take everything, to the realization that they are intent on just that, to a sense that there is still something left that they will never be able to take, or a last meaning, that of a possible curse, as in *they won't be able to take what will happen to them*.

If we have vanquished the lost and the dead from our perimeters of the self, we ignore them at our peril. The world, as Sacajewea writes in her journal, is dangerous with spirits of the past. Their voices are still here, as are their images, if one could see them. In 1855, the Duwamish chief, Chief Seattle, famous to white people for a benign speech about caring for the earth, also gave a speech that said, "And when the last Red Man shall have perished, and the memory of my tribe shall have become a myth among the white man, these shores will swarm with the invisible dead of my tribe, and when your children's children think themselves alone in the field, the store, the shop, upon the highway, or in the silence of the pathless woods, they will not be alone. . . . At night when the streets of your cities and villages are silent and you think them deserted, they will throng with the returning hosts that once filled them and still love this beautiful land."<sup>11</sup> This is the prophesy Sacajewea leaves us with. "Someone is moving. / Beyond the clearing," she writes. It is a gift that Earling gives us, that she has seen them, too.

### Footnotes

\*Adapted from "Ghost Dance: The Poetics of Loss," first published in *The American Poetry Review*, March/April 2015

<sup>1</sup> Neihardt, John G. *Black Elk Speaks*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, p. 276.

<sup>2</sup> Limerick, Patricia Nelson. "Haunted America," in *Sweet Medicine: Sites of Indian Massacres, Battlefields, and Treaties*. Drex Brooks. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995 [no page].

<sup>3</sup> Szyborska, Wislawa. *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*. New York: Mariner Books, 1995, p.184.

<sup>4</sup> Solnit, Rebecca. *Storming the Gates of Paradise: Landscapes for Politics*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007, p. 355.

<sup>5</sup> *We, the Northern Cheyenne People: Our Land, Our History, Our Culture*. Lame Deer: Chief Dull Knife College, 2008. p. 41.

<sup>6</sup> Earling, Debra. *the Lost Journals of Sacajewea*. Photo-interventions by Peter Rutledge Koch. Berkeley: Editions Koch, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Harjo, Joy and Tanaya Winder. *Soul Talk, Song Language: Conversations with Joy Harjo*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011, p. 13.

<sup>8</sup> Tall Bull, Linwood. Indian Education for All Conference. Montana Office of Public Instruction. Helena, Montana,

Feb. 25, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Harjo and Winder, p. 11.

<sup>10</sup> Berger, John. "Twelve Theses on the Economy of the Dead." *Leftcurve.org*. Web. 8 Feb. 2012.

<<http://www.leftcurve.org/lc31webpages/John%20Berger.Poems.html>>.

<sup>11</sup> Brooks, Drex. *Sweet Medicine: Sites of Indian Massacres, Battlefields, and Treaties*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995. [no page]



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## DREAMS BEFORE EXTINCTION

Naeemeh Naeemaei

These paintings, inspired by Maeemaei's concern for the endangered species of Iran, were part of a series shown in an exhibition at the Henna Art Gallery in Tehran. The entire series is collected in *Dreams Before Extinction*, a book edited by Paul Semonin in collaboration with the artist and published by Perceval Press in 2013. Written commentary by Naeemaei accompanies each of the paintings.

In the introduction to *Dreams Before Extinction*, Paul Semonin writes,

*Painted in a dreamlike, figurative style that is disarming in its sincerity, the images bring together many different elements of Iranian culture, from religious ritual and sacred scriptures to folk tales and children's stories. "I use my dreams, wishes, memorabilia and legend, plus information about the species, to extend my imagination," [Naeemaei] says. "In each painting, I've lived with an animal in my mind. It is a deep connection." In effect, she is asking us to do the same, to identify with the animals in a more personal way, as though they were part of our family.*

*Dreaming becomes a powerful medium of communication, both for her personally and for the viewers of these artworks. Dreams take us out of the comfortable region of the conscious mind to a mental and physical place where emotion comes into play much more readily. In many ways, Maeemaei is saying that the purely logical mind has its limitations when it comes to expressing the pain and grief she herself feels at the loss of these species, or the damage our way of life causes to the natural world up on which all life depends.*



### **SIBERIAN CRANE**

Acrylic and oil on canvas, 2011, 152 x 210 cm

They say that he is the very last one! The Siberian Crane is a traveler from Russia that comes to the coast of the Caspian Sea in Iran to spend the winter each year. His Persian name is "Omid," which means "hope." The book I am holding over the crane's head is the Koran. Traditionally the Koran is held over the head of a person who is leaving the house for a journey, to make sure s/he will return safely. I am using this custom, which is common in Iran today, to ensure the crane will come back next fall. It was the only thing I could do, as a mother, sister, or a wife, whichever you may.



### **IMPERIAL EAGLE**

Acrylic and oil on canvas, 2011, 94 x 210 cm

An art critic once asked me: Have you paid attention to the symbolic meaning of the animals in your paintings? Did you think of the power of the Caspian Tiger or the symbolism of the Imperial Eagle in your paintings of these animals? Are you interested in wild and powerful animals? Do you believe in their legendary powers? He guessed that my general ideas were taken from the symbolic values of each animal. I told him, No! I don't care. I am happy if the symbols match my animals, but to me all animals, even the seemingly weak ones, are as real and powerful as any other in the real world.



**CASPIAN RED DEER #1**

Acrylic and oil on canvas, 2010, 205 x 146 cm

For me, the Caspian Red Deer is a mysterious animal. I had eaten its meat in my childhood and had seen his antlers in my paternal relatives' houses, but I had never

seen his picture. I didn't know his name or what he looked like? The dark background of this painting is an image I had in mind from outside my grandma's house during a cold autumn, her house being located right in this animal's habitat! My uncles are hunters and they don't listen to my bemoaning them not to hunt. I had those antlers, so I decided to be the body of the animal himself, to be buried under a tree respectfully with him. And perhaps I wanted to say to my uncles: "We are one! Bury us together or stop killing us."



### **HAWKSBILL TURTLE**

Acrylic and oil on canvas, 2011, 190 x 160 cm

"The Turtle and the Geese." In Iran this story is found in the tales of "Kalila and Dimna," from the *Panchatantra*, an Indian collection of ancient animal fables. Once upon a time

there was a turtle who lived in a pond that was going dry. The turtle asked two geese for help, and they agreed to fly him to another pond. They held a stick in their beaks while the turtle was hanging onto it by his mouth. The geese warned the turtle that he must remember not to open his mouth, lest he would fall. While the geese were transporting him in the air across the countryside, a group of children down below burst into laughter at the funny sight. The turtle became angry at their rude remarks and opened his mouth to reply but fell from the sky to his death. If you don't mind, I would like to change the old story to make my own story. In a new version of the *Panchatantra*, I play the role of the turtle, and the blue sea plays the part of the sky. The turtles help me to fly in the sea, and I guide them far away from the roads and artificial lights on the shoreline, a form of light pollution that disorients newborn turtles, sending them inland to their deaths rather than to life in the sea. I don't want them to remain endangered. I want them to live and flourish.



**PERSIAN STURGEON**

Acrylic and oil on canvas, 2011, 190 x 125 cm

This painting is the only nightmare in the series. You can predict the end. The net will definitely fall. The old house in the painting is my maternal grandma's house in an old

sector of Tehran. It is located in a narrow alley with a little stream running through it. When I was about five years old, I used to sit on the stairs watching that small, dirty stream, waiting for a fish to pass by! I even tied a rope to a branch to fish there. How foolish! How hopeful! The sturgeon lives in the Caspian Sea and is valued mainly for its caviar. The Caspian Sea is actually a closed lake and is getting more polluted every day. The problem began after the Soviet breakup when the new countries around the lake put aside any restraint in fishing sturgeon. I have brought the Caspian Sea to my grandma's alley to be with the sturgeon there. And, as in a nightmare, the fisherman comes out of the windows above to fish us. I hug the sturgeon to be with her, to be part of the same destiny. Under the net...it is a ruined dream.



### **CASPIAN TIGER**

Acrylic and oil on canvas, 2011, 117 x 190 cm

In his habitat he was called the "Red Lion." Actually he wasn't a lion, but I must admit that he was red; he was bloody. The last one was killed in 1959, but there was no funeral and no one cried. I don't know where his tomb is to put flowers on it. I can only wail and mourn his passing in my own way.



**LORESTAN MOUNTAIN NEWT**

Acrylic and oil on canvas, 2011, 218 x 160 cm

This is the most introspective painting in the series, and the only abstract one. I am in the center with many salamanders linked to me by black and red threads. We have

many things in common: the patterns on the backs of salamanders, the design of the costume from Lorestan province that I am wearing, the lines of my wavy hair, and my blood veins that connect me to the red pattern of the salamander's back. I've tried to gather all of them around me, to connect our blood, our body, and our destiny.

Naeemeh Naeemaei's paintings and sculptures have been widely exhibited in Tehran. She has also had exhibitions in Berlin and Eugene, Oregon. She received her B.A. in sculpture from Tehran Art University in 2006. The subject of her last series of sculptures at the university was "the decay of plants." She is active in Iran's environmental movement and involved with several organizations that seek to raise awareness about endangered species and other environmental issues. "I want to make some changes at least in my own people about their behavior with regard to nature and the environment. Even for just a bit!" she says.



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## **Our Radiant Lives**

Deena Metzger

Each of us adds to the council of not knowing as our own churning anguish rises from the radiant sea that is outshining the night sky. The sacred, it was said by someone who had studied forgotten and destroyed languages as if they were precious foreign objects, appears when everything is in its place. It assumes place. It assumes you have a place to put your feet and so do I. A place that might even be a stone pillow upon which you lay your head so that you might, tirelessly, watch the moon rainbow cross the sky, waiting for God.

If place has disappeared into the wind shear of destruction, has the sacred tumbled into that pit as well? A poetry of place today as ravaged as the Disappeared and out of this, a mutant birth, if any.

Repetition follows repetition, radiant, radiant, radiant – a rat striking the electrified button to turn on a synapse of relief in a metal cage insuring there is no escape from torture. This does not illuminate how I or you or we could have constructed Fukushima or torture chambers for humans and non-humans. A rat would not have thought of it, nor the Earth Sea Mother. A mental shift, a brain change, a devolution as rapid and extreme as climate change and created by the same thoughts and activities.

“We are the earth,” we said as women concerned that we might disappear into the mind set of the corporate maw, “and how you treat us is how you treat the earth.” Or maybe we said the opposite: “How you treat the earth is how you treat us.” Or both.

Knowledge and understanding are not remedy, we came to understand, as we stood and remain with Cassandra watching the on-going carnage; against our will, we become whores to it.

Accepting that people I know have been tortured does not assure me I could survive it, or better, die of it when applied. And science, the great god of a depraved species, will soon offer a procedure or a pill, made of our own DNA, our own genetic material, to wipe out bitter memories. Related methods, newly tested on veterans suffering PTSD, can wipe out the memory of slaughter – what they did, what was done to them, their responsibility or lack of it – so that even wars may be erased from our memory, and consciousness will shrivel like an old balloon, and then the brain will wither, nothing in it but a false positive of Eden. The soldier forgets that he tortured while his torture victim writhes wherever she has been dumped to resume her rat life. Or maybe we can arrange for her to forget, as well. Not one of those murdered by government order will be brought back from the dead. Nor those vaporized by bomb blasts rivaling the sun.

An old memory:

I told a friend: "I can't bear it."

"Who asked you?" she answered.

I thought this was our comedy routine.

She died early, wailing at the injustice of it, without knowing she was being given the grace of escaping what was left of the twentieth century and the brutal beginning of the twenty-first on Planet Earth.

**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.* She has just completed a first draft of a new novel, *A Rain of Night Birds*.



## Her Body is Burning

Mary Sutton\*

It is 1991, and my body is burning.

Doctors mark my skin in ink, drawing borders around areas that are hot to the touch. Like wildfire, infection advances across these boundaries in a matter of hours, sometimes faster. I am possessed by fever extremes of hot and cold that refuse to be regulated. A river of antibiotics floods my system, killing good bacteria along with the bad. The boundaries we draw stop nothing. My tissue swells with poison and turns black as it dies. This is the nature of necrotizing fasciitis, also known as the flesh-eating bacteria.

Saving my life requires medical experts in infectious diseases, gynecology, plastic surgery and other specialties.

The only way to stop the infection is to cut it out. Across the entire width of my abdomen, down through my pelvic region and part of my left leg, metal tools carve into my skin, through the subcutaneous tissue, and remove everything above the fascia, forever changing the landscape of my body.

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Two decades later, in 2011, I was doing well at work as a corporate communications professional, had a loving spouse, and was living a comfortable life. Yet I had the nagging sense of participating in a sham. My skin felt too tight. I was agitated and uncomfortable. I wanted to break out of what I was in and enter into... I didn't *know* what. I felt there must be something else, something more.

I began to have dreams. Night after night they came. Some showed me violence, loss and death. Some included images and iconography that were foreign to me, but which I later learned are significant in other cultures. Some dreams presaged events or conversations, teaching me that time is unbounded in the dream world. Frequently, the dreams involved animals. I researched their geographic origins, their spirit-totem associations and their habitats, trying to understand what they might be trying to tell or teach me. Initially, it seemed that most of the animals that visited my dreams were endangered species. Over time, the dreams made it clear that all animals, including humans, are endangered; again and again, I learned that the primary threat to their survival is our way of living. Through the dreams, animals became my primary source of awakening to the danger facing all life:

*A reindeer, her dark hindquarters strewn with white speckle-stars, comes with her little one. I learn that the reindeer, and the cultures in which they are at the center, are in jeopardy.*

*A doe and her daughter graze in my yard until a lone gunman shoots them just because he can, then leaves them on my doorstep. I am catapulted into grief.*

*A mule deer teaches me that wildfire and overdevelopment are eradicating its habitat.*

*A snow leopard appears in the heat of the summer sun, and I learn that climate change and poaching are two of the greatest threats to her survival.*

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One night in 2012, I held the question before sleep: “Where is the rest of me?” I hoped I might glean insight into the source and nature of my longing, and the persistent sense that something was missing—something important, and maybe essential. In response, an epic dream-journey

returned me to several life events during which had I left my body. The dream, which I titled “Remembering,” allowed me to finally feel and integrate those moments of dissociation.

*A bear comes and gives me explicit instructions for reclaiming lost parts of myself: “Go back to the woods. Go back to the water.” I return to the scene of a frightening and painful betrayal in the beloved woods of my childhood home. Pinned beneath a trusted friend like small prey, my face in a bed of dead leaves, I feel confusion and terror, the threat of violence, as he mockingly thrusts himself against me from behind. I hear his dry laughter when he finally releases me, as though it was all a game. I want to flee from him, from our friend who witnessed and also laughed, and the flood of embarrassment, hurt and fury that fills me. Then, separate from the memory, I hear, “I wandered out of the woods and got lost.”*

*Next, I am in the hospital pool after the surgery for necrotizing fasciitis, where each day, my wounds are debrided in bleach water. I lie on my back as the nurse moves me around the pool, doing her work of cleaning the surgical site. My flimsy hospital gown floats up around my chest, exposing the rest of me. Looking up, I am mortified to see that through a window above the pool, I am being observed by a large group of residents. They see the most private parts of my ruined body, the body that even before the surgery was a perpetual source of disappointment and shame. I feel the violation of their unannounced invasion of my privacy, their detached, clinical regard for their “subject,” the nurse’s failure to cover me or turn me away from their gaze. Then I am alone in my hospital room. I slide out of bed and position myself in front of the mirror. Defying the doctors’ recommendations, I undo my bandages, and for the first time since the emergency surgery some two months earlier, look at my body, willing my eyes not to leave the mirror. It is not my body, not the one I remember. Spanning the entire width of me is a deep, raw, gaping space where the smooth white skin of my belly used to be. Gone is the line of peach fuzz that led from my belly button down to the curly dark triangle of womanhood—and*

*that, too, is gone—all of it replaced by the glistening red hole where the center of me used to be. My stomach roils as my grounding gives way to an inky darkness of shock, horror, fear and shame. Swells of dizziness accompany tingling at the top of my head as I try to comprehend that the wreckage in the mirror is me.*

The final image of the dream was one I did not recognize, and could not reconcile: *A newborn is submerged in a pot of boiling water, then pulled out and held up with forceps. It is beet red, arms and legs clutched tight, its entire body trembling, its face contorted in a shattering scream.*

I woke terrified and choking on tears. Afraid of whatever in me could have conjured this last image, I told myself it might be a depraved metaphor for something I couldn't quite decipher, perhaps related to the bleach water in which my wounds were debrided.

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One year later, I was reading Eve Ensler's memoir, *In the Body of the World*. There on the page, in even more gruesome and impossible detail than in my dream, was the infant. A woman in Bukavu, Democratic Republic of Congo, was telling her story to Eve, reliving it. Raping soldiers cut the baby out of her best friend's belly, tossed it in the air and then into boiling water. The soldiers held a gun to the mother, forcing her to eat her baby or be shot. Eve writes, "It was here that I walked out of the world.... Here where I decided to exit, to go, to check out. Here in the suspended somnolent zone where I told my body it was time to die. It was not a foreboding, as I thought. It was in fact a longing, a decision I made...I saw how death had been my only comfort. I had quietly and secretly been moving toward it."

Not long before reading this, I had a dream in which elephants self-selected to be culled: *Take me. Take me.*

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I knew something about making the decision to check out of the world, had lived my own version of “Take me”. Before contracting the flesh-eating sickness, I was on a path to starve or drink myself to death, or both. Starvation took me out of my body, away from its persistent needs, its softness and vulnerabilities, away from its intrinsic and dangerous proclivities for “sinful” thoughts and behaviors. Control became my religion, and my body was my offering. Life lost all color and nuance. I began to see the world, to live it, as a series of extremes: good or bad, yes or no, all or nothing. I measured my worth by the numbers on the scale. Achieving “success” as an anorexic (and later, bulimic) became a solitary endeavor, one in which I was at the center of everything: how I looked, how much I weighed, what I would eat or not eat, how I felt, who or what might be an obstacle to getting what I wanted or needed. There was little room for anyone or anything else. My body became an empty, arid landscape—all hard surfaces, straight lines and sharp angles. There was no such thing as going too far or getting too thin. The sensitive, artistic, intuitive, and compassionate girl I once was got smaller and smaller. I was going to make her disappear.

Drinking, on the other hand, took me out of my head: a reprieve from the logic, discipline and control that dominated my daytime behavior. As the alcohol flowed, it carried me along, loose and free, from initial buzz to blissful oblivion, where I could feel nothing. When I drank, the introverted, prudish anorexic became something of a “wild girl”—I laughed too loud, danced with abandon, spoke with confidence, tested my sexuality. But, just as there was no “too thin,” there was also no “too drunk.” More was always better, and I overindulged—in alcohol, food, spending, and sometimes risky and irresponsible behavior. Most days, I spent many hours hiding in some bathroom, sick from the last night’s drink, or the box of laxatives I had eaten before bed, or a morning binge. The potentially rock-bottom moments—stealing from a roommate, sexual assault during a blackout, repeatedly soaking the bed with my own urine—failed to move me to change.

What the starving, purging and drinking had in common was to sever me from my heart, from the messiness of feelings. It was this I craved most of all.

Having finally depleted my immune system to such a degree that I had no defenses, my body succumbed to a shock-and-awe attack from *Streptococcus A*, the bacteria that caused the necrotizing fasciitis, and put my slow march toward eventual suicide on the fast track. That I survived is a mystery and a miracle.

Shortly following my release from the hospital, after the surgery that saved my life, I resumed a cycle of dieting, binging, and purging. And drinking. Having come so close to death, my body radically and irrevocably changed, one might assume that I woke up, took my great good fortune to heart, and made different choices. The truth is, I did not. I continued to struggle with disordered eating for another nine years. It was another eighteen years before I got sober. I never mourned what the illness had taken from me, never celebrated or gave thanks for my survival. I got on with it, pushed forward. I moved through the days functionally enough to acquire some trappings of “success”, and spent my nights in search of “the flat line” – a quiet state of numbness, a placebo for inner peace. Shutting down was reflexive, like a series of steel doors slamming shut from the pit of my stomach to the top of my throat and across my chest: *Access Denied*. Vulnerability, needing others—these were the hallmarks of the weak and undisciplined and were to be avoided at all costs.

Now, nearly twenty-five years after surviving necrotizing fasciitis, and in recovery for the disordered eating and drinking that made my body an ideal host for the infection, I am beginning to understand that my illnesses were a microcosm of what is happening in the dominant culture and on the planet. Dreams have come to weave a story of connection and disconnection that

has helped me begin to understand the nature of our world, though it has taken me years to piece it together.

The “Re-membering” dream tells me: “I wandered out of the woods and got lost.” In the moment of my friend’s betrayal, my body and the woods had become unsafe, and I fled them. In doing so, I quite literally became a lost soul, untethered and disconnected from my body and the earth’s. The bear’s instruction, “Go back to the woods,” suggests that to reclaim the lost parts of myself, I must return to the forest, rebuild my relationship with it. The bear also tells me, “Go back to the water.” I understood this to mean that I must return to the ocean—one of my greatest sources of comfort and inspiration. Along with bathing suits, I had avoided it in the years since the surgery. The image of the infant in this dream sequence connects me in an uncanny and terrible way to Eve Ensler, whose work has been significant to me since I discovered it in the late 1990s. We both have a history that includes being unable to really live in our bodies, and now my psyche and hers share this hideous image.

The dream of the elephants who self-selected to be culled helps me to understand the anguish of other species that are being asked to witness and bear the unbearable: the slaughter of their families, communities, and habitat at the hands of humans. If humans can decide that the only comfort or hope of relief is death, could not animals decide the same? How do we live with this possibility?

Through the lens of these dreams, I began to see that the cultural mindset that causes men to systematically destroy women and children in the Congo is the same mindset that causes them to brutally decimate communities of elephants for their ivory. It imagines, enacts and justifies horrors such as the genocide of Native Americans, the African slave trade, the Holocaust, Hiroshima, the global war on women, and ecocide. It is this same mindset that caused a young

woman to turn against her own body, to view it as an enemy to be dominated and controlled, and to ignore the grave risks and dire outcomes of her life style.

In my understanding, this mindset arises out of our profound disconnection from the earth, the great body from which we all emerge, and by which we are sustained. Life itself has become the “collateral damage” of our rapacious hunger for more power, control, property, resources, and wealth. We take with a sense of entitlement and impunity.

In *Columbus and Other Cannibals*, Native American author Jack D. Forbes puts it this way: "I call it *cannibalism*. ...But whatever we call it, this disease, this *wetiko* (cannibal) psychosis, is the greatest epidemic sickness known to man. The rape of a woman, the rape of a land, and the rape of a people, they are all the same. And they are the same as the rape of the earth, the rape of the rivers, the rape of the forest, the rape of the air, the rape of the animals. Brutality knows no boundaries. Greed knows no limits. Perversion knows no borders. Arrogance knows no frontiers. Deceit knows no edges. These characteristics all tend to push towards an extreme, always moving forward once the initial infection sets in."

In my own prolonged state of disconnection, I perpetrated countless acts of violence and betrayal against my body. Eventually this led to a rapid and irreversible die-off, as infection devoured my skin and left only gangrenous tissue in its wake. Cannibalism, as Forbes describes it, consumes the lives of others; gangrene consumes its living host. I think about illness as metaphor and wonder if gangrene is a form of cannibalism turned inward—a disregard for the sanctity of life that can eat us alive.

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During a recent meditation, I ran my hands across the forehead and down the trunk of an elephant, then along the broad and weathered expanse of her side. Moving around to the back

of her, I regarded her tail, imagining I might hold onto it like a young one, following wherever she led. Before I could grab hold, she began walking ahead of me, turned back and looked at me for a moment, then continued walking. In an instant, she disappeared into a smoky blue mist with the words, "We are all becoming extinct." I was bereft.

Whatever else may be required to bring healing, I have learned that I must know my grief: for the animals, for the earth, for humanity, the future, and myself. Occasionally, the enormity of it has overwhelmed me. But grief has brought me back into my body and my heart. It has been the glue that has helped me begin to reassemble the lost and missing parts of myself that I could not piece together even a few short years ago. I feel more human, more whole, for having entered into relationship with it. Sometimes when it comes, whether unbidden and urgent, or having simmered just below the surface before breaking through, I think, "Okay, thank you, I am still real, I can still feel, I am *here*."

Each of us has a gateway, or portal, to our grief; the animals are mine. They are suffering greatly as a result of our ways of living. They are grieving, too. My dreams tell me that they want us to grieve *with* them for all that we have lost, are losing, and still stand to lose.

During the meditation, another elephant told me to go to Stonehenge. He said, "There you will know ancient. There you will know devotion. There you will know memory." A Cree woman once told me that the Stone people have borne witness to everything since the beginning of time. Like the elephants, they are beings of long, long memory. Good teachers, both, for without memory, there is no wisdom. The real world wants us to remember how to live in a way that furthers life. It is willing to help us, if we listen for the ways in which we can ally with it and act accordingly. "*I wandered out of the woods and got lost.*" "*Go back to the woods, go back to the water.*"

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Through my own particular suffering, dreams, and memories, I have come to understand that I carry the grief of humans' disconnection from the body—the earth's and our own—and the consequences of this disconnection. I carry it in and on my body, its scars the evidence of my betrayals. When, as a young girl, I wandered out of the woods and out of my body, I entered into the cultural mind of "I." This mindset is the real disease. Anorexia, alcoholism, and necrotizing fasciitis were my symptoms, and, one might say, central characters in my personal story. I no longer experience the illnesses as "something terrible that happened to me," but as allies that were trying desperately to get my attention and signal that something had gone terribly wrong.

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Four years ago, I huddled under five layers of covers, the windows draped in quilts to keep out the cold. Outside, pines and maples, oaks and beeches groaned and cried in the night wind, their limbs snapping like bones under the weight of snow and ice. Whole trees came down with a sickening sound that knotted my stomach and brought tears to my eyes. This was no dream; it was Storm Alfred, which arrived in New England two months after Hurricane Irene, and four months after the Northeast tornado outbreak. I wept to a friend, "The trees are the front lines." Alfred took thirty-nine human lives; more than a thousand trees are estimated to have fallen in Central Park alone. Twenty-two hundred trees in the New York Botanical Garden's old-growth forest were damaged.

The following spring, I hiked through a local game refuge, and wept again at what appeared to me a battlefield strewn with bodies of trees. The woods on my own property have lost some of their density due to the storm. During the past two winters, they have thinned even more as the deer with whom we share the land have, seemingly in desperation, stripped the bottom six feet or so of the hemlocks for food. This year, for the first time I can remember, the brook on my

friend's property was bone-dry. My friends out West have been praying for rain for four long years; across the country, we are losing millions of acres and animals each year to mega-fires.

*It is 2015, and Her body is burning... Wildfire... advances across ...boundaries in hours....*

*Extremes of hot and cold refuse to be regulated... A river floods... killing the good ... along with the bad. The boundaries we draw stop nothing...*

When I do as the dream tells me to do, and return to the woods and the water, I am right-sized, no longer at the center or the apex of things, as our culture would have us believe, but one miniscule part of a living, breathing, interconnected organism that is constantly communicating. In the presence of brook or ocean, under a canopy of birch and conifer, I begin to remember what I come from, what I am made of and belong to, what I must attend to, and what is at stake.

\* "Mary Sutton" is an assumed name to protect the author's identity in an era of Google searches and background checks, and in a culture in which addiction is still a source of great stigma and shame.

<sup>1</sup> Jack D. Forbes, *Columbus and Other Cannibals* (New York: Seven Stories Press, Revised edition, 2008), Introduction.

#### **About the author:**

**Mary Sutton** lives with her husband and cats. They happily share the land with bears, deer, foxes, coyotes, rabbits, hawks, skunks, squirrels, chipmunks, raccoons, vole, countless birds and crawlers, a gorgeous variety of trees, and generations of Stone people.



Naomi Shihab Nye

**My Grandmother Said**

*They just don't know our stories,  
(after being tear gassed by Israeli soldiers,  
she held the cut onion, the hankie to her face) -  
If they knew our stories, they would behave a different way.  
They never sat around my small fire cracking almonds.  
They don't know I have a great sense of humor.  
I never showed them what I keep inside my green trunk,  
the tiny treasures I have left, since they took my house...  
... if they saw them they might laugh,  
the broken plate, the strip of cloth.  
It might be good for them to laugh,  
since they never smiled at us yet,  
not even once. I don't know where they came from  
but I come from here, it was always my field,  
I don't care who owns it, it's mine.  
If you speak to the trees, they'll speak back  
not only with olives but a soft mixing of leaves  
after the soldiers return to the city, or wherever else they go,  
and the trees with their deep hearts apologize for all meanness,  
I mean this, a rustling...  
They just do not know.*

## **Netanyahu**

You don't need a periscope

or a microscope

to see another human being

guiding a child

hand on shoulder of a child

arranging a coverlet over a sleeping child --

You don't need a stethoscope

to imagine a heartbeat.

What does it mean when one person thinks

others deserve nothing?

What is that called?

If you know what it is called why keep

doing it?

You don't need a skewer for broiling

or a paring knife for seeing inside.

## **Notes**

My Palestinian father, Aziz Shihab, was a newspaper journalist most of his life. Though generally a congenial, gracious spirit, he was highly annoyed by headlines that didn't actually fit their stories—a more common predicament for print journalists than many might believe. He resented poor grammar—in English or Arabic—and was exquisitely careful with his own. And he was saddened by displays of inequity and small-mindedness—in society, religion, politics—and the ongoing false spins about the “great

democracy of Israel,” when his own family had lost their home in Jerusalem in 1948 due to the occupying Zionist soldiers. It was all a sell-out: money, guilt, power. Why couldn't a balanced country have been created instead, one which recognized that Palestinians were already conducting themselves and their precious lives on the same soil (do not for a minute, please, believe the empty desert-before-their-coming myth which Zionism has repeatedly tried to perpetuate)? It was a lifelong grief for him and he did everything he could—speaking, writing, advocating—to try to balance the “dark matter” of lies.

Why couldn't we more easily imagine one another's lives? Why was empathy so difficult? Former President of Israel Shimon Peres once said what surprised him most about getting to know Palestinians was, “that they had aspirations like ours.” Well, why wouldn't they? Do I in my Texas home two hours north of Mexico imagine mothers across the border don't love their sons as much I love mine? Since when did human imagination become so parched and puny?

Many regular citizens of Israel are able to appreciate Palestinians as human beings with traditions, skills, incredible patience and intelligence—and vice versa. Consider hospitals. Consider Hand in Hand Schools. Consider the fascinating and balanced-power Neve Shalom village, etc. Why can't politicians with tons of cash behind them imagine a wider horizon of shared lives together, as regular citizens can, and do? Can anyone even imagine what a tremendous glowing society that might be? And how would this single shift change the sizzling, awful, underground energy of “terrorism”?

But the “chosen” theory would have to die. You can't have “chosen” and “unchosen” dwelling in easy harmony. (How these ongoing, seemingly endless inequities of consideration might connect to recent Paris crimes, or the popularity of extremism, or attitudes of American exceptionalism which suggest we are free to do whatever we like within other people's borders, is a long discussion for smarter people. I do recall a South African driver asking me, at the moment the United States was invading and bombing Baghdad, what would Americans think about us if we did that in Algeria?)

The current crop of Republican candidates, with their righteous spouting of devotion to Israel (never considering all the crimes against humanity Israel conducts on a daily basis, or the regular massacres of thousands of innocent Gazans, with American

weapons, which gets almost zero press) would have disgusted my father. He would have turned his face away. I am almost glad he died so he didn't have to hear them.



Naomi Shihab Nye's most recent books are *The Turtle of Oman* (Greenwillow), a novel for children, and *Famous* (Wings Press), a single poem illustrated by Lisa Desimini. She has written or edited thirty-five books and been a "visiting writer" all over the world for many years.





## Arrest

Lena Khalaf Tuffaha

In the middle of all of this

just for a moment

can we stop to talk about the thirteen year old boy's legs

still covered in thin hairs that have not grown long

enough to be coarse against the soldier's palms,

their softness unnoticed by the

machine-gun callouses of the soldier's hands

mangling the slender legs,

stripping them of their cheap jeans,

lifting them like kindling

from the floor of the army jeep,

splaying them apart so that even as he writhes in pain,

his legs battered by the soldier clad in

layers of fibers crafted by modern technology

to protect against weather, flames, the dust

of the earth, even as the Palestinian boy writhes

in pain on the floor, he tries to fold onto himself

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as the soldier spreads his matchstick legs apart  
an animal fear awakened in the boy of what a predator  
might want to crush next,  
can we just take a moment  
to ask: if this boy somehow  
lives, what will his legs have to carry  
as they grow and the hair on them  
thickens to barbed wire?  
what weight will he lift each time he walks?

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**Notes:**

Palestinian children face a profound threat every single day that they live under Israeli military occupation. Soldiers, many of them only a few years away from their own boyhood and steeped in increasingly vitriolic anti-Palestinian rhetoric and deep fear of the other, patrol their neighborhoods, stand by idle or participate as extremist settlers taunt and harass the children on their way to school, and often engage with Palestinian children with ferocious violence. Israeli laws are constantly being changed to allow for the detention by armed soldiers of younger and younger children. Palestinian bodies are under constant threat. This violence is one aspect of an ongoing *Nakba* that Palestinians have endured for decades, a project of erasure that leaves no human being, olive tree, or square meter of land unscathed



Lena Khalaf Tuffaha is an American poet of Palestinian, Jordanian, and Syrian heritage. Lena's poems have been published or are forthcoming in journals including *Lunch Ticket*, *Monarch*, *The Lake for Poetry*, *The Taos Journal for International*

*Poetry and Art*, *James Franco Review*, *Mizna*, *Borderlands: Texas Review* and *Sukoon*. She is a two-time Pushcart Prize nominee, for her poems "Immigrant" (2015) and "Middle Village" (2016). Several of her poems have been anthologized; most recently, her poem "Running Orders," published in *Letters to Palestine: American Writers Respond to War and Occupation*, by Verso Press and "Seafaring Nocturne," published in *Gaza Unsilenced* by [Just World Books](#). She is an MFA candidate at Pacific Lutheran University's Rainier Writing Workshop. Her first book of poems, *Water & Salt*, is forthcoming from Red Hen Press.



## Tree Holocaust

Sara Wright

Almost 30 years ago, I stepped out of the car in pouring rain and fog so thick it enveloped me instantly in a misty shroud. I let the roaring brook guide me to the edge of the field where I peered down at a red deer who raised his new rack of moss-covered antlers to meet my gaze. We stared at each other in mutual wonder as water flooded the emerald banks of this sinuous mountain brook. Although the rest of the landscape was obliterated by fog, I understood that this piece of earth *knew* me in some inexplicable way, and was calling me home.

Three months later this patch of woods and brook with its field overlooking the mountains became mine. From the beginning the land held and spoke to me even as I gathered sweet summer berries. Here under my feet pulsed the body of the mother I had never known. Although She remained invisible, I knew I was loved because I could sense Her as I touched each plant, flower and tree, took in each



breath of clear mountain air, or wandered over the steep granite speckled field to visit with the foxes near their den. The very next year I constructed a very small twelve by eight foot camp in the woods next to the brook and fifteen years later built the small log cabin in which I have lived ever since.

One day driving home from town that first summer I felt compelled to explore a mountainous area that had been brutally logged. Baffled as to why I felt so driven to get close to this tree holocaust, I climbed the steep hill, parked the car, got out, and almost immediately stumbled and fell; I could barely manage

to navigate the piles of slash. I kept moving until I became hopelessly entangled in this human-induced wreckage. Then I collapsed in a heap. Death rose up from the ground. The severed trunks and limbs wept, the smell of pitch was nauseating. Why in god's name had I come here? The question hung in dead air. A great hole had opened in the sky where the trees once stood. I staggered back to the car scratched and bleeding. The sight of such mindless annihilation was impossible to process.

Coming home to my sanctuary didn't erase the image of tree devastation that seemed to have imprinted itself on me; I was haunted by the images of dying trees and the wrenching grief I had experienced standing on that piece of land. That night I had a dream.

*I am standing in the middle of tree destruction overcome by a profound sense of hopelessness. A transparent image of my land seems to superimpose itself on the logged land, floating down and settling over but not obliterating the hideous slash. I can still see the wreckage below but the upper transparent layer of my land is tranquil.*

When I awakened from the dream I was free from the horrific imprinting and looked around with a heart bursting with gratitude for clear waters rushing over stone, for leafy green maples, oaks, beech, birches, wild fruit trees, alders, witch hazel, pine, balsam, cedar, hemlock, and spruce. I wondered if the dream was suggesting that although I might be powerless to stop the logging, I could help the Earth and my



newly found mother by *loving* my land and her trees? The idea seemed credible at the time and I attached myself to its hope like a barnacle.

Oddly, the dream of the two landscapes stayed vivid and clear often surfacing in my mind. But I was troubled by the apprehension that flowed through me in its wake. I continued to comfort myself with the thought that I could interrupt tree destruction by loving my land, and by honoring all trees.

It wasn't until after spending prolonged periods at my camp, "elf house," that I began to have strange unsettling repetitive dreams about 'my' land and our future together. Most of these dreams involved boundary violations. Trees were being cut on the back boundary of my property, thugs on machines also entered from behind my camp. Aggressive neighbors built houses around me and they had guns. These neighbors disliked me and wished me harm.

I felt fear, confusion, and dismay as I awakened from these dreams wondering what they could possibly mean. This land and I were wed to one another; each bird, tree, flower and bush was sacred to me. I experienced joy and gratitude on a daily basis. Why such dark and ominous dreams?

A few years passed before I first started to hear the whining sound of a chainsaw in the distance on a regular basis. Most folks around here including myself heat with wood, so early in the fall whenever I walked up the hill to the road I could hear my neighbors saw their wood for the coming winter, but thankfully these sounds were drowned out around my camp by rushing water and the surrounding forest. When the sound of the chainsaw first penetrated my little patch of wilderness I felt invaded by something sinister. Just as disturbing was the way my body responded to the high - pitched chainsaw whine: by going on high alert until the wail ceased for the day. I also experienced a peculiar buzzing throughout my body. I was unable to calm myself.

I felt compelled to find out exactly where the noise was coming from. One of my neighbors, I soon discovered, had just retired and was logging the entire mountain behind him, a mountain that happened to be located across the road from me. It took him a number of years to strip his mountain of trees, because logging was to him a recreational pastime. I felt such relief whenever the wind drowned out the buzz of the ever-present chainsaw. With increasing distress whenever I walked up the woods road I witnessed new patches of raw earth crisscrossed by tree bodies that left new holes in the sky. After a season or two, during the summer, each bare area was covered over by the lush green leaves of slender saplings attesting to Nature's will to live and withstand harsh treatment. The winter told a different story; the craggy mountain was clearly visible down to its bare granite bones. In my dreams whole forests disappeared, while in day life my relationship to trees deepened, and became more personal as I wrote poems and stories about them. Being sheltered by trees became an obsession. I began to wonder uneasily if my dreams had been casting a net around a future that I was starting to live...

At first I thought it was my imagination that I could hear the trees screaming as trunks and branches were severed from their roots by giant machines as I walked down logging roads. But when they cried out in my dreams, I started to pay closer attention to the collective wailing I thought I heard during the day, and my disbelief collapsed. I am not sure where I got the idea that the way I could help trees the most was to *listen* to their dying but I came to believe and accept that it was true, even though this witnessing forced me out onto the edge of my own despair.

Each year the assault on the trees escalated. Huge skidder marks now ran in parallel lines up and down the sides of some mountains, leaving deep scars on the surface. These ruts would become silt-laden waterways removing precious topsoil from the mountains during the spring melt. More and more logging trucks thundered down the winding roads, swaying dangerously. The hawks and owls and many other birds that once inhabited the surrounding forests disappeared as they lost precious habitat.

Whenever I attempted to bring the plight of our shrinking forest to anyone's attention I was told that Maine had one of the largest forests in the country, that a hundred years ago all these mountains were cleared for farming, or most distressing, that I was a pessimist, wedded to a dark way of seeing.

Ten years ago we all crossed an invisible boundary. The price of lumber went up. Suddenly the logging companies stripped whole mountains in a matter of weeks and virtually every neighbor of mine except three closest to me stripped his/her land of every tree larger than a sapling. At any time of the year, I would be awakened by screaming trees and skidder machines and the earth-shaking thuds of tree trunks crashing into the ground.

When the back boundary of my precious land was brutally logged for the first time I made a pilgrimage through my woods up to the ridge. I wept, said prayers for the dying trees, felt the holocaust permeate every cell in my body. I repeated this pilgrimage only once, when the screeching skidder machines returned a second time to mow down more saplings to get to the last of the Elders, those that used to be my boundary trees.



When I discovered that our local land trust brokered a deal to buy a giant parcel of this same mountain for adult recreational purposes as long as the conservation group agreed to having the land logged first I was stunned. This meant nearly the whole of Moody Mountain, not just a few parcels. I loved this mountain with her ragged granite cliffs, her caves, her springs and brooks, the comfort of her presence;

she had sheltered me for many years. If our local land trust conservation group logged our forests (for their profit) and in exchange gained property that was already logged for recreational purposes there was no hope.

I protested, was patronized, and ultimately dismissed by our local conservation group. Acquiring land for wilderness' sake was not a priority, while stripping the land of its trees and then opening it to four-wheelers and other off road vehicles and for hunting--creating adult playgrounds—was supported with great enthusiasm.

By this time I understood that my relationship with all trees was unusual. I had spent many thousands of hours with trees, blessed and prayed for them in written ritual, talked to them, mourned their losses, found shelter beneath them, listened with my heart opened by the light that I could sometimes feel pulsing through their branches. I loved them and they knew it. At first I was unable to separate their grief from my own and this confusion muddied conversation between us, which upset me a lot. The trees had enough to deal with; they did not need the burden of my psychological projections.

I talked to a few of these tree mothers in my mind, asking them to help me discern. They answered by creating what I can only describe as a light field around me, a field permeated with deep compassion. While in this *Presence*, I attempted to feel my way through their grief and separate it from my own. They had lost almost all their Elders and a multitude of children, experienced ongoing distress for their remaining relatives. Despair was a given.

While writing a letter to protest logging parts of the White Mountain National Forest (supposedly protected wilderness) last spring, I checked Global Watch and discovered that Maine had only sixteen – eighteen percent of mature forest left in the state. Maine foresters suggest that a tree is mature at thirty years old. Are they serious? No one mentions that nut-bearing trees like beech and oak don't begin to produce viable crops of nuts until they are much older. In Northern Maine the demise of the only nut-

bearing tree, the beech, is creating a cyclic starvation scenario for the black bear who is dependent upon its fall mast to survive. Ironically, The Nature Conservancy of Maine has only one small (a few acres) stand of old-growth trees protected in the northern part of the state but it is impossible to access because these trees are in the middle of a huge area that is logged all year round.

Early this spring one of my two closest neighbors began to cut away the glorious crowns and limbs of all the dense white pines on his side of the road leaving bare trunks open to the sky. This man, a security guard by profession at a local ski lodge and his wife, who works there as a waitress, both dislike me (for reasons that remain totally obscure), and at first I suspected that this mutilation of the trees by the road was his way of making a statement to me. He deliberately threw severed limbs onto the road that I walked up each day. It was chilling to watch the way he beheaded each tree and then stripped the trunk of its limbs leaving them in piles to rot. I knew that it took years for a tree to die in this manner. Since most of the initial cutting occurred near the road, I witnessed and grieved for the dismembered trees every time I walked my dogs.

In May when the mutilation began on my other neighbor's property I asked Mary why she would allow this to occur on her land. It wasn't as if the chopping would open a view (for either neighbor). Mary's response dumbfounded me. She *denied* that any cutting was happening on her land. Every day with my heart in my throat, I walked up the road cringing. Birds screeched as their nests were systematically destroyed during nesting season, eggs smashed, chicks left for dead on the ground, keening heartbroken parents left behind. And after the road destruction was complete Mike began to open a huge area around Mary's house. Piles of slash lay everywhere, and the nauseating smell of pitch intensified as more trees lost their crowns and some limbs (most of their trunks were left standing with a few sparse branches remaining). In late July, the next and final time I spoke to Mary, she finally admitted she was opening the area up around her house because she felt so claustrophobic.

I am doing my best to accept the carnage that is creeping towards my front door. For whatever reason, I believe I was called to this land to witness our future. Precognition, a so-called “paranormal” ability, seems to be an ongoing reality in my life. The dream of an image of my land superimposing itself on desecrated earth warned me that things were not as they seemed, that under peace lay heartbreak. Because of the trees I have witnessed my own suffering in the context of that which is greater than my personal story.

But what about the trees? When I listened to the trees, I was surprised to learn that it wasn’t collective tree death that was the worst problem for them; it was their *invisibility* as living beings that distressed them the most. The trees had given up on humans--although they were still able to feel compassion for us as a species because they considered us so lost. (How is this even possible, I wonder.) I was astonished at the depth of their gratitude for me just because I could *see* and *hear* them. I felt ashamed because these simple gestures seemed so inadequate.

This brings me around to the beginning of my story and the hope I hung on to for so many years. My initial impression/interpretation of the dream was incorrect. I understand now that loving my land was not meant to be enough. I was not going to be able to heal devastation with love although it mattered that I cared about my land. I was being called to *witness* for the trees in both their wholeness and brokenness. *Witnessing matters regardless of personal feelings or outcome.* It is only when we are truly able to *see* the trees in whatever shape they are in, and stay in the truth of what we see, that Love with a capital “L” becomes possible.

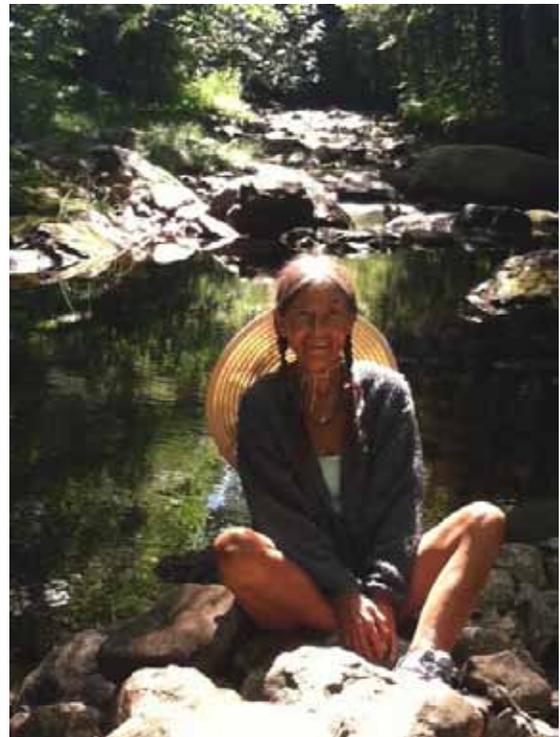
I have recently made a decision to sell this house and land and to leave this area. I am leaving not because of what is happening to the trees, although a circle is closing for me. I came in joy and will leave in sorrow. The noise is untenable. In this valley alone there is daily target- shooting, often with high- power rifles and machine guns. At night there are fireworks and unpredictable explosions. In

summer in order to escape the noise I have to keep my windows shut and when the gunning is at its worst I have to wear ear protectors. The winters are long and harsh and unfriendly neighbors make living here more difficult than it has to be.

Where will I go? I think the answer to that question is less important than my understanding that wherever I go I will be called to witness Nature's sorrow. From now on I will make this choice willingly. It's all I have to give, and in that giving of myself I participate in the Great Round of life in a way that matters to the Earth and to me.

Sara Wright is a naturalist and a writer. Presently she lives in a log cabin by a brook with two small dogs and one dove. She writes about the animals and plants that live on this property and publishes them monthly in her nature column in *The Bethel Citizen*. She has also written for *Trivia: Voices of Feminism* [www.triviavoices.com](http://www.triviavoices.com), and *Return to Mago* [www.magoism.net](http://www.magoism.net). 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. Please visit her blog "Over the Edge and Beyond: Journal of a Naturalist."

[sarawrightnature.wordpress.com](http://sarawrightnature.wordpress.com)





## Curtain Call: Portable Altars for Grief and Gratitude

Beverly Naidus

Seattle, 2015



**Overview of several altars installed at Karl Drerup Gallery, Plymouth State University, NH 2014**

In the summer of 2014, I found myself making altars about extinction. My heart was breaking and I needed to find a way to process what I understood was happening to the world and its species. I wanted to make a series that would roll up and be easy to carry from place to place.

Typically, when I start working with any concept, I scavenge diverse materials and let my intuition dance. It's a form of "contact improvisation" with words, materials and feelings, where I let the weight between each gesture shift, then find balance, and unexpected forms emerge. I may start with a bunch of questions, maybe even a confusion of thoughts about a particular topic, but the way to get there is mostly unknown. False starts can litter the studio and then get recycled.



**In Honor of Monarch Butterflies (detail) 2014**

This time I started with something skeletal. I sewed remnants of cloth, burlap and old curtains, onto thin branches. I punched holes into the edges of old x-rays of my body and sewed them into a central space in each curtain. I was thinking about Tibetan Thangkas as devotional images, with their central imagery of the sacred. I journeyed into something I could not yet visualize, ripping out many threads as things began to gel.

For a brief moment, I wanted to place dystopic images on these hanging altars, but I rejected that impulse early on. Dancing into the nightmare can be therapeutic, but my intention was of a different sort. I encouraged myself to make beauty that speaks about this precious moment, a beauty that expresses my gratitude for the sweet, imperfect contradictions in this life. In other words, when I began to open to the suffering, the grief of losing so much, somehow I found that beauty emerged.

I started listening to Joanna Macy (one of my early teachers) while I worked. In her talks and her writings she discusses the “Great Turning” and what might be necessary to shift our world into one that is concerned about future generations. She talks about the legacy

we are  
leaving the  
future

beings and she does it in a way that resonates deeply. I began to meditate on those generations to come, the ones that will be contending with a radioactive planet with fewer species and less access to clean water, clean air, topsoil, healthy food, shelter and any sort of well being. As I was stitching, I allowed images to dance, like hidden energy behind each curtain; images of people connecting through their pain to morph into vast networks of people educating each other, finding new tools for creating a just & healed planet, bubbling and juicy with diversity, fertility and possibility. I imagined people all over the planet turning their shared grief and gratitude into a resonant and luscious chorus that cannot be silenced until the shift occurs.



**In Honor of the Creatures of the Sea, 2014**



**In Honor of Human Beings, 2014**



**In Honor of the Winged Ones, 2014**

The twelve hanging altars were birthed almost simultaneously, in the sense that I worked on them all at the same time. The first to appear complete was in honor of honeybees, and then monarch butterflies arrived. Over the course of three months, altars to honor old growth trees, clean water, indigenous cultures, clean air, creatures of the land, the winged ones, clean energy, creatures of the sea, fertile soil and human beings emerged. Twelve in all, each one a piece of the puzzle we need to solve. Although there is so much more to mourn and experience with gratitude, I felt complete with this chapter.

When the altars are on display, the audience has an opportunity to share stories of their own grief and gratitude on a piece of tracing paper. A basket of small stones sits nearby. Contributors leave their “trace” under a stone at the foot of each wall hanging/altar. Visitors can read the contributions of others, each person bending down, in a modest form of homage, and moving stones as they do this.



**In Honor of Honey Bees, 2014**

As Alice Walker says, "For we can do nothing substantial toward changing our course on the planet, a destructive one, without rousing ourselves, individual by individual, and bringing our small, imperfect stones to the pile."

### **About the Author**

Beverly Naidus is an interdisciplinary artist who creates interactive installations, imagery and artifacts for site-specific performances, artist's books, and both digital and mixed media works on paper. She facilitated and designed the permaculture-inspired, eco-art project, *Eden Reframed*, on Vashon Island, WA. She is an author, educator and facilitator of the Arts for Change network, an online pedagogical project focused on socially engaged art. Early recognition in the NYC and Los Angeles art worlds offered her many opportunities to exhibit her interactive installations and other work in diverse venues, including mainstream museums and city streets. Inspired by lived experience, topics in her art focus on environmental and social issues. She is the author of *Arts for Change: Teaching Outside the Frame* and numerous essays. Her teaching career includes work as a teaching artist at NYC museums,



Carleton College, Cal State Long Beach, Hampshire College, Goddard College and the Institute for Social Ecology. She facilitates a unique, interdisciplinary, socially engaged, studio arts curriculum, for the UW Tacoma campus and leads workshops and discussion groups in her Seattle studio. She is a cofounder of the collective ARTifACTs currently designing the project "We Almost Didn't Make It," a multidisciplinary, nomadic project that will engaged audiences in a dialog with their descendants. Her website is <http://www.beverlynaidus.net> and her eco-art project's blog is [www.edenreframed.blogspot.com](http://www.edenreframed.blogspot.com)





## TURNING POINT

Marilyn DuHamel

It is too quiet at my house. The songbirds are gone. Really, they are gone. I think they died. I may have killed them.

### Before

On the patio just out my bedroom door there is a residential version of a savannah watering hole, my joy and offering during these parched years of Californian drought. A large green bowl I fill with water each day sits next to an iron birdbath, leaf-shaped, just steps away from a hanging cylindrical feeder chock full of sunflower seeds and millet.

Each morning, warm under my covers, I look out on this scene, curious who will be the first to arrive. Usually a few juncos beat the scrub jays but once the jays come everyone decides it is off limits until these blue rowdies leave.



The chipmunks don't seem to care. Pretty cheeky themselves, they scurry under the swinging feeder, scrambling after spillage from messy jays who, filled for the moment, squawk their exit, which is eagerly anticipated by the varied audience in surrounding shrubs.

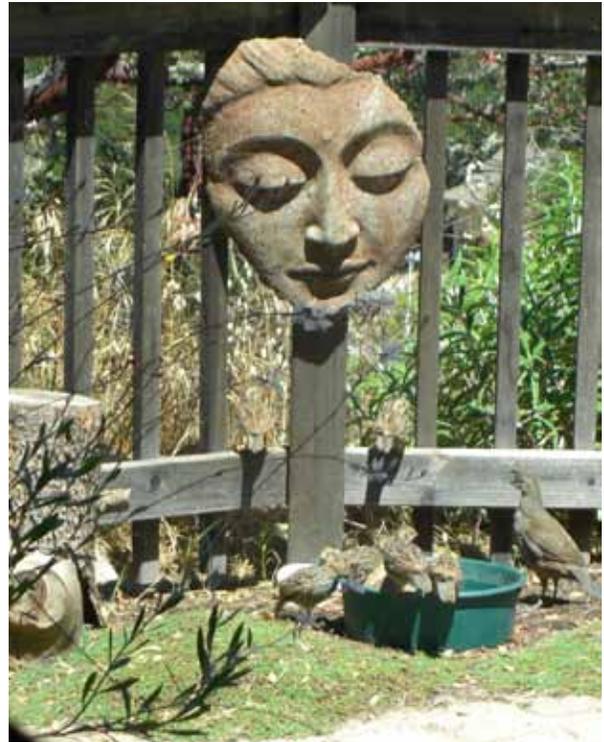
Juncos are the first to sweep back to vacated perches. Chickadees, sparrows, and pine siskins grasp nearby branches. A few stand demurely in line on the redwood railing until one frustrated onlooker finally darts in an attempt to dislodge that junco that has been there a very long time.

I muse from the comfort of my bed about these arrangements. Is there a protocol? Some avian code of ethics? Meanwhile, though the air is chill, small yellow warblers crowd the birdbath and sparrows turn the green bowl into a spa. One, then another, takes a turn to squat, splash, flap and ruffle.

## **Suddenly**

This was the raucous morning world until a short while ago, when instead of critters, uneasiness crept in. Why so quiet? Why's the feeder still so full? Is no one thirsty?

I did a search and discovered—horrified—there's an avian epidemic in many locations across the country, including Northern California. Salmonella. It is deadly and contagious, especially to songbirds, especially those who congregate at feeders, water bowls, and baths where infected fecal matter can contaminate food and water. With the best of intentions, have I created a deadly environment? I remove everything: the green bowl, the birdbath, the feeders.



And I wonder, can it happen just like this? Populations wiped out?

In my darker moments I have despaired for future children: will they hear birdsong in the morning air? How many decades until skies are empty of birds? But it is now, not later, in my yard, on my street. I walk my dog and peer everywhere – not a songbird to be seen. Will they return? When? For how long?

I shudder and weep as I shed one more skin of innocence.

## **A Few Weeks Later**

And still so quiet – no small fluttery movements in bushes. No morning trills or liquid lullabies. Juncos, sparrows, chickadees – so beautifully ordinary, so soothingly numerous, and now not. Because they are not here, they are with me all the time. Rarely have they been so near, so dear. Death and absence bring the cherished inside as constant companions.



In our long drought, rain manifests as “Not Raining”—its essence conveyed through absence. When have we—rain and I—ever been so familiar, as through this thirsty longing? Over and over I bring it close, smell what I remember of it, taste its clearness, hear its patter, the gush through gutters, feel it cover my upturned face and trickle, wet and cool, down my neck.

### **This Morning**

An act of faith: I fill a brown ceramic bowl, small enough to discourage bathing, with cold clear water and pledge to sterilize it daily. Now I wait to see.

This is an act of self-forgiveness. The softening of all or nothing, the thawing of paralysis from guilt. A recognition of nature’s resilience. A few small birds have recently perched on the railing, peeked in my windows, pecked in the duff.

### **This Moment**

As I keep watch for birds, a redbud sapling taps and brushes at the glass door, calls my attention. A little tree in a three-gallon container that I left to die—I couldn’t justify the water in this severe drought. The tree is not edible, not native, and the conservation guidelines suggest no. But it clung to life in desiccated soil, leaves unfurling despite neglect, heart-shaped and green. They quiver like alpine aspens.

This sapling seems to ask – can it stand sentry by my door? It has branches perfectly sized for songbirds’ tiny feet. Who am I to say no, to be so stingy? Right action is complicated: what was a green thumb has become extravagance as we shift from nurturers to conservators of resources.



Yet life wants to be lived, to green out. Guidelines are good, but rigidity becomes a drought of spirit. Can I say “yes” to this one redbud spreading its tiny boughs? For returning warblers to alight upon? A being that can live on recycled water from the bird basin? Can I say “yes” to songbirds splashing and sipping as they slowly return? Count them - one by one, two by two.

**Marilyn DuHamel** is a psychotherapist who has spent several decades listening deeply to the people who have entered her therapy office. In the last years, she has found herself increasingly pulled to the nonhuman realm, tuning her ear, her heart, her psyche to the wild animals that approach her, to the sensate world out her door, and to the dreams and synchronicities that startle her with mystery and meaning. She is committed to following this trail, accompanied and sometimes led by her dog Shadow.



### **Bird Feeding Guidelines**

Online resources provide information about avian diseases that humans can inadvertently foster as well as advice on how to prevent the spread of disease. Many guidelines suggest the following:

- To prevent disease avoid overcrowding at feeders.
- Clean feeders at least every two weeks, soaking in a 5 - 10% bleach solution for 10 minutes, then rinse well and allow to dry.
- Birdbaths should be cleaned daily.
- If you suspect disease, remove all feeders for a month.





## Bear Requiem

Susan Cerulean

Despite a court appeal, dozens of demonstrations, and forty thousand letters of protest; despite impassioned editorials in every major newspaper, and without regard for the opposition of three-quarters of the state's human population, nearly three hundred wild bears (including three dozen lactating mothers) were gunned down in a "recreational" hunt in Florida, from the northern panhandle to the Ocala National Forest, in late October. The event was strong-armed by Florida's governor and his appointed wildlife commissioners—a state-sanctioned slaughter of Florida black bears.



We hoped the bears would be wily, and escape the bullets of the hunters. But baited and tempted with corn, birdseed and glazed doughnuts, they didn't stand a chance.

How could we respond to the brutal slaying of animals only just recovering from threatened status? What gesture could we devise to transform our grief and our outrage, knowing that sixty traumatized and orphaned cubs still wandered the woods? How would we reset a moral compass in a state that presently appears to have none?

In Tallahassee, on November 21, a group of musicians, artists and spiritual leaders—mostly women—created a memorial service not much different than we might have had the mass murder targeted human victims.

On the morning of the Requiem, I dreamed of eight bears, with all manner of coats, some spotted, some gold, some brown. The animals pressed against the glass windows and doors of a church, apparently gathering for our service.



Our ritual began with procession of artists wearing handmade masks—deer, bear, wolf, bird—creeping and stalking down a central aisle to the beat of a single somber drum. The artists carried a larger-than-life bear with a bejeweled head, and a body sewn of tawny fabric. The bear was laid on a woodsy altar overarched with tall bamboo and grapevine, and strewn with baskets of flowers, acorns, shells and blueberries.



Rev. Candace McKibben spoke of the many forms senseless human violence takes, and the numbness it can create in our hearts. Many audience members openly wept. Buddhist practitioner Crystal Wakoa urged the audience to consider a perspective that seeks an opening of hearts, even those of hunters and politicians, so they might see themselves anew and change. The Ursine Chorale, a small *a capella* group of women, sang a promise to never forget or forsake the earth's creatures, reworking a Becky Reardon song for the bears: "The bear cubs remember/ A dream in September, alone with Mom/ At one with all of the woods/ We honor your spirit./ Forgive us, forgive us."

We designed the Requiem to help our community move through grief to a stand of advocacy and recommitment. Near the close of the ritual, we invited the audience to take part in a special communion. From baskets, we chose flowers to adorn the symbolic bear. We ate blueberries, sharing the sweet taste of a favorite bear food. And each of us present selected a bear paw shell, collected from a local beach, a reminder of our pledge to stand with the bears.



Susan Cerulean's most recent book, *Coming to Pass: Florida's Coastal Islands in a Gulf of Change*, was published by University of Georgia Press in April 2015. You can subscribe to her blog at <http://www.susancerulean.com>







## Our Safe Word Margo Berdeshevsky



### Notes:

This is a piece I am reluctant to explain too much. It must reach the eye and the mind and the heart—on its own, I hope. I ask and want it to ring loudly, or to whisper, but for itself and for its reader(s.) There are rituals that suggest that there is such a thing as a “safe word.” The montage of the poem with the darkly shadowed bells is one way for me to ask and to say—the bells are speaking now. Aren’t they? They have, before. But now is now. And now is when we live—while we still do. This is not a safe time. Of

course, we know that. We know how precarious our time and each life is. We are trying like hell to defend against our breaking. We are nearly beyond any language that will stop what we fear. Or stop the lying. Or the memories. We have been living more consciously, but more tragically, in a time when each event insists that we are beyond breaking. That we *are* broken. And we want a word, a memory, an action—that says "stop." Don't we?? What occasions such a poem is simply—being alive in my time. Our time. And aching for—seeking a word, some word(s) that might bear what we are knowing, and what we are yet desperate for. Desperate for safety? For peace? For better memories? Of course. What word will make our lives safe? I'm trying, as you are—to find it.



**Margo Berdeshevsky**, born in New York City, often writes in Paris. Her newest poetry manuscript was a finalist for the National Poetry Series, 2015. Her published poetry collections are *Between Soul & Stone*, and *But a Passage in Wilderness* (Sheep Meadow Press.) Her book of illustrated stories, *Beautiful Soon Enough*, received Fiction Collective Two's Innovative Fiction Award, (University of Alabama Press.) Other honors include the Robert H. Winner Award from the Poetry Society of

America, the & *Now Anthology of the Best of Innovative Writing*, numerous Pushcart prize nominations for works in *Poetry International*, *New Letters*, *Kenyon Review*, *The Collagist*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, *Gulf Coast*, *Pleiades*, *Prairie Schooner*, among others. In Europe her work has been seen in *The Poetry Review (UK)* *The Wolf*, *Europe*, *Siècle 21*, & *Confluences Poétiques*. A multi genre novel, *Vagrant*, is at the gate. Her "Letters from Paris" may be seen in Poetry International here:

<http://pionline.wordpress.com/category/letters-from-paris/> She may be found reading from her books in London, Paris, New York City, or somewhere new—in the world.

For more information, kindly see: [margoberdeshevsky.blogspot.com/](http://margoberdeshevsky.blogspot.com/)





## **II. DEVOTION**



Mei Mei Sanford

**Serach bat Asher speaks:**

When a story is true in one world, it is sometimes true in another. My people are travelers; we have been traveling a long time. It is becoming more difficult; so many places are now narrow places to us.

I am the clan mother. I am called daughter of a tree. Maybe because my legs are like trees. Maybe because we depend on trees for so much. We eat their leaves; we scratch our backs against their bark; we dig among their roots; we rest in their shade. Sometimes we dig trees up, but it makes room for new growth. Water collects in our footprints. Turned earth settles around the seedling. No wonder our people call us mothers "useful trees."

We have places along our route where our people come to die, people of many clans, and where their bones rest. When our journey brings us here again, we find our loved ones' bones among the bones of many. We know the ones we love even in their bones. We pick them up, we touch them and we remember. Distant peoples who understand nothing else of us, understand this: we never forget.

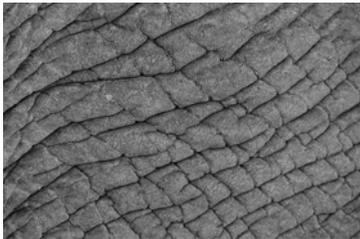
I am the clan mother, so I remember most of all. It was I who found my uncle's bones, my uncle, the dreamer. Then we all picked them up in love. Some stories say we carried them with us. That is true, but it was in our memories we carried them.

Once long ago, my grandfather, the lame one, the seer, the one who saw people in the sky, was sick with sadness. He thought he had lost his favorite son, my uncle. It was I who sang to him and let him know that his son lived. It was not a song that **you** people could hear. It was like a deep rumbling under the earth. Like a purr. Just joy, just joy.

Remember us, as we remember. We mothers who keep our daughters close; who have nineteen words for our daughters for every three we have for our sons. We who have so many exiles and so few return. But when we reunite we have such joy. We flap our ears and we pound the ground. We are so big and we touch each others' mouths so gently with our trunks, we touch the songs in each others' mouths.

Remember us. As we remember us. Remember us on the journey.

Note: Serach bat Asher, in Jewish tradition, becomes a woman of memory and wisdom, traveling through the centuries and the many Jewish Diasporae to help her people in need. Her name “bat Asher” means daughter of the tribe of Asher, but it can also be understood as “daughter of a tree.” In the Torah, Joseph dies and is buried in Egypt, and just before his death he demands that his descendants remember him by bringing his bones with them into the new Land. According to the rabbis, it is Serach bat Asher alone several centuries later who remembers the place in the river Nile where Joseph’s bones have been buried. The rabbis note that she is listed at the end of Genesis among the family accompanying Jacob in Egypt, and listed again in Numbers among the people entering Zion. Serach bat Asher remembers, they conclude, because she has been alive all this time, blessed with eternal life by Jacob for being the one to tell him that Joseph was still alive. She arrives in times of difficulty, unrecognized. In many ways she is like Elijah, but her gifts are specifically knowledge, sense, wisdom and most of all memory.



Mei Mei Sanford is a writer, storyteller, teacher and woodcarver. She was ordained as a Kohenet by the Hebrew Priestess Institute in the particular roles of story teller and shapeshifter. She is also the Iyalode Osun of Iragbiji, Nigeria. She teaches in the Africana Studies program at the College of William and Mary. She co-edited with Joseph Murphy *Osun Across the Waters: a Yoruba Goddess in Africa and the Americas*.

She is currently completing a young adult, Jewish mystical, queer, historical novel tentatively titled *Lioness on the Ark*.

She writes: "As I worked on this piece, I read research somewhere about mother elephants' language including 'nineteen words for our daughters for every 3 we have for our sons.'"





## Lise Weil

### **First, a mother: Interview with Megan Hollingsworth, founder and creative director of *ex-tinc-tion wit-ness***

*ex-tinc-tion wit-ness* is a collaborative art project with a primary focus on personal and global peacemaking. From February 2014 to September 2015, *ex-tinc-tion wit-ness* offered creative witness, revolving monthly, with animal and cultural groups being or becoming extinct. At least two electronic posts were offered each month in addition to the production of short poetic films. The 2014 to 2015 monthly witness collection will be available in print 2016. Electronic posts continue now in keeping with the most pressing concerns and emerging regenerative practices. \*



Since devoting herself full-time to *ex-tinc-tion wit-ness* in 2012, Megan Hollingsworth has sold her belongings and depended on the generosity of friends, immediate family members, and food banks for food and lodging.

I first spoke to Megan in July of 2015 when she was living rent-free at the home of a friend in Missoula, Montana. Her son Elias was five and a half years old and the two of them had lived at least three hours apart from one another since January 2014. Megan has since moved to Bozeman where Elias lives with his father. She and Elias are together now on a regular basis.

**LW:** As you know, this issue of *Dark Matter* is partly centered on the theme of devotion. We asked women what they've had to give up, what institutions and traditions they've had to break from, in order to pursue what matters most to them. Your example is a bit extreme. For example, you've broken with the tradition of motherhood in pretty radical ways.

**MH:** Indeed I have...

**LW:** Can you give us a bit of the history?

## Casting \*\*



**MH:** I founded *ex-tinc-tion wit-ness* because I knew grief inspired by mass species extinction and genocide is too much for a person to bear alone. Loss of this magnitude is incomprehensible to the mind and thus capable of changing the mind. Whether this change of mind is ultimately destructive or regenerative is determined by many factors and most critically community support. I wanted to celebrate compassionate actions inspired by extreme ongoing loss and support students of ecological studies in a way that academia does not.

*ex-tinc-tion wit-ness* began with the questions “Who am I?” “What am I here for?” The questions were forced by emotional exhaustion from searching a flooded job market August through December 2011. My son Elias was two years old then. I’d been fired from a salaried position in Development at Naropa University in Boulder Colorado. I had joined a faction of staff and students speaking for coexistence with prairie dogs, who were at risk of losing their homes on the Nalanda campus in the interest of Naropa’s building plans. I was uncomfortable fundraising for the University and I was open about my discomfort. The job loss left my family without any income, so we moved back to the house we still owned in Livingston Montana and my husband, Charles, accepted a job offer three hours’ drive away in Cody Wyoming. The separation meant in part that I claimed more time for myself and returned to my passion for grief and peace work, which was reignited by the Nalanda Campus prairie dogs. The marriage did not survive the separation and my passion.

**LW:** Readers won’t be as surprised that you separated from your husband as they may be that you separated from your son.

## Devotion \*\*



**MH:** The choice wasn't to separate from Charles or Elias, it was to return and live true to myself and my calling. The separation from Elias had everything to do with the urgency of this time coupled with my passion and knowing that it's possible for the human mind to change, regenerate. That's what originally made me okay with placing Eli in the hands of his father so that I could be a free voice for healing, for peace.

In December 2012, I experienced a shockwave of light energy move from my sacrum to my crown during orgasm accompanied by a raging scream. I was alone in bed and had just read the story of a 300-ft diameter giant sequoia cut in 1853 as told by Paul Hawken in *Blessed Unrest*. The giant sequoia had been encountered by a man chasing a wounded grizzly during the California gold rush. The tree was cut for 'show and tell' a year later. The cutting sparked outrage that helped to spur the establishment of National Forests and National Parks.

My activist background is in forest protection. I'd wept for many trees and I'd walked among the giants. I knew that forest. Yet the tears weren't coming. I couldn't grieve or sleep, so I pleased my body and then came the wail along with the light. That light wave was to be the beginning of a spiritual walkabout. I was propelled into a healing process that I only saw clearly once I was through. My devotion was to spirit.

If children weren't being trained to hate and kill other children and if people and other animals weren't starving and if everyone were sheltered, if the world were peaceful, I would be able to devote more of my attention to my own and my own child's emotional needs. But my life is not about me anymore.

You know, I've seen a lot of contradiction between message and behavior in the ecology and environmental studies community. Individuals write about how materially driven culture is insane and then continue on the same track. It's not easy to discern what is enough when you have been raised in more than enough while others have none. To live something that is simply enough looks or is perceived to be extreme...

### Grieving Giants \*\*



**LW:** It isn't just a matter of perception because what you're living is difficult. It's not for everyone. We're spoiled people.

**MH:** I am first a mother. I am really a homemaker. A homemaker. I enjoy taking care of a home and those who live there. I appreciate furnishings, cleanliness and order. With the witness, I have sacrificed this enjoyment and done so willingly because the lives of other mothers, of all walks, are disrupted as they are displaced from their homes. This violation is far from new. The soil I was born to in Indiana bleeds of it. I want to help heal old and fresh wounds while preventing more. There is sorrow in my own transience, but not as great as the sorrow and solidarity I feel with refugees, be they human or nonhuman.

I write and pray because I want to help prevent other women from having to separate from their children. A parent parting from their child to answer a spiritual calling is a sign that something culturally or socially is unaligned with truth and goodness. I refuse to be silent and just go about my life as other women and children are raped and killed and families are torn apart in a system that enslaves everyone. I write and pray because I want everyone to know the comfort of shelter and sustenance naturally provided by an intact ecological community. Everyone is provided for by an intact community, which is comprised of intact individuals. By

intact, I mean spirit *and* soul connected. I mean everyone is doing the thing they were born to do, tending to those they are responsible for, first and foremost themselves.

Elias is frustrated when I tell him that a lot of kids in the world his age work. He happens to have been born to a mother who can't stand that her life has been made possible by, for example, sanctions on Iraq. I know the cost of the material excess, I know what is behind all of this. And to know that and live that knowing is who I am. I believe the best that I can do for Elias is be the mother he was born to. As long as I am living out of this privilege and out of this violence, I will use my voice for personal and global peacemaking.

I feel I have a job, I'm doing a job. I have let go of material attachment in order to be able to do my job and all the while I have been sheltered and fed. I have learned the way the world works through showing up, staying open, giving and receiving.

### Inside and Out \*\*



**LW:** So far in *ex-tinc-tion wit-ness* I've only seen writing about animals, not human slavery or exploitation. Is that in there too?

**MH:** I write human slavery and exploitation into the letters. If white women had not been vitiated and burned we would never have seen the violation of other women and their children. Had women been listened to all along, respected for our intelligence and guidance, our sensitivity and sensuality, genocide in its commonly understood form and in the form of ecocide would not have been allowed.

All of this competition, all of this need for ownership, this greed stems from insecurity, the thought that if I don't take this someone else will, or I must take this to get what I really want,

which is the woman or the man. That thought is born of scarcity resulting from the degradation of women and our caring ways, in which women have been complicit for the sake of security. *I*. You could call this poaching or taking mentality Western mind or even human nature except it is not located anywhere in particular and it is not present among lasting indigenous groups. It's a fear-based mentality that is rather pervasive now and threatens the last remaining intact people and forest.

**LW:** The subjects you take on in *ex·tinc·tion wit·ness* are pretty bleak. What draws you to this work? What's the positive spark?

### Dreams in the Dark \*\*



**MH:** The positive spark is sharing what's surfacing in response to the loss: creative genius, connection and togetherness. And having the experience of oneness in my own being. People say "you can't hold the whole world." Well it's possible. It's painful, but it's possible. And I believe we do whether we acknowledge it or not. Acknowledging the pain allows something creative, helpful to come of it. Otherwise, there is depression and addiction.

There is this horrible foreground noise—war, genocide, global climate change. How do I make peace with my comforts? How do I help relieve the suffering rather than contribute to it? For me, it's the voice. It's the writing. It's being free to play and smile. Compassion is happiness. And I'm probably one of the happiest people on the planet. I don't have a thing of much material value to my name. But I appreciate my life, that I'm honest about being in love with life and everyone living and how much it hurts to see others suffer, destroy themselves and one another.

I feel that my compulsion to speak for world peace is greater because I have a child in the world. If humans keep fighting each other, we're done, finished, because it draws attention from the regenerative work that needs to happen. I could spend every day with Elias and love him up and down and it wouldn't change the fact that without world peace and an immediate response to mass species extinction and subsequent global climate change there is no conceivable future for him and other children. An overwhelming regenerative response is not happening yet. So, I am extremely restless.

Grief is not bleak, grief is beautiful. Grief in response to genocide and mass species extinction belongs to everyone. The grief and the loss are communal. A lot of people look at the loss and say it's too depressing. But, really, what's depressing is not looking at the loss. Basically, what I am saying with this project is *I want to hold your hand*. That's the invitation with *ex-tinc-tion wit-ness*, let's be together in this because we are together in this.

I saw clear-cuts of the Pacific Northwest in person for the first time in 1998. I knew then that to call for cutting the forest like that, a man must be severed from himself, severed from his own rhythms. Earlier this year, with witness to Pacific dying, I honed in on what we're grieving by going there myself. It's really the loneliness. We're grieving lost connection, not disconnection from something outside ourselves that many call nature, but something within ourselves that is natural, that is spirit and soul wedded. And it's that disconnection that's driving genocide and accelerated species extinction.

\**ex-tinc-tion wit-ness* also hosts discussion and facilitates grief support at Depth Psychology Alliance. <http://www.depthpsychologyalliance.com/group/animal-aspects-of-human-psyche>

\*\* Images: still overlays from [Wildfire: a love story](#), copyright 2015 *ex-tinc-tion wit-ness*



## **Beauty from Brokenness: Caroline Casey interviews Lily Yeh\***

### **Caroline:**

Lily Yeh is an internationally celebrated artist whose work has taken her to communities throughout the world as Founder and Executive Director of the Village of Arts and Humanities in North Philadelphia from 1968 to 2004. She helped create a national model of community building through the arts. In 2002, Yeh founded Barefoot Artists Incorporated to bring the transformative power of arts to impoverished communities around the globe through participatory multifaceted projects that foster community wealth, improve the physical environment, promote economic development and preserve indigenous art and culture.



**Lily Yeh**

In addition to the United States, she's carried on her projects in multiple countries -- Kenya, Haiti, Philadelphia, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Rwanda, China, Taiwan, Ecuador, Syria, Republic of Georgia, Haiti and just returning now from Palestine. Welcome, Lily.

### **Lily:**

So happy to be here.

### **Caroline:**

It's such a powerful historic time and I so admire your work. We know dedicated acts of beauty trump tyranny. When you were working at the Beijing School, some young woman, as I remember it, said, "Since Lily guided me to my own creativity, I am no longer willing to accept the fate that was assigned me."

### **Lily:**

Yes. I think the participatory creative process everywhere, in community or in schools, is very, very empowering for young people, for people in disenfranchised communities. They don't have the voice. They can't express themselves. And so often they feel that they have no power. But in the art, it's a direct participation. And if we encourage everybody to imagine and to express their voices and not be afraid, that is a very effective way to empower people.

### **Caroline:**

So Venus truly is an agent of a trickster redeemer within us all. If we animate our own creativity, we have more freedom. Just as this young woman expressed.

**Lily:**

I want to tell you the story. Dandelion School, it's far out on the outskirts of Beijing. And I thought, "Okay, you have some influence there." But a group of young women from Darien, Connecticut, from a very prosperous wealthy community, they visited China. They spent one day in Dandelion School and they were so impressed by the environment, by the creativity of the people. They didn't know that academic environments don't have to be just whiteboards and books.

And so they came back empowered. They formed an art club and they demand to have their voices heard through painting. So they created the mural to color. And this is in Darien High School.

**Caroline:**

My late great friend and master Wu Bong when we'd drive around would go, "Looks like a prison. Must be a school." And so you're transforming these schools, these hardship places.

I want to also speak to beauty and danger. There's a wonderful lecture that Peter Warshall, late great environmental ally, was doing on nature and how beauty and danger are intertwined in the evolution of this planet in some serious way.

He says octopi in the sea create magnetize biofluorescence which is very beautiful and other little creatures go, "How beautiful!" And then they eat them. We know everywhere in our own personal and collective lives old structures are collapsing and we can either go waily-waily or we can view it as an opportunity for liberating ingenuity to redesign the world.

And you have such medicines for now because you go into broken collapsing places... That's the extreme version of what's happening everywhere. And you go, "We're going to make beauty out of this. What if crisis is an evolutionary opportunity to become more intelligent and more beautiful?"

**Lily:** So well described. I would like to reverse the order and say danger and beauty. It reminds me one of the most powerful moments that I experienced when I walked into the dumpsite community in this place called Korogocho. It's twenty minutes outside of Nairobi. And the community of 100,000 people wanted to build the shanty around a big dumpsite with a dead lake in the middle.

Nobody in their right mind would walk into such a place full of poisonous air and the pollution and the violence of poverty. And yet, when there is nothing else one can do and one starts to bring color, bring creativity and invite children, adults come together to imagine what their world can be. And when we

put the bright colors on the wall, nobody thought beauty can exist in such a dire place including me at the beginning.

But when we put beautiful colors on the wall, when we put flowers, when we put angels, when we put all the big birds and all the things they imagine, and that begins to transform the mentality and create a sense of hope for the community. And that was one of the most powerful moments I have ever experienced.

And I always say that when it seems like one can do nothing in such desperation, if we create through imagination, creativity, and make beauty, it is like making a fire in the dead winter night. And that strikes hope. Brings light. And that beckons people to join us. And that's the power potential of broken places, places of despair, ready for transformation.

**Caroline:**

Absolutely. And the fundamental question we want to put on the altar of desirable mystery everywhere is how do we humans heal our relationship to each other and all our kin and nature itself and all the flora and fauna on this planet? So in nature, some seeds only sprout after cataclysmic flood or fire...

**Lily:**

Yes.

**Caroline:**

I know that you went also into Rwanda when there was still fighting.

**Lily:**

No. I went there after. Actually, ten years later. But the pain was so deep. That's what awakened my -- That's what moved me. I was in the international Conference in 2004 and I heard a person speaking from Rwanda, Jombasco Musana, and his voice came from so deep and so wounded for his people. And he said how much the nation still suffers. And I was just so moved by that. I was on my way to Kenya and I said, "Well, I will be in the continent of Africa." So I said, "Wait for me at the airport and I'm coming to check it out."

I didn't have any idea what I would do. I just want to be there and to be where the pain is, the brokenness and listen. And then what followed was the ten-year project unfolding and leading through the building of the genocide memorial and then working with villagers and then transforming from destitution and despair of a genocide survivor village of 100 families into the beginning of prosperity

with jobs and with assets and a cottage business and so forth. So that transformed not only the villagers but also transformed me. Yes, all of us have the power to help and to transform each other.

**Caroline:**

Yes. And as we dedicate in this call and forevermore in our hearts, when we internally dedicate it strengthens our signal so we're more likely to connect with these opportunities. We say inward dedication magnetizes outward opportunity. Shamanic ally Martin Prechtel says when he came back to America after 25 years in Guatemala, he'd forgotten that Americans had lost the art of grief. He said for lack of grief, we go to war. How do we metabolize and honor grief again through beauty, which is so much of the medicine that you carry and inspire in us.

**Lily:**

It comes from the same place. From the same place. When you talk about grief and beauty, the beauty that moves comes from the broken dark places. And it roots in the depth of humanity. That has light, has darkness, has good, and also has bad intention, evil intentions. And that's when we always have to keep vigilant. And that's the metaphor of Buddhist symbol, the lotus flower. It roots in the darkness of muddy water, in mud, in chaos.

But it strives towards the light. And when the flower opens in its perfect symmetry, in beauty, that represents enlightenment. Rooted knowing the grief and the pain and the darkness but then keeping to the light. And that's when the beauty is wrestled from the heart of darkness. That has the power to transform.

**Caroline:**

That's so great. May all our metaphors be derived from nature like the lotus.... Remember in the United States after 9/11, there were spontaneous altars and beauty of poignancy everywhere. And then that beautiful impulse was kidnapped into the unimaginative tyranny of war. So we want to put it back in everyone's core response that their primary and sustaining response to tragedy is dynamic beauty and honoring the art of grief.

There's a wonderful essay by Julie JC Peters on the little-known Hindu goddess Akhilanda, she is the goddess of the power that comes from being broken on the floor. And she rides on the crocodile of her own fear going, "Woohoo, woohoo."

Her name means "never not broken." And that's how I've introduced you before ---because you have introduced yourself saying that when you started off on this, at first you were frightened.

**Lily:**

Oh, yes. Well, not only the first time. I mean, who is prepared to walk into darkness? There is unknown. You don't know what's lurking there. One doesn't know whether one has the capacity to deal with the unknown. That unknown is very scary. And then every time -- for example, in Rwanda, I could never imagine that I would go to a place that's not even on my agenda? And then I would build a genocide memorial. That is totally frightening. Even when I think about it now, I get scared because when you do that, you touch people's bones. And the bone represents the most grieved part of the national psyche. And if I do anything wrong, then I really become -- I don't know how to reconcile to that deep grief. Yet when we are guided by our heart, when life beckons us, and when we are sensitive to the inner voice, and when we are brave enough to follow life's calling, then wonders happen. Things unfold.

And then you have guardian angels. When you're lost, there are birds talking to you. There are animals pointing directions. There are people along the way helping us. We just have to be brave enough to listen to our heart, which has that wisdom, intuition, that evolved through millions of years. Nature's evolution. A lot of time we don't pay attention. We lose touch with that.

And so it is through not only learned skills, knowledge and everything, but also listening to the heartbeat of our inner voices. That comes from light, from the depths of being itself.

**Caroline:**

And that takes us to the heart of everything. When I first heard you at the Bioneers Conference, you said you were daunted. And then you said there was a deep voice inside you that said, "But if you don't do this thing, the most important part of you will die." So you said you made yourself frightened of being a coward.

**Lily:**

Yes. Well, fear, in a way, is our friend. Like life causes us to move forward. And if we're always in our comfort zone, we will be like in a cocoon. But when we break the comfort zone, we always get scared. But then in the transformation from cocoon to butterfly... a world of wonder and revelation. It's important we not only heal others. We must heal the wound inside. Otherwise, it festers. And then it expresses that hurt and wound and pain through the things we touch and things we do. And so a person who journeys, a spiritual journey, a life journey is both internal and external simultaneously. That demands our attention.

**Caroline:**

And I like to say also for all of us, suffering is not a credential. It's an assignment. That it extends our range of empathy going, "That could be me. That could be me. That was me." But we don't count on everyone's hardened heart wakening. When you first went to North Philadelphia, you said people were suspicious of crazy Chinese lady coming to their neighborhood. And you encountered Jojo who was in difficult underworld shape. And you went to Jojo and said, "I need your help."

**Lily:**

Yes.

**Caroline:**

And that creates a partnership.

**Lily:**

Jojo, he was so angry. He was always screaming, yelling and wearing bandana like a pirate and then with knives and hammers walking down, raging down the street. Everybody is afraid of him. But I didn't know that history. But I knew he was a jack of all trades. So I went to him and he dodged me three times. And the last time I talked to him, I tracked him down.

And then I said, "Jojo, let's build this park." And he was moved by that idea of beauty, green and flowers and art and whatever. He decided to help me. And I said to him, "I need your help." So....he become a giant person. He's going to help me, this person, someday outside to do this art park. So just by that invitation and that respect of his ability, then we're equalizing the ground. And that's how you do community work, equal footing and equal exchange. In open, inclusive with respect. And that's the first rule for success in community building work.

**Caroline:**

And that's another reason I so love and admire your dedication because it is so clean. We want to beware and compost any sneaky little tendril of colonialism that may adhere to us and even our goodhearted spirituality whenever we feel special or more important than ... You're guiding people to their own autonomy.

And I just want to say that that's a crucial working principle for all women heroes and that which resides within men as well, which is, does any teaching or project, does it guide people to their own autonomy? Or does it pull them into an external dependence. So these projects continue even when you're not there, right?

**Lily:**

Right. In successful project I will go there and start working with people to create a process that is inclusive and participatory and democratic and full of fun. But the most important thing is that attitude. We are not special. Everyone has that divine. The Kingdom of God is laying inside of us. And so we go there and I got in touch with the light, the flicker of light. And that's been guiding me. And so, when I go to a project, I don't want to dominate. It's not about me. It's about us together. And it's about that real joy and that joy will come out when we treat each other with respect, with sincerity, no hidden agenda. And that nurtures deeply inside. That's why we do it. Because it feels good. It feels honest. And it feels authentic.

And then through the work, we light up everybody's, try to light up other people's private life. And to expel the darkness, the ignorance in that kind of egohood and attachment. We need more light, more people lit up across the continent, across the land. And, yes, we do hope and we can do it. Yes.

**Caroline:**

We don't have to create cultural movements. These movements are happening. They want to happen with us as their agents. And again, may we be dedicated. Is there a blessing you'd like to spiral out to each kind heart here gathered and spiraling out there into the memosphere?

**Lily:**

I think my wish is that it is so simple, that we all can do it especially the women, softer, gentler, usually because of the feminine, more yielding. And, I think, my wish is that we don't need to create any great movement or great event or whatever. If we can, just be more of our authentic self. Be honest, be true. And celebrate who we are. And we listen to the voices inside and work very hard, learn all the skill.

We all can light up a fire and change the surroundings around us. And we become transformed in the process. Thank you so much.

**Caroline:**

Thank you so much. May we cahoot in perpetuity and may all of our hearts bloom under the beautiful gentle rain of your dedicated wisdom.

\*Adapted from audio interview "Transforming Community Through Art"  
conducted as part of the Shift Network's Inspiring Women Summit, May 19, 2014

**Caroline W. Casey** is dedicated to Pragmatic Mysticism-Democratic Animism and the Trickster Medicine that brews it all together- to encourage a Renaissance of Reverent Ingenuity (rising from the rubble of humorless dominance). She is host-creator, weaver of context for “The Visionary Activist Show” on Pacifica Radio Network, from D.C to KPFA (94.1); her guests are leading contributors to a culture of reverent ingenuity, all teased into pertinence. Her audio book *Visionary Activist Astrology* is published by Sounds True. She is the author of *Making the Gods Work For You– the astrological language of the psyche* (Harmony Books/Random House). A rousing and frequent key note speaker and MC (Symbiosis and Gaia Festivals), she offers Trickster Training Council a weekly tele-class as well as councils at a wide variety of conferences all over America as well as in South Africa, Bali, Sweden, Syria, UK, New Zealand, Hawaii, the Caribbean, British Columbia. Caroline invites us to imagine, conjure, and implement a more lovingly ingenious world.







## **Our Call to Indigenous Consciousness: Taiaiake Alfred's Wasáse**

By Sharon English

*"Make no mistake about it, Brothers and Sisters: the war is on. There is no post-colonial situation; the invaders our ancestors fought against are still here, for they have not yet rooted themselves and been transformed into real people of this homeland."* –

*Taiaiake Alfred*

In Toronto, in the woods at the end of the street where I live, there's a standing stone mounted in the ground. Beside it sits a smaller companion, halved and polished and engraved with a story: it was here in 1615 that Étienne Brûlé, 'an adventurous spirit,' became the first 'white man' to sight Lake Ontario and thus begin the founding of our nation. Oaks probably stood here when Brûlé arrived; now the woods are brambly, too dense to see the lake. A sewage treatment plant lies below this ridge. As I read these words, someone's running a wet saw through concrete.

Some years ago I started a journey. Like Brûlé I yearned to discover a new country, but the land my heart ached for didn't lie across an ocean. It was right here: the land we have yet to truly see, let alone love.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the fish populations in Lake Ontario effectively collapsed. Colonial industry had already extracted what the water could provide, and in Toronto today you still cannot buy local fish. Living here on the shore of a great lake, few of us think about this tragic absurdity. The lake's story has been pushed underground.

Being a storyteller, my journey took the form of writing a novel. My earlier fiction had explored how places inhabit and shape us, even when we've chosen to be rootless. Now I wanted to probe the sources of our separateness. I was fed up with it, desperate for another way. Our civilization was accelerating its crash-course to biocide. In the midst of this, I wanted to write about re-connection.

My immigrant ancestors were always moving; they'd stand still long enough to let a child age or an elder pass away, then push on to another town, another property, always another, better place. Following the opportunities opened up by colonial conquest and the imperatives of capitalism, which must always have new and expanding markets, settlers claimed this continent as an endless frontier. And so it's remained: a resource to develop and 'get a living' from. Yet a commodity isn't a home. In my novel I tried to dramatize a process whereby people like myself—modern, urban—are drawn to the land, drawn down past empire's foundations, physical, psychological and mythical; are drawn into a place of nakedness in themselves, where re-connection to this earth can begin. This is the place—outside the borders of empire—that the Kanien'Kehaka (Mohawk) scholar Taiaiake Alfred speaks from in his urgent and visionary book, *Wasáse*.

Like an eagle feather, *Wasáse* fell across my path at the end of my long writing journey. *Wasáse* means "thunder dance, war dance," and this book summons all of us to the work of restoring a free and thriving world. Until we settlers become "real people of this homeland," Alfred warns, we will remain perpetual drifters and conquerors—alienated and defensive, destroying the land and attacking those who protect it, or feeling disempowered, apathetic, useless in the face of such destruction.

Although Alfred is addressing Onkwehonwe (original or indigenous) peoples and their situation specifically, he also promises that “if non-indigenous readers are capable of listening ...[they] too will be shown a new path and offered the chance to join in a renewed relationship between the peoples and places of this land, which we occupy together” (35). This new path is nothing less than the restoration of “indigenous consciousness and ways of being” (39). It is “a spiritual revolution, a culturally rooted *social* movement that transforms the whole of society and a *political* action that seeks to remake the entire landscape of power and relationship to reflect truly a liberated post-imperial vision” (27).

For Alfred, indigenous consciousness is the only thing standing between Onkwehonwe and the pervasive “delusions, greeds and hatreds that lie at the centre of colonial culture” (35). If indigenous peoples do not claim and nurture this consciousness, their way of life as indigenous will soon disappear. More broadly speaking, Alfred’s assertion applies to us all: if indigenous consciousness isn’t resurrected and fostered, then empire will utterly consume this world.

A rooted, indigenous consciousness is fundamentally at odds with the mindset that makes the wheels of our modern world turn. Having indigenous consciousness means that you’re ‘at war’ whether you realize it or not. You’re a target. You don’t fit into the system. And you should stop trying to fit in, Alfred writes. Adapting to settler ways will not bring indigenous peoples peace because in empire there is never peace—only domination and control.

*Wasáse* proposes “a real and deep notion of peace” (27) to counter the acquiescent passivity we generally mistake for ‘peace.’ In imperial culture, we all learn to tolerate the intolerable: poisons pollute our world, the state makes wars and lives are expendable—but that’s alright, the stuff of daily news. Living in integral relation with other nations, without the dynamics of oppression, assimilation and servitude, seems unimaginable. ‘Peace’ is confused with order and

(apparent) stability, the uncontested rule of law (28). The machine runs well: you get to work on time, there's money in the bank and food in the stores, no rioting in the streets. Peace.

A warrior, according to Alfred, is one who strives to bring about true peace: not the absence of conflict, but a “culture of freedom” (29), a coexistence of diverse nations that is “hopeful, visionary, and forward-looking” (28). As an Onkwehonwe activist tells Alfred,

The healthy ones, the bright-eyed ones, must accept their responsibility to restore those in grief, temporarily in dysfunction, so to speak, to health, to accept, recognize, restore, ameliorate, admonish, and provide the new mentor, model and inspiration. In today's context, this is the primary task and responsibility of the warrior (80).

“It is time for our people to live again” (19), Alfred writes. Instead of squandering their energies negotiating terms with their oppressors, indigenous peoples must regenerate their cultures. Much has been lost to them since colonization. Yet not all. To recover indigenous ways of being, Alfred argues, Onkwehonwe must begin “living the rites of resurgence,” fostering “self-transformation and self-defence” against state control (29). These rites involve the recovery of indigenous story, language, health and community, and above all, a living philosophy or spirit.

This too must be the settler path: our only road away from the statist, capitalistic framework that makes impossible a rooted relationship to earth and all its kin. Yet how do we non-indigenous, who have no cultural connections outside of an imperialist system and thinking, recover an indigenous consciousness? What does it even mean for us to *come home* to this land? To root?

First, Alfred says, as settlers we must face our denial of colonialism and our painful heritage as imperialist subjects: “Change will happen only when Settlers are forced into a reckoning with who they are, what they have done, and what they have inherited; then they will be unable to

function as colonials and begin instead to engage other peoples as respectful human beings” (154).

Secondly, Alfred does not recommend even for indigenous peoples that they set about “replicating the surface aspects of the lifestyle and manners” of indigenous in past times. Rather, he calls for regenerating “the *quality* of an indigenous existence, the connective material that bound Onkwehonwe together when ‘interests’ and ‘rights’ were not a part of ... people’s vocabularies” (254). For settlers, this means we root not by playing Indian but by cultivating that ‘quality’ of indigenous being that connects us deeply to life in this world.

Reading *Wasáse*, I felt confronted, affirmed, inspired and fiercely guided by Alfred’s warrior honesty and, surprisingly, his optimism. He helped me articulate new and urgent questions: what are those ‘rites’ that we settlers might resurrect? What ways of being will foster a “renewed relationship between the peoples and places of this land” (35)? How do we exchange entitlement for humility, liberal guilt for friendship and alliance, consumerism for caring and detachment for deep devotion?

The woods at the end of my street extend a long way up the river valley through the city. The first time I visited, I left the concrete walkway for a trail, not knowing where it led. The sun shone down through the leaves onto spider webs that hung like dream catchers. I entered a dim grove of cedar and fir. The place carried an uneasy feeling, some echo of misery. On the other side I saw a shape in the trees: a Cooper’s Hawk, a bird I’d never seen. We regarded each other with mutual seriousness. The next day when I returned to the woods, I took a different trail and encountered a coyote standing on the path ahead, looking back at me. I offered a greeting before it bounded into the ravine.

What are our rites of resurgence? How do we become again people who know how to love this earth and live by that love? There isn't a formula, but there is a path. It begins with the land. Kinship—that 'connective material' that joins all life—abides in the body, the spirit and the earth. And even in a rootless time, we retain this alignment—for it comes through the heart.

I went to the urban woods again with a friend, wanting to show her this place. We took the trails. We weren't alone: others were there, men and women who also go to get away. Rounding a bend, my friend and I came face to face suddenly with a doe. In the grey light of evening she was almost invisible. She didn't run. Nearby, we could see that she had a smaller companion. The doe stood before us majestically, holding her ground and our gaze for a long moment. And without thinking, we smiled and poured out our blessings and praise.



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Cynthia Anderson

### **From the Beginning**

We live where people have lived  
from the beginning

Where giants care for  
and hold up the earth

Where spirits ride in  
on whirlwinds

Where wind is their breath  
and that's what we breathe

Where we recall  
the planet we came from

Where we sing to the dead  
and guide them home

*Their eyes open  
to see a bright future*

Where songs carry maps  
of our desert

Where birds say their names  
in the old language

Where we know the power  
of feathers

Where medicinal herbs  
call out, *Here I am*

Where sand shows the future  
to snakes and lizards

Where tarantulas tell us  
when to go to Gorgonio

Where stones are alive  
because they used to be people

Where people can turn  
into anything

Where shamans exhale  
to send their words skyward

Where Coyote races Rabbit  
across the Milky Way

Where a spider web holds  
the earth together

Where the world's spinning  
keeps our hearts beating

**Notes:**

I moved to the Mojave Desert in 2008. The most vital spiritual guide I've found to living in this region is *Wayta' Yawa': Always Believe*, a book of reminiscences by Serrano Indian elder Dorothy Ramon. This poem cites many stories told by her. According to traditional Serrano culture, their ancestors chose to come here from another planet; in addition, their ancestors were asked, and agreed, to become every visible thing in this world.

Not surprisingly, interspecies communication was the norm. Medicinal plants spoke and revealed themselves to the people who needed them; tarantulas told people when pine nuts were ripe on Mt. San Gorgonio, many miles distant, so the annual harvest could take place at the right time. Songs contained maps of the desert, and songs also guided the dead back to their planet of origin—the words “*Their eyes open/to see a bright future*” are from one of those songs.

These stories offer expanded ways of looking at life in the desert. They affirm our connection to everything in the landscape and to the people who preceded us—who thrived here for millennia and whose lives touch ours through Dorothy Ramon.

More often than not, the desert is feared and hated—and now, regarded as disposable, as massive solar farms are built and scant water resources are diverted to cities. The common belief is it doesn't matter—“there's nothing out there.” In fact, deserts are incredibly rich and complex ecosystems, teeming with unique species that contribute to the well-being of the planet.

## Nova

Vandals trap the wild snake I love—  
the rosy boa who lives out back—

and stow him in a clear plastic box.  
He coils and clings to the side

like a starfish. Captors gone,  
I try to free him, trip the latch

so he can escape without harm.  
But the entire nature of the box

changes—his head stays stuck  
while his body separates and

drops to the ground. Suddenly,  
that narrow cylinder of muscle

and bone becomes a tunnel  
of blinding light where I walk,

gazing at choirs of galaxies  
stretched to infinity.

If this is death, I rest easy.

### Notes:

This spring, a dream came to me unlike any I've had before. The central figure is a rosy boa—a docile and especially beautiful desert snake. We feel honored to have them living on our property. Every year, as the weather warms up, we record the day when we first see a rosy boa. They are a federally protected species—designated as a species of special concern. They are also among the most ancient snakes still alive on the planet, dating back tens of millions of years.

What wisdom do they hold in their bodies? In my dream, the answer is all the drama of deep space—star nurseries, the source of life, and the glory of death. As I walked inside the body of snake/tunnel of light, the galaxies I saw looked like the spectacular photos taken by the Hubble telescope.

My daily devotional practice consists of reciting a litany of my own making—a prayer that names everything I'm thankful for in my life and that asks the universe for help in areas where I need it. One of my daily requests is to understand the true nature of life and death before I leave this body. The dream of the rosy boa felt like both an acknowledgment of this request and a teaching.



Cynthia Anderson lives in the Mojave Desert near Joshua Tree National Park. Her poetry collections include *In the Mojave*, *Desert Dweller*, and *Shared Visions I and II* (in collaboration with photographer Bill Dahl). She co-edited the anthology *A Bird Black As the Sun: California Poets on Crows & Ravens*.





## Calling out the Names

Anne Bergeron

### *Journey*

*Four years ago, in the midst of monsoon season in South India, my husband and I were homesick and cold. The rains had knocked out power days earlier, and one interior wall of the house was crumbling into a heap of stones. In the kitchen, a thick, golden sambar soup flavored with pungent mustard seeds, fresh curry leaves, and grated turmeric simmered atop the propane hotplate. Each night as rain slammed into the windows, we huddled by the light of the open fireplace, sipped the sambar, and felt warm, safe, and happy. The arrival of the intense rains was good news, but this downpour had begun several weeks later than usual, and that worried the farmers who depend on rainwater brought by the Northwest monsoon for planting rice and other crops. What no one knew then was that the rains would remain erratic for four consecutive years, interrupting rice planting and harvesting, drying up groves of drought-resistant coconut palm trees, and sparking fears of shortages in drinking water. The biannual heavy rains that take down power lines and wash out roads mean survival for every person, animal, and plant who call the Western Ghats home.*

*Glynn and I had been working for an NGO in Tamil Nadu in the fall of 2011, and the return to our home in rural Vermont coincided with the Winter Solstice. Eager to reunite with our friends and to share the spicy soup that had kept us warm during the rains in India, we cooked up a sambar on the first night of winter and welcomed the return of the light with forty neighbors and friends by the warmth of a roaring fire on our hilltop. In late summer, Glynn and I had been reluctant to leave our land and the home we had built together to work in India. However, that work, which focused on the health of young children of subsistence farmers, gave us a deep awareness of how the changing climate was affecting food production in a country of a billion people, as well as our own food production in backyard gardens in Vermont. More than a decade of hit-or-miss snow and rainfall in Vermont had brought us growing conditions that were too wet or too dry, as well as seasons of blight to some of our*

*crops, and, with each spring, growing worries that this would be the year that our well would dry up.*

*On that snowy December night, as I stood by the fire listening to my friends speak aloud their hopes for greater peace in the world, I did not know what I would say. I had moved to this land to grow my own food and live a life close to the earth, but what exactly did this mean in the context of a changing climate and the sixth greatest extinction? How could a lifestyle choice – or hope - be enough? What came to me by the fire was the understanding that I owed the worldwide water crisis, the shriveled coconut palm, the blighted fields of potatoes, something more. When my turn to speak came around, I heard myself say something about wanting more peace in the world. But inwardly, I felt a new and different statement forming. On the brink of this new year, I realized I wanted to give the collective survival of the earth my voice.*

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The Ainu, who are native to Japan, have a word, “iworu,” which means their territory or range, their biome.\* “Iworu” has specific land mass denotations – the deep forest over the rise, the salty bay full of salmon, the high, pointy mountain. As is true of most original cultures, the Ainu invest their geography with spirits. There is a pulse in the forest, a cry in the winter field, a song in the mountain.

Language belongs not only to humans, but to animals and spirits, to all things wild. Ancient cultures, whether in the depths of the Indonesian jungle or the high arid desert of the American West, felt a natural desire to sing, chant, call out the names of the places that held their stories, as an answer to the hawk's cry and the wolf's howl, as an expression of gratitude for how the land gives us our lives. Story and place were one, and that symbiosis meant survival.

Survival was catalogued in the beauty of hearing the names of places spoken aloud.

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I have long been nostalgic for a home I never had, a feeling that my family, who provided me a very good home on the shoreline of Lake Champlain, surrounded by the Adirondack and Green Mountains, has found difficult to understand. As a teenager, I felt generations of family bonds splintering at the same time that I



**Lake Champlain, South Hero Causeway in Late Winter**

witnessed the wild spaces around me diminishing. I felt the ache of being someone who, by following my heart's desire to leave home and explore the world, knowingly participated in the twin losses of family and wilderness. My brothers, my cousins and I were the first generation that was not planning to live in the town where we grew up, even though it meant discontinuing the legacy of three generations of family stories held in the memory of our neighborhood by the lake. My family never traveled; we have no stories for journeying. And here I was in their midst, needing to experience life beyond the family, beyond their chosen place. For over a decade, that desire would take me on airplanes, boats, and trains to Canada, Europe, Central America, and Asia, as well as on numerous car trips criss-crossing the United States. To compound matters, I would expend finite natural resources to take myself where I wanted to go. The strength of my desire left me no choice. I had to leave. I had to explore. As a young woman, all I knew was that it hurt to want what I wanted.

I have curled myself around that ache, hidden it like a family secret, wrapped it with a silk cloth of protectiveness. I am surprised now to find beauty in the language of its cry. In what appears to me a not-entirely-even trade with the wilderness, my husband and I have swapped our meager savings for 47 acres of forest land and wild animal habitat high in the hills of eastern Vermont to try to learn

something of the language of one place before we die. In memories of our early days here, I find the beginnings of an understanding of our “iworu,” and in these memories the beginnings of a language we will spend the rest of our lives learning.

### *Intimacy*

My husband Glynn and I walk our land with a local forester. Glynn carries loppers, I carry a scythe that belonged to my grandmother; Marcus carries a slide and a clipboard that holds a topographical map. His pocket holds a GPS. We are placing a conservation easement on our property to prevent development in perpetuity, and the state of Vermont requires that we submit a management plan in order to conserve the forest.

On this walk we identify beaked hazelnut, hay-scented fern. I find a clump of maidenhair fern, and Marcus points out evidence of beech bark disease and spruce rot, the latter an illness that takes mature spruce trees by hollowing their cores from the roots upward. Nothing to be done about it, he says. It will be fine to cut the trees where the rot has not spread too much and mill them as lumber for the house we plan to build. A few years after this walk, we nail white spruce boards milled from those trees into diagonal sheathing as early snows fall on us. Those trees now surround us daily, keeping us warm when the winter winds barrel across the meadow.

As we walk our woods in the peak of autumn foliage, the overcast sky has the sheen of pearls which illumines the sugar maples from within, their reds a contrast to green beech and birch leaves. The wind picks up as we descend toward the far boundary of our land into a conifer forest. We find fresh moose scat, and shortly after, flattened, mossy ground where the moose bedded down. In the wet earth of the vernal pool, black as raven feathers and muck dry, we find evidence of the bear who has been digging trout lily bulbs.

The moose browses on native buckthorn and maple saplings, the bear digs bulbs and forages wild

raspberry in summer, the coyote yips and laughs at night, and I walk along, trying to find my place in this forest.

The intimacy the Ainu have with their landscapes is born of feeling the direction of the prevailing winds on the skin, of knowing the subtle scent of a strong storm coming, of divining the first inklings of winter in the August air. It is knowing well the scents, sights, sounds, and textures of a place; it is understanding its intimations, feeling what the trees intuit.

Night descends and we leave the forest. Marcus will write a plan for us to review. As I move cautiously into my new habitat, I feel the whole of the place listen for what I will ask of it. I sense the deep tug of responsibility to hold up my end of the deal, to learn exactly what I have entered into with this land. I hold a promissory note of paper birch, a deed proffered by white spruce and sugar maple. What response do I offer to the blue jay's screech or the tiny saw whet owl's repeated calls for a mate? In the darkness, I feel the weight of my choice.

### *Roots*

I cannot imagine living without a garden. The return of my favorite strain of red Russian kale or calendula or salmon runner bean provides a consistency to the chaos of summer. In the garden, all about me grows excessively – daylight, heat, grass, thunderstorms, the buzz of insects, the fulsome songs of birds. Spinach bolts, thistle and witch grass thicken between emerging heads of ruby red lettuce, and arugula reaches its prime one day, then shoots sprays of white flowers skyward the next.

Building gardens makes us feel established here; we push out gently against the forest. Transplanting bee balm, anise hyssop, Siberian iris, rhubarb, and false indigo, given to us by friends, feels like sealing our commitment with every place we've ever traveled, with every place we've called our home.

Plants root easily, but how do I root myself? I think of the Ainu and try to speak my way into rooting in

this ground, to offer my attention to the conifers, the maples, the hay-scented fern, the bear, the moose, rhubarb, the indigo.

I stand in this fledgling garden and say aloud the names of the places that hold my stories, in my territory, my iworu. The sounds I make are barely whispers, tentative. I feel self-conscious. No one is watching. Just the trees. I turn toward the white spruce and red maples and speak their names louder, hearing my voice grow stronger with each one that comes.



**Highland Place, West Corinth, Home**

*Lake Champlain. Red Rocks.*

*Winooski River. Huntington Gorge.*

*Colchester Point. Nebraska Notch.*

*Mount Mansfield. Bolton Mountain. Camel's Hump.*

*Salmon Hole. Wild River. Mount Osceola.*

*Pemigewassett River. South Kinsman. Three Ponds.*

*Grand Isle. Keeler Bay.*

*Hurricane Ridge. Moonstone Beach. Highland Place.*

The air around me inhales each sound, each exhalation of my breath. The forest breathes back into me as I breathe in between each word.

The air, the trees, echo back to me my life. It is like hearing my own name called lovingly. It is like hearing a eulogy for all that I have to lose.

### *Harvest*

Saturday morning, I stand by the vegetable garden and a familiar honking directs my gaze up. It is the fourth flock of migrating Canada geese I have seen in the last two days. What tugs at me as I see them in a wavy wishbone heading south? The cycle of the year turning inward once again. I watch them leave and am thankful I have the good fortune to stay. My love is here, my gardens are here, my animals, my cabin, the whole of my life. In the oven, a pie made of wild apples bubbles over, cinnamon tea steeps on the wood stove. I measure the wealth of my days by scent and harvest, by the warmth of a fire and a hand that slips easily into mine.

With the turning of the leaves, the cold settles in. The crickets are barely audible at night and the sun pulls away from our meadow by five in the afternoon. Light grows dense and golden, yellow pin cherry leaves dapple meadow grass. Still, twenty-five blue morning glories opened today and pale pink hollyhocks bloom without a hint of fading.



One year has passed since we were handed the deed to our land. Under this autumn sky, I begin to understand my youthful desire to leave family and home as a yearning to be a denizen of the planet, not a person of a specific neighborhood or even of a

specific family. For the first time in many years, I have no desire to leave in fall. On the autumnal equinox, we gather friends to a potluck supper. Night falls, and we stand in a circle around the fire. As I watch the rising smoke, I promise myself to kindle the home fires in honor of the voices that speak to me in these woods and from my ancestral past. I listen to the geese and do not wonder where my next migration will be.

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An Apache man once told the anthropologist Keith Basso that he repeated the names of wild places aloud simply because “they are good to say.”

They *are* good to say. And we need to say the names of our wild places - chant them, sing them, call to them literally - so that their sounds flow easily off our tongues, become a part of the daily language we speak. In my sleep, on my woods walks, as I drive my car to work, I practice calling to the wild places being cut, flooded, and dried up. Deep in the forest, at the edge of the lake, on the banks of a river where wild leeks grow, on the top of the bare mountain summit, saying all the names of the things I love is the beginning of breaking a deafening silence and rooting myself in my home, the earth.

\**The Practice of the Wild*. Gary Snyder. New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1990. Page 93.

**Anne Bergeron** is a free-lance writer who lives with her husband in an off-grid house they built together in West Corinth, Vermont. She teaches literature and yoga at the Blue Mountain Union School in Wells River, Vermont, a rural pre-K through grade 12 public school of 400 students. In 2011, she received a Rowland Foundation fellowship to promote global awareness by developing a curriculum that integrates cultural diversity and wellness throughout her school. As part of this work, she was granted a sabbatical to



study and teach in Indonesia and India. That experience inspired the current aim of her writing and teaching: to cultivate the necessary sensitivity and courage in herself and others to work to reverse species and cultural extinction. Anne holds a Master of Arts in English from the University of Rhode Island and an Individualized Master of Arts in Ecological Literature from Goddard College. She tends sheep, chickens, guinea fowl, dogs, cats, and vegetable, herb, and flower gardens, and enjoys being on the land in all seasons.



Julie Gabrielli

### Song of the Chesapeake

“Anything we love can be saved.”

Alice Walker

As a resident of Baltimore for the last twenty-five years, I have spent many days on the Chesapeake, usually in a sailboat. Like many Marylanders, I am acutely aware of the state of our great estuary and her many tributaries. The Report Card issued in late 2014 by the Chesapeake Bay Foundation gives the State of the Bay a D+, the same grade as in 2012. Hard-won improvements in water quality were offset by losses in other areas, the impression of no progress defying the dedication of thousands of people and millions of dollars.

Returning from western Maryland on Interstate 70, I’ve seen a highway sign that says, “Entering Chesapeake Bay Watershed.” A colorful foursquare illustration depicts a wading heron, a blue crab, a rockfish, and water waves. The Chesapeake Bay Commission and state highway departments in Maryland and Virginia



have scattered them on roadways throughout the watershed. This is likely counted as a win for awareness. The signs have subheads like, “Be a friend to the Chesapeake Bay,” “Please Treasure the Chesapeake,” and “Conserving Waterways Protects the Bay.” My heart aches at the irony of such a sign placed on a four-lane divided highway crashing through farmland and forest, where exhaust from cars and trucks spews nitrogen into the air and overheated,

hydrocarbon-laden water gushes off paving into local streams. Scouring banks, this “runoff” erodes fragile soils and sends sediment into the Bay.

The Report Card says:

The State of the Chesapeake Bay is improving. Slowly, but improving. What we can control—pollution entering our waterways—is getting better. But, the Bay is far from saved. Our 2014 report confirms that the Chesapeake and its rivers and streams remain a system dangerously out of balance, a system in crisis. If we don’t keep making progress—even accelerate progress—we will continue to have polluted water, human health risks, and declining economic benefits—at huge societal costs. The good news is that we are on the right path. A Clean Water Blueprint is in place and working. All of us, including our elected officials, need to stay focused on the Blueprint, push harder, and keep moving forward...

Pushing harder is the mantra of the human-centered mindset that has been destroying the Bay since French and Spanish explorers came through in the 1500s, followed by Englishman Capt. Smith’s expeditions in 1607. It’s time to try something new. Or something ancient. In this uncharted territory of climate change, species extinction and the general breakdown of our old cultural stories, imagining new pathways is a first step towards taking them.

I have begun dreaming about going on a “Water Walk,” following the example of Grandmother Josephine Mandamin, who has circumnavigated the Great Lakes with blessing and prayer ceremonies and inspired many others to follow her lead. The shoreline of the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries presents quite a challenge, as it measures over 11,000 miles, longer than the entire west coast of the United States. Much of that is on private property or marshy and

inaccessible. I'm intrigued with another possibility: walking the outline of the Bay watershed, an area of about 64,000 miles, in stages, as a pilgrimage.

*Her surface is a threshold between visible and invisible worlds. Above: the great dome of sky, waves, wind, low-slung shoreline. Below in the brackish gradient from the Ocean: menhaden, crabs, oyster reefs, eels, skates, terrapin, mud. Above: cormorant, eagle, osprey, goose, great blue heron, ibis, pelican. Below: drowning, dredging, a riverbed gouged out by an asteroid, red algae, fossilized sharks' teeth. Above: clouds, sunsets, gales, heat, dead calm, bluster, ice, moonrise, meteor showers. Below: eelgrass, shipwrecks, molting crabs, and sunken islands that once supported towns bustling with confectioners, baseball teams, Methodist churches and cemeteries.*

Last summer, I had the helm of our old 34-foot Bristol as we glided slowly under a perfect blue sky, heading southwest on a broad reach out of Eastern Bay. We'd spent a quiet night anchored in Tilghman Creek off the Miles River, tuning ourselves to sunset, stars and sunrise. Poplar Island stretched along the horizon to the left and the wide-open Bay beckoned straight ahead. The breeze was light enough that I could divide my attention between steering and daydreaming over names on the nautical chart. The two-word epics read like Haiku: Hollicutts Noose, Wild Grounds, The Hole, Airplane Wreck. Gum Thickets. Brownies Hill. Bloody Point. What events had named those places? What ghosts lingered there? A waterman might board his skipjack and head out to Bugby Bar or Choptank Lumps or Devils Hole to tong for oysters early on a cold November day. The only data he needs to set course is the feel of the breeze on his nose and cheeks and the position of the sun emerging low on the horizon.

While the watermen were dredging and tonging oysters, fishing sturgeon and trout and netting crabs, the first oil in North America gushed forth from deep beneath the land far upstream in Pennsylvania. At that time, the Civil War raged through the land: men cutting each other down over



stories of power and domination, economics and ownership. The land-dwelling men were soon beguiled by the energy from coal and oil, but the Bay's watermen remained under sail well into the twentieth century. Eventually, even they could not compete with other vessels powered by the dark energy of the Underworld. Under pressure to continue feeding their families, one by one, they began retrofitting their boats, taking the heartbreaking step of cutting into wood-planked bulkheads to install loud, stinking engines.

"Civilization" spread like a crust over the land and suffocated the life out of it.

Despite their enslavement to coal and oil, the watermen still treasure their kinship with the Chesapeake herself. Skin of leather from hours under the merciless sun. Arms and backs sinewy from scraping for peelers in eelgrass. They speak of the wily Jimmy\* with respect, as of a complex relation whose mysterious ways can be observed, sometimes anticipated, but never fully comprehended.

*On the soft sandy bottom where the grasses wave in the tide, golden light filters down from the close surface. When the usually fierce Jimmy encounters a Sook half-hidden and ready to mate,*

*he rises to the tips of his walking legs, dancing and waving his claws. She submits. He sidles up and embraces her tenderly from behind. In a cage made by his walking legs, she sheds her shell, becoming utterly defenseless and ripe for mating. Jimmy cradles and protects her, gently turning her to face him for the act. Their lovemaking lasts from five to twelve hours. Afterwards, they remain locked in a two-day embrace while her shell hardens.*

I live near a stream called Western Run that feeds into a larger stream called the Jones Falls that flows into one of the Chesapeake's rivers, called by the original people the Patapsco. I imagine the Bay offering this suggestion of a Water Walk to every heart living in the 64,000 square miles of her watershed. As I research the idea, it helps to see that I am not the first one who has said yes. Still, I have no idea what will be required of me.

In the Creator's Original Instructions, women were to be the caretakers of the living water. When the big ships arrived in North America with men who did not know these instructions, many traditions were suppressed and forgotten. Some of the original people still follow the instructions and the prophecies of the Grand Chiefs, women like Grandmother Josephine Mandamin. She was born an Anishinaabe far to the north in a land carved by glaciers, and grew up on an island, living the same way as the Chesapeake's first people—in kinship with the water, the fish, the birds, the sun and moon, and the seasons.

In answer to the cry for help from her watery home, which her people in their language called *The Big Boss Lake*, Grandmother Josephine took up her copper pail in 2003 and started to walk. She walked with her open heart along the awakening springtime shoreline, circling the entire lake to bless the water, to listen to and speak with the water spirits, to sing prayers of healing, and to perform ceremony by offering tobacco and thanksgiving. She walked to restore right relationship with the water and for the benefit of the next generations.

The following year, she circled another of the Great Lakes, gathering attention and new participants along the way. These walks continue every year. Websites have sprung up, such as [www.waterwalkersunited.com](http://www.waterwalkersunited.com), [www.idlenomore.ca](http://www.idlenomore.ca), and [www.nibiwalk.org](http://www.nibiwalk.org).



There's even a Facebook group, Water Walkers United. Their journeys are both spiritual and physical. They walk to call attention to the sacredness of water, to honor and heal it, and to raise awareness of the need to take care of the water. Their 2015 Walk took place during July and August, trekking 846 miles westward from Ontario through Michigan to Wisconsin.

Many of Grandmother Josephine's sisters have been inspired to organize Water Walks along ailing waterways in their own home places, including the St. Louis and Ohio Rivers. The 2014 Ohio River Walk spanned 906 miles from Pittsburgh to Cairo, Illinois. They walked for thirty-three days, averaging twenty-seven miles per day.

Closer to home, in May of 2015, walkers in Virginia trekked the three hundred and forty-mile length of one of the Chesapeake Bay's tributaries. When the English came, they named this river the James, but it was also known as the Powhatan, after the great chief of that land. They walked to bless and pray for healing of the waters after a CSX train derailment in April 2014. The one hundred and five-car train, en route to Yorktown, Virginia from North Dakota's Bakken shale region, spilled crude oil directly into the river, which then exploded into a fireball.

The Unity Walk began near the river's source in the Blue Ridge Mountains at Iron Gate, Virginia. They averaged twenty-eight miles per day on the twelve-day journey, which took them past

state parks, historic sites, farms, cities, wildlife refuges and industrial sites. When the group reached the Chesapeake Bay, they sang and performed ceremony to offer the headwaters from their copper pail. "We are telling the water, 'This is how you began, and this is how we wish for you to be again,'" Ojibwe elder Sharon Day told a local newspaper. The walkers wept tears of joy to be greeted by a family of cavorting dolphins.

*I imagine walking with a small group of companions, carrying a copper pail and pouches of tobacco and corn pollen. Walking with an open heart and listening, trusting that my sincerity will allow me to hear the song of the Chesapeake, even though in my growing up no one taught me how to do this. In my culture such things are dismissed as childish superstition. As I walk, my ancestors send visions of the great crust of my culture slipping off the living land, just as a crab sheds his shell. When my path takes me through the asphalt parking lot of an abandoned shopping center, I see the truth of their vision: knotweed rising to the light from a crack in the paving. The spirit of the knotweed plant sings of restoring balance to the waters of the human body. And my spirit is filled with hope. I know myself to be water, to be united by water with all other beings.*

There are hundreds of thousands of creeks, streams and rivers in the Chesapeake Bay watershed. At the shoreline, the major tributaries are the Susquehanna, the Patapsco, the Patuxent, the Potomac, the Rappahannock, the York, the James, the Pocomoke, the Nanticoke, the Choptank, and the Chester. Smaller rivers include the Elk at the head of the Bay, the Gunpowder near Aberdeen Proving Ground north of Baltimore, the Severn and South Rivers at Annapolis, the Piankatank and the Nansemond in Tidewater, Virginia, and the Sassafras on the Eastern Shore. There are two small Wicomico Rivers. One feeds into the north shore of the Potomac about twenty miles from its mouth. The other lies between the Pocomoke and the Nanticoke, with the Ellis Bay Wildlife Management Area at its mouth. Mostly marsh and forested

wetland, this three thousand-acre haven for ducks, wading birds, deer and smaller animals is one of many lands left behind by time on the Eastern Shore. Lands that will be submerged under rising sea levels.

I can see no practical way to embark on a walk like this. Using Google Earth, I gauge the perimeter of the watershed to be a rugged line through valleys and mountains, cities, suburbs and farm fields, measuring approximately seventeen hundred miles. By comparison, the famed Pilgrimage Route (*Camino*) of Santiago de Compostela winds its way across Northern Spain for five hundred miles. People embark on this walk with motivations varying from spiritual to sporting. It's usually done in thirty to forty days, for an average of twelve to seventeen miles per day—roughly half the daily distance of most of the Water Walks. This is the granularity with which such adventures must be considered. People have been walking this route since the Middle Ages, staying in quaint *Albergues* and *Refugios*, gorging on local food and basking in the scenery of ancient landscapes and villages. Probably not how a Bay Watershed Walk would go.

The Appalachian Trail also comes to mind. It runs from Springer Mountain in Georgia to Mount Katahdin in Maine, and measures about twenty-two hundred miles. Every year, “thru-hikers” attempt to walk it in a single season, usually from south to north to follow the weather as it warms. This takes at least six months, not to mention the training and preparation beforehand. Some avid long-distance hikers go for the “Triple Crown” of hiking, completing the Continental Divide Trail and the Pacific Crest Trail, which measure thirty-one hundred and two thousand six hundred and sixty three miles respectively. Seeing those numbers makes me think this might be possible.

Until I remember that none of my walk would be on public trails, maintained by parks departments, nonprofit environmental groups and scout troops. I had hoped that the

Chesapeake Blessing Walk would at least follow the Appalachian Trail in the mountains of Virginia, Maryland or West Virginia. Alas, a quick superimposition of the two maps in Photoshop reveals that the A.T. neatly bisects the Bay Watershed.

*Gradually, others join the walk, women and men. They too hear the song of the Chesapeake. Together, the people walk along shorelines of sand and stones, of hard paving, manicured lawns and tall marsh grasses. They say blessings and sing prayers, perform ceremony and gaze upon the Chesapeake and her many tributaries in wonder. They converse with the spirits that dance in the sunlight on the water's surface and with the shifting tides in the depths below.*

Rather than choosing between shoreline, rivers, or watershed perimeter, why not walk it all? Why not here, there and everywhere? It's the least we can do, after the last four hundred years of ignorance. We have the science-based



advocacy, the citizen activist teams, the interactive web maps to track stream health and bird and butterfly migrations. We have the license plates and highway signs and storm drain stencils. Why not keep going and try everything that comes to mind, get all hands on deck? What have we got to lose? The places we love just might save us. Or at least they will change us.

*As we walk, pray, and sing our blessings to the land and the water, we feel our own bodies and hearts becoming more whole and vibrant. When we return from our walks, we raise oysters and restore the grasses that have been lost. We plant trees and care for streams in towns and cities far from the Bay's shores. Some of us tend gardens; others turn panels to the sun and blades to the wind. We walk and sing and share more. Our dances cause more cracks to appear in the*

*crust, and more healing plants emerge. People are inspired to tear up paving wherever they find it.*

*And on it goes, as the oysters multiply. The Chesapeake is well pleased that she and her rivers run clear again. The cormorants and osprey, herons and geese and Monarchs once again fill the skies. The blue crabs thrive because the grasses have grown thick. Even the rockfish and the sturgeon return in great numbers. And we do not blush to bless a glass of water before drinking it nor find it strange to sit in hushed stillness under the sky that arcs over the Mother of Waters, bowing our heads in thanks as day becomes night.*



Julie Gabrielli has practiced and taught architecture with a focus on sustainable design for over twenty-five years. She was a faculty advisor for the University of Maryland's 2007 Solar Decathlon entry, LEAFHouse, which place second overall, first in the U.S. The essays and paintings on her blog, *Thriving on the Threshold*, explore the both/and territory of living between cultural stories. In her Restorying retreats, participants experience sensory and imaginative kinship with the wild, animate world and practice listening for stories from the land. Her writing has been published online, in magazines including *Ecological Home Ideas* and *Urbanite*, and in the *Dark Mountain Journal* #6 and #8. She counts on her teenage son and her novel-in-progress for frequent lessons in humility.

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\*"Jimmy" is the waterman's term for male crab. "Sook" is a female crab





Nora Jamieson

## **I am Nothing Without My Dead**

*We become the stories we tell, that's why I tell certain stories again and again.*

Thomas King

I put out apples for the dead last morning. Cut in half, two rounds of sweet flesh, twin star-wombs nestling tiny brown seeds. The rounds were uneaten this morning. I guess they haven't come by yet, unless they've grown finicky basking in my attentions. Unless I have not yet found a way to feed them well. I've prayed, sung, pleaded, offered and even made my case as I've heard the indigenous sometimes do, yet of late they're not speaking to me and I miss them.

Unless the wind just now is their answer to my call, the wind that swirls down dead leaves in a rattle of descent against a grey, storm portent of a sky. Unless the scavenging of the squirrels in the same dry leaves, nosing into cold earth for acorns is an answer. Unless the thin tissue voice of the corn stalks is them whispering, we're here. And now the late-day sun finds its way through the dark clouds. The wind has stilled. Is that you?

The world speaks to us in a language I long to know, to hear. It's a good thing the dead love our longing for them. It would be a good thing, too, if the living kept the gate cracked.

*Why? And by what authority do you say that?* Someone asks, someone who lives in my mind, *Why carry the dead? What on earth for?* She is persistent and I suspect she too is my inheritance.

Because, I say to her again, if I am the sprout of their planting, how can I not carry them?

How can I forget them?

At any rate, I cannot help myself. I cannot help the persistent call to the web of my origins. I want to know who and what I belong to. And who belongs to me. And besides, if you cut a piece of the web, without repair, it falls apart. Until I make that repair, I am a clanless, tribeless woman and I know it. This is a dangerous condition, afflicting many, cut loose from any obligation to carry the past, to ensure a future. A world gone rogue.

I have always known that something is inside of me, someone lives in this skin house, someone calls to me in these bones. But it is dark in here and the voices far away through time. I hear weeping. I see grey granite sheared and plunging down, a steep chasm, a mountain? I hear weeping. Is it my own? Is it my dead come in the night?

*I dream of an old woman with white and luminous hair. She is surrounded by young people who attend the feast of her dying, the rhythm of her breath straining through cheesecloth lungs. This is the instruction to me – attend to the oracle of her breath – keep my finger on the red circle inscribed before me until she releases her last breath. I do. She does. I leave.*

*I dream an old woman who tells me my unacknowledged grief is terrible.*

*I dream that CS Lewis of A Grief Remembered has given me his room.*

*I dream of my dead returning to me.*

*I dream of grief bowls made of earth, sold in the village marketplace where we pay our debts to creation. In the carrying of them, peace is created between neighbors.*

*I dream of collecting death teachings with a dying woman.*

*I dream of carrying a human skull, memento mori, remember death.*

*I dream of crossing the bridge of tears, her daughter and I guiding my friend to the other side.*

*I dream I am dancing, swaying with a dead man in my arms. A Pieta.*

*I dream of probiotics for the dead.*

*I dream I tell someone there are old ways to touch the dead.*

*I dream of an otherworldly café, I am lost, I am afraid, I've made a mistake, I want to go back. The GPS fails. The roads are icy and I skid. I ask a woman for help, she tells me she cannot help me go south. I am traveling North.*

*I dream. I dream. I dream.*

Following the instructions of a teacher, I look for my dead, their tracings, in the old ways of my people. I study Scots Gaelic in which I learn that my ancestors did not say *my* land, *my* house, *my* family, *my*. Other than for relatives and the body they did not express possession in that way. They literally expressed connection by saying someone or thing is on me, with me, at me. An echo of all my relations. The dead are at me. They surely are.

I try my hand at the drop spindle, the most ancient form of spinning. I hook the roving to the spindle, draw out the fibers and spin the spindle sunwise. I imagine spinning the thread of creation; as the spiral of energy travels up the wool I pray to renew the world and make holy the daily life. I spin, I pray, all to weave myself back to them. I write. I sing. I call to my dead in their language, I introduce myself and the dog who is with me.

I am trying to carry my dead. And, I don't know how.

Some would say I am obsessed, and they would be right. Some would say it is a distraction. Perhaps. But this is what I know. It is the story that has conjured me my whole life, that has tried to plant itself in the stubborn soil of my heart. A heart harrowed by grief – both the proper grief that calls to those gone from my sight, and the sorrowful wreckage that I inevitably caused when running from that grief.

I surrendered to my grief many years ago, I had no choice, on my knees in the garden unable to move for the pain, and in doing so tried to heal it. In Western ways, that means I put myself to the task of disappearing it, killing it with kindness, drowning it in tears,

purging it with catharsis, and boring it to death with analytic repetition – all in the name of healing. But grief's faithfulness was carried on the back of my necessary failure. Grief is meant to grow something, it seems.

Yet, the seed has taken this many years to root. It is fragile. Will there be time? It is a calling no one has asked me to take up. Except, perhaps, my dead? It is, by necessity, in these times, a solitary work. It is lonely. And I don't know how.

I search in the old way. I circumambulate. I circle around.

I take the light and move from room to room in this haunted house that I am, tracking my own dusty footprints looking for signs of them. The light reaches deep in the corners, shadows loom and I wait.

She shows herself in a dream.

There is a wolf, who is a woman, who is a wolf. She lives behind a wall in my mind. She steps out, she looks at me and in her fierce gaze she tells me to knock it off, this doubt, this worry. She has come a long way. She has been waiting for me and my lantern. There is work to take up.

When she arrived I do not know, perhaps she was a seed, a dream, a song carried in the egg basket of my mother, that tiny pocket woven with flesh and blood, filled by other-worldly hands, the midwives of fate, with oracles. With me.

I am coming to know her, the one with a name only known to the spirits. How did they know that she, the one who lives behind the wall in my mind, would be needed. Now. At just this time. For these times.

She follows the tracks of the disappeared stories, the exiled names, the stolen children, she laments the lost heart, she might even return it to you. I see her. Her throat is open, there is a rope, a thread, an umbilicus, twisted by the spindle of stories we do not want to hear, but must. She is the throat woman, the spinning song woman, she wraps the lost, the missing, the forgotten in the silk of her spinning lament and brings them to the living.

The pitted earth is the throat of the keening woman: the test pits, the uranium pit, the mined earth gouged with our longing. Out of the throat of the keening woman comes everything you did not know you longed for. Out of the throat of the keening woman comes everything we destroyed in our innocent desire for a good life.

She is the throat woman, the spinning song woman, she wraps the lost, the missing, the forgotten, in the silk of her spinning lament and carries them home. But first we must hear her cry, be shattered by the ululation of her grief. Then maybe all will be whole.

She is faithful, she has called to me through death, the flood of my own longing, the floating wreckage of history. Like luminous moths battering against the light in soul darkness, she is faithful. She is wolf, she is woman, howling. She spins the thread of return; her throat is a whirlpool, her voice keening, wild.

I see now, she rocked with me when my beloveds died. She lamented. Oh, do not pity

me. They died, the gate opened, she saw her chance, stepping through and into a child's lament. She has been the unknown walking stick of my journey; she is the singer, the finder of lost sorrows, the weaver of memory; she lives in the underside of history's tapestry, the underworld of our dreams.

I heard her once in the death lodge in the voices of rain and thunder. Lightning. I thought I'd imagined it.

She is of my people. The Keening Woman. And I belong to her.

I walk up the hill in these small woods and I lay down tobacco, I lay down corn meal and mead, I pour whiskey, and I sing a mourning song. And I ask her to teach me.

Nora Jamieson lives in Northwest Connecticut where she writes, counsels women, and unsuccessfully tracks coyote. She is the author of a book of short stories, *Deranged*, and 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. [www.norajamieson.com](http://www.norajamieson.com)







**After-Word: Deranged, Nora Jamieson (Weeping Coyote Press, 2015)\***

Patricia Reis

*Deranged*. The title grabs me. When I consult the dictionary I find definitions:

**adj.** mad, insane, disturbed crazed, demented, unhinged, certifiable, berserk, irrational;

**verb.** cause someone to become insane, throw something into confusion, or the more

archaic, intrude or interrupt. Suddenly the ghost of Mary Daly rises up from wherever

she is hopefully getting a well-deserved rest. Although it is not in her *Webster's First*

*New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language*, she would surely love this word,

turning its meaning inside out, pointing to the deep background where it belongs in “the

Realm of Wild Reality; the Homeland of Women's Selves and of all other Others; the

Time/Space where auras of plants, planets, stars, animals and all other animate beings

connect.”<sup>i</sup>

The stories in *Deranged* are often heartbreaking, poignant and harsh. The uncanny events, the disconcerting connections between the human and other-than-human world may, from one perspective, appear as demented, a bit mad, even, one could say, deranged. When combined with Jamieson's depiction of the crush of cultural expectations, the visceral experience of gender, as well as the blood-and-bone parallel between the treatment of animals and women, they work to reveal, redeem and restore the true implicate order of things.

Wildish, slightly suspect, a bit undomesticated, Anna, Sophie, and Louise, the three unforgettable women who feature in these short stories, prowl the outskirts. They are prompted by impulses often outside the ken of their neighbors, and sometimes even themselves. Each is in the business of recollecting, reckoning and remembering. They travel the beaten paths of their personal past and keep going, picking their way through

the brambles of bygone times, nose to the ground, sniffing for the ragged remnants of the old ways that will bind the sorrows left behind by history. Each woman carries a story bundle packed with grief and loss; each is seeking redemption of suffering, piecing together a crazy quilt of meaning from odds and ends of memory, dreams, visions, the hard truths of the body, fragments of bones and scraps of animal hides.

Their stories work to free us from cages of imposed meaning, the baited leg traps of thought, the colonization of mind that drive us into confusion, that drive us mad. They are root medicine harvested from the bone yard of memory—astringent, ferruginous, cleansing—an antidote to poison and amnesia.

Known to each other only through happenstance or hearsay, Anna, Sophie and Louise live in places like Mountain Road and Scantic Gap, shimmering places between civilization and wilderness. They are women who when noticed at all are judged as eccentric, witchy, maybe even scary, certainly strange. They are the kind of women your mother tells you to steer clear of (unless she happens to be one of them herself). Ranging in age from middle to late (Lou/Louise's story is her midlife recollection of her childhood), they make brief and sometimes surprising appearances in each other's lives. As do the local four-footeds—coyote, deer, fox—whose lives and pathways cross trails with the human ones. In fact, it is the animals in these stories that are the unwitting game-changers.

“Some would say Anna is a toughened woman, strong spirited, raw boned, the lines of grief imprinted on her face. But right now she is perplexed and not a little frightened.”

Thus begins *Reckoning*.

Anna, a crusty sixty-year-old who wears a lumberjack shirt, old jeans and mud-spattered boots, rolls her own cigarettes and keeps goats. She lives alone in a house with walls porous enough for dreams and ghosts to pass through. An old stone wall marks her land from the woods beyond. Like Anna herself, the man-made boundary between the domestic and the wild gaps open. She knows the habits of her neighbors – the crows, owls, pileated woodpeckers—she can read the tracks of deer, fox and coyote as they go about making their living. She has a few human neighbors, of whom Adam, a bachelor who “cuts holes in the sky” with his chainsaw, is one. He is a quiet, sympathetic man, willing to be of use where he can, comfortable with long silences and Anna’s strange ways.

The story opens with Anna attempting to bury the past, literally. Her mother has left her an urn containing the ashes, not of a person, but of a family album she immolated years ago in an effort to release herself from sorrow. Anna has a great appetite for the past, for stories, for memory, for the people who have gone before. Try as she might to put it to rest, the urn will not stay under the lip of a boulder where she has buried it. Each time she looks, Anna finds it unearthed. Amongst the ashes, her father’s eyes stare out from a scrap of charred photograph. His early death when Anna was a child is an open portal to grief. But this story is not only about her personal loss.

While pondering why the urn will not stay buried, she looks out the window to an opening in the stone wall, just in time to see a creature stumbling through the gateway. Anna recognizes this coyote as one she has watched for years. “She watches the slow crumble of joints, as if disassembled by pulling the connecting thread from the long and graceful legs, first front, then back, then spine, then head, and finally from the heart. . . . Poison.”

Unhinged by the senseless brutality of this animal's death, the broken treaty between animal and human, Anna puts a funeral notice in the newspaper. "Eastern Grey Coyote died on February 10<sup>th</sup> from an acute illness after suffering excruciating convulsions and suffocation. Cause of death: poison." Following the template for a human obituary, she goes on to recall the coyote's "exemplary mothering," her "haunting songs and keen survival skills. . . . How, "having been displaced numerous times from her home habitat, she developed the capacity to make do without assistance. . . .She displayed strength of character, curiosity and a playful humor even in the face of intense hatred. She will be dearly missed by those she leaves behind, her family pack and Anna Holmes of Mountain Road who is holding calling hours on February 12<sup>th</sup> from 9p.m. to midnight."

The funeral draws a bunch of curious neighbors and a mysterious old truth-telling woman. The story drops into deeper territory where everything becomes simultaneously complex and simplified; the age-old arguments between livestock keepers and coyote defenders are put to rest for the moment by a particularly coyote way of reckoning, and with their tricksterish help, Anna finds the redemption she has been seeking.

Sophie Carson declares herself to be "The Looking Back Woman of Scantic Gap." She is an old woman, close to dying, who is writing her story for an unnamed "you." Scantic Gap, a place in the river where the water drops sixty feet, is "the place where the old is done and new is coming." Sophie ponders a particular stretch of this river, "where the water swirls and spirals around, where it rests and considers this change in direction. I like to think it is gathering up memory in that vortex of time, before plunging on." It's an

apt description of Sophie herself, as she pokes at the past with her stick, looking for memories of her ancestors.

“I am descended from a hard working, hard drinking people. And hard hearted too, suspicious and battle weary.” Her people are Ulster Scots forced by the English land clearances to Ireland, and from Ireland to America by the potato blight. But that is only one stream in her blood. There is another: the “indigenous peoples who wore skins...for whom the land and the red deer were sacred.” Sophie contemplates her mixed blood ancestry: “Two warring bloods living side by side, keeping this life running now for some eighty years. I lost many, not so much to history as to hope. The kind of hope that carries us across seas, over borders, that issues from a hunger so desperate it drives murder. Of a people, of a land. Hope can be terminal. It blinds grief, the portal to the soul of a person.”

Sophie declares herself to be deranged, like the polar bear she saw in the zoo as a child, hopelessly pacing its small enclosure. “What is wrong with that bear?” she had asked, and her mother replied with a memorable word: “Deranged.” Like the bear, Sophie paces “the cages of history’s making.” From a lifetime of living, Sophie has gleaned her blood stories: her grandmother, Rayna, a mixed blood Abenaki-Scot who quietly taught her native ways; her grandfather, Joe, an Ulster Scot who emigrated to the States looking for work as a weaver; her parents, Angus and Fiona; her husband, Samuel, fresh off the boat from County Armagh and with whom she had two stillborn children, their marriage faltering under the weight of childless sorrow.

Sophie tells her unknown reader, who has now become us, what compels her to write everything down. “Like the bear, I am trying to walk home and it is hopeless. I do not

recommend it, but I do encourage it. I wake everyday in homesickness and while I don't remember the way, I keep the homesickness alive because it is the only entry I have that might lead me into the way it should be. I may not get there, but I keep it open for you, or for someone who comes behind you.”

For the past thirty years Sophie has lived alone in the house her father and mother built at Scantic Gap. She has neighbors, including Anna Holmes on Mountain Road. When she reads Anna's newspaper announcement of the funeral for the Eastern Gray Coyote, Sophie attends the ceremony. Afterwards, at her home in Scantic Gap, she is given a dream vision that brings her story full circle.

*The Taxidermist's Daughter* is what some would call a coming-of-age story, but in Jamieson's hands, it is a coming-to-sanity tale that sutures a whole skin from things that have been split down the middle, the ripped and torn fragments of childhood, a necessary triage that allows the wise woman teachings to live and breathe.

“My name is Louise Estey Sewell,” announces the narrator in the first paragraph. She has returned in late middle age to her childhood home where her father, following three generations of workers in the fur and hide trade, had a taxidermy shop.

“You might wonder how I could, for a time, turn away from what I came to know in these rememberings... I left home at seventeen, moved to the small city nearby and turned my back on what I knew for many years. I became sick—heart sick, home sick, bone sick, city sick, is this all there is sick. Desperate, I took to walking, like I had as a girl.”

The rest of the story is a childhood memoir. From earliest memory, Lou had been surrounded by fur. “Pelts of deer, bear, raccoon and wolf had lined my bed... They were a beautiful and warm comfort to me, my lap and my solace... furs and how they came to be were always an unquestioned fact of my young life.” As the only living child of her parents, Lou, as she was called as a girl, apprenticed to her father at an early age; she worked with him in the back room of his shop and assumed that she would carry on her father’s tradition. But the skinned animals also gave her pause. As she observed, “the molded meat and muscle, the bluish tissue that wrapped them, the open mouth, the lolling tongue,” she understood that, “this was dead... and the recognition of my own animal self sent a shiver of wonder and unease through me.”

While Lou and her father worked in the back of the shop, the local men gathered in the front around the woodstove, “the air blue with their smoke, their language.” Lou listened and watched and became “as mute as the death that came through our door... Sensation and smell, the warmth of the stove, the men’s voices, the pelts, the sitting and stitching, this was my life as a child.” Bonded in their work and their silence, Lou’s father treated her as the son that she should have been. But that’s just one half of it.

Next door to John Sewell’s Taxidermy was her mother’s store—Salome’s Lingerie and Corset Shop. The wives of the men who sat around her father’s woodstove voiced their marital laments amidst the delicate hand-sewn undergarments of silk and lace. Skilled with a needle, Lou worked both fur pelts and fine cloth, moving between her parents’ domains, absorbing the charged tension that arced between the men and women, a sizzle of sexual heat, longing and fury.

When Lou's father calls her by her formal name, Louise, on her tenth birthday, and tells her not to be a pussy when she hesitates to skin a freshly killed rabbit, she crosses over into an unwanted yet unavoidable womanhood. She is pulled out of childhood innocence by what she see and senses around her: a fox who mourns for a relative whose remains are tossed in her father's outdoor bone cage, a man who leaves bruises on his wife and frequents the taxidermy, the whole desperate and displaced violence and love that runs between humans and animals. Louise begins to take revenge. She takes up cursing and blessing and springs traps in the woods. When one of the hunters comes upon her in the woods and takes out his deadly mix of longing and frustration on her body, she seeks the old woman, Sophie Carson, who offers her refuge, wisdom and healing in the old manner, with feathers and smoke and teachings from the elders.

These loosely interconnected stories have the internal complexity of Louise Erdrich, the sharp tang of Linda Hogan, and the quirkiness of Leslie Marmon Silko, but Jamieson's voice is unique; her perspective is shifty-eyed, her language an irreverent mix of raw emotion, probing intellect, soulful reflection and deep wisdom. In this work, Jamieson issues her readers a passport into the invisible and unspoken realms of forgotten stories: the human ones and also those of other-than-humans. Along with the passport, the only thing required at the border crossing is an open mind, an open heart and a willingness to be moved. The signpost warns, "Here is where history ends and the healing of deep memory begins."

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\*Available online at Amazon and Barnes & Noble, or through your favorite bookstore.

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<sup>i</sup> Mary Daly and Jane Caputi, *Websters' First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1987.



Patricia Reis is the author of numerous articles and essays, (see “Over the Edge” in *DarkMatter#1*) and has published four books, including *Daughters of Saturn: From Father's Daughter to Creative Woman*, *The Dreaming Way: Dreams and Art for Remembering and Recovery*, and *Women's Voices* (co-edited with Nancy Cater, 2014) which includes an in-depth interview with Terry Tempest Williams. Her as-yet-untitled memoir is forthcoming in fall, 2016. She divides her time between Portland, Maine and Nova Scotia.

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**The Bone in My Yard:  
Offering, Devotion, and a Story-Carrier's Tale**

by Rebecca Brams

I buried the bone in my backyard, under the Japanese maple tree, as Puma told me to. I would have thought the offering should be left in the wilderness, in the high places, close to the mountain gods. But no, under this tree in our tiny yard, the dense weave of city life just beyond the fence. When I listened, I heard: that was what Puma wanted.

Thirteen years before, I was given an unexpected gift that set me on the path of the story-carrier. It all started at Raqchi, an Inca site in the Peruvian highlands between Lake Titicaca and Cusco. That was where Mara found me.

I was 26 years old, a Jewish girl who grew up in a desert presided over by Joshua trees, ravens and tortoises. I was a traveler passing through the Andes, learning for the first time about this land of condor, puma and snake. These travels were for me a period of deep listening, opening to a call that could easily go unheard.

*Raqchi. April 2002, autumn south of the equator.*

*I wander a long grassy aisle in what our tour guide called the women's quarter. Thick walls rise on either side of me, each stone fit against the next in a tight embrace. Above the stonework soars smooth adobe. Doorways lead into identical roofless rooms. I pause at the entrance to one. A little breeze sweeps through, touching my hair, bringing with it the smell of crushed grass. I look around. My boyfriend Mikhail is nowhere in sight.*

*I step through the doorway. Inside, the air is quiet and still, sheltered by all that rock. There are three trapezoidal niches set into the wall. I sit in the corner near them. The stone wall at my back is surprisingly warm, still holding heat from the afternoon sun. I rest against it; my eyes close.*

*My fingers weave down into the thick pad of grass. Fingertips graze something hard. I work my hand around it, the smooth oval shape of a pebble revealed. I draw the stone to the surface. It fits perfectly in the hollow of my palm.*

*And then, I feel her – another presence, in the room with me.*

Although I was a writer living in Berkeley, I didn't think spirits talked to me. I believed the short stories I wrote came from my own creativity, inspired by the world around me. I considered the Muse a concept, an idea, not an ancient spirit who would hand me a story when I picked up a rock. There were no formal introductions: "Hello, my name is Mara and I'll be your spirit guide for the next several decades." Instead, a vision of a woman and her story shimmered on the hushed air – gauzy, diaphanous, the echo of a dream.



The "women's quarter" at Raqchi, Peru (tile roofs are not original)

*Rock, that bare, unadorned essence of a place, retains its character no matter how it is manipulated. The wall at my back, the pebble in my hand. They hold the memory of her still. My hand touches the imprint left by her hand centuries ago. Six hundred years.*

*She chooses me.*

*I loosen my grip on the pebble. Impossible.*

Raqchi was my first step into the region dominated by the mountain Ausangate. Rising above the landscape, Ausangate is not just a mountain, he is an Apu – a sacred peak permanently covered in snow and ice, a mountain god.

For the Incas, and for many Andeans still, the gods are not mythical beings; they are forces of nature with whom the people have intimate, complicated relationships based on reciprocity and offering. They are spirits whose moods and tempers can change the course of lives in the extreme, highland climate of the Andes. Gods who need to be pleased and appeased, and who can call forth blessings or curses on those who people their world.

In Mara's world, a place where everything is alive, the lines of the sacred and mundane weave together. The condor is an animal, yes, but he might also be a helper of the Apu, sent out from the mountain's icy folds to see the world beyond his gaze. The snake is a snake, but he is also a spirit of the underworld, connected to the dark and deep places of Pachamama, the Earth Mother. Sun, Moon, Thunder: these are both gods and the natural forces that shape peoples' lives.

*"There you are," Mikhail says. "It's time to go."*

*I want to sleep here, curled up with the taste of ancient stone in my mouth. But Raqchi is a ruin now, governed by the rules of tourism, and it closes at night.*

*Mikhail comes into the room and helps me to my feet. My jeans are damp from the grass. We walk down the aisle. The color of the sky is deepening as the blue hour approaches. This has never changed: the slow onset of night.*

*Suddenly, I realize the pebble is still in my hand. "Hold on," I say. "I'll be right back."*

*When I turn, the rooms are shadowy past identical doorways. I take a few steps, afraid I won't be able to find the right one. Is it really so important? But I sense it is. She is waiting.*

*I keep walking. There, on my left. I know that's the room. I step inside. The smell of crushed grass welcomes me. I leave the pebble in the center niche. Her gift. My offering.*

Though I had not been in the Andes long, I was beginning to understand that the culture was rooted in duality, reciprocity and the pervasive power of offerings. Andeans often use the word *pago* instead of the more formal *ofrenda*. *Pago* means “payment,” but the concept goes beyond our idea of a payment as part of a simple transaction. To many Andeans, even today and no matter how Catholic or non-traditional they are, leaving a *pago* is a gesture that is simply part of life. It is a thanks and a praise, a query and a prayer, a wish and a plea. It is a way of marking a moment. From the simple drop of alcohol spilled on the ground to Pachamama, to a *quintu* of coca leaves at a crossroads, to a complex offering given in a high place in the company of fellow devotees, leaving a *pago* is a way that Andeans assert over and over again their part of an ongoing relationship of reciprocity with the powerful forces of nature that surround them.



*A quintu, trio of coca leaves, as a pago to an Apu, Peru*

*We go to Cusco, once the Inca capital, navel of one of the world's great empires. I fall in love with the city, and it reciprocates with a horrible bout of traveler's illness. As I float on waves of fever and nausea, Mara stays beside me.*

*Visions of her girlhood in a remote canyon of the altiplano mingle with the shouts of children playing in the schoolyard behind our hostel. She is a chosen woman – first by the Apu to be a seer, and then by the Incas to become an aklla, a woman who serves the gods and the Empire.*

*I take powerful antibiotics and slowly recover. Mikhail and I hike the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu. Mara walks alongside me, layering her story over the tour guide's explanations. She is a woman trying to find her way in a time of flux, as the world around her falls under the domination of the rapidly expanding Empire.*

*At the top of Huayna Picchu, Mikhail asks me to marry him. He has two silver rings. One fits. The other we throw off the peak into the cloud forest below, our pago to the gods.*

Back in the U.S. months later, I knew the story wanted to be a book, but I resisted writing it. An epic historical novel seemed beyond me. I wrote short fiction instead, but I couldn't get Mara's story out of my head. Finally, I decided to write down the idea, thinking that might quiet the voice.

Sixty pages later, I accepted my fate. "Okay, okay," I said, and wrote the first draft.

A first draft, of course, is only the beginning of the journey. I returned to Peru on a Fulbright Fellowship to research and continue writing the book. Mikhail and I, newly married, criss-crossed the country for a year, tracing Mara's story through the lines of topo maps and over the dirt roads of the *campo*.



Exploring Mara's home region with a local boy, Peru

I wrote a second draft, and after we came back to the U.S., started a third. By then I was gestating a new big project requiring high levels of devotion—a baby. Two weeks before my son was born, with three different versions of the book tangled in my mind, I decided to take a break and focus on motherhood. Mara let me go. We were both sure I would come back.

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We don't always choose the stories we wind up carrying. Like we don't choose the children we are called upon to raise; they exist because of us and yet are independent of us.

I have often questioned why this woman—this spirit, muse, spark of inspiration—chose me to carry her story. I couldn't have been the first to pick up that pebble, but maybe I was the first to listen deeply enough to hear her. The first one crazy enough to say yes.

Perhaps she chose me for my youth, knowing it might take a lifetime to write her story. For six years, she waited—through my fractured nights with two babies, through exhaustion and distraction, months when I hardly remembered her. When finally I had the space inside my head to return to her, I was relieved and daunted to find she was still there.

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Carrying this story shifts the focus of my life. It has given me moments of transcendent beauty and wonder. Taken me places I never would have gone otherwise—to a remote canyon high in the Peruvian *altiplano*, where the children crowded around our camping stove, transfixed by the magic of the blue gas flame.

Carrying this story fills me with fear and doubt. I worry that I will not live up to what has been entrusted to me. I dread being accused of cultural appropriation because of my lack of Andean blood. I know that the lives of pre-conquest Andean women are shrouded in uncertainty. These women did not get to tell their own stories. The little we know has been distorted by the interpretations of everyone from Spanish conquistadores to modern tour guides. There is no “true” story. Yet I’m still concerned about getting it wrong.



Talking with women weavers on the Island of the Moon, Bolivia

The story demands that I open my eyes to realities I would rather not consider. The Inca Empire is often idealized in the Andes today, and the monuments it left behind, such as Machu Picchu, are world-renowned treasures. Yet these creations were built by people laboring under a totalitarian god-king. I wrestle with how to honor the beauty and spirit of a society while acknowledging the suffering it must also have caused.

Finally, this journey requires me to face tragedies in our modern world, such as how climate change is impacting the Andes. Canadian anthropologist Wade Davis, in his book *The Wayfinders: Why Ancient Wisdom Matters in the Modern World*, states: “Eighty percent of the fresh water that feeds the western coast of South America is derived from Andean glaciers. These are receding at such an obvious rate that the pilgrims to the Qoyllur Rit’i [Snow Star Festival], believing the mountain gods to be angry, are no longer carrying ice from the Sinakara [Valley] back to their communities, forgoing the very gesture of reciprocity that completes the sacred circle of the pilgrimage and allows for everyone to benefit from the grace of the divine.” I am forced to consider the effects of this devastation, not only at an environmental and human scale, but also at the level of cosmology. I don’t want to imagine the mountain gods stripped of their regal white cloaks, the mantles of snow and ice that have inspired centuries of devotion and awe. But the journey of the story-carrier insists that I do.



Writing at Inca site Ollantaytambo, Peru

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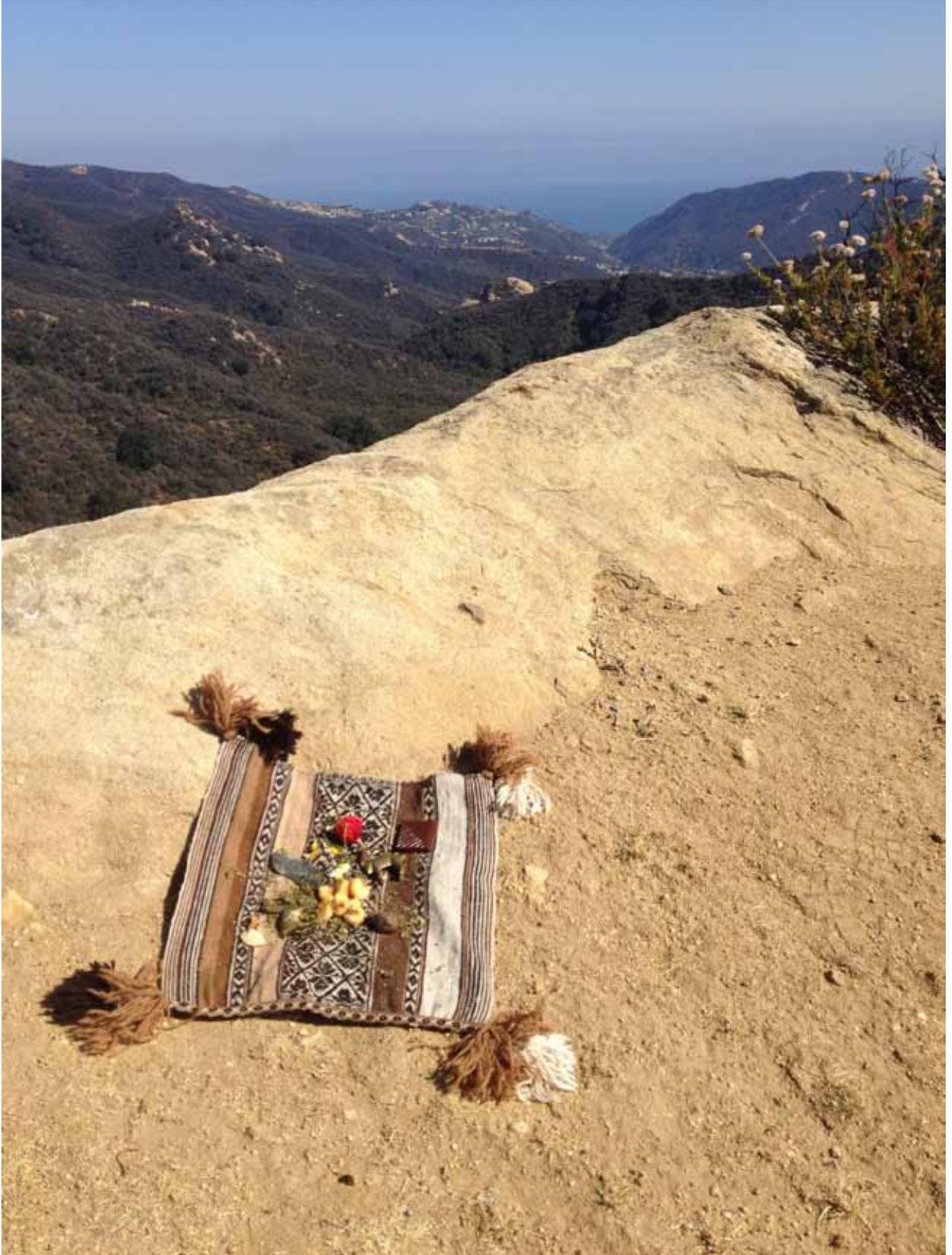
These days, there is not a lot of stillness in my life. My two young boys are whirlwinds circling around our small house, their needs and heartbreaks and joys constantly calling my attention.

Even when my children are out of the house, I am subject to the same forces as everyone in the plugged-in world. We live in an age of distraction, subject to the dominating influence of the screens we turn to for entertainment, information and connection. They are useful—perhaps essential for modern life—but they are attention-stealing machines, and we all know it. I go to my computer to write and can easily end up down a rabbit hole of classroom notices, work requests, and news of the latest tragedy somewhere on this big, beautiful earth.

Despite the logistical and psychological hurdles, I push myself to step out of the fast flow of my life in order to tend the story. I make the offering. This is the devotion of a thousand tiny steps. It is about showing up at the page as close to daily as I can muster, stringing writing sessions together like tiny beads on a strand. And in that preciously won time, I often struggle at the page, like every writer does. I get tangled up in the threads of the story. Sometimes I have to unweave line after line. This is the humbling work of daily practice, based on patience and persistence more often than grand leaps of inspiration.

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On a writing retreat in Southern California, no snow-covered Apu in sight, Eagle Rock was the highest place nearby. I hiked to the top. On my offering cloth, I spread chocolate, coca, chamomile flowers, sage I picked along the trail, and the big-kernelled corn from Peru called *choclo*. I sprinkled water, the most precious gift in these drought-stricken hills. Afterwards, I bounded down the hill, exhilarated. At the bottom, I discovered a sliver of orange *mullu*—the sacred spondylus shell—had come out of my ring, bought a decade ago in Peru. Eagle Rock wanted more than the *pago* I left. Sometimes the gods take more than what is willingly offered to them.



Offering at Eagle Rock, Southern California

The night before, on a different kind of journey, the pounding of the drum led me out of these sage-scented hills to the top of a snow-covered Apu. There I met Bird Spirit, a swirl of purple-black, and Puma Spirit, tawny paws crossed in front of her. They did not care for many of my questions or requests for guidance. *Irrelevant*, they responded. *Not our concern*. Bird spit on the ground. But they knew what they wanted. Bird wanted birdseed scattered in the hills. Puma wanted blood—the bone buried in my yard—and a liberal dose of alcohol poured on top.

To them both, I swore my devotion to the story I have been given to carry. I offered up my *pago* —to pay attention—perhaps the most sacred of currencies in this age of distraction. I promised to tend the story as I tend my children, to stay on the path until the journey is complete. Bird and Puma were not impressed. They expected nothing less.

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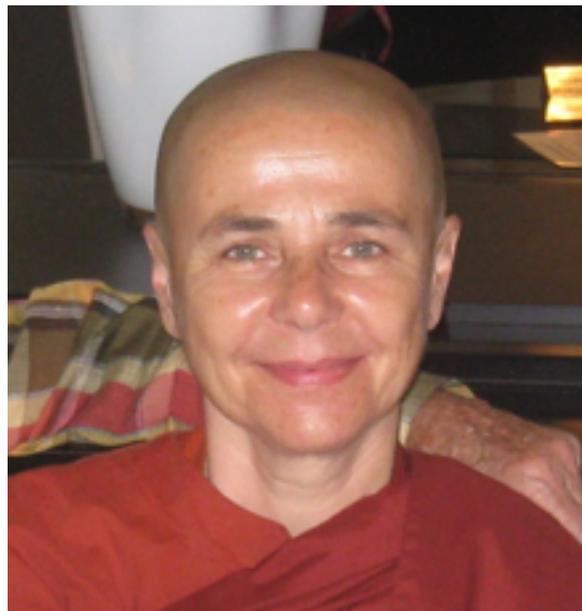


Photo - Andrea Scher



## Lise Weil Listening to Natural Law: Interview with Ayya Santacitta

Ayya Santacitta and Ayya Anandabodhi are two Buddhist nuns who came to the U.S. from England in 2009 in order to found a residential monastic nuns' community in the style of the Theravada Forest Tradition. Two years after they arrived, they broke with the order in which they had trained so as to pursue full Bhikkhuni (nun's) ordination, which, until a recent worldwide revival, had not been available in the Theravada tradition for almost 1,000 years. They received ordination on October 17, 2011 at Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Northern California. In 2012, they were joined by Anagarika Maria, who received bhikkhuni ordination at their community, Aloka Vihara, on November 1, 2014.



**Ayya Santacitta**

As both an ardent feminist and a practitioner of one form of Buddhism or another for close to thirty years, I was inspired by their story. I liked the idea of nuns in leadership roles with no master! And I liked what I read about them on their website <http://saranaloka.org/about/videos/> (emphases mine): “They are dedicated to practicing the Buddha’s teaching in the style of the Theravada Forest Tradition. Their practice emphasizes simplicity, renunciation, service and *an orientation towards learning from the natural world*, all held within the context of the Buddha’s teachings. The sisters *are committed to embracing and integrating the realities and challenges of contemporary society into their practice.*”

I became even more curious about these nuns when a friend directed me to talks in which they take on the issue of our ongoing destruction of the biosphere with a directness and a passion that, as far as I have been able to tell, is rare in Buddhist communities. <http://saranaloka.org/teaching/eco-dhamma/> As I read through their teachings and listened to their talks, I was moved by their obvious commitment to living in truth—or in Ayya Santacitta’s words, “To live a life that is congruent with what we know to be true.” Their website includes a long list of resources on climate action. In fact, Ayya Santacitta, the subject of this interview, traveled across the country on the climate train in September 2014 to participate in the Climate March, of which she said: “It was not just a dead serious march—but a celebration of becoming a channel for the Earth and to speak on behalf of Nature.” Recently, she co-organized an interfaith climate march in Sacramento ([a photo gallery](#)).

In a recent issue of *Inquiring Mind*, in an article co-written with Ayya Santussika <http://www.karunabv.org/about-us.html>, Ayya Santacitta wrote: “Some people may say, ‘We don’t want our monastics to be political.’ But if we monastics are not addressing this very concrete, desperate, ethical issue, then we’re not doing our job. In fact, we find that most people feel a sense of relief when they hear monastics break the silence and speak clearly about the environment and how this topic fits into the framework of the Dhamma. Our aim is to bring a bit more sanity to an urgent situation so that people are able to act effectively. This is what the Buddha did when people were in crisis; he placed it in the bigger context of the reality of aging, sickness, death and rebirth. The crisis of climate change can be framed in these same terms. It’s the death of a worldview and a way of life based on fossil fuels. The kind of rebirth the human family will experience depends on our actions now. “

Ayya Santacitta graciously agreed to be interviewed for an hour in January, just a week before the three nuns were about to embark on a three-month silent retreat. Subsequently, I had the good fortune to be able to sit a weeklong monastic retreat in April, at IMS, with her and Ayya Anandabodhi. It was more moving than I can say to sit before a shrine centered on the earth and two women who, moment by moment, so actively and passionately embodied devotion.

**LW:**

As a long-time feminist, I was interested in your having founded this training monastery/residential monastic community for women. The other thing that interested me was your directness and your passion about what is happening to our planet. With the exception of Thich Naht Hanh, I wasn’t seeing this in other Buddhist communities—even where there’s lip service played to activism. There is a fire in your response that excites me. I used to think Buddhism was always about a commitment to living in truth, but in practice it seems it isn’t always.

**AS:**

But doesn’t everyone have their own truth? We all look at it through our personal karmic lens.

**LW:**

Well then I guess some of our personal karmas allow us to take in more of the truth, and my sense is that you and Ayya Anandabodhi take in more of the truth, more of a complete truth.

**AS:**

We have been forced by circumstances to step out in a big way. My first teacher in Asia left the city monasteries and went back to nature and lived in a dilapidated old temple in the south of Thailand. He became a well-known teacher, attracting many Western disciples. I stayed with him for some time, and then I came to Amaravati Monastery in England where I met Ayya Anandabodhi and we practiced in this big monastic community for fifteen, sixteen years. And then, because women were not allowed to have an equivalent ordination to the monks, though this was offered to women by the Buddha over 2500 years ago, in the end we decided to leave the community, though we liked it there and we had a good training. But we wanted to have the full ordination because we were invited to come to America and establish a training monastery, and when we were here on the West Coast, it became clear to us that if you want to offer something to women in this part of the world it needs to be the real thing.

**LW:**

It's extraordinary what you've done, and what you had to give up...

**AS:**

It was an unfolding, really. It came clear to me through study, having read about feminism, and studied other things, the connection between the oppression of nature and the oppression of women, and then it wasn't a far stretch to feel connected to the environmental movement and that was what gave me the extra kick to leave it all behind. So the ordination wasn't the real motivator, only when I connected it with the bigger whole, such as the environmental movement... only then did it become a big impetus.

**LW:**

It seems the environment has been part of your mission from the beginning.

**AS:**

Vandana Shiva has been a big influence in that respect, hearing her talks and reading her work seeing so clearly the connection between the oppression of women and the environment. And then Thomas Berry, who wrote that this whole universe is actually a spiritual scripture and increasingly through evolution we are waking up to the oneness of it all and seeing ourselves as part of it. Those two have very much influenced me. My Buddhist practice is very much situated within this framework.

**LW:**

That's what I intuited, it's why I wanted to do this interview.

**AS:**

Yes, this was the other push in stepping out from the old safe environment and coming to this small place, leaving behind the security of this huge lineage which has hundreds of monasteries. I should say "security" in quotes.

**LW:**

I don't know if you know Mary Daly, the great feminist philosopher. She writes about the spider in freefall, who has to jump into the void in order to spin her web.

**AS:**

Yes, it was like that, and it still feels that way. We're out in the Sierra Foothills near Placerville, we're three nuns with a manager, tomorrow we're having our first novice ordaining and now taking on this property and developing it. It's a tall order, we're not builders or anything. And as you know, women are not as well-supported as men in Buddhism.

**LW:**

Absolutely not. And we're not where the money is. So all of this takes a lot of courage.

**AS:**

Thank you. But you know, it didn't feel like a choice, it was just clear this is what needs to be done.

**LW:**

I love that you've made it clear that this wasn't just about you and your spiritual growth, it's on behalf of the whole planet.

**AS:**

Well, also because I can't make that separation anymore. If you've been practicing for a certain amount of time, you just can't do it.

**LW:**

Yes, you would think so, but I don't hear this that often from other Buddhists. That their own spiritual evolution and the state of the planet are indivisible.

**AS:**

For me, I can't think otherwise, I feel it within myself, in my body.

**LW:**

Well yes, it is in our bodies!

**AS:**

Yes, after all we are made of the same stuff.



**LW:**

I want to return to what you said in the interview after the climate march, that there is no difference between responding to climate change and practicing the Dhamma. Can you say more about this?

**AS:**

Well, the Dhamma is a body of teaching that was given by the Buddha and is a recipe for letting go of greed, hatred and delusion in the mind, and it's exactly these things that are responsible for actions that are out of synch with reality. Climate change is part of that because you can't on a finite plane live in a

way that's so growth-oriented that it's completely out of touch with what's possible. And it's all driven by greed, hatred and delusion. Any spiritual practice is about seeing through this and letting it go, aligning yourself with the laws of nature. One translation of "Dhamma" is nature, or the laws of nature.

**LW:**

Really? I didn't know.

**AS:**

For example, in the Thai language, *dhammajati* means "natural," it's really about aligning yourself with the laws of nature. And not only how a tree grows or a fish swims, but how the mind works—it's all the laws of nature.

**LW:**

This feels so important.

**AS:**

These laws permeate reality and we can get to know how they work so we can align ourselves. When we work against them there is always something there to do with greed, hatred and delusion. The mind is contracted and unaligned.

**LW:**

So then, is part of the practice coming to know what the laws are?

**AS:**

Yes, exactly. It's about how to cultivate the mind to be in greater alignment, which means letting go of greed, anger and delusion. I think if people see the connection between deluded mind and climate change—I see this as a great motivator. If people can see the connection they feel even more motivated to practice.

**LW:**

Yes, as you said in the climate action video, you see this as an opportunity.

**AS:**

There I am very influenced by both Thomas Berry and Joanna Macy. The planet is holding up a big mirror now, and we need to make an evolutionary leap, to put energy into finding ways to work

together. There is inequality on the planet on so many levels. Rich countries go and cut down the forests, steal all the resources and leave chaos behind, people are uprooted, have lost their way of life and are left with a mess.

**LW:**

That's the foundation this continent is built on, it's what we did to the indigenous people here. So the way you see it is, the urgency of the situation could push people to see that there's something profoundly wrong with the way we're living on this earth.

**AS:**

Yes, and speaking about it, even if we don't know exactly what to do yet. Because here for example we still have gas and electricity, we don't even know when we can install solar, it's not cheap. But it's important to be speaking about it and moving towards systems change. Here we are working together to build Buddhist Climate Action Network (BCAN - <http://globalbcan.org>), together with a group of people from the East- and West coast, a global network for Buddhists, it's what came out of the climate march. I am particularly involved with the Sacramento & Sierra Nevada BCAN.

<http://sacsfbcan.globalbcan.org>

**LW:**

Wonderful. I also want to ask you—you're about to go on a silent retreat, you won't be doing anything activist at all for three months and I want to know—one of the questions this journal exists to ask is, "how do we live in response to what's happening?" In a moment-to-moment way, is there anything you can say about how you see your life as a response?

**AS:**

I see it more as an offering now. I'm now 56, and in the younger years you have a very strong, concrete vision of where and how to live your life. Now, since menopause, more and more I just let it unfold. I have been trying for a very long time to create a certain thing, now I have run out of that kind of energy, and I am where I am and I just work with whatever comes up. I don't know where it's going to lead.

**LW:**

So you're saying everything you do is a response, you can't separate it out. It's just how your life is unfolding.

**AS:**

That's right. I can't separate it out. It's not as if I don't make decisions and distinctions, but it feels more like ... like a river. Like a big river. It doesn't mean I'm always happy, sometimes it's very painful.

**LW:**

So you live in response to the conditions that present themselves.

**AS:**

Yes, it really feels like that. For example, we didn't know where we were going to go, we just thought "West coast" and now here we are in the Sierra foothills in this tiny town, we're actually twenty minutes outside the town, and I don't really know how we got here. Before we had a house in San Francisco a block from the beach, and now here we are in the forest, there is forest all around.

**LW:**

Well, that must be good.

**AS:**

Yes, it is good, but it's also isolated. When you're pioneers the way we are, there's a lot of work. And we're a small group of women and it's not always easy. We have a dormitory where three women can stay as guests for a few days to several months. But it is beautiful, we have no light pollution so we see the stars, and we have deer, bobcats, coyote, turkeys.

**LW:**

You mentioned somewhere that you wanted to live in nature because you wanted to listen to her, to hear what she had to say. What is she saying to you?

**AS:**

You know we are trained in the Thai Forest tradition and we now call ourselves nuns of the Theravada Forest Tradition in the West. The forest tradition, like most spiritual traditions, has a wilderness

component. Those who go out into nature and live simply, and the main emphasis is on meditation, not so much study.

**LW:**

But, at least in the Judeo-Christian tradition, my understanding of those sojourns is the point is not so much to be in nature as to get away from civilization so you can hear your own thoughts. Whereas you said, "I want to hear what she has to say."

**AS:**

You can learn so much from nature, you go in the forest and impermanence is everywhere. Being in the forest, in a quiet forest, you can learn so much from the trees. The presence of the trees just grounds you. The laws of nature are at work and you can tune into them. Just listening to nature is the same as listening to truth. You can access truth through understanding the laws of nature deeper and deeper.

**LW:**

In the climate action talk you said something I wanted to hear more about. You said we need to get out of the way and let evolution take its course.

**AS:**

What I meant is the ego part needs to get out of the way and intuitive awareness has to take over. This is what I mean: there is less and less of a clear agenda, it's more of a going with the flow. You respond in whatever way is possible in the given situation. We are teaching a retreat at IMS in April called "Listening to Natural Law" and we taught a retreat at Spirit Rock last year with that title, and wherever we teach, we have a three-dimensional picture of the earth in the center of the shrine—so the Buddha kind of sits on the planet—and we introduce the planet as being our teacher. We present this as a given, nothing special, just how it is. As you know, there are Buddha statues where he has one hand touching the earth. In the night of his enlightenment this is what he did, he touched the earth and called her to witness that he has the right to be here and to be enlightened. He was supported by the earth, just as we are being supported by her right now. It's not difficult to bring it all together.

**LW:**

So I guess this long silent retreat ahead of you is something you've been waiting for for a long time. Do you have any aspiration for yourself in these three months?

**AS:**

I think I want to work more with acceptance, you know, getting to know the banks of the river... and more kindness, for myself and for others. I think that's the main thing.



**Lise Weil** - was founder and editor of the US feminist review *Trivia: A Journal of Ideas* (1982-1991) and co-founder of its online offshoot *Trivia: Voices of Feminism*, which she edited through 2011 and which is now published by an editorial collective at the University of Arizona ( [www.triviavoices.com](http://www.triviavoices.com) ). She recently completed a memoir, *In Search of Pure Lust*, centering on the tension between the grand experiment of lesbian-feminism of the '70s and '80s, in which she was a fervent participant, and her later immersion in Buddhist practice. In 1990, she left Western Mass. for Montreal, where she has lived ever since. She teaches in Goddard College's Graduate Institute.





**After-Word Kenny Ausubel's *Dreaming the Future: Reimagining Civilization in the Age of Nature*, Chelsea Green Publishing, 2012**

Courtney Cable

*In truth, although it's one minute to midnight on the ecological clock and too late to avoid large-scale destruction and disruption...around the world, the transition from fossil fuels is irreversibly under way, along with countless other basic changes in how we organize human civilization to operate in concert with natural systems and in a reasonably peaceful coexistence with each other. We're entering the Age of Nature, and there's no turning back.*  
-Kenny Ausubel, *Dreaming the Future*

I read that opening paragraph over and over again, hoping that through the sheer force of repetition its truth will write itself deep into my being and manifest in my every action. We are indeed entering a new age and I hold great hope that it will be one of Nature. While the current political climate may strike a blow to such optimism, a lack of federal or even state leadership has opened the way for decentralized change. The task before us is to preserve as much diversity of life as possible to bring through the bottleneck with us into the new, unknown, and radically changed world on the other side. But how?

When it comes to innovative ideas for how to continue on this planet, Bioneers, the annual conference founded by Ausubel and his partner Nina Simons, has been charting the way for the past twenty-two years. Bioneers is a forum that brings together top thinkers from the humanities and the sciences who share a humbleness before nature and espouse the view that our salvation can only be found by working with, rather than against, natural systems. In *Dreaming the Future*, Ausubel has gathered twenty-four essays that, like the thinkers featured at Bioneers, highlight an effort to shift our mindset from taming Mother Nature to mimicking and working in concert with her to achieve mutually beneficial goals.

After spending the entirety of my 20's within the safe confines of academia, I entered my 30's having not yet truly engaged with my larger community. I felt this lack and found myself, as many others have, deeply yearning for a more authentic way of being; a way that was rooted in place, intertwined with neighbors, and connected to the very earth. For the first time I was open to learning about environmental toxins, the tidal wave of plastic pollution, and the vast inequalities in the world. I became desperate to find an elusive "right" way to live, but every choice seemed imperfect, leaving me overwhelmed and full of despair.

I found my personal antidote to such pessimism after having a baby. Witnessing first-hand how a tiny human, new to the world, could connect with the earth taught me a sense of reverence for Mother Nature as teacher. A simple drop of water could capture his focus completely, leading him to fully immersive, joyful exploration with the entirety of his body. His interactions with simple things – water, leaves, grass – were completely present in the moment and I realized that the natural world had my son's full attention and he was listening. Why couldn't we?

Children remind us that we humans are not separate from our environment. In *Dreaming the Future*, Ausubel argues that this is a crucial point for us to remember as we forge ahead. His book explores the ways in which we have butted heads with the natural world, discusses in-depth the problem of corporate power, and shares inspiring examples of how individuals have wrought real and tangible shifts in their communities by restoring ecosystems, enacting social justice, and bringing people together. Here we have municipalities choosing to employ the precautionary principle and banning pesticides in public places, small Pennsylvania townships successfully standing up to agribusiness to

stop the spreading of human waste sludge on fields, and individuals using nature's favorite form—the spiral—to transform everything from electronics to transportation.

Ausubel has dreamed for us a future in which individuals are empowered, nature has legal rights, and connection—with the earth and with each other—takes precedence over the bottom line. To write it out this way seems wildly optimistic if not delusional, but Ausubel is not at all naïve nor is he a purveyor of magical thinking. His writing is at times funny, often profound, and always informed by his deep knowledge and understanding of history, science, and politics.

By returning to our childness – our state of wonder and unity with our natural surroundings – we can better see the wisdom that is all around us. Our task is large, but the solutions have already been developed by nature. We only have to quiet our insistent human voices and listen.

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## Offerings

Cynthia Travis

In the dreams, I see huge, conical mounds of bright yellow corn; oversize platters piled high with rectangular slabs of cake; tropical fruit cut into delicate cubes and tenderly arranged in tiny glass bowls set on an outdoor shelf for runners in a race. I awake knowing that these are images of offerings.

Sometimes I dream of ways I am to offer myself: I reach into my gut and remove a clump of flesh shaped like a crescent moon. I fasten it closed with a twig and return it to my belly. This is painless... I am to dance a dance of reconciliation for arguing guests followed by gifts of olive oil in ceramic flasks... I hold out my outstretched arms as a perch for birds of prey...

When one receives a gift such as a dream—such as these dreams—what is called for? Over the past eleven years, I have been fortunate to work with traditional indigenous communities in Liberia,<sup>1</sup> where dreams are considered to be a gift, a precious communication from the Spirit World. The natural response to receiving a gift is to acknowledge the source of that gift, to express gratitude, and to reciprocate. Therefore, in Liberia, and in my community here in the U.S.—where we are seeking to re-learn to live by dreams—we sometimes make offerings in response to significant dreams. We like to go to the river, the ocean, or into the forest to leave nourishment for the animals and animal spirits: water or milk or some other libation poured onto the earth or into the water with fragrant words of gratitude; a glistening slice of honeycomb oozing through a basket woven of fresh rosemary; a poem spoken through tears. There are endless ways

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<sup>1</sup> I have a small, peacebuilding non-profit organization, *everyday gandhis* ([www.everydaygandhis.org](http://www.everydaygandhis.org)).

to show gratitude, or to notify the Spirits of our heartfelt commitment to live in active alliance with the natural or unseen world. I find it odd that this field of creative expression is seldom spoken of in artistic or spiritual circles.

Sometimes Nature responds in tangible ways (though the desire for a response cannot be what motivates us). In Liberia, when we were told that elephants were a sign that peace was coming, we offered mounds of favorite elephant foods in the forest surrounding certain villages: corn, squash, bananas, and rice. Two months later, real forest elephants came to the villages where these offerings had been made. In one, the entire village turned out to tell us that since the appearance of the elephants, no poisonous insects or snakes had troubled them. In response, the elders went to the outskirts of the village, stood in the forest and read aloud to the elephants from the Koran. In that same village, a widow came upon a massive bull elephant in her meager garden. His trunk was wrapped around a cassava vine, ready to pull it up. In spite of the danger posed by standing face to face with a hungry, wild elephant, the widow stood her ground and spoke to him out loud: "I am a lady, and I have no husband to provide for me and my children. We are hungry. Please, be sorry for us and leave us at least one cassava to eat." The elephant gently removed his trunk from the vine and ambled away.

In 2004, shortly after the end of the Liberian civil war, after a huge community Mourning Feast that had suggested itself in dreams, a small circle of diviners informed us that more offerings were required. After fifteen years of war and neglect, the Spirits were hungry. The diviners gathered rice flour, eggs, kola nuts, and shells and we went with them to the banks of the Lofa River, and then into the forest. Laughing and singing, the offerings were lavishly shared. In the forest, the ceremony began at a huge termite

mound, recognized, like double-trunked trees, as one of the many homes of the spirits. When we returned to the termite mound a couple of hours later, we found it covered in white chalk dust. Our western minds reeled.



This experience and others like it awoke in me a hunger for the magic of a felt connection to the Invisible. The consensual reality of the west, and the structures that support it (cities, cars, houses, jobs, schools, churches, etc.), seem designed to keep the Life Force contained and, therefore, separate from our daily focus on *things* and *results*, and to reinforce the illusion that humans are in control. Prayers are uttered, blessings are wished for, Magic is invited in - but always with the expectation that Magic will come to *us*. To make an offering is to deliberately extend our hand toward the Other World, so that Mystery can reach out and touch us in return. In opening the hand to make an offering, the language of Magic runs from our fingertips into other dimensions to establish an authentic, lived connection with the Other World in order to express

appreciation to Life for life. Making an offering is a radical act of beauty in response to a suicidally disconnected culture.

To live in a world of offerings is to invite a reciprocal relationship to that which sustains us, enlivening that connection because gratitude so quickly becomes specific and, therefore, palpable, revealing its anchors in the experience of the moment: Oh, that intake of moist air filling my lungs! That wave curling! That hummingbird! Those geese! This soft shawl around my shoulders! Making offerings is a way of being present, and one of the more useful responses to wonderment. A relationship based on offerings is a *real* relationship because it requires attention, humility, intimacy, dialogue, awareness and reciprocity. Making offerings keep me sane.

One of my favorite practices is to make a small Ancestor Plate at the end of the day, with scrumptious bits of the meal I am about to eat, and set it outside in the corner of the deck before dinner. The Ancestors' Emissary seems to be the little silver fox who lives in the field next door, and takes shelter from the rain in the culvert at the end of the driveway. She cleans the plate and leaves a tiny fox-poop next to it. Once, as we sat up late talking by candlelight, she stood on her hind legs at the living room window and gazed in at us.

I pour milk into the ocean with the thought: *may this milk feed all the life in the sea*. For that moment I am the primal mother releasing primal nourishment. As the liquid arc flows from my hand, it becomes a tiny bridge of protection and for that instant all creatures are safe and loved.

As I place an egg in a stream I am entrusting the possibility of new life into the tumbling flow that dances fresh and cool over the mossy stones. It is a sunny day in January. I remove my shoes, roll up my jeans and step barefoot into the icy water. I can barely keep my balance. My feet are numb and the stones are so slippery. But I cannot hold onto an overhanging branch or reach into the stream to steady myself on a rock because I have an egg in each hand that must be protected at all costs.

On the sacred mountain I come upon a cache of plastic water bottles. The elephants have told me that they are thirsty. I pour water on parched ground, becoming rain. Later, I learn that at the base of the mountain, at the exact same moment, my friend has also poured water for the elephants. That afternoon, we watch as the cloudless sky darkens and rain comes in person.



My friend Alex once said that the act of making an offering creates a tangible edge, a threshold across which one can enter into dialogue with the Source. I like to conjure the image of that threshold: a luminous oval platform floating in space above my head and a bit to the right, in a dimension right next to this one, pressing close, always available. In Permaculture, edges are known to be especially fertile. Perhaps this holds true at the edge between the Spirit World and the tangible one as well. In Nature as in human society, the edges are where the action is. Think of a cut, a scab or a bruise: the outside edges heal first and then the healing moves slowly toward the center. In Nature, the edges where different ecosystems meet (riverbanks, edges between field and forest, ocean and shore) are more fertile and have higher concentrations and diversity of insects, plants and animal species. Crops planted in fields at these edges are dramatically more productive than those planted in other areas. By observing these natural processes we can see that edges and 'edgewalkers' have a special role to play in restoration and healing. Offerings are healing dialogues that take place at the edge.

In Liberia, the words *offering* and *sacrifice* are often used interchangeably. A serious crisis in the life of a person or a community is considered an indication of an egregious imbalance in the Other World, in need of a commensurately serious offering. This often involves a blood offering of a chicken, sheep, goat or cow. A specific result is requested. The covenant between the animal, human and spirit worlds must be explicit and clear—and mutually agreed on. This is a sacrifice. After the Mourning Feast in Liberia, we met with a circle of Mandingo women who patiently explained to us that, *In our language, the word for sacrifice means 'to give more than you can'*. (As a Westerner, I have yet to surrender to this depth. As I clean and organize and store my too-many possessions, the

question sits on my shoulder: Am I willing—am I able—to depend on the community and on the Spirits, that fully? Thus far, no.)



We say that a soldier who dies has made the 'ultimate sacrifice'. But if that death is without clear intention, what is the message to the Other World? To shed blood mindlessly, with nothing more than terror or hatred in one's heart, creates confusion at best. Little wonder, then, that we are beset by such a massive spiral of death in response to our heedless ways.

To squander Earth's gifts is an active insult. It creates chaos. And yet the living world continues to be generous. For me, this generosity is an expression of the original order of things and making offerings is a way to show gratitude for the fact that, in spite of everything, there are fragments of intactness glistening amid the wreckage wrought by hierarchical, linear western thinking. When I am connected to the Holy, when I can see

that the world around me shimmers with aliveness, I am *of* it. There is no room for thoughts of grandiosity, or for self-doubt. Making offerings is my way of reaching for that zing of reassurance that can only come from the prickling, soothing excitement of humble belonging to something so reassuringly vast. As a woman—a Jewish woman—making offerings is one of the ways I participate in reassembling the jagged shards of the shattered bowl of the world.

Waking before dawn I sleepily look for the first shapes to emerge at the far end of the garden. The light before the light arrives on a palette of beiges and grays. Then I see the silhouette of the giant Eucalyptus tree. I wrap a blanket around my shoulders, put on my slippers and call the dog. No lights on yet, that would break the spell. I fill the kettle and hear its first drowsy hiss. I catch myself thinking there might be time to make tea and carry a steaming cup out with me to greet the sun. No! Mustn't get distracted. I watch for the suggestion of pink above the horizon. The dawn comes quickly and I don't want to miss it. Slowly, I hurry to the tree. I am excited. Like a puppy. Like a birthday girl. Like a woman acquitted of yesterday's sadness for the breaking world. For this moment, before the tea, before the headlines, the light is fresh. When it suddenly blooms, so golden against the tree trunk, I gasp. It takes me by surprise every time—as it should. The chilled air curls around my neck and wraps around my ankles as the dark ground releases its last shadows. And then suddenly there is warmth on my eyelids as I squint towards the East. A faint warmth on my chest as I gratefully inhale. Warmth on my lips as I smile and say, *Thank you for this day*, and mean it.

Imagine! A chance to feed the sun! What an outrageous honor! I reach my hand into the sack of cornmeal and pull out a fistful. It feels powdery and cool in my tingling palm. I

stand with my outstretched arm suspended between earth and sky. The gray-blue grains sift through my fingers into the light and are gone.





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