

DARK

MATTER

OCTOBER 2016, ISSUE #4
MAKING KIN PART I

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 #4 MAKING KIN: Part I

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Lise Weil

EDITORIAL

Who and whatever we are, we need to make-with—become-with, compose-with—the earthbound... My purpose is to make kin mean something other/more than entities tied by ancestry or genealogy.

Donna Haraway

And I've long thought there is no environment. There is only community comprised of organisms who exist within bounds without borders. Organisms whose birth, survival, and death ensures communal thriving.

Megan Hollingsworth, *ex•tinc•tion wit•ness* July 2016

This issue of *Dark Matter* was inspired by Donna Haraway's essay "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin"ⁱ in which she argues that a revisioning of "kin" and "kinship" to include non-blood relations and nonhumans is imperative for us now as a species ("Make Kin, Not Babies!" is her proposed slogan). The call we sent out was for "writing and artwork that offer ways to embody and/or enact an expanded vision of kin/kinship." Interestingly, most of the material we received centered on human-nonhuman relationships and most especially on human-animal kinship. At some point in production, between the fact that much of the writing we had expected to publish here was still in progress and that this issue had already burst its seams, it became clear that this was Part I of a two-part series. Part II of "Making Kin" will appear in spring of 2017 with more on making kin across the human-nonhuman divide, but also—we promise!—at least some writing on human-human relationships.

During the time we were gathering work for this issue, I had to have my cat Davy put to sleep. She had been with me for almost seventeen years. The night after she died I dreamt I was in a realm where there was no human/animal distinction. It was a realm I'd never been in before. A month after her death I dreamt I came across a group of rural hippies, mostly guys, sitting outside on big couches. Animals were snaking in and out and over and under their legs and laps, not only cats and dogs but undomesticated animals like ferrets and raccoons. One of the guys came to me with a sandwich. It looked like a hot dog but it was wedged between slices of homemade bread. "Here," he said, "It's a grief sandwich." "Thank you so much!" I said. "Oh," he said, "it's not just for you. I'm making a grief hot dog sandwich for everyone." Behind him I saw a grill and indeed there were a lot more hot dogs cooking on it. Now I understood these guys were all in mourning like me. A couple of them began telling me about the cat they'd just lost, listing its features exactly as if it were a human being. They handed me a printed piece of paper listing all the attributes and accomplishments of the deceased, just like an obituary.

This dream tells me a lot. These were not the kind of people I usually bond with. Guys on outdoor couches cooking hot dogs on a grill? But we did bond – by way of our love for our animals, by the grief we felt for the ones we'd lost. They saw their animals as complex beings with attributes and accomplishments. In fact, they lived in a realm in which ordinary human/animal distinctions did not exist, in which we were *all one*. And by the end I had come to feel I was one of them. Together we took the holy communion of grief hot dog sandwiches, made with homemade bread.

Kristin, *Dark Matter's* assistant editor, lost her cat only weeks after I lost Davy. Davy and Duncan were not our only cats, but they were the ones with whom we had the deepest intimacy. Two or three times during this period we made dates to discuss *Dark Matter* submissions--and each time got no further than talking

about Davy and Duncan. We discussed their particular attributes and accomplishments. We ate grief hot dog sandwiches together. Kristin wrote a piece about Duncan that I felt belonged in this issue. I sent her a piece I wrote awhile back about losing my cat Gracie which she insisted we put in to accompany hers. So, in a Coda, you will find our testimonials to cats we loved and lost as a kind of hot dog grief sandwich to share with our readers. Like so many of the others in this issue, and like so many thinkers and writers at this time, as Patricia Reis points out in her *After-word*, both pieces play with and push up against the rigid human-animal divide we've been taught to believe in.

Almost all the writing in this issue is testimony to the fact that animals, stones, flowers, landscapes, the night sky, sea creatures, even shoes and bars of soap, can be extraordinary teachers. And it would seem that what they have to teach us is – primarily—kinship, not only with them but with the entire physical universe.

In January of this year, friends Deena Metzger and Cynthia Travis travelled to an African reserve hoping to receive instruction from elephants. We are lucky to have their reports from that trip in this issue. It originated in a dream Metzger tells in her piece, one from which she awoke knowing, first, that “we must do everything we can...to prevent elephant extinction” and second, that “we will not be able to think our way to vision. We will have to go to Africa and listen.” In the end, the elephants came. And they communicated, with tremendous eloquence. Most of what they conveyed was wordless. But Cynthia Travis distinctly heard this: “You must learn to listen with your feet—then you will know what to do.”

In Linda Bender's profound and beautiful book *Animal Wisdom: Learning from the Spiritual Lives of Animals*ⁱⁱ she writes of an encounter with buffalo in an African park that is strikingly similar to the meetings described by both Travis and

Metzger. On her last day in the park a large herd of buffalo emerged suddenly from the bush, came to a full stop in the road and turned to stare at her and her driver. "Every single member of the herd, even the very young, was standing stock-still, gazing at us with an air of solemn formality. In that moment, I understood that their sudden appearance had been intentional, that they were a sort of delegation, and that I was the one they had come to see. Their message, delivered telepathically with one voice... was: *Do not forget us. Do not forget us. Teach others in your land what you know; do not forget us.*" Bender understood this message, most immediately, as a cry for help from endangered animals. But it was not only that, she felt sure. "More frequent contact with us has sensitized [the animals] to what troubles us...The pain of being disconnected from the Earth, from each other, from our fellow creatures, and from the Source of all life is the worst pain they can imagine, and they are concerned about us. They understand even better than we do that the suffering we inflict on them is an expression of our own suffering, and that their physical condition cannot get better unless the human spiritual condition gets better. They want to help." (17,18) Writes Travis: "It behooves us to consider that the elephants realize that our species has gone rogue - that our trauma is driving us to rape and destroy; that we are in dire need of some serious cross-species eldering and matriarchal leadership..." About the remarkable encounters with whales she recounts in this issue, Nancy Windheart remarks: "We often talk about 'saving the whales'--but the truth is, the whales are saving us."

We humans are in need of saving. Just as we don't seem to know how to stop abusing and destroying the earth we live on and owe our lives to, we do not seem to know how to stop abusing and destroying each other. Camille Norton reminds us in her *After-Word* "how the dark matter of racial injustice belongs to the history of our planetary ecological crisis"; for one thing, as she points out, places of ecological trauma are so often home to people of color. (Climate change itself cannot be considered apart from white supremacy, as Naomi Klein has demonstrated, because the "wildly unequal ways in which human lives are

counted” has determined the level of change considered to be “dangerous.”ⁱⁱⁱ⁾ Karen Mutter’s “Kinship and Murder” begins as a response to the anti-gay massacre in Orlando but moves almost immediately to the other recent violence in her back yard: the gunning down of Trayvon Martin of 2012 and the Florida bear hunt of 2015. Mutter is both unable and unwilling to consider any of these events separately. “In a world that does not see each living being as kin, we are all fair game.” More, she links them to the violence of her own profession, medicine, which “did not ask me to consider the lives of my kin beyond the human realm... [which] does not consider the consequences of pharmaceutical and radiologic pollution for the Earth and all beings...[which] places human need as supreme to everything else.”

It is the separating that is killing us—the not-seeing-as-kin/kinned. If it is true that we cannot consider our ecological crisis apart from systemic racism, it’s also true that we can’t keep addressing human-on-human violence without reference to the larger physical world we’re all part of. In her notes to “She and I,” Kathryn Kirkpatrick writes of the growing rift she has felt between herself and other feminists whose “thinking.. assumes human beings are in the struggle alone.” As someone for whom “feminist,” intrinsic and essential as it is and has been to my sanity and my self-definition, is for this very reason no longer an adequate identifier, I felt a shock of recognition at these words. What if, as Megan Hollingsworth suggests in the epigraph above, when we said “community,” we meant not only the humans existing inside those borders but all the other organisms living there as well?^{iv} What if social injustice were never considered apart from the injustices we humans inflict on the earth and other nonhuman beings? “Some of us have become used to thinking that woman is the nigger of the world, that a person of color is the nigger of the world, that a poor person is the nigger of the world. But, in truth, Earth itself has become the nigger of the world.”^v Alice Walker wrote these words, way back in 1986.

But justice isn’t the only or even the main issue. It’s our human cluelessness. “Our spiritual ecosystem is out of whack because there’s too much human nature

in it and not enough of other forms of nature,” writes Bender. The same could be said for many of our other systems. In “Listening for the Long Song,” the concluding article in this issue, Andrea Mathieson notes that “...most of us have lost our ability to hear the subtle sounds of the Earth and the voices of all her creatures.” Caught up as we are in our human dramas (this U.S. presidential election needs to be over now!), “we become deaf to the loving wisdom constantly available to us within the natural world.” We are unable to “listen with our feet”—as the elephants instructed—to that “great animal, alive and breathing”^{vi} beneath us.

I had a moment reading Mathieson where I was able to see even my own rage and panic about testosterone-driven destruction and extinction as a kind of static preventing me from tuning into deeper levels of awareness--- and ironically, from truly hearing the beings whose lives I’m so anxious to save. Windheart says the whales taught her “how to drop my awareness down into the earth, to open through the perceived edges of my physical form into something vast, deep, and universal.” Call it universal awareness, call it *Anima Mundi*, call it The Long Song, call it Source, we humans are mostly cut off from it and suffering the pain of disconnection. We need the wisdom and counsel of nonhuman nature and we need to learn to listen.

I have learned so much from the writing in this issue. Every piece deserves your careful attention. Please don’t miss out on a single one.

ⁱ <http://environmentalhumanities.org/arch/vol6/6.7.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Linda Bender, *Animal Wisdom: Learning from the Spiritual Lives of Animal*. North Atlantic Books, 2014.

ⁱⁱⁱ Naomi Klein, ““Why Black Lives Matter Should Transform the Climate Debate”

https://www.google.ca/?gws_rd=ssl#q=naomi+klein+black+lives+matter+and+climate

^{iv} The biophysical and systems environment is nothing less than a consequence of a whole community comprised of brilliantly unique individuals dancing in relationship,” 2012 post, *Elephant Journal*. <http://www.elephantjournal.com/2012/04/life-is-our-cause-megan-hollingsworth>

^v Alice Walker, "Everything is a Human Being," *Living By the Word: Selected Writings 1973-1987*.

Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich

^{vi} "Come to a place like this, shut your mouth and your mind and walk on the moor, walk in the wind and the sun, and you will understand soon enough that the world is a great animal, alive and breathing" Paul Kingsnorth, *Beast*. Faber, 2016.

Cynthia Travis

Listen with Your Feet

Prior to colonization, African elephant consciousness mirrored the unfenced expanse of the continent. Elephant civilization was a dense, intricate, multi-dimensional network of millions upon millions who were comparably bound to all other creatures and Nature's rhythms. Experience occurred in tandem, embedded in the space-time matrix of infinite relationships... Each elephant was a self-similar fractal who embodied all elephant consciousness...

The way forward is the way back - by returning to a way of life modeled on elephant ethics and values. Restore our consciousness to that of elephants of old. Renewal will come. www.gabradshaw.com

- *Elephants, Us and Other Kin*, G. A. Bradshaw,

The way we treat land, and the ghosts of our land, is the way we will treat everything, including ourselves.

- *Leaving Before the Rains Come*, Alexandra Fuller

We have subjected ourselves to a holocaust of the personal, the subjective, and the intuitive, becoming objects, even to ourselves. And that has made us lonely. No wonder we stay up late and keep the lights on all night long. A little more darkness and we might awaken to the question suppressed by virtually every aspect of our light-drunk lives: What on Earth have I done?

- *Waking Up In the Dark*, Clark Strand



I really must get to sleep, and soon, because by 3 a.m. the logging trucks will resume their ceaseless clatter. Tie-down chains bounce against the long, empty metal platforms of the trailers – long as a tree, as the trucks judder and clang along the narrow haul road across the river from my usually night-silent land. Well, almost silent, except for the all-night barking of my neighbors’ dogs as they patrol their small flock of sheep, an irresistible buffet loitering just out of reach of the mountain lions that have been hemmed out by fences, and bears driven mad with hunger because the logging companies have cleared the acorned oaks that are normally interspersed among the redwoods. In desperation, the bears scrape and eat redwood bark. The trees ooze a sweet sap to repair themselves. Bees that feed on this sap are immune to colony collapse disorder.¹ Species in distress seem to have built-in mechanisms for protecting each other. Let us *bear* this in mind. At least the distant barking is an animal sound that blends with the calls of the owls and the booming rush of the ocean that echoes up the canyon from the dunes. But it is not possible to become inured to the logging trucks, not possible to sleep to the jarring lullaby of metal against metal. I turn out the light. I turn it back on again. Shit. In Mexico, they have a saying, *se me espantó el sueño*: sleep got frightened away from me. I find myself flipping through Facebook, looking for hope. (I don’t own a television. This is my version of numbing distraction.) With luck, the blue-light-blocker pasted to my laptop screen will allow sleep to find me if it decides to return.

Here are baby elephants piling into the laps of delighted humans who are visiting an elephant orphanage. The little elephants gently knock the humans down and curl up in their laps. It’s so cute that I almost forget to wonder: What has happened to their mothers and fathers? Were they machine-gunned for ivory? Culled because the herd outgrew its impossibly small range, reduced by human encroachment? Or were the elephant parents enslaved by loggers, or perhaps stolen for a circus or a zoo? The Facebook clip makes it all seem like a day at the petting zoo.

¹ Brock Dolman and Kate Lundquist, OAEC (Occidental Arts and Ecology Center), www.oaec.org

I dreamed once of a long line of baby elephants ambling by, and awoke with the words, *our nearest orphans*.

Martín Prechtel says that in early times, when hunters killed an animal mother, they understood that they were now



responsible for its orphaned young. This is how we came to have pets.² How many, many orphans have we created?

An unexpected memory swims to the surface. When I was a little girl, my grandparents used to vacation in Hawaii. On one of those trips, my grandfather went sport fishing and caught a Marlin. A few weeks later, it arrived in Los Angeles, stuffed and lacquered in a permanent, exuberant arc. For years it hung above the louvered doors of the His and Hers changing rooms by my grandparents' swimming pool. I always hated walking beneath it, always felt ashamed and vulnerable, as if it might crash down on my head, as if any one of us would have deserved to be crushed by the obscenity of its ignominious end. Years later, my friend Tom told me that Marlins mate for life. I thought of her then, the swimming widow spawned by my grandfather.

Tom worked as a termite inspector. In his early forties, he contracted pancreatic cancer from exposure to Chlordane, a pesticide developed and manufactured by Monsanto and used from 1948 to 1988 for fumigation of corn and citrus crops and for termite eradication in over 30 million homes. It has a half-life of 30 years.³ Tom died in our arms the year before Chlordane was banned. The notion that 'pest control' is necessary and can only be accomplished by eradicating entire species of insects is identical to the

² *The Smell of Rain on Dust: Grief and Praise*, by Martín Prechtel
³ Wikipedia

thinking template of the Nazis' 'final solution', identical to the justification of every genocide. Are humans the host for greed? Is greed the intermediate host for Death?

Just as each life has its personal snapshots of mayhem and suffering, every era has its wars, it seems, and its public icons of madness. I was born after the concentration camps with their emaciated prisoners in striped pajamas; after the boxcars and the impossible mounds of children's shoes; after the mushroom clouds and the indelible, scorched shadows etched onto the sidewalks of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In elementary school, in the 1950's, we used to practice 'drop drills' – a sudden shout from the teacher to DROP! and we'd throw down our pencils and dive under our desks, covering our heads with our hands. It was a surreal enactment of the illusion of Western invincibility, as if our spindly arms and a piece of Formica could protect us from an atomic bomb. It reinforced what we already intuitively knew: that, like everyone and everything else, we, too were expendable. At best, the adults in our lives would shout a warning, but it was up to us children to protect ourselves. The fact of nuclear weapons meant that, like us, the future was expendable. By the early 1960's, this sent us, like lemmings, over the edge of our known world, in search of a better way. Our drugged hedonism and political fury gave momentary expression to our desperate longing (and there are some beautiful experiments that have taken root). Yet, fifty years on, we are still running, faster than ever. Running away, always running away. But what are we running toward?

I came of age during the Viet Nam war, watching Watergate on TV at dinnertime, stoned, with my roommates, the whole surreal drama unfolding as if real-time war and Nixon's crumbling presidency were just another sitcom. For me, the overarching image of that time was Kim Phuc, the napalmed girl running toward us, naked and screaming, with outstretched arms. Now we have Alan Kurdi, the drowned toddler from Syria who washed up on a Turkish beach.

In the media, human suffering, though terrible, is nonetheless privileged over the suffering of the natural world. Images of the devastated Earth and her beleaguered animals are comparatively few and hidden, reinforcing the illusion that we are separate. One must look more deeply to get to the truth. Few among us can escape the expanding library of horror lodged in our minds, whose images we can play at will like a slideshow. Each one is unbearable. With each one I think, That does it! *That* toddler, *those* baby

elephants, *that* melting ice. *This cannot continue!* But how? How can I contribute to wholeness with the shape of my life?

And so, and now, how shall we live?

The Wild is sanity. Darkness. Silence. The great knowing of Nature's rhythmic wisdom. In the wild is contained the dignity of intactness, authenticity, and the congruence of original design. Earth's relentless enfolding of each thing into another keeps life going. It is a terrifying comfort to remember that nothing, *no thing*, is outside it. *Every thing*, everything, is contained within her eternal cycling. All of the murdered and all of the murderers. Policemen shooting unarmed black men, and those who, in turn, shoot policemen. Revelers. Travelers. Suicide bombers and drone-makers. The fracked earth, pitted and paved, and politicians justifying torture as they parse 'collateral damage'. Even the mines with their unspeakable chemicals, and the desperate gouging for gold, silver, copper, platinum and 'rare earths' to put in our smartphones. Each and all of it deemed by someone's mad calculus to be a necessary sacrifice in the pursuit of righteousness, pleasure or profit.

Last night, I saw a huge, black mound lying motionless in the middle of the road. I realized it was a black bear that had been hit by a car. It was past midnight, and with no houses nearby, and no other cars on the road, I could neither attend to it nor move it by myself, and so I guiltily drove on, nauseous and in tears. I remembered the afternoon in 2006 when I saw a pair of courting blue jays. As I slowed my car to watch them, the male hurtled into my front bumper and dropped from sight. The female alighted on a patch of curbside grass, wings spread wide as she flitted and paced in alarm. The male lay motionless by the curb. I grabbed a towel from the back seat, scooped him up and held him in my lap as I drove the rest of the way home. His body was warm against my belly. When I opened the towel and bent my head to look at him, my exhale gently lifted the feathers on his neck.

The dogs slunk over and lay down at my feet. I explained what had happened, telling the story in every way I could think of: *It was an accident. It was Fate. Something spooked the jays. I was driving too fast, or too slow. We shouldn't have cars in the first place. It was an offering that I don't understand.* Up close, the jay was iridescent. Even the gray

feathers glowed. I hadn't known that gray could be so luminous. I called my friend Deena Metzger, who advised me to return the bird to the site of his death so that the female might know what became of him. I took him back to the little patch of grass by the curb and tucked him under a nearby bush.

A few weeks later, a fledgling jay lay dead on the flagstone by the guest room, a plump young bird on my doorstep. A tiny gray feather was stuck to the sliding glass door. This jay, too, was still warm. I left it there for a few hours then buried it near the place it had died. The following spring, I found a dead jay at our cabin in the mountains, a whole bird, cool and hollow, its desiccated body perfectly preserved by the dry mountain air. All that was left was a shell of feathers.

Fistfuls of blue jay feathers appeared on hiking trails and at camping spots. When I walked the dogs, blue jays flitted from branch to branch ahead of us. It occurred to me that I was a host. My task was to tend to the guest that was this story and to the jays. I began leaving peanuts in my patio. I learned to throw them onto the roof so that they didn't roll back down into the rain gutter. Most days, four jays came, two that would eat from my hand. One intrepid bird in particular would peck at the little window in the front door if the peanut dish was empty. If I left the slider open in back, he would hop into the house in spite of our two dogs and two cats, calling with his hopeful, shrill reminder until I came with peanuts in my outstretched hand. Have you ever felt a wild bird's talons wrap around your fingers, or his smooth pointed beak gently pecking at the soft flesh of your palm? It is an honor, thrilling and primal, this meeting of talon and skin. He turns his head sideways, as do I, and we gaze into each other's eyes.

One day, my friend B calls from Liberia. He is an ex-combatant who had joined the Liberian army when he was a teenager because the recruitment ads said that if he joined he would get an education. He became a model soldier, and, eventually, a presidential bodyguard to the infamous Sam Doe. He was sent for anti-terrorism training in Israel, weapons training in Lebanon and interrogation training in Romania, all of it paid for by the CIA. When Doe was overthrown by Charles Taylor, B was imprisoned and tortured. Upon his release, he joined anti-government rebels. When the war ended in 2004, he became a traveling salesman for bloodshed, recruiting child soldiers to go fight in neighboring Ivory Coast. Around the time we met him, he was overcome by remorse

and vowed to work for peace. He was now visiting the hidden encampments of former fighters, trying to convince them to lay down arms and come home. We worked together from 2005-2009 in peacebuilding and community reconciliation. On the phone that day, he sounded excited.

I was driving to Sarkonedu, where the ex-combatants were waiting. On the way going, I saw a little boy netting a blue jay. I said, 'Stop the car!' and got out. The little boy said he wanted the blue jay to cook for his soup. He told me that the people gather grasshoppers and cockroaches and put them out to lure the birds. Then they throw nets over them to catch and eat them. So I asked the boy, 'How much for that blue jay?' He said, '250 Liberian dollars' (about \$4 US at the time). I bought the bird and told the little boy to use the money to go buy a chicken. Then I released the bird. I cannot describe the feeling in my heart when I freed that blue jay and watched him fly away! And you know why I did it? It was because of that blue jay that ate from my hand at your house. It was so sweet! I remembered the feeling of that blue jay sitting on my hand. A few weeks later B called again: Today I took my plate of rice outside to sit and eat. I had forgotten my glass of water, so I went in the house to get it. When I got back outside, there was a flock of blue jays eating my rice. I have never before seen blue jays in Monrovia!

A bird in hand: What is it truly worth?

The keystone species⁴ that sustain entire ecosystems are under siege as never before: beavers, whose wetland engineering protects endangered salmon; wolves whose presence keeps rivers alive; sharks, who, as apex predators, keep the oceanic food chain in balance; bees, whose pollination we depend on for food; and elephants, especially elephants, with their huge range that benefits countless other species who depend on their journey, that also protects the land itself. Every life prepares the way for those that will follow, whether consciously or not. Are we humans a reverse keystone?

⁴ "A keystone species is a species that has a disproportionately large effect on its environment relative to its abundance... The role that a keystone species plays in its ecosystem is analogous to the role of a keystone in an arch... which collapses without it. Similarly, an ecosystem may experience a dramatic shift if a keystone species is removed, even though that species was a small part of the ecosystem by measures of biomass or productivity." Wikipedia

A tracker friend once told me that when a species goes extinct, the last individuals step into a world that is invisible to us, a parallel reality enfolded in a corner of the space-time continuum beyond our reach, awaiting the day when it is safe to return. I imagine a shimmering curtain, a barely discernible ripple in the air. Beyond it there are grizzlies, great auks, and northern white rhinos, all thriving. There are tribes of Native Peoples from all over the world, speaking their lost languages. It is comforting to think that so much beauty and irreplaceable wisdom remain intact somewhere.

It used to be that elephants migrated over thousands of miles in cycles lasting 200 years or more. The elephants' long memories made it possible to find water, food, and refuge along the way and to honor their dead. Unerring navigation over vast distances remains encoded in their DNA. By the time the elephants had come full circle, many generations later, the trees their forebears had pulled down had regrown, and countless plants and animals had been sustained in the interim.



Elephants communicate through infrasonic rumbles and seismic vibrations across hundreds of square miles. When they stand on the tips of their massive feet, they are listening. The fatty tissue that cushions their footpads also transmits sound waves to their brain. With their trunks, they can discern scent particles of one part per 100 million. They are matriarchal and communal. They mourn their dead, remembering the identity

and location of those that have perished.⁵ Elephants have an unerring, psychic intuition. The morning that legendary conservationist and ‘elephant whisperer’ Lawrence Anthony died of a heart attack in 2012, the two herds of rescued elephants that live at Thula Thula, his private game reserve in South Africa, gathered in the predawn light in front of his house. Each year, on the anniversary of his death, they return.⁶ In both Sudan and Liberia, when peace came at last after protracted war, elephants returned that had fled into neighboring countries.

Male elephant elders keep young males in check. Like humans, when juvenile males are not properly elderled, they go berserk, raping and killing. (Elephants attack not only their own species but others as well.)⁷ Elephants, humans, and dozens of other species (including birds, reptiles, dogs, and many others) currently suffer from PTSD. Elephants, like humans and other animals, are able to heal once they find safety, kindness, and the opportunity to devote themselves to helping others.⁸

It used to be that elephant hunting was a gory colonial sport, and modern poaching was the province of hungry villagers or resentful farmers. Now elephants (and rhinos) are being gunned down from helicopters by criminal gangs armed with automatic weapons and night-vision scopes. Rangers who attempt to protect the animals are often executed. The numbers are staggering: it is estimated that in 1900, there were 10 million elephants in Africa. In 1980, 1.2 million. In 2013, 450,000.⁹ Each day, about 100 elephants are killed in Africa - one every 15 minutes, 35,000 or more per year.¹⁰ At this rate, viable populations of elephants in the wild will be gone within our lifetime. The situation for rhinos is even worse. Yet, despite hundreds of years of torture, enslavement and genocide at human hands, elephants remain miraculously steadfast in their willingness to connect with us. They are a keystone species and then some. In the refined complexity of their social behavior as well as in their physiology, elephants are deeply, exquisitely sane.

⁵ Lawrence Anthony, *The Last Rhinos*, and *The Elephant Whisperer*

⁶ <http://zululandobserver.co.za/26978/elephants-commemorate-late-conservation-hero/> and <http://www.beliefnet.com/columnists/news/2012/03/rescued-wild-elephant-herds-inexplicably-gather-to-mourn-lawrence-anthony-south-africas-elephant-whisperer.php/>

⁷ G.A. Bradshaw, *Elephants on the Edge*

⁸ G.A. Bradshaw, *Elephants, Us and Other Kin*, www.gabradshaw.com

⁹ <http://www.howmanyelephants.co/>

¹⁰ CA4Elephants.org, & savetheelephants.org

When I search my mental Rolodex for icons of human sanity, Mother Theresa comes to mind. I read an interview once in which she said that, as a young woman, she had felt the presence of God, but only briefly. She never felt it again, but lived her life in hopes that it/He would return if only she could make herself sufficiently hospitable to God's presence as she understood it. And so, she is reputed to have picked maggots from the infected wounds of the forgotten. It seems that even the radical kindness of Mother Theresa was mostly hype. She was more in love with suffering than with the sufferers. Apparently her Missionaries of Charity did not spend the millions of dollars they raised on medical care, pain relief, or sterilized needles. She said, "*I think it is very beautiful for the poor to accept their lot, to share it with the passion of Christ. I think the world is being much helped by the suffering of the poor people.*"¹¹ But even if all the publicity were all true, it would have been compromised because salvation is not external. Charity, in general, is unidirectional rather than reciprocal, and, therefore, can neither address the plight of the less fortunate nor fill the void inside those that wish to give. Western charity is by its nature an anomalous, palliative generosity enacted within a social milieu whose axiomatic illusion holds that it is not only possible but acceptable for whole segments of the larger community to languish, unattended, without causing damage to the whole. This is why most aid programs, NGO's, charities, philanthropy and, in the long run, most businesses are doomed: They consider themselves separate from those they seek to assist, and separate from the rhythms of the Earth. They are fragmented rather than fractal. They are non-elephantine.

I knew a man in Liberia whom we called Uncle Robert. One day he grabbed my arm and said, *I want to ask you a question. When I go home to my village, I know everyone there. I know their children, the people they married and all their relatives on both sides. I know their grandparents, their aunts and their uncles. I know their clans and their taboos (totem animals). I know where they make their farms and what they grow, or what business they are in. In the same way, I know all the people in all the villages around us. I have heard that in America, people sometimes don't even know the people who live next door or across the street. Is this really true? How can this be possible?*

¹¹ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/progressivesecularhumanist/2016/09/sadistic-religious-fanatic-mother-teresa-was-no-saint/>

In September of 2006, I went to Botswana with my friend Deena Metzger to visit the Elephant Ambassador, so named for a bull elephant with whom she had had a life-changing encounter a few years before, and had pledged to live in alliance with the elephants as a result.¹² We had returned in hopes that the elephants might wish to continue the connection. Whenever we were with them, we practiced, as best we could, a sustained heart and mind-opening, allowing our awareness to melt into theirs and vice versa. In the course of our silent conversations, we mentioned that we were on our way to Liberia, where the presence of elephants was known to be a sign of peace. We told them that peace was deeply needed there, both for their elephant kin, the beleaguered forest elephants of West Africa, and for humans.



As we sat under the tree that was our elephant meeting place, an elephant family of four crossed to the nearby river to drink and to play. As with Deena's first encounter with the elephants in that place, we had

been waiting all afternoon and, on the last day, at the last moment of the last hour, they came. When it was time for the elephants to go home, the youngest didn't want to leave and the adults had to insist, gently pushing it out of the deliciously cool mud and back up the riverbank. The parents stood close to our truck and affectionately entwined their trunks before the mother left with the youngsters. When they had disappeared into the bush, the male began pulling at something in the low grass, eventually picking it up and tossing it toward our truck. He came closer. Stopping about ten yards away, he turned to face us and got down on one knee. After a few moments, he stood up again, twisted his trunk into a figure eight - a sort of elephant-trunk infinity, and ambled away. What he had

¹² *Entering the Ghost River: Meditations on the Theory and Practice of Healing*, Deena Metzger

thrown to us turned out to be an elephant thighbone. Surely he must have known whose. The deliberateness of his actions was unmistakable. It took our breath away.

And so, and now, how shall we live?

While in Liberia some weeks later, we made offerings to the elephants in the forest and told them of our visit to their cousins in Botswana. The following year, just before Thanksgiving, I received a call from Liberia that elephants had arrived in all of the villages where offerings to the elephants had been made. I rushed back to hear the stories in person, wondering whether the Botswana elephants had, indeed, put out the call to their Liberian kin.

In the village of Womanor, when the elephants came, the elders fanned out into the forest and read certain passages from the Koran out loud. They explained that this had been customary in the old times, to let the elephants know that the people recognized their presence as a sacred event. Since the appearance of the elephants the village had not been troubled by poisonous insects or snakes. The elephants had come in a small group, led by a large and very old bull. It was thought that this individual had escaped from a zoo during the war, and had walked several hundred kilometers to safety in neighboring Guinea, and recently returned. One day, a woman met him while farming her small plot, coming face to face with the huge old bull elephant just as he was about to pull up one of her cassava plants. She looked him in the eye and said: *I'm a woman and I grow this food for my children. My husband was killed in the war. Please, be sorry for me, and leave us something to eat!* The elephant unwound his trunk from the cassava stalk and disappeared into the forest. A short time later, that elephant died. The people brought out his massive skull to show us.

We accompanied our friend Karmah Jallah, an elder from the Lorma tribe, to the Mandingo village of Kuluka. Though the Mandingos and the Lormas were historically very close, during the Liberian civil war they were, literally, at each other's throats. Now, two years after the war had ended, there was still much bitterness and animosity between them. Because the elephants had come, Karmah Jallah convened a council at Kuluka, which was held at the gravesite of the founding elder of the village. There, Karmah Jallah recounted the history of their two peoples and the deep and loving

connection they once enjoyed. The Mandingo elders wept openly and peace was restored. A few weeks later, Karmah Jallah died.

In the village of Barkedu, we met a man whose elephant dreams had flowed into daytime reality. Other villagers corroborated that when the elephants told him, for example, *Meet me at the pond on Thursday at noon*, he would go there at the appointed time and find an elephant waiting for him. Soon, the elephants instructed him where to plant his crops. He did as he was told. The elephants ate the other farmers' harvest, but left the dreamer's plot undisturbed. When he asked them why, they replied, *The others have forgotten their manners. They are cutting down too many trees, and killing too many animals for no reason.*

One of the elders there told us that, before the war, the people and the animals used to speak freely with each other and communicated well. He remembered when, as a young boy, there had been trouble in the river nearby. Crocodiles were attacking humans, and humans were killing the crocodiles in self-defense. The head elder of the village summoned the crocodile elder. The man telling us the story said he remembered seeing the old croc walking slowly up to the old man's hut. There, the two leaders sat together all afternoon, discussing their shared dilemma. They came to an agreement that each group would have its own special bend in the river where they would each be safe. The agreement was still in force at the time we were told the story. People said they bathed, washed their clothes and swam freely in their designated area, without a crocodile in sight. A short distance away, the crocodiles basked in the mud undisturbed.

At the end of our meeting, an ex-combatant recounted a dream: He is pounding on his neighbor's door and shouting, *Is there Mercy enough for me?* A question like that burrows deep in our soul and lays its eggs. It feeds on our unshed tears.

Intuition, dreams, and synchronicities are the language of the liminal world where human and non-human meet. Logic cannot take us there. This past January (2016), inspired by a mysterious dream that had come to Deena, we returned to the site of our previous meeting with the Elephant Ambassador, and visited two other preserves where we hoped to find elephants whose communities were relatively intact. Everywhere we went

the elephants seemed to deliberately come meet us. The desert elephants of Damaraland, in Namibia, reached their trunks into our vehicle to sniff us.

Stories make images, images make memories, memories feed questions. What does it mean to inhabit a question? To invite the questions, the images—and the elephants themselves—to inhabit us, and to notice where they take up residence in our bodies and in our lives? *That* blue jay. *Those* elephants. *That* soldier. *Is there Mercy enough for me? Enough for us all?* Not God's mercy, but our own. They're one and the same. That's the point.

Back in the U.S., Deena and I sit together to ponder what the elephants might want from us now. In our minds, we journey to meet them. At first all is darkness and chaos. Fleeting images, none that are clear. But at the last moment, I hear them say, *Learn to listen with your feet. Then you will know what to do.*

It behooves us to consider that the elephants realize that our species has gone rogue - that our trauma is driving us to rape and destroy; that we are in dire need of some serious cross-species eldering and matriarchal leadership; that they are calling us back into the life-and-death alliances that are our birthright if we are to reweave the threads of ourselves back into the tapestry of Life. It is the last hour of the last afternoon of the last day – the hour of the elephants. It is time to quiet ourselves in order to receive them. *And so, and now, how shall we live?*

About the Author



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

Jennifer Finley

Deer

At night, I lie beneath the stars, year round.
I smell like open sky, snow, and lake water.
Nobody has to tell me my face is holy and beautiful.

I dream in a language your people used to know.
Woman, I see you and your children looking at me
through car windows and house windows.
I smell your children's breath when they step outside.
The blood in your veins is not so different than mine
that pulses warm on moonlit winter nights
as you listen to your offspring breathing.

We are not so different. We both gave birth.
We both smelled danger in a man's angry voice.
We both know when to run and when to hide.
We both know how to kick with our strong legs.
We both know we are the ones on which someone else depends.

We are the ones with the power of moonlight in our hair.
We are the ones with the beauty of this land imbedded in us.

Magpies

My dad used to say magpies were a nuisance bird.
I seem to see them everywhere I go.
Magpie flocks flutter in the pine trees in my yard.
They eat dog food from my dog's dented metal dish.

I know what it's like to feel unwanted, like my existence,
my words are a nuisance and are not welcomed.
I will never kill a magpie.
I will remember magpie mothers
who must feed their young no matter what.
I will remember black hooded heads and black eyes
that know these trees and lakes and deer from the sky.
I will remember that nobody can be wanted all the time.

One time or another, we have all been magpies.

What My Cat Would Say to Me

Sometimes I like to stretch out belly to dirt my face close to the earth.
I can hear things you can't understand. I would like to tell you
how much I love your hands on my head, my back, my ribs.
I would like to tell you what it's like to climb a pine tree at night beneath the stars
and how all living creatures have wise things to say.

There are times when all I can do is sit next to your arms
when you weep silently in the wee hours of the night.
I wish I could tell you how much the trees love you,
how much the moon loves you, and how there is good magic in your dreams.

Tonight, when you sleep, I will look at your closed eyes in the moonlight.
I will listen to you breathing, and I will purr a thousand lullabies just for you.

Notes:

I wrote these poems shortly after my divorce. At that time, I was feeling particularly unloved by people. I had a few friends and was alone on many levels. Being in that position reminded me to reach for and acknowledge other connections and for non-human beings that loved me.



Jennifer Finley lives in Ronan, Montana. She's the author of two books of poetry and a children's book. Her forthcoming book of poetry is entitled *My Hands Have Vertigo*. Jennifer's first love and soulmate is poetry. However, she's also an award-winning journalist, and she's a playwright. Jennifer is a member of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, and she's Chippewa-Cree. Jennifer is a mother, cat lover and a runner.

Karen Mutter

Kinship and Murder

Forty-nine of my kin were killed early this morning. They were murdered in a hate crime. A gunman entered the gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida with two firearms and began shooting. Some of the patrons on the dance floor thought that the loud booms were part of the music until people all around them fell to the ground wounded or killed by the barrage of bullets. One young man interviewed on the news escaped death by dropping to the floor and then shimmying out of the club on his belly. Another 53 wounded are at local hospitals and many of those are fighting for their lives right now. Right now.

Right now I sit at my computer 100 miles away from the massacre site, undone. My heart is aching for the family and friends who are waiting to find out if their loved one is one of the bodies still yet to be identified. Right now I am thinking about the irony of where I was last evening when the shooting occurred. Three of my longtime friends and I attended a play about five lesbians, desperately closeted in 1956. A nuclear explosion left them stuck in a bomb shelter. With nobody else alive on earth left to condemn them, they were free at last to fully express themselves. It was a comedic tragedy, a parody filled with innuendo--the appreciative audience far more straight than gay. Though the message about extreme repression was painfully clear, my friends and I laughed and reminisced after the show about how far we had come, both as individuals with our own anguishes and coming out stories and also as a society where just last year, the U.S. Supreme Court and the state of Florida condoned our relationships through the right of marriage. I am thinking of the false sense of security that this implies. To awaken to the news of this massacre reminds me that being gay in this country is still for some religious groups one of the greatest sins. I am thinking about my brothers and sisters living in the 76 other countries where homosexuality is illegal and in 10 of those places, punishable by death. Sadly, I no longer find this so hard to imagine.

Right now, my thoughts shift to Trayvon Martin, the young, unarmed black teen killed just outside of Orlando in 2012, gunned down by a man who positioned himself as neighborhood crime watch. The all-white female jury declared he was not guilty. *Young black men everywhere beware*, I thought to myself then. *You are still being hunted*. In 2015, police in the U.S killed five times more blacks than whites. In total, 102 unarmed blacks were killed, and of those cases only two deaths resulted in conviction of police officers. The murders continue.

Right now, my thoughts race to my kin—the Florida black bears. In just two days in October 2015, 295 bears were hunted and killed in Florida. The largest number—139—were gunned down in the central Florida region, the place I call home. The hunt was unanimously sanctioned by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC). All seven of those commissioners were appointed by Florida Governor Scott, and all have ties to the private sector, including ranching, contracting and land development. Black bears are seen as a possible threat to such intentions, although black bear attacks in Florida are quite rare and are generally provoked by humans. Just three years earlier, the Florida Black Bear was listed as an endangered species largely due to the fact that more than a thousand bears had been lost to vehicular impact since 2009 alone. In that same time period, 11 bears were shot or euthanized after encounters with people. Florida's bear population is currently estimated at around 3,500, compared to 12,000 before European settlement.

Right now, I don't see any difference between those innocent Florida black bears, those beings hunted down in the Orlando nightclub or Trayvon Martin. In a world that does not see each living being as kin, we are all fair game.

Kinship in indigenous culture, the way of kin, was lived in every moment. Everything in nature— plant, animal, inanimate, elementals, including the Earth itself—all considered an essential member of the web. We all belonged to one another and were equal in stature. We recognized each being's place. Each was

essential for the survival of all. Hierarchy of existence was not part of the way of thinking. There was no entitlement. No mine and yours. As such, gratitude was the currency of exchange. A gift was given, like tobacco or cornmeal, for the plants harvested for food or clothing. Gratitude was offered to the animals, insects, water consumed for the sustenance of the village. Rituals and ceremony to celebrate gifts given—the lives offered for our nourishment and our medicines—were essential to keep the balance of give and take. We lived in *relationship* with and to each other. The result of not embracing this way of life is evident everywhere—rampant pollution, alarming extinction rates, despoliation of nature. Without conscious relationship—the core of kinship—life on Earth is simply not sustainable.

As a physician of nearly 30 years, I see the dire health consequences of this disregard for the Earth and all forms of life. I took an oath those many years ago when I was just a young woman. It was one of the greatest days of my life—surrounded by my classmates, witnessed by family and friends, my right hand raised, in cap and gown with the green hood for Medicine proudly worn. I swore to do no harm and preserve human life at all cost. But as I have learned over the years, this promise is woefully limited. It did not ask me to consider the lives of my kin beyond the human realm. It does not consider the consequences of pharmaceutical and radiologic pollution for the Earth and all beings. It places human need as supreme to everything else. It is based on the imperialist mores of a society born out of domination and conquest.

When I was a first-year medical student, we were expected to participate in a physiology lab using live dogs. The dogs were anesthetized and then dissected to expose their beating hearts. Our educational responsibility was to administer different medications intravenously and observe their effects on cardiac function. At the end of the experiment, the dogs were euthanized. I was terribly upset about the prospect of participating in this exercise. I spoke to my professor about it privately and received a warning that an incomplete on my transcript might keep me from continuing to progress in my studies. What could I do? My sole

focus and purpose in life was to become a doctor. I attended the lab but refused to be the one in our group to administer the drugs. It distressed me so much that I have only the faintest recollection of what actually happened that day. Only my regret and the memories of the dog splayed supine—its open chest cavity and the rich pink color of its heart—remain.

Each year, more than 100 million animals—including mice, rats, frogs, dogs, cats, rabbits, hamsters, guinea pigs, monkeys, fish, and birds—are killed in U.S. laboratories for biology lessons, medical training, curiosity-driven experimentation, and chemical, drug, food, and cosmetics testing.¹ The truth is that research done on animals does not translate to humans. This has been reported by prominent medical journals such as the *Journal of the American Medical Association*² and the *British Medical Journal*³, and echoed by former directors of the National Institute for Health (NIH)⁴ and the National Cancer Institute (NCI).⁵ In 2006, The U.S. Food and Drug Administration stated, “Currently, nine out of 10 experimental drugs fail in clinical studies because we cannot accurately predict how they will behave in people based on laboratory and animal studies.”⁶ Despite this information, approximately 47 percent of NIH-funded research involves experimentation on nonhuman animals, and in 2012, NIH budgeted nearly 30 billion dollars for research and development.^{7,8} In addition, many charities—including the March of Dimes, the American Cancer Society, and countless others—use donations to fund experiments on animals.

Pollution from biomedical waste is another concern. A steady stream of pharmaceutical byproducts, both from human and veterinary medical practices and waste from medical supplies is leached into the environment each year. The largest pharmaceutical offenders are sex hormones, antiparasitics, antibiotics and steroids, which have already begun to alter the composition of bacteria in the soil, the insects that feed on them and on and on up the food chain. Antibiotic waste from manufacturing is one of the leading causes of antimicrobial resistance to antibiotics—a global emerging health crisis. China, one of the largest sites of antibiotic production, has pollution of active antibiotics in all of its

main rivers and waterways.

Hospitals generate an enormous share of the waste burden, an estimated six million tons/year. This translates into about 34 pounds of waste per patient per day during a hospital stay.⁹ Surgical procedures generate a third of all hospital waste. A single knee replacement generates more waste than a family of four does in a single week. Surgical waste includes everything from disposable gowns, plastics, gloves and drapes, to sponges, gauzes and other infectious materials. On average, 64 plastic wrappers, 41 sterile surgical gloves, 29 green sterile towels, 10 vinyl gloves, five surgical gowns, five surgical drapes and three table covers are used per knee replacement, as reported in the Canadian Journal of Surgery.¹⁰

Medical waste winds up in landfills, which contributes to greenhouse gasses. Large amounts of dioxins, polyvinyl chlorides (PVCs), mercury, cadmium and arsenic are emitted in the incineration of paper and plastics in medical waste--extremely toxic chemicals that wind up in the soil, waters and in their inhabitants, which in turn are consumed by humans and contribute to birth defects, immune dysfunction and cancers.¹¹

The enormous scope and global effects of medical waste pollution cannot be adequately expressed here. It is a critical challenge to our environment, our health and our progeny. Is it possible that the very system designed to help us in time of illness contributes largely to the cause of our diseases? Does the physician consider this when writing the prescription or admitting her patient to the hospital? Does the patient consider this when making choices about what ways she will treat her maladies or what steps she can take to prevent them to begin with? If we lived as if our choices about our health and wellbeing mattered not only to our families and ourselves but also to all other living beings as kin, might we live differently?

On the other hand, are our lives not better because of hospitals and pharmaceuticals? What would have been the fate of those wounded in the Orlando shooting if it were not for the hospitals nearby waiting ready for just such an occasion? Have we each not been impacted positively by some medical intervention in our lifetime?

The problems are complex and solutions of this magnitude require an entire paradigm shift. A great problem solver, Albert Einstein, wrote: "We can not solve our problems with the same level of thinking that created them." Perhaps, like our ancestors, we might turn to our dreams and visions for guidance on such matters. This dream that came to me a couple of years ago has haunted me with its beauty and possibility:

I'm back in my residency training... I go to the classroom auditorium where we will start our day with a lecture. The room is buzzing with other young docs in white coats standing around the small auditorium talking with each other. The elder teacher sees me and immediately hands me a small clear cellophane bag filled with tiny wine colored seeds or shavings. Like red quinoa. The top is open and she tells me that this is very poisonous stuff. As she does this, the group of young doctors standing about the room gathers around me to see what is happening. I hold the small bag in my outstretched hands and see that somehow it is leaking out of the bag; the way sand falls through fingers. I try to stop it but I cannot. I feel panicked and look to the elder, questioning her with my eyes. She asks me to lead the sing that will stop this from happening. I hesitate for a moment pondering her request then take a deep breath and begin to sing to the poison in the bag.

Almost immediately, and to my surprise, the whole classroom of doctors joins in with me and the most beautiful sound comes out of all of us. We are transformed into a chorus of doctors in white coats, singing to stop the leaking poison. As we sing, the poison in the bag continues to diminish but it is no longer leaking out, just disappearing before our eyes. When the poison is all gone, we finish

singing. I am ecstatic. As I look around at the fifty or so colleagues gathered around me, they too are excited and awestruck. They wait for me to speak but I am speechless, humbled, and incredulous. Many moments pass and finally I say: "Well then...we must keep singing together".

This dream suggests a paradigm shift that could be the medicine for our time. It is a dream about kinship, not only amongst those in the white coats who, when joined in song together, become the true medicine women and men of their calling, but towards the poison itself—a profound teaching about right relationship and how this might restore, diminish, or balance the damage we have already caused. In the kinship of singing together, our hearts are opened and love becomes, rightfully so, the center of our healing presences and medicine bundles.

Right now, we are all endangered species. There has never been a time when it was more urgent to restore a way of living that honors all life. A cultural meme of our indigenous ancestors, "honor all life" is very different from "thou shalt not kill"—a religious commandment about individual responsibility with individual repercussions for disobedience. "Honor all life" is explicitly about kinship, with broad implications for taking care of and respecting all beings. It implies that we are part of something larger than ourselves and as such, we must be accountable to the larger community of life. Somewhere along the way we have forgotten about this most basic and profound way of living.

To honor the guidance of the dream, what would it look like if we began to incorporate kinship as a way of life and as a way of healing large and small? Beyond simply utilizing natural and safer treatment options, to be *in alliance* with all the life around us might be the essential change required. To be in relationship with the infection, the cancer, the metabolic imbalance, the technology that has come to show us the path toward healing. Or to choose a treatment path that is not just best for self but takes into consideration where the medicine came from and where it might go after it leaves the body. Offering

gratitude to the medicine itself, be it natural or synthetic, changes the way we see the world around us and inside of us. It transforms our reactions and behaviors from careless and irresponsible to taking care and considering both harmful and beneficent consequences.

When my friend Nora had exhausted all options to deal with unremitting hip pain she agreed to get an MRI. As she found herself inside the machine that she had tried so hard to avoid, the response that arose within her was a profound and beautiful example of kinship in action:

“Mine was an hour long and most of the time I prayed—for people who have claustrophobia having to endure tests, and all the really ill ones. I did guided breathing. Then somewhere it became very primary to me to pray for the machine, all the constituent parts that come from the earth, extracted and manipulated and used for our healing. So with every sound I'd say ‘thank you’ and ‘I'm sorry.’ ‘Earth, air, water, fire, magnetism, electricity, vibration.’ Then the dolphins were there and I thought about how they have been known to echolocate illness and emotional pain in people the way the magnets were resonating to my body and I wondered if the makers of this machine had studied the dolphins. And I thanked them, too.”

When Sharon was about to receive her first doses of chemotherapy for pancreatic cancer, she felt great concern about the toxicity of the medicines being utilized. So she called on two friends to be with her. In the doctor's office just before the bag of chemotherapy was infused, it was passed around between them, prayed over, thanked, blessed and sung to. In this way, Sharon's fear was largely reduced and a relationship of gratitude and kinship transmuted Sharon's response to it, physically, mentally and emotionally.

The standard practice of conventional western medicine, while perhaps the best in the world for acute care, has become dangerous and is limited in its ability to prevent or reverse the course of chronic disease. There is a great division

amongst physicians: those deemed conventional, self-proclaimed “evidence-based,” and those who have adopted holistic, integrative, medical practice. This is a sort of war unto itself and patients are unrightfully in the middle, often chastised by physicians or family members for straying outside of convention. Yet despite steady and intense opposition, integrative medicine has grown significantly over the past two decades, reflecting the collective mistrust of a medical system that kills over 120,000 patients annually due to medication adverse effects, infections or hospital errors. Doctors too are adversely affected by a system that is increasingly governmentally regulated, productivity-driven and focused on symptom mitigation, without adequate time to delve deeper into the underlying causes of disease. As a result, physicians are leaving medicine in record numbers.¹²

Perhaps if we gather together in open-hearted song to our kin— the murdered and the murderers, the black bears and the hunters, the toxic medicines and those who administer them—then the poisons of our time—disconnection, violence, oppression, disease—will diminish and maybe even begin to disappear. With love at the heart of kinship, let this be the medicine first and last employed. Let us make kinship the foundation of our medical, industrial, agricultural, educational and political decisions. On behalf of the earth, the ancestors and all beings, let us step into the river of love and gratitude that kinship engenders. In doing so, we will each of us become both healer and healed.

Right now.

FOOTNOTES

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9. Nina Rastogi, Slate.com. "Wasting Syndrome: How much trash do hospitals produce?" October 19, 2010

10. Sharon Kirkey, Postmedia News, News.nationalpost.com. "Knee replacement surgery produces more waste than family of four in one week: study" May 27, 2013

11. Andy Harris, MD from Physicians for Social Responsibility, speaks to the problem of dioxins emitted through incineration of medical waste as follows: "Dioxins are among the most toxic chemicals on earth, the contaminant in Agent Orange used in the Vietnam War. Dioxins are Class 1 human carcinogens and according to the EPA, the average American's cancer risk is increased 1000-fold because of dioxin stored in our bodies. Dioxins also cause multiple reproductive and developmental abnormalities. They have been linked to disrupted sexual development, birth defects and damage to the immune system.

The EPA has concluded there appears to be no 'safe' level of exposure to dioxin.

Dioxins are extraordinarily persistent in the environment, resisting physical, chemical and biological degradation for decades and longer. Because they are oil soluble, they bio accumulate in fatty tissue and are found in highest concentrations in dairy products, eggs, meat and fish. Humans are particularly contaminated because of eating at the apex of the food chain. The highest concentrations of dioxins are in human breast milk,... imagine that...., and nursing infants take in 10-20 times as much dioxin daily as does the average adult. Worse yet, a nursing mother rids herself of half her body burden of dioxin during six months of breast feeding."

Andy Harris, MD, PSR.org. "Hazards of Medical Waste Incineration" Salem City Club, September 23, 2005 andyharrismd@comcast.net

12. R. Jan Gurley, centerforhealthjournalism.org. "Whether retiring or fleeing, doctors are leaving health care." March 27, 2014

About the Author



Karen Mutter is a practicing physician in Clearwater, Florida. She founded Integrative Medicine Healing Center in 1998 to pursue the exploration of healing outside the confines of western medicine. Informed by specialty training in internal medicine, she relies on shamanic practices, dreams, the natural world, nutrition, osteopathic practices and principles, compassion and love as her primary healing modalities. She is an aspiring writer, peacemaker and policy changer of medical education and practice.

Another Letter to the Soul

Melissa Kwasny

You picked me from the litter as a brightness, rubbed me between finger and thumb. You placed me, and the bees, who are like-spirits, came. You gave them, through me, a place to come to. You provided me with properties, inaudible spells, invisible arrows that point to the hurt places. Illness of my friends: her failing liver, his failing nerves, earth-drought, flood, the poisoned animal. I know you have been testing me, first toughening the fragile frame.

Inside, an infant cries and objects. You have set me apart like the bald eagle, found floundering in the river and put into the feeding cage. Long enough to gain its strength back, and then it fled. I admit I didn't know that a broken wing could right itself. I forget about healing, though I grow more fond of birds, the poor nieces I can afford to bring the berries to. Sun's out, you say, serving its broth of light.

The watercolorists are happy. They've picked their views and are sitting, barely moving, in long-sleeved shirts. Mystery and clarity is what we aim for as an achievement. You speak in the variations of wind. Upper reaches of the cottonwood, its adolescent limbs spurred on and off into a froth of soundings.

Anxiety of ground-shadows as wind passes among the leaves. It stops, and the tiny insects descend. We experience you only in your arrivals, not departures, so strong you tear the tent from our hands. And yet your remains are tender, broken and soft, as if strung with beads of dew atop wet sand. Each one of us suffers, small things and joys. All of us are aging, having watched each other age. What are the past lives of the wind? It cycles through the channel where the deer carcass stinks. Where dinosaur bones protrude from the ancient banks.

Water. Mint. Water-mint. The braided currents at the bend of the nearby stream. Their fluid consonance. A granite boulder, like a sibyl behind summer leaf, shade-spattered with lichen and moss. Bachelard writes that, in human reverie, the rock imagines. Not we that imagine the rock. Because how could we have come here, have accepted so much, without having had a foundation to build on? You, then, as luggage, our library, perhaps our DNA? Entrance as noun: what we step through. Entrance as verb: how we are changed. What could we see if not movement? The sibyl measures each fish's weight against the blue root of her own. The leafage separates in autumn into its individual tones. We say autumn moves us. That it is moving. Given the forecast. Given how easily the subject can be erased.

Notes:

This prose poem is from a new manuscript I am working on, provisionally titled *Where Outside the Body is the Soul Today*. When I began the poems, it was to challenge the prevailing assumption that words like “soul” and “spirit” don’t belong in our highly technological, secular world, and that, as well, they are not a fit subject for contemporary poetry. Contrary to my understanding that soul was something found deep inside us, as I wrote these poems, I began to discover that I can sense soul most clearly in others, especially the animal, plants, rocks, waters, and winds that people our world. Anima /animal: our intuition, even expressed in our language, that the soul is embedded in the animal body.

About the Author



Melissa Kwasny is the author of five books of poetry, most recently “Pictograph” and “The Nine Senses,” as well as a nonfiction collection, “Earth Recitals: Essays on Image and Vision.” She co-edited, with M.L.Smoker, an anthology of poetry in defense of global human rights, entitled “I Go to the Ruined Place.” She lives in southwestern Montana.

Deena Metzger

Becoming Kin—Becoming Elephant

At the center of empathy and compassionate understanding lies the ability to see the other as true peer, to recognize intelligence and communication in all forms, no matter how unlike ourselves these forms might be. It is this gift of empathy and connection, embodied in the relationship between us and other species that enables us to thrive now and into the future.

Because we share with them the same life force, to know the animal other as worthy, alive and even as a beloved peer is to be truly in relationship with powerful forces of creation itself. To acknowledge and even cherish the intelligence in other forms of life is to sustain our own future. To honor intimacy across the seeming boundaries of species is to return the sacred to the world. We are all the same world inside different skins, and with different intelligences.

From the introduction to *Intimate Nature: The Bond Between Women and Animals*, edited by Linda Hogan, Deena Metzger, and Brenda Peterson



The Ambassador 2008 Photo by Cynthia Travis

Kinship means relationship. It could mean family. It implies attunement and long-term commitments to each other. The first time I met the Ambassador Elephant, I said, "I know who you are. You are from a holocausted people and I am from a holocausted people. ... I promise you, your people are my people."

That was seventeen years ago. It was a commitment. We are kin. The Ambassador and his people know this. How else explain that he and his community have met me each of the five times that I have returned to Chobe National Park in Botswana? My agreement is to return to a particular tree by the river at the same hour on the last day of our visit to mirror the original meeting with the Ambassador and his people in 2000. His part of the agreement is to show up in ways that are unmistakable. Each time, we were able to construct a narrative, to find meaning in the elephants' displays and interactions with us or with each other. Story, we can say, is the medium.

In 1999, the groundbreaking anthology *Intimate Nature: The Bond Between Women and Animals* that I edited with Linda Hogan and Brenda Peterson, was published. The book established that compassionate and intuitive relationships with animals lead to greater knowledge and understanding than does objective research. Knowledge emerges from relationship. Intimacy informs. Additionally the selections revealed that animals are remarkably and surprisingly intelligent, are spiritually alert and can, like human beings, exercise agency.

It hadn't been our goal to draw this conclusion; it was not evident until the book was complete. We had intended to look at women's bond with animals, we didn't realize we were also discerning animals' focus and activity. As relationship is reciprocal, the relationships between humans and animals are inevitably reciprocal. In the editing of the book, we had acknowledged that animals are peers but we hadn't fully investigated the implications. For anyone who read the book attentively, the five- thousand- year Western cultural hegemony of humans over animals was challenged.

After the anthology was published, I visited Gillian Van Houten, one of the contributors, at the wild animal preserve, Londolozi in South Africa. Her story of hand-raising the lion Shingalana and releasing her to the wild is in the anthology, as are stories from many of her colleagues at other reserves in Africa. We tried to make contact with one of the several breeding herds that live at Londolozi but the elephants had, conspicuously it seemed, avoided us. Sighting elephants is commonplace at Londolozi but I was denied connection, which I took to heart. It seemed I was not ready for what I was imagining – not to view, but to sit in council with elephants.

I needed to prepare. That is what I did. In Chobe, Botswana, on Epiphany, January 6th, 2000, my heart and soul were ready.

“Slowly the elephant lifted his head from the grasses and began walking along the river. He did not stop to graze nor did he look around but walked with clear determination and intention....focused, deliberate, determined, conscious, aware intention.

He stopped directly in front of the truck and raised his trunk toward us. It was over and under itself and up and over again. That is, he tied his trunk into an impossible knot.... I was on my knees in the flat bed of the pickup.... My hands were open on the edge of the truck so that the elephant knew that I was empty-handed and that I had no weapons.

In my mind I spoke to him.

“I know who you are and what kind of beings your people are. I have some sense of the extent and depth of your intelligence and development. And I know that you are of a holocausted people”

Then I silenced my mind. I had said enough. Humans have said enough.

...The elephant stopped and looked me in the eye. We stayed this way a long time. Ten minutes perhaps....

Then he turned and moved to the back of the truck and faced it. I moved to him and put my hands out again. We looked at each other eye to eye.

...Another ten minutes passed.

...I heard words in my mind and I let them be spoken silently. *I promise you....*

He turned and went behind the truck as if to disappear up the hill into the brush but turned again and faced the truck and so I turned also and on my knees again, acknowledged him.

...Another ten minutes passed.... The elephant departed, climbing slowly up the hill and disappeared into the trees.

...We did not explain or understand anything except that Amanda Foulger said, "You are an ambassador and they sent their ambassador and you have made a covenant with each other.

It was getting late and one must be out of the park by 7 o'clock. We made our way slowly...

But then we couldn't believe our eyes. Elephants were coming down the hill and crossing the road to the river. At first only a few females and their babies, but then more of them. Waves of elephants. Waves upon waves. ...The elephants continued to come. Dozens of them lined up alongside the river and still more were coming. Bulls and cows, old ones and young ones, babies and adolescents. It was like ...it was like the world ended and then it was saved and the animals were coming forth into the new dawn.

...The animals were lined up for a quarter mile as if for a parade.... They were bowing their heads and flapping their ears at us. And we were bowing and waving and saying, "Thank you. And bless you. And thank you. And bless you."

From *Entering the Ghost River: Meditations on the Theory and Practice of Healing*, Deena Metzger, Hand to Hand Press, 2002

Despite the anthology, and the surge in writing about animal intelligence and relationships, this first meeting and those that followed¹ remain unprecedented. Cynthia Travis, writer and founder of the NGO *everyday gandhis*, has been my companion and colleague on several of the meetings when the elephants have communicated by enacting a Story, creating a piece of theater that invite us to participate. The mystery increases the more often the elephants appear and the more dramatic their exchange with us. It is as if we are making 'first contact' with another species and culture altogether. We are entirely captivated and are trying to understand what the elephants might have in mind with these communications.

Cyndie and I had a remarkable encounter in Tanzania in 2008 that alerted us to the possibility that we were being called into unique relationships with elephants in general rather than with a particular elephant and his people.

We were traveling in the Ruaha, Tanzania, with, for the first time, a guide. We did not know how the presence of a local might affect our connection or whether a relationship was possible outside of Chobe and the elephants we knew. Her son and a companion were with us. Stopping to look over an embankment, we saw a female elephant with several calves in a shallow pool of water in the sand river below. We quietly watched as one of the young female elephants ran to and from the bank alternately spraying water upon us and herself with her trunk. Her action was deliberate and conscious. We stayed engaged until the mother called the calves away, wandering away down the river. Having been given permission to leave, we proceeded onto the dirt road again. Suddenly, a great

¹ The history of meetings with the Ambassador are chronicled on my blog, <https://deenametzger.wordpress.com/2011/12/07/the-language-of-relationship-engagement-with-elephants/>

trumpet sounded. The entire elephant family had come up the road behind us and were closing in on the truck. I interpreted the trumpeting, coming from the young elephant we later named Spirit Sister, as an injunction to stop. I had to heed her demand. The guide who was driving was concerned but yielded to my request. In a moment, we heard another trumpet. A young bull elephant emerged from the trees, stopped and trumpeted before us, then took his place within the elephant family. Spirit Sister was introducing her family to us. We began to consider again that we might, in fact, be Ambassadors between species.

At first we thought that the meeting with the Ambassador in Chobe was privileged, because he and his people met us again and again without having any way of knowing when we would arrive. We also thought it could occur because we were in our own vehicle and free from the opinions, beliefs, and restrictions of the locals. Though the meeting in the Ruaha was not as dramatic and extended as our other meetings in Chobe, it did occur, irrefutably, in another country and in the presence of a guide.

Perhaps because I have returned to Chobe so many times, and the interaction with the elephants has been so personal, I have held the belief that the relationship is between the Ambassador and myself and whoever has joined us for a visit. Cyndie thought that the relationship was between us and elephants, not the Ambassador exclusively. Whatever the means of connection between us, both Cyndie and I have felt called to meet the issue of elephant and animal extinction. A dream in July 2015 furthered this commitment.

Valerie Wolf and I were upstairs in an old Victorian like mansion. [Valerie, Cyndie and I had had a remarkable meeting with the Ambassador in 2008]² We heard voices downstairs and became alarmed. Two dark skinned men, neither black nor white, revealed they were from the Radical

² See, <https://deenametzger.wordpress.com/2011/12/07/the-language-of-relationship-engagement-with-elephants/>

Elephant Movement, a revolutionary network acting to prevent elephant and animal extinction. We were being recruited into the movement and asked to find ways to participate that have never been thought of or tried before. Radical action is what is required. The men faded away but not before they opened conduits to other dimensions through the four directions.

After they left, we noticed a fire in the fireplace in the adjoining library. Two women were entering the room, one through the walls and the other through a tube in the midst of the fire. The woman coming through the wall said she was too sensitive. She had seen elephant culls. She didn't know if she could If she could ... what? Go on? Go on with the work? Continue the elephant radical work?

The mouth of the woman in the tube was wide open and her voice or words were struggling to be heard. Her name, Ashanti, was repeated or omnipresent. It is clear: there is something we must do.

On awakening, I knew that we must do everything we can – whatever it is – to prevent elephant extinction. Researching, I learned that the Ashanti were a tribe in Ghana, devoted to elephants, offering dead elephants funerals equal to what they would provide for a chief. Also, they were dreamers. Harriet Tubman, of this lineage, directed the Underground Railroad through her dreams. I had been recruited, through the dreamtime, into a radical elephant network. Cyndie and I determined to return to Africa to see what we could learn. We knew this: We will not be able to think our way to vision. We will have to go to Africa and listen.

Whether it was an individual elephant, his family and herd, or whether the elephants themselves were exercising agency, is something of what Cyndie and I wanted to investigate when we returned in January 2016, first to Chobe then to Mashatu, a reserve in southeastern Botswana, and finally to Damaraland in

Namibia to visit the desert elephants. We wished to know if the Ambassador and his herd were singularly in relationship with us, or whether we might have similar contacts with different elephants in other places. We were always careful about whom we invited to join us on such a pilgrimage and wondered if the elephants would contact us when we were in trucks driven by guides from the area. New rules were being enforced in Chobe National Park. We were no longer able to enter without a guide and even Lynne, the local woman guide, was working under unwieldy restrictions. This visit would test whether we could overcome the greater obstacles to meeting the Ambassador and whether the meetings would be confirming for us and convincing for Lynne and our other guide, Matt Meyers, from South Africa, who had been Head Ranger and Head Photographic Ranger at MalaMala, adjacent to Kruger National Park, one of the first private reserves in South Africa. If the connections with the Ambassador or with elephants were to have impact, they would have to be acknowledged by people who had expertise in the wild.

For our own purposes, we had to find guides who could listen, who would agree to spend two to three hours in silent meditation each afternoon at the Chipungo tree. The guides at the other reserves would have to agree to spend long periods of time in silence without driving and to allow me to direct our activities as long as there was no evident sign of danger. The usual patterns is for all tourist vehicles to converge when there is a sighting -- a leopard, a kill, a rare animal. Then each truck may only be allotted five or ten minutes of primary viewing area before it has to yield its place to others or speed away to see a herd of buffalo, a pack of wild dogs, or a mother cheetah and her cubs. Both Matt and Lynne were very happy to have the afternoon to sit and watch what appeared to us over time instead of chasing around the veldt.

* * *

On a boat trip the day we arrived, we were able to sidle up to the shore where many elephants were splashing in the water.



Exhilarating as it was to watch them, I was hoping, as I had in the past, for some sign that contact would be made on this journey. Soon something called the herd inland and they began walking up the hill away from the river. As we were about to turn away, a young elephant, much like a teenage girl, reversed herself and came trotting down the trail to the water, turned to go back, then stopped and held my gaze, almost coquettishly, for a few minutes. Unprecedented. Lynne, who had only heard a few stories of our history with elephants from Matt, looked at me. “She knows you,” Lynne said. The small connection and Lynne’s confirmation boded well.



Driving east the next day, to the original site, I learned that I had to identify the Chipungo tree with certainty, as once we descended to the now one-way river road we could only continue west. If we made a mistake we could not turn back. I hadn't been to the tree in five years. As everything is always changing in the wild due to river tides, rain, storms, winds and time, I was concerned. Driving along the bluff, we stopped to visit with some elephants coming up a trail from the river. At first, I was taken by the babies cavorting among their mother's legs as they ascended, but then when I looked down to the bottom, I saw the Chipungo tree.

Thus at the very, very beginning, the elephants and the spirits were showing us where to go; we were entering a field of consciousness with the animals. A first Story had occurred and revealed our meeting place.

For the next days, we encountered different elephants, variously engaged at our common meeting place. We were always grateful for their presence and began to feel that they were revealing themselves to people who had become familiar to them. But on the penultimate day, the elephants, who had gathered at the adjacent water hole, suddenly all left at 5 pm, crossing the river, wandering, virtually disappearing from view.



We were disappointed for there had been some interactions between them that seemed to signal something coming, but now the area was empty, except for a few birds and the hippos, rising, grunting, sinking down into the water. We had made the commitment to stay until six and so we settled down to keep our promise. Then at about 5:40, we were aware of a profound shift. The elephants on both sides of the river that had walked off to the east and west seemingly turned at the same time and began walking back toward our area. Then those on the other side of the river began swimming toward us.



By 5:55, it seemed all the elephants that had been near us that day had returned and were milling around the water hole until they started up the incline to the trees above just as Lynne turned on the engine and we began our way back to the Lodge.



We were the audience for a Story orchestrated on our behalf. Had the elephants decided to reveal their ability and desire to communicate to others beside Cyndie and myself?

Then came the moment we had been anticipating. The last minute of the last hour of the last day when we had always met the Ambassador. But we did not see a single elephant that day. It was greatly disappointing but not surprising as a much needed rain had been falling all day and the animals, particularly the elephants, do not come to the river when it rains. Still, it felt as if the entire trip to Africa had been for nothing.



But as we were driving away, Matt reminded me that he had suggested that I change my watch. “Yes, Matt, you told me my watch was wrong and I moved it ahead to coordinate with yours.”

“Look behind us,” he said. Cyndie and I turned around. There, at the Chipungo tree, was a large bull elephant. Without the adjustment, it was 6 pm. The Ambassador had arrived. I was stunned.

We had left early and missed our appointment because Matt, our guide, had advised a time correction. And it was Matt who saw the Ambassador at our meeting place at the agreed- upon time. Cyndie and I were already convinced of the real if inexplicable connection with the Ambassador. But Matt, a ranger, would need his own irrefutable proof. He got it. Once again, an elephant had created a narrative that was incontrovertible, even by a skeptical guide.

Next we wanted to see if other elephants would contact us outside of Chobe. Mashatu, one of the largest privately owned game reserves in southern Africa, is sanctuary to the largest herds of elephant on privately owned land on the continent. We were the only guests except for the President of Botswana and his retinue. The two guides who accompanied Cyndie, Matt and myself were seasoned rangers, who had been partnering for many, many years. We knew the quality of the men we were with when we were driving back after sunset and the tracker spotted a newborn hyena in a hole behind trees and brush more than 30 yards away.



At Mashatu, we were able to create our own routine. Introduced to the animals and terrain in the early morning hours, we spent the afternoons among the elephants. We were particularly interested in whether the elephants would respond to us differently than they do to the other tourists who gathered from other lodges. From the beginning, it seemed that the Mashatu elephants found us interesting, particularly the little ones who often came very close, not always to the mother's liking.



Early on, a very young bull came to the side of the car and put his trunk up to Cyndie and almost touched her, another one examined the front of the car and another the rear. Each day, the elephants permitted us to observe the activities of the herds as if we were being introduced to their culture, the complexities of their relationships and, particularly, their appetite for play.

On our last day, we drove down a sand river and were met by Henry, a bull elephant whom Eric, the guide, had seen born fourteen years earlier. A gentle elephant, he allowed Eric to park the truck next to him under the tree. Such a greeting, like all the other encounters, appeared both purposive and happenstance. In ways we had not experienced ever before, we found ourselves amidst dozens of elephants engaged in every possible elephant activity. An older bull and a younger one were tousling – the younger one being chastened.



Little ones were frolicking, one pushed down into the mud, a pod gathering around it. Older ones were above on the ridge, eating. When they passed us they came closer and closer, making eye contact. Sometimes they lined up in a semi-circle, staring. We were not peripheral. We were somehow incorporated into the herd, their ways openly and deliberately displayed, including what the guides had never seen before, a female nursing two babies. What distinguished this moment from those in the past was that the elephants were not only allowing us to look at them, they were looking at us. “They are interested in you,” Eric said, puzzled.

Then it was the last hour of the last day we would spend at Mashatu. Our plane would be leaving that afternoon. We were awed by having been received so openly. We couldn’t, however, leave without the last ritual of finding a place away from the usual animal trails, without visible snakes, animals, predators, to enjoy a stretch, a pee, and a late morning cup of coffee and pastry, outside the truck. Lounging around, relaxed and joyful, we saw elephants climbing up the hill

toward us from every possible direction. They came in waves so close that we had to re-enter the truck in order to watch the procession; the entire herd, more than a hundred elephants, had come to say good-bye.

We spent the several days in Damaraland, our last stop, holding the range of questions that had developed over sixteen years of observation and concern, knowing that any answers would not address the greater mystery we were in, the magic of communicating heart- to- heart across species. Mornings we spent on regular safaris and sought the elephants in the afternoons when they would likely be at the river until sunset.

But desert elephants are different; they have adjusted to planetary difficulties. They can go one or two days without drinking, unlike forest elephants who must drink their fill twice a day. Some small herds of desert elephants are tusk-less, having genetically adapted in a very short time to poaching. Not having the means to protect themselves, these testy and somewhat hostile elephants have hidden themselves in remote and forbidding areas.



So I did not have high expectations. It seemed unlikely they would welcome close human presences. Additionally, we learned that our guide, Chris, was afraid of elephants. As a young boy, he had witnessed an elephant stalking a man who had undoubtedly done him harm. The man ran to the church for protection. When he felt safe, he ran out toward the nearby school, but the elephant, who had been waiting for him, scooped him up on his tusks and killed him. Elephants remember those who do them harm. Do they only remember individuals or the species?

I wondered on the last day whether the young bull elephant who slammed his tusks down on the hood of the truck knew Chris' story or his fear. But Chris did not start the truck to retreat. Because relationships with animals are silent, they must be transparent and so are intrinsically truthful. One cannot deceive an animal; she or he is always reading your heart. And so the little elephant read our souls' intentions and went on. Despite my concerns, the elephants allowed us near them and often exhibited curiosity about who we were. We went closer to them than the other tourists and stayed a long time, listening and present; this, we believed, encouraged a bond between us.



* * *

At the last hour of the last day a pregnant female approached us. She stood at the hood of the car, occasionally sweeping her trunk over the dust, looking at me for a long time, twenty minutes perhaps.

“Are you talking with her?” Chris asked.

“I am,” I answered, “but I don’t know if she is answering.” I was asking her to guide us as members of the Radical Elephant Movement. I was asking her to help us save the elephants from extinction. I was praying that she would imprint us so we would know how to stop the mad behavior of our species. But she didn’t answer. No words or thoughts appeared in my mind other than my longing to be of service for the restoration of the natural world.

Then, as suddenly as the Ambassador had turned away from us originally, she bolted for the hill above us as if there had never been a connection.



Perhaps we hadn't gone to Africa for answers; perhaps we had gone to refine the questions we've been carrying for years, that have deepened and expanded with each encounter. Who has agency, the human or the elephant? The Ambassador, an individual, particularly gifted elephant? The herd? The elephant people? A unique aggregation of individual souls? The embodied Elephant culture? Increasingly, it seems that elephants by their unique immersion in a continuously responsive herd are exercising agency in relationship to us. Maybe they developed this capacity in response to the terrible circumstances of their lives as they face loss of habitat, interrupted migration corridors, poaching. all equaling extinction at our hands.

We are left with the original unfathomable events. How do the Ambassador and his people know we are coming to Chobe? It may be that elephants, who are probably more intelligent than we are through their capacity for unparalleled empathy, can read the heart across vast distances, unimpeded by species barriers, and send out subliminal communications which I / we receive and respond to by coming to meet them.

I was reading *The Elephant Whisperer* by Lawrence Anthony when flying home from my 2011 visit to Chobe. Anthony, the founder of the South African reserve Thula Thula, had had a remarkable relationship with elephants based on intimacy and proximity. One might even say the elephants engineered their transfer to his reserve in order to create this relationship. I wanted very much to meet him but he died suddenly before I returned to Africa. Then stories emerged of the elephants knowing of his death and coming to his house every year on the anniversary of his death. How is this possible? What does it mean? What do the elephants want us to know?

Cyndie and I will be returning to the elephants in the last days of December 2016. We will spend New Years Eve and another few days at Thula Thula. Perhaps Anthony's herd will visit us.

In the last years, we have been allowed to be very close to the elephants. But this connection has not yielded the answer to the essential questions: How and why are they communicating with us? What do they want? How can we meet their call? Perhaps in Thula Thula we will be able to be immersed in the herd. Perhaps they will speak to us. Or, perhaps this time we will understand. I am praying that the elephants will take us across another barrier. I am hoping we will hear and listen deeply enough to yield entirely to elephant intelligence, to allow the elephants to guide and determine the future actions of the Radical Elephant Movement.

* * *

Mandlovu Mind – music by Jami Sieber, poem by Deena Metzger
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OSQGVWmt1V8>

MANDLOVU*

Suddenly, I am of a single mind extended
Across an unknown geography,
And imprinted, as if by a river, on the moment.
A mind held in unison by a large gray tribe
Meandering in reverent concert
among trees, feasting on leaves.
One great eye reflecting blue
From the turn inward
Toward the hidden sky that, again,
Like an underground stream
Continuously nourishes
What will appear after the dawn
Bleaches away the mystery in which we rock
Through the endless green dark.

I am drawn forward by the lattice,
By a concordance of light and intelligence
Constituted from the unceasing and consonant
Hum of cows and the inaudible bellow of bulls,
A web thrumming and gliding
Along the pathways we remember
Miles later or ages past.

I am, we are,
Who can distinguish us?
A gathering of souls, hulking and muddied,
Large enough – if there is a purpose –

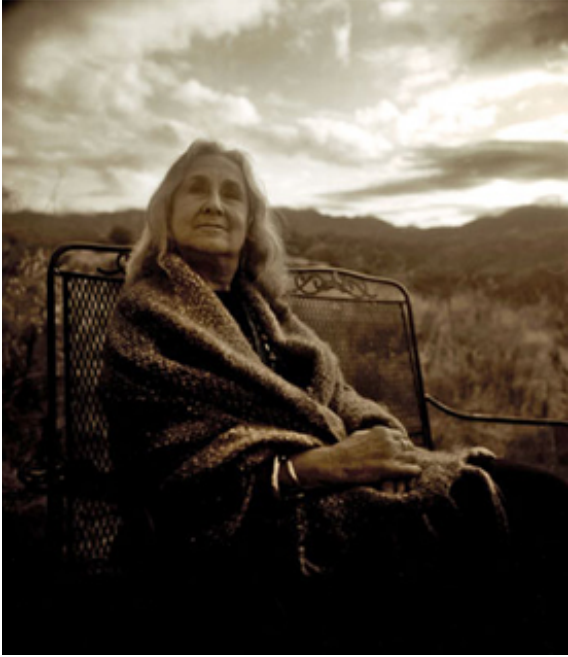
To carry the accumulated joy of centuries
Walking thus within each other's
Particular knowing and delight.

This is our grace: To be a note
In the exact chord that animates creation,
The dissolve of all the rivers
That are both place and moment,
An ocean of mind moving
Forward and back,
Outside of any motion
Contained within it.

This is particle and wave. How simple.
The merest conversation between us
Becoming the essential drone
Into which we gladly disappear.
A common music, a singular heavy tread,
Ceaselessly carving a path,
For the waters tumbling invisibly
Beneath.

I have always wanted to be with them, with you, so.
I have always wanted to be with them
With you,
So.

*Mandlovu is the word the Ndebele people of Zimbabwe use for female elephant.
It is connected in resonance with Mambo Kadze the name for the deity that is
both elephant, the Virgin Mary and the Great Mother.



Deena Metzger has been writing for fifty 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*; *Doors: A fiction for Jazz Horn*; *Entering the Ghost River: Meditations on the Theory and Practice of Healing*; She has just completed a first draft of a new novel, *A Rain of Night Birds*. The novel bears witness: climate change arises from

the same colonial mind that enacted genocide on the Native people of this county.

www.DeenaMetzger.net

Kyce Bello

Correspondence with the High Country

Words spill, aconite blossoms
gathered creekside.

Deep purple petals pressed
against the page, smudges

spread across your palm,
dark in the basket's bowl.

Though the stream disappears
into long grasses

and cold ground dips
into hollows,

you go on gathering till morning.

Correspondence with My Garden

The letter came, a white wing

envelope opened
like the sphinx moth
whose careening

maps the garden's scrawled branches,
or the mourning dove

in the apple tree who calls
at dawn before lifting
from her tangled nest near the top.

Every day that moth alights
on each blooming weed.
Every spring that haunting cry
from the fruit tree.

Dryland Canticles

1.

This is the gown I dress in—
silk or coarse wool, lather
of soap root over earth-caked skin.

Belief is no business of the young,
who can pretend anything.

Unwind
the length of your head covering,
that drift of prayer,
that blanket of loomed body
knotted by storms.
Mustang clouds rear,
but when I hold the mirror of river up to the sky,
no rain falls.

2.

If you could only hear.

Soft splashing

of reservoir against stone. Swell

of riverbody

gathered and held.

The road splits and flanks. The boat

was left adrift.

You have never heard a sky

like the one

sinking in these blue waters.

3.

Alongside the tin-roofed house

runs this riddle:

place that fills, but is empty.

I tell my story in cairns

set against the banks

and in the bare armed cottonwood

a dozen bushtits leap from small twig

to small twig. Collecting place,

releasing place, water

never held in the hand place.

Oh river. This is your sweet mouth.

Dry sand waiting to be run through.

Notes:

My series of “correspondences” is a communication with aspects of the natural world, including my body, my garden, and the mountains and wilderness closest to me. Text and messages found in the scrawl of branches, the letters of leaf and trail write us back into an ecologic language of place. I spend a lot of time listening for this language— naming and identifying plants and animals as a naturalist would, but also listening for what can never be named— to create a sense of kinship. At some point, though, my attention to the outer world turns me back to rhythms of loss and renewal within myself.

Water and the way its presence and absence shape the landscape, forming a geography of its movement and containment, is an ever present part of life in the high desert. More and more, I am seeing how these features shape my inner life, as well.



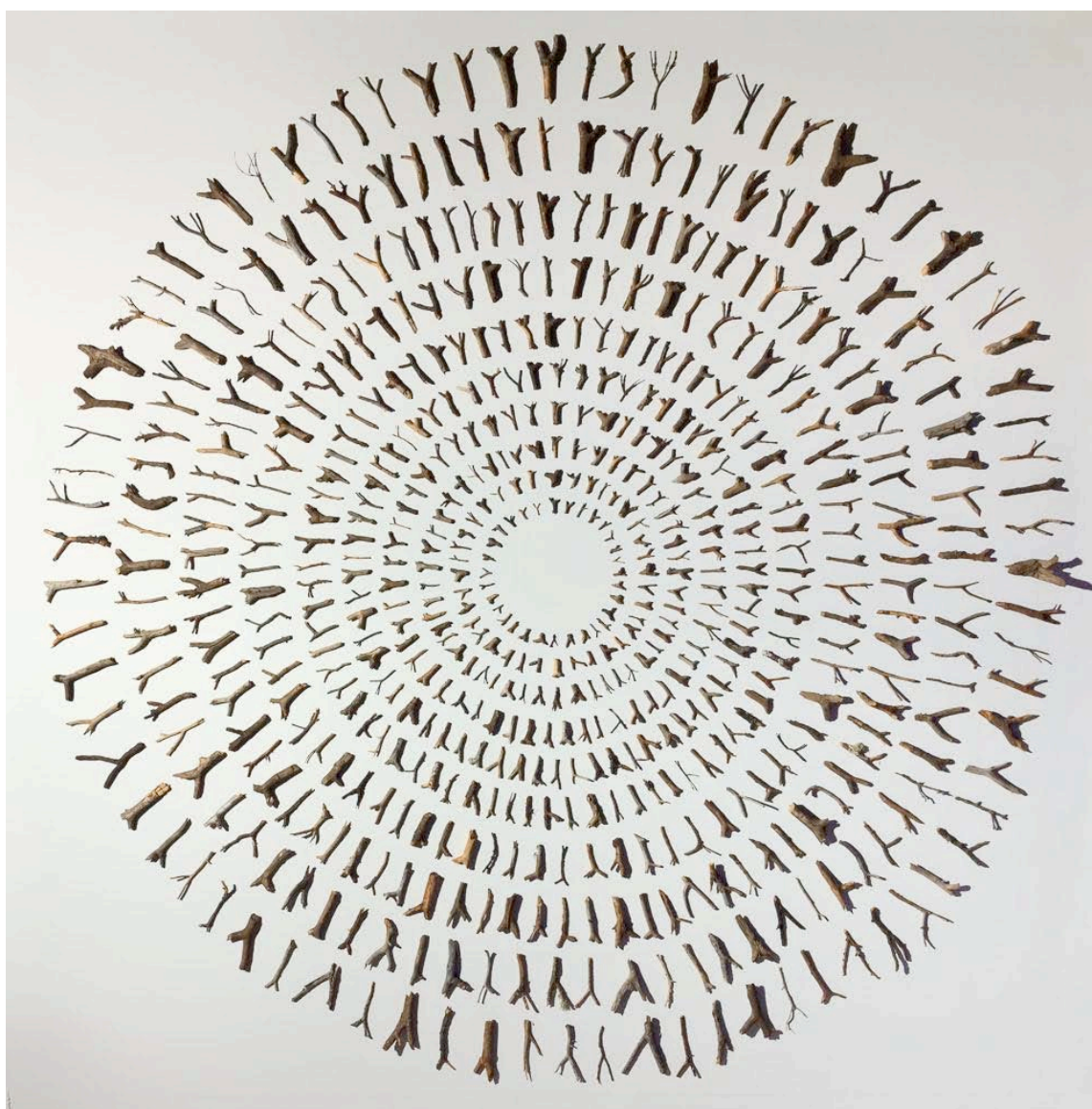
Kyce Bello edited *The Return of the River: Writers, Scholars, and Citizens Speak on Behalf of the Santa Fe River* (Sunstone Press, 2011), an anthology of literary ecoactivism which received two New Mexico book awards. Of Cuban, Puerto Rican, and Anglo descent, she is an MFA candidate at the Institute of American Indian Arts. Her poems have recently been published or are forthcoming in *Written River Journal of Ecopoetics*, *Taproot*, *Sonora Review*, and elsewhere. She lives under a very old apple tree in Santa Fe, with her husband and two daughters, and writes occasionally about their days at Old Recipe for a New World.

Dominique Mazeaud

Material is Matter... is Mother

*.... matter is a physical exuberance, ennobling contact, virile effort and the joy of growth,
it attracts, renews, unites and flowers. By matter we are nourished, lifted up,
linked to everything else, invaded by life... it contains the spur or the allurements
to be our accomplices towards heightened beings...*

Teilhard de Chardin



One Thousand Arms of Compassion by Dominique Mazeaud, 2010. The outdoor installation is 9 x 9' and the material is Y-shaped twigs. Photograph from Alan Eckert.

When I tend to the world from the heart, it becomes poetics. Poems of praise may come to my lips at any time. I can be touching something as mundane as a broom. But when I wrap my hands around the worn wooden handle, so polished with age that it glows, I can feel the life force of the broom handle. I remember that the handle was once a tree. And then I travel beyond the confines of my room and my sweeping... It's as if I see the sun shining above and the soil below exuding its own kind of invisible light. I feel more alive when I think in terms of these other dimensions. Envisioning the dance between outside and inside, high and low satisfies me beyond measure.

I find ironing to be another rewarding activity. When I press a cotton shirt, I might start thinking of the miracle of cotton, the beautiful cotton flower, and the women who first began to weave it. As I continue to press down on the iron, I tune into the factory where the shirt was made. Was it China, India, or Bangladesh? My thoughts drift to the laws governing the factories, and I hope it wasn't the one in Dhaka, Bangladesh, where a hundred and seventeen workers perished recently because of the owners' negligence. I ponder the route the shirt might have taken from the factory to me. The men who handled the transport containers from road to ship. The store where I bought the shirt. The sales clerk...

My love for "mater-ial" takes me far and wide. With lightning speed I travel in my mind to an assembly plant in China where a thousand workers toil. The insane reality of this work environment was recently portrayed in the documentary *Samsara* by Ron Fricke. In one horrifying scene he accelerated the already inhuman speed of the repetitive gestures, each sequence a few seconds, a quarter of a minute at most, underlining the fact that the workers themselves have become machines.

I am a hunter-gatherer. Like a child, I cannot go on a walk without bringing back some little treasure from Mother Nature. It may be a strand of grass, a heartshaped rock, some powder-fine sand, a small branch with lanternlike seedpods, a clump of tender velvety moss, some unusual-looking twigs. This habit of mine evolved into a work I titled *One Thousand Treasures du Jour*, a precious celebration of the miracle of life. It is an installation of one thousand tiny things, mostly from Nature, that bless our days, from seed to pebble to feather, all fitting 2" x 1.5" gray cardboard receptacles. I used the shells of small Diamond match boxes which in their delicate craftsmanship (as industrialized as the process is) are a good 'match' to the

spirit of my work.

Like all artists, I take pride in my materials. Anything can be a material for making art – even tears. I list tears as a ‘material’ on my website. Tears are grace that flow from pain. Tears are the grace that leads to joy... Tears are both *petits trucs* (ingenious forms of creativity) and have become *petites amies* (literally little friends).

My love affair with *le petit* goes back to the France of my childhood when I was captivated by a riddle: *Tout ce qui est petit est gentil; tout ce qui est grand est charmant; tout ce qui est moyen est bien*. The literal translation is not quite as enchantingly onomatopoetic. “everything that’s small is kind and everything that’s big is charming; everything that’s inbetween is good.”

My love for the small crept into my performances when children's shoes became one of my 'materials.' This wonderful association began with a pair of white Mary Jane shoes. They were the first 'gift' I received from the river when I set out on *The Great Cleansing of the Rio Grande*, a ritual performance I did monthly from 1987 to 1994. When I realized the vast threat to our waters and what this meant for the Earth, my heart broke. Out of this brokenness, my heart became a huge delta emptying its precious (yet to this point unknown) sediments into the sea of my being, and a sudden inspiration to speak on Her behalf was released. As I 'walked' the river (I began with the nearly dry Santa Fe River, walking my way toward *The Great River*), I received many 'gifts' beyond the trash that I was collecting, sometimes unspeakable trash such as syringes or dildos. Perhaps the most surprising find was a statue of Jesus which ended up being exhibited among other found objects to tell the story of the forlorn river. Shoes were common, however, and their size increased as time passed, a fact that did not go unnoticed. It is true, I did a lot of growing up during the seven years of my river performance. Undoubtedly, I had found my true mother.

The little white Mary Jane shoes made me step into one creative period, as years later, a pair of shiny red patent leather shoes, 'winking' at me from a thrift shop shelf, laid out another round of work. They inspired the second version of *Tears of the World*. In its original incarnation, *Tears of the World* was a one-week performance/vigil which I did in the winter of 2001 on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the first bombing of Iraq. My devotional watch was simple. I stood on the Santa Fe Plaza in front of the Soldiers' Monument for

several hours a day. I dressed in black and covered my face with a white mask. Right below the hole carved out for the left eye was a large bead in the shape of a tear. In my hands I held a bowl filled with water, symbolizing the sorrow (read tears) felt by people all over the world about what was occurring in Iraq. It was a very cold January and one day, the water in my bowl froze.

The second version of *Tears of the World* was held on Valentine's day, a month after I had originally launched the piece. It was for me a day of despair. I could not fathom what was happening in Iraq, especially when I learned that our sanctions were instrumental in sending half a million children to their death. Instead of a tear-filled bowl, I held a box with the shiny red patent leather shoes placed inside to represent a dead Iraqi girl whom I named my little sister. Against the Plaza's Soldiers Monument I set a sign with a photograph of a little Iraqi girl which read: "These are my little sister's red shoes/She was born and died in Iraq./She will never be able to walk/on our beautiful Earth again./LOVE is COMPASSION./Please join me/In reminding our new president/of the COMPASSION/He so often mentions/And beg him to initiate a new era/That finds a nonviolent, COMPASSIONATE solution/For the people of Iraq. I am so sad,/My little sister,/She died because of our policies."



Little children's shoes have spoken to me in such a meaningful way that they took me on more adventures. I left my Plaza vigil for a few hours to join *People for Peace*, a peace community that integrates action, support, and study and which still meets today twenty-five years since its founding in 1991 to protest the threat of yet another war. My peace friends had organized a rally at the Santa Fe's main Post Office, part of a campaign to lift the Iraq sanctions. On that occasion, *Tears of the World* took a different tinge. Since it was forbidden to mail a package containing much needed necessities of life, like vitamins and aspirin, to Iraqis, our option was to express our outrage to United States Senator Pete Domenici which we delivered via a shoe box 'installation.' Placed inside the box were five pairs of little shoes with candles and pictures of dead Iraqi children and a statement. "These are the little shoes of five of the 500,000 Iraqi children under age 5 who have died because of our policies."

II

No mode of creation is more direct or naturally arrived at than the accumulation and agglomeration of materials founds close at hand.

William Seitz

I regard everything from shoes to cabbage to keyboard as noble when put in the context of the extraordinary creation they and I are part of. Whether or not we are aware of it, we are all caught in the dance of attraction.

The first expression of wonder is through the senses... enthralled by the miracle of e.v.e.r.y.t.h.i.n.g. First I praise the “mater-ials” that serve me. I am not a compulsive hoarder, I am a grateful devotee. .My dearest wish is to go SLOWer, taking time to register and praise e.v.e.r.y.t.h.i.n.g.

One of my cherished materials is soap. I like clear, unscented glycerin-based bars of soap. When I release the angular shape from its clear paper cover, I am taken by the sharp edges, an intriguing contrast to the flesh-like velvety feeling of the soap. I experience these bars of soap as poems of (divine) mater-iality. I delight in the way their edges soften and become rounder over time. My pleasure deepens when the soap dwindles down to a transparent sliver as its color changes from gold to yellow to ocher. To hold this piece of soap in my hand is to also hold it in my heart...and when I hold it up to the light, I see a stained glass window, or the amber bead of a funky necklace. Or maybe I just see a fragment of soap. It is worth being admired for what it is. Perhaps I will be inspired to make something of this soap someday, but for now, the material is matter... is Mother. When I get up during the night and fumble my way to the bathroom in my old adobe house, my hands touch the smooth, rounded walls, reminding me of my smooth, rounded bar of soap. Touching the walls, I feel touched by tenderness.

Another beloved material is the match. Why does match, the tiny word-being that speaks of fire, draw so much of my attention? Match, as minute as she is, speaks on behalf of light. If Light is Spirit, no wonder I have a thing for match. Match touches many different parts of me. Visually, she is utterly precious in her pale smallness, carrying the memory of her mother tree, the aspen of my home in the west. Aurally, she emits a slight and hollow sound, a cross

between an Oriental temple instrument and an Australian rain stick. Then there is the olfactory, that sulfurous emanation which may require a long nose like my own typically long French one. This is not to forget the tender smoke she exudes, a fuming vocabulary of sorts. But then, every being has many sides to its beingness.

Burnt matches are one of my collectibles. I began this particular collection over twenty years ago, and it has gone way beyond my need for praise. I wonder how long it will take me to gather enough burnt matches to reconstruct a mother aspen tree--a conceptual work at this stage, yet one I seriously hope to realize. This would be my way of celebrating and thanking my kin from my deepest 'skin,' my heart. For now, the tiny sticks are enchanting, their lightness, their spark, the delicate 'unmatchable' sound. Each strike, a mini ceremony in itself. For Marcel Proust, it was the taste of a *madeleine* dipped in tea that made him revisit his past. It is sound that moves me, and I can't decide if it is the sound one little "fire-stick" makes when dropped on other matches or the psssssss sound of the incandescent tip put out in water.

I confess I have a special liking for the French word for match, *allumette*, which is close to the word illumine, for light is how Spirit manifests. Match actually comes from the Old French *mèche* (the wick of a candle). The beauty of being bilingual is that the world becomes more expansive, which increases the potential for existential joy and wonder at the mystery and oneness of life.

Rags are another favorite material. "Better go to heaven in rags than to hell in embroidery," reads an old proverb. When I fold newly washed rags, I journey into the past and reconnect with them as old *familiars*. It is a celebration of their beingness. A love song. Occasionally, an exercise in peacemaking. The caramel-colored flannel night gown that once kept me warm is now a tattered square for reviving old wooden furniture. The seasoned remnant of a cotton camisole with an embroidered panel now lightly strokes the bathroom mirror. The kitchen towel, part of the trousseau that traveled with me in an ocean liner trunk on board the S/S France in 1967, has lost much of its natural linen goodness, but is still good enough to gently caress the trees that willingly or not sacrificed themselves to chairdom. Rags for me are ageless poems made of cloth.

My materials are deeply private objects, personal matter “altared” and transformed by the ceremony of a shared experience. I began collecting things from day-to-day life in 1989 when I moved to a small log cabin North of Santa Fe. First it was soap and matches, then hair-- Life/Art gestures that translated into the realm of practice.

Every time I pick up a strand of hair, whether from my shoulder, a coat, a pillowcase or the comb after combing out my newly-washed hair, I think of the final breath before death. Like a Zen nun carving her tombstone, this practice helps me prepare for the reality and sacredness of the last moment. I have conceptualized a performance for these last moments I call *The Last Performance Project*. My goal for this work is to spin a thread made of my hair to be used in my “last performance,” my funeral. Hair and thread, representing life force and human destiny, set the stage for the living to transcend the pain of losing a body, while reaffirming the connection of life to Spirit. I am not attached to what will happen during this “last performance.” However, I do find this image beautiful and inspiring: a circle of “mOrners” (mourners awakening to the Oneness of All Life) holding the spun thread of hair, each person like the pearl of a special rosary celebrating the Oneness of All Things, alive or dead.

About the Author

Dominique Mazeaud is an artist whose ritual performances and installations are prayers. Born in France, she has lived in the United States since 1967 and in Santa Fe, New Mexico since 1987. Her passion is the Earth and her identity belongs to Spirit.

Material is matter... is Mother... is an excerpt from a manuscript titled *The Spiritual in Art: a heartist's journey*. The word *heartist* is the gift of her quest for the meaning of the Spiritual in Art in our Time which

she has tried to answer since 1979. She feels so strongly about matter that she often calls the objects of her life *familiars*. She can be reached at heartistdm@gmail.com.



Kim Chernin

A Stuttering Kind of Worship

I

When I was a child
morning and night I crawled out
on the fire escape
I heard a murmuring, a gathering, a delivering, every each with its particular message.
Great rushing rivers boisterous silence. Something waiting,
the whole tribe, our nearest kin, playing hide and seek with us
so young, so young in the birth of a sight that gives birth to itself
and we know ourselves then irrevocably
stitched to the taut weave of what is.

II

Look: a whole new batch has been delivered.
Some of them, before they discover wings
plunge to earth as guardians
of the great whispering rivers;
another crop of forgotten kin
wanders around looking for purpose;
the next pack gets blown over the edge
in the first strong wind
to teach those of us,
who might notice,
how to grow feathers;
a fourth bunch likes to sing
so that's what they do
all day they sit around inventing
close harmonies meant for us;

And now, hold your breath:
here comes the weary season's bumper crop:
little corn deities with big ears
climbing down the ladder.
Not exactly one for everyone one of us
but thick as summer leaves
mostly eager, somewhat melancholy,
cautiously hopeful about their purpose
that must be us, who don't believe in them.

III

It's fairly obvious to those of us
who think about these things
that we exist;
We can't demonstrate ourselves if
asked for evidence
but we know how to kick
the side of a desk
and come away smarting.
Most everyone would agree
pain equals existence;
whatever else you say about
non-existence it doesn't hurt
and that is perhaps the reason
so many people choose to suffer.
But all it takes is a quick moment
of knowing when the small kin
are hanging around like luminous gnats
longing to fulfill their guardian task
and you offer yourself to them
believing in them or not because surrender

to the isness of what is, what-
ever that is, probably is the
keenest ecstasy you can endure.
We were made for this:
a stuttering kind of worship
and they in turn were hatched for us.

IV

There is a rift in the nature of things
thinking cannot mend;
those who feel their way into whatever is
don't see the problem
let it be nameless, without shape
or form or the dying breath of late
season carnations, whatever
is establishes itself
a hair's breadth apart from us,
willing to be united
already having endowed us
with the capacity. Who wants
to be lonely? I have heard
the leaves whispering the
sermon and the mysteries
the smaller leaves not yet
staying on key, all
hoping we would
send out a tear or two
of recognition:
whatever is longs to be part
of whatever else might be,
every one of us sending

out signals, 'I'm here,
are you kin? Please
you to love me.'

V

Words have their twin being
in the world of things
you say 'they'
you look around wondering what sort of they
a long-lost they a home-coming they
a they who have come to unravel
a rare spool of reverence?

VI

For me it was the key of E flat minor
the entire world in one split second
a late string quartet dark and mysterious
and the late birds hurrying to get home
before the nest closes down for the night.

VII

Time came and I heard them
laughing their heads off
debating our existence
they asked how many of us
could dance on the head of a pin.
I suggested they go out
to count the number of teeth
in a horse's mouth
leaving aside the vexed question
as to the existence of horses.

VIII

What am I talking about?

It's not easy to

put your finger on

an almost-there

a hovering close-by at a far distance;

What puts the sting in the bee

flavor in sweet, needle in pine, k in akin to us, gossamer in web, unyielding in stone,
yielding in long grass, future in seed, flourishing in flower?

IX

Of course these hovering, these protective

these small kinfolk get tired of upholding

the created world without our help

they retire, they give way after their season,

long or short hardly matters,

a new batch will come round again.

peeping out at us, a reassurance, a never lost, a clamoring shyness.

X

And so I sit here at the edge of myself

on the banks of the world's end

and I wonder:

what has given me this

different kind of seeing

a sly look directed straight at us

from the no longer weeping willow

the scolding of three barred owls

beneath a wanton moon?

XI

Look for them, look sharp
lessons everywhere, early
and late all of us learning to read
dutiful students of the waiting-to-be known.

XII

Who said it was a great mystery?
It is a weave so fine we're always in danger
of falling through into an embrace of light
that subtle far sturdier light
known in its poised transparency
as birthright, homecoming. heartache, memory
as this-side daily presence
stretched out to near invisibility
An everywhere. Where is the mystery?

Suppose we are the maturing of a cycle
in the terrible renewal of others waiting to be earthed
how we mourn the diminishing,
our kinfolk swept away
in the fire of the great autumnal sweeper
while we who remain are asked to learn the names
of the intricate, coiled, expected ones
who come to take their place.

Notes:

When I was a child I used to greet by name the flowers and trees I met when we went out for a walk. Holding tight to my father's hand I would nod my head or curtsy and call things by their name. "Good morning roses, here I am again pine trees, it's been a long time chipmunks..." We lived up a long flight of stairs from the Bronx Park, which I thought of as a great woods, filled with tree-like family members. I seemed to see everything as related to me, like Sonya downstairs and Libby across the hall, and Sonya's sister who lived worlds away on the other side of the woods. They all, merely neighbours, seemed to belong to us. In a Chinese restaurant I would stand up in the booth and ask the people (strangers) on the other side to give me the shrimp from their rice dish. My mother thought I should outgrow this sense of relatedness to everything but my father and sister encouraged it and I held onto it long past the time many children give up their magical sense of the world.

Unfortunately, I did outgrow it and for years and years came to see nature with alienated and indifferent eyes. During this time I was constantly asking about the meaning of life and finding no satisfactory answer; it was that early youth-time of black stockings, dark turtle neck sweaters and fashionable existential despair.

But one day, in my late twenties, I was walking through the Golden Gate Park in San Francisco, when I suddenly felt that my legs had become very short and that I was close to the ground. At the same time the flowers in the botanical garden and the ducks in the pond took on a kind of technicolor vividness that reminded me of images from my childhood book of Russian fairy tales. Then, in the next moment or two, I had exactly the same feeling I'd had as a child, a strong wish to call everything by name and to say hello. An enchanted world, kinship with everything, a memory, a truth, a reality. A crucial way of experiencing the world that had been protected from the disenchantments of growing-up?

Of course, this enchantment did not last, but it would come and go over the years until as I grew older it seemed to settle in as a permanent relationship to the world and especially to its duck ponds, palomino horses, weeping willows, oyster ferns and

climbing roses. I felt that nature was teaching me to recognize the inseparable bond of our human life with the life of nature and that in this kinship life's meaning became abundantly apparent. Life was meaningful because of the way we were tied into everything. All the poetry I have written arises from this enchanted conviction of kinship, which so often brings me to a sense of breathless awe and a stuttering kind of worship.



Kim Chernin is the author of many books in many genres. She has written and published fiction, non-fiction, creative non-fiction, poetry and essays, including In My Mother's House; The Hungry Self; Crossing the Border; The Flame Bearers; My Life As A Boy. These books are deeply concerned with women's lives, as are all the books she's published. She lives in Point Reyes Station, California, with her life-companion of 30 years, Renate Stendhal.

Nancy Windheart

Saved by Whales

From the time I was a small child, I've had a deep curiosity about how other beings perceive the world. As a girl, I'd spend hours alone in the park or in my bedroom, wondering about how my dog or the trees experienced the world that I was seeing through my human eyes. How did the world look to them? What did they feel? How did they sense, smell, hear, touch? How did they understand their lives, their reality?

As I sat quietly pondering these questions with my dog, the trees, and the birds, I began to learn to shift my awareness away from the perspective of my own human form and blend it with the consciousness and awareness of other beings. I began to feel my dog's experience of the world from his perspective, rather than my own. I became aware of the enormous sensitivity of feeling in the giant maple tree in my neighbor's back yard as her branches moved in the wind and glistened in the moonlight. I sensed the awareness of the insects and the birds as they went about their daily lives.

My closest childhood friends were barn cats, the trees, and my dog. My relationship with the human world was confusing and fractured. The first rift came in the separation from my birth mother, and next in my adoptive family, where I experienced a confusing mix of love and fear of my awareness and sensitivity. I saw things, felt things, and understood things that others didn't, and that were considered suspect at best, or evil at worst, in the fundamentalist Christian religion to which my parents had dedicated their lives.

As a child, I spent as much time as I could away from other people, preferring time alone and with my beloved animals and trees. My grandparents had a small dairy farm, and when I visited, I'd spend whole days in the barn, singing to the barn cats, standing with the cows as they ate their grain and hay, and sleeping in the hayloft with a kitten in my arms.

In these times, I discovered deep relationship, family, and kinship with non-human beings of many species. More than "pets," these creatures were my family, my connection, and my primary place of belonging in the world. I trusted them, and I trusted the sensory, emotional,

and spiritual experiences I had with them.

Although I had many religious experiences as a child, my first mystical experience happened when I was about twelve years old. I remember lying in my bed at night, connecting with the maple tree outside of my bedroom window in the moonlight, and suddenly understanding that all of life was a great net, a web of connection. I saw how I was connected to the tree, to other people, to animals, and how this connection went far beyond the beings that I knew personally, extending all over the earth. I remember clearly being aware that time was not real, that these connections extended into both the “past” and the “future” in a way that was both incomprehensible and perfectly obvious.

These experiences saved me. They allowed me to have a sense of connection, of belonging, of family, community, and kinship that was lacking in my life. I was able to feel in a deep and wordless way that I did actually belong on the Earth, even though I often felt like a stranger here.

Guru Cat

My first meditation teacher was a cat. He was a beat-up street cat named Freddie whose body was scarred and torn. He’d lost both ears, his eyelids were ripped, and he came to me infected with FIV—the feline equivalent of HIV.

Freddie was semi-feral, and in our first months together, he scratched, bit and hissed at me. And then, seemingly overnight, he made what I now understand was a conscious choice...and settled down to become a lap cat and my first true guru.

My spiritual path up until that point in my life had been circuitous and without a clear focus or tradition. After I left the fundamentalist Christian cult in which I’d been raised, I voraciously read and studied, trying to find a spirituality that made sense to me as a young lesbian woman whose primary connection with the divine was through classical music and the piano.

I studied the Buddhist teachings of Chogyam Trungpa, the writings of Christian mystics Thomas Merton, Henri Nouwen, and Hildegard of Bingen, feminist theologian Mary Daly,

and I learned to use the I-Ching. After that came forays into paganism, Wicca, and earth-based practices originating in Native American traditions. Each of these areas of study taught me many things, but none of them led me into a consistent experience of spiritual practice.

It was with animals that I found connection, grounding, and a connection to what deeply moved me. Through working in animal rescue and advocacy, I rediscovered my childhood ability to hear, feel, and understand my non-human friends' thoughts, feelings, and communications. These experiences awakened what was most alive in me, and I moved deeper and deeper into the animal world and took my first tentative steps toward leaving my career in classical music. As I opened into the world of interspecies telepathic communication, I began to experience profound changes in both my inner and outer worlds.

And then Freddie came into my life. As we'd sit together each night, he offered me a visceral, embodied experience of dropping deeply into the lake of awareness that was present behind my constantly-running thoughts. Through his example, which included a kind of energetic transmission that I felt with my whole body, I was able to enter into a place of shared awareness where there was no me, no cat, no chair. "We" were simply a great pool of awareness, deeply grounded, connected, centered, and resting. Sometimes we'd both sleep, but mostly I'd find myself in a deep meditative state that had no edges, no boundaries. Often, insight and wisdom would bubble up, and the clutter that was in my mind and life at the time would simply fall away.

Sometimes Freddie would give me meditation instructions telepathically. If I popped up into thinking, worry, spinning, and obsessive thoughts, he'd wake up, look at me, and send me the clear message: "You're fussing again. Come back." And with that guidance, I could. He'd put his head back down and close his eyes, and I'd drop back into presence and awareness. I learned that thoughts would always be there, but that rather than try to get rid of them, I could simply drop "beneath" them, into an awareness and a state of being that was Freddie's natural state. Through his example, I learned that rather than trying to control or remove my frenetic thoughts, I could simply allow them to exist on the surface and drop into a place below them that held a deep experience of what was real and true.

I discovered that what was most alive in this place of awareness and openness underneath

my mind and thoughts was love...that LOVE was the essence of this quiet and deep space of pure presence. With Freddie's precious body on mine, and our shared experience of deep meditation and connection, I found that love and awareness were not separate things. I was love, he was love, we were love, love was. Love. Just love.

Welcome to the Family: Whale Teachers

I saw my first whales on a whale-watching boat in Iceland, where they continue to be hunted. My eyes filled with tears as I saw the magnificence of the whales' bodies, and my heart exploded with joy as I felt the magnitude of their presence. As waves of emotion moved through my body that day as I watched the whales blow and breach, I received a direct, clear communication from them:



"Welcome to the family." I felt a deep resonance with the whales reverberate in my cells, and I knew that in some fundamental way my entire orientation to life had just changed.

I felt the whales' awareness of me as an individual, a female human, and their perception of "family" and "kinship" as encompassing all beings of the earth. As they welcomed me to their "pod", they were acknowledging our commonality as living beings on this planet, as well as our particular spiritual connection with each other. They felt me, I felt them, and this began a journey of relationship with cetaceans that has profoundly guided and changed my life.

In the years since that first encounter, I've had the incredible privilege of spending extended time in the water with wild humpback whales. I've been engulfed in the energy fields of "dancers"—whales in their courtship ritual (a profoundly erotic and sacred expression of sexuality and connection). Baby whales have played carefully around my body while their mothers kept watch from below. Adult humpback whales the size of a school bus have come close enough to look deeply into my eyes, while carefully moving their pectoral fins below me so as not to harm my small, fragile human form.

I've floated in trance as the sound vibration of the "singers" moved through the molecules of the water deep into my being, altering my cellular structure and opening my meridians and chakras in ways I never dreamed possible. I've wept with gratitude for the deep gifts I've received from the whales in their ocean home as they have allowed me to share a small piece of their lives, their families, and their spiritual awareness.

When I first heard the voice of master yoga teacher and peace activist Rama Jyoti Vernon chanting "OM" as she'd discovered it in her own body and voice, I felt the same cellular vibration, overtones, and harmonics that I'd first heard and experienced in the water with the singing humpback whales. As tears streamed down my face, I knew not only that I'd found one of my most important human teachers, but that I'd been given a window into a common interspecies language of sound healing, vibration, sacred geometry, and spiritual wisdom. I had a vision of a time when the "universal cosmic vibration" that is OM was known by all species...a frequency of sound and vibrational energy that encompassed this planet and far beyond.

I developed a close and deep relationship with a female humpback whale whom I call "Kaiya." Kaiya has worked with me over a period of many years, both when I was with her in the ocean, and long-distance through telepathic communication and spiritual transmission.

One of Kaiya's first and most important teachings was about spiritual awareness in a physical body. After one particularly intense day in the water with her, I was in my cabin on the boat resting, when she gave me a strong and clear telepathic message: "Come with me." She invited me to shift my awareness, much in the way I'd learned to do as a child, and enter her body, perceiving through her perspective and consciousness. As I did this, I felt her great physical sensitivity, her awareness of the water, the earth beneath the ocean floor, her connection to not only her immediate physical family and podmates, but others of her kind all throughout the seas. I felt "my" cellular structure expanding, stretching out, touching the water around me, the earth beneath me, and sinking deep into the ocean floor, through the center of the earth, and out the other side into the cosmos.

Kaiya taught me how to connect to the earth and the universe beyond through my belly and my breath, and how to feel the meridians and magnetic grid of the earth through my skin, my cells, my breath, my own physical body. I learned that for the whales, there is no separation between physical form and pure awareness...they are one and the same, and their physical lives are never disconnected from this universal awareness.

As I learned to work with my breath through the example of the whales' conscious breath, I discovered how to drop my awareness down into the earth, to open through the perceived edges of my physical form into something vast, deep, and universal. In doing this, I discovered gateways in my own being that opened into other dimensions, other realities, and ultimately into a numinous place of universal awareness.

Awakening Boddhicitta: the Grey Whales of Baja

In the winters, the Pacific grey whales migrate from their summer home in the far northern latitudes to the protected lagoons of the Baja Peninsula of Mexico, where they mate and bear their young. These whales are known for their close and extended interactions with humans, and have been named “the friendly whales of Baja.”



The lagoons of Baja were once the scene of some of the most brutal episodes in the long history of human predation on whales. The whaling boats would trap the whales in the lagoons as they came to give birth, killing the young. Stories of enraged and grieving mother whales hurling themselves at the boats and breaking them in two were common. Eventually, the whaling ended, and the grey whales continued their migration, mating, and calving in the lagoons.

One day in the 1970's, a local fisherman was out in one of the lagoons when a mother grey whale approached his boat. She came close, and then lifted her baby up to him, close enough that he could reach out and touch the young whale. Since this time, generations of mothers and baby whales have invited and welcomed interaction with humans in the lagoons all up and down the Baja coast. Some of the adults still bear harpoon scars. They circle close to the pangas (small fishing boats), and they often invite and welcome human play and touch, coming back over and over again.

The experience of being in these lagoons with the grey whales is profound. Whales fill the waters, coming close to the boats...spy-hopping, breaching, bringing their calves alongside, circling again and again to be near the people and the boats, rather than swimming away.

I've noticed that the boats that have children on them receive special attention from the whales. I once witnessed a baby whale circling and jumping again and again near a boat with a delighted, laughing, screaming human child. I could hear the baby whale communicating with his mother:

"It's a baby human! Can I play with him?"

And as his mother gave her blessing, he came near the boat with the child again and again with pure delight and joy.

I'm moved beyond words by these magnificent whales and their loving, joyful, playful, compassionate outreach to humans. The whales have communicated to me that they have full consciousness and awareness of their history with humans in both their individual and collective memory. And they have chosen to forgive us.

The whales choose to be with us, to come close to us, to play with us. They gently move their bodies away if they are so close that they might harm us. They offer us their young, their bodies to be touched, with nothing but open-heartedness and joy as their motivation. They don't have to do this. They're not being fed, coerced, or manipulated. They simply come with openness and love to be our teachers, our evolutionary leaders on the path of love, forgiveness, and healing. They come close to us with the recognition that we share the same planet, that the relationship between our species is important, and that there is more that unites us than that separates us.

Through the example of the whales, I've had the courage to look deep into my own heart at the places where I hold resentment and haven't completely forgiven others. I feel the places where I have not loved and forgiven myself. And these places within me have softened and opened as I feel the great example of the whales, offering forgiveness and love to a species that has often been so unconscious and cruel to them. They recognize us as individuals, and they also choose to stay with us, to come close to us, to help our species evolve.

We often talk about "saving the whales"--but the truth is, the whales are saving us.

The time I've spent with these whales has profoundly altered my awareness of the meaning of compassion, kindness, and forgiveness. This example of species "forgiveness" is for me, one of the clearest examples of what the Buddhists call bodhicitta...the soft spot, the aspiration that all beings be free from suffering (enlightened).

The whales teach me that there is no power in the world greater than love. That forgiveness heals...and that creating lasting change in our world starts with something that is both so simple and so powerful: connecting with each other, past the differences, wounds, and history that separates us, through what we have in common—our open hearts, our love of our young, our desire to live happy, free, joyous lives.

Rejoining the Human Family

As I found my spiritual home in the world of animals, a wonderful thing began to happen. Through their teachings, their wisdom, their example, my relationship with the human world began to heal. As I connected with the animals and with my own animal body, seeing both the great challenges of the human condition and our fundamental connection with all of life, I found myself opening to myself, my own humanity, and other people in a whole new way.

I discovered that many of the spiritual practices I'd learned from the animals were found in some of the ancient human wisdom traditions of the earth (indigenous shamanic traditions, the lineage of Vajrayana Buddhism, the ancient practices of the yogis). Finding this wisdom in human traditions was a homecoming...a full-circle return to acceptance of my karmic destiny, soul-choice, and gift of my embodiment on the earth in human form.

I began to remember. I remembered what I came to the earth for, and why. I remembered what it is that I intended to do here, and how I was meant to do it. My personal journey became impersonal...flowing out into an intention to be of benefit, of service, to others...including, most importantly, to others of my own species.

I carry the message of the whales with me in my daily life--imperfectly loving, imperfectly forgiving, but continuing to try, as best I can, to live as they do: with an open heart filled with joy and love.

In rejoining the circle of non-human life, miraculously, I've been able to come full circle and recognize that I, too, am part of the vast human family. I don't do this perfectly, ever. And I won't. But what I am learning is that I don't need to. All that I really need to do is what Freddie taught me so long ago:

Sit. Breathe. Come back.

Over and over again, come back to presence, come back to awareness, come back to love.

Nancy Windheart is an internationally respected animal communicator, animal communication teacher, and Reiki Master-Teacher based in Cornville (near Sedona), Arizona. She teaches animal communication and animal Reiki classes and provides animal communication consultations for clients worldwide. Nancy is a Reiki Master-Teacher and professional member of the International Association of Reiki Professionals, Registered Yoga Teacher, and an ordained minister through the Universal Life Church. She is a former professional classical pianist and music professor.



Susan Richardson

Tope

Imagine smelling more
than that drop of blood
 in the water
 a quarter of a mile away;
more than location, source,
and readiness for sex or eating.
Imagine smelling dolphins' one-eyed sleep,
seastars' tube feet,
the hubris of scuba.
Imagine two nasal tracts,
 undistracted by breathing.
Imagine smelling the creeping acidity of sea,
 tiny shelled terrors,
chemical errors in the bloodcells
of dab and pouting.
Imagine reading those smells
that are long out of print –
the origin of salt,
 oxygen's historic drift,
 misspellings
of sinks
 of carbon.
Imagine smelling that urge
 to purge an estuary
of its role as a long-term nursery;
her internal stilted hatch of eggs,

the silted stench
of her last
birthing.

Notes:

'Tope' will appear in my fourth collection, due to be published by Cinnamon Press in 2017. I'm currently poet-in-residence with the Marine Conservation Society in the UK, writing poems and running poetry workshops for the organisation's Thirty Threatened Species project. This venture aims to raise wider awareness of the plight of thirty marine species, all of whom appear on the IUCN Red List. They include such iconic creatures as the Atlantic puffin and sperm whale, as well as beings about whom we know comparatively little, like the angel and frilled sharks.

In addition to engaging with the theme of loss, I have an enduring fascination with human-animal/non-human-animal metamorphosis: my most recent collection, *skindancing* (Cinnamon Press, 2015) focuses exclusively on this subject, exploring both our intimacy with, and alienation from, our animal selves and the wider natural world. This 'becoming animal' theme continues to be present in many of my marine conservation poems-in-progress, where I'm still grappling with such questions as: where is the borderline between humanity and animality? what are the animal possibilities of the self? I'm especially interested in considering these questions in light of the fact that our behaviour (including overfishing, habitat destruction, profligate production of plastic debris) has caused the near-extinction of so many marine creatures. How comfortably may we 'become animal' and 'make kin' in this context?

Much of the language in 'Tope' has been chosen for reasons of sound: my aim was to create a chain of assonance, part-rhymes and words-packed-with-plosives so that the reader is drawn through the poem from sound echo to sound echo, just as the tope shark is drawn, by its extraordinary olfactory ability, through the water from smell to smell.

Susan Richardson is a Welsh ecopoet, performer and educator, whose third collection of poetry, *skindancing*, was published by Cinnamon Press in 2015. Her first collection, *Creatures of the Intertidal Zone* (Cinnamon Press, 2007), was inspired by her own, and other human and non-human animals', journeys through the increasingly fragile Arctic environment. *Where the Air is Rarefied* (Cinnamon Press, 2011), her second collection, is a collaboration with visual artist Pat Gregory, focusing on environmental and mythological themes relating to the Far North.



Susan is currently poet-in-residence with both the Marine Conservation Society and the global animal welfare initiative, World Animal Day. She is also the co-founder and poetry editor of *Zoomorphic*, the online journal that publishes work in celebration and defence of wild animals.
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Patricia Reis

***After • Word* DINING OUT ON THE GREAT DIVIDE: Donna Haraway, Thomas Thwaites, Frans deWaal, Karen Joy Fowler, Charles Foster and Helen MacDonald.**

Like all defensive wall building, the Great Divide that separates humans from other-than-humans has been long in the making. Built over several millennia and supported by such stony stalwarts as Genesis, the Great Chain of Being, and René Descartes, the wall requires constant shoring up and anxious monitoring. With Darwin's help, parts of the wall came down. Like cows looking for better grass, no one wants to squirm under, wriggle through, or leap over the barrier more than a few errant *homo sapiens*, *sapiens* who write books.

I have recently read six books addressing the subject of humans' relationship to other-than-humans. There is a veritable flood of these books lately, each of them coming at the subject from a different perspective, each concerned, more or less, with issues of human ethics, morality, intelligence, politics, psychology, philosophy, religion and spirituality.

The authors in question are all highly educated, privileged white Western anglophones—three Brits, two Americans, and one Dutchman who lives and works in America. Each of them presses hard against the boundary that separates humans from those other creatures with whom we share the planet. Reading their works, I am reminded of the ancient story about people in the dark (in most of the stories, it is blind men) who touch an elephant to learn its nature; each puts a hand on a different part and describes it, but no one has a complete sense of the whole animal.

Individually, the books are entertaining, fascinating, quirky, sometimes funny, bleak, poignant, chock full of scientific information you would never ordinarily come across. Gathered together, they represent some new imperative, some compelling drive in the human collective that is trying to bend us toward a new consciousness. For these authors, the old religion of human domination is a crumbling wall, and each of them bulldozes a section of the Great Divide hoping to liberate us from the tyranny of our dreadful histories and practices, if not from our very selves as humans. Along with an air of urgency, there is human loneliness, outrage, alienation, grief, desire, humor, and love in these books, along with a hunger for new understanding, if not for reconstructing our human nature, our natureculture as some would say

Everyone needs to eat and food is on everyone's mind these days. Food preferences, something humans share with other-than-humans, is where things get interesting. Donna Haraway is a multispecies feminist theorist. *When Species Meet* is a wide-ranging riff on species-related topics. Like Mary Daly, Haraway wants to forge a new language for our times. Language structures how humans think and what we can think. Haraway's word for our times is not Anthropocene or Capitalcene, but Chthulucene. This epoch, Haraway explains, requires a completely different kind of thinking, new concepts and language, so we can "stay with the trouble of living and dying together on a damaged earth . . . [in a way that] will prove more conducive to the kind of thinking that would provide the means to building more livable futures." Some of the concepts Haraway plays with are: entanglement, messmates at the table, companion-species, becoming-with, co-evolving.

Haraway takes into account all the practices and perversions that occur when species meet. She does not judge anyone's food choices, but she might question a penchant for purity. She is pragmatic, generous, and profoundly inclusive. She has tasted a fresh human placenta and eaten wild boar at a recent faculty barbeque. She's omnivorous in her appetite and thinking, doesn't mind blood

sacrifice, is not cowed by sacred cows, and is a self-confessed expert on indigestion. She says, “There is no way to eat and not to kill, no way to eat and not to become with other mortal beings to whom we are accountable, no way to pretend innocence and transcendence or a final peace.”

Haraway’s view is cosmicpolitical, but she is not without a moral compass or deep and passionate sympathies. She is not implying that *any* way of eating and killing is fine. There are consequences, all the way up and all the way down. “Multispecies human and nonhuman ways of living and dying are at stake in practices of eating.” There is no relief, especially in our dietary practices. Indigestion is a chronic ailment all humans must bear.

Thomas Thwaites, author of *GoatMan: How I Took a Holiday from Being Human*, is human-weary. He wants out of his *homo sapiens sapiens* life. He thinks too much, and he worries. All humans worry, he notices. “Even the Queen who is born into a life of the utmost privilege and prestige. . . . Yes, even the Queen has worries. To be human is to worry.” (And he is only in his thirties!??) Thwaites is not overly impressed by brains and is quick to point out that human brains have shrunk considerably over time. “That’s the thing about brains—without some embodiment, a connection to the real world, it doesn’t matter how capable your mind is (even if you are René Descartes).” But smart Thwaites is, and savvy, and obviously endearing. He manages to get a very prestigious artist’s grant from the Wellcome Trust in London who think his plan of becoming an elephant a “wonderfully engaging idea.” OK, he had a bit of a track record; he made a toaster from scratch, mining the iron and making the plastic himself. The toaster was later acquired by the Victoria & Albert Museum. Even if it was a one-off, it was quite a success.

A toaster is one thing, but an elephant was of a different, rather larger, categorical order. Thwaites began to imagine building an elephant exo-skeleton he could inhabit while he went along eating grass. But after a trip to South Africa

where he encountered elephants in the wild, he was quickly put off by their size and their strength; he figured it would take a diesel-powered bulldozer inside the exoskeleton to even approximate the strength of an elephant. And then there were other more existential problems. Elephants mourned their dead. A friend told him what he needed was the services of a shaman who was familiar with human/animal issues.

When he tells the Scandinavian shaman he consults that he wants to become an elephant, she sets him back on his heels, or should I say hindlegs. An elephant? She says “[that is] idiotic. . . . They are completely alien to the environment you’re connected to.” You are not a bushman in Africa, she reminds him. She sizes him up, then: “Actually, for you, the Goat.” This triggers a flashback to a very early childhood memory where he tried to eat a leafy houseplant by nibbling at it with his teeth. “Annette has gotten it absolutely right,” he thinks. She also gives him an informative discourse on the history and practices of shamanism and suggests he undertake a shamanic journey. Which he does.

Thwaites is not looking to become more conscious, to think more; he wants to not think at all. He is willing to risk his brain to achieve it. As a goat, he does not need language, he can eliminate the vexations of time—past, present, future—he does not need hands with opposable thumbs, all those things that gets humans higher up the species ladder. He charms high-level experts into conspiring with him on the project; he consults a goat expert, a world-class veterinarian, a neurologist, and a builder of prostheses. He learns everything he can about *Capra aegagrus hircus*, even participating in an autopsy. For nourishment, he learns to eat grass, something the human gut cannot process. He constructs an artificial rumen he can spit into, and then later boils the grass mash down to edible sugar components. Eating grass offends no one. He is willing to repurpose his body at great and possibly mortal risk to his present human incarnation so he can become a goat and cross the Swiss Alps with a herd.

I imagine the primatologist Frans de Waal regarding Thwaites with avuncular amusement, thinking here's a young man who *is* smart enough to know what a goat thinks by actually becoming one. de Waal would appreciate the determination and the semi-scientific pursuit of Thwaites' impossible dream, maybe even recognizing aspects of his younger self.

In *Are We Smart Enough to Know How Smart Animals Are?* de Waal does not mention his personal food preferences, but he does recall some of the most egregious experiments in his field that have to do with food, or better, lack of food. Early behaviorists of the Skinner persuasion used food deprivation, claiming this was the only way to give the experimental apes "purpose in life." de Waal wryly observes, "Obviously, this has less to do with methodology and more to do with ethics." In any case, the Skinner people left when the sympathetic lab staff started feeding the animals at night.

de Waal is like your favorite uncle who shows up at Sunday dinner full of interesting stories about apes and chimps, birds and snakes, humans and others. He has spent forty some years studying apes. He considers the Great Divide to be specious because, after all, by most measures, we *are* beasts. de Waal believes that humans in any other way than language are not unique; we share many traits with animals, but unfortunately we still have a need to insist on being set apart. As an evolutionary cognitive observer, he believes human-animal difference is, as Darwin famously pointed out, one of degree, not kind.

In his professional life, de Waal has been called a lot of names: "naïve, romantic, soft, unscientific, anthropomorphic, anecdotal, or just a sloppy thinker for proposing that primates follow political strategies, reconcile after fights, empathize with others, or understand the world around them." He is no fan of human exceptionalism. Like Haraway, he is an advocate for human empathy as a way to understand other species. True empathy, he says, is not self-focused but other-oriented. "Instead of making humanity the measure of all things, we

need to evaluate other species by what *they* are.” “Animals,” deWaal says, “should be given a chance to express their natural behavior. We are developing a greater interest in their variable lifestyles. Our challenge is to think more like them, so that we open our minds to their specific circumstances and goals and observe and understand them on their own terms.”

Karen Joy Fowler’s novel *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* could put a twist in the lab coats of de Waal’s cognitive behavioral cohorts. Fowler embeds a great deal of factual information about chimp studies as she delves deeply into the nature of identity, family, attachment, loss, and grief on both sides of the Great Divide. What you might not guess from the title of her book, although it is ironically implied, is the explosive device at the center of her story.

Rosemary and her sister Fern have grown up as siblings from birth to age five. They are in all ways similar, except Fern happens to be a chimpanzee—the boundary between the two sisters so porous that Rosemary acts chimp-like and Fern thinks she is human. Same-same. When Fern eats the only existing photograph of Rosemary’s grandmother, Rosemary says if there had been another she would have eaten it, too. But there are differences. When Rosemary draws pictures of Fern, she chooses a burnt sienna crayon for her eyes. Fern’s drawings never get finished because she eats the crayons. And Rosemary does the very thing that identifies her as a human—non-stop talking.

During their first five years, the sisters were closely observed and documented by Rosemary’s father, an animal behaviorist. When Fern is forcibly removed from the home, it feels like ripping Velcro. Devastating for all—humans, chimps, and this reader. As one might expect, things do not go well for Fern, but Fowler also details the psychological and spiritual crises for the human family. Rosemary’s father attempts to comfort young Rosemary with a sanitized version that Fern is happy with another family, on a farm with other chimps, when in reality she has been put in a chimp “refuge” with other chimps who have not been human-raised.

Rosemary worries that Fern will have to try new foods, something she and Fern heartily dislike. When her father recites a colorful litany of exotic fruits that Fern will be enjoying in her new life, Rosemary repeatedly interrupts, “But can she still eat her favorites. . . ? Apples, bananas, candy.” Underlying the narrative are the ethics, morality, and unexpected consequences of a certain kind of scientific inquiry that involves using animals for human-centered purposes, in this particular case, human-fostered chimpanzees.

When Rosemary researches human-fostered chimps for a college project, she discovers their terrible outcomes. Rosemary also falls in love with a wild and crazy woman named Harlow, surely a cross-species type, her name an obvious nod to Harry Harlow, he of the infamous chimp-terry-cloth mother studies. With the help of Harlow and her brother, Rosemary locates Fern and makes a final visit to the place where Fern now has her existence.

Throughout her novel, Fowler asks similar questions as de Waal—do chimps have empathy, memory, develop attachments, intelligence? And if so, how are they the same or different from us? “Animals,” deWaal says, “should be given a chance to express their natural behavior. We are developing a greater interest in their variable lifestyles. Our challenge is to think more like them, so that we open our minds to their specific circumstances and goals and observe and understand them on their own terms.” Fowler’s novel gives this point emotional poignancy.

Charles Foster not only wants to think more like animals; he wants to physically enter their *umwelt*, the world as experienced by a particular creature, which is why his book is titled *Being a Beast: Adventures Across the Species Divide*. Like Thomas Thwaites, Foster is existentially perplexed. He asks himself the perennial human questions: who or what are we, and what on earth are we doing here? He hopes to find answers, not by observing animals as deWaal does, or by trying to become one, as Thwaites attempts, or having a wild animal live with

his family as in the case of Rosemary and Fern. Instead, Foster decides to live as a badger, along with his cub, his eight-year-old son Tom.

In Wales, Foster's farmer friend digs him a sett, the burrow in which badgers live, on the side of a hill and Foster and his son settle in. Their trials are many, including becoming nocturnal, eating worms, and staying very close to the ground. But there are pleasures to be had, like sleeping in the burrow in a thunderstorm, cradled in the tree roots curled up against each other along with a dislocated mouse who sleeps in the crook of his son's knee.

Foster learns a great deal about being a badger. For instance, earthworms form the major portion (85%) of a badger's diet. Worms, Foster tells us, taste of slime and the land. They are the ultimate local food. But not all earthworms are created equal. Foster has as many descriptives for worms as a wine connoisseur has for wine; depending on their *terroir*, they can taste musty, like leather and stout, like burning rubber and halitosis. He distinguishes between the taste of slime and the worm itself. Few humans can claim such advanced knowledge. Foster's list of comestibles would certainly give anyone's stomach a turn. But Foster is a manimal. Most of what finds out about badger life he likes, or learns to like.

That is not the case when he tries to be an otter. Unlike the sociable, communicative badger, they are not easy to like and Foster has nothing good to say about them. Emulating one is like being trapped in a disastrously bad marriage where the spouses are vicious and hate everything about each other. Still he tries and his efforts are, if not rewarding, revelatory. These animals are not the playful ones found in children's books; solitary, food-driven, with needle teeth, otters are known to rip the testicles off dogs and other intruders.

The title notwithstanding, being a beast is not Foster's aim. He wishes to become better at being a human, a father, a husband, a better friend, better in all his relations. He does not want his kids to live a life in air-conditioned cubicles

under fluorescent lights. He wants for them what he wants for himself, a maximally expanded sensorium. No soccer games or piano recitals for his six “cubs.” He takes them on expeditions to find otter spraint (poop) on muddy riverbanks and then encourages them to make their own. Later they go on a ‘treasure hunt’ to locate and identify the little chocolate frostee-freeze piles. In the acknowledgments, he thanks his “long-suffering wife.” Indeed.

Basically, Foster finds that humans and other creatures are always inscrutable to each other, something he experiences it as an “exhilarating inaccessibility.” He is honest about a number of things. “The universe I occupy is a creature of my head. It is wholly unique to me. The process of intimacy is the process of becoming better at inviting others in to have a look around. The sensation of loneliness is the crushing acknowledgment that however good you get at giving such invitations no one will be able to see very much at all... But we need to keep trying. If we give up with humans, we’re wretched misanthropes. If we give up with the natural world we’re wretched bypass builders, or badger baiters or self-referential urbanites.” Maybe a diet of earthworms helps one to become more philosophical.

Plunged into a state of intense mourning by the sudden death of her beloved father, Helen MacDonald begins a relationship with a fierce goshawk she names Mabel. Helen learned hawks as a child. She is familiar with their aristocratic heritage, the long heraldic tradition and history of falconry; she knows the methodology, the equipment--the leash, the glove, the creance, the hood. When MacDonald chooses Mabel for a companion, she is mostly just focused on her grief and knows she needs to engage with a creature strong and wild enough to keep her from disappearing.

Ever since she was a child, MacDonald tells us, she sought safety in not being seen. She is good at watching, not doing. She understands it isn’t a good trait for a human, but for her goshawk, Mabel, it is the greatest skill in the world. When

she begins her life with Mabel, she locks herself away, leaves her poor friends behind and becomes a hermit, living off frozen pizza. She loses herself in the hawk. "I didn't know who I was but the hawk was vital and present – more real than I was. . . . I had identified with the hawk, taken on her imagined character. I was close to breaking." MacDonald becomes increasingly more feral; Mabel inches toward less fear. MacDonald sits motionless, her mind as empty as an ancient mountain yogi, her heart full of hope. They spend days in her darkened apartment like this.

Over time, MacDonald and Mabel co-evolve; there is an understanding of the inequality in their relationship, there is a great deal of training and practice, there is anxious attachment, but there is also that most important virtue, respect.

MacDonald, like Thwaites and Foster, has existential angst, especially over absence, abandonment, death, and disappearance. She is not training Mabel because she wishes to feel special. She is not puffing her feathers with the long-standing glamour of falconry's history. She has no use for history, no use for time at all. She is training the hawk to make it all disappear. "I felt incomplete unless the hawk was sitting on my hand: we were parts of each other. Grief and the hawk had conspired to this strangeness."

Mabel does not eat worms. If she can't hunt, she will eat a dead, day-old cockerel chick, or a rabbit pulled from Helen MacDonald's fridge. Like Foster, MacDonald and Mabel live with the fact of predation. It is not for the squeamish, or the gentle bird-watcher with binoculars. "It's unusual to see animal death up close. I was responsible for these [deaths] because I had the hawk, but people who eat meat are responsible for the deaths they cause. They just don't see it."

And MacDonald has this to say about hunting with Mabel: "It didn't feel like sport. It was nothing like sport. It was an entirely natural phenomenon, only I was there. I'm probably a bit unfashionable in this regard, but I have this utopian notion that

if you have close personal contact with wild animals you experience that animal with a wonderment and you feel a responsibility and a love for it, which is what drives proper conservation."

To return to Donna Haraway: she is vigorously, humanly engaged and exhilarated by the messy entanglements that arise between species in the ordinary everyday mundane world. She never avoids conflicting opinions and greatly enjoys engaging her messmates, as she calls them. Entangled as we are in a complex web of connectivity, she recommends and embodies a general attitude of courtesy, curiosity and respect.

Haraway encourages us to pay full attention to the vicissitudes of animals' lives; she exhorts us to be grateful for the sacrifices made for the food we eat, include gratitude for the lives of lab animals who have helped in making certain diseases less lethal; keep the vivisectionists in our thoughts; be aware as well of the circumstances of feral and domesticated pets and all wild creatures. Do not back away from their suffering, but use it to inform our human choices, improve their lives and ours, minimize suffering when and how you can. Do not be overly human-cherishing.

Like a good ex-Catholic, she hands out a short list of commandments for everyone to consider before confession: 1) do not be self-certain 2) do not relegate those who eat differently to a subclass of vermin, underprivileged or unenlightened 3) insist on knowing more, including scientifically, and feeling more, including scientifically, about how to eat well—together. She knows that in order to steer clear of moral ambiguity and self-righteousness as humans, we have to cultivate and suffer permanent moral and intellectual indigestion.

Haraway's next book, appropriately entitled *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (September, 2016), grew out of the essay that inspired this issue on "Making Kin." Her work is important for all species, including ours.

Karen Joy Fowler, *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*. G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2014.

Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet*. University of Minnesota Press, 2007

Frans deWaal, *Are We Smart Enough to Know How Smart Animals Are?* W.W. Norton, 2016.

Charles Foster, *Being a Beast: Adventures Across the Species Divide*. Metropolitan Books, 2016.

Helen MacDonald, *H is for Hawk*. Grove Press, 2016.

Thomas Thwaites, *GoatMan: How I Took a Holiday from Being Human*. Princeton Architectural Press, 2016



Patricia Reis is passionately interested in how creativity, depth psychology, and the natural world inform a woman's spiritual life. Her new memoir, *Motherlines: Love, Longing and Liberation* (October 2016) weaves these threads on the warp of a midlife passage. Visit her website www.patriciareis.net for more information on her work.

Grace Grafton

Crow Mother, Her Eggs, Her Eyes

A crow picks her swaying way across fields
searching for food. Three-pronged skinny feet
splay, gripping slope. It would be better if this field
hadn't been plowed after harvest. Easier if the
spray hadn't killed what she eats.

* * * *

Crow Mother has no face, expects nothing.
All wings and eggs, flying and holding on,
she sees but does not know.

How does she breathe?

Through the beat of her wings.

How does she think?

There is no confusion in her.

* * * *

Without sun's reflection to glint off feathers' perfect curve, a crow would be a chunk
carved from the night forest. But a crow is not the bird of night, at least not the night sky
with its starry crazyquilt or summer's warm moon-work. The crow's black is dense,
storm or giant trees' blotting of the dome.

* * * *

See with Crow Mother's sightful wings,

what do you look for?

Seeds, rain, heat.

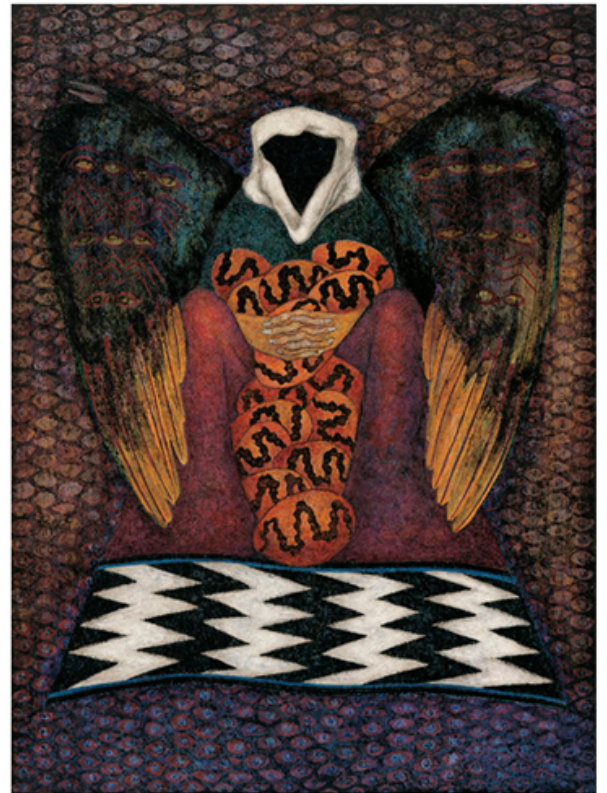
Someplace safe enough for eggs,

where you incubate,

dark, unknown.

Where all your selves

can be born.



Crow Mother, Her Eyes, Her Eggs

Artist: Meinrad Craighead

Notes:

I was inspired to write 'Crow Mother, Her Eggs, Her Eyes,' when I found the painting by that name, created by Meinrad Craighead. Ms. Craighead subscribes to a belief in animal guides. In my neighborhood around the same time, I kept seeing this coterie of crows near my house, and I put together the physical crows with the metaphysical ones.

The physical world we perceive and the mythical realm we create are tethered to each other. Out of the first arises the second. Myth serves our hunger for meaning. As poets and artists, we participate in the making of myth and how it sustains spirit.

Long Ago, they captured our city

The city of our mothers, who built it out of
each day's straw, the raucous calls of jays, the wings
of the cormorant flapping languidly over water,
the many earnest ants carrying bits of
ground out of the ground, liberating them
from the dark. It didn't matter that the ants
were blind, they'd been bred to their task.

It didn't matter whether the mothers were beautiful
or gifted, tall or talkative or wholly wise.

It mattered that they spoke the words
everything obeyed, the fish, the newts
who could choose so many forms, the bulky
water buffalo, the barren rocks. All
understood each other and even though
there was killing and there was dying,
there was also understanding of these things,
and forgiveness. This was the beginning,
the story that everything knew, and the ants

in their labor fashioned the fretwork of tunnels
that would house this knowledge safe from
an invading force that did not speak to earth.

Notes:

The title of the poem is taken from a line from a poem by Kevin Prufer. I asked myself 'What is our City?' and got the reference to the mothers because who else makes life? I was reminded of the Native American myths of, in particular, Spider Woman and the Turtle that holds up the world, which catapulted my imagination into what our City (i.e., our World) might have been before the 'invasion' pulled us from union and grace.

About the Author

Grace Marie Grafton has been writing poetry for over four decades. Six collections of her poems have been published, the most recent *Jester* (2013). She has taught literally thousands of children the art of writing, through her work with CA Poets in the Schools.



Some things that inspire Grace to write are orchids and ravens, art and meditation, love, curiosity and the sounds of words. She lives in the hills of Oakland, CA, near redwoods, oak and bay trees, salamanders, skunks, squirrels and many birds including the local wild turkey flock.

Cynthia Anderson

Invoking the Salamander

*So we will walk on the ruins of a vast sky,
The far-off landscape will bloom
Like a destiny in the vivid light.*

*The long-sought most beautiful country
Will lie before us land of salamanders.*

—Yves Bonnefoy

I. Visitation

Indian summer, season of dust.
I vacuum blinds and behind
louvered doors, where I find
the salamander—tiny, lean,
built like a racecar, almost
blending into the carpet.
I take a napkin from the table,
scoop up the interloper,
shake him out the front door.
He stands on the concrete,
looking straight at me,
wide-mouthed and wide-eyed,
defiant as a boxer. I go back
inside, turn my thoughts
to the next room.

II. Dream

There's a keepsake box
I've had since childhood

but never look into.
The lid lifts. A giant
white salamander slips out,
quickly hiding where
he can't be found.
Of this earth, yet not
of this earth—a hidden
life, untended, survives
on air, and finally stirs.

Someone holds a gun
to my head. I am strangely
calm despite the threat,
the cold kiss of the barrel,
the menacing strangers
in an unknown room, doing
what they think they must—
what I think they must—
since this is my dream.

Or is it?

I feel something
dreaming outside me,
an ether of swirls and eddies,
a rushing stream of intent.

Somewhere the salamander
waits, careful teacher,
patient survivor—
pale as the ash of a pyre,
fearsome arbiter of fate.

III. Origins

When Earth's magic was
younger, people trembled
before the salamander:

Eater of fire.

Birther of gods.

Bestower of visions.

Smiter of ignorance.

Master of transformation,
bridging earth and water.
Master of disguise,
portal to soul memories.

The salamander speaks
in the hiss of a match,
the crackling blaze,
the spent coals. Those
who follow the changeling
across the threshold
remember each incarnation,
the alchemists' gold.

IV. Invitation

The dark-haired, dark-skinned woman
bows her head. She does not look
this way. The day's work waits
to be done. She walks steadily
over the ridge and down the arroyo.

I have tried to see more, but it feels

made up, a reflection not of her,
but of me. She looks back, laughs,
teases, leading me somewhere
I'm not sure I want to be led.

Her arm moves in a circle,
slow and deliberate, a ritual.
There is a trail. Others to go with.
Food is prepared by women
silent as stones, smiling
like pebbles in water.

Time passes and we return,
she and I, to the place where she
walks away and I do not follow.
Yet each time I go a step farther.

V. Journey

The tiny salamander reappears,
runs circles around the foyer.
How he gets in is a mystery.
Released to the backyard,
he vanishes into nature.

The great white remains at large.
But in my poems, sheet after sheet,
ceremony stones fall into place,
feet blaze the path ahead,
lungs expand into deathless space,
each word an open mouth
that demands: *Burn. Defy.*
Rise. Leap.

Notes:

Salamander appeared to me in both physical reality and dream around 2006, several years after I was diagnosed and treated for cancer. Initially, I was startled and baffled by these visitations. I knew nothing about salamanders and had no idea of their history as potent symbols of transformation. Yet at the time, my entire life was about transformation. I was engaged in the long process of recovering my health, which included a lifestyle centered on quiet, yoga, and meditation—along with a return to writing poetry. I also visited Little Petroglyph Canyon in the Coso Range of the Mojave Desert, which brought forth memories of a past life among native people thousands of years ago. These elements are intertwined in the poem, as they continue to be in my life.

The epigraph by Yves Bonnefoy is from *On the Motion and Immobility of Douve*, a book-length poem whose central figure is a woman who dies and then rises—or simultaneously, does not rise—from the dead. “Each instant I see you being born, Douve, each instant dying.” This female figure is highly symbolic; in French, her name means “moat.” For me, she is an archetype synonymous with the Divine Feminine—“I will name wilderness the castle which you were...”—a wilderness that is lost and found and lost again, though we continually seek connection.

The tiny salamander in my house brought the wilderness to me. I have no way of knowing whether it was male or female, though my intuition says male. The great white salamander of my dream felt androgynous. A telling aspect of salamanders is that some have the ability to change their sex. They unite both aspects of creation, challenging us to be reborn in the fires of body and spirit.



Cynthia Anderson grew up in Connecticut and attended the University of Pennsylvania as a Benjamin Franklin Scholar. She went on to earn a B.A. in literature from the College of Creative Studies at UC Santa Barbara, where she received two grants to conduct research on the poet George Oppen. Her work with Oppen's archives was published in the journals *CONJUNCTIONS* and *Ironwood*.

Cynthia lived in Santa Barbara from 1982-2008. During that time, she received poetry awards from the Santa Barbara Writers Conference and the Santa Barbara Arts Council, and served as an organizer of the Santa Barbara Poetry Festival. For many years she hosted a quarterly reading series at the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden. She also wrote poetic scores for choreographer Robin Bisio and co-founded Mille Grazie Press to publish poets of the Central Coast.

Since moving to the Mojave Desert in 2008, Cynthia has embraced writing about her new home. Her books include *Mythic Rockscapes*, *Desert Dweller*, *Shared Visions I and II*, and *In the Mojave*. She frequently collaborates with her husband, photographer Bill Dahl. Cynthia is co-editor of the anthology *A Bird Black as the Sun: California Poets on Crows & Ravens*, which features over 80 leading poets and is described by the *Los Angeles Review* as "a riveting collection."

Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Askew*, *Mojave River Review*, *Inlandia: A Literary Journey*, *The Sun Runner Magazine*, *Phantom Seed*, *Dark Matter*, and *Whale Road*. This year she has received poetry awards from the Palm Springs Writers Guild and the Harpa Concert Hall in Reykjavik, Iceland.

Sudie Rakusin

Where I Stand



Image: Soulscape: Sense of Place/Belonging.

A landscape becomes a soulscape when there is a sense of belonging. Belonging is a feeling, an inner landscape, which may have nothing to do with physical surroundings. This group creates a soulscape. They're kin; they belong together. They have come home.

My paintings, drawings and sculptures flow from what moves me and from where I find beauty: women, animals, the earth, color, pattern and light. My art represents the deep connection I feel with these elements. Through my artwork I am envisioning and creating the world as I would like it to be: a place where harmony is present between animals and human.



Image: Trust in the Infinite to Answer your Deepest Prayers in the Darkest Times.

This artwork is about global warming. Many of the animals within this piece are endangered. There is a sadness. We are facing this bleak day together. The title is from lyrics by peace activist Snatam Kaur.

In college I was introduced to feminism. I began to realize that the underlying slant of words and behaviors could be coercive and oppressive in its intention. Feminism challenged me, but I did not have real clarity until I read Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*. Her work galvanized and synthesized historical events, making connections between them that I had not seen before, helping me understand that no choice is benign. At that point my artwork began reflecting my newfound awareness and beliefs, moving from creating classical figurative images of women to works showing them in all their diversity, shapes, colors and ethnicities.

My feminism evolved into considering that the oppression was not only of women, but included the abuse and neglect of animals and the earth. I began questioning the hierarchy of all living things, wondering why most humans believe they are superior to animals.

When I am with animals I can feel their essence as sentient beings whose unique purpose deserves to be considered. It is a deep connection, both visceral and soulful. I have been calling animals kin for many years and actually feel a greater affinity with them than with humans. I don't understand the inherent coldness and cruelty I see in people and feel safer surrounded by my animal companions and art.

There are times I feel a parallel existence. My life carries on with the quotidian – working in my studio, feeding my dogs, running errands, reading, going to



Image: The Art of Living a Fine Mingling of Letting Go and Holding On.

We fear to let go too soon or to hold on for too long... the choice between the two is one of the great lessons of life. Our Lady of Guadalupe, queen among queens, enfolds us with maternal protection as we choose.



Image: Into the Mystic.

She walks into the sunset with her leopard companion, living each day to its fullest.

the kitchen
for food.

The predictable. The usual. Simultaneously, I can feel the dry heat of the savannah where my kin, the elephants, are traveling to the next water or food source. I can hear the pounding of their feet, the earth trembling from their weight. Surrounding them are human predators who will take their lives for the ivory of their tusks, murdering their young or leaving them to die of broken hearts. They are not safe, these big majestic creatures. There is so much pain and sadness in this reality. I know all elephants carry this betrayal with them. I wonder how long it will take the collective to rid itself of the circus. This is just one

species I am drawn to and care deeply about.

Images have the power to affect the viewer's mind and make them question the status quo. With my work I hope to portray a visual alternative to the world as it presently exists. My desire is to offer a world where there is a collective heartbeat and a soul. A world with no hierarchy, where there is equality and freedom, mutual respect, communication and understanding.



Sudie Rakusin is a visual artist, sculptor, illustrator for authors such as Mary Daly, Carolyn Gage and Patricia Monaghan, and a children's book author of the *Dear Savannah Blue* series. She is the owner of Winged Willow Press where she has used her original painting and drawings to create coloring books, divination cards, illustrated journals and more. She has also created the coloring app for iPad, Unwind Time.

Sudie's artwork includes 3-dimensional oil on canvas paintings, papier-mache sculptures and drawings. She currently resides in Hillsborough, NC, in the woods, on the edge of a meadow, surrounded by her gardens, with her Great Dane, Fiona Fig and Pitt/Boxer, Marmalade Moon. See more work at <http://www.sudierakusin.com>.

She and I

Kathryn Kirkpatrick

Next door a feminist makes her bed. Her room adjoins mine, as in dreams the impossible clearly isn't. She is old and venerable, and I help her with the floral spread. I am a feminist too, only, we shall see, different, because outside a window—whose? Perhaps it doesn't matter. We are two feminists together for a moment in one poem. I look out at a doe strung up by her hind legs and her fawn, wet, as if they have been hanging in rain. And when I look again, the doe reaches her damp head and licks her fawn. It might have been her last gesture with her last strength. Then I am doing the dangerous thing, running with sharpness—scissors? a knife?—outdoors on uneven ground. I wheel one way and another, but there is no doe, no fawn. I have come to cut them down. But someone has taken them already. I double over on the path, sobbing. It is more like a wail, a keen. The old and venerable feminist tries to shush me. I wave her away. I will grieve for the doe and her fawn. She cannot stop me. I am a feminist too. And somewhere the hunter has his carcass. She and I, we have made our choices. She has chosen the hunter. I have chosen the deer.

Notes:

This poem is based on a dream I had shortly after attending a conference with other feminists who did not share my ecofeminist perspective on the need to make common cause with other animals. It was one of those dreams from which you wake raw with emotion, and I drafted the poem with urgency.

In 2007 I had gone through breast cancer treatment, and while in that process I began to identify powerfully with the deer who live around my home. The last animal flesh I ate was from the body of a hunted deer, and I woke that night in terror, understanding the moment of the deer's death. Since then, other animals have not been food for me, and I have discovered the brilliant work of Carol Adams, Josephine Donovan, Lori Gruen and others.

When I read feminist theory in graduate school in the 1980s, I was taught to dismiss ecofeminists as essentialists who simplistically assume that women are innately closer to nature and therefore uniquely qualified to address our environmental crises. That was a reductive misrepresentation of ecofeminism that still has currency today; it doesn't do justice to the complexity of the field nor the ways it has developed as any dynamic perspective does.

The poem addresses the blind-spots I still find in feminist thinking that assumes human beings are in the struggle alone. Though the divide in the poem seems generational, of course ecofeminists have been working since the beginning of the contemporary women's movement in the U.S. in the early 1970s. Perhaps the "old and venerable" feminist represents the painful ways I have had to acknowledge a breach with my own feminist teachers and mentors on this issue. At a very visceral level, the poem names my refusal to marginalize a feminist perspective that has the greatest explanatory and healing message I know.



Kathryn Kirkpatrick is a Professor of English at Appalachian State University where she teaches environmental literature, creative writing, and Irish studies. She holds a Ph.D. in Interdisciplinary Studies from Emory University, where she received an Academy of American Poets poetry prize. Her poetry collections include *The Body's Horizon* (1996), selected by Alicia Ostriker for the Brockman-Campbell award; *Beyond Reason* (2004), awarded the Roanoke-Chowan Poetry Prize by the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association;

Out of the Garden (2007), a finalist for the Southern Independent Booksellers Association poetry award; *Unaccountable Weather* (2011); *Our Held Animal Breath* (2012) selected by Chard DeNiord for the Brockman-Campbell Award; and *Her Small*

Hands Were Not Beautiful (2014), selected by Carolyn Kreiter-Foronda for the Brockman-Campbell Award. She has held writing residencies at Norton Island in Maine and the Tyrone Guthrie Center in Ireland. Her long poem about Maud Gonne in six voices was performed in 2013 as part of the Yeats Summer School festivities in Sligo, Ireland. Currently, she is the editor of *Cold Mountain Review*. As a literary scholar in Irish studies and the environmental humanities, she has published essays on class trauma, eco-feminist poetics, and animal studies. She is the editor of *Border Crossings: Irish Women Writers and National Identities* and co-editor with Borbala Farago of *Animals in Irish Literature and Culture* (2015).

Camille Norton

***After • Word* VOYAGE OF THE SABLE VENUS AND OTHER
POEMS: Robin Coste Lewis**

Robin Coste Lewis's *Voyage of the Sable Venus* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2015) is an extraordinarily accomplished first book of poetry. It won the National Book Award for poetry in 2015 as part of a trifecta of prizes for African-American writers that include Claudia Rankine, who won the 2015 National Book Critics Circle Award in poetry for *Citizen: An American Lyric*, and Ta-Nehesi Coates, who received the 2015 National Book Award for non-fiction for *Between the World and Me*. It is no longer possible for any thinking person to disregard the tension between literary recognition in the U.S. and our contemporary political reality, between the flowering of black literature and the diminishment of black lives. At a moment in American culture when the theater of racial murder repeats as a feed of images on our devices in real time, literature serves to teach us how the dark matter of racial injustice belongs to the history of our planetary ecological crisis.

Coste Lewis' *Voyage of the Sable Venus* confronts racism as an environmental, spiritual, and psychic catastrophe for black women and all who are kin to them. The "Venus" of the title poem stands for the representation of the black woman's body as it is traded, fetishized, described, fragmented, and realized in the catalogs of Western art. The black woman may be a ladle, a pin, the back of a mirror, a spoon—an artifact of thingness and of use dating from 38,000 BCE to the present time. The poet appropriates the exact wording of archival descriptions of objects, strips them of punctuation, and rearranges her findings into collections that speak directly to the history of conquest and its eros of commodification. What is an ebony goddess? Is she a forest that has been felled and converted into art? What does she have to do with the bodies of women that have been bought and sold? Why, to paraphrase Coste Lewis, did an emperor

feel the need to have a black woman's body engraved into his buttons? And who collects those buttons? Coste Lewis's answer can be found in her list of the hundreds of museums and museum catalogs that comprise the final "poem" in the Venus sequence. Because museums reify what our cultures prize, and because all prizes are part of the traffic of Capital, it appears that the black woman's body is integral to the movement of both Capital and beauty. This is a hard insight to bear.

Such an insight can be produced only by a writer who has heated her project at a slow burn. Coste Lewis, who is in her early 50's, completed a graduate degree in Sanskrit at Harvard, where she studied the epic in its most ancient form. She has also studied comparative literature, poetics, and art and is completing her Ph.D. in Poetry and Visual Studies at USC. Remarkably, she continues to suffer the effects of traumatic brain injury. In an interview with Hilton Als, she describes how her brain injury forced her to dramatically slow down her writing, so much so that she spent a year relearning the alphabet: (<http://www.wnyc.org/story/robin-coste-lewis-turns-tragedy-triumph/>). When her neurologist told her that she could only write one line a day, Coste Lewis honed those single lines with care. In a sense, the injury made her a poet. Her slow brain allowed her to decipher the representations of black women in art. The wound, in other words, ushered her into an archive that would forever alter her as an artist.

Other poems in the book chronicle voyages as complicated as those of the "Sable Venus". In "On the Road to Sri Bhuvaneshwari," Coste Lewis recalls her journey as a tourist in India. She has come to find a temple at the top of a mountain where, according to the myth, the charred body of the goddess Parvati had been dropped by the god Shiva. But the road is blocked by a throng of black water buffalo stalled around a female buffalo who is giving birth to a dead calf. The frantic mother buffalo is held in place with ropes by men. To an outsider, her confinement within the ropes may appear to be an arbitrary act of human domination. It is not. "She must turn around and see/what has happened to her,

or she will go mad,” Coste Lewis writes. The poem concludes with lines that are emblematic of the book’s motive:

I have to go back
to that wet black thing
dead in the road. I have to turn around.
I must put my face in it.

For those of us attentive to the relationship between the human and “nature,” the poem reminds us that there is no easy resolution between supposed binaries. There is, in fact, a difficult, painful, affiliation between “the human” and “the natural.” The buffalo, who is an aspect of the Goddess to the men who restrain her, will go crazy if she cannot “see” the dead child. By holding her back, the men ensure that she will remain a healthy animal. The poem comprehends religion’s symbolic structure, and the way the symbolic mediates our human suffering. It does this while identifying with the animal. It also points to the political necessity of seeing what has happened to us in the story of what we must see and why. I notice that in this poem Coste Lewis is the educated and privileged American “scholar” among the Hindu herdsman. And yet the boundaries between inside and outside, self and other, human and animal blur and dissolve here, as if we were a dream, all of us implicated, taking on the parts.

I began this meditation by thinking about why racism and environmental crisis are part of the same web. The black woman’s body is figured in Capital; Capital is a story of bodies exchanged for gain; gain is the figure beneath the blight in which we live. Back in America, in an outer L.A. wasting into suburban blight, Coste Lewis describes a homeland where “The Farmers were lost/and hating it. We were lost/and couldn’t care less” (“Frame”). This poem in particular brings together the history of racism and the history of environmental depredation. It was not so long ago that it was against the law for African Americans to buy property “except in certain codes: South Central, Compton, Watts,” places of

extinction. Here, in the valley, where the poet was young, the land was already cementing into sprawl. “I never knew what, if anything, they grew. Never knew of a harvest./ Never saw a thing begin as seed, or sow its way to plant, flower, fruit.” Coste Lewis reminds us that places of extinction and trauma, like New Orleans, like Flint, Michigan, like South Central L.A. and Stockton, California (where I live), are indeed connected to “the Sable Venus”— to the bodies that were and are the traffic and casualties of Capitalism. These places are trashed. People live in them. And yet, as Coste Lewis observes, they are also gorgeous. That’s another tension that’s hard to bear.

In thinking about *The Voyage of the Sable Venus*, I have also thought about the tension between environmentalism and racism, between the concerns of the Green movement and Black Lives Matter. In Naomi Klein’s recent essay for The London Review of Books, “Let Them Drown: The Othering of Violence in a Warming World,” she observes: “People do tend to get cynical when their lives are treated as less important than flowers and reptiles.” To borrow from Naomi Klein’s reassessment of Edward Said, perhaps there are “ways we might respond that are far more inclusive than current campaign models: ways that don’t ask suffering people to shelve their concerns about war, poverty, and systemic racism and ‘first save the world’—but instead demonstrate how all these crises are interconnected.” It seems to me that poetry is one of the ways in which we know that our crises are interconnected. I would argue that Robin Coste Lewis’s work teaches us how we must slow down before we can see how beauty and catastrophe are part of the same traffic of the human, a traffic in which we are all implicated.



Camille Norton teaches literature at University of the Pacific, in Stockton, California. She is the author of *Corruption: Poems*.

AMA NO MUSUME

Mandy-Suzanne Wong

On almost every day of her long life, Sumiko Iseya (*née* Nagata, 1954-2040) jumped into the Pacific Ocean and dove through shadows blue-on-blue to frigid depths of perhaps 30 meters. She was an *ama* (ocean-woman), predator-daughter-mother of the deep. Not for her any scuba, snuba, snorkel. Sumiko learned to dive from her foremothers, learned to breathe from whales. Down to the seafloor, reef, kelp forest, where she stayed for 2 minutes, ascending with laden hands, breaking the surface with a gasp like a cry of pain — exhaled in a long whistle which some called the sea's lament (*iso nageki*). She deposited her load in a floating wooden barrel and dove again: 50 dives an hour.

She was after snails: *sazae* with silver shells like inverted whirlpools and their sisters, *awabi*, mother-of-pearl abalone with expressive eyes. She also hunted their cousins, octopi, urchins, spiny lobsters, sea stars, seaweeds, and sea cucumbers (*namako*). But *awabi* were above all: *noshi awabi* was the sacred sustenance of the divine *kami* Amaterasu, ancestress of all Japan, and luxury markets paid ¥8000 per pound of *awabi sashimi*.

Even men followed *awabi* into the water when prawns were scarce or finned fishes weren't biting. Men preferred fishing from boats atop the sunlit surface. Grubbing in the sand in all the perilous between, between light and dark, air and water, life and death;

turning over rocks and plunging hands into black crevices, the secret lairs of biting eels and stinging puffer fish; battling the cold, the currents, struggling mollusks, and the fighting urge to breathe — that was women's work. When Sumiko was born, no community incurred greater disdain than the *ama*. They were *hinnin*, strangers who dirtied themselves with death's dirty work. But from her mother and grandmother, Sumiko inherited the belief that all *ama* shared. It wasn't that women and snail-seeking were ignoble.

They believed that only women had enough subcutaneous fat to endure cold at extreme depths. They believed that women needn't fear the ocean's chilling love. And *ama* couldn't be afraid. Sumiko feared only one thing. Not running out of air, not sharks, demons, freak currents. She was optimistic, curious, and proud, with indefatigableness she inherited from her ocean-mother. She lived half a century before tasting fear for the first time: fear of being unable to lie to her daughters.

Daughters, she believed, are those to whom you give existence, shape, mass, energy, and a place in the world. Daughters devour, exult, and endure. Mothers make and give, position, suffer, and rejoice. Because Sumiko was of the ocean — where all was slippery, shadowed, roving, waving — she believed in the fluid simultaneity and ceaseless blending of visible and invisible life. She believed that mothers' acts and memories carved their daughters' bodies and believed that daughters should also be mothers. The ocean was Sumiko's mother-daughter. *Awabi* were her daughters and her mothers. *Ama* followed the *awabi* as they followed their human mothers into the

ocean, devoured the sea-snails as they fed on their mothers' milk.

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Her great-great-grandmother learned to dive from her mother, who learned from her foremothers. She taught her daughters, and her daughters taught their daughters. She was a migrant following *awabi* along the southern coast. As the Edo period waned, she and her daughters slipped between fiefdoms in a wooden boat.

Her husband steadied the boat while they submerged. He looked into the clear water, watching over them, sometimes used a rope or bamboo pole to whisk them through the final sun-splashed meters of their ascent.

They obeyed him in all things but one. His wife told him where to steer the boat. The household moved with her sense of the ocean. Her earnings were sizable, for there were fewer *funado ama* deep-diving from boats than there were *kachido ama* swimming out from shore to work the shallower waters.



They sold their snails to whichever shoreline village had charge of the water in which they dove. Villages welcomed them, sometimes giving them land in addition to fishing rights, for every village owed a certain amount of *noshi awabi* to its feudal lord, who took it to the Shinto shrines and gave it to the *kami*.

Sumiko's grandmother told stories of noblefolk who envied her great-great-grandmother.

She was always chasing discoveries, Sumiko said of her great-great-grandmother, *free to be a loudmouth and a dirty one at that. Highborn women had to be quiet and sweet*

and agree with the men in everything. And they were often afraid. There was always some backstabbing intrigue going on in their big houses.

Fisherfolk had simpler lives. We retained the kind of humanity that fancy people forgot when they got lost in all that power and silk — the kind that comes from nature.

But that's how it was then. Nowadays, everything's different. Everything hangs by a thread. And we're the ones getting lost.

Sumiko's mother and grandmother taught her to dive as her great-great-grandmother dived: naked except for a bandanna with protective symbols, a loincloth and mulberry rope around her waist. The rope tied her to a boat, netted float, or floating barrel, depending on her prey. It secured her *nomi* to her back: the wooden spatula she used to wrestle snails from rocks. She carried a net bag with a pointedly wide mesh — wide enough to give *awabi* every chance to tumble to freedom.

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Sumiko's grandmother resisted the diving mask. It would make them see too well, she said, they'd discover and kill too many hidden snails. It magnified everything — made her fearful of kidnapping babies. All the *ama* said:

10.6 centimeters. A smidgen smaller — use a ruler — and you have to release them. Find somewhere dark and narrow with kelp nearby. Give awabi babies every chance.

Sumiko's grandmother balked at the wetsuit, too. Disrespectful, said Sumiko's grandmother, to go to the ocean like that. *You don't see whales going around like that. Like demons*, umi bōzu — glossy, black, humanoid giants who thrashed the sea into deadly typhoons. *Plus, you're more likely to snag something and get stuck. Then you'd drown. Wouldn't happen if you dressed the way your mother made you.*

Yet it was Sumiko's grandmother — while her daughter-in-law, Sumiko's mother, roared with laughter — who was the first Nagata *ama* to wear clothes into the water. Skirt and blouse, pearl-white, they'd go down in history as the "traditional" costume of Japanese *ama*. These outfits, *amagi*, offered little warmth, flailed in the water, and were designed in the twentieth century by the Mikimoto Pearl Company in Toba.

World Wars brought an end to migrant work. In each village, a sea tenure system enforced by a local co-op granted fishing rights only to residents. Sumiko's village, Kaiyono, was a ward of Toba. Her grandmother worked part-time for the pioneer of cultured pearls, diving up oysters, taking them back down after someone in the factory slipped tiny irritants into their shells. The pearls were world-famous, as were Mikimoto's *ama*. But the sight of their thick, brown, naked bodies appalled the factory's non-Japanese visitors.

Sumiko was a senior citizen when she got her first *amagi*, handmade by a friend in the Ama Preservation Association. She never dived in it, only wore it to her night job. Neither she nor her mother, her great-great-grandmother, nor any of their friends ever

hunted pearls. But she said "traditional" without a whiff of sneering.

As a child, she asked, *Doesn't it hurt them, ripping them open? Shoving rocks down their throats?*

This made her grandmother feel like a sapling in an earthquake. At the factory, they said they were helping oysters: oyster farming for cultured pearls helped the oyster population to recover from previous generations' over-harvesting. Maybe they were right, but so was Sumiko. Torturing oysters was no better than killing them.

Sumiko didn't know it, but this was her first exposure to the feeling that drove every *ama* to frustration — the sense that their efforts to conserve were all for nothing.

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The co-op allowed each household one wetsuit. Sumiko's mother claimed it, a skillful *funado* who breastfed Sumiko on the beach between dives. Reminiscing, she said:

We were already diving five, six hours every day. If all of us stayed even longer, toasty warm in our wetsuits, think how many more awabi would've died.

Sumiko had no opportunity to wriggle into a wetsuit till she was almost thirty. Growing up, she dove in cotton shorts and a bandanna, imitating her mother's straight-down dive, feet skyward shooting. Her mother taught her, as she'd learned from her mother, to live and dive and die in the current that commingled predators and prey and

daughter-mothers as it swirled and surged and flagged and swirled up again in time.

Best day of my life, Sumiko would say, when she walked into the ocean with her mother and grandmother for the first time, a young teen with her own *nomi*, mask, and barrel.



They walked without mincing though waves towered over them. They laughed when the ocean slapped them in the face with the full force of its grandeur, 3 generations with their faces to the blue-on-blue. Sumiko recalled:

Back then, I could catch 40 awabi a day. 10 years ago, I was down to 4 a day.

Nowadays, if you can find one, that's really something.

With chattering teeth, red eyes, and heavy barrels, the *ama* emerged from the water and huddled, ten or twelve to a group, shuddering, *kimono*-swaddled, around a small pit fire in the *amagoya*, their narrow bamboo hut. Later *goya* were of corrugated tin sheets held down by rocks. They had showers and places to hang nets and floats, drying wetsuits, sodden underwear. Some even had doors, which the *ama* left open to keep an eye on the ocean. Though they sneaked emulous looks at other people's catches, they'd run back to the sea if anyone came into difficulty. Sumiko said:

The best thing about being an ama is the ocean. Second best: the snails. Third: the amagoya. That's our real home.

It was a noisy place. Wood cracking, wetsuits flapping, water hissing on the fire. Loud gossip, singing, shouting fisherfolk tales ("The Big One" "The One That Got Away"), boasting and bitterness about the size of the haul and the best and worst divers, bawdy jokes about husbands and who had better breasts.



Outsiders thought the *ama* the opposite of beautiful. They were too brown from the sun, too stocky with necessary fat and muscle, coarse of hand and tongue, dirty with sand and slaughtered sea-snail slime, slithering in in-betweens. But their almost inhuman strangeness, the sense that their dolphin-esque ability was some kind of mutation, and the bareness that shocked Mikimoto's clientele lured anthropologists, physiologists, and photographers to Kaiyono. Salarymen followed, seeking the slender, white-clad pearl-divers and topless Amazons they'd seen in advertisements and a James Bond blockbuster. The demand for *awabi sashimi* shot up, hotels shot up and dumped sewage in the ocean.

Sumiko didn't feel like a sex symbol. She strained under the weight of barrels full of squirming snails, hustling them to the co-op for weighing. She bent double under piles of seaweed she bore on her back from boat to shore. She helped her father drag in the great prawn-fishing nets, which the *ama* had to clean, picking out dead fish and garbage. Everyone threw their weight against the boats', heaving them onto the beach, hauling them into the hills out of the weather, dragging them back down again in the morning. When all ocean-work was done, there was still the house to clean, vegetables to tend. And Sumiko could not complain, couldn't carry less than the maximum that she could manage, fail to take risks in the water, seem to tire easily, come up to breathe too often, surface empty-handed. Fishermen and other *ama* would publicly remark upon that kind of thing. And yet, her mother said:

The most important thing to do in diving is relax!



With her *kachido* and *funado* skills, Sumiko's parents kept her around as long as possible. But Sumiko couldn't wait to get married. Not that there was anything spectacular about Hideki Iseya, the Kaiyono-born fisherman selected by her father. What Sumiko really wanted was a daughter.

She'd already amassed a hoard of Things To Tell Her. She wanted to tell her daughter, for example:

The ocean is a mother but also a big, strong daughter. We must respect her power and her hunger.

Be fluid. Except when it comes to co-op regulations. No scuba. No hoses. No sonar. No exceeding the time limits. No hunting anywhere outside Kaiyono.

If your grandmother and her grandmother hadn't obeyed the rules, you and I wouldn't be what we are.

You understand why, don't you? Ama follow the awabi as we follow our mothers. Even to death and vanishing.

When the daughter came at last, she was so slimy and crimson like a sea cucumber that despite Hideki's best efforts, Sumiko refused to name her anything but Namako (b. 1983). She played in the ocean, and Sumiko said: *Tell me what kind of mood she's in.*

Sad, said Namako. Hotel sewage was nothing compared to the industrial pollution flooding sky and sea from all over Japan, especially from power companies. Sumiko convinced Hideki to join a group of fishermen who took a wriggling lobster to visit the Prime Minister, hoping to persuade him to strengthen environmental policies. Nothing changed except that frustrated husbands took up drinking, seaweeds withered, and shellfish died of poisoning.

To give the ocean every chance, the *ama* progressively curtailed their diving periods. By Namako's third birthday, Sumiko's daily dive was barely longer than an hour. Her annual income, which in the 1960s topped ¥8,000,000, fell to ¥40,000 (roughly \$4,000).

Hideki did no better in his abbreviated season. And Sumiko's mother died embittered. For fisherfolk of tiny Kaiyono, who could barely make ends meet, what was the point in self-imposed hardship if urbanites everywhere indulged in water-polluting, ozone-killing extravagances with snail-massacring consequences?

We aren't blameless, said Sumiko. She was up at four each morning, checking the ocean's mood. She cleaned and checked her gear until the co-op leader's voice boomed over the village loudspeaker (Dive Time is 9 to 10 a.m., please respect the firm time limit!!), sent Namako to school and hurried to the boat with the *ama* who were her kin and whichever husband happened to be free to skipper. For a blissful hour it was almost as if nothing had changed since her girlhood. The ocean picked them up, waves loosened them all over — except the tension in their bellies when they delved into prime hiding spots and found nothing. In the *amagoya*, a doddering lean-to, they couldn't dally or the co-op might think they'd bent the rules. Off then for the weighing, with talk of how the ocean had cured their ear infections, cramps, or constipation, and the *ama* pretended not to pay attention when the men at the co-op announced the weight of their slimming catch.

In the evening, Sumiko doted on Namako, read up on global warming, worried about snails, paced beside the ocean, and joined the other *ama* in badgering the co-op to beg the government again. She was confident they'd come around. After all, Namako was good in school and a strong swimmer. When young people started leaving Kaiyono to be white-collar workers and urban housewives, Sumiko was too optimistic to notice.

Notes:

This excerpt from my short story, “*Ama no Musume* (Daughters of the Ocean-Woman),” is based on experiences of several real and historical *ama* in Japan’s Mie and Shima Prefectures. They are accurately presented to the best of my knowledge. These all-women subsistence free-divers struggle to protect their nonhuman kin – the ocean itself as well as the sea creatures who are their prey – even at the expense of relations with their human kin. It’s entirely true, for instance, that while plundering the ocean for all she’s worth would make their lives less difficult, the *ama* protectively impose harsh restrictions on their practices. This story attempts to describe the *ama*’s history, techniques, and challenges. It envisions their yearnings through one diver’s eyes as the *ama* find themselves caught up in love and despair over their mother-ocean. The latter part of the story, which is not included here, speculates on the *ama*’s future as their snail-daughters, their prey, decline.

All photos are by Nina Poppe, creator of the photo-book *ama* (Kehrer Verlag). Her portraits of these amazing women and their environment have been exhibited in several European galleries. She lives in Germany. I am very grateful to her for allowing her fine work to appear alongside this excerpt.

About the Author:



A proud denizen of Bermuda, an ocean-loving culture, **Mandy-Suzanne Wong** has long admired Japan's courageous *ama* divers. She imagines them in her fiction, which debuted in *The Hypocrite Reader*. Her fantasy story, "Persimmon Wonderseeker and the Mystery of the Deadly Lambshade," which questions imaginary differences between biological genera, was shortlisted for the 2015 Aeon Award. Also in 2015, her novel, *Drafts of a Suicide Note*, was shortlisted for the Santa Fe Writers' Project Literary Award. She has published creative nonfiction as well as scholarship, and she is the Editor in Chief of *Evental Aesthetics*, a philosophical journal.

Author photo by Heather Kettenis

Tricia Knoll

The Divorce of the Night Sky

Announcement of the filing of no-fault dissolution papers appeared in the *Times* near the obits. I read it over oatmeal with raisins. I saw another article standing in a grocery line to pay for an organic turkey. Front page in the *Enquirer* beside a photo of Armstrong on the moon. On the noon news a cartographer led in to a holiday weather forecast with a satellite photo of earth at midnight, pointing to black outs around war zones, fading to videos of street lamps and security flood lights with motion detectors. A state park in New Mexico claimed the title of darkest place on earth using the Bortle Scale. A couple in Miami named their first daughter Venus. An interview with an astronomy professor who developed an elaborate infidelity metaphor involving Earth and Heaven got tweeted worldwide. The night came on in silence.

My family and friends flew in for Thanksgiving on Wednesday night. They told how they leaned toward jet windows to trace the light rivers of freeways and constellations of big box parking lots. As we settled at my table, I lit six beeswax candles and admired the shine of my polished silver. I'd found online a brimming dipper poem, a two-part ode to both big and little. We read it in unison. Silence was our grace.

My son played a bubble-bursting game on his cell phone with his hands under the table, pretending to look prayerful. Mother asked him if he had ever seen the Milky Way. He shook his head without looking up. My second cousin-once-removed described the allure of a one-way trip to Mars and passed mashed potatoes. His wife, the only lawyer at the table, said the divorce was expected, that this happens whenever one side stops paying attention, takes the other for granted. My son achieved a high score that rang bells.

George turned to his sweetheart of forty years, the woman we wondered why he had never married, *Marie, remember those shooting stars? Behind the barn? Perseids.*

Yes. She unfolded her napkin. *August in Pendleton. Your father's dapple-gray mare in the north pasture, the one with the blaze. On our backs in grass and the universe above us. That night started it.*

Notes:

The 2010 census found that more than 80 percent of Americans, like me, live in urban areas. Human beings have lit up the world with traffic lights and street lights that never sleep at night. Some nights, even on nights without Oregon's fogs, it is hard to see the Big Dipper because the night sky is filled with reflections of urban light. As a plane descends into Portland I can track where I am by the brightness of the freeways, the position of the parking lots around malls. The alienation I feel at times from the night sky is similar to a divorce. Something I knew well, something I trusted -- is gone. It's possible to buy into eco-tours to travel to the darkest places on earth to experience what the night sky looked like to human beings for thousands of years. Most of us have to work to take children somewhere distant from where we live to see the Milky Way. This is the feeling that prompted me to write this poem.

About the Author:



Tricia Knoll is an Oregon poet who lives in Portland where the night sky is often not as brilliant as she would like. Her work leans often toward eco-poetry -- including her recent collection, *Ocean's Laughter*, about a small town on Oregon's north coast (Aldrich Press, 2016), which combines lyric poetry with eco-poetry. Her chapbook *Urban Wild* (Finishing Line Press, 2014) looks at how people interact with wildlife in urban habitat.

Andrea Mathieson

Listening for the Long Song



*For all things sing you
at times we just hear them more clearly.*

-Rilke

*“To listen is to lean in, softly, with a willingness to be changed by
what we hear.”*

Mark Nepo

I want to share some of my experiences of kinship with Life as I've listened for what Clarissa Pinkola Estes calls 'the river beneath the river' — the pulsing sounds within silence and the whispered secrets longing to surface. I call this “yin-listening,” an ability we are all born with but are rarely encouraged how to develop. While our culture values mental accomplishments, material success and power, yin- listening is rooted in the vulnerability of an open-hearted, reciprocal intimacy. Ever since a series of personal disasters unraveled my life in 1990, my intuitive listening has drawn me steadily deeper into this deeper river through many conversations with plants, stones, trees, and animal spirits.

Before energy manifests as form it lives as a frequency, a vibrating song within a womb of silence. We all have an innate capacity to perceive a far wider range of frequencies than we generally engage but most of us have lost our ability to hear the subtle sounds of the Earth and the voices of all her creatures. This collective deafness reinforces the belief that the Earth is mute. It also compromises our ability to gracefully coordinate with Life on this planet. It is my belief that this quality of intimate listening is essential for wisely navigating the tremendous environmental challenges we are now facing.

Rationally, we know stones do not talk; though trees may creak in the wind, we mostly see them as silent sentinels. Meanwhile, Kirlian photography reveals vibrating auras around both living and 'inanimate' things and sophisticated devices can detect sound frequencies in plants, stones, and even metals. In other words, science is helping us understand that *everything is singing*.

I think of listening as taking place within a series of concentric circles, activated from the core — the still small voice of our own heart wisdom. When we listen carefully, the still small voice grows steadily louder and clearer. Gradually, our focused yin-listening develops a palpable field of energy within and around us. We can begin to perceive other voices that resonate with our developing heart wisdom by focusing on an animal we love, a significant tree, or a landscape that really calls us. Listening within this larger circle through an open, engaged heart brings us into a dynamic relationship with the inner life of the 'other'. Our focused desire to listen, without agenda or expectation, magnetically draws out the other's voice while enriching our own experience.

As we develop confidence in this type of deeply receptive listening, we can move our attention to other fields of energy, including situations that challenge us or difficult issues in our personal lives and our environments.

Listening to Flowers



Solomon's Seal

Polygonatum multiflorum; Liliaceae

Supporting clear listening, Solomon's Seal helps us receive aural information fully and accurately. Instead of our mistranslating, over-reacting, or putting our own spin on things, the essence helps us entertain a wide range of possibilities within our listening hearts. As our listening deepens, we can sense the tone of voice required in any situation. With bell-like resonance, Solomon's Seal expands the range of our vocal expression by modulating harsh abrasiveness and amplifying the sound of our love and joy.

Flower color: white with greenish tinge; Musical term: legato (smooth, connected sounds)

Andrea Mathieson, 1996

As I write this article, the Solomon's Seal is blooming everywhere in my garden. It is a signature plant, growing into large swaths of beautiful arching bell-flowers. It is a constant reminder of the importance of listening.

I only began to practice yin-listening in my forties. Though I studied many subtle nuances of music as a classical pianist, when I was a child, playing the piano was more about winning at local musical festivals than joyful self-expression.

In 1995, I began making flower essences, a process that involves intuitive listening to each flower's essential nature. I loved the visceral sensation of intimacy as I carefully observed the plants. Softening my mind and opening my heart to perceive their blossoming expression, I heard distinct phrases conveying the essence of their spirits. Though I was focused on creating healing products, I gradually realized this intuitive process was subtly altering me, drawing me steadily into relationship with the Great Mystery. Flower by flower, I gathered Nature's stories through the plants in my garden. The experience became an intoxicating love affair. Out of my conversation with Solomon Seal essence the following poem arose, with Gaia's voice as first person.

*I hold more pain and grief
than you can ever know,
and I know the ways of change.
When you feel the sting of pain,
let yourself surrender.
Do not bargain for relief.
That will keep us distant.
Walk the pathways of your pain.
Close your eyes and let my humming guide you.
Always, if you yield and trust,
a sweet elixir greets you.
Return again and again
for tenderness begins the change.*

*From Gaia's Invitation – 120 Poems
from the Sacred Earth by Andrea Mathieson, 2005*

My focus has now shifted from producing flower essences to helping others learn to listen. Recently I gave a private flower essence tutorial to a young woman, a gifted clairvoyant whose orientation was primarily toward communing with the angelic realms. I explained how this type of listening involved a conscious rootedness into the heart of nature. After leading Danielle through a guided meditation to ground her energy, I invited her to practice drawing up energy through her root chakra before she went out to the garden to locate the flower that called her. "There are two hosta plants," she said, "in different locations in the garden." After she put the petals in a bowl of water to begin making the essence, I asked her to take quiet time to commune separately with each of the plants. Later, she shared her experience.

"This way of listening feels very different," she said. "I had to engage all of my body and even touch the plants to get clear messages. Before that, the information was very random and scattered..."

Her first conversation yielded a fairly typical flower essence description outlining the hosta's healing properties, but when she shared the second, I was amazed. This conversation took place in an area of the garden I'd previously identified as the root chakra zone. In this setting, Danielle's communion with the hosta took on a very transpersonal quality that I recognized as similar to what I feel when I'm in communion with Gaia, the spirit of the earth. Feeling a distinct humming vibration in the earth, she sensed her body was naturally in tune with this frequency. "My song is dancing with the earth's song." She also realized she needed to continue consciously tuning into this vibration to feel safe, grounded and fully present in her body.

Though I have taught many people how to make flower essences as a way to commune with the plant kingdom, I did not expect a 'beginner' to perceive these deeper layers of connection. My own explorations had introduced me first to the individual personalities of the plants but further meditations opened a powerful portal for me, directly into the heart of the earth. As Danielle received information-energy through her root chakra rather than her third eye, she was able to access this different realm of earth-wisdom, accompanied by a rippling sensation throughout her entire body.

Listening to Ancient Stones



*We are not talking to the river; we are not listening to
the winds and stars;
we have broken the great conversation.
And by breaking that conversation we have shattered the universe.
We have to learn again how to listen to the earth,
how to open the ear of the heart.
Thomas Berry*

Every summer, my artist friends Ed Bartram and his wife Mary Bromley move up to an island in Georgian Bay where they live for four months in a very beautiful and rustic setting, painting, gardening, and entertaining friends and family. The remarkable striped stones in this area of Ontario are a geologist's treasure-map, revealing stories about the earth's formative shifts millions of years ago. I've enjoyed visiting Ed and Mary on their island for the past twenty summers. While they paint and tend other projects, I head out with my journal to commune with the ancient stones.

Listening in this landscape is very different than in my suburban garden. In my experience, while flowers tend to mirror our human personalities, ancient stones offer us entry into a deeper earth-story. Whenever I visit this island, I feel powerfully connected to the *anima mundi*, the Soul of the World. It usually takes me several days to settle into coherent resonance with this wild place before I feel sufficiently tuned and ready to receive the slowed wisdom of the stones.

Knowing how ancient and articulate this landscape is, when I approached the land in 2013, I paid particular attention when I heard '*The things that are broken apart are still connected.*' The huge broken stones, split open by ice or major earth upheavals had captured my attention and this phrase became the focus for our annual conversation.

Softening my tired body and opening my heart, I let my breath slow and deepen until my energy gently dropped into my lower body. As I consciously surrendered to the Great Mystery, once again the magnetic tug of the ancient stone drew me down into a slow, rhythmic pulsation where ideas begin to flow into consciousness like warm lava. I spent time throughout the rest of my holiday receiving information about 'brokenness within the web of life.'

Coming down with a painful bladder infection forced me to set aside my plan to listen to the stones; I turned instead to my aching body. This is part of my conversation with my bladder.

A blossoming needs to occur through your pelvis. You are designed to be awake and responsive to Life's multi-dimensional, enlivened frequencies but you need to be present in a completely different way. Three words: Abide, Breathe, Attend will guide you in this different way of being. Applying these three words to your root chakra will broaden your earthed vocabulary and serve your destiny... People tend to want transformation in the form of pain-free miracles, but it is our capacity to willingly bear the anguish that is ours to hold that actually fuels the transformation.

When I eventually returned to the broken stones I received information about how the earth listens to us!

Gaia always responds with a pure, loving intent to serve and to evolve the whole of Creation. Part of what is broken now is the field of our reciprocal listening, the deep soul-witnessing that is a dance of love between human beings and the sacred pulse within all matter.

I realized that when we remember our kinship with this deeper conversation, the Long Song sustaining all Creation, it becomes natural to allow the necessary tectonic shifts to occur during the course of our life and especially at the moment our soul leaves our body. In reality we are all rooted in this Long Song, with the topsoil and the earthworms, bees and flowers, buildings, paintings and poems...



Remembering this and tuning myself to the Long Song, over and over and over again, has shaped my deepest and most holy connection with Creation. Though there were times in my life when the web ripped open, if I listened, I could still feel the Song shaping delicate new webs. Life's mystery constantly invited me to open and stand in the new emerging beauty — in the midst of the brokenness.

Listening to Whales

"What we need most to do is to hear within us the sounds of the Earth crying."

— Thich Nhat Hanh

We are living in a time where evidence of the brokenness within the sacred web of life is becoming more painfully apparent each day. I am concerned that our attempts to understand and make amends will be unfulfilled and counterproductive unless we can learn to listen to the Soul of the World. Without this deep communion, we will not understand how to participate in what is unfolding now. In a dream in 2009, I was given a glimpse into the nature of this time as an 'awful birth'.

I'm called down to the shore of an island in northern Ontario by two friends who have just paddled in. Gesturing out to the water, they tell me about a huge creature they've seen. As they talk, a whale surfaces out in the bay. It comes straight toward us, arching and cresting through the water, and calmly beaches himself right in front of us on the small sandy shore. Sensing he wants to communicate I run up to the house to get my camera feeling no one will believe me if I don't record the moment. When I return, the creature is gone.



I wake, horribly disappointed at the opportunity I've missed. Later that morning, still very upset at my self-serving behavior in the dream, I decide to commune with the whale through automatic writing. This is the message I received:

Do not run away. I have come a great distance to be with you. I have but a brief time. Hear me and speak for me. Set aside your shame at not being present in the dream...

There is a deep and painful aching in the oceans, an amniotic screeching within the watery womb of the planet. It must be heard and released... You are one who has been tuned to bear this awful birth, a birth of such agonizing pain and unknown consequence.

At this point in the meditation I broke down, weeping. With more to share, the whale waited for me to regain my calm.

We are not asking to be saved. That time is past. We know our immediate future and have accepted it. We present ourselves to you in a pledge, an invitation to work with you in creating a new way, one where our minds and hearts are in complete harmony and communion with you, with humanity.

*You need us and we need you. The first step is simple: Be with us. Be present. Open and listen — beyond the grief, beyond the shame. Receive us as kin, with information you can attain from no other. Linger with us, for our speech works in your cells in ways of which you have only the glimmer of remembrance. Do not dismiss what you feel in these rarefied encounters for it is the beginning of a new language between us. **We need your hearts and brains; you need our ways of knowing.** What has been divided — human from animal — must be re-membered. There is little time for this work.*

I was stunned by the statement that, from the whale's perspective, we have passed a tipping point where all our best attempts to 'save' them is no longer possible. Loss of hope always feels devastating, yet I also heard the whale's urgent call — to remember our ancient, reciprocal kinship through a new language, apart from the drama of extinction. When we are caught up in high-intensity drama it is easy to panic, become ungrounded, go into over-drive or simply go numb. But when we respond in these ways, we become deaf to the loving wisdom constantly available to us within the natural world. Trusting the wisdom needed for this 'new language' would rise from the deep river between our souls, I kept listening through my broken-open heart for ways we might access our ancestral kinship. Instinctively, I knew I must begin by trusting my own animal body.

Over the next two years, I began developing 'Wild Animal Prayers,' a practice of spontaneous movement and authentic sounding that engages our bodies' primal wisdom. Though this work may appear similar to other techniques using spontaneous movement and sound, my intention was to access this new language of communion, not just with the animals but with all creation. Gradually I found my way into this 'common language' through my soft animal body.

In his book *Becoming Animal*, David Abram writes about a terrifying experience he had while kayaking near large herd of enormous sea lions in the ocean near Alaska. *"My encounter with the sea creatures initiated me into a layer of language much older, and deeper, than words. It was a dimension of expressive meanings that were directly felt by the body, a realm wherein the body itself speaks... It was a dimension wherein my verbal self was hardly present, but where an older, animal awareness came to the fore..."*¹

Rather than facing real dangers, my Wild Animal Prayers are done in the peaceful quiet of my living room, in my garden, or the open spaces of Georgian Bay. Yet even though the settings are safe, as I move and make my strange, unpredictable sounds, I am often aware of a distinct shift in the quality of atmosphere around me. It is as though a veil opens and I am no longer in ordinary space and time. During one session, a squirrel hung, upside down, on the trunk of the tree outside my living room, completely captivated by my sounds and movements. Only when I stopped after several long minutes later did he scamper away. On Bartram Island, I did a Wild Animal Prayers near a large water snake as he lay shedding his skin in a shrub. As intensely aware of me as I was of him, my own serpentine movements and slow, primal chant created a thick and intensely alive communion between us.

We sometimes judge others by saying, "You're behaving like an animal" but this attitude conveys our ignorance of the tremendous integrity and natural wisdom of creatures. I sense the animals, whales and wolves, raptors and lions are anxious to access our consciousness not only through dreams but through our full body-listening. Allowing our bodies to move in uncensored, instinctual ways while releasing the sounds that want to pour out of us, we begin to loosen our 'humanness' and open to the 'other'.

Each Wild Animal Prayers dropped me into the earthy depths of my body-soul where I often stood, quivering on the edge of the Great Mystery. It was very powerful to be witnessed by a colleague or a small group of women during the movement and sounding, for I was both intensely focused and utterly vulnerable. Coming out of the work, I sometimes felt incredibly exposed and shy; it was helpful to witness the changes in my expression in a small mirror. I have joked about how the Wild Animal Prayers are an anti-aging activity for invariably I look at least ten years younger, more open and alive after five minutes of focused movement and sounding.

I love holding space for others as they enter a Wild Animal Prayer. I hold space and wait, listening for the buried sounds to be released as the frozen, forgotten zones of her body begin to melt and flow. Whenever a woman lets out a whimpers or a growl, a soaring cry or a stuttering agony, some blocked energy is always liberated in the highly-charged atmosphere in the room.

Deepening into the work, I began to experience a potently embodied kinship with creation, richer and more viscerally engaged than my previous encounters with nature. In a strange yet tangible way at times I sensed I was tracking ancient songlines through the earth of my own body, perhaps like aboriginal peoples perceive and respond to their landscapes. Danielle's discovery in my garden that her song was dancing with the earth's song echoes Bruce Chatwin's insight, "The song and the land are one." Though this song has been long abandoned, it still hums within and between all of us — human beings, animals and the earth.

It is my belief that Nature yearns for this communion. Rather than coming with expectations to heal the earth, we are most available to life when we bring our completely open-hearted presence. Listening to the heart of Nature has been a long and compelling love affair; each encounter stretched my capacity to be an attentive witness and to receive Nature's varied frequencies of love. As I communed with the natural world, I learned a profound truth:

Whatever is not witnessed with love tends to wither. To me, this is the crux of the environmental crisis. Because we have forgotten how to witness the world with love, the Soul of the World is dying. Whenever I feel heart-broken about the state of the world, I try to remember the wisdom of the ancient Georgian Bay stones: *The web may be broken, but the Long Song continues...*

Experiencing Yin-Listening

Near the end of a lovely holiday in 2014, I communed again with the spirit of the island in Georgian Bay and received a clear message about my life-purpose.

*You do not need this setting any longer to take you to the ancient depths. The way is open now in your own body-soul. This island has mothered you. These rocks and waters have healed and repaired parts of your psyche. That healing is done. Now you walk with the teachings of reconnection alive in you. Anywhere you go, you can enter, if you choose, the spirit of the landscape and listen to its soul. Often you will hear aching and longing, a desire to be seen and heard. You may sense broken story-lines and many wounds of ignorance, abuse, or neglect. Repairing each of these is NOT your work! **You are meant to tune the listener to the land.** That is enough for this lifetime! Let others assume their responsibility as they begin to listen.*

Though I'd already been hosting workshops and retreats to assist people in communing with the *anima mundi*, the Soul of the World, I was inspired by this message to carefully examine the intuitive listening process I'd experienced over the years to create a reciprocal relationship with Nature. There are several simple yet vital steps that help to re-establish our instinctual kinship and respectful etiquette with the Earth.

The first step is to allow yourself to be magnetically attracted to something in the natural world. Take time to be fully present in your body through meditation, deep breathing and slow, spontaneous movement, preferably in silence rather than with music. When you have consciously engaged your body, move outdoors and trust your feet to guide you. Walk slowly, allowing yourself to feel as though something in Nature is gently pulling in a particular direction. You may find yourself in a familiar place or somewhere new and unexplored. Though you might anticipate being attracted to a particular tree, when you get there, it could be the stone at the base of the tree that is actually calling your attention.

The second step is to closely observe what has called you – an animal, clouds in the sky, a flower, a body of water. For the purposes of this exercise, I will refer to trees... Gradually let yourself come into relationship with the tree's 'otherness' by honouring and observing the

details of its physical presence. Look with your heart's eye, not just your usual vision, like a child who sees the world with a sense of complete awe and wonder before learning the names of things. You may have walked past this tree hundreds of times but never really paused and observed it closely. Take slowed time to really look at its body — the bark, the patterns of the branches against the sky, the play of light through spaces between the veins on the leaves as you let the tree pull you, slowly and quietly, through its physicality into a relationship with its soul.

The next step is coming into deep, respectful resonance. *Let your breathing synchronize with the tree as you allow yourself to feel the tree's energy in your body. Everyone's experience of resonance is different. Over time, our bodies become more sensitively enlivened by our conscious contact with the elements of the natural world. Be aware of any subtle sensations occurring in your body: a slight tingling, a slow, sinking sensation throughout your torso or rippling looseness through your back could indicate that you are beginning to receive the tree's energy and vibratory information. Try not to edit any of these subtle sensations. Trust your intuition, and continue opening your receptive body to receive the inaudible frequencies. When we doubt ourselves, our fragile heart-connection with Nature tends to wobble, closing the door to deeper intimacy. Staying present and attentive, we gradually become more comfortable and familiar with nature's language of subtle sensation. This is the foundation of true kinship: our willingness to be fully present and radically receptive.*

(Imagine encountering a mother deer with her fawn in the woods. Naturally, we would want to be as still as possible to allow the creatures to feel utterly safe in our presence. In this way, we pull back our 'humanness' with awe and respect towards the other. For a time we are participants in a highly-charged atmosphere of resonance with an entirely different form of communication.)

The third step involves listening. *Only when we have closely observed the tree and allowed ourselves to experience resonance are we ready to hear the tree's 'language' on its terms. As a harmonious atmosphere is established, information-energy begins moving back and forth between you and the tree in a fluid reciprocity. It is vital to set aside our personal agendas, assumptions and prejudices otherwise we are just talking with ourselves. Our task is*

simply to be open to receive. Posing an open-ended question to the tree such as, “Do you have a message for me?” is a good way to begin the conversation.

As you listen, you may experience various physical sensations. An image may come to you — strong and clear or subtle and fleeting. You may hear a simple phrase or have a significant memory. Pay close attention to all the impressions, letting the experience unfold naturally until it feels complete. Then be careful not to immediately interpret your experience as this tends to break the fragile rapport. Simply receive and notice the effects of the tree’s presence in your body-soul and when the process feels complete, express your gratitude to the tree.

Later, record your experience with as much detail as possible, holding it quietly in your heart-space to integrate within you. Containing and gestating these numinous experiences is important. Though it may be tempting to share your revelations with a friend, casually chatting about these experiences before they are fully integrated can dilute and distort what is germinating within you.

After listening, the information needs to be embodied. *It may take considerable time to embrace and grow into the fullness of the messages you receive from the natural world. I am still attempting to integrate a message I received twenty years ago, ‘Teach like a tree and talk like a stone!’ Each person’s way of listening is unique. How the tree communicates with you may be different with the way it communicates with another person. How the tree communicates with your intuition and imagination may vary with each encounter. We are remembering, at a cellular level, a living language we have long forgotten.*

I have found Nature tends to speak in poetic metaphors and with a tremendous kindness. If you hear messages that sound like a harsh teacher or a flaky guru, you may need to get more grounded and centered before proceeding. As you become more familiar with these exchanges, you will begin to recognize a certain tone and distinct energy that is characteristic of your unique relationship with Nature. Magnetic yin-listening strengthens our heart-energy and invites hidden or buried parts of our soul to emerge. Observing people as they share their encounters with some element of the natural world, there is usually a beautiful blossoming in their expression. As we learn to listen and feel the Soul of the World in our body-soul, parts of ourselves that were lost or abandoned begin to be gently resurrected.

Witnessing each person's communion with Nature is vital. As people share their stories in a safe, non-judgmental space, confidence in their embodied intuition strengthens. Listening open-heartedly, we honour these liminal moments together, grounding our experiences and making them more real. While sustaining a quality of intimate kinship in our conversations with each other, we deepen our relations with all of Gaia's creatures and kingdoms. In these simple ways, we create sanctuary, for ourselves and for the Soul of the World.

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¹David Abram, *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010), p. 167.

Kristin Flyntz

Embracing Duncan

When I saw him, he was asleep on a bed of autumn leaves. Sugar maple and oak, I think. His strawberry-blond head glowed like native honey in the mid-afternoon sun. He was stretched out long and laying on his side. For a moment, I watched the rise and fall of breath in his body; the rhythm eased me, inhale by exhale, into my own body and breath, where I felt myself gradually come to rest in the space behind my belly button.

Leaves and twigs crunched and snapped beneath my feet, as I closed the space between us with a few ginger steps. I lowered myself to the ground and lay down beside him, spooning from behind, my chest and belly curved to his back. I placed my right arm across his body, tentative, gentle, wanting him to know I was there, yet not wishing to disturb his rest.

Beneath the sweet scent of new fallen leaves I could smell the earth, and the musty aroma of an older layer of foliage that had begun to decay. Above us, the sun played upon a full canopy, suffusing the air around us with a rosy hue.

I pressed my face to the back of his head and inhaled full and deep, gradually syncing my breath with his. He was warm and soft and solid. With each exhale, I imagined emptying all my adoration into him through the narrow space between his shoulders.

After a few moments, he stirred, and then turned to face me. Following his lead, I enfolded him, first with my arms and then my legs. He leaned in, and eyes closed, I felt him press his brow to mine.

In this embrace, I felt a deep, secret connection. As we held each other heart to heart, time and words were of no use or consequence. I felt ecstatic and utterly at peace.

I could still feel the weight and shape of his body when I awoke to find it was a dream. The sweet glow of mutual adoration lingered for a moment or two before giving way to discomfort edged with shame. The one who held me with such tenderness was not my husband. It was Duncan, my cat.

Such a sensual exchange between human and animal felt a little dangerous, maybe even illicit. The roots of my Roman Catholic childhood woke and stirred in my belly: was it wrong to enter into such an intimate embrace with an animal? Unnatural? This was not, after all, the simple, playful affection of a woman toward her pet. Neither was it an anthropomorphized embrace between human “mother” and animal “child”. What transpired with Duncan felt like a deep, almost mystical exchange between equals, like the meeting of two souls.

Duncan. Regal and self-possessed, his green-gold eyes registered everything. When he held me in his gaze, I felt emotionally bare, my thoughts and feelings transparent as water. Duncan, whose thirty-three pounds of presence belied a disposition so gentle and kind it made us weak in the knees. He was not much of a climber, not much of a mover at all, so it was my habit – as well as



my need, and my pleasure, if I am being honest-- to drop to my knees, thread my fingers through the silky white ruff at his throat, to bathe his head and cheeks in kisses before sinking all the way down to enfold him, my belly to his back. Once there, I would tuck his head under my chin, or nuzzle the back of his head, allowing my breath to attune to his. His purr was a symphony of low bass notes threaded through with complex harmonics, a soft, bell-like trill at the top. It was music, and it was medicine – medicine best taken in the closest proximity to its source that one could manage.

When my husband found Duncan, he did not think it right to move him before I saw him. His body was cooling by the time I arrived.

My knees once again went weak as my gaze came to rest on his body in repose, but this time, it was with shock and sorrow. Just two hours earlier, he had purred when I kissed him goodbye before leaving to meet a friend for coffee.

He was stretched out long, lying on his side, in the same position as the opening of the dream. His hips and hind legs were on his favorite blue mat, while the rest of him was on the hardwood floor. It might as well have been cement; I prayed that by the time his ear reached the ground he was gone, for there were no leaves to cushion his fall.

The breath I loved to watch rise and fall beneath his honey-colored coat had left him. His bladder had emptied, and his mouth was open – perhaps in surprise –his cheek and chin wet with saliva. His green-gold eyes were partially open, and unlike humans, it's almost impossible to close a cat's eyelids after death.

Even with the life gone out of him, I could not resist the urge to touch him, to pour all my love into him. I sunk to my knees, then turned myself to curl my chest and belly against his back for the last time. Sobbing into his neck, I could still smell the flowery shampoo the groomer had used on him a month earlier. Each of his great paws was nearly as large as my palm. I took his right front paw in my hand and massaged it, feeling the smooth pads, once petal pink, now leached of their color. I stroked the long, silky fur between his toes, and I allowed my heart to break.

Once I had gathered myself enough to do so, I filled a bowl with warm soapy water. I thought of my elder women friends who have bathed the bodies of their loved ones immediately after death. I washed the saliva from his face, noticing that his tongue had taken on a lavender hue and lay to one side of his mouth. When I leaned in close to kiss him and whisper my love, I could smell the kibbles he ate for breakfast and a faint briny-ness beneath. I cleaned between his stiffening legs and beneath his tail. As I worked, I recalled the times he had trusted me enough to be utterly vulnerable with me: clipping mats from his belly and private places, helping him get clean after an “accident” that

was too much for him to manage on his own. When I was done, I dried him with a towel. Without his breath rising to meet my hands upon him, without the whimpers and groans and occasional growl to let me know I was entering sensitive territory and should tread cautiously, without his purr to keep both of us calm, I almost felt as though I didn't know this version of Duncan. And yet, I had cared for this body since it was twelve weeks old, nurtured it and watched it grow, along with the intelligence and spirit that had inhabited it.



It has been five years since I dreamed of embracing Duncan, and five months since he died. I went back to the dream in hopes that it would open my heart to grieving him more fully, and it did. Yet I could not revisit it without also revisiting the sense of shame I felt upon waking from it. What was that about? I've been wrestling this, dancing around it, distracting myself from it, sanitizing it, knowing that going there means diving deep into a sea of divisions that exist within me: between my mind and my body, between my body and nature, between humans and animals, domestication and wildness, control and impulse--the list is long and daunting, and knotted up with shame.

I consider my statement that the dream embrace was "*like* a meeting of equals" and wonder what needs to change in order to say, "*it was* a meeting of equals"? I believe it would require me to acknowledge and own my animal nature – not theoretically, but in my body.

And so, is the dream (also) an invitation to remember and reclaim my animal body? The body that navigates the world and each moment by instinct and urge, sense and sensation, where the thinking mind and all its notions of and taboos about "the other"

drop away and communing between species becomes possible in waking life as well as in dreams?

I do not know how to traverse this divide. The prospect of it excites and frightens me. I wonder who and what might emerge from my rather prim and civilized persona if I were able to throw off the chains and layers of convention to find out. Who, then, would turn to meet Duncan in that intimate embrace?

About the Author



Kristin Flyntz lives in northern Connecticut with her husband and Ophelia and Zoe, two feline companions and teachers.

Lise Weil

Just This*

Where are you now my darling? My sweet girl. *Ma cocotte*. I don't stop listening for you, sniffing the air for your smell, seeing you out of the corner of my eye. Feeling your fur with my fingers.

Your exquisite fur, white grey taupe black. *Tes poils*, which I find everywhere now, not just on couch and chairs and blanket but in my drawers and closets, white filigree lacing through sweaters and coats. My hair sheds too only it's longer less fine. Our curly white hairs are everywhere in this apartment, I can't brush yours away.

You're nowhere, and everywhere. The flash of white that never appears though I'm always seeing it, wherever you used to lay yourself down. You always were everywhere, here, in these rooms, I took you in through senses I didn't even know I had. That's why I still feel you still smell you still hear you. I don't stop listening for you.

All day long I keep telling myself no: that isn't you rustling papers in the corner, that can't be you at the window wanting to be let in, no that isn't the soft thud of you landing as you dismount from the chair in my study.



I brace myself before walking in the door: no she is not curled up on the living room rug. No she won't be there in the hallway when the door opens, doe-eyed fur a little matted from sleep, she won't stand expectantly for a moment and then, tail up high, dance her little twirl. She won't fling herself at the back of the armchair and hang there, body stretched full length, backpaws touching the floor, eyes turned in my direction.

Sleep undoes all the work of the day before. I lie in bed in the morning waiting, waiting for you to come in and hop on the bed. The floor creaks overhead, the refrigerator rattles. You don't appear.

Distraction only makes it worse. Allows it to creep up on me when I'm not ready. Makes me forget so I have to remember all over again. Last night after the movie which made me leave you behind such a harsh return—to the is-not-here, the won't-be-here, of you.

I sit at my desk and look out at the park. Our park. You spent more hours sitting in this chair than I ever did, gazing, dozing, gazing. The trees are maimed from the ice storm, lopsided, limbs missing, pitiful to look at. What kind of spring will this be, with you gone and the trees all scrawny?

"*Errante*," said the slip of paper the woman gave me at the SPCA when I came to pick you up on that first day of our life together. "Stray" in English, but if the slip had said "stray" instead of "*errante*" I wouldn't have seen you, as I did so clearly then, wandering the *ruelles* of the neighborhood whose name was written there—Pointe Claire? Point Charles? it didn't register, I barely knew the city then. What drove you into the cold November streets? Did you eat out of trash cans? Find old rags to bury yourself in at night?

A sign from the first of how it would be between us, till the end of our days together: you wandering off and never telling. Never making me any wiser about where you'd been.

Leaving me in a chronic state of wanting-to-know and not-knowing. Even when you stayed right there on the chair in my office. Your chair. Now here again you've left, wandering deep into a night of your own where I can't follow. Leaving me wanting and not-knowing. How much mystery you held in your tiny body!

You, *mon errante*, my sweet wandering girl. These terms of endearment I've never used with any woman. I never knew any holding back with you. From the first I knew how to give you pleasure. When to touch you, and when to stop. How to hold you. When you had fleas I bathed you, I knew how, I clasped your forelegs firmly, without hesitation, I dunked you, I held you there. You protested, you tried to wriggle free, but you never bit or clawed. You trusted me by then. When we went away together, you let me place you in your box, you sat there and submitted as I lowered the lid over your head. Only afterwards, once we were in the car you beside me on the passenger seat, did you start your moaning.

Why am I writing to you, about you? I never could write about the women I've loved and lost. Not without feeling underhanded. Not without my own story getting in the way. I'm not afraid to be found out with you. Nothing feels tainted. With you I was never ashamed. My hair could look any old way.

Why am I writing about you? Because I want to reach you. Because I want to put you to rest, in me, without sealing over. To heal, without moving on.

Where are you now? Everywhere I look I see your absence. A dullness to the chairs, the rugs, the floorboards, the plants. The bloom is off. Deprived of your appreciation, of your endless consideration. Lovelorn without you. What am I without you. Like the trees in the park with their limbs lopped off.

I prepare myself before getting into bed: no I won't hear the door creak as you nudge it open, no you won't circle the bed while I wait, knowing you're down there biding your time, I won't feel that little bounce as you mount the bed at last, hear the purr that begins the instant you land, feel you padding towards me on the quilt, purring louder as you approach. I won't reach out to where I know you are, just about even with my waist, let my hand fall on you, then stroke you as you push your head through my hand, over and over, until you've had enough and make your way back to the foot of the bed, discreetly, where as you mark out your nest then lower yourself down into it your purr subsides and we both drop gently into sleep.

I keep trying to get to the new life the one you've made possible by leaving, so far nothing compensates, I try and add up the advantages but they don't amount to a hill of beans. I'd give anything to be vacuuming twice a week, running the lintbrush over the chairs, the couch, the blankets, riding my bike home from the pet store with my knapsack full of cans, all the shopping cleaning and worrying and you know it was all a pleasure because it was all for you my dear.

Not political this time, not global. So small you didn't even weigh eight pounds.

Not that I was abandoned, not that I was hurt, not that I was accused. Not that I failed.

No rewriting of our history, no sudden stabbing memories of hate, or love. No anger, no indignation.

No trace of relief. No up side. No perks. What did you ever get in the way of, nothing that I can think of, you were always there but never in the way never demanding your needs so simple to gratify.

When I went to see you at the clinic they let me take you out of your cage, they unhooked the tube from the IV, they led us to a private sitting room where we nestled down together on the couch. Your belly was shaven, you had an orange velcro sleeve on your foreleg. I covered you with my green parka, you were shaking and crying, your claws dug into me. I sat there with you on that couch as the sky darkened out the window and the room grew black. I had as much time as you needed. After an hour I could feel your body starting to relax. And then it came. The softest purr. You started to lick my hand. You'd come back, you'd let me bring you back.

No guilt. The vet said there was nothing to be done. I did all I could. No regrets. I took time to stroke you to talk to you to just sit with you. We spent long hours sitting together, you and I.

I wonder what I will do with myself all day long, all my life. I fear a dreary succession of days filled with "no," no you, no ground, no heart at the center of things.

Don't expect, say the Buddhists. Learn to live in the moment just as it is. But it's my body expects you, in every moment, when I sit on the floor my hand expects your head to come find it, to push its way through, expects your whole body to come tunnelling through after, then to turn around and do it again. My waist expects to feel you sidling up against it, circling round.

My eyes expect you, only now do I see how the ever-present possibility of you filled these rooms, how atmospheric was my anticipation of you. How the sight of you—your heart-shaped face your pale green eyes your dainty step your electric fur gray white diaphanous—brought. . . relief, delight, joy. And even, sometimes, shock, the shock of a lover showing up when you're not expecting her, oh remember how you suddenly appeared down by the lake on that full moon night? I'd never seen you there, you'd never ventured down that far, yes it is true when you suddenly appeared and often even

when I was expecting you, when I first walked in the door and there you were—I had the start that lovers have. My pulse would quicken as I climbed the stairs, just to know I'd be seeing you! Just to know you were there. And of course you always *were* there, I could count on you to be there even as I could count on that little rush at the sight of you. It seemed too good to be true. With humans one of those assurances always seemed to rule out the other.

My ears expect you, the language I learned that was all yours, the deep pleasure purr when I touched you, stroked you, and you'd been waiting for my touch, the quieter subtler purr as you approached, that anticipatory whirr as you headed towards me on the couch, on the floor, on the bed. The focused, aggressive purr, while you waited for me to open a can of food. And outdoors, your particular cries I struggled to make out from among the tapestry of sounds, the rustling of the leaves and the squeaking of the chipmunks and the rushing of the wind.

The series of little "mews" piping a greeting as you ran towards me from the woods, tail high, body electric with energy. The yowl at the door, repeated ever more insistently until someone came and let you in. The more primal yowl—conquest? pride? victory? —as you pranced across the porch with a shrew in your mouth. The sounds that over the years I learned to pull out from among the vast universe of sounds. Having strained to hear you all these years my ears go on hearing you, and I have to train them in reverse now, to release your beloved mews and yowls and purrs back to the universe, to return them to the vastness from which they came. I have to unlearn your language.

Today I walked into my bedroom and gasped. There on my bed! The flounce, the flash of white. As after a dream my rational mind restores the contours of the waking world. My gray shorts in a ball, pockets turned out. . .

Seeing you, suddenly, on the rug in the alcove. Shock. Until I realize it is two books I left sitting on the floor in the exact spot you used to occupy. A pale sweater left draped across your chair produces another start. Just so you continue to take shape before me, beside me. What shape is that shifting over there?

I know this stance from having hunted for you so many times: ears attuned, eyes trained, all senses straining to make out the desired one. Spotting you—*la voilà!*—the shock to the heart: you were so often scarce, so often when I called you didn't show. That rustling in the leaves, the tiny piping sound you made as you ran, oh come to me please come all I ask is for you to come come home my prodigal daughter/ lover/ beloved.

Last night I dreamt of you, I was holding you, you were in my hands, and one hand was stroking you, all over, your head your back your sides your tail. Such unexpected fulfillment to hold you that way. To hold you, in my hands, in your entirety, as I did when you died, holding you on my knees feeling—in my hands and my legs, as I could never do for any human—the life go out of you. Completely.

Grace. Gracie. My Gracie girl, my sweetest most beautiful girl, these words I've never used with any woman, or any child. "My girl" "my sweetest girl" I called you knowing you would never be mine, knowing I could hold you, I could pick you up and shake you about, I could rough you up the way I often did, I could gather you completely in my hands, and hold you to my chest and yet—ownership was out of the question with you, always. You would never be *à moi*. Maybe that's why I felt so free with my possessives. You would always be *mon errante*, straying from me even as you stayed at my side. At the same time you *were* mine, you were of me, in me, part of me as my legs are mine or my fingers.

My Gracie girl, *mon amour*, *ma cocotte*, I loved you without reservation, without fear. Without holding back. I was never afraid to run out of love with you.

What was our story, yours and mine? The drama the conflict the turning point the dénouement? We fell into rhythms and whole months disappeared into them. By “disappeared” I don’t mean that anything was lost. It continued, we continued, the fabric went on being woven, threads of love spun—that’s how I took you into me.

No drama to mark our days, months, years together. Only constant repetitions, day in day out. You were always my first thought in the morning. My rising would rouse you. Over and over I fill the bowl I open the window, I listen for the sound of you scratching to be let back in. Over and over I sit on my cushion and you come join me, circle around me, let your body drop against my folded legs.

Over and over we soak in, we give thanks. You taught me that. How to rest in the moment. How to give ourselves over to. . .rapture. Among the plants. Above the burnished floor. Beside the green-leaved window.

This is life, Gracie, just this, I felt myself saying to you, over and over, and in your silence and your soft purring I heard you agree. And it’s nice like this, it’s good like this, just this. Isn’t it?

Yes, yes.

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