This issue of Camas pleaded for completion this summer, and was delayed by many incidents—the last of which was the sight of a double rainbow hovering as a light shower pierced an amber Missoula evening sky. That was how the world around us provided sufficient inspiration for our final session of melding the words and images that now stand before you as a living, breathing, slightly overdue journal.

As a student publication, subject to the fickle fortunes mostly of grad students in Environmental Studies, Camas is a fluid entity. That is, I think, one of the magazine's strengths. This is the sixth Camas, and each has been a labor of love; a disaster; and, in turn, a celebration. We are not a professional journal, and that’s exactly the point. What we are is a magazine responsive to a small corner of the manuscriptine mecca that is Missoula. It is a community that has leapfrogged to inhabit the pages of Kinesis, CutBank, Northern Lights, The North American Review, and lots of other cool publications. That’s not to say that Camas nor the Writing Wild Reading Series are in any way responsible for the further successes of writers who first appeared in its pages. Hell, we’re just grateful they let us print their stuff. We'd especially like to extend our gratitude to Audubon and Colin Chisholm for letting us print "Flight of the Water Ouzel," a piece that we accepted first but Audubon published first—in a condensed version—as "A Place Worth Fighting For" in its August 1995 issue.

Of course we’d also like to thank the other authors and artists who have chosen to join or remain a part of the Camas family. And the folks whose sweat binds the pages of this journal together deserve more recognition than they generally receive. This is the last issue of Camas for several of us, some—like Jeff Smith and John Dillon—who’ve been on board since the beginning. Fortunately others have provided Camas with a transfusion of enthusiasm. Certainly you would not be reading this now were it not for the efforts of everybody in that there staff box, and I’d sincerely like to thank them all. We’d be remiss not to thank the Environmental Studies Department, ASUM, and Freddy’s Feed and Read for supporting Camas and Writing Wild. And I’d like to thank you, whoever you are, for picking Camas up and nurturing our shared appreciation of the natural world. Without that—without a stunned giggle at the site of a double rainbow—where are we? Let’s hope together never to find out. Enjoy.

-Rick Stern, for Camas

Camas' first-annual ESSAY CONTEST
First Prize: $150
Second Prize: $100
Third Prize: $50

The prizewinning essays will be published in Camas #7, Fall 1995. Winners will be announced October 15, 1995; enclose an SASE with your submission if you would like a list of the winners.

Mail entries to Camas by September 15, along with a $5 reading fee; entries without fees will not be considered.

Contest is open to everyone except Camas staff.

Submissions

Camas seeks work that focuses on nature and the environment. We favor regional writers who have not published widely.

Prose and Poetry: double-spaced, clean copy. If your piece is selected for publication, we will ask you for a computer disk copy, if you have one. Because of space limitations, longer works are more likely to be published if they are no more than 25 double-spaced pages.

Photographs: black-and-white prints only (no slides, contact sheets, or color prints).

We also encourage submissions of cartoons, pen and ink drawings, or unconventional types of work that we can’t even think of.

SASE: Please enclose a self-addressed stamped envelope if you’d like your work returned. The deadline for our Fall 1995 issue is September 15.

Camas

c/o EVST
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Missoula, MT 59812

Who we are and what we do:

Editorial Board: Barb Cestero, Beth Cogswell, Larry Hogue, Mike Kustudia, Gilly Lyons, Phil Peabody, Jeffery Smith, & Rick Stern

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Camas is a free publication and production costs are met solely by donations. The journal is organized as a non-profit group under the umbrella of the Associated Students of the University of Montana. If you would like to support this forum for new artists please send a check payable to Camas, Jennifer Mandel, Treasurer to the address above.

Cover photo: Jamie Schapiro
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into spring

Like the break-up
long months of stillness that
periodically overflow their own barriers
churning dangerous exciting
migration.

Katie Deuel
Rick Craig

Crowheart

Hey partner.” When the Indian that had yelled came towards me across the parking lot I just locked the loose gear from the bed of the truck into the toolbox and made for the liquor store without looking at him. It was the last Friday in September—a welfare payday—and a half dozen of them were leaning against the store passing a bottle. “Hey, ‘lectrician’s boy,” he yelled again, “Mister don’t-talk-to-nobody.”

That stopped me cold. I waited for more, but he just stepped in front of me and grinned, showing his ruined face like a trophy. His forehead was caved in on the left and pushed down over where the eye should be. Scars streaked from above the missing eye like the tail of a shooting star, and the other eye was bugged out and yellow like it was straining to make up for the missing one. It followed my eyes as they moved around his face, and I could see he was enjoying making me look him over. I was about to give up on him and head inside when I placed him. Without the long hair and the belly, and before the face was stove in, he was a carpenter I’d known on job sites eight years ago.

“Wasnakie’s great-grandson,” I said, because I remembered he was always claiming to be descended from the old chief. “George.”

“Lectrician’s boy,” he said again, his grin getting bigger.

I remembered George Washakie as a clown who was always joking and trying too hard to fit in. What’s a seven course meal for an Arapaho? he’d ask the others on the framing crew. On the other side of the building where we were rough-wiring Glen would mutter no goddamn pride and frown his iron-grey mustache down over his mouth. A six pack and a puppy! Washakie’s great-grandson would shout, and the other carpenters would laugh and shake their heads. Do you suppose he really thinks helping them hate Arapahoes a little more will make them hate Shoshones a little less? Glen would mutter again, They’ll tell his jokes later and just say Indian where he says Arapaho.

Glen had won a bronze star in Viet Nam and come home to say he hated that and all other wars. In my nineteen-year-old eyes that made him a wise man, a man who could hold two different sides of a thing inside him at once.

Glen had won a bronze star in Viet Nam and come home to say he hated that and all other wars. In my nineteen-year-old eyes that made him a wise man, a man who could hold two different sides of a thing inside him at once.

“Take me to Crowheart,” he said. Crowheart was the same direction as my place, but I was only ten miles out and it was nearly fifty.

“I ain’t seen you on a job site lately,” I said. “Where you been?”

“I’ll tell you on the way.”

“Just you?” I nodded at the group he’d come from. He jerked his thumb at them and laughed, “Those guys ain’t goin’ nowhere.”

“Get in the truck,” I said and he climbed into the cab while I headed for the store.

I set a twelve-pack and a pint on the seat between us as I swung up behind the wheel, then pulled onto Main and followed it out of town. George opened a beer and handed it to me, then opened one for himself—just did it easy and natural, like we drank together all the time. I looked over at him with my eyes wide, but he was turned away and I could only see the hole where the one eye used to be.

We climbed the rise at the edge of town and followed 287 as it swung north along the base of the Wind River Mountains.

“What’s in Crowheart?” I asked him when we topped the hill.

“Oats mostly. And hops. They sell’em to Coors.”

“I mean, why’re you goin’ there?”

“You still workin’ with your father?”

“He wasn’t my dad.”

“No?” He looked surprised. “I always liked that man. He was cold to everybody. Like he was better than all of them. Made those white boys feel like Indians. When he come on a job site all those white boys act real quiet, start to make mistakes—shoot nail guns in their feet, cut studs too short.”

“He’s dead.”

“Too bad. It’s good to have men who can make people feel stupid.”

“He killed himself.”

“That man?” Now he was really surprised. “Why?”

“I don’t know. People made up reasons, but they weren’t true. He was cold to some people, so they said things about him after he was gone, that’s all.” I could feel George listening hard, but I didn’t know what to say. He was the first person to ask me why Glen did it—everybody else thought they knew.

“Maybe he was crazy from the war,” I said. “Jungle ghosts in his closet and a revolver under his pillow like all those Viet Nam vets. There wasn’t any note—he just left people to guess his reasons.”

There had been plenty of guesses. George Washakie wasn’t the only one to think Glen held himself above people. They wouldn’t admit it, but there were some who felt better about themselves because of Glen’s suicide, and they all
wanted to explain it. The story that caught on came from a nurse Glen had jilted once who said she’d seen the results of a blood test, and he’d killed himself because he couldn’t stand being the first man in Wyoming to die of AIDS. There were some other women Glen’d been tough on and some men he’d told just what he thought of them, and they’d all chimed in on it and before long some people believed he spent his vacations in California, cruising the cities for the kind of slant-eyed boys he’d learned to like in Saigon.

“What kind of things they say about him?” George asked. I could feel the yellow eye trained on me, even though I stared straight down the road.

“They said—I don’t know how to explain it—that he wasn’t who he said he was. That he was sick and didn’t have the courage to face it. That he ...” I stopped. “They just wanted to think he was weaker than he seemed, so they could win out over him somehow.” George looked at me, and I looked at the road, and we drove that way for a long time. I knew what they said about Glen shouldn’t have any power over me if it wasn’t true, but I couldn’t bring myself to tell it, even though it felt like George was waiting.

Nine miles from town we topped a ridge, the plain below us bright with sunlight slanting in from just above the Wind River Mountains. My place was a mile ahead, the light bouncing off the windows of the double-wide I’d hauled off my old man’s place when we first married. With the sun at that angle even the low foundation walls for the new place threw shadows I could see from the ridge. They traced the outline of a big house, room for kids, still waiting to be framed after four years.

I remember when Lila helped me set the forms for that foundation. The trenches were in, and I’d brought home a load of scrap plywood for the formwork. Lila worked beside me all day like she was born on a job site, her curly hair tied back with a kerchief, oversized work gloves at the ends of those skinny, freckled arms. By dark we had everything ready to pour concrete the next day. Then she walked me through the place, building it in her mind right there and doing a better job than some architects I’ve seen. Lila knew what a house needed and how she wanted to live.

She walked through that set of empty formwork and made a house out of it—built it right around our lives, and the way she saw it was so powerful I could see it too. When she placed our bedroom I laid her down right there, smelling like dirt and sawdust, and it was about the happiest we ever felt.

It wasn’t a month after that she made me leave Glen—said I could make more on my own and we needed it if we were going to have kids, and besides, it was time for me to grow up. I’d been with him four years and we were friends, but Lila had decided and she was right about the money.

At first we had fun trying—it got to where seeing her with that damn thermometer in her mouth made me horny. But after a year of that she had us both in for tests, and I never forgot the way she looked at me that day the first results came back. Every couple months I’d take my stuff to the lab in the bottom of a Dixie cup. I’d worked a year for the power company on high voltage lines before I apprenticed with Glen. After I learned what that kind of voltage can do to a man I wouldn’t even walk under one of those lines, but the count never did go up. When Lila started cooking me that crazy Chinese stuff I knew she was desperate. One night last winter she just rolled away from me when it was done, turned the lamp out and said, “I don’t know why I bother.” I lay in the dark with those words ringing, and could hear them all the rest of the time we were married.

“My turn was coming up, and I shifted down to third. “That’s my place,” I said and saw George’s head nod. “You run outta money?” He was looking at the foundation.
“Not exactly.” I pulled onto the shoulder across from the turn. “It’s a long story.”

I looked up at the place and noticed for the first time that the cottonwoods in the draw were going yellow. I could hear the stream flowing out of the culvert, and that last bit of sunlight hit everything just right. Since Glen died and things for me and Lila came apart I’d hardly noticed the world, just worked as much as I could and stayed drunk the rest of the time. Other than people I was working for or buying whisky from, I barely talked to anyone. It seemed like I’d been underwater for a long time and had just broken the surface and come back into the world. Only the light was waning and the leaves were dying and maybe it was too late.

“Hell,” I said, thinking about the dirty dishes and empty fridge waiting for me inside, “I ain’t been to Crowheart in a year. What else am I gonna do tonight?” I unscrewed the cap from the pint and took a long pull as I eased onto the highway, heading for Crowheart with the shadows of the Wind Rivers creeping over the road.

You goin’ up to Crowheart to talk with your great-grandfather’s ghost? I asked George when we crossed the Little Wind River at Fort Washakie. The story of how Crowheart got its name was nearly all I knew about Chief Washakie, and I figured it must have something to do with George heading there.

“That what you think Indians do—get drunk and go driving around after dead ancestors?” His head was dropped down so his chin was on his shoulder and he had to look up at me through the one eyebrow he had left.

“No, I just thought—shit.” George saw I felt foolish, and he took advantage of it to open another one of my beers while he knew I wouldn’t complain. He took a long pull then leaned his head back against the rear window.

“I’m just goin’ to see my father.” He drank again.

“You’d like my father. He’s your land of Indian, all crazy with visions and religion.” It was supposed to be a joke, but his voice sounded thin. He was looking at the ceiling of the cab, and the light from the sunset came through the rear window and made his face glow warm and yellow, the shiny scars raised above the other skin.

“I always liked that story about Chief Washakie and Crowheart Butte, and I just thought maybe it had something to do with you goin’ up there.” George’s head lifted off the seat back.

“You know that story?” George asked.

“Sure. People around here tell it all the time.”

“Whites?”

“Sure.”

“Tell me the way you know it.”

At first I thought he was just making me tell it so I’d say something dumb, and he could make me a fool again, maybe pinch another beer. But he was really listening. I told him the story the way I’d first heard it, the way Glen had told me eight years ago when we were driving through Crowheart on the way to Dubois for the first job I ever worked with him. I told about the different tribes all wanting to winter in the Wind River Valley in those days, on account of the easy weather and the game, and how before the government shipped the Arapahoes up from Colorado it was the Crows the Shoshones hated. I played up the part about Chief Washakie being so brave and such a great warrior, but then seeing too many people die and deciding it had to be settled once and for all. He went to the Crow chief with a challenge, and the Crow took it. The two of them climbed on top of the butte with their weapons and one man each to witness. When Glen talked about Washakie killing the Crow chief, and how he respected the dead man so much that he cut out his heart and ate a piece of it to get some of the bravery, I remember looking up at the butte’s flat top above the river and thinking that it fit.

“It was Glen—the one who killed himself—who first told me all that,” I said to George. “People told me he was a hard man and that I’d have a hell of a time working for him. But after he told that story I saw why people around here didn’t know what to make of him. He didn’t see things the way they did, I could hear it in the way he told that story. It was like—” I looked at the dusky sky. “It was like he came from

The land arches over the oilfield in a big fold that runs all the way up to the peaks like a buttress holding them up against the sky.

that time when men would risk their lives to end a war—when there was courage in their hearts.”

What I didn’t tell George was how others told the story of the Crowheart fight. I worked a lot of jobs up north when I first went on my own, and it seemed like anytime I came through Crowheart with someone else in the car they’d start in on it as soon as we saw the butte. It was different from them—they told it as a kind of joke. They claimed when the chief was an old man someone asked him why he’d done that with the Crow’s heart, and he just shrugged his shoulders and said, You do foolish things when you’re young. The idea of the chief saying that worked on men in a funny way. I’ve heard them repeat it three or four times, like it was the punch line to a real knee-slapper, their laughter getting uglier each time. By the third time it isn’t the chief’s excuse anymore, it’s theirs, for everything they ever did. Only they never tell you whose heart they cut out.

After I finished George looked at me for a long time, and I started to wonder if he was going to say anything at all. “That’s a good story all right,” he finally said. “Sometimes we tell it like that—with the chief’s fighting on the butte that way. But that’s only for children. It don’t surprise me that whites tell it like that though, ’cause they always like stories about Chief Washakie, about how brave he was and how good a chief. You know why?” He didn’t wait for me to answer. “Because that Chief Washakie, he made war on lots of tribes but he never attacked the whites, never let his people do it either. So whites tell children’s stories about him, even though it was just a battle with some Crows and some Blackfeet that got pushed out of their place. They killed some Crows up that way and somebody got excited and cut out one
of their hearts. All that about two men fighting on the butte
and eating hearts is made up. I know because my great-
grandmother, the one they call Crow Woman, got caught
that day, and the chief took her for his last wife.

“You knew her?”

“Mmmm.” He

nodded but didn’t seem
too happy about it. “She
lived a long time, that
Crow Woman.”

He was quiet
while we rode over the
high ground north of the
Little Wind River with
the oil pumps swinging
their heads in the grey
light. The land arches
over the oilfield in a big
fold that runs all the way
up to the peaks like a
buttress holding them up
against the sky. Where
the road crossed the fold
we could see out over
everything but the peaks.
The sun behind the
mountains sent up clean
white light that faded to
blue-grey above us, then
turned cool and silvery
in the east where the
moon was about to rise.

It slipped up round as a nickel and bright enough I could see
the truck’s shadow running quiet beside us in spite of the
headlights and the fading sunset.

“That’s where all these problems started,” George
said after a while. I didn’t know what problems, or whether
he meant they started on the moon, which is where he
was looking. “You see, that Crow Woman, she was just a girl, and
the chief took her for a war trophy ‘cause she was so beautiful,
but his other wives didn’t like her being a Crow or being
young and beautiful. When she got older and started to have
children by him they would say things. That she was with
soldiers at the fort—or even with Arapahoes—that her chil-
dren got no Shoshone blood at all. When my grandfather
grows and wants to be a big man like his father people say
those things even more, that he’s a bastard, that he don’t come
from the chief’s line.”

“People talk too much,” I said.

George nodded and sipped his beer. “My grandfa-
ther don’t mind ‘cause he just wants power, and people can
say whatever they like as long as he gets his way. So he led
the tribal council and pretended that was the same as being chief.
But on the council he sees where the real power is, and that
grandfather of mine decides to raise his son to be a real
politician, a chief for the white man’s world. But my father,
he’s not like my grandfather, he don’t wanna be a big man. He
just wants to be good. He’s thin-skinned, too, and that talk
about his father being a bastard hurts him. It starts to make
him a little crazy, because he don’t know if he comes out of the
chief, or maybe the fourth infantry is his grandfather.” He

shook his head. “Those people who talk that way, they don’t
know how it can hurt.” I nodded and wanted to say some-
thing, but he was caught up in his story.

“They send him to mission school, and it makes him
even crazier. Those Jesuits, they’re crazy for God, and my

father liked that. He tried hard to be good there, but always
he’s getting beaten, always God’s mad at him and he don’t
know why. So he tries harder to be good, sings the old songs,
makes prayers for Jesus, for White Buffalo Woman—he asks
all the gods for help, he wants to be good so much. For that
he gets beat some more. You see, my father, he’s not smart. He
don’t know how to be anybody but himself. For that they
send him away from school, but he keeps on wanting to be
good, keeps trying all the ways he knows and everything gets
mixed up inside him—Christian religion, Indian religion,
even those TV preachers he watches.

The moonlight threw the bad side of his face into
shadow, but somehow it seemed worse that way. “Me, I
learned from him,” George said. “I learned how not to be
crazy. I learned how to show people what they want to see. I
learned to be respectful with the old ones, to drink with the
young ones, to make the whites laugh—even get work with
'em.” He finished his beer and threw the can out the window.

“But I don’t know. My father ’n me, we’re tied too close.
When I go drinking, he comes looking for me. He can’t let me
go like that, and I can’t stop wanting him to come for me. One
time he found me back there,” he jerked his head toward the
back of the truck, “By that liquor store where I saw you. He
went crazy with visions right there. He said he saw Jesus nailed
up on the side of the liquor store and Custer stabbing Him
with a Shoshone lance and vultures taking bites from Him.”

“Maybe it’s good to have somebody to come get you
like that,” I said. “My dad never gave a shit.”

“Oh, he got me all right. You can see how he got me.”
The way he said it made me look at him, and when I did he
tilted his head so the moonlight hit the scars.

"He did that to your face?"

"Yeah." His head turned back towards his window and he looked out for a long time. "One night he got real crazy 'bout me drinking, started talking about how I hate myself, how I'm killing myself. He got all kinds of visions that night, saw my spirit in the whisky bottle, whisky spirits in me. He couldn't take it, his boy's spirit trapped that way." He looked at me. "He broke that bottle over my head, kept hitting me with the broken neck. I was too drunk to run away."

"Shit." I took another long pull from the pint and this time I passed it to George. "So why the hell are you goin' to see him?"

He held the pint in front of him, but didn't drink, just stared past it. "It's like I said, we're tied too close, me and my father. I gotta show him I still got my spirit, ain't left it in no whisky bottles." He took a quick shot from the bottle, then held it in front of his eye. "See here, ain't none of me in that bottle."

"Has he seen your face?"

"They say he came to the hospital," he was looking into the bottle again, "But I was sleeping."

We came to the rim of the Wind River Valley and dropped towards the junction at the bottom, losing the moon as the rim rose behind us. I thought about George's dad going crazy that way. I could see the whole thing—it seemed like I could even feel it. And I thought about George going to Crowheart to see him.

"What about you, partner," George asked me, "You been leaving yourself in whisky bottles?"

"Maybe that's it." I tried to laugh. "Maybe that's where I've been lately."

"Because of your friend?"

"Partly. I got divorced too. After he died. We had a big fight over it." I fumbled for the pint on the seat next to George and he found it for me and unscrewed the cap before he passed it. The swallow I took didn't leave much in the bottle, and when I looked back at the road the headlights were floating in the dark like the world ended at their edges.

"Over what?"

"Him dying."

"What's to fight over after he's dead?"

"What people said about him. She said it too." I watched the headlights float while the road drifted toward the valley bottom.

"But she was your family," George said.

"Yeah. But I wasn't hers." He cocked his head back and squinted his eye at me. I tried to think of how to explain what I'd said. Lila came from a tight family, and ever since she found out she and I wouldn't have one like it she'd been more with them than with me. "She said she couldn't think of us as a family until we had kids." I turned the pint up until it was empty. "And I couldn't give her kids."

"So she left you?" George asked.

"Yeah." I wanted to leave it there, to believe that partly true was good enough, but it sounded like a lie. "After the fight."

"You hit her?"

"She said those things about Glen and -" I looked over at George, then I looked straight ahead and said real quiet, "things about me, too. About the two of us." I felt the empty bottle in my hand. "And I beat her up pretty bad."

We were almost there when the moon rose a second time for us in the valley bottom. It hit full on Crowheart Butte, except for the shadowed line of a gully that split the east face into two patches of light. The Big Dipper hung above it, spilling onto the butte's flat top. The whole plain was built up to that level before the river started to carve away at it, but the little patch at the top of the butte is all that's left. They say there are plants up there that haven't grown anywhere else in the valley since cattle and irrigation came in.

I wanted to believe the story about Chief Washakie fighting the Crow up there was true just the way I'd heard it. I even wanted to believe the chief made the joke like they said—that he was still up there like some kind of patron saint for the Rocky Mountain Front, throwing his blessings down on us, forgiving us, You do foolish things when you're young.

But I knew George was right, it was just a made up story and a made up excuse, our words put into the old man's mouth. I thought of George bringing his ruined face back to his dad, and wondered what they'd be able to make of it all. And I thought of Lila with the bright red print of my palm on her face and of what I'd ruined and what was left and the lonely drive back home.
More Jitters Blues

November crows
pick
parking lot
garbage
as I walk
Sunday morning
streets
the local team
has won
the big game
but it means
little
to me
yes, I feel a certain
vicarious
glow
and the chili
Charlie provides
eases
the edge
but I am
nervous
with small
comfort
the thin thread
of somehow
this all hangs
together
for the crows.

Dave Thomas

footprint

I walk more slowly
watching where each step will be
for I know, now
that it matters.

Katie Deuel
Reaping the Night Sky

The sickle moon's come round again another year.

Last March I drove west to Dixon and sorted seeds.
Driving the narrow highway above the river
I watched the moon hang like a bowl in the sky,
holding a single star.

All spring I tended seedlings and dug beds,
reclaiming this abandoned garden.
Unexpectedly, there were daffodils and violets and peonies,
planted by the woman who helped build this house
and settle this farm.
I hoped for her blessing.

I was told to expect my first garden would get a late start,
and it did.
I planted potatoes on June first,
green beans and snap peas on the Fourth of July.
That summer, the rains were long and late,
but with the August sun,
my Labor Day harvest was generous.
The edible pea pods were crisp and sweet —
I ate as I picked,
standing between rows, my eyes and mouth and hands
pleased.
Around me wind blew soft and warm with the scent
of second cuttings in my neighbor's alfalfa fields,
the sounds of their mowers and balers,
and the first bellowing of cows separated from their calves.
I pulled pea vines, dug carrots,
stored turnips and rutabagas,
and ate the last lettuce.
The days shortened.
I planted garlic,
and let summer
stop.

And here I am again, mid March,
watching the sickle moon in the western sky.
Throughout the evening it has moved slowly northward.
At dark go out to call my cats,
the grey tabby still prowling while his yellow step-sister waits
in a tree for the sound of the front door and my voice.
But my grey friend in his intransigence
has given me the gift of the sky,
much more familiar each night.
With each year, I will mark the passing seasons.
I will water young plum trees
and grow new squash from old seeds.
And I will watch for the quiet moon.

Leslie Budewitz
Aubade As Condition

Light
Plays on the spider thread.
From the glint and movement,
The thread strung from tip
Of leaf to tip of leaf,
Sound comes.

Listen
How one will,
The instrument played upon
Is mind.

Under
The light song of parting,
An orchestral anthem urges.

Once,
Billions of springs ago,
The sun struck matter alive.

Jack Fleming
Most people are frightened of rattlesnakes, linking them with viciousness and inevitable fatalities. People will go to great lengths, real or imagined, to avoid contact with such vile creatures. In 1952, a hobo, because of his fear of rattlesnakes, refused to sleep with his companions in a railroad culvert. Instead, he preferred the tracks, where no snakes might be hiding. He was hit and killed by the 4:15 Burlington Northern out of Duluth.

The chance of a hobo, or any person in North America, being fatally bitten in their lifetime by a rattlesnake is less than one in 5,000,000. Given these statistics, everyone should relax. But people still fear rattlesnakes. One reason is probably venom; rattlesnakes are poisonous.

Rattlesnake venom is complicated stuff. Venom is not composed of a single substance common to all venomous reptiles: rather, each species has toxic saliva with slightly different properties, causing different reactions in the prey. Venom is approximately 90% protein in the form of enzymes. These enzymes work in various combinations so that each species of rattlesnake's poison is unique. Annually, there are about 8,000 cases of human envenomation in North America, but that number is sketchy. Only 10–15 of those bites are fatal. In 1987, for example, this statistic included the case of someone who killed a rattlesnake, then suffered a fatal bite from the decapitated head. Nature has, on occasion, a unique form of justice.

Massasaugas are becoming increasingly rare. The general deterioration of their natural habitat is probably the major cause of their decline, eliminating large populations in certain areas. Humans have drained swamps, marshes, and bogs, creating conditions unfit for the wetland-loving massasauga. In many places, including Illinois, they are an endangered species.

Massasaugas are relatively mild mannered, though differences in dispositions between individuals do occur. There is nothing in the snake rule book that says that they need to announce their presence by rattling, either, making each encounter with a rattler...unique. In Missouri, the only bite recorded from a massasauga in over ten years was a drunk who handled the poor snake for over ten minutes. In that case I felt the snake had amazing tolerance; I have snapped at drunks with much less provocation.

At Hanging Rock State Park in southern Illinois, I went to find the rare massasauga. Though many reptile enthusiasts never see one, I found two massasaugas only 20

I like rattlesnakes. Basically, they are reptiles with venom that have rattles on their tails. You could think of them, as I do, as being an integral part of the natural history of North America. I like rattlesnakes because they have beautiful patterns and coloration. I admire them because they are well adapted to their environment, an important part of many biological communities, and efficient hunters. They have also been around awhile; fossil records of rattlesnakes date back from the ancient Pleistocene era.

Wearing heavy boots, a smile, and carrying a big stick, I have gone searching for rattlesnakes. Rattlesnakes hold a fascination for me. They are truly wild creatures, yet with proper precautions, they can be observed. My stick is a four foot long snake hook, good for probing, poking, and in the case of chubby poisonous pit vipers like rattlesnakes, moving them if necessary. Since most fatalities occur because people attempt to handle rattlesnakes, the hook is essential, as is some common sense. But not too much—I'm looking for something most people pray to avoid.

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At Hanging Rock State Park in southern Illinois, I went to find the rare massasauga. Though many reptile enthusiasts never see one, I found two massasaugas only 20
minutes from the parking lot—ya just gotta know where to look. It was late May. The sun had been up for awhile, and my feet made sucking sounds in the moist vegetation; a wet grassy meadow surrounded by forest.

The two massasauga rattlers were about six feet away from me, entwined in the rich grass. I, by the way, was safe at this close encounter—a startled rattler can only strike its body length, which gave me easily three feet worth of safety zone. By the S shape of their bodies, I could tell they were on the move. Shuffling my booted feet to give warning, I watched their body language closely. Tongues out, heads up—it was human encounter time! The smaller one coiled quickly. Almost as an afterthought, it raised its tail and buzzzzed. Since snakes are deaf, this warning was for my ears alone. The larger one, darker, with a dry scar on its side, just looked and sat still. Tense. The bodies of the snakes hugged the land. All parties concerned had a staring contest. Only I blinked. In synchronicity, we all took a deep breath.

Both snakes relaxed visibly and decided to ignore me. They seemed hungry and were probably hunting. Together, they began to move along the damp ground, and I, hunched over to feign smallness, decided to go along for the crawl. The snakes never reacted to my presence again, as if every search for food by two pit vipers is accompanied by a large, rather clumsy mammal with a racing heart.

Staying fairly low to the ground, I observed both snakes, moving along with them from log to puddle to bog. They moved slowly but never sat still, tasting the air with their forked black tongues. As the tongues flicked in the air the muscles moved, as if their entire bodies were sense organs. I wondered if they tasted the sun, or the molecules of humidity that encased them.

Rattlesnake senses are acute. They detect endothermic, or warm-blooded prey, such as mice, with heat sensing facial pits. Frogs and other amphibians are detected with unusual elliptical pupils of the eyes, which act as motion sensors. Odors are also important feeding cues. Massasaugas will eat birds, insects and other snakes. Most prey are struck, poisoned, then eaten only after they are dead. Nature planned well; by biting quickly, poisoning the prey, and then withdrawing, poisonous snakes will not be bitten or gouged by its intended victim. Snakes do not eat very often; one meal can take a week to digest. I hoped to observe a kill.

I stood up and stretched, not too boldly, hoping to blend in with the scenery. The snakes looked like they belonged to the earth. Massasaugas are not large by rattlesnake standards; the darker individual was roughly 2 1/2 feet long, the other somewhat smaller. Both snakes had a double row of blotches running the length of their spines. In the larger snake, these blotches were almost black, each one distinct; with three rows of smaller black spots on each side of its body. The smaller snakes’ blotches were brown, the color of logs and dying leaves. The eyes were marked by a dark, light–shaded stripe that ran backwards from the eye like the mask of Zorro, but without the mustache. This marking helped to camouflage their eyes. I counted seven buttons on their dark brown rattles. Rattlesnakes add a button every time they shed their skin, (snakes often shed more than once a year) and buttons can break off with hard wear. I could not guess their age.

The thick moist air made my t-shirt cling; I scratched my arm, watching the snakes all the while. The larger one yawned. A snake yawn is like nothing else. The jaws disengage and instantly the mouth becomes the biggest image in the landscape. The fangs swing down into place; shorter than some species’, I was still impressed. The tongue hangs out. I could easily see the roof of the mouth, which was pinkly pockmarked with sense organs.

Looking relaxed, the yawn a simple pleasure, the rattlesnake re–composed itself—it took a minute. The fangs fit into a pocket in the gums, the tongue was sucked back in like a piece of spaghetti. And then, looking exactly like my ancient Uncle Al, the snake worked its jaws back into place and sat a moment longer, looking content. I’m surprised it didn’t pull out a cigar.

Then the snake scratched itself. Not in the armpits
like Uncle Al. Turning, the larger snake rubbed its chin along the head and neck of its companion, accompanied by flexions of its entire body. Although early for the mating season, it occurred to me that this could be a pair on an outing together. Just dating, but with so much in common. Massasauga courtship can take over six hours, with much rubbing, stroking and touching. But this was a lunch date. From my height I could see what both snakes tasted in the air—a whiptail lizard (*Nemidophoros*) sitting on a log about eight feet away.

**I had a dream about that day at the shopping mall. I am in the woods.**

The lucite encased head is in my hand. I have come to this beautiful spot with a purpose—to reunite the severed head with a body.

Both snakes moved toward the log, a muscle at a time. Hoping that I was doing the same I crouched low, trying not to drag parts of me on the damp ground. Seeing the lizard reminded me of my own cheese sandwich and apple; I was hungry.

Forty-five minutes later the larger snake had moved to within striking distance of the whiptail, who was basking in the sun. I wish I could say how much I enjoyed watching the snake gaining ground inch by inch, but...I'm human. I was bored. "Why didn't I bring something to read?" I thought. The snake struck. It was a blur of motion that made my heart jump. The lizard disappeared. What happened? Did the snake bite the lizard? Did the lizard escape? The smaller snake joined the first, its rapid tongue movements seeming to ask the same questions.

If it was a good strike, the whiptail, which was over six inches long, would die 3–23 minutes after being bitten, depending on the amount of venom injected. Then, hopefully, lunch would be served, the snakes trailing the dying lizard by scent. If the lizard escaped, it is back to the hunt. Being a rattlesnake takes patience.

I fumbled around in my backpack and captured my own lunch, unwrapping the cheese sandwich fiercely and chewing with big, wide teeth. After eating the sandwich I walked as close to the snakes as I dared. I munched my apple; the crunching sound wouldn't bother them. Both were busy crawling around the log scenting for the lizard. Neither one interrupted their search; they did not react to my apple.

Glancing at the sun, I realized it was time for me to head back to the city. I left the snakes alive and wild, feeling lucky to have shared time with them. I felt alive myself, flushed with nature. On the way to the car I tripped on my shoelace and fell on my face. "I have too many limbs," I thought.

Months later, I was at a shopping mall in a far suburb of Chicago, optimistically named Willow Creek Plaza. Neither willows nor creeks were in sight, just a parking lot with lots of cars. This area, like much of Illinois, was once prime long grass prairie, with wetlands, streams and marshes. And lots of animals, including rattlesnakes. The wetlands were gone, but the rattlesnakes have not entirely vanished.

I ventured into a "western" shop, looking for a gift. These stores are popular near big cities, with cowboy boots and hats, rich Pendelton blankets that probably will never feel a chill, and other "rugged" gifts like fancy knives and elaborate leather goods. In a glass case were the rattlesnakes.

They were not alive. One, a large timber rattler, was stuffed in a realistic striking pose, fangs at the ready. There were rattlesnake skin wallets, hat bands, and key chains. Apparently, someone in Texas "hand crafts" these items. What really caught my eye was a head. A rattlesnakes' head, fangs bared, was encased in a clear lucite ball on a wooden stand. There was no tongue. The eyes were fake. Maybe this severed head caused, posthumously, a fatal bite. Where is nature's sense of justice?

I marched up to the sales girl; I was numb with shock and sorrow. I told her, my anger totally misdirected, that rattlesnakes should not be made into paperweights and hat bands. While she stood there, astonished, I told her that I, not to mention my vast multitude of friends, would not shop there. I know she was relieved when I turned and left the store, but for me, and rattlesnakes, there seemed to be little relief in sight.

Massasauga rattlers have many natural predators. Hawks, large wading birds, carnivorous mammals and other snakes all take their toll. However, habitat destruction and road kills by humans eliminate more of these snakes each year than all natural predators combined.

Venomous reptile populations are decreasing at an alarming rate in the United States and Canada. While some people consider this a blessing, naturalists see the decrease as further evidence of the human failure to maintain an ecological balance between nature and our use and development of the land.

The estimated human lethal dose of massasauga venom is 30–40 milligrams. What is the estimated lethal dose...
of human “poison” in relationship to rattlesnakes? We bulldoze their habitat and dynamite their dens. Communities sponsor “roundups” where rattlesnakes are gathered and killed. The snakes are kept in large pens without food or water. They are wrestled, stepped on, and often skinned alive. Tourists line up for the novelty of eating fried rattlesnake. A teenage “Round-up Queen” presides over the festivities. Later, the snakeskins are made into curios, wallets and hatbands. Some of us have been taught to kill rattlesnakes on sight. Others display rattlesnakes at roadside attractions as “curiosities”, or swerve their cars to run over snakes. The chemical pesticides used to grow our food builds up in the fatty tissues of rattlesnakes, killing them or damaging their reproductive systems.

I had a dream about that day at the shopping mall. I am in the woods. The lucite encased head is in my hand. I have come to this beautiful spot with a purpose—to reunite the severed head with a body. I have this idea, like the mythical Hercules when he buried the head of the Hydra, that the head will come back to life. Under a tree I scratch a hole near some burly roots. Crying, I bite on the heel of my hand, and I can taste the earth in my mouth. I place the lucite head into the hole and cover it with dirt, patting it gently. But it doesn’t work, not even in a dream, in the dream—like woods. The damage can not be undone. The lucite head remains alone, set apart, and will not even decompose.

In the darkness I felt a tremendous loss, a grieving, for that rattler’s head. I saw that snake: curled in a den for the winter, sunning itself on a warm rock in spring. I wondered: was the snake male or female? Had it ever reproduced? I could not understand someone who had the nerve to take this animal, bold and sensitive, and turn it into a paperweight. This snake represented thousands of others, all the useless man-made curiosities; each one was once a living, breathing animal. What is it about us that makes us capture the wild, destroy it, and then turn it into cheap facsimiles of the original?

What does it mean, for all of us, and for the earth? It feels like a great loss. It is the loss of nature’s beauty, of biodiversity, and of the incredible richness that embodies this complicated, wild place. Will our world be the same if the animals are all gone, and we are left with just the dusty relics of their beauty?

Venom is a snake’s adaptation for immobilizing prey that is used secondarily as a defensive mechanism. Admittedly, rattlesnakes do pose a danger, but in our modern society, this danger is minuscule. I believe that humans manufacture venom too; it is fear, ignorance, and the urge, then the ability, to control nature. We are poisonous. I wish humans would take the time to become acquainted with these often shy reptilian creatures. We might develop a new attitude, not only toward rattlesnakes but also toward all dwindling wildlife. An attitude of understanding may prevent us from ultimately poisoning ourselves.

There is the story of the rancher who, stooping to pick up a large stone to kill a rattler, was bitten by a second snake that he had not seen. It lay under his granite weapon. Rushed to the doctor, he was pronounced unhurt; no venom had been injected. Both the rattlesnake and the rancher had been scared. But the snake withheld its venom. Can we do the same?

The author would like to thank Carl Ernst and Laurence Klauber.
Rattlesnake Fear

watch for it
hidden in the leaves
under bushes
down that thorny wash
where we always go
to bathe.

Coiled
and concealed
it'll get you
if you let it.

When the sun
starts its vigilance
beyond the upper atmosphere
listen,
though it may not sound:
they'll be out,
waiting.

Fantastic colors -
how can all those lines
blend so well
into rock,
sand,
into dust?

Watch for it
It'll get you
if you let it.

Katie Deuel
Yellow Oboe

Yellow, it moves along dampened
Branches, where there are green leaves
And white flowers. Sunlight touches each
(Warbler, leaf, flower), and the brown-
Grey sparrow pausing where it searches.
Rain has fallen, and now water stands
On leaf and petal.

An oboe moves
The companion ear. Its water’s first
Falling centuries ago, at morning’s six
Its re-occurring shower blossoms
And, released from stem, in sunlight,
By white flower and green leaf,
Along dampened branch, it moves, yellow.

Jack Fleming
It’s Only August

Already I can see
my breath
walking
this damp
end of summer
Sunday morning
green droops
perhaps a little
sad
these leaves
have not had
their fill
of the sun
either.

Dave Thomas
Flight of the Water Ouzel

But the ouzel never calls forth a single touch of pity, not because he is strong to endure, but rather because he seems to live a life beyond the reach of every influence that makes endurance necessary.

- John Muir

No moon. My brother and I sneak out of the house at midnight, armed with flashlights but not using them yet. We cut through old man Big John's front yard and duck under the log fence that surrounds the meadow. Horses graze there, and through the pitch dark come the snorts of the herd. As we come closer we see the dark outlines of the horses standing still, some lying down, all bunched close together. It is cold, air comes thickly from their nostrils. I pull carrots from my pocket, hand one to Brad, and slowly, quietly, we walk flat-footed towards the horses with carrots extended.

There is a general flurry of movement. Then they adjust, smell the carrots, maybe our familiarity, and move towards us through the dark. Brad searches off to the left for the appaloosa he likes, and I feed my carrot to Mrs. Fox's palomino, whom I've been horsejacking for years. I pull a halter over her head as she eats, wrap the lead rope over her neck and tie it on the other side, creating makeshift reins. Then with a grunting lunge I'm aboard and kicking to catch up with Brad galloping into the night.

Riding at night is like swimming underwater in the dark. Only better. I can hear the horse's legs pounding ground and wind in my ears, and me hanging on to the mane, my legs gripped tight. Once before, the palomino had tripped and sent me flying into the night, and I'd done a belly flop on the ground, and head back to the horses. When we get there his horse has pulled loose and taken off, so we both jump on to the palomino and ride double back across the meadow, me in front and him in back holding the fish in one hand, my shoulder in the other. We ride slowly, and smell the fish and hear our breathing, and give the horse one more carrot before we slap her butt and send her back into the meadow's night.

My parents came to Squaw Valley in 1952. They were living in Buffalo, New York, and came west that year on a ski trip. A few months later they packed their bags and drove west for good. They settled in a small cabin just above the long green meadow that ran the length of the valley and was split by a small creek winding its way to the Truckee River at the valley entrance. Squaw Valley was, at the time, a tiny ski area with one lift and a jigback, an old one-seater chair on which the skier sits sideways. Lift tickets cost one dollar. Mostly just the locals skied there. The one road in was dirt, and the town consisted of a post office, a general store, and the Pig Pen, a two story bar with a giant rack of elk antlers hanging over the door.

My parents thought they had found their paradise. Behind our house, up Shirley Canyon, were hundreds of square miles of wilderness, including the Desolation and Granite Chief Wilderness Areas. Shirley Canyon was a mixture of huge granite slabs, giant old growth trees, and lush fern forests cloven by the granite troughs of Squaw Creek running through. It was the main feeder of the valley aquifer which lived under the meadow on the valley floor. Because of the massive Sierra snowfalls there was always plenty of water, and Squaw Creek turned into a raging water monster in the springtime. But the meadow soaked up much of the water and was always covered in waist-high grass and innumerable...
wildflowers. From my parents’ cabin they could watch the entire length of the meadow, all the way up to the looming cliffs of Granite Chief Mountain.

My father, John Peter, still tells of watching the meadow in early mornings, coyotes trotting through the cold fog that hovered ethereal just above the grass. Squaw Creek was the meeting place of animals, and my parents watched deer, beaver, raccoons, coyote, and bear navigate around one another on their way to a morning drink. There were mountain lions, too, they knew from the tracks, but they never saw one. I can see my father, there on the deck of his little A-framed cabin, his hands down the back of his underwear scratching his butt, his then-red hair ruffled and his steel blue eyes looking out over his place. He did that every morning, looked out over the valley like a king over his kingdom, though as years went on the changes in the landscape registered on his forehead as deep, curving grooves that came and went and then finally, one day, became the permanent contour of his face.

My mother, Doris, was half Yup’ik Eskimo, born in 1929 in a small fishing village named Kotlik, where the Yukon River drains into the Bering Sea. Her Eskimo mother died of tuberculosis when my mother was two, and for her first five years she was raised by her extended Eskimo family. When she was six her Finnish father became ill and arranged for her and her brother to go to Seattle for school, living with Swedish adoptive sisters, who conspired with her to hide the differences by showing her how to use makeup and how to dress just right. She is always smiling widely, in contrast to her brother, Carl, who seems sad and also out of place. They are both displaced, but he, at least, seems hurt by it, as if he recognizes his loss. My mother, on the other hand, looked to her Future to bury the past.

For my mother, I think, moving to Squaw Valley was like taking a step back towards the more wild landscape of her Alaskan youth. As the years went on she spent more and more time exploring the wilderness that surrounded her home. I think, though, that she never forgot Kotlik, and despite her love of Squaw Valley and Shirley Canyon she was always a person displaced.

By the time my brother and I were born, eleven months apart, in 1967, Squaw Valley was already long gone as paradise. The winter Olympics had come in 1960, bringing with them all the growth required to house a world community. In those two weeks Squaw Valley was transformed from a tiny, little known ski town, into a world class destination resort. Half the meadow was paved over to make a massive parking lot. The mountain was stripped of its trees to create the downhill ski course. The Olympic Village was built at the base of Shirley Canyon. The Olympic rings hung like gold from the rafters of the concrete and steel Olympic ice arena. The world’s largest tram was strung over the cliffs between the valley floor and the upper ski mountain. Suddenly the locals were sitting on millions of dollars of property and the entire Lake Tahoe basin was booming.

My parents must have seen it coming, and from early on my father fought the Ski Corporation for every acre of trees they clearcut to make room for more groomed ski runs. After
the Olympics things calmed down a little. The monolithic monuments fell into ruin, until virtually all of them were torn down. In a way it was like growing up in an Olympic ghost town. We still had half the meadow and Shirley Canyon, and for many years after I was born they still lived under the influence of their early visions of Squaw Valley. I think my parents thought the worst of it was over. It was twenty years for many years after I was born they still lived under the

I remember driving into the valley after a year away, and seeing that the beaver dams had been bulldozed. About the same time we found out my mother had cancer. down the road before they realized how much trouble they were in.

My mother loved to hike to the water ouzel falls. When I was old enough to walk she’d pack a lunch of peanut butter and honey sandwiches, strap Brad on her back, and off we’d go up the trail into Shirley Canyon. It was a long walk for little kids, maybe two miles, and I remember it seemed to take forever to get there. Along the way my mom would point things out to us: the Three Grey Ghosts, 400 year old Jeffrey pine trees; the Big Flat Rock, a piece of granite flat as a pancake and as wide as our house; the Bathtubs, huge pools scooped out of the granite by millenia of water; squirrels, hummingbirds, sugarpine cones almost as tall as I was. We marveled at the things she showed us, and it made the journey go faster. We were always excited, too, because we knew the water ouzel falls was her special place.

After coming through a thick ferny forest we’d break through the trees, crest a small rise and go left to the falls, a series of cascades spaced out on a long sloping slab of white granite, like a long smooth water slide. The main drop was about five feet, and behind the water pouring over this drop was a wide horizontal cave, in which water ouzels made their yellow and green mossy nests. The grapefruit sized nests were built mostly of moss, but intricately interwoven with pieces of driftwood and rock appendages to which they were anchored. Sometimes, when the water flow was low, little flowers would grow off the moss and color the inside of the cave. My mom told me once that the water ouzel’s house was alive, and that sometimes, when the water flow was low, little flowers would grow off the moss and color the inside of the cave. My mom told me once that the water ouzel’s house was alive, and that sometimes, when the water flow was low, little flowers would grow off the moss and color the inside of the cave. My mom told me once that the water ouzel’s house was alive, and that sometimes, when the water flow was low, little flowers would grow off the moss and color the inside of the cave. My mom told me once that the water ouzel’s house was alive, and that

and a wide round face, and when she smiled her face lit up with a huge jaw of teeth. She’d sit in her yellow bikini, her knees drawn up to her breasts, her journal resting on her shins. She’d sketch the water ouzel falls, the trees, her children.

The water ouzel is an amazing bird. I learned that from my mother. Water ouzels are virtually unaffected by weather—they sing all winter long, seemingly aloof to freezing temperatures or violent storms. As John Muir noted, "The ouzel sings on through all the seasons and every kind of storm. Indeed no storm can be more violent than those of the waterfalls in the midst of which he delights to dwell. However dark and boisterous the weather, snowing, blowing, or cloudy, all the same he sings, and with never a note of sadness." Once my mother snowshoed up Shirley Canyon in midwinter to see how the birds were doing. She was gone all day.

When she returned at dusk she was as happy as I’d ever seen her. "The falls are frozen," she said, "and through the ice you can see the nests. Like looking through glass into someone’s home at night." Later, she told me, a water ouzel poked out through a hole in the ice and disappeared downstream. When it returned it was carrying a little tuft of moss. "Piling on the blankets," she said.

Ouzels are the size of robins, with slick bluish grey feathers, sometimes brown on the head and shoulders. Their beaks are long and pointy, and their tails are alertly erect. Their real beauty for me, though, is in their flying and acrobatics. They fly like bees or hummingbirds, the wings buzzing and the movements quick and magically vertical. Flying is how they commune with water.

The first time I remember seeing the ouzel I was four or five years old. I was watching with my mother when suddenly the ouzel flew straight into the whitewater rapids downstream where the creek narrows. I thought it had made a mistake, had drowned, when in a split second it reemerged from the water like the phoenix rising from the burning lake. It continued diving in the same same spot for an hour, returning to its nest in between dives to deposit whatever food it had found beneath the water.

Often the ouzel is seen wading upstream, dunking its head under water like a crane, picking at the stream bottom. And always the water ouzel is seen on, by, or above water. Perhaps that is what my mother so loved about the ouzel: its fidelity to place. The Shirley Canyon water ouzels were born in the falls, made their living along the creek’s mossy banks, and died when the water carried them away. I think my mother saw in the water ouzel how she wanted to be and could not. She never went back to Kotlik, though over the years she often talked about doing so. Shirley Canyon became her surrogate landscape, and she invested in it the love for place she could never manifest for Kotlik.

If Shirley Canyon was my mother’s place, the meadow was my father’s. He’d take long walks along the banks of Squaw Creek, and together we’d skip rocks across the wider pools down near the beaver ponds. He was gone a lot, on one business trip after another. He was an engineer and worked all over the country on various projects, and my mother said he loved his work. He never talked much, and when he did it usually had to do with business. I have no doubt they loved
each other. They loved to hike together, and some days after work they’d take a walk in the meadow or up Shirley Canyon. Later my father would walk around his property checking on the hundreds of various trees he’d planted over the years. Gradually our view of the meadow was cut off by growing trees and by houses sprouting up like weeds all around the valley floor.

“You know we can lose everything,” he said. “You have no idea how much power these people have. We can lose everything. God dammit!” Then he turned and walked into his office, slammed the door.

I saw, for the first time, that he was really scared. I realized I had no idea what was really going on. The developers had enough capital to bury my father in court, and his neck was on the line. On top of it all was my mom’s cancer, growing by the day. In the end, I think what hurt my father the most was his powerlessness. He stood with my mother on the old porch of our house, his arm around her too-thin shoulders, watching them build in the meadow, and he knew, I think, that none of it would last.

My mother died four months after she was diagnosed. She tried to heal herself through macrobiotics and massage and anything besides surgery, and part of her healing was to maintain a low level of stress. When we talked, we talked about school and the everyday things in my life; we never talked about whether or not she hurt, or why her skin was turning yellow and hanging off her bones. She was confined mostly to bed, and I know she missed being outside.

When I came back from hiking up Shirley Canyon she’d ask me to sit by her bed and tell her what I had seen, how many ouzels, how fast the water was flowing, what the colors were like. At the end of the summer I went off to college because I didn’t know what else to do; she died three weeks later.

She wanted her ashes thrown in the water ouzel falls. But my father could never get himself to do it, so they sat in a tin box in a closet for two years until my aunt’s patience wore out and she had them buried under my mother’s headstone in a cemetery on Vashon Island. It was five years before I went back to see the water ouzel.

Horses no longer graze or run in the meadow. The golfers aren’t willing to share their fake mounds or putting greens. The once tall, flowing meadow grass is covered by nature’s equivalent of astroturf. Golf carts race around. On the far side of the meadow is a twelve-story hotel and resort area. It’s constructed of black reflective glass and looks like Reno’s version of Darth Vader’s Death Star. Rooms start at 160 dollars a night. Eighteen holes of golf goes for a hundred.
Squaw Valley’s aquifer is drying up. Squaw Creek is a dirty little trickle that looks out of place flowing through the wide, dry banks. Snowfalls aren’t what they used to be and the ski area sucks up much of the water for its snow-making machines. My father argued in court that the aquifer couldn’t supply the massive amounts of water needed to water a golf course and make fake snow. He lost, and now there are water-use restrictions and constant talk of drought.

Still the growth continues. The developers lobby for another hotel, blaming the lack of water on “temporary” drought. The ski area has expanded into the upper end of Shirley Canyon. In the mid-eighties the Ski Corporation received a Forest Service permit to cut 2000 trees for a new chairlift in Shirley Canyon. There was a public outcry and a judge ordered a hold on the permit for further review. The owner of the ski area, Alex Cushing, ordered his men to cut the trees anyway. He was quoted as saying, “What can they do? The trees will be gone and all they can do is replant them.”

I think of all the winters this bird has endured, its singing through the storms, and how good it is to come here and find the ouzel still in place, still building its mossy nest and flying low over the water.

They installed their chairlift just in time for the first snow. The base of the lift, a huge slab of concrete and steel, sits about two hundred yards up from the water ouzel falls.

With the help of Bill Hewlett, a lawsuit was filed against Cushing, out of which emerged a unique court ruling, which not only fined the Ski Corporation a quarter of a million dollars, but set aside a portion of Cushing’s private property as protected from development, keeping him, in effect, from developing the lower portion of Shirley Canyon. Because of the loosely interpreted Fifth Amendment, the case is expected to proceed to the Supreme Court where it may prove to set precedent for “takings” cases across the country. The ultimate irony for me is that the Ski Corporation, it seems, owns the water ouzel falls.

The fight continues. My father, seventy-one years old, has dedicated himself to preserving the lower half of the canyon. He doesn’t think about much else, and when I call him on the phone and ask how he is, he answers by telling me the latest developments in the valley’s ecosystem. He realizes that Squaw Valley will never be again what it was when he first came there, but he believes that what is left is still worth fighting for. He knows there are very few beautiful places left, and all of them are threatened. He recognizes cancer when he sees it.

It is late spring in Squaw Valley. Brad, my dad and I go for a hike up Shirley Canyon. My dad is old and his knees are weak, but in the last few years he’s begun hiking again. We hike along the north side of the creek, by the Bathtubs where Brad and I strip and go swimming. It feels good to be running around naked on the rocks with Brad, my dad watching like time has reversed itself twenty years. Further up the canyon we stop for water on the Big Flat Rock, and my father points out the old fire ring we’d used when we were kids and our family had camped up there.

An hour later we come to the water ouzel falls. I’m nervous being there with him, wondering if he is thinking about my mother and the ashes he never threw. Spring water is rushing over the falls, but I can see at least one nest underneath. I haven’t been there in years, but it looks exactly the same as I remember it. My dad points to a large stand of trees up from the falls, says “That’s where it is, the lift. Through those trees. We’re lucky they didn’t plant it right here.” I can’t see it, but the thought of it being so close is unsettling. It is hard to believe such ugliness exists so near to the water ouzel.

We sit on the rocks and watch the falls, hoping to get a glimpse of an ouzel. We can hear their singing so we know that they are there. It’s strange being there with my dad, because most of my childhood memories there are associated with my mother. After a while with no luck I sit back and close my eyes, listening to water and the water ouzel’s song. I hear my dad’s breathing, and I wonder what he is thinking.

“Colin, Brad, look,” he says quietly after a few minutes, “the ouzel.”

I rise up and there it is, hovering just above the water twenty yards downstream. Then it darts to the side and lands on a rock in midstream, where it begins its dance of plunging head and rising tail, every once in a while extending its wings for balance. I think of all the winters this bird has endured, its singing through the storms, and how good it is to come here and find the ouzel still in place, still building its mossy nest and flying low over the water.

My father clears his throat, as if to speak. The ouzel looks up, alert, then buzzes into the air back upstream, disappears into the waterfall.

“Beautiful,” he says, “isn’t it?”

“She,” I answer. “It is.”

“You boys know,” my father says, “your mother, she loved this place.”

It is the first time in eight years I’ve heard him speak of her, and I let the words hang in the air for a while around my head, the ouzel’s singing blending with the small roar of falling water. I think about the ashes, about asking him why he can’t throw them, but then I realize it doesn’t really matter. It is good enough just to be here with him and the water ouzel, and I know someday after he is gone Brad and I will remove the ashes from her grave on Vashon and sprinkle them over these waters. Maybe we will have his ashes, too, and we can throw their ashes together into the creek. Maybe that is why he has waited all these years.

I picture their soft flakes of bone, borne along the current over the water ouzel falls, winding down the canyon and into the depths of the meadow, where someday long grass may grow again.
Touching A River

Thousands of uprisings hatch here, teeming little conspirators breaking free, flying off with one another into the bushes. They’re mixing it up, coiling strands of DNA around to insure future excursions before they’re set upon, consumed, bound again among loops of a well-knit food chain. Regard the ease with which all of it manifests itself and flows. It has heart, this water, and gives one pause. It asks to take your hands, give it measure.

There’s plenty of ageless rock around, pounded, polished smooth as glass, and stirring offices of driftwood, and case after case of the caddis larvae’s stick and stem, stone grains, can-do industry. The pale, detached wings of morning duns drift over shells of spent crayfish. Lengths of beard moss string out beyond the burlap weave a scalloped leaf has foraged clean by a aquatic bugs. On the face of it, on a not so ordinary planet 93 million miles from an ordinary sun, I’m giving notice. Gratitude and I are jumping in.

We’re taking the plunge to find out where we are, what direction there is in the wash of a river’s name: Powder, Popular, Big Horn, Tongue, Red Rock, Rock Creek, Boulder, Swan, Teton, Blackfoot, Missouri, Wise, Yellowstone, Medicine, Bitterroot, Milk. Mineral-pebbly syllables on my lips, rounding my human edges, there’s an ease of mind with water, a settling in that shimmers. It makes me glad I’m touching a river, room is made, and attention’s given —briefly, simply, wholly, to who I am.

John Holbrook
Salt

...Salt on our tongues, lips, is the first taste, mother-sweat sucked in with milk.
- Chitra Divankaruni

First taste of a world; my mother's nipple's sweat's salt —

Resting on that first vessel's bow, who had carried me in her hold.

Shore, too, and the round world and all-in-all.

Salt.

Jack Fleming
Joy Mae Gouker

River of Souls

Mike has gone back to Canada, supposedly for a visit. I met him in Hot Springs, Montana, which is where I’m livin’ for now. He’s 6 foot with blue eyes that curl up at the ends and the shining sea inside of them. He has blond hair that’s tangly and long, about to the middle of his back. He’s pretty much a Viking. Most of his people immigrated from Norway and settled in Vancouver Island off the western coast of Canada. He says he’s simple as a scarecrow sometimes. He lives in the moment, doesn’t fret a lot. He likes to move his body through the weather, look at the sunshine, eat, smoke pot, lots of sex, and he likes to drive drive drive deep into the night because that is mostly what life is like—you can’t see what’s in front of you and anything can jump in your path or wander into your mind.

It’s Springtime. I love the sun, but it can make me wander into my mind. My brother Kim is dead. He died about four years ago around this time. I remember wandering around and crying, searching for a pay phone after I found a note from the neighbor whose phone I used to receive messages that my mom had called saying it was an emergency, I knew it was death, and I wanted the spirit to tell me who it was, but I was scared to know. My brother’s neck and spinal cord snapped when a truck ran head-on into him and his Harley. I have a picture of this in my mind—he has been thrown from his bike and it is him swirling head over foot on the cement road, not his bike.

Kim grew up in a rural area just outside Tiffin, Ohio, in an old farmhouse with his paternal grandparents. I remember his grandma wore prescription glasses tinted dark. She was nice, and they had chickens and horses. She grew dozens of different flowers. They were country people who knew how to take care of themselves better than city people—they grew their own food, and could fix their own cars and house, but back then it kind of baffled me. I grew up in a working-class neighborhood in Vermilion, Ohio, a larger town on Lake Erie. Most of the working people were displaced Appalachians, including my Mom, coming up from West Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee to work at the Ford plant on the outskirts of town. All of our ways of living self-sufficient were being replaced by stores and machines.

My brother was about 5’10” with blue eyes and long thick blond wavy hair like my Mom and my younger brother Butch. Butch and him had the same deep crackle at the edge of their voices which always raised up a note when they were being funny. Kim was taller by an inch, but the structure of their bodies was the same—firm-muscled, perfectly proportioned and smaller-framed. Even though Kim and Butch didn’t have the same father (none of us did except me and my sister), it was as if my mother’s genes held sway, just as she held sway over our love and hate, who would be together and who would be apart.

Me and Kim always loved each other even though we didn’t grow up together. In the few childhood photographs my family had of Kim, he is either with me only or is smiling only at me, not my parents or the camera. I realize now that in that smile was his wonder and love for the sister that got to live with their mother. My mother never really got close to her son until he was an adult. Before that she was always disapprovin’ at him about something—his girlfriends were sleazy, he wanted money from her, why wasn’t he working, he was gonna end up in jail like all the people he grew up with, those people think being in jail is a symbol for being a man. And Kim did end up in jail, county jail, for about a year. He was busted for selling pot and possessing stolen motorcycle parts. Thereafter he said, “Don’t do the crime, less you can do the time.”

My mom had Kim when she was 16. This was in 1954. She was married to his father, Russell Cleveland, for about two months before he was sent to jail for breaking and entering. The marriage was annulled shortly thereafter. Looking back now, I realize that I don’t know how old she was when she gave him up to his paternal grandparents. Was he three? Did he scream for the mother that looked just like him? Did he remember her blond and blue-eyed just like himself? Did he have to remind himself that he looked like her every day so that his heart wouldn’t slow down and die out into that emptiness? The only explanation I got was that my father was mean to him—it wasn’t his son—and that was part of the reason she didn’t keep him.

(Into this light we now gather. I can see Kim now and
his hands are leaves and he says, look Joy—there is all this life in them and they are as delicate as the blood that carries life to us—love, death, clots, dreams—and in your blood is me. You were born with this beauty to see everything—the sad and the beautiful. And this blood that bonds you to me is the river of souls runnin' through Appalachia and into Ohio and into our bones and our funny faces and sad hearts, and it will heal us. And though it speaks with thousands of faraway voices, and sometimes you just float and cry into your own soul, I am always with you—blood in blood, brother to sister, soul to soul, rivers flowing without end. And he grabs my hands with his leaf hands and we shake and cry like small trees next to this river and we are never apart.

My stepfather, Layne, worked as a clerk-typist for the railroad just as his father did. Layne was sadness all twisted up in a beer can and drunk down. Like a beast wandering our dark ground whose eyes have burst and fallen into the hills because of its breaking heart, he was solitary most of the time. But if you got too close he rushed at you. He became a blank face, a raging mouth, a black and cold energy fisted-up and settin' in a corner—it spread into the cracks of the walls and underneath the floorboards, it twisted the house up, made it crooked, and I ran from it. I tried to hide where I came from, I became complicated and broken.

Now maybe he dreamed of traveling the rails in the summertime, of hearing the sound of crickets in the empty yellow fields alternate with the slow clacking of the train wheels. Maybe he saw the stars bursting and falling into other people's hands and he made a wish and the train ran hard into the night like lost things do, and the wind rushed against him and ripped the ghosts off and he was finally free.

My mom was always trying to find a friend. She worked in a nautically-themed restaurant on the lake. In the humid Ohio summers she worked five nights a week during the busiest season and dropped to three nights a week during the off season. Most of the burden of cooking, cleaning, and raising kids was on her plus the strain of having to cover her sadness for so many people who might pay you off if you're nice enough or detached enough, or tall enough or short enough. Dreams died in the dust that settled on mom's tables and were resurrected again in the glasses of wine she had after work. When she got home she didn't want us near her, she wanted that friend. There were women at work she tried to hang with, women who knew about books she hadn't read, women who had college degrees or were working on one, but they excluded her from their most intimate gatherings. So when she came off shift, Layne would be drunk, sitting in the backyard and staring at the black.

Maybe when my stepfather dies, he will ride his train into the world of changing skies—a red one for the heart he cannot find, a blue one for flying high, a yellow one for the summers he can't feel anymore, a black one where he can see the fires of the ancestors and be in awe again.

Kim was four years older than me. I started runnin' with him when I was fourteen. My first drunk was on lime vodka at a party in his first apartment in Tiffin. Our Grandpa
Prindle came up and asked if I had been drinking. No, Grandpa, No. I kept sneaking sips and my Bro turned the other cheek, so to speak. When I was fifteen he started picking me up real regular on the weekend. He had some old white car he was always working on that had bucket seats, and when he brought his friend Perk with him, I sat on Perk’s lap. I rushed from the kisses, then rushed from the pot, then from the kisses ... the whole 90 miles from Vermilion to Lodi, Republic, and Attica—our small town stomping grounds. The pot sent the kisses into the center of me where they turned into liquid and flowed into every cell of my body then raised me up to enter every layer of experience, and I breathed in the life heat of it all—of the night wind where it entered my skin and starlight on cricket backs, tree branches rushing in out of moonlight and music woven through the breath we shared when we kissed. Perk taught me how to merge with everything. He made my river shake. All of it saved my life at the center of me where they turned solid—Oh tell my baby sister not to do what I have done. I was a sad whore and he was a sad man singing and crying, sitting in a little red house, stuck in a sad place and I was with him and we were so far from home.

(And now I feel lost. In my life I am alone, alone as a skeleton, a secret, a breath unmet by another’s breath, no man standing on a shore, no sea flooding for me and I will wander this earth and I need Kim traveling with me. Where are you my brother? Will you stay by me tonight?)

Kim used to say to me, “Just be cool little sister.” The first time Kim left me at his house to do something separate from me, I yelled and yelled. I was heartbroken. I kept asking him what he was gonna do, what could he be doing? Something wrong, I bet—stealing, sleepin’ around. I had to stay and talk to his wife. He had gotten her pregnant when she was 17 and he was 19. He couldn’t hold a job down too good and she was upset with him often enough. He was with his buds and me a lot. She was from a “good” rural family, honest and hard-working. She was sweet looking and soft-voiced with shoulder length honey blond colored hair. She was kind to me and I liked her (my mother approved of her) but she was long sufferin’. She was bound to be the good girl hanging on to the bad boy, and he was bound to be running away. They had a baby girl together and a baby boy that died shortly after he was born. His girl developed brain cancer when she was ten. I haven’t seen her in years. I don’t know when the last time was that she saw her father, and she didn’t attend his funeral.

Mike has gone back home, and though he says it’s only temporary, I know he’s looking for something better—whatever dream comes in on the wind. I can see his blond hair and blue eyes, his tallness and slenderness, and I see my brother. Driving home one night on the Old Ronan Road, I was lonely and crying when my brother came to me. I knew from his comfort that I was trying to get him into my life through Mike—it can’t be done.

Mike called today. He talked about the sun and getting a redneck tan. Said he liked working on his momma’s house and that he wanted to fly in a small plane to his father’s worksite. I said, “You like adventures.” He said, “I do. If I had enough money, I’d sail around the world for a year.” “Yeah, be one with the wind,” I said. “Yeah, like on a motorcycle.” “Maybe that’s what Kim was, an old sailor from a past life but a biker in this one.” “Yeah, well, bikers wear earrings and have tattoos like pirates do.” I laughed.

But all men are sailors at sea. I’ve looked for my brother, the sailor-pirate, in every man I’ve loved. I wanted a man to be as simple and strong and moving as the wild wind out over the sea. Today I can see this wind coming for me. I’m standing on the shore, the sun is setting red and she spreads her warmth out across the water. He starts to rock the waves back and forth until they’re so deep and so high that I feel those stars burning on my tongue and the bottom of the sea on my knees. In this place, I die gently and let the sun carry me on her back as she walks across the sea to take me home.
Dry Hope

Walking to the pasture, I hear snap, crackle, and I hope to God not pop. It is so damn dry this year you could hang the wash on it. It’s as bad as 1988 already and looks to be the worst ever, and I’ve been in this country since 1926. Everybody remembers the fires in ’88 — Montana looked like a goddamned birthday cake.

I remember the cows. The stock ponds dropped so low the fish shit stank. We hauled water three times a day, and kept the cattle in the hill pasture till the grass gave out. The electric pump and gasoline engine may be miracles — hell, they are miracles — but they don’t change drought. The sky and earth and cow are still the same.

In a bad year they all go dry. Just a white ring on the earth where water should be. Makes you sick to see grass wither because the cows are too weak with need to eat it. My best cow just lost her calf, sweet little thing, Brown Swiss and Red Angus with a white star on her forehead. She was born the day the first wild rose bloomed. “Rosie,” I called her, and my wife reminded me about naming them too soon. So much easier to lose #367 out of #84 by the big Angus bull. No, not much easier. I feel every cow’s teats and know the calves’ thirst like my own.

I could sit all day by the spring underneath the old willow and not see a drop of fresh water, only the magpies happy to claim the place for themselves. I would sit there if I could, but since the summer I worked as a fire lookout, 1949, it’s just been too hard to watch the country go dry. I know what can happen. It’s not just money — if the hay’s bad, the cows starve or get sold cheap and the rancher’s in a bad way, and if the grain’s poor, too, the farmer takes a hit, along with the elevator operator and seed dealer and everybody else in town who can’t sell to those who haven’t got. It’s a little easier now; we’re all diversified, whatever the hell that means.
But no, it’s not just the money, it’s, hell, I don’t know, it’s just hard, seeing the grass brown up and knowing all the wheel line I could buy wouldn’t do any good if the reservoir don’t hold, seeing the cows barely able to lift their heads in the heat, hearing them bawl, knowing it’s too late for good rain and it means a lean winter and a worried one. We don’t need no more worries. They say the Indians here don’t do rain dances, and I never heard a one, but Lord, if it rained, I’d dance, this cane be damned.

Leslie Budewitz

The Flogging of a Dead Horse

hate is
a frost-kissed leaf, fallen to the ground.
dead already, dead again.

Eric Rutar
In rooms of glass (high walls)
skulls ribs vertebrae
leg bones arm bones
finger bones gut
feelings humming

jungles and barren plateus
pyramids tower
in bone-like dignity
clustered
in dead cities
they grow a flesh
of ferns and vines
their secrets mumble
like deaf dogs
begging tourist eyes
for a bone
bones, bones, pots and bones -
how many bones
can turn
your mind?

men with shiny buttons and shoes
walk around all day
guns on their hips protecting
the dead
ALL these things!
these big stone faces
fading in agony
swollen heads like deformed
children carved out of time
Who did this?
outside these rooms
a roar of fossil fuel
and people with skin
the color of volcanos
and eyes that see through dreams
they are shining my boots
and wearing
sandals.

Dave Thomas
Whatever the designated use of an area, the desired relationships between human and animal occupants are difficult to establish. I believe from observations to date that it is justifiable to state the general proposition that the more man desires to preserve the native biota, the more complex become his problems in joint occupancy.

-George Wright, 1930

I found articles in the library describing their favorite foods, the political warfare they caused, the emotional debates they provoked and the questions they were making people ask. In the 1920's, a dozen mountain goats were brought into Olympic National Park because they were fun to shoot. At the time, environmentalism wasn't even in the dictionary and Olympic National Park wasn't on the map. Wildlife biologists didn't give it a second thought when the animals were introduced. It seemed a good idea at the time. An appealing game animal screwed into the perfect little niche. Nature had failed to provide goats and so it made sense to correct a natural mistake. There were just a few dissenters who were already opposed to the hunting of mountain goats in the Cascades. Those voices faded into ineffectiveness and the goats were shoved into their new home. Today, the question of what to do with the goats has become, in the words of one ranger, "the park's Vietnam."

National park tenants for over half a century, subject to current park service policy, the goats are considered "unwelcome additions," "aliens in the park." They've moved tons of soil, and eaten plants you won't find anywhere else. The park service has spent over a million dollars on research and goat removals by helicopter, sterilization, darts, nets, and even a little shooting for biological sampling. A lot of them are gone now, taken by road and sky to places where they are welcome. That is, welcome to state lands run by wildlife departments that equate mountain goats with sport hunting and revenue-generation. But to get any more goats out alive is considered dangerous. Helicopters and people weren't made for such steady intimacy with the dizzy, precipitous home of the mountain goats. The National Park Service, feeling that they have exhausted all practicable alternatives, just finished an Environmental Impact Statement that has been hung up for the past four years. It advocates the shooting of the remaining population. After 56 years of fortuitous protection, the goats may again be legally shot, this time in the name of preservation rather than sport.

After spending time researching the facts and arguments, I wanted to see the goats to legitimize my armchair study. I spoke with the ranger who had been in charge of airlifting out a substantial part of the population in the late 1980's. He drew me a map to one of their remaining residential areas on a slip from a yellow message pad. He was the one Park Service person I spoke with who violated Park Service nicey-niceness, and showed me pictures of a drug-shot goat that stumbled and crashed down the mountain to its death during the capture operation. I could tell he was giving me his litmus test for bleeding hearts, who wouldn't appreciate the "intellectual" side of the issue. I made a point not to flinch when he showed me the picture, because I wanted him to speak freely with me. The goat's eyes were glassed over, stunned and resigned. Before I left, he told me he wished the National Park Service had had the "guts" to just go in and shoot them all in the early 1970's before the whole thing became high-profile. He would have done it, he said. Didn't mind being the bad guy.

His scrawled map led me up Switchback Trail to Klahane Ridge. This area once contained the highest population density of goats in recorded mountain goat history and is often used to illustrate the results of concentrated mountain goat impact. Klahane Ridge probably attracted a lot of goats because it was perfect terrain: lush alpine meadows for feasting mingled with craggy cliffs for escape and shelter. The NPS planted a salt lick there earlier to attract goats for capture
and research purposes. The salt leached into the soil, encouraging the goats to dig for their favorite seasoning, especially in the late spring, exacerbating their impact.

Klahane Ridge is quieter now. The last time NPS checked, two billy goats had been seen in the area. I kept walking a little further, looking closer at the lines and circles scrawled underneath “While You Were Out.” Though I didn’t explore very far, I didn’t really see what was wrong. I also didn’t know what I was looking for. Goat impact isn’t always obvious to the public. Without a trained eye, you still see vegetation, not realizing that it’s altered by disruption. Some wallows look like sandtraps while others just look like smudges of erosion, not starting without a lesson in their significance.

My friend called over to me. “You’re going to like this.” I tried to quietly gallop over to his patch of stale, crusty snow. Across it trailed the repeated prints of two big lima beans touching head to toe. The series of prints stamped a gentle arc across the snow remnant, then disappeared at the start of the rocky soil. I went further and explored. No goats. Just ghosts.

I tried again later. The map-maker also told me that some of the goats were removed by helicopters, airlifted like stork-babies away from their mountainside, and taken to Woodland Park Zoo. So Christmas Day, when Seattle was coated in a drizzly film, I went to the zoo. The goats were part of the Northern Trail Exhibit, where a noteworthy effort has been made to simulate the animal’s natural environment, albeit on the scale of a postage stamp. The grizzly was pacing back and forth on his lush, green simulated hill next to his simulated mountain creek. I wound through the maze of the exhibit. I finally saw the goats at a distance, poised, motionless on their fabricated rocky mountainside. These goats, I was told, were sterilized to keep them from over-populating their enclosure. These goats, at least, would benefit from foresight.

So I’ve only seen the goats up close on television, kicking up balls of dust as they clatter up steep mountainsides to flee from the camera-toting helicopter, or standing family-portrait style, the white robed stocky adults and the gangly cotton kids, posing for the newscasts on the destructive vegetarians.

Television news shows and popular magazines have featured the goat population in Olympic National Park. They are a lively subject of discussion in academic and scientific journals. After twenty years, the question of if and how the goats should be removed has hardened into a highly politicized and emotionally charged conflict between supporters of shooting the goats to protect the sensitive endemic plants, and opponents who feel such an action is tyrannical and unjustified.

Scientists can’t prove the goats will exterminate the seven endemic plants in goat habitat. The possibility just clearly exists. The goats dustbathe and wallow, pawing up clouds of dirt over their bodies to cool down and fend off insects in the summer, often displacing several tons of soil per wallow. In addition to disrupting soil, goats consume alpine plants, including the sensitive, threatened endemics. If the mountain goats were considered native, this activity would be considered a natural disturbance. And Olympic staff can’t entirely prove the goats never wallowed in the Olympic Mountains before they were brought in for a little hunting fun. However, geological history and the early documents from scientific expeditions where groups say they didn’t see any goats, or don’t mention goats at all, support that assumption.

The park also appears to be geographically isolate from colonization from other regions, judging by the topography of the peninsula and the several occurrences of endemism in Olympic plants and animals.

Current park policy calls for restoring, where possible, the native composition of the ecosystem. This includes removing introduced species, like mountain goats, that threaten native communities. The National Park Service asserts that the goat is exotic, and so the removal of goats from sensitive alpine vegetation areas is logical NPS policy interpretation. However, implementation in the “real world” is more difficult. This problem is made more difficult when the selected removal method is lethal and the “problem” animal is an intelligent, sentient animal, as endearing as the mountain goat. The definition of exotic is potentially easier to pinpoint when the animal is indisputably from a distant foreign land or when one agent is making the decision. It can become difficult to define an animal as exotic under less clear-cut circumstances, with several participants.

Animal rights group brandishes a couple of articles from the late 19th century which mention goat sightings, and sees the park service staff as ecological fascists. An anthropologist juggles a few theories and assumptions and asserts the possibility that the goats hung out on the Olympic Peninsula 10,000 years ago. A native plant protection group demands that the goats needed to be shot yesterday. The state Department of Wildlife, which manages
the bordering hunting lands, shrugs at the park’s science, disagreeing with the botanically-based conclusions that all of the game animals need to be deported. Some members of the public don’t understand the emphasis on non-native removal when human impact remains relatively uncontrolled. Writes one community member to a local paper, “I would have to suggest that no more time and money be spent on the goats unless there is some conclusive evidence that they are destroying people, causing mud slides, cutting down large trees or contributing to the decline of salmon.”

So now the goats are at the center of a controversy raising difficult questions about the true meaning of “exotic” and managing what is deemed an exotic on public lands: How should a native or an exotic be defined? Where should the geographical, temporal and empirical lines be drawn in the sand? How will that determine an animal’s fate? How strictly can land managers strive to restore and protect the ecosystem shared by different mandates? How should we decide? The National Park Service, other agencies and interest groups that influence decisions affecting wildlife will answer these questions in a variety of ways. When government manages habitat and wildlife, the “definition” of an animal is determined by an agency’s policies and mandate. On the other hand, animal rights supporters may critique policy applications which seem “slapped on” to complex problems involving animal welfare.

In simple terms, this is a story about how our characterization of an animal determines its destiny. This is a classic wildlife management controversy over the role of an animal and the role of a public land. These arguments over removing mega-charismatic immigrants tend to be highly charged emotionally and politically, and probably always will be. Preservationists see an ecologically interloping quadruped, hunters see perfectly good game animals and animal supporters see individual animals, unlucky consumers. The decision to define wildlife, manipulate the size or distribution of a population, to hunt or protect animals, infers a value position about human relationships to wildlife, and express certain beliefs about the appropriate human uses of animals. Though a definition may be rooted in scientific or philosophical terms, there is no absolute definition when an issue involves values, whether the priority is preservation of biological diversity, animal welfare, viewing opportunities or hunting availability.

It’s amazing to see how differently groups and agencies, that is, humans can look at a single animal. This is a difficult issue; in resolving it, we are tempted to be quick and decisive before other considerations seep in and muddle the clarity. One ranger’s favorite story (he told it to me twice with the same chortle), was how when he would give his goat talk to the Elderhostel groups, a sweet old bluehair would raise her hand and in a quavering, indignant voice say, “Why don’t you just shoot the bastards?” I think he enjoyed the story for it made the issue, for a moment, seem simple. Most of the rangers I spoke with were tired and jaded. They felt the goats should be shot, but not all were comfortable with the issue. One biologist who had worked with the issue since the late 1960’s grumbled about Olympic National Park staff being depicted as “soul-less”, devoid of care for the animals they chose to kill, after spending several years painstakingly laboring over alternatives. Shooting sounds clean and neat and cheap. It’s a one-step solution that doesn’t require perpetual funding, research and removal efforts. Maybe it will make the political skirmishes slow to a scuffling and everyone will have to move on. Yet with all the vying agencies and interest groups, it just won’t be that easy. “Pack it in, pack it out,” will never be easily applied to animals.

Like any turbo-charged emotional issue, the goats at Olympic National Park have been mainly discussed from the position of one particular agenda or another. Few approaches, without oversimplification, address both sides of the dilemma: protection of biodiversity and threatened species and consideration of the welfare of animals that we have “misplaced.” We’re moving into a world of paradox. Right when we see the environment slipping between our fingers and stretching at the seams, we’re ready to appreciate and salvage the remaining variety. And we’re also trying to listen to the voiceless animals. But in cases like this it seems we can’t do both. Few approaches address the fact that ethics is an environmental issue and we need to start choosing between firmly held sets of values to make difficult decisions about cleaning up some of the messes that we’ve made.
the Old Masters had
a koan
(passed on to me in college):
“What is the sound of one hand clapping?”

five years -
and much pondering of dandelions later -
i offer my own:
“What is the sound of the Milky Way sucking its thumb?”

Eric Rutar