The Teller Issue

John Elder on awakening to conservation
Susan Tomlinson canoeing in dry country
Danielle Lattuga listening to the elephants
Photo credits

Front & Back Covers: Del’Aurore Kyly

Inside Cover: Darren Guyaz
By the time the news hit,...it was so outrageous and enormous that it was hard to believe it was true.

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Camas provides a forum for the discussion of environmental issues and is a place for creative writing dedicated to the nature of the West.

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Printed on peroxide bleached, 100% post-consumer recycled paper
Bison Bob wields a hammer, flyrod or pen with equal enthusiasm and grace. Still saddle-sore from the ride up from Waldo, New Mexico, he's resting up in the Bitterroot Valley and chipping away at a graduate degree in Environmental Studies.

Tami Brunk is a Missourian by birth, but also loves the West. On a short break from graduate school, she spent part of the fall wandering through South America, and looks forward to returning to Missoula in the spring.

John Elder teaches English and Environmental Studies at Middlebury College in Vermont and is the author most recently of Reading the Mountains of Home and The Frog Run. His wife Rita and he live in the nearby village of Bristol, where they also operate a family sugarbush with their three children.

Jeff Kessler taught elementary school for four years in Los Angeles. After a stint in graduate school he has found his way back into the classroom at the Missoula International School.

Danielle Lattuya has claimed Montana as her home since 1996, believing that it is some perfect refuge between Vermont and Africa. She lives happily with her two unemployoed herding dogs, a highly dextrous cat and some of the most wonderful people in the world. She thinks everyone should dance at least three times a week, even if it's just around the living room in their underwear.

Melissa Matthewson was raised in California and this is her first year of graduate school at the U of M. She has spent several years working in California as an organic agriculture advocate and someday hopes to buy a farm in Oregon or Montana.

Ryan Newhouse moved to Missoula in 2002. He had no job, and so instead learned to fly fish. He's in his first year of graduate school. When he's not fishing or writing, he's spending time with his wife, one small cat, and one noisy cat.

Susan Tomfinson is an Assistant Professor in the Honors College at Texas Tech University, where she directs the Natural History and Humanities undergraduate degree program. She loves life.

Jeremy Watterson grew up in Wolf Point, Montana and is a sociology major at the University of Montana. This is his first poem in print.

Dave Bolch is a massage therapist for the United States Postal Service cycling team. His camera is a constant companion to races around the world and in the US.

Darren Guyaz is originally from Maine but finds Missoula to his liking. He enjoys photographing mud wrestling and nature.

Nancy Q. Kirk is a social worker in Missoula but a nature photographer by secret desire. She's had 20 years of delight in wandering, capturing, and sharing the beauty of our planet in publications, slide presentations, and exhibits.

Def'Aurore Kyly calls herself a native Oregonian and currently resides in Portland, Oregon. She enjoys traveling and adores the outdoors and her boyfriend Tim.

Tim McMenamin lives in Portland, Oregon. He has been an amateur photographer for the past 8 years and spent a month of his summer exploring the wild lands of the Southwest.

Sacha Pealer is an Environmental Studies student at the University of Montana. She's spent the last five years working as a field biologist in Maine, Alaska and Wyoming.

Janelle Stanley works in IT for the steady pay, but prefers to spend her time writing, running and taking pictures with her good old-fashioned 35mm camera. She lives in Massachusetts with her husband and very large cat.
On the Nature of the West

According to family legend, I was conceived on a couch in an old house not far from the northern bank of the Columbia River. I like to lay claim to that event as proof that I am a native Westerner, despite having spent the first part of my life in the Midwest. Like a steelhead thrashing upstream to its natal waters, once I caught the scent of the West again, I knew it was where I belonged.

I was twelve years old when I first crossed the hundredth meridian. My father and I chose to trade the desolation of winter in southwest Michigan for a Christmas with family in southwest Washington. Mesmerized, nose pressed to the airplane window, I watched the flat geometry of farmland gradually give way to dry, rumpled hills, then the jagged peaks of the spine of continent, arrayed in dazzling white snow and deep blue shadows. On the other side of the Rockies, there were no breaks in the clouds, and I read a book until the plane began its descent into Portland. In a maneuver with which I am now intimately familiar, the plane banked steeply, losing elevation at the same time. The clouds gave way to deep green forested hills. Real hills. In Michigan, where they have to build ski runs on top of closed landfills in order to make downhill skiing a possibility, folks would call them mountains. But I knew these were only hills, because the snowy base of Mount Hood was just barely visible beneath the clouds, hinting at greater heights. Another dip of the wing, and the Columbia hove into view, a vast, shimmering, silvery pool of light so alive it threatened to overtake the dark basalt cliffs holding it in check. Just as we leveled out for the landing, the skyscrapers of downtown appeared in the distance, bright rectangles against a backdrop of still more forest.

That first breath of damp, fir-scented air was electrifying. And the second, and third. My aunt and father, engaged in conversation in the front seat, didn’t notice that I’d rolled the window down and was sniffing the cool breeze like a dog. Or that I was staring so hard at the hills and mountains and river and trees that I hardly had time to blink. I wanted to hoard every sensation, to possess the landscape as much as it already possessed me. I wanted to know the name of every tree, rock-hop along creeks tripping down the narrow valleys and look beneath fallen logs to see what lived there. I wanted to, as Wren Farris says in her essay in this issue, “search for the interior heart of this one wild thing”—any wild thing, so long as it was in the West. I wanted the story of my life to twine with the story of this place, for one to be indistinguishable from the other.

And it has: the West has been home for half my life now, and like many others who feel its pull, I’ve wandered its forests and deserts, rivers and shorelines, seeking the source—the nature of the West. What I’ve come to believe is that there is no one definitive thing that makes the West what it is—even beyond the dry line of the hundredth meridian, scratched in the thin topsoil of high plateaus, you still find rainforests and perennially green valleys. There are plenty of people here who are barely aware that the frontier ever existed, or that, as Bison Bob points out in his essay in this issue, it closed a hundred years ago. Tami Brunk’s essay on a bioregional gathering in Peru reminds us there are people all over the globe who care as passionately for their landscapes and communities as we do, and John Elder, a Westerner turned Vermonter, points out that “conservation” is a complicated concept no matter which side of the continent you call home.

What makes the West what it is has more to do with what it inspires than the physical, tangible features of its terrain. It is that impassioned search for the story of the land, that desire to belong that is so powerful it seems brutal at times, which defines the West. More than any interlude on a couch, it’s what makes me a Westerner. Here in these pages, you will find the stories of those who have taken their search for the story of the land out into the world and brought the lessons learned there to bear on how we live our life here. From Libby, Montana to the plains of Africa, each has some essential truth to offer, something that will take root in this rocky soil and grow.

-Katharine Hyzy
Reflections from the Teller Workshop

Three days into our group's time together at Teller and we were in the zone. Walkabouts, workshops on the essays that emerged from our descriptive studies and memory pieces, and conversations about our backgrounds and goals as writers came to feel like pulses in a larger creative rhythm. Before lunch on May 31st we were discussing Leslie Marmon Silko's essay "Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination" and decided to take the following sentence as a prompt for our next journal entries: "Whatever the event or the subject, the ancient people perceived the world and themselves within that world as part of an ancient continuous story composed of innumerable bundles of other stories."

Here's what I wrote as we turned to our notebooks under the shade of those ranch-house cottonwoods: "A community of writers on retreat is a bundle of stories. We gather together and learn of each others' lives and aspirations, through our essays and our conversations alike. We also begin to create new stories, linked together by mountains like the Three Sisters that rise above our circle, as well as by the shared meals and the intensity of our days. I appreciate the experience of creativity as a collective effort, an antidote to the excessive emphasis on individuality and uniqueness that can cast writing in such a neurotic light. How encouraging to pursue our work in a supportive and functional community and within the context of a specific ecosystem. Besides, it's fun to participate in each others' projects."

The essays by Danielle Lattuga and Susan Tomlinson printed in this issue of Camas convey the trust that is essential to both a wholesome community and an adventurous piece of writing. My preferred definition of the word "essay" is as a verb, meaning "to take a chance." To engage with such powerful experiences as these two writers do requires faith both in their own ability to shape complex experiences into literature and in the existence of empathetic and discerning readers. The daring that connects a firelit memory of elephants in Tarangire with the picture of a friend's newborn on the internet, or that superimposes an image of canoeing a west Texas river onto a near-fatal automobile accident can also offer a surprising, authentic, and nourishing sense of wholeness. These two pieces of writing reflect the memorable work achieved by everyone, without exception, in this community of writers. It was truly a privilege to be a member of it.

- John Elder
Huckleberry Wine

Farm-to-College Gets Campus Eating Locally

In the spring of 2003, the University of Montana in Missoula took a giant leap forward in preserving both the environment and the local economy when it began exploring the possibility of purchasing locally grown food with its $2.5 million a year food budget.

On May 8th, four environmental studies graduate students at UM made their vision of large-scale local food purchasing a reality with a well-attended breakfast entitled “Montana Mornings.” This tasty breakfast featured farm-fresh food grown only in Montana, and officially launched the Farm-to-College program. To further the program’s goals, two of the graduate students, Crissie McMullan and Shelly Connor, have been hired by UM Dining Services to research options for increasing the university’s local food purchases.

McMullan’s and Connor’s progress to date includes a number of environmentally-friendly changes within UM Dining Service, including a switch to only locally processed and regionally grown safflower oil and buying and using local produce like apples and tomatoes when in season. A major contract is also under way to purchase Montana wheat products.

McMullan is enthusiastic about the future of institutional local food purchasing. “The Farm to College program shows UM’s dedication to the state and local economies,” she says. “We re-circulate money within the community and support local farms. It’s exciting to be modeling local food purchasing for other large-scale food buyers.”

The Farm-to-College program is based on the premise that food shipped from large corporations must travel thousands of miles, and is bred for storage, not taste. However, food grown nearby—on small, privately owned farms—can often be eaten the same day it is harvested. Connor and McMullan explain that supporting the local Montana food producers helps support the farming lifestyle, and conserves the beautiful landscape that accompanies these ranches and farms.

Connor says, “We’re building relationships with all types of Montana agriculturalists, especially many of the small growers near Missoula. There are tons of possibilities for buying local in this state, all of which encourage sustainable community development.”

-G Hiro Ramirez

Garden City Lives Up To Its Name

The heat of the 2003 summer did more than spark fires in Northwest Montana: it also created conditions for a bountiful growing season for Garden City Harvest, a Missoula non-profit dedicated to ecologically-conscious food production. GCH managed to expand its operations this past season, growing tons of high-quality food for Missoulians. Since its inception in 1995, Garden City Harvest (GCH) has operated the network of community gardens in the city, and has partnered with the University of Montana to run the PEAS (Program in Ecology, Agriculture, and Society) Farm in the Rattlesnake.

GCH’s five community gardens are located across the city of Missoula, and provide access to land, water, and tools, giving people the opportunity to grow food who would otherwise not have the resources to do so. There are over 100 community gardeners in the GCH program growing nutritious produce, beautifying neighborhoods, and sharing knowledge with each other.

At each of these community gardens a portion of the land is put into food production for hungry Missoulians. This year that food production totaled 9,000 pounds and included everything from beans and tomatoes to winter squash. The Poverello Center, Missoula Food Bank, Joseph’s Residence, and the Watson’s Children Shelter were the beneficiaries of this locally grown produce.

The GCH/PEAS Farm in the lower Rattlesnake is an educational farm that teaches University students and community members about ecologically-conscious food production. With instruction, these students help to operate a CSA for 80 members in Missoula while growing the remainder of its crops for hunger agencies. In its second season in the Rattlesnake, the farm grew over 18,000 pounds of food for the Missoula Food Bank and 4,000 for the Poverello Center. This season the farm also began the Youth Harvest Program, which employed at-risk youth, striving to improve their situations through farming efforts.

The success of the farm and the gardens is largely attributed to the tremendous amount of help these programs receive from volunteers in the community. Those wishing to learn about farming and gardening are encouraged to take part in the efforts of GCH and are rewarded with produce from the sites. This “Volunteer for Veggies” Program, which accounted for over 2,000 hours of work from individuals and groups, has proven to be a great way to involve the community in these agricultural endeavors.

The success of GCH amounts to much more than the pounds of food that these edible greenspaces produce. The efforts of GCH also help create vibrant communities through the
enhancement of the local food system, community greening and the development of educational and employment opportunities, reaching diverse groups of people through the simple act of growing food.

For more information about the Garden City Harvest Project call (406) 523.3663.

- Joellen Shannon

It's Time To Yaak

The Idaho Panhandle and Kootenai National Forests are up for their 10-year Forest Plan revision. Tucked into the northwest corner of Montana on the Idaho and Canadian borders, the Yaak Valley is part of the Kootenai National Forest. Ignored, neglected, and clear-cut, this particular valley has been severely mismanaged for decades.

In any given year, the Yaak Valley has given up more timber than any other valley in the state of Montana, and the Kootenai National Forest is the most fragmented forest in the state. Despite this, the Yaak is also known as the wildest and most unprotected land in the lower 48. Often called "Montana's only rainforest," the valley contains Montana's few remaining stands of old-growth larch, cedar and hemlock. Through years of mismanagement, the Yaak has been left with only 15 roadless areas, which create a pearl necklace of habitat for various wildlife—most notably the grizzly bear. Population reports on the number of grizzly left in the Yaak vary from as few as 11 to hardly over three dozen.

The Yaak is also notable as the setting for books written by Rick Bass, both fiction and nonfiction. Rick Bass is a co-founder of the Yaak Valley Forest Council, a community grassroots organization trying to protect the Yaak. Formed in 1997, the YVFC’s preferred method of lobbying is letter-writing. This is a critical time for the Yaak and its residents—human and non-human. The new Forest Plan will determine the Yaak’s future for the next 10 years. The Yaak is 97% public land, so the public should have a voice in what happens there. The Forest Service and Montana’s senators and representatives are key figures to whom letters should be written. Letters can be strong and lengthy, detailing how the Yaak should be protected as wilderness—the only true and lasting protection—or they can simply say “Save the Yaak.” Every letter helps. Learn more about the Yaak Valley on the web at www.geocities.com/yaakvalley/; or visit the Yaak and witness first-hand why it is worth fighting (and writing) for.

-Missoula to Miami

This November, the Montana Fair Trade Action Alliance—a delegation of 12 activists from Missoula and the Bitterroot Valley working to educate their communities on the effects of the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA)—traveled to Miami, Florida for the FTAA ministerial. There, the group joined thousands of other labor, environmental and human rights activists raising their collective voices against “free” trade and its negative social and environmental effects, and offering an alternate vision for a world economic system based upon social justice and planetary stewardship.

The activists arrived in Miami to discover that the city had been converted into a police state. A steel fence cordoned off a large section of the downtown area where the trade talks were convening, and over 2,000 fully armored riot cops patrolled the streets, along with two military armored personnel carriers and several helicopters.

Althought protests were peaceful, the police indiscriminately used chemical weapons, electric tasers and rubber bullets on non-violent protesters and bystanders alike, resulting in over 100 documented injuries. About 240 people were arrested, including three members of Montana delegation who had been attending a peaceful jail support vigil when riot cops attacked the crowd with pepper spray and tasers. Amnesty International and the United Steelworkers of America have called for independent investigations of police conduct.

Protesters were relieved to hear that the FTAA talks resulted in little more than an agreement among participants to keep meeting, with a final document scheduled for approval by 2005.

Because Montana has a significant agricultural sector and natural resource base, the impacts of corporate globalization will be felt here as well as abroad. The policies codified by “free” trade agreements such as the FTAA explicitly subordinate the sovereignty of democratic governments to the power of corporate capital. For instance, should the Montana state legislature finally decide to listen to Montana farmers and protect them from the economic and environmental uncertainties of genetically modified wheat, under “free” trade agreements it will be unable to do so. As under the WTO trade agreements, the FTAA will make it illegal for a member country to do anything that will infringe upon the legal profit-earning rights of multinational corporations. The state of California, currently wrapped up in litigation for banning MTBE, a toxic gasoline additive made by a Canadian manufacturer, is learning the hard way that their sovereignty comes second to corporate profits.

-On A Wing and A Prayer

At 1:30 p.m. on November 5, 2003, one very large wish came true for the Peregrine Fund in the Grand Canyon National Park: the first California condor chick hatched in the wilds of Arizona took its first flight. The chick brings the total number of free condors in Arizona to 36, the highest concentration of wild condors in the world.

For more information and photos, visit the Peregrine Fund's website: www.peregrinefund.org

-Dereck Goldman

-Peregrine Fund

-Camas, Fall 2003
We were walking in the winter woods with the tracker Sue Morse. Our eyes were fixed on the ground, as we searched for more of the bobcat prints we had just traced around the base of a cliff. When Sue called to us, we figured she must have picked up the trail. But instead, when our small group had gathered around her, she pulled back the bough of an overhanging hemlock and released it over our heads like a plucked bowstring. We looked up, startled, as the snow that had been packed on the branch swirled around our warm cheeks and spangled against the sky. As we stood there, transfixed, she recited Robert Frost's short poem “Dust of Snow”:

The way a crow
Shook down on me
The dust of snow
From a hemlock tree

Has given my heart
A change of mood
And saved some part
Of a day I had rued.

Seven years later, the gift of this poem still comes back to me when snowshoeing through a forested landscape, where drifts hang in the trees around my head as well as lying under foot. I'll sometimes push on a branch with my ski pole then look up into the enlivening micro-squall that follows. Such moments remind me of the wildness behind all this white serenity and release me for a moment from whatever map or agenda I may just have been following.

Recently, I also had occasion to remember Frost's “change of mood” while skiing with my friend Peter Forbes on the hilly trails that wind around Craftsbury, Vermont. On this particular outing I never did stop to dislodge snow from an overhanging bough. The truth is that I could barely keep up with my swift companion, even when he tactfully slowed down or called my attention to a scenic outlook that seemed to require a long, reflective pause. But our intermittent conversation included one remark on Peter's part that widened my eyes and shifted my perspective like a wintry spritz in the face. We had been talking about the relationship between Buddhist practice and the environmental movement, when Peter asked whether the concept of conservation might not be, on one level, just another form of attachment. It certainly involved a powerful effort of clinging to something precious, he pointed out, with all the personal and social suffering implied by such attempts in a world of transience. We needed to rethink our approach to caring for the natural creation, in order to find a more balanced and participatory model.

This was a startling challenge to a core value the two of us shared. In our professions, our memberships, our writing, and our daily choices, we both had long identified ourselves as conservationists.

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Letting go of the word felt like a kind of free-fall. In fact, though, the received vocabulary of environmentalism has also been taking a lot of other hits. Two provocative essays, by the environmental historian William Cronon and the writer and farmer Wendell Berry, are representative of these challenges to the lexicon. In “The Trouble with Wilderness,” Cronon argues that the term “wilderness” expresses a particular social and intellectual history more than an objective reality in nature; he further suggests that such language can actually reflect alienation from the land rather than intimacy with it. In “Conservation Is Good Work,” Berry takes aim at the word “environment” itself. By implicitly separating human beings from what is “around” us, the word is “a typical product of the old dualism that is at the root of most of our ecological destructiveness.”

Rethinking these words, and others like them, need not lessen anyone’s commitment to protecting wild habitat and endangered species, to practicing stewardship of natural resources, or to changing the practices that lead to global climate change. But there is something to be said for a spirit of detachment from the language with which we surround such projects. We need, even amid the deep snows, to stay light on our feet.

If the word “wilderness” has become a serious point of contention, it’s worth exploring different language with which to affirm the value of roadless areas and of unbroken canopies for certain species of wildlife. Such an affirmation certainly does not cover all the important elements of the wilderness-ethic—an environmental philosophy for which I continue to feel a strong personal affinity. Still, a provisional shift in our way of talking may allow us to move forward with individuals and groups from whom we previously felt divided. Similarly, if the word “environmental” and its variants seem to be obstructing certain conversations, we might sometimes want to reclaim the language of citizenship as we consider our society’s place in the larger community of life.

We don’t need to abandon these important terms forever; I won’t be able to do without them even until the end of the present essay. But they, and we, could still use a break from time to time. As far as that goes, newer terminology like “sustainability” and “sense of place” will doubtless seem problematic soon enough. That’s good. The collapse of accustomed ways of thinking and speaking can let us fall back into a bracing presentness. Which recalls that word “conservation.” Distraught as many of us are about heedless development in our home landscapes, not to mention about the dismantling of earth’s living systems and the diminishment of biodiversity, it is understandable for a certain clenched and trembling quality to come into our thinking. Our own little efforts feel so inadequate in the face of present destruction and impending dangers. At such a time, it is possible to fall into despair about stemming the tide of harmful changes, or to become bitterly alienated from what seem to be the culture of consumerism and the politics of vested interests. I speak from experience. But these emotions ultimately make us rigid, and slower to adapt to changing circumstances and opportunities. Further, they can dampen our joyful awareness of wild beauty—the wellspring of our most vigorous environmental activism. This is when we need to be shaken up by flurried arrivals and a splash of unanticipated weather. Such refreshing openings to what David Abram calls the “more-than-human world” can restore the elasticity of our spirit and allow us to return to our civic and environmental commitments with new resolution.

Any sudden loss of bearings, within our multitasking, overcommitted lives, can leave us breathless and insecure for a moment. But it is also an exhilarating relief to tumble through the prefab words and concepts and to enter the always-welcome reality of what’s-happening. Loss of certainty can be as arresting as the Northern Lights, when the

Nancy Q Kirk

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overhanging bough of darkness pulses into life and stops us in our tracks. Surely many of us feel, within such a moment of astonishment, “Yes, I remember now!” Koan study, too, can feel like bushwhacking home through winter woods. So many handfuls of snow, sometimes whapping us in the face, sometimes sliding slyly down the backs of our necks. Look out. Look in. Wake up. For environmentalists (that word again, what can I say?) this can also mean recollecting what Gary Snyder calls our 50,000-year Homo sapiens history. From such a vast perspective, the institutions and technology of post–World War II society no longer seem so inescapable. Bearing the millennia in mind may help us to cultivate a spirit of vibrant celebration within our communities, and to feel that, rather than running against the tide, we are (quoting Snyder yet again) “in line with the Main Flow.” A refreshing rhythm of turning away from our effortful agendas may help us return with new vigor and pleasure to the work of conservation.

Frost’s poem and my friend’s question were both koans—surprising, momentum-reversing words that continue to reverberate. Haiku, as R. H. Blyth and Robert Aitken have both so memorably discussed, can serve in a similar way. In their pithiness, they strip away the familiarity or routine which so often muffle our perception; in their surprising juxtapositions, they sharpen our awareness of seasonal tides drawing through what might have seemed homely details.

When our family was living in Kyoto, we visited the Basho-An, a simple hut on the forested slope behind Kompukuji Monastery. Basho lived here in 1670, as did his great successor in haiku Buson, almost a century later. Slender rectangles of wood, not so much thicker than a piece of paper, dangle from trees on some of the surrounding paths. Onto them have been brushed haiku by the two poets or occasionally by their present-day admirers. At first, these small placards, shifting in the breezes after the autumn leaves had fallen, felt superfluous to me. But eventually I came to feel that, though I wouldn’t want to brush past poems on every hike, these tokens of appreciation for poetry were touching and meaningful in their own right. They clarified that falling back into a presentness unaligned with our expectations need not imply turning away from other human hearts, any more than the love of wilderness must mean eradication of our social bonds.

We sometimes assume that art is the expression of an original, isolated imagination, often amplified by a spirit of estrangement. But there is a great tradition in poetry, running through poets like Basho, Wordsworth, Rilke, and Frost, and extended by contemporaries like Mary Oliver, that celebrates moments of refreshment and consolation in the larger natural world. This is not a linear, continuous tradition. Wordsworth and Rilke would never have read Basho, for instance. But this landscape of kindred perceptions and revelations has become available to us today, just as the study and practice of Buddhism, for instance, flourishes here in New England in ways that our ancestor Frost could never have anticipated. Those poems spangling in the trees around the Basho-An, like “Dust of Snow,” can continue to gust and swing in our minds. They remind us how others, too, have found moments of release into the presentness on
which we too depend every day of our lives. Within every community of effort there is a community needing to awaken, over and over again, to the world beyond our projects and expectations.

A poem can serve both as door into a more spacious world of natural beauty, and as a reminder of the long history of human sensitivity to it. Master Hakuin's Zazen Wasan ("Chant in Praise of Zazen") contains the lines

How near the truth yet how far we seek,  
like one in water crying  
"I thirst!"  
Like a child of rich birth  
wan'dring poor  
on this earth,  
we endlessly circle the six worlds.  
(Philip Kapleau's translation)

Within the landscape of poetry we find both a prompt to immediate sensation and the reminder of a larger story to which we belong. The dust of snow shaken down from a hemlock tree removes us neither from history nor from the human community. It reminds us that those realities exist within an interwoven world, in which isolation is always an illusion and a misdirection of our efforts.

Frost's poem echoes not just with Vermont's winter landscape but also with a particular haiku by Basho. Here is a literal English translation (the translation is mine.)

On a bare branch  
a crow alights—  
autumn's end.

This branch releases no snow, but it does bounce under the weight of a large bird settling brusquely onto it. The Japanese word tomarikeri includes both the root of the verb "to stop, stay, or settle" and two syllables—keri—added not for any grammatical reason but just to signal the branch's springy up-and-down on the level of sound. Startled, we look up into a honed world—black silhouettes of tree and crow sharpening the edge of a season. We can find the dramatic outline of that tree in each of the haiku's first two kanji. "Kare" combines the radicals for "tree" and "old," while "eda" is formed from "tree" and "limb."

I appreciate Peter Milward's translation of the last line (aki no kure) as "the fall of autumn," an acknowledgement of the seasons within seasons so essential to a Zen perception of nature. Something is always ending, something always beginning. Here in Vermont, too, autumn has its spring, when the maple leaves first turn yellow and red and the sumacs flame up; its summer, when the maples' crimson and orange flood the mountains, with russet contributed by the oaks and gold by the larches; and the hush of its fall, when branches are bare but the snow has not yet arrived. In that moment of suspension before the next big event, a crow flexes a leafless branch, reminding us that life continues on its way, unregulated by our calendar of human expectations.

How fortunate we are—conservationists, environmentalists, lovers of wilderness, earnest citizens—for moments in which we forget our language, our projects, and even our names.

Soon enough, we will turn back to our lifetime projects and our daily work. But it's always good to remember that our path is leading home, under branches shimmering with unexpected but familiar life.

This essay first appeared in the Fall 2003 issue of Tricycle. Used with permission of the author.
Ars Poetica

I wrote this poem in the quiet of the night.
I was alone, unsure and without sight.
My pen crept in small half-circles,
exploring the edges of lengths and lines
with such devotion and style
that birds sang with soft breath the praises of accomplishment.

The pen paced to the end and back,
thinking and rethinking what it means to
carry a poem in its belly, and to term it
in metaphors for those who know truth.

The truth is this: hidden.

A poem is a bird flight, a cat fight,
a hindsight, all held within
the realm of truths and half-light.
It's a guide in a world where
the sea meets shore, and there is love.

To make a poem any other thing than
what it is can surely be poetry.

My eyes are impressed with sounds,
and my ears ache with shapes,
but it is my tongue
that knows where to hide—deep in the bones of language,
half-truths, and side shows.

My tongue wrestles a bear
as she slowly surges from her dormant lair
and walks straight up my throat,
four fists digging in the mountain ground.

To know where you stand in the face of this
is truth enough itself.
But knowing more that the truth you seek
already stands behind you, breathing down your spine,
is knowing that the bear is there to feed,
in the quiet of the night.

-Ryan Newhouse
In Catavina

This is the privilege I know of living—
to watch on high plateaus of wide boulders,
in deserts with dry fields of yuccas and prickly pear,
farmers grazing their cattle during the hottest part of day.
It is how I know this place, recognizing
we cannot have all things that please us.

I can see the farmer choose to watch a songbird—or hawk—then return to his work as I can write
the message that will call my lover home.
If he must, he can choose to walk
the long way home as I can choose to stay.

If I had not been a child of my country,
would I too look at this same farmer with such
marvelous eyes, and would there be days like these
where only a mosquito seems to find its
way to my mouth, where only from this perch
do I consider the shape of this central desert,
an empty landscape of washed out gulches and
 tumbleweeds, blistering on outcropped granite.

-Melissa Matthewson
Out here, where I grew up and still live, you are more likely to see the sign of water than the thing itself. Water is a mystery that arrives after a big rain, like a blessing or a gift, only to fade away as suddenly as it has come. It carves arroyos into the plains, where, after the violent pass of weather, they lie dry and silent most of the time. Geologists call them ephemeral streams, and truly, they are ephemeral in that they are short-lived, but they are also such in the sense that they are marginal—if something lives for only a day, it is on the edge of existing at all.

There is a fairly large ephemeral stream where I live that has a wonderful name: The North Fork of the Double Mountain Fork of the Brazos River. The stream is really just a dry tributary that feeds storm runoff into the larger, but still sketchy Brazos River. The Brazos itself has had several names, including the Tokonohono and the Maligne, but the one that stuck speaks to the critical nature of stream systems in dry country. Spanish explorers, near death from thirst, stumbled upon this river where it was flowing, drank from its salty waters, and, presumably feeling cradled by grace, named it el Río de los Brazos de Dios—the River of the Arms of God. The songwriter Andy Wilkinson calls el Río de los Brazos de Dios the river with the most beautiful name in Texas and therefore all of America. I believe he is close to being right.

If my little tributary were to shoulder its full name, then it would be the North Fork of the Double Mountain Fork of the River of the Arms of God. Maybe all ephemeral streams should carry names of such gratitude and lineage. They might then serve to remind us that like ephemeral streams, we, too, have only the most precarious hold on life.

If you did not know you were looking at a branch of the Brazos (and perhaps even if you did), you might see only a dusty ditch in a rough, plain landscape. Sometimes the ditch has scrubby brush in it, and on occasion murky runoff from city effluent, but it is otherwise mostly unremarkable.

Still, it entertains us. I tease my students: “What do you do when you drive over a bridge?” The ones from west Texas nearly always reply: “Look to see if there is water down there.” The students from elsewhere are baffled; they take it for granted that water can be found in a riverbed and so are unmoved by the possibility of its presence below. But the rest of us know. Water is an event in dry country.

(I also have to point out to my west Texas
It was folly that I bought it. I didn’t know a blessed thing about canoeing. The only time I can even remember being in a canoe was once many years before, when I was in high school. A friend and I were at a debate camp during the summer, and the host campus had a livery of lumpy Grumman canoes available for paddling a local river. I remember that we took it out on a windy day. We paddled downstream a bit. Easy enough, we thought. Then we turned around and tried to paddle back to the put-in. It seemed to take forever, paddling upstream and against the wind, and I came away from my first canoe experience thinking that canoeing was a very hard thing, and not especially fun.

Years later, when I’d finished my doctorate, my in-laws gave me a bit of money, and in a bizarre fit of impracticality that I cannot explain to this day, I bought a little solo canoe. It was a thirteen-foot, 36-pound, teal-colored Mohawk with cane seats. I ordered it factory direct, and six days later it arrived at a local freight office in a big cardboard box roughly the size and shape of a giant, rectangular banana. The men who helped me load it on my car were intrigued.

"A canoe," I said. They nodded politely but passed looks between them that told me that my cargo and I were curiosities worth talking about once I left. Who could blame them? We live where streams flow dry.

I tried to teach myself to paddle the way I learn most things—I researched the problem and gleaned...
my information from books. Then I took the little canoe out to a local playa lake at a park here in the city. The lake, unlike natural, non-urban playas, always has water in it because the city uses it for wastewater treatment. It is, perhaps, not the most elysian spot for sporting around in boats, and may explain why, though the city playas are in fact small, permanent lakes, you seldom see anyone on one. Of course, the reason may also be that people from a place where water is scarce simply don’t know what to do with it.

Anyway, a couple of times I took the canoe out to the park and launched my boat. I tried to practice the j-stroke, and the c-stroke, and even the draw, just like I remembered from the diagram in the books—but without much success. My trajectory on those trips can best be described as wiggly. Again, I decided that canoeing was harder than it looked. I stored the canoe and prepared myself to believe that buying it was a mistake.

A year or so later, I finally got the opportunity to put it on a river. We were planning to take some students on a field trip to our satellite campus in Junction, Texas and I decided to scout the geology. This was not unusual—I normally take scouting trips so that I might sound intelligent when the time for the field trip arrives. Junction got its name from the fact that two tributaries join together there—the north and south forks of the Llano River. The South Fork of the Llano flows through a state park and right past our campus, and it is a tradition to take students down this stretch in canoes. I knew this, and anticipated that we would do the same, so I went prepared. I strapped my solo onto the top of my SUV and drove to Junction, where summer classes were in session.

Jeff, a colleague, was teaching a geography field course and he offered to let me tag along on the canoe trip he’d scheduled for his class so I could check out the geology of the river. They hauled a trailer full of Grummans down to the put-in, and I followed with my sleek little boat.

A Grumman is a graceless thing. A staple at summer camps, where abuse of craft is expected, it is a metal tank of a boat. These specimens, dented and scarred from years of hard use at the hands of students ignorant of the ways of paddling, looked especially seedy next to my gleaming, teal-green, scratch-free polymer canoe. Jeff’s students looked at me with open respect when I unloaded and single-handedly carried it down to the water. I could tell they were thinking I was an expert. One of them asked how long I’d been canoeing.

I mumbled a vague reply, and let him think I knew what I was doing.

I flipped my canoe on the second turn of the stream. This rather quickly and effectively put to rest any ideas the students might have had about my prowess. It didn’t matter that nearly every other boat did the same thing. A person who owns her own canoe, especially a pip of a boat like mine, ought to be able to take it around a simple curve in the stream. I bobbed up from the water and dragged my swamped boat over to an eddy behind the point bar. Every sucking step I took in the green muck that lined the bank slowed my progress to the shore.

Some love affairs begin with pain. Such was mine with water.

My problem, though I didn’t understand it at the time, was not just that I didn’t know the j-stroke or the c-stroke, but that I didn’t know water. Until that moment I had never thought about water as a living thing, with personality and moods. Water had been a mere acquaintance, abstract and distant. Something to look for under bridges, but only as a curious sighting of a rare thing, like Big Foot, or Nessy. And like those
mythical creatures, I suppose I thought of water as primitive, and therefore uncomplicated. I could not have been more wrong.

After I righted my craft, I settled in and began, for the first time, to look at the water through which I traveled. At some indefinable moment on that trip, it suddenly seemed clear to me—and I cannot explain this any other way but to say that it was as if presented with a vision—that what I was seeing was not merely water, utilitarian and plain, but the miracle of two gases, joined to form beauty. And I knew: I was never to look at water in any other way again. The river had seduced me.

...what I was seeing was not merely water, utilitarian and plain, but the miracle of two gases, joined to form beauty.

You do what you can to be near that which you love, and so I became determined to learn how to paddle a canoe. I started looking for excuses to go canoeing. With other colleagues, Mark and Bert, I designed curriculums with canoeing components in order to entice students to sign up for environmental classes. All my field trips became river trips. We hired a guide, Jordan, from the student recreation center to run the trips, and I pumped him for lessons on both paddling and reading the river. And as I learned to read the river, I began to know water in a way I never had as a dry stream geologist. Static, lifeless, mid-channel bars and holes became fluid riffles and pools. Flood deposited boulders became rollers and rapids. Cutbanks and point bars became currents and eddies. Moving water breathed life into the signs I'd seen in arroyos. I began to have conversations with the streams I paddled.

And at night, I began to imagine waters. I created a waking dream, a "film" that I played over and over in my mind before I fell asleep, trying to picture the way water behaves in various scenarios, and trying to imagine how I might respond to it in a boat. There was one film in particular that I often watched in which I was looking for the perfect line around a curve in a river. Jordan once told me that a person who can read the river hardly ever has to use a paddle—the water's momentum does all the work. I became obsessed with this notion—it seemed to describe some intimate, perfect knowledge between paddler and water. And so I created this film to look for this perfect understanding.

It starts on the Llano at the put-in. The water is flowing beneath the low bridge into a pool. Below the pool, there is a curve where the river narrows slightly, but enough to speed the flow into subtle, barely perceptible rapids.

Picnickers line the river, some sitting on plastic lawn chairs, others standing on the banks with paper cups and plates in their hands. Children play in the pooled water. I hold the canoe against a grassy drop off and step in. The canoe bucks and glides against the surface of the water as it settles, ever so slightly, into the river beneath my feet. I kneel and feel the gentle rock of the canoe, its skin between me and the surface of the water. I use the paddle to swing the bow toward the narrow neck of fast-moving water, which gurgles against the boat as I feel the canoe catch the current. The children part long enough for my canoe to slide past and then come back together, like a swirling wake behind my boat. The river takes me and I am flying downstream.

I paddle in the straights for a while until I reach the upstream part of a meander, and the same bend that dumped me the very first time I took the canoe on the river. I let the boat slow and scout the turn. Water spills through a tight channel, forming a respectable current and a small set of rapids. The point bar is to
my right, the cutbank straight ahead. A cushion of water curls like a rope against the wall of the cutbank. The water reveals the line I need to take with startling clarity. The current forms a “v” of smooth water between churning roils. At first, I follow a line that is close to the middle of this “v,” but slightly to the right. It is not a line I would have taken when I first started canoeing rivers, but I have learned a thing or two. To the left of the “v”—the outside of the curve, where the momentum of the current is strongest—lies certain disaster. Follow this line, and my canoe and I will careen helplessly into the cutbank, and, to add to our pain, probably flip as we go. If I am tempted by the “v” to follow a course down the middle my chances are better, but I will have to work hard to maintain control. So I choose to slide just to the right and on the downstream side of the “v,” taking advantage of the power of the current, but not being ruled by it. When I am ready, I slip into the current and let the water pull the canoe toward the opening of the channel.

The canoe moves swiftly. Then, at the top of the bend in the stream, at just the right moment for some perfect compromise between maximum depth, speed of flow, and control, I place my paddle in the current and draw on the port side, leaning back to catch the water by the stem. I don’t need much force, because the paddle acts like a pivot and turns the canoe out of the stream’s main thrust. I ride against the cushion in front of the cutbank as the current slings me through the curve and delivers me into quiet water.

I could see this in my mind so clearly: pointing the canoe, the river taking me, planting the paddle, sliding past the cutbank into peaceful water. It was possibly the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. Each time I rolled the film, I found myself cradled by water’s grace. I could have watched it forever.

On a hot summer Sunday at the end of July, my husband and I were traveling on a highway on our way home from a niece’s wedding when the tread came off the right rear tire of our SUV. A witness says that the car swerved, then rolled once, bounced into the air and spun, struck the ground, flipped into the air again, and then, finally, landed and rolled four more times on the ground before coming to rest upright.

As we catapulted past her car, the witness saw our faces through the windshield and thought, ‘I’m looking at dead people.’

My injuries, as I understand them, were a basilar skull fracture, a fractured eye socket, a fractured sinus bone, a bleeder in my brain in the right temporal region, three deep scalp lacerations, two broken ribs, a punctured and collapsed lung, a bruised right shoulder, a sprained left shoulder, a sprained neck, a bruised spinal cord in the neck region, two chipped vertebrae, lacerations and windshield glass embedded in my left wrist above my artery. Walt suffered four fractured vertebrae, two scalp lacerations, a broken rib, bruised lungs, a broken collarbone, a broken humerus, a lacerated bicep, a sprained neck, and a fractured finger.

I remember none of it—not the accident itself, not the thirty minutes it took paramedics to cut us from the car, not the hour and twenty minutes it took the helicopter to get to us, not the thirty minute ride in the sky that saved our lives.

I take that back. I think I remember hands pulling me from the car, and hearing Walt moaning in pain. Other than that, though, the accident is a blank.

I remember more from the hospital: coming to consciousness and hearing the chirp of my heartbeat on a machine. The surgeon inserting a tube in my chest, and the sharp pain as it slid across the top of my lung. My sister Helen wiping vomit from my chin...
after they removed the airway that connected me to the ventilator. My brother Jack playing a recording of Walt's voice by my ear. My elderly mother holding my hand in the night.

I can't describe what it is like to know that something terrible has happened to you and you have no real memory of it. I can say this: I can't seem to make peace with it. My brain works at it constantly. The accident has become a tape loop. At night before I fall asleep, it has replaced the beautiful film of the water with a new film that tries to replay the accident, always in slow motion, always relentless. While I sleep, as I dream, it goes over and over the blank parts, working at filling them in. In the morning, when I am lying in bed in the darkened room, it whispers, as the images unfold, "And maybe this happened, and then this. Here is where your head hits the roof of the car. Here is the bone behind your eye cracking from the pressure. Here is where the door crushes your lung. Look at it."

My brain does such a good job at this I have flashbacks of the accident during the day that cannot possibly be true. Sometimes I actually see and feel something large made of glass and metal hitting my face, but nothing like that happened. My injuries—what I know of them—occurred when the back and top of my head struck the roof of the car. Nothing hit my face. I hit the back of my head hard enough to fracture two bones in my face, and my brain is trying to make some sense of this.

At one point, in an effort to understand what happened, I tried to write about the accident. This is how I started: "My bald spots are growing in."

After that: nothing. I tried filling in all of the blank bits with the medical reports and the email dispatches that flew around among our friends and families those weeks we were in the hospital. I showed the results to Michael, a friend of mine who is a writer.

"My bald spots are growing in' is great, but I need more narrative to read," he said. "I need more bald spots."

The problem is, there is nothing after bald spots. I have tried and tried to write about it, but the story keeps slipping from my grasp, like vapor. I find myself putting dots on the page, hoping that someone will connect them for me.

And perhaps that is the injury that bothers me most of all. There is a part of my life that has no narrative, no story. Or maybe this is the story: I don't know what happened to me. It is like looking for water and seeing only sign. I press my face against the wall of the arroyo and hear only thunder where I strain to hear voices.

Months have passed. I wake some mornings from one particular dream about the accident. In this dream, it is always just after the car has stopped rolling and come to a rest, upright and sideways to the highway. It looks like a crumpled gum wrapper. A soft lift of dun-colored dust circles the car, and there is a noise, like a sigh. Blood runs down my face as I stare stupidly at the air in front of me where the glove box used to be. I can't see Walt, but I hear him moaning.

After the dream, I lie in bed for a while and wait for it to fade. Walt lies sleeping fitfully on his back beside me, free from his body cast for a few more hours until he, too, awakens. I rise to find the cat waiting for me in the spill of moonlight from the window, his head tilted with expectation. He talks to me in cat murmurs as I pad stiffly through the dark to the utility room, where I place a handful of food in his bowl. I let the dog out and make myself a cup of tea. I wrap myself in a quilt and carry the tea upstairs and out onto my balcony, the fog of the nightmare still pulling against my skin. It is 4:30 am.

...continued on page 38...
Listen. Out in the night, I can hear something. My eyes probe the darkness, made darker in places by the hulking silhouettes of the baobob trees. I can hear something. But I feel it more. The fire is dwindling and hissing in front of us, our feet propped up on the stones that contain it. My friend and I have been sharing the story of his life. We talk of his father, who died not long ago. I can see how he is shedding his layers. His face softens in the flickering of firelight, as the words peel away. I know that he feels safe in this place with me, and it has taken him a long time to get here. I know that now is a time for listening, a chance for me to step outside of my own head.

Low murmur. Vibrations in my chest, sliding down the backs of my legs and making my toes twitch. It draws nearer, steadily, rhythmically, becoming a conversation. I whisper, “Shhh. I think it’s the elephants, wow, listen, where are they?” In the same breath, the darkness moves and shapes emerge. It is the elephants, and they are lumbering towards us. They whisper and hum. I can feel their gentle steps in my gut and my heart. We sit motionless, leaning back with our arms wrapped around our knees, so we can take in all of their hugeness. The matriarch leads her family group. They are all in a line, swaying, across the savannah, weaving in and out of the shadows. They blend with the hulking shapes of their rooted counterparts, and then emerge, animated, ghostly. Baobob. Elephant. Fiber. Vapor. One, then many. Now I see why people love Tarangire.

Elephants pass ten feet in front of us, skirting the other side of our fire. I can see their comical feet glowing in its dwindling light. I stifle a giggle as I watch the fire tint their toenails red. They tower above us and move with such grace. We dare not shift, for fear of disrupting their midnight stroll. Trunks sway, ears flap gently, fluttering with each step like a butterfly feeding. They must know that we are here, so close, but this moment, while most everyone is sleeping, belongs to them.

This morning, 9 years and mingi (many) miles away from the elephants of Tarangire, I woke to a story on Montana Public Radio about elephants in Africa. It is time for the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) to meet once again. CITES deals with illegal trade in endangered, often exotic animal and plant species. There are several African countries that would like to bypass a CITES
We have not found the skill
or patience for cohabitation with
species other than our own. It seems to
be challenging enough to live
with each other.

law regarding trade in African ivory. Their countries
have become so overpopulated with elephants, the
local officials claim, that enough die of natural causes
to allow surplus ivory to be obtained legally,
without poaching. Certain CITES
officials are against
bypassing the law,
because they believe
it will only
encourage more
poaching. If
trade regulations
are softened,
then poachers will
see more
opportunity for
financial gain. There is
currently no system of tracing the
source of the ivory and poachers will
capitalize on this fact.

Elephant “overpopulation” was already an issue
when I was in Africa, but I still balk when I hear the
term used. It would be more accurate to say elephant
concentration than overpopulation. The problems that are
being discussed in relation to elephants are not due to
an increase in the population of elephants, but more to
an increase in human population and an accompanying
loss of habitat for the planet’s largest land mammals.
It is a problem that we see time and again as the world
human population increases. We have not found the
skill or patience for cohabitation with species other
than our own. It seems to be challenging enough to
live with each other.

Many questions arise among Africans living with
elephants. How do we keep elephants from pilfering
our crops and inhibiting our ability to feed ourselves?
How do we share resources with animals that can
injure us or carry bacteria and parasites into our sole
water source? How do we enable the elephants to
maintain their vital migration patterns while our
population consumes the land around them? Some
researchers have conducted studies in order to explore
and ultimately propose solutions to these issues that
are raised when living with elephants. One such
project involves setting up microphones, in the jungles
and savannah, that record the low vibrations and
murmurs of elephant groups, to determine where
they are, and in time, determine what they are saying,
much like we try to do with whales. Not only will this
help us to understand the habitat needs of elephants
more clearly, but it could possibly help people to be
aware of when and where they might interact with
elephants, so that they can prepare for and possibly
even prevent altercations. If we learn to listen, there’s
a chance we might learn to live with them.

The elephants that lumbered past us in
Tarangire National Park remain
a vivid memory. I think of
them more often than I
do of my friend
who sat next to me
and watched as
they passed.
When I do think
of him, I am
comforted that he
trusted me to listen.
He reminded me that
everyone feels heartache,
and that mine was not so bad,
compared to some. I don’t know where he is now,
and I am content with that, but my perspective about
the elephants is different. I don’t know where they are
either, but I doubt their ground is any more stable.
Their words are not accessible to me, and my faith in
their safety is shaky at best. If I saw my friend again, I
trust that we would pick up where we left off.
If I saw the elephants again, I could listen as hard as I wanted and still not understand what they were saying.

It took extraordinary circumstances for my friend to communicate his truths and he is not unique in that respect. For humans, typically, listening is not required for survival. Elephants use sound to communicate over miles. Their very survival, the quality of their lives, depends a large part on their ability to speak and be heard. On their ability to listen.

In 1994, when I visited Tarangire National Park, an elephant researcher there was studying the effects of poaching on elephant migration patterns. He was attempting to address many of the same issues that the scientists in the NPR story were. It appeared that these elephant populations were in a predicament. They were staying in the park for most of the year because, the theory was, they knew that they were safe from the poachers there. The ecosystem of Tarangire could not support all of these elephants year round. They were consuming their niche.

Poachers always take the biggest ivory that they can, meaning the oldest bulls and cows in the populations. Elephant social structure is very delicate, and in Tarangire, there were no elephants above thirty-five years of age—yet the average lifespan of an elephant is around sixty years. Had they lost their ability to sustainably inhabit a niche because fear of poaching distracted them, or because they were losing their matriarchal knowledge of migration trails and traditional watering holes? If we could listen to them, would they tell us to stop killing their mothers and stealing their wisdom and history?

One evening in Tarangire, three other women and myself met up with the researcher, Charles, and went seeking the group that he wanted to observe the next day. The sun was beginning to set when we piled in his little Suzuki Samurai and sped into the park, cruising over sandy dry riverbeds, past acacia trees and closer to the places of moisture, where wildlife congregated in water and mud holes.

Almost immediately we located two females that Charles knew, Crossroads and Crosstusks. He told us that these two used to confuse him when trying to identify groups, because they were floaters and moved from one group to another. I was struck by how close we came to the sisters, and how at ease they appeared to be. Charles automatically lowered his voice in their presence. He spoke softly, pointing to the curving bump of their foreheads and their breasts, as indicators of their gender. He also reminded us that there was constant communication going on between them. We could not hear many of their vocalizations, and that was all the more reason to watch their body language. We joked that they were probably talking about how ugly my dress was, and that it didn’t suit my complexion at all. When the wind changed, they lifted their trunks and caught our scents.

Although they knew Charles, we were unfamiliar to them, and they began to nod their massive heads in warning. They held their ears out wide and shifted their feet. We decided to pile back in the jeep and move on, driving out into the savannah.

Crossroads and Crosstusks became acquaintances of mine and still inhabit my dreams and memories. They were friends of Charles and he was learning to listen to them. I recall the stories of Jane Goodall and Dian Fossey when I think of him because he, too, developed passion and a genuine caring for the future of the elephants. I can’t help but think that if we learn to hear what the elephants are saying, we will learn to interact with the land that we inhabit, not just act on it, and against so many of the species that we supposedly share it with.
But then I can’t help but wonder if it is at all possible to learn their language, when we humans are losing our own. David Orr, a proponent for environmental literacy and pioneer in ecological design, points out that Americans are slipping from a vocabulary of 25,000 words to 10,000 words and that globally, by the year 2100 only 150 of the 5,000 languages now spoken are expected to survive. What is happening to the elephants is happening to everyone. We have stolen their history and our own. As cultures conquer other cultures and silence their stories, as oral histories are lost to future generations embedded in concrete and computers, our language dwindles. Our ability to adequately express our thoughts and feelings is becoming lost.

I remember a phone conversation with a friend after he quit his fifth job in a year. I asked him why and he said, “Because I didn’t want to put up with their shit, it wasn’t worth my time.” When asked what their shit was, he responded, “just a bunch of crap, “ and I thought, “Well, I am glad that we cleared that up.” I know that communication impairment is not unusual, and I don’t consider my friends unintelligent. I often find myself struggling to find the right words, kicking myself because I don’t have an extensive or sufficient vocabulary, hesitating and apprehensive when it comes time to express something that is truly important and significant in my life.

Orr also writes, “Language reflects the range and depth of our experience, but our experience of the world is being impoverished to the extent that it is rendered artificial and prepackaged. We’ve become a nation of television users and Internet browsers, and it shows in the way we talk and what we talk about.

More and more we speak as if we are voyeurs furtively peeking in on life, not active participants, moral agents, or engaged citizens.” We are losing our language to technology: emails, film, internet, and television. Dialogue is influenced by the full sensual, intellectual and spiritual experience. Eliminate one of these aspects and suddenly, there is less to say, or it is harder to say it. Words begin to carry less weight and lose significance. Take the phrase, “I love you,” as an example. Humans have struggled with the nature and definition of love throughout the ages. Yet those three words often become markers or distinct moments in our relationships and they are arrived at through a melding of interactions, emotions, conversations and intimacy both physical and mental. Would you feel closer to understanding love, if you read those
words on a screen from a person that you knew only through that screen? Or would you know love if you heard it spoken against your collarbone, the breath and smell of your lover staying in your memory to resurface each time you hear those words again?

I don’t deny that all of this technology has its advantages. I use email. I search the Web for information. On occasion, the only way I wish to spend my evening is by plopping down in front of the T.V. and putting in a movie. But if I sit too long in front of the computer, I begin to feel like I am missing something. I become restless and feel the urge to get outside and touch the world around me.

In Vermont, during the summers of my childhood, my mother ushered us out the door after breakfast each day and expected that we would be dirty enough for a bath by evening. It wasn’t that she didn’t want us messing up the house (well, not entirely) but that she knew how much more we could do around the neighborhood. We were part of a pack of children that had amazing discoveries to make each day.

We caught frogs and fish from the pond in the back field, built castles and tree forts, watched night fall with the flicker and puff of lightning bug waltzes. GREEN, yellow, YELLOW, GREEN, yellow, green, GREEN. And then the symphony of frogs and crickets began. This is what makes my history. For many children today, their history is being made in some kind of plastic box that has no smell, or texture. The only kind of dirt they get on their hands is the oil from the bag of potato chips that came from some place far away. They don’t know what it feels like to plunge their hand into the cold damp soil, squeezing clumps between their palm and feeling them crumble. Searching, breaking the earth apart from the leafy green overturned plant until it does not yield to their probing fingers. Pulling their arm out of the ground because it is now wrist deep and they want to bring the treasure into the light. Rub the clumps of soil from it; trace the knobs and wrinkles of its firm skin. Potato, pomme de terre: the world rests in their hands, discovered, revealed for just a moment.

An elephant traces the branches of an acacia tree, seeking the tender green leaves; she grabs them with the end of her trunk and tucks them into her mouth. As the season progresses and the rain refuses to come, a male rams his tusk into the flesh of the baobob and tears the fiber out, so that he may chew on it and quench his thirst. Ancient baobobs stand like jolly kings, with holes torn in their bellies, all the richness of the world spilled out on the sand. Children climb inside them for shelter, hungry for the knowledge of smell, touch and feel. They listen to the baobob creak and whisper, telling the story of all that came before, great herds of wildebeest and zebra. Bull elephants with tusks so grand that it seemed they would pierce the sky. Leopards that appeared out of the darkness and hypnotized their prey with the slow twitch of their tails.

I come home from a hike and have twenty minutes before I need to be at work. I sit down in front of the computer and send my mother an email, telling her about the grand revelation I had while staring at the bark of a ponderosa pine. I know that she will smile and for a moment I feel like we are not so far apart. I press a button and a picture of my best friend from high school pops up on the screen. She holds her day-old son in her arms, and I find myself trying to peer around the shadows of the image, in order to see her eyes and

![Image](https://scholarworks.umt.edu/camas/vol7/iss1/1)
how she has aged. I can’t hear her voice. I can’t see her move. Lost are the subtleties of language, the qualities that tell me how she really is doing and if she has found peace and joy in her life. I find too much room for assumption and misunderstanding when we reduce our lives to characters on a screen.

I could send her a picture of the sunset that night in Tarangire, and she could marvel at its beauty. But she wouldn’t be able to feel how the pink light washed over me and softened all the edges of my life for just a moment, if she didn’t see it in my face as I told the story. She couldn’t possibly understand how I saw the elephants in how she held her son, cradled against her breast and belly, not so different from the way a calf leaned into her mother as the night fell, speaking the undeniable language of blood and security.

With a diminished language, our stories lose significance. They no longer teach us, so that we may choose a better future. Stories contain our history, where we have come from, and without that knowledge we cannot see clearly where to go.

There may no longer be lessons to keep with us when these illustrations of our lives are reduced to outlines and flash animation. We may come to a standstill, like the elephants of Tarangire, staying in a safe space because that is all they know and have left. Safe spaces. The elephants won’t leave those safe spaces, because they are afraid to witness the murders of the ones they love. Their stories die with their mothers and they are left with nothing but fear, a fear of being hunted that rules them.

Technology creates the illusion of safe space. In a way, it is another method of protecting us from heartbreak and fear. We can write to strangers and share our deepest secrets. If they decide they don’t like us, oh well, we never have to see them face to face. If we are angry with a coworker, we can send them an abrupt email, with sentences that may be on the edge of meanness, but perhaps not quite. They will never know, because they can’t hear how we say it or the expression on our faces when we say it. Ambiguity allows room for misinterpretation and displacement of responsibility. The less personal, the less risky. Fewer words, fewer risks. And still, we are devouring our niche, like the elephants of Tarangire.

Love and intimacy has taught me a language that applies to every aspect of my life. Those uncertain spaces of the emotional landscape have forced me to find a way to speak, reminded me to listen. Navigating a conversation with a loved one demands subtlety, introspection, and focus. Each sense is engaged, each word carries weight. Yet even the value of intimacy and responsibility has become skewed, disjointed and misunderstood as we all seek ways to become rooted again, to tell our stories and speak our truths.

In recent years, this is the story that I have often heard: two people meet and begin having sex before they know each other’s middle name. Eventually, they become pregnant by accident. They decide to have the child. Then they decide that they better get married. All along they seem rather nonchalant about their decisions, until they can’t afford the medical bills, or they realize they don’t want to be together for the rest of their lives. Yet now they will always be tied to each other, with the life that they created together. Next their relationships strain and break and another child is left with less than the best options in life, less than the healthiest choices to thrive and live a meaningful life.

In our overpopulated world, so many, it seems, treat children as if they are a notion, not a life. The idea of a child is crammed into the here and now, fulfilling immediate needs or desires, like the continued on page 39
Ground truthing, though not often overtly defined, describes the process of monitoring private and agency activity on public lands. It refers to a specific sort of walking, one in which attention to detail goes beyond the naturalist’s eye and includes the surveillance of boundary markers, marked trees, marked sites, and plotted schemes. It requires careful study of proposals, assessments, jargon-laden government documents, and company practices. It requires that everything be documented—time of day, slope aspect, vegetation type, weather, number of visits, and exact violations written up in specific language.

The purpose for ground truthing is almost always subversive, unless, of course, your work is “contracted,” and then you could be “surveying” or “sampling,” which is not what I am discussing here. I am discussing citizens’ on-the-ground tactics for monitoring extractive industry behavior on the increasingly less vast expanse of wild land. I am discussing why three people would get in a Jeep near midnight on a full moon and head into a spaghetti dish of logging roads to verify a suspected spotted owl site. And why the BLM might send officials out to monitor the activities of citizen onlookers at the oil and gas development sites in the Redrock desert of Utah. I am discussing truth, as the ground declares it, and the recorders of those essential facts—whether a tree is on one side of an arbitrary boundary, or the other, for instance, making a substantive difference.

This could be a commentary on how ludicrous it is that we live in a culture that steals from itself, and has to police itself, and write itself up, and tell on itself, and remind itself not to be an addictive fool—ground-truthers snap the metaphorical rubber band around the wrist of a greedy culture. It could be that commentary, but it is not.

Instead, this is a message from the ground, for all of us who have ever heard the earth whisper: tell this story.
Fritillaria gentneri

Thank God we live in a world where a flower can alter a timber sale. Don’t worry, though, nobody’s broadcasting this information. Here’s what the agency folk would rather you not know: Where it is found. That it’s endemic. Or what monocotyledon means. You are dangerous if you know these things and you are out walking, or worse yet out looking, or worse yet off trail, or worse yet in a proposed timber sale unit.

Be aware that if you enter an intimate discourse with a rare, native thing, your whole life might have to change...Whole days, whole weeks, whole life plans could morph into the search for the interior heart of this one wild thing.

This lily is magnetic, the thinnest lips of the flower open, stamens peeking past orange/red petals flecked with burgundy—like dripped wine or drizzled chocolate. They don’t want you to think it is erotic. In fact, they don’t want you to think about it at all. It works to their advantage when you are busy. When you don’t mention “fritillaria” at any meetings. When you don’t come into the room smelling of the ambrosia of the wild places where she is growing. It helps them if you do not draw elaborate pictures in your journals, record locations, take long, slow observations. It is useful to them if you are involved, instead, in the watching of the story of our artificial culture. There is no fritillaria stopping anything at the shopping center, or on television, or downtown today.

Be careful that you do not fall in love with a seeker of fritillaria, either. For soon you would learn that the breaking of the long, delicate neck of this one dry-soil loving lily is analogous to your own small life being crushed. Be aware that if you enter an intimate discourse with a rare, native thing, your whole life might have to change. You may have to stay put in that one location. You may have to walk every drainage in search of the Beloved. Whole days, whole weeks, whole life plans could morph into the search for the interior heart of this one wild thing.

They could call you crazy then, and it would be elaborate, their telling of the tale of your eccentricity, your ramblings, your obsession with a monocot. They could try to discredit, discount, disclaim, and disregard this person smelling of forest, this person with moss in their hair, this person streaked with pollen and wonder. Then you could save your own blossoming for the right moment when you fooled them by knowing their language. When you spoke it in direct tongue at their meetings, wrote it in extensive comments to their supervisors, and distributed it to lawyers, before slipping quietly back out to be with your lover, while your lover’s body still rests undisturbed in the duff.
Hard Rock

The mile-long, ten-story-high mine tailings pile rimming the small town of Anaconda, Montana, in the right light, is a pleasing place for the eye to rest in an otherwise monotonous landscape of flat. There is no sign announcing; toxic sludge here. Cancer-causing, radioactive off-gasing: stay back.

"Where else are we going to put it?" asks the tow truck driver hauling me and my dead Subaru down the freeway. He is not an ignorant person, nor am I, but neither of us seems to know the answer. Under my breath I suggest "Maybe we shouldn't be allowed to make any new messes before we can learn how to clean up our old ones." He's heard the radio man say that taking advantage of our natural resources is the only clear link to a healthy economy too many times to believe some bogus remarks from a young Environmental Studies student about restoration creating jobs. Anyway, a tailings hill here, an open pit somewhere else—the ground tells the true stories, and we just concoct opinions around them.

Anyway, a tailings hill here, an open pit somewhere else—the ground tells the true stories, and we just concoct opinions around them.

In North Central Montana the borders of the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation were gerrymandered to give the state control of the land they would lease to the Pegasus Gold Corporation to build and operate the Zortman-Landusky Mine. Years into the mine's operations, when Indian mothers took their children to the White, pro-mine doctors because they had strange rashes and welts on their skin from playing in their nearby creeks, the doctors scolded the mothers in an act of dismissive racism, saying, "Maybe if you bathed your kids more often, they wouldn't have these rashes." In the Sunday March 6, 1994, issue of the Spokesman Review it was reported that, "...children no longer play in several streams flowing down the Little Rocky Mountains for fear of getting sick."

"Maybe if you bathed your kids more often, they wouldn't have these rashes."

Things had been quiet for nearly sixteen years of cyanide heap leach mining in the remote Phillips County, Montana, where there is only one person per square mile in a region larger than Connecticut. With Pegasus Gold offering up 250 jobs and a $10 million annual payroll, raising opposition was not on the county residents' list of high priorities. Opposition, however, was ripe for the raising.

With the company's sordid history of multiple publicly-known cyanide spills and acid leaks, one can only imagine the unreported violations the creeks and groundwater had to contend with. It wasn't until a few tribal members at Fort Belknap formed the Island Mountain Protectors and filed a citizen lawsuit under the federal Clean Water Act, that Pegasus had to stand up and rear its ugly political head, threatening to withdraw from Montana altogether. The company's vice president reportedly said that the choice to threaten to pull out has been, "...thrust upon us by the regulatory environment that exists in Montana." I guess the $25,000 per day that Pegasus would have had to pay to the state for punitive damages due to the intense "regulatory environment" in Montana wasn't justified in their minds by the $935 million they'd already made.

Some people might not have seen Pegasus up and leaving as the worst of all possible scenarios. Regardless, the extractive beat went on, settlement in hand.
If you don’t know how to read a seven-and-a-half minute map, start there. Since we’ve progressed to the point where extracting oil from delicate, ancient desert land is justified in sound-bites, and three marks on an obscure map represent life-obliterating barracks, we best learn what the contours of creation in the actual desert look like. We can memorize the lines that on the ground are grottos; the curves of buttes, cuts of craters, and the circles that make up swells. We can learn the flat-line data.

Next we’ll have the Bureau of Land Management tell us everything, because it is illegal for them not to—the plots they’ve leased, the Environmental Assessment documents, the exact coordinates of every proposed “operation.”

In our minds we’ll create the living desert: the sun-warmed sandstone, feeding flocks of pinyon jays chattering around ripe berries, the scent of orange coming off thickets of cliffrose, sand verbena closed to the daylight, waiting for evening and the sweet touch of the feet of moths. We’ll see the hard work of hundreds of years of patient creation in the singed tops of cryptobiotic soil, like a note with burned edges. All of it: wind, sun, lizards, arches in the distance, swells, stands, rises. Cliffs, ravens, and far away clouds, will become alive in our imagination, a living landscape. We will lay our map over our mind’s creation of the desert. We will inlay barracks, cement platforms, and 2-ton trucks going back and forth crunching the paper of our desert’s story, obscuring the text, ripping up the tiny suns of globe mallow, and covering the dens of ground owls.

We will inlay the exact locations of the coordinates we read after we dislodge them from agency jargon—the purposely incomprehensible documents—onto the microcosm in our mind. We will imagine the desert, and what lies beneath it here, being trampled, systematically shocked, drilled, extracted, and flat out taken away. Now we will use that same beautiful, brilliant mind in which we’ve placed our living landscape to uncover for ourselves an appropriate response.

When we inlay that response over our map, our living landscape, and our targeted locations, what we will have is the literature of loving a vanishing world. Like watching the sandstone drink in a waterpocket day after autumn day in an eternally thirsty world, we will know we are slowly losing the profoundest of secrets.

We had been walking the ridge watching the trees marked blue for cut slope steeply toward the creekbed, and looking for a spot to drop down. It would have been a silent day but the wind caught the bald south-facing hills and brought their golden whisperings to be sorted and sifted in the long needles
The dark-haired girl steps over to face me. Her copper-brown eyes meet mine, blue and gray. We join hands. “Soy tu,” she says, the Spanish made fluid by her native Brazilian Portuguese. “Eres yo,” I return. We smile and hug, and she moves to the next person beside me. I am you, you are me. There are thirty of us in this circle. We stand in a long, deep Andean valley, sprinkled with tall cacti and yellow miraflores blossoms. Mount Verónica looms above us, snow covered peaks glinting in the early morning sun. The mountain’s Quechua name, Wacay Huilque translates to Sacred Tear, a tribute to the tragic flight of the last Incan ruler, Manco II, through the pass at its base.

Below us, the Urubamba River rushes headlong through the valley, its milky-white waters saturated with Andean soil, still streaming off maize fields from last night’s pouring rains. All around us are the makings of a temporary village, bustling with more than 700 inhabitants from across the globe. Hundreds of tents dot the valley floor, and stone-lined paths lead to makeshift pit-toilet bathrooms, a large circus tent features lighting fueled by solar panels, a recycling center, and temporary kitchen, staffed by the grandchildren of Incans. Here at the Call of the Condor Bioregional Gathering in Peru, spring has begun.

Just three days before, my friend David Haenke had left his home in the Missouri Ozark Mountains. The wind had taken on the melancholy feel of autumn, and golden yellow maple leaves drifted back down to the cooling red clay soil. As he drove through the thickly forested sloping hills of the Bryant Creek watershed, he imagined it as from an airplane, thousands of acres intact, healthy, housing whippoorwills and groundhogs, settling in for the winter. A true bioregionalist, the heart of his work for the past thirty years has been stewarding his watershed. I had visited two weeks earlier, and as we toured the forests around his home, he described his collaborative work with neighbors to set aside thousands of acres of woodland bordering Bryant Creek. The land would remain open for hunting, fishing and sustainable forestry, continuing to provide locals with vital sources of food for their families. It would, however, be protected from the commercial development, mining, and clear cutting that threatens much of the surrounding area. In addition to his work in the Ozarks, David has worked to take the bioregional movement to the global level.

I, too, am from the Ozarks. David is a new friend, who has recently inspired me with his bioregionalist philosophy and practice, and it was his exhortation to attend a Bioregional Congress that brought me to Peru. In 1980, David organized the first Bioregional Congress, gathering ecologically minded folks from across the Ozarks to form networks, share strategies for effective environmental action, and articulate a coherent local vision for the blossoming ecology movement. He also invited key people from across the nation, encouraging them to start up their own congresses. Over the next two decades, congresses sprouted up across the U.S. and Canada, eventually making their way down to Peru. The gathering that David and I were attending was a hybrid of the Northern bioregional gatherings and the spiritually centered “visioning councils” of the South. The “Call of the Condor” is a reference to a South American
prophesy suggesting that when the head-centered Eagle (North America) joins with the heart-centered Condor (South America), an era of heaven on earth will result. This vision reflects what bioregionalists stand for as well—the bringing together of heart and mind, to recover the health of our human and more-than-human communities and in so doing, discover “heaven” in our own backyards.

I leave the circle of thirty to begin my day at Camp Veronica. Beside our circle, a group of nearly one hundred has gathered. They raise their hands skyward in a collective sun salutation. I know that soon they will begin a round of Om. In a setting such as this, and with the spiritual leader-to-normal person ratio standing at about 5:1, ceremonies tend to spontaneously form at every available moment. The overtly spiritual contingent at the gathering includes a couple hundred members of the Mayan Calendar movement, headed up by Jose Arguelles. Members of this movement believe that a shift from Gregorian to nature-based Mayan time is a necessary precursor to true restoration of the earth. A dozen or so indigenous spiritual leaders have also traveled here from remote regions in the Andes and the jungles of Peru and Bolivia to lead ceremonies and share their traditions. Among them is Don Vidal, a local healer and bread maker who hosted a group of volunteers, including me, at his spiritual center Inti Ayllu during the weeks leading up to the event.

I head off to the circus tent after breakfast, where the morning plenary has begun. Over 300 people have already assembled. The first part of the plenary has been devoted to the nuts and bolts of ecovillage living. Odin, member of the HueHue Coyotl, an artisan’s ecovillage in the Mexican mountains, has begun his comical routine of how to use a pit toilet—pantomiming the “little eagle,” and “big eagle,” strategies for waste elimination. An awkward conversation about disposal of “feminine products” follows, bringing Mexican elder Abuelita Margarita onto the stage, indignant. Her long white hair, gathered in braids, encircles her eloquently lined face, and her eyes snap as she speaks. “It is a sad thing for people to be ashamed of their own bodies,” she says. “Women’s blood is sacred!” She offers a workshop that will help women better understand the menstrual cycle, and their unique connection to the earth.

It seems to me that the spiritual emphasis of the event, and sheer number of activities draws energy away from vital efforts to connect with the local community. I take the stage with Mary, a twenty-year old Peruvian, to announce an afternoon service project in the local pueblo. We ask for a show of hands, and only ten are raised. “Why didn’t more people volunteer?” Mary asks in frustration as we sit down. “Jose Arguelles just arrived,” the woman sitting next to us offers. “He’s teaching a workshop at the same time.” Pancho, the president of the pueblo, is seated quietly behind us. I look back at him, and feel a rush of blood to my face. I am embarrassed. How is it that the indigenous people who actually live here—our hosts—so easily sink into the background amidst all the frenetic activity in a gathering of this kind? In the South American class system, felt strongly here in Peru, the “Indigenas” are the ones hardest hit by poverty, and treated by foreigners as a quaint touristic novelty rather than equal human beings. Even in a gathering of this kind, where honoring of indigenous cultures is an important element, we seem to fall into old patterns of separation and disregard for traditional people.

After the plenary, everyone rushes off to the consejo, or council, tents. There are seven, covering the themes of Ecology, Spirituality, Health, Traditions, Children, Social Movements, and Arts and Culture. I arrive late to the Ecology Consejo, where over 60 participants—bioregionalists, ecovillage founders and environmental activists, among others—are crammed into a tent the size of a station wagon. Lucia, a young Uruguayan, skillfully channels the animated conversation, helping the group complete a list of workshops to be offered over the course of the week. Odin will link up with Nelson, from New Mexico, to teach a workshop on permaculture. Mario, from Uruguay, invites others to help him organize a barter market for the following day. David Haenke offers to teach a workshop on ecological economies. Two young punks, decked out in black leather and spiked collars, offer to give a...
workshop on their “ecobarrio”—urban ecovillage—in the heart of Mexico City. Over the course of an hour, valuable networks are being formed, to be strengthened over the course of the week.

I escape for an hour to visit the river. From my perch on a large granite boulder, I watch the Urubamba River flow past and relive a moment from two weeks previous, along the banks of this same river. Don Vidal had led us down to the river to wash off the dust from a hard day of work, building adobe walls, and tending the gardens at Inti Ayllu. We each made a ceremonial offering before entering the water. “Willcamayo.” Don Vidal offered the river its Quechua name, as he stood out on a small rock that led into the water. He held out three coca leaves from the mountains, and in the center, a golden lemon candy, sweetness returned for the sweetness of the water. He dove in and swam across the turbulent river, his sixty-year-old body more fit than any of ours. Alesa followed, a slender Italian woman with a gentle smile. “Gracias” was what I remember her saying most clearly, as she offered thanks to the river, and the earth—known here by the name of pachamama. “A las montañas” I added when it was my turn and I, like the others, let the coca leaves and candy fall into the swirling current, watching as the water carried our prayers and blessings down into the heart of the Valley. After thirty years of resistance to the Christian ritual, submerging myself in the icy waters of the Willcamayo River feels like baptism of a truer kind.

I am startled out of this memory by one of the camp staff, who has come to pick up trash. Roberto is a small 26-year-old with a ready smile. I ask him how his community feels about the gathering. “Es bueno,” he says. He thinks it is good that people are gathering in circles to meditate and pray. Later, I will ask the camp owner, Ricky, the same question. He tells me, “It's positive for the local economy. The stores in town are empty, have you noticed?” Yes, I nod ruefully—every store is out of chocolate. He also feels people are learning a lot from the event. People from the pueblo were invited to the event for free to attend the workshops. Though it was difficult for many to find time away from their small farms, a number made it at least to the evening performances. Local farmers had also expressed interest in the permaculture workshop offered this afternoon as part of our service project in the pueblo.

I leave my meditation spot to gather up volunteers. We are twenty, double the number that volunteered in the plenary. We form a long line, following Pancho along a narrow path that cuts across the side of a mountain and down, crossing a bridge that trembles when we walk across the Willcamayo. Entering the pueblo, we hear chicha music bouncing out of the windows of adobe dwellings that line the streets. It is a favorite form of pop music here in the Andes, and it’s bright, cheerful sound contrasts comically with the woeful, lovelorn lyrics. We ascend another small hill, then walk along the edge of an intricate system of channels between the corn-maíz fields. Among the maíz are avac-bean plants, which add nutrients to the soil. Down below, women wear felt hats of brown and gray over their long black braids and peddle chocolates, batteries and camera film to tourists. “Mamita.” they croon, “¿Qué quieres?” The vibrant, hand-woven scarves stretched across their backs might carry pineapples from the market, or an infant. Along our narrow path, wiry boys lead ridiculously large bulls down the street on minuscule ropes, tugging and shouting when they refuse to budge.

A farmer joins the group, and leads us into his maíz field. “These are mal yerbás—weeds, the farmer demonstrates pulling out invasive grasses. He tells us to toss these out completely. The other weeds, many of which are familiar—lamb’s quarter, dandelions, and chickweed among them—we would leave as mulch beside the maíz plants. David Haenke and I work our way down the rows together and talk. “You know, this is the most important part of this whole gathering,” he says, resting one knee on the ground, and chewing on a sprig of lamb’s quarter. The rhythmic work of pulling weeds out of the crumbling soil is a simple, quiet activity that both David and I relish and need, to balance out the frenetic activity at Camp Veronica. Afterwards, the farmer and his
family bring a large barrel of chicha—a fermented corn beverage—for us to drink. We pass around three plastic glasses, filled with the foamy yellow liquid. Each time we return an empty glass to our hosts they hold it up and ask, “quieren mas?” After a moment’s hesitation, someone shouts, “Sí!” Our hosts laugh, and pour another. We all watch as Mount Huelca brightens under the fiery glow of the setting sun.

Sunday morning is spent in plenaries, considering resolutions hammered out by each of the councils over the course of the week. David has created his own personal resolution. After suggesting the cost of the Call of the Condor to the earth—in fossil fuels to fly people there as well as personal energy—he offers the following:

Now and forevermore to ask of ourselves and the people of the Earth to tithe—traditionally and approximately at least 10 per cent of our individual and organizational resources to the carrying out of physical actions for the healing, restoration, and nurture of the physical body of the Earth and its ecosystems.

At 5:00 Sunday evening, we gather for the final ceremony. In the center of the circle sit the spiritual elders, arrayed in their vibrant traditional dress, reflecting their varied traditions and homelands. Each shares insights and prayers. All at once, a collective cheer breaks out as we look up to see two large birds wheeling above us. The soft-spoken Bolivian elder whose turn it is to speak does not break stride. “We need to critique this gathering.” He says, looking around the circle. “There are things that could have been done better. But they came,” he continues, gesturing at the birds, “so we must be doing something right.” According to this elder, and many others, the lower bird is an eagle, and the bird that is flying up closest to the sun is a condor. David gives me a hug and confesses in a low whisper, “I’m obstinate, but I think I’m starting to get what they’re trying to do here.”

A solitary elm clings to its dead leaves in my backyard. All the rest, the maples and red oak have yielded them, to stand naked and bold against the smoky-gray sky. Last night, I awoke in the middle of the night, soft voices murmuring in Spanish still drifting through my half-dreaming mind like the snow swirling outside my window. I miss the sound of other languages, here in this country where everything mirrors me back to myself with little or no imagination. In my wakeful hours, I receive e-mails from new friends in the South, reporting on the work they have resumed in their own communities. Orlando, a Venezuelan who became my closest friend during the event, is traveling across Colombia, teaching workshops on permaculture to communities and university engineering students. Mario has begun efforts to start a bioregional campaign in Uruguay. Hernan is getting an ecological congress off the ground in Peru. And Berta is forming her own ecovillage in Northern Mexico. David Haenke arrived back home just in time for the 25th Ozark Area Community Congress, where he led a sustainable forestry hike in his own beloved Bryant Creek Watershed.

For my part, I am organizing a letters-to-the-editor campaign as part of an effort to halt a commercial development that threatens a creek I love in the Bonne Femme Watershed of Columbia, Missouri. It gives me joy to imagine others across the globe working, each in their own ways, to care for their own beloved streams, mountains, forests, communities. I am you, You are me. I consider these words. I take them to heart. I left Camp Veronica in the back of a campesino’s truck with thirty others, including Hermano Vidal, and a mama and baby sheep that were loaded in at the last minute. I remember the radiant faces of the others, and the small boy from the pueblo, singing beside me in a sweet, high voice. As we looked back at Wacay Huilque we sang thank you songs in Spanish, and grinned, and grinned, as the wind rushed over our faces. I was surrounded by community—of these mountains I’d come to know, the Willcamayo River, the Andean soil in my mouth, and a group of large-spirited adventurers from around the world who, like me, want to find the best way to sing “thank you” to Pachamama.

Bearing Witness In Libby:

Andrea Peacock

by Margot Higgins

The Graveyard in Libby is an appropriate place to begin divulging the heartbreaking story of one of the worst environmental disasters in U.S. History. The opening scene for Andrea Peacock's recent book, *Libby, Montana: Asbestos and the Deadly Silence of An American Corporation*, is a chilling reminder of the 200 people in the town of 12,000 who unjustifiably lost their lives to a predictable and preventable disease. For nearly 30 years, the WR. Grace Corporation knowingly operated a vermiculite mine that poisoned the people of Libby as well as the local environment with a particularly virulent form of asbestos. By the time the news hit the *Seattle Post Intelligencer* in 1999, it was so outrageous and enormous that it was hard to believe it was true.

It takes a special kind of journalist to capture this kind of disaster story which slipped through the radar of the national press for so many years and then spilled out overnight in the form of a national scandal. While "This corporate abuse was happening in my backyard... We just weren't listening in the right places."

What began as an article for *Mother Jones* has evolved into a heart-wrenching book that powerfully captures the individual voices of the people of Libby who were ignored by the government and abused by the corporate hand that fed them. In an era when newspapers too are subject to the corporate interests that control them, taking fewer and fewer risks, and picking those stories that hang low on the tree, Peacock's work exemplifies a return to responsible investigative reporting. She writes forgivingly about an unforgiving tragedy with the acute sensitivity of a seasoned journalist.

dozens of reporters streaked through Libby with fleeting visits in and out of the small town after the story broke, Peacock took a different approach. For almost two years, she made countless visits to the small mining town to capture the personal accounts of the people that lived there.

"I wanted to tell the story of the town, not just the scandal that happened there," said Andrea Peacock, a former reporter for the *Missoula Independent*. "As a Montanan, I was appalled that our state could be so lax and not notice this catastrophe. This corporate abuse was happening in my backyard. I was shocked that the *Independent* missed the story. We just weren't listening in the right places."

Colleen Lux

Camas Fall 2003
“People in Libby wanted their story told and they were generous with every journalist who took the time to listen,” Peacock tells me in a recent coffee date in Missoula. Sitting across from her with her steaming mugs between us, I am reminded of Peacock’s innate gift for making those around her instantly comfortable. With a bright smile and sincere expression in her eyes, she is warm and engaging in conversation. It is easy to understand why the people of Libby would immediately trust her.

Written from the heart, Libby, Montana fills the holes for anyone who may not have tuned in to the national headlines. Peacock brilliantly weaves together the history, politics and social climate of Libby through the voices of the people that live there. “I tried to paint as honest a picture of the place as I could,” she says.

A dedicated researcher, Peacock digs deep into the public records which provide profuse evidence, dating as far back as the 1960s, that the Grace company knowingly allowed its workers to continue getting sick. She also follows the wider consequences of the vermiculite that was mined in Libby, tracing the Libby asbestos all the way to the World Trade Center, as well as to millions of homes in the United States that were insulated with the deadly material.

Peacock demonstrates that objective journalism need not be compromised by a loss of compassion for the characters who define the story. With a tenacious approach, Peacock depicts the hardness of the lives lived in one of the poorest communities in Montana with originality, tenderness, and humor. Her narration is warm with the unassuming nature of an outside observer and the wisdom that comes with a deep compassion for human life.

We meet Les Skramstad, with a “neatly trimmed beard,” and “legs that speak loudly of his cowboy days,” who now pays for working at the Grace mine for less than two years with “a voice ... whispered and hoarse from the effects of the asbestos scars wrapped around his lungs.” And there’s Gayla Benefield, who was one of the first citizens of Libby to avenge the death of her loved ones in court. Peacock describes Gayla, as “a formidable woman ... quick-tongued and sharp-witted” who after raising five children, has “decided to enjoy her middle age sleeping in, which means company can come by, but they better not remark on her pajamas or get between her and the coffeemaker.”

During the dozens of interviews she conducted, Peacock watched as the people of Libby got sicker and sicker, realistically portraying the emotional strain they endured. She paints hope in the face of hopelessness. The beauty behind the characters that Peacock introduces prevents her audience from being completely devastated by the tragic story. She distills the characters of ordinary people, gives them a powerful voice, and creates eternal heroes out of those who were willing to take a stand against the corporate abuse. “I am hoping people will gain a sense of empowerment from this book,” Peacock says.

Peacock also aspires for her story to create a shift in consciousness in the environmental community. “I had to learn to talk to people with whom I didn’t always agree with on environmental issues,” she says. “We tend to think of ‘us and them’ a lot. Libby gives us a chance to have compassion for them and think of ‘them’ as us.”

“Skillfully exposes a true axis of evil and its dire human effects ... a ‘must read’ for people of conscience.”
—Jim Harrison

Libby, Montana
Asbestos & the Deadly Silence of an American Corporation

Andrea Peacock
Howdy folks, this here's Bison Bob scribbling at you from the trail near the Two Medicine River, Montana. Me and my horse Tumbleweed just got off a long push from the border down Mexico way. Yep, a feller who pays attention on such a ride could learn something about this here West and the people in it. After hours on the trail each day, an old boy gets to listing in the saddle. I began to think of all the books I've read on the West, and I come up with a pretty good list of the twenty books newcomers oughtta read and old time Westerners darned sure better already have done. Here they are, pardners.

The history of the West is grim in lots of parts, and a lot more complicated than it looks on first blush. It's hard to talk about it without encountering the idea of the “frontier,” a notion that drove westward expansion for decades. Thing is, the frontier is something that a feller named Frederick Jackson Turner declared closed—that's right, cerradoed—over a hundred years ago. Richard Slotkin's *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* gives a good look at how the frontier theme played out in the grand old West from just about the time them pointy-headed Spaniards showed.

If you haven't figured it out yet, you'll soon understand that I'm not playing into John Wayne's hand. The frontier was a nice idea, and one with a lot of historical punch, but since it's outdated, a group of recent historians have looked to elsewhere to explain what we're about, to things like people's lives, including women and the experiences of folks who ain't exactly white, and places—meaning locations that humans have lived in and known for a time—in order to puzzle out what this great big geosociovisceral experiment is all about. Back in the late 1980’s, in that most Western of all towns, Santa Fe, there was a conference that drew the finest historical minds of the day to talk about what a truer history of the West might look like. A book came out of it: *Trails: Toward A New Western History*, edited by Patricia Limerick, Clyde Milner and Charles Rankin.

Now that you've gotten a feel for the West, we can move onto some bigger bubble bustin'. For starters, let's get this business of cowboys and Indians cleared up once and for all. Folks from Texas are always eager to claim a Texas-size chunk of the West's history and image. Well, here's a book that honors that urge, and gives Texans some of what they're due in history. Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, a novelized telling of the actual exploits of some of Texas' founding halfwits and criminals back in the 1850's is a good place to begin. This is one of the finest American novels, and it's also a good way to separate those who are willing to see and be part of the real West, warts and all, from those who prefer the kiddie-book version.

A shamefully underappreciated fact about the West is that it is home to the original American Revolution, and it took place a hundred years before Paul Revere took his horse ride. Franklin Folsom's *Red Power on the Rio Grande: The Native American Revolution of 1680*, is no kiddie book. It provides a concise history of the whys and hows of the revolt. The book is out of print, but its rewards will amply reimburse your efforts in finding it.

It would be a mistake to leave the struggle of the Native Americans in the distant past—from Chinle to Cut Bank, they're still very much in attendance. *Native American Testimony: A Chronicle of Indian-White Relations From Prophecy to the Present, 1492-1992*, edited by Peter Nabokov, gives voice to generations of Native Americans. Vine Deloria's classic, *Bury My Heart At Wounded Knee*, is another book that offers the Indian perspective on the tragic Coming of the Great White Honky. Read them.

The US of A showed up in the West around about the beginning of the nineteenth century with the Louisiana Purchase and Thomas Jefferson's reconnaissance efforts. The most famous information-gathering venture was, of course, the one headed by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark. We're all going to hear plenty on that expedition in the next couple of years. For a look at a lesser-known but more qualified bunch of Jeffersonian investigators, check out Dan Flores' *Southern Counterpart to Lewis and Clark: The Freeman and Custis Expedition of 1806*. This bunch made their way up the Red River, seeing all sorts of fascinating things along the way, until they were rudely
intercepted and repelled by Spanish forces.

Readin’ about the West these early explorers encountered, if you’re like me, you’ll wish you could have been there. Several artists had the privilege of visiting the lands beyond the 100th meridian early in the 19th century and recorded what they saw. A Swiss artist named Karl Bodmer made the voyage up the Missouri in the company of Austrian Prince Maximilian in 1832, and his watercolor paintings are head and shoulders above anything else of the time for their intimate detail and artistry. Get ahold of a copy of Karl Bodmer’s America, a coffee-table size book of his depictions of the Plains and its people, from Mandan to Blackfeet. You’ll feel like you were along on the journey, the paintings are that rich.

The United States succeeded in sewing up the perimeter of the West with the US-Mexican War, the Gadsden Purchase and other maneuvers by the middle of the 19th century. Just as Mexico plays into the West’s history, so does Canada. The fur trade linked much of this territory together, for better or worse. So, a book on that history is in order, and David Wishart’s The Fur Trade of the American West is the best around.

On the heels of the fur traders, homesteaders and honyockers bounced into the West’s territory, the miners made their rushes, the railroads stabbed seaward, and the Chinese and other immigrants came to work and have their piece of the dream. In the midst of this post-Civil War melee one of the West’s most illustrious public servants explored the country and developed his vision for how the West might come to be its own group of distinctive regions, a vision both flawed and transcendent. Many books have been written about John Wesley Powell, including Wallace Stegner’s wonderul Beyond the Hundredth Meridian. When you’re done with that one, I also recommend the recent A River Running West: The Life of John Wesley Powell by Donald Worster.

The main feature of the West is its country, its natural setting, its topography and ecology. The West’s environs inspired the conservation movement and led to the establishment of the Forest Service, the Park Service, the National Monuments, and, later, for other purposes, to the Bureau of Land Management and the Bureau of Reclamation. These next few books deal with the West’s critters and country. First, I’d nab myself a copy of Roderick Nash’s Wilderness and the American Mind, because wilderness is both within those randomly firing synapses and without, in the far-off mountains and the nearby fields of sage. This is a history of how Americans came to recognize, in some part, the gift we’ve acquired, and how we’ve protected it.

For the nexus between environment and people in the modern West, you can’t do much better than Charles Wilkinson’s Fire on the Plateau: Conflict and Endurance in the American Southwest. Wilkinson, a law professor with long experience in both environmental and Indian law, provides a keen view of the Colorado Plateau’s rich history with particular emphasis on the mining of Black Mesa, the associated rip-off of the Hopi and Navajo tribes, the duplicity of lawyer John Boyd, and the big buildup that transformed the region. This is a fascinating and well-written book. Another volume along the same lines covers the West’s water troubles and the paradox of so much agriculture and so many people living in an arid land. Marc Reisner’s Cadillac Desert: The American West and its Disappearing Waters is a classic. There’s a whole lot of history and sleight of hand behind the water that gushes forth at the turn of a faucet in the West.

By the time you wade through Reisner and Wilkinson, you’ll be so mad you’ll be burstin’ blood vessels and wishing you could bust some dams. Lucky for us, a fellow by the name of Edward Abbey felt the same way after seeing his places of worship in Glen Canyon inundated by the likes of Floyd Dominy and the Bureau of Reclamation. He fought back with a book called The Monkey Wrench Gang and a crew of fictional characters who have some fun with dynamite and karo syrup. Good stuff, compadres!

Old Abbey was a thorny character and he had a bit of a blind side when it came to folks south of the border. But we’ll not let his shortcomings stand in the way of our literary venture, shall we? After all, continued on page 40
I have become an old woman. My limbs feel brittle, and my walk is stooped, my gait ragged and slow. My lungs cannot get enough air. The fluid cooperation between muscle and bone is gone. In the yard below, I can make out the shape of the canoe, which I am thinking now of selling. Paddling rivers seems part of someone else's life. My life has become something I do not recognize.

I used to read about terrible accidents in the newspaper, events where ordinary people were maimed or died suddenly and unexpectedly, or when their lives were otherwise turned brilliantly and horribly topsy-turvy for all time, and wonder, ‘Did you know?’

Did you know that morning, when you poured the Wheaties into the cereal bowl, that this was the day? Did you have some sense when you climbed onto the plane, fired up that table saw, pushed away from the dock, strapped on the skis, that life as you knew it was over?

Was there some sort of awareness for you that it was a day like no other?

Here is the answer: it is just a day.

There is a time that comes for everyone who has ever canoed down a fast-moving stream. On a given day you have made a mistake and missed the line, or perhaps the power of the current around a turn is stronger than your wit and skill. When this happens, no strength of purpose can possibly overcome the inevitable. You are destined to careen into the rock, or cutbank, or whatever it is that is bending the will of the water. Instinct tells you to lean away from the thing you are going to crash against, but instinct is exactly wrong in this case. Leaning away from the rock, or cutbank, or whatever, will cause the boat to tilt upstream and fill with water, and then, as my father used to say, that’s all she wrote. It’s time for a swim.

The correct thing, the only thing to do when faced with the inevitable, is to stop struggling against the current and fight the instinct to shy away in fear. You must relax and accept what you cannot control. You must do the unthinkable and embrace the obstacle, lean into it to shift the balance of the boat. Only then do you have a chance of surviving the collision and continuing down the river, upright and dry. When it happens, when you finally recognize fate, cease struggling and relax, let your craft hit, bounce off, and survive, all in a heartbeat of time, it is a moment distilled into the pure, concentrated beauty of mortality.

I think that life must be like an ephemeral stream. And so I wait for the dream to pass and the waters to return. Sometimes these days I have a flashback that goes like this: I suddenly see the car turn sideways to the highway. I see my arm go up to protect my face as the car starts to tip and roll. I see the ground rising to meet the window. And in that instant a wave of peace washes over me.

By way of explanation, I can only say that when I see the ground rising up, I am reminded of beauty. Everywhere this fall, I am surrounded by it: the color of prairie grasses in late afternoon. The smell of desert brush after rain. The clean clatter that dry leaves make when they blow across pavement. Child noises in school playgrounds. Sunrise topping autumn trees with a cloak of gold. Insect wings flashing like coins in sunlight. Walking to work on chilly mornings. Walking at all. Seeing my husband laughing with neighbors. Seeing my husband laugh. My husband. Neighbors. The return of the geese. The return of the cranes. Light on water. A voice on the radio in an empty and nearly silent room. Cats lying in the sunlight. A flock of blackbirds against a white winter sky. Morning tea in my pajamas, wrapped in a quilt, on the balcony, watching the western sky as the September sun rises in the east. Late season baseball. October baseball. October. November. December.

This is the day. There is no other. It turns out that the meaning of life is a terrible knowledge that sharpens the line of the tree and the bite of the wind. It deepens the sky and brings the moon closer. It shows us, with brilliant clarity, the perfect line to take around the turn in the stream. It turns out, finally, that it is life itself that cradles us with grace and delivers us into peace.

This is what I think of when I see the ground rise through the window. I see the pure, concentrated beauty of mortality. In that moment, a bridge opens before me, and I cross it. As I do so, I look downward and inward, and find that waters lie there.
Low Murmur, continued from pg 25

possibility of rescuing a relationship, or having something beautiful that is all your own. Thinking long-term is not a factor much of the time. Quick, appealing ideas bring more “fun and cute” into our lives and fill the gaps in our histories for a little while, until the puppy continues to pee on the carpet or the fancy sports car starts to fall apart. By having babies in such a way, perhaps we are grasping at our instinctual, primal compulsions in order to maintain some kind of wildness, to reclaim some kind of language. The trouble is, we are running out of room on this earth. The elephants are telling us this by their sheer attempts to survive. And still we are living on the surface, not delving into ourselves enough to find out what really works for us and how we can truly understand each other enough to take on the responsibility of another life together. Not turning our ears inward to where the vibration and hum of the elephant song is rattling our bones.

The gestation period for elephants is 22 months. They carry their young for almost two years. All that time, the calf is growing and hearing a muffled version of the outside world. She learns the motion of her mother’s body and feels the language that her mother speaks. She knows her mother when she is born. If human babies were carried for two years, would they learn to hear the elephants in their mother’s bones? The speed of our world would surely slow down in some respects. I am sure I would think even more deliberately about the possibility of bearing a child.

All that the elephants have are each other and the earth. They stand in a circle, tails held in trunks; calves huddled together, pressed against the legs of their mothers and aunts, brothers and sisters. Their heads are set low, tusks gently curving up to the vast African sky. They are an island, watching their world fall away. But still they sing. Wide ears flutter. They sway with each other. Dark, ancient, wrinkly flesh. Low murmur. Hum. Listen. Please listen.

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HIS & HERS
for Raymond Carver

My wife likes troubled men, so I play along. Even though I have a rewarding job and haven’t drunk hard since our first child was born. And my wife knows all this, but it’s a little game we play. So now, it’s five in the morning and I’m out of bed, pulling on some clothes, ruffling my hair, and taking a shot of Beam as I lock myself out of the house. Next, I’m banging on the door, and really losing it on our front porch. The neighbors’ lights are coming on, dogs are barking. My wife is finding her robe, she’s racing down the steps. I have the morning paper in my hand. She peers out the window at me, as her fingers clasp the neck of her robe. The front porch light comes on, the door opens, and there’s a smile on her face.

-Jeremy Watterson
of the pines. Far below, needles drop, we are quieted by these murmurings, and by the quiet itself. It is dangerous to describe a quiet place. This place has fewer pines to read grass-slope language now—whole theses are going untranslated—the wind rips through harder and it is limbs that fall instead of needles, and it is less quiet, although the heart is still quiet here, but for a different reason.

Cutting down the steep decline on a deer trail, the Oregon grape is so thick we joke of making wine—someone wonders if we spike our native juice with the oils of poison oak, and drink, will be all become immune? Regardless, next year the sun will be too much for the grape to make its home here—every big tree we pass is marked.

This is not a new story. Some of us are already immune to the never-lessening loss, and just take the BLM’s word for it when they say, “fire hazard” and “fuels reduction” and “selective cut.” Those of us who don’t take jargon at face value must understand the paper procedure that will be done to attempt to lessen, or to stop, what is planned here if we are to directly intervene in a manner according to protocol. We understand that the “purchasers” have not seen these trees or this ridge—they read maps and board-feet estimations that the BLM prepares. A group of men enter a meeting hall to bid on this ridgetop, this ecotone belt of pine and fir gliding downslope. Nesting site, refuge.

Our own walk, the witnessing we do of this place, makes an already unbearable crime only slightly less egregious. We get a handful of trees removed from the sale—four that are closer to the streambank than is permissible, three for a rare vole’s nest, and six that exceed the upper diameter limit in a “thinning” sale.

Covered in poison oak oils, tired from a day’s inner toils and walking, we head back into town and meet up with friends. We drink organic beer because it is a good life we live, and because we have choices. We talk of paint, of trees, of fragmentation. We hold space together. We stay awake, for what we see terrifies us more madder than a snake, along with ones that caused our hearts to soar like the buzzards over the Kaiparowitz Plateau. It goes to show that the West is bigger, more ballied up and muddled, and more beautiful than we ever imagined. I’ll leave you with a few books that might help us continue to view the West as, in Stegner’s words, the “native home of hope.”

William Kittredge’s Hole in the Sky is just downright beautiful prose, and as true as the shaft of a flicker’s tail feather. A book Kittredge likes an awful lot, James Galvin’s quiet and powerful book, The Meadow, is essential. And there’s one more book you must read, at least twice: Norman McLean’s A River Runs Through It and Other Stories. If you have a Bible on the shelf, consider allowing this book to take its place.

So, friends and neighbors, we’re at the end of the line, but hopefully at the beginning of a newer, truer vision of the West we share. Here’s hoping we meet somewhere down the trail.
I used to lie in my house among the trees, on the lower slopes of the San Gabriel Mountains, and gaze over the huge megalopolis that stretched to the sea. I could see the lights of civilization snaking into every canyon below. Lying there, I wondered why I ended up teaching in a place that I had always judged so harshly and didn't want to be. My ideals of social justice had sunk in the quagmire of the Pasadena Public Schools. The soft, green valleys of Oregon, my college home, had slipped from memory. The reasons for my journey to the West had become clouded in the ever-present smog of Los Angeles.

Then the local coyote pack would start crying nearby, almost answering my question. Wildness, they said, was outside my door; I just had to go and look. Wildness hangs on in the American West, even in L.A. Listening to them, I pretended that the sound of their cries carried down the canyons to the ocean, unhindered by urban noise.

The coyote is the ultimate survivor. Not very different from minorities in the United States, the coyote has withstood an onslaught of violence produced by human fear. He has persevered through at least a century of persecution and, despite it, has expanded his range. From the dusty canyons of Southern California, to the fields of Central Park, coyotes are flourishing wherever we have left some open space.

The coyote is a symbol of hope in a future that looks increasingly bleak. When I think of other species that have prospered in great numbers with human expansion, sheep and cows come to mind. I cannot draw strength from these domesticated animals. The coyote, however, has resisted the best efforts of predator control, adapted to human settlement, and is happily supplementing its diet of chokecherry and voles with the occasional domestic cat. I can draw strength from that.

I often imagined Los Angeles two hundred years ago and marveled at what a wonderful place it must have been when it was full of grizzly bears, cougars, eagles and humans, all coexisting in a beautiful coastal basin. It is a paradise lost, but the coyote is a part of that lost age that refuses to go away.

A huge male coyote lived in a canyon right above my tree house in Altadena, California. The first time I saw him I was shocked by his height and girth. I thought he was a wolf. Most coyotes I had seen before were small and scrawny. As I walked to school on days when the marine layer lapped against the chaparral covered slopes of the San Gabriel Mountains, he would appear out of the mist. With yellow eyes and tense shoulders he tracked me as I walked up the quiet street.

Once during sustained silent reading time, one of my designated “at risk” students burst into my quiet classroom and shouted “Mr. Kessler, there’s a wolf outside!”

“Kedric,” I replied “There haven’t been wolves in California for fifty years, now sit down or it’s your recess until Monday!”

“Man, I ain’t playing with you, look!” He swung the door open and it slammed against the outer wall, shaking the classroom. I stormed toward him as he backed out of the room. I looked him in the eye and saw a fear on his face that I was incapable of producing. I turned around and there, not five feet away, was my early morning friend. He stared at us and Kedric grabbed my hand.

“What he gonna do?” Kedric asked in a frightened whisper.

“Shit, Kedric, he’s trying to go home.”

“Shit, Mr. Kessler you just swore, but where he live?”

“Here, Kedric, he lives here. We’re just in the way.”