Janisse Ray
on walking the hard miles

Michael Ableman’s
FIELDS OF PLENTY
Review by Ariel Bleth

Seasons of Smoke
Wade Davis:
Creative Ethnobotanist

Five Dollars
Published by ScholarWorks at University of Montana, 2005
Not by Medicine

Kim Stafford

Where the trail turns, crossing the creek, where my foot
seeks in the dusk a stone in water stable enough for a moment
of passage, where an old cedar stands at this moving water’s edge,
where the last light flickers silver between dark stones, the silver
moving and still at once, in place unchanging even as what makes
it changes and is never the same, at this moment of location in my
life I bow by the cedar tree, take a quarter from my pocket and
find a place among the roots, my hand burrowing into the tangle,
and there—there the offering, George and the eagle given back at
the place I was healed, the place that knew me not, but healed me,
the place where water travels for some hidden reason, and I.
Continuing Education
Kim Stafford

In this nation of deep green, rain, mysterious change, fox finds new scent by the river—busy whiskering wet grass. And farther up, the river fingers higher into old hills, and the hills grow taller by the worm's labor. The worm sips clay, spits earth, savors old leaves, curls about a cedar sprout. The old cedar towers in sun, puts forth a million buds. And you, though long in the world, long to be new, to breathe and reach, to bud, to savor where rain falls. Who do you want to be?

You want to be you—but deeper, wiser, farther on.
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By Jeff Gailus
I heard the knocking before I saw the bird. The sound echoed in the forest, hollow and resonant. Insistent. Slogging through crusted snow, I went in search of the sound and found the source. Clinging to the side of a towering ponderosa pine snag was a magnificent bird — shiny black back, brilliant red crest, and a graceful neck lined with a curve of white. The bird swung its head with stunning force against the snag, sending chips of wood flying into the air. It was the first pileated woodpecker I had ever seen.

In the cold of January, I moved to Missoula, Montana, from the Gallatin Canyon where I had been living on our family ranch on the edge of Yellowstone Park. The two places are four hours of driving and an ecosystem apart. I was not prepared for the striking change in climate, vegetation and landscape. And so the discovery began.

First it was the ponderosa pine forests, where I often go to escape what still feels to me like a large city. Accustomed to the omnipotent lodgepole pine of the Yellowstone ecosystem, the long needles and thick trunks of the ponderosa were different — and beautiful. Then I started to see pileated woodpeckers in those magnificent forests. In my bird book, pileateds are still listed as the biggest woodpeckers in North America. Even now, with the celebrated return of the ivory-billed woodpecker, they are worthy of admiration.

When the days stretched out and winter packed its cold away for the season, each walk I took became a journey of discovery. The ‘dead’ trees I observed during the cold months started to produce needles — larch! I have never lived in landscape with this species of deciduous conifer. Trillium blossomed, then lady-slipper orchids. Then, of all the blossoms, the most intriguing — the bear grass started to bloom. All new, all rich and exciting, to a naturalist from a different ecosystem.

Still, every trip home to the Gallatin Canyon, I breath in the scent of the sagebrush, run my hand over the scaly bark of the lodgepole, and delight in the familiar.

But the familiar has been transformed.

Having been transplanted into a different place, where the color, shape, and smell of the plants and creatures are highlighted by their novelty, my senses are opened. On my frequent trips home, walking in the lodgepole forests, I now see the intricacy of the colors and patterns of the trees with a new eye, take in the smells with a new understanding, and note the intricate markings on even the most familiar of friends — such as the chickadees that chitter in both lodgepole and ponderosa pines alike.

It is a complex world, and it is too easy to take for granted those things that are familiar. Excited by my first sighting of the pileated woodpecker, I exclaimed my pleasure to a local Missoulian. “Oh yes,” she said with a dismissive wave of the hand. “Those birds are common.” I paused. I knew I would have said the same thing if somebody had expounded about their first sighting of elk in the Yellowstone meadows.

Beauty is everywhere — if we just remember to see it, smell it, and find it in the everyday things that are both familiar and incredible at the same time.

Beginner’s mind. Staying open and aware. It’s even better when mixed with the warmth of familiarity.

I am new to Camas. I bring to it a beginner’s mind. What I hope it brings to our readers is a chance to explore new terrain and to see the familiar with a new eye.

The Fall issue of Camas provides many new perspectives. Past readers will note that for the first time in many years, the Fall issue, traditionally dedicated to the Environmental Writing Institute (EWI), is not...
the “Teller Issue.” EWI moved to the University of Montana campus this year, but maintained its creative inspiration and commitment to excellence. Janisse Ray, Kim Todd, and Camas’ own mentor Phil Condon combined their efforts in a week of exploring the new, the familiar, and the intangible. Camas is a celebration of that kind of exploration – the insights, perceptions, and wonder that can come from exploring the world through writing – and through finding new perspectives and beauty in both the unknown and the familiar.

New perspectives lie in the inspired writing of all of our contributors. EWI leader Janisse Ray blesses this issue with an essay that tweaks death and nature into different realms. Animals and wildfire take on new meaning through the EWI essays of Catherine Meeks and Cedar Brant. EWI alums Ariel Bleth, Hank Green, and Becca Hall write of people, places, and things that feed the fires of inspiration and thought. Other insightful contributors have taken the time to consider the people and places that teach in subtle ways. Their words and art introduce our readers to a world of novel familiarity.

Tilt your head. Take a new look at the world around you. Be inspired.
Welcome to Camas, Fall 2005. Enjoy.

ROBIN PATTEN, EDITOR, FALL 2005

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We invite submissions of article ideas, prose, poetry, photos and artwork. Please visit us at

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The Bottle

for mom

Becca Hall

1.
You gather things to you like a dirt road.
You lie littered with them all, and beautiful.

Every crooked useless thing
I made -- the tangled mobile, scribbled
notes, dark blue clay swan.

You accept anything discarded:
mad woman at the bus stop, old bottle
dug up with potatoes.

2.
The past is a blue bottle on the windowsill,
my drawing of a happy sun.

But how tired you have become, leaning
by the stove, skin clinging to your cheekbones.

3.
It's a constant task, this dusting, arranging,
judging the relation of thing to thing,
knowing what to toss out, what to hide away.

It does not matter. Each thing held
leaves the feeling of its weight in your hand.

The bottle on the windowsill
could hold hellebore, both being fatal
and blue.
In the Elkhorn Mountains, every direction of the compass points to death. Bones are scattered across the yellow-green hills – jawbones of mule deer, elk femurs, pelvis bones with their gaping holes. When I pick up a two-foot length of backbone, the vertebrae fall apart in my hands.

Life is built on fragility, breath and blood and white bone. It’s an old war to survive, a cairn in a high wind.

The Elkhorn cabin where I am to spend a week is fifteen miles from remote Townsend, Montana. Those fifteen miles are slow ones, seeking deeper and deeper into the Helena National Forest, the roads gradually worsening amid so much inhuman country. The Forest Service has granted me this cabin as a retreat for a week -- I applied to be writer-in-residence of the wild. I’m here -- way out here -- alone. Somewhere in history, alone.

I park in front of a corral that circles Eagle Guard Station, which is 110 years old, I’ve read, and constructed of hewn, chinked logs. The cabin has a small porch and pretty, white-frame windows. I have been sent a key to the door, but when I climb the steps, I see the lock has been cut and the doorknob broken. Somebody’s big footprint shows the door forced open. I duck inside and look around. The dim cabin is so richly brown that it recollects an old hollow tree. A woodstove sits in one corner, a handmade table in another. Bunk
beds and a bench occupy a second room.

Lanterns that the Forest Service papers promised would be here are gone, stolen, as is the propane stove, pots, pans. Buckets for hauling water are gone, a shovel.

Right then I retrieve a small revolver my father taught me to shoot years ago out of the truck. The gun makes me feel safer, while I get my bearings, a young woman alone in deep wilderness. I haven’t shot in two years. I balance a lumber scrap on a post and pop at it with the .022. On the fourth bullet the scrap falls. Then I find two six-inch nails and nail shut the bunkroom door. The front door bolts from the inside.

I light a fire. At this elevation, 6,800 feet, the weather’s cold for June, down in the 40s.

I need water, and I find a two-pound coffee can to fill, and head down-canyon.

Eagle Creek is two feet wide and cuts through a perfect meadow of lush fescue and tufted hairgrass, through long-plumed avens and cranesbill. Mountain bluebells hang over the water; quaking aspens shake and shimmy. If there’s cougar anywhere, it’s here. I fill the coffee can.

The rain ends while I’m eating supper and the setting sun immediately pours brilliant fire across the mountains. A rainbow begins into a far canyon, more and more luminous as it arches and touches down near me, up the creek. In minutes a second rainbow materializes from out of the cloudbank and bends over the first. For a long time I watch the lingering light stroke the soft-green line of peaks.

Fifteen months later, after Michael is dead, I will think about the week in the Elkhorns, when the knowledge of death hovered about me. That week, death in all its forms forced me to live on the edge of existence. But what happened to me is that, unlike Michael, life came to mean so much more than death.

Michael was my friend. I wished he were my boyfriend and sometimes he seemed to be. He was a painter in the art department, exactly my age, also a graduate student. He painted seeds a lot. Sometimes I went and sat on the ratty sofa in the room where he and other students painted. His studio was in the back corner. He stuck Van Morrison on the tape recorder and stood at his easel, drawing huge black scribbles of seeds amid a flurry of red sky.

I had invited Michael to come to the Elkhorns. But he wouldn’t. Being alone in a cabin doing art for a week would force us to be close. I know that scared him.

Next morning I descend again to the creek for water, through the transition zone of sagebrush, where
When all was said and done, I had almost nothing of Michael's. I have a drawing he made for a poster to advertise my thesis reading. I have a picture of him from his obituary. I had a few poems about blackberries he had given me, which luckily I kept. Michael talked about the blackberries that grew huge and black near his Mercer Island home as if they were sacred.

alive and indebted to distance
blackberries are as far away as daybreak
-I don't expect to see much light this year.
I will imagine their dark juice running down the thorny reaches
giving way to the cold rains of winter and winter
ruin. (Blackberries '96)

I have memories. Of both of us riding home on Michael's bicycle through a cold Missoula night. Of making brownies. Of dancing. Of opening the door to a bouquet of flowers. Of “I'm sorry” notes. Of Easter Service at St. Ignatius Church, when a 1000-year comet streaked through the sky. Of the smell of paint.

One afternoon I lie outside beneath a strict sun, reading. A golden eagle circles above, lower and lower, until he is less than 100 feet overhead. As he lowers he grows, until he is immense, a mythic vulture, a winged reaper, capable of carrying me away. I leap to my feet.

Earlier this summer, a strange thing happened to me. I was on the Missouri River, canoeing for five days with a friend. The river was swollen, two feet above flood, and it had risen into beavers' lodges; it gnawed at cutbanks. We kept midstream, avoiding the crashing wedges of earth that would sink a boat with no place to climb out. The river was a muddy brown, until whatever life contained in it was invisible.

On the fourth afternoon we were stopped on Holmes Council Island. The sun was gentle and there was a wind. I was lying against a fallen cottonwood and could look up and see thousands of cottonwood hearts throbbing in the wind, like so many hummingbird wings fanning tiny flames. Their little hearts beat against the sky.

I felt safe where I lay in the plains sun, warm against the belly of ground. Something in the river’s motion, 36 miles of it so far, had entered my body, and I found myself rocking, tipping and correcting, which had the startling effect of my body disowning me. Even on dry ground I was adrift. For once I was not thinking.

Then I felt myself leaving this world. The whole of it—the breaks, the wide, muddy river with its animal-like lapping, the incessant wind, the sun in the dry blue sky—began to warp and slide away from me.

Or maybe I was the one leaving, sliding backwards, the landscape melding to a green and blue distortion. Neither was I in my body nor of the earth, but disembodied and helpless in that, as if somehow my soul had slipped from my body when I sneezed, or had crept out with steady exhalations, but had not gone far, not out of camp. My soul was hanging close to my body. But not inside it. Definitely not inside it.

It was like a slept-upon arm that has become numb; you lift it, shake it like a stick, move its fingers with your other set of fingers. For a moment you wonder if any of it will ever work again, or if it will forever be worthless as a wooden spoon dangling from your shoulder.

Except now my whole body had retreated. I could just as well be dead. Maybe I was dead. I sat up; if I could function, spirit had not completely abandoned my body, but somehow pulled it along, a sled roped to a line of running huskies.

My friend hunched in the grass some distance away, reading.

“Mick,” I said. I could still talk. My friend looked up and put the book on the grass.

“I feel so odd,” I managed to say. Tears flew out of my eyes. “My body is leaving the earth.” I tried to focus on the worn rock of the cliff, to see it apart, in its place, and not rise above it.

Then my friend was on his long legs, coming toward me, bending, clamping his arms around my shoulders, holding me down.

I have a memory, too, of walking with Michael in the woods above Mt. Sentinel in Missoula, not far from campus. I heard
birds in the green treetops above us and looked up, and there, not far above our heads, was a pair of the most beautiful lovebirds I’ve ever seen. They seemed unreal, birds painted on canvas not of real life. Later I would find them in the field guide: Western tanagers.

Toward the end of the week in the Elkhorns I begin to fast. I am stripping the world away, to get a good look at what it leaves behind. That morning I wake and hike toward Peck Mine, six miles away along a rutted Forest Service Road. I am close to Dickinson’s “zero at the bone.” I am choosing it. I could leave, go to town or return to my friends. I could eat. My dreams have been ragged, Michael with his back to me.

I pull my body along; the flesh is weak. I can’t walk far without stopping to rest, and my heart beats hard in my thin body. I feel it pumping through all parts. Even the air is lean.

Two mule deer stand alert on a near slope. They seem torn. A yearling watches me while the other turns away, watching something else. I look. It is a mule deer, bounding across a hill. Before him a coyote leaps away, at first trotting, then galloping. The coyote dashes toward an outcrop of gray rock where a few Ponderosa pines are growing. The coyote circles out of sight, then reenters my vision, trotting beneath low-hanging branches of a pine. There the mule deer can close in but not thrash him.

The coyote watches me from under the bough, watches the deer, and finally, uncomfortably, jogs into the open. The mule deer is again in pursuit. When I round the hill they’ve disappeared.

Michael’s death was a suicide. He hung himself in the apartment where he lived. I had lived the last summer in Missoula in the apartment across the hall. Most of the time we avoided each other. I wanted a relationship with more intimacy—a ripening, a deepening—and Michael wanted that too but he wasn’t able to do it.

Separated by a thin apartment wall, I could hear when he came home, when he pulled his Murphy bed from the wall. Toward the end of summer, Michael took a long trip back to the West Coast. He left in a hurry one morning, just before day. I heard him go, taping a note to my door asking me to water his plants.

When he came back, he brought me a bowl of those fat Washington blackberries and I came over to his apartment and ate them, sitting in a straight-back chair in front of him.

I kept thinking that if I’d stayed in Missoula, just across the hall, Michael might have come to me for help. If I’d stayed clear about our friendship, he might have been able to trust me. I was angry that I hadn’t known enough about him to keep him alive. But most of the time he had pushed me away.

After Michael died a mockingbird would come and scratch at the windows of my house in Georgia. I’d never seen it before. I knew it was not Michael but I associated it with him.

On the last day in the Elkhorns, following a topo map I bushwhack to the confluence of Eureka and Crow creeks, then hike along the bank. The going is hard, through willow and alder, but I’m eager to see Crow Creek Falls. I collect moose pellets. (Chuck Jonkel the biologist showed me they burn like incense.)

Finally I ford the creek, hiking boots around my neck, to gain a foot-trail. The trails in this national forest aren’t to be trusted. Through forest they’re blazed, and traceable, but in the wide meadows, paths disappear into lupine, arrowleaf balsamroot, gromwell. This one, however, is well-worn, and unspeakably lovely. It follows Crow Creek past talus slopes and cedar trees, and I don’t put my boots back on right away.
Hard Miles in the Dark

In two hours I reach the falls, startled to find old mining equipment that has been heli-lowered into the crevasse. Creek banks are littered with rusted cable and plastic bottles of used petroleum products. But the waterfall itself—the water does not fall. It flings out a narrow gorge and explodes into a swirling pool fifteen feet below. A few trunks of trees are caught in the pool, where they keep spinning. The scene makes me feel flimsy.

I take a different trail back that promises the guard station in four miles. It climbs a canyon where Tom Brown, Jr. could write a thriller from the tracks: elk, coyote, mule deer. I could easily be the first human on this trail this season. Maybe the last. It’s too faint. I don’t always want to be so alone, and rickety, on these whimpers of trails.

After a mile I’ve lost the path and instead follow the compass east. I leave the canyon and traverse a meadow, then link onto a scrap of trail. I stick to the meadows, training east, and bisect canyons when I must. The trail is gone; there are no signs, no blazes. I don’t like being lost.

Overhead a thunderstorm brews, clouds racing. God knows where I am. A guild of thunderheads closes out the sun. The storm is imminent, a bad one. I walk faster, until I am running. I cross one meadow, weave through a patch of pine and Doug fir, and enter another. Sometimes I have to scout and retrace, and take another route. I hate to think how long a person, wet and weak, could be lost out here.

On a high knoll I take my bearings. I recognize a certain peak visible from the cabin, then a ridge I climbed a couple days ago. There’s meadow to cross, then the Eureka Creek canyon, then open prairie again. Maybe a mile home. But the storm now has blotted out most available light and the afternoon is so dim I can barely read the topo map, so I stop long enough to memorize the geography before I angle downhill, crashing. I trip and fall. One cheek is bleeding.

If I can find Eureka I can trace it home, even in the dark. And if I can’t, I have a rain suit and a gun, a knife and a compass.

In the middle of a high, wide meadow the lightning starts, slicing down with electric knives, thundering against the scabbed sky. The clouds are low and angry, a blue bruise. Lightning twists down and cracks the clouds open, loosening rain, which hurls coldly down, mixing with pebbles of hail.

Moving to the meadow’s edge, I take refuge near a grove of pines. Then I move again, skirting grassland. The rain is hard and lightning crashes at the same time the thunder strikes, but the red arrow of the compass is guide enough.

I’ll make it home.

And I do, passing out of the storm and setting on a trail along Eureka, looping along the logging road, rising above Eagle Creek – uncountable hard miles.

When the dark week was done, I drove straight to Michael. In the afternoon quiet of the Sunday town, he was napping and I asked if I could climb in with him. I said I needed to be held. He said yes. I told him about the mule deer chasing the coyote, and about the tree swallows nesting in the crude bluebird box that a father and daughter, previous guests, had fashioned — how they asked in the cabin journal if someone in the fall would please clean the nest out for next spring’s birds; and about the bluebirds nesting in the swallow’s mud-cup; and how the female flew toward the window and dropped again and again before her reflection, catching herself inches off the dew-tipped grasses.

The last morning, I told him, there were crossbills in the creek. I’d hidden behind a gooseberry and watched them bathe where the creek ran shallow. The sun was young and bright, and this was the first time I’d seen crossbills, the charcoal x’s of their bills. I told Michael how long I sat there, watching.

Pine siskens came to join the crossbills. The birds slung water and chirped, dipping and flinging: red males and yellowish females. They exhibited little fear, such was their joy to be wading in the half-inch of clear water in the sand-bed of the summer creek. They twittered among cress.

I was less than six feet away, I told Michael, part of the world and glad too.

Life can be seen as courage. ♦
Dreaming

John Noland

I watch elk gaze quietly
into the twilight, wondering
why the afternoon has given up
its light, wondering
why the frogs croak such dark songs--
tiny shadows
flickering like flames
in the silver dusk,
sweeping across the fields, flames
growing darker and darker
until the whole earth
escapes sight, revealing itself
only in sounds and wild rivers of odor
twisting and turning,
while ravens huddle high
in dead trees, reciting the moon’s litany.
Golden butterflies,
that all day have praised the sun
with their wings, praise the moon
with silence, and the cougar
unfurling his long tail, rises slowly
into the dark, burning shadows
like a god entering his dream.
don’t own land, and very few people I know do. Renting is the only feasible option for those with transitory and uncertain lives. But somehow, all of the land in America is owned. Every piece has a line drawn around it. Every piece is regulated, controlled, and, in some way, used. I feel somewhat lame in not owning any of it myself. But there is a huge chunk of land, say 700 million acres, that, in a way, I do own. When the United States’ destiny became manifest and great gobs of Indian, Spanish and French land was “acquired,” the immediate owner of that land was the U.S. Government. And while the feds made a good show of giving a lot of that land away - to settlers, railroad tycoons, states, and lumber companies - they managed to hold on to about one third of the land area of our country. When I say “they,” I sorta mean “we”. The funny thing about a democracy is that everybody controls what the government owns. Our responsibility then, is to make sure the government does what we would like it to do with our land.

Seven hundred million acres is a lot of land to look after. So, after a couple centuries of trial and error, we’ve actually got a pretty great system for keeping it all straight. Three different parts of government control the land: the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the Forest Service, and the National Park Service. The relationship these organizations have with their land is somewhat complicated but, from a distance, the differences are fairly obvious. BLM lands are for cows, Forest Service lands are for trees, and National Park lands are for the Japanese.

I just spent a week in Yellowstone and Grand Teton

To be in the presence of such fascinating and delicately beautiful works of nature should touch and amaze all Americans.
National Parks, and I can’t help but sing their praises. Though my car-load of friendly folks generally referred to Yellowstone as “The Stinky One,” and agreed that Grand Teton was “The Boring One,” no one can tour those enchanted lands without praising Teddy’s vision of a “national” park. A place owned by everyone for everyone; a place of national pride and wonder and beauty. Without that vision, I cannot see a place as amazing as Yellowstone staying as unspoiled as it is today.

This is not to say that Yellowstone is unspoiled. Roads branch through the park and hundreds of animals a year are killed by cars. Fleets of tour buses unleash floodgates of sunburned Europeans and shutterbug Japanese. In the fifty years since my girlfriend’s father visited the park, Old Faithful’s viewing platform has grown from a couple log benches to a broad semi-circular seating platform from which hundreds of people can watch the geyser perform.

And even if some of the park remains unspoiled, its inhabitants certainly do not. To be in the presence of such fascinating and delicately beautiful works of nature should touch and amaze all Americans. And while some children I spied had the looks of wonder I would expect, others were much more impressed by the special effects in “Revenge of the Sith”. A proclamation of “Television is my favorite hobby” from a preteen boy drew groans from me and my companions. The twelve-year-old spitting-image of Britney Spears sighed at the edge of Yellowstone’s Grand Canyon and said “I got out of the car for that?” And overweight children of all ages panted through the hot summer days, complaining, and wishing they could be back in their air-conditioned cars with their iPod and Pringles.

So they don’t appreciate their land, but I do. And so do the bison, the elk, the trout, ducks, coyotes, bears and wolves. Together, we appreciate it enough for all of America. That land is part of me and my country. Yellowstone, Grand Teton, Arches, Everglades, Yosemite, Mesa Verde, and all the others, are real and true reasons to be proud of this country. It is our land, and it is great land.
Fields of Plenty

A farmer’s journey in search of real food and the people who grow it.

Ariel Bleth

If you were raised on wrapped sliced Swiss cheese or orange Cheddar singles, you may not want to read Michael Ableman’s description of the cave-aged sheep cheese he came across in Wisconsin. Never mind that David and Mary Falk’s efforts have landed them a Food Artisan of the Year award bestowed by Bon Appetit magazine. The cheese is blue and white with brown streaks covered in leaves. Some are brown and crusty with ruts and holes. Though they are wrapped in vodka-soaked nettles and aged on cedar boughs, Mary’s own mother told her they look like “moldy horse turds.” But the Falks are passionate about their cheese. How many other families would you find sitting in a cave, at eleven in the evening, gushing with excitement over a new strain of mold?

In his book, Fields of Plenty, Michael Ableman introduces us to farmers and food artisans from across the country who are similarly passionate about their work and, like the Falks, are innovatively making a difference in what we eat and how we experience our food. The book is substantial, filled with stories, photographs and recipes. Ableman’s sensitivity to farming and food (a farmer himself of over thirty years) as well as his training as a visual artist quickly becomes apparent. His beautiful images convey the uneven texture of a kale’s leaf, the early morning communion between farmer and cow, the attention and care given to a row of transplanted seedlings. We are asked, as readers, to consider choosing a farmer, thoughtfully forming a relationship with the source of our own food, in the same way we might choose our doctor or pastor.

The book’s stories ask us to pause, think about not only where our food comes from, but also how our food is grown and how it gets to our table. It is a book that asks us to explore the meaning of food in our culture today.

Fields of Plenty describes Ableman’s three month journey across the United States, taken at a time when many people are getting involved in alternative agrifood initiatives. Scholars, community organizers, land use planners and researchers are exploring community and locally-based solutions to the current state of our agrifood system — a system in which healthy food is not accessible to all, where the travel distance between fields to plate is immense, as is the dependence on non-renewable energy sources to grow and transport the food. Advocates of local food systems believe that the way our food is grown, distributed, and eaten has profound economic, environmental and social impacts on individual and community health and well-being.

Ableman is no stranger to these issues as founder of the Center for Urban Agriculture at Fairview Gardens, California. An international model for small scale, urban agriculture, Fairview Gardens is
both an education center and working organic farm. In addition, Ableman has authored two previous books, *From the Good Earth* and *On Good Land*. Though he is an advocate for localizing our food system, Ableman doesn’t offer us, in *Fields of Plenty*, a critical analysis of globalization or the different theories of social change and food democracy. Nor, in the end, does he offer even a definitive understanding of a localized food system. Instead, Ableman shares a conversation with us - a conversation that is humorous, honest and often poignant. He travels by car from British Columbia, to Oregon, to Maine and back again, witnessing the daily lives of those perhaps most intimately involved in challenging the dominant food paradigm. The people we meet in *Fields of Plenty* may or may not see themselves as part of a movement for local food or community food security. They may or may not be comfortable with Ableman’s perception of them, as folks using their farms as educational platforms and as agents for social and environmental change. One does get the impression, nonetheless, that they are creating a new agriculture.

Ableman’s writing brings alive the people he met across the country, some of them longtime members of the so-called organic movement who have found themselves uncomfortable with the industrialization of organic agriculture – a once grassroots movement with the simple goals of soil regeneration and producing food for local communities. Today, purchasing produce with an organic label does not guarantee that laborers are paid fair wages, that the produce didn’t travel the average 1,300 field-to-plate miles, or that they are not mono-cultural crops. Ableman himself, though adhering to the basic tenets of organic agriculture throughout his own thirty years of farming, is quick to point out the importance of moving beyond organics – that is, expanding notions of food production from what inputs and materials are or are not used, to a system where farmers and consumers are back in relationship with each other.

The Knolls, farmers whom Ableman met in Santa Ana, California, would agree. Rick Knoll is a six foot tall, long-haired Vietnam vet with a Ph.D. in organic chemistry and an almost–second Ph.D. in agricultural ecology. He once was a member of a Cold War top-security research and development project for the Lawrence Livermore Laboratories. Now he and his wife, Christy, are known as “the fig people.” The popularity of the figs they grow is evidenced from the pictures of the farm and stages of the crops they put on the internet, so people can plan their vacations around fig harvesting time. This kind of relationship with their customers was established from selling consistently high quality produce at the Ferry Plaza farmer’s market in San Francisco. That relationship allowed the couple to drop organic certification when the paperwork and new Federal rules and regulations became too onerous.

There is a growing frustration among farmers at the watered down definition of “organic,” as well as the consolidation in the organic market which is pushing small to mid-size farmers out. In response to the large volume demand from supermarket chains, many farmers are turning to direct marketing ventures, such as Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). As Ableman learned when he stopped at a Whole Foods store in Saint Louis, 90 percent of their organic stock is produced by one California-based megafarm. The produce manager didn’t know what percentage of the produce was local or regional. “We don’t do things that way,” he says. Peppers, for instance, could be from Canada or the Netherlands one week and from California the next.

Ableman admits that figuring out how to feed people sustainably is a messy process of unraveling...
Ableman often refers to the farmers he met on his journey as “outlaws” by conventional terms. They may be outlaws because they are lured by a sense of being part of something much bigger than themselves.

old ideas and experimenting with new ones, but he adamantly holds to his conviction that the most important aspects of a healthy food system are relationships — relationships that include the interpersonal but also the ecological and biological. The farmers he met on his journey were as different from one another as you would expect to find traveling the width of this country. Yet consistently, Ableman met farmers who were passionate about quality, committed to a high level of mastery and technique, and who constantly pushed the edge toward greater innovation. Not surprisingly, each farmer had their own unique way of expressing the importance of relationship as well.

In California’s Sonoma County, Ableman details the tell-tale signs of “conventional” farming in the immaculate vineyards and tidy, uniform agricultural fields. By contrast, in Bob Cannard’s field, one has to get on their knees and part the “weeds” to find the beautiful red peppers hidden beneath a cover of mustard, mallow, and amaranth. His is a less-is-more philosophy that relies on nature taking some responsibility. Bob’s “weed thing” is the best-known and most controversial aspect about him. He challenges the dominant belief that a farm should be made up of straight rows consisting only of what we put in them. Heavy machinery and chemical use has fueled an attitude that farmers should have control over the land — an attitude which has lead to enormous resource depletion and pollution. Bob’s dream is to not have to plant anything but just wander around gathering. While he may not be quite there yet, his Florence fennel and radicchio have been self-seeding and managing on their own for years.

And his harvest — squash blossoms, rosemary, thyme, green beans, spring onions, and red and yellow cherry tomatoes — goes to the well-known Chez Panisse restaurant in Berkeley, the temple of the field-to-the-plate revival led by Alice Waters. Bob experiments with irrigation as well as cultivation techniques. His irrigation water originates in a 10,000 gallon redwood tank to which his home-brew compost tea is added. Into this compost goes crushed rock, sea salt, oats with molasses and just about everything from beer to burnt ketchup. Innovation does not stop there, as Ableman observed when he saw Bob standing on the edge of the bubbling, gurgling compost tank, peeing into it. Bob likes to think of himself as fairly experimental and willing to implement visionary or imaginative ideas.

Agriculture can involve common sense relationships as well. Vermont hosts a dairy farm where nearly every aspect of the operation — 30 head of Guernsey cows yielding 10,000 pounds of milk and 800 pints of...
ice cream per week — is run on gravity. Ed Ransom’s
milking barn sits atop a small hill, the cooling tanks,
bottling and ice cream rooms are built in succession
going down the hill. Milk moves from parlor, to tanks,
to plant without a single pump. But Ed also exemplifies
an attention to quality that is rooted in local knowledge
and understanding. He understands that milk from
cows in Ohio will taste different from his in Vermont;
that milk taste is terribly complex and affected by the
dust, the dandelion flowers, and the bits of manure that
the cow may smell. As Ed explains, if his cows are
out in a field “that’s got blackberry bushes and Queen
Anne’s lace and orchard grass, red clover, and around
the edge of the fence there’s some comfrey growing that
particular day, if you were really good, you could smell
that stuff and you could say, ‘these cows were grazed on
an east-facing slope, in September, in Vermont’.”

Local knowledge is an important part of the
sustainable food system that Ableman imagines, as
is biological and cultural diversity, decentralization
and ecological responsibility. As important to him,
however, is the question of how our society partici­
pates in the food system. How do we address the need
for sustainable food sources when we build cities
where the closest real food is hundreds or thousands
of miles away? Imagine a system of movable farms
which restores the fertility of vacant city lots, provides
food and jobs to local residents, and is able to move to
the next lot once the tenure agreement with the city
is up. In Chicago, Ken Dunn grows tomatoes on an
island surrounded by skyscrapers, sidewalks and bad
air. His heirloom varieties — Striped German, Green
Zebra, Black Russian — grow in the scraps from local
restaurants, compost made of cherry pie filling, arugula
salad and filet mignon. The 1,000 tons of compost Ken
uses is just a fraction of the 15,000 tons of urban waste
disposed of in Chicago each day, but it nevertheless
returns to the soil some of the nutrients consistently
hauled away in the process of trying to
feed a nation.

Unlike bustling Chicago, the
rural black community of Pembroke
Township, Mississippi, is one of the
most economically depressed regions
in the entire country. The uniform
corn and soybean fields one sees while
traveling along the dirt roads are quickly
replaced by clapboard houses, rusted
vehicles and trailers. John and Ida
Thurman live with their seven teenagers
in a compound of about half a dozen
dilapidated buildings surrounded
by their 27 acres of farmland. They
raise many of the same crops that
their fathers did during the 1940’s:
okra, squash, sweet potato, beans,
peas, and watermelon. The sandy
soil, the minimal support from farm
extension and development agencies, the
oppressive heat and humidity, all make
farming here a challenge, however.
John nods toward his makeshift home
and says, “It’s not hard to see that we’re
sure not keeping up with the Joneses,
but we’re only poor in dollars.” They
are wealthy in family and community
and, in fact, helped organize a
community effort to use farms to keep
families together. The family, for them,
extends far beyond bloodline to what
Fields of Plenty

they call the “rural village.” The Thurman’s primary concern is the intense pull of the urban world on youth. They are committed to showing young people that farming is an honorable and inspiring way of life. To this end they started a youth training program that teaches kids farming, marketing, leadership and organizational skills, all couched within “the value of giving back to the community.” The list of requirements for taking part in the training includes:

1. Participate four days or more per week
2. Follow work/safety rules
3. Join a credit union
4. Practice regular savings
5. Attend meetings
6. Respect other enrollees
7. Provide community service
8. Take vegetables home
9. Share what you learn with others

The back of the training brochure closes with the words: “we have looked into the past and accepted the future. Agriculture is art, our heritage, and our future. It is our duty to preserve this small piece of Mother Earth. Our future depends on it.”

Farming requires an ability to adapt to changing environments. The weather, the demand for products, the prices, and the soil and crops, continually ebb and flow. Blending economics with biology is not always easy. For some, this blending is a form of artistic expression, for others an act of faith. “To plant a seed and believe that it will germinate, out-compete weeds, bloom, set fruit, and be harvested and sold at a fair price is a great leap of faith,” says Denesse Willey, a farmer in California’s Central Valley. “This is why I have always said that farmers are the most faithful people on earth. Next to spiders, faith is the farmer’s best friend.” Ableman himself admits that he considers quitting farming five or six times a year. He isn’t sure if it is the hard physical labor, lack of help or this balancing of economics and biology. He does know, however, something subtle always pulls him back from the edge: a shift in the wind that carries the smell of a new season, a dramatic sky or the shimmer of a leaf. It is about the sense of connection that comes from producing something that is beyond a commodity and a valuable part of a whole. The Willeys also consider connections, as Denesse explains to Ableman why their cleaned and washed produce is stored in recycled wood boxes lined with white paper. Her husband, Tom, reminds her constantly that using wax cartons in their packs (even though it would make them more price competitive in the marketplace), would merely shift the cost of packaging disposal to the community where our products end up. “That’s why we stick with reused and reusable packaging.”

Ableman often refers to the farmers he met on his journey as “outlaws” by conventional terms. They may be outlaws because they are lured by a sense of being part of something much bigger than themselves. They may work to protect and encourage the habitat that already exists and rejoice when spotting bumblebees hovering over the plants, or spiders and snakes in the fields, or at hearing the sounds of geese or ravens overhead. They may be conservative in the literal sense, by knowing the limitations of the resources at hand and taking care to conserve them with an eye toward the future. They may seek to undo the violence inherent in so much industrial agriculture by wrestling with the idea of feeding ourselves while respecting other creatures and existing ecosystems. They may wonder how best to become advocates as well as farmers, how to become a voice for the land as well as for the critical connection between farmers and consumers. As two percent of the population grows nourishment for the rest, the farmer’s crisis is our crisis. Similarly, the growing poverty, hunger and resource inequity experienced within our nation is a call for us to move beyond being consumers of food to participants in determining how our food system is shaped.

In parts of our country, Ableman observes, there is frenzy over arugula or white asparagus, a panic over possessing heirloom tomatoes. To him, these are but symptoms that indicate a longing for connection to the real world. Our poisoned food, depleted land and loss of knowledge are symptoms of biological and spiritual problems that will not be solved by technological or petrochemical solutions. If we are suffering from a lack of creative vision, as Ableman believes, Fields of Plenty may well provide its readers with both hope and inspiration. In this book are farmers who are also artists, people who are creating a bridge between nature and human nourishment, citizens who are rediscovering ways to work and live harmoniously with the natural world and with one another. If you are looking for a critical analysis of the transformative potential of alternative food movements, you might be disappointed in Fields of Plenty. If, on the other hand, you are searching for real food and the people who grow it, this may well be the book for you.
No one could break the purple horse
that grazes tall grass of the artist’s mind.
He wears no bridle.
Reined to a stop by his creator’s pen,
he stares shocked at the wide Wyoming sky,
listens to the cry of sage desert wind.
His mane flows like the booze
in Mickey’s blood. Pinedale’s own
eccentric artist, rusted cowboy,
Mickey can’t explain the visions
that leap from his hands.
He sleeps in an alley shed
and drinks his breakfast at the bar.
He staggers over gaping hills
making pictures, crawling
through fences that never divide
his own vast landscapes.
Whiskey steals his words,
whittles his declaration down
to the single point of a pen
that glides over white paper,
over Jim Beam stains in sagebrush
of the unfenced foreground
and the purple horse
with wild astonished eyes.
In the beginning it was winter light. That pre-dawn winter light that emanates not from the northern dark, but from the frozen crests and dips of the snow itself. It was into this frigid light that I plunged just after seven in the morning the year I turned fourteen.

Barefoot, my hair hung in wet cords from a bath I soaked in moments before. I ran out into the snow, luminous orange from the chimney fire that crept quickly through the cold rafters and now blazed thirty feet in the dark air. My hair froze in thin plates. It was twenty-two below zero. The soles of my feet burned cold. Light slowly filled the sky as if the heat of the blazing house melted the horizons enough for day to seep in.

A rite of passage, my past was wiped clean. I watched the roof of my childhood home cave in and burn everything familiar. My mother and sister were standing in the driveway. My dad pulled hose with the firemen, and when the water pressure dropped from the cold, he stood and watched. The cats and our dog and several mice escaped. No lives were lost that morning.

We spent the following weeks deep in the ashes. We tore down the skeleton of blackened beams, scraped through coals and drifts of snow finding old coins, the curled end of a fiddle, a scrap of shirt in which my father was married.

One July afternoon I watched a diaphanous purple storm sweep the mouth of the Swan Valley and roll out over the Scapegoat Wilderness. It was the driest summer in my memory. Hot wind pulled storms all across the state and thousands of acres of forest burned. From a ridge in the Garnet Mountains, I watched white fingers of lightning coil from the sky every several seconds. Plumes of pink-gray smoke rose from the hills. That night the mountains glowed.
Four years after my house burned down, I signed on with the Tally Lake Fire Crew. Without realizing it, I was drawn to understand the language of fire. I learned to scan the green-backed mountains on the tail of a storm for thin ribbons of smoke. One evening, I hiked with my crew to a steep, thick place where lightning hit an ancient spruce, split open white wood, and arched to a young fir stand, plunging into the ground. We arrived on the edge of a small fire crawling through brush and moss. We started digging. It was a thin line, a ridiculous scratch across the forest floor, but it was enough to stop the slow spread of one spark against another. I learned to know fire, to feel it through the soles of my boots, crush hot coals in the fingers of my gloves. I learned the smell of soil still burning with invisible heat, days after the flames were dead. I dug in hot ash, spraying water that leapt back as steam, stinging eyes and throat. I ran a chainsaw through burning trees, growing top heavy and dangerous. I ran water pumps, radios, and pocket weather kits. I learned the details of fire.

Pyrolysis is the conception of fire. It is the point of combustion when heat melts the chemical structure of wood and bursts into flame. This flame spreads by evaporating the moisture in the wood nearby, breaking the cellulose in the plant fiber down to volatile chemicals, which, like gas, in turn ignites. The growth of fire - from smoldering pine needles, to erupting in a crown fire rolling over an entire ridge - depends on intensity, and intensity is what destroys. The actual temperature of the flame on a burning twig can be the same as the thirty-foot flames of a crown fire. It is the intensity, or heat transfer, of the fire that causes neighboring fuels to heat, ignite, and build in strength. Unlike water, fire moves against the pull of gravity, burning quickest uphill. With steady wind, steep slopes, and dry fuels, the fire sounds like a freight train roaring up a drainage.

After three summers fighting fires, I found myself reading the landscape wherever I went. I could not walk through the woods without snapping small twigs between my fingers, testing the dryness of the air. I watched wind shift over grass. I was alert in ways I had never been before. Just as fire transforms the pulsing land to stark black lines and shadows, I felt those long days pulling line, breathing smoke and steam, hands callusing under my gloves settle down in my bones, smoldering in the duff of muscle and memory.

Snow came in and settled on the slumping spine of the piano, in the kitchen sink, over the trail of stairs. I walked up the frozen river from our friend’s house, where we lived in the basement for the time being. At our house, several warming fires were crackling in the January morning. A big pot of bean soup simmered on the grate. The four of us, my family, stood in the living room, wind on our faces, surrounded by the transformed shapes of our things. The precious and dispensable fused together, found in
ridiculous combinations. The Christmas ribbons melted onto the surviving presents, my sister's tiny ruby earrings like flecks of obsidian, silver coins draped over the shard of a broom handle. We laughed hard, being together in our homelessness. And even as we sled down the stairs thick with snow, and hung beautiful fragments of melted glass on the birch by the door, we felt the cold gathering in the rooms of our family. We did not realize the penetration of the fire in our lives, the cellular change that fire creates in us as it burns. With a group of friends, we took sledge-hammers to smoke shadowed walls of sheetrock, hauled what we could to the dump, and threw into the warming fires what was left unburned. We secured a rope to the remaining beams, tied the other end to a pickup and pulled down the space beneath the eaves.

The weight of the fire settled into our lives, displacing us from each other, changing the shape of our family. We were the same, but the space around us different. The impression of the fire moving like the quiet hull of a ship through the slim body of my eleven year old sister, my father's humiliation and ambition, cleaving open the steady history of my parents’ marriage.

In my tent, I pull on pungent Nomex fire pants. It is still dark and a cool wind is pouring out of the mountains. Fire crews line up for a plate of breakfast from the dining trailer. The swath of prairie where we are living temporarily is speckled with tents. In the first light, my crew lifts off over the mountains. We fly by helicopter up narrow drainages to the ridge above the Burned Point Fire. Hiking in single file, we cross the top of the burn stretching out like night below us. The black thorns of trees overlap their shadows against the charred ground; so many shades of black stacked and falling away down
the ridge. When I walk, ash puffs up around my feet. The soil here is hydrophobic; it repels water, beads it up in its own surface tension and sends it rolling in bright droplets downhill. The islands of green left in the surrounding black, smoke softly around the edges. We drop down into the heart of the burn, where the relative humidity hovers in single digits, and the smell of burning wood permeates everything.

Walking over the black valley bottom, I come across the bleached skeleton of a rabbit, its rib bones piled together like piano ivories. It may have just died, or been buried under leaves and moss for years, but now its exposed bones, the color of smoke, reflect light.

We are here to control fire, but this is just the aftermath. This fire gusted over a thousand acres before reaching the edges of this valley, slowing naturally and spitting embers down the next ridge. We come along behind to put out the three foot flames, the sparks. My role here has little to do with the protection of our natural resources. Standing in a thousand acres of ash, I am a minute witness of a momentum much greater than myself, an impetus that has shaped my life and the land with equal force.

As morning grows into the heat of day, I pause to drink water, an act that seems wholly apart from the landscape. I feel the acute contrast of being alive and sweating in this expanse of dryness. Yet in only three days, life is returning to the burn, spinning its webs, surging up from the ash. Black stubs of bear grass singed deep into the soil open like white stars against the cinders. A nighthawk dives towards us shuddering the air. A white spider crawls out of an ash-hollowed log trailing a thin line of silk.

Spiders are some of the first arrivals after fire. They blow in with the wind, along with other tiny insects and mites on which they prey. Several types of beetles are actually attracted to smoke and fire. These pyrophilous insects possess organs designed specifically for infrared radar-detecting. They use these built in “thermo receptors” to locate forest fires. The early smoke and heat detection organs alert the beetles who travel up to 60 miles, arriving at the fire while the wood is still glowing with heat, to mate and lay their eggs. Raptors fly ahead of the flames hunting fleeing voles and mice, and deer come to eat charred wood, rich in minerals. In three days at Burned Point, water again begins to seep up through the shifted ash from a spring running down the canyon. Immediately, the tiny green hands of leaves opened to the new sun, stronger now that the forest canopy is cleared.

Standing in the blackened belly of a river bottom, something in my body remembers. I followed fire deep into the woods to feel the direct consequences, to watch the land push back up through the ash. It is apparent that burning is instrumental in shaping the forests of this valley that will soon begin to sprout from fire-adapted cones, woody caudex, creeping rhizome. It is harder for me to see the imprint of fire on the memories of my regeneration: eating cubes of watermelon under a tree, orange high school lockers moving by like train cars, light through our new apartment window like a puddle full of rain. Fighting fires was a map back to the experience of my own burn, a chart of how a place recovers. I dug my hands into wet black dirt to feel for warmth. I smelled out smoldering edges and felt, deep in the root sockets of trees. There is something that feels eternal about destruction by fire. It is a way back to the elements. I live in these high enduring mountains of Montana to remember these things. Fire reminds me.
It was early September. It did not occur to me that I did not really know where I was, that all I knew of Limerick so far was how to point to it on a map. I had only been breathing the Limerick air for six hours and my head was still pounding for a clock that agreed with my sense of time. I walked down to the river on my first day in Limerick with the months I was to spend in Ireland stretched before me like a feast on a long oak table in some majestic, brightly lit hall. I walked with purpose, intending to plant myself, to insert the small, uncertain seed of my being—nineteen and incredibly hopeful—into the riverbank, to grow into something that knew where it stood with the world.

My beginning, then, was the desire for immersion. I hoped to immediately connect with this new landscape (never mind the city for now, with its buses and the castle and small piles of vomit lining the street outside the pubs on Sunday mornings). I was convinced, too, that I was the first young American girl to come looking for something undefined but very important on the banks of the River Shannon. This immediate belief in the potentially transformative power of the river was helped by the weather. I first saw that river on a clear, bright day, under a sky far removed from the oppressive grey and rain for which I had prepared myself. Those grey skies would, eventually, become an inseparable part of my picture of the river, but a few weeks of uncharacteristically sunny days preceded them.

The swans, too, did not become part of my picture of the river until later. Once I noticed them, a sort of flood gate opened in my mind so that everywhere I went—even the middle of the cities—animals caught my attention. What started with the swans continued with cattle, dogs, sheep, llamas, rats, roosters, goats, and one rather aged donkey I met on the Aran Islands a few days after New Year’s. At first, my observations were ordinary. I marveled at the way in which animals of different shapes, sizes, and species seemed to have a commonality of carriage. They belonged to their landscapes by instinct and circumstance, unquestioning, surviving. Their singleness of purpose made all of my attempts to ‘get to know’ a new place, all my particularly human worry about life in general, seem frivolous.

There was, moreover, an ease with which all the animals I saw filled the space that instinct told them was theirs. The way they occupied their bodies which, in turn, occupied the land seemed missing in my own sense of where I was, who I was. They had what seemed a deep and simple sense of belonging. And besides the farmers I met, and the two friends who watched the rats with me in downtown Limerick one afternoon.
in January, I wondered if human beings in general don’t spend enough time watching—really watching—animals.

I certainly did not expect to spend my time in Ireland chasing calves, collecting eggs, and watching swans, and expected even less the types of lessons these activities would afford. For those first few weeks in Limerick, I learned to do all the customary things that give a foreigner a sense of belonging. I learned to listen without laughing to the Irish accent, the ascension at the ends of sentences, the vernacular that turned a sentence as simple as ‘You going to college today?’ into something wholly new. I set up a bank account and bought milk and eggs and cheese at the Saturday market. I could catch the bus, and, once, gave directions to a man from Cork looking for the University with the authority of someone who had lived on her own, in a foreign country, for years.

My easy assimilation into the superficial elements of culture, however, was halted one day in early October at the University gym. And, really, the incident had less to do with being foreign in Ireland and more to do with being foreign to gyms. I couldn’t figure out how to use the lockers. After five minutes of struggling with the magnetic wristband that was supposed to open number 352, I became convinced that the children running around the locker room playing tag in their swimsuits were secretly waiting to watch me fail. They would point and laugh and in one fell swoop demolish all the work I felt I’d done to make myself comfortable, at ease. I ducked into a shower stall and cried for the first time since leaving home. It’s never clear, I suppose, when the breaking point will come, or where; when it does, the fragility of being human is no longer a source of wonder but a sense of embarrassment. Quickly wiping away my tears, I retreated. I walked to the river, seeking that seed I’d planted there.

Instead, I met the swans. They came gliding in, a cloud of wing and water, as soon as I had settled on the bank hugging my knees.

Of course, I’d seen swans before. I’d seen them in ponds on my college campus in Georgia, though those were imported with great pomp and never seemed to last very long. I’d seen them in the lake in the middle of a park in the middle of Nashville, where, on the rare occasion that it froze, my mother would sneak my sisters and me to ice skate until the security guards asked us to leave. And I’d seen them in various other man-made environs where two or three swans glided around in circles, sort of aloof decorations that never seemed quite comfortable with the other noisy ducks and Canada geese who shared their home.

But I’d never before seen them come flying in from somewhere else—a place I couldn’t see—in flocks, never heard the way their wings catch the wind and slow their descent so that they land on the water with only a slight splash, never noticed the way the water seems to bend to receive them. I realized that I’d always vaguely associated the idea of swans with the idea of grace and lightness, even Beauty itself, but had never really known where this correspondence came from until that moment of their landing on the Shannon. I stayed perched on the bank until it began to get dark. Then reluctantly remembering the warnings of the natives of Limerick to avoid the river alone at night, I wandered back in the gathering dusk to my University village.

Watching the swans became part of my routine for the fall. Saturday mornings I would take the road by the river the couple of miles into town, to buy groceries or have a sandwich in the window of some small shop. The section of river that ran through the city had been tamed (as all rivers running through cities must be) by
massive stone walls hemming in both sides. The swans, though, seemed to enjoy this domesticated segment of river as well as the wild one running beside the University. They wheeled around close to shore with no apparent concern for their proximity to roads and the noise of the city.

One particular Saturday, after the swans had either left for winter or were keeping private quarters for the colder months, two friends and I stood on the embankment in the middle of the city, peering into the river. I don’t remember who first saw the rats scurrying on the mound of clay and dirt beside the stone wall. We first noted them with only mild interest, but then found ourselves, hours later, standing in the same place. We watched these generally mistrusted creatures collect all sorts of miscellaneous goods from shore and tote them, sometimes with ease, sometimes with great difficulty, into their cave homes within the walls. There was something mesmerizing in their total confidence with their work, and the way in which each rat seemed absolutely certain that what it gathered was useful, necessary, and irreplaceable.

Sometime after first seeing the swans and watching the rats I decided not to go to school in the spring, and instead, to work on farms in various parts of the country.

This decision first took me south, to the Iveragh Peninsula in County Kerry, then north, outside of Riverstown in County Sligo. Lastly, I went east to the midlands of County Westmeath, where few postcards of the countryside are made but where there is a woman called Nowell who, from a renovated Georgian mansion, directs both a bed and breakfast and a beef cattle farm. My roundabout farming excursion began in February and continued, a few side trips to Galway and Dublin notwithstanding, until the middle of April. I spent these months amidst llamas, hens, and cattle, respectively, plus innumerable cats, several dogs, six goats, and a peacock that preened himself every morning outside the window of the broken-down trailer that served as my lodging for a relatively mild March in Sligo.

This particular bird seemed, unlike the swans I watched in Limerick, not only aware of the beauty of his brilliant colors but intent upon flaunting them before me, God, the peahen, and whatever else might be watching. He stood every morning on a busted air conditioning unit directly outside the window of my make-shift home (blissfully unaware, I thought, of the dinginess of his immediate surroundings), carefully picking at each individual feather, worrying over his utilitarian decoration with the care of a mindful hostess dusting each vase and picture frame before company arrived. I peeked out of the pile of comforters I had burrowed into during the night to observe his daily ritual. After working with one feather, he tossed it aside like a flag unfurled. Toward the end of his preening, his body was an illuminated manuscript, his feathers forming an extravagant fan.

My mind wandered down many paths as I watched him work. Here was a tropical bird, transplanted to the northern part of a northern country. His body was a spectacle in the midst of other animals whose colors matched their landscape. But rather than appearing out of place, he occupied his space with apparent ease; though he found no recognizable counterpart in the vicinity of his territorial world, he managed to become a part of his unfamiliar landscape. He seemed just as comfortable with his surroundings as the troupe of goats whose earth-tone coats and weathered faces seemed to have risen directly out of the soil of the farm where they lived. And the goats, for their part, appeared untroubled by the outsider.

The manner of the peacock—his ability to seem
Catherine Meeks

so entirely ‘of his place’ while he was so obviously ‘out of place’ in the literal sense—struck me as similar to the task of the traveler. The body: it accompanies us when we travel, I thought, but it doesn’t seem to fit everywhere. Traveling forces us to be keenly sensitive of our differences, and we devise ways, as I did in Limerick, of making ourselves feel at home in a ‘new’ world. These ways seem, generally, devoted to a glazing over of the surface of a place. We become familiar with the stores, the bus schedule, the path along the river. Perhaps these are necessary first steps in the orientation of the body to its disorienting surroundings. But it becomes tempting to stop there; the traveler is easily satisfied by these accomplishments of physical and mental adaptation. After I became comfortable enough to chit-chat with the cashier at the Spar down the road from the University, I could have gone home with the sense that I had ‘experienced’ Ireland. I kept coming back, though, to a feeling that there were other concerns necessary to knowing the place I had traveled to. Following the urging of the swans, I tried to figure it out.

Then the peacock, confident in his decadence of form and color despite his less colorful world, urged me on further. (Oh, there were rats in the trailer as well, outside a thin door where the hen feed was stored. The industriousness I had noted by the river in Limerick often kept me awake far into the night.) After he’d finished his preening and I had climbed out from under the duvets, I went on with my daily routine: collecting, cleaning, and packaging eggs. Over the course of the next few months, there were other farms and other routines. There were, too, other animals that caught my attention, and each one untangled another piece of a slowly unraveling thread of awareness.

Winter became spring while I was farming. Soon, it was time to return home. I went back to Limerick for my last days in Ireland, and paid a visit to the Shannon—there were more swans than when I had left. I sat for a time and watched them. I revisited in my mind the first time I saw them, and realized that the thread I’d been following started and ended here, beside the river. I’d come here in the beginning seeking roots, and believed these roots could be found intellectually, that I could take in the river as one would a landscape painting and glean from it that way a sense of place and belonging. The swans, though, gave the river a physicality that I couldn’t ignore. What had started as cluttered observations—the river, the swans, the city, the rats—led me to places where my day-to-day experiences were tied up with the experiences of the animals and the land. When this happened, and I woke up watching a peacock and spent the day feeding cows and went to sleep with the rhythms of these creatures’ bodies growing ever more implanted in my own body, the sense I had had of being a traveler began to shift. It became instead a sense of belonging.

Farming is not the only way to form a connection to a place; it is one way among many. Travelers arrive, wearing different colors and expecting different things, and an intimacy with the landscape or cityscape may not be one of those things. Perhaps if I’d planted my ‘seed’ in the University pub rather than on the riverbank, my own travels would have unfolded much differently than they did. For whatever reason, though, there were animals wherever I went. With their help, I found a landscape where something inside me took root, and grew. ♦

Abigail Berenbak

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Into the Abyss

How Wade Davis, one of North America's leading environmental writers, snubbed academia and turned a passion for adventure into a successful literary career.

Wade Davis stepped into the impregnable jungles of the infamous Darien Gap between Columbia and Panama. Parrots and scarlet macaws cackled in the species-rich tropical rain forest. Snakes, some of the most poisonous in the world, hung like vines in the trees, and caimans and crocodiles cruised mangrove swamps searching for careless deer come to the murky water to drink. Somewhere, a few Natives lived in the jungle as they always had.

It was 1974. Two weeks earlier, Davis, then a 19-year-old undergraduate at Harvard, had waltzed into the office of Richard Evans Schultes, a Harvard professor considered by many to be the father of ethnobotany. Davis was a bright young student who had never even taken a high school biology class much less a university-level course in botany. He told Schultes he had saved some money logging in B.C. the summer before, money he was prepared to use to study plants in the Amazon.

Schultes looked at the nameless undergraduate standing before him and asked with characteristic aplomb, "As long as you don't compromise, every choice you make in life by definition is the right one. I have trusted in serendipity — put myself out there where the winds of change can happen."

Two weeks later, with a one-way ticket, two letters of reference and $2,000 in his pocket, Davis arrived in Bogotá to begin a love affair with the Amazon that would last a decade.

"I just wanted to get away and seek my fortune, my destiny. I knew nothing about South America and less about plants, but I decided to be a botanist for a while."

The trip marked the beginning of a long and successful career that has taken Davis as far afield as Borneo, Ecuador, Haiti, the Sahara Desert and the Canadian Arctic. Along the way he earned a Ph.D. in ethnobotany from Harvard, collected thousands of plants, studied many of the world's indigenous cultures, including many in northwestern North America, and turned his Ph.D. dissertation into a best-selling book and a film script that Hollywood turned, he readily admits, into a bad B movie.

Now a self-styled explorer, conservationist and raconteur, he stands as one of the world's most eloquent advocates for the conservation of biodiversity and the world's disappearing cultures.

I caught up with Davis at the Banff Mountain Book and Film Festival, where he was speaking to a sell-out crowd despite the blizzard that raged outside the walls of the Banff Centre. Davis expounded eloquently about Schultes's adventures in mid-twentieth century South America, about his own search for new plant species and his experiences with magic mushrooms, and about an impending rubber crisis that could, if and when it hits, paralyze the world economy. He spoke with a fervor usually reserved for Baptist preachers. He rocked incessantly on his feet, his hands beating out a silent but constant cadence on the side of the lectern. His voice rose and fell like the sea. The audience responded with respectful silence punctuated by bouts of laughter, and then, as he finished at fever pitch, a thunderous wave of applause.

Born in Vancouver, B.C., Davis grew up in Pointe Claire, a middle-class suburb on the west side of Montréal, before his father moved the family to Victoria in 1969, when Davis was 16. He finished high school at Brentwood College, a well-respected but conservative private school where Davis reigned as the academic king. During the summers, Davis did what many young men did in the 1970s, he worked the bush. He served on youth crews in provincial parks, cutting trail and fighting fires. Ironically, his experience in the backcountry led him to the eclectic excellence of Harvard.
“It was Vietnam. Draft dodgers swarmed into B.C. and found jobs fighting forest fires. They had a marvelous irreverence that captivated me — I mean here were these obsequious, solicitous Canadian boys with a wild glint in their eyes, and the Americans were so incredibly irreverent. They were obsessed with freedom.

“One of them had a *Life Magazine* that showed the Harvard Strike of 1968 on the cover. I had this raw atavistic association and wanted to become like these guys, so I applied.”

For Davis, Harvard was an awakening. He arrived in Boston in the fall of 1971, where the best and brightest minds on the continent were gathered together while their countrymen fought an unwinnable war halfway around the world. He studied and experienced everything he could get his hands on — yoga and meditation, anthropology and student protests, theatre and music and acid.

“I only had one word in my vocabulary — ‘yes.’ I was so outraged by what I had learned about Vietnam and the nature of colonialism. I began to experiment quite a bit with psychedelics and at the same time I discovered eastern religion. I tried everything.”

After two years of living life at warp factor 10, Davis was exhausted. In the spring of 1973 he quit school and went to work on a ranch in B.C.’s Kootenay Mountains. Once there, however, he began to have second thoughts. One day he just packed up his tent and hitchhiked to Boston. In Dickensian fashion, two convicts who had just escaped from an Alberta penitentiary picked him up. They drove across the bald, flat prairies together, pilfering gas as they went. The decision to return to school proved to be pivotal. That year at Harvard, Davis met Schultes, a man who became his mentor and changed his life forever.

“If I hadn’t gone back [to Harvard], who knows . . .,” Davis said, his voice fading to silence at the thought.

When Davis left Harvard with an undergraduate degree in anthropology in the late 1970s, “the blush was off the rose of the ’60s,” he says, and a sense of gloom had settled over the cultural landscape of North America. Confused and lost, Davis took a summer job as a foreman on a youth crew on Haida Gwaii, the Queen Charlotte Islands. The fall rolled around; with nothing better lined up Davis took a job as a surveyor in a logging camp.

“I had a friend who worked for MacMillan Bloedel, so I BS’ed my way in. I had never worked as a surveyor so I just lied and a friend covered for me for the first two weeks. I learned quickly and I did great. It wasn’t a lie in a mean way. You take a risk and you learn. That’s what it’s all about.”

The year at the logging camp was “one of the most educational years of my life,” Davis said. “I
consider the year I spent at the logging camp as useful as any year I spent at Harvard. It really allowed me to see through the bullshit of the ideology of forestry.”

His experiences there prompted him to write “In the Shadow of Red Cedar,” a poetic diatribe against the B.C. forestry industry that he included in The Clouded Leopard, a collection of essays that follows Davis all over the world. But the drudgery, vulgarity and destruction of the logging industry took its toll on him. By the following May he was exhausted and ready to go back to school. He applied to Harvard. Not surprisingly he was told he needed to pick up some biology courses, so he headed to the University of British Columbia’s botany department on a scholarship. It was a bitter disappointment. The program focused too much on chemistry and lab work. He immediately transferred to the forestry program, where he once again found discontentment.

“That year in the forestry school was one of the most alienating and instructive I had had up to that point. I was astonished by what I saw there. I gave a seminar about the eradication of the Amazonian rainforest and the forestry group just walked out. They didn’t want to hear it. It was ridiculous.”

Fed up, Davis completed his courses and returned to Harvard.

Davis journeyed through interminable deserts and jungles, rugged mountain landscapes, frozen tundra and sweaty movie sets, anywhere he might find compelling stories about the wisdom of human beings living with the natural world.

In 1981, Davis returned to South America, where he spent the most productive months of his ethnobotanical career. He lived with the Waorani in Ecuador and studied the plants they used. He bolted down the coast of Peru, heading into the mountains where he took and studied *huachuma*, the Cactus of the Four Winds, a plant loaded with mescaline that “could annihilate consciousness, transform body into spirit, crack open the sky.” He traveled south to search for *chumara* in eastern Bolivia, and then joined a group of explorers who packed their inflatable rafts overland on donkeys and put in “ten days past where National Geographic said the Amazon was navigable.” He collected plants all the way back to the lowlands.

In the process, he published dozens of scientific papers and, as always, diligently recorded his experiences in a journal, honing his writing skills for a career he could never have foreseen.

By this point Davis had finished all of his coursework and was searching desperately for a thesis topic. He considered an ethnobotanical study of the intriguing Waorani, but felt he had done all he could do there. He toyed with a nutritional study of another tribe, but that too seemed unfulfilling. He took off for Brazil on a botanical expedition. Nothing seemed to work.

“It was hot and muggy in these shitty little Amazon towns and I realized I had lost all my interest. At one point in my career I couldn’t walk past a plant without knowing what it was. I just didn’t realize the extent to which I wasn’t a scientist. I didn’t want to live in a village and measure the carbohydrate intake of a tribe. I just couldn’t bear the thought.”

Then Schultes asked him if he wanted to go to Haiti to study zombies. The research there — to identify the formula of a folk poison used by Vodoun sorcerers to turn people into the living dead — went far beyond the narrow confines of traditional ethnobotanical field work, for the power of voodoo was immersed in a complex matrix of psychology, politics, culture and history. Davis had found his thesis.

“I found myself swept into a complex worldview...
utterly different from my own," Davis wrote later, in the introduction to The Clouded Leopard, "one that left me demonstrating less the chemical basis of a popular belief than the psychological and cultural foundation of a pharmacological possibility.

"Living among dozens of tribes in South America...had opened my mind to the poetics of culture. Haiti completed the process, shattering the rigidity of my scientific perspective."

This disappointed Schultes, who had hoped his young protégé would focus on Amazonian botany, just as he had, but it energized Davis like a wad of lime-tinged coca. With the help of the masters — Hemingway for dialogue, Durrell for character, and Lawrence for the spirit of place — Davis taught himself to write for a popular audience and penned the best-selling The Serpent and the Rainbow based on his experiences in Haiti. Soon after the book came out he sold the movie rights for almost half a million dollars. That sealed the end of his academic career before his thesis had even been published.

When he finally graduated from Harvard with his Ph.D. in 1986, he applied to do a post-doctorate in Ecuador with the New York Botanical Society. They offered him a salary of $19,000.

"I had published a book that sold 400,000 copies and made half a million dollars on the movie rights, and they wanted to pay me $19,000 to be an academic. I said, 'forget it.'"

Instead, Davis journeyed through interminable deserts and jungles, rugged mountain landscapes, frozen tundra and sweaty movie sets, anywhere he might find compelling stories about the wisdom of human beings living with the natural world. In the process he immersed himself in cults, challenged the Himalaya on the edge of winter, and did enough natural hallucinogens to make William Burroughs and Timothy Leary look like lightweights.

"People always ask me, 'How did you get to have a career like you have?' — as if there is some magic formula," Davis said. "But there is no magic formula. In fact, it was not even a matter of making decisions because I am notoriously indecisive. In retrospect it was an inability to compromise. As long as you don't compromise, every choice you make in life by definition is the right one. I have trusted in serendipity — put myself out there where the winds of change can happen.

"I never thought of myself as a writer," he said after his presentation at the book festival. "I'm not sure what that means. What I am is a seeker of experiences, a seeker of knowledge."

The strategy seems to have worked for Davis. The Serpent and the Rainbow (1986) made him famous and financially independent, and One River (1996) earned him a nomination for the Governor's General Award, perhaps Canada's most prestigious literary award. He published Light at the End of the World in 2002, the same year he won the latest in a long list of awards: the Lowell Thomas Medal from The Explorer's Club and the Lannan Foundation's $125,000 prize for literary nonfiction.

Not bad for someone who doesn't think of himself as much of a writer.
Ariel Bleth is a student of Environmental Studies at the University of Montana, Missoula. She is enjoying dabbling more into writing, learning about community, food and farming, and meeting people who are passionate about living in a sustainable and peaceable way.

Cedar Brant lives at the toe of Black Mountain near the confluence of the Bitterroot and Clarkfork Rivers in Missoula. She spent the last slew of summers living in a trailer in the Blackfoot Valley, counting and keying out plants, and harassing small mammals for an ecology study for the University of Montana. Her most exciting find was the "paradoxical moonwort." When she was ten, she published her first book of poetry, sewn with golden thread and sent to her grandma. In winter, she takes up drinking coffee and practices writing in the third person.

Kathy Conde is a graduate of the creative-writing program at the University of Montana and is currently working on an MFA degree at Naropa University in Boulder, CO. Her poetry has appeared in Poetry East, Calapooya, Orbis, and other literary journals. She loves the Rocky Mountain west for its heights and depths and Ponderosa Pine.

Jacob Cowgill was born and raised in Montana. He is and continues to be shaped by the state's geography and people. He currently resides in Missoula where he pursues a Master's Degree.

Jeff Gailus is an award-winning writer and conservationist from Canmore, Alberta. A firm believer in the crucial role of writers in bringing about social change, he has written about environmental, social and political issues from Banff to Budapest. He was awarded a Canada Council for the Arts grant and an Alberta Foundation for the Arts grant for his current project, a book about the natural history and future of the Great Plains grizzly bear. His work has also garnered awards and nominations from the Canadian National Magazine Awards, the Western Canada Magazine Awards and the Associated Collegiate Press. He is finishing his M.S. in Environmental Studies at the University of Montana, and can be reached at jeff@gailus.ca.

Becca Hall writes poetry, rides bikes, eats lots of applesauce, tells stories to preschoolers, works towards her EVST masters, and enjoys making friends.

Hank Green is academically a writer, professionally an internet consultant, physically a broomstick, and spiritually an amateur football player. Hank is usually hungry and he really likes to dance. His favorite food is corn dogs. He recently became engaged and he and his fiancée are looking to complete their lives by getting a dog.

Mike McDonald is an Oregonian living in Missoula, studying wildlife biology at the University of Montana.

Catherine Meeks was born and raised in Nashville, TN. She most recently lived in Rome, GA, where she went to school, played outside, and adopted a dog. Going to Ireland taught her to appreciate Guinness as well as animals.

John Noland lives and writes on the Oregon coast. His work has appeared in Big Muddy, The Laurel Review, Georgetown Review, Petroglyph, Orion Nature Quarterly, Nature Writing 1999 and Mountains and Rivers. He recently won first place in the Kulupi Press Poems of Place chapbook contest. His book, This Dark Land Where I Live, is being published this month.

Writer, activist and naturalist Janisse Ray is author of three books of literary nonfiction, including Ecology of a Cracker Childhood, which won the Southeastern Booksellers Award for Nonfiction 1999. Her latest book is Pinbook: Finding Wholeness in a Fragmented Land. Much of Ray's work focuses on alternatives for industrial capitalism, ending corporate control of government, slowing the rate of global climatic disruption, working to decelerate fragmentation, and making logging sustainable. Ray currently lives in Brattleboro, Vermont, with her husband, Raven Burchard, and son, Silas, although a family farm in Georgia is her home.

Craig Rigdon tries to glimpse things from the verge, working as a wildlife biologist, logger, arborist, ranch hand, and musician. He spent the last four years as a wildland firefighter for the Lolo Hotshots, based in Missoula, Montana. He is currently pursuing a master's degree at the University of Montana.

Kim Stafford directs the Northwest Writing Institute and William Stafford Center at Lewis & Clark College in Oregon, and is the author of The Muses Among Us: Eloquent Listening and Other Pleasures of the Writer's Craft.
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to the southwest, the Tetons
light up under midnight ground strikes.
be over us soon—dry storm with heavy winds.
too tired for humor, I wrap up in a tarp
and listen to trees fall in the dark.
the fire ripped through an entire drainage
today. not much we could do.
tonight, the campfire wanes.
only three months left.
I no longer use utensils.
stars hidden now. I hunker down, pray
to escape the lightning. peering out, I can see
someone’s hooch blow off
into the night, and the hail.
13 days with no shower—sleep
like a baby.
Self-Portrait Under a Ponderosa Pine

Craig Rigdon

Language is not the border
we cannot cross—the schism is far more elemental.
Refine my mind, the scoria will settle
to the bottom, heavy, leaden: attenuated dogmas
mired in something lost—muffled
murmurs of a stream gone subterranean, subtexts so simple
they become complex; carving the earth one unfettered
frictional moment at a time, a pace too immense to comprehend
within the folds of my adamant prison, brooding over what I am
not and then emerging downstream singing as if
the joke is on me.

You are not prone to such inanities, transcending questions
with such predatory grace. We civilized ourselves, and thus
extorted our ability to understand. You
remained wild and never thought to wonder why.

Photo by Steven Gnam
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