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Finding Poetry in Nature

Tammis Coffin

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FINDING POETRY IN NATURE

By

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B.A. College of the Atlantic, 1987

A MASTER PROJECT

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

(in Liberal Studies)

The Graduate School

The University of Maine

December, 2001

Advisory Committee:

Mary Bird, Instructor in Education, Advisor

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Project Advisor: Mary Bird

An Abstract of the Master Project Presented
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
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Finding poetry in nature is a project about cultivating receptivity and curiosity to the experiences of the natural world. It is about using language imaginatively to deepen a responsiveness and respectfulness towards nature. The project is allied with movements in Environmental Education and Language Arts Education that address sense of place and “place-based” education. My discoveries take the form of a literature review, a set of facilitation techniques, and samples of my own nature writing.

An exploration of a sense of place is enriched by actively integrating four different perceptual paths. Attentiveness to sensory and imaginative impressions as well as emotional and intellectual responses deepen a responsiveness to the natural world. Touching on these four paths allows nature writers and other observers of nature to be guided to meaningful discoveries and new perceptual terrain.

Facilitation techniques from contemplative practices can help awaken reverence and sense of wonder and techniques from the expressive arts and other therapies can help tune sensory awareness, prompt curiosity, and free creativity. I experiment with these techniques in my own writing practice and share the results.

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PREFACE

This Master's Project unfolded as part of my search for ways to grow as a writer and teacher. I wanted to increase my depth and versatility as a nature writer and become more effective as a nature educator. I am laying the foundation for a life-long project of kindling practices of attentiveness and engaging human creativity to celebrate our connectedness with the natural world.

The products of this effort are a review of nature writing, a set of facilitation techniques, and samples of creative nature writing. I explore ways of cultivating greater attentiveness and responsiveness to the natural world. As a naturalist, I know I will do a better job of forging intellectual and emotional connections between learners and the natural world, if I understand how to do this for myself. Before anyone can know or care about nature, they must see. By routinely expanding the limits of my own perceptions, I will be better able to assist others in extending theirs.

I compiled a series of exercises that can be used to facilitate creative engagement with nature and used these activities as part of a systematic process for improving my own nature writing. As I explored and extended the reach of my senses, my awareness, and my curiosity, the project became a project in learning how to learn.

Many authors and teachers contributed to my thinking over the course of this project. It wasn't until the final flurry of reading and contacts that I found my colleagues in this field. There is not yet a suitable name for the field we claim as our own. We are a collection of nature writers, nature educators, and poets of place striving towards imaginative identification with nature. We wish to infuse the creative arts into environmental education. We are proponents of nature literacy, place-based education, and the ecological arts. I point to the Orion Society (in Great Barrington, Massachusetts), the River of Words (Berkeley, California), and the Teachers & Writers Collaborative (New York City) as a few examples of the growing number of kindred spirits who are lighting the way.

My contribution is the idea that an exploration of sense of place is enriched by actively integrating four different perceptual paths. Attention to sensory and imaginative impressions as well as emotional and intellectual responses deepens our responsiveness to the natural world. Touching on these four paths allows nature writers and other observers of nature to be guided to meaningful discoveries and new perceptual terrain. I offer facilitation techniques from contemplative practices that awaken reverence and sense of wonder (the emotional path) and I offer techniques from the expressive arts and other therapies that are effective for tuning sensory awareness (the sensory path), prompting curiosity (the intellectual path), and freeing creativity (the path of the imagination).

INTRODUCTION

Finding poetry in nature attends to our needs as humans to re-learn how to see ourselves as connected to the natural world. Finding poetry in nature is about engaging attentiveness, curiosity, and creativity to explore these connections with depth and joy. This is akin to an ideal set forth by American poet Gary Snyder (*Language Goes Two Ways* 4).

To see a wren in a bush, call it “wren,” and go on walking is to have (self-importantly) seen nothing. To see a bird and stop, watch, feel, forget yourself for a moment, be in the bushy shadows, maybe then feel “wren” – that is to have joined in a larger moment with the world.

To find the poetry in nature and to join in the larger moments with the world are one and the same. Nature educators are aware how important it is to create experiences that forge emotional connections between learners and the natural world. Author Rachel Carson made the point that striking the spark of wonder ignites a lasting fascination for learning and caring. The challenge is how to reliably ignite wonder in learners and even in oneself. It is not always easy to feel inspired about nature, or to pass this inspiration along.

Awakening the sense of wonder is an emotional outcome, and we nature educators (usually from science backgrounds) tend to be trained in achieving intellectual outcomes. To learn how to bridge this gap, I turned to the nature writers who are successful at weaving together scientific and poetic ways of seeing (Part One: *The Writer’s Four Paths to Place*). Arriving at a

sense of oneness with the natural world does not need to rely on a mysterious accident of awareness. Contemporary nature writers demonstrate that learning the natural history, exploring nuances of sensory perception, tapping our imagination, and identifying our personal connections to our surroundings gives us the opportunity to integrate images of ourselves with images of the natural world.

I consulted practitioners of the creative and contemplative arts for ideas on how to bring people closer to their experience of nature. This led to the compilation of a set of techniques for facilitating attentiveness and engagement (Part Two: Cultivating a Creative Response). My own experimentation with the process of learning how to find poetry in nature led to the creation of poetry, nature journals, and essays (Part Three: Writings from Rocky Places).

Finding poetry in nature is a study in how to capture place, moment, and perception. It is a pursuit of a poetic perspective that can lead to imaginative discoveries about the natural world. It is about engaging openly and creatively with nature. I studied how skilled writers join in the larger moments, learned how skilled teachers facilitate this process, and I practiced doing it myself. The reason I use the word 'finding' as opposed to 'writing' is to suggest that we are surrounded by a wealth of poetic discoveries whenever we step outside. This project is directed towards finding ways to take in a fuller measure of the aesthetic and ecological possibilities.

PART ONE:
THE WRITER'S FOUR PATHS TO PLACE

I began this project by reading widely among contemporary nature writers, searching for the works that inspired me, and looking for the reasons why. I studied the ways writers organize their awareness to create rich experiences of discovery outdoors. I examined the ways they go about capturing sense of place, and I pondered what sense of place was. I knew that searching for the answers to these questions would help me be a better nature writer and help prepare me to become a teacher of nature writing. In addition it would give me the opportunity to gather excerpts to serve as a reference and a teaching collection. Part One of this project distills the insights I gained from studying the approaches of many contemporary writers. The ideas provide the foundation for the nature awareness activities that are introduced in Part Two and help guide my own nature writing, presented in Part Three.

Nature writers are wonderful models for experiencing and writing about the natural world. I am most powerfully drawn to the writers who cultivate a deep and multifaceted awareness of their surroundings, and who achieve scientific and artistic depth. The sense of place appears to represent a heightened awareness of one's bearings in space and time. It relates to the discoveries that we can make about the land and the people that we are part of. The writers who shed the most light on the notion of sense of place are dedicated to experiencing a place from many different angles and explore the author's impressions with scientific and artistic thoroughness.

I am drawn to the graceful, reverential prose of scientists Rachel Carson, Loren Eiseley, and Chet Raymo. I enjoy the expressive writings of naturalists Annie Dillard, Barry Lopez, and Terry Tempest Williams. I am taken with the creative attentiveness to natural history in the poetry of A.R. Ammons, Gary Snyder, Abbie Huston Evans, John Hay and Gary Lawless. The “place-based” works that I most admire combine attentiveness to the natural history, emotional responsiveness, fascination with the sensory details, and imaginative probing. When all of these modes of perceiving are active, I find that a writer achieves a powerful grasp of their situation.

Just as author Hannah Hinchman views the nature journal as a naturalist’s “path to place,” I have come to view the intellect, the emotions, the senses, and the imagination as the writer’s four paths to place. I use the idea of the four paths to organize this collection of excerpts from nature writers and I use it as the organizing theme for project as a whole. Passages are selected that probe deeply along each perceptual path and help integrate these different ways of seeing to enlarge total awareness.

Literature of Sense Impressions:

The Sensory Path to Place

I collected excerpts from contemporary American writers to study ways that sensory impressions can be tapped to elevate nature writing to a higher level. I begin with Barry Lopez, who pays careful and thorough attention to sensory impressions in his essays, almost as if he is conducting a sensory inventory. Lopez describes the process of tuning his senses to time and place on a river trip through the Grand Canyon (Gone Back into the Earth, 49).

I focus quietly each day on the stone, the breathing of time locked up here, back to the Proterozoic, before there were sea-shells. Look up to wisps of high cirrus overhead, the hint of a mare's tail sky. Close my eyes: tappet of water against the boat, sound of an Anasazi's six-hole flute. And I watch the banks for beaver tracks, for any movement.

Annie Dillard is another contemporary American writer who is attentive to her own sensory perceptions and highly attuned to her own process of perceiving. She describes her efforts to sort out the confusion of sensory perceptions that greet her arrival to the Alaskan Arctic (Expedition to the Pole, 39-40).

I stood on the island's ocean shore and saw what there was to see: a pile of colorless stripes. Through binoculars I could see a bigger pile of colorless stripes. It seemed reasonable to call the colorless stripe overhead "sky," and reasonable to call the colorless stripe overhead "ice," for I could see where it began. I could distinguish, that is, my

shoes, and the black gravel shore, and the nearby frozen ice the wind had smashed ashore. It was this mess of ice – ice breccia, pressure ridges, and standing floes, ice sheets upright, tilted, frozen together and jammed – that extended out to the horizon. No matter how hard I blinked, I could not put a name to any of the other stripes. Which was the horizon? Was I seeing land, or water, or their reflections in the low clouds? Was I seeing the famous “water sky,” the “frost smoke,” or the “ice blink?”

Dillard is committed to registering her visual sense impressions as closely as possible to how she experienced them. This type of writing requires discipline. I view Dillard’s description as being very close to a phenomenological exploration. She is working at recording what she sees, restraining most of her interpretations to guesses and questions. I like the way Dillard wraps up the passage (40).

If I loosed my eyes from my shoes, the gravel at my feet, or the chaos of ice at the shore, I saw what newborn babies must see: nothing but senseless variations of light on the retinas. The world was a color-field painting wrapped around me at unknown distance; I hesitated to take a step.

Not surprisingly, it is the sense impressions of the writer-naturalists as they travel that most vividly capture place and time. Perhaps this is because the sense impressions of home are an accretion, and a consolidation of so many moments. It is difficult to reach towards the fresh phenomenological instant in a landscape we know well. Maine poet Gary Lawless takes in Isle Royale in his collection of poems titled, “Host Rock: Isle Royale Fragments”. After mentioning names of some of the plants, Lawless adds (63):

Where we peel back layers of fog, moss, rock itself -
Inside there is sunlight
Inside there is wolfsong
the light step of the moose,
berries waiting to ripen
where the wind never touches –
All this light at the heart of things.

Simple sensory images, yet Lawless' presentation is not straightforward. With images nesting inside other images, this is no naturalist's checklist. However, as a record of perception, somehow it rings true. I can almost see how the unusual presentation may come closer to communicating the poet's actual experience of perception than a list ever could. The poem goes on, interspersing sensory images with words of reverence.

The water all around,
Touches, touches...

I include a few more lines to show how Lawless selects sensory images that speak volumes.

Birds land and leave –
Clouds, fog, sunny days.
Everything sinking slowly into stone –

As American naturalist Terry Tempest Williams enters 'The Country of Grasses' (6), she hears, "The sweet hissing of grasses accompanies us as we move ahead. We pass the swishing tails of wildebeests..." In her essay, "In Cahoots with Coyote," Williams writes of sitting on a hillside at home in her native Utah, watching the "sun sink into the plains – a sun, large, round, and orange in a lavender sky"(24). Concrete sensory images give readers something to hold onto. Simple acknowledgement of basic sensory elements, such as color, can lift a piece of writing into a new domain. There are some brightly colored lines in 'Ghost of a Country Man,' by New England poet John Hay (16).

Yellow, dying leaves of cherry slipped
On blood-red leaves of huckleberry
Skipping across lichen

Color and other sensory details enliven scientific writing, especially with a subject as vast as the earth's history. Loren Eiseley begins 'How Flowers Changed the World' this way (61).

If it had been possible to observe the Earth from the far side of the solar system over the long course of geological epochs, the watchers might have been able to discern a subtle change in the light emanating from our planet. That world of long ago would, like the red deserts of Mars, have reflected light from vast drifts of stone and gravel, the sands of wandering waters, the blackness of naked basalt, the yellow dust of endlessly moving storms. Only the ceaseless marching of the clouds and the intermittent flashes from the restless surface of the sea would have told a different story, but still essentially a barren one.

Eiseley invites us to view the color of the Earth before there were eyes to see it, and his concern with the concrete sensory details – red deserts, black basalt, and yellow dust -- help the reader latch on.

Of greatest interest to me are the nature writers who attempt to remove as many barriers as they can between themselves and their sensory perceptions. Their sensory images are honored foremost, prior to scientific, emotional, and imaginative interpretations. Natural images are valued in and of themselves rather than serving as symbols. The literature of the senses is more phenomenological than psychological. Complete sensory immersion approaches the domain of the wordless. The writer who struggles to capture their immediate perceptions with words operates at the frontiers of new perceptual terrain. This brings a fresh excitement to their writing. I offer a sentence that rings with sensory appeal from the opening of a novel by Ruth Moore (4).

No matter how quiet the day, or how still the spruces baked in the summer sun, a slow, cool, sleepy sound hung over the island everywhere, a sound, it seemed, not so much of water as of air.

Moore's sentence captures something special about the feel of a Maine island in summertime. She obviously took time to absorb her sense impressions, and communicates them by merging sound, movement, and temperature, almost in one. This sort of synesthesia (translated sensation) appears to be common in writing that explores the range of the senses with a high level of sensitivity.

Naturalist John Hay approaches forest and open sea with an acute sensory consciousness. In his collection of poems, Natural Architecture, Hay is attentive to birds and their forest homes and their calls and he opens 'Little People of the Trees' this way (2).

It was the dapple of light they liked,
Needled and spindled floors of light
and living shadow; towers and transepts
transcending cathedrals where they ran,
twitted, talked and fled around, a circuit
of leaves and flight, fight and follow.

Hay's words are light brush strokes, suggestive rather than conclusive, suited to grasping subtle perceptions of light, movement, and sound. Later, "Little People of the Trees" juxtaposes sight and sound and movement again (2). "They fetched in to daylight's water silences / Little wings, small voices, taps and falls..." Another poem titled 'Bird Song' (4), spells out a birdcall, "tsee-tsee-weeo," and offers an image of the bird song as, "elegant twists on threads of air." Hay continues, "Listen and you touch on light / twisting through shallows." Somewhat like Moore, Hay experiences air almost as water. This sort of blurring and blending of the senses may be what happens when we really try to be attentive, when we strain at the limits of our senses for new ways of perceiving. Hay himself states in 'Truth' (26) "I am a moving traffic of senses / uneasily assembled." In 'Sea Song,' (24) Hay juxtaposes movement and color.

...Rock and sea
smash each other,
and the weather trails their long war
through aisles of Arctic,
agonizingly blue.

An excerpt from 'Change of Tide (25) offers another view of the sea, juxtaposing movement and sound.

Now the sea bellies
bell buoys,
drag lines of silver
netting notes away.
Sing earth, sing sea,
sing song the bell.

A glimpse at the literature of the senses reveals the value of cultivating an awareness of nuances of color, movement, temperature, light, texture, shadow, scent, and taste in a writing practice. Written descriptions of sensory impressions capture moment and place as nothing else can. Carried to its fullest extent, the literature of the senses works at the frontiers of sensory perception. With the writers and poets of the senses such as Lopez , Dillard, Lawless and Hay as an inspiration, it appears this is an approach well worth cultivating.

Literature of Reverence:

The Emotional Path to Place

Sense of wonder and sense of belonging, feelings of attachment and feelings of home; the emotions play a strong role in forging a sense of place. With these excerpts I gather writers' moments of awakening to awe and to beauty. We join Loren Eiseley in "The Flow of the River," as he is "standing quietly in the water, feeling the sand shifting away" under his toes (19).

Then I lay back in the floating position that left my face to the sky, and shoved off. The sky wheeled over me. For an instant, as I bobbed into the main channel, I had the sensation of sliding down the vast tilted face of the continent. It was then that I felt the cold needles of the alpine springs at my fingertips, and the warmth of the Gulf pulling me southward. Moving with me, leaving its taste upon my mouth and spouting under me in dancing springs of sand, was the immense body of the continent itself, flowing like the river was flowing, grain by grain, mountain by mountain, down to the sea. I was streaming over ancient sea beds thrust aloft where giant reptiles had once sported; I was wearing down the face of time and trundling cloud-wreathed ranges into oblivion. I touched my margins with the delicacy of a crayfish's antennae, and felt great fishes glide about their work.

Eiseley shares a rare experience of merging with forces far greater than himself. In doing so, he allows us to glimpse potential for becoming one with water, a watershed, and a continent.

Eiseley's exploration is rooted in sensory perceptions and extended with his imagination, yielding

a vivid awareness of his place in space and time. This author expresses his admiration for nature's beauty and inventiveness in a slightly different way, in a passage from "How Flowers Saved the World" (72).

These fantastic little seeds skipping and hopping and flying about the woods and valleys brought with them an amazing adaptability. If our whole lives had not been spent in the midst of it, it would astound us. The old, stiff, sky-reaching wooden world had changed into something that glowed here and there with strange colors, put out queer, unheard-of fruits and little intricately carved seed cases, and, most important of all, produced concentrated foods in a way that the land had never seen before...

At its essence, nature writing is about cultivating and expressing the sense of wonder. Some of the writers who provoke some of the deepest, most inspired responses to nature happen to be scientists, like Loren Eiseley, Rachel Carson, and Chet Raymo. Whether they are writing about the Earth, the sea, or the stars, they communicate a fascination for the mysteries that life holds. Their commitment to expanding their knowledge propels them towards expressions of praise. Rachel Carson tells "the story of how the young planet Earth acquired an ocean" in her opening to The Sea Around Us (19).

...The story is founded on the testimony of the earth's most ancient rocks, which were young when the earth was young; on other evidence written on the face of the earth's satellite, the moon; and on hints contained in the history of the sun and the whole universe of star-filled space. For although no man was there to witness this cosmic birth,

the stars and the moon and the rocks were there, and indeed, had much to do with the fact that there is an ocean.

Carson's admiration and affection for "Mother Sea" and the planet's story transform a factual explanation into a marvelous tale. Astronomer Chet Raymo's search for "an appropriate language of praise" in Honey from Stone is impressive for its attentiveness to geography, natural history, and small moments of discovery. Attentiveness can represent small prayers to the Earth and to life. Aldo Leopold does this well in Sand County Almanac.

...What one remembers is the invisible hermit thrush pouring silver chords from impenetrable shadows, the soaring crane trumpeting from behind a cloud, the prairie chicken booming from the mists of nowhere; the quail's Ave Maria in the hush of dawn...

Prayers to the Earth find explicit expression in the poetry of Gary Lawless. Following is an untitled excerpt from the poem, "Caribouddism" (3).

We worship in wetlands,
bow to the fern, the rock,
the holy salamander,
the blood of sweet water,
the body of moss.

Lawless' attentiveness to breath forms the structure for another prayer poem, 'Sunset, Cedar Mesa' (16). The poem starts with the line, "In and out breath," and every line is an acknowledgement of some part of the setting as something that has its own breath and that the poet breathes too. The poem ends with these lines.

breath from the warm red rock
storm cloud breath
breath from the afternoon rain
breath from slow moving light
old breath, lizard breath
in and out
breath

Powerful nature writing has a reverential quality. At their best, nature writers and nature poets find beautiful ways to use language to explore and deepen a responsiveness to details, discoveries, and moments. In turn, these become some of the larger moments of joining with the world. By finding that part of themselves that is connected to the larger universe, writers come to view themselves as united with the whole. This type of writing holds emotional resonance and has the power to stir the soul.

Literature of Perceptual Shifts:

The Path of the Imagination

Some nature writers reach beyond the limits of what is known by science and their senses, extending their curiosity to the edges of human awareness. A passage from Chet Raymo's book Honey from Stone, about the Dingle Peninsula in Ireland, skillfully illustrates the use of a perceptual shift to make comprehensible the geological passage of time (101).

...As I watch, what I see and my description of what I see flow together, back and forth, like a river meeting the tide, and the mountains let go of their moorings and they flow too, rising and falling like waves on the sea; the floor of the sea lifts and bends, the face of the cliff crumbles into sand, and the sand is hardened into stone...

In "The Flow of the River," Loren Eiseley discusses his experience of making the perceptual shift that allows him to become one with his watershed (16).

You have probably never experienced in yourself the meandering roots of a whole watershed or felt your outstretched fingers touching, by some kind of clairvoyant extension, the brooks of snow-line glaciers at the same time that you were flowing toward the Gulf over the eroded debris of worn-down mountains.

Eiseley goes on to say that these sensations are not unique, but that they are hard to come by. He likens them to the “sort of extension of the senses that people will accept when they put their ear against a sea shell...” He carries his description further (17).

I drifted by stranded timber cut by beaver in mountain fastness; I slid over shallows that had buried the broken axles of prairie schooners and the mired bones of mammoth. ... I was streaming alive through the hot and working ferment of the sun, or oozing secretively thorough shady thickets. I was water and the unspeakable alchemies that gestate and take shape in water...

Eiseley’s imaginative immersion in his watershed experience is so complete that when he is finally “edged gently against a sand bar and dropped like any log” he experiences the air as a harsh and unsupporting element and expresses his “reluctance to break contact with that mother element.” He arises from this experience with a new perspective of humans as “little detached ponds,” water’s way of moving about outside the reach of rivers.

As writers play with perceptual shifts, they allow sensory images to become more elastic. Poets accomplish perceptual shifts in myriad ways. Gary Lawless superimposes contrasting images in the poem, ‘Sitka Spring’ (37).

Reach into your chest and
Pull out fishbone.
Reach into your heart and see
The tracks of brown bear.

The smoke is full of patterns,
paths crossing, migrations, spawning grounds,
the snag roost and tide pool.
Snow and cloud along the ridges
of your spine.

Besides these surprising juxtapositions of human and animal shapes, another imaginative connection that Lawless explores in his poetry is the idea of viewing visual images as nature's language and nature's songs, with the humans as listeners to this language and singers of these songs. In the middle of 'Caribou Sutra' (15), we encounter the lines:

We take our songs
out of the air,
and speak the language
of sun on the rocks...

On the subject of 'Giving Voice to Place,' in an interview, Lawless makes a statement to explain his poetic approach to perception (Caribouddism 68).

I have an idea that if you listen closely enough in ways that aren't necessarily connected to human discourse, that you can pick up on the conversation of the place, and you can try to represent the voices of the lichen or the wind or fish. There are lots of different images to be sensitive to in that conversation and to almost get to take part in it.

I gather Lawless is speaking of sensory ways of perceiving as well as a sixth sense for capturing the voice of the land. As an editor, Lawless compiled a collection of nature poetry, Poems for the Wild Earth, that does a remarkable job of demonstrating ways that poets can use perceptual shifts to reach toward kinship with the land. “In Praise,” by John Daniel begins this way.

The night wind rising high in the pines
lifts me out of sleep
to glittering stars
and silhouettes of shifting trees...

The poem presents exhilarating images of joining self to a larger breath of spirit that passes like the wind. Another poet in this anthology who explores ways of merging her own self with the larger forces of nature is Patti D’Angelo, in ‘Wind and Rock.’

I will lay my body smooth
face down in the soft granite.
It will stretch into me,
surround me like a fossil.
I will sink into a slow opening...

In nature writing, there are many examples of viewing land, grasses, twigs, and bird movements as a various forms of calligraphy or script or some form of symbols to be read and interpreted by human eyes. In Lost Woods, Rachel Carson expresses the idea that clouds are the writing of the wind in the sky. Terry Tempest Williams and Barry Lopez take up the same idea.

The potential for human creativity by way of perceptual shifts is as vast as the potential number of connections that can be made between natural images, human images, facts, and feelings. Perceptual shifts allow ecological relationships to be artistically explored, through juxtapositions, and through the merging of parts with wholes and wholes with parts. Attempts to focus perceptions flexibly on the natural world seem to involve a mutual reaching and a joining to match human imagination with the sensory suggestiveness of the land. This can lead to a closer identification, and a sense of oneness with animate and inanimate forms.

Literature of Natural History:

The Intellectual Path to Place

Nature writers acknowledge the uniqueness of local natural history and the particularities of place. For a writer to do this well, it is not necessary to demonstrate a thorough knowledge of all the creatures that reside there (flowers, weather, rocks). Rather, it is important that they demonstrate an interest in learning these things. Curiosity about natural history is a form of attentiveness that is akin to reverence. It's an expression of respect toward the landscape where one happens to be. Writer Terry Tempest Williams expresses this spirit in her opening to 'The Country of Grasses' (3).

For a naturalist, traveling into unfamiliar territory is like turning a kaleidoscope ninety degrees. Suddenly, the colors and pieces of glass find a fresh arrangement. The light shifts, and you enter a new landscape in search of the order you know to be there.

The pattern recognition that Terry Tempest Williams discusses in this essay is something that she has developed for her home in the Great Basin of Utah. There she can read the landscape well and she "knows the subtleties of place" (The Country of Grasses 9).

A horned lizard buried in the sand cannot miss my eyes, because I anticipate his. A kit fox streaks across the road. His identity is told by the beam of my headlights. And when a great horned owl hoots above my head, I hoot too....

Williams expresses her admiration for the ability of her Maasai guide to see what she cannot see as a newcomer to the Serengeti Plains of Africa, watching him “pull animals out of hiding with his eyes” (4-5). She concludes that “home is the range of one’s instincts” (9). Ones *trained* instincts I should add, for it requires a certain dedication to learn a landscape and its creatures when one’s livelihood does not directly depend on living from the land. Nature writers and naturalists who possess this dedication help instruct the rest of us who wish to learn.

Nature writers who master aspects of the natural history of place and who combine this with a gift for poetic expression can serve as valuable translators for other human inhabitants. I am referring to “place” in a loose sense, because some of the great nature writers are spokespersons for ecological systems that affect the entire planet. This excerpt from Loren Eiseley’s ‘How Flowers Saved the World’ (63) marries scientific knowledge with eloquence.

Flowers changed the face of the planet. Without them, the world we know – even man himself – would never have existed. Francis Thomas, the English poet, once wrote that one could not pluck a flower without troubling a star. Intuitively he had sensed like a naturalist the enormous interlinked complexity of life. Today we know that the appearance of the flowers contained also the equally mystifying emergence of man.

Loren Eiseley is an imaginative naturalist who makes an excellent spokesman for all of life.

Rachel Carson steps forward as spokeswoman for sea and sky. Her television script, “Clouds,” reprinted in Lost Woods, stands as one of my favorite pieces of natural history writing (178).

Look, for instance, at this ribbed pattern of high clouds...

Like white caps on the crests of ocean waves, these clouds mark the crests of gigantic atmosphere waves – waves surging through space in an undulating pattern.

It is a pleasure to read the works of the nature writers who research their topic thoroughly and who add their own fresh observations and insights. This sort of synthesis offers a reading experience that is informative and enlivened with a personal narrative. To be granted a glimpse of the writer's own curiosity, passion, and the sensory details they absorb in the field allows a fuller participation in what they are writing about.

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PART TWO:
CULTIVATING A CREATIVE RESPONSE

When we tune our full awareness to the natural world, we return to the integrating genius that we possessed as children (Stafford 57). We awaken and re-awaken sense of wonder; we engage and re-engage our curiosity. We reach out to what is already there, reaching towards us.

The facilitation techniques that follow correspond to the four perceptual pathways explored in the collection of excerpts from nature writers in Part One. These paths correspond to emotional, sensory, intellectual, and imaginative ways of perceiving. I share my process of experimenting with these approaches as a way of introducing and explaining them. Specific guidance for readers is set apart from the text in a series of boxes. The boxes represent a miniature set of prompts, to facilitate a fairly systematic process of integrating a full range of creative responses.

This distillation of ideas and practices is for learners, teachers, and writers who wish to work towards more engaged ways of seeing. The techniques compiled here can enhance any art form or can simply lead to a fuller experience of life. The shift from awarely perceiving to creatively thinking appear to be so closely linked that the two seem almost indistinguishable. When we reach a high degree of attentiveness, our creativity is functioning fully. The challenge lies in how to reach this state of openness and receptivity.

Tuning the Senses

Step outside. What is seen, heard, smelled, felt and tasted at this moment? Which sense is operating most strongly? What are the less dominant senses picking up? If you decided to remember this moment forever, what sense impressions would you rely upon to help bring you back?

Taking a simple sensory inventory can swiftly organize our ability to pay closer attention to our surroundings. Sometimes it's best to slow down the process of finding words as an experiment in perception, without the end goal of written words. Physical sensations are by their nature, elusive, somewhat delicate and difficult to capture in words. It may be best not to snare them too quickly. We expand our capacity to notice and receive if we do not rush to translate or describe. If I experiment with memorizing sense impressions to see how well I can retrieve them a few hours or a few weeks later, I find that some of my senses are much better at storing memories than others.

It's revealing to do the sensory inventory with another person and share the results. We vary so much in how we experience the same place and the dominant senses that we use. With repetition, the sensory inventory allows finer and finer discriminations, and a chance to find the language to express them. I practiced the sensory inventory exercise during an early spring paddle on the Sudbury River in Massachusetts with these results.

My eyes are drawn to shades of light green, white, and pink in the budding trees. The colors are fluid, blurred by mist, and blended in their reflection. Larry is tuned to the songs of the spring warblers in the brush, and the splash of his paddle entering and leaving the water. I am also paying attention to damp earth smells that seemed to rise all around us. They would be unpleasant if they were not connected to such a magical, misty morning. Larry notices the pull of the paddle in his arms and his back, the sensation of moving the boat forward.

When considering different “paths to place,” it seems the sensory path is one of the most important. Capturing accurate sense impressions appears to be key to some of the most finely nuanced poetry and nature writing. Phenomenology is described as a science of the senses, and it seeks to describe rather than explain. “Phenomenology returns to things themselves.... to a world which precedes knowledge of which knowledge speaks” (Abrams 49). This approach to awareness suggests a lifelong mission of continually opening up to the world in fresh ways.

As most of us become educated, we learn to receive information about the world from sources outside of our own sensory impressions. It is worthwhile to make an effort to continue the natural process of making our own discoveries. We can do this by taking a brief journey with the phenomenologists, to linger with sense impressions, and give them more time to be savored. We are so rich in knowledge, and facile with our imagination, but it is through the simple senses that we may be most alive. The senses are the surest route to contact with the natural world and they are what bind us the most strongly to our sense of place. To write these sentences I must rely on prior knowledge to say what I’ve learned, and my imagination to offer a hypothesis. But if I rely on senses only, I will simply write of this moment.

Shadows being cast by waving greenery outside my window, shadows of pencil on a page; body ease of late summer, stillness of afternoon; soft clink of pool table balls, far off echoes of bells stopped ringing, door creak in hall, man's voice humming, gentle murmur of sea gulls; fatigue that radiates from back of neck.

Though it occurs to me that this phenomenological approach could be an original style for writing a Master's Project (and a lot of fun), it won't be achieving what I've set out to do. It is difficult to find examples of nature writing that arise entirely through the senses, because without applying existing language and the names of things, our ability to communicate collapses.

The senses are an immediate and trustworthy path to place, in comparison to the wild leaps we can make with emotions, imagination, and explanations. I have a fondness for the prose and poetry of the senses. These words form a tendril to a place and a moment. They happen to be what someone chose to pay attention to. To analyze the poetry of sense impressions too deeply would be missing the point. Experimentation with all perceptual paths, however, can lead to a fuller and richer experience and help develop the tools that seem so important for good nature writing.

Awakening Wonder

The common avenue to all creativity lies in the cultivation of receptivity. Other words for this are attentiveness and mindfulness. This is the state of relaxed awareness that most forms of meditation and stress reduction strive for. It is a condition of heightened awareness. Simple immersion in the natural world can allow us to reach this state of mind. When this does not happen automatically, there are some steps that we can take to awaken the sense of wonder. Exploring what is happening with our breathing is one of the most basic techniques.

Set down this page. Check your breathing. Without changing it, notice its quality. Examine where it begins and ends, and the different sensations that are involved.

Attending to breath celebrates being alive, and can help cultivate a reverence for life. Breath itself is a profound form of worship in several religious traditions. In The Spell of the Sensuous, David Abram points out that the Hebrew word for wind is the same as for spirit and is sacred and holy in the Jewish tradition (39). On the in-breath the first half of the word is spoken, and on the out-breath the second sound is made. The most holy name is spoken whenever one is conscious of their breathing.

Exploring and paying attention to breath is a significant tool. Finer discriminations of what is happening inside our bodies allow finer discriminations of what is happening outside. Expanding awareness of the natural history of our own inner world allows a keener awareness of

the outer world. There are many schools of breath-work and hundreds of different ways that breathing can be used to bring attentiveness and clarity. When I received training in “Awareness Through Movement,” a form of somatic education established by Moshe Feldenkrais, I was taught to pay close attention to the muscular and skeletal sensations that accompany the in-breath and the out-breath and to notice how these change over time. Simply exploring the differences between the way the body holds the two different phases of the breath can shift the mind to a place of greater awareness. With any breath-work, conscious attention to breathing is a way to move towards greater overall attentiveness to ones physical body, ones physical surroundings, and a fuller experience of sensory impressions.

Inhale what is beautiful and say hello to it by name. Exhale and dismiss the unneeded thoughts.

I find that I can use breathing to activate a sense of wonder. I link a heightened awareness of the in-breath and the out-breath to my perceptions of the natural world by gazing around, thinking of what I could inhale from the beauty that surrounds me. Sometimes I will say, “Hello” on the in-breath, and name whatever it is that I am drawn to noticing. “Hello, white skipping butterflies on the lawn.” Sometimes I will say, “Goodbye” on the out-breath to release the thoughts that don’t wish to have crowding my mind. “Goodbye worries of lost wallet and misplaced keys.” If this is sustained, repeatedly revisiting the images of “hello” will slowly shift me into a calmer more receptive state of mind.

There are other breathing exercises that I find helpful for awakening wonder. These allow the senses to wander, purposefully, yet loosely, until they find something to settle upon. Each type of breathing has a slightly different result. In one approach, I breathe fully and consciously for three full cycles, allowing the three breaths to become the organizing framework for the discoveries I make. Another is to silently count to four while slowly breathing in, count to four while gently holding the breath, and exhale slowly to the last count of four. Another breathing exercise involves silently counting upwards, using one to inhale, two to exhale, and so forth up to ten. Generally the cycles are repeated until the breathing becomes distinctly pleasurable and is repeated for as many times as it takes to calm the body and the mind. They can be done still or walking, slowing the gait to one step per count or per breath.

Set down this page again. Look outside. Breathe. First breath – what do you notice? Second Breath – what else? Third breath – what else? Is anything different now?

Fresh awareness of nature can be an immediate, spontaneous result of the breathing exercises. I paused just now, to take three breaths at the front door.

First breath: sun and swaying things
Second breath: red roses
Third breath: falling yellow leaves

As I became attentive to the three breaths, my impressions of the sun, flowers, and leaves became suddenly richer and clearer. The light intensified. My vision improved. The three-breaths images of roses and leaves stayed with me the rest of the day and remain fresh five months later

as I reread these words. Attentiveness to my breath helped me see the gifts at the threshold of Saint Margaret's College in February. Recently, it dawned on me to experiment with the reverse. What happens to sense impressions when the breath is held? I tried this last week during a writing class I was leading in a maple grove.

My breath held. Without it the sound stops, the movements stop. The woods become a museum. Scent is essential. With breath comes spice of pine, taste of powdered mushroom, something else that smells green. To pick up this moment and take it with me, I need to breathe.

Other ways to activate the sense of wonder can involve giving thanks silently or aloud, to the sunset, or to give complements to trees and the birds. Making a habit of doing this can subtly shift attentiveness and frame of mind. Passing dead animals by the side of the road can be an awkward and uncomfortable experience. With my breath held and my eyes averted, I usually try to prevent the image from registering. Yet if I pause and thank that animal for giving its life (so that we may pass by), I allow myself to embrace that interrupted life and its relations who live on.

Engaging the Imagination

Focusing on our senses and our sense of belonging are two reliable paths to awareness. They can lead almost automatically to fresh or creative ways of viewing the world. Another way to view imaginative thinking is as a perceptual shift. Heightened receptivity has been equated with the ability to readily slip out of perceptual boundaries of culture and of language (Abrams 9). The sensing body can be seen as lying at the “heart of even our most abstract thoughts” and our creativity can be viewed as “an elaboration, or recapitulation, of a profound creativity already underway at the most immediate level of sensory perception” (Merleau-Ponty qtd in Abrams 49). To me this suggests that creativity is automatic, inherent, and continuous and that no one is more creative than another. Perhaps the only way we differ is in our ability to find language for our thoughts, or perhaps in the value that we assign to our creative images. Abram writes (63), “Even boulders and rocks seem to speak their own uncanny languages of gesture and shadow, inviting the body and its bones into silent communication.”

Hold a tree until you can feel your heart beats merge. Scan the
four receiving channels. What impressions arrive?
- From Mary Getten, Telepathic Animal Communicator

An individual who offers ideas for engaging the imagination directly, by way of perceptual shifts is Mary Getten, a telepathic animal communicator based on the San Juan Islands in Washington State. Getten says that the ability to communicate nonverbally with animals is inherent in humans and is used by babies to communicate with their mothers “until they are so

rewarded for speech.” Returning to this awareness is like learning a language and takes practice and time. Getten says the way to begin is by cultivating quiet and inviting more silence into our lives. She says, “It’s about being open and receptive instead of doing.” Getten explains that there are four channels of reception recognized by telepathic communicators: words and music, visual pictures, emotional or physical feelings, or “an intuitive sense of knowing that is just there.” There is usually a primary channel, but it can vary over time. Getten recommends expressing appreciation to nature on a regular basis, perhaps by starting with a tree.

Soon after speaking with Mary Getten, I decided to listen to one of the giant old cedars on Vancouver Island. Arms open against the trunk, I pressed my ear to the bark. Suddenly I felt a deep feeling of calm. Images arrived – mostly visual images with some sounds. I jotted down the sense of this experience as follows.

The old cedars spoke of rocking chairs, hearth warmth, grandmother’s slow tick tock, old-fashioned kitchen with windows to the sea, of sailing ships, open bays and ringing chimes.

In the months that followed my conversation with Getten, I’ve practiced tuning in to a variety of creatures: dogs and cats and geese. This helps me observe the animals more carefully and improves my relationships with them.

As I read the works of a great many nature writers, I am delighted to discover that many of them experiment with perceptual shifts in their writings. Well known and respected writers Barry Lopez, Annie Dillard, Terry Tempest Williams, and Chet Raymo all go out to dance on the edge of the unknown, and embrace their intuition and their imagination in the most delightful ways.

Deciding to be Curious

An excellent way to hone attentiveness and cultivate curiosity is to keep a nature journal. Memorable journal entries (and poems for that matter) crystallize place, moment and perception in a few choice words. In the book, Keeping a Nature Journal, Clare Walker Leslie and Charles Roth note that the journal is a way to keep an ongoing connection with the flow of life, day upon day, year upon year. It's one way to become more inquisitive about the natural world. An entry I made last June reminds me of my delight in marking memories with the flowers in bloom.

I will remember this rainy day hike on Sargent Mountain as the hike of white blossoms. Hobblebush in the ravine next to the waterfall; pin cherry on rock ledges close to the ground, shadbush blooming late by the sea.

According to Hannah Hinchman, author of A Path Through Leaves: The Journal as Path to Place, a sure test of success in journaling is whether you are inclined to read and re-read what you have written for sheer enjoyment. Hinchman advocates active experimentation with the way we take notes to keep our observations fresh and alive (16). She writes that the journal is the place to “decant the stuff of life” In the journal, the recollection “remains fresh, still tasting of its source...” Stay away from the “summing up” words, Hinchman advises (46), for example, the nice, the wonderful, the terrible, the interesting. She tells writers to “get a grip on the real stuff” to capture the flavor of their experience.

Making a decision to pay attention to one thing in nature and watching it over time can dramatically improve our observation abilities. I have begun paying closer attention to the moon, and designing calendars of moon phase, moon rise and moon set in relation to sun rise and sun set. I am learning where and when to find the moon, drawing its curve, tilt, and color, and adding “frames” for the moon, to show the waters it sparkled across, or a hilltop or rooftop below. I caption the frames, sometimes with a haiku.

Gibbous moon now high,
held in arms of Sitka spruce,
night clouds flowing by.

I have become aware of how the moon fit itself into my daily routines. The first quarter is poised over the Bingo Hall as I leave my office and walk to my car. The first view of the full moon comes from the bridge on my drive home. The last quarter means a dark evening until the moon rises at midnight. I continue to gain satisfaction from recording observations of the night sky with and without the moon, jotting this line one evening.

“I have an appointment with dusk, river, and moonless night.”

Hannah Hinchman’s guidance for using the journal as a path to place are so effective that I must set her book down to experiment with her ideas. She leads nature observers away from list making and cataloguing with solid suggestions for ways to really capture the moment. If we can apprehend the world as a series of events, Hinchman suggests, it allows us to get around the limitation of not knowing the names of things (152). She encourages observers to jump in and get caught up in the unfolding stories. Hinchman shares a belief that “the love of and the ability to craft language, colors, lines, is permeated by the same physical delight as the child who runs.”

We need to become curious in order to draw. Sometimes simply sharpening a pencil and opening up to a blank page can activate the curiosity. At other times, I must pay attention to the landscape until I can find something to be curious about. Wonder and curiosity require conscious cultivation. We need to become curious before we can learn. If information begins to tumble at us too quickly, before we have had a chance to form some questions, we have no place to store it.

The act of drawing can assist with perceptual shifts because it directs us to pay attention in new ways and to notice details we wouldn't normally see. The decision to draw something changes the way that we look at it. Even tracing the form with our eye, or moving a hand through the air to suggest its movement, allows a deeper awareness to emerge. Traditional Japanese ink brush painting captures ideas and initial impressions. With minimal brush strokes the artist works swiftly. Naturalist and artist Hannah Hinchman finds that simply mixing colors to match landscape features can work well for hesitant painters.

As I practice drawing as a path to place, I tend to reassure critics and bystanders that my goal is not scientific illustration. My goal is to connect, explore, observe, and immerse. Some of my favorite teachers of drawing refer to the activity as "making marks on a page." Terri Badger, an Expressive Arts Therapist told me that the idea of making marks frees learners from performance pressures that are implicit in "making art" and opens the way for creative expression. The looser style that can result may better capture general impressions, such as a sense of movement, than a more studied approach.

I favor an activity that was developed by Cindy Krum that uses curiosity along with storytelling as tools for exploring inner and outer awareness in the natural world. Cindy Krum is a College of the Atlantic graduate who is a naturalist and licensed therapist, based in Portland, Maine. In her business called Soul Trackers she uses storytelling in nature for the treatment and prevention of substance abuse. She has made an innovative connection between forms of therapy that use natural settings for healing and those that use creative expression. In addition to presenting workshops on this technique to social service providers, she also offers workshops on storytelling in the outdoors through organizations such as Maine Audubon.

Krum's instructions are simple. Relaxation and breathing exercises are done first. Then participants are asked to notice what draws their attention or what fascinates them. They are asked to follow that connection with their curiosity, to explore it, to see what kind of a story can emerge. In Krum's experience using this method, she has found that people are drawn to something outside that symbolizes what they feel inside. Their story about nature can be a powerful way to share something important about themselves.

Allow your senses to roam. What draws your attention? Stay with it.
Explore your curiosity. See where it leads. Allow a story to unfold.
– from Cindy Krum of Soul Trackers, Portland, Maine

I like Cindy Krum's Soul Tracking activity for many reasons. Each of its individual components - letting the senses roam, selectively engaging the curiosity, making up a story - are in themselves effective ways to cultivate a creative response to nature. Put together in this sequence, it is a powerful exercise indeed. Directing the senses to roam helps to simultaneously

free and focus the mind. By allowing us to be drawn to one thing, Krum allows intuition to be our guide. Being asked to stay with one aspect of nature and explore, asks us to stretch our attention span, and prolong our contemplation. These are casual, understated instructions. Being asked to explore the ways we can engage our curiosity is not something that we are often asked to do. It is a wonderful opportunity to let a purposeful intuition take over. To then allow a story to unfold may seem like a sudden leap, and yet this sequence feels completely natural. It is easy for the story to come. I experimented recently with this approach in the back yard.

I'm under the tree whose shade holds me, whose roots weave unseen beneath me, who holds a hieroglyph of my moment of awareness. This is the tree I observe every morning on waking. The tree who occupies most of the big dipper's space in the back yard. The tree who begins the day dark, shot through with gold...

Here arrives the Monarch Butterfly. Unmistakably monarch. This happiness of moving sunlight, of so much color and size, arriving from the east, near the corner of the house, swinging northwest to the neighbors purple pom pom flowers, skipping in a half circle, east to west, in to elderberry bush corner and away to the south corner tree shadows.

I find that the decision to use curiosity as a tool for exploring the natural world can be highly effective. At times, it can be a rigorous attitude to maintain, but the rewards are great. New discoveries occur when I decide to use curiosity as a tool and let it guide me. The idea of following the path of curiosity to stand at the edge of the unknown forms a key part of a counseling technique known as Systems Centered Therapy. Participants gradually learn the art of being fully present. Doug Johnson teaches this approach at the University of Maine as a form of student counseling. I blended the approaches of Krum and Johnson with an idea from a yoga class with Barbara Lyons of Bangor, Maine to design an exercise to unite physically or emotionally felt inner sensations with externally sensed parts of nature. What we had done in yoga class was scan for emotional and physical sensations in either side of our bodies for comparison. Having never done this before, I was startled at the differences I found.

Use conscious breathing to calm the mind and invite receptiveness. Explore physical or emotional sensations or tensions that arise from within. If it is an emotion, try to locate where in the body it seems to be held.

Scan the natural world nearby to find something that can symbolize or resemble the way you feel. Pay attention to this part of nature in a relaxed, non-focused way, while attending to breathing.

Search for something in nature that resembles the opposite. Invite that opposite image into awareness, imagining that it is the new sensation that you feel.

The activity begins with using conscious breathing to calm the mind and invite receptiveness. Physical or emotional sensations that arise from within are explored with curiosity. I tend to refer to these as “tensions.” The next step is to locate where in the body the physical and emotional tensions seems to be “held.” Curiosity is directed towards these tensions while continuing to pay attention to breath. The natural world nearby is scanned for something that might resemble the feeling inside. The focus is on feelings and sensations. Mental, analytical mind paths are gently set aside. The last step in this process is to find something in nature that resembles the opposite of the feeling inside and the natural image that was selected. Again, this is more of an intuitive leap than a rational problem-solving process. With curiosity, the new image is invited into our felt awareness. We become one with the new sensation or the image, or imagine that the image is one with us.

Since discovering this technique, I’ve practiced it often, for it leads quickly to fresh observations. It is fairly efficient for clearing and shifting my awareness. I tried it by a stream on a hike in New Zealand with a church group. With three breaths I noticed how my shoulders felt

pulled, pushed, compressed, like the shoulders of the rocks or like the gravel bars that resist the stream's flow. With more breaths, a solution arose. I imagined being on my side, like the streamlined grasses and fish, allowing the flow of the stream along the full length of me, trailing an arm behind. This quiet moment of engaging my curiosity cleared by awareness so that I jotted a few lines.

Basalt boulders tumbled out of trees hold and hills grip, hunched in a ball midstream;
Waters push at you, mosses turn you all green, but I know you're black inside.

The process of becoming fully attentive to the natural world can be viewed as a systematic process of opening all the doors. It is possible to engage creative ways of perceiving by paying attention to breathing, and by consciously monitoring emotional response. Making the most of what nature offers is a constant creative challenge and curiosity is a highly effective tool.

A Mental Checklist

Whether we operate systematically or intuitively to engage curiosity, and to tap sensory, emotional, imaginative, and curious responses, the inclusion of all these approaches appear to be key for nature writing that is searching and thorough. As I read “The Stone Horse” and other essays by Barry Lopez, I cannot help but think that he is operating with precisely this mental checklist. Lopez begins, “I did not go until the following day because I wanted to see it at dawn” (The Stone Horse 6). We are given the authors intention. He continues, “I worried only about rattlesnakes.” The author shares a worry. “I traversed the stone plain as directed, but, in spite of the frankness of the land, I came on the horse unawares. In the first moment of recognition I was without feeling.” He is plumbing for an emotional reaction. “I recalled later being startled, and that I held my breath.” He is attentive to his breath. Lopez continues his account in “The Stone Horse” as follows (6-7).

It was laid out on the ground with its head to the east, three times life size. As I took in its outline I felt a growing concentration of all my senses, as though my attentiveness to the pale rose color of the morning sky and other peripheral images had now ceased to be important.

The author consciously tracks his perceptual shifts.

I was aware that I was straining for sound in the windless air and I felt the uneven pressure of the earth hard against my feet

Throughout “The Stone Horse” and in other writings, Lopez is highly attentive to his own process of exploration and observation. He examines his sensory receptors one at a time: sight, sound, feeling. He shares his unease about rattlesnakes. He’s thorough. The writings of Barry Lopez

offer excellent teaching examples for writing as path to place, for he devotes as much attention to his approach as to what he finds. He explores his tactile sense of the air and the feel of the earth under his feet.

To approach nature knowledgeably, with wonder and curiosity takes practice. Patterns of understanding can become richer and more versatile through expression and active use. It is possible to learn how to engage perceptively with a landscape and a moment by tuning sensory perceptions and activating emotional and imaginative responses. The project may well occupy the course of a lifetime.

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PART THREE:
WRITINGS FROM ROCKY PLACES

Part Three of the Master's Project presents nature writing that I developed in response to the landscapes of New England, the San Juan Islands, and Southern New Zealand over a period of one year. In selecting which works to include, I favored those that came closest to weaving together the writer's four paths to place that I describe in Part One. Most of the materials were written using the facilitation exercises introduced in Part Two.

The poems and journals were written as I purposefully explored perceptions by way of sensory, emotional, intellectual, and imaginative pathways. I often used meditation and consciousness of my breathing to calm the mind and invite receptivity. I experimented with sensory inventories and used perceptual shifts to find matches between inner felt sensations and outer observations. The poems and journal excerpts are organized chronologically and identified by month and place. My goal was to extend the reach of my observations, practice writing skills, and create something that I (and possibly others) would want to read.

Two essays at the end offer reflections on my process of exploring landscape perceptions. The first is on nature photography as an approach to creative engagement with nature. The second is about how travels in New Zealand helped develop a geological sense of place for my hometown of Lincoln, Massachusetts.

Poetry

The eleven poems that follow were written in four distinct time periods. The first three were written early in this project, between May and October, when I was beginning to experiment with the idea of writing nature poetry. What I accomplish with “The Sparrows Thin Song,” “We are the Waves,” and “Near Chimney Pond,” that I have never done before is to purposefully establish a connection between myself and my surroundings. I imagine I am leaping into the starry sky, and I practice imaginative identification with waves, islands, and boats. These poems are simple, but they contain satisfying lines.

The next three poems were written on a November trip to Vancouver Island. I view “Arriving in Tofino,” “Tonquin Park,” and “Meare’s Island Cedars” as being slightly more graceful attempts to merge my image of myself with my surroundings. The sensory images are explored with more detail and there is more movement to them than the nearly still portraits painted in the earlier poems.

To my surprise, “Boulders in Flagstaff Creek,” was the only satisfactory poem that I wrote during a two month stay in New Zealand. Instead, I filled journals with drawings and single sentence observations. This poem about the boulders in the creek is short, but it relies on all four writer’s paths, and captures a sense of participation with a moment and a place.

Near the end of this project, I immersed myself in the brand new landscape of the Massachusetts Berkshires. There, I practiced the writer's paths daily and worked at mastering the art of perceptual shifts. The last four poems explore new ways of perceiving and capture my growing engagement with light, shadow, land, leaves, and sky.

"Joyous Commotion" ventures into new perceptual terrain, linking light, color, movement, and a sense of space. "How to Find Poetry in Nature," and "The Poet, the Naturalist, the Pollywog" both look for ways to be attentive to natural history details and were written as part of a conversation with Berkshires naturalist Dave Gafney. "Driving Home" is a search for words to describe cloud and valley views and hints at my growing interest in searching for images in the spaces between things.

Sparrow's Thin Song

Couldn't sleep last night
Cast myself into the sky

Shooting stars and tears
The heaving stirring sea

What is next
I don't know

The great rock is
cracked and worn

Dark waters hold the colors
and I hear the sparrow's thin song.

Phippsburg Harbor, ME
May 2000

We are the Waves

We are the waves,
one pushing forward as the others pull back

We are the islands,
holding our distance

We are the boats,
nodding in quiet agreement

Bar Harbor, ME
October 2000

Near Chimney Pond

Fractured starburst rocks
with peaks or holes at your center

You are a frozen explosion
I am a solo hiker

Mountain ash
berries and stems
scattered red on the trail.

--

Baxter State Park
October 2000

Arriving in Tofino

Tick tick
of two dogs nails
on pavement
signal possibilities for happiness.

Follow the wood steps with their moss and drip
and sunlit hemlock boughs,
sun of pacific afternoon.
The gift of a November day.

Rock appears granite
sand reflects sky.
Who would dream of
driftwood logs this big.

Tofino, BC
November 2000

Tonquin Park

Surf carves
Sand hollows
Back of my shoulders
Heart space
Surf fills.

Tall springy trees add
bounce to my stride.
Morning cartwheels in the sand.

Noticing how the granite weathers
from white to purple maroon.

Tofino, BC
November 2000

Meare's Island Cedars

The old cedars spoke

of rocking chairs
hearth warmth

Grandmother's slow
tick tock,

Old-fashioned
kitchen with

windows to the sea,
of sailing ships

open bays and
ringing chimes.

--

Tofino, BC
November 2000

Boulders in Flagstaff Creek

Basalt boulders tumbled out of trees hold and hills grip,
hunched in a ball midstream;

Waters push at you, mosses turn you all green,
but I know you're black inside.

Dunedin, New Zealand
February 2001

Joyous Commotion

Pine needles silvered
 mid-day motioning
 pine shimmer in shadow
still, a white holding of
 the light, heaving down
 low, rollicking open
stained glass above
 joyous commotion
 let down the sky
upheld outheld
 attentive to whispers
 to motions of birds.

Great Barrington, Massachusetts
July 2001

How to Find Poetry in Nature

Stop for Oxalis (wood sorrel) and sporophytes.

Ask if your feet will learn the difference between:
birch root, beech leaves, mud, gneiss,
fallen tracery of hemlock twig.

Find out if hobblebush really have their own moths,
buff and brown-barred.

Breathe the intermittence of bird, frog, breeze song.

Start with the stars, weave in the hemlocks.

October Mountain State Forest, Massachusetts
July 2001

The Poet, the Naturalist, the Pollywog

One drop
 spreading
 pollywog-wise

One tree
 seizing the wind and
 roaring as
the rest of us quietly
 bask in bird twittering
June gleaming sun stillness
 of pondside.

*Can we write some more?
cuz this is the only time
I've been inspired to write
poetry in my whole life.*

Lap of water
 wisk of cloud
 rich blue sky.

*I like your lines as much as mine
Maybe even a little better.
You're just saying that
cuz you want me to be a poet.*

A beaver
 Is a silver
 gleam in dark water, a
 liquid undulation.

*How long can you spend talking about hemlocks?
What else can you tell me about oak fern?*

Finerty Pond, Massachusetts
July 2001

Driving Home

Berkshire valleys
 hold the mists
 after the rain
And the mists hold
 colors
Orange glow, red mist
 purple evening

Trees reach high.
 Sky swoops low.
Tattered streamers
 of color clouds
 lace hill curves together.

--

Great Barrington, Massachusetts
July 2001

Nature Journals

I formerly viewed nature journals as a place to take the notes that would form the basis for future essays and poems. However, my review of nature writers led to the realization that the essay form risks becoming overworked and can lose touch with sensory details and the resonating spirit of the moment. I now prefer a note-taking format and I have come to be satisfied with single lines and sentences. The excerpts that follow were selected carefully and only slightly reworked as I came to savor these words in their original form.

The first set of journal excerpts cover summer and fall of 2000 in Maine as I began to stretch my nature writer's muscles. The second set explores images of the Pacific Northwest in November 2000 with a greater sense of purpose. Next are the December 2000 entries from Maine and Massachusetts as I began to record fragments of poetry. The most dedicated set of observations cover my February and March travels in New Zealand where the journal was my top priority. The excerpts I share focus on the two weeks I spent in the native New Zealand bush, volunteering to help map the vegetation of an island that is a refuge for highly endangered birds (I obscured the island name and the bird species). The June 2001 Cobscook Bay song captures season and place in rhyme. June and July 2001 entries celebrate my quest for fresh ways of seeing in the southern Berkshires of Massachusetts.

Summer and Fall 2000 - Maine

Looks like the Aurora tonight lapping the edges of sky in green.
Dousing the headlights on Mann Hill Road, I don't know where
to steer.

-Song-

I am the rock of the mountain - Bathed in the salt of the sea
I have rolled forth into your life - Cradle me
When I go ... Watch me go ... Watch me tumble so
Spinning, Turning, Whirling, Swirling, Dancing in the brine.

Crouched in the sphagnum
tasted little cranberries
admired blue gray clay
saw the ocean's old shoreline above us on the hill
felt raindrops fall
saw the lightness of the pale leaves holding drops of dew
felt softness underfoot, softness all around

I have an appointment with River, Dusk, and Moonless Night.

On Monday the yellows fell out swiftly. And now we have
bronzed red that glows more rich and quiet, sings ever so slightly
off key. There are bare branch fingertips laid against the sky.

November 2000 – Pacific Northwest

Tonight, through loose knit clouds near two bright planets, the full frost moon. Tonight is also Orcas Island's first frost of the year.

Sunrise sneaks between layers of blue, white, silver, islands, mountains, sea. Upstairs a woman sings.

This morning, the frost of the night lies thick as snow on the planks of the Friday Harbor pier, on the holly leaves, and the orange poppy blossoms. Cold nibbles my fingers in my gloves and my toes in my sneakers.

Under the last of this moon we drive to the airport and I return to a dry and cold I had forgotten.

December 2000 – Maine and Massachusetts

Lightly snowing, lamp glowing, postman just came to front box drop. Cat outstretched. Car swish on road, refrigerator hum, fire crackle, neck rest. Thermometer points to the need for green wax. Too cold for me, too cold for the cat, we rest. We need to trust that there is no such thing as an insignificant task.

I am starting to notice the gray squirrels who shake the pine branches leaping, the red squirrel in the woodpile, the crows who swoop to the compost, the jay on a branch. The twigs of the trees toward the river pinken first with morning, then the trunks of the trees in the back yard.

I like watching darkness come to the woods.

Sky fades mauve to gold through faintest hint of blue. Sight of first evening star over winter silhouetted trees and my tracks in the snow.

Thin new moon hangs in the west before it goes down, a pale yellow curve in deep blue over Stillwater Avenue.

When I am on the other side of the world, the moon that sets for you will rise for me. Send the moon my way. Attach your words and wishes and I will reply by return moon the very next night.

It's late. I skied on a buttery gliding substance into star world, so close by.

February and March 2001 – New Zealand

I'm on a bench beneath the Sitka Spruce, bright flowers all around. "Don't tell me you're missing the snow," Cliff says as he hoses down the bricks. I smile. He doesn't know he's my favorite person here.

The wind swirls into the northwest corner of the courtyard, lifts the doormat and sends rose petals down the stairs to my room.

The air in Invercarghill is warm, but the addition of fine sheeting rain to the wind causes me to want gloves on this mid-summer day.

Low clouds always moving, tearing on by. Cirrus spun high above.

I find myself still laughing at Ursula's story about rolling over the snorer in the DOC hut.

"The best view on the island is from the loo at sunrise", Robyn told us, "looking over the Ruggedy Range."

I am in the first group of four to fly out to the island in the six-seater plane. Our luggage together weighs 100 kg. We land on the beach. We trundle to the cookshed. We close the doors. We search for rats. We are shown to our bunks. We have a tour.

"Don't open that drawer," Matt says.

"What happens if we do read these files?"

"Then we'll have to kill you," he says, not cracking a smile.

Here live 62 of the world's most sought-after and endangered birds.

My patterns of meaning are not set for this place. I know only short paths to beach to hut to outhouse. I see a round shape on the map now as a hexagon. I see a lovely view. I hear birds I don't know. I see clouds. I see a fishing vessel. I see a fly, black like a fly I know. I hear surf pound as surf does. I see ocean of unfamiliar color.

The cloud curtain has been pulled down for the night. The sandflies on the backs of my hands seem like blackflies. Sounds that begin to my left - the side that receives the breeze - are passed to the right - slosh...thunder...rain.... shimmer...

My breathing, if I let it, investigates an emptiness, a sea cave where cold dark waters lift and fall.

The sea is so much bluer-aqua than our deep dark green in Maine.

Night sounds reach up in undulating waves that match the dark waves of the land and tree tops. Stars reach down.

So strange the sounds. No mammals, no frogs, nothing to fear. So strange the bright stars, these chirps and groans. And yet how comfortingly beautiful, simply beautiful to me. My thirst for pattern, for belonging is finally satisfied. My first moment of wonder on this island.

Later, wind erases sound, clouds erase stars. But I remember.

I knew none of the plants of the island as I stood in the chill and damp in the first forest plot. Latin and common names came raining down to be immediately forgotten. *Coprosma foetidissima*, *Pseudoplanex simplex*...

When the rain slowed, I began to sketch. This gave me my framework for learning. Five sketches and five hours later, I know four trees, 10 shrubs, and six ground covers. Having a story for each one helps me remember.

The Totara is a reddish bark tree. Mutton birds were wrapped in kelp bags and totara bark. One cut for the wrap would kill the tree. The cuts we see on the standing dead trees are evidence this track has been here at least a hundred years. So these are historic trees.

After a wet morning in a forest plot, we climb to an opening. We step out into a view. We step into sun and wind. A view of such sweep. East to south to west. A valley of shoulder high trees, trimmed to undulating forms by wind. Rock crags and sea beyond. It was the view from the plane. The dense yet open forest. "Have you ever been anywhere that looked like this before?" I ask. Louise shakes her head in quiet amazement.

Sun drops behind dunes, creek, low saddle of hill. A pinkness to the sky farthest away from the sun overlying the Stewart Island range. Gray and gray blue stray clouds. Rock faces lit yellow when I got here tonight, jagged heights now softened to gray. Waves lap white up a glass pink sand. Wave curls green before plunging to white. Light softening from blue to pink, to gray. Two fishing boats remain at the far end of the cove.

To sleep here is quietly wonderful. Parakeet caws, other bird barks and trills and chirps flow in the open windows. Quiet breathing. Airy lofty bunk. Stars shine in the window as bright as the lights on the fishing boats.

Now I know yesterday's plants better, plus ten more. I'm starting to recognize their odd fragments scattered on the track and the forest. On the data sheet we list the epiphytes. In addition to the lichens, mosses, orchids and ferns, there are trees that grow on trees that grow on trees.

Parakeets dip and pass all day over upper slopes, moving too quickly for their bright colors to be seen.

They are trying to teach me to swear.
Bugger this and bugger that and bloody hell.

Sudden awareness of just how complex the topography is. I memorize a horizon we are aiming for, with its rocky prominences. We arrive. Those rocks are hidden and there is a new horizon spread out in all directions.

In this far away temperate rainforest I can sense in this eve of no stars (clouds) and no bird sounds (wind), just sense and feel rain coming on, the changed breath of the wind that sends the windsock streaming away from the setting sun.

Graeme said his compass was buggered from being carried around in his pocket.

Night sounds identification begun at breakfast. Mottled petrels – ih ih ih ih, Cooks petrel – not known. Blue penguin – like a donkey or a snore. Haw ee, haw ee. Exhale, inhale. The blue penguins spend the night beneath our hut.

Today I'm with Sue and Mike, at a lower elevation. Hardwood podocarp broadleaf forest with trees of Rimu, Miro, Rata.

Pulse and wash of waves, light as wind and interrupted by gulls and bellbirds. Hum and throb of generator; tune your ears to a lower and steadier vibration.

Afternoon Bearing is 278 degrees. Each field day the weather's been entirely different. Yesterday, gusty, cloudy, sort of warm. Strong breezes rocked the tall trees, sent things clattering down.

The filmy ferns on the tree trunks feel dry. Marbleleaf blossoms sprinkled in the trail. Ate supplejack tips and they tasted like raw green beans.

Six gulls wander in and out wave patterns. 25 tracks of Hoiho march straight to and from the water. Last night's inbound tracks became hard edged by rain.

Bull kelp writhes, curls, streams, winds, unfurls, bends, floats, winds, pulses, spills, sways, twists, and startles when it slaps.

Windsock, sagging blows away from sea. Tail streaming to the NNW. Three oystercatchers avoid me by going to the base of the dunes.

Our bearing is 281 degrees and takes us to a view of the western end in hearing range of seal pups on an unseen beach that the GPS says is 192 meters below.

We've sorted out what each of us does best. For the most botanical, the groundcover plants and herbs. Mike says taking diameters lets him hug all the trees. For me it's satisfying to establish our line plot to plot, hold a bearing and mark out a 10 meter square. Tracing straight lines and squares, order is established. A data sheet is filled. We move on. Our fastest plots are done in half an hour.

We are asked by the bird observers if we get much exercise from looking at plants. It is hard to explain how we wade, crawl, measure, keep moving, and how I so much wish to sit for a while. How does this compare to bushwacking in Maine, I'm asked, as we go through the most densely tangled muttonbird scrub and flax. New Zealand bush, even though it is slippery and muddy and tangled, it is not as sharp and prickly and therefore preferred!

On this island common birds are rare and the rare birds are common.

Each day on the island is a combination of hello and goodbye. I see things I have never seen before that I will probably never see again.

- Song -
Pull over me the sand; pull over me the sea
Nestle down...
Pull over me the Ruggedies; Pull over me the clouds
I want to stay...
Land on me the rain; Sunset colors go
I know...
Your silhouetted trees and your hills that rise
Goodbye, Goodbye!

Hounds tongue now dried and drying after rains has iridescent
bluish cast.

Why are night parrots so beloved? Is it because they have more
personality than any other bird?
"There's just something about them," Louise says.

We are on a northerly bearing. Second plot is dense with
supplejack and is damp and low with thigh-high hen and chicken
fern. We are not far from the odor of penguin droppings and
"paths" beaten down by their webbed feet. After lunch the
bellbirds join us for the first time today. The five petaled intact
white flowers on the ground are from the marbleleaf.

Owen wrested the tape forward on our compass line through a
leg stopping assemblage of tree ferns and supplejack, both giving
way when grabbed, one snapping, the other entangling. Surf is
louder. We climb again.

The outhouse is where we have our first view of the type of day
it is to be... Today the view at the outhouse shows tide to be high
on the marker ledge that I sometimes mistake for an additional
fishing boat. White surf on its left edge instead of being blown
well over yesterday.

Watched a penguin this morning. White front and black back
moving. Running once in the surf, going up to half its height
and launching itself horizontally into the next breaking wave.

Breaks in the clouds lay strips of blue across the water reaching
towards shore, alternating with stripes of darker blue purple and
stripes of rose yellow light. These last dance the most...
shimmer the most, pulsing with movement as waves toss around,
play catch, with the brightest of the morning shine.

The deepest purple is laid in the shadow of the Ruggedies and dances in a slower liquid way, the dark color shot through with light blue shimmers.

Light-catching paths of water sparkle, bright.
Shaded stretches shimmer, easier on the eye.

The bees are humming today. It has to be warm enough I think. I don't think we've had too many bee humming days. Yesterday was not a bee humming day.

Loaned the other group my U.S. Environmental Protection Agency pencil. "Sounds intimidating," Louise said.

"This stuff lasts forever if you varnish it." said John as he and Graeme fingered parrot droppings.

Tonight, under a quarter moonlight and with our headlamps on, we went to meet one of the hand-reared male birds. To silvery light and tree shadows, with a generous sprinkle of stars above, we met the night parrot on a hillside.

The parrot grasped our fingers gently with a beak that is capable of debarking a tree. He extended a foot to shake my hand. He took a running leap to land on Graeme's head.

I was impressed with the softness and colors of the night parrot plumage. The alternating green and brown looks like a perfect blend with the forest floor. I see the tail feathers brown and barred as mimicking the lower brown fern fronds. I can see how the parrot head first in a set of ferns would be hard to see.

It's another bee-humming day, a bellbird song day and the rata stamens have rolled out the red carpet in the sun. We smell honeydew by the grass trees. Looking down over the windswept tops of the manuka trees, it's like a lawn mower has gone over the tops of them.

It is our last day on the island. Wind and surf softly rearrange the sand, sun warms, blue surrounds. Soft hearts beat in green breasts, blending in dappled fern shadows. Dry days of bee hum and bell bird trill, rata sprinkles and surf pound. At night, penguins complain, petrels clamor. Murmurs of birds reach to star songs and touch in the shimmering night.

June 2001- Cobscook Bay, Maine

- Song -

Oh the land has an easy roll
It holds the winding road
Rising from the bay
Dipping under twice a day

Verses:

We are driving towards the roar
Heard so faintly day before
Is that traffic or the falls
Paddle fast it dooms us all

Mr. Cox rowed daily here
Whirlpool currents did not fear
Mrs. Cox from yonder shore
Married him in days of yore

Lupine meadow now in bloom
Tamarack take up the tune
Hawkweed yellow, daisies white
Clover, roses, pale and bright

Rockweed tangled, rockweed curled
Golden, green, saltwater swirled
Low tide rocks are purple black
High tide, white, and full of cracks

Evening spreads out flat and still
Summer on a Cobscook hill
Pink on far shore lasts and lasts
As the day does slowly pass

Luna moths come in the dark
Fireflies are yellow sparks
Untold stories linger where
Silent voices fill the air

(written at a song writing class with Maine folk singer Anne
Dodson; later performed by Anne)

June and July 2001 - Southern Berkshires, Massachusetts

Hemlock tips silvering,
their dark rafters supporting
a lattice of sunlit beech leaves and blue.

Dry bits of hemlock needles mulching the dark soils.

Well before dawn, the bird I don't know
begins the relentless up and down that accompanies
all spring wakings in the woods.

Make space for this trembling exchange of me and air, pond and
life.

On my skin lies the shadow of a leafy day.
A single cricket fills the night.
Birds embellish the edges of what we don't see.

I am the thunder pushing you home.
I am solstice sighing.
I am twilight washed in rain
I am north sky's lingering light.
I am mourning dove persisting.

Leafy ridgelines, waving
flat hands of leaves,
pale and yellow green,
shimmering,
cascading,
rippling
in concert with cloud sky and
loft and heave of land.
Odd leaves,
chestnut, mountain laurel, Virginia creeper.
Maple,
maple,
maple abundance.
Layered, lofting, arching,
to unimagined heights and depths.

There is a wrinkled weathered
grainy face,
a silver powdering of sand
near summit heights.

To touch, it's smooth,
so smooth.
Cleaves all ways,
sculpturally,
not yet predictably,
as curving motions,
blocks and lines.
and its colors
here blue, there gray, almost white,
rust and pink toned, even green.

Lifting white butterflies in the morning fields.
Golden bits of evening light caught in maple trunks and
leaves.

Under the planet's yellow eye
Beneath the clouds soft press
And in the wood thrush moment.
Dusk on the silken lake

Clouds today
a light exhalation
on blue.

I'm under the tree whose shade holds me, whose roots weave
unseen beneath me, who holds a hieroglyph of my moment of
awareness. This is the tree I observe every morning on waking.
The tree who occupies most of the big dipper's space in the back
yard. The tree who begins the day dark, shot through with gold.

Sweet winds of
perfect
temperature...
Warm rock...
you sun catching
pine tips...
You pluckable
clouds...
We sang to you...
danced of you...

Essays

Carrying An Empty Camera

Looking around at the natural world with the intention of photographing it or peering through the camera's lens can be a rich way of focusing awareness. The act of slowly moving the camera around and filling the viewfinder with different colors and compositions can be all-absorbing. I am conscious of my in-breath and out-breath to hold the camera as still as possible while I gently squeeze the shutter.

Occasionally I spend hours composing images in the camera, only to find the camera empty of film. Instead of experiencing this as a loss, I tend to feel grateful for the presence of the camera as a viewing aid. There will be no photograph to remind me of the details that absorbed me that day, but my own memory and experience of the place will have been enhanced by the intent of taking pictures. A camera provides an opportunity to pay attention to my surroundings, in the same way a fishing rod offers an excuse to sit by the water. Sometimes I deliberately delay the processing of a film so that my sense memories and impressions will settle in and not be replaced by the images recorded on film.

Less-than-perfect images captured on my own camera have more value than the picture-perfect postcards. The act of seeing and recording things the way they struck me has more personal meaning. A photograph serves as a satisfying reminder of engaging with a place.

Last fall I spent a day sketching along the Roaring Brook Trail in Baxter State Park. I deliberately left my camera behind, but returned with it the following week to snap photos to guide me in finishing the drawings. Having appraised each scene with an artist's eye, I knew the angles I wanted to shoot from, yet I was forced to step backwards and forward and up and down, as I discovered that the camera lens was not as adaptable as my sketcher's eye. This roll of film proved to be one of the best I've ever taken, although I prefer the sketches, even in their rough, unfinished form. The lesson I learned was to leave the camera home more often. Not having the camera develops a longing that forces me to sketch, or to pay close attention to the images that I would like to capture on my return. With camera in hand, the photograph is all too quickly snapped, creative tension resolved, and the image set aside.

On a recent boating trip I did not have my camera with me, which filled me with regret, for we traveled the full length of the Otago Peninsula in rare sunlight. The New Zealand landscape was so entrancing that I felt I needed to capture it somehow. I used my blue ballpoint pen to trace the curves of hills, outlines of pastures and trees, the volcanic cliffs, the high shaggy clouds, cormorants (different sizes, rounder, more varied colors than those in Maine), and the flapping plastic bags tied to sailboats on their moorings to keep the gulls at bay. The drawings were rushed and poor, and yet the act of drawing had a value. Engaging eye-hand movements to make a sketch, even if the sketch is done poorly with poor materials, allows one to "steep" in the landscape, find its lines and light, and notice the qualities that make the strongest impression.

Returning with a camera to a setting I've sketched, I arrive with a sense of purpose. Impressions have intensified and coalesced. I'm more selective about the images I choose. Even if that photograph is never taken, or does not turn out the way I hoped, I'm satisfied because I've

made a connection. Aesthetically and emotionally, I have ‘discovered’ a place and somehow made it my own.

I offer a few ideas on photography as a route for cultivating a creative response to nature. Framing a portion of a scene inside a viewfinder is a good perceptual shift. Looking at one parcel of a view at a time helps to focus on visual patterns and details. Even if the camera is in its case, or has been left at home, being in a photographer’s state of mind is a good primer for creative viewing. Consciousness of breathing while looking through the viewfinder and releasing the shutter can elevate the photographer’s practice into a form of meditation, a state of relaxation and receptivity. Going without the camera and returning with it later can open up one’s capacity for viewing a scene with a higher level of attachment. Alternating photography with sketching can help each of these creative responses attain more depth. Attentiveness to any aspect of the creative process can help refine and develop the photographer’s eye.

Crossing Lake Manapouri

I grew up on the trailing edge of a drumlin and picked corn in an outwash plain. It was on the low ground leading to a swamp. We skied and swam in kettle holes including one called Walden Pond. The ledges glittered faintly with mica, suggesting meta-sedimentary. Though I have lived it, the geology of New England has seemed complicated to me. The mess of eskers, kettles, deltas, and moraines is a confusion to my half-trained eye. To make sense of it, I had to leave it far behind.

In New Zealand, traveling between the South Island's unglaciated east side and the glacially scoured west, I had the opportunity to notice how easily I became disoriented in unglaciated terrain. Where the glaciers had not been, there were no parallel U-shaped valleys. Hills and valleys were spread out unevenly and their ridges were not aligned. Suddenly I realized how much I rely on glacial footprints for my sense of direction. Erratic boulders cheered me as much as the sight of a long lost pet.

Bedrock also signaled messages of familiarity and unfamiliarity. I was most at home among New Zealand's sparse outcrops of granite and metamorphic rocks. Foreign to me were the fossil-rich sandstones and limestones and youthful volcanic hills, which formed baffling horizon lines.

Towards the end of my stay, I visited the Fiordlands in the southwest corner of the Island. By motorboat, it took an hour to speed the length of New Zealand's fifth largest lake, taking in the low rolling hills and gray jagged peaks. There was a crystalline feel to the rocky shores. I sketched the shores of Lake Manapouri with growing recognition. Beech trees held branches at attitudes strikingly similar to spruce and their color was much the same. Glaciers had ground the hills and headlands into familiar shapes (roche moutonnee). When clouds dropped low and erased the jagged peaks, I imagined I was in Maine. When the clouds lifted I was in New Zealand again.

Sketching was difficult in the small boat. I had to keep wiping spray off the page. "Are you writing a book?" I was asked. "Yes," was the simplest answer. Our boat captain was a newcomer to Fiordland. What was familiar to me was unfamiliar to him. He shared a private observation, wondering why the loose rocks of the valley were mixed with gravel and sand. I told him that glaciers were responsible for the unsorted heap of material that was damming the lake and he was glad to know.

I have come back to a New England covered in old snow, to sap running and sunshine. Gone are jagged peaks and eye catching horizon lines. Home in the Sudbury River Valley, I'm far from the curious undulations of sedimentary hills; far from sand-blown plains and braided river beds. A tangle of twigs and evergreens meets the sky in a gentle clasp. The sky is a more muted blue and the clouds layer in flatter bands. The land swells with puddles, potholes and the promise of spring. Here roll the cornfields and hayfields I know so well. Here grow familiar oak and pine.

Even though the geology of New England still seems complicated when I try to put it into words, I have a felt understanding that organizes my way of thinking about all other lands that I see. The geological underpinnings of home form a reference point for everywhere I go. Walking them, farming them, mowing them and driving them, I have come to know them with my bones.

CONCLUSION

Finding poetry in nature is about discovering and building towards a way of seeing and feeling. Finding poetry allows us to uncover richness, texture, and abundance in daily life. We discover connections between ourselves and the world we live in. It is not necessary to be a poet or to write poems. Finding the poetry is simply choosing new ways of perceiving.

Insights on the nature writer's four paths to place from the literature review suggest a framework for appreciating and understanding the works of nature writers. The four paths also suggest ways of organizing a teaching and writing practice. Our natural tendency to integrate sensory, emotional, intellectual, and imaginative ways of perceiving can be heightened by selectively exploring each path.

I have learned from personal experience that breathing with full awareness while following the path of the senses helps to heighten sensory impressions and synesthesia can be the natural result. To increase attentiveness and deliberately admire the natural world can take us down the path of wonder and reverence. Using the imagination to prompt a perceptual shift allows us to merge and participate with nature in new and profound ways. Writing and drawing extend these explorations into new realms and making a conscious decision to be curious opens our awareness to a new range of natural history discoveries.

Connections with sense of place are heightened with newness, but are deepened with knowledge, repetition, and anticipation. Paying attention to the color and motions of a white-tail

deer or a red eft help us to see where they blend best in the landscape we share (dried oak leaves on the forest floor; wet cast off mountain laurel leaves). Being alert for the images that we wish to remember, and finding the words to capture them, allows the moment to be savored in more detail and the experience to be deepened.

Certain themes arose during the course of this project that merit future exploration. The first is the unspoken, but inherently spiritual nature of this undertaking. It may be worthwhile to grant explicit recognition to nature writing and nature education as a spiritual endeavor. In this respect, it might be helpful to explore where such an endeavor belongs within our society. Perhaps a home for this project may be found in churches or other religious institutions.

Another theme that arose was the therapeutic value that is derived from the process of finding poetry in nature. Certain components of this practice already receive recognition for their therapeutic value: the creative process itself, mindfulness, time spent outdoors. This suggests that a program of finding poetry in nature that combines all three of these elements may have a dramatic healing potential. I would like to explore this further.

It may be useful to explore the contribution that the writer's four paths to place can make in the field of science education and parks interpretation. Just as the integration of sensory, intellectual, emotional, and imaginative paths help writers and readers to connect with their natural surroundings, it could be that learners and listeners will respond more fully to a presentation that touches upon all four perceptual paths.

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Tammis Coffin was born in Boston, Massachusetts on November 10, 1961 to a librarian and a puzzle maker. She was raised on a small farm in Lincoln, Massachusetts and graduated from Concord Academy in 1979. She attended Tufts University and graduated from the College of the Atlantic in 1987 with a Bachelor of Arts in Human Ecology.

Tammis has offered nature education programs in park and school settings since 1983. She led ecological inventory teams for the Maine State Planning Office and was formerly the editor of the Friends of Acadia Journal. She served as an environmental planner for the Penobscot Indian Nation. Tammis is a candidate for the Master of Arts degree in Liberal Studies from The University of Maine in December 2001.