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Listen for the Desert: An Ecopsychological Autoethnography

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LISTEN FOR THE DESERT:
AN ECOPSYCHOLOGICAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

A Dissertation

Submitted to McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Dorothy Cashore

August 2019

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Dorothy Cashore

2019

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AN ECOPSYCHOLOGICAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

By

Dorothy Cashore

Approved March 22, 2019

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ABSTRACT

LISTEN FOR THE DESERT: AN ECOPSYCHOLOGICAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

By

Dorothy Cashore

August 2019

Dissertation supervised by Will W. Adams, Ph.D.

What does it mean for human beings to be part of nature – not just as a conceptual justification for doing right by the planet, but actually as an embodied, emotional, and sensuous experience? What happens to the experience of being human when notions as fundamental as voice, absence, suffering, and psyche are re-encountered from a perspective rooted within, rather than apart from, the natural world? While this dissertation responds to these questions, it initially took shape in response to something that felt less like a research question and more like a summons. Following a startling experience of feeling called and claimed by a part of California’s Mojave Desert known as Jawbone, the author returned to Jawbone to camp without human company for a month. Interweaving ecopsychological perspectives with autoethnographic methodology allowed the author to share the story of her fieldwork in ways that disturb the expectation

of an individualized, separate, and anthropocentric “auto,” or self. The experience of being with Jawbone, as well as the aftermath of that experience, prompted the author to explore what it means for humans to engage with the other-than-human natural world as a relational partner, as well as how an understanding that human beings are a part of the natural world invites those working in mental health fields to consider how their work can be of service to nature. The project that resulted is in part a love letter to a place, in part an ecopsychological exploration of the experience of relationship, and in part one human animal’s story about the grief and the joy of belonging deeply to ecology in an ecocidal time.

DEDICATION

For Rattlesnake,
coming closer

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This project grew up in the shelter of many, only a few of whom are named here.

My gratitude goes out to:

My desert rat, Darren, whose love started everything.

The three members of my committee:

my reader Elizabeth, for coaxing my voice back when I lost it,

my reader Suzanne, for being a place art loves to live,

and my research director, Will, for teaching what I most needed to learn and for trusting my vision, my process, and my grief.

My parents and sisters, who were teaching me, long before Jawbone, that the whole world is alive and speaking. Thank you especially to my sister Kristin for being the first to read my stories and suggest edits.

My friend and mentor Mark, who has been right there with me.

My Daniel. *Mo sheasamh ort lá na choise tinne.*

The other-than-human beings and presences of Jawbone and Pittsburgh.

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It is not for me to say what is this wind
or how it came to blow through the rooms of my heart.

– from “The Wind Blows Through the Doors of My Heart,” by Deborah Digges

Introduction: Locating the project

Let them not say: we did not hear it.
We heard.
– from “Let them not say,” by Jane Hirshfield

In our culture, listening for the voices of the Earth as if the nonhuman world felt, heard, spoke would seem the essence of madness to most people.
– Theodore Roszak (1995, p. 7).

December 28, 2014

We pull in after dark. The headlights sweep a faded wooden sign that welcomes me to California’s Jawbone-Butterbredt Area of Critical Environmental Concern. As my fiancé Darren navigates slowly over dirt roads in search of a place to pitch the tent, I take in the unexciting movie projected by the headlight beams: sand. Low, brittle desert scrub. A low, sandy, scrubby place. At daybreak tomorrow, the squat foothills of the Scodie Mountains, a sub-range of the Sierra Nevada rising out of the Mojave Desert, will become visible. But even then, they will resemble less the breathtaking rocks I’ve glimpsed over the past week in Sedona, Zion, and the Grand Canyon, and more the gigantic heaps of road maintenance gravel that I used to pass when I took the train from Boston to Gloucester, back before I moved to Pittsburgh for a clinical psychology doctoral program. There seems to be hardly anything here. Nothing to indicate that by morning, this place will have changed me.

I injured my knee a few days ago in Tucson, so as soon as Darren sets up camp I disappear into the tent. He stays outside. I know he’s leaning against the car with his

hands in his pockets, letting his eyes adjust to the dark. We're here because he loves this place where he spent sixteen straight months sleeping outside at night, doing desert restoration during his waking hours. Even with this pain in my knee dogging me, eyes weary from too much beauty in too short a time in the preceding days, I want to be here to meet this part of him – but tomorrow, after sleep.

It is definitely not tomorrow yet when Darren calls to me to come back out. Groggily, I consider protesting, but the excitement in his voice has me up on one elbow and then out before I've really made up my mind.

Until he says "Listen," I don't hear it. But there it is. On the far side of broad-backed silence, a single note: constant and concentrated, like the low-pitched droning of massive bees. It's coming from somewhere high up and due west. He tells me it's the sound of the wind that will be here in a few hours, on its way to us through the Scodies. I realize, more slowly than his words reach my ears, that this place is so quiet that I can hear the wind blowing toward us from miles away. Here, I can hear the wind before I feel it.

Something about this undoes me. I sit down hard, not onto the sand, but inside myself. The feeling is jarring, like love before you're ready. But now it's time for sleep.

Three or four hours later, I wake with a gasp. The tent is bucking wildly, collapsing and then billowing out, a lung taking sharp breaths. It snaps and clacks beneath the locomotive roar of wind. The moon has risen, and moonlight through the lime green nylon casts an alien abduction glow. By the time I figure out that I'm not being abducted, Darren has wrestled his way out of the tent. Through the howling of

wind, I hear him reposition the car alongside the tent so that he can tie a trucker's hitch to the wheel rim to give us a shot at staying staked.

I feel safe. Improbably, given the ruckus, I lie back and drift to sleep.

The next day, limping out of the car to examine baby Joshua trees and photograph sand-colored crickets on sand-colored scrub, my affection for Jawbone grows with each small discovery. But my commitment was made somewhere in the roaring night, with scraps of time and memory circling the tent like the chicken coop and granny-in-a-rocker outside Dorothy's window before touchdown in Oz. I will return to this place.

* * *

Present day: July 13, 2018

As soon as I arrived back in Pittsburgh after that trip – a vacation from my doctoral program, and my first experience of the American southwest – I began plotting my return to Jawbone. That windy night, a seed had blown in; something was growing. I felt called back. It was crazy, I told myself, but maybe I could ditch my existing plan for a dissertation on human trafficking, and instead build a project that would get me back to Jawbone. I kept silent about it for weeks, keeping the idea a secret even from Darren. It just didn't seem feasible. All I had was a pesky conviction that a patch of desert I'd met for less than 24 hours was asking me to come back. I had no method, no clear topic – I didn't even have a research question. Clearly, I didn't have a project.

Welcome to that project.

* * *

Located twenty miles west of the city of Ridgecrest in Kern Country, California, Jawbone-Butterbrecht Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) covers

approximately 256,000 thousand acres of Mojave Desert managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM).¹ The ACEC is known locally as Jawbone. Much of Jawbone, and much of the land abutting Jawbone, is federally designated wilderness. Roads inside Jawbone are unpaved and, with the exception of several roads maintained for servicing power lines and aqueducts that transect Jawbone on their way west to L.A., the roads are a very travel-at-your-own-risk affair. To enter Jawbone, you simply turn off of one of the adjacent state highways and drive on in. There are no check stations, forms, or fees; there is no way to register your presence with any agency.

The federal government tasks the BLM with preserving Jawbone as an ACEC for the protection of “natural and cultural resources.” Jawbone, like so many areas with wilderness designation, had a long history of human and nonhuman cohabitation prior to the eviction of Native Americans from their traditional land by new arrivals who, like me, were white. The cultural resources in question at Jawbone are primarily artifacts, structures, and traditional sites of the hunter-gatherer Kawaiisu people. Their history in the western Mojave Desert and far southern Sierra Nevada dates back at least 1500 years, and displacement from their indigenous lands and lifeways began with Spanish and Mexican military incursion in the early 19th century and accelerated with the arrival of white miners and settlers drawn to California by the Gold Rush of the mid-19th century.² None of the Kawaiisu resources at Jawbone are marked, and for how little knowledge of them circulates amongst visitors to Jawbone, they may as well be absent from the landscape. Displaced Kawaiisu continue to lead vigorous campaigns to protect their culture in the places where they now live, but apart from these campaigns, almost no

effort has gone into the preservation of Kawaiisu culture. This makes it likely that many Kawaiisu resources at Jawbone, if not most, have never been documented.

Just as Jawbone's prior history of human inhabitation challenges popular ways of imagining wilderness as unpeopled, the biodiversity of its Mojave desert ecosystem, with a floral and faunal nightlife that rivals that of Pittsburgh, challenges tired ways of imagining deserts as barren and inhospitable to life. Of the numerous plant and animal species that call Jawbone home, the "natural resource" that has received the most federal attention at Jawbone is the Mojave desert tortoise, a burrow-dwelling animal that feeds on desert vegetation. I'll say more about both the Kawaiisu and this tortoise, which currently has a federal "threatened" status, later in my writing.

At the same time that the BLM is tasked with managing Jawbone as an ACEC, it is also tasked with preserving Jawbone for recreational use by off-roaders. The BLM maintains a network of public-use trails designated for use by off-highway vehicles (OHV's), and is responsible for enforcing rules meant to prohibit OHV's from wandering off designated trails into protected areas. Actual enforcement is nigh on impossible – the local BLM field office at Ridgecrest employs 6-8 rangers responsible for policing an area many times larger than all of Pittsburgh's city and county parks combined (Darren, who manages Pittsburgh's park rangers, tells me that he employs 16 rangers in the city parks alone). The position BLM officers occupy is arguably an impossible one: they are expected to operate, with insufficient personnel, at the intersection of federal conservation regulations, on the one hand, and state and public demand for recreational access to BLM-managed land, on the other. The difficulty of their task is poignantly illustrated by the fact that desert tortoises, which store water as up to 40% of their body

weight in order to survive dry spells, void that water store as a defensive measure when frightened – frightened, for example, by the sudden appearance of a deafeningly loud OHV. The damage done to the landscape by OHV's was what brought Darren to Jawbone for the first time, years ago, as a conservation crew leader.

* * *

Nearly a full year after my return from that first meeting with Jawbone, I still did not have a dissertation proposal. Unaccountably, although I felt no clearer about a question and method with which to go back, I felt an increasingly clear sense that I would find a way, with the support of my program, to shape my dissertation into a return to the place. One November night, I sat journaling in an armchair in my Pittsburgh apartment, still trying to understand why, although Jawbone was neither a physically comfortable place to stay nor a stereotypically attractive Southwest landscape, I had left the place reluctantly, with tears in my eyes, feeling some mixture of provoked, disturbed, awed, and addressed. As I wrote and re-wrote the story of what I had experienced there, I suddenly realized something new about what had impacted me so strongly that night: I had heard the same sound Darren heard, but whereas what I heard was so much mysterious noise, what he heard was a voice. We were both visitors to the place, but Darren had lived in close proximity to the colors, textures, and sounds, the charms and dangers of Jawbone. When the desert announced what was coming next, he was able to translate it. Alone, I would not have heard any meaning in that strange voice pouring toward me through the Scodies.

My project, I realized, was at the mercy of that voice. Some experience I had had of Jawbone speaking – speaking in ways that included yet exceeded the wind, ways

translatable and untranslatable into human terms – had pushed the horizon inside me farther away. The world I inhabited was different now. I needed to find a way to live in this newly voiced world. Perhaps, in the process, I could acquaint others with this world that Jawbone had opened up for me. Maybe I could get clearer about the nature of that world, which, I suspected, was the world I'd been inhabiting all along. Somehow, this would be my research.

For the remainder of this introduction, I'd like to describe the outlines of the project that took shape. At this juncture, any readers who would prefer to skip my discussion of the scholarly context for this work and my research method can skip ahead to the final section of the introduction, "Suggestions for reading," and then continue along. I've written the body of the dissertation in such a way that you can experience the project without taking much notice of its research-ness, if that's to your taste (a bit like sneaking vegetables into your kid's spaghetti sauce). But for those of you who want to know more about how my approach is situated relative to psychology and to social science research, you can meet the vegetables on their own terms by reading the remainder of this introduction.

First, I'll describe a movement within psychology that is called "ecopsychology" – there are ecopsychological aspects to the approach I've taken in every phase of the work from conception to completion. The review of ecopsychological literature I undertake in this introduction frames up an ongoing engagement with that literature that continues through the body of the dissertation and into its conclusion, so that if you keep my early framing comments in mind, then you as a reader can expect to get to know ecopsychological thinking by immersion as you move along. I'll then describe the

research method I chose. I'll close this introduction with some suggestions concerning how to read the remainder of the project – there are a few different ways to go about it, depending on why you are reading and your reading style.

One final comment before I continue: parts of this introduction draw from my dissertation proposal, but I wrote this introduction after writing nearly every other part of the dissertation, including the concluding section. That means that key themes of the body of the dissertation and the concluding sections are necessarily also present with me now, as I guide you into the project for the first time as reader. It will seem, to readers who accompany me all the way through, that I am starting in some of the same places in which I end. This is not the kind of project in which conclusions can be cleanly withheld until the end (and my discussion of method will help you to understand why). Every line of this document is a “result” of a project that moved me, and my only option is to start from that place of already having been moved. However, readers may also notice that my treatment of certain themes deepens across the course of the writing as the experiences I write about provide me with opportunities to think more comprehensively or critically. The writing to come should give you the ability to trace developments that unfolded during and after my return to Jawbone, developments resulting from the contact I made with Jawbone and from the process of crafting stories about what I experienced there.

Joining the movement of ecopsychology

This project is a contribution to the literature of ecopsychology. Broadly defined, ecopsychology is the study of human psychology in its reciprocal relationship with the other-than-human natural world. Ecopsychological perspectives typically understand human being as one of a vast array of expressions of nature. These perspectives also

render as social and psychological the larger-than-human natural world (Fisher, 2013). When psychologists and other mental health professionals understand humans as part of nature rather than as separate from nature, a new set of questions emerges that links ecological crises to disturbances in human selfhood and suggests that a number of problems from which humans suffer, such as dissociation and abusive relationships, cannot be adequately addressed outside of dissociative and abusive relations between humans and the natural world of which we are a part. This perspective doesn't seek to privilege the wellbeing of the nonhuman natural world *over* the wellbeing of the human species (or vice versa). Ecopsychologist Jeff Beyer (2010) explains that ecopsychological perspectives dissolve the dichotomy between (nonhuman) "environmental" and (human) "psychological" issues, revealing that these supposedly separate categories are really two faces of a "fundamentally relational issue [that] has to do with the quality of the experience of the relating between humans and the rest of the natural world...The well being of nature and the well being of humans are...inextricably intertwined; it seems we will have them both, or we will have neither" (p. 112).

The term ecopsychology, introduced by cultural historian Theodore Roszak in his 1992 book *The Voice of the Earth*, suggests the study of *psyche* in relation to its *oikos*, or dwelling. Roszak's (1992) hope for the field was that it might "bridge our [Western] culture's long-standing, historical gulf between the psychological and the ecological, to see the needs of the planet and the person as a continuum" (p. 14). Writing a new field into being, Roszak (1992) documented a history in which "all psychologies were [once] 'ecopsychologies'" and in which inner life was neither conceptually nor experientially split from the "outside" world as it is today (p. 14). With a focus not on the past but on

the future he and other ecopsychologically-minded therapists would like to usher in, psychotherapist and environmentalist Andy Fisher (2013) declares that ecopsychology is not so much a field as a *project* that has emerged in response to pressing historical need, and submits that “perhaps one day it will seem strange that psychologists were ever so deaf and blind to the natural world – at which point ecopsychology will simply be psychology itself” (p. 8).

Helpfully for those interested in understanding the scope of ecopsychology, Fisher (2013) has organized the ecopsychological “project” around four interrelated tasks: the philosophical task of placing psyche “back” into the (natural) world; the practical task of developing therapeutic and what he calls “recollective” practices toward an ecological society; the critical task of engaging in an ecopsychologically based social analysis of social and political “arrangements...that have historically sanctioned ecological degradation;” and the psychological task of acknowledging and understanding the human-nature relationship *as* relationship (p. 7-23). Fisher’s way of categorizing these four tasks demonstrates the intrinsically interdisciplinary nature of ecopsychology, and all four, despite their differing labels, have important psychological dimensions. The project you are reading engages with each of these ecopsychological tasks in different ways. However, it aligns most clearly with the task of acknowledging and understanding the human-nature relationship *as* relationship.

On engaging with nature as relational partner

Engaging with other-than-human nature as a relational partner and even as a research collaborator is a major organizing theme of my project. Yet the notion that other-than-human nature might be engaged in a conversation with the human species is

by no means common sense to some. From a dominant psychological perspective, only humans and a few non-human animal species of the especially brainy variety possess what can be called a “psychology.” Mainstream developmental psychology views appropriate human development as a process of differentiating from nonhuman nature and from other animals such that “through a succession of collectively mediated disconnections, the human psyche becomes increasingly experienced as anthropocentric” (Bradshaw and Watkins, 2006, p. 6). And a person who shows up at a therapist’s office anguished by their³ empathy for the grief of an endangered forest, mountain, or species risks being pathologized, labeled psychotic, or dismissed as “woo.”

Ecopsychologically-minded mental health researchers and clinicians are becoming more common and are increasingly contributing to a body of work demonstrating the essentially psychological nature of ecological crises and the interdependence of human wellbeing with the wellbeing of the nonhuman world. On the whole, however, psychologists have been “conspicuously mute” about ecological suffering (Fisher, 2013, p. 7). Traditionally, psychological forays into study of the environment have fallen under the umbrella of environmental psychology, a subfield of psychology concerned with the interaction between environmental surroundings and human behavior and mental states. For example, researchers in this subfield might study the relationship between various types of indoor lighting and worker productivity, or the relationship between children’s BMI’s and the time they spend playing outdoors. Overwhelmingly, thought leaders in mental health fields have shown their willingness to “dichotomize [ecological problems] into individual and environmental problems” and to repress “any possible relation between the two” (Kidner in Fisher, 2013, p. 7).

Psychologist Ralph Metzner (1995), summarizing six “diagnostic metaphors” developed to explain human alienation from the natural world, notes that “none of these psychological diagnoses have been made by psychologists” (p. 55). Ecopsychology is thus a thoroughly interdisciplinary endeavor, as political activists, environmentalists, ecologists, philosophers, religious and spiritual scholars, feminist scholars, and historians come together with a growing number of mental health professionals to fill in the gaps in the story psychology tells about the most urgent problems facing humanity – and their solutions.

Perspectives on why mental health professionals have shown so little interest in addressing ecological crisis and have been so reluctant to study pathology in the relationship between human beings and our world are many and varied. A conflicted relationship with the natural world and the animal nature of human beings was conspicuously present in the thinking of Freud (1962), for whom civilization was possible only at the price of domination over nature. Metzner (1995) points to evidence that well before Freud and his legacy, well before even Descartes and his dualism, fledgling Western culture developed a conflicted relationship between two supposed human “selves – a natural self, which is earthy and sensual, and tends downward, and a spiritual or mental self, which is airy and ethereal, and tends upward” (p. 66). Environmentalist Paul Shepard (1995) suggests that the sense of separation from nature that is now ingrained in Western psychology has its roots in the invention of agriculture, which introduced a new breed of alienation into the relationships of humans to their local ecosystems. There is no single comprehensive perspective on the issue; Shepard’s (1995) cultural-historical and developmental approach to understanding humans’ destructive

behavior toward nature is incomplete without Macy's (2012) appreciation for the ways in which psychic numbing of the grief associated with environmental devastation accelerates its pace and Shiva's (1989) ecofeminist arguments that the ecologically disastrous Western project of development is a capital-driven extension of colonialism "based on the exploitation and exclusion of women..., on the exploitation and degradation of nature, and on the exploitation and erosion of other cultures" (p. 4). In the chapters that follow, I will take up all of these arguments and more, offering multiple points of entry into thinking about the scarcity of psychological dialogues about ecological suffering and about human psychology as part of nature.

It is important to note that while the denial and apathy of mental health professionals with regard to rupture in the human-nature relationship is a psychological problem, it is in no way a problem limited to mental health fields. Mental health professionals, despite and in some cases because of our training, are susceptible to the same forms of fear, denial, apathy, and dissociation, as well as the same forces of capitalism, technology, patriarchy, racism, and classism that characterize the wider industrialized Western relationship to nature. If, as Metzner (1995) argues, "the entire culture of Western industrial society is dissociated from its ecological substratum" (p. 64), then this is neither a problem of particular individuals within that society nor a problem of a particular field. Rather, "individuals feel unable to respond to the natural world appropriately...because the political, economic, and educational institutions in which we are involved [including those that provide psychological training] all have this dissociation built into them" (Metzner, 1995, p. 65).

While mental health professionals are not solely susceptible to or responsible for such problems, we are particularly well-poised to do something about them, given our dedication to ameliorating “the deadening and depression” that become widespread when, in order “to live with the repeated violation of the natural world and the harsh environment that has resulted, we shut down much of our sensitivity” (Gomes and Kanner, 1995, p. 118). Furthermore, given that ecological crisis is a crisis of culture and of consciousness, psychologically-informed responses to the crisis are urgently called for. Yet, before we can rally ourselves to act, we face the challenge of confronting the ways in which, incentivized by our culture and the dominant narratives of our fields, we have shut ourselves off from experiencing our interdependence with and empathy for the other-than-human natural world, as well as our own participation, as animals, in the processes of nature. Without risking this confrontation, we remain unintentionally complicit in silencing environmental distress calls that come to us through our bodies and our patients:

In...environments where [ecological] distress can be heard and witnessed, healers may interpret symptoms as calls to put something right in the environment...But where such symptoms cannot be heard and interpreted, there may be a descent into a chronic state of psychological dissociation and the lonely suffering of symptoms that compromise vitality, creativity, eros, and compassion. (Watkins and Shulman, 2008, p. 75)

As healers who dream of truly holistic modes of practice, our hope rests in perspectives that enable us to bear witness to our own and others’ fear, confusion, grief, and anger regarding ecological suffering.

A number of ecopsychologists and ecophilosophers hold the view that citizens of the Western industrial world have lost a conversational relationship with nature that once characterized our species:

For the largest part of our species' existence, humans have negotiated relationships with every aspect of the sensuous surroundings, exchanging possibilities with every flapping form, with each textured surface and shivering entity that we happened to focus upon. All could speak...Every sound was a voice. (Abram, 1996, p. ix)

For many who subscribe to the movements of deep ecology and transpersonal psychology, the problem is essentially a problem of how the self is defined and lived. So, for example, supported by Buddhist teachings which question the supposed separateness of one self from others, Buddhist philosopher Joanna Macy (1996) points out the "arbitrary," culturally-constructed nature of Western industrial selfhood that inheres within the boundaries of the skin. She argues that the most mature form of selfhood is the "eco-self," which includes within it all the beings and presences of the earth. She criticizes "reductionistic pop-therapy" that pathologizes an expansive, world-inclusive sense of self, writing that the solution to the environmental crisis that threatens all life is to cultivate an eco-self:

It would not occur to me to plead with you, "Oh, don't saw off your leg. That would be an act of violence." It wouldn't occur to me because your leg is part of your body. Well, so are the trees in the Amazon rain basin. They are our external lungs. And we are beginning to realize that the world is our body. (1996, p. 180)

From this perspective, the relationship with nature is reconsidered as a relationship with an expanded self, such that the needs and motivations of other beings and presences are also human needs and motivations. The writings of deep ecologists on an expanded notion of selfhood have been criticized, however, for appropriating Native American views without attribution and for representing a white, middle-to-upper class attitude that leapfrogs over the difficulty humans of privilege have hearing the voices of marginalized members of their own species, neglecting imbalances within human ecology while drawing attention and resources to problems facing nonhuman ecologies [see, for example, Melissa Nelson's 1997 essay "Becoming Métis;" or an interview with Carl Anthony in which he worries that "the desire of a tiny fraction of middle- and upper-middle-class Europeans to hear the voice of the Earth could be in part a strategy by people in these social classes to amplify their *own* inner voice at a time when they feel threatened, not only by the destruction of the planet, but also by the legitimate claims of multicultural human communities clamoring to be heard" (1995, p. 265, italics in original)]. I will raise some of these concerns in more detail later in the project.

Ecologically-minded phenomenological thinkers have also offered a unique perspective on the human relationship to the other-than-human world. The phenomenological argument sometimes incorporates the critique of modern selfhood I associated with deep ecology and transpersonal psychology, above. For example, ecopsychologist Will Adams (2007), in an article which draws ecopsychological wisdom from the work of phenomenologists Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, starts out by adumbrating a "psychological/cultural/spiritual pathology" which he believes is "driven largely by three key constructs of the modernist world-view:

an exclusively ego-centered, individualistic, narcissistic subjectivity; an illusory...separation or dissociation of humans and the rest of nature; and exclusively human-centered cultures, values, and practices” (p. 26, italics in original). For Adams (2007), the value of a phenomenological perspective lies partly in the discovery that humans are always already interrelating with the other-than-human natural world, and that the fullest expression of our humanity requires us to cultivate our awareness of and sensitivity to this interrelating so that new forms of responsivity and exchange became available to us. If we take seriously phenomenology’s revelations concerning interrelating, we are led to ask what a mutually beneficial relationship with other-than-human nature must entail.

These conclusions align with the phenomenological approach of philosopher David Abram (1996), whose work directly addresses the notions of conversation, dialogue, and relational exchange with other-than-human nature. Claiming that “we are all animists” (1996, p. 57), Abram develops the work of phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty to affirm that describing

the animate life of particular things is simply the most precise and parsimonious way to articulate the *things as we spontaneously experience them*, prior to all our conceptualizations...Our most immediate experience of things...is necessarily an experience of reciprocal encounter...We know the thing...only as our interlocutor – as a dynamic presence that confronts us and draws us into relation. (1996, p. 56, italics in original)

Abram goes further than this, restoring speech to birds and voices to rivers through elaborate arguments that de-anthropocentrize language: “To affirm that linguistic

meaning is primarily expressive, gestural, and poetic, and that conventional ...meanings are...secondary and derivative, is to renounce the claim that 'language' is...exclusively human...Language as a bodily phenomenon accrues to all expressive bodies, not just to the human" (1996, p. 80). From this perspective, the earth and its beings and presences express themselves at all times, and human beings can be more or less aware of our reciprocal exchanges with other-than-human nature.

Abram's move to establish that "it is the animate earth that speaks" and "human speech is but a part of that vaster discourse" (1996, p. 179) bears on the concerns of the field of trans-species psychology, which asks, "Given the degree to which language plays a pivotal role in...relational exchange in psychology, how is interspecies dialogue to be comparably envisioned" (Bradshaw and Watkins, 2006, p. 14)? Adopting a liberation psychology approach to trans-species psychology, psychologists Gay Bradshaw and Mary Watkins undertake the "de-privileging" of human language, citing trans-species therapeutic work (for example, trauma work with African elephants) that relies on communication through modalities devalued by Western industrial culture. They point out that through the marginalization of modalities such as "the wordless unconscious, smell, touch, sight, taste, [and] other types of vocalizations ...psychology has pathologized non-European peoples as well as animals" (2006, p. 15).

Trans-species psychology views species difference as a form of cultural diversity. From a broader ecopsychological perspective, represented in the views I have presented so far in this section, not only non-human animals but also plants as well as mountains, sand, and air can be viewed as diverse cultural forms. This is not to collapse differences among species and forms taken by matter, but rather to question human privilege and

speciesism. After all, the work of Merleau-Ponty suggests that “once I acknowledge that my own sentience, or subjectivity, does not preclude my visible, tactile, objective existence for others, I find myself forced to acknowledge that any visible, tangible form that meets my gaze may also be an experiencing subject, sensitive and responsive to the beings around it, and to me” (Abram, 1996, p. 67). Traditionally, Western psychology denies the possibility of responsivity (but not “reaction,” at least not in animals) to the vast majority of non-human beings and presences in the world, relating to these beings and presences primarily “in the form of colonized fragments as projections (e.g., anthropomorphism), symbol (e.g., mythic figures), or physical objects (e.g., laboratory animals) whose identities are shaped by human need” (Bradshaw and Watkins, 2006, p. 6). The idea that as a researcher, I believe I might converse with other-than-human nature, will seem odd to some. Yet this is not so abstract or unfamiliar a dynamic as it might initially seem. As an example that may help to make concrete what I mean by “engaging nature as a relational partner,” take the following description of an encounter with a black-throated green warbler from Adams (2007):

I step in for a closer look: And the singing stops. Then, when I sit still for a while, when I become quiet and unthreatening, the birdsong begins again. I listen to the warbler and the warbler listens to me. The little bird speaks with me and (via my gestural presencing) I speak with him.... In fact, there is no separate warbler and no separate me. Both of us are involved in and expressions of the integral human-nature community (within the local ecological and cultural systems, encompassing bioregion and society, and whole animate and sentient earth). The warbler is not singing for me but for his mate (although his love-song changes to

a warning cry when first faced with my presence); the mate who just flew to a nearby branch in order to eat a gnat; a gnat who was blown towards that tree by a breeze and who landed on a leaf to quench her thirst with a droplet of dew; a breeze that is the gentle leading edge of the thunderstorm I see rolling over the distant mountain ridge; and on and on. There is no end to these resonant interrelationships. (p. 47-48)

Amidst otherness, with no hope of straightforward “translation” of the expressiveness of the other-than-human natural world, we nevertheless relate intimately with non-human partners. Without avoiding the complexities of engaging with forms of otherness that do not share human language, it is nevertheless possible to hold a conviction about the meaningfulness of such exchanges for ourselves and for the earth, and to learn from otherness about how to reconceive of dialogue and exchange. This project has drawn on the support and legacy of ecopsychological perspectives, because these perspectives, by acknowledging the psychological significance and reciprocity of human relationships to nature (nature as embodied by humans as animals or by other-than-human nature), have helped me to think freely about my relationship with Jawbone.

As this project moved from my daydreams into an actual proposal, I drew from ecopsychological principles to propose several guiding questions for the work:

- *What is nature asking of human beings?*
- *What does Jawbone ask of me?*
- *How can humans more deliberately engage other-than-human nature as a relational partner?*

- *How can psychological research be of service to nature, as embodied by both non-humans and humans?* (In retrospect, had I been less worried about trying to convince myself that what I was doing really “counted” as research, I would have made this a broader question: How can the work of psychologists and other mental health professionals – including, but not exclusive to, the work of research – be of service to nature?)

These questions felt less like research questions I might try to answer through the project, and more like hopes concerning what the project might turn out to offer – and indeed, in the end the work did take up all of these themes, among others. There was a very real sense in me that framing questions were necessary to help me feel that I had some minimal structure to push off from as I began the project, but that I needed to find a way to hold these questions lightly rather than let them define the goals of the project in advance. It seemed to me that I was returning to Jawbone less because I had an articulable question and more because my body was ringing like a windchime. Could there be a research method, I wondered, that would allow this wind-struck body of mine to lead the way?

A method for returning to Jawbone: Autoethnography

Philosopher John Caputo (1987) has written that:

the concern with method so characteristic of modern science makes science subservient to method so that method rules instead of serving, constrains instead of liberating and fails conspicuously to let science be... In its best sense...[method] is the suppleness by which thinking is able to pursue the matter at hand; it is an acuity which knows its way about, even and especially when the

way cannot be laid out beforehand, when it cannot be formulated in explicit rules. Meta-odos is a way of keeping underway, in motion, even when it seems there is no way to go (p. 213).

When it came time to propose a method for returning to Jawbone, my dissertation director Will Adams asked me a very good question: “*How* would you most like to return to Jawbone?” “Simply,” I replied right away. I was aware, alongside Caputo, that method has the potential to become a kind of setting-upon the matter at hand with a lot of trappings and force. I wanted to go back in “simply:” open and vulnerable, as the body I am, without a master plan. Early in the process, supported by the relational ecopsychological thinking I summarized in the previous paragraphs, I understood that I would need a method that allowed me to return to Jawbone with maximal openness to a relationship with the place – a relationship I did not (and might never) fully understand. I would need a method that allowed me to return not as an interrogator but as a seeker of I-didn’t-know-what, not as analyst of the place but as participant in it. Given my own uncertainty about what I was doing – I didn’t even have a single clear research question – I would need a method spacious enough to allow me to discover what I was doing in vivo, through the relationship with Jawbone.

The method I alit upon is a form of writing called *autoethnography*. Autoethnography is a qualitative method of research that studies the self and personal experience (auto) in relation to culture (ethno), with writing (graphy) employed as the mode of inquiry. I first heard of autoethnography in a Cultural Differences course in my graduate program: an autoethnography was on the recommended reading list. The professor spoke so nonchalantly about the method that it was not until I began reading

articles about autoethnography that I discovered that the very same qualities which made it a perfect fit for my project also made it an “outlaw research genre” from a more traditional perspective on social science research (Hodge, 2009, p. 24).

Autoethnography began to emerge as a research method in the 1970s, in response to researchers’ concerns about existing methods of research in the social sciences. Within ethnographic research – an anthropological and sociological form of research and writing which has been characterized as the “thick description” of cultural experience in meaningful context (Geertz, 1973) – concerns had begun to emerge that ethnographic studies tended toward the othering of research subjects (many of whom were non-Western) and the colonizing of the experiences of research subjects by the belief systems of researchers (Adams, Jones, and Ellis, 2014). The emerging research method of autoethnography addressed these concerns about colonialism by inviting researchers to study their own subjective experiences and their own cultures. Autoethnography also took shape in response to concerns about “the need to recognize social difference and identity politics, an insistence on respecting research participants, and an acknowledgment of different ways of learning about culture” (Adams, Jones, and Ellis, 2014, p. 21-22). In addition, the developers of the method sought a way to do research that would not require scientists to conceal the “intuitive leaps, false starts, mistakes, loose ends, and happy accidents that comprise the investigative experience” (Ronai, 1995, p. 421). The method that took shape dialogues personal experience with cultural critique, revealing situated aspects of the relation of self to culture in ways that may reveal, question, resist, or transform normative cultural discourses (Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013; Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2014). It differs from memoir and from journalism in

a number of ways: autoethnography deliberately brings attention to the relevance of personal lived experience to the cultural dimension, it dialogues with and extends existing research into the phenomena in question, and it makes a direct appeal to the personal experience and sense-making of the reader (Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013).

There are two main ways in which autoethnography differs from other forms of research, whether quantitative or qualitative. These are the inclusion of the personal experience, identities, and embodiment of the writer; and the use of the writing itself as the mode of inquiry. Let's take a look at these one by one.

Regarding the inclusion of the writer, much autoethnographic writing is as personal as memoir. In order to make use of the subjectivity of the researcher, autoethnographies necessarily include personal narratives. Some autoethnographies do not merely *include* personal narratives but actually read as personal narratives from start to finish, with the personal narrative constructed and delivered in a way intended to provide thought-provoking commentary on a cultural context that is implied by the narrative, but not explicitly analyzed within it. Autoethnographies vary widely according to how writers take up the invitation to study self and personal experience. Some writers adopt a more confessional or archaeological style that attempts to lay bare a number of historical and cultural factors that contribute to their constructed experience of self, making the constructedness of the writer's self the main focus of the research; other writers offer up a narrative of personal experience that attempts to use personal experience to point out, question, or resist cultural narratives, focusing the work more on the culturally transformative potential of attention to personal experience (Adams, Jones, and Ellis, 2014). The work I have done aligns more with this second description. My

ecopsychological approach to autoethnography has the effect that the “auto” I introduce you to across the course of the writing could not be adequately illuminated by a tour of my personal history, because it’s not an individualized, separate, or anthropocentric self.

In order to write autoethnographically, the writer must share their personal experience. At the same time, sharing personal experience is only one aim of a method whose broader

purpose...is, through the medium of personal story-making, to undermine the politicization of the self, to contextualize smaller self-stories as commentaries on practices and power relations within culture and society, to craft a sense of self and community, and to create a voice for those who experience a world that does not resonate their concerns or excludes their identity (Hodge, 2009, p. 35-36).

The method is not intended to explore selfhood in a self-indulgent way but to take personal experience as a jumping off point from which to connect with the personal experiences of readers, shedding new light on the self-culture relationship in the process.

The personal voice of autoethnography creates a number of opportunities and impacts unique to the method. All researchers view their work “through the lenses of language, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity,” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005) and the frank inclusion of the researcher’s personal narrative in autoethnography allows readers to observe and wonder for themselves about how these aspects of the writer’s identity inform the work. Against accusations that autoethnography is self-indulgent, Carolyn Ellis (1997) has argued that researchers are more susceptible to self-indulgence when they practice methods that allow them to believe that their subjectivity, including these identity markers, can be prevented from “contaminating” their science. The inclusion of

personal narratives also allows writers to tap into and write about their embodied experience, recognizing “the embodied person as an epistemically fruitful condition for the production of knowledge” (Breuer and Roth, 2005, p. 426). When the writer describes how they moved, or what they felt, saw, smelled, and otherwise sensed, this can provide a sensuous way to say something about the self-culture relationship. Embodied writing makes it more likely that readers will find their own sensuous bodies awakened, moved, agitated, or persuaded by the work. Autoethnographers, because they are expected to conceive of their work as storytelling, are free to write in ways that non-scientists can read and that all readers can take aesthetic pleasure in. This means that autoethnographic voices “[open] up social science discourse to a larger and more varied audience, making knowledge more useful,” and “[respond] to the alienating effects of scientific discourse on researchers and audiences” (Hodge, 2009, p. 16).

Another impact of the personal voice that delivers the autoethnographic tale is that the method lends itself to a relational exchange with readers. Autoethnographers intentionally craft their work to engage readers so that readers will think and feel differently about their own experiences in light of what the work reveals. The conversation between “storyteller and reader...creates a shared history that diminishes marginalization, permitting personal encounters in the highly impersonal spaces of research/science communities” (Hodge, 2009, p. 21). Autoethnographers aim as much at the production of a relationship between the reader and the work as at the production of new knowledge, believing that readers who feel included in and addressed by the work are likely to create new knowledge for themselves through their engagement with what they read.

For autoethnographers, writing itself is the mode of inquiry [while I am focusing here on the “traditional” approach to autoethnography as a written form, some researchers are expanding autoethnography to include non-written, “artful and embodied” modes of inquiry – autoethnographies have taken the form of films, musical performances, and oral storytelling (Jones, Adams, and Ellis, 2013, p. 443)]. This means that in autoethnographic research there is no attempt to present findings as separate from a process of inquiry. Data collection, analysis, and presentation are viewed as intertwined in the process of telling a story about self and culture.⁴ Autoethnographers may assist readers in a process of analyzing and drawing conclusions from their narratives, or they may opt to embed analysis within their narratives without labeling it as such. Regardless of which choice an author makes, autoethnographies do not contain the “conclusions” and “discussion” sections of traditional research papers. Kimberly Hodge (2009) points out that “in conventional social science research, data is related to specific already-existing theoretical constructs” (p. 23). In autoethnography, however, data and the conclusions to be drawn from data are “underdetermined and interpretively flexible; readers are asked to make sense of their own by relating descriptions to their personal experiences and life worlds” (Breuer and Roth, 2005, p. 430-431). This is not to say that autoethnographers can’t present their own interpretations or conclusions to readers. Autoethnographies can be aesthetically, evocatively, and theoretically “persuasive,” and authors can be quite intentional about the kinds of cultural critique they hope readers will take to heart. I present many of my own conclusions quite unambiguously in this work, partly because I decided to take clear countercultural positions in order to join with the project of ecopsychology. Yet, because theory, critique, and argument are all

contextualized by personal narrative, the method makes a direct appeal to the life-world of the reader, where aspects of the text can be confirmed, questioned, recognized, applied, revised, discarded, and so on. If all of this sounds like a description of art, that's because it is. Autoethnography can be considered an "imaginative, creative, and artistic craft" which, partly because its practitioners operate within the academy and partly because autoethnographers share the common aim of generating new experiences and understandings of the self-culture relation, also functions as a research genre (Adams, Jones, and Ellis, 2014, p. 23).

Given the ways in which autoethnography disturbs the usual ideas about the steps and aims of research, it will not come as a surprise that the concepts of generalizability and validity are also taken up uniquely by autoethnographers. Qualitative research methods are suited to the study of "*particular* lives, experiences, and relationships" and not to the production of generalized demographic descriptions or generalized conclusions about groups (Adams, Jones, and Ellis, 2014, p. 21, italics in original). For autoethnographers, a work is "generalizable" not because its contents are valid for a group but because the inherent interpretive flexibility and the relatability of the narrative means that readers coming from multiple contexts can make use of some piece of what the work offers: "the focus is not necessarily on producing statements that are considered valid for a range of individuals, but to allow the reader to recognize and empathize for [sic] the author, as well as make the story part of her own story" (Hodge, 2009, p. 23).

The philosopher Abram (1996) has argued that truth and validity are functions not of literality (or the lack thereof) but of relationship. A story (including a research paper) is "true" if it enables mutually beneficial relationships among humans and between

humans and the nonhuman world, and a story must be evaluated not according to its “universal” or “literal” validity but “according to whether it...[enlivens] the senses” (1996, p. 265). For me, these statements lend an ecological spin to the type of validity to which autoethnographers aspire, a validity “judged by whether [the autoethnography] evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is authentic and lifelike, believable and possible” (Ellis, 1997, p. 133). In autoethnography, both generalizability and validity can only be understood within the context of a relationship struck between the author and the readers, a relationship that ensures that the work, and any conclusion drawn from it, “does not solely belong to the author...nor...to the cultural landscape that permits its very expression” (Hodge, 2009, p. 28). Autoethnographers believe that the work also belongs to readers and the meanings they make of it.

Autoethnographers sometimes make a distinction between evocative autoethnography that relies upon descriptive and performative writing, on the one hand, and analytic autoethnography that relies upon references to theory to deepen understandings about self and culture, on the other (Atkinson, 2006). I settled on autoethnography as a method because I wanted to do both: I wanted to write descriptively about my personal experience in a way that introduced cultural critique with the help of other thinkers and theories. I also chose autoethnography because I desired the freedom to write in an evocative way that could appeal to a wide readership, and because the method did not prescribe a master plan for how I might arrive at the themes of my writing, yet still offered up a minimal framework that allowed me to organize my project: regardless of what happened at Jawbone, I would be able to write about the personal experience in a way that also commented on culture. Most importantly, though, I chose

autoethnography because the ecopsychological principles that allowed me to conceive of the project in the first place made me interested in autoethnography as a framework well-suited to shed light on culturally mediated aspects of pathological (and non-pathological) individual and collective relationships to nature. It seemed to me that, without cultural critique, any attempt I might make to share my experience of being called by Jawbone could only fall through the cracks of a ubiquitous scientific objectivity that normalizes “the assumption that the land is a dead and servile thing that has no feeling, no memory, no intention of its own” (Roschak, 1995, p. 7).

What I did

In this section, I will describe my process of writing the autoethnography, including how I went about taking field notes and turning them into the text that follows this introduction. I’ll begin, however, with some practical details concerning my return to Jawbone – for how long, when, with what supplies, etc. Most, if not all, of these details are referenced in various places in the following chapters, but I have gathered them here for the sake of any reader who would like to see the material conditions of my fieldwork collected into one place.

Material conditions, intentions, and how I spent my time

Before this fieldwork, I had never before camped alone. Prior to leaving for Jawbone, I read multiple books on wilderness skills, wilderness survival, and desert survival, learning such skills as how to read a topographical map, how to store used toilet paper in environments without waste disposal, how much water the average human being needs to drink over the course of a desert day, and what to do if I encountered a mountain lion. Darren taught me how to change a flat tire and how to operate a Whisperlite stove,

and gave me frequent reminders that I was completely capable of everything I would need to do to make it through the month.

In the fall of 2017, I drove from Pittsburgh to Jawbone, arriving on September 1st. I stayed at Jawbone for one month, departing for Pittsburgh on October 1st. During that time, I left Jawbone once, staying for a night at a motel in the city of Ridgecrest, CA in order to bathe, do laundry, and restock food and water.

At Jawbone, there were no bathrooms, no sources of electricity, no water sources, and no trash cans or dumpsters. For safety reasons, I kept my car within a short hiking distance of my base camp at most times, with the exception of a couple of multi-day hikes that took me far from my vehicle. Also for safety reasons, I took with me a SPOT personal tracker, which is a device hooked into satellite networks that allowed me to send “All’s well” messages to loved ones and also enabled me to summon a search and rescue team to my GPS coordinates in an emergency. Before leaving, I arranged with several friends to send “all’s well” messages twice a day, 12 hours apart, and I left instructions for how my friends should contact emergency services if they did not receive an “all’s well” from me. The SPOT did not allow me to receive messages or to send personal messages.

I had a tent with me, and the chapters to come will describe how I sometimes slept in the tent and sometimes slept on a mat on the sand. I had two base camps that month: I stayed at the first camp for nearly a week, and then left that site to set up a base camp elsewhere. I thought of base camp as a site where I would sleep when not hiking, and where my car, which contained my food and water supplies and some of my gear, would be parked nearby. Supplies I brought with me included nonperishable food, water,

Ziploc bags, a sleeping bag, a mat, a shower curtain which I used as a tarp, a cooler, a first aid kit, a toothbrush and paste, a headlamp and solar lanterns, batteries, tampons, toilet paper, a homemade “wag bag” for collecting my toilet paper, a trowel for digging poop holes, a bottle of Dr. Bronner’s soap, a topographic map of the area, a wristwatch that I used to time my “all’s well” messages, blank notebooks, writing utensils, trekking poles, two compact portable stoves and lighters, cutlery and a couple bowls, a canvas folding chair, a seiza bench (a bench that allows me to kneel while meditating), lots and lots of sunscreen, and a canister of a substance that will be revealed in story II.

I also brought an mp3 player with music on it, which I ended up not using once during my fieldwork. I brought my cell phone, which I used as a camera and also used to send and receive texts occasionally when I was in an area with a signal (In my dissertation proposal, I wrote that I wanted to allow myself use of my phone because I felt that leaving it out of the experience would make my project less relevant to the technology-saturated daily lives of my readers – and of myself). I brought with me (and read) several books: *Handbook of the Kawaiisu*, a reference compendium of the history and culture of the previous human inhabitants of the area; *Desert Solitaire*, a memoir by Edward Abbey; the *Tao Te Ching* (a gift from Darren); and *Anam Cara*, a book of Celtic philosophy by John O’Donohue (a gift from Daniel, whose name will reappear later).

While there, I changed my underwear every day! I changed my socks every few days, and I changed my shirt and pants only once that month. If the sun was out, I was wearing a wide-brimmed hat, a bandana around my neck, and sunglasses. Apart from brushing my teeth and wiping my butt after pooping into holes I dug in the sand (not very deep holes, because the microbial life in desert sand lives mostly near the surface), I had

no hygiene rituals. Before I left, I had my (already short) hair buzzed to save me the trouble of greasy locks. Nevertheless, I got dirtier and smellier than I had ever been before.

While I was at Jawbone, I neither sought out nor avoided contact with other human beings. During that month, the sound of distant gunfire and OHV motors sometimes alerted me to the presence of other human beings. A few times a week, I saw an OHV at a distance. With the exception of the people I encountered during my night at a motel in Ridgecrest, only three human beings ventured within shouting range. I did not see anyone else tent camping or hiking, although when I looked down at the landscape from a high elevation, I saw two trailers parked far from my base camps for part of the month. These trailers probably served as home base for OHV drivers.

I have practiced vipassana meditation for years, and I continued this practice while at Jawbone. While I didn't consider my meditation practice a fully integrated part of my research method, it did ultimately serve my method by assuring me of fifteen minutes to a half hour daily during which I was attuned to my experience of the place and to my embodied senses. This practice kept me in regular touch with what I saw, heard, smelled, tasted, and touched at Jawbone, all of which factored into my developing relationship with the place.

In my dissertation proposal, I recorded several concepts that I felt might be useful for me to keep in mind during my time at Jawbone, as ethical and relational touchstones for the developing project. These included *Gelassenheit* (letting be) as developed by Caputo (1987) with help from Meister Eckhart and Martin Heidegger: the practice of “openness to mystery” and of allowing that which resounds through beings to remain

concealed, so that the movement of that resonance is not blocked by authority and metaphysical “pretensions to presence” (p. 289-290). A related orienting concept that I invoked in the proposal was “joining the play” as developed by Caputo (1987): the process of breaking up stoppages wherever thinking and movement become serious and inflexible (note that the point is not to eliminate stoppages, but to notice them and to break them up, and then to break them up again). I also wrote that the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas’ (1998) statement that “‘Here I am!’ means ‘Send me’” (p. 199, n. 11) would be useful to carry with me into Jawbone, as it resonated with my desire for the position of researcher to move beyond that of observer or bystander. Before I left for Jawbone, I re-read my dissertation proposal, taking note of these ideas and setting an intention to carry them with me into the work. I didn’t incorporate them into my month of fieldwork in any more formalized way – they remained present but not figural, like the art on my walls that contributes to the tone of my daily living, despite my rarely stopping to view it.

As the month progressed, I began waking shortly after sunrise and falling asleep an hour or so after nightfall. During my waking hours, I alternated mundane tasks like heating up food and reapplying sunscreen with my main calling: simply being with Jawbone, whether sitting and taking in what was happening around me or hiking through the landscape. I spent a great deal of time just sitting – not formally meditating, but truly just *sitting there*. I have never *sat there* so much in my life as I did that month. I reserved the activity of reading for the most miserably hot hours of the most miserably hot days, when even sitting up and paying attention to my surroundings seemed too demanding. At

those times, I would lie down in the largest available shadow and shrink the scope of my attention to the book before me.

The writing process

At all times, including on my overnight hikes, I was within close range of a notebook and pens. With these supplies, I recorded field notes from which I would draw, after my return to Pittsburgh, to produce the dissertation. When it came to recording these field notes, I didn't have many rules for myself. In my dissertation proposal, I indicated that I intended to hold off on beginning my field notes right away, perhaps allowing myself a couple of days of encounter before writing. However, so much noteworthy stuff began to happen right away that I ended up recording field notes every day except for the final several days of my time at Jawbone (that decision will be referenced in a later chapter), nearly filling a standard composition notebook by the time I left. I produced notes at various unscheduled times throughout the day, recording the date and time whenever I began a new note. My notes are mostly in paragraph form, with a few bulleted lists and some drawings and diagrams interspersed. I recorded anything that I wanted to remember, and, guided by an intention set in my dissertation proposal, I took special care to record experiences, thoughts, and feelings that struck me as relevant to the theme of engaging other-than-human nature as a relational partner. The bulk of my field notes are detailed descriptions of encounters I had with the beings and presences of Jawbone – who I met, what we did, how I felt about it, and any colors, shapes, sensations, odors, textures, or other sensory information that I recalled. I deliberately made no attempt to analyze the experiences I recorded or to begin culling potential themes or

arguments from what I was writing, preferring to wait until after the fieldwork to begin this process. The notes read like a diary focused on my experience in a particular place.

By the time I returned to Pittsburgh and began writing the autoethnography, I had had no epiphanies concerning what Jawbone was asking me to write (if anything) or how best to proceed. I had not decided in advance on what my final product would look like, other than that it would be written. So, I read through my field notes several times and then plowed through a few different attempts at writing the project before I landed, with Will's help, on a structure for the writing that felt like it had fidelity to the relationship that had grown between me and Jawbone.

I arrived at this structure after confessing to Will that although I felt that I would spontaneously combust if I tried to write another word of theory, I was pretty sure I could write some compelling stories. His advice – to forget about the theory, for now, and just write some stories – finally released me to write in the way I needed to write. Previous to this advice, I had combed through my field notes for recurring “themes,” like *voice*, *otherness*, and *grief for the world*, that I felt could be the topics of chapters that would combine theory and personal narrative. I had even made an outline of these chapters, which I soon trashed. The result of trying to follow the outline was writing that led with theory and reduced the personal experiences to illustrations of that theory. Now, I returned to my field notes looking not for themes but for specific experiences I really wanted to share. I made a list of those experiences; the list totaled sixteen. Then, I wrote sixteen short, nonfiction narratives about those experiences. As I wrote, I drew from my field notes to describe what had happened, often using bits of the exact language I had used to record the experience. During this phase of writing, I was concerned with nothing

other than telling a compelling and relatable story, the same way I would want to tell a story to friends over dinner.

Once I had written the stories, I felt (and still feel) that they were the heart of the dissertation – a collaboration between my narrative voice and the beings and presences of Jawbone who made the experiences possible in the first place. This collection of stories helped me to imagine a structure that would let me lead with the personal experiences, allowing theories and critiques to take their place as “mere signposts within the broader field of experience,” as my former professor Annie Rogers used to say to her undergraduates. I decided that I would write short, theory-inspired essays following each story, and that I would call these “interludes” to emphasize that I viewed the stories as the main event. I made no outline for the interludes, instead proceeding to write them just as I had written the stories, from scratch, one by one. To write them, I re-read each story several times and asked myself what the experience evoked concerning human-nature relationships, searching for some particular offering of the experience that felt most important to unpack or emphasize to readers. Each story evoked multiple potential themes, so I leaned on the aims of autoethnography for support as I considered which themes to draw out from each story, asking myself how the experience I had described commented on human relationships to nature within a cultural context that debases that relationship – was there some implicit cultural critique in the story I had written? If I was having trouble settling on a theme, I shared stories through email or read them out loud to friends and asked them which parts they most resonated with. Their ideas sometimes helped me clarify what I wanted to focus on. After I had settled on a particular theme, I wrote an initial draft of what I wanted to say, and then searched for relevant material in

scholarly books and essays. When I came across a quotation relevant to the theme I had chosen, I recorded it in a Word document, until I had a bank of germane theory to draw from. Sometimes, I completed this process of searching for theory before I attempted to write the interlude, but in the majority of cases, I drafted an interlude and then searched for theory that would open up the theme as I had written about it. I did this in order to let myself play at the intersection of interlude and the story while writing the interludes, rather than writing in a way that tried to anticipate the intersection of interlude and theory.

From each story, I could have crafted many different interludes. But I intentionally tried to limit the scope of the interludes, resisting the urge to expand upon every relevant theme. I did this in the hope that it would make the final product more readable. I also kept the interludes short so that readers might be left with their own sense of what I had omitted – so that they would feel they had ample room to imagine how they might differently construe what was most significant about any given story. In writing the interludes, I was concerned with preserving the relationship to the reader that the narrative voice of the stories made possible. I felt that too much academic jargon and too many citations in the interludes would be jarring in contrast to the more intimate and evocative tone of the stories, and I didn't want to alienate readers by scattering words like "hermeneutics" and "ontogeny" all over the place – I myself am a reader who finds academese alienating. So I took a suggestion from Darren (a suggestion which I had initially laughed at): as I wrote the interludes, whenever I felt that it would be helpful to interested readers for me to provide a citation, quote a scholarly work, or formally introduce a psychological or psychocultural critique, I placed this material in a endnote.

The process of writing the interludes often surprised me. The sixteen stories I wrote were based on experiences that already felt significant to me before the writing – that is why I chose to write about them in the first place. Yet writing the interludes often ripened the significance of what had happened to me in ways I did not expect. This is, of course, is one of the most powerful things about writing as a craft – creating a narrative re-creates the narrated experience every time, bringing some new and ever-revisable truth into being. Earlier, I wrote that it was not until I sat down to write about my first night at Jawbone that I realized that Darren had heard Jawbone’s voice differently than I had that night. Similarly, as I wrote the interludes, the experiences I had lived through blossomed freshly. Often, it was not until after I had written an interlude that the reasons I had so desired to share the particular story on which the interlude was based became clear to me. Sometimes, I had the delicious experience of some piece of theory retroactively illuminating an embodied experience I had had, and on these occasions, I felt like my whole body was bellowing a “yes!” of recognition at some section of a scholarly text.

The result of all this writing is a series of fifteen short stories alternating with fourteen theoretical interludes (I ended up combining two of the original sixteen stories when I realized I wanted to explore the same theme for both of them, and the final story leads into a closing chapter rather than an interlude). The interludes are supplemented by endnotes. An afterword rounds off the project. Autoethnography as a method tends to refrain from a final “making sense” of the text, partly because this sense-making and synthesizing is understood to unfold in dialogue with the reader’s engagement with the text, and partly because the autoethnographer’s own sense-making and synthesizing permeates the text from the beginning. In some cases, autoethnographers actually strive

to create texts that do not suggest conclusions to readers, so that “no interpretation is privileged” (Denzin, 1997, p. 225). The afterword I crafted can usefully be thought of not as a “Results” section but as an “Effects” section which provides a glimpse of the effects this dissertation has had on me – that is to say, where the project has brought me.

Suggestions for reading

Several different paths into and through this work are available to you. You are welcome to read only the stories, which you can identify by the Roman numerals preceding the story titles. You are welcome to read the stories and the interludes (all of which begin with the heading “Interlude”) without reading the numerous endnotes that accompany the interludes. Or you might choose to read everything. While reading only the stories will give you a rich enough experience of the project (I tested this on my sister!), reading only the interludes will not have the same effect. The stories are the ground of my relationship with you as reader, and without entering into that relationship through the stories, the heart of the work will be lost to you.

If you decide to read the whole thing, I recommend waiting to read the endnotes to any given interlude until after you have read the interlude straight through. The endnotes are many and often extensive, and it’s my sense that trying to read every endnote as it occurs interrupts the experience of moving through the text. The endnotes are present for two reasons: to pay tribute to the thinkers who have inspired so much of my own thinking (the people I consider to be ancestors of this text), and to provide elaboration and opportunities for further reading for readers who are particularly interested in following up on some aspect of an interlude. Readers who do not feel the need to meet these ancestors or to follow up on concepts in the interludes need not bother

with the endnotes. However, the difference between skipping the endnotes and reading them is a bit like the difference between taking a stroll down a forest path and bedding down on the forest floor overnight. Reading the endnotes will draw you into the landscape of this work – and of your own experience – in ways that may surprise you.

Knowing something about the identity of a writer has often helped me, as a reader, to develop an interpretation of a text that differs from interpretations intended by the writer. As you read this work, you will discover some markers of my sociocultural life and identity as you move along. However, I'd like you to have a sense, from the get-go, of the background I bring to this work. I'm a 32-year-old white PhD student. I'm an able-bodied, woman-identified female. I'm straight, and from a solidly middle-class Catholic background (I distanced myself from Catholicism as a preteen and don't identify with any particular spiritual tradition). I grew up in a wildly rural area, pun intended. Conservation and respect for the nonhuman natural world were key values of my upbringing in a social setting that included very few people of color. There can be no straightforward one-to-one correspondences between these markers of my identity and the presumptions and ignorances that you may pick up on as you read my work. I nonetheless ask that you please read with this description of me in mind, to help you contextualize and critique my writing.

In the same spirit, I invite interested readers to take up a suggestion made by Robert Steele (1989) for reading psychological texts: read for enjoyment, for interest, and hopefully to find something of use, but also read for the ways in which these markers of my subjectivity – and others I may not have thought to disclose to you – shape my work. One way to do this, according to Steele, is to ask yourself which worldviews you're

capable of reading this text from, and then actively read from those perspectives. Read this from the perspectives of transectional feminism, from queer studies, from a Marxist or a psychoanalytic perspective. In this way, play with what my work reveals and what it discounts.

Then, most importantly, let me know what happens. Write to me at cashored@duq.edu, and make a conversation out of this exchange we've already begun.

And if you are able, dear reader, read this somewhere where the wind can reach you.

I. *The voice*



The northerly view into the Scodie Mountains from the ridge that became my usual meditation spot.

The wind here will blow the toothpaste off your toothbrush. It will also blow the hat off your head, no matter how cleverly you believe you have secured the knot beneath your chin. And in fact – there goes my hat this very moment. And as I am reaching for my hat, the wind plucks my sunglasses off from behind and lobs them, just to keep things interesting, in the direction opposite to which my hat is still tumbling through the sand. There is an unwitting striptease unfolding, a desert striptease set to white noise.

It's my nineteenth day of camping, without human company, in the Mojave Desert. I've come to a place called Jawbone, a federally-managed Area of Critical Environmental Concern, to live for a month while I complete the fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation in clinical psychology. My hope is to learn something about how the work of those in the field of mental health can be of service to nature, at a time when the planet's life-support systems are under siege. Every evening, I lug my little meditation bench up from my sleeping place to this low ridge along which the wind is now tugging my hat. From here I can see the Scodie Mountains close by to the north and west, the El

Paso Mountains and the Rand Mountains farther away to the southeast, and the Coso Mountains to the northeast, where, on a clear day, I can also make out the higher peaks of the Panamints behind them. I meditate in the gaze of all these ranges that frame Jawbone, and then I head back down to my little base camp. On many evenings, I observe a phenomenon I've now come to expect in the same way I expect to find burrows at the base of every creosote bush: the moment the sun slips beneath the Scodies and Jawbone is in shadow, the wind erupts. It pours down out of the mountains, a flash flood of air.

Tonight, as I am heading back down the slope with my hat newly affixed to my head and the muscles of my outer legs straining to stabilize my gait against the force of the air, I hear a man's voice at my right shoulder. He is speaking a word I can't catch, and he is speaking it with urgency. I spin around, startled – I do not expect to encounter people here. But there's no one behind me, and the word has vanished. I stare for a few seconds more into wind that makes my eyes water, and then I turn toward camp again, still feeling unnerved.

This is the second time I've heard a voice here on a windy night. The first time I heard it, it just said, "Dorothy."

Interlude: Listen my heart

Voices, voices. Listen my heart, as only saints
have listened: until the gigantic call lifted them
clear off the ground. Yet they went on, impossibly,
kneeling, completely unawares: so intense was
their listening. Not that you could endure
the voice of God – far from it! But listen
to the voice of the wind and the ceaseless message
that forms itself out of silence.
– from *Duino Elegies*, 1, by Rainer Maria Rilke

It is the animate earth that speaks; human speech is but a part of that vaster discourse.
– David Abram (1996, p. 179)

When I heard a voice in the wind, I spun to attention immediately, without
thinking. It was as though, as far as my body was concerned, it was simply not the case
that there was no one there. My body, twirling like a weathervane to face the speaker,
insisted that *there was someone*.

I don't pretend to be able to name the speaker. I don't want to tell you, "It was the
wind," or, "It was Jawbone," or "It was Earth." Even when my own voice sounds, I can't
be entirely sure who is speaking.⁵ We are all made up of so many voices that every voice
is a chorus.

I can't tell you who it was, but I can tell you that living with Jawbone was living
with voices. Some of the voices used words; most did not. Anywhere, at any moment, I
might be addressed. Like watercolor paint blooming, voice bled into the heart of my very
experience of place. And so, as days and then weeks went by, every being and presence I

met, as well as the many-voicedness that I knew as Jawbone itself, was no longer *something* but *someone* who might speak. And each of these someones – each stone and Joshua tree and raven – carried some small piece of my experience of being addressed by a voice that belonged to each of them and none of them at once.⁶

The belief that voices emerge only from human beings (and the gods in whose image some believe we were created) is relatively new in the history of our species.⁷ And while there is real value in being able to experience the birds and trees in our backyards as expressive someones, here I am focusing less on the silencing of the voices of individual beings and more on the disappearance of the experience that at every moment, voice calls to and through us. The experience that voice does not belong to us humans, but rather to an expressive world of which we ourselves are but one brief, colorful utterance.

Voice isn't something we can possess. It is true that the voice that moves through me does distinguish me from other speakers. After all, wind moving through an oak sounds different from wind moving through a pinyon pine (and, for that matter, from wind moving through another oak). But voice does not reside inside me, like the voice box inside a pull-string doll. It's a power that courses through all ecologies, enabling expression and intercommunication at the smallest and grandest of scales.

That voice belongs to no single being or presence means that we all have something to say. Voice moves through me, as it moves differently through coyote, through wind, through lichen and starlight (you would be hard-pressed to try to find me something in this cosmos that is truly silent – according to the news, even black holes can hum to themselves in B-flat, 57 octaves below middle C!⁸). When I speak, I never speak

alone. I speak as a member of an ecosystem – although I may speak with greater or lesser awareness of this. Every voice may contain a chorus, but every voice is also contained *within* a chorus. Every speaker is different from us in some way. Each is also in some way our kin, and, as kin, bears a message we might learn to listen and respond to.⁹

As a therapist, when I went to Jawbone, I knew a thing or two about listening. But now, I feel far less certain about how to listen well. Living without walls or a ceiling, it was simple to tune in to how voice connected me to my nonhuman kin, rather than separating me from them. I found that I couldn't avoid grappling with how to respond well to the ways in which I kept being addressed. In my mostly-indoor life, I find it too easy to slip back into the perspective that only human beings have anything to say – that voice moves only through animals of my own species. My city hearing is shriveled, more of a prune than a plum. And so when I listen to a human voice, I forget that with a simple blossoming of my perspective, I could also be listening to an ecosystem – an ecosystem as it expresses itself through that human animal's voice, and also an ecosystem of which that voice is one part. It's a bit like looking through a pinhole at a single color on the horizon and claiming that I took in the wildness of the sunset. How can I listen well to any voice, human or otherwise, if I close my ears to the broader chorus?

II. The first storm



Several of the inselbergs at Robber's Roost, with my tent visible as a speck of blue at the right.

On my first night at Jawbone, I make camp at the base of one of the inselbergs that comprises Robber's Roost. An inselberg is what is left over after a long process of erosion strips a gigantic body of rock down to its most resistant core. Robber's Roost is infamous among American inselbergs for having sheltered Tiburcio Vasquez and his bandit gang while they looked down from the top of the Roost, scheming to rob this or that stagecoach making its way from Los Angeles or the San Joaquin Valley with a load of freshly mined gems or gold. From February through July, the Roost is a bustling nesting area for birds of prey, but now the rocks are silent, save for an owl that calls nightly. I've set up my first camp here for a couple of reasons: the inselbergs themselves are not very high, but they are located on an incline 4000 feet above the surrounding desert plain, at an elevation where I'm likely to have a cell signal in case I need one

during my first few days. And, during the day, the Roost supplies a priceless commodity: shade.

That first night, exhausted and in pain from a mishap earlier in the day, I don't pitch the tent. I drift to sleep on a mat on the sand, an arm's length from the grey-brown rock of the Roost. But by midnight, lightning and high wind are threatening a downpour. The nearest sand road is a quarter-mile away from my camp, and it's there I've left the car. And though the downpour never arrives, I trudge blearily back to the road, and bed down in the hatch.

On my second night, despite still being in pain, I decide to pitch the tent – I am determined, this time, that even if a storm breaks I'll not wind up sleeping in the hot, cramped car. I take pleasure in building the tent. It's only my second time setting it up with no one else around, and I fancy myself a bit of a wilderwoman, the integrity of my shelter entirely dependent on how my hands respond, with tightening or slackening, to the tensions and yearnings of this nylon beast.

The wind picks up just as I drive in the final stake with a flat rock. I haven't attached the rain fly, but the night looks clear, and anyway I want to be able to stargaze through the mesh. I pack up my cooking gear and start hiking it back to the car. I am eager to get my gear stowed so that I can climb inside the tent and let go my weight. It's been a rough first couple of days, and as I hike along, I mentally inventory the reasons for my exhaustion. When I spent my savings on a well-worn Prius a year ago, my dissertation plans were not fully formed, and so it hadn't occurred to me that this would be the car I would have to rely on to get me in and out of Jawbone. I had felt ridiculous and terrified navigating my decidedly low-clearance hatchback across miles of high-

clearance-only roads of sand, gutted with flood-carved ravines and blockaded with archipelagos of tire-sized rocks, and I had arrived at the Roost taut with adrenaline. My impression of myself as a fairly gutsy person is being mocked by a sudden, unwelcome fear of everything from sweet, beady-eyed desert mice to my own shadow. And I've been making stupid decisions in the cognitive fog induced by 110 degree heat.

But of all the reasons these first two days have given me a run for my money, the most uncomfortable reason is the one that is currently making a bid for my attention: pinpricks of pain spreading along the backs of my hands like slow-motion lightning remind me of what happened when, upon arriving, I decided to test-fire the bear spray I had brought with me, on the advice of a female friend with solo camping experience, to defend myself not against wildlife but against human males. I waited for the wind to die down, pointed the canister away from my face, and pulled the trigger. But rather than releasing a stream of spray, the canister released its contents in an explosion that rocketed, like fireworks, in every direction. Too late, I realized my mistake: it was too hot out here to safely store anything compressed and flammable. Luckily, I was wearing a long-sleeved shirt and sunglasses, so my eyes and most of my torso were spared. But I had no running water, and after some deliberation, I decided I would rather wait for the capsacinoids to degrade on their own than return to civilization in search of a sink – I'd waited so long and worked so hard to get myself here that I couldn't stomach the idea of leaving again as soon as I'd arrived. So, as the pain set in, I gritted my teeth and dipped my skin into a bowl of Dr. Bronner's and water, over and over.

A day later, my neck, hands, and face are still burning. I resolve to soak my skin in soapy water again before bed. Then I will do my best to sleep through the pain.

I make it to the car and begin packing my cooking gear. The wind that started up just as I finished with the tent has begun to rise. It's a cool breath of relief against my inflamed skin, and I sigh with pleasure. The bear spray made my first full day here a bit dramatic, but it seems I've gotten through day two with no catastrophes. Now, with the burning soothed by the wind, I can almost believe I'm going to do ok here. By the time I have stowed my gear and reach up to slam the hatch shut, a few raindrops have begun to fall. *Isn't this supposed to be the desert?* I think to myself. It seems a storm is always brewing. Perhaps the rain will stay light, in which case I may try sleeping outside again, to keep the breeze close against my aching skin.

Before I can secure the hatch, however, the wind remixes its own album. What had started out as a breeze inhales deeply and begins to howl. Before I can begin to process that a storm is upon me, the big red bowl that I've been using to soak my skin has launched itself out of the back of the car and sailed westward, and my wide-brimmed hat has flown off my head. Vaguely, as I recover my hat and chase down the big red bowl, it occurs to me that I should really get the fly onto the tent to give it some extra structural integrity before the wind snaps a pole – but even as this thought crosses my mind, the wind is reaching a fever pitch, growing ever louder as it swells in momentum.

In weeks to come, I will learn to anticipate a Jawbone-style storm – what to look for on which horizon, what changes to feel and smell for in the air, and what to do to prepare. But for now, all I know is that whatever is happening to the air has me feeling like I've stumbled into a demon having an orgasm. The sky has turned to liquid and is falling.

In fact, I think to myself as I give up on finding the bowl, slam the hatch shut, and begin running toward the tent through sand that has become mud, I have never felt such hard rain in my life.

In fact, I think to myself as I make it half the distance to the tent and tuck myself into a crevice in the Roost to catch my balance in wind that is pushing me backwards, I'm not sure "rain" is an adequate descriptor for what is going on here.

By the time I make it to my tent, 6-inch high flood water has rushed into and through it, besting the "bathtub floor" that is designed to seal off the tent from water. Everything inside is soaked, and the force of the water has bent one of the fiberglass tent poles. Narrow waterfalls are cascading off the Roost with surprising power. I realize that trying to take the tent down is not an option – the water and wind are both too high, and I will surely lose the tent if I try. I scoop up the wet sleeping bag and mat from inside it and turn to run back in the direction of the car.

I stop in my tracks. Something towers before me, a twisting form draped in cords of rain. Surprise, or wind, knocks me back into the flank of the Roost, kicking up water as I go. It takes another few seconds for me to register that the writhing figure before me is the wind – or more specifically, the shape of the wind, made visible by the rain it is wearing. Of all the threats I thought to prepare myself for before embarking on this harebrained expedition, my own stupid decisions and leviathans made of wind-crazed rain were not among them. I feel I can hardly breathe, with the wind reaching down my throat to rifle through my lungs, a pickpocket. I have to make it to the car.

I bank right and edge myself blindly past the tower of wind, clinging as close to the rock as I can. Once I am clear of the tower, I fling myself in the direction of the car,

for a stream that has formed where the road used to be. I climb into the hatch and shut myself in. The flash flood – and this *is* a flash flood, I now realize as I begin to catch my breath – has eaten deep gorges into the sandbank that I parked the car atop, and suddenly it dawns on me that if the water rises higher, the car may get swept away with me in it. And I have no other cover to take. Panicked, I call Darren and his friend Natalie, who he is visiting in Tucson. I tell them through tears that there's a tornado. They stammer their way toward reassuring me that it's not a tornado, though how they know this, none of us is sure. By the time I get off the phone with them, the wind has calmed somewhat, and the rain sounds softer. The car has not budged from its perch atop the sandbank.

Suddenly, I am one big yawn. I fall asleep, uncomfortably lodged into the hatch for the second night in a row. As I pass out, I recall how grade school friends used to greet me, playing on my old-timey name: *Auntie Em, it's a twister!*

The next morning, I wake up dry. A fullhearted sun is already baking the car, which never abandoned its sand bank after all. Climbing out and observing the state of the road, I wonder how I am ever going to navigate back down it again. But a kind of bird I've never seen before is sitting atop a Joshua tree. And I've spotted my red plastic bowl – the only speck of fire engine red in the landscape – trapped in the embrace of a creosote bush half a mile downslope. The day is calling. There is no catastrophe. I want to walk around.

An hour later, I am wandering slowly around the periphery of the Roost with my trekking poles. Every few moments, I stoop low to examine the ground, which is strewn with bones. There are bones absolutely everywhere: femurs and pelvic bones, a spinal

cord the length of my index finger, a skull that I decide must have belonged to a snake. Last night's waterfalls washed the remains of countless seasons of raptor kills down from the top of the Roost. For years I have harbored an inexplicable love of bones, and I am captivated. The bones stand out against the sand, bright white announcements of plans interrupted. The silence of the bones refers me to the silence of the morning, and suddenly, I am aware of the silence of my skin. Before the howling of the storm, there had been the howling of my skin. But now there is only the sun's warmth on my face and the backs of my hands, and this heat that does not burn me beckons me instead, drawing me across the sky with the sun, deeper into what I suspect will be another unfathomable desert day. For the first time in days, I'm in no pain at all. Last night, while I was busy panicking under the gaze of a wild sky, that leviathan of wind-driven rain scrubbed every last molecule of bear spray off me.

Interlude: The beauty of no exit

Let us thank the Earth
That offers ground for home
And holds our feet firm
To walk in space open
To infinite galaxies.
– from “In praise of the earth,” by John O’Donohue

How well we relate is always in question, but we cannot not relate with nature.
– Will W. Adams (2007, p. 25)

We gestate suspended in water, and, once we leave the uterus, our lungs begin their life’s work of combing the air for oxygen. Like leaves of a tree transforming sunlight into energy, our skin knows how to harvest the sun’s fire to make vitamin D. And it is easy to forget, enveloped as we are in it, the constant tug of the earth’s body on our own – how, with even the smallest of movements, we ask gravity to dance.

This intimacy with the planet is choiceless. We can’t escape our relationship with the natural world of which we are a part. It’s elemental. This relationship is even more basic than our relationship to the swath of nature that we recognize as humanity.¹⁰

But we can live *as though* we have a choice – as though we could get out of the relationship, and the ways it limits us. During my first couple of weeks at Jawbone, I chafed at many ways in which I was at the mercy of my relationship with the place. When I felt uncomfortable, inconvenienced, or afraid – when the wind was blowing out my cooking fire, or stealing my stuff, or creating such a din that I couldn’t hear myself think – the last thing I wanted to do was settle into my *actual* relationship with Jawbone.

I had no interest, in those moments, in learning from the relationship I found myself in. What I wanted, instead, was to escape that relationship for another one, one in which the place would simply behave. Not so much a relationship as a power play.¹¹

Cultures with empire campaigns at their origins, like the culture that raised me, encourage humans to live out a relationship of domination over nature.¹² As a cultural value, domination over nature looks like denial that the ecosphere has any power. It also shows up as attempts to control, transcend, and outsmart forces with which we are entirely entangled. In cultures of domination, the many forms taken by matter and energy, from the minerals in the soil to nonhuman animals to the wind itself, are primarily viewed not as relational partners but as resources for human use. We also carry this attitude of domination and “resourcification” into our relationships with our own animal bodies, which, with their woundability, unpredictability, and neverending hungers, remind us that we are a part of the natural processes we wish we could control.¹³

Lives insulated by technologies, from cosmetics to air conditioning to motor vehicles, encourage the cultural fantasy that we could overcome the limits placed on us by our entanglement with the nonhuman world and by our own status as animals – including the limit of death. Painfully, cultures that value domination over nature encourage the story that human attempts to control, transcend, and outsmart nature could actually work.¹⁴ And while efforts to dominate our way out of our given relationship with nature often appear successful for short periods of time, the hell to pay is always on the horizon. Right now, at the broadest level of system, that hell is climate change.

We cannot get out of our given relationship to nature. And the nature of that given relationship differs quite drastically from the kind of relationship we have constructed

and are attempting, to our detriment, to live out. In the relationship we are given, any power we have does not come from our ability to dominate. Any power we have comes from our capacity to be deeply curious and willing to learn from forces that are more powerful than we are and upon which we depend, in a grand scheme in which we are simply not that big a deal. We are not in control, we are profoundly dependent, and we are not special – or, if you prefer, we are no more special than anyone else. That is the given nature of our most basic relationship.

There is no exit. We can live this as though it is an ugly truth, the ugliest. Or we can make it through another storm, thankful, once more, not to be snuffed out, and shuffle through the calm of the next day taking a good, deep look at the bones of the place. We can learn a thing or two in the aftermath, and feel that much better adapted the next time the wind changes. We can share with others the heart of what we discover: that it is possible to live no exit as inescapably, mortally beautiful. As all that we have.

III. *The Datura flower*



A Datura vine growing several miles south of Robber's Roost, illuminated by my headlamp. Photo taken on a return trip to Jawbone in May, 2018.

I keep my toothpaste – along with anything else with a scent – in the car, in order not to attract pack rats to my tent. Now, on my third night at Jawbone, I am taking my nightly walk to the car to brush my teeth.

It's a short walk from the campsite, but the desert night has me on high alert. At this point in my stay, I don't know whether I will ever become accustomed to the way Jawbone feels to me after dark. The night here feels awake, alert, teeming. To comfort myself, I keep reminding myself of things I know about desert ecosystems, facts that help justify my feeling. I know that many of the animals who live here – everyone from kangaroo rats to rattlers, coyotes, and mountain lions – are most active at night. I also know that, unlike the plants I am used to back home, cactuses, yuccas, and Joshua trees

all open their stomata – the little mouths through which plants exhale water and inhale carbon dioxide – only after the sun sets, in a clever adaptation to dry heat. I feel a kind of admiration for all of these daytime dreamers – since I arrived, I’ve been paying in sweat and lethargy for my stubbornly diurnal ways.

But it seems to me that what I know about desert fauna and Crassulacean Acid Metabolism – the scientific term for the nocturnal feeding of Joshua trees and chollas – only partially accounts for the way I feel here after dark. It is difficult to relax into sleep here, because each night as my eyelids grow heavy and my senses begin to withdraw, it seems to me that the desert is opening its eyes and its ears, its mouths and nostrils. While I am sleeping, Jawbone is wide awake and thinking. And although I sleep outside of the tent on rainless nights, I do so only despite fear. Not so much because of the (exceedingly low) risk of a predator taking an interest in me, but rather because, at night, I feel the desert watching me.

Now, as I walk along beside the Roost with my headlamp, the night feels watchful again. The briefest rustle to my right makes me start, and I train the beam of my headlamp onto a *Datura* vine growing at the base of the Roost, rooted so close to the rock that it almost appears to be growing out of it. At the base of the *Datura* plant is a dark tunnel leading down below its roots. The opening is about the diameter of a half dollar coin. As I swing the headlamp beam from the tunnel up to the stalk of the vine, I spot a plump mouse observing me from a shallow depression in the rock, just behind a tapered leaf.

My headlamp is set to red, to preserve my night vision. The mouse stands perfectly still. Its tiny, round eyes reflect red light back to me. I imagine that if I move

any closer, it will disappear into the tunnel. Its body is framed by Datura leaves which, in daylight, are a heady, no-nonsense green. Datura is one of a small handful of desert plants I instantly recognize – Darren taught me to identify it last time we were here. All parts of a Datura plant are poisonous if eaten, and I suppose he wanted to discourage spontaneous salad-making. A spiny, globular fruit dangles from the vine. The fruit is pale green and resembles a sea urchin. To its left, a single white blossom droops, looking spent, as though at any moment, it might drop with a small sigh of relief. The limp blossom is the only part of the plant that appears lifeless. Even the short stem that attaches the fruit to the stalk of the vine has a robust look to it.

There is no breeze, and the Datura appears as unmoving as the mouse. Yet, as I stand observing it from two feet away, the plant strikes me as startlingly... restless. It takes me a moment to alight on the word, as I wouldn't typically use it to describe a plant. This is not the largest Datura I have seen, but the spread of its leaves gives the impression of an animal crouching at the base of the Roost, musculature humming. It occurs to me to wonder whether, like the beady-eyed mouse still frozen behind it, and like the Joshua trees surrounding us, this Datura vine might pop awake after dark.

I have begun to feel a bit bad for delaying the mouse in this way, and I am growing tired. Tearing my attention away from the Datura-animal, I continue my trek to the car. I brush my teeth, looking up at the stars. An owl calls from the Roost as I close up the car and head back to camp.

I'm still on alert, but this time, I'm prepared to encounter the mouse. I am even a little hopeful that I will meet it again. After all, we are neighbors, for the time being, and

it's only been fifteen minutes – surely it's still about its nocturnal business. Once I near the Roost, I direct the beam of my headlamp into the Datura, in search of eyeshine.

I gasp, and take a step backward. A round, pale face nearly the size of my own is staring directly at me from the Datura vine, low against the Roost. It takes only a moment – less than a moment, perhaps – for me to recognize the face as the wide, moon-white expanse of the Datura blossom I had earlier deemed dead. The flower is now fiercely erect, attending to the star-strewn sky like a satellite dish. The petals are flung so far open that they bend back on themselves. Just as it did ten minutes ago, the plant appears entirely still.

Recovering my breath, and feeling a bit sheepish, I crouch low and gaze into the full moon face of the flower. Sightless, the desert gazes back.

Interlude: The council of perspectives

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting –
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.
– from ‘Wild Geese,’ by Mary Oliver

If the surroundings are experienced as sensate, attentive, and watchful, then I must take care that my actions are mindful and respectful, even when I am far from other humans...It may be that the new “environmental ethic” toward which so many environmental philosophers aspire – an ethic that would lead us to respect and heed not only the lives of our fellow humans but also the life and well-being of the rest of nature – will come into existence not primarily through the logical elucidation of new philosophical principles and legislative strictures, but through a renewed attentiveness to this perceptual dimension that underlies all our logics, through a rejuvenation of our carnal, sensorial empathy with the living land that sustains us.
– David Abram (1996, p. 69)

We dwell amongst perspectives. That is true in Pittsburgh, as in Jawbone. But it’s all too easy to reduce perspective to a human gaze. It’s easy to forget that we are not only looking out at the world, but being taken in as well, by the fly whose tongue on our skin implies a different perspective on our sweat, by the dog whose nose in our crotch implies a different perspective on our odor, by the tree whose inaudible breathing implies a different perspective on our exhaled waste, by the mountain whose autobiography implies a different perspective on time.¹⁵

In urban spaces, the nonhuman perspectives we encounter are those left over after our species has forced a human perspective onto an ecosystem. In cities, many of the perspectives our cosmos has evolved are relegated to the margins, and the wild

foundations of otherness are driven out. Urban centers offer us more access to human diversity than rural settings. Yet humans in all settings struggle to tap into diversity as a source of resilience in a cultural context that cheapens the meaning of otherness, reducing it from the beckoning of an irrepressibly multiple cosmos to (some of) the forms of diversity evolved by a lone species of mammal: *homo sapiens*. A great deal of non-human nature persists in urban centers, often beautifying our sidewalks and parks, but it is always subject to control and management by the humans whose perspectives determine whether it stays or goes. And in places where a single human perspective drowns out all others, a lack of exposure to nonhuman otherness deprives us of support we need, as individuals and as a species, to develop a deep sense of ourselves and our place within a larger conversation.¹⁶

The capacity to take multiple perspectives into account, and to risk the de-centering and vulnerability that comes with stretching beyond our own perspective to imagine another's, is a developmental achievement that is not given.¹⁷ Without the ability to imagine, and listen to, perspectives other than our own, dialogue cannot take place. As humans immersed in cultures that often make us choose between exposure to human diversity or nonhuman diversity, we risk settling for a form of maturity that falls short of deep dialogical capacities. Dialogue, in its most profound form, is not merely a conversation amongst humans. It's an exchange that carries us across (dia-) into difference. It is vitally important for human beings to learn to talk with other humans – our species has its own diverse ecology to protect. It's also vitally important to remember that no amount of human-on-human dialogue can preserve our species if we refuse to dialogue with the perspectives of a nonhuman world whose fate is tangled up with our

own. (Besides which, human relations stand to gain a lot from extra-species dialogue – sometimes consulting *outside* the family helps us learn how to live together differently *within* it.)

When we dare to meet the gaze of an other who comes to us bearing a difference we cannot predict, we begin to change. We begin, perhaps, to heal – to discover, through an exchange with otherness, that we ourselves contain more otherness than we had imagined. That we are far more multiple than we thought.¹⁸ Part of the healing that takes place through dialogue with nonhuman otherness is the reclaiming of a properly human perspective. A properly human perspective is an animal perspective. That is, it has no truck with the story that humans are separate from, and more important than, nature. A properly human perspective looks out from within nature. It carries the recognition that to begin to come into dialogue with perspectives of wild otherness, we need not travel to the desert or use our imaginations to try on the perspectives of other species. All we need to do, to begin, is listen with curiosity to the animal perspectives that are already speaking through our own bodies, despite being relentlessly silenced by the cultural water in which we swim. When we acknowledge that our culture encourages us to dominate the nature that we *are* in addition to the nature that surrounds us, we are on the brink of rediscovering our own bodies' animal perspectives – on everything from nourishment and rest to community and death.¹⁹

At Jawbone, the perspectives of the desert were everywhere evident to my senses, so long as I was willing to hear them. That's not to say I immediately knew how to respond – mostly, I didn't. Sometimes, I found a way: I gave up my fantasy of campfires at night in response to the protestations of charred cholla cactuses next to an abandoned

campsite, with the added input of the cactus wrens whose nests, anchored amongst the thorns, had burned. And in adapting my choices to the perspectives of cactus and wren, I discovered cactus and wren inside me – a council of perspectives which I sensed had in some way been my own all along. But then there were less fathomable moments, as when I sensed a desert flower taking me in from a perspective that mystified me, and I felt at a total loss. And then there were moments when I felt that something impossible was asked of me, as when the desert complained to me that roads are wounds that take many human lifetimes to heal. I kept driving on them anyway.²⁰ I found, though, that I could no longer retrace those wounds without feeling conflicted, as though the desert inside me knows full well that the conversation remains to be finished.

What's required isn't immediate knowing, or a perfect response. What's required is the support to remain in the conversation.

IV. *The desert horned lizard*



Buckwheat (red) edged by Indian rice grass.

It's my fifth morning at Jawbone. A couple weeks from now, the idea of sleeping inside the tent will baffle me, but last night, I felt too afraid to let the desert watch me sleep. Half an hour after sunrise, I wake up to the murky blue light inside my already sweltering tent.

Once a few morning chores are out of the way – poop hole dug and filled, sunscreen applied, granola bar eaten, liter of water chugged – I pick up the camp chair and trudge up a sandy incline to the west-facing side of one of the inselbergs that comprises Robber's Roost. At any time of day it is possible to find shade in the shadow of Robber's Roost, or, at high noon, inside numerous deep alcoves scooped out of the rock by wind. I am heading now for one of the larger alcoves, set deep enough into the

rock that I can park my chair in temperatures cool enough for thinking. There, sunlight will not touch the toes of my boots until 3:45 in the afternoon.

As I round the southern face of the Roost, a flash of movement beneath a clump of scarlet buckwheat catches my eye. I drop the chair and crouch, examining the sand beneath the buckwheat. I can just make out the outline of a kind of lizard I have never met before and cannot name. I will later describe it, in my fieldnotes, as “one of those flat, spiny lizards from the Texas license plates” – a desert horned lizard, also called the horny toad.

The lizard has frozen, knowing it has caught my attention. Its body blends nearly perfectly with the whites and light greys of the gravel beneath it. I open the chair and plop down into it, bending low to continue gazing at the flat, armored body. I notice immediately that I resent having left my phone at camp. I want to take a picture. I feel fascinated, but I also feel single-minded and greedy. Acquisitive. I wish that I could pick the lizard up. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I know that I am interrupting its morning. I am aware that I am probably causing it stress. But I don't care. I don't want it to leave.

And then I grow suddenly impatient – though for what, I don't know. I stand up and move in closer. I pick up a little dry stick, and I poke at the lizard frozen beneath the buckwheat. It runs deeper into the roots, seeking protection. I feel a sharp satisfaction. I jab at it some more, not touching it with the stick, but scaring it. It flees the buckwheat, making a dash for the roots of a nearby shrub and freezing again.

This time, it is not well hidden. Its camouflage is of little use against the dark patch of sand ringing the shrub. As I take in how exposed it now looks and how easily I

have managed to herd it away from safety, a change tumbles through me like a dead bough releasing from a trunk. The acquisitiveness passes away, and where before there was a dearth of feeling, I now feel terribly sorry. I drop the stick, pick up my chair, and walk far enough away that I imagine the lizard will feel free of me. At this distance I cannot see it any longer, and anyway I am averting my eyes. I realize I don't know how to apologize to a lizard, or whether this is even possible. Stutteringly, I say out loud that I'm sorry, that I promise not to poke at any more lizards. I mean it. I feel about six years old.

Just after sunrise the next morning, I encounter another desert horned lizard scuttling amidst the brush. This one is dark instead of tawny. I bend over to say hello, but then the memory of yesterday's cruelty breaks through the hungry fascination that has already begun to flood my gaze and the tips of my fingers. Drawing a breath, I straighten up again and keep walking. A yellow butterfly gusts past, carried by wind. I tilt my head all the way back, following its ascent until the wind carries it so high beyond my reach that it disappears into blue.

Interlude: A lonely species

Your great mistake is to act the drama
as if you were alone. As if life
were a progressive and cunning crime
with no witness to the tiny hidden
transgressions. To feel abandoned is to deny
the intimacy of your surroundings.
– from “Everything is waiting for you,” by David Whyte

Most people don't know the names of these relatives; in fact, they hardly even see them...Philosophers call this state of isolation and disconnection “species loneliness” – a deep, unnamed sadness stemming from estrangement from the rest of Creation, from the loss of relationship. As our human dominance of the world has grown, we have become more isolated, more lonely when we can no longer call out to our neighbors. It's no wonder that naming was the first job the Creator gave Nanabozho.
– Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013, p. 208-209)

It sometimes seems to me that loneliness is spreading through the communities where my friends and patients and I live like an oil spill, choking out the longing of many people to be held, from day to day and from year to year, by stable, meaningful connections. I hear people talking about loneliness that clings to them even in spaces overflowing with humans, and loneliness even at the core of close friendships and partnerships, startling as an icicle in summer.

We are exquisitely dependent, for all kinds of needs, on our relationships with other humans. These bonds are so crucial that rarely, if ever, does anyone stop to ask whether the deep hunger countless people feel for contact could be anything other than a problem of humans relating to other humans – a human hurt that could (we're crossing

our fingers) find human healing. Rarely, if ever, does anyone ask whether some dimension of this pesky alienation, this longing to belong, is ecological.

The human need to belong does include the need to feel enfolded in a human community, but we are cheating ourselves if we stop there (quite literally cheating ourselves, since human communities stable enough to enfold their members depend on stability between people and the biosphere²¹). We want to feel *at home*. We long, at riverbed level, to feel that we belong to this earth, in this time. This longing is so fierce, so unmet, and so unrecognized by consumer-capitalist cultures that we scarcely manage, anymore, to feel it. Yet our bodies preserve the secret – well-guarded for some, out-of-the-bag for others – that we cannot feel at home with ourselves unless we are in right relation to our kin, most of whom are not human.²² The ache of feeling not-at-home is terribly hard to bear, even for the adventurous – just ask Dorothy Gale.

Other human beings, important as they are to us, represent only the teensiest sliver of the otherness we long to be enfolded by. Yet most of us move from technology to technology (from building to building, from furniture to furniture, from screen to screen, from vehicle to vehicle) through lives organized around the doings and makings of our own species.²³ Nonhuman otherness bobs and weaves all around us, even on city streets, but the birds may as well be wearing tiny muzzles for how well we know their voices. Our longing for contact with nonhuman otherness insists in our relationships with pets and houseplants, in trips to the zoo or the botanic gardens or, for those of us with the resources, a national park.²⁴ But by and large, we go hungry.

We reach for nonhuman others, and bring them as near as technology and safety will allow, because it is entirely normal to long for our family. My fascination with a

desert horned lizard was as spontaneous as a seed's germination. But in reaching out to know this kin who wears life so differently from me, and yet with whom I have so much in common, I found my hunger for belonging tipping into control. Control is sometimes a perversion of hunger, the best we can do with needs that nobody has helped us to make sense of.²⁵ Needs that entire cultures are organized to disavow.

We should be allowed to hunger for our family, and supported to make sense of that hunger. We should be encouraged to reach for the otherness we are born into, not in order to control it but in order to let it change us and bring us home. We should be fumbling, with as much haste as conscientiousness allows, toward the discovery that loneliness is more than we thought. There can be no exclusively human solution to the problem of a lonely species.

V. *The swarms, the sand, and the rock*



Moon over the El Pasos on the night of swarms.

In Edward Abbey's autobiographical book *Desert Solitaire*, he is always stretching out on the sand to take a nap, hat over his face, or leaning into a cottonwood tree to eat his lunch of canned tomatoes, or fording crimson rivers in his bare feet. He is always *touching* the desert, which is to say that the desert is always touching him back.

It's not just Edward Abbey, of course. It's a theme in all my favorite nature writing – Eva Saulitis and Terry Tempest Williams, Ellen Meloy and Barry Lopez don't observe their surrounds through binoculars from a camp chair. They lie down on the dusty plateau, strip naked in the canyon, and generally give the impression that they are as comfortable with the furniture nature has provided as they would be back home – maybe even more so. And this freedom of contact with place is part of what makes their writing so compelling.

I'm not like that.

Even at home, I have trouble plopping myself into the grass or cozying up to a sycamore trunk at the park – just ask Darren, whose way of moving through outdoor spaces is a lot like Edward Abbey's, minus the macho. For me, it's not about staying clean. Here at Jawbone, I'll discover for the first time that it's no big deal for me to go two weeks without bathing, and I actually kind of enjoy it. My hesitation about touching the desert, and being touched back, is about something else.

If Edward Abbey moves through the desert like it's his parlor, I move through it like it's a haunted house – but one that I'm determined to make peace with. This place always seems poised to penetrate me, or swallow me, yet I am skeptical of my own fear, and always searching for a way to release it. On my first night here, I decided to sleep out without the tent, despite knowing that I would feel far more at ease cloistered inside nylon walls. When I zipped up my sleeping bag, I was amazed by the instantaneous difference in how I felt: unzipped, I felt vigilant, unsafe. Zipped, I felt suddenly protected – though from what, I'm not sure. I lay there for a while, dreamily zipping and unzipping my sleeping bag, marveling that such a seemingly insignificant change – inserting a permeable layer between my skin and the desert night – could so profoundly alter my sense of safety. As I drifted to sleep with my toes lodged, comfortingly, into the cocoon created by the bottom of my sleeping bag, I pictured my loved ones under bedcovers at home, with their doors locked, and screens in their windows.

When I took off my shoes and found cholla spines in my foot after a walk the next day, it wasn't the pain that unnerved me. It was how the desert always seems to find a way to get inside. Days later, I am still lugging my camp chair with me everywhere, not

bothering to really consider sitting on the ground. The ground seems dangerous, and I leave this feeling largely unexamined. Even the sudden appearance of a raven wheeling into my peripheral vision, or the dry thrashing sound of the brush rebounding as a jackrabbit flees – even these suddennesses that cannot hurt me feel like the desert coming at me and into me, and I feel myself recoil from the touch.

Tonight, I eat dinner early so that I can begin meditating before nightfall – I have begun meditating every evening. At the car, I rinse off my dinner plate and brush my teeth, noting, on the walk back to camp, that the *Datura* vine, still crouching at the base of the Roost as though about to pounce, has finally dropped its blossom. Near the tent, I lay a mat on the sand and take a seat on my kneeling meditation bench. As sunset gets under way behind me, I face east, hoping to catch tonight's moonrise.

As I sit, thick swarms of insects, larger than gnats but smaller than mosquitoes, begin to gather. Swarms congregate everywhere around me, with a few feet separating each cluster from its neighbor. The swarms are so thick and numerous that they bring to mind cobwebs in an abandoned attic. I don't know what they are, but I know that they are not whining, or biting, or stinging. They are not even landing on me. The most they are doing is harmlessly banging into me, making pittering sounds on my sunglass lenses, like raindrops.

But I feel myself recoil, and I begin to squirm. I button my shirt all the way up and turn up my collar. I yank my wide-brimmed hat down to cover the tops of my ears. But the insects are still pittering into my sunglasses, and every once in a while I feel one ricochet off my cheek. I am jumping out of my skin, and embarrassed to be having such a strong reaction to these harmless neighbors. Finally, I get up and fetch a bandana,

which I tie around my face to mask myself all the way up to my sunglasses. I sit back down on my bench, determined to continue meditating in the presence of all this unexpected company. Even sealed off like this, looking fit to rob a stagecoach, it takes great effort to remain sitting and not hide myself in the tent.

But I remain, and so do the insects. And increasingly, as I breathe and open, that's alright with me. There is still a little light left in the sky when the moon crests the eastern horizon, its Datura-flower face open. I no longer feel afraid of the swarms, and I toss my sunglasses aside and pull my bandana down. But even as I uncover myself, the insects are rising higher with the moon, clear of my kneeling form. An owl calls over and over, and I hoot back, mimicking its punctuation: Hu-hu-huu! HUU, hu. A pair of bats emerges from the Roost. They swing through the air on invisible vines. Instantly, I recoil from them, and just as instantly, I laugh at myself and relax again. I grew up with bats, for Pete's sake – there were so many bats in our rickety old house that my sisters and I learned early how to catch a bat in a garbage can and release it outside. And presumably, these bats are leaning hungrily into the very same swarms that so tormented me a half hour ago.

Sitting there, I wish that I could do the evening over. Now that I have re-found my breath and my sense of humor, I can imagine myself sitting down to meditate amidst the pittering swarms, and responding in reverse. Tossing my hat aside. Undoing my shirt buttons. Loosening my belt. Ending here, in a foamy mix of moonlight and the dregs of sunset, naked on my bench.

Still kneeling, I reach a hand down to touch the sand. I think: *I am claimed by this place that frightens me. That doesn't mean it's easy to be claimed, to be touched. I am still in the early days of finding my way.*

A sudden gust of wind temporarily deafens me, in the same way that intense light blackens vision. The wind enters me through my ears. Another thought arrives: *Let Jawbone be Jawbone.*

* * *

A few days later, it occurs to me that it may be time to leave the Roost.

I never intended to stay here for the entire month. The Roost has its advantages – shade and a cell signal being two of them – but the sand road that leads to it has already been re-carved once by flood waters since my arrival, and the end-of-summer storms have continued. The longer I stay, the more I risk losing the road entirely and ending up stranded. Plus, there are other parts of Jawbone that are calling to me: places to return to, and places to meet.

The day is blisteringly hot, and I spend much of it in a deep, west-facing alcove, listening, watching, and trying my hand at raven-speak (from the response of the ravens, you'd think I was making no sound at all). My throat feels a little raw when late afternoon sun begins to creep into the alcove, signaling me to pack up and round the Roost to the east-facing side. But as I start to pack up, it occurs to me that I may leave the Roost tomorrow, and if I leave, I'm unlikely to come back – the road is too treacherous for me to attempt it again. That would mean this is my last afternoon sheltered in the alcove.

I sit back down. Lizards are creeping about everywhere, and I notice that I feel empty – not a hungry kind of empty, but an uncontrollable empty that is utterly bereft of agenda. I am just here, and that's all.

I look west, out of the alcove. There is no photo I can take with me that will do this view of the Scodie range justice. To see Jawbone like this, I have to be inside it.

When I bring my gear around to my camp on the east side of the Roost, I at first pitch the camp chair and sit down in it, but it bothers my back. Behind me, the Roost's haunches are in shade; they look cool. I sit down on the sand at the base of the rock wall and lean back, tentatively, wary of sharp bits and aware that I would not have risked this contact with the sand and the rock as recently as two days ago.

The sand and the rock hold me. All of the rock's solidity and age pushes back as I lean in, and I realize that if I sat here for a thousand years, the rock would not give way – though it might shape itself to me.

Tears are in my eyes. Comfort is waiting here for me, on the condition that I let go.

I am not ready to say goodbye to the Roost. I'll hope that the road holds, and give myself one more day.

Interlude: Grounding

Pull up the roots
and what do we see but the night
soil of dream, the night
soil of what we call
home. Home that calls
and calls
and calls.

– from “Coastal Plain,” by Kathryn Stripling Byer

I cannot have a spiritual center without having a geographical one. I cannot live a grounded life without being grounded in a place.

– Scott Russell Sanders (in *hooks*, 2009, p. 68)

I grew up in the gaze of Pennsylvania’s Endless Mountains, in a village isolated enough that school bus service petered out well short of the house and sidewalks struck me as novel the first time I saw them in a neighboring town . I was a grass-stained, dusty kid without a gaggle of neighbor kids to play with, but I never felt the lack of them. I had the world. I climbed spruce trees, tumbled down hills, puddle-jumped, squished mud between my toes, and arrived home with fingernails blackened from re-burying earthworms to “save” them from robins. I devoured Jean Craighead George’s *My Side of the Mountain* and spent the following day kneeling on a grassy slope, scraping acorns against a rock, bent on making acorn flour pancakes for dinner. I was always touching the earth, which is to say the earth was always touching me.

Now, in my early 30’s, I have far less physical contact with the earth than I did at the age when I first met George’s runaway protagonist, Sam Gibley. There are countless

reasons for my physical estrangement from the places I move through. Some of them have to do with my female body: as I grew up, I learned that grass-stained girls are “tomboys,” and the experience of touching and being touched morphed dramatically as I learned that inhabiting my body past puberty would often mean feeling physically invaded.²⁶ To this day, this anxiety about being invaded is a major feature of my hesitancy to plop myself down on the soil or lean back into the embrace of a tree – I tell myself that I don’t want anything climbing all over me or, worse, getting into me, without my knowledge. Experience combined with socialization have led me to want more control over my physical boundaries than spontaneous contact with this teeming planet allows.

There are other reasons. Movies like *Jaws* and *The Blair Witch Project* altered – perhaps permanently – my experience of swimming in the ocean or wandering through woods, especially alone. News media, too, seems always to be sounding the alarm, warning me not to go outside if I value my life: I’ll be bitten by deer ticks, get struck by lightning, contract a fatal virus from a mosquito, and inhale pollutants, possibly all in one afternoon. Speaking of pollutants, surely part of my skittishness about being in touch with the soil, water, and air, with plants and nonhuman animals, derives from what I now know about the contamination of all these entities by human-synthesized chemicals including pesticides – reading *Silent Spring* filled me with awe at the natural world at the same time as it made me think twice about walking barefoot through the park.²⁷

At Jawbone, the sand got on me. The rain got on me. The wind got on me. Insects spent a lot of time on me, and, once I stopped carrying my camp chair everywhere like a transitional object, I spent a lot of time in physical contact with the ground and the plants

rooted in it. Quite simply, I got a lot of practice being touched by the nonhuman world.²⁸ In the process, I experienced some fear – of course. I was also worked over and changed by several varieties of joy.

There was the joy of feeling unthreatened. This is not the same as feeling safe, or fearless. Making peace with the swarms, reaching down to touch the sand, and leaning back into the Roost were moments in a progression toward more and more sustained physical contact with Jawbone, but those moments were not made possible by my conclusion that I wasn't going to get hurt, and I was therefore safe. I remained selectively aware of ways in which contact with various parts of Jawbone could injure me. But months before the advent of #metoo, I was having the experience of remembering that when the earth and its beings touch me, that touch is not motivated by neurosis, by ignorance, by oppressive power dynamics, or by intent to abuse.²⁹ If nature targets me for harm, then it is the mountain lion's bid for survival, or the rattlesnake's startled self-defense. And for the most part, the ways in which the nonhuman natural world harms me are not targeted at me, even if they are devastating to me. As time went by at Jawbone, I grew into a delicious, grounding new experience of fear: not fear as a cortisol-driven mode of navigating the assaultive aspects of day-to-day urban living, but fear as an appropriate honoring of my vulnerability as a part of nature.

Then there was the joy of grounding, itself. Gravity patiently insists that the ground, the skin of the world, is where our lives must unfold. Despite all the discomforts of outdoor living, at Jawbone I felt stabilized and eased by coming back into consistent contact with the textures and colors of ground. Ground is different from a floor. Touching ground, I have the sense that much has emerged from this place, and much will return to

it.³⁰ Soil and sand wait to receive and transform us; in the meantime, they hold us up. It was only in redefining for myself what it means to “be grounded” – this time in relation to the actual ground beneath my feet – that I began to register the enormous amount of energy I have expended holding myself at a distance from the earth, and the enormous amount of energy my society expends to make this distancing possible.³¹ Grounding is a way to reclaim that energy. There is a kind of dignity in being freed to touch our home.

Which brings me to a third flavor of joy: that of belonging. Many times now I have heard the scientific story (to me, one of the more beautiful stories told by science) that all matter in the solar system, like the carbon that is the major constituent of both soil and all organic lifeforms, as well as the minerals that constitute both soil and organic lifeforms, were forged inside stars that then released it in supernova explosions.³² The information that we are made of “star-stuff” has a kind of poetic resonance for many people, but I think such stories take on transformative meaning only when our bodies tell us that the science is on to something. In my case, leaning back into wind-sculpted rock was a risk, a bid for another kind of contact, but also, ultimately, an act of ancient recognition.³³ I can belong in the embrace of rock and of ground because of a deep resonance that comes of shared ingredients. There is perhaps nothing so grounding as the sense that we are made of the very ingredients of belonging.

VI. *The tortoise gods*



Burrow of a Mojave desert tortoise.

To look closely at the Mojave is to see holes everywhere – large dens dug into sand banks by pregnant coyotes and kit foxes, small tunnels at the base of every plant leading down into the nests of tiny lizards, kangaroo rats, ground squirrels, and snakes.

On my last day at the Roost, while hiking downslope from the largest inselberg, I stumble across a large burrow whose breast shape distinguishes it from others I have seen. A foot and a half across at the entrance, the burrow has been dug into a sandy slope alongside a narrow wash. At its threshold I spot a kind of dung I haven't seen before – and I've seen a great deal of dung at this point.

I know immediately who lives, or lived, here. The breast-shaped entrance is the perfect echo of the high-domed shell of a Mojave desert tortoise, a being who has lived here since the Pleistocene but now has a federal “threatened” status due to the impact of human encroachment into its habitat for off-road recreation, cattle-grazing, solar development, and military installations. The tortoises live for about half a century if all goes well, and they spend up to 95% of their lives underground, hibernating for up to nine months of the year to preserve themselves through the extreme heat. These animals are painfully vulnerable to the off-road vehicles that tear through Jawbone all year long: when they are startled, they pee, and the loss of the water stored in their bladders is often a death sentence in this dry climate (I recall the response of one of my dissertation readers, Elizabeth, when I shared this with her: “So,” she said, “they are literally being scared to death!”) There are so few of them left that I never expected to find a burrow, much less a tortoise. I feel jubilant, but I stay fifteen feet away from the burrow and allow myself only the time it takes it snap a single photo before tiptoeing on. If anyone is asleep inside, I am keen not to bother them.

As I continue my hike, on a hunch I wander far from the sandy road, deliberately seeking out middlingly steep slopes of packed sand that border narrow washes – slopes that have a similar incline and sand composition to the one I just left. I hike alongside

these washes, gazing across at the opposite slope from what I hope is a respectful distance. My hunch is rewarded. Before I turn back to the Roost, I have found four more tortoise burrows.

Each time I find one, I feel a thrill of excitement, but I don't stop walking. Just catching sight of the dark entrances feels sacred. I realize that were I actually to come across a tortoise today, I would not take a photo. I feel that I am tiptoeing past the doorsteps of gods.

As an undergrad, during an exchange semester in Finland, I traveled to Iceland for a few days. The visible signs of geothermal activity, like gas pockets in the water at the edge of a bay or steam pouring out of cracks in the soil, kept me aware of the ceaseless movement beneath my feet. I sensed that much was roiling and shapeshifting under the earth's skin. But Iceland's underground felt volatile, quick, eruptive. The beneath of Jawbone, the beneath of which these tortoises are a part, feels slow, gentle. Patient. In my fantasy, the tortoise gods are powerful sorcerers, ministering to the needs of those who belong to this place, orchestrating surprises and lessons for those who visit.

My footsteps on the sand are reverent as I return to camp.

* * *

It's a windy night, and the wind is cold, pouring in from the high mountains to the west. There is lightning to the southeast, but no rain. In my fieldnotes, I express amazement that I now automatically know where southeast is.

As I kneel with my meditation bench, half an hour after sunset, I know to listen for the distant hooting of a great horned owl – and there it is. I hear the goodnight calls of smaller birds whose names I still do not know. Ravens let loose a few final croaks.

Gigantic dragonflies speed past my kneeling form, their buzzing low and serious. A chorus of crickets, distributed two or three to a creosote bush, add their raspy voices to the mix. The wind surges and falls away, surges and falls away. Each time it ebbs, the sounds of birds and insects wash over me.

When sunset has concluded and the beady-eyed mouse that lives beneath the Datura vine pops above ground to begin its day, I am still on my bench. I hear the mouse rummaging behind me, and I greet it silently, not turning around. The birds and dragonflies have fallen silent, but now a new sound enters the mix. Not new, exactly – I have heard it on several previous nights, but I still have not located its source. The sound is a rapid clicking, coming from ground level. It sounds for all the world like tiny toenails clacking at the gravel as something races by, but even with my headlamp switched on, I can see no one. The sound seems to surround me, as though I am being circled by whatever is making it.

Suddenly, a bat swoops into my field of vision, low and close enough to floss my teeth. As it passes, invisible toenails clack across the sand 6 inches in front of me, and I make the connection. I look up. Visible as silhouettes against the stars, three bats are trapezing across the sky, their wings silent. I have been looking for an animal at my feet, when the source of this sound has been above me all along: echolocation calls, ricocheting off the sand.

Damnably, lovably tortoise gods.

There is life everywhere here, beneath me, above me, and around me, tunneling into me through my eyes, my ears, welling up from below through some opening in me that seems to have no corresponding organ. I am well and truly in the mix. Finding

myself immersed in batsong, what am I to do but lie down, awed and afraid? Asleep by 10, I wake up at 11:30 to record, in the haywire handwriting of the half-asleep, "*A pack of coyotes, yipping and howling, high-pitched.*"

Interlude: Holes

We dance round in a ring and suppose,
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.
– “The Secret Sits,” by Robert Frost

Nature hides.³⁴
– Heraclitus (in Graham, 2003, p. 178)

In college, I had an astronomy professor named Salman Hameed. As a child, he fell in love with his future field when he watched the TV series *Cosmos*, hosted by the astronomer Carl Sagan, who died in 1996. Salman lent me all the episodes of *Cosmos* on DVD, and I immediately developed a crush on Carl Sagan. Here was a person so saturated with wonder at the world he found himself in that he could not help but bring us all sailing along with him on a tour of the mysteries of the universe, riding, of all things, a dandelion seed he called “The Spaceship of the Imagination.” What I most liked about Carl Sagan was the way he kept reminding me that I didn’t need to resort to human-crafted fantasy or science fiction (both of which I love, and so did he – he wrote *Contact*, after all) to satiate my hunger for wonder. *Just look around you!* he seemed to be shouting. *Just take a look at what’s already here!*

Carl Sagan seemed, to me, to be fueled by the understanding that coming into contact with the mystery and wonder of the world is a kind of nourishment. A necessary nourishment.³⁵ He knew that it is utterly, tragically common to forget that the natural world (including ourselves) is one big exhilarating mystery. And I remembered this about

him when, at Jawbone, the mysteriousness of the world entered me, enchanted me, and quenched me in a way I had forgotten was possible.

The culture I was born into has very little patience for mystery.³⁶ It's hard to use what we can't understand; it's hard to control what we can't reduce. It's hard to commodify a mystery. From farmers to banks to governments to e-commerce companies, a lot of human interests seem to want to get as far away from mystery as possible in order to pursue their agendas. And science, despite its potential to bring its practitioners and beneficiaries into profound contact with the mysteriousness of the natural world it plumbs, tends to be leveraged more often as a scathingly bright searchlight that could (the fantasy goes) drive mystery out, leaving us with only things we could control. This isn't a problem of the nature of science; it's a problem of the intersection of scientific practice with a culture that values domination of nature.³⁷ And it's not just a problem for scientists, either, because science isn't just simmering in a lab somewhere downtown: science is a worldview that permeates this culture and shapes the way each of us approaches life. As a worldview harnessed to an anti-nature culture, science becomes perverted into a way of seeing that separates us from a world we become convinced we could master.

There is an antidote to this worldview, and tapping into the antidote is like moving from a room lit by the headache-inducing glare of fluorescent lighting to a clearing, at night, illuminated by firelight. When we prioritize direct experiences of the natural world of which we're a part, and when we make sure our children and our loves come outside with us, we make joyful discoveries that are more in line with the spirit of science as a wonder-fueled endeavor.³⁸ We discover, for example, something that

vipassana practitioners are trained to look for within their (so-called) interior landscapes: that the natural world (including ourselves) is an ungraspable series of disclosures and withdrawals, a beady-eyed desert mouse that appears only to disappear. We humans like to ask questions about the ground of our existence: what is this aliveness, what is this place we call “here?” And when we hang out for long enough with the countless forms of life and matter that are readily accessible to us just on the other side of the window glass, we discover that the ground of our experience, like desert sand, is riddled with holes. The natural world to which we belong is not a thing that we could illuminate with even the most powerful searchlight: it’s a network of processes and relationships that are always in flux, never stagnant.³⁹

And in this churning ocean that forms our ephemeral “ground,” there is always something hidden. Intimacy with the natural world requires going outside to see and sense. But it also requires not-knowing, and not-seeing.⁴⁰ Every natural phenomenon is born out of a wider ground that we can only imagine: trees reach down into darkness at the same time as they extend a part of themselves into the light, and everywhere we could go, there are concealed gods – the hidden ways a place breathes, moves, and carries itself forward in relationship with all else.⁴¹ If we want these mysteries to survive, we have to go out into the places we live in and share the stories of the awe we felt in the presence of what we could not grasp. To walk reverently through the mystery is among the most direct ways to remember our own sacred mysteriousness to ourselves – our wildness that can be forgotten but never taken from us, because even we can never know what it is.⁴²

VII. *The Joshua trees*



The Joshua tree I kneeled beside.

There is no real strategy to my search for a new campsite. Upon leaving the Roost, I allow my gut to dictate which roads to turn onto, hoping I'll be able to guide the car over whatever terrain presents itself, or at least manage to turn around before getting stuck. Several times, I do turn around when a stretch of deep sand or a high boulder sets an uncrossable boundary. Once, I back the car up painstakingly slowly for two miles after coming upon rocks too high to cross on a road too narrow to turn around on. I see no other humans in the hours I spend exploring the roads, although on several occasions, I am overflowed by the bizarrely geometric silhouettes of jets being tested by the nearby

China Lake Naval Air Weapons Station. Jawbone is the kind of place where the military can conduct tests on its newest models without attracting much attention.

I have just come across a tire-sucking stretch of soft, deep sand on a road labeled Scodie 120 (after the surrounding Scodie mountain range) and am considering my strategy for turning around when a sign indicating a designated campsite catches my eye. The site is not visible from the road. I guide the car down into a dip and then up a long, sandy driveway. At the end of a 75-foot stretch of hard-packed road that tells me this site must get regular use, I find a sprawling circle of sand edged with bollards marking the boundary between the human use area and the rest of the desert. The cleared space is so wide that previous campers built two fire pits, one at each end.

I park the car and get out to look around. I'm a bit turned off by what I see. This feels very different from my site at the Roost, where there were no bollards or firepits, I had to leave my car at a distance from my camp, and I squeezed my tent onto the only available patch of sand that the desert had left clear of brush. The sheer amount of cleared and leveled sand here makes a statement that this place has been prepared for humans, by humans. What I'm standing on isn't the ground, it's a floor. It just happens to be a floor made of sand.

I approach the only creosote bush that is growing inside the space marked off by bollards. It is the largest creosote I have yet encountered. It towers above me, still fragrant with last night's rain. This creosote is broadcasting fertility: fuzzy seedpuffs bounce in the breeze while perky yellow blossoms get it on with a harem of bees. Many of the creosotes at the Roost were in flower, but none so ostentatiously as this, and none stood so high.

I step back to admire the bush, puzzling over the Muresan-Boguesian difference. Perhaps it's a matter of altitude – the Roost is significantly higher. Or geography – this site is in a basin, unlike the sloping plains spreading out around the Roost. And then it hits me: this creosote has no competition for water. Humans clear-cut all its neighbors. My delight in its height and lustiness evaporates abruptly.

The detritus of years of human visits to this site is concentrated around the base of the creosote like a skirt around a Christmas tree. I see bullet casings, rusted screws, a rainbow of airsoft pellets shot by kids, broken glass, lengths of plastic tubing, tin cans, mangled bits of plastic, tangled wires. Crouching, I discover a weather-eaten toy soldier, half-submerged in the sand. The little man is an infantry radio operator, down on one knee, with a receiver to his ear.

Is this a kind of warzone, then? I think at him. I am still considering moving on in search of a less impacted site as I wander over to greet a venerable old Joshua tree growing just across the bollards, opposite the giant creosote. As I approach the tree, a collared lizard the length of my forearm scurries down the trunk and disappears into a crevice at the roots. My attention is drawn to a pair of unnaturally straight forms sticking out of the lowest limb. It takes me a moment to make any sense of what I am seeing.

Arrows. Two black fiberglass arrows with yellow fletching are deeply embedded in the trunk-like limb, in a side-by-side arrangement that suggests the tree was shot deliberately. Without thinking, I leap over the bollards, kneel, and begin tugging on the arrow shafts. But it's a hopeless case – there is no way to remove these arrows without cutting open the tree. My only comfort is that the cretin who shot a threatened species of

yucca (Joshua “trees” are really yuccas that look like trees) cannot get their arrows back. They belong to the tree now.

Kneeling beside the old Joshua tree, my pectoral muscles clench as though I am holding down a sob, although all I’m aware of feeling is disbelief. Suddenly, I realize that I will not be ready to leave this tree for quite some time. This will be my new base camp, after all.

* * *

Two weeks later, my tent is still pitched next to the Joshua tree. I have hiked out of this site since arriving at it; I have spent nights in other parts of Jawbone. But I have always returned.

I’ve become acquainted with the collared lizard who lives in the Joshua tree. One day, I watched it morph from a brownish olive tone to bright turquoise as it chased down a fly. Ever since then, I’ve called it Prism. There is a proud, gray bird that perches on the same boulder every evening at sunset and calls with such vigor that it hops straight up into the air with each *ch-hee, ch-hee*. A western fence lizard lives in one of the fire pits. It cranes its neck to gaze at me peevishly when I wander over daily to say hello. Every afternoon, a tiger whiptail lizard with a bright blue tail parades importantly through, digging up ants. And every night after sunset, I sit still and wait to catch sight of a kangaroo rat I call Kanga, zooming fatly from creosote to creosote like a golf ball with feet. Kanga is wisely wary of me, and ventures no closer than ten feet as she stuffs her cheeks with creosote seeds. Her jowls grow ever pouchier as she scoots from bush to bush, until she looks the way I would look if I stuck an old-fashioned telephone handset into my mouth. Her hind feet are massively out of proportion to the rest of her body, like

clown shoes, and they make a distinctive whispering sound as she crosses the sand. Many nights, I close my eyes while I wait for her, snapping my headlamp on only when I hear that familiar *shhhhhhhhh*.

The company here is good. But I'm staying less for the company and more because I have work to do. This very moment, I am squatting in the sand beneath the implacable sun, wearing blue latex gloves I dug out of the first aid kit. My hands feel swampy inside the gloves. At my feet is a gallon Ziploc bag with its mouth open. In my right hand I am clutching a Joshua tree leaf, and in my left hand is a shiny bullet shell that I just picked out of the sand. For the next hour, I will be crouched like this in the sun, plucking boiling hot bullet shells from the ground, scraping sand from their hollow insides with the sharp end of the Joshua tree leaf, and clinking them into the Ziploc bag. The ground at this site is so thickly strewn with shells that I will easily collect 300 in an hour, without wandering more than twenty feet.

It would be much quicker to simply dump the shells into my bag without cleaning them out first, and that is what I did when I first began collecting, four days ago. But within the first hour, I discovered that about every fifth shell contains a compact spider web, and about one in five of these webs contains a tiny golden spider. I now use the Joshua tree spine to painstakingly clear sand from the mouth of each shell and peer inside in search of a spider. Given a chance, the spiders hop out on their own and scurry away in search of a new cave, which may or may not be another bullet shell. I feel apologetic each time this happens – when I began cleaning up the sand, I had no intention of evicting spiders. But I am willing to disturb them to get all this metal out of the sand.

There are no other humans to joke with here, so in an inside joke with myself, I have started referring to bullet shells as “human droppings.” The surest way to know where humans have been at Jawbone is to scan the ground for the glint of metal. This site is among the most disturbed I have seen in my wanderings. Looking at the sand makes me feel disgusted and incredulous. These feelings are so uncomfortable that it was not until my twentieth day at Jawbone that I finally made a switch: I went from trying my hardest to ignore the feelings aroused in me by the destruction, to feeling it, documenting it, and cleaning it. The decision to start tending to the place was a relief – after all, it was falling to my knees over arrows embedded in a Joshua tree that bound me to this site. Now, I spend a timed hour every day shoveling human droppings into bags – timed, because I’ve discovered that if I don’t set a timer, I’ll spend too many hours collecting and wind up dehydrated, with an aching back. In my first four days, I have bagged 1,465 shells, bullets, and airsoft pellets. Still, shells litter the sand like confetti after a demented parade.

* * *

I take photos of the areas I clean, before I clean them. And once I make the decision to document the shells, I allow myself to look at, and photograph, everything else I have not wanted to see. The arrows. Spent firecrackers, jammed into ant nests. Joshua trees half-downed by axes, the hacking abandoned when campers discovered that the inside of a Joshua tree is pulpy, not wooden. Chollas where cactus wrens had nested, burned and blackened by escaped embers from a fire not properly extinguished. And, hardest of all to metabolize – there is no metabolizing it, really – Joshua trees that have been shot dead with bullets.

Long before I discovered that it had been murdered, I had a relationship with the first murdered Joshua tree I became aware of. I knew it as a landmark: a dead tree leaning crazily out of the ground at a 60 degree angle, ending in a two-pronged fork of stumps, one of which pointed the way up the ridge toward my meditation spot. Returning from hikes or from meditating after dark, I had many times relied on that tree to orient me correctly in the direction of camp.

I don't know exactly what leads me, one day, to approach it not as a landmark but as a tree in its own right, to walk right up to it and really look. But I imagine that a suspicion has been growing in me ever since I first saw the unnatural-looking angle, the way it appears to be heaving itself out of the ground, as though trying to run away. It is normal for the branches of Joshua trees to spread all akimbo, but the main trunks know perfectly well the advantages of growing skyward. And dead Joshua trees are actually an uncommon sight at Jawbone – the dead trees I see here are giants that have toppled after a long life of enthusiastic branching, not relatively young trees like this one, surrounded by healthy neighbors, with no clear reason to have sickened.

The day I walk up to it, I have already completed my hour of shell-collecting, and I suppose I am as ready as I can be for what I am about to find. I allow myself to look, for the first time, at ragged patches where bark has detached from the trunk in a way that looks, well, explosive. I really look at the stumps where branches have broken off at the top of the tree, and see that a piece of one branch dangles by a thread from its stump, while at the base of the tree, two leaf clusters still lie in the sand where they landed. It's common to find individual Joshua tree leaves at the base of a tree; not so common for a tree to drop entire clusters.

Joshua trees typically grow at least twenty feet tall, and can live for upwards of five hundred years. This tree, before it lost its branches, was about ten feet tall, and I cannot begin to guess its age. Circling the tree, I find the bullet hole at my chest height. The bullet has blown a tunnel all the way through the tree – bending slightly, I can see through the hole to the landscape beyond. Tiny pieces of shrapnel still dot the splintered pulp surrounding the wound. The whole scene lacks forensic subtlety. Even Fox Mulder would make quick work of this one: Joe Cowboy, in the desert, with a gun.

I find other murdered Joshua trees in my remaining days at Jawbone, and each time, I instinctively start talking to them. The things I say feel useless to me at the time, and sound feeble to me even now, but they tumble from my mouth anyway: *poor tree you didn't deserve this who did this to you I'm sorry I'm so so sorry*. I pick up any shells and bullets at the base of these trees, figuring that if I can't undo the crime I can at least clean up the mess, the same way I'd want to put my friend's living room back together after a burglary. There are days when, as I'm collecting shells beneath a Joshua tree corpse, I hear firearms discharging in the distance, creating more ground-metal faster than I can pick it up. *Clink!* announce the shells as they join the others inside my Ziploc bags. *Boom!* proclaim the guns of strangers miles away.

Before I came to Jawbone, I knew something of humans taking advantage of the desert. This is the whole reason Darren ended up here in the first place – he came here as the lead of a conservation crew restoring areas decimated by off-roaders unconcerned with sticking to the routes provided to them. Part of what drew me to return here is the knowledge that Darren's love is in the land. He has slept on it, kneeled in it, shat in it, nursed it, and taught others to nurse it. It was his organization that erected much of the

fencing I find on my hikes, fencing that has since been torn down by off-roaders who seem to feel that the desert is a body to whom they are entitled. And I have read the accounts of what else goes on here, things that are easier to write than to speak out loud: grenades tossed at snakes for sport; desert tortoises lined up beneath 2x4's and driven over for the fun of hearing them pop. While I am ministering to the ghosts of shot-up trees, I don't think about why men did what they did. I don't even really care why, in those moments. All the space of my heart is taken up with telling the trees that I'm sorry.

* * *

I leave Jawbone with ten large Ziploc bags crammed with shells, bullets, and airsoft pellets. A week after I return to Pittsburgh, I take a walk with my friend Christine down a dirt road through a forest she's never visited before. She asks about Jawbone, and I tell her lots of things, in the order in which they present themselves to my heart, starting with all the hours I spent collecting the shells that are currently taking up a great deal of space on my living room floor. The thousands of shells I don't know what to do with. I tell her how long I fought off the impulse to pick them up, despite feeling the urge to do it nearly every day. It took me twenty days to even start, I tell her. I tell her that doing it was useless, silently pleading with her not to tell me it wasn't useless. I know that it was.

Christine can be quiet; it's part of why we mesh. She's quiet for a while after I share about the shells. We wander farther down the dirt road in search of a horse cemetery we've heard is somewhere nearby.

When she finally speaks, she's heard my silent plea. "You know," she says, "there's something beautiful about what you did. Maybe despite, or even because of, how useless it was."

Interlude: Home is where the broken heart is

I tell you this
To break your heart,
By which I mean only
That it break open and never close again
To the rest of the world.
– from “Lead,” by Mary Oliver

No one is immune to doubt, denial, or disbelief about the severity of our situation – and about our power to change it. Yet of all the dangers we face, from climate chaos to nuclear warfare, none is so great as the deadening of our response.
– Joanna Macy (2007, p. 92)

A few years ago, at the invitation of my friend Mark Fairfield, founder of The Relational Center of Los Angeles, I began teaching trainings on culture-shift. Lots of therapists attend these trainings, but they’re also attended by community organizers, artists, administrators, and students, as well as non-working people. The trainings are geared toward anybody who has at least a budding curiosity about what it would mean to create widescale change not just individual by individual (the change strategy of individual psychotherapy), not only in organizations, institutions, or systems, but actually at the level of culture – what Mark calls “the water we’re swimming in.” Early in each training, my co-leaders and I direct everyone’s attention to a long list of social, economic, political, and environmental crises. The items on the list run the gamut from bullying to racism to trade abuses to political corruption to species extinction and climate change. It’s an overwhelming list, because it accurately reflects the toxicity of the cultural water we’re swimming in – the mounting crises we live with on a daily basis. Some of us are

privileged enough that we're insulated from the most devastating impacts, but all of us are kept informed about the water we're swimming in by headlines, if not by firsthand tragedies. There is nothing on the list that is "news" to anyone.

My co-leaders and I always ask our participants to take a quiet minute to register what happens in them as they read through the list. Then, we invite people to share what came up. Every time I teach, I silently watch people's bodies change as they accept the invitation to do what so few of us are ever invited to do – notice, in community with other humans, their pain for the suffering of the world. Some people's bodies become tense and closed off as they read; others begin to tremble or tear up. Fists and jaws clench. Mouths harden. Sometimes, shoulders drop and the whole body appears to collapse, as someone looks up from the list with exhausted resignation. When it comes time to speak, our participants use the same words over and over: *Despair. Overwhelmed. Afraid. Pain. Numb. Hopeless. Paralyzed. Paralyzed. Paralyzed.*

Early on in teaching, I discovered that I desperately need these moments when participants share with us what happens in them when they confront the list. Because when they speak out about their fear, despair, numbness, and paralysis, they remind me of something that I am at daily risk of forgetting: that all of us, including me, expend a lot of energy trying not to feel our pain for the world – the pain we feel in response to the abuse and devastation of ecosystems everywhere, including both human and nonhuman communities. Even I, who teach these trainings, quite literally *forget* how much pain I am in for the world. I barricade my heart from breaking open, like plugging my ears so that I don't have to hear the fire alarm incessantly going off. And I push through my days in this incongruous state, exchanging hopeful smiles with friends and colleagues whose

ears, I notice, are also sealed off – all of us crossing our fingers that we could respond wisely to the pain of the world while also blocking off our own panic, despair, and grief.⁴³

It often doesn't feel safe to de-numb – indeed, sometimes it *actually* isn't safe. Many of the arguments for not feeling are compelling.⁴⁴ At times when I'm not tapped in to the support that's available from my friends, from colleagues, from poets and songwriters, from the ecosystem that's chirping and waving its branches at me through the screen door, and from my connection to ancestors, I'm just as capable of numbing by over-exercising or over-working or over-Netflixing as the next person (the “over” here is important – watching a show for pleasure and connection feels so different from using a show as an anesthetic, for psychological survival!). And, again when I'm not being reminded to lean into my supports, finding some way to numb really does feel like my best option. *I'm too drained, and I'd have nowhere to put my feelings if I felt them, anyway*, I tell myself.⁴⁵

Yet there is incredible value, and untapped collective power, in our pain for the world. If we wish to support the formation of sustainable collective social movements that can heal the water we're swimming in, then it is wise to talk with each other about the value of feeling this pain, and to do this more often, and more loudly, than we talk with each other about the value of numbing.

One of the precious aspects of feeling our pain for the world shows itself when we take a second look at the fact that we feel pain for the world *at all*. We are all sensitive to this pain, and we are all always responding to it, even if the response is to shut it down through strategies of denial, avoidance, or aggression. That we cannot help but respond –

with a broken heart, or a gesture of aid, or a numbing strategy – is in itself very revealing. If we were truly separate from the beings and presences that share the planet with us, some human and many not, then we would not feel suffering because of their suffering. Our pain for the world is a directly accessible invitation into understanding our true nature: we are kin with all life.⁴⁶ That “we are all connected” need not be a disembodied, clichéd argument in favor of a different way of living: that we are interconnected is an embodied awareness available the moment we find ourselves silently rooting for a squirrel traversing a swaying telephone wire, or the moment we read in the news that the last male northern white rhinoceros died in Kenya and tell ourselves, in our practiced way, to move on with our day because there’s nothing to be done.

There is a way, then, of valuing our pain for the world as a myth-busting communication about who we really are: even among our own species, we are not self-contained entities veering into each other’s paths like bumper cars. The idea of the “self” as something distinguished by its separateness from other selves is problematic and needs revisioning.⁴⁷ We are networked into all others, all otherness. Selfhood is really more like kinship, a term which evokes family and commonality at the same time as it evokes difference.⁴⁸ When we are denied access to our pain for the world, we imagine that we celebrate and suffer in isolation, with embeddedness in a community as an option rather than a given. When we feel our pain for the world, our nature returns to us, and we become able to access the most grounded intimacy and solidarity. Greater-than-human intimacy and solidarity.⁴⁹

Honoring this pain, then, is a way to remember who we really are in a cultural context bound on making us forget. But the value of this pain does not stop with the pain

itself. The value continues into the alchemy that takes place once this pain for the world finds safe, communal avenues into expression. Our interconnectedness isn't just a source of hurt; it's also the source of our greatest joy, comfort, and restoration, as a walk down a forest path at the end of a heartrending day will verify. And, importantly for this work of opening to our pain for the world, our interconnectedness is also a source of resilience, empowerment, and that irreplaceable zingy feeling of being well-and-truly *alive*.

Allowing our hearts to break open with pain for the world, as long as we have someone else to do it with (and preferably a great many human and non-human someones), releases creative energy for responding differently to this pain, now that turning away is no longer our default response. When we begin to feel, we make a discovery that any grief therapist would gladly confirm: not-feeling freezes us into place, while feeling in the presence of support frees us back into the flow of life.⁵⁰

This transition is like winter turning over into spring inside the body. When I finally allowed the evidence of human mistreatment of Jawbone to break my heart, I felt enormous relief. When the pain instructed me to begin squatting down to collect all that metal, the relief became even more delicious. And when I wrote down the story of the Joshua trees and began to share it with others who let themselves be moved by it, I felt my heartache rewarded with solidarity and even more energy for action. When my grief was still raw and new, in order to feel the full depth of my pain I needed to believe that the actions I began to take once I finally let Jawbone break my heart were useless. But I no longer believe this. As I teach participants in my culture-shift workshops, every choice has an outcome – for a choice not to have an outcome of any kind is inconceivable. It was my dissertation director, Will, who pointed out to me (in a demonstration of the value of

support) that among other outcomes of my choice to feel and respond to my pain for Jawbone, what I did gave birth to this story. And now the story belongs to you.

VIII. The ravens



Two ravens in flight over the Scodie Mountains.

I'm meditating on the ridge above my base camp by the Joshua tree with the arrows in it. It is midday, and I'm facing west toward the Sierra Nevada. Closer to dusk, a conspiracy of ravens will convene downslope to the east, behind me. They meet in the

same place every evening, and to my human eye, nothing distinguishes this patch of Jawbone from any other – nothing, that is, other than that the ravens and the place have chosen each other. I have come to enjoy watching the dark shapes descend, some to alight in Joshua trees and others to pace the sand. And I have particularly come to enjoy their sounds. Before Jawbone, I had heard plenty of cawing, but I had never known ravens to croak or belch or make staccato vocalizations that sound a bit like a mallet striking a wooden xylophone.

But there is one raven sound that I have fallen for most helplessly, and that is the sound of raven flight. Jawbone's silence is such that I can hear the individual wingbeats of a raven passing overhead. The sound is both sustained and sharp, like a freestyler's stroke. When I first heard it, it startled me. Looking up, I simply could not believe, at first, that I was hearing a bird fly. It seemed as unlikely as hearing the moon rise. But why not? A raven is a large bird, after all, and air is thick. All I have to do to remind myself of that is inhale deeply.

I've become so enamored of this sound that sometimes, when I spy a raven – or, more often, a pair or threesome of ravens – wheeling in my direction, I grab my phone and stand poised to record the sound as they pass overhead. But they never do. Always, just as they are about to reach me, they change course, taking their wingbeats with them. The ravens only pass directly overhead when I am not expecting them.

Now, as I meditate, a pair of ravens is approaching from the south. I feel a familiar flame spreading through me from my pelvis into my fingers: I want to reach for my phone and set it to record. Maybe, at long last, this will be the time when I succeed at capturing the sound.

The work I task myself with, on this bench, is to stay present to what is arising in my experience. And so, as my thoughts turn to the approaching raven pair and the gorgeous sound I anticipate hearing as they draw near, I don't reach for my phone. Instead, I let myself crave.

As I lean into the craving, a few things begin to happen. First, it occurs to me that what is happening is extremely funny. Recording the sound of raven flight has become a bit of an obsession, and it occurs to me that I could probably become obsessed with nearly *anything*. As the comedy reveals itself to me, a sadness emerges as well. I become aware that at the heart of this craving to capture the sound is something that feels less like the itch of craving and more like the ache of longing: a longing for other humans. I want to record the sound of raven flight because I want to send it to the humans whose voices and eyes and hands I miss. Suddenly, I feel heartbroken and alive.

The ravens pass directly overhead, their flight sounding like two heartbeats just slightly out of sync. They come to rest not far north of me, crowning two Joshua trees.

Abruptly, I make a decision that stays in place for the rest of my time at Jawbone. I'm not ever going to try to record that sound again. The flame retreats from my fingertips, returning to my pelvis, where I feel it as an unsettling ache. But I have no interest in evicting this ache anymore. It's my connection to the people I love.

The moment I drop the urge to reach for my phone and allow my gaze to rest on the western horizon again, one of the ravens takes off from its Joshua tree. In my peripheral vision, I see that it is flying south, back toward where I am kneeling atop the ridge. As it approaches me, it descends. Its wings slice through the air fifty feet to my

right, then 25, and I feel my pulse quicken as I realize the raven is not on course to pass over me. It is headed directly toward me.

The wind is strong, coming in from the west. The raven brakes sharply, five feet to my right and two feet above my head. It hovers. Both of us are facing west, into the wind. I'm reminded of strangers sharing a park bench. Slowly, I turn my head to look up. The raven hovers so close to me that I can see the creases in its toes, which are curled into loose fists. I register surprise that its feet are gray, not black like the rest of the bird.

The raven is balancing in the wind like a boat in a choppy sea, bobbing up and down ever so slightly just a few feet above my right shoulder. It is not looking at me, but I feel its awareness of me. Nothing prepares me for the moment when it pumps its wings like a bellows. Once, twice, and then silence as it rises and glides back downridge, trailing my longing behind it like a kite.

Interlude: Appetites

And did you get what
You wanted from this life, even so?
I did.
And what did you want?
To call myself beloved, to feel myself
Beloved on the earth.
– Raymond Carver, “Late Fragment”

As human life comes to be structured increasingly by mechanistic means, the psyche restructures itself to survive. The technological construct erodes primary sources of satisfaction once found routinely in life in the wilds, such as physical nourishment, vital community, fresh food, continuity between work and meaning, unhindered participation in life experiences, personal choices, community decisions, and spiritual connection with the natural world. These are the needs we were born to have satisfied. In the absence of these we will not be healthy. In their absence, bereft and in shock, the psyche finds some temporary satisfaction in pursuing secondary sources like drugs, violence, sex, material possessions, and machines. While these stimulants may satisfy in the moment, they can never truly fulfill primary needs. And so the addictive process is born. We become obsessed with secondary sources as if our lives depended on them.
– Chellis Glendinning (1995, p. 53)

I’m very familiar with hunger. It has been just over a decade since what I think of as my hungry years – a period lasting from my pre-teens through my early twenties when I struggled, largely privately, with eating disorders. For years, my habitual way of relating to my appetites – whether those appetites were for food, love, justice, power, contact with nonhuman nature, rest, safety, meaning, beauty, or belonging – was to starve myself until my body, panicked and confused, forced me to binge. I felt ashamed of bingeing, and in order to relieve the shame, I ran. I ran nearly every day for years, often

running for three to four hours a day even after multiple physical therapists told me that damage to my knees meant that I could never run again. As a junior in college, after years of accumulated self-abuse, I finally found that starving, bingeing, and running had so taken over every moment of every day that I could no longer function as a student – or as a friend, partner, or citizen. It took going on medical leave for three semesters before I became able to start surrounding myself with the support that made it possible for me to inhabit a new relationship to appetite. The people who are closest to me now see my life as a kind of love letter to appetite, and those who know my story understand why I return, every day, to add to that love letter.

I'm sharing this because I want you to know that I understand that it is not easy to know our own appetites, much less to befriend them. I understand how hard it can be to really *be with* hunger. In the physical sense, I was hungry nearly all the time for a third of my life, so it might seem that I was an expert at being with hunger. But the real appetites underlying my eating disorders – the appetites that nothing consumable could ever hope to quench – felt impossible for me to be with or even to understand. Until I found the supports of feminism, body-positive communities, meditation practice, and therapy, I devoted myself to what this culture encourages women, in particular, to do with our desires – I reduced all my appetites to a physical hunger that I then made it my full-time mission to conquer.⁵¹ And even after I stopped trying to conquer my appetites (including my appetite for food – boy howdy, do I love food now!) and became quite good at identifying them, the struggle was not over. I am never going to be done building relationships, and shaping a culture, that are responsive to my deepest hungers.⁵² A lot of the time, I still feel too weary and withdrawn to summon the motivation to get the

aching-est parts of me fed. So I am not going to pretend that I think it should be easy for you to just figure out what you are *really* hungry for, and then go after it.

What I want to offer here, instead, is empathy, and an honest accounting of my own path. In this cultural context, at this time, being with longing is maybe the hardest thing of all. A lot of us are functioning like addicts, responding to any stirring of need, any hint of edginess, by compulsively consuming anything at all that will temporarily plug up the feeling. Before it even occurs to us to ask what we might be hungry for – what is actually missing, or even *whether* anything is actually missing – we’re reaching for a fix. We reach for our phones, for entertainment, for gym equipment, sex, food, “retail therapy,” actual therapy, beauty products, you name it – it’s easier for a lot of us to name what our fix is than what our needs are.⁵³ We get restless and edgy if we try to sit still. We can’t calm down if we go more than a few moments without feeling full. The gaps, the empty spaces in our experience – we don’t experience these as an invitation to get to know what it’s like to simply be, without doing. We don’t look to them as opportunities to get clearer about our longings or the nature of our existence. Instead, we experience the gaps as a problem. We live as though wanting is a problem to be avoided, or to be fixed immediately upon detection. And those of us who tell ourselves that we have conquered our appetites are often, if unknowingly, living totally at the mercy of fear – fear of our own wild, irrepressible hungers.

Pema Chödrön, in her book *When Things Fall Apart* (1997), was the first person to break the news to me that feeling edgy and empty and full of wanting isn’t a problem. Try hanging out there, she suggested. Refrain from indulging the feeling, refrain from squirming away from it, refrain from beating yourself up, and see what happens – that’s

what meditation is.⁵⁴ I tried what she was suggesting. I took her at her word when she told me it wasn't going to click right away. I kept at it for a while. I worked especially hard at not beating myself up (it seems to me that a lot of meditators skip this step). The first thing that happened was that I discovered that the feelings I had designed my entire existence around avoiding – the edgy wanting, the incoherent, seemingly overwhelming mashup of all kinds of appetites and cravings – were not going to destroy me. I actually *could* sit with their intensity and relax at the same time. And the second thing that happened was that the more time I spent with this confusion of appetites, the more I became able to discern the difference between, on the one hand, the mindless, conditioned cravings that were my habitual response to a basic groundlessness that I discovered was always at the heart of my experience, and, on the other hand, the truly compelling longings in me, like my need to feel part of the natural world. It reminded me of slowly learning Finnish, largely through immersion, when a Rotary scholarship sent me to Finland for an exchange year in high school. The grammar of appetite was not really so convoluted. It was just unfamiliar – until it wasn't.

I know now that when I let go of craving and surrender to a deeper appetite, or maybe just surrender to the experience of longing without quite knowing what I'm longing for, I create an opening. I feel groundless and shaky in that space, but it's only through that opening that I can receive something from the world – almost always a surprise, almost always an offering that speaks the language of my most basic needs. I surrender to longing, and a space is created for a raven's curiosity, for an oxygenating exchange, for gratitude for the ache that connects me to what matters to me most. I'm still perfectly capable of distracting myself with addictions that guarantee I'll go

malnourished. But these days, I find I'm spending more and more time facing into the wind, my heart breaking open to the intimacy on the other side of longing.

IX. Milk



Milk, with incursions visible and torn down fencing in the foreground.

This morning, when I squat to pee, blood trickles into the pit I've dug, staining the sand dark red. I've been waiting for my first period without running water, wondering what this would be like. The guidebooks I read before coming out had a lot to say about what to do with pee and poop in a wilderness setting, but nothing to say about menstrual blood.

I clean my vulva with a wet wipe and insert a tampon – in the past I've tried two brands of rubber and silicone menstrual cups, but no matter how carefully I follow the instructions, I end up with bloody underwear. I tuck the wet wipe and the tampon shell into my wag bag – a Ziploc bag I've reinforced with duct tape, where my used toilet paper mingles with a half cup of baking soda, to cut the odor. When I stand up, I briefly

consider covering the blood with sand, but I decide to leave it be. This isn't *Jaws*, after all. My period isn't going to page every mountain lion within a hundred-mile radius.

Menstruating out here turns out to feel pretty much like menstruating at home. The main difference is that out here, I feel no motivation to hide it. I don't conceal my tampon between my thumb and my palm as though I'm about to perform a sleight-of-hand trick; the odor of blood is just one more addition to my rapidly diversifying smellscape.

When I first arrived here, as a woman camping alone, I wished I could hide myself completely. I remember the instant regret I felt after the man who checked me into my motel in Ridgecrest asked me where I was going and whether I was really going alone, and I answered honestly. *Stupid, Dorothy!* I decided then and there that I would always lie when asked if I was alone out here. Any people I encounter at Jawbone are likely to have at least two things in common: they will be male, and they will be gun-toting.

Two weeks before coming, I came close to filling out an application for a firearm. After I told Darren that I was much more afraid of being assaulted by a man than by a mountain lion, he set up a phone date for me with his friend Sydney, a woman who has done solo camping. For years, Sydney resisted purchasing a gun, but she eventually grew so worn down by repeated experiences of fear that she bought a pistol and learned to use it. If I wasn't going to bring a gun, she recommended bear spray – it sprays farther than pepper spray, and for longer, and it hurts worse. After Darren called Wal-Mart for me to find out if they carried pistols, I fretted my way to the conclusion that I just couldn't imagine showing up to Jawbone with a lethal weapon. I bought a can of bear spray and

took another of Sydney's tips – I packed a second tent to set up, to make it look like I had company. Before getting off the phone with Sydney, I asked her if she'd read any writing by women who'd done this kind of thing solo. "I've read a few things," she said. "But you know, it's weird – they never write about the fear."

Several weeks in, I've encountered two humans. The first was a friendly white man with white hair in a white pickup who rolled down his window to ask me if that was my beat-up Prius parked two miles down the road (it was). The second was a white police officer or BLM ranger (not sure which) who pulled up to my campsite in a truck marked CA State Parks, told me she was doing site checks, and asked me how I was doing before getting back into her truck and driving east. I laughed at myself when the officer turned out to be female – as soon as I saw the truck, I assumed I knew who'd be getting out of it. Neither of these people felt even remotely threatening to me, and that feeling of safety referred me to the advantages of being a white woman – when I told a friend of color in my grad program about my project, she told me she wouldn't even risk applying to clinical internships in rural areas, much less spend a month on her own in the Mojave.

I haven't worn a bra since arriving, and I've started leaving my shirt unbuttoned in the shade. The stubble that I normally tweeze from my chin every morning – my secret goatee – has grown in, and in absent moments I catch myself rubbing it. I still reach for my personal tracker if I think I hear an OHV engine over the sound of the wind, but all in all, being a woman here is actually a lot more fun than it is back home.

When I first came here with Darren, he introduced me to a peak called Nellie's Nipple. I've since learned that the Kawaiisu people who inhabited this part of the Mojave before white settlement called this same peak Pihivi, which translates as Milk. Now I use

the name Milk, too. If I face north while meditating, Milk is clearly visible as one of the shorter peaks marking the boundary of the Scodie range. For me, it's more than just the prominent nipple that makes Milk the breastiest of the Scodies – Milk is lopsided, like a real breast, with more flesh on the western side. And from a distance, undulations in the sloping terrain surrounding the nipple resemble stretch marks.

I've now hiked to the base of the peak twice. Close up, it's obvious that Milk gets a lot of attention from the men who come out here to ride ATV's and shoot guns. The remnants of federal attempts to protect Milk are strewn about the base: faded signs marked RESOURCE RESTORATION PROJECT, and yard upon yard of fenceposts and barbed wire that have been torn down by off-roaders determined to reach the nipple. It's a popular summit to attempt, and I do my best not to imagine the kinds of jokes that get told in the attempting. From up close, the incursions – illegal routes – that have been traced and retraced from the base of the breast to the nipple resemble scars.

The first time I encountered the torn down fencing surrounding Milk, a vivid fantasy came to me: I become the guardian of the breast. I wait here, between uprooted fence posts, all day and all night, magically not sleeping. Anyone who attempts to get by me is warned, and anyone who ignores my warning is shot – not by a gun in my hand, but by my black heart, which is a loaded .22. The bones of would-be trespassers pile up around me while, over decades into centuries, the great breast heals.

I jotted my fantasy down in my field notes before taking a few photos of the incursions and hiking on.

Today, a few hours after my period arrives, I walk up the ridge to get a view of Milk. From the crest of the ridge, I tip my stubbly chin toward the breast in greeting. From this distance, the scars are just barely visible.

On the way back down, I pass the pool of blood that I left on the sand earlier this morning. A line of ants stretches from the red-stained sand at my feet to some ever-hungry colony beyond my line of sight.

Interlude: The right to depend

There are so many things I want
you to have. This is mine, this
tree, I give you its name,

here is food, white like roots, red,
growing in the marsh, on the shore,
I pronounce these names for you also.

This is mine, this island, you can have
the rocks, the plants
that spread themselves flat over
the thin soil, I renounce them.

You can have this water,
this flesh, I abdicate,

I watch you, you claim
without noticing it,
you know how to take.

– The witch goddess Circe speaking to Odysseus; excerpted from Margaret Atwood’s
“Circe/Mud Poems”

[This] culture defines worth, especially masculine worth, in terms of radical
autonomy...Domination becomes a way to deny dependence, a dependence that has been
culturally defined as a failure and a humiliation, rather than as a natural and inevitable
part of life.

– Mary E. Gomes and Allen D. Kanner (1995, p. 114-115)

When independence and domination are conditions of agency and full citizenship
in a culture, what happens to all those human qualities and experiences that don’t fit the
rubric? For example, what happens to dependency – all the ways in which human beings

lean on each other and the nonhuman world in order to survive and flourish, all the ways in which our resilience resides in our reliance upon others?⁵⁵

In urban-industrial cultures like my own, dependency causes such alarm that I feel justified in calling this a dependency-phobic culture. As a group, we are phobic both of being dependent and of being depended upon. We strive for self-sufficiency, not neediness; autonomy, not the limitations imposed by bonds to others. “Dependency” is a word we reserve for drug addicts, children, and the infirm. Yet we are, all of us, utterly dependent on people we know, a huge number of people we’ll never meet, and the generosity of the planet. As my friend Mark says when he teaches workshops on culture-shift, “People who claim to have achieved ‘independence’ have in fact achieved *power* over a vast array of resources upon which they are entirely dependent” (M. Fairfield, personal communication, May 19, 2016).

So where does our awareness of our dependency go, as we grow up absorbing the message that it is a part of ourselves we must reject? We’re scrappy, we animals. We have more than one way of handling the dilemma, and any such strategies that I describe here are far more nuanced than my description will suggest. But in general, in human societies – and this is an implication of Mark’s pithy statement about the relationship between independence and power – the degree to which we can put on a show of having overcome our own dependency (and it is always a show, even in those who are themselves convinced) corresponds to how much privilege and power we are accorded.

There is a long history of, and a prodigious scholarship concerning, the ways in which patriarchal societies associate women with the earth and then position both the bodies of women and the body of the earth as resources for extraction by men, while at

the same time avidly denying that men are dependent upon either.⁵⁶ One way of living male privilege involves incorporating the less powerful other into oneself: I needn't worry about feeding myself, finding clothing, or scheduling dentist appointments because the needs of my body are the responsibility of my wife; I can do what I want to the land because it has no existence or needs separate from my own.⁵⁷ Another way of living this same privilege involves disowning one's dependency and projecting it into the bodies of women and the body of the earth.⁵⁸ Then women can be positioned as needy and dependent foils for self-sufficient manhood, and the earth can be positioned as unable to fend for itself and in need of management by men. Whether accomplished through incorporation or projection, and whether accomplished with or without conscious awareness (the exercise of privilege doesn't take effort – that's the whole point), using less powerful others to disown one's dependency always implies a profound degree of free *access* to the other: I am entitled, and fences be damned.⁵⁹

As a white, straight, upwardly mobile human, my own privilege exempts me from the active struggles of some marginalized groups to counter the ways in which their identities are erased and then redrawn in distorted ways by the projections of privilege. Yet, as a woman by both socialization and identification, there are many stories I could share from a perspective that comes from within marginalization. I have an abundance of clear, strong feeling about women's bodies and the body of the planet as policed and threatened territories where capitalist-industrial culture gropes after access and control.

But identity politics is not where I want to begin or end this. As desperately as I long for certain changes in what it's like to live as a woman, I'm not trying to make an argument here about women's rights, or even about environmental rights. The fear of

males that I feel entirely too often is the direct result of what patriarchal cultures do with dependency: they twist the vulnerability of dependency into patterns of desensitization and domination. And so my concern is broader than the rights of select groups: *all nature has the right to depend.*

The demonization of dependency by one species of animal is a disaster for everyone, privileged or not, human or not. It is not actually good for us, or for anyone, to have untrammelled access to the bodies of others and of the earth – this kind of “privilege” extracts life from us commensurate with the benefits it confers. And only when dependency is acknowledged does reciprocity become possible. It is only when dependency is lived with awareness that access can be negotiated, and exploitation prevented.⁶⁰ The call to end the subjugation of women and of the earth is the call to restore to humanity that debased, feminized treasure that is our dependency.⁶¹ This piece of our nature is excluded from the ideals of industrialized culture precisely because it threatens to dismantle powers that value financial interests over life. That the earth’s generosity has been nursing us all along, and that our own bodies have such richness to offer to others – it’s a tragedy that humanity should live this source of resilience as a mark of shame.⁶²

Imagine demanding your right to depend.

X. *A Nights Inn*



A sign marking the western boundary of the city of Ridgecrest, CA.

On the afternoon of September 15, I guide the Prius down an old ranching road that seems as though it should lead nowhere, but in actuality dumps me out onto the berm of Highway 14. I imagine that if anyone is paying attention, the sight of a Prius emerging onto the highway from what appears to be straight desert merits an eyebrow raise.

I turn left, navigating toward the town of Ridgecrest, twenty miles to the east, where I will resupply water and butane, see about fixing a tent pole that broke in the flash flood at the Roost, pick up some hot-weather-hardy carrots and apples, and bathe for the first time since I arrived. The speed limit on CA-14 is 65, but I can barely bring myself to hit 40. I punch my four-ways on and set cruise control to 35. Let everyone think I'm a motorist in distress. I've been moving at the speed of my own body for two weeks, and the speed of driving now feels manic.

I check into A Nights Inn, where the front desk attendant calls me “lil’ cowgirl” and offers to do my laundry for me, for free. I load him down with two weeks of dirty underwear and take a shower, tweezing my chin in the bathroom mirror and pulling on a bra before dressing. Instantly, I feel prettier and less myself.

That evening, I walk to a restaurant whose Google notecard describes it as “unassuming.” There, I inhale a plate of pad see ew. After so many days without fresh food, the crispness of broccoli and sprouts feels luxurious. After dinner, I discover that the sun set without my taking any notice. I take another walk, this time to a Starbucks. As I walk, I realize I have no clue in which direction I’m headed – the buildings here aren’t that high, but they’re high enough that I can’t orient myself in darkness by the silhouettes of the surrounding mountains. Feeling a bit like an alien, I pause to really look at a flag pole in the parking lot of a shopping center, marveling that I have never found flag poles bizarre before. The same goes for the shrubbery lining the sidewalks. I stare at the weird symmetry of these bushes – they were put here by someone, like everything else in this cityscape, and although they are alive, it is clear that they are intended to be as decorative as the flagpole. Objectively, it seems that I haven’t been living at Jawbone for very long. Yet walking through even this relatively small city feels uncanny. I wonder whether any of the people passing me by as I ogle a row of bushes notices that practically everything we can see has been manufactured or cultivated just for us. I feel like I’m on a set that we’re all pretending is real. *The Truman Show* comes to mind.

Starbucks sells me a hot chocolate. As I stroll back to my motel, I’m surprised to discover that I find it too sweet. Apparently my tastes have mellowed since arriving. I

unlock the door of my motel room, head to the bathroom sink, and dump the remainder of the hot chocolate down the drain. Then I turn around to take in my lodging.

Last night, while the wind howled and jostled and would not stop for long enough for me to hear even one of my own thoughts, I fantasized about this motel room: the bed wide enough to roll over on, the hot running water, air conditioning. I could not wait for a hiatus from the discomforts and inconveniences of living outside. Now that I am here, I feel lonely and far away from myself. I miss Kanga. The room is standard motel fare but to me it feels ludicrously muscled, a fortress, as though I asked for a bicycle and was brought a tank. *Why on earth, I wonder, would I ever desire to be this sealed off?*

I talk on the phone with Daniel. When he asks me to read him my list of animal encounters, I give him an annotated rundown, feeling as though I am introducing him to my family. It's while I'm on the phone with him, under the covers inside my daytime-bright locked box, that I begin to cry for the sad strangeness of being in a city. "It's only been two weeks," I tell him. "How can so much have shifted in two weeks?" I am more entwined with Jawbone than I had realized, and it took leaving to really figure that out. I fall asleep watching time-lapse videos of Datura blossoms on my phone.

When I wake up, I don't wake up into the weather, and I have no idea where the sun is.

I check out of my motel and flit from errand to errand through the morning, ending with grocery shopping. As I pull up to a grocery store called Albertsons, a man with a black fedora atop long brown hair perches on a bench outside, singing, "the answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind." I listen from my car until he's finished, then walk over and hand him two bucks. "I needed that," I say. "Thanks."

“Right on,” he replies, flashing me a smile. His teeth are astonishingly white.

Later, as I drive west, back to Jawbone, four-ways flashing and cruise control set to 50 this time, I decide I’m not going to sleep underneath a ceiling again until I’m home – not even on the drive back.

Interlude: Lost and found

Shall the water not remember *Ember*
my hand's slow gesture, tracing above *of*
its mirror my half-imaginary *airy*
portrait? My only belonging *longing*,
is my beauty, which I take *ache*
away and then return as love *of*
of teasing playfully the one being *unbeing*.
whose gratitude I treasure *Is your*
moves me. I live apart *heart*
from myself, yet cannot *not*
live apart. In the water's tone, *stone?*
that shining silence, a flower *Hour*,
whispers my name with such slight *light*:
moment, it seems filament of air, *fare*
the world become cloudswell. *well*.
– Fred Chappell, "Narcissus and Echo"

With more and more of the natural world being replaced by structures built for human beings, we increasingly relate like Narcissus only to our own reflection, to our own kind, to ever more of the same...*Rather than mutually enhancing I-Thou dialogues with nature, we are creating mutually impoverishing monologues with ourselves.*
– Will W. Adams (2006, p. 125, italics in original)

I had begun to reinhabit a kind of conversation.

Living outside, I'd begun to notice the way the nonhuman world was ever adjusting itself to me, and I to it. I'd begun to do my writing farther away from the Joshua tree with the arrows in it so as not to disturb the collared lizard who basked there – I'd noted that the lizard retreated when I came within five feet. Ravens veered away from me if I betrayed my interest in them, but I had learned to grow motionless and look slightly askance to draw them toward me. Hard-packed sand, I had learned with some dismay,

would spray my urine right back up at me. And so I had begun habitually to take note of the texture of the sand beneath my boots as I hiked, and I saw that the sand that lay along paths I traced and re-traced became looser in response to my impact, as my boots dislodged the root systems of tiny plants that had been holding the sand in place. Each day, the heat presented itself, and could not be eluded. But I had learned to save my chores for the coolest parts of the day, and I had become familiar enough with the local Joshua trees to have a mental map of the most luxurious shadows. Each day the wind too, presented itself and could not be eluded. But I had learned to lay nothing down without weight on top of it, to use trees and bushes as wind breaks, and to look rather than listen for rattlesnakes when the air was at its roaringest. I had even learned to sniff the wind for the scent of creosote leaves, which could tell me if rain was moving in, and from which direction.

Stripped of much of my usual technological cocoon, and consistently confronted with a landscape that – apart from sand roads – had not been designed for me, my expectations, my behaviors, my schedule, my attention, and my senses were all being reshaped.⁶³ I was being claimed, folded into an intimate relationship with the nonhuman, non-manufactured aspects of a place. But this intimate relating was so essential to my outdoor living from the start that I hardly noticed the change until I took my reshaped expectations, behaviors, schedule, attention, and senses on a brief sojourn to the city.

In Madeleine L'Engle's (1962) novel *A Wrinkle in Time* (a favorite of mine since childhood), the protagonist, Meg, is mistakenly transported to a "two-dimensional planet." Her heart cannot beat, her lungs cannot expand, and she nearly dies before her guides realize the mishap and whisk her off into three-dimensional space again (p. 79-

80). In Ridgecrest that night, I remembered Meg. I felt suddenly that some vital part of me was being compressed so aggressively that it could not function. And although I knew where I was – could have recited my motel room number and showed you Ridgecrest on a map – I had utterly lost my bearings. It was only when the experience of Ridgecrest newly confronted me with how my society typically relates to nonhuman nature – either by controlling it or barricading it – that I realized how deeply *orienting* a more nuanced and aware mode of relating to place had become to me. Intimacy – relating as kin to the beings, presences, and cycles of the place I was in – had become almost like a sixth sense, a conversational means of navigating my days-in-relation. The city seemed to ask me to relinquish that sense of intimacy with otherness in exchange for the promise of control over it.⁶⁴

Later, when I share the story of what happened when I returned to Pittsburgh from Jawbone at the end of my month, I will focus more on the disturbing aspects of what becomes visible when we view the human-centered world from a perspective expanded by ecological intimacy – how attempting to return to city life was like surveying an oil spill from a helicopter, how for the first time, I could see the outlines of the disaster. Later, I will also say more about what healing is possible in the face of that disturbance.

For now, though, this is where I want to land: I could feel lost in the city only to the extent that I felt found in the world bordering the city. But the difference in my experience was not down to one place being wild and the other not, or one place peopled and the other not. The difference was a quality of relationship between the human and the non.⁶⁵ We can feel lost or found in any variant of this relationship – after all, I once was found in the city, and now was lost. But the encouraging discovery I had made, in a

couple of weeks of living intimately with a place where federal protections have tempered human impact, was that it was both possible and enormously rewarding to reinhabit the conversation of which humans are only one part. And as I sped back into the Scodie Mountains with Ridgecrest receding behind me, my relief was not because I now felt more “found” with lizards than with human beings. It was because I now felt more lost in monologue than in conversation.⁶⁶

XI. The El Pasos



Sunrise over the El Pasos.

Most evenings, I meditate facing Milk, to the north – a choice made early on, out of sheer affection for this particular peak. But tonight, as I approach my sitting spot on the ridge that rises up from my base camp by the Joshua tree with the arrows in it, I feel a strong urge to sit facing the El Pasos, to the east.

Yesterday, I hiked several miles north in search of a perennial spring Darren had mentioned to me before I left, and decided to sleep there, despite not turning up any water. Bedding down in a broad canyon in an unfamiliar part of Jawbone, I had felt uneasy and a bit lost – sleeping in an unimpacted area, my chance of encounters with rattlers was higher than usual. As the sun sank low, I felt that I was sinking deep into this wide scrub-strewn canyon, and I took great comfort in the face of the El Pasos, still visible to the east. They were a prominent presence on my horizon at the Roost, and they

occupy even more of my eastern view from my base camp. In their familiar gaze, I felt found. So tonight, when I notice my inclination to meditate facing them, I decide to go with the inclination.

I drop onto my kneeling bench, and my eyes settle on the highest point of the range, a broad, slightly indented sweep of mountain that calls to mind the crown of a Panama hat. The silhouette of the 18-mile-long range is so familiar to me now that I feel I could never mistake any other range for the El Pasos. The western face of the range, the part I am viewing now, lies about ten miles from me. I know from my reading that the Spanish named this range the El Pasos to indicate that it was “the passing through place” – though what kind of passing through they meant to connote, I’m not sure.

As I breathe and gaze at the familiar silhouette, something unexpected happens. Last night, and all of the nights before that, I had looked at the El Pasos and seen one more-or-less continuous slope of rock, rising from the desert plain like a single broad ocean wave reaching from north to south. Ripples and bumps in the slope had seemed to suggest peaks lined up single file, in a two-dimensional row from left to right across my visual field. Now, the range suddenly *unfolds* before my eyes, sliding east away from me, like a rattlesnake extending its body to full length from a coiled position. As the range stretches hungrily east, I have a corresponding feeling of sliding westward on my bench, in the same way that when I am wading on a beach, waves rushing down past my ankles toward the sea give me the sense of falling backwards. Now, although I am looking at the same ripples and bumps, they no longer appear to be lined up in a two-dimensional row. I am seeing peaks *beyond* peaks *beyond* peaks. I have looked out upon this range dozens of

times a day, every day, for nearly three weeks, thinking I was seeing it. Yet somehow, until this evening, I have not been able to see its depth.

The crown of the Panama hat, I realize, is not sitting at the western boundary of the range. It is much farther away from me than I had assumed. Multiple peaks, gradually increasing in height, undulate away from me, probably covering two miles or more of distance between the western edge of the range and that highest point. My lazy vision had collapsed all of that distance into a single rock face, as though the range was literally just a silhouette – not a place to pass *through*.

I feel simultaneously disoriented and delighted. I think about all the days I have spent wandering the distance from mountain to mountain here, learning the difference between how far away a peak appears and how far away it actually is by placing one foot in front of the other until I get there. Learning through experience that from any distance, the mountains will always be farther away than they appear – that my mind needs to relearn scale here, in order for me to make good judgments about how many hours to plan for and how much water to pack. Most of the routes that call to me here are roadless – I cannot speed over the landscape as though skimming a surface. I have to pass through, immersed. Over and over again I have had to remind myself that there is hidden depth in the landscape separating me from the horizon, and it is only recently that I've started making accurate estimates of distance. Just now, I feel for all the world as though the El Pasos have unlocked themselves and opened up to me, as if to say, "Come on in." Giddily, I allow myself the fantasy that maybe, they've decided I've finally earned it.

Interlude: Passing through

where do we see it from is the question

– from Adrienne Rich, “An Atlas of the Difficult World”

The recognition of being within carries with it a number of psychological repercussions. Quite noticeably, a sense of being within produces a distinct vulnerability; it is a recognition of one’s psychological permeability and lack of control. But there is also a kind of ecstatic liberation, a freeing from the need to control. One feels a relinquishing of defenses and separation.

– Laura Sewall (1995, p. 213)

There is a modern, scientifically-endorsed way of living as though the earth is flat – not plummet-off-the-edge flat, but flat nonetheless. Distance, to my conventional way of thinking, is the line that Google Maps draws between my starting point and my destination. Indeed, linear distance – distance conceived in terms of flattened out miles (or kilometers, to the rest of the world) overlaid across the surface of land like a tablecloth – is the kind of distance most of us are used to, as we drive or fly at machine speed across landscapes that would take much longer to traverse, reveal much more to us, and ask much more of us, at animal speed.⁶⁷

The linear conception of distance requires an earth that we can be on top of, like game pieces on a Monopoly board. To be “on top,” in my culture, implies dominance, success, mastery. This way of conceiving of distance is hooked into a worldview, recognizable as the dominant scientific worldview, that positions humans above and separate from a world that can be understood – and mastered – from the outside.⁶⁸

But is distance not measurable, not able to be de-lineated? What else could distance be, if not the number of miles between here and there?

When I returned to Pittsburgh after a month in Jawbone, I started getting mild headaches. A wearer of glasses and contacts since the age of 13, I thought to go to the eye doctor – and it turned out I needed a new prescription because my vision had *improved*.

This is not unheard of (although I had never heard of it), and it could be the result of any number of factors. But I have a pet theory, if you'll indulge me. Myopia, or near-sightedness, is caused by foreshortened muscles in the eye. This muscle atrophy happens when the eye muscles focus too often on near distance and are deprived of healthy opportunities to focus on points yonder. Lives lived primarily indoors, and in particular lives organized around screens and books, don't allow the eye muscles a normal range of flexion and extension (Bowman, 2016). But according to ophthalmology research, more hours spent outdoors translates into a lower frequency of myopia in kids and adolescents.⁶⁹ It's unscientific, I know, but I love to think that I'm a big kid whose eyes got some much-needed exercise from a month of living outdoors with a 360 degree view of desert horizon, bookended by two weeks of driving for eight hours a day toward the distant kiss of ground and sky. (And yes, I am still waiting to see if my eyes worsen again now that they are no longer getting a workout.)

Our bodies and bodily senses, as the ocular muscles illustrate, are primed for depth. That is, we are oriented toward a world that envelops us as it extends away from us, a world that we can discover only from within. Depth is not a phenomenon created by the brain, it is the dimension in which vision is always already housed because our bodies are enfolded into it rather than separate from it.⁷⁰ And it is this lived experience of depth

that ultimately renders linear conceptions of distance awkward and strange to people who spend extended periods of time moving through landscapes at body pace.⁷¹ This experience of lived distance begins to pry apart the notion that human lives take place *on* a planet, as opposed to *within* a biosphere.

Many of us are only rarely able to see the place in the distance where the sky and the ground meet, simply because we spend much of our time indoors and live in environments in which buildings block our view of the horizon even when we venture outside. But the encircling horizon is a visual cue that we are internal to something: the horizon traces a seam that joins the layers of earth swelling up beneath us to the fluid atmosphere that cloaks us and circulates inside our lungs. This atmosphere is not in some way floating separate from the planet but is fully intertwined with and interdependent with the body of the planet; it is as much a limb of the biosphere as the oceans.⁷² As we move around with land stretching out beneath and around us, and often rearing up above our heads, and with atmosphere surging all around, the biosphere is indubitably something that we are inside of.

The linear conception of distance misses the fact that if we are making sensual, animal contact with the places we move within – as opposed to moving across space in a detached, separative way – then we ourselves become different as we pass through the world's depths. Depth – living within the intersecting forces of weather, geology, topography, ecology – demands that each and every mile be lived in a slightly different way, which is why as we pass through mile after mile, we discover that the denizens of each bioregion have developed entirely different wisdoms. In this place, my body is

asked to adapt to strong winds; in this place, to altitude; in this place, to an abundance of water. In each place, I move within a slightly different element.

Why should it matter whether we think of ourselves as living on a planet or as living within a larger, vibrant body? Isn't it only a trick of language? Darren once mused to me that most people, if you gave them an aquarium, would understand that there are certain things you can't do to the aquarium water if you want the fish to survive. He went on to say that by extension, most people can grasp that there are certain things you can do to ocean water that will kill the fish living in the ocean. I followed his point: many critical human choices depend upon whether we believe in an element that contains us; it matters whether we believe that we are *within*. To be within is to be abjectly dependent upon our element, just like the fish.⁷³ To be within is vulnerable – suddenly what happens “out there” is also happening to me. Once within, we can no longer imagine an objective distance separating our fate from the fate of what contains us.⁷⁴

But there is another way of framing this withinness: as a calling we are literally made for, and are now waking up to. Human babies gestate in a liquid element and are born knowing how to swim, knowing what to do about depth. When we hold ourselves aloof, we pay the many-horrored cost of never getting to *belong*. Out beyond the fear of getting off our high horse, the world is waiting to let us all the way in. Just a bit further into the vulnerability we feel, there is good work waiting to be savored, a new way of thinking about what it means for our choices to be guided “from within.”

Sink down into the earth with me. I promise you'll be in good company.

XII. Bird Spring Pass



Pine nuts inside the scales of a pinyon pine cone, center.

With four days left at Jawbone, I decide to hike to a mountain pass called Bird Spring. Draped across a saddle between two gentle peaks of the Scodie mountains, Bird Spring Pass is high Mojave, where the air is cooler and a characteristic mix of pinyon pines and juniper trees – often collectively referred to as “pj” because they grow at the same altitude – dot rubbly slopes. I have been to the pass a handful of times, including on an overnight hike earlier this month, when I spent a particularly cold and windy night watching clouds scud across the moon and fretting pointlessly about attracting coyotes.

I am no longer afraid of coyotes – my fear of the various beings who live here has ripened into something more like a mixture of veneration and curiosity – and I want to experience the pass from this new, ever-so-slightly wiser, place. So I make a list of what I will need to carry, organize my pack, and set off at sunrise, stopping from time to time to

rest and rehydrate amid gatherings of silent boulders. The first time I stop to sit, the tripartite call of a quail from downslope makes my heart leap. I notice other sounds: a raven's wingbeats, the breeze arriving in soft sigh-like gusts, the buzz of a fly, rustling ricegrass. Even my own digestion. I lift a rock to hold down my gear and discover, underneath it, a pale pink scorpion no larger than my pinky nail, waving a single pedipalp as though to scold me.

Following a dusty OHV route, I hike on. And on and on, the whole way uphill, past thickening groves of Joshua trees enamored with this narrow altitudinal band, into the first junipers with their bright blue-white branches, all the way to Bird Spring Pass, where the Joshua trees thin out again and scraggly pinyon pines join the junipers. I am in pj country now, and it is pine nut season. I spend two contented hours harvesting pine nuts from pinyon pine cones, prying shelled seeds (pine nuts are not actually nuts – they are the seeds of pine trees) from beneath the scales of pine cones and gently cracking the shells with my teeth, hoping to find seeds to spill into my collecting bag. About a third of the shells contain a pine nut; the other two thirds contain nothing but a papery sheath. When I am finished, I eat the pine nuts as an appetizer to my dinner of peanut butter and jelly on a tortilla, looking around in marvelment at a food-bearing landscape so many people call “inhospitable:” rice grass, buckwheat, sage, juniper berries, and pine nuts are offering themselves up everywhere I look, and had I arrived earlier in the year, I might have tried the fruit of Joshua trees and prickly pear cactuses.

The Pacific Crest Trail crosses through Jawbone at Bird Spring Pass. After dinner I follow it to a lookout where my view opens up onto big sky framing the southern edge of the Sierra Nevada. This range begins right where Jawbone ends, and extends north for

400 miles. I decide that I will sleep here, close to this view that always sets my heart spinning like a top. Beneath a particularly stocky Joshua tree, I lay out the shower curtain I use instead of a tarp, which would weigh more heavily on my pack. On top of the shower curtain, I set out my mat and sleeping bag, weighing them down with rocks in case of wind. The earthy taste of pine nuts lingers in my mouth, tempting me to skip brushing my teeth tonight. For a few minutes before I lose the sun, I try to wipe the tacky pine resin off both hands. But I give up when I discover that the most efficient way to shred wet wipe after wet wipe without becoming any cleaner is to attempt a clean-up of pinyon pine resin. I will just have to stay sticky.

With the sun down and the moon risen, I wander to the lowest point of Bird Spring Pass, where I can see west into the Sierra Nevada and east into the familiar face of the El Pasos. Here, there is the sand road I hiked up on. The wind is picking up – just an occasional, powerful gust, for now, in the low, hoarse voice of the Sierra Nevada. But I can tell from the rhythm of these gusts that soon the Scodie peaks rising up to my left and right will be full of higher-pitched, whistling wind. I shiver in anticipation.

The moon is bright tonight, and everything has a moonshadow – every stalk of brittle desert grass, every pinyon pine, every wooden bollard fencing the Pacific Crest Trail off from the main road. I attempt to take a photo of my own moonshadow, and the photo that results is an entirely black rectangle. This, then, is another offering of Jawbone's that resists capture. I pocket my phone again and sit down in the sand as the wind gains strength, sooner than I expected. A covey of quails gobbles, hopping from juniper to juniper in search of wind protection for the night. At the same time, a cottontail rabbit hops silently across the road, its moonshadow crisp as a shadow cast at high noon.

The quails select their juniper tree and quiet down. I picture their black faces, recalling that the Kawaiisu, for whom these lands were traditional pinyon harvesting grounds, believed that when Quail lost her children she wept so hard that her face turned black. The moon coolly casts its shadows. And now I am hearing a new sound underneath the ocean rush of wind.

I have heard many sounds this month, from coyote song to owl calls to bat echolocation to raven croaks and the varied voices of smaller birds. This is none of those sounds. From the direction of the pinyon pines I crouched beneath earlier this afternoon, harvesting my dinner, I hear the crystal-clear voice of a child singing in a language I don't know.

I am paralyzed with some combination of terror and disbelief as the voice reaches the end of its simple melody and then begins again. The child sounds about five or six years old, with a high-pitched voice that could belong to any sex at that age, and the song sounds very convincingly like the kind of song a small child would learn, lilting and repetitive, the epitome of sing-song. Each line is eight notes. I am too frightened to move, too afraid that if I reach for my phone to make a recording – which is exactly what I want to do right now – I will shatter some magical crystal pane that has enclosed this night, and I will never hear the child again. My fear of interrupting the singing is roughly equal to another fear that is harder to describe: that if I move, I will attract the attention of whatever presence I am sensing out there in the pinyon pines. I don't want that presence to know I am here, in my penetrable, pierce-able, possessable human body.

I sit frozen, ears straining, barely breathing, until the singing stops. The song lasts perhaps three minutes. Shaking, I creep back up the hill to my sleeping spot, where I bury

myself in my sleeping bag, closing the hood entirely over my face. Very, very quietly, before I fall asleep to the voices of wind, I sing what I can recall into my phone's recorder.

* * *

The next morning, although I clearly remember the child's voice, I find that I cannot feel paralyzed and fearful beneath the friendly sun. Instead, I feel loose, enchanted, and a bit punchy – I couldn't have heard a child, and anyway nobody would believe that I heard a child, but I did hear a child, I did! As I pack to hike back down to my base camp by the Joshua tree with the arrows in it, I am laughing at this bizarre problem of fearing that I will not be believed if I report something that I myself can scarcely believe. Every time I tell the story, if I tell the story, I will have to package it inside of disclaimers. It could have been a nocturnal bird, I will say. It could have been the wind, playing tricks.

I cannot help but return to my pinyon harvesting grounds before leaving. If last night I heard a child singing in a language I do not know – which of course I didn't, because that is ridiculous – then this is roughly where the voice originated. The pines wave at me amiably in the breeze. The only visible tracks are my own and coyote tracks that were already here yesterday. I push past this gathering of trees, walking farther than I have ever walked out onto the flat, high promontory edging the pass. It's not long before I come across another small copse of pinyon pines, this one interlaced with high boulders. The boulders and the trees form what feels like a protective boundary around a little sandy clearing, where I pause to take off my pack and stretch my aching back.

As I sit there tiredly, glazing over a bit in the warm sun, my eyes rest on a number of low rocks at the base of a pinyon pine. There is something a bit uncanny about the arrangement of these rocks. And that, I slowly realize, is what is so uncanny: these rocks appear *arranged*. They are all roughly the same height, lined up next to each other in a nearly complete circle about ten feet in diameter, with one sizable gap that looks, for all the world, like a threshold. They do not look recently placed – they are well-established in the sand, and the back portion of the ring undercuts what is now a healthy adult pinyon pine. Pinyons, I know, usually live at least 400 years. And from what I know about the time frame of the Native Americans who used to harvest these pinyon pines every summer, it seems entirely possible that if what I am looking at is the remains of a shelter, it was built before this tree existed, or perhaps when it was a mere sprout. That would explain why the ring seems to run into the tree.

If. *If* what I am looking at is the remains of a shelter. Because honestly, maybe I have just been out here on my human-own for long enough that I am starting to hear children singing at night, and remake perfectly natural rock formations into former houses in my imagination. Maybe I am just starting to project my own species onto the landscape. Next I will dream up a full bar with a pack rat bartender. Before I hike away, I crouch in the sand, taking photos of the ring from every angle, with the intention of doing my research when I have internet access again.

Weeks later, when poring through articles in archaeology journals in search of sites in the area of Bird Spring Pass yields no results, I nearly convince myself that the rocks I found just happened to arrange themselves into that suggestive shape. But then it occurs to me that there is really no reason to assume that archaeologists would have

found and documented such a site, situated as it is in a part of the pass that modern humans have little incentive to visit. The steep, brush-strewn hill leading up to it makes access difficult, and anyway the peaks of interest to humans lie immediately north and south of it, with easy access provided by the Pacific Crest Trail that bypasses this site entirely.

So, on a whim, I try a new Google search for “Kawaiisu dwellings,” invoking the name of the group that called Jawbone home 1,500 years ago. Dwellings, I find, were built of juniper limbs thatched together with desert brush into dome shapes. The domes were secured to the ground with low rings of rocks, with a gap left in each ring, for a door.

It could have been a bird in the night. It could have been the wind, playing tricks.

Interlude: Terra nullius

I don't trust nobody

but the land I said

– from “WHEREAS,” by Layli Long Soldier (poems in response to the 2009 Congressional Resolution of Apology to Native Americans)

For many Indigenous peoples the concept of land ownership is and was foreign to their ontologies: land is never owned. Rather it is a spiritual and material entity to be treasured and cared for as a relative for all those generations of beings who will follow... Whose traditional land are you on?

– Celia Haig-Brown (2009, p. 4-5)

My maternal great-grandparents immigrated to what is now called the United States from the island of Sicily. My paternal great-great-grandparents came to this country from another, tinier island: Inishbofin, off the west coast of Ireland. It is only in recent years that I've done any imagining about the tides of industrialism and globalization that beat at the coastlines of both islands in the early 1800s, churning my ancestors' dreams of departure from their homeplaces to a new home across the Atlantic. Only in the last few years have I begun to connect this recent ancestral immigration story with my thinking about human relationships to land, allowing myself to feel my way into the psychological significance of dis-place-ment and re-place-ment in immigrant stories. But it is only since returning from my month in Jawbone that I've begun to think in a more complex (though still wet-behind-the-ears) way about immigration, diaspora, indigeneity, homeland. Before my ancestors could come to North America bearing the

traditional wisdom of their own European cultures, colonizers were clearing a space for them – a space that was later to be reduced, in the cultural imagination, to *terra nullius*: “nobody’s land,” empty territory.⁷⁵ For non-native North Americans, displacements always come in (at least) twos: there is the question of where your people come *from*, and there is the question of whose land your people came *to*.⁷⁶

The very first time I entered Jawbone, a couple of years before this project, I asked Darren to stop the car so I could squint at the badly faded text on a wooden sign at the unmonitored entrance. The sign explained a number of restrictions on vehicle use. These restrictions, it explained, were intended to protect “natural and cultural resources.” This sign, which is still standing in all its barely legible glory, has a number of effects in me each time I see it. First, it serves to remind me that human cultures, and especially the Kawaiisu culture, have a long history at Jawbone. Second, in its vagueness (Cultural resources? Whose culture? Resources for whom? Is the “natural” more important than the “cultural?”)⁷⁷ and its actual fadedness, it serves to remind me of the attempted erasure of the Kawaiisu, who had to do their best to take their cultural resources with them when they were driven out of their traditional lands by an earlier iteration of the government that erected this sign and still refuses to recognize them as a tribe.⁷⁸

There is another effect this sign has in me that is a bit trickier to articulate. Jawbone is a nexus of the relationships of so many humans to land: the Kawaiisu, other Native American groups who interacted with the Kawaiisu, off-roaders, ranchers with cattle-grazing permits, hikers on the Pacific Crest Trail, ecologists, conservation crews, utility workers who service the aqueducts and power lines that transect Jawbone on their way to L.A., BLM officers, and at least one clinical psychology researcher. And all of us,

in various ways, experience an estrangement from land that is part and parcel of membership in, and/or predation by, urban-industrial culture. Relationships of people to landscapes are often exploitative or negligent in this cultural context. But like the faded wooden sign, this formulation (which I've now repeated in so many ways you probably think I sleep with it under my pillow) leaves quite a bit out. And that's the third effect the sign has in me – it points me toward these omissions.

Among other things, the formulation that “people” or “Westerners” are estranged from nature and from land leaves out that while estrangement from nature is always the product of violent ideologies, forced separation from nature is actually a form of terror and material violence that, in North America, most severely affects colonized, indigenous, and diasporic peoples.⁷⁹ It also leaves out the long history of ways in which different targeted groups have responded to the destruction, or attempted destruction, of their relationships to homelands: resistance, contestation, mobilization, and rebuilding, as well as resignation, assimilation, forgetting, survival.⁸⁰

All human groups, in all cultures, have an experience of psychological embeddedness in land. This is not just true of “traditional” cultures, which is why many college freshmen struggle with mourning the loss of the relationships to people and land that characterized the places they left, and why communities of freed black farmers in the south established a subcultural identity based on belonging to the land before that subculture was decimated by white takeovers of black farms.⁸¹ Everywhere, psyche and land interpenetrate. Yet for some groups, especially groups whose survival is closely linked to their direct contact with the land they live on, this interpenetration has historically been lived with more daily awareness than for other groups, or it simply

features more prominently in implicit cultural value systems.⁸² For groups with intact, intimate, and respectful relationships with traditional lands, displacement from those lands is displacement from sanity itself.⁸³ In cultures in which dependency on local ecologies is acknowledged and has shaped practices, stories, and ways of knowing, the intertwining of the identity of the people with the body of the land cannot be overstated. Land is “belonged to” rather than owned; ownership represents a relationship of exploitation that makes little sense in a context of acknowledged interdependence.⁸⁴ Health *is* a right relationship with one’s bioregion, which nurtures a self that is understood to be a part of the land.⁸⁵ The stories that transmit cultural values and practices are grounded in the landscape and make little sense without them, and the significant memories of a people likewise exist not in an ungrounded brain but in a relationship between people and specific places.⁸⁶ To lose the land that carried one’s health, created one’s body, grounded one’s values, practices, and memories, and provided one’s very sense of belonging to a species and a world, is to be both materially and psychologically dispossessed.⁸⁷ And the anti-nature value systems that characterize the cultures to which the dispossessed are then pressured to assimilate significantly compound the trauma, as assimilation frequently requires taking on the dominator’s ways of abusing nature (where nature is understood as including land, ecology, and the human body).⁸⁸

There is little discussion, in psychological circles as in other predominantly white circles, of the psychological impact of displacement and estrangement from land. This silence is not simply because, as urban-industrial humans, we are all under the same spell of estrangement, and so tend to normalize it. That there is so little attention paid to these

issues is also a moral problem of whiteness. If we take seriously the teaching of many indigenous American cultures that the health (mental and otherwise) and power of a people is in their relationship to the land they depend on, then we are called to support the resistance movements of all peoples displaced by the whitening of North America – truly to reckon, some of us for the first time, with the question of whose land we are on. In the category of “displaced peoples,” I include members of the African diaspora in the United States, with their complex history of initial displacement from African lands, the subsequent driving away by whites of freedpeople from agrarian homesteads in the south, mass migration to the industrialized north in search of safety and opportunity, and ongoing displacement, even within urban environments, through segregation.⁸⁹ When we recognize that to exile people from their connection to land is to exile them from sanity, and when we glimpse, without blinders on, the facts about *whose* sanity is enslaved through displacement, then we who’ve committed our lives to healing suffering inherit the delicious task of redesigning our work to be at least as reparative as it is therapeutic, conceiving of our practices as more public than private.⁹⁰

I brought very few books with me to Jawbone. But I did decide to bring with me a particularly bulky book called *Handbook of the Kawaiisu: Sourcebook and Guide to the Primary Resources on the Native Peoples of the Far Southern Sierra Nevada, Tehachapi Mountains, and the Southwestern Great Basin*. It is a collaboration between anthropologist Alan P. Garfinkel and Kawaiisu elder and historian Harold Williams (2011). While I was there, I read this book in its entirety, learning, for example, that the Scodie Mountains surrounding Bird Spring Pass were the traditional pine nut-gathering grounds of Kawaiisu families, and that the Kawaiisu name for Bird Spring Pass, “cho’iki-

vo'o-vüzi," incorporates the word for "pinyon jay" (a bird) and the word for "water" (which existed more plentifully at Jawbone prior to the landscape alterations caused by cattle grazing by white ranchers). I don't imagine that by attempting to include the Kawaiisu in my stories of Jawbone, I can do their legacy justice or erase my own implication in colonizing narratives. But when I learned that there are five fluent speakers of Kawaiisu left,⁹¹ I felt that it was especially important to pass on a message that I received at cho'iki-vo'o-vüzi, and that I can no longer dismiss as a bird in the night, or the wind playing tricks: to live out our accountability to displaced peoples, we can begin by cultivating sensuous connections to the places where we live and travel, honoring the lands that displaced peoples called home, and empowering those people to cultivate relationships with land wherever they are.⁹² The voices of those who treasured the land still animate the land, calling us into relationship. And in the end, places like Jawbone may be the last remaining fluent singers of indigenous songs.

XIII. Snakes



A Mojave green rattlesnake beneath a pack rat midden.

My field notes from September 10, my tenth day at Jawbone, are a mystery to me as I record them. I jot down the time – 8:50 AM – and then attempt, for three and a half pages, to draw a shape that appeared to me in last night’s dream. The shape, something

like a top-heavy letter S inset within a crescent moon, eludes me now, as I try to reproduce it. I feel satisfied with none of my ten drawings, some larger or smaller, thicker or narrower than the others. Next to my third attempt, I draw an arrow pointing to the figure and scribble, “something like this... roughly hammered from copper or maybe silver. There was also a wolf in my dream, and deep kisses.” After pondering the dream for a few moments, I forget about it entirely.

* * *

Months before leaving for Jawbone, I read Barry Lopez’s *Desert Notes*. One scene in particular stayed with me – the fictional account of a person awaking in the desert morning to find the body of a rattlesnake huddled into the warmth of their chest. Rattlesnakes were often on my mind as I moved through my initial days and nights alone. When I felt afraid – and I often did – my thoughts chased after snakes. Where were the rattlesnakes? Surely, waiting just behind the next boulder or beneath the next creosote bush. Surely they were everywhere, waiting.

Early on, I began keeping a list of the animal species I encountered at Jawbone – an incomplete list which, even in its incompleteness, totaled over fifty by the time I left. On my seventh day, I got to record my first snake. A Mojave red racer, five feet long and slender, with so many kinks it looked like it needed ironing, had stretched itself across a sandy road in the mid-morning sunlight. The red racer isn’t venomous and surely didn’t look it. At a soft tap from my trekking pole, it zoomed away, leaving me with no doubt as to where it got its name.

“*Still no rattlesnakes,*” I recorded on my list on my fourteenth day, at the halfway point of my trip. It was becoming clearer to me that, whether or not the rattlesnakes were

just around the next boulder waiting for me, I was waiting for *them*, with something like the excitement with which I have anticipated reuniting with a lover after a long time apart. Was I afraid, or was I longing?

Jawbone took care in opening its snake collection to me gradually, starting with the nonvenomous racer, then moving on to two rattlesnake sightings from a safe distance, in a single morning. Hiking back to camp after spending the night in a wilderness area where I had hoped to find a stream (the stream was very much present, but underground), I met a Mojave green outstretched on the sandy trail, perhaps sunning, or digesting, or both. The Mojave green was followed an hour later by a Western diamondback that was on the move, leaving its gusty track in the sand as it motored thickly through brush. Before traveling to Jawbone, I had not bothered to look up pictures of the various snakes I might meet, as Darren had assured me I would know a rattler if I saw one. He was right. These snakes were so impressively thick, so slow-moving and grave, and had such severely patterned skin that they could hardly be anything else. Even from a distance, I could make out the delicate rattles, made of papery, interlocking segments that grow in number each time the snake sheds. I gave both snakes a wide berth. Neither rattled. I arrived back to camp jubilant, and recorded them on my list. I had not felt afraid. I had felt elated.

* * *

Now, on my twenty-second day at Jawbone, nearly a week has passed since my last snake encounter. I am hiking cross-country today, planning to head back to my base camp before dark. As I pick my way down a buckwheat-studded slope, I am drawn toward a boulder pile by the sight of a gigantic pack rat midden. Pack rats build elaborate

shelters for themselves – middens – sealing off small cave openings or crevices between rocks using sticks, dung, stones, and human debris, if it is available. Weeks ago, I made the discovery that pack rats often decorate with bones. It is in the hope of spotting some interesting bones that I now hike uphill toward the largest midden I have yet seen, a veritable pack rat manse, sprawling across a crevice at the intersection of oven-sized boulders.

I draw within two feet of the midden before inhaling sharply and dancing away in mid-stride. Coiled silently in the shade beneath an overhanging portion of one of the large boulders is a Mojave green. The color – a cooling, minty green unlike anything else around it, suddenly registered in my sight just as I came extremely close to stepping on it. It has not rattled.

From twenty feet away, I look at the snake. After I told him that I had gotten close enough to a Mojave red racer to tap it with my trekking pole, Darren instructed me never to get that close to a rattlesnake, as it would put me within their striking distance. I hear his warning in my head now, as I review what little I remember about Mojave greens. They have a special venom that is several times as toxic as the venom of other rattlesnakes, because it has neurotoxic effects: in addition to causing the usual hemorrhaging and tissue decay, the venom of a Mojave green sends the nervous system into a frenzy. Like most other rattlesnakes, they hunt in the cool dark, and they are only aggressive toward humans in defense, if they are attacked or accidentally disturbed. And like other rattlesnakes, they do not necessarily rattle before striking. Best to stay away from their minty coolness, lest a Mojave green misinterpret admiration as hunger.

And I do feel admiring. Curiously so. *The snake is beautiful*, I think to myself, as I creep several feet closer, still keeping myself out of striking range. And a half hour later, *Have I ever seen a creature so beautiful?*, as I remove my pack and place my trekking poles on the ground in order to creep several feet closer. The snake has not budged. I bring out my phone and take several photos. I put my phone away. I stare. Maybe my admiration *is* hunger. My eyes are savoring every visible aspect of the snake: its impressive size. The bead-like, richly textured scales in white and various shades of green, so much brighter than the scales of the Mojave green I saw on my hike a week earlier. The way the scales know to arrange themselves into repeating ovals, edged in white, that travel the length of the snakebody. The striking angles of the solid white lines on both sides of the eyes. The impossible posture of the snake. I had expected rattlesnakes to rest in spiral formation, like mental images I have of cobras from childhood movies, but this snake, the first I have seen coiled, is really not “coiled” at all. The shape it has taken is vaguely familiar.

I inhale sharply, this time not in surprise but in recognition. Here is the shape that I drew, and re-drew, in frustration in my fieldnotes twelve days earlier, not knowing even what I was attempting to draw. A sort of top-heavy S inset within a crescent moon lies still and silent in the shade of the boulder. This is the shape – not just any snake, not even just any rattlesnake, but this particular rattlesnake that is calling to me greenly, now from ten feet away.

I move closer.

* * *

The next day, I will write in my field notes, *I wonder. How many hikers who race to the emergency room for antivenom lie, saying they startled a hidden snake by stepping on it or reaching their hand for the wrong ledge? How many of them were actually bitten because they discovered what I discovered, that a coiled rattlesnake is enchanting, bewitching? Darren would have been furious.*

* * *

I am squatting four feet away from the Mojave green, watching its face. “Too close,” I say to myself, and still I stay. Since the moment I recognized the snake as the form from my dream, I have been aware of an unbidden, and certainly foolhardy, intuition that I am safe. The snake remains motionless. Not even a flicker of its tongue animates the scene beneath the boulder. I have become nearly as motionless as the snake. I am, it turns out, getting the close-up view of the pack rat midden that I had wanted in the first place, and as I squat with one eye and both ears on the snake, I look behind it at the elaborate structure. The snake lies just to the side of an entrance to the midden, and in the gap beneath a boulder, I have a view of what is, by this point in my stay, an assortment of familiar pack rat building materials: dry creosote branches, brittle stalks of rice grass and spiny fiddleheads, jagged rocks. And something else. Deeper into the midden entrance, about a foot beyond the Mojave green, something translucent and coppery brown dangles from a branch. At first glance, it looks almost like it has the fossilized imprint of a ribcage on it. A few moments after I spot it, the unfamiliar form resolves itself into a snake skin. What I had taken for an imprinted ribcage is the portion of skin shed from the segmented underbelly of the rattlesnake.

I look back to the green intensity of the snake. It can take a rattlesnake several days to a week to rub and press against a branch or a stone until its old skin splits and begins to peel off. The new skin waiting beneath is bright and shiny. The snake that emerges, gleams.

Prior to this moment, I have taken note of my reluctance to take anything from Jawbone. I leave beautiful pebbles and stones where they lie. In my excitement about the spines and skulls and talons I discover at the doorsteps of pack rat middens, I am sometimes tempted to start a collection, but I don't. Though I imagine bringing home to my loved ones the broken off red blooms of buckwheat strewn about here and there on the sand, I leave them where they fall. But the feeling gathering in me now is altogether different. I feel a kind of permission too powerful to ignore. Squatting unwisely close to a gleaming new animal I met in my sleep weeks ago, I realize I am in the presence of a gift.

Now, this is not simple for me. I don't imagine that the snake shed for me, or even that the snake and I have the same understanding of the concept of a "gift." I am aware of having entered into an interaction the moment I danced away with a gasp and then chose to keep looking. Somewhere in this interaction, in a translation from snake to human and back again, something my body recognizes as a gift has materialized. A gift not like a birthday present wrapped up and handed to you, but like a peach growing on your sister's tree – ripe for picking, and freely offered. It is not even necessarily a gift of the snake, or of anything but this astonishing moment in time. But it is a gift. And I can accept it, or not.

I walk back to where I had dropped my trekking poles, and I telescope them out as long as they will go. With one in each hand, I walk back to the snake and squat. I

breathe. I can see the snake breathing. It does not budge as I extend both trekking poles as smoothly as I can back into the den behind it and pull the skin away from the branch and out into the sunlight, where I hold it in my hands, surprised at its softness.

I feel that I could stay here all day, into the night, until the moment when the Mojave green finally unfurls and slithers forward, out from under its boulder, into hunger and hunger's corresponding deeds. But with the skin tucked as gently as I can tuck it into a compartment of my pack, I finally back ten feet away and take the dream snake in one last time before thanking it silently, and turning to go.

Weeks later, on a hunch, I Google, "do snakes have eyelids?" No, it turns out. Instead of eyelids, snakes have transparent scales known as "spectacles" that protect their eyes. It is very hard to tell when a snake is sleeping. I wonder now whether, the entire time I was crunching around in the gravel, admiring, hungering after a gleaming form that had spent a night with me in the company of wolves and kisses, the snake was enjoying the well-earned sleep of the newly shed. I wonder now whether it might have been dreaming.

* * *

I fret, at first, about what to do with the skin. It is fragile, already in two pieces, and I worry that if I attempt to bring it back to Pittsburgh it will arrive in tatters. But the idea of leaving it at Jawbone feels equally disrespectful, like a rejection of hospitality or of a blessing. Over the final week I spend there, while I mull over what to do, I keep the skin in the hatch of the Prius, weighted down with whatever is handy so that it won't blow away every time I open the car. Once, in a high wind, I grab for the only ready-to-hand thing that will work to secure the skin to the bed of the car – a recently hardboiled

egg. The next morning, I laugh aloud when I reach for the egg for breakfast and see that a piece of the skin has torn away and clung like wallpaper to the eggshell, which had still been moist from boiling when I placed it down. The egg is half papered with coppery scales that look surprisingly natural. I call it my dragon egg and eat it with glee. But here is confirmation of what I have feared: the skin is just as fragile as it looks.

I see no more rattlesnakes in my remaining days. But two days after meeting the Mojave green, while meditating atop a ridge, I leap from the ground to chase down two loggerhead shrikes who are viciously attacking a Mojave shovel-nosed snake. Loggerhead shrikes are impressively large, predatory songbirds known for a characteristic way of hunting: they lift their prey and drop it, killing it by impaling it on cactus thorns, Joshua tree spines, or barbed wire. At the time, I don't know that this is their hunting method – I only know that one moment I am facing southeast in silence, and the next moment, directly in front of me, a kind of snake I have never seen before, 18 inches long and entirely banded in black and white from head to tailtip, is being lifted into the air over and over again by two screaming birds the size of blue jays. I don't think. I just respond instinctively to the helplessness of the snake, running into the scene yelling and flailing my arms to drive the birds away. The snake, clearly as frightened of me as it is of the shrikes, lunges for the protection of a bush, glancing back at me once as its frantic swimming movements carry it to safety. Afterward, I cry, feeling conflicted about having interfered with what would have been a hard-won dinner for the shrikes, and shaken by an awareness of the strong solidarity I now feel with snakes.

* * *

As the sun rises on my final full day at Jawbone, I still have not decided what I will do about the skin. In addition to the risk of damaging it in transit, I worry that if I manage to get it home, it will end up pinned to a shelf or a windowsill somewhere, disintegrating and forgotten, disrespected. Yet it still feels wrong not to keep it. I move through my last day, into my last evening, aware that I must make a choice before morning.

Interlude: The real snake

All day I'm giving a name
for what isn't there...
Even though the snake
has slipped into the shade,
the shed skin, deceptively whole,
hidden in the sun-flecked grass,
remembers what it once held.
– from “Snakeskin,” by Liz Beasley

But I wouldn't want to forget about the real fox...I think it is important to see the animal as you do in dreams, but dream animals must not be segregated from the animals living out back under your porch or in the brush. One must be careful when adopting an “inner” animal that the connection to the animal world is not reduced to a feel-good-about-*me* condition. There is something else.
– Margot McLean, in dialogue with James Hillman in *Dream Animals* (1997, p. 5)

Rather than interpret the dream, or the encounter, or the gift, let's not.⁹³

Let's say this instead: if there is an interpretation for my dream, it is the living presence of the snake beneath the overhanging rock.

I met this snake twice. The first time we met, I didn't recognize ki⁹⁴ as a visitor. I did not even recognize ki as an animal. I had never met a rattlesnake before.

It was our second meeting that gave to me the body of our first meeting. Here was the snake, half-hidden beneath an eave of rock as ki had been half-hidden in the dream – in full view, yet unrecognizable. Here was the snake, unmoving in the shadow, just as the dream form had held so still I did not even recognize it as alive. Here were the scales: keeled, raised into ridges, like a band of soft metal, roughly hammered. Here was that posture: unmistakable. And here was the shed skin itself, the gift: that coppery color. In

the presence of a real snake, the dream retroactively made itself known as a visitation, and I cannot say that it was one or the other of us doing the visiting.

I am grateful that I did not recognize the snake the first time we met, that the snake appeared and stayed hidden. If I had recognized the snake in my dream, then upon waking I might not have let it be. I remember that when I woke up, I began to make guesses about the meaning of the wolves and kisses in the dream. *Passion*, I thought to myself, and my associations turned to a certain wolf-like man I know. The real wolves faded into the background; the real kisses gave way to questions about my desire. But I could make neither head nor tail of the unfamiliar form in the dream, could not even represent it to my satisfaction when I tried. And so, in unwitting preparation for our second meeting, I let the form lie hollow, empty of interpretations.

That's the temptation: to interpret.⁹⁵ To pin a grand meaning onto the dream, the encounter, the gift, and the snake. At the very least, to say something allegorical about what the shedding of an old skin has to do with me, or to gloat about being precognitive. To make the snake a symbol of something. To claim the snake as a part of me, or – a more subtle way to colonize – as separate from me, but *about* me. And whether I say that the snake is me, or make the snake about me, the real snake begins to vanish. I no longer need the real snake.⁹⁶

Rattlesnakes need, as I do. Rattlesnakes do many things: bask. Coil. Wait. Open. Strike. Pierce. Swallow. Digest. Rattle. Shed. And do they tempt? And do they offer gifts? And do they, as the Kawaiisu believed, guard the caves of the desert?⁹⁷

I do believe the human stories have some place here – that without erasing the real snake, I can set loose my imagination to rattle around with the dream, the encounter,

and the gift. Meeting the face of the snake, I can slip into Eve, and out again; I can turn toward my own death, and away again. These are ways to acknowledge the snake as kin, a relation who teaches me something about myself even as ki differs from me in ways I can and cannot grasp.⁹⁸ The stories humans tell about snakes might have been cooked up by humans. They might have been cooked up by snakes. Or they might be a stew bred of mingling, of encounters in the borderlands of dreams, where neither human nor snake is any more real than the other, and where stories shapeshift, fork like tongues, and belong to everyone.⁹⁹ But wherever these stories come from, there are real snakes at the bottom. The stories are the way living snakes undulate through the human imagination like a poem, eluding snares.¹⁰⁰

I've imagined things about the snake. I've tried on quivering, uncertain stories about what happened. The stories and imaginings are a fluid legacy of the dream, the encounter, and the gift, but they can't take the place of my need for the snake. I got all that I needed, and nothing that I can explain, when I sat, for a time, with the real snake. Breathing ki in, then breathing ki out: *in me, and not mine; with me, and never mine*. The snake is meaning-full, without my meanings added. I don't know what the snake wanted, if anything. But I can tell you what desire I'm left with. More than anything I hope that we might meet again – neither on ki's terms, nor on mine, but on the shared terms of some half-concealed place, like a dream, or a gathering of boulders. Any place where two real animals can find a way to take each other in and let each other be, neither one of us striking.

It will help, I hope, that I'm telling this story in summer. It's June as I write at my desk in Pittsburgh, listening through window screens to the voices of robins, starlings,

and the occasional raven. According to Kawaiisu wisdom, one should wait until winter, when Rattlesnake is sleeping, to tell the important stories.¹⁰¹ This is not for the sake of Rattlesnake, but for the sake of the people. If you tell your stories in the hot season, Raven will eavesdrop, and gossip. Your stories will spread through the desert, sooner or later reaching Rattlesnake, where ki stands guard at some dusky entranceway. And when Rattlesnake hears, Rattlesnake will be tempted, and will seek you out, wanting... Wanting what? More stories?

No one quite knows for sure. But Rattlesnake will come.

XIV. Wind



A Joshua tree looking unperturbed in high wind on my final night at Jawbone.

My last week at Jawbone is marked by a growing awareness that my mind is an overflowing fountain of human language. That's actually a bit of a generous metaphor – it's really more like an overflowing toilet. When I am not narrating my every move out

loud to myself (“Two eggs should do it, that’s the ticket”), I am hosting full-blown conversations in my head – and not just conversations with myself. Without trying, I script and perform entire inner dramas involving not only my loved ones, but people I have never met. I catch myself giving myself heartfelt advice in the voice of the deceased poet and ex-priest John O’Donohue – yes, in an Irish accent (embarrassingly, the accent sometimes spills over into my more mundane narrations, so that I end up describing my own toilet routine to myself in John O’Donohue’s voice). I have sickeningly poignant exchanges with the ecophilosopher David Abram. I run for office, berating my speechwriters for compromising my views. I seduce pizza deliverymen. And when the conversations cease, a fresh language storm is always brewing on the horizon – snippets of poems waltz through me, and I am tormented by lines from songs I don’t even like, forced to hike along under the serenest of skies to the stodgy rhythm of “We are never (ever, ever) getting back together” (Swift, 2012).

It is for this reason that, in my final few days at Jawbone, after my return from an emotionally powerful experience of hiking to and from Bird Spring Pass, I decide that I will not record any more field notes until I have left Jawbone. I need less human language in me – I sense that I will be able to hear Jawbone more clearly, and make a more proper goodbye, if I stop writing.

I don’t have a written record, then, of exactly when I discover the source of an unremarkable-yet-curious sound I have been hearing intermittently since day one. I have noted the sound – a quiet *whoosh* that is over nearly as soon as it begins – perhaps once or twice every three days. I haven’t really puzzled over the *whoosh* – it’s not a particularly compelling sound. But I also haven’t been able to identify its source, or any

pattern to when and where I hear it, other than that it always seems to originate extremely close by, almost as though whatever is making it is sitting on my shoulder.

I don't have a record of *when*, in my last several days, I make the discovery, but I have a memory of *how*. I am finishing up a meditation session on the ridge just above my base camp. This session has felt particularly playful. A strong wind has been at my back the whole time – Jawbone-strong, gusting to perhaps 60 miles per hour and kicking up divots of sand all along the ridge. As I settle into the deep time that opens up when I slow my awareness to the speed of my lungs expanding and contracting, I gingerly lean back into the wind. I hold the musculature of my back just tensely enough so that when the wind recedes, I can catch myself before I tumble backward. But I hold the musculature loosely enough that for short moments, I am allowing the wind to hold me up. This is a kind of trust-fall practice that I began to develop just after the midpoint of my stay here, when I returned from my overnight stay in the city of Ridgecrest with a new determination to stop resisting the many ways Jawbone touches me – including the wind.

I stand up after my meditation session feeling light, free of strain. And as I turn to look toward base camp, preparing to trek back down the ridge, my lips are slightly parted in the relaxed position they tend to adopt as I sit on my bench. This time, when the *whoosh* arises, I make the connection immediately: the wind is playing my open lips like the mouth of an uncapped bottle.

* * *

My very last night at Jawbone is so windy I will be lucky if I manage to fall asleep. This does not feel like a problem. I cannot stomach the idea of leaving; my heart is in pieces held together with fraying twine. I don't want to sleep. I want to stay awake

with the Joshua trees and the creosote bushes, the buckwheat and the sagebrush, the rattlesnakes and the lizards, the kangaroo rats and the coyotes, the mountains and the wind. The wind. The wind that has prevented me from sleeping on so many nights before this one, the wind that has stolen my stuff, the wind that has made pitching a tent or cooking or writing in a notebook into Herculean tasks, the wind that has sprayed my own urine all over me time and time again, the wind whose sheer relentlessness and volume has induced panic and frenzy in me on countless occasions across the course of this month. The wind I cannot bear to say goodbye to.

I climb to the top of the ridge, and then I climb further up, onto the top of a boulder I know well. This boulder is topped with a shallow depression that makes a perfect receptacle for my butt, and I have spent many evenings settled into ki.¹⁰² Tonight, I am here on this boulder not to look or listen or write – I would not be able to write legibly in this wind, anyway. Tonight, I am here to offer my mouth to the wind.

I have done this every night since discovering the source of the *whoosh* – perhaps only two or three nights in total. On top of the boulder, with my head thrown back, I open my mouth and pivot my neck until I find the angle at which the wind will play me. At the first *whoosh*, I settle into position and stay there. The wind skims across my lips, teasingly at first until, gaining power, ki slips into the canyon between my lips, producing a more sustained rushing sound as I hold my mouth in position. I part my lips further and the wind pools into my mouth, icy against my teeth, firm against my tongue. It coils against my gums and then bursts from my lips like a jack-in-the-box, with a deeper, more thunderous sound. I breathe normally and surrender, sometimes parting my lips wide, sometimes bringing them close together, allowing the wind to play every note ki can find,

every note I didn't know lived inside my mouth. Never has it been clearer to me that the desert always finds a way inside.

On this last night, with the wind French kissing me, a decision suddenly matures in me. In the car, a snakeskin has been awaiting my choice as to whether I will keep ki with me or leave ki at Jawbone, and I suddenly realize that formulating the choice in this way misses the point. The choice is not between keeping ki with me and leaving ki here without me. If the desert is inside me, then I am inside the desert. And this will not change simply because I get in my car and drive back to Pittsburgh.

I jump down from the boulder and practically race down the ridge to where I have left the Prius. Opening the hatch, I take the snakeskin into my cupped hands, slam the car shut, and race back up the ridge. I climb back onto the boulder, still cupping my light-as-air cargo carefully with both hands.

“Ok!” I yell into the wind. “I’m not leaving this here. And I’m not taking ki home, either. I’m *keeping ki here*, you understand? Right here is where I’m keeping ki.”

I throw my arms wide and let go.

Interlude: Psyche

“We’re played on like a pipe; our breath is not our own.”
– Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (2013, p. 15)

Humans are themselves one of the Wind’s dwelling places.
– David Abram (1996, p. 235)

As my time with Jawbone draws to a close, I find that I’ve come back into my mind. Coming back into my mind, I discover that it’s not mine anymore, and it’s not where I expected it to be. When I look for mind inside, what I find is a wisp of sky, pouring itself back into the windy vault from which it came, and pouring my attention, along with it, back outside again. I’m always being carried outside myself by the wind, to where mind permeates everyplace, the way the yipping of coyotes seeps into and haunts every fiber of darkness, or the way sunlight finds the seed in everything.

But everywhere I look, the boundaries I draw between inside and outside are being trespassed by a trickster wind. And in the wake of this movement that I cannot control, there’s a kind of negotiation, a circulation or respiration, that I’m hopeless to pin to any timeline or map. Wind, as the movement of air, is big – there’s global wind, solar wind, planetary wind. And wind is also differentiated – there’s the exhalation of a rattlesnake, the expansion of my own lungs, or the eddy kicked up by a fleeing jackrabbit, on which a creosote seed takes flight. Wind connects the largest and the smallest scales, joining all interiors with all exteriors. Yet ki is also local, and made up of the ways we participate in ki.¹⁰³

Air is a true *medium* – not an empty space, mind you, but a power-full element laden with fluid comminglings, communications, and fiery bursts of potential.¹⁰⁴ Invisibly, air as a tangible presence feeds soil with nitrogen, oxygenates our blood, and empowers the rhythms of water. Air is always on the move, and this is wind – our element, easy to forget, yet palpably influential when attended to, like an invisible nervous system ribboning its way through a collective body, making this and that breath possible. Making now possible.

The word *psyche*, when uttered in ancient Greece, meant *wind* and *breath*.¹⁰⁵ Not an invisible, intangible, inner thing, but an invisible, *tangible*, journeying, border-defying gesture. A gesture we are all caught up in. What, then, is psyche-ology the “study of?” Gradually, during my month with Jawbone, I came back into psyche, astonished to find that my moods, my patterns, and my challenges lived in my relationships to all that could be shaped, or carried, or animated by wind: voices, ravens, trees, seeds, songs, storms, snakes. Mind was not my own, and not where I expected it to be, and suddenly every relationship with all the wind brought was a site of possibility and healing, and also of confusion and wounding, because here – in relationships with the stuff I had been taught had nothing to do with my sanity – was mind. Here, in a between-space teeming with air, mind is nothing if not an organ of a living world.¹⁰⁶ We are born into that mind. And the conditions that produce sanity and insanity, health and sickness, are co-germinated and participated in by all who kick up little winds within the big, globally enveloping wind – all who participate in the making, changing, and healing of the world-mind.¹⁰⁷

If we drive the air and weather insane, if we drive the water insane, if we drive the soil insane, then we lose our mind.¹⁰⁸ What we know as our mind is our curious, fertile,

human-animal way of dwelling at the threshold of an ecological mind. Giving the snakeskin to the wind, I entrusted ki, for safekeeping, to psyche.

XV. The return



View from inside the Prius at a Wal-Mart Supercenter parking lot where I slept on the drive back.

In October of 2017, I drove back across the country from Jawbone to Pittsburgh, taking five days to drive the 2,411 miles. The whole way back, I slept in the lit parking lots of Wal-Mart Supercenters, amid rows of overnighting RV's. I safety-pinned homemade curtains above the windows of the Prius, for privacy. Sometimes, I cried at the beauty of the landscapes flashing past at an unnatural speed, but mostly, I sang along at the top of my lungs to all the music I hadn't listened to for a month. I felt elated, even manic, as I drove. Sentences that I hoped to weave into my dissertation bungee-jumped into my thoughts, fully-formed. I felt Jawbone churning inside me, wanting out. Rarely in my life have I felt so inspired as I did across those five interim days, barreling across the changing terrain between the home I was leaving and the home I was going to attempt to

re-enter. I Wal-Mart-hopped from Gallup to Amarillo to Joplin to Terre Haute, ending the trip with one final push through a hard rain that stretched the full length of Ohio and washed me up onto the stoop of the studio apartment I shared with Darren.

When I arrived home, I hadn't bathed in 19 days, and I smelled like all the pee the wind had deposited on my pants. I walked into a residence with a floor, walls, and a ceiling. My residence. I sat down in a La-Z-Boy and Darren microwaved me some food. The microwave heated up my food so quickly that I burst into tears. I'm still not sure whether I was crying out of gratitude for the efficiency, or heartache over the perversity of all things instant.

"What do you need us to do this weekend?" Darren asked, gently. "We can do anything you want."

"Camping," I replied immediately. "I need to go camping."

So we left for national forestland, a day and a half after I got back. I was already packed for it; honestly, how much does a person need, anyhow? Darren and I made love frequently those first few days, as I hungrily searched through him – the only person who knew Jawbone as well as I did, the only person, it seemed, who could understand – for the sun and mountains and wind. The immediate camping trip allowed me to pretend, for a few more days, that nothing had to change. Stars could still be the last thing I saw every night. The air would always smell like whatever was growing nearby. The timetable of the sun and the temperature of the air would constrain me in ways that would keep me well-rested and physically strong. I would remain tuned in to the life pulsing through everything around me, and to the life pulsing through me. The same life.

Back in the city after a few days hiding out in the forest, the shower water was hot, and seemingly bottomless. The bed was soft. And it was with a sinking feeling that I fell asleep, five nights after returning from Jawbone, with my eyes closing on a starless plaster sky.

* * *

Jawbone opened me up, and I arrived back in Pittsburgh open. At Jawbone, that openness of my senses had served to connect me to the beings and presences who taught me so much, the beings and presences with whom I shared a habitat and a mind. In Pittsburgh, that openness quickly became a form of agony. Within a month of returning, I was going three or four days at a time without leaving the apartment even to check the mail. I spoke to my friends only sparingly about what was happening, afraid that they would raise their eyebrows at such a dramatic change in one short month.

I could not stand to go outside in the city. Every smell was offensive, and if there were non-offensive smells, they were masked by the odors of gasoline and rubber. Artificial lighting rendered the night nonexistent. Everywhere I walked, the horizon was choked with buildings, so that I felt I could not really see where I was, only where I could spend my money. The ground was covered with a manufactured ground made of asphalt, in the same way that all the women's faces were covered with manufactured faces made of chemicals. There were so many buildings that I could not track the sun and moon, and I simply stopped looking up. Most of what I needed to accomplish in a day required me to linger inside rooms, where the air only circulated if artificially propelled. I wandered exclusively through landscapes that had been domesticated, apparently for my safety and convenience. These landscapes felt deadened to me; I felt afraid to try to converse with

the trees and birds – what if I could not hear them? What if I *could* hear them, and couldn't stand what I heard? These safe, convenient landscapes also dulled my awareness of my own body. And the safety-oriented awareness I had developed into a limber muscle at Jawbone began, again, to calcify around an old familiar threat: sexual assault.

I could choose from seemingly endless options for any meal, yet none of them felt so satisfying as the simple meals I had cooked over the Whisperlite stove. But when I tried eating the same foods now that I was back in Pittsburgh, they no longer felt right. Suddenly, my enjoyment was spoiled by the idea that eating was supposed to be *exciting*. Indeed, very little in my life felt like enough. I was hyper-aware of advertising, feeling bombarded by the three-part message that A) something was missing, B) that was a problem, and C) I could eat or drink or fuck or invest or accumulate my way out of that problem, if I learned to put my money in the right slots. Consuming, rather than relating, began to seem like the only compelling reason to leave the house. I could not slog my way into relationship with Pittsburgh. I felt separated from the life of the place by pane after pane of impact-proof glass.

The dark circles that had disappeared from beneath my eyes when I began rising and setting with the sun at Jawbone returned, as I began to stay up well past sunset again, watching shows on Netflix to kill the time that now passed as “leisure.” I had trouble peeing and pooping now that my body had grown accustomed to squatting, and I sometimes spent a long, frustrating time on the toilet just trying to empty my bladder, pulling my knees to my chest and placing my feet on the toilet seat in the hope of tricking my body into believing I was in the position for which I evolved. I stopped meditating entirely – sitting with my experience felt like the worst kind of nightmare. My potted

plants, all of whom have names and all of whom I doted on before leaving for Jawbone, now just depressed me. They looked, to me, as trapped as I felt. The people who care about me encouraged me to go outside. “Just try it,” they’d say. “Sometimes the thing you need most is the last thing you want to do.” Sometimes I took their advice, and they were right – I always felt better after going outside for the first time in days. But afterward, I would retreat into myself again, convinced that only an assault on my senses awaited me beyond the apartment walls.

In October 2017, just a few weeks after I got back to Pittsburgh, Will counseled me to “cherish the disruption” of the return. I tried. A year and a half later, I’m still trying, in what feels like a full-time occupation, to cherish the fault lines that continue to spread. Using the toilet is easy again, and my nose can’t detect the city air anymore. But so much of the time, in this life lived largely inside buildings, locking eyes all day with screens and others of my own confused species, I starve for the soul of the world. My grief for losses few others seem to register gets too big for my body to contain. I fill up with fury and then go numb. And through the body I returned with, there’s a many-timbred voice calling out, which no power I’ve faced off against since that month with Jawbone has been able to silence. In my numbest, deadest moments, I hear it sounding from someplace that’s neither close nor distant, inside nor outside. It repeats a warning, in the form of a feeling, that I translate in this way: *If you lose Jawbone, you lose your mind.*

I need the voice not to go silent – that would be a kind of death. So I fight to break back out into the mind of the world, out of the separateness and interiority enforced by this deranged urbanity. I forage for joy, and keep my eyes peeled for rest. There’s so

much I *do* – the activism, the teaching, the meditating, the storytelling – to midwife a culture of sanity. I try to celebrate the little successes – switching my apartment over to wind power (which I like to call Jawbone power), leading another culture-shift training. But it's hard to keep going, even though the change is already in the wind, and even though I have more and more company, it seems, every day. I'm still chest-deep in grief, with hope halfway through some metamorphosis outside of my control. To keep going, I have to surrender to loving Jawbone, and to what that love ultimately became – the act of opening myself wide enough to hear the earth calling. All my work, and every tendril of my care, takes shape in answer to that call, if I can hear it. I have to listen, then, as a person who is falling in love with the voice of the very air. I have to listen for the desert.

Afterword: Three griefs and an opening

All you can depend on now is that
Sorrow will remain faithful to itself.
– from “For Grief,” by John O’Donohue

What we most need to do is to hear within us the sounds of the Earth crying.
– Thich Nhat Hanh, upon being asked, “What do we most need to do to save our world?”
(in Macy, 2007, p. 95)

We are consoled and strengthened by being hopeless together. We don’t need specific
outcomes. We need each other.
– Meg Wheatley (2004, p. 350)

Orcas, also known as killer whales, travel in matrilineal clans.¹⁰⁹ Families speak
their own dialects and stick together throughout their lives, with children and
grandchildren never straying far from the matriarchs of the family. Female orcas can live
for over a century, and, like females of my own species, they go through menopause.
Orca communities rely on female elders for midwifery, childcare, and navigational
wisdom, as well as their knowledge of food sources. They are the keepers of the family’s
cultural memory.

In recent decades, the extended family known as the Southern Residents have
seen their main food source, Chinook salmon, dwindle to famine levels due to human
damming and overfishing in the Salish Sea off Washington state and British Columbia.
No longer able to find enough Chinook salmon to sustain themselves in their native
waters, the family has begun to starve. Hungry mothers miscarry or give birth to sick

children. So it was a very exciting day for humans who love orcas when, on July 24, 2018, a 20-year-old Southern Resident known (to humans) as Tahlequah gave birth to a daughter.

Tahlequah was not a stranger to motherhood – her son, born in 2010, is still living. Researchers suspect that Tahlequah miscarried a few years after the birth of her son. And when her sister died in 2016 at the age of 23, Tahlequah was one of many aunts and uncles who took over care of her sister’s two children, bringing them salmon and teaching the older sister to take care of her younger brother. The younger brother starved to death not long after his mother, with his family still rallying around him.

When Tahlequah gave birth in 2018, her daughter was alive, but so emaciated that she lacked enough blubber to float. She lived for 30 minutes.

Orca families have been known to carry their dead before, lifting them with their rostra (what we might think of as the snout) and swimming with them for as long as a day. So there was a precedent, in the research, for what happened after this particular loss: Tahlequah lifted up her dead daughter and began to carry her. But researchers had never observed a precedent for what Tahlequah and her family did next. Seven days later, Tahlequah still had not let go of her child. She was looking increasingly gaunt, and her family was starting to act distressed. Soon, they began to trade off carrying the body, taking over Tahlequah’s burden for long enough for her to eat and get some rest. But she always returned to take her daughter’s weight back onto her own body.

Day turned into night and back into day. They lifted and carried the dead child. It was Tahlequah who finally let go, after 1000 miles and seventeen days.

Scientists called it a “tour of grief.”

* * *

A year and a half after my month with Jawbone, as I bring the writing of this project to a close, I don't want to have to write about grief. Being with Jawbone opened me, and the writing of this project became a practice that tended that openness, in the same way you might tend a fire. Through the writing, I fell more deeply in love with the world at the same time as I began, in earnest, to grieve it – so that when I look back over the stories and interludes, I recognize in pieces of my writing a kind of determined optimism that now feels very far away. I feel enormous resistance to leaning into the grief that has been ripening throughout this work, from the initial experience of being claimed by Jawbone through the process of writing itself. Yet I want this project to have fidelity to the ways Jawbone continues to call me, and I sense that that requires telling the truth about grief.

I'm not sure how best to speak to you from my grief – where to start, how to invite you in, or even whether you'd willingly accompany me here. This is “still the land of Dale Carnegie and Norman Vincent Peale, where an unflagging optimism is taken as the means and measure of success” (Macy, 2007, p. 96).¹¹⁰

If I let you in on my grief, will you ask, “Where's your fighting spirit,” as though grief means giving up?

Will you tell me to “stay positive?”

Will you lift up the bodies with me?

* * *

Grieving the dying ones

A single Joshua tree stands in the Desert Room at Pittsburgh's Phipps Conservatory, looking strangely claustrophobic amid the assortment of flora from various deserts planted into the surrounding display. I've been to visit it several times during this writing, but not for a while. It's gotten hard for me to go back.

Years ago, scientists started sounding the alarm that climate change was fatal news for Joshua trees. A 2012 study – whose authors called their findings “more optimistic” than previous studies – predicted that by 2100, Joshua Tree National Park may lose over 90% of its Joshua tree habitat.¹¹¹ Still, scientists imagined that Joshua trees might manage to survive in various pockets across the Mojave, in narrow altitudinal bands where friendly temperatures would be maintained – safe-havens known as “climate refugia.” Now, more recent research shows that the yucca moth, an insect that co-evolved with Joshua trees and serves as their only pollinator, is dying out in the very temperature bands where Joshua trees might have made their last stand.¹¹² I haven't been back to visit the tree since I learned about this.

On this intricate planet, no being dies out alone.¹¹³ There will be no Joshua trees without yucca moths, and yucca moths, likewise, have only one way of reproducing: inside the ovary of a Joshua tree flower. In my imagination, the losses pile up around them. Joshua trees are the tallest plants in the Mojave. They offer shade, shelter, food, sand stabilization. Microhabitats center around them.¹¹⁴ Without Joshua trees, who survives? I imagine Jawbone after the cascading losses, losses not only of particular beings but of the relationships that make up the life of any place. I imagine Jawbone like that and it's like confronting the dead body of someone I loved. I'm left with the same kinds of questions. Where is my beloved now? Is she anywhere at all?

Joshua trees. Southern Residents. Monarch butterflies, Asian elephants, Georgia asters... There are not enough living bodies to lift and carry the dying ones. Of course, I always *cared*. Years ago, I read W.S. Merwin's poem "For a Coming Extinction"¹¹⁵ – "One must always pretend something/Among the dying" – and felt a chill. But in that and every other instance of caring, I used my intellect like tongs to hold the pain at a manageable distance.

I've had plenty of experiences of personal and political pain – it was my own story of healing that led me to become a therapist, and anti-racist study and activism have become a way for me to find solidarity around excruciating aspects of being alive in this country at this time. But before Jawbone opened me, I never had days of feeling physically immobilized by the scale of earth's losses. I didn't know what it was to be ambushed by a pain "of another order altogether, [that] pertains not just to privations of wealth, health, reputation, or loved ones, but to losses so vast we can hardly name them."¹¹⁶

Now I am grieving the real losses of real beings. The pain is as exquisite as an ecology. It's different. It's not bearable. And it's only a fraction of what's to come.

* * *

Grieving my professional community and identity

When I started grad school six years ago, it was with the goal of eventually becoming a full-time, private practice therapist. I've so savored working with patients that I've sometimes joked that I need a bumper sticker that reads "I'd rather be doing therapy."

Therapy itself has never felt simple to me. Intuitive, yes – but not simple. Part of what I’ve so loved is the nuance and surprise of the practice, the way I can never know ahead of time where a patient’s path toward healing will take us or which vulnerable parts of myself I’ll need to turn toward in order to accompany someone where they need to go. The practice has felt beautifully complex, but my relationship to *being* a therapist has always felt simple. Since I was nine or ten, I never wanted to *be* anything else. It was my calling.

There’s another calling in me now. From some new perspective which feels neither anthropocentric nor ecocentric, I cannot un-see that humans are nature. I cannot un-see that psyche is everywhere – that psyche is ecological. I cannot un-see that my life is unfolding inside the bigger body of the earth. This has fundamentally reset my perspective on what it means for humans to heal.

The dominant forces of this culture abuse, destabilize, and sicken ecologies, and I can no longer see that as an “environmental” problem separate from human suffering. Human ecologies are being unraveled by the same forces threatening nonhuman ecologies. And while it’s true that the individual animals who come to my office seeking therapy have been wounded, much of their wounding reflects a culture that needs diagnosis and treatment.¹¹⁷ The culture is sick, and I feel called to heal the culture.

I could keep limiting my work to the healing of individual human animals, in the hope that this will ultimately heal the culture. This is the hope referred to by Ignacio Martín-Baró (1994), a founder of Central America’s liberation psychology movement, when he wrote that psychology “tries to change the individual while preserving the social order, or...[while] *generating the illusion that...as the individual changes, so will the*

social order – as if society were a summation of individuals” (p. 37, italics added). It’s a bit like triaging one sick aquarium fish after another, when it’s clear that the water needs to be changed – both need to be happening, but the more resources allotted to changing the water as soon as possible, the better.¹¹⁸

In a form of work that “of necessity, [takes] on an individualistic and intrapsychic perspective” (Watkins, 1992, p. 67) and imagines wellbeing as a personal pursuit, it’s not clear to me that I can find a useful and specific way to tell my patients the truth: that the sickness in them reflects the sickness in the culture, and that no fish can be well in sick water.¹¹⁹ But even if I can find a way, then my patients and I are still left with an urgent question: what next? Surely the answer to this question cannot simply be “more therapy.” Something else is called for: “Once the unconscious cultural aspects of our self-constructions are made conscious, psychotherapy recedes in importance. For, indeed, an hour a week is clearly insufficient to the task” (Watkins, 1992, p. 66).

This new calling could be a joy. I trust that someday, it will be – after all, there are practices that are designed for upstream impact, and my psychological training may make me even better at them than I would have been otherwise. But now, having lost the simple clarity of the calling to do individual psychotherapy, and with no clear sense of what path will replace it, I feel at a loss. And I’ve lost more than a path. I’ve lost my sense of belonging to what has been, for the last decade, my primary human community: the community of therapists.

Every day, therapists bear expert witness to the ways in which this culture chews people up and spits them out. Therapists are a workforce intimately familiar with the pain of humans trying to survive inside a deranged environment. Yet in my long history as a

therapy patient, never once has a psychologist, counselor, or social worker asked me, “How do you feel about what’s going on in the world?” or “What do you think it is about this culture that seems to produce so many people who share the kind of hurt you’re feeling?” I used to imagine that I would end this project with a kind of Therapist Manifesto or rallying cry to therapists, but the truth is, I’m feeling weary of trying to inspire therapists to shift some of their talent, knowledge, and resources upstream.¹²⁰ Increasingly, it seems my energy might be better spent working with allies outside the mental health fields. Most therapists I talk to about changing the water respond with some version of, “You’re right, but there’s very little we as therapists can do about that,” or, “That’s so important! I’m glad you’re on it.” At most, rather than taking my invitation to go back to the drawing board and dream up wild new healing strategies appropriate to the level of collective illness and dysfunction, they ponder how they might tweak their existing approach to individual psychotherapy.

This scares me. I’m scared of therapists’ disempowerment – that we don’t actually realize how much power we possess to draw attention to the ailing culture, if we organize. I’m scared, also, that if we don’t come up with strategies to heal the water in addition to caring for the fish, then we are making a living off an abusive culture.

Mostly, I’m scared that a great many of this planet’s mental healthcare providers are unable to hear within them the sounds of the earth crying.

* * *

Grieving all that can’t be saved

When the UN body known as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) published a special report on “Global Warming of 1.5°C”¹²¹ in October of 2018, I

was alerted about it by a *New York Magazine* headline that read “UN Says Climate Genocide is Coming. It’s Actually Worse Than That”¹²² (thanks a lot, David Wallace-Wells). News outlets everywhere were spasming with the story of the IPCC report, in a way that seemed unprecedented when it came to climate change coverage.

I had never read anything by the IPCC. Truth be told, I hadn’t read much at all about climate change. I was used to not clicking on the headlines, and I was used to not dwelling on the emotional overwhelm underlying my avoidance. But when I started seeing headlines about the IPCC special report, I was surprised to discover a quiet decision fluttering behind my ribcage. I was going to read the report – not just the news coverage about the report, not even the “Summary for Policymakers” prepared by the scientific panel that compiled the report, but the report itself. In the same way that I hadn’t dwelt on my previous decision not to click on headlines, I also didn’t dwell on my decision to read the report. I didn’t tell anyone about it. I didn’t brace myself. I waited six days from the appearance of the headlines, in the same way you might close your eyes and exhale slowly before walking into an oncologist’s office for your biopsy results. Then I downloaded all five chapters of the report from the IPCC website, and began reading.

* * *

It’s not that I finally surrendered *because* I read the IPCC special report. Something was already changing in me before I started poring through the most simultaneously riveting and tedious document I have ever read in my life (more accurately, I alternated poring and skimming, daily, for over three weeks – the report is more than 500 pages long). I suspect that I had been at the threshold of surrender since

returning from Jawbone, and some part of me knew that reading the report was exactly the ritual that would tip me over the edge. But when I emerged from the reading, I had given up a kind of optimism that had been accessible to me before.

To be sure, I had now read enough to understand that the bulk of the media coverage I had seen was omitting half the message. Yes, the results of research on human-induced climate-related disruption that has already occurred are staggering and detailed beyond my wildest imagining. And yes, the best-case scenario predictions of what is to come are grisly, nevermind the worst-case scenario predictions.¹²³ But the IPCC special report reads less like a tragedy and more like an extremely somber choose-your-own-adventure. In painstaking detail, it represents multiple potential futures that exist at the (predicted) intersection of choices human societies might make about everything from land use to technology development to women's rights (see for example IPCC, 2018, p. 110). In each of these futures, enormous loss is a foregone conclusion – but how enormous is enormous? The answer to that question, the authors say, depends on what we choose to do with the information. The report is like the doctor who tells you, when you wake up in the hospital unable to walk, that you are lucky to have your life.¹²⁴ And the doctor is right: it would be better for 496 million people to experience water shortage (with another half degree Celsius of warming beyond our current levels) than 586 million (with another full degree Celsius of warming). It would be better to see 70-90% of corals bleached than 99% (IPCC, 2018, p. 453).

At the time when I initially began to envision this project, I still believed (because I had not looked at the evidence) that while climate change was a real threat, it did not have to be a devastating one. I didn't imagine the project as *about* climate change. But,

embarrassing though it is to admit, at some level I imagined this project as a contribution to *preventing* climate change as the broadest expression of the cultural dysfunction ecopsychology critiques. Perhaps I even imagined that through my work I could help to “save” something or someone from climate change – Jawbone? The world? Humans?¹²⁵

A week after I started reading the report, I sat across from Darren at our favorite Chinese restaurant, breaking down in public. As I wept into my broccoli, I told him I hadn’t really *gotten* climate change, before. It was true: a believer in climate change, I had also been in denial of it. I was just now beginning to digest the myriad losses that have already taken hold, and the further losses that our species is committed to through emissions already released into the air. I hadn’t wanted to surrender to a vision of the future in which “avoided impacts and reduced risks” (in the language of the report – see for example IPCC, 2018, p. 253) would be among the biggest reasons to celebrate. At Jawbone, as I began to come more fully in touch with my pain for the world, I was being prepared to take in the IPCC report and its accounting of losses that range far beyond the disappearance of nonhuman species, into the loss of countless human lives, entire nations, and ways of life that many have always taken for granted. I was unwittingly being prepared to really reckon, as the storytellers of climate change have been doing for decades, with all that can’t be saved.

Darren, from whom I had separated prior to that dinner outing (another post-Jawbone change to my life), had begun his own grieving process years ago – a head start that makes him a skillful ally in such moments. He let me cry. At one point, when I asked him if he thought the soul of a place could survive the extinction of that place’s ecosystem (I was thinking of Jawbone), he mused that even the harshest regions of the

Sahara, where no plants or animals live, have a soul. We ate our food together, and didn't solve or save anything.

* * *

Opening beyond grief

In "From Hope to Hopelessness" (2004), organizer and management consultant Meg Wheatley writes about grieving a sense of hope that once infused her work:

In the past, it was easier to believe in my own effectiveness. If I worked hard, with good colleagues and good ideas, we could make a difference. Now, I sincerely doubt that. Yet without hope that my labor will produce results, how can I keep going? If I have no belief that my visions can become real, where will I find the strength to persevere? (p. 348)

I've been grappling with similar questions, in a context that keeps delivering messages that it's not ok not to be optimistic.¹²⁶

I feel radically disrupted by grief, where "radical" refers to a disruption that gets to the very root of who I am. Whatever the ways forward look like, they need to preserve space for this disruption. Alice Walker (2004) writes, "I have learned to accept the fact that we risk disappointment, disillusionment, even despair, every time we act...and that there might be years during which our grief is equal to, or even greater than, our hope" (p. 367). I have no desire to rid myself of grief. It's a basic expression of my sanity, and frankly I think most people I talk to could use a little more of it. But I do want to become resilient to grief – an art that many humans who carry less privilege than I do have been practicing for generations. I was reminded of this art recently when, at a meeting of a Pittsburgh-based anti-racist group, a member named Erika punctuated a sober discussion

about white supremacy with the comment, “It’s necessary for us to grieve. It’s also our duty to find joy. The revolution needs us to grieve, and the revolution needs us to dance together. It needs us to be sexy together!”

Us. Together. Even as I was laughing with the group, picturing all of us sexy-dancing with tears running down our cheeks, these were the words that were nudging at me. I consider myself introverted, yet during the worst of my despair last fall, I joined an anti-racist group and a climate justice group, and drew up an invitation to a still-to-be-scheduled forum discussion about psychology and climate change that I’m tentatively calling “Therapists Feeling the Heat” (because, despite my weariness, I do still desire to connect with likeminded therapists). Since reading the IPCC report, I’ve met more of my human neighbors in Pittsburgh than I did during my previous five years as a graduate student here.

So much of what Jawbone offered me was an aware experience of ecology. And what is ecology but a network of interdependent relationships? I see now that the upwelling of connection I have experienced alongside my grief has been my way, as part of nature, to activate a human ecology to support me. I feel deeply indebted to this part of nature that reaches out through me for relationships with humans (and non-humans too, of course) when I am in trouble.

In the same Wheatley essay I referenced earlier, she quotes a letter from the Christian mystic Thomas Merton to a friend:

Do not depend on the hope of results...you may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no result at all, if not perhaps results opposite to what you expect. As you get used to this idea, you start more

and more to concentrate not on the results, but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself...You gradually struggle less and less for an idea and more and more for specific people...In the end, it is the reality of personal relationship that saves everything. (in Wheatley, 2007, p. 350)

Out beyond grief, beyond optimism, out even beyond hope, there is the reality of relationship. In this planet-time, after all the love this project has given me, it seems to me that my best response to grief is connection. If the wind has brought me, like a seed, to where I now find myself, then it's my grievous, joyous duty to send down roots into the humans and other-than-humans who are my ground. Can I get as good at "together" as I've gotten at grief? Can I let relationships guide my work, as much as or even more so than ideals? I don't know. Then again, these probably aren't questions I can answer on my own.

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Endnotes

¹ Much of the information about Jawbone in this section is taken from multiple unpublished and untitled sources including placards on the wall of an OHV outpost called Jawbone Station Visitors Center; signs posted by the BLM at entrances to Jawbone on CA-14 and CA-178; and signs posted by the BLM at multiple sites outside and within the Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area, which lies southeast of Jawbone.

² This information is taken from the comprehensive discussion of Kawaiisu ethnohistory in *Handbook of the Kawaiisu* (2011), compiled by archaeologist Alan Garfinkel and Piute Shoshone Kawaiisu elder Harold Williams.

³ In order to include a range of gender identities outside of the gender binary in my writing throughout the dissertation, I use the gender-neutral pronoun “they” when I’m referring to a hypothetical or non-specific human. More on pronouns for nonhuman beings and presences later.

⁴ By “story,” here, I do not refer exclusively to the linear, five-part Western dramatic structure, although some autoethnographers do structure their work in this way. Rather, I use the word “story” to draw a distinction between autoethnographic texts that deliberately draw upon literary and performative devices (examples of which include dialogue, multiple points of view, and foreshadowing) in order to disrupt a “scholarly” presentation style and more traditional research texts that, in the words of Norman Denzin (1997), are written “about facts” rather than arranged artistically and evocatively “in facts” (p. 208). Whether the “story” told by an autoethnographer is linear and

dramatic, nonlinear, or even anti-resolution or chaotic, the “direct appeal” that autoethnography makes to the reader shapes a product that is conspicuously relational and reflects the efforts of the author to hold a tension between concerns usually regarded as scholarly (e.g. “Does this say something substantive?”) and concerns usually regarded as aesthetic (e.g. “Does this move anyone?”), similarly to the way that performance storytellers leverage their craft “as a way of knowing [but also as a way of] sharing and relating” (Jones, Adams, and Ellis, 2013).

⁵John Caputo (1987) reminds us that uncertainty about who is speaking is at the very root of the word “person:”

I would like to dust off an old word...: *per-sona, per-sonare*, the person as sounding-through, resonating. ... Whose voice speaks? What is the more than human “It”...which speaks whenever man [sic] speaks, which makes itself heard, if we are attentive enough, whenever human words are uttered? ... Is it no human voice at all but simply the echo of the world-play as it plays itself out, the rush of its winds? Is the human breath but a share of this cosmic whirl? When we put our ear to the human mask, as to a shell we find on the seashore, what roar do we hear? ... The task...is not to decipher the speaker beneath the mask but to alert us to the distance which separates them – and then to preserve and keep it open. (p. 289-290)

⁶David Abram (1996) has argued, building on the work of the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, that human beings are animistic by nature. By this, he means that humans spontaneously experience all phenomena that we encounter – from birds to storms to balloons – as both alive and expressive. This view that every phenomenon is a

“someone” is preserved in the languages of some indigenous cultures. Among these languages is Potawatomi, a nearly extinct language spoken by a group of related American Indian cultures known collectively amongst themselves as the Anishinaabeg. Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013), a botanist and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, writes in an essay called “Learning the Grammar of Animacy” that in Potawatomi, it is impossible to refer to a bay, a tree, a cloud, a chickadee, or your dog as “it.” This would be as bizarre as referring to your grandmother as “it.” She writes,

In Potawatomi and most other indigenous languages, we use the same words to address the living world as we use for our family. Because they are our family... The animacy of the world is something we already know, but the language of animacy teeters on extinction – not just for Native peoples, but for everyone... When we tell [children] that the tree is not a *who*, but an *it*, we make that maple an object; we put a barrier between us, absolving ourselves of moral responsibility and opening the door to exploitation. Saying *it* makes a living land into “natural resources.” If a maple is an *it*, we can take up the chain saw. If a maple is a *her*, we think twice. (p. 55-57)

⁷ Abram (1996) writes that “the belief that meaningful speech is a purely human property was entirely alien to those oral communities that first evolved our various ways of speaking” (p. 263).

⁸ Strange but true: Black holes sing. (October 18, 2007). Retrieved from <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/strange-but-true-black-holes-sing/>.

⁹ Children learn to listen and respond to these messages as part of their psychological development in cultures that support contact with a voiced, expressive kinship network that extends well beyond the human:

The child...has been bathed in voices of one kind or another always. Voices last only for their moment of sound, but they originate in life. The child learns that all life tells something and that all sound – from the frog calling to the sea surf – issues from a being kindred and significant to himself [sic], telling some tale, giving some clue, mimicking some rhythm that he should know. There is no end to what is to be learned. (Shepard, 1982, p. 10-11)

¹⁰ Andy Fisher (2013) writes that the field of psychology has a “deeply ingrained habit of ignoring the psychological significance of the human-nature relationship” and that in order for mental health practitioners to serve human well-being faithfully, they must shift into “*acknowledging the human-nature relationship as a relationship*” (p. 8, italics in original). Following Fisher, I suspect that most people working in the field of mental health, even those who think and practice relationally, would draw a blank if asked how their work addresses the psychological imbalance and sickness that results when human beings live in unskilled relationships to nature. Instead, most approaches to psychology frame human development and well-being “as though the human race were alone in the universe, pursuing individual and collective destinies in a homogenous matrix of nothingness” (Searles, 1960, p. 3).

¹¹ Individualistic cultures, such as the culture I’m writing within, tend to normalize a phobia of interdependence. The goal, after all, is to be “*independent.*” Within this context, it is entirely common for people to live in ways that deny both their dependence

on their relationships with other humans and their dependence on their relationships with the ecology. A relational approach, to psychotherapy or to life, requires grappling with this cultural devaluing of relationship:

There is a deep longing to overcome relationship, a terror of having to bend to the vicissitudes of forces not under our control. ... Relationship traps us in a determined space, and we cannot control that space. All we can do in that space is learn about the relationship – learn to come to understand the meaning of our lives, our futures, and our worth, all while being shaped and constrained utterly within that nexus of relationship. (M. Fairfield, personal communication, January 2018)

¹²Domination over nature is a value intrinsic to empire campaigns:

The momentum of the dominant culture has been building throughout thousands of years of history aimed at the agenda of empires. Empires are systematic campaigns to conquer other cultures, values, and beliefs. ... The values perpetuated by empires are framed through stories that must separate humans from the objects they are led to believe they should conquer. ... When we attempt to conquer what we are a part of, we ultimately destroy our own humanity and are therefore conquered. (Fairfield, Engler, Landsman, and Demaris, 2016, p. 3)

¹³ Quite simply, in cultural contexts that value the domination of nature, “our bodies remind us of nature, so we feel ashamed of them and seek to subdue” them (Fairfield, Engler, Landsman, and Demaris, 2016, p. 7). Andy Fisher (2013) writes that “when we dominate nature we inevitably get pulled into the arena of violence as we ourselves are converted into instruments and resources” (p. 85).

¹⁴ Regarding our capacity to be fooled by this story, Pema Chödrön (1997) writes, “Our relationship with the phenomenal world has always been choiceless... The choice that we *think* we have is called ego” (p. 135-136). (Here, Chödrön does not mean to imply that we don’t have a choice as to *how* we relate to the world. She is naming ego as the part of us susceptible to believing that we can choose not to be in a relationship with the world at all.)

¹⁵ Abram (1996) draws from the work of the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty to make the point that we ourselves are a part of the world we perceive through our senses. The point is so basic that I actually find it easy to miss: we can explore the world with our senses only because we have bodies which are themselves able to be contacted by the world. He writes,

Clearly, a wholly immaterial mind could neither see things nor touch things—indeed, could not experience anything at all. We can experience things—can touch, hear, and taste things—only because, as bodies, we ourselves are included in the sensible field, and have our own textures, sounds, and tastes. (p. 68)

¹⁶The flagrantly diverse local ecologies into which we are born could not be better suited to school us, throughout our lifespan, in skilled relationship to otherness. In *Nature and Madness* (1982), Paul Shepard argues that stunted psychological development, including a weakened capacity to relate skillfully to the diversity within our own species, results when societies deny children the cosmic mentorship of the habitats in which they play:

Urban civilization creates the illusion of a shortcut to individual maturity by attempting to omit the eight to ten years of immersion in nonhuman nature. Maturity so achieved is spurious because the individual, though he may be

precociously articulate and sensitive to subtle human interplay, is without grounding in the given structure that is nature...Indeed, the real bitterness of modern social relations has its roots in that vacuum where a beautiful and awesome otherness should have been encountered. (p. 108)

¹⁷ Mary Watkins and Helene Shulman (2008), arguing for the role mental health providers could play in creating cultures capable of resisting all forms of oppression, write that “adulthood can be reached and traveled through without the development of adequate dialogical capacities. In this absence, ‘the other’ – be it part of oneself, one’s neighbor or enemy, *or an aspect of nature* – can be silenced, used, abused, and, even, destroyed” (p. 178, italics added).

¹⁸ Commenting on how we come home to our own multiplicity, Shepard (1982) writes:

All children experience the world as a training ground for the encounter with otherness. That ground is not the arena of human faces but whole animals. Nonhuman life is the real system that the child spontaneously seeks and internalizes, matching its salient features with his own inner diversity...A metaphor is to be invoked later in his life, when he awakens to the richness of the Other in himself...[In the city] a self does not come together that can deal with its own strangeness, much less the aberrant fauna and its stone habitat. (p. 98)

¹⁹ Fisher (2013) reminds us that at the historical origins of modern psychology, “psychoanalysis was born only when the revolt of nature within the individual could no longer be ignored” (p. 159). If, in looking to your own animal body in search of wild otherness, you wonder where to begin, I recommend listening to the places where your body is in revolt – the places where your body protests the lifestyle normalized by an

ecocidal culture. In the discourse of mental health, these protests are often called “symptoms.” These “revolts” can be quite easy to discover: for example, what does your chronic exhaustion have to say about how your culture is set up to push you past the limits of your own nature, insinuating that your animal body should perform more like a machine?

²⁰ There is no way around the experience that when we commit to listening for and responding to the perspectives of a broader-than-human ecosystem, we find that we are asked to compromise our positions in ways that may feel exceptionally challenging. In the words of Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone (2012), “Increased connectivity is no picnic” (p. 95). This is true of relational practices among human partners, as well. Here is how Fairfield and O’Shea (2007), both psychotherapists, describe a relational position: “A relational emphasis demands a...complicated decision-making process that takes longer, attempts to deal with higher levels of complexity, and seeks creative solutions that maximize benefits for the greatest number of people” (p. 28). The only thing I would add to this description is that an ecologically relational position maximizes benefits for the greatest number of *parties to relationship*, many of whom are not people. Indeed, we have much to learn about how to be ethical agents on this planet from the many nonhuman perspectives in tension with our own. Elizabeth Kolbert (2017), imagining her way into the perspectives of endangered species, concludes that “It’s easy to worry that the human project is in danger...[But] from the perspective of other species...what’s scary is not the *fragility* of human life but its remorseless vigor.”

²¹ That the welfare of human societies hinges upon how well we honor our interdependence with the biosphere is a core lesson of ecology that was helped into public consciousness by Rachel Carson (1962) in *Silent Spring*:

The balance of nature is not the same today as it was in Pleistocene times, but it is still there: a complex, precise, and highly integrated system of relationships between living things which cannot safely be ignored any more than the law of gravity can be defied with impunity by a man perched on the edge of a cliff. The balance of nature is not a status quo; it is fluid, ever shifting, in a constant state of adjustment. Man [sic], too, is part of this balance. Sometimes the balance is in his favor; sometimes – and all too often through his own activities – it is shifted to his disadvantage. (p. 246)

²² After I returned from Jawbone, I remember resonating strongly with Kathleen Dean Moore's (1999) observation that

When people lock themselves in their houses at night and seal the windows shut to keep out storms, it is possible to forget, sometimes for years and years, that human beings are part of the natural world. We are only reminded, if we are reminded at all, by a sadness we can't explain and a longing for a place that feels like home. (p. 14)

Fisher (2013) puts the same sentiment into more explicitly ecopsychological terms: "Our humanity is incomplete until we have established our kinship or social relations with the larger natural world and so satisfied our longing to feel at home in or at peace with the cosmos as a whole" (p. 122).

²³John A. Livingston (2007) has argued that the “sensory overload” experienced by urban, tech-saturated humans is problematic not so much because of the *quantity* of stimulation (after all, we are designed to take this effusive world in through our senses) but because its monotonous *quality* renders it assaultive:

In a qualitative sense, far from being sensorily overwhelmed, we are virtually starving for variety. Something, anything that is not of human manufacture, human fabrication. I can conceive of no other situation in which sensate beings are harshly and uninterruptedly imprisoned in this way, exposed entirely to sensory stimuli from a single source – themselves. ... Thus it is that we find ourselves estranged not only from the life context external to ourselves, but also from our own being. *We are all alone*. No wonder we behave the way we do. Strange things happen in solitary confinement, and strange things happen too in high-density confinement. Paradoxically, the individual finds himself [sic] in high-density “solitary.” (p. 120-121, italics in original)

²⁴ Using the language of Gestalt psychotherapy, Fisher (2013) comments that all of these behaviors can be viewed as “creative adjustments to an antinatural world” and that these creative adjustments communicate about “transhistorical needs that are being thwarted by our society” (p. 173). He refers his readers to Livingston’s (2007) musing that “the boom in the house plant business [is] not so much a decorative fad as the expression of a deep and primal need... The geranium on the tenement windowsill is both an offering to the mysterious tidal pull of some distant biological memory, and a heartbreaking cry for help” (p. 121).

²⁵ A number of scholars have described how the human need for a sense of belonging to the natural world becomes an abusive power-grab when it is thwarted by the cultural story that humans are separate from and more important than the rest of nature.

According to Shepard (1982), the collective ecocidal choices of modern humans betray “a readiness to strike back at a natural world we dimly perceive as having failed us” (p. 124). For Livingston (2007), humans who are not supported to find a sense of belonging in an ecology and cosmos become confused, fearful, and controlling:

Having willfully abdicated our place in life process, we can no longer remember that ‘place’ means ‘belonging,’ and that belonging is what living is all about. Since we can no longer conceive of a natural system that includes us, we feel estranged, alien, even resentful. Our bewilderment can turn ugly. This of course is the necessary outcome of our conscious and deliberate denial of nature, our nature, our life sphere. From this springs the paranoia that is the hallmark of every thought and action with respect to those aspects of non-human nature...not yet brought under our absolute control. (p. 109)

²⁶ Iris Young’s (1980) phenomenological analysis of the movement and bodily/spatial experience of those who, like myself, are female-bodied and woman-identified (presumably in Western cultures, though Young does not specify) leads her to comment that that ways in which a female woman comports herself and modulates physical contact and closeness/distance reflects that she

lives the threat of invasion of her body space. The most extreme form of such spatial and bodily invasion is the threat of rape. But we daily are subject to the possibility of bodily invasion in many far more subtle ways as well...The

enclosed space that has been described [by Young] as a modality of feminine spatiality is in part a defense against such invasion. Women tend to project an existential barrier closed around them and discontinuous with the “over there” in order to keep the other at a distance. The woman lives her space as confined and closed around her. (p. 45)

²⁷ Fear is a thread running through all of the reasons I mention here. There are many depthful ways to think about both the nature and origins of fear associated with going out into and/or making physical contact with the nonhuman natural world, and I will not be exploring those here. Both Louv (2008) and Fisher (2013) suggest that in the context of cultures that value domination over nature, fear of nature becomes “a stand-in for other, less identifiable reasons for fear” (Louv, 2008, p. 130). For Fisher (2013), fear of nature is one disguise worn by “ontological insecurity” (p. 98). From my perspective, there are a number of useful ways to story the origins of such fear that are not mutually exclusive. These include framing fear of nature as anxiety about dependence, a conditioned response to living under capitalism, and, from an ecofeminist perspective, hatred of the feminine.

²⁸ This point about practice is worth emphasizing, because it’s easy to miss. It was not primarily through introspection, reasoning with myself, or insight that I became more comfortable getting the world all over me. More than anything, what made the difference was simply being outside, regularly in the midst of my many points of contact with Jawbone, such that intimacy could not help but become my default mode of relating:

Just as a mutually enhancing relationship between people depends on ongoing experiential contact and renegotiation of the relationship based on such

experience, so also in our relationships with the rest of nature. (Adams, 2006, p. 123)

²⁹ Adams (2014) argues that

In contrast with human relationships, although we can be injured by natural forces, nature has no ego to impose or protect and, therefore, no malicious intent to hurt us personally. This makes it much easier for us to let go of our excessive defensiveness, to be creatively vulnerable, and to surrender into surprising and intimate encounters. (p. 81)

³⁰ It is easy to forget that all metaphors about ground, which refer to the source or setting of all that emerges and transpires, refer back to actual ground. Abram's (1996) language often skillfully evokes the actual underlying the figurative: "The living world... is both the soil in which all our sciences are rooted and the rich humus into which their results ultimately return, whether as nutrients or as poisons" (p. 34).

³¹ Fisher (2013) points out that experiential separateness from the rest of nature, when paired with experiential kinship, is not in itself problematic. He further points to the value of distance, writing that

Humans are able to feel awe and wonder because as creatures of distance we can differentiate and contact the world in its sheer and inexhaustible otherness...Under the best conditions, we are creatures of *right* or *optimal* distance: the distance where we make meaningful contact...The crisis in our current relationship with nature is not, then, one of distance per se, but of *overdistance*. (p. 96)

³² That human beings and our planet are made of “star-stuff” is a turn of phrase commonly attributed to Carl Sagan, but various writers have played with such language both before and after Sagan. For example, in a 1913 newspaper column Ellen Frizell Wyckoff wrote, “The sun is made of star stuff, and the earth is made of the same material, put together with a difference” (in O’Toole, 2013). In a book published in 1973, Sagan wrote,

All of the rocky and metallic material we stand on, the iron in our blood, the calcium in our teeth, the carbon in our genes were produced billions of years ago in the interior of a red giant star. We are made of star-stuff. (p. 189-190)

³³ Philosopher and ex-priest John O’Donohue (1998) uses the phrase “ancient recognition” to characterize a sacred experience of belonging that one experiences upon meeting an *anam cara*, or “soul friend.” Here I am suggesting that such an experience need not be limited to human-to-human relationships.

³⁴ This statement by the pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Heraclitus has been popularly translated as “Nature loves to hide.” Alternate translations abound; scholars including the philologist David Graham suggest that the translation I offer here is faithful to the original text.

³⁵ The nourishment to which I’m referring can be thought of as the satisfaction of the spiritual urge in human beings. Fisher (2013) writes that “with the exception of our own largely despiritualized society, spiritual practice has been a prime, if not all-encompassing, concern throughout the record of human existence. I do not hesitate therefore to call the spiritual an essential form of experience for humans” (p. 97). For the philosopher and rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (1976), all religion stems from “the

question what to do with the feeling for the mystery of living, what to do with awe, wonder and amazement” (p. 162); wonder is both a source of and a response to spiritual hunger. The experience of wonder, as he sees it, is threatened by our predominant cultural projects:

As civilization advances, the sense of wonder declines. Such decline is an alarming symptom of our state of mind. Mankind [sic] will not perish for want of information; but only for want of appreciation. The beginning of our happiness lies in the understanding that life without wonder is not worth living. (p. 46)

³⁶ John O’Donohue (1998) writes, in his book *Anam Cara*, that “the light of modern consciousness is not gentle or reverent; it lacks graciousness in the presence of mystery; it wants to unriddle and control the unknown” (p. 80). Fisher (2013) describes how modern science focuses this controlling “light,” linking the trend to the attempt to control nature:

Today’s scientific project of total unconcealment is an offense against the things of nature (including ourselves) because it attacks the mystery that is essential to them and only invokes them to further withdraw from us... The idea of nature as otherness... implies an opacity, polydimensionality, or wildness that asks to be respected. (p. 101)

³⁷ Kimmerer (2013) helpfully contrasts scientific practice with what she calls the scientific worldview. Of the promise of scientific practice, she writes

The practice of doing real science brings the questioner into an unparalleled intimacy with nature fraught with wonder and creativity as we try to comprehend the mysteries of the more-than-human world. Trying to understand the life of

another being or another system so unlike our own is often humbling and, for many scientists, is a deeply spiritual pursuit. (p. 346)

However, the cultural worldview that is being fed by the practice of science “uses science and technology to reinforce reductionist, materialist economic and political agendas” and allows for “the separation of knowledge from responsibility” (p. 346).

³⁸With regard to creating alternatives to this worldview, the importance of actually spending time outside of buildings, as simple and obvious as it may seem, cannot be overstated. Any shift in cultural worldview needs experiential context to support it, and

The natural world provides the most accessible, local circumstance for the disclosure of a crucial psycho-spiritual truth: That is, we are manifestations of and responsive participants in and for an infinitely deep, inclusive, wild, and awesome mystery. (Adams, 2014, p. 81)

Beyer (1999) also comments on the profound effects of the normalized, yet far from normal, disappearance from our daily lives of time spent in non-built nature:

It is reasonable to suggest that, in general, the less time a person spends [in nature], the less familiarity and personal involvement is likely to develop, less care will be felt, and the less basic information and first-hand knowing will be available to all the people of the culture. Of course, this very lack of close relating, information, and knowing permeates our entire society today. And it does so to such an extent that ideologies and practices can emerge that have no proper ground (as it were) or basis for wise relating with nature. When there is so little personal involvement and when so little is known about nature there is ample room for culture-wide prejudice and misunderstanding, and the chances for

insensitivity, abuse, and exploitation increase. It may be therefore not altogether surprising that we in our society persist in destroying the habitat that sustains us, the conditions for our very survival. (p. 51-52)

³⁹ For Fisher (2013), nature “is a process, is a verb... The natural world is fundamentally... a field of arising-and-passing phenomena or appearances, a myriad of unfolding-and-dying interactional events” (p. 99).

⁴⁰ If we take not-knowing seriously as a necessary aspect of our relationship to the natural world we can begin to imagine that an ethic of respect for limited knowing would bring radical reform to industries of all sorts (including the mental health industry). One of my favorite pieces of commentary about such reform comes from the farmer and cultural critic Wendell Berry (1987), who writes in a letter to his friend Wes Jackson that “mystery” may refer to a pattern or logic beyond the limit of human understanding:

To call the unknown by its right name, “mystery,” is to suggest that we had better respect the possibility of a larger, unseen pattern... What I think you and I and a few others are working on is a definition of *agriculture as up against mystery and ignorance-based*. (p. 4-5, italics added)

⁴¹ Fisher (2013) expresses this beautifully:

All phenomena arise from out of a larger field or ground, as plants perhaps teach best. They all, therefore, have a hidden dimension: they are mysterious. The natural world, as a play of appearances in which the things that are disclosed to us are rooted in what still remains closed, is intrinsically mysterious. (p. 100)

⁴² As manifestations of nature ourselves, we can find our own hiddenness and ungraspability reflected in the more-than-human natural world, in a refutation of the dominant cultural

momentum toward reducing human being to determinable (and therefore predictable and controllable) properties. If we neglect or destroy “a beautiful and mysterious world, we are less able to know our own corresponding beauty and mystery” (Fisher, 2013, p. 172.)

⁴³ In using the phrase “pain for the world,” I am following the example of American Buddhist ecophilosopher and activist Joanna Macy, whose writings (see for example Macy, 2007; Macy and Johnstone, 2012) and organizing have disseminated this phrase widely through circles concerned with human responsibility for, and responses to, ecological crises. In their book *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We’re in without Going Crazy*, Macy and Chris Johnstone (2012) cite a research survey of UK citizens that offers a glimpse of just how profoundly various aspects of pain for the world can impact a society:

In a survey of more than two thousand people, one in four said they were less inclined to plan for the future, and one in seven said they were reluctant to have children because of world conditions. More than half described feeling powerless to change things, and 30 percent said that nothing helped relieve their worries about the future. (p. 64)

⁴⁴ Macy and Johnstone (2012) provide a list of reasons people give for avoiding their own emotional responses to “planetary emergency.” Among them: “It is so upsetting that I prefer not to think about it;” “I feel paralyzed. I’m aware of the danger, but I don’t know what to do;” “There’s no point in doing anything, since it won’t make any difference” (p. 63-64).

⁴⁵ When we manage to feel our pain for the world, many of us keep it to ourselves and suffer in isolation. We do this for numerous reasons: we may not have a human

community to go to, or we may perceive that speaking about this pain is taboo because it confronts others with their own unbearable pain (Macy and Johnstone, 2012). The field of mental health also contributes to the continued silencing of this suffering in a number of ways. For example, psychotherapists tend not to ask about pain for the world, implicitly suggesting to patients that it is not relevant to their psychological health (it is striking to me that not once in my long career as a patient has a therapist asked me, during an intake full of questions about my history, context, and functioning, “How do you feel about what’s going on in the world?”). In addition, therapists working in individualistic cultures (like my own) are usually trained to locate the source of psychological suffering “inside” the patient or at the relational boundary between the patient and the world (for example, in a maladaptive cognitive pattern, a problematic cycle of relating to others, or an unconscious conflict). This means that within the therapy relationship, a patient’s healthy dysregulation and despair at toxic conditions *outside* the patient can easily get taken up as a personal problem which communicates something that is primarily about the patient and calls for working-through and/or medication (as distinct from a communication about a real, multifaceted global crisis calling for a new world order):

This tendency to reduce our distress about planetary conditions to some kind of psychological problem or neurosis is common. Our anguish and alarm about what we’re doing to our world are viewed as symptoms to be treated or as markers of an underlying personal issue. (Macy and Johnstone, 2012, p. 66)

Therapists are called to reconsider what it means to be healers within individualistic cultures, not only because individualizing solutions do little to come to the aid of a dying

planet, but because neglecting pain for the world can cause massive damage to human lives:

In cultural environments where such distress can be heard and witnessed, healers may interpret symptoms as calls to put something right in the environment...But where such symptoms cannot be heard and interpreted, there may be a descent into a chronic state of psychological dissociation and the lonely suffering of symptoms that compromise vitality, creativity, eros, and compassion. (Watkins and Shulman, 2008, p. 75)

⁴⁶ On this felt evidence for our interconnection, Will Adams (2014) writes, “Our very turning away is evidence that we were never actually separate, that we were moved by a direct ethical imperative” (p. 76). Elsewhere (2006), regarding a different kind of response that leads to the same conclusions about our interconnection with the nonhuman world, he points out that

To feel that our hearts are breaking as we witness the annihilation of nature is actually a manifestation of a health and sanity. It is a sign that our hearts are working just as they should...And it is evidence that we were only illusorily but never really separated from the natural world in the first place. (p. 127)

⁴⁷ Adams (2014) explains that this “way of being, knowing, and relating” that presumes a “skin-bounded, masterful self intrinsically separate from others, the world, and nature” *is* what we call “ego” (p. 72). From this perspective, an egoic mode of living and relating is a ubiquitous, culturally-endorsed delusion. On the power of our pain for the world to dismantle this delusion, Macy and Johnstone (2012) write:

Extreme individualism takes each of us as a separate bundle of self-interest, with motivations and emotions that only make sense within the confines of our own stories. Pain for the world tells a different story, one about our interconnectedness. We feel distress when other beings suffer because, at a deep level, we are not separate from them. The isolation that splits us from the living body of our world is an illusion; the pain breaks through it to tell us who we really are. (p. 75)

⁴⁸ Fisher (2013) writes that “kinship denotes the experience of unity-within-separation, likeness-within-difference, continuity-within-discontinuity, or identity-within-differentiation” (p. 95)

⁴⁹ Macy and Johnstone (2012) point out that our pain for the world is a source not just of information about environmental problems but also of intimacy and solidarity with our more-than-human community: “When we hear the sounds of the Earth crying within us, we’re unblocking not just feedback but also the channels of felt connectedness that join us with our world” (p. 76).

⁵⁰ In *World as Lover, World as Self* (2007), Macy details the psychological toll, and the practical danger, of refusing to feel our pain for the world:

It not only impoverishes our emotional and sensory life...but also impedes our capacity to process and respond to information. The energy expended in pushing down despair is diverted from more creative uses, depleting the resilience and imagination needed for fresh visions and strategies. Fear of despair erects an invisible screen, filtering out anxiety-provoking data. In a world where organisms require feedback in order to adapt and survive, this is suicidal. (p. 93)

Elsewhere (2012), she and Johnstone describe the psychological benefits of honoring this pain: “It is enlivening to go with, rather than against, the flow of our deep-felt responses to the world [and] we feel tremendous relief on realizing our solidarity with others” (p. 70).

One of my favorite statements about the value of feeling and honoring pain for the world comes from an interview with climate activist Tim DeChristopher in the documentary *How to Let Go of the World and Love All the Things Climate Can't Change* (2017). DeChristopher told filmmaker Josh Fox that

I stopped trying to avoid despair, and then I even stopped trying to get through despair, and I just picked it up and carried it with me. Everywhere that I go. And just realized that I had to make a place in my heart for despair and keep doing the work. One way of looking at it is that carrying around a heavy weight is a burden in tranquil times. But in turbulent and stormy times, that heavy weight is an anchor and that big rock that you carry around can be what prevents you from getting swept away. (Schlosberg & Fox, 2017)

⁵¹ Here I would like to thank, and recommend, some of the numerous authors whose voices formed part of the chorus of support that helped me to see that healing from eating disorders would mean re-wilding my body and redefining womanhood:

- Susan Bordo in *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*
- Caroline Knapp in *Appetites: Why Women Want*
- Various contributors to *Body Outlaws*, edited by Ophira Edut and Rebecca Walker
- Marilyn Wann in *Fat!So?*

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- Anita Johnston in *Eating in the Light of the Moon*
 - Joan Jacobs Brumberg in *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls*
 - Marya Hornbacher in *Wasted: A Memoir of Anorexia and Bulimia*
 - Roberta Pollack Seid in *Never Too Thin: Why Women Are at War With Their Bodies*
 - Margo Maine in *Body Wars: Making Peace with Women's Bodies*

⁵² Our personal efforts to get to know and honor our appetites can make a big difference in our lives. However, chronic disconnection from embodied knowledge of our needs is an intrinsic part of life under consumer capitalism. Psychoanalyst Joel Kovel (in Fisher, 2013) points out that “were people either happy or clear about what they wanted, then capitalism’s ceaseless expansion would be endangered” (p. 165). Fisher (2013) writes that “active mystification of our needing” is part of the strategy of an economic order whose survival depends on guarding “against our becoming aware of needs lying outside the field of commodity consumption” (p. 166). Such “active mystification” makes it easy for us to imagine that technology, commodities, and purchasable experiences and services are appropriate ways to meet needs for non-commodities like safety and respect.

Human confusion about what we really need is therefore inextricably linked to the exploitation of nature that generates “resources” to meet the demands of unchecked consumption. This confusion also prevents us from discovering that asking what the biosphere needs is actually a great way to get a clearer sense of what we ourselves need, since we are an organ of the biosphere. And even when individuals call capitalism’s bluff and realize that “the deeper, nonmaterial sources of fulfillment that are the main

psychological determinants of happiness...are infinitely sustainable” (Durning, 1995, p. 75), institutional, social, and infrastructure limits (such as a lack of a good public transit system that would make life livable without a car) make it hard to make different choices. Without substantial cultural change, including collective efforts to organize our lives according to non-consumer capitalist values, personal efforts to honor our natural appetites will be hard to sustain. Furthermore, focusing attention exclusively on the responsibility of *consumers* for their choices within a manipulative system can be a way to divert attention from the culpability of the *producers*, the most powerful of whom, including oil companies, are absolute economic juggernauts. This is what leads Alan Durning (1995) to conclude that any “strategy for reducing consumption must focus as much on changing the framework in which people make choices as it does on the choices they make” (p. 76).

⁵³ My comments on addiction here are primarily inspired by the work of Chellis Glendinning (1995), whose ideas about normalized addictive behavior are quoted at the start of this interlude. For Glendinning, the addictive behavior of those of us living in ecocidal cultures is understandable as a result of a violation that we ourselves have suffered at the hands of the technological order:

The trauma endured by technological people like ourselves is the systemic and systematic removal of our lives from the natural world: from the tendrils of earthy textures, from the rhythms of sun and moon, from the spirits of bears and trees, from the life force itself. This is also the systemic and systematic removal of our lives from the kinds of social and cultural experiences our ancestors assumed when they lived in rhythm with the natural world. (1995, p. 52)

Glendinning has good company in framing Westerners as addicts responding to the effects of alienation. Psychologist Philip Cushman's 1990 article "Why the Self is Empty: Toward a Historically Situated Psychology" argues that the consumer-dependent post-World War II economy, in tandem with historical forces of industrialization, urbanization, and secularization, has produced an "empty self" that

seeks the experience of being continually filled up by consuming goods, calories, experiences, politicians, romantic partners, and empathic therapists in an attempt to combat the growing alienation and fragmentation of its era. (p. 600)

Whereas Cushman's thesis fails to consider the impact of humans' alienation from the rest of nature, Beyer (2010) traces the problems of alienation and addiction to the "posture of separateness" that we cling to in denial of our intimacy with and inseparability from nature:

We like to tell ourselves that though the world is a dangerous and scary place, we humans are in some way separate from it and above it all...Psychological distance, the denial of connectedness, seems to offer us a quick and easy sense of safety...So we construct and then inhabit and submit to a cultural ethos which inclines us to wall ourselves off from nature, from each other, and even ultimately from the experience of the whole of our selves...We are left to live our lives so many steps removed from the full richness of genuine presence and nourishing intimate relating, and we are too alone, and there seems to be something missing. It is for want of greater intimacy that we are left immature and empty and our earth overheats. So we try blindly and in vain to fill this culturally promoted and sanctioned emptiness – fill it with work, maybe, or consuming, or entertainment,

or drugs, or texting, or some other modern way of distracting ourselves from the discomfoting effects of this prophylactic psychological disconnection. (p. 111-112)

These comments on the addictive process are best appreciated in dialogue with my comments on consumer capitalism in the previous footnote. Fisher (2013) points out that consumption “has the character of an addiction” and is “a mode of experience that amounts mostly to tension relief and not to any restructuring of the ground of our existence or carrying forward of our lives” (p. 167).

⁵⁴ In Chödrön’s (1997) own irreplaceable words:

Refraining—not habitually acting out impulsively—has something to do with giving up entertainment mentality. Through refraining, we see that there’s something between the arising of the craving...and whatever action we take as a result. There’s something there in us that we don’t want to experience, and we never do experience, because we’re so quick to act.

Underneath our ordinary lives, underneath all the talking we do, all the moving we do, all the thoughts in our minds, there’s a fundamental groundlessness. It’s there bubbling along all the time. We experience it as restlessness and edginess...but we never get down to the essence of it.

Refraining is the method for getting to know the nature of this restlessness...It’s a method for settling into groundlessness. If we immediately entertain ourselves by talking, by acting, by thinking—if there’s never any pause—we will never be able to relax. We will always be speeding through our lives. We’ll always be stuck with what my grandfather called a good case of the

jitters. Refraining is a way of making friends with ourselves at the most profound level possible. (p. 57-58)

⁵⁵ In this interlude, my thinking about what dependency is and how the denial or expression of it relates to power and privilege owes much to my conversations with my friend and mentor Mark Fairfield, LCSW, BCD, who, along with his team at The Relational Center of L.A., have developed clinical programming, activist training, and public education curricula designed to dismantle cultural stories that encourage domination over nature, the marginalization of minorities, and the denial of our dependence on each other and the biosphere.

⁵⁶ Feminist eco-criticism, or ecofeminism (this latter was a term more often employed before the approach became intersectional), is a political and academic movement that addresses the overlap between the subjugation of the natural world and the subjugation of female and other marginalized bodies within patriarchal cultures. Fisher (2013), writes that

Ecofeminists bring attention to the historical fact that under patriarchal rule the repressing and exploiting of women has gone hand-in-hand with the repressing and exploiting of the natural world. The domination of nature...cannot be satisfactorily understood unless viewed as a feminist issue, so close is the connection between the man-centered or “androcentric” exploitation of nature (regarded as feminine) and of women (regarded as natural). (p. 19)

Among my favorite feminist eco-critical texts, due to its meticulous tracing of the historical permutations undergone by the association of the earth with women (and vice versa) since the 16th century, is *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific*

Revolution by Carolyn Merchant (1980). Starting with the argument that “women and nature have an age-old association – an affiliation that has persisted throughout culture, language, and history” (p. xix), Merchant goes on to document that by the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, technological development and the development of a new scientific worldview that “reconceptualized reality as a machine rather than a living organism” (p. xxi) began to draw upon long-established images of women and the land as nurturing, passive, and beneficent, yet also chaotic and in need of control, in order to sanction the exploitation of both women and land that was necessary for the rise of commercial capitalism.

Underlying all of Merchant’s historical excavations, and much feminist eco-critical thinking, is a focus on the problem of nature-culture dualism:

At the root of the identification of women and animality with a lower form of human life lies the distinction between nature and culture fundamental to humanistic disciplines such as history, literature, and anthropology, which accept that distinction as an unquestioned assumption. Nature-culture dualism is a key factor in Western civilization’s advance at the expense of nature. As the unifying bonds of the older hierarchical cosmos were severed, European culture increasingly set itself above and apart from all that was symbolized by nature. Similarly, in America the nature-culture dichotomy was basic to the tension between civilization and the frontier in westward expansion and helped to justify the continuing exploitation of nature’s resources...If nature and women, Indians and blacks are to be liberated from the strictures of this ideology, a radical

critique of the very categories *nature* and *culture*, as organizing concepts in all disciplines, must be undertaken.

Anthropologists have pointed out that nature and women are both perceived to be on a lower level than culture, which has been associated symbolically and historically with men. Because women's physiological functions of reproduction, nurture, and childrearing are viewed as closer to nature, their social role is lower on the cultural scale than that of the male. Women are devalued by their tasks and roles, by their exclusion from community functions whence power is derived, and through symbolism. (p. 143-144)

Merchant's explorations of the ways in which nature-culture dualism link the oppression of women and the exploitation of nonhuman nature are far-reaching. Her discussion of the origins of large-scale mining is particularly compelling ["The sixteenth- and seventeenth-century imagination perceived a direct correlation between mining and digging into the nooks and crannies of a women's body" (p. 39)]. Also fascinating is her discussion of sixteenth-century witch trials, in which she points out that as commercial capitalism sought greater control over the unpredictability of nature, it became more socially significant that

symbolically associated with unruly nature was the dark side of woman...The witch, symbol of the violence of nature, raise storms, caused illness, destroyed crops, obstructed generation, and killed infants. Disorderly woman, like chaotic nature, needed to be controlled. (p. 127 and 132)

Among the most disturbing of her investigations is her discussion of the use, by Francis Bacon and his followers, of images of the enslavement and rape of women, and the

torture of witches, to further the development of the new “scientific method” that is still the predominant mode of inquiry driving the industries that currently exploit the natural world in the name of technology and progress. Among the evidence she presents is a passage of Bacon’s writing in which he refers to the methods of witch interrogation endorsed by James I:

For you have but to follow and as it were hound nature in her wanderings, and you will be able when you like to lead and drive her afterward to the same place again...For the further disclosing of the secrets of nature...neither ought a man to make scruple of entering and penetrating into these holes and corners, when the inquisition of truth is his whole object. (Bacon in Merchant, 1980, p. 168)

The “sexual politics [that] helped to structure that nature of the empirical method” (Merchant, 1980, p. 172) are still evident in the value systems of disciplines, including psychology, that legitimate attempts to predict and control nature – human or non – for the “good” of humanity.

⁵⁷Psychologist Ellyn Kaschak (1992) names this dynamic “engulfing of the Other” and writes that it is employed, mostly without awareness, by men who have discovered that the radical autonomy demanded of them by their cultures is impossible to achieve: “If men define women, children, and even physical aspects of their environment as extensions of themselves, then their own difficulties with separation are made invisible” (p. 136).

⁵⁸ Beyond dependency, any culturally devalued aspect of humanity can be piled, in this way, onto marginalized human groups, nonhuman animals, and the land. In this way,

culturally devalued qualities like irrationality, incompetence, and passivity become stereotypes of disenfranchised groups. As Mark Fairfield puts it,

Women's bodies and the environment, those are territories where we've established labor camps where we've imprisoned certain aspects of our humanity... What doesn't fit into the rubric of mastery is projected onto recipients who don't have enough political power to stage a revolution and push back, and if they try, they get snuffed out. So it's compelling to think about how more than half of the planet's population might be in a position to stage the ultimate revolution against that toxic strategy! (Personal communication, January 4, 2018)

⁵⁹ Mary E. Gomes and Allen D. Kanner (1995) write that

Attitudes about access to women and access to wild places...illustrate the way in which women's subjugation by men parallels the Earth's subjugation by humans...Men are entitled to have access to women more than the reverse. Women who systematically deny men access – either generally, through a separatist life-style, or in specific instances, such as women's colleges or activist organizations – arouse extreme suspicious and discomfort in many men. In a similar vein, industrial society assumes a right of access to the entire planet. No place is considered by its own rights off-limits to humans. (p. 116)

⁶⁰ Regarding the extensive harm wrought by cultural devaluing of dependency, Gomes and Kanner (1995) share an insight of feminist psychology that

concerns the parasitic quality of relationship that comes from the denial of dependence. By acknowledging our dependence, we allow gratitude and reciprocity to come forth freely and spontaneously...When we deny our dependence on another person, we threaten not only to engulf them but to feed on

their strength and vitality, often until we have used them up...The unacknowledged dependence makes us act as parasites on the planet, killing off our own host. (p. 115)

Later, commenting further on the way in which no one is immune to these damaging effects, they write,

Hyperindividuality is a type of relationship that denies and often destroys the larger context, whether this is a friendship, a family, or an ecosystem. When these larger systems are destroyed, everyone ultimately suffers the consequences, dominators as well as the dominated. (1995, p. 117-118)

⁶¹ The term “feminized” here refers not to females as sex nor to womanhood as a gender identity but to “the feminine” as the assorted ways of being, capacities, qualities, and practices that patriarchies denigrate.

⁶² I’d like to note here that diverse groups negotiate the shame of dependency locally, differently, and complexly. For example, enslaved African Americans were the target of cultural shaming for their dependency on slave-owners, but some took pride and joy, after escaping slavery, in an acknowledged dependency on the land that they farmed (hooks, 2009, p. 48). Yet when African American communities struggle economically, they are shamed and stereotyped for their dependence on welfare programs. In suggesting the possibility of claiming a “right to depend,” I am not imagining equal ease of access to such a claim – privilege makes just about any demand easier to make. I am, however, suggesting that all human groups, and all manner of transectional human identities, can begin collective efforts to replace phobia of dependence with practices of interdependence, once they are educated about the toxic impact of self-sufficiency. One

worthwhile use of privilege is to bolster the efforts of less privileged groups to accomplish this work – by both providing the necessary resources and by being careful not to obstruct the work.

⁶³ The array of psychological and behavioral changes experienced by many people who spend extended periods in places unimpacted, or only lightly impacted, by industrial-era humans, have been collectively dubbed the “wilderness effect” (Greenway, 1995, p. 127). These changes do not proceed inevitably from such experiences. As psychologist Robert Greenway (1995) puts it, it is possible to “cross the wilderness boundary physically but not psychologically” (p. 132). The difference, for him, has to do with whether the program or experience in question has been designed more in the spirit of contacting “wilderness on its own terms” or more in the spirit of “[using] wilderness to develop skills [seen as] ‘useful’ or ‘empowering’ by our culture” (p. 133). People who take a less utilitarian approach to the experience are more likely to undergo the types of changes that I am describing. Greenway (1995) attributes these changes to a shift from a culturally-enforced, dualistic mode of experiencing oneself as separate from nature to a “more nondualistic mode” of nonegoic information processing (p. 131-132).

⁶⁴ In *Nature and Madness*, Shepard (1982) traces historical changes in Western civilization’s relationship to the nonhuman natural world, beginning with nomadic hunter-gatherer groups and ending with modern cities, making the argument that in high-density urban societies, “the ideology of progress is mainly one of increasing our domination over nature” and that city-based culture “is saturated with the necessity of increasing, and the fear of losing, control” (p. 99).

⁶⁵ In the words of Jack Turner, “wildness and wilderness is determined not by the absence of people but by the relationships between people and place” (in Forbes, 2003, p. 90).

⁶⁶ This is not to say that dialogue with nonhuman nature cannot happen in urban environments – far from it. Mutually beneficial dialogical relationships between humans and the nonhuman world can happen anywhere where the two coexist. However, the *predominant* form taken by the human-nonhuman relationship in industrial environments is not dialogical, and this is often most evident in urban areas. It was this realization that my body was responding to in Ridgecrest. How to increase human access to intimacy with nonhuman nature within cities – how to open up the possibility for urban life to be more “conversational” than “monological” in relation to nonhuman otherness – is an important question. Cities, after all, are growing larger, and marginalized human groups – who have often experienced the most violent forms of coerced separation from nature – are increasingly urban dwellers.

Drawing on the work of the philosopher Martin Buber, Adams (2007) describes the culturally predominant human mode of relating to nature as “an I-it relationship, wherein we reduce [a nonhuman being or presence] to a mere object and use it instrumentally for our gratification. Far from being an authentic dialogue, this is actually a monologue with our own fantasies” (p. 31). Taking the example of a tree, Buber provides a corrective to this monological mode when he writes that an I-thou relationship with nonhuman nature is entirely possible:

It can also happen, if will and grace are joined, that as I contemplate the tree I am drawn into a relation, and the tree ceases to be an It...The tree...confronts me bodily and has to deal with me as I must deal with it – only differently. One

should not try to dilute the meaning of relation: relation is reciprocity. Does the tree then have consciousness, similar to our own? I have no experience of that. But...must you again divide the indivisible? What I encounter is neither the soul of a tree nor a dryad [a tree nymph], but the tree itself. (in Adams, 2007, p. 31-32)

Watkins and Shulman (2008) have researched the transformational healing that occurs when “I-it” monological patterns of being and relating give way to “I-thou” dialogue. Their conclusions suggest that liberating our species from its deadening monologue with itself is crucial to the development of ethical and mutually sustaining relations between humans and the biosphere: “Moving from bystanding to compassionate engagement, facing one’s own collusion with perpetration of violence and/or injustice, and healing from the wounds of oppression require the development of dialogical skills” (Watkins and Shulman, 2008, p. 176).

⁶⁷ Abram (2009b) comments that the experiences of driving and flying cut us off, at least partially, from the sensory perception of place that “is the silken web that binds our separate nervous systems into the encompassing ecosystem” (p. 226). To journey contactfully across local ecologies is necessarily to experience “our nervous system being tuned and tutored...by the gradual changes...in sensorial topography” (p. 227).

⁶⁸ Sewall (1995) describes how the practice of hiking into a canyon can rewrite “one’s sense of living *on* a planet” (p. 213, italics in original). Recasting linear distance in terms of “depth,” she writes that

Conventional reductionistic science defines depth egocentrically, or as that which is out in front of us: it is the narrow part of the visual field in which signals from

both eyes overlap. This conception of depth perpetuates a worldview in which separation is enhanced. (p. 212)

Also commenting on the limits of dominant understandings of distance that seem to suggest that human life is overlaid “on top of” the planet, Abram (1988) writes,

Our civilized distrust of the senses and of the body engenders a metaphysical detachment from the sensible world – it fosters the illusion that we ourselves are not a part of the world that we study, that we can objectively stand apart from that world, as spectators, and can thus determine its working from the outside. (p. 104)

⁶⁹ American Academy of Ophthalmology. (2011, October 24). More time outdoors may reduce kids’ risk for nearsightedness. Retrieved from

<https://www.aao.org/newsroom/news-releases/detail/more-time-outdoors-may-reduce-kids-risk-nearsightedness>

⁷⁰ For this formulation, I’m indebted to Merleau-Ponty, whose work on the topic of depth I encountered through the writing of Abram (1988):

Merleau-Ponty was one of the first to demonstrate, contrary to the assertions of a dualistic psychology, that the experience of depth is not created in the brain any more than it is posited by the mind. He showed that we can discover depth, can focus it or change our focus within it, only because it is already there, because perception unfolds into depth – because my brain, like the rest of my body, is already enveloped in a world that stretches out beyond my grasp. Depth, which we cannot consider to be merely one perceptual phenomenon among others, since it is that which engenders perception, is the announcement of our immersion in a

world that not only preexists our vision but prolongs itself beyond our vision, behind that curved horizon. (Abram, p. 104)

⁷¹ The disorientation, and subsequent reorientation, that comes of shedding linear conceptions of distance in exchange for the embodied experience of depth has been described by psychologists with wilderness-based practices, such as Steven Harper (1995), who writes that

outside familiar cultural boundaries and within wilderness, there are noticeable and sometimes radical shifts in the perception of time and space...Space, instead of being measured in linear distance, is measured in experienced distance. (p. 192)

⁷² In 1974, James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis famously proposed that the atmosphere is “a component part of the biosphere rather than...a mere environment for life” (p. 2). Their “Gaia hypothesis” has received much support and much criticism within atmospheric science, but whether or not you accept their specific argument, it has become clear that our embeddedness in the atmosphere is determinative of factors from the circulation of pollutants to the regulation of temperature to the ability for sound to travel. Here is how Abram (1988) puts it:

Our scientists with their instruments have rediscovered what the ancients knew simply by following the indications of their senses: that we live within a sphere, or within a series of concentric spheres. We now call those spheres by such names as the “hydrosphere,” the “troposphere,” the “stratosphere,” and the “ionosphere,” and no longer view them as encompassing the whole universe. We have discovered that the myriad stars exist quite far beyond these, and now recognize

these spheres to be layers or regions of our own local universe, the Earth.

Collectively these spheres make up the atmosphere, the low-viscosity fluid membrane within which all our perceiving takes place. (p. 106)

⁷³ Sewall (1995) writes that “conceptually, being within and...dependent upon the body of the Earth requires a kind of communication or exchange not unlike that shared with a lover” (p. 213).

⁷⁴ This falling away of the illusion of separateness can inspire entirely new lifestyles, priorities, and commitments, as Abram (1988) observes:

For many who have regained a genuine depth perception, recognizing their own embodiment as entirely internal to, and thus wholly dependent on, the vaster body of the Earth, the only possible course of action is to begin planning and working on behalf of the ecological world which they now discern. (p. 101)

⁷⁵ Framing land as “terra nullius,” or, essentially, “up for grabs,” was a tactic used by European powers to justify the conquer and sale of inhabited lands (Haig-Brown, 2009).

Regarding another idea mentioned in the footnoted sentence, when I make specific mention of the traditional knowledge of my European ancestors, I am attempting to avoid the trap of too easily dichotomizing “colonizers” and “colonized,” or “indigenous” and “immigrant,” in a way that erases the multiplicity of practices and worldviews that can be found in all groups. Here I am following the example of ecologist Melissa Nelson (1997). In an essay on her mixed Anishinaabe and Norwegian ancestry, she writes that for North Americans of European heritage, grappling honestly with the history of European violence in the Americas is not tantamount to “disregarding...European heritage” (p. 63). Rather, it involves “transcending the self-

centered, ethnocentric, and exploitive patterns of Western hegemony [and] explicitly questioning the so-called objectivity and universal character of the Western scientific paradigm” (p. 63). My European ancestors participated in colonization at the very least through their presence in indigenous territories (and my presence here is also a way of participating). And yet, it was the values passed on to my mother by her Sicilian ancestors that inspired her to have the family farm in New Jersey legally protected so that it can only ever be used by small, ecologically-conscious farms, and never big agribusiness

⁷⁶ For this formulation I am directly indebted to Celia Haig-Brown’s (2009) essay “Decolonizing Diaspora: Whose Traditional Land Are We On?”, in which she explores “the possibility of decolonizing discourses of diaspora, by asking the central question not only where do people of the diaspora come *from*, but where have they come *to*?” (p. 5). Although both Native American and African diasporas are explicitly considered in this interlude, for the purposes of the footnoted sentence, I am taking Haig-Brown’s question out of a diaspora-specific context to suggest that it is relevant not only to members of a diaspora, but also to people like myself who have immigrant ancestry and don’t identify as part of a diaspora. Indeed, for immigrants (or descendants of immigrants) who do not identify as part of a diaspora (for example, because their move was not precipitated by violence and/or because they have the option of returning to the homeland), asking who inhabited the lands we are on can be the start of “decolonizing” not a discourse of diaspora, but our discourses about citizenship/nationality.

⁷⁷ In “Becoming Métis,” Nelson (1997) points out that there is a longstanding tradition in ecology and ecophilosophy of pitting “anthropocentrism” against “biocentrism,” as

though the natural and the (human) cultural are necessarily at odds and only one can be prioritized at a time. This is one way that the nature/culture dualism discussed in footnote 56 shows up in these fields. It is important for ecopsychology to be aware of this tradition of dichotomizing, as it stands to inherit it. While I don't actually think the maker of this wooden sign intended to suggest a prioritizing of natural over cultural resources (we don't have a word that encompasses both!), it is this problematic way of thinking that made me wonder, upon reading the sign, about how efforts to preserve two threatened groups – Native Americans and the nonhuman residents of Jawbone – must necessarily be impacted by a differential valuing of their respective worth, by different powers at different times. If only we had a word that encompasses both – perhaps “kinship resources?” Nelson's friend, native restoration ecologist Dennis Martinez, suggests that “we need to move beyond the anthropocentric-biocentric dichotomy and see that we are really kin-centric” (in Nelson, 1997, p. 63).

⁷⁸ Writing about a military massacre and federal policies that killed and displaced many Kawaiisu after Californian statehood in the mid-1800s, Leslie Zaglauer (1995) notes that

As a result of the federal government's refusal to recognize all tribes, numerous tribes in California as well as in other states, have been declared extinct or non-existing in a political sense. Despite not having a political relationship with the federal government, it is known among locals, especially Native peoples, that many such groups are in fact not extinct, politically or culturally. (p. 6)

⁷⁹ In an illustration of how racism and alienation from land are inseparable in the experience of people targeted by racism, hooks (2009) describes how “rigid rules of

racial segregation” forced African Americans out of the major role they once played in the horse culture of her native Kentucky:

Separating black folks, especially black jockeys, from the world of Kentucky horse culture went hand in hand with the rise in white supremacist thinking. For us it meant living with a culture of fear where we learned to fear the land, the animals...This separation from nature and the concomitant fear it produced, *fear of nature and fear of whiteness was the trauma shaping black life*. (p.10, italics added)

⁸⁰ Mary Watkins and Helene Shulman (2008) write, in *Toward Psychologies of Liberation*, that

In the twenty-first century, human-place relations are under siege...The morphing of colonialism into globalization has deprived countless local communities of their economic means of survival, forcing millions to leave their land and families in search of distant employment. A rapacious hunger for profit has led to violent displacement of indigenous groups from land that is rich in coveted natural resources. Many groups trying to build or to sustain homeplaces do so under threat of losing the places they call home or having already sustained this loss. (p. 220)

Their book also provides an overview of the range of responses, by displaced and/or colonized groups, to their forced separation from land. For anyone interested in reading about collective resistances to separation from land, and the cultural therapeutics of such resistance, I recommend beginning with the sections on Kenya’s Green Belt Movement (p. 17) and Mexico’s Zapatistas (p. 223).

⁸¹ The history of agrarian black families in the south establishing ties to the land through organic farming, only to then be driven off their farms by whites, is apparently not well known even within African-American communities. hooks (2009) describes this legacy in detail in her book *Belonging: A Culture of Place*:

Within imperialist white supremacist capitalist culture in the United States there has been a concentrated effort to bury the history of the black farmer. Yet somewhere in deeds recorded, in court records, in oral history, and in rare existing written studies is the powerful truth of our agrarian legacy as African-Americans. In that history is also the story of racist white folks engaged in acts of terrorism chasing black folks off the land, destroying our homeplace. That story of modern colonialism is now being told. Recent front page articles in the Lexington, Kentucky newspaper, the *Herald-Leader*, highlighted the historical assaults on black landowners. In a section titled “Residue of a Racist Past” Elliott Jaspin’s article “Left Out of History Books” tells readers that “Beginning in 1864 and continuing for about 60 years whites across the United States conducted a series of racial expulsions, driving thousands of blacks from their homes to make communities lily-white.” Black farmers, working their small farms, were often a prime target for white folks who wanted more land. (p. 44)

For hooks, understanding that “black folks cared about land, about the fate of the earth” (p. 45), “taught that the earth was sacred” (p. 46), and had begun to create, after slavery, “a culture of belonging rooted in the earth” (p. 46) is crucial to understanding that one of the most virulent impacts of racism is the separation of people from land. hooks (2009) also describes a form of resistance to racism forged in dialogues between Native

Americans and African Americans: “Sharing...reverence for the earth, black and red people helped one another remember that, despite the white man’s ways, the land belonged to everyone” (p. 35).

⁸² Invoking the history of “groups” who lived, or live, in balance with their local ecologies can be othering or exoticizing of those groups, especially considering that much of what has been written about the ways of land-based cultures (and, especially, oral land-based cultures) has not actually been written *by* them. As Nelson (1997) puts it, there may be a tendency in the white cultural imagination to attribute “special spiritual ‘goodies’” to Native American identity, for example (p. 63). That being said, there is reality to these histories. Seeking non-othering ways of acknowledging these histories is one way to combat their exclusion from dominant cultural narratives. Telling these stories can also help us to understand ways in which contemporary, normalized phenomena like estrangement from land are actually forms of pathology bred by *the same colonizing forces that displaced land-based groups*. When these stories are told in this spirit (the spirit that holds colonizing forces accountable not only to the contemporary distress they cause but to the original, racist violence they inflicted), then the stories become allies to the resistance movements of displaced groups, rather than simply ways to hold these groups up as models for the white imagination to attempt to emulate or recover. Wherever possible in this section, I have included sources in which members of Native American and African diasporas speak for themselves. I would also like to state explicitly my view that the “traditional wisdom” of, for example, the Anishinaabe group from which Nelson is descended, is too often taken to mean a *lack* of destructive technologies and practices rather than a *presence* of alternative, ecologically

sophisticated expertise. Living in right relationship to land is not a spiritual goody.

Traditional Native American and African diasporic resource management is a highly skilled enterprise involving the use of a great many sustainable technologies.

⁸³ Jeannette Armstrong (1995), a member of the Okanagan Nation, recalls a conversation between her parents which she translates into English to express the Okanagan perspective that insanity can be caused by “displacement panic...[people being] pulled apart from themselves as...place” (p. 319). Abram (1996) argues that “indigenous, oral persons [experience] the local earth [as] the very matrix of discursive meaning; to force them from their native ecology (for whatever political or economic purpose) is...*to dislodge them from the very ground of coherence*. It is, quite simply, to force them out of their mind” (p. 178, italics in original).

⁸⁴ These words have been attributed to the transcript of a speech given by Chief Seattle of the Suquamish Indians (there is controversy over the attribution; further, if Chief Seattle did deliver this speech, he would have done so in the Lushootseed language, which would then have had to be translated into English for the transcript):

How can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them?...We are part of the earth and it is part of us. (in hooks, 2009, p. 35)

⁸⁵ Jeannete Armstrong (1995) writes, of Okanagan language and culture,

We...refer to the land and our bodies with the same root syllable. This means that the flesh which is our body is pieces of the land come to us through the things which the land is...We are our land/place...As Okanagans, our most essential

responsibility is to learn to bond our whole individual selves and our communal selves to the land...Without this self we are not human: we yearn, we are incomplete...We cannot find joy because we need place in this sense to nurture and protect our family/community/self. (p. 323-324)

⁸⁶ Vine Deloria, Jr., of the Standing Rock Sioux, and Daniel Wildcat (2001), a Euche member of the Moscogee Nation, have written that tribal stories and memories reside in tribal lands, and the memories living in a place are an essential part of what determines the spirit of a place. Abram (1996) notes anthropological research on the Western Apache, for whom auditory memories of tribal teachings were activated by encounters with the specific places in the landscape where a story took place or was told.

⁸⁷ This is not to say that a new relationship to a new place cannot be established. There can be no straightforward definition of home, and experiences of geographical relocation are now so ubiquitous that Afro-Caribbean scholar Jacqui Alexander (2005) writes that the concept of “home” must be able to accommodate uncertainty of identity, nationality, and origin. At the same time, indigenous and diasporic perspectives have drawn attention to the long-term, deleterious impacts of displacements from traditional land. Regarding this dispossession, Armstrong (1995) writes that “the thing Okanagans fear worst of all is to be removed from the land that is their life and spirit” (p. 324). Of the loss suffered by agrarian African-Americans displaced from their rural farms, hooks (2009) writes,

Leaving a rural past many black folks began to feel estranged from our southern roots, from nature. This estrangement meant that the organic spiritual renewal generated by direct engagement with the natural world was no longer a given in the daily life of ordinary black folks. (p. 62-63)

Watkins and Shulman (2008) highlight the important of these narratives about the psychological impact of separation from place when they write,

The psychic damage attendant to the loss of place has been increasingly minimized in America as industrialization and other economic changes have led to migration from the countryside to urban centers, as well as to multiple moves in the course of one's life. Given the sway of individualism, the breaking of human-nature connections have [sic] only recently been thematized as injurious to individuals, communities, and to the environment...De-placing a community can be compared to efforts to destroy access to its language: both are effective in mortally wounding the transmission of culture. (p. 220-221)

⁸⁸ For example, hooks (2009) writes that “in seeking freedom in the city via mass migration from the agrarian South, most black people began to embrace dominator ways of thinking about the earth” (p. 180). For her, dualism of mind and body was one such “dominator way of thinking” that assimilation practically guaranteed:

If we think of urban life as a location where black folks learned to accept a mind/body split that made it possible to abuse the body, we can better understand the growth of nihilism and despair in the black psyche. And we can know that when we talk about healing that psyche we must also speak about restoring our connection to the natural world. (2009, p. 39)

⁸⁹ Practices of segregation have everything to do with controlling who has access to which places, which land. Hooks (2009) illustrates this by contrasting urban segregation with reservations in a way that also highlights their similarity:

While we were not placed on reservations, black folks were forced to live within boundaries in the city, ones that were not formally demarcated, but boundaries marked by white supremacist violence against black people if lines were crossed. (p. 8-9)

⁹⁰ Hooks' (2009) encounters with the mental health system point to some of the ways in which providers of mental health care are called to reshape their work:

At the predominantly white colleges I attended, it was accepted that students might feel overwhelmed by separation from their norm environment, that we might feel estranged, alienated, that we might in fact lose our minds. Therapy, I learned then, was the best way to face psychic wounds, the best way to heal...I could not find a therapist who would acknowledge the power of geographical location, of ancestral imprints, of racialized identity. (p. 17)

⁹¹ In 2011, Garfinkel and Williams noted that efforts to preserve the Kawaiisu language and culture have been spearheaded by “elders Luther Girado, Lucille Girado Hicks, and Betty Girado Hernandez, a brother and two sisters who are three of the five remaining native speakers of Kawaiisu” (p. 15).

⁹² Ann Cvetkovich's (2012) research has linked the experience of depression to displacement. She comments that in light of this link,

it is tempting, of course, to suggest that “cure” or “healing” or “recovery” comes from finding or returning home...[Yet] sovereignty...can also take the form of emotional, somatic, or sensory connections to place rather than nationalist or essentialist claims. Indeed, this is often the only kind of “land claim” that is possible when, as in the case of African diaspora, people remain displaced. A

sovereignty of the sensory or embodied self is not necessarily about claiming land but about claiming a relation to a place or environment as a way of grounding the self. (p. 152)

hooks (2009) writes compellingly about the role that connection to place must play in the healing of African American communities from racial trauma:

In modern society, there is...a tendency to see no correlation between the struggle for collective black self-recovery and ecological movements that seek to restore balance to the planet by changing our relationship to nature and to natural resources. Unmindful of our history of living harmoniously with the land, many contemporary black folks see no value in supporting ecological movements, or see ecology and the struggle to end racism as competing concerns. Recalling the legacy of our ancestors who knew that the way we regard land and nature will determine the level of our self-regard, black people must reclaim a spiritual legacy where we connect our well-being to the well-being of the earth. This is a necessary dimension of healing... Collective black self-recovery takes place when we begin to renew our relationship to the earth, when we remember the way of our ancestors. When the earth is sacred to us, our bodies can also be sacred to us. (p. 39-40)

⁹³ After writing down the story of my encounters with snakes at Jawbone, and in particular my two meetings with the Mojave green (once in a dream, and once in a boulder pile), it took me quite a while, and a good bit of struggle, to settle on what I wanted to do with the interlude. I read and re-read the story, hunting for some salient theme that I could develop in an interlude, turning up ideas and dismissing them one by

one. At long last I realized that against my own inclination (and perhaps the inclination of readers) to palpate the story of my encounters with the Mojave green for a deeper significance, what I most wanted to do was to find a way to write that wouldn't take up the snake as a representation but rather would keep me crouching close to *the snake*, a living being, just like you, who I actually spent time with.

It was only after this realization that I remembered the Margot McLean quote that opens this interlude. I had read the McLean quote in Gay Bradshaw's and Mary Watkins' (2006) liberation psychology approach to "Trans-species Psychology: Theory and Praxis." Returning to that article to look up the source of the quote, I ended up requesting the book *Dream Animals* (a 1997 collaboration between McLean, who is a painter, and James Hillman, who was a Jungian psychoanalyst) from the library, so that I could read the quote in context. When I opened up the book to the table of contents and saw that the very first chapter is titled, "A Snake Is Not a Symbol," I got a rather funny, rather wonderful feeling.

Dream Animals is quoted only a few times in the footnotes to this interlude, but the ideas animating the book and in particular the themes of the essay "A Snake Is Not a Symbol" have influenced my approach to the writing.

⁹⁴ This is my first use of the pronoun *ki* in the dissertation. Robin Wall Kimmerer (2017), a botanist and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation whom I have previously quoted as a source for this project, has suggested that it is highly problematic that speakers of English are forced by the language either to refer to beings and presences of nature (such as a rattlesnake, a bay, or a bioregion) as "it," or to foist human gender onto these beings and presences through the use of the pronouns "she" and "he." This problem with

pronouns does not exist in the Potawatomi language – members of the nonhuman natural world are referred to as subjects rather than as objects, through language that identifies them as family, or kin. Kimmerer (2017) links this property of Potawatomi to its suppression and current state of near-extinction: “The language we speak is an affront to the ears of the colonist in every way, because it is a language that challenges the fundamental tenets of Western thinking—that humans alone are possessed of rights and all the rest of the living world exists for human use.”

In interviews, published articles, and in her work with botany students, Kimmerer has proposed that, with respect for the view that “our [Potawatomi] language holds no responsibility to heal the society that sought to exterminate it”(2017), the state of human-nonhuman relations demands that English speakers be given a practical way to refer to nature with non-objectifying language. She writes, “I have no illusions that we can suddenly change language and, with it, our worldview, but in fact English evolves all the time... We need words that heal [the human-nonhuman] relationship, that invite us into an inclusive worldview of personhood for all beings” (2017). In Potawatomi, the term *Aakibmaadiziwin* refers to any “being of the Earth,” and Kimmerer recommends that English speakers experiment with replacing “it” with the root syllable “ki” when referencing a being or presence of the natural world (she further recommends pluralizing the pronoun as “kin,” since this term accords so well with a term already in use in English). So, “it lay coiled beneath the boulder” becomes “ki lay coiled beneath the boulder;” and “they flew past, cawing,” becomes “kin flew past, cawing.” I have struggled with the pronoun “it” throughout this entire process of writing, and now, at this point in the writing, I find that I simply *can't* bring myself to refer to the rattlesnake as

“it” – as an object, and as lesser. So, starting with this first use of the pronoun *ki*, I’ll be employing *ki* (as a singular pronoun) and *kin* (as a plural pronoun) frequently throughout the remainder of the project, joining with the handful of nature writers, philosophers, artists, teachers, songwriters, and writers of children’s books who have accepted Kimmerer’s invitation. It won’t always be obvious to me whether it makes more sense to use the pronoun “it” or “*ki*,” or even whether to use a gendered pronoun like “she” or “he” in certain circumstances where the biological sex of a non-human animal is known to me. I’m just going to use my discretion and aim for fidelity to the spirit of the word.

Even as I take up Kimmerer’s invitation with gratitude, concerns about cultural appropriation linger for me. It’s better, I think, that these concerns not be quickly or easily resolved, but continue to haunt this new practice, keeping me sensitized to my accountability to traditions whose exploitation I’m implicated in.

⁹⁵ As James Hillman (1997) remarks in a conversation about nonhuman dream animals with Margot McLean, “It’s very hard to hold back the desire to interpret, to capture the animal into a meaning...Our civilized mind makes a terrible mistake by contrasting ‘real’ animals and animal ‘images,’ as if the one standing in the zoo and the one you meet in a dream are two different beasts altogether” (p. 8-9). For Hillman, there is no reason why the subjectivity of a nonhuman animal in the dream realm should be taken any less seriously than the subjectivity of a nonhuman animal in the waking realm: “We do not invent these images, arrange for their arrival, or manage their autonomy when they come...They are not merely images *of* animals...but images *as* animals” (1997, p. 24).

⁹⁶ Regarding the way that nonhuman animals are typically positioned within psychology, Bradshaw and Watkins (2006) observe that

Psychology participates in speciesism by ignoring individual and personal animal psyche except in the form of colonized fragments as projections (e.g., anthropomorphism), symbol (e.g., mythic figures), or physical objects (e.g., laboratory animals) whose identities are shaped by human need. (p. 6)

Hillman situates most approaches to dream work [including Jung's method of active imagination, which Hillman writes is "not for the sake of the animal's soul, but for...the dreamer's" (1997, p. 28)] within this speciesist tradition. Taking the example of a snake, he writes that the interpretation of nonhuman dream animals solely with reference to human subjectivity and needs has the effect of

[settling] the emotional quivering and mental uncertainty that came with the snake. In fact, the snake is no longer necessary; it has been successfully banished by interpretation. You, the dreamer, don't need the snake anymore and you then form the habit of not needing dreams anymore either, once they have been interpreted. Meaning replaces image; animal disappears into the human mind. (1997, p. 28)

⁹⁷ Maurice Zigmond (1980) and his team of researchers documented the roles Kawaiisu tradition ascribes to numerous animals in *Kawaiisu Mythology: An Oral Tradition of South-Central California*.

⁹⁸ Fisher (2013) describes one approach to dream work within Gestalt therapy that attempts to create space for the subjectivity of nonhuman presences encountered in dreams:

Gestalt therapists Erving and Miriam Polster argue that...interpretation can also involve an *interplay* between, on the one hand, recognizing what aspects of

oneself are “echoed” in the dream image and, on the other, a “healthy respect” for what qualities the dream image *itself* offers or brings to the dreamer, how the image *exceeds* the dreamer. They argue, that is, for a recognition of the “kinship” between the dreamer and the dreamed. (p. 137, italics in original)

While I very much appreciate the spirit of this approach, I wonder on what basis practitioners determine who is the “dreamer” and who is the “dreamed,” or even how they determine that it is possible to make such a distinction. Fisher (2013) also references a phenomenological understanding that seems to upend such easy distinctions:

While dreams are often thought of as subjective events that belong entirely to the dreamer, as a projection *of* the dreamer, a philosophy of the flesh supports the idea that dreaming and waking worlds are better seen as intertwining or corresponding realms of being. Medard Boss was emphatic that we do not *have* dreams; rather, dreaming is a mode of existing in its own right. (p. 137, italics in original)

If dreams are not territories possessed by a dreamer but rather modes of existing, then there would seem to be no need to establish *whose* mode of existing is determinative. Dreams can then be approached nonhierarchically as ecologies supporting modes of existing for all figures gathered into them.

⁹⁹ For Hillman (1997), dreaming is a realm where human and nonhuman “meet as images. And we are no more substantial in the dream, no more physically located, no more timebound, than their appearances” (p. 15).

¹⁰⁰ For Hillman (1997), the stories human cultures tell about nonhuman animals, including the meanings attributed to encounters with those animals in dreams, “are

revelations of the imaginative essence of the animal, how its image strikes the psychological imagination” of the human (p. 69). In other words, they are ways in which nonhuman animals make a habitat of the human imagination, showing up in the imaginative context in ways that both reveal and conceal something of how they live.

¹⁰¹ Zigmund (1980) records this story about Rattlesnake in a compendium of oral interviews with Kawaiisu elders.

¹⁰² If you haven't been following along with the interludes, check out footnote 97 for an explanation for why the word “ki” appears here instead of the word “it.”

¹⁰³ Some of my characterizations of wind here are inspired by Abram's (1996 and 2010a) writings on air as “the soul of the visible landscape, the secret realm from whence all living beings draw their nourishment” (1996, p. 226). For Abram, the transformations and movements of air “confuse the boundaries between the invisible and the visible, between inner and outer, between ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’” (2010, p. 140). He writes that it is the nature of air to “[unite] our breathing bodies not only with the under-the-ground...and not only with the beyond-the-horizon...but also with the interior life of all that we perceive in the open field of the living present” (1996, p. 226). Wind in particular, as the movement of air, “recklessly [transgresses] the boundaries between places, between things, between inner and outer worlds” (2010, p. 149). Although Abram's writings on air are beautiful, he doesn't make his observations for the sake of their aesthetics. For him, human disregard for the invisible air is tantamount to disregard for the awareness and aliveness of the biosphere. Air is k itself the source of awareness and the realm of mind, from which every “individual” experience of mind derives. Human disregard for air as the immersive, invisible enabler of all intelligence, communication,

and life supports a broader, destructive forgetting of the fact that we are wholly immersed in a biosphere upon which we depend.

¹⁰⁴ Abram (2010) describes how the experience of the air he discovered during time spent living in Nepal contrasted with the experience of air he returned to upon re-entering the United States:

[In Nepal] the air was a thick and richly textured presence, filled with invisible but nonetheless tactile, olfactory, and audible influences. In the United States, however, the air seemed thin and void of substance or influence. It was not, here, a sensuous medium – the felt matrix of our breath and the breath of the other animals and plants and soils – but was merely an absence, and indeed was constantly referred to in everyday discourse as mere empty space. (p. 26)

Mourning the felt richness and significance of air, Abram (1996) is later led to a description of

air as “the original, more-than-human medium” (p. 258) in a world now overrun by human-designed media:

In the oral, animistic world of pre-Christian and peasant Europe, all things – animals, forests, rivers, and caves – had the power of expressive speech, and the primary medium of this collective discourse was the air... Human utterance, whether embodied in songs, stories, or spontaneous words, was inseparable from the exhaled breath. The invisible atmosphere was thus the assumed intermediary in all communication, a zone of subtle influences crossing, mingling, and metamorphosing. This invisible yet palpable realm of whiffs and scents, of vegetative emanations and animal exhalations, was also the unseen repository of

ancestral voices, the home of stories yet to be spoken, of ghosts and spirited intelligences – a kind of collective field of meaning from whence individual awareness continually emerged and into which it continually receded, with every inbreath and outbreath. (p. 254)

¹⁰⁵ In his essay “The Air Aware” (2009a), Abram explains not only this etymological origin of psyche but also that

the word *spirit* derives from the Latin *spiritus*, meaning a breath or a gust of wind. Likewise, the modern term *atmosphere* is cognate with the Sanskrit word for the soul, *atman*, through their common origin in the older term *atmos*, which originally signified both air and soul indistinguishably: the atmosphere as the blustering soul of the world.

In this 2009 article and in an earlier book (1996), Abram traces the historical evolution of the term “psyche,” asking “how the ancient Greek psyche, or soul, was transformed from a phenomenon associated with the air and the breath into a wholly immaterial entity trapped, as it were, within the human body” (1996, p. 255). His complete argument is nuanced and includes an argument that “psyche” became abstract and interior partly because of the introduction of characters representing vowels (sounds made by unobstructed breath) into the Greek alphabet (though I do not delve into this part of his argument here, interested readers can refer to p. 239-253 of *The Spell of the Sensuous*). Another facet of his historical explorations concerns the loss, after the Copernican revolution, of the human sense of the “interiority of the surrounding world” that had been represented by Aristotelian and Ptolemaic cosmologies, which rendered the universe as a series of concentric spheres with the Earth centrally nested (2009a). Abram writes that

in the seventeenth century, European persons suddenly found themselves adrift in a limitless space, a pure *outside*. Only in the wake of this dramatic disorientation, and the attendant loss of a *collective* interior, did there arise the modern conception of mind as a wholly *private* interior, and hence of each person as an autonomous, isolated individual. Experiential qualities once felt to be proper to the surrounding terrain — feeling-tones, moods, the animating spirits-of-place known to reside in particular wetlands and forests — all lost their home with the dissolution of the enclosing, wombish character of the pre-Copernican cosmos. Such qualities now had no place in the surrounding world, itself newly conceived as a set of objects connected by purely external, mechanical relationships: a world of quantities. Unlike quantities, qualities are fluid, mercurial realities arising from the internal, felt relations between beings. Qualities — these ephemeral and fluid powers — require at least a provisional sense of *enclosure* to hold them. When they could no longer be contained by the visible world (no longer encompassed and held within the curved embrace of the spheres), these ambiguous, ever-shifting qualities quit the open exteriority of the physical surroundings, taking refuge within the new interiority of each person’s “inner world.” Henceforth they would be construed as *merely subjective* phenomena. (2009a, italics in original)

The experiential understanding of psyche as continuous with the enveloping, invisible medium of air in which all beings participate gave way, therefore, to an experience of psyche as internalized and discontinuous from the surrounding air – and a corresponding experience of the air k itself as empty.

¹⁰⁶ In the essay “A Psyche the Size of the Earth,” Hillman (1995) makes the wonderfully disorienting argument that “if psychology is the study of the subject, and if the limits of this subject cannot be set” in any certain way because they have been revealed to be arbitrary, “then psychology merges...with ecology” (p. xx). This merger, he argues, is only a problem for the field of psychology if it continues to insist that mind is a property of humanity. Otherwise, this merger simply broadens the horizons of the field, since psyche is now “anywhere we look and listen with a psychological eye and ear...[This broader field of psychology] would let the world enter its province, admitting that airs, waters, and places play as large a role in the problems psychology faces as do moods, relationships, and memories” (p. xxii). If one takes seriously his argument that “we cannot be studied or cured apart from the planet” which provides the context for our health and the ground of psyche, then environmental justice work (understood here as mental health professionals applying their many competencies to the development of interdisciplinary practices for healing wrongful relationships between humans and the natural world, including human abuse of our own nature) is a legitimate and vital professional aspiration to be nurtured in those training or practicing in mental health fields.

¹⁰⁷ In a discussion of *nilch’i* – the Diné (Navajo) interpretation of air as “Holy Wind” – Abram (1996) writes that *nilch’i* encompasses the global atmosphere as well as locally generated currents of air at smaller scales, and that *nilch’i* serves as the medium of animation, movement, sentience, and communication for all beings and elements of the world. Psyche, in this worldview, *is* wind as the circulation of air in which all beings and elements play a role, such that “one’s own intelligence is assumed, from the start, to be

entirely participant with the swirling psyche of the land” (1996, p. 237). Importantly, this experience of wind is fundamentally relational and participatory:

Just as we are nourished and influenced by the Air at large, so do our actions and thoughts affect the Air in turn. The individual, that is, is not passive with respect to the Holy Wind; rather she participates in it, as one of its organs. Her own desire and intent (her own interior Wind) participates directly in the life of the invisible Wind all around her, and hence can engage and subtly influence events in the surrounding terrain. (p. 235)

There is a personal and collective responsibility, then, for the tending and nourishing of a psyche that also tends to and nourishes us. This psyche is lived in personal ways by each of us even as it envelops us as a circulating awareness rooted in the relationships that constitute ecosystems. Adams (2010) characterizes such ecological awareness in this way: “Mind infinitely transcends every particular relational exchange, while being embodied in and as every single one” (p. 27).

¹⁰⁸ Gregory Bateson, a social scientist, anthropologist, and scholar in a variety of other fields, worked to reframe what humans call “mind” as part of a larger eco-mind (my term, not his) characterized by a system of relationships rooted in the material bodies that make up an ecosystem. He suggested that sanity or insanity could evolve as a factor of sane or insane relationships at any juncture within the eco-mind, and that this sanity or lack of it is shared by all members of the system. When I think of air pollution and global warming, for example, as ways humans can drive the air and weather “insane,” I am thinking of a passage in which he addresses the pollution of Lake Erie:

You decide that you want to get rid of the by-products of human life and that Lake Erie will be a good place to put them. You forget that the eco-mental system called Lake Erie is a part of *your* wider eco-mental system — and that if Lake Erie is driven insane, its insanity is incorporated into the larger system of *your* thought and experience. (1972, p. 492)

¹⁰⁹ In this section, information about orcas in general and Southern Resident orcas in particular is taken from the Marine Mammal Commission’s write-up on Southern Resident killer whales, retrieved from <https://www.mmc.gov/priority-topics/species-of-concern/southern-resident-killer-whale/>. Information about the Southern Resident orca known by humans as Tahlequah is taken from the following three sources:

- A July 2018 NPR.org article by Colin Dwyer titled “After calf’s death, orca mother carries it for days in ‘tragic tour of grief.’” Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/2018/07/31/634314741/after-calves-death-orca-mother-carries-it-for-days-in-tragic-tour-of-grief>.
- An August 2018 *New York Times* op-ed piece by Susan Casey titled “The orca, her dead calf and us.” Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/04/opinion/sunday/the-orca-her-dead-calf-and-us.html>.
- An August 2018 *National Geographic* article by Lori Cuthbert and Douglas Main titled “Orca mother drops calf, after unprecedented 17 days of mourning.” Retrieved from <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/2018/08/orca-mourning-calf-killer-whale-northwest-news/>.

¹¹⁰ A note on style: in this afterword, I make an exception to my practice of placing the voices of my sources into endnotes. While several endnotes do accompany the section, I have also welcomed citations into it because I found, at the time of writing, that I wanted the voices of my human supports very close at hand as I completed an emotionally trying section of writing.

¹¹¹ Barrows and Murphy-Mariscal, 2012.

¹¹² Harrower and Gilbert, 2018.

¹¹³ This is the flip side of Rachel Carson's (1962) comment that "in nature nothing exists alone" (p. 51).

¹¹⁴ Facts about Joshua trees in this paragraph are taken from an interview with Joshua tree researcher Jennifer Harrower in the October 2018 *National Geographic* article "Iconic Joshua trees may disappear – but scientists are fighting back." Retrieved from <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/2018/10/joshua-trees-moths-threatened-climate-change-scientists-seek-solutions/>.

¹¹⁵ Merwin, W.S. (2017). *The Lice: Anniversary Edition*. Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press.

¹¹⁶ This quote taken from Macy, 2007, p. 93. In a chapter titled "Despair Work," Macy (2007) argues that public apathy and numbness concerning wide-scale, unprecedented dangers such as climate change and nuclear war result from a kind of pain the ancient Greek society that invented the word *apatheia* could not have known. This is a form of pain that cannot be captured by words such as

fear, anger, sorrow...for they connote emotions that humanity has known since time began. The feelings that arise now cannot be equated with ancient

dreads...They arise from apprehensions of unprecedented collective suffering that is accruing to our own and other species, to unborn generations, and the living Earth itself. (p. 93-94)

¹¹⁷ In an essay on cultural suffering, Watkins (1992) writes: “That [psychological] suffering is experienced as *individual* rather than as *cultural* is due to a powerful sleight-of-hand performed by our prevailing paradigm of selfhood – individualism” (p. 56-57).

Later in the same essay, she writes

I hope the time is ending when therapy is used as a defense against acknowledging the impact of culture, as a theoretical camouflage that obscures the origins of some of our suffering...To the extent that our suffering is created by cultural assumptions and values, we must become aware of those assumptions and values...In this way, pathology ceases to be solely an individual problem but also serves as a commentary on our culture, identifying the pathological features of our sociological reality. (p. 67)

¹¹⁸ As an intervention, psychotherapy works individual by individual rather than at the level of collective or community interventions. It also differs from other interventions in terms of *when* in the development of illness it is most helpful. If we use the metaphor of a stream, where the cultural and social conditions for wellbeing or sickness are created far upstream, then the work of psychotherapists is far downstream, at the juncture where bodies sickened by processes that began at the mouth of the stream are now in need of skilled professionals who can pull them out of the water and begin healing the damage. In public health terminology (a discourse which, like many holistic healing modalities, takes health as the default state toward which humans tend and understands illness not as a

given but as an exception) the primary level of intervention involves promoting the conditions that produce health and prevent disease within a population, prior to illness. Treatment of those who were not protected by interventions further upstream is considered a secondary level of intervention – or, if treatment must be engaged over the long-term, a tertiary level of intervention. Psychotherapy operates at the secondary and tertiary levels. (Vu, 2015, p. 2). That psychotherapy is more and more often approached as a personal growth/self-exploration service as distinct from a secondary or tertiary care intervention into illness is a fairly historically recent development driven by the conflation of a public health framework with a personal luxury framework (Fairfield, personal communication, January 2018; see also the 2016 NPR story “How Therapy Became A Hobby Of The Wealthy, Out Of Reach For Those in Need,” by April Dembosky).

In *Silent Spring* (1962), writing about pesticides and other chemical contaminants that cause health problems, Rachel Carson responds to those who would focus their resources downstream with a story about a historical figure who dealt, quite literally, with the water:

“Isn’t it a hopeless situation” is the common reaction. “Isn’t it impossible even to attempt to eliminate these cancer-producing agents from our world? Wouldn’t it be better not to waste time trying, but instead to put all our efforts into research to find a cure for cancer?”...Most of the really decisive battles in the war against infectious disease consisted of measures to eliminate disease organisms from the environment. An example from history concerns the great cholera outbreak in London more than a hundred years ago. A London physician, John Snow, mapped

the occurrence of cases and found they originated in one area, all of whose inhabitants drew their water from one pump located on Broad Street. In a swift and decisive practice of preventive medicine, Dr. Snow removed the handle from the pump. The epidemic was thereby brought under control – not by a magic pill that killed the (then unknown) organism of cholera, but by eliminating the organism from the environment. (p. 240)

¹¹⁹ Some who identify as ecotherapists, as well as some who practice from nontraditional perspectives, may object to the view that the work of individual psychotherapy necessarily occurs within an individualistic frame, with an intrapsychic focus. The claim that the individual psychotherapy practiced by a therapist trained in this culture does not carry an individualistic perspective reminds me of the claim of “not racist” still wielded by so many well-intended whites. It is very important to look at the ways in which the basic structure of individual psychotherapy, whether or not a given therapist espouses an individualistic perspective, is enabled by individualism – from the conditioning of citizens to view their suffering as individual (if they did not, they would likely seek solutions other than psychotherapy), to the language therapists use to discuss suffering, to norms around confidentiality, boundaries, and neutrality. Even ecotherapist and activist Sarah Conn (1995), who writes that “the challenge of an ecologically responsible psychotherapy is to develop ways to work with the ‘purely personal’ problems brought by clients so that they can be seen...as microcosms of the larger whole, of what is happening in the world” admits that she is just “beginning to explore this with clients” and that “there is work to be done in looking at the role of collective action in mental

health and psychotherapy” (p. 170). The question is not whether or not our therapy smacks of individualism. It’s *how*.

¹²⁰ In my own weariness and reluctance to keep sounding the alarm in the professional environments I move through, I resonate to Patricia Hasbach’s (2015) questions in the essay “Therapy in the Face of Climate Change:”

And what about those people who make it their life work to know the facts about our changing world—scientists, educators of environmental science and environmental studies, students studying in these areas, environmental activists, and others who face the evidence daily—how do they cope with the sense of overwhelm? We need to look at the emotional experience of knowing the problem. John Fraser, a conservation psychologist and researcher...said, “When you can see the evidence, it is distressing. And when you think people around you don’t believe you, you self-edit because the emotional labor that goes into doing that work is difficult” (Fraser & Swim, 2014). What does it mean to be the storyteller of climate change and the long emergency? (p. 206)

¹²¹ (IPCC, 2018). See full citation in References. (2018).

¹²² Wallace-Wells, D. (October 10, 2018). UN says climate genocide is coming. It’s actually worse than that. *New York Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2018/10/un-says-climate-genocide-coming-but-its-worse-than-that.html>

¹²³ In this section, I am intentionally keeping references to specific statistics and predictions contained in the IPCC special report to a minimum. While there is a lot of specific information I feel tempted to share, I’m wary of reinforcing numbness in my

readers. Macy and Johnstone (2012) point out that “when people are already feeling so overwhelmed they don’t feel they can cope with any more distress...or if they believe they need to protect themselves from negative thinking...presenting more shocking facts can just increase the resistance [to the] journey of really getting it that our planet faces a life-threatening condition” (p. 70-71). By the time I made the decision to read the IPCC report, I had been so worked over and tenderized by discovering my “self” to be part of nature that I was ready (ready enough, anyway) to respond to the influx of factual information by honoring my grief and finding a new way forward.

¹²⁴ Here I want to mention one limitation of this analogy: not everybody suffers the same degree of injury in the wake of the collision with climate change. From the IPCC report: “Ethical considerations, and the principle of equity in particular, are central to this report, recognizing that many of the impacts of warming up to and beyond 1.5°C...fall disproportionately on the poor and vulnerable (high confidence)” (2018, p. 51).

¹²⁵ In *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities* (2016), Rebecca Solnit argues that the discourse of “saving” often employed by environmental and social change organizations (and religions) sidesteps the real complexity of crises and systems of oppression by fantasizing a world in which loss need not be a defining feature of our relationship to that which we cherish:

You can’t save anything. *Saving* is the wrong word, one invoked over and over again, for almost every cause. Jesus saves and so do banks: they set things aside from the flux of earthly change. We never did save the whales, though we might have prevented them from going extinct. We will have to continue to prevent that as long as they continue not to be extinct, unless we become extinct first. That

might indeed save the whales, until the sun supernovas or the species evolves into something other than whales...Extinction...is forever, but protection needs to be maintained...It's always too soon to go home. (p. 61-63)

¹²⁶ Macy (2007) writes that “in a country built on utopian expectations, failure to hope can seem downright un-American. In our culture despair is feared and resisted because it represents a loss of control” (p. 96). The writers whose thoughts are the ancestors of my own have various ways of deploying words like “hope” and “optimism,” with some of them drawing meaningful distinctions between the terms. For example, for Cornel West (2004),

hope is not the same as optimism. Optimism adopts the role of the spectator who surveys the evidence in order to infer that things are going to get better. Yet we know that the evidence does not look good. The dominant tendencies of our day are unregulated global capitalism, racial balkanization, social breakdown, and individual depression. Hope enacts the stance of the participant who actively struggles against the evidence in order to change the deadly tides...To live is to wrestle with despair yet never to allow despair to have the last word. (p. 297)

Similarly, for Rebecca Solnit (2016), “Hope is an embrace of the unknown and the unknowable, an alternative to the certainty of both optimists and pessimists” (p. xiv). For both West and Solnit, hope (as uncertain struggle) is a precondition for activism. Others, like Wheatley (2004), make a plug for *hopelessness* (as nonattachment to outcome) as a precondition for activism, and counsel us to abandon what they call hope. The difference here strikes me as a difference of terms, rather than a difference of philosophy. Whether we are advising hope, optimism, or hopelessness, the heart of the matter is uncertainty:

we act without knowing what the result will be. In this way of thinking, there is ample room for despair, as both fuel for, and companion to, action. In quite a few cases, despair may actually be what *undoes* the certainty that prevents many from acting.