For the Trees

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Ann Fisher-Wirth

1. The Dream

In my recurrent dream, I am sitting in a brightly lit waiting room. Other people may be there, but they are not speaking, they are not particularly doing anything; their presence or absence does not matter. Nor am I, particularly, doing anything.

What kind of waiting room also does not matter: hospital, bus station, morgue, unemployment office, principal’s office. . . Sometimes the room has banks of seats, a large round clock on washed-out puke-green walls; sometimes it is merely an empty, glaring cubicle. Nor does it matter that it’s a waiting room. This is not a dream about escape or afterlife, elsewhere or beyond. The room could be, in fact, a 24-hour lights-on maximum security prison cell, such as I saw once on a TV documentary, where women convicted or suspected of crimes against the state were illuminated and scrutinized as they ate, read, sat, huddled under blankets to touch themselves perhaps, tried to dream, broke to pieces. All that matters is that the room is brightly lit, with a flat, steady wash that exposes every corner, that whitens through shut eyelids, that holds one pinned, exhausts one with its immitigably asserted right to probe, intrude, undo.

Life, I begin to suspect in my dream, is nothing but this brightly lit room. No darkness. No mystery.
No shadows. Everything has been dragged out into the glare, everything cut to the measure of the conscious human self.

2. The Numenon of Material Things

Oxford, Mississippi is a boom town. The year-end headline for the local paper, The Oxford Eagle, says it all: “1998 saw city, county grow, grow, grow.” In the ten years I have lived here, the changes have been enormous: what was a small, diversified town of around 10,000 inhabitants and another 10,000 students, surrounded by country and accessed to the east, for instance, by only a two-lane highway, is well on the way, folks always remark, to becoming another Chapel Hill. The projected Lafayette County population for 2020, the Eagle reports, is 60,000 — double what it is now (28 August 1998, 1).1

“Every small town sells what it has,” one local official remarked several years ago, “and what we have is Faulkner.” Since then, and in many different ways, the decision to promote tourism has been widespread and conscious. We’re on all the lists: we’ve been named one of the nation’s 100 Best Small Towns, one of the nation’s 100 Best Small Arts Communities, one of the nation’s Five Best Retirement Communities. Property values have soared: what went for $70,000 in the historic part of town ten years ago might now bring in $350,000. The Eagle reports “some 40 subdivisions under construction in Oxford and Lafayette County” (31 December 1998-1 January 1999, 1). A Kroger superstore is planned, and a major shopping center on what has been undeveloped land out by Oxford Elementary School; the landowners, who held out against the city’s desire to build a power substation on the site several years ago, now apparently “seek to establish Oxford as a ‘regional retail destination.’”

A new federal building is taking out the last of the vine-tangled, ghost-haunted gully through which Joe Christmas ran after his doomed escape from jail in Faulkner’s Light in August. Every available morsel of land is snapped up as fast as it can be.

Lafayette County, surrounding Oxford, has a planning commission but few regulations regarding development. For the past couple of years — since the widespread community protest I will mention again, below, helped to elect a new mayor, a new alderwoman, and several new aldermen — Oxford itself has had a planning commission, and has commissioned a long-range plan from Georgia Tech called Vision 2020, but the planning commission has inadequate power to enforce its rulings, and building decisions continue without final input from the Georgia Tech advisors for Vision 2020. Woods and green spaces are vanishing. In the rush to develop, what Wendell Berry eloquently describes as “the margins,” the “lanes, streams, wooded fencerows, and the like” that form “the landscape of harmony” and “are always freeholds of wildness” (151), are valued only as real estate. Squirrels, raccoons, possums, deer, which until recently lived in all the ravines and wooded patches scattered throughout Oxford, have begun to disappear. Fawns are caught on fences. What was so rich about this area — its heterogeneity; its fertile, rank, shabby, polysemous un-fixed-upness; its ditches, privet thickets festooned with honeysuckle and
trumpetvine, and weedy hot corner lots speckled with coreopsis — is largely a matter of the past. Development and modernization are foregone conclusions. They lead to wealth for some, but when the average price of a house is $125,000 and the average county salary is $20,000, it would be hard to claim that they lead either to an increasingly diversified community or to wealth for all. And they proceed at a ruinous pace, with little or no thought for the area's ecology.

Last week I walked with my husband and dog out toward Thacker Mountain on the abandoned railroad tracks just south of town. This is one place we go when we need to get what Robert Frost, in “Directive,” calls “[b]ack out of all this now too much for us” (520) — an overgrown trail that winds through pinewoods some three miles down to a two-lane road that leads to the town called Taylor. We walked past pines and winter-dead, leafless tangles of kudzu, through rainslick mud and patches of ice from the storm that began ten days ago. We've been there often; it's one of the places we love. But suddenly, at a crossroads midway along the trail, we encountered the blue paint of loggers' slashes on a whole further area of pine trees. Later we learned that more than 800 acres of the some-1400 acres that comprise this forested area will be clear-cut within the next five years; half this clear-cut has already taken place. Another area of leafiness and shadow, another stand of woods full of “summer, and fall, and snow, and wet and sapriee spring in their ordered immortal sequence, the deathless and immemorial phases of the mother” (Faulkner 326), will soon be nothing but trash. There has been so much cutting around here the past two years, I realized that day as I stared at the blue slashes, that I've developed the visceral reaction of a rabbit or rat at harvest time: how they shrink back into a diminishing circle, only to be forced out at last into the blades and light.

Aldo Leopold — naturalist, co-founder of the Wilderness Society, and author of the classic Sand County Almanac — writes of “the numenon of material things.” The numenon, the spirit or essence of place, cannot be quantified. It “stands in contradistinction to phenomenon, which is ponderable and predictable, even to the tossings and turnings of the remotest star”; it is easily ignored, but once it is gone, “there has been an ecological death, the significance of which is inexpressible in terms of contemporary science” (146). Sand County Almanac abounds in examples of numinous presence — specifically in this passage the ruffled grouse, whose existence creates what Leopold calls “the physics of beauty” when it is seen in the north woods in autumn, among the red maples. My area also abounds in examples of numinous presence. I understand the reasons for the building and the cutting. Historically the poorest state in the Union, Mississippi welcomes growth, which is supposed to bring amenities, revenue, and jobs. Of course, growth does not always create the benefits it is supposed to create. And meanwhile we lose the physics of beauty; what we gain, increasingly, are hillsides of pine debris and mud-choked streams, expensive new houses on already cracked foundations, drainage pipes debouching onto residential streets, earth shoved in place with bales of hay, with each new rainfall further erosion. And we lose something else, harder briefly to articulate. With the outer, the inner landscape is ravaged. What is going on here is merely the local example of the worldwide, wholesale destruction of wilderness.
And as Paul Shepard argues in *Nature and Madness*, when "the wild Other" is no longer "the context but the opponent of 'my' domain . . . [i]mpulses, fears, and dreams — the realm of the unconscious — no longer are represented by the community of wild things with which I can work out a meaningful relationship. The unconscious is driven deeper and away with the wilderness" (35). Finally, death becomes its only repository. Life becomes a brightly lit room, as in my recurrent dream.

3. "You Must Change Your Life"

Imagining the wholeness of being embodied in an archaic torso of Apollo, and the impact upon one who gazes on it, Rainer Maria Rilke ends a sonnet with the shocking command, "You must change your life" (61). I've thought of this line repeatedly while reading environmental literature and theory: works such as *Sand County Almanac, Nature and Madness*, David Abram's *The Spell of the Sensuous*, Niel Evernden's *The Social Creation of Nature*, and Max Oelschlaeger's *The Idea of Wilderness*. The wholeness of being these works envision, and the etiologies of destruction they trace, have given me the sense of coming home to my deepest, most enduring passions and convictions. But there has been a spell on me as I set about struggling with this essay. I am reluctant to come into language, come into print — partly because I'm afraid to expose the limitations of my understanding, but also because I'm haunted by the inadequacy of discursive prose to speak powerfully enough of the issues that concern me most nearly. The more intense my response to the natural world, the more direct shared activity and artistic experience seem like the best ways to communicate the kind of truth I am after. This is truth, as Abram writes in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, that has to do not just with "static fact" but with "a style of thinking . . . a quality of relationship":

Ecologically considered, it is not primarily our verbal statements that are "true" or "false," but rather the kind of relations that we sustain with the rest of nature. A human community that lives in a mutually beneficial relation with the surrounding earth is a community, we might say, that lives in truth. The ways of speaking common to that community — the claims and beliefs that enable such reciprocity to perpetuate itself — are, in this important sense, true. . . . Statements and beliefs, meanwhile, that foster violence toward the land . . . can be described as false ways of speaking — ways that encourage an unsustainable relation with the encompassing earth. A civilization that relentlessly destroys the living land it inhabits is not well acquainted with truth, regardless of how many supposed facts it has amassed regarding the calculable properties of its world. (264)

Facts can always be mustered to counter facts; and only when desires change — when certain things become essential, and other things unthinkable — will behaviors and choices follow. Therefore, Abram writes, "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 [the] perceptual dimension that underlies all our logics, through a rejuvenation of our carnal, sensorial empathy with the living land that sustains us” (69-70). I would make the point more simply. “The body makes love possible,” as the poet Galway Kinnell has remarked (112). To make contact in our bodies with the body of the earth, whether in work or play, makes love for the earth possible. Might that love, perhaps, make certain things impossible?

My life and perceptions have been radically altered, these past few years, both by what I have read and by what I have seen. It seems odd to write of “reading for pleasure” when the reading has often filled me with bitterness, anger, and pain. But it has also reinforced my conviction that one’s intellectual life and practical experience are not in opposition, and — more deeply — that what is ethical can be pleasurable. One’s life can be a gift to the earth that granted and sustains it. And maybe, like Thoreau, I crave reality. “If we are really dying” — if we have done ourselves in through our disastrous relationship with the natural environment — I would just as soon not fool myself about “the rattle in our throats” and the “cold in [our] extremities” (88).

Like most people, though, I am still full of laziness and deadness — partly so as not to be full of despair. Leopold’s famous “land ethic” has become a foundational statement for deep ecology: “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise” (262). But virtually every policy enacted in our world flies in the face of Leopold’s realization. Robert Hass writes in his famous poem, “Meditation at Lagunitas,” “A word is elegy to the thing it signifies” (4). Nowhere is this more true than in environmental writing, for nearly all writing about the natural world, these days, is elegiac. Our losses are inconceivable.

Several years ago I began to teach courses in environmental fiction, nonfiction, and poetry, and became involved in the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE), an interdisciplinary organization that has grown since 1992 from twenty-five members to over one thousand. I became involved as well in community activism, as part of a widespread protest against the city’s ill-considered decision to five-lane a beautiful two-lane road that ran away from the Square, under a little old railroad bridge, and on past groves and hills of more than three hundred trees, some more than one hundred years old, along the campus, out to the mall and eventually to the highway. This street was far more important than it might seem, because it was the only buffer between the frenetically growing Strip and the quiet, residentially mixed town; it was also wonderful in its own right, a serene and scruffy place right in the middle of the modernization. Issues of development had been fought before in specific neighborhoods, over specific issues, but this controversy mobilized the whole community. The plan to five-lane had not been adequately publicized and therefore not adequately discussed. Beginning in February 1997, when word finally got out as to what was happening, several local citizens formed a nonprofit group, Concerned Citizens for Oxford, and started meeting almost
nightly to decide how we might try to stop the construction. One meeting of the board of aldermen erupted into a shouting match and ended with the board's vote to postpone awarding the highway contract for two weeks, in order to study the issue further. During that two weeks' time, several hundred people (in a town of 11,000) signed a petition and nearly two hundred marched in the rain to save the trees. But then, at a meeting so full that the audience spilled out of the courtroom, down the stairs, and out into the street, the board of aldermen voted four to three to go ahead with the contract — to the rage of many, many Oxford citizens. That was in early March, 1997.

Then, on March 24, ten minutes before my graduate seminar, “Writing Nature,” began, I got a call: “The bulldozers are starting.” Ironically, we were just about to discuss the poems in “Logging” from Gary Snyder's *Myths & Texts:

The ancient forests of China logged
and the hills slipped into the Yellow Sea.
Squared beams, log dogs,
on a tamped-earth still.
San Francisco 2 X 4s
were the woods around Seattle:
Someone killed and someone built, a house,
a forest, wrecked or raised
All America hung on a hook
& burned by men, in their own praise. (35)

I told my students — several of whom had been involved in the five-laning protests — that I was dismissing class, that they were free to do whatever they wanted, but that I didn't want to talk about trees right then. Nearly all of them chose to hurry to the site. The scene was one of general confusion, with people screaming, police and protesters milling around, bulldozers poised to take the whole hill down — and at a certain point a number of us just decided we wouldn't let them do it. With eight others, I was arrested, for the first time in my life. For the few seconds just before and during my actual arrest, I clearly and simply understood the truth of Leopold's “land ethic.” What was happening, no matter what the putative reasons, was wrong. It did not preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the town, much less the biotic community. Police ordered us away from a hillside where flowering dogwoods were being uprooted and tossed aside, and earth gouged, and pines torn and shredded like confetti, but like the others arrested with me, I finally could not step aside. I sat with my back against a hundred-year-old oak tree; it was quiet in me and in the tree, and time stood still while the bulldozers poised, engines running, on the ridge, and a policeman — who, it is true, hated to arrest us — pulled us up and snapped the cuffs. The calm I felt, having crossed that line at last, will remain with me always.

During the months following the arrest, it seemed as if the five-laning issue might have an electrifying effect. On June 12, 1997, I wrote, to members of ASLE:
City elections were held a week ago. Every single one of the officials who had supported five-laning West Jackson has now been voted out. The Mayor's hand-picked successor who had expected to win got 20% of the vote. There's a whole new government in Oxford, and at the top of its agenda are preservation, environmental awareness, recycling... The Mayor-elect has already formed a task force to investigate what can be changed, undone, about the original five-lane plan. The rest of the five-lane plan, which was conceived as three stages, will never go forward now. The trees that were cut are gone, but the other hundred planned for cutting will remain, and maybe grass and wildflowers and new trees will replace what was going to be asphalt.

How wrong I was. After that brilliant flurry, the cutting and paving and building have gone on much as always.

4. Butterfly, Luna, Gypsy

But ye shall destroy their altars,
break their images, and cut down their groves.
—Exodus 34:13 (quoted in Snyder, "Logging")

What we are seeing in Oxford and Lafayette County is merely the local example of an escalating process of environmental destruction going on all over the world. In Humboldt County, California, a particularly intense struggle has been under way these past few years to save the Headwaters forest, a 63,000-acre watershed that constitutes "the largest private holding of old-growth redwoods in the world" (St. Clair and Cockburn). As a transplanted Californian, I've followed the story of the fight for Headwaters forest; again and again I've been reminded of Rilke's line, "You must change your life."

On December 10, 1997, near the Headwaters forest, Julia "Butterfly" Hill, a twenty-five-year-old Earth First! activist from Arkansas, used rock climbing gear to mount 180 feet up an ancient redwood she calls Luna, and she has been living on a six-by-eight-foot platform since that time. Luna, also known as the Stafford Giant, is a thousand-year-old redwood that grows above the town where seven homes were destroyed on January 1, 1998, in a mudslide caused by Pacific Logging's logging practices. Purchased in 1986 by Maxxam Inc., which is based in Houston and run by financier Charles Hurwitz, Pacific Lumber has gone from being a modest family business to the "largest timber organization in Humboldt County"; it has become "a clear-cutting machine that is responsible, many activists believe, for a large portion of the environmental wreckage in Humboldt County during the past decade — naked mountainside, silted-up rivers, mudslides and a rapidly declining salmon population, to name a few examples" (Goodell 61). Though Luna is not in Headwaters forest, part of Hill's purpose is to fight for Headwaters, which Pacific Lumber has been clear-cutting, racking up hundreds of violations of the California Forest Practices Act during the past few years.
Hill’s journey began in August 1996, when a car wreck left her injured for nearly a year, and awakened her desire for “the real and important things” (“Luna”). She began to travel, ending up in California, where she saw the giant redwoods for the first time. “I knew then,” she says, “that protecting these trees would become a spiritual quest for me.” The words she uses to describe her experience with Luna are poetical, replete with a sense of interconnectedness between the human and nonhuman. Of her fear the first time she climbed the tree, she says, “I was scared at first, and then I just started paying attention to the tree and drawing strength from it. I saw all the scars and wounds from fires and lightning strikes.” Shortly thereafter, the worst storms in California history descended upon her. She hung on through the tumultuous El Niño weather: ninety-mile-per-hour winds, battering rains, snow. On January 31 she wrote in her journal of the winds that threatened to tear her tarps away, leaving her exposed to the storm, that they howled “like a crazy, wild animal — the most intense noise I’ve ever heard.” At first as she clung to the tree she thought, “This is it, I’m going to die,” and then, as she tells it, Luna spoke to her: “She said, ‘Bend, flow and let go, and I’ll take care of you.’ I felt such peace.”

Now, Hill says, “I have become one with this tree and with nature in a way I would never have thought possible.” She has earned a quiet authority when, in “Offerings to Luna,” she writes:

She speaks to me though my bare feet . . . my hands
She speaks to me on the wind . . . and in the rain
telling me stories born long before my time . . .

She has stuck it out for over fourteen months, through El Niño storms and what Earth First! reports as Pacific Lumber’s “starve out patrols, climbing police, insults, flood light, helicopter and siren intimidation.” What she reports about Luna, and by extension about all trees, will likely be widely taken as unbelievable. She can see Pacific Lumber headquarters and clearcuts from her perch, and when they started logging “the steepest part of the ridge,” she found herself “crying a lot and hugging Luna and telling her I was sorry. Then I noticed that I was being covered by sap pouring out of her body from everywhere, and I realized, ‘oh, my God, you’re crying too.’ The sap didn’t start pouring out until the logging started.”

Julia Hill concludes that “[t]rees pass information on how to hold up hill-sides and how to grow, and they also communicate feelings.” This is not generally accepted by mainstream American society. Where I live, “tree-hugger” is a strong pejorative, and not just because tree-huggers insist that the culture is committing environmental mayhem. Tree-hugging implies that trees are sentient, that they matter in and of themselves, simply because they exist, that they cannot merely be translated into board feet. Tree-hugging implies, as well, that we cannot begin to calculate the results to the environment — to animals, fish,
earth, water, birds, as well as to the human community — of large-scale logging. This avowal of connection between the human and nonhuman has nearly the taint of sexual perversion: one might bugger sheep if one hugged trees. But in fact, Hill’s conclusion, arrived at through personal experience, echoes the naturalist David Lukas’s research on the communicative powers of trees, as well as research reported in the 1987 text Terrestrial Plant Ecology. A 1983 experiment, for instance, showed that leaves of willows declined in palatability following attack by tent caterpillars, as did the leaves of nearby unattacked trees of the same species; discussing this case, David Lukas e-mails me: “[A]n injured tree releases terpenes into the air as a message of warning to its neighbors to boost their defenses, nearby trees pick up (smell?) the aerial terpene messages and immediately begin mounting their own immune defenses.” And a 1964 experiment placed radioactively labeled isotopes on a freshly cut stump and found that the isotopes showed up in 43% of all species in a large radius around the stump within days, showing the effectiveness of the communication network of trees via their root systems. [The researchers] concluded “it would seem logical to regard the root mass of a forest . . . as a single functional unit” (Lukas, citing the original experiment). Lukas goes on to conclude:

This underground communication network is facilitated by microscopic mycorrhizal fungi which bridge the microscopic gaps between the very finest plant roots. From one plant, through its roots via fungi into the roots of the next tree, it’s a seamless flow of information that extends throughout an entire watershed. Our tools allow us to measure this flow of information as a movement of chemicals, but who is to say what kinds of information or knowledge are contained therein?

Julia Hill’s conclusion echoes as well Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological concept of “Flesh,” a concept he arrived at shortly before his death, which — David Abram explains — goes beyond his earlier emphasis on just the human body and “signifies both our flesh and the flesh of the world” (66, citing Merleau-Ponty), and which conceives of them as joined in “the mysterious tissue or matrix that underlies and gives rise to both the perceiver and the perceived as interdependent aspects of its own spontaneous activity” (66). This concept of interconnectedness, combined with a belief in the integrity of all species — a belief in their right to exist, not merely in order to serve human needs and desires, but because they exist — is at the foundation of “deep” as opposed to “resource” ecology, the ecology expressed in Abram’s statement: “Many individuals today experience a profound anguish that only deepens with each report of more ancient forests cleared, of new oil spills, of the ever-accelerating loss of species. It is an anguish that seems to come from the earth itself, from this vast Flesh in which our own sentient flesh is embedded” (69-70).

And it is an anguish that changed, then took, the life of another Earth First! activist, twenty-four-year-old David “Gypsy” Chain, who died on September 17, 1998 in the Headwaters forest, crushed by a redwood felled by A. E. Ammons, an angry logger employed by Pacific Lumber. The sheriff’s department immediately claimed that the death was “a logging accident”
(Goodell 86), but a videotape one activist made an hour before Chain's death puts the case in a different light. As the protesters approach and try to talk to him, Ammons shouts, on the tape, "I wish I had my fuckin' pistol! I guess I'm gonna just start packin' that motherfucker in here. 'Cause I can only be nice so fuckin' long." A few minutes later he adds, "Fuck it, it's our forest... We can cut wherever we want," and, threatening to fell a tree on the Earth First! protesters, "I'm not going to hesitate like I did last time" (quoted in Goodell 67). Some have claimed that Chain and others, such as the activist "Steve" who fell more than one hundred feet from a redwood on January 22, 1999, when a pulley broke (Caffrey), are getting what they ask for if they trespass on private property. Of Chain's death, Jerry Partain, a former director of the California Department of Forestry, wrote in a local newspaper: "This time their stupidity killed one of their own" (quoted in Goodell 86).

Ninety-seven percent of ancient coastal redwood forest, which used to cover two million acres, has been cut in the twentieth century ("Luna"). In the Headwaters forest itself, a recent series of compromises and environmental defeats, biting reported by Jeffrey St. Clair and Alexander Cockburn, has resulted in a plan whereby the US government and the state of California have purchased from Maxxam fewer than 10,000 acres (only 3,500 acres of which are old-growth redwoods) of the original 63,000-acre watershed, for the vastly inflated sum of $480 million. Hundreds of violations of the California Forest Practices Act have been charged against Pacific Lumber but inadequately pursued until finally, on November 10, the company's license was suspended for the rest of 1998 (Goodell 86). According to Andy Caffrey, media spokesman for Earth First!, the license remains suspended as of January 26, 1999. But the company has simply hired subcontractors and will doubtless be allowed to liquidate nearly everything outside the area bought by the government, wreaking irreparable damage in the process on local populations of marbled murrelets (threatened seabirds), coho salmon, and spotted owls. The activists know they are taking their lives in their hands. But as Earth First! comments: "The single-minded focus on quick profits precludes concerns about the environment and long-term economic stability. To the corporate mind, ancient redwoods are just under-utilized assets to be liquidated, a means of throwing off cash flow and servicing debt" ("Luna"). In such a case, St. Clair and Cockburn are right: "The only restraint left in saving the ancient redwoods is direct action demonstrators like Chain. There is no alternative."

5. "The Story of Our Brokenness"

The most famous chapter of Sand County Almanac, "Thinking Like a Mountain," powerfully exemplifies the kind of ethical transformation the writers I discuss here are concerned with, and describes one turning point in Leopold's own life. A young man working for the National Forest Service in Arizona and New Mexico in 1918, he shoots a wolf one day and watches "a fierce green fire dying in her eyes" (138). Trigger-happy, convinced that "fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters' paradise," and simply one of the
millions of Americans who "had never heard of passing up a chance to kill a
wolf," he takes his act for granted until, watching the wolf, he realizes "then,
and [has] known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes
— something known only to her and to the mountain."

I began this essay wanting to write about wolves — specifically, about Billy
Parham's attempt in Cormac McCarthy's magnificent novel The Crossing to
save the life of a pregnant wolf by returning her to the north Mexican moun-
tains. But I had to write about trees. Trees, not wolves, are what I love and
know. Still, what Billy experiences once he turns away from his human family
to accompany the wolf across the border, not just into Mexico, but into "a world
burning on the shore of an unknowable void" (73), has haunted my memory of
that split second I experienced two years ago, when the anthropocentrism so
firmly inculcated in me suddenly dropped away and I knew beyond doubt that
I was the guest and not the reason. That the dogwood or pine tree I saw flying
into the air, clawed and shredded, splintering like matchwood, was as much
alive as I was. Or, to change the image to Billy Parham's, that the blood of the
wolf tastes "no different than [our] own" (125).

Paul Shepard believes that "the framework of nature as metaphoric foun-
dation for cosmic at-home-ness is as native to the human organism ... as any
nutritive element in the diet. Lacking it, he will always lack true reverence for
the earth" (quoted in Sale 31). Shepard writes about rituals such as the Indian
vision-quest and solitary hunt as ways in which past communities fostered in
their adolescents the "metaphoric, mysterious, and poetic quality of nature,"
what he calls in his homely way "a good sense of being in the cosmos." Billy
Parham creates this sense and discovers this reverence, instinctively and with no
community support or affirmation, in his solitary journey into Mexico to return
the wolf to safety. Tragically, he fails to deliver her. Instead, she falls into the
hands of Mexican villagers whose sport is to chain her and set pack after pack
of dogs on her, and whose cruelty toward wolves, as Barry Lopez abundantly
attests, has been manifested for centuries throughout both North America and
Europe. Billy shoots her at last rather than see her tortured and defeated inch
by inch, carries her body to the mountains, and sits with her all night, waiting
for dawn when he will bury her.

He squatted over the wolf and touched her fur. He touched the cold
and perfect teeth. The eye turned to the fire gave back no light and he
closed it with his thumb and sat by her and put his hand upon her blood-
ied forehead and closed his own eyes that he could see her running in the
mountains, running in the starlight where the grass was wet and the sun's
coming as yet had not undone the rich matrix of creatures passed in the
night before her. . . . He took up her stiff head out of the leaves and held it
or he reached to hold what cannot be held, what already ran among the
mountains at once terrible and of a great beauty, like flowers that feed on
flesh. What blood and bone are made of but can themselves not make on
any altar nor by any wound of war. What we may well believe has power to
cut and shape and hollow out the dark form of the world surely if wind can,
if rain can. But which cannot be held never be held and is no flower but is
swift and a huntress and the wind itself is in terror of it and the world cannot lose it. (127)

Billy Parham has learned the thing of which Aldo Leopold speaks, the thing known to wolf and mountain. Brilliantly McCarthy articulates the danger and beauty of the "fierce green fire" Leopold sees in the dying wolf's eyes. But Billy has gone farther, too. He has gazed in perfect darkness upon the matrix, beyond and before that green fire, the mother in whom or which all creatures are held, in whom or which there is neither beginning nor ending. Then — one of the most beautiful things about this book — there is a lacuna. He carries the wolf into the mountains and buries her "in a high pass under a cairn of scree." Thinking "to become again the child he never was" (129), he whistles a bow, makes arrows, and wanders starving, bereft, through the mountains. Weeks pass, about which practically nothing is written. He shoots trout, eats green nopal; his horse grazes on winter grass, gnaws on lichens. One day, then, a hawk passes before the sun,

and its shadow ran so quick in the grass before them that it caused the horse to shy and the boy looked up where the bird turned high above them and he took the bow from his shoulder and nocked and loosed an arrow and watched it rise with the wind rattling the fletching slotted into the cane and watched it turning and arcing and the hawk wheeling and then flaring suddenly with the arrow locked in its pale breast. (129)

Why, I wondered at one point, does McCarthy write so little about the weeks and so much about the hawk? Perhaps it is because these weeks have constituted the hunt or quest of which Paul Shepard writes. Little is written about them because little can be written about them; they occur outside narrative, outside ordinary time. Billy's respect and reverence for the wolf, so different from the hatred accorded her by both North American ranchers and Mexican villagers, more nearly echoes the attitude of many Native American tribes: of the Plains Indians, for instance, who viewed wolves, bears, mountain lions, and wildcats as "the creatures with the greatest power and influence in the spirit world" (Lopez 102). Fittingly, Billy's subsequent actions take on a Native American resonance, too. After burying the wolf, he walks between two worlds. On the one hand his wanderings seem aimless; on the other, he seems to be impelled to improvise a vision-quest, a self-wonnowing. According to Native American beliefs, the success of such a quest would be revealed by a sign, which in turn would reveal to the initiate his place in the universe, his oneness with nature (Oelschlaeger 12). And indeed Billy does receive a sign: as the wounded hawk turns and vanishes, a single feather falls.

Linda Hogan, a Chickasaw poet and novelist, writes of feathers, and in particular of a golden eagle feather that she dreamed, which then appeared floating through the air outside her window and was subsequently involved in several marvelous occurrences. For her, the feather is an example of "events and things that work as a doorway into the mythical world, the world of first people, all the way back to the creation of the universe" (19). The feather is not
merely inert matter, but numinous, mysterious, full of power and knowledge. “There is something alive in a feather,” she writes. “The power of it is perhaps in its dream of sky, currents of air, and the silence of its creation. It knows the insides of clouds. It carries our needs and desires, the story of our brokenness” (20). All the grimmer, then, The Crossing: though Billy sees the feather fall, try as he might, he cannot find it.

The Crossing would be a very different novel if, beyond the wolf’s death, the universe offered a feather, a sign — conferred some benison — upon Billy Parham. But all he ever finds, for his wounding of the hawk, is “a single drop of blood that had dried on the rocks and darkened in the wind” (129). Either the quest has failed, and the universe remains closed, stitched over, or its only meaning is suffering. As usual, McCarthy is inscrutable.

Billy cuts his own hand then, and watches “the slow blood dropping on the stone” (130). The questions that arise about his action are ultimately questions that arise whenever, in our lives, we stumble toward awareness of the depth of our connection, the enormity of our crime. Does this action, cutting himself, show admission of guilt? The bloods together, his and the hawk’s — like the wolf’s, not so different from his own: does his action show acknowledgment of kinship?

Notes

I am grateful to Jay Watson for inviting me to write this essay, to Andy Caffrey, Kathy Field, Kristin Harty, and David Lukas for generous assistance over the months with information, and to Peter Wirth for encouragement, tough editing, and thousands of hours among trees.

1. The projected population is according to Chris Nelson, co-director of the Georgia Tech planning team hired to develop a plan for the city’s growth, Vision 2020.

2. We were released on our own recognizance and a trial date was set for July 10, 1997. In June, however, elections largely reconstituted the city government. It was determined that we were arrested on what was, in fact, university property, and when we appeared in court, charges were dropped.

3. Merleau-Ponty’s concept of “Flesh” closely resembles the Gaia hypothesis advanced by James Lovelock: that all living things on earth, as well as the earth, water, and air that form their environment, function in some respects as if they were a single living organism, and, like a single living organism, tend toward an equilibrium.

4. Several minutes short of the deadline at midnight on March 1, 1999, a controversial Headwaters forest deal was signed between government agencies and Pacific Lumber/Maxxam. Earth First! calls the deal a “classic Clinton-era environmental compromise, trading preservation of a portion of the forest for a huge sum of money and near-certain destruction of the other old-growth areas. Pacific Lumber/Maxxam also now holds a ‘license to kill,’ a permit allowing the company to destroy 17 different endangered species and their habitats” (“Head-
Briefly, the headwaters forest deal transfers around 10,000 acres of redwood forest, including the 3,000-acre Headwaters grove, to public hands, at a cost of nearly half a billion dollars. But environmentalists find much to criticize about the plan; for one thing, only about ten percent of the Headwaters forest is permanently protected, and for another, the 50-year Habitat Conservation Plan associated with the deal provides many loopholes through which Pacific Lumber can “kill endangered species and destroy habitat protected under law” by getting around the Endangered Species Act (Pickett).

The area of Julia Hill’s protest is not protected under the plan. As of May 1999, she continues to occupy Luna.

5. Of Wolves and Men remains the classic source for the history of what Lopez calls “the wolf war in North America” (194). He describes the ways wolves have been hunted and killed, surpassing in horror even the ways in which we killed other predators:

A lot of people didn’t just kill wolves; they tortured them. They set wolves on fire and tore their jaws out and cut their Achilles tendons and turned dogs loose on them. They poisoned them with strychnine, arsenic, and cyanide, on such a scale that millions of other animals — raccoons, black-footed ferrets, red foxes, ravens, red-tailed hawks, eagles, ground squirrels, wolverines — were killed incidentally in the process. In the thick of the wolf fever they even poisoned themselves, and burned down their own property torching the woods to get rid of wolf havens. In the United States in the period between 1865 and 1885 cattlemen killed wolves with almost pathological dedication. In the twentieth century people pulled up along-side wolves in airplanes and snowmobiles and blew them apart with shot-guns for sport. In Minnesota in the 1970s people choked Eastern timber wolves to death in snares to show their contempt for the animal’s designation as an endangered species. (139)

Attempting to account for this hatred, Lopez concludes: “The hatred [of the wolf] has religious roots: the wolf was the Devil in disguise. And it has secular roots: wolves killed stock and made men poor. At a more general level it had to do, historically, with feelings about wilderness. What men said about the one, they generally meant about the other. To celebrate wilderness was to celebrate the wolf; to want an end to wilderness and all it stood for was to want the wolf’s head” (140).

Works Cited


Lukas, David. Personal correspondence (e-mail). 30 January 1999.