Coming Home:

Nature and Me and Other Essays

by Nowick Gray

cww@hyperlife.net

A Cougar WebWorks Publication

http://cougarwebworks.com

Acknowledgements

A portion of "Nature and Me," originally titled "Of Ducks, Trucks and Bucks," was published in NeWest Review (summer 1989), and reprinted in Inside Essays 2 (ed. Doug Hilker, HBJ, 1992).

"Running Wolf Canyon" was published in the anthology Walking the Dead: Myths and Legends of Contemporary Argenta Natives (Argenta: Lost Trends, 1984).

All of the other essays in the section "Forest Walks and Other Exercises" have appeared on the Alternative Culture Magazine website (http://www.alternativeculture.com). Also appearing on this site are "Just Coyotes," "Before the World Burns," "The Meaning of Life," "Climbing Mt. Cooper," "Breathing Together," and "Deep Summer."

"Before the World Burns" was first published by the online magazine On This Planet Earth (March 1997), and later appeared in The Animist, Electronic Journal of the Arts (http://animist2000.netgazer.net.au/, 1999). "Entering the Tunnel" appeared in On This Planet Earth in August 1997.

"The Meaning of Life" was selected for a philosophy course reading list at Central Penn College, summer 2001.

A version of "Rendezvous" appears on the website HyperLife: A Life in Hypertext (http://www.hyperlife.net).

Table of Contents

Introduction

I can see, through the window beyond my computer screen, the young hemlock trees dripping with fresh March rain beaded like jewels at the ends of branches. The dim forest wall farther on beyond the pasture stands mute and uninviting, as the mist, mingled with smoke from my studio stovepipe, drifts between us. The steady rain falls, speeding the last of the winter's snow on its way into the brown earth. A slight wind stirs the branches. I remember to breathe.

For the last two decades of the twentieth century I sequestered myself in a protected corner of the world – nestled in the Purcell Mountains of southeast British Columbia – so as to enjoy the rare privilege of wilderness. That involvement began with years of hard work, clearing raw land and building a long-dreamed homestead from scratch. Then, as the primary needs for food and shelter came to be satisfied, my activities and interests increasingly departed from firsthand involvement in my chosen environment. My devotion to nature remained, but it became less literal, less attached to the particularity of my surroundings. I became more interested in writing, playing music, traveling.

By my last year in Argenta, I would be satisfied with a daily walk, for an hour or two, generally along the same dirt road leading to a mountain trail and a woodlot haul road near my home. I would putter in the garden (with my partner more dedicated than I

to the ongoing work of growing our own food); and I would pull my weight on the homestead by gathering most of our six cords of firewood, thinning the surrounding forest each fall. But more often than not, my outdoor preoccupations were internal. Drawn outside in warm sunny weather – if mosquitoes weren't around – I tended not to engage directly with my surroundings in any practical or even fully conscious way, but instead would be sure to bring an intermediating distraction: a book or notepad, a flute, a destination, a headful of questions to ponder. . . .

To look back a hundred and fifty years before Emerson's famous essay called "Nature" takes us all the way back to Shakespeare, and the birth of the modern English language. A hundred and fifty years after Emerson, we have less nature to write about and more reason than ever to examine its meaning.

Clearly, as even Emerson realized, there's more to nature than meets the eye. His essay actually was a collection of "Nature and other essays," including discourses on the following aspects of human nature: Commodity, Beauty, Language, Discipline, Idealism, Spirit, Prospects. And even in the title essay he waxes poetic, not so much about the power of the natural scene in itself, "but in man, or in a harmony of both." "Nature," he admits finally, "always wears the colors of the spirit."

Emerson was a prophet and a philosopher; and Thoreau, with his more practical and hands-on approach to nature, was his disciple. These writers did not describe nature or

delve into its meanings in any sense apart from the value which such observations give to our own existence. That human consciousness should always be at the forefront is no fault or prideful sin, though; it's rather a sage admission of the necessary place our consciousness holds as an intermediary between our internal and external worlds.

When we come truly to see and intuit the force that runs throughout the natural world and inspires us in our contact with it, we can also feel that same force within us, to inspire us in our own growth. In an age where the frontiers are all breached and the natural world is in decline, one important task before us is to salvage and restore what we can of the natural world in its own right. It also becomes more important than ever to bring more awareness to the nature intact within us. Nature is not confined to forest and field, nor even to an infinite field of stars. Its power and immensity inform every detail of our own biological machinery, and remain available to us also as a comprehensive mirror of our most transparent selves.

Nature and Me: A Short Autobiography

I grew up in cities until I was six. "Nature" to me then was a postage-stamp back yard, a thimble plastic pool. (Snapshots show six little girls in party dresses; a puppy with its teeth in my pants.) In my later youth, in a small Allegheny mountain town, I delighted in roaming the woods and fields, playing army, hunting crayfish, damming creeks. Then it was back to the suburbs for my teen years. Nature then meant sports: swimming in Long Island Sound, baseball in red sandlots outside Atlanta, running wintry Illinois roads.

By the time I was twenty, poetry, drugs, and the New England woods had opened the doors of my perception much wider, and I was able to see past the merely recreational uses of nature to its comforting and superordinate beauty. My appreciation had become aesthetic, and more – it was psychic and spiritual. I felt that I could behold nature in its majestic integrity beyond regard to the works or pretentious interpretations of small-minded "man." Yet, on the threshold of leaving the idealistic womb of academia, the question of survival loomed large: both in a personal and global sense.

When I dropped out of the rat race I was after something more than the endless pursuit of money, the constant echo of bucks, bucks, bucks. I was lured by another dream, the grail of rural self-sufficiency. Not that I was ever granted the whole utopian

vision, mind you – just glimmerings of a life lived closer to nature. There was always the problem of making that living, of financing the dream.

I jumped cold-turkey from the academic hothouse into the granitic soil of New Hampshire, one of North America's most economically depressed areas. Land was cheap because the former generations of farmers had given up and moved on. A fellow ex-student had sunk his borrowed fortune into a large chunk of wooded hillside for a cooperative homesteading venture and was seeking willing bodies to help flesh out his vision. I came full of theories about gypsy economics, constructive anarchism and apocalyptic survival. But I had no money, and no useful trade.

I took a job on the district highway crew, manning the street sweeper unit which the old boys dragged over the undulating roads of the county, and which spewed road grime over me, head to toe, for $2.17 per hour. I drove to work in a yellow lemon of a Karman-Ghia that I bought from a fourteen-year-old boy for $140. It was my first car. It worked fine until I decided to treat it to a quart of high-quality detergent oil. The detergent action dissolved whatever carbonaceous glop was holding the pistons together and the car promptly died. It was a sign. As were the eleven days and nights of rain that dismal spring, that I counted off like Noah watching the end of the world.

On day twelve I left my drenched dreams behind and took off for California with thirty dollars in my pocket and another gleam in my eye: the riches to be made in the sunny, booming West. I figured that with a big bank account, I could better cushion the

rocky landing on my next journey back to the earth. But the California cities, I found, were not made of gold.

After two years of odd jobs as an unskilled urban laborer – housepainter, clerk, gas jockey, parking valet – I dreamed up a new way to get back to nature. On the inside track, so to speak. I would go back to my books and find nature in literature. The bonus would be a paying job, a career as a teacher. And I might even find a nice pastoral place to settle down. According to this latest conception, nature was mostly a state of mind, an aesthetic quality of life; and so "self-sufficiency" was confined to the status of financial equilibrium.

Drawn by the compelling beauty of the rugged Northwest, I came to British Columbia for more university study. The setting proved apt for delving into the rich natural resources of Canadian literature – an entity which, until registration at the University of Victoria, I didn't know existed. Upon graduating two years later, I discovered that a masters degree in English is worth about as much as the paper spelling it out. But I finally landed a job in the midst of a nature more vast and remote, yet also more human, than I had imagined.

I was hired by the school board of Northern Quebec to teach junior high students in an Inuit village, where my girlfriend from UVic had also just been hired. We both ended up learning more than we taught. While Jeanne and I shared a dream of one day trading

in our newfound bucks for such "alternative" goods as trucks and ducks, the people in that wild, white world had made their own selection of different tools. And more compellingly, they survived by virtue of an attitude, a history, a culture based on living with nature, in nature, of nature. This is not to say that they were in any way "primitive." Their own nature was warm, friendly, infinitely patient and optimistic – and above all, adaptable. Their history is all about change, of making practical use of whatever is at hand – from whalebone, to steel knives, to flour and tea, to rifles and snowmobiles, to aircraft and development corporations. With every innovation has come a compromise with a former, "more natural" way of life. The Inuit are no longer self-sufficient, in material terms. Yet in bearing, in outlook, in grounding in the matter of survival in an always challenging environment, they are supremely self-reliant. I learned that when I saw the hunters using knives to operate on skidoos in open-air surgery at forty below in the middle of nowhere.

Not exactly in our element in a culture and geography so foreign to us, Jeanne and I left the North with a new appreciation of what it means to live on the land, with renewed resolve to try it ourselves, and with the capital required to begin. We bought a share of a land co-op in the interior mountains of B.C. and started carving a homestead out of the bush.

Here was my chance, finally, to create the lifestyle most in accordance with my values. And what were they, by then, at the age of thirty?

Self-sufficiency was high on my list. The world was in a shaky place in 1980 because of Reagan and the arms race, and my partner and I both wanted to increase our chances of survival with a well-established independent homestead, far from the vulnerable urban centers. Survival was a prime concern, but we had a lot of work to do before we could feel secure. Our skills in the basics of rural living were negligible. Tapping neighbors for help and advice, we cleared a driveway and laid a waterline; cleared space for a garden, orchard and house; built a woodshed and temporary chicken coop number one. Then came housebuilding, a project which would take seven years.

Jeanne grew disenchanted early on, leaving for the city even before the foundation went in; I spent the first three years of the building phase living in a tipi. During this time another partner came my way, who matched my commitment to building a life on the land. By our first summer together, when we adzed the logs for the floor joists, Sarah was pregnant.

For those first three years I had paid little attention to schemes for making money – the endless schemes which preoccupied many of my low-income neighbors. When my savings account finally ran dry, however, and Sarah and I brought home a baby daughter to a half-finished house, I had to start hustling. There were a few useful trades I'd learned

by experience, and some others I had to learn from scratch. I began hiring myself out as a carpenter, stonemason, firefighter, treeplanter.

Now money earned meant time spent away from family as well as from the lagging house construction. I began to look closer at ways to work at home: both to generate income and to produce what I would otherwise have to buy.

Short of pure self-sufficiency, I found instead a place in a fabric of interdependence. It seemed neither possible nor desirable to produce every food, every tool locally – whether on the homestead, or in the nearby community. Barter, home business, homestead production, and paying jobs all played a part. It is relatively efficient, for example, to grow all one's vegetables, plus extra garlic, and then to sell the garlic and buy grain, which is not so easy to grow in a mountain valley. Another example: Sarah designed box labels in exchange for the products they advertised – apples and a kitchen stool. And after gaining experience building rock walls for our own house, we were both hired to build a rock-walled planter for a local artist who'd received a bed-full of lilies in trade for a painting.

Sometimes the transactions were inefficient, sometimes unexpected. Take the case of the ducks. We ordered ducklings from a distant supplier to raise for eggs, manure, and slug-control. Instead of being shipped direct as arranged, they had to be rescued from town, two hours away. I drove, let's see, truck number four (we went through seven in all), and on that trip the transmission disintegrated, losing its last gear at the foot of the

driveway on the way home. Those ducks lived on to trample the garden, before succumbing to hawks.

Then there's the story of the donkey we bought to save on truck use. Several months later we watched in complete surprise as she gave birth. The next year we recovered mama's original cost by selling the young jenny – or rather, trading her, for two ducks, some truck repairs, and a bit of cash.

Living on the land doesn't usually pay well, but then it's more than an occupation. It's a kind of relationship with the natural world that takes a commitment to a lowered level of consumption, helping to reduce the total human impact on the overburdened planet. It's a learning process which is gradual and endless. If the homestead books didn't quite balance, we would keep tinkering with the equation, seeking the right combination of ducks, trucks, bucks, and whatever else we could throw in the compost, while keeping the larger balance at heart.

Throughout this decade of the 80s, another force was intruding upon the landscape of my life: the politics of survival. While in the process of establishing a life largely dependent upon homemade shelter and homegrown food and subsistence income, I felt obligated to do my part in addressing perils in a wider sphere of influence – first becoming active in the disarmament movement, and later, closer to home, in the movements against pesticides and logging in local watersheds. Both pursuits demanded

modest outlays of money and vast expenditures of time and energy; and this drain on the home scene, while seeming absolutely necessary at the time, further called into question the viability of "the homestead economy" as a self-sufficient enterprise. Win or lose, there was going to be an impact. But if we lost, and the worst fears came about, all the efforts to make a natural life work would be wasted: a radioactive or chemical cloud or a landslide or a drying up of our springs would render the land dead and useless. So the political work had to be done.

At the same time, Sarah turned to market gardening as a means of establishing a viable "natural" way of life. This was a hard path to go down, because the local consumer base was small and the nearest towns were expensive to reach by truck. Eventually the pressure to make ends meet, and the grueling, day-in, day-out labor wore her down, and she turned to other odd jobs instead: cone-picking and construction, which paid more fairly.

I was weaned away from gardening in those years in which food was my partner's business and therefore more naturally in her sphere of responsibility. I was becoming instead more interested in African drumming, and in advancing my career as a writer and online editor. While on the surface, these pursuits appear to have separated me further from my chosen environment, they also allowed me to dwell in peace with it: not struggling with the weather, predators, the rocky soil, the isolation from spare parts or customers. Developing economic viability through an Internet-based business allowed

me to continue living in my isolated location, when otherwise I might have felt compelled to move in search of work. That economic independence also allowed me to come to a new relation with the nature around me: not as a working partner in the sense of literal husbandry or industrial production, but rather as a spirit-partner; a love-partner; a companion who helped me in the appreciation and creation of art, of beauty, of understanding and wisdom. Though I still made use of the nature around me for much of my food needs, I wasn't locked into a disadvantaged attempt to convert compost to cash.

Back in Victoria now, after twenty-seven years (half my life) away in wilderness settings, I lie in my sterile apartment, gazing out the window to bare branches against the bright blue sky . . . and catch a glimpse of beauty that gives me an answer to the question my partner Oiseau poses: "Do you miss wilderness?"

"No," I say, after some thought. "Not really. I have it, can find it within me now, within my experience, my memory, having lived there so long. It has become a part of me. The places and scenes that became so familiar are familiar to me still."

There is a larger question now, which seems well answered by this window-framed beauty of light and form. And it's the same question and answer that confronted me in Victoria so many years ago.

I had arrived fresh from my journey through the Cascades and Olympics, asking at the time of university registration: "How do I study nature – by which I mean the relations between humans and nature?"

I went on to say that I was not satisfied with the environmental studies approach, with its emphasis on the sciences and social sciences. I knew that for me it would have to have more to do with the "humanities" – with spirit and art, language and philosophy.

The English department chairman confirmed my inner leading with a simple suggestion: "Study Canadian poetry. And probably American poetry too."

Now my daughter has begun attending the same university, and Oiseau writes the only poetry in this family. But in further answer to Oiseau's innocent query, I find my own, more essayistic voice:

"I no longer need to see wilderness in the literal, ground-level sense. It no longer has to have primary meaning for me as a particular environment or geography. Now it's enough to appreciate my immediate contact with nature, even right here through this city window. Nature's primary meaning to me has become (once again) spiritual and aesthetic, a quality of experience that's personal and direct and not dependent on what's over the horizon. I have more of a sense of wilderness, or of the limitless in nature, in this scene here and now, than I would if I were in the middle of some wooded hillside in, say, northern Ontario, with nothing but the same view for a thousand kilometers in every direction.

"There I would be wondering what to do next. Should I keep walking, find the nearest road, look for something to eat or hunt in the forest, start farming, or what? Here, there's nothing to do – there's just awareness and appreciation of beauty, of color and light and form and my own connection with nature."

"Ah," says the poet, "but there is something to do."

Interior Rainforest

Forest Walks and Other Exercises

The Homeland

It's been a long, cold winter and a long, cold, rainy spring. Now, near the end of May, the warm sunny weather has finally arrived. There's much catching up to do: in the garden, the orchard . . . and the heart. While my days now will be filled with managing my little corner of nature, there is more yet to be done under the sun: but this in the shelter of wild trees. I am struck this morning, as I walk in the sun-salved forest, with a sense of homecoming.

I was raised in such a forest. Oh, not me, personally; and not exactly this type of forest. But over the long term of millions of years of evolution, humans developed in such an environment – warm, shady, filled with other living things, and a sense of presence: them in me and me in them, all part of a living fabric. The whole brain and body there (here) is awake, aware, alert to the presence of all life. Today we call this unity an ecosystem.

All seems possible now, as I walk gently, quietly here under shade as tranquil as a cathedral. It even seems plausible, when it's warm and dry and comfortable as this, to

"make a living" in a harmonious manner here, with those other living things. This is a northern mixed forest, predominantly fir and pine, cedar and hemlock, vine maple and birch. There are, on this outing, no deer to be seen. Maybe, finally, they have taken their climatic cue to move up to the high country. Small animals are few: the odd squirrel; the sound of birds. Inevitably some ants; no mosquitoes, yet. The plant cover on the forest floor is behind schedule, with the bracken and thimbleberries not really opened up yet to spread thickly everywhere, as they will after a spell of hot weather. There is not, in other words, a lot to eat in this forest. But still, I have a positive feeling about the prospect of spending the time here to seek out food, or to prepare shelter, if needed. I'm not going to freeze to death at night. With a little more practice in snares and tracking, cordage and firekeeping, it could be done. . . .

A light breeze riffles the treetops.

I reflect further that, to really do the job right – the job of primary production and survival – would take a full-time commitment, and cooperation with others at the same task, over the course of the good growing weather. The native tribes of the B.C. interior possessed the necessary skills, and worked like mad in the summer to put away forest foods for the long winter. And it worked: they were successful in making a living from their natural homeland.

I don't plan to stay, of course, to do all that, but will continue down the trail toward my house and computer to write about it instead. Am I just another intellectual copout, in

a human world doing head work, abstract work for a living? How can I claim to be truly at home here? From the perspective of the forest, or its indigenous inhabitants, no doubt I'm just a tourist, passing through. Or worse, a colonizer here only to extract value on my terms.

That's a fair enough critique. But given such limitations, I still find a valid sense of rootedness here: a connection that is deeper than culture or level of technology. I come home by noticing, by appreciating, by paying homage to that thrill in the heart that comes from being here, in the ancient homeland. Even if just for a period of years, or months, or one day, or during one morning walk down a forest trail, I can share in a more universal human homecoming: the warmth of recognizing the ancestral house and family; of joyfully stretching limbs and lungs in that soothing, familiar element.

The high drone of a plane enters without knocking.

My reverie is broken and I lope down the trail towards home, leaving the forest behind. I have words that must be written there; and seeds to plant in the garden, and an orchard to water.

The Curtain of Trees

This morning I go out walking early, into the forest and up the ridge behind the house. Through the curtain of trees I can hear the orchestra of human activity beginning to warm up for its daily performance: commuters on the road across the lake, headed for the early shift at the mill; chainsaws muffled in the distance; lone planes and helicopters cruising overhead.

Around me, the trees wait silently, their days numbered. I have to ask myself: How hard will I be willing to fight for the lives of these trees, my trees – trees, like casualties of war, dying for someone else's profit?

Squatting on the hump of the ridge facing the thin, sheltering line of fir and pine, I hear the rumble of traffic as from an urban scene. This is it, already close, that unmistakable feeling of rushing, of energy in urgent motion somewhere, to do something . . . is it a headlong rush to the end of history, or merely a race against individual death?

Either way, my own life seems caught in its path. Only for the moment, I take the leisure to linger contemplatively among these old trees; they, like me, holding out against the human storm. For an even briefer instant I can visualize this hillside as a clearcut, like so many shorn hills I've replanted, full of black stumps on razed ground.

What is this affinity I feel for the living forest? Is there something sacred about trees? Certainly they are kin in a number of respects: we have a majority of our

respective DNA in common, and share a reliance on sophisticated hormone systems; we interact in a breathing network of life energy. All around me they rise graceful, powerful, ancient and noble in form . . . keepers of the earth.

But what role do such esoteric factors play in the human drama of current events? I recall how hard it was in 1970, or 1983, to convince the average citizen that human life was more sacred than the buck or some shade of ideology. So this "war in the woods" is the same old war, isn't it? Does it matter whether the genetic material is Asian, or African, or Amerindian, or Douglas Fir? It's all part of the continuing exploits of the industrial model human. War on all else, for his satisfaction.

From the sound of his engines, it's obvious that he's in a tremendous hurry – but for what? To taste the illusion of glory before the inevitable void comes to swallow him up? To fulfill the historical karma of the collective race?

The trees sway in a gentle breeze. I stand up, loosening my cramped knees. I look at my watch: time to be getting to work.

What am I in a hurry for? Oh, I, too, have a backlog of ambitions in various categories, and a pressing greed to get on with them. Money, approval, success . . . I'm driven like all the rest.

Instead of simply enjoying where I am.

I squat down again momentarily, in front of this curtain of trees. Then a more subtle veil lifts, and I realize that I'm the advance guard, the microphone in the woodwork, the fox among the chickens.

The act has already begun.

I walk back to my house at the edge of the forest, a certain slowness in my stride.

Entering the Tunnel

Through the canopy of green, into the dark interior of forest . . . I walk this path to send my spirit on its journey home.

When I come through the passage and emerge into the soft light, with the branches all around, and the trunks standing solid beside me, I have reached the realm of spirit-life, the world where time and I are one, where my movements and the universe are in order.

I cannot say this exactly right – because I am not now there in physical space, but only revisiting the place in memory.

The tunnel before me now is the invisible thread, or the visible one of ink, or the thread of understanding I seek through this trail of words.

Through the tunnel I come to the place of "I am" with my surroundings: the tabletop, the hum of machinery pervading the outside air. Yes, even here, I now observe in full clarity: I have brought my home to an industrial basin. Or the basin has come to me.

In this way I pay for the privilege of contact with the outside world, represented by my phone line, computer, road access . . . the supply line of material goods. I am tempted to call this line of contact a "lifeline," but really it's just a "comfort line."

Today I found out that logging in my watershed is to proceed, a road permit to be approved through the most sensitive area for recharge of the source springs. This after two decades of concerted community efforts to forestall logging on the hillside.

I am dulled with a sense of futility and powerlessness. I could attempt to assert my power, and to increase it with the joint effort of others; whereupon we would face the likelihood of being squashed under the steamroller of this government's policy to take out the trees at all cost.

Whether or not my interests and desires are shared and supported by the majority, they are annulled by the ruling equation of economic power. I do have potential influence; but when the stakes are merely "local" interests of subsistence, as opposed to easy corporate money to be raked off the land, I and my kind have little relative weight – we are brushed aside in the rush for profits.

Nor does it matter that I ally myself with the trees, the animals, the wilderness, the water, the earth. Man is king here, and he means to show all beings that Crown authority is absolute. If the Crown must have its gold, and its favored citizens silver, then all else is obstruction and subversion to be swept aside, crushed, eliminated.

In an earlier age it would have been obvious (if dangerous) to shout out for the countermove, the dismantling of the king's armies. Of course only the most desperate rabble would have joined the cause. With a flourish of caustic speech, I would have challenged any more reticent audience with the slap of the prophet-martyr's gauntlet:

"Rejoice, O citizens of this fine civilization, for you will enjoy the fruits of my oppression – while they last. When the trees are gone, and the water flows no more, you will have other fields of conquest, and I, a bitter memory of your unconcern. Enjoy the harvest feast, and think not of the coming winter."

Now, however, in a time of universal higher education and ready political analysis, I have been told that to accuse the majority of complicity in the crimes of our state is unfair. It is the favored few, it is said, who are our common enemy in this struggle for justice, and only those who control the reins of government are responsible. The many are duped and innocent, ignorant and indifferent to the exploitation carried out in their name.

Possibly this analysis is true. An astute political scientist would probably go even further, to show that our system was created, or evolved, precisely for the purpose of

furthering commercial interests above all others. Example: Which side in the present issue is more likely to afford the legal weight to pull injunctions in their favor?

Making the conflict run even deeper is the alignment of the population's real or perceived self-interest with the reigning commercial interests. Many people in my community, for instance, side more with the logger than the waterusers. In this case they don't gain from employment or other spin-offs from logging that woodlot – because it's basically a one-man show. Rather they sense or believe that their lifestyle demands that logging continue, and they recognize correctly that there is nowhere else for logging to continue at present levels than in sensitive watersheds like this one.

So it comes down to this: either we as a society continue our pace of resource extraction regardless of consequences, or we risk cutting back on the luxuries that our present lifestyles provide us. There might be a third way out, to find alternative means of economic health. But to create alternatives to established habits is always challenging and leaves us meanwhile in the lurch, facing a simpler choice:

To cut, or cut back.

Given that choice, it seems that the majority (or its government, or both) will choose to continue supporting the cutting of timber even in sensitive areas. Because more sensitive to most people is the area of their own material comfort, and they are buying the argument that their own comfort is upheld by that familiar recipe, cutting wood.

Water vs. Comfort? Or is it, Water vs. Luxury?

No wonder feelings run so high, divisions so deep. This is a basic battle in the course of civilization: a turning point. Are we to continue on the road hacked out thus far over the last ten thousand years – hacking at an ever-increasing pace as we go – or are we to rest awhile, evaluating our present status, surveying the country around and ahead of us, taking stock . . . and perhaps deciding to stay where we are, go back down the road aways, or even depart the road altogether for a forest path?

Big questions – and if they are not answered immediately, they vanish into the one option of the superhighway going on to the end of the earth. At the end of the earth only two scenarios present themselves: falling over the precipice where the road ends, or finding ourselves back on familiar ground: farms, houses, cities and planted trees everywhere, all the wilderness gone, all water treated and trucked in. The homestead, the wildlife, the hillside spring, the non-industrial community are gone, and the air hums with the sound of engines at work.

The daylight passes, I write. I won't die in this affair. I'll survive and move on. If the majority or its government here really wants this outcome, maybe I'll have to search elsewhere for my paradise, my utopian haven – or else accept the fate of the powerless. In the meantime I can only raise my voice, and say what's on my mind.

The key in that public life, as in this act of writing – or in the spirit realm, in walking through that tunnel in the forest – is to go forward in full consciousness, ever forward and mobile.

Words give motion to thoughts, and expression makes room for more. Evolution gives rise to new life; the passage of time births the future.

Traveling, by car or plane, is too fast: the spirit has to catch up later. Sitting, or lying down trying to think a way out, is usually not helpful – too static and unmoving.

But work at a natural pace, or walking, or meditation designed to free the mind to the movements of its own subtler energies, or writing, or conversation, will be enough to move thought forward to join reality at its own pace of motion. Of course, reality's motion is only relative to the objects concerned.

In cosmic terms, time and space are measured by the movement of gases, dust, rock and light. In terrestrial terms, they are measured by the movements and passage of sun and moon, water and wind, the growth of plants and wanderings of animals. In human terms, we can measure motion in our animal form, or in our cultural productions, or in social forms as the ebb and flow of relationship, the whirlpool of politics, the progress of thought or conversation or imagery.

From observing this whole range of motion, it becomes clear how integral motion is to any notion of reality. Stuckness is unreal, or an incomplete reading of reality, then, at one end of the scale. At the other end, movement at faster speeds than are natural or

normal are allied with stress and transformation: explosion and collision, change of state, going to seed, heart attack and cancer, burnout and overdose, revolution and confusion.

More moderate rates of motion are aligned with normal passages of events, seasonal changes, life cycles, healthy growth and continued evolution of form and process. So the pace of change must be patient and persistent, calm and controlled, inexorable and undeniable.

No Mas

Walking through the woods to the post office, intent as usual on my own purposes and bodily exercise (but this time slower, after a recent virus), I happen to notice several old, moss-covered stumps.

I stop, feeling something of importance in these old stumps I pass so often but notice so seldom. What is it?

What can I say for them, or about them? What do I even care? They don't give a hoot for me. And yet, we live side by side. It strikes me that I haven't paid them enough attention. They are like neglected children, whom I've fathered and forgotten; or parents left behind to die, though they've sheltered me with love and money and wisdom . . .

Or maybe it's I who have been neglected by them.

But they cannot move, or reach out, or be active in any physical or conscious way, so it is unfair to expect of them what I can expect of myself: to take notice. I walk on to the mail, getting my exercise. But having noticed, having opened myself to that extent, now I can't get rid of the things. Old stumps, moss-covered: they stand soft yet firm in my consciousness, like breasts of a familiar lover. What do I do with them now?

– Give them attention, and love, and care.

Who said that?

And more: that those trees forgive me (or my brother or neighbor or whoever cut them down – probably a man, by all the odds).

Can this be true – forgiveness from the forest? Doesn't such a pathetic fallacy spoil the rational basis of argument (if there is an argument)?

What's the argument?

Somebody cut them down. Young ones grow up around the stumps, diffusing the pain, healing the vision until the old wounds are practically unnoticeable. This is good: instructive as to what works for humans too. But would it be better not to have cut them at all? It may as well be asked.

I probe the lessons of history, economics, ethics. Somebody likely made good use of that wood. I myself have turned the same trick on a number of specimens, leaving old stumps, moss-covered, in the forest to be noticed or not as I or another two-footed one

passes. I own my guilt in the matter: I have cut down trees to make my shelter. This just cause redeems the guilt, or calls it something else.

Having cut them, I owe homage to that fact by noticing, now, as I walk. And then reflecting: how many? The newer, big live ones, are they next, on someone's list? Undoubtedly; and the younger ones to come. The real question, allowing cutters-to-come the same privilege I took, is how many more, for how long?

Soon we won't be able to ignore them; we'll have to stop, noticing so many new stumps. In their growing numbers they will cry out to be noticed. We will have to wonder then (as I have to now, having once noticed) where this vision is headed. Because a present vision noticed is a past wound acknowledged is a future laid bare. Do we want that future? Humans multiplying endlessly, endlessly cutting? Somewhere there is an end to it. The end comes when we notice, when the old stump is our lover, when we give our one or two children attention and love and care, and say to all those who ask, No More.

Cat Tracks

I begin with all the proper preparations: lunch consisting of a basil-rich pesto fortified with fresh garlic and fried ground venison, served with semolina al dente.

Followed by a bitter half-cup of instant coffee brewed strong, drunk while sitting in half-lotus a foot away from the hot tub, staring into the rocks . . . and a little inspiration from Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dali Lama, on breathing, smiling and walking.

Then I set out. Mind rolling with the rock and reggae rhythms of the previous night, present in the now-mind. My steps are slow, measured. I see the trees approaching, my vision widened to the edges with the extra time I take. I've already turned back to put away the tapes I was going to return to Julie – not today. Today is for solitude.

I walk. The air is mild, almost balmy. It's overcast all the way to the hills across the lake, where snow patches mark the rockslides and clearcuts. The distance puts a bluish-gray cast on the rocky hillface; the lake is steel-colored. Bare branches in the foreground; my feet pad thin snow underfoot. Air clear in the nostrils. Counting steps, in, out.

Up the hill of the driveway, to "walk around the block" . . . but around here, what constitutes a block? A more or less arbitrary circuit on the network of old skid trails snaking through the woods. I take the old cat-track veering up into the flattish area I call birchland, and walk on. Off the main drive, the branches scrape against the nylon of my coat and the denim of my pants. Leaves and twigs occasionally crunch or snap underfoot, through the covering snow.

It occurs to me how walking in the woods like this is the way of the hunter: wary, watchful, slow, alert, patient, steady. At one with the world around, with the animal

world. Indeed, all around me I notice bare patches of brown leaves in the snow, where the deer have bedded for the night.

Then I see it: a deer on its side, half-covered with sticks and leaves and clumps of hair, over the yawning cavity of its broken ribs, its stomach and chewed meat, its pooled blood.

Was this the work of dogs? A careless hunter?

I bend and work the front legs – still pliable. The blood looks and smells fresh, and the musky odor of the buck mixes with another, more sinister spoor. The ground around the kill is scraped of snow where the struggle took place. Then, on a snow-covered log near the body, I see tracks. Again, I wonder: a large dog? No, these pads are more rounded, more like those of a cat – a cougar.

I follow the tracks away, in the direction I'm going. Do I really want to stalk this killer? It couldn't be very hungry, after this recent feast. I look up to check the limbs of the thin, rough-barked pines around me.

No cat lurking there. So I walk on, following its tracks, until I see a line of deep-set deer tracks angling up the hill. Where the tracks practically converge, I decide to go back to see how it happened. Did the cat sneak up and surprise the buck as he slept?

Back at the scene, I stoop for a closer look. It occurs to me that the ground has been scraped to cover the half-eaten cache for a later date. I feel a back leg, and discover it's

bent sideways, broken. I slip my hand under the body, and can feel live warmth there still.

How exactly did this deer die? Did it start out with a leg broken in a fall, which made it vulnerable in a chase? Or did the cat hobble it with a crippling twist of that leg at the knee-joint?

I inspect the neck and see only a small superficial wound of missing hair, a ragged spot of torn skin. It's hard to tell if that was the killing bite. The only thing obvious now is the carnage that followed. Those ribs are chewed in half; the liver and most of the loin meat on the upper side is torn away, as is the upper portion of hind leg.

The smell of blood and meat and vitals is powerful, rich, almost heady with promise, even for my own already-satiated palate.

I no longer feel afraid of this cat. Only respectful.

After all, I too am a hunter.

I, too, kill and eat of such meat.

Fickle Sun

Fickle April sun, the way you show and hide – now running silent and weary onward, now laughing and skipping away across the sky – how you lure me out and then

chill my bones! You proceed with great fanfare, or no sign at all. Where do you get that uppity attitude, so high and mighty? You are the creator of all my clichés, and so I have a little issue to raise with you, in a manner of speaking.

There is nothing if not dialogue between us, yet it's ever an uncompleted conversation, punctuated with long pauses, fruity trills of laughter, stonefaced asides. Where is your heart in my country, and what claim do you lay to my soul?

Every April you do this to me: yet every turn of your great wheel is not the same. Sometimes I can plant corn in your beckoning heat; sometimes shovel snow while awaiting your tardy arrival. You never tell me when you're coming back, I just have to trust.

I know that later or sooner, you'll be there for me, but what then? All that I have tried to accomplish in your absence goes out the window: or rather, stays indoors while I wander out to taste your rich colors, your airy promises of freedom and eternal bliss. It will not do to believe you fully, I know, because experience tells me you have other errands, other lovers, a shadow side which is yours and yours alone. That's fine, I can live with it. But in the meantime, I'm left wondering, at the onset of each new temptation, what to do. How will I adjust my life to make room for that next whimsical (I might say stray) appearance? Do I just say you can come and go as you please, but I'm going ahead with my plans? Or will you ever promise to stay for a week sometime?

True, I too am fickle. I have to wonder, what happens when the beach gets old? I never pledged myself to your ultimate tan; nor made it clear that I was my own man. I too come and go, meeting you as I choose, as the inner desire strikes me. I have made it my profession to shelter myself from your harsh and overbearing extremes, so that I can follow my own dim light from within; can worship at your muted and square-framed likeness engraved with endless filligree of my own design.

Let us make a pact, then. You come and go as you like, and I will do the same. Together we will dance as the day arises, and join in passing again and again, kissing (if only briefly) to commemorate our mutual respect, sparking our love to momentary glory.

What do you say?

I should have known. While I've been soliloquizing, you've gone off in a huff of cloud.

All right. I'll see you in May.

Forest Storm

26 September 2001

No TV. No Internet. No email, and even the phone was out for a day – which was better, in a way, than unplugging it, because this time I just had to let go.

Nature spoke. I didn't even hear the wind over the rain in the night, but in the morning, trees were down everywhere. Needles and branches littered the dirt road through the forest I call home. The power lines were down for three days.

It was no death scene of a distant city, like those I had witnessed the week before, with the painful luxury of a front-row seat three thousand miles and a way of life removed. The forest took its losses without complaint.

Another Gulf War, longer, and larger, rages in the rumors of front pages, elsewhere. But today, instead of world news, I take in a walk to the river. I write outside with cold fingers on a small notepad, while the silver morning grows over the mountains to the south. A single raven calls, answered by various-rhythmed birds . . . then a humming silence.

Last night the boys did homework by candlelight, played acoustic guitars. The night before, Nintendo gave way to Kahlah. I re-learned an old tune on the pennywhistle, beat on a drum.

Have I embraced this emptiness yet? These last few nights there was more time for sleep, dreaming, love. Now there is only time.

Shouldn't it be this way?

Nature spoke. I can no longer take "power" for granted.

White Rabbit

Marching down the wintry road, it occurred to me that roads and marching were the instruments of war. It was a logging road, after all. I was just out for a walk – but with what murderous intent? Stride, stride, stride . . . what fight was I determined to wage, on this path cleared for me into the heart of the wilderness?

When I thought about it, I recognized that I was filled with a sullen anger over several personal affronts and impasses: the boss hadn't returned my call; my wife was in a bad mood; I couldn't make any clear decisions despite a morning poring over the budget. I hated being left hanging, not knowing what was to come.

When I realized what I must look like in the eyes of the forest, it gave me pause. In fact, I stopped in my tracks – and turned straight off into the pathless, snowy woods. The strange thing was, I kept right on marching, with more gymnastic effort required to go around and over the bent saplings and fallen trees.

What a crashing idiot I was, in that still, silent forest!

Then a sudden flash caught my eye: white on white – a rabbit, teasing, first hopping out from behind a log, then turning back under, and bounding away.

I followed, a little way, until my guide vanished . . . leaving me with the mystery of not-knowing, pen in hand.

The woods are silent again – and so am I.

The air is brighter now.

Running Wolf Canyon

Bounding up the babbling stream in the canyon, I look up often at the golden cliffs, down more often at the ground, feet flying, and wonder, as I go, against stumbling.

I cannot stop, but only go with what I know. The trail I make is left behind, of no more need to be followed than the one ahead.

The sky listens earnestly, without care. I run, and breathe deep; I run, rouse pebbles out of sleep; I run, and trees go by; I run, and the stream goes on past, by my new trail, from my trail-to-be.

I cannot stop, unwilling. The legs, the feet, the blood are listened to, without care. I run, the trial yields to trail, from unknowledge. Blissfully it becomes footed, allowing my grace on its. Awaiting further air, my lungs go, I run, they blow big and low, I run.

The back path is forgotten, the new one yields. The quickness of it sets it to music, the sound of feet, pads on pebbles, the stream rushing past, the other way. I stumble up the canyon path, wondering: when winter comes, different streams will rise.

For now, I run, the stream beside me and I are one, it runs, we pass each other almost nonchalantly. It runs, I rush by.

The sky sends wind to fill my lungs. I breathe, the wind goes down the cool canyon, water beads my face. My feet run dry, send sand alongside water's worming way. Birds cannot know this, flying. They only hopple when they try. Likewise for us, flying – we

only hope, dreaming at the best of times. Angels fear to tread our earth, where animals roam. We keep the peace between them, running. Me and my wondering, the stream and I. The wind, wandering, the wind and sun passing by, we run.

There are blanks in thought, running – as rocks in stream – until rapids overcome their aimless resistance, wandering. The easiest path is chosen, quickly, without thought. The true footing gains itself. Watchfully the sky waves on. I dream some, forgetting yester-pebbles, aware of not-the-stream, the stream aware of not-me. Awaiting sun of tomorrow is too long, for now, so we-I-you say okay, let's keep on, what were we talking about?

Our old conversations roam wildly through many worlds, having lost their homes into ashes, dust, dry air and realms of voicelessness. Their shouts are sometimes heard echoing from the rocks in the stream, but where that echo comes from and where it goes I don't have time to stop and question. There will be more besides, so I run on, they shout and die away it seems further down the stream, repeating themselves as my feet must seem to do, to the pebbles cast once and for all time aside.

The stream voices no learned opinion. It listens; what it hears I hear, above the shouting rocks. Human voices are indistinguishable in such a roar, the pounding hum.

I run on, still up, sometimes stumbling. When the stream stops, I will. When I will, it will go on again. I will not decide. The stream will not. The wind will not decide. The sun will not. The pebbles are left behind. They will not be forgotten, hard as they try. Their

opinion will be voiced in the end, and I'll be too far up the trail to hear them. I'll be going on, running, listening to all these things, hearing nothing.

Rendezvous

The cabin appears in the distance, nestled beside a half-frozen pond. It's a scene from an old-fashioned Christmas card – except the cabin's chimney pipe shows no smoke.

"Looks like we're the first ones here," I say to Matt. I check my watch again.

My companion bends forward with the weight of his pack. He rests his hands on his knees, catching his breath. "Yeah – what time is it?"

"Twenty past three."

"Well, we're behind schedule from losing our trail. They could have had the same trouble on the other side."

"Yeah; or maybe they got a late start."

Matt turns his eyes from me toward the cabin. Sweat generated from our last steep climb up the scree slope drips from his limp, wet mustache.

I try some other explanation: "Maybe they're already in the cabin and there's no wood; or they've just got there and haven't lit a fire yet." I start to shiver. It's the end of June, but at six thousand feet a sweating body cools quickly.

We trudge on through wet, foot-deep snow to the cabin. A couple of wooden steps at the entrance are falling apart, but otherwise the rustic structure appears stoutly built, with walls of rough planks supported by a stone foundation.

I push open the creaking door; wind whips into the single room. There's a neat pile of split firewood stacked beside a little stove, with cobwebs stretched between.

The cabin is well-equipped, for all its remoteness. There are stacks of blankets and sleeping bags and spare shoes, all on a drying rack overhead; and four built-in bunks complete with foam mattresses. In the kitchen we find matches, toilet paper, tea, cocoa, canned soup, and a bag of rice – along with a portable campstove and fuel, cookware and dishes.

Matt starts unlacing his wet boots and suggests we get a fire going to dry our clothes and heat water for tea. I'm too anxious for the arrival of the other party to sit tight just yet; I tell him to go ahead, I'll scout around to see if I can see or hear a sign of their approach. He tries to reassure me that they're probably just running late. But I leave him to the stove and take off with map in hand to the end of the ridge, calling out and peering down into the dim vastness of the Glacier Creek drainage.

There's no response to my shouts in the empty wind. Far down the mountainside, the creek streams out from its source icefields and winds away beyond sight. I know that somewhere down there, a trail runs along the heavily wooded slope, veering up for a final ascent to the pass. Somewhere down there are Sarah, our daughter Nashira, and an adult companion, now over half an hour late – not a big deal, if you're meeting someone at a restaurant; but this is wilderness.

It's cold sitting out there on the exposed rock, and so I get up and walk, with a growing uneasiness, back to the cabin. A gray plume of smoke now curls out of its chimney. Looking beyond, I hesitate in my steps, struck by the awesome beauty of the mountain peaks that loom all around. A beauty so desolate, and incomplete . . .

2

Morning light drew our eyelids slowly open. I pulled Sarah closer for a kiss while we still had the chance.

"Nine weeks," she said in a forlorn whisper. "Nine weeks too long."

As soon as our lips touched, Nashira awoke from her bed beside us, right on cue. There was no turning the clock back now.

Never had I been away from Sarah for longer than a week, in our four years together. Now we would have to last likely four or five weeks at a stretch, until I could arrange a quick trip back home on a couple of days between shifts. The treeplanting camp would be a full day's drive away, in the next valley. But when John Harris had called me, a job offer out of the blue, I'd told him I'd do it; because with a half-finished house and a three-year-old child, we needed the money.

We got up and dressed; then Sarah made breakfast while I finished packing. It was all happening so fast. Over breakfast and a road map we tried to calculate how many round-trips our budget could bear, feeding the gas-guzzling Ford three-quarter ton truck.

I wasn't too concerned about using some of the big bucks I'd be making, for the odd trip home. At a hundred and fifty dollars a day . . .

Sarah was more prudent: "Remember all the other things we need that money for; those planting days have to cover us for the whole year."

"Yeah, I know, but – "

Then her eyes lit up. "Hey, I know how we could do it!"

Uh-oh, I thought. Here comes an adventure. I almost flinched.

"You're going to be up near Invermere in a couple of weeks. Directly across the mountains from here."

"Yeah, that's kind of neat."

"More than neat. Look on the map. There's Jumbo Pass, right up there. If there's a trail on the east side, you could hike over the pass on a day off and meet me on the Glacier Creek side."

"That's true. You could drive up to the trail – if the road's open – and pick me up. It would take me a whole day to get home, though. If I happened to be lucky enough to have two days off, I'd have to head right back over the next morning, and then work another shift with no rest. We wouldn't have much time together; just the overnight."

"But it <u>seems</u> so close . . ." Sarah leaned onto a muscular forearm. Her jaw was set. There had to be a way; and if not, she'd push one through anyhow.

I had no solution to offer, other than driving the long way around.

Then the idea came to her: “Hey, I’ve got it. You hike up your side, and I’ll come up the trail from the west, and we’ll meet at the pass. There’s a cabin there, where we can stay the night. We’ll have more time together that way.” Her eyes sparkled.

I pictured our bed, not in the cabin but out under the millions of stars wheeling around amid the frosted peaks. “Hmmm. I wonder. Maybe it’s not such a crazy scheme after all.”

Nashira had stopped stuffing pancake in her mouth long enough to attempt speech. The result was something of a strangled whimper, muted but nonetheless effective.

It brought me back to earth. I spoke for the little tyke before she choked: “But Sarah, what do we do about Nashira?”

“Oh, I’m sure she’d love to come, too.”

“I’m sure she would.” Nashira was vigorously nodding her head, with her cheeks still bulging. “But how’s she going to get there? It’s what – a three-hour hike for an adult, in shape?”

“She could walk up part of the way.”

“And have you carry her the rest? Wouldn’t it be easier to find someone she could stay with?”

“Oh, she’d rather come – wouldn’t you, Nashira?”

When Nashira hesitated, perhaps trying to swallow first, Sarah added, "We'll bring lots of food along; and your bluey quilt . . ."

"Yessee, yessee, I wanna come."

That settled that. And so our plan was hatched – at least in principle.

Saying good-bye was difficult – though less so for me than for Sarah. I had the excitement of a trip and new experiences to look forward to. Sarah would be at home with Nashira and the big garden to look after; and as if that weren't enough, she'd also taken on the job of babysitting two other kids.

"Are you sure you can manage all that?" I'd wondered.

"Oh, no problem." And for Sarah, it probably didn't seem like much. Backpacking around Europe at seventeen, running a printing press at nineteen, roaming the mountains for a week in her twentieth year, and having our child at twenty-one: these all came naturally to her. With Sarah it was a matter of style, pace. On a morning off from more widespread obligations, she could conjure a whirlwind in the kitchen yielding a batch of bread, a couple of dozen quarts of canned fruit, and several pies – with a cord of firewood split and stacked, between infrequent peeks in the oven. One or two burned pies, no big deal: the cost of accomplishment.

But now as we held each other one last time by the brown truck door, Sarah cried for her coming loneliness. I smoothed the wet strands of hair to the sides of her cheeks,

encircled her arching back to pull her closer, and took her mouth to mine. Then I got into the truck, tried to smile for her, and rumbled down the driveway.

3

From my first day of work I began to dream of the coming rendezvous. Packing fifty-pound treebags up and down the razed slopes and gnarly ravines, through logging slash and rockslides, fighting duff and sod and rock and flies, my body took a beating and my mind sought solace elsewhere. I filled the mindless dimension of the work with clear visions of Sarah: her sparkling almond eyes, her full lips, her familiar body.

But the quality of my work suffered. Daydreams of the distant peaks turned to nightmares under my nose as I had to spend two days replanting whole sections of ground: digging up each of hundreds of seedlings and packing them back in the earth, firmer, straighter, deeper.

Somehow two weeks passed, and that hellish first contract was finished. No one had made much money. A dozen planters had quit or been lamed. After days of blistering heat, it snowed the day we broke camp. I worried about my truck with no chains getting down the winding dirt roads, but made it with no trouble. A ragtag caravan of assorted vehicles carrying forty surviving planters and all our camp gear – kitchen and shower trailers, collapsible tent-shacks for drying clothes and for dining, all

our treebags, tapered shovels, spiked boots, rainwear and so on – proceeded up the valley to set up again for the more promising five-week Jumbo Creek contract.

I took the occasion of a supper stop in Invermere to phone Sarah. Beyond the essential I-miss-you's and I-love-you's, she had some news to report. She'd taken an exploratory trip up the western route to the pass, accompanied by Karianne, a woman whose husband, David, was part of my crew. The idea was to make the hike a double-date. They took Karianne's small horse along in the back of our old Dodge half-ton truck, as a means of carrying Nashira and Karianne's two kids up the trail.

The Glacier Creek road was in such bad shape, Sarah told me, that they had to stop and move rocks in several places along the way, from slides that half-covered the road. On the creek side were steep dropoffs.

"I was terrified," Sarah told me.

I asked her why they didn't turn around and go back home.

"Turn around! Are you kidding? That would have been worse, to try to back up far enough to find a wide spot for turning around. You know how it is for me to try to drive in reverse."

"Yeah, you're right." She could only reach the pedals in a normal driving position with the help of two pillows propped behind her back. "So what did you do?"

"Well, Karianne got out, with all the kids of course, and tried to guide me through. She seemed to think I had lots of room. But I couldn't see anything – except air

on one side, and rock on the other. My hands were shaking so hard I could barely hang onto the steering wheel."

It didn't work out very well, for all that. There were too many logs that the horse couldn't get over; and even after continuing on foot, they were turned back by old unmelted snow on the upper reaches of the trail.

That left Sarah's sturdy five-foot-two frame with the task of carrying Nashira at least part of the way up. She was determined to make a go of it. When I expressed my serious reservations at the prospect of her carrying both the child and a full backpack up the steep trail, she said she might find someone else to come along, who could help with the load. I promised to keep in touch as I found out more about the road and trail at my end.

The caravan turned west from Invermere into the mountains. The new campsite was located an hour's drive along Toby Creek, at the point where Jumbo Creek roared in. Halfway along this last road we passed the plush Panorama Alpine Resort, and the pavement turned to dirt and gravel. This would be the closest outpost of civilization – if civilization is tennis courts, hot tubs, a telephone and a bar.

The mountains surrounding the new camp rose with spectacular grandeur into ice- and wind-carved peaks, forming on the western side a range which now stood between me and my home and family. Beyond camp, the dirt road narrowed and stretched up the

Jumbo Creek valley for twelve more kilometers. The planting blocks rose up the east slopes from the road. Jumbo Pass beckoned invisibly, tantalizingly from around the last mountain in sight.

As we traveled each day in the crew trucks that took us to work, I began to plan in earnest for the day I would drive my truck to the end of the road, where the trail to the pass began. When I broached the idea to Harris, my towering, intimidating boss, he told me that the road was reportedly washed out somewhere past the last planting blocks. There was a possibility, he said, that it had been patched since.

"But if not," I was happy to hear him say, "you could take one of the boony bikes. I'll check out the situation one day when I'm up that way." He enjoyed bouncing around on the balloon-tired, all-terrain, motorized "trikes" and I was glad to have the big man's support for my little adventure.

Weeks went by. On the better ground here I became preoccupied with trees, time, and money. Never mind the dazzling vistas of glaciated peaks from the higher slopes. I could take in glimpses during lunch. On and on I pushed myself. Faster, faster, stride, stride – tree; stride, stride – tree: my shovel and I made a hybrid machine. Up and down the mountainsides, all day long in a race against time, I pounded in the seedlings, up to a thousand a day. At twenty cents a crack, I couldn't afford to think about Sarah.

Back in camp at the end of a day, when my stomach was filled and the conversation became sparse and stale, my thoughts would return to her. As time wore on,

past the third week, into the fourth week, and fifth, I ached with a visceral emptiness, that all the good camp food couldn't touch. I'd plod over to my plywood box, brush my teeth reflectively, and crawl into my bed of foam pads and sleeping bags, diverting my mind until dark with a good mystery or Stephen King horror novel. But it was the dimly-formed vision of Sarah's face, the disembodied love behind her ever cheerful smile, that would haunt me into sleep.

Sarah and I still had a plan for an alpine rendezvous. But it was becoming clear to me that Harris wasn't going to give the crew more than one day off at a time, until this contract was finished. With constant pressure from the contracting company to keep production up, he wasn't about to let planters take extra days for fanciful honeymoons.

As that magical last day approached, I finally got some useful information out of him. The road was indeed washed out beyond repair, he'd found, not far past the last planting blocks. The boony bike "might" make it, Harris told me, if the right place to cross were found. There were other complications, however.

In fact, the details, as the time approached, were maddening. To begin with, the actual days off at the end of contract were unknown until the last minute, due to an indeterminate number of remaining trees. There was some pressure on Harris to move right on to the next contract; so the days off might be needed for breaking camp, traveling, and setting up again. Meanwhile I knew from periodic phone calls to Sarah

that she might have trouble arranging her own days off from babysitting when I was free. But despite the uncertainties of our plan, she remained confident that it would work out somehow. And I felt we were too close to making this fantasy a reality, to watch it pass us by because of some small hitch.

Related to the problem of timing was the problem of access. The farther down the road I could get before starting to walk, the more time I'd have for the hike to the cabin. But even if I could wrangle a couple of days free between contracts, with the camp gone I'd no longer have the option of using a boony bike. That left me with my truck. But there were numerous minor washouts on the way, that we crossed daily in the crew trucks only with a good deal of scraping, bouncing, churning, and plain dumb luck. And these freshets were increasing in volume every day in the sweltering June sun.

4

The last full day of work, a Saturday, was a long one. The hope of finishing that day spurred everyone on. I started highballing, and in the process lost the line of planted trees I was supposed to be following. The hell with it, I said to myself – and ended up planting a single line of trees on a beeline into nowhere. When the run of four hundred was done, I tried to get my bearings, bushwhacking over ridges while calling out for some sign of humanity. I was watching out, meanwhile, for a rumored rogue moose, a mother separated from its young one. Finally I stumbled into a tree cache. Alex, my

graybearded supervisor, calmly looked up from his cup of coffee and said, in his best Texas drawl: “Doctor Livingstone, I presume?”

Despite the crew’s collective best efforts, a few dozen boxes of trees still remained in the caches at the end of the day. That was just as well, because now there was a large unplanted hole to fill between my errant line and the main section of planted trees.

Sunday was to be a short day with a partial crew. I chose not to work, but to rest and prepare for the hike – leaving the vacant area I’d created for the more eager planters. Monday the camp would come down and be moved on toward Cranbrook, and Tuesday would be another full day off before the next contract began.

I hopped in the crew truck with the radiophone and drove it down the road to the one point where radio waves could find a hole in the wall of mountains. I reached Sarah to finalize our plans. Our voices and breathful silences pulsed wondrously in the crackling airwaves.

Sarah had acted on my tentative information from a previous phone call and fortuitously arranged Monday and Tuesday off. The best bet for a hiking companion was a mutual friend, Ron; but he hadn’t yet made a final commitment. I told Sarah that a fellow planter named Matt had expressed interest in accompanying me.

She said, “It won’t be quite the same as just us, up there together.”

“It wouldn’t be just us, anyway, with Nashira there.”

"That's true."

"Anyway, it still makes sense for both of us to go with someone."

"I know. Ron was telling me that it's the grizzly capital of the world up there."

"Oh, great. Well, I hope he decides to come along. Bears or no bears, anything could happen."

"We'll be all right."

"Yeah, I think so." I was impressed as always with her level of confidence; in the case of this upcoming trip, I was infected by it.

Matt was a tall, thoughtful theology student, whose black hair and beard framed a strong-featured face of gentle intensity. On the slopes where he spent his summers working, he was an aggressive planter who could flail all day through logging slash or duff, like any six-foot-five bear. He was also an experienced mountaineer.

When the time came to break camp and head for the pass, I trusted Matt's assessment that my big truck would probably do fine over the washouts. As for timing, we agreed to aim for a return before four-thirty on Tuesday, so we could phone the forest company office for directions to the new camp location. Then it would be touch and go to make it to Invermere, because my truck only had a quarter-tank of gas.

When we set out Monday morning, the washouts were definitely deeper. It felt as if we were fording a river, crossing that first one in the lumbering, three-quarter ton Ford.

Halfway through, the back wheels began to spin in the loose gravel and then the truck stalled. I figured maybe this is it – we could call it quits now, before we got too far down this former road, and just move on with the rest of the camp. There was still time to drive home the long way around . . .

But then, with Matt beside me waiting for me to try harder, to start the thing up again and rock it back and forth out of this hole in the creek, I thought of Sarah – with her determination to push on with her end of the journey from the west – and I was inspired to barrel our way through, if not hell, then at least a little high water.

We managed to drive on through several minor washouts to the eight kilometer mark. There, sure enough, we were stopped by a raging river cutting completely through the road. On the other side was an old shed lying on its side, a victim of some previous spring flood.

Now we were close enough, though, to get out and walk – provided we could get across the roaring torrent before us. A slender poplar had been good enough to fall neatly across the creek. So Matt and I stripped off our boots and pants, heaved them across the creek, put our backpacks on, and waded across, using the poplar as a handy bannister to brace ourselves against the frigid current. Then we dressed and walked on in high spirits down the last stretch of road, with vast mountains towering up on both sides of the narrow valley.

Where the trail was supposed to start, there was an old cutblock, partially logged, with a few old skid roads crisscrossing it and disappearing into the remaining growth of trees at the edges. I pulled out the dog-eared map that I'd drawn with directions from the Forestry office in Invermere, to get our proper bearings. The map proved not to match exactly the actual layout of skid roads on the site. In fact, after three-quarters of an hour of fruitless trial and error, we gave up and decided to follow our noses uphill in the general direction of the pass, which we could see from the clearing.

The dense alder was wet from an overnight rain, but it offered plenty of handholds. Matt and I put on our raingear and managed the ascent without much difficulty, in a couple of hours of climbing, jumping creeks, crossing boulder fields and snowslides. Then we had to pick our way along a precipitous rockface, until at last we stood beneath the final, broad, steep approach to the pass itself.

Our destination hovered before us like some distant dream coming true, which it was. Jumbo Pass, In its summer color, its profusion of alpine flowers and moss and sparkling rivulets, its mantle of shifting cloud and patches of ice and snow, was stunningly beautiful. Beautiful, but still desolate and incomplete – until, in a few moments, Sarah would appear to complete the picture.

Near the top was the toughest going of the trip, up a slick bank of compact mud and shale above the flowers. We crawled like snails along that final bank, our boots

balanced at the tips of the toes on the slimmest of notches kicked into the hard surface, our fingers grasping at ephemeral stone chips that went skittering away at our touch.

Then we were there, in the snowy pass, with the Christmas-card cabin nestled some two hundred meters away beside a half-frozen pond.

5

Did I really expect to see Sarah, Nashira and Ron all cozy in the cabin, drinking tea and smiling for us when we arrived? Returning from my scouting mission, I walk back into the cabin, stamping the snow off my boots, ready at least to warm up while waiting. Matt sits with his feet up roasting by the stove, apparently unconcerned.

"No sign of them yet?"

"No."

He reads my face, my heavy voice and says, "I wouldn't panic about it. There's plenty of daylight left."

He looks the part of the preacher now, with that smug assurance. But I'm not about to embark on a discussion with him about God's benevolent hidden agenda behind all the world's disasters.

Anyway, he isn't here to talk shop. "Before you take those boots off," he says to me, "how about we climb that hill behind the cabin for a better view of what's around us?"

"Okay, sure," I agree. It's part of why we've come here. And while Matt gazes at the mountains, I can scout the western approach from a higher vantage point.

We had only to climb a short distance up from the cabin to find excellent vantage points from which to scan the exalted mountain peaks that ranged everywhere around us. To the west loomed the blue-black, glacier-filled masses of the western Purcells and Selkirks: Banquo, Covenant, MacBeth and Lady MacBeth, Cauldron. To the east rose the red-rock giants of the dryer, eastern flank of the Purcells: Karnak, The Cleaver, Jumbo Mountain, Glacier Dome. Down the Glacier Creek valley lay the lesser slopes we'd spent the last month planting. We studied our topographical maps, then sat with the remote stillness of it all. There was no sign or sound of anyone else in this whole vast wilderness.

By the time we came back to the cabin and settled in, the sun's rays were slanting through the cabin's tiny west windows. Then at long last there was a voice in the distance, calling. Instantly I slipped on a pair of the cabin's battered old running shoes and ran out the door, down the rickety steps and across the snow in the direction of the shouts. The voice grew louder, closer.

A series of little parallel ridges, spines of alpine rock and scrub trees, angled down from the cabin toward the headwaters of Glacier Creek. I crossed one or two as I headed down to meet the approaching hikers. Finally Sarah came into view a hundred

meters down along one of the ridges. She was alone with Nashira, carrying a large backpack as well as the child on her shoulders.

As we approached like two powerful magnets, the force of our unfamiliar closeness was staggering. Within reach now, Sarah's face beamed vibrantly under her bedraggled hair and skewed wool cap. We embraced with all the muscular energy we could muster, for long, long moments, silent but for our breathing.

Finally words came, breathless and trembling.

I said to Sarah, "You made it."

"Yes. I can't believe we're finally here, together."

"You came alone? What about Ron?"

"When I came by to pick him up, he said he was sick and couldn't come."

"Oh, Sarah. You look exhausted."

"Yeah, but – it wasn't too bad."

Nashira still sat above me on Sarah's shoulders, bundled in her purple snowsuit. I picked her up into the air and then cuddled her joyfully, while still holding Sarah.

"I walked some-a-way myself," she chirped.

"She sure did," Sarah said. "For a long way, too. And she would have walked more, except she was so slow, I didn't want to take the time. We were late getting started, at Ron's. He took a long time deciding not to come."

"I was getting worried. We've been here over an hour."

"What time is it?"

"Four-fifteen."

"Oh – we're practically right on time, then. It's only three-fifteen, our time."

For all my figuring of logistics, I'd forgotten we would be meeting on the time-zone boundary; and so I'd worried for nothing.

Except that now Sarah had more to say about the difficulty of the way up. The trail she'd been following petered out in the alpine, and she'd come by instinct the last half-hour or so in the rough direction of the pass. Hiking up among the ridges on the west side, she lacked the clear line of sight that had guided us to the cabin from the east. Attaining the lower bowl of the pass, she'd lost her bearings and had to depend on her voice to make final contact with us.

When we arrived at the cabin, Sarah exchanged brief greetings with Matt, unstrapped her pack, and immediately collapsed on one of the bunks.

I helped Nashira out of her snowsuit and boots. As I did so she said in a thin, shy voice, "Nowick, I'nt someping a-eat."

Back in my familiar role, I chuckled, "Okay, Nashira, what would you like?"

"Someping from backpack."

I opened Sarah's pack and found it crammed with extra warm clothes for two, bedding for three, food for a group, toys and books and art supplies for Nashira, and a

bundle of mail for me. I was astonished at the size of the load – at least thirty pounds she'd carried up, with Nashira doubling that.

"Sarah, you didn't have to bring all this stuff, did you?"

"I thought you'd want to see those new books you ordered."

"Yeah, but I could have waited! I mean, I appreciate it, but all the way up here . . . and the junk mail – "

"It doesn't weigh that much."

I wasn't sure whether to admire her or simply feel appalled at the extent of her ambitions. I sat beside her, putting my arm around her. She leaned her head against my shoulder. I could feel the weight of her exhaustion and relief. It was so good to see Sarah, to hold her again like this.

Nashira reminded me of my promise to get some food. I found a muffin for her and sat back down beside Sarah. Now I wanted nothing more than to cuddle with her under the bulky down comforter she'd brought along.

Matt graciously took his flute outside to serenade the mountains and left us to ourselves. Sarah was so chilled from her trek that she kept her down coat on as we lay on the bunk together in tender embrace. That didn't matter; we could at last lie still together, with mingled feelings of excitement, fatigue, accomplishment and good fortune. By the time Matt returned, Sarah had almost drifted away into the mists of sleep.

After a supper of lentils and vegetables, rice cakes, fruit and mixed nuts, we all gathered around the cabin's logbook, while a light rain fell outside. We learned that the shelter had withstood thirteen years of the clashing of weather systems at the top of this mountain range, where moist air traveling from the coast drops its last load of rain and snow before reaching the Rockies. Entries made in every month of the year recounted blizzards. We felt snug enough so far, though we had some reason to be apprehensive as we closed the logbook and prepared for bed.

Matt chose one of the top bunks. I made Nashira's bed under his, while Sarah piled our comforter on the other bottom bunk. Outside, the wind was picking up. We put more wood in the fire for the night and dove shivering into our beds.

Love was never so lovely as this, so patiently earned; so forgiving of the weeks we'd spent apart, and those yet to come; so generous with its soothing balm. Our hands played over the rediscovered terrain of our skin, finding soft echoes of the mountains and rivers and forests that lay all around us in the unseen night. The roar of our passion was muted by respect for Matt's close-by solitude, yet in the process it was transmuted into deeper frequencies, richer harmonies, more resounding exclamations of the heart.

The cabin walls shook with the buffeting of wind and rain from all directions, while thunder and lightning made a mounting attack on the darkness. Our bodies clung tightly together into the night, courting sleep. Somewhere in the realm between love and the void, we heard a crashing and banging of wood outside. Sarah's eyes popped open –

I could feel the lashes against my cheek. Instantly I was alert to the arrival of a grizzly, come to claim some of the new food in its domain.

Or, I considered, maybe it was just the wind blowing some boards about. As the sounds subsided amid the general cracking of the elements, somehow we found our way into sleep, long and dreamful.

6

Morning dawned slowly through misty, drizzling sleet. Visibility, if you chose to call it that, was practically nil as we got up and peered out the cabin windows, as into the walls of a cocoon. It remained to be seen how we would fare going back, today. Especially difficult would be Sarah's descent in search of an unmarked trail.

But we dressed for wet weather, packed up the rest of our things, and sat down to a hearty breakfast of dried fruit, porridge, nuts, and leftover soup, while mulling over the prospects before us – including staying put until the visibility improved. On the other hand there were jobs to return to, on both sides of the mountain, and people expecting our return. I voiced my concern about the idea of a search party (or two), mobilized into action on our behalf while we sat up there huddled in the cabin.

For Sarah's part, though she confessed to some uncertainty about finding her way in the icy gloom, she was willing enough to make a go of it. "If you guys made it up okay on your side without any trail at all, then I should be all right finding my way down."

She said this with an air of justification, so that I wasn't sure if she believed it. I wondered how much her willingness to go ahead was a sacrifice on her part for the sake of my desire to stick to the prearranged schedule.

Matt had a suggestion. "Maybe, Nowick, you could go partway down with them, until Sarah got started on the trail. Or I could come too if you want, and help with the load."

"Yeah, that makes sense." I turned to Sarah. "Matt and I could leave our packs back at the cabin, and we could help you carry Nashira and your backpack at least part of the way down."

Sarah was still dubious. "What if you guys got lost on the way back? You wouldn't even have your packs."

Matt and I discussed briefly the problem of timing, whether we could make it down the east side for our call to the forest company office before it closed at four-thirty. It seemed it could work if all went well.

Sarah spoke up again. "I think I'll be fine. I made it okay carrying everything uphill. Maybe, Nowick, you could walk down with us just to where we met you on our way up."

I had learned to trust Sarah's self-reliance, stubborn as it was, so I agreed to this plan. Now I could be helpful to her (and we could say our little family farewell alone together out in the wild and whirling elements) without jeopardizing my schedule.

Matt deferred to our decision, saying flatly, “I’ll stay and finish cleaning up. Then we’ll be ready to go when you get back.”

Ten minutes out of the cabin, we were all three soaking wet. Sarah’s down coat and Nashira’s polyester were slick with the freezing rain; Sarah’s hair streamed out from under the edges of her soggy wool hat; and both their faces gleamed with the shiny glow of the exercise and the glaze of sleet. We couldn’t see very much at all: traces of footprints here and there in the patchy snow along the ridged rock; white air.

We followed our noses some ten minutes further, and then I turned the backpack over to Sarah. She looked around uncertainly, trying vainly to recognize some landmark or sign of her passage the day before. We were now past any leftover footprints, and visibility remained negligible. I tried to offer some final guidance before turning them loose.

“We know Bastille’s over that way. So down there a little farther to the right, that deep draw goes down toward Glacier Creek, and then your trail must be somewhere farther right, pretty much downhill from here.”

“Yeah, I guess so. But it comes straight up the hill a long way from where it follows the contour. If I don’t find where it starts up high, I’m not likely to find it until way down below.”

"Well," I persisted, conscious of time ticking away, "we lost the trail on our side and just bushwhacked uphill. And I guess we'll do the same on the way down. If you just head straight down you're bound to end up on the trail eventually – or if not, you'll come out on the road, or down to Glacier Creek itself. Either way you'll know where you are."

"That's true . . ." Sarah still seemed uncertain. "I did tell Ron that if I wasn't back by seven he was to come out looking for me." She looked intently into the white haze. "This ridge here looks kind of familiar," she ventured, putting on a bright face.

I didn't want to face the full fear inside me. It would mean taking some other, unplanned action, also with uncertain results. "Are you sure you'll be okay? I could still come down with you part way, a little more, if it would be any help."

"No, that's okay. We'll be all right, thanks."

We stood and held each other close, our cool cheeks firmly pressed together against the sleet, for a long moment meant to last until another reunion. Then, whatever the wisdom of our parting there among the trackless ridges at the base of the pass, Sarah and Nashira set off on their way down the west slope, and I trudged back up to the cabin.

Within minutes down the east side from the pass, the air was clearer and drier. Evidently the foul weather was expending itself against the western bulwark of the pass

and the adjoining ridges that formed the height of land along the spine of the Purcell cordillera.

The ground was still slick and slippery. I followed Matt's cautious lead down the mud-and-shale slope, until he stopped and pointed.

The bearshit steamed in the cold morning mist, just at the point where the flowers began. My own progress came to a chilly halt at the fresh sign.

Our eyes swept the landscape, near and far . . . no bears in sight. I wondered what this grizz had eaten, and how recently. It likely owned this mountain ridge, sniffing and browsing every inch of it, in time.

Which would be worse?, was my paranoid query as I followed Matt's lead, creeping down the slope. For Sarah and Nashira to disappear forever into that white void on the western side? Or for a marauding bear to snap Matt and me in half like so much dry spaghetti – leaving them to grieve?

Such grim thoughts faded behind as our stride lengthened on firmer ground, and soon we were hotfooting it down the mountain in boyish leaps and bounds. Once on the road, we had another hour's walk to the truck, during which our conversation turned already to plans for a celebratory supper in Invermere when we arrived later that day.

At one point we paused to greet a Stellar's jay who perched beside us atop a precipitous drop to the gorge below. I felt a giddy wave of vertigo, backed away from

the edge, and again voiced misgivings about my headstrong decision to let Sarah and Nashira go unguided down the western slope. But Matt said no, the jay was a good omen.

7

The truck, we knew, was parked just around the next bend in the road, across the last washout. But the runoff had swollen to a considerably greater depth and force after the overnight rain. So we chose to cross this time with the aid of a rope sling which we set up to ferry our packs across.

With dry clothes waiting in the truck, we decided to keep our boots and pants on as we waded into the waist-deep, icy current. Luckily our poplar bannister was still there for us to hang onto as we fought the turbulence on the way across.

We came to the truck with final sighs of relief, briskly changed and jumped in the cab. But around the next bend in the road, we were forced to wonder where we'd taken a wrong turn. There was another major washout where the previous day, harmless inches of water had trickled over the road. It was nearly as wide and deep as the one we'd just waded through. Could we have somehow bypassed the real road? No, the truth remained: this was a brand-new washout, created overnight by the combined deluge of the storm and the melting snows. Logs that had formed a foundation for the roadbed were strewn about in the water, among the large rocks downstream, like so many pick-up sticks.

We got out of the truck, gaping in disbelief. The creek that roared in front of us was a good ten feet across and two feet deep, and full of boulders in such irregular array that, except for the old logs, and the road which plunged abruptly into the torrent on either side, one would never know that a road had ever crossed there.

There was little chance of making it across now. We paced back and forth along the rocky bank. Our minds raced from one unreasonable solution to another.

We could go for the crossing, hoping for freakish luck to bounce us from boulder to boulder and over to the other side. If we didn't make it, well . . . the truck could sit there in the creek until we got a tow truck up here.

But it would be a thirty-kilometer walk to Panorama, and it was already mid-afternoon. If we phoned from there for a tow truck, it might not make it past the other swollen washouts farther along the road; it would, however, coming all the way from Invermere, be sure to cost plenty – maybe close to the value of my stranded truck.

So maybe I could just ditch the ill-fated Ford – at least temporarily. Then I'd have to somehow make it through the rest of the planting season without a truck (and all my gear for camping and planting, the variety of clothes for weather ranging from snow to burning heat, the spare boots, shovels, sleeping bags, tent . . .); and I could plan to return later in the summer with the Dodge to pull it out – what was left of it by then.

We desperately plumbed our reserves of luck and surveyed the possible angles of an alternative crossing. Twenty feet upstream the creek was wider and somewhat

shallower, though still it swelled with a wild force that made the prospects of success seem madly slim. The only hope might be to build up the deepest holes in the creekbed there with fresh layers of rock. The current was strong enough to make loose boulders roll, however; so a log dam, supported by a row of well-placed rocks, would have to be installed first. It just might work, we began to think. I observed that we would also have to mine the approaches on both sides for the large rocks and log-ends that otherwise prevented access to and from the existing road. That operation would provide plenty of fill right at hand by the stream.

It was still a gamble, and it would take hours. If we invested our afternoon in such work and then stranded the truck in midstream, we'd be left without enough daylight, energy or food for the walk to Panorama. Either way, botching it like that, or forgetting the whole thing and walking now, we'd be faced with a six-hour walk. Unless the gamble worked.

"So, what do you think?" I asked Matt.

"It's your truck."

"Oh, hell," I said, with a shrug of my shoulders. "Let's go for it."

We spent the next three hours hardly talking, just working doggedly to throw and drop and nudge rock after rock into place, building up the stream bed, wading and digging, smoothing and widening the approaches.

At last the job was done well enough – we hoped. The water still rushed over the rocks about a foot deep, but without its former turbulence, as the boulders now fit together in a relatively even pattern under the current. The large tires and high-riding frame of the truck would be put to the test, but with a good head of steam, we just might make it.

I hopped in behind the wheel, with my adrenalin starting to flow. Matt posted himself on the upstream side to watch where the wheels were headed. It was going to be hard to see where I was going, and I'd only have one chance.

The engine revved smoothly; I gunned it. I spun the steering wheel just right, apparently, because I was over and down onto the road in a moment. Matt's eyes were large, however, as he trotted down to the truck and pointed back to the creek.

"Man, you just made it," he said. "Your right rear wheel took out that log dam just as it passed over. Good thing you had some momentum or you'd still be back in the creek."

8

We arrived at Panorama just in time for our four-thirty phone call. We got directions to the new camp location; then I tried my home number to see if Sarah had arrived yet. There was no answer, and once more I began to worry.

"It's still a little early yet," Matt reassured me. "It must have been slow going with that load she was carrying."

"Yeah, I guess you're right." Sarah's descent was about the same distance as ours, with a similar drive to get home from the foot of the trail. But she would be slower, either carrying the extra load of Nashira on her shoulders, or waiting while the child walked part of the way.

As if the lingering anxiety weren't enough to sap my appetite for a celebration, I had to wonder if we could even complete the short drive on to Invermere, as the needle of the Ford's fuel gauge crept down past E.

"Maybe I should have tried Ron's while we were at the phone, to see if she stopped in there on her way home. Or maybe her sister's place . . ."

"Hey, we'll be in town in a few minutes. It's all downhill from here."

As soon as we gassed up and parked in town, I headed for the pay phone. Matt went on to a restaurant across the street called The Meeting Place.

The phone rang and rang. In my mind's eye I saw the Stellar's jay plunge down off the road into the gorge below. I still couldn't help imagining the worst. I blamed myself, of course, because it would have been so easy to go down with them to the trail. And now? Maybe Sarah had turned an ankle and just needed to sit tight and stay warm until help arrived. Or maybe a bear – I put that thought out of my mind. No, she must have simply lost her bearings and wandered . . . through the sleet and fog, both their coats

soaking through to the skin, Nashira stoic with the cold rain streaming down her cheeks as the tears would if she hadn't been holding them back, in her blind trust in Sarah to lead them back to the truck and home.

Still no answer. I walked across the street to join Matt in the restaurant and order our meals. We talked about what we could have done but didn't – because I was so concerned about earning an extra day's wages. Wagering two lives, my life, for a hundred dollars. We agreed that Sarah had likely had trouble finding the trail, and Matt reminded me of the obvious – that she would have taken extra time to find it.

Still, I hardly tasted my lasagne when it arrived. Matt ate fish and chips with similar disinterest. He was concerned about hypothermia if they strayed across the mountainside too long, especially under the threat of coming darkness.

I pictured Sarah trying, from the outset but with increasing desperation, to guess which way to go, whether to veer left or right. If she headed too far left, she stood the chance of bypassing the rise of the trail altogether and ending up in the untracked vastness beneath the glaciers. So probably, I said to Matt, she would have angled to the right. But that way she might also have missed the upper trail and would have ended up instead high above its lower contour, separated from it by hundreds of feet of steep, slippery brush. So she would have had to backtrack, and by then she'd be exhausted from trying to keep her footing on the alder stems that covered the ground like millions of greased rails – not to mention the sixty pounds of load taking its toll on her shoulders,

leg, back, and spirit. Nashira's patience and sense of security, meanwhile, would have surely worn thin. Under such conditions, Sarah would realize that trying to get the child to walk would be even worse than carrying her.

So perhaps, in that scenario, Sarah would have considered an attempt to return to the cabin. Her pride and determination to forge ahead would be a force against such an option – as would the prospect of hiking back uphill still lost, ever more fatigued, with darkness fast approaching.

We passed on dessert, and I made one last attempt to phone before leaving for Kimberley, where our crew was lodged, two and a half hours away.

Sarah answered, her voice vibrantly alive. She and Nashira were all right. But on the way down, she had been lost.

"Oh, Sarah," I told her, at once joyful and sick at heart. "I should have gone with you farther to find that trail."

"I don't how much that would have helped, really. I just couldn't see a thing. And I was completely soaked, and shivering, and my pants were torn, and Nashira was crying – " And Sarah started to cry on the phone while she told me the rest.

For hours she'd wandered through the untracked brush, until, at the limit of her endurance, she decided to bushwhack straight downhill, leaving the backpack behind so as to save what little strength she had left for carrying Nashira.

My grief at being partly responsible for her nightmarish ordeal was balanced by the final elation that they'd survived. The backpack could stay there forever, I told her, even with our down quilts inside, as a monument to what might have been.

"But I know where I left it," Sarah said. "Under a certain tree . . ."

"Oh, great. Under a tree."

"No really," she laughed. "I don't think it would be that hard to find. I made a little stone cairn, to mark the trail where I came onto it, straight downhill from the pack. I bet we could find it."

9

Morning dawned through the nearby window, and my eyelids pulled slowly open. Sarah still slept beside me curled up under the covers; I'd tossed them off during the night and now felt cold in the chill morning air. I could see that Nashira still slept peacefully in her bed. I pulled the bedclothes back over me and snuggled closer to Sarah. It was clear out, likely to be another scorching July day once the sun came out in force. I was glad to be taking a semi-voluntary break from planting in the heat; though my shin still ached from the contusion I had given it with a shovel blow glancing off the rocks on a Kimberley hillside.

This was to be the day we would go back to Jumbo Pass together, to see if the bears and squirrels had left us anything of the backpack. We would take along some

flagging tape and mark the hillside, planting-style, as we traversed it looking for the pack. Nashira would come along for the ride, motivated by the promise of a picnic (if the bugs weren't too bad) and the recovery of her favorite crayons (if we could actually find the missing pack).

By now we knew that in this wild country, all plans were subject to change, and not just from our whims. In this case our plan depended on a number of known factors: if the Glacier Creek road was still negotiable. If I didn't get called back to work while we sat down to breakfast. If the good weather held.

Then there were the unknowns . . .

Somewhere a bright blue bird swoops down through the yawning gulf over a rushing creek so far below, it cannot be seen, but only darkly heard.

Just Coyotes

Beside me Sarah grabbed covers, threw them off, thrashing with her fever. My reading light burned down on her open face banked by strands of damp hair. Finally she sat up, slowly, and reached away from me for her dog-eared paperback, short stories of Poe called Master of Terror. She wore an old white turtleneck riding over her bare bum. I was wrapped up in Naoya's The Paper Door, a book of Japanese short stories which featured characters (usually the narrators) facing painful choices: like the husband caught in a crisis in his marriage caused by an affair with another woman. How to choose the proper course of action – to be true to himself when fate has presented him with another path?

Sarah coughed wetly. I put a hand on her thigh, and kept reading. Not much longer to the end of the story. After that, maybe one more. The weekend had been a busy one for both of us. She'd dug new beds in an old section of garden, before succumbing to the chicken pox our daughter had brought home from school the previous week. I'd dug blackberries, greased the truck, stayed up late playing music with friends. I'd fished without luck, by a cold, windblown river. Now my torpid limbs soaked up heat from Sarah's fever under the winter covers.

"I wonder," she said while still looking at the page she was reading, "what I did during that week as a child." She was an only child, raised by a brutal father in a harbor town, after the unsolved murder of her mother.

"What week?" I knew that to continue reading now was fruitless. I looked at her blotchy complexion, her puffed temples.

"The week I chose not to get the chicken pox – saving it till now, instead."

"I don't know." I really wanted to finish Naoya's story. The husband, a novelist, had arrived at a critical point of decision. In the meantime, life had to go on: he was reading his son a story about an enchanted lion, while his wife wept in the bath. Wept, I imagined, as Sarah did in those black episodes in which she tried to express some deep pain locked inside her, and was never able to. Did she really want to? Maybe it was only I who wanted her to. But now was not the time; her tone was too casual, the hour too late.

I fell asleep before finishing the story. That night I suffered vivid dreams of a teenaged girl who had been killing people (her mother and sister) and had buried their parts in the row-house backyard. Someone made her dig up the shallow graves, and she showed me the grisly, half-rotted remains. With horror in my heart, I tried to take a compassionate attitude toward her, as a neighbor, a friend. But what could I do? I woke up in the gloomy dawn haunted by her words: "Then I'll find a way to kill you."

I tasted onions from the previous night's supper, and blamed the nightmare on them. "I should have known better," I said to Sarah as I dressed. She lay glassy-eyed,

unmoving, her head propped up on the reading pillow, the Poe book closed beside her, the reading light still on. “Are you all right? Did you stay up all night reading?”

“I’m fine,” she said with a slack mouth. “I couldn’t stop. I think my fever’s better.”

“I’ll make some breakfast for you. What do you feel like eating?”

“Hmm. Nothing I can think of. I’m not really hungry. You go ahead.”

It was not yet light out. Our nine-year-old daughter, Nashira, was crying from her room down the hall, a tiny, distant wailing. When I got up and went to her to see what was the matter, she said she’d had a bad dream.

“Coyotes were coming after me. I tried to chase them away by throwing my chicken pox scabs at them, but it didn’t work.”

“So did they eat you, then?”

“Stop teasing.” She didn’t smile. It was hard to tell her freckles from the scars of the chicken pox.

Toast and jam, apple juice, mint tea. Sarah had no appetite; Nashira licked the last of the jam from his plate and said, “I’m still hungry.”

“I almost made eggs,” I pleaded.

“That’s all right,” they both said at once.

Nashira told Sarah of her dream.

Outside, the wind blew high and gusty. I retreated to my study, and from time to time glimpsed tantalizing patches of blue sky which never quite broadened through the gray March cloud cover. The writing went slowly. By the end of the afternoon I was ready for exercise . . . but hesitated before trading the cozy house for the damp, cold outside air.

Sarah appeared in the study door, holding foamy glass mugs of homemade milkshake, and smiling.

I pushed my work away and leaned back in my chair. “You look like you’re doing better.”

“I think I may have turned the corner.” Her black eyes had a new sparkle.

“Did you manage to take a nap?”

“No, but I think I’ll have a hot bath now, then maybe try. Want to join me?”

“I was thinking of maybe taking a walk. I’m stuck on these revisions. I can’t decide which way the story wants to go. But the weather doesn’t look that inviting.”

We sipped the milkshakes: Sarah still in the door, me in my chair.

I felt vaguely disappointed, as if I wanted Sarah to tell me which way to go, what to do. Or, was I just picking up on something she wanted from me, but wouldn’t say?

“Where’s Nashira?”

“In her room coloring. I suggested she make a picture about that dream she had. Now she’s totally absorbed in it.”

“Good idea. Get the demons out.”

"Yeah, like that Poe guy. Maybe it's better for some people to keep them in!"

"I don't know. He might have been like his characters, then, instead of just writing about them."

She drained her mug and looked at me strangely.

"What, are you afraid I've got some demons in me? We all do, I guess." I finished my milkshake in a gulp and stood up. "Well, I guess that puts me over the hump. Might as well go out while there's still daylight."

I kissed her in the doorway on the way out. After days and nights of fever, her lips and cheeks now seemed cold. When I remarked on this, her black eyes sparkled and she replied, "Probably just the milkshake."

I started with a leisurely climb along the deer-trail slanting up the wooded hillside to the east of the house. Where the ridge flattened out I eased into a loping run, enjoying the clean, cool air, and the ground underfoot with its carpet of brown leaves. The birches stood bleakly awaiting the new year's growth. I ran on through them to the cedar grove, where I stopped as I always do to stare up at the trees and sky, and into the calm, all-forgiving forest.

A notion occurred to me, as I started running again: Why take the same old path to the right, which loops around to the road and back down the driveway home; why not go left this time instead, and see how that choice develops?

It could turn out like one of Naoya's slighter stories, I thought, in which a trivial incident on the subway or in the countryside is described, and left by its author to stand by the wayside, a little Shinto shrine to everyday experience.

But I did know the left-hand trail, after all. I'd been that way a couple of times before. Nothing unusual or interesting was going to happen. It would make a story more like the contemporary American kind in which the point is to say that nothing interesting happens.

I decided to take the left fork; but right away hesitated again because the trail was not clear. It was less traveled by deer; it was crooked and somewhat obscured by brush and the undulations of a seasonal creekbed. I looked more closely at the ground. A ragged, foot-deep trench, roughly six feet long and a foot wide, gaped up at me, giving the impression that someone had dug here: a forestry agent, sampling?

Or had some tiny, localized earthquake pulled the ground apart in this one spot? Ridiculous, I know. But this is the effect it had on me. Some cause was to be found somewhere: some blame assigned.

I bent through some overhanging branches and followed a more or less clear passage along the slope to the west. The forest cover thinned, opening ahead to a white, close-hanging sky that was condensing into a sparsely blowing snow. It was here that my opinion of the uneventfulness of my choice came to be qualified by a sense of the

ominous, of the possibility of something beyond my ken looming ahead, ready to precipitate out of the heavy, roiling air.

Around the hump of the hillside the terrain flattened again and I came to a place where a few birch trees had been cut to enlarge a natural clearing. Bits of black plastic poked out from under the sticks and leaves, and I inspected the ground more closely. Little mounds of dug earth appeared around a formation of crude terraced beds. Again I found myself looking into trenches: these deeper and wider than the stream cut, and four or five feet long. A few were covered with a casual lattice of sticks, as if to obscure sight of them from above.

Was this place the source of that sense of foreboding? I knew this to be an old pot plantation – not a graveyard. I could recall that Sarah and I had chanced upon it some years previously. And then, for some inexplicable reason, I began to wonder if Sarah had ever contemplated suicide. Suddenly I wanted to return home quickly. I was comforted to know that Nashira was there, coloring coyotes.

Heading back down the gentle southward slope, I figured I was pointing homeward. I expected to come first to a rocky ridge face and adjoining ravine – the place where thirteen years before, I'd brought my unmanageable dog, Miso, at the end of a chain. My options for dealing with him had come to a dead end. Then for once in his life he'd sat obediently, while I put a rifle to his head. I buried him there and covered the shallow grave with a large heap of leftover cedar shakes. The following autumn I noticed a hole

in the side of the mound of wood, making it look like a hut. The grave had been robbed: probably by coyotes.

Making hasty choices on the braided animal trails, I stayed too high and bypassed the homestead. I was still up on the flat ridge, past the now-tranquil scene of another murder: a fresh deer kill, only partially covered in leaves by a cougar. This discovery had come more recently, in the winter of the previous year. I'd found the carcass still pliable, half-eaten – on a trek that began as a morning stroll down the driveway and detoured through the woods, on a whim. Now, of course, there was nothing, the bones far-scattered. But my heart beat unsteadily as I came out of the woods on the dirt road by the house of my nearest neighbor. To complete the figure eight of crossing loops I walked home on the roadway, welcoming the cheery column of smoke I saw rising from the house at its end. I left my psychic agitation behind in the dark woods, drinking in the fresh air and enjoying the live feeling in my limbs.

Supper was ready: corn macaroni, kidney beans, tiny spinach thinnings; Parmesan cheese for sprinkling on top. The three of us held hands until Nashira said, "Silence is spooky," and we broke to eat. Sarah served herself small portions but I was glad to see her with some appetite again. I told her about my outing, having seen a number of "empty graves." She scraped her fork slowly on her plate as she listened, her cheeks rosy from the bath and yet still gaunt from the sleepless night in Poe's crypts.

When I mentioned the plantation site, her sunken eyes widened. “Oh – I was just thinking about that place earlier today! It’s the first time I’ve thought of it since we were there.”

I felt a sudden chill, myself, and tried not to think of my own premonition there. “That’s pretty eerie. Why were you thinking of it today?”

“After reading all those Poe stories, I was wondering, as I was lying in my bath: If I murdered someone, what would I do with the body? I could take it up in the woods somewhere and bury it; but then, would someone notice the turned-over dirt?”

Nashira stopped chewing and put down her fork; she seemed a little shocked at what her mother had said.

I too was taken aback and said to Sarah, “What a morbid imagination you have.”

My wife of ten years looked hurt, and lowered her eyes in the manner (I imagined) of a Japanese farm wife; then, unable to eat, she turned her head and looked out the window into the gloomy twilight.

I didn’t know how seriously to take this fantasy of hers. It was totally unlike her, or what I knew of her, to have such thoughts of violence. Maybe it was just the fever, or, as she said, the Poe stories.

“Wanna see the picture I drew today?” Nashira broke the uncomfortable silence.

“Sure,” I said, getting up from the table. “Let’s go have a look. You can tell me all about it.”

I didn't like going down the dark hallway that evening, but it seemed no worse than that brightly-lit kitchen with its idle cutlery and brooding, unknown desires.

As I read to Nashira I thought of Naoya's story, the one with the unfaithful husband reading to his son. Nashira's freckled face looked genderless: as it was before the chromosomal die was cast. All a matter of X's and Y's: crossroads and forks . . .

In such a manner did my divided attention wander. Then when we came near the end of our chapter from The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe, I heard a faint yelp, a distant, high-pitched keening. "What's that?" I said, listening.

My daughter's eyes shone bright and black as her mother's. "Just coyotes."

Before the World Burns: How to Make a Fire

> Here is this vast, savage, howling mother of ours, Nature, lying all around, with such beauty, and such affection for her children, as the leopard; and yet we are so early weaned from her breast to society, to that culture which is exclusively an interaction of man on man – a sort of breeding in and in, which produces at most a merely English nobility, a civilization destined to have a speedy limit.
>
> – Thoreau, "Walking"

Workshops

June, 1995. The scene is the first Northern Lights primitive skills gathering, on a two-hundred acre piece of land at the foot of the Valhalla wilderness in southeastern British Columbia. I'm drawn here by the enthusiasm of my ten-year old daughter, Nashira, for all things "Indian," and by my own long-standing desire to become more competent in the business of survival.

There are workshops in every facet of primitive skills: firemaking, felting, flint-knapping, roadkills, shelter, cordage, basketry, hides, tracking and snares, basic survival skills, edible wild plants and medicines, knifecraft . . . with experienced instructors from all over the continent, and indeed from as far away as Sweden and Australia. Some teach these skills in university courses; many of them make a circuit of the seasonal camps which occur in various parts of the Northwest. It's a little funny to see guys with

buckskins and face paint talking in Brooklyn accents, but we all gotta start somewhere, sometime.

Nashira likes best the flint-knapping pit, at the edge of activity. Here a dozen students in safety goggles chip away for hours in the sun, having grasped the inner geometry of obsidian – a knowledge required for taking lumps of volcanic glass and making edges sharper than surgical steel.

Another of our favorites is the felt-making area. Also in a far corner of the field, but in the cool shelter of trees and with the soothing sounds of a nearby stream, a half-dozen gentle souls work in silence, patiently rubbing and matting fibers of wool together to make hats, boots, capes, or a designed blanket for Glen, the event's host. The chief felter has a bushy gray beard and head of hair that looks like it has been, well, felted.

The root lady, squatting barefoot in the dust, splits spruce roots expertly with a knife along their sinewy lengths. She's collected these from local trees as part of her workshop, with a dozen helpers. She'll weave the split roots into watertight baskets, and the students will watch closely as they make their own.

In the central circle under a giant tarp, a hundred diligent novitiates of all ages bend intent over fire-making supplies: slender dogwood sticks, split boards of cedar, bow drills of bone sockets and carved wood spindles.

In the hide-working area, people are busy scraping skins, or washing them with brains, or twisting them dry, or stretching them. (Because the brains have to be fresh,

they are bought from the grocery store in the nearest town.) Many throughout the grounds wear buckskins: smoky brown or dove-white, loincloths and dresses, vests and pants and moccasins.

In the evening, there is a gathering of those who want to talk about the state of the world. A hundred or so squeeze under the tarp in the rain. The world is going to hell in a hurry, we all agree. Some are doing things differently: living from the land, in the old ways, the native ways. I raise the question: "But what would happen if we all tried to do that?" The answer from the moderator, a veteran of years of practicing these primitive skills, is that "People won't all want to do it. And as far as I'm concerned, that's just fine. Let them suffer the consequences of how they live. They got themselves in the mess they're in."

Drumming every night by the long fire trenches is a treat. Sometimes with facilitated dance steps, but usually just with the spirit of the moment and the fire. One night "the Old Bullshitter" (a grizzled old mountain-man herbalist) tells his tales. Another night a guy in a cowboy hat and flowered shirt dances around clowning and telling jokes, goading the drummers on with vocal percussion when he runs out of words.

There is an underlying, largely unspoken current running through this event, and in all of its participants: a growing awareness of the connection between what we're doing and global issues. Necessary questions: how many of us can sit by the fire? Will there be a trench stretched across the breadth of each continent, a scar made to mark a rite of

passage into a new adulthood? We look, meanwhile, to each bite we take, each implement we use to eat. How did we travel to this place, and where did the fuel, and the metals and the plastics and the machinery to make it all, come from? How much land is used for these things and how much can we afford to keep using, and for how long?

There are lambs on a spit, and turkeys in a pit (wrapped in tin foil). Potatoes by the hundred baked on coals . . . also wrapped in foil. The food trip has to be together: "for health reasons." Milk from cartons, vegetables from cans. Food-grade bleach to sterilize the water. Basic skills, brought to bear. How long will it take you to make your bow, your arrows, and learn to shoot? How long will the game hold out if everyone you know does the same? What will you do instead of all this, then, when the systems break down and the deliveries of milk and vegetables and fuel and auto parts are stopped from lack of supplies, or staggering prices, or unacceptable levels of toxins? Or, is there middle ground to steer in this path to comfort, between the dirt-bare basics, and the levels of luxury we now enjoy?

Aftermath

November 1996: I struggle to get a fire going in my woodstove in the morning, as I prepare to write this on the computer. Glossy catalog paper does not ignite to a clean-flaming burn for kindling – it's far inferior to birchbark. I start to write, thinking about the episodes at the primitive skills gathering that had the most emotional content for me:

Fire-Making. Easier said than done. It ends up taking me a couple of hours, with much trial and error, and patient coaching from Matt, the brawny young instructor who moves among fifty or sixty others trying the same thing. Using wands of dogwood or elder, boards of incense cedar, cattail fluff and dried wisps of birchbark, and just the right twisting, bearing-down motion of the hands to generate the right amount of friction. Despite my efforts, I get only smoke, and a charred, glazed socket where the spindle seats. Matt instructs me to try a different board, or better yet, make a new one, with a fresh socket. More work: and again, I get only smoke. Frustrated, I'm about to give up and try another workshop, but Matt checks back and gives me a tip, demonstrating. I can see that when the smoke increases, he bears down harder, while still turning the spindle straight and fast between the palms. Suddenly there is a coal in the socket, glowing in the dust that's been ground from the action of the spindle. He dumps the coal into a handful of tinder and blows on it, until it explodes into a ball of flame at his mouth. He tosses it into the air, smiling. In another ten minutes, I manage to create my own glowing coal and apply it to a wad of tinder. This is a critical moment, and I don't want to let it go out now, after all that effort. I wave the fragile ball around a bit, fanning it: suddenly, a little flame! That's all it takes. I blow it up to a raging miniature holocaust, my heart beating fast – and my inititation is complete. The ten-year-old beside me grins and goes back to his bow-drill.

The catalog pages smolder under the kindling, which is about to go out. I stick my hand in with a larger round of wood, hoping it will catch. I burn my knuckle on the stove in the process. The little flames sputter and dwindle. Hoping for the best, I leave the would-be fire and go back to the writing, where the computer screen stays uniformly lit.

Midnight Sweatlodge. I find myself standing around the fire with a few others, waiting until the person who will lead the ritual rounds shows up. When he comes he begins telling us his expectations, and some history of the tradition, which he has learned from Blackfoot Indians. Listening silently, I stew away, raging inside at the discrepancy between this person's formal expectations of how the ritual must go, and my own experience of sweatlodges inspired by native tradition, but flexible to the needs of the people in the moment. Is there any room for compromise here? Then he says that we all must remain clothed. Strange . . . isn't part of the magic of this experience, to be naked with the Mother Earth? Isn't this rule about clothing just another cultural artifact like the modern society we're trying to get away from? In the end there is input from others of my bent to go with the naked sweat, with those who want clothes free to wear them. We can all deal individually with our needs around the clothing issue. After the sweat there is a profound sense of unity among us around the campfire, and we exchange bare-chested hugs with each other before departing into the pre-dawn darkness.

The fire in my study dies. I pull out the charred sticks of cedar, the unburnt rounds of pine and maple. Start again with pages from The Farm Mechanic's Construction Book, 1949 (useful, in theory; but I've never used it – till now.) Plus some newsprint from the Banyen Books catalog, Branches of Light. Lay in fresh kindling and watch it take off, hear it crackling behind me. I turn to throw in a round: almost squash the flame. Adjust it to tilt, just so: ah, the secret of air flow, and arrangement to keep that happening. In this way I can add another big piece, with the flame able to stay strong between them.

The Felt Camp. Here the vibes are magical: very mellow, with hardly any speaking. Someone's putting wool through a carding machine; another is soaking a tray of carded wool with soap solution. Others are working it, the basic part of the process: rubbing smoothly, lightly over the surface of the wool, vibrating the fibers so they mesh ever more tightly together. It's easy work, but takes persistence and patience. I kneel beside the blanket project and add my pieces of wool, smoothing them into the fabric of the whole with my hands. The people beside me do the same, smiling and looking back to their work. The shade here is cool and delicious, as is the sound of the creek nearby. The sounds of chipping flint and obsidian, in the dusty hot knapping pit across the grove of trees, filters through dimly and is lost in the afternoon light.

Avoiding the Issue

A year and a half after Northern Lights (having skipped the second annual gathering, this year), I still wonder: why, after I was so inspired by the accessibility of all these primeval skills, have I procrastinated again and again ever since, in my resolve to undertake a systematic learning of them on my own, at home?

The first thing that happened, when I returned home, was a road blockade on the access to the woodlot in my watershed. Thus began an explosion of political activity which has continued to blaze or smolder in my life ever since. It raises important new questions about areas of competence required to sustain basic life needs (in this case, water). Is nonviolent political action a "primitive skill?"

Also, I was faced immediately with a number of chores and tasks around the homestead that, though I wouldn't call them prmitive skills, are basic jobs integral to a lifestyle which is closely adapted to the natural world. They are basic skills appropriate to a lifestyle where the level of comfort I call "basic" is several notches of civilized evolution beyond what would be possible with animal hides, natural shelter materials, stone tools, wild plants. The homesteading lifestyle in this bioregional culture relies on the garden, on copious quantities of firewood, on canning and freezing more than on drying of foods, and on maintaining a household that uses home-generated electricity, a truck, a computer, money, eyeglasses, food supplements and medications, books, condoms, a telephone and post office, and on and on. While relying heavily on these ties

to civilization, much of this lifestyle is also sufficiently connected to nature, in a hands-on way, that there is little time or, indeed, apparent necessity to practice other skills which I don't presently use.

I keep telling myself, however, that I should be learning the "real" basics. Why? For starters, there is this stubborn idea, which comes from growing up in the age of nuclear threat and eco-destruction, of preparing for the collapse of civilized support systems. This prudent anxiety was part of the reason I began doing the back-to-the land thing. I've lost the edge of fear which peaked in the early eighties (the Reagan years) and acquired, meanwhile, a deeper resonance with earth-based values and practices as being worthy in their own right. Part of the attraction of the Northern Lights event was the opportunity it provided to join with others of like mind in a common pursuit, a tribal sense of community. Most of us don't belong to the aboriginal races of this continent; but we do have a common identity of sorts. The word used widely at the gathering is "Abos." This communal spirit, too, is valuable in itself; and when humanity finds itself on the rocks, we will need each other and our all our skills to pull through, together.

So why haven't I buckled down to the learning of cordage and wild plants, shelters and snares? Actually, I have, a couple of times, gone into the woods behind my house, with Northern Lights instructor Mors Kocharski's book Northern Bushcraft in hand, to make tinder out of old jeans; or to attempt (unsuccessfully) to strike sparks from rock with the back edge of a pocket-knife blade; or to hunt out wild edibles; or to do

woodworking tricks with a knife. But now winter is here, and though I may yet wander out at some point and shoot a deer to add to the chickens, vegetables and fruit already cramming the freezer, I'm unlikely to stray for very long from the computer, and the cozy little stove now simmering away at my back. After all, I mean to enjoy the first winter in five years in which I won't be trying to learn telemark skiing.

Where Do We Go From Here?

> Above all, we cannot afford not to live in the present. . . .Unless our philosophy hears the cock crow in every barn-yard within our horizon, it is belated. That sound commonly reminds us that we are growing rusty and antique in our employments and habits of thought. His philosophy comes down to a more recent time than ours. There is something suggested by it that is a newer testament – the gospel according to this moment. . . . I hear a cockerel crow far or near . . . and with a sudden gush return to my senses.
>
> – Thoreau, "Walking"

In a time of the history of the world when the forests are the last great slave market, I hear an Abo prophet shout, "Citizens! Vikings, Mongols, Romans, lend me your ears! There is a new way coming!" And I have to wonder, will we still be around when it arrives? Will our home still be viable enough to sustain us in the era of our awakening?

I, too, postulate an awakening, because without it there is extinction and suffocation, mass misery and unartful collapse of the most serious order.

It comes down to the <u>now</u> . . . the moving, flexing, living, present moment. Otherwise, relying only on the bones of our ancestors, we move too slowly. But

connecting to the breath of the new and moving now, we come free into the present future, saying, "Thank you, ancestors, for bringing us here; now what is to be done?"

Now we pause the programs and looping routines long enough to wonder, what next? Which path, of all those possible, may be more advantageous than the ones we've been on, individually and collectively, up to this point? We stand on a single point of time, with blankness all around. One path appears before us: steps by steps continuing, rhythmic echo of the past. These steps, too, lead into darkness, but the motion of our past movement impels us blindly forward. If we were to stop and look around, we might envision creating footsteps, by our own simple walking, in paths as yet unexplored. There is a frontier yet to be tasted: not on any continent but that of the human spirit. Here too we may suppose it's all been done: but the next moment is unprecedented, the conditions changed. The dynamics of the whole have come into play as never before, and will continue to create novel contexts by which to judge each next move. This game develops new and evolving rules, and twists of rules, all the time. Random factors are at work, giving us continual opportunities to change our expectations.

My cat, for instance, is a creature of habit. A predator, he leans on his experience of the behavior of his human, another creature of habit. When the second alarm goes off in the morning, he arrives in the bedroom waiting by my clothes shelf to rub against my legs as I dress. If I linger in bed, he waits impatiently there, wondering what went wrong. His

pattern is bred and that is to watch the pattern of prey, those stupider animals on which he feeds, which run in predictable paths and so are caught through his watchful presence.

Do I pattern my behavior on mouse, or cat, or something more watchful still? In my freedom to choose my action at every moment, to walk at will through an untracked wilderness, is a power so often disused as to astonish me. To abdicate such power collectively is to allow the unimpeded, hyperbolic advance of planetary eco-collapse which has appeared on every graph of world-watchers since the middle of the twentieth century.

Even this perspective, one might say, is not new anymore. It's just more fuel for the flames: computer time, paper weight. What words can poorly convey, however, spirit can take beyond. By leaving these tracks in the sand, I might see the route of my own departure.

Now somewhere we fly together, dreaming, singing. Somewhere the dance goes on without end. The footsteps we leave are only the measures of our stride; ripples the mark of our course on the waters. Our freedom yesterday gives us nothing but another choice today.

Isn't this mysticism? Of course. What else drives the world, gives us hope and purpose, than a connection with life-force, full force, filling us as full as we dare? Mysticism is a primitive skill.

Walking on the frozen flats at the head of the lake, I notice my tracks go straight; when I decide to change direction, the new direction is also straight; I walk a large zig-zag pattern. Coming into the sparse brush, I continue walking straight until I notice deer tracks, meandering with gentle curves through the brush. The undergrowth is sparse enough that a straight path would still be convenient. Yet, following the deer's tracks, there is a different consciousness at work. This meandering course of gentle curves, I discover, can only be made step by step, moment by moment, with decisions always tentative, subject to influence by the next whiff of air, the next attractive bud, the next whim of inspiration or pure serendipity.

Walking: this, too, is a primitive skill.

The Meaning of Life: or, Animal Tracks

Once a man went walking with his partner. He didn't like to call her his wife because she and he agreed that they liked to see things differently than the mass. Yet they were not too snobbish. While she credited him for his "aristocratic features," he appreciated her for her "purebred peasant look." Really they were both middle-class, and did everything they could to escape from that heritage. Escaping to what?, was another question. Their "alternative" ways of making a living – selling homemade ice-cream and tofu – hadn't panned out. Socially, they didn't really mesh that well even with the so-called counter-culture community where they'd set up housekeeping.

They boycotted the community Christmas dinner: the one event of the year that "everyone" attended. It was the next day when they went for this walk on the flats at the head of the lake. Wandering, for that is all you could do there. They wandered right to the edge of the water, where the river carved away a foot of sandy soil every year, and where the fence lines ended –

Another abandoned project, a strawberry field. This was a large-scale failure – someone else's.

He crossed on the rotting ice over the slough; she went to the old beaver dam overgrown with long prairie grass. They embraced there – and nearly toppled into the water. That would have made a good movie shot.

They meandered on. It was only a matter of time before they found themselves in the long snow-beaten grass (soft as a foam-core futon) rolling around in mock-lovemaking, relaxing to look up at the sky through tan strands of grass. They marveled at the purity of the moment. Then her knees got wet and they had to stand up.

They ambled on, reflecting on the serenity of the previous evening. "Much better than the Christmas dinner," she observed. Alone together, they'd celebrated with a long hot bath by candlelight, leisurely conversation. He agreed, stumbling on the grass.

The cat, too, had been glad for their company. The man mentioned this as he examined the cause of his misstep, a clump of coyote scat. Their cat was a replacement for one who'd disappeared, probably a victim of marauding coyotes.

He inspected the dark dried turds for clues: embedded were a number of short white hairs. Rabbit? There were no black cat hairs in this pile, anyway.

Did they speak of the meaning of life, following animal tracks across the wastes?

I know they spoke of humour, the importance of it. He wrapped a handful of long grass in front of her face, and hugged her from behind: "The attack of the two-legged coyote!"

"I know what you should do," she smiled. "Write a story as funny as you are."

He laughed. "Yeah, you're right. Why not? My natural voice. Treat the reader as a friend."

"And for your subject, take what's real. Our morning here together on the flats."

"All right. Sure. When's my deadline?"

She said without hesitating, "Tonight."

He missed the deadline; she seduced him (and he was never one to decline a persuasive seduction, believing firmly that any seduction was persuasive if carried out in good humor and with honorable intention).

So, the next day, loose-limbed and languorous upon arising, he put himself onto the assignment. He tried his best. But he was rusty. He hadn't written anything new in months. The words dragged themselves out of his fingers. His mood, he found, was no longer frivolouos, but melancholy.

Maybe it wasn't a root problem, he thought. Maybe the cat on his lap as he wrote was too distracting. Maybe he was distracted by the thought of his obligation to spend the afternoon with his daughter. Maybe he was distracted by the virtual pile of new reading he had taken on, in the form of a large number of files downloaded from the Internet the previous week, still unread.

Even so, his characters loped mechanically through their traces, following the tracks of deer on the flats, crossing ice and beaver dam without remarkable incident. His narrative mood (it occurred to him with some detached horror, as he was powerless to

change it) matched the bleak, slant-sunned day they spent there; and the story rambled like their aimless feet.

He showed it to her when he was done. She read it, not smiling.

"Well . . . " she said tentatively.

"Well what?"

"I don't know. It's missing something. Wasn't it supposed to be funny?"

She tossed her tan strands of hair to the side, as if wishing she were laughing in the sun. The overhead fan whirred silently.

"Yeah, but it's subtle. You know, the irony of understatement."

She looked thoughtfully at the manuscript again. "Hmm. I'm not sure. How about more dialogue; that might liven it up a little."

"Maybe. Anyway, it was just an exercise, right?"

"Whatever. I thought you wanted some direction. I gave you my advice."

"Sure. I appreciate it. Anyway, I did the best I could. Maybe the subject just wasn't right."

"Haven't you told me before that any subject is okay; that it's just the style or treatment that matters?"

He looked offended. "Uh – maybe. But still, you can't always make a silk purse out of a sow's ear." As he said this he remembered that he used to call his older sister Sal that. "Hi Sow," he'd say to her.

She never laughed at his joke.

Climbing Mount Cooper

I go off into the heart of the "White Grizzly" wilderness, at age forty-five, to climb a ten-thousand-foot peak only climbed a half-dozen times before. I have no climbing equipment; I'm not in particularly good shape; and my decision to go was made on the spur of the moment, the night before.

Because of my coming on board at the last minute, it was my responsibility to arrange a place for Nashira to spend three days, with possibly an extra night at the end. That was the hard part of setting this plan into motion on such short notice. But finally it clicked into place, around 8:30 p.m. I proceeded to pack my basic hiking and camping gear, and was off early the next morning with Chris and Sarah.

Chris, fifteen years my junior, is a compulsive athlete in perfect shape. Sarah, my partner, is Chris's age; runs a market garden full-time and squeezes time around that to play soccer, do gymnastics, and go on rock-climbing and skiing expeditions. I was outmatched, but they were agreeable to having me along. I'm still limber and reasonably strong, and this trip seemed my kind of quest: to go as far as I could past civilization by foot, within a three-day limit. I was not as fixated on the peak as they were: Sarah having attained Cooper's lesser east peak the year before while Chris declined the last stretch up the steep glazed ramp to the summit – to his continual gnawing regret ever since.

Still, when I think of Cooper, it's the summit that comes to mind. Sure, the journey, the process, that's all fine . . . but the Summit! As it happened, I didn't bring a camera on the final ascent; but the picture is imprinted in my memory. There were massive sweeps of the purest white snow in nearly vertical sheets falling away from the knife-like ridge at the top, into vast green valleys far below; with a view beyond into the pale brown and gray masses of the northern Selkirk range, from a vantage so high above them I was giddy. The feeling, too, is implanted in my heart; but for that, you had to be part of the journey to get there.

The journey was a succession of points of doubt . . . interspersed, of course, with visions of glory. There was the remote glory of the wilderness itself, of course; but also three dots of human ego skittering across the bottom of the canvas, aspiring to the magnification attending sheer effort on a grand scale.

The preliminary hike into the backcountry was relatively easy, thanks to a long drive up a logging road leading to a two-hour walk through five-to-six-thousand-foot high, open alpine terrain, over a marked trail. The first obstacle came where Sarah and Chris had predicted, from their scouting trip the week before: at the steep headwall of the first pass, leading down into a huge verdant valley beckoning like the Lost World.

Slick rock and glazed old snow, dizzying steepness. We figured there must be a way. We roped to get down the long run of snow, and picked our way ever so gingerly down

the rockface to the bottom of the six-hundred foot headwall. Then came a decision: the valley floor or the sidehill?

On the assumption that the flatland along Keen Creek would be choked with alder, we took the sidehill. It, too, proved thick with brush, over rough, rocky footing, so we figured the bottom couldn't be worse, and changed our course. Bears had paved the way through the head-high vegetation, and it was easier going. But we had a long day's journey ahead of us with another fifteen hundred feet of elevation to gain back at the end of it.

We cast our eyes speculatively back over our shoulders at a ridge shortcut Chris had spotted earlier just past the headwall. The map indicated a glacier descent on the other side of it, of unknown difficulty, so we'd opted to stick with the original plan, the sure but grueling trek down the valley.

By mid-afternoon it was time to climb again, to angle up the sidehill, cutting the corner to go up the creek which ran in from the right. Here the alder and cedar became almost impossibly thick. Burdened with our bulky frame packs, we wedged our way forward inch by inch, climbing and crawling, laughing and nearly crying at the ridiculous mess we'd got ourselves in. Daylight was proceeding and we had hours yet to climb to reach our projected campsite. With sheer determination, we made it before dark to what proved a perfect camping spot, by a little lake below the final pass to the approach to Cooper.

Next day we had a long, grueling marathon ahead of us. To fit the summit within our three-day schedule would take a full, thirteen- or fourteen-hour day, allowing for the round trip to the campsite, before another full day's return hike back up the valley. Already my feet were sore and my legs tired. But the terrain was pleasant again, and the weather was good, so our goal seemed reachable if all went well.

We began at six; but four hours later we still hadn't reached the foot of Cooper. Our route had gained us a couple of hundred feet of elevation and we were faced with a tough decision. Ahead we could see the profile of one possible ascent of the peak, which on the White Grizzly map was marked as the "historic route" to the top. From our present vantage point this route would mean a long detour back down and then ahead, with a tough climb on the mountain itself to regain our current elevation. Or, we could keep climbing the more reasonable slope of this adjoining ridge, hoping to skirt around the top of the intervening glacier. The glacier, by the way, was a surprise. The route we had been following was one which Chris and Sarah had agreed upon earlier, before I expressed interest in the trip. I remembered how they had pored over the topographic maps on the kitchen table, debating the pros and cons of the various options and clearly favoring our present route. Now however, this glacier appeared which was too small or too new or too hidden to have appeared on the maps. Yet it had to be reckoned with, if we continued to commit ourselves to this route. Now it was clear that we'd come to a delicate point in terms of group process, leadership, expectations and attachments.

I felt reluctant and unprepared to exercise a full vote in the proceedings, having come aboard so late. Chris and Sarah were clearly frustrated by the gigantic flaw in their plan for conquest. If only we'd taken the historic route before climbing this high. If only we'd taken that ridge-top shortcut from the headwall. But here we were. The outcome of our attempt on the summit depended on making the right decision, right now. And there were still so many unknowns. Was there really going to be a way over the top of that glacier in front of us, once we got up there? Which route up Cooper itself would prove more difficult? Distances were deceptive: how long would it really take to go down and around and up the long side of the mountain, and was the terrain worse than it looked from where we sat? Meanwhile the sun was riding high on its course, having no patience for the likes of us.

An hour's tough climbing gave us the top of the ridge. From there we could see a jagged knife-edge between us and Cooper proper. It was impossible to tell if the route was navigable except by trying it. A knife-edge it proved to be, though irregular: composed of sharp and narrow rock slabs to shinny along or hang from. On the right was a dropoff fifty feet down to the glacier; on the left, a thousand to the valley below. I took a cautious lead forward. Chris followed dubiously. Huge columns of rock blocked the way in several places and we had to scout our way around the base or sides of these.

Though I had lagged behind on the scaling of vertical pitches, I found a more assertive role on this narrow ridge in searching out side-routes, using tiny ledges and handholds to advantage with my long limbs. When we arrived at a particularly intimidating tower blocking the ridge halfway across, however, I was ready to call it quits. Here it was Sarah who found a way around a slippery block of slate, and we cautiously advanced. A final section was so sharp we had to straddle it, supporting weight with hands, inching forward.

It had taken two stressful, exhausting hours to do the ridge and knife-edge. Noon already; our turn-around time from the peak, if we could reach it, was one-o'clock: or two, at the very latest. It was best to err on the early side so as not to risk being caught in the dark without sleeping gear or bearings to reach camp.

Sarah, of course, was gung-ho; Chris was unsure of the prospects of continuing. He scanned the route ahead up the slope to the peak, trying once more to gauge the difficulty and the time it would take. I had to question seriously my motives for continuing, considering my already depleted energy.

What did it mean to get to the top of a piece of rock? How much sacrifice was it worth? How much risk? How much pride and self-esteem depended on it, and what was all that worth? Was this an exercise on my part to grab for what was left of my fading youth, to shore up my aging manhood? Practically speaking, I felt I'd be doing well to get back to camp from here in the remainder of the day. The hike would still be a success, in

terms of . . . what? Why was I here, why had I come this far? I kept telling myself and my companions that I wasn't attached to results – except getting back home in one piece. I couldn't help thinking of the way back out of this remote wilderness – the torturous knife-edge, the laborious ridge, the long trek back to camp by nightfall. That would make a thirteen or fourteen hour day; and the following day, with full packs and worn-out legs and feet, we'd have to battle the evil sidehill again with its alder slides and rough footing, and then tackle the final ascent up the valley headwall with its slippery rock and snow.

Why make it harder? Why risk everything on an arbitrary and meaningless accomplishment? Anyway, I'd brought a book along for just such an eventuality. I didn't want or need to hold Chris and Sarah back from their ambitions: I could happily settle down on a large rock on the ridge and bask in the sun with my book until these more intrepid adventurers returned from bagging, or more likely failing to bag, their peak.

Sarah was sure there was a reasonable chance to make it to the top in the time we had. The approach looked not so difficult as long. I nearly sent them on their way without me, but at the last minute I had to reconsider. After coming all that way, making all that effort so far, getting so close to the top of the 10,000-footer, could I really rest content with Go Tell it on the Mountain? If Chris and Sarah did make it to the top, I'd never forgive myself. Or maybe I would, but like Chris on the last attempt at the front peak with Sarah and Stan, I'd be haunted forevermore by the nagging knowledge that I could have made it, too.

So I pushed on – at least a little while more, to see how hard the ascent actually was. Again on the very first pitch, it looked ridiculous. It took Sarah ten minutes to go up twenty feet. I followed, straight up the rock wall (without ropes), but so tentatively that Chris warned me from behind, "Are you sure we're going to be able to come back down this thing?" By now I'd committed myself to this mountain. I paid no more attention to worries about the way down. The way down would take care of itself.

Now Sarah was calling from above, "It's much better once you get up here!" When Chris found an easier way around the pitch I'd just climbed, we were on our way. We first dropped off our day packs, with their load of heavy clothing, raingear, binoculars, camera and food, by a patch of colorful and recognizable rocks. We made this impulsive decision for the sake of speed and, I suppose, the reward of freedom to meet this mountain face-to-face, without props or baggage. Another hour of brisk climbing and we were there.

Breathless, we stood over a vast creamy snowfield draped below us on the north slope, gaping at an ocean of peaks all around. The sheer exhaustion and gratitude and wonder and awe of it all brought me to the verge of tears. We'd done it. And I'd done it.

Chris consulted his watch: it was 2:00, the "latest" turnaround time. But still we had to stay awhile, to savor the experience of being there, and the achievement of getting there. To capture that scene in a camera frame would have been an exercise in futility. We didn't need any extra clothing either, it was so warm in the sun.

Sarah found a cairn and opened it. Six climbing parties had recorded their presence on this spot before us over the years, beginning in 1964. Several other attempts we knew about had failed. To have come where so few others had was exhilarating: not so much to compare oneself with the mass of humanity, but to realize the immensity of doing, in the extreme, what the will and the body conspire to accomplish.

Half an hour later, on the way back down the mountain, I had another moment of doubt. I sensed that I really might fail, now, to find the energy to continue much longer. It was realistic to suppose now that I could be abandoned here, left alone while the others went to get help. I could die here, for the sake of this great accomplishment.

Forty-five was evidently too old to be doing this sort of thing. But certainly it was old enough to die.

My feet hurt; they were starting to get blisters. Food and water were running low. I had another six hours of tricky downward climbing and sheer dogged hiking to look forward to before camp; and then tomorrow, after a couple nights of negligible sleep, I'd have to repeat the grind of the day before. It was not looking good.

Somehow I kept going. I had to: there was no choice about it. I turned to thoughts of the spiritual mottoes (gleaned from a New Age Mayan calendar) I'd been carrying with me on the trip. The day before, it had been "awareness of energy channel" – fine as far as it went, going with the flow of active energy and just doing it. Today it was more about effort: "spirit-form union – to be clear, calm, and centered at all times." Remembering

these elemental sources of power gave me strength at moments of doubt and indecision; a feeling that it would all be okay if I trusted in the grounding of my instincts; a renewed faith in my ability to do with my body what my spirit still felt was possible.

It was. We made it back to camp at seven, with an hour's daylight left for foot soaking, and for cooking the most marvelous meal of black bean and mushroom soup, followed by couscous. The latter was cooked in such volume that I had to discard the leftovers in a plastic bag down an old marmot hole, being too lazy to hike back across the lake to hang it in the food bag from the little cliff.

The next day's motto was "to be open to universal direction." I needed something to keep me going: ten minutes after setting out with heavy packs, I had to stop for a first-aid break. Blisters, so raw and wide on each side of each heel that I had hardly slept during the night, gave pain at every step, so I applied bandaids over moleskin and took 1000 mg of Tylenol. That combination worked; I floated through the rest of the trip.

We decided to go for the valley-bottom route as soon as the dreaded sidehill became uncomfortable for all of us. That move paid off handsomely, with the discovery of a clear bear trail the whole way to the headwall at the valley end. To ward off any unsuspecting bears, we made sure to be loud and obnoxious – singing "The Bear Went over the Mountain"; shouting "Coming through!"; or, borrowing the call of the logging truck drivers, "Three loaded up the Keen!" Chris alone was brave enough to dive into the green and frigid lake near the valley end, as we celebrated an easier-than-expected day's hike.

Even the last climb up the headwall, though intimidating at a glance (six hundred feet up slick, wet rock) proved straightforward, approached step by step.

That final day out was a confirmation of the impulse that had guided us to undertake the trip in the first place – especially my last-minute decision to go. It was all about intuition, inspiration and instinct, following what seemed possible. Going with the flow can be the easiest way forward in a context that is not easy at all. The body may rightly balk at what the spirit determines. But if the body can be brought to have faith in the spirit's decision, great rewards can be enjoyed: deliverance into a stunning and vast wilderness of beauty, and joined with it, a sense of respectful satisfaction in the accomplishment itself. This human animal can be brought live and wonderful to its highest vantage point, and return to tell the tale.

Remembering Winter

Cold. Twenty below, celsius. Trees cracking in the snowy forest, gold trim on the mountains glimpsed through the veil of trees.

There is something special about this arctic cold . . . on the hillside, in the depths of the forest, on the way to the cave where the elevation gives a view of the line of distant peaks colored gold in the dawn . . . or on the flats, where the desolate wastes of grass are topped with white frosting, the basins of blue ice puddles reflect the sky over distant peaks to the north, and the brush crinkles brittle before us as Sarah and I bushwhack to the river to fish. We follow deer and coyote trails in the shallow snow, single file, like Adam and Eve after the fall.

There is something special in being alive and aware in such a circumstance, when all the world around is dormant and cold, locked in the grip of winter. True, ducks sit placidly on the water, a heron is startled out of its resting spot and flaps away in stunning grace, and everywhere are tracks of the four-footed ones. We cross beaver lodges where underneath our feet they must be sleeping, or looking up wondering who comes calling. Still, we are the only large life form about on this day, and being the only one elevates us in our own minds. We are special, privileged, to have walking rights out here in the sunshine when it's twenty below, because we have been clever enough (as a species) to devise clothing that gives us that comfort. There are species better adapted with natural

fur, of course – whose fur we have stolen to enable us to share their wintry domain. But where are they now? Laying low. Or maybe we've just wiped them out by now.

At the river, we sit fascinated and charmed by the beauty of the scene, both in large and small focus. Most compelling is the play of the wide river in its bend through the marshy flat, its surface blue with silver sun speckles, its currents whirling and streaming in chaotic yet perfect patterning across the flow. Closer at hand, on the sandy frozen shore, we marvel at the little stems of grass in the shallow water that wears crystal caps of ice; and the flat scallops of thin ice that shine white when the water laps away, and then transparent when the water laps in close under them.

It makes sense to us now, how mesmerized people are by the seashore, and why they choose to live there, or to travel there to spend such long moments as this, gazing out at the water. Watching the endless variations and constant flux of the flow, we are reminded of the pattern of all life and material in the universe: of time itself, ever changing the scene before our eyes. This is truth, is the visible show of energy at work, driving everything forward. Without seeing the water in this natural state, however, we could be lulled by the apparent solidity and permance of land: a mere illusion of our standard of measurement, our stance in our own time of life which stretches before us with seeming infinitude.

After this excursion in the land of cold water and ice, we have the luxury of coming home to warm ourselves in the stone hot tub. After ten minutes of that I'm ready for the

cold treatment again, and spend five minutes alone outside walking naked in the cold clear white and blue air, just at sunset. I wear plastic thongs on the way to the big cedar tree down the driveway – where I stand, with bare skin steaming, for a brief moment of respect to the elements.

On the way back, just bare feet. I recall tales of stranded travelers in the mountains, or refugees from Tibet, or wounded soldiers or prisoners of war, walking "barefoot in the snow" . . . for how long? My limit is about two minutes of it.

The sky is already darker now. Gray-white woodsmoke coils out of the chimney. I retreat to the house, where Sarah has remained, for the long winter night.

In another month, March, our fourteen-year-old marriage will be over . . . will have died, you might say, from the cold.

Breathing Together: Sketches of You and Me

The Triple Muse is woman in her divine character: the poet's enchantress, the only theme of his songs.

– Robert Graves, The White Goddess

1

Broth of potato, parsley, cabbage leaf and nettle is the food I take on this cleansing fast. Slowly I walk down your driveway in the cold May air. Words lie piled up like cordwood along the road. I feel like running past them – or slowing down to a crawl, feeling my way: forward, always forward, breathing, just breathing. All the rest is production: the conversion of energy into matter, the making known. Baseball scores, tax payments, the local weather: part of the stew of what happens. I continue my search for the missing words, the ones that really matter. To what other enterprise can I bring such wonder? I rest awhile, to hear your thoughts.

2

At this long table, my spreading heart, you do have a place – and now, I've told you. I love you.

Believing in you, I can believe in myself, can play the tune to the end without stopping, can begin another without even thinking. In your beauty of silver cloud-wool, your promise of garden glory, I take my measure of life by the lungful. Breathing together, let us walk now under these dark firs, into rarer sunshine tonight, the all-too-forgettable bliss of stars.

3

Caught between spring and summer, sunshine and rain, I pause in the stillness again, awaiting your move. I deliberate, while the rain starts and stops. I collect the fragments of past and future love together. If I can sift them tiny enough, they will vanish altogether. This, in the doing, is all I can play of this game.

Another moment, there is more time to ponder, to wonder about how it happened or will transpire. We sit holding hands that droop like last week's flowers. In this rush of new love we are fallen branches caught upon rocks; we are dripping leaves; we are silent.

4

There was hoarfrost on the rippled mounds ridged beside the road to the snow-hung creek, where I walked away from you once. Now between us, in a warmer season, we have five kids to take care of every day. With you in my arms, I taste the salt of my own

becoming. And I whisper in your ear, come away with me; come away to a space that time forgets.

You allow me to feel that I'm living inside a painting – where tree shapes, lively and interpenetrating, enfold me.

Now tell me how it is for you. Blind, surfacing, say – and I don't mind waiting in your close embrace.

On the woodlot above that snow-hung creek, are scattered trees left standing – bruised, battered, broken and alone. How can we tell them we love them?

Astonished, opening, you hold my name in yours, breathing, only breathing in our felled silence.

Let’s just say no to the drug of doing, for a while.

This is easier in a forest.

5

Old man's beard hangs from a dead drooping thin branch, in midair, by a dying pine with brown-yellow pitch wounds; stoic.

In Nature's studio there are no demands – only sun dappling through greenweft, with the sound of shushing water, under blue pastel brushed skyhaze.

On Valentine's Day you walked with me steady on the compact snow corn, soft treading. Now we come to the melted moss of a new day.

This energy, come drink with me.

Did I say I want, I do?

Marriage in a Cave

She walked ahead of me on the angled trail across the hillside, up to the cave that would tell us where to make our home. On the way I joked about the possibility it would be already occupied on this sacred occasion . . . then noticed, halfway, a camouflaged tent in the forest – of a squatter or spring pot-planter, it wasn't clear. That circumstance is coincidental; but in the circumstance of life as it's lived fully, nothing is irrelevant to the ongoing ritual.

We mounted the final sloping ground, digging toes into the trail which was soft with limestone dust and gravel, and found our way into the mountain of rock: fifty feet high, fifteen wide, and narrowing to an end another fifty feet inside.

Near the back is a nest of sticks and rock, big as a beaver and likely home to a rat, judging by the skunky smell of the place. A rusty old shovel with short broken handle lies to the side where once mounds of batshit collected; it's all long gone, to the first wave of forest planters, for fertilizer.

In the center of the cave a griddle-sized flat rock rests wide to the opening, inviting our use of it as an altar. We sit and place a thick high yellow candle rising behind it, steadied by smaller stones, and on the flat surface, three daffodils, a hyacinth blossom, an oyster shell, and a four-pronged antler.

We light a fire, collecting wood spilled from the nest-mound, and make ourselves comfortable seated on sweater and vest, with an imported sleeping bag of goose down to wrap around us. This is our own nest of and for each other, as the air fills with the haze of smoke and the rain begins.

In a future time we will tell each other again of the love we held there.

"You, always. Always you. Our time, now and again and again."

I was moved – on a day which began with unbearably building tension over the question of which of our two houses to move to (with her two kids and my one, merging households and families) – to tell her, "I give you the freedom and the responsibility to choose the home that works best for you, that most matches what you need. I've had the chance to live in the home of my life. Now it's your time to have the home of your life."

She wept to know what her choice would be, in this moment: to leave her own home behind and adopt mine, to create a new home with me from the bones of the old one, strong and dear. The Mayan Oracle contributed Cauac, the card of purification, transformation, and letting go utterly of everything not made of the light body, our essence in love.

The ceremony completed with the burning of a basket, which she had woven of weeping willow branches and long dried leaves. It roasted with floating flame like a

brain on fire, then settled in a charred pattern of ash over the glowing coals, the very image of an old home given up to spirit, a past in sacrifice to the ancestors.

Vows repeated, we exit clear, clean, and ready to get on with life: able, we feel, finally to know where to dig, where to plant, where to stack our newly cut firewood for the winter to come. This particular decision is not sacred in its worldly form, however; as we will reverse it just two days later. It is the enactment of loss which holds meaning, the willingness to give up everything material that we have created, except our own children.

Ready to follow in the footsteps of our ancestors, we have begun in the very first home, earthwomb, house of houses, home of home. We turn to pay last homage to that great vagina of rock standing up against the larger earth and sky and birthing us to paths unknown.

Deep Summer

It's like riding the crest of a wave, so that just as you're most enjoying the high buoyant arc as it rolls against the sky, you find it curling under you, dropping through the air and tumbling you under to churn in the roiling surf, wondering where the surface was.

It's like the full moon passing from its swollen glory into a belated remnant, now pale against the morning glare.

It's the red-topped grasses reminding you that time always passes faster than you think; that death will come before you are ready.

I was sick for two weeks, in a July where, as always, there was so much to be done. The garden sets the pace but in some years, like this one, it was only the symbol for the piling up of events, emergencies, outdoor chores, places to go. With such a glut of possibility, I accepted the scaling down of activity with sullen grace, narrowing my focus to the necessary tasks at hand: feeding the family, answering email for my business. I even began to enjoy a chance to catch up on those books gathering months of dust on the shelf by my bed . . . finally finishing off The White Goddess, for instance, that dense tome with its tales of the ancient Muse and her two children, Star-son and Serpent.

The weather turned hot and sunny, meanwhile – the first stretch of solid blue in a year or more, it seemed; and I took to roasting the last of the lingering cold out of me,

sunning on the lawn under the cherry trees . . . gazing up at the rich dark green of their leaves and the reddening cherries against the backdrop of impossible blue, the glorious golden sun at its zenith. In the midst of this unmanageable growth and unhealthy, underlying ferment, I had just turned fifty.

There was a morning there, less than a week before, as I sat on the porch of Oiseau's house eating a late-morning meal and looking out at the horizon brimming with still firs against sky rippled with slight clouds, over the garden basking in full repose at its peak of production, when it appeared that this was a magical land, another world, a charmed country, a realm removed from time and rain and action and suffering. I made some remark to Oiseau about the flow of the seasons here in this interior B.C. mountain rainforest – that we really have just one year-long season, punctuated by two interludes: deep winter, when the cold locks in and the land is bound with bundled snow; and this, now, deep summer.

Of course, with the observation comes the passing of what is observed. On a walk three mornings later, I noticed our local landmark, 9000-foot Mount Willet, showing an unfamiliar aspect from our vantage to the north – appearing conical, instead of angled sharply one way against the sky. But I took a moment to form the words, as our steps carried us downward under the line of tall trees, and by the time I gave voice to the observation, the peak was no longer visible.

2

During my time of sickness I had put off a longer walk down the hill to my original house – the one I had built a decade ago and this year had rented out, while I lived with Oiseau and her two sons in their house. The tenant in my house was never there, but had left it full of Y2K food supplies. His plan was to vacate in another month, and in the meantime a friend of mine was going to come and stay there for a couple of weeks. I wanted to check on things; to prune and thin the orchard; to pick raspberries and cherries; to clean up and prepare a space inside for my visiting friend.

The heat had become intense, jumping from its months-long pattern of twenties and rain, to thirties and full sun. The mosquitoes had taken a couple of days to hatch, it seemed, in the heat and in the fullness of the moon, and now they were appearing in clouds. The humidity was rising daily.

My yard and orchard were covered with four-, five-, six-foot-high grasses and weeds, bending in waves under their own weight. The raspberries and cherries were just coming on. The fruit trees were full of vertical suckers, this year's growth, and badly in need of a summer pruning. Through this jungle I approached the ginger-colored house.

There was a gaping, jagged hole where the swinging cat door had been, near the bottom of the padlocked door to the porch. A bear, I was dismayed to discover, had forced its way through the thin plywood around the cat door, gone into the porch, turned the doorknob to the main door and waltzed into the house to a Y2K cornucopia of cat

food, brown rice, sunflower seeds, potato chips. The remains of this wave of plunder now lay scattered about in overturned barrels and buckets and shredded bags. The bathroom featured a bar of soap slightly nibbled, some toilet-paper confetti, scattered toothbrushes still in their cases, a plastic-framed mirror tipped into the tub.

I felt fortunate that the house was not totally wrecked. The walk-in pantry, full of an even more enticing array of goodies in fragile glass and plastic containers, was miraculously untouched, on the other side of a simple swinging door. I must have crashed this bear's party after only a couple of days of feasting; and knowing bears, realized that this party was far from over.

I walked about the house in a daze, surveying the damage and beginning to pick up the pieces. Absently I swept and gathered debris into an empty barrel, as if soothing myself with the possibility of restoring a patina of human order to an impossible situation, a repeatable destruction. Finally, countering dread with determination, I got down to business, checking every entrance and making a list of materials: nails for toenailing doors shut; boards for barricades; plywood patches for the torn opening.

When I tried to remove the hinges on the outer door in order to truck it up the hill for repairs, I was buzzed by wasps streaming out from the siding just over the door. Reeling away and then approaching more cautiously, I saw a yellow-uniformed rank of them waiting there ready for my next approach, as if asserting nature's will against my efforts to reclaim this house as my own.

Forced to retreat, I went back up the hill in my truck for reinforcements: insect spray, tools, nails, boards, thicker plywood. I came back and doggedly set to work. First donning silk netting and long pants and sleeves, I blasted the wasp nest with a killing fog. I patched the enlarged cat door with three layers of plywood and boards, nailed from both sides. I blocked and nailed all the openings to the greenhouse entrance. On the main door I installed a barricade over the doorknob; blocked off its cat door; added a wire latch. There wasn't much I could do about that pantry door, besides the minor deterrent of a high latch; I would have to hope the outer defenses would hold.

3

The next morning, July 20, I went down the hill around 9:30 to see if the bear, or bears, had come back. I knew that there was a mother with two cubs at large in the community, who was already responsible for breaking into numerous freezers and houses, and it seemed likely this was her idea of a great new home for the summer, at least. This time I came on foot, with a rifle, just in case. On my approach to the house I saw, as if in a single frame, the fresh debris of shattered plywood outside the newly opened wound in the door, and black shapes moving in the grass behind the house. In that same instant I heard the mother grunting to her cubs, or to me, and they waddled off into the forest.

I was quick to reach for the bullets in my pack and take off after them, loading the .30-30 as I walked. The cubs slowed the pace, and I caught up with them a hundred yards into the woods. When I came within sight, the cubs went up a tree, and the mother circled around anxiously, unsure of what to do. I held my distance, not wanting to provoke her, while looking for a good shooting angle from a supporting tree. My heart was pounding – this was my chance to put an end to this madness, to solve the problem that threatened to haunt the rest of the summer.

I got off a quick shot with a decent view of her tawny face and black breast. She bolted, but not far, with the cubs still treed. I waited till she was still enough to find in my sight again, and fired. She bolted again. I was still too excited, too anxious. I didn't want to miss, but I didn't want to miss my chance, either. Two more shots . . . and the way the last one was lined up I felt she must be hit, but she bounded about active as ever, and I had to retrace my steps for more bullets which I'd left loose in my pack. When I came back with the two remaining cartridges, the bears were gone.

I was discouraged. There was some hope the mother was wounded and would simply go deeper into the forest to bleed to death. The cubs would no doubt follow; and after that, who could tell what would happen? It wasn't as if I had it all figured out. I was still reacting – out of frustration, a sense of injustice, sheer self-defense on behalf of my home. Obviously this little corner of the forest once was an uncontested part of the vast stomping grounds of the black bear, and ever since claiming the homesite as my own, I

was content to be good neighbors with them. But when it came to them leaving their natural abode and messing with my chickens, my fruit trees, or now, my house, I felt I had to draw the line. In such a mood I was not so much rational as resolute, yet still agitated – which was no doubt the problem with my aim.

Maybe the mother was still unhit but would be frightened enough to stay away – but I rather doubted she would, with that deluxe larder calling to her stomach. I would have to go to work again, this time with more ingenuity or better materials; and if she were determined to continue the siege, I would have to find a way to meet up with her again – maybe sleeping in "her" house, if necessary.

The damage to the outer door was worse than before. The 3/4 inch plywood patch was chewed to bits; the nailed boards were pulled free. This time, as if seeking an easier or larger opening, the bear had also pulled off the first two boards from the porch wall, where the building paper now lay exposed but intact. A pair of boots inside the porch were tumbled about; but the inner door had held.

As an interim measure I replaced the siding and the remains of the door patch, then went home for lunch, more materials, and more bullets . . . reflecting on my own ineptitude as a marksman. It occurred to me then, too late, that in my haste I'd been targeting within the larger circle around the beaded gunsight, but not taking care to line the bead itself neatly within the tiny notch of the rear sight. It didn't help that I wore my glasses for long-range vision, blurring the notch too close to my eyes. Correcting this

sighting problem with more care and a more all-purpose pair of glasses, I now felt sure, would make all the difference . . . if I got another chance.

An anxiously sober lunch and resupply of materials later, I was down the hill again in the truck for the afternoon shift. This time I parked at the end of the driveway and approached on foot with rifle at the ready, in case the bear had made a quick return in my absence. I recalled the time almost two decades earlier, when I'd just begun living on this raw new homesite in tent and tipi, storing sacks of bulk food in barrels further down the hill in an abandoned dome. That was an unfinished structure with open windows only partially boarded over, and a bear had begun getting in the windows and breaking into the barrels. I spent an evil summer's night there sleeping in ambush in the loft, but not really sleeping at all between the fierce attacks of mosquitoes, skittering of rats, and noises from the woods throughout the night. In the morning I had taken a break with a short hike up to the homesite for breakfast, only to return an hour later to find the bear had helped itself to breakfast from the unguarded barrels.

This time the offending bear had not come back – yet – and so I set to work rebuilding the porch door with a thick square of aluminum plate set behind tightly nailed metal roofing. I covered the adjoining section of porch wall also with roofing; and added a third piece to the inside of the pantry's cat door, just for good measure. Cleaning up the scraps of shredded plywood and pulling nails from the failed wooden patch, I was startled then to hear a strange growling, close by . . . a gurgling, throaty roar, a hideous moan, an

animal cursing. The truck with my rifle was parked between me and the sound; I couldn't see the mother bear or the cubs.

Cautiously I approached the truck, heart thumping. Instantly my throat had become dry as summer dust; but I wouldn't stop for water now. I took the rifle from the back seat with a dozen fresh cartridges, put on my alternate pair of glasses, and followed the retreating sounds up the trail. I still could not see what I was tracking, but I heard the occasional grunt or snapping of wood to keep me going in the right direction. I was wary of a wounded or simply angry mother, but encouraged by her slow and steady progress away from me.

Up the ridge into the flatland of birch and thimbleberries, I gave pursuit, cautious and taut with attention to sound and movement in the underbrush. Still in a T-shirt, I was plagued by mosquitoes and thirst, fearful yet more determined than ever . . . and I thought of the poor soldiers on Guadalcanal creeping up the sweltering hill under fire by the Japanese, in the film The Thin Red Line.

I caught sight of them finally, a vision of idyllic nature: two cubs rising on hind feet to spar playfully, while mother nosed leaf-high through the rustling thimbleberry bushes. I stopped and sighted, followed a little, looked and sighted again . . . but was teased by the shifting glimpses of black amid the sea of green. I didn't want to shoot the cubs first. This was a dangerous enough game as it was.

But a game it wasn't. I had my life as well as theirs in my hands. I felt backed against a wall, at war with these creatures because they had attacked, and were certainly going to keep attacking, my house, the home I had built, until they'd broken through and sacked it completely. So if I had to take the war to them, to their territory, so be it. If I was therefore exposing myself to danger, it was better than the alternative: to watch my house being torn apart, piece by piece. I might indeed have aged over these last few days; but I was no wiser – just more determined.

The bears seemed to have settled into a comfortable area, not moving far anymore. I glided closer, jockeying for aim from behind a comforting clump of birches. Still I couldn't quite get the clear line of sight I needed on the mother. I was reluctant to move further into the open, drawing attention to myself and surprising her at close range, on her turf. But I was growing impatient. The mosquitoes were coming at me. It was time to make a move. I stepped out to a more open view between me and them. The cubs saw me first and went up the tree. The mother shuffled around under the tree wondering what the fuss was about. I never saw her face again but got a good view of black to sight against, drew the bead into the notch, and fired.

She tumbled over with a paw thrown up in the air and I knew the shot was good. Quickly I decided what I hadn't yet brought to full consciousness: that the cubs would have to follow. Whether they could survive on their own was questionable. So was the morality, or "humaneness," of forcing them to try. (The previous winter a scrawny

orphan bear had been shot in the snow on Christmas Eve, after weeks of garbage raids and overnight "hibernations" in warm compost bins.) Then there was the more serious matter of these cubs' education. Having watched their mother systematically breach freezers, porches, sheds and houses so as to feed on a steady diet of humans' rich food, they would surely follow in her footsteps if left alive . . . until it came to someone else's turn to shoot them.

I might have decided earlier to leave this whole grim job to a regional conservation officer – except that he had already set a trap for this bear, given up and moved on to an urban problem area. Local information had it that he would have shot all three, since a cub tranquilized eighty feet up a tree was doomed to a quick death anyway.

So I kept my eyes on unfinished business: sighted on the first cub and dropped it beside the mother. The second cub was luckier, or unluckier; as, shaky from the killing, I missed, and it scrambled down the tree to go wandering, meekly bawling, into the bush. Scared and confused, it peered at me from behind a tree like a child playing hide-and-seek, but now I had to fire again. The cub went up the tree, and up, and up, and I fired again and missed, and it went higher, until finally I recovered a steady hand and finished the story. The cub dropped sixty feet to the ground and bounced into a heap. I could only then walk away, with an unsettled mixture of gratitude and regret, leaving them all to the nature they had left for their brief and filling journey through the land of humanity.

Deep summer – so fleeting it was over the day I noticed it – was long gone now. We were into the dying season.

Return to Paradise: A Hawaii Journal

24 November

Fourteen-year-old Nashira and I are enroute to Hawaii; our first trip outside of continental North America. The most trying part of the journey is already behind us. It's winter in the B.C. mountains, and the Castlegar airport was socked in, so our initial flight was cancelled. The airline offered to bus us instead, but by a roundabout route that would have arrived to late for our early-morning flight from Vancouver to Kauai. So we took off by truck instead, with a twelve-hour time-frame for what normally is an eight-hour trip. We left at four, hit snow in all three passes and rain the rest of the way, and arrived at the airport in Vancouver at three in the morning: eleven hours in all.

Nashira took it all like a trooper. We lifted our spirits with stops every hour and a half: more gas, a stretch, snacks, new music tapes to keep us rolling. But it was a grueling trip, with poor visibility, faint clues of tracks in the snow or a center or side line here or there, a pair of red lights to follow when I was lucky.

Manning Park in silence was a snowy, treacherous dream, forcing me to be calm, relaxed, attentive. I followed the lights of one car most of the way through, coasting in soft communion behind it, pacing my distance, breathing, sweating lightly, coming finally to a peaceful revelation of being home again, truly at home, on the road. In that breathing space of acceptance expanding suddenly to all of my world, wherever I now

would move, my center would come with me, a home mobile and live and adaptable to any contingency. Facing death on every curve, with every passing truck a whisper away, I knew that in that calmness and steady awareness is the power to protect, to guide, to hold the life force in sacred responsibility.

There were more challenges to come. In Abbotsford the wind buffeted the truck so strongly that it was hard to hold it steady on the road. Through the outlying areas of Vancouver, lights were flashing with this or that minor disaster everywhere: a tree across the left lane of the Trans-Canada Highway that we almost hit, blinded by the warning lights; an overturned vehicle at a dead-end crossroads when I took a wrong turn to the airport near Langley; a taped-off area of several blocks in Vancouver; another tree blocking both lanes of the Trans-Canada eastbound; another blinding repair light; whole sections of the city darkened with power outage (affecting 200,000 people, we heard later). The plane even now, two and a half hours after takeoff, is rocking through 200 km/hr. winds.

So many details had to be figured out, to get here: a lifetime of figuring them out, taking care of business. I think of the writing projects I have yet to complete, to accomplish in the next eighteen months, or fifteen years, or variable times yet to be determined by the slippage of other events in my life: a change in relationships, a sudden

pregnancy – I hope not – music opportunities, business ambitions, infinite Internet promotion.

These details fall away, for now, into the far Pacific beneath me, the roar of the engine, the sea of clouds.

People ask me, why did you decide to go to Hawaii? I answer, it was time.

I have done everything else now but this. I have done the north – now it is time to go south.

From this altitude, I am struck by a new perspective of the world, of reality itself. How tiny my homestead in the mountain land far away; how tiny our focussed destination, on its spot of land in the midst of the vast ocean; how trivial our preoccupations left behind and carried with us, my blue scratchings included! For a long time I fix my vision on the ocean below, pondering its enormity against my miniscule watery being, before considering how much vaster still reaches the limitless space above.

How curious that, being so moved by this immensity of the blue ocean and its teeming fluffy endless clouds, and the even bluer more endless empty sky above, I would turn instead to write these tiny blue ink marks upon a white page, like a reverse image or negative, a microcosm.

How curious that this whole planeload of humans passes through such an experience of vastness, of interconnection, of hugeness yet smallness of our one earth, largely

oblivious to the immensity and grandeur because we are being intentionally diverted from it by our friendly staff with their constant diet of food, magazines, films, drinks, reminders, and snacks, providing not even a moment for sleep, or open-eyed reverie, or contentment in being where we are.

And yet, it is only through this, in its own way, immense construction of human ingenuity – the modern jetliner with its wing and engine both partially blocking yet finally supporting this grand vision of mine – that we are privileged to be here, to glimpse this ever-opening blueness if we choose.

If I were an alien traveler just coming to inspect this watery planet for the first time, in such a place as this, I might be amazed to find that these oceans held such marvelous creatures as the whales and fishes, or that this flying monstrosity could soar above. Or perhaps amazement would not be the occasioned response, after all, if my species had the knowledge to come so far in the first place – the knowledge of universal oneness and connection that would be required for such a visit to be conceived and carried out. Such knowledge would put even this humming business of the airplane in its place, as a curiosity to be examined alongside the whales sporting in the unseen depths.

Perhaps we human travelers would seem simply banal, amid the clacking of our plastic cups and crinkling of snack-wrappers. Or perhaps we'd be viewed with some moral concern, if all the implications of our insidious close-minded business were considered. Yet from our human point of view, the whale's life is just as banal –

scooping plankton, sunning under this generous sun the same as we are bound to do when we reach the scrap of land we have evolved to enjoy.

We chatter and snack and scratch like this and I am content to say so, and to wonder if we are somehow afraid to gaze longer out these small but sufficient portholes, at the somewhat unsteady engine, the wordless clouds, the numberless droplets of ocean and fathomless reach of sky. In such frailty and immensity we might go down, might lose heart for the land paths we have chosen, the mission we have committed ourselves to, the image of ourselves we have created from some even more unfathomable inner space.

25 November

Yesterday, laden with heavy backpacks, we emerged into the muggy Lihue airport knowing immediately that we had far too much to carry and no clear idea of where to go. Fortunately the quick solution – the car rental agency and requisite plastic card – was close at hand.

Now I sit at a picnic table, writing by fading sunset, at Polihale Beach. This "paradise," we have found, is fraught with conditions: a dangerously rough surf and dangerous undertow; burning sun on November-pale skin; stinging jellyfish; humidity and a finicky cookstove; wind gusting sand into our faces as we relaxed into the late afternoon; many visitors in the morning and evening; lingering sickness in sinuses and lungs prohibiting fresh clear perfect energy of enjoyment.

Yet there have been moments of perfection in these first couple of days in the sun. We discovered a nearby refuge from the surf in shallow pools between a small reef area and the shore, with crystal water perfect for swimming. Last night we enjoyed a warm calm sunset and slept on the sand under the open clear sky. There are relatively few people here; instead, numerous feral cats and chickens. One small lizard appeared in our rented car.

Now it's too dark to write. It feels like summer here; except that it gets dark at suppertime.

27 November

Last night we talked long and intimately with Tony, a young man who spent the last glimmers of daylight madly writing at a nearby picnic table. He's taking a writing course by correspondence, and trying to catch up. He's been working on a story he might pitch to Outdoor magazine, relating his less-than-friendly experiences with the young rasta crowd the night before at this same area. He wonders, did he not have enough patchouli, was his hair too short? Like them, he was camping here without a permit. He didn't get caught, though, as they did; he was nestled in the dunes and up by six.

He "sells activities" in Kapaa to tourists; surfs with the Hawaiians. From Colorado and Minnesota, he's been here four months. He's prejudiced against the Japanese for dumping garbage from barges, which washes up on these shores.

The Hawaiians are proud, a fighting culture, who pound him if he takes a bit too much of the good waves. "All they have left is the waves."

The young Hawaiian guys, he tells us, are fond of hunting pigs. "Not the cute pink kind, but boars – with three-inch tusks. They hunt them down with dogs, corner them and then jump on their backs and stab them with big knives, while the boars thrash around with those sharp tusks. They invite me to come along, and I tell them they're crazy."

His advice on my courting of my ex-partner's sister: "I've tried that. It'll come to a bad end."

His advice to Nashira: "Express your feelings to your parents as soon as you can – because otherwise the feelings just stay inside you and never go away."

He feels trapped by the system which gave him no option but college and no option to pay for it but student loans. These are unforgivable under "Chapter 7" which says you can't lose the debt, even by bankruptcy. "They'll chase you for life."

His dream was to live "like Grizzly Adams" in a cabin in the woods. But at twenty-three he can't quite swear off city life yet, and is bound in a month for San Francisco. His best career choice at this point is as a small business startup consultant. He wants to take on one project at a time, bring it to success in a three-year period, and then move on.

*

We broke camp in the morning and drove in our rental car up through Kokee Park, past Waimea Canyon (the "Grand Canyon of the Pacific"), to the Kalalau Valley lookout. A broad verdant valley between impossibly-shaped cliffs against a miraculous blue ocean appeared instantaneously out of the mists and cloud. To our right a sign pointed behind us toward a constant shroud of gray cloud and announced: "Mt. Waielale: the Wettest Place on Earth. 451 inches of rainfall per year." Around us the mist whirled. We bypassed the trail to the Alkali Swamp, drove back down the road to park headquarters, parked, walked on roads awhile trying to find a trail, got different directions from a guy with a baseball hat saying "Alaska" on it, drove and parked further down a dirt road full of potholes like the roads back home in Argenta, hiked a trail through highland forest replete with wild ginger and redwoods . . . to arrive finally at fabled Kauaikiole Stream. There we followed another lush jungle trail which ended in a mysterious tunnel, where the stream comes out of the ground before flowing into the open air, and back into another tunnel fifty feet away.

Short of time (it was already four o'clock, two hours before dark), we turned back for the long hike up the steep road. When we stopped for a rest we were promptly offered a ride by the first vehicle to pass – a Hawaiian driver and three white passengers all in the front seat.

We thought to camp at Salt Ponds Beach Park in Hanapepe, but it was Thanksgiving, and the campground was full of Hawaiians sitting at long tables laden with food, as music blared from huge speakers.

So we got back on the road again, stopped for food at a roadside market, and drove on to the north coast, looking for Anahola Beach. We never found it in the dark, but must have cruised right past it on the highway to Kiluea. We also searched vainly for Secrets Beach, and landed finally at Annini County Park, where I now sit in the muggy tent after a night of rain, a morning stroll down the beach with Nashira, and a futile attempt to light the stove. Between the humidity, the wind and rain, and the lighter fluid I was attempting to use for fuel, the stove would not stay lit for more than a couple of minutes. Disgusted, I finally drained the fuel and gave up on cooked food for the rest of the trip.

No coffee to cut the drowsiness, and I succumb to tropical languor.

-- November

What date is it? I've lost track already. Yesterday we slept in, and in the afternoon toured Hanalei. It was still raining off and on. Nashira and I finally discovered Secrets Beach; so today, in sunnier weather and supplied with fresh produce, we moved our camp here. There is more solitude, and ample shade. We are shy of this strong surf as yet, but will venture in before long, no doubt. For now, we're relaxing gently into this scene,

retreating into the tent at the occasion of a momentary shower, reading, writing post cards.

Beyond our post-card view of the blue expanse of ocean lies home, North America. On a gut level it's unimaginably distant. A little thought puts it just two time zones away; plus north, as far as I care to measure.

We are not yet a week into this two-week vacation. Already we're putting aside food for next week's hike of the Kalalau Trail, and making plans for camping and hitchhiking without the rented car.

For now, there's just this beach luxury, the unthinking waves, sleeping as long as we like, eating whatever, whenever – a whole pineapple, tofu for breakfast. The sun returns faithfully, and we lay lounging under a broad canopy of giant trees, with palm fronds swaying in the foreview.

What else is there to say, to do?

This is the intellectual's lament – only to describe so much, then to agonize over what more to write, to accomplish. It's all so irrelevant here – as elsewhere, but here more obviously so – in such contrast to the relentlessly pounding surf, the ever-changing sky; where there need be no thought of "the coming winter" or keeping warm, but only of where the next fruit is to be picked. In Eden there is no agricultural duty or calendar; no work ethic necessary; no ego required, nor accomplishments to prop it up.

Therefore I may pause awhile in my discipline of daily writing practice, my observations and reflections, to read from Steinbeck's East of Eden. Charles complains of Adam, "If you don't like it here why don't you just go to the South Seas then, and spend your days in a hammock." To read from John Stewart Collis' The Worm Forgives the Plough, in which the life of the intellectual is put in stark contrast to that of the agricultural laborer. In a sense the intellectual life and the island life might seem a good match, in terms of the ease of physical requirements. But there is little mental requirement here, no challenge but to question the worthiness of intellect at all. In this respect the sea and surf call out the same tune as the hard-working farmer – the tune of Nature – to which our bold and well-read cries are but whistling in the dark. For instance, even as I speak, the rain begins again, and I am forced to consider retreating inside the tent to reflect on the sodden condition of the paper, the smearing of ink.

This is what happens in the literature of South America, where culture disappears quickly into the miasma of jungle and humidity. I think also of Maugham's colonials, whose British backbones melt quickly into tropical dissolution, alcohol and amorality.

At the moment I'm hard-pressed to make more elegant sense out of the theme I've begun here, which is simply awash in impressions, vague traces, and glimpses like leaves scattered randomly about me and slowly rotting. How is all this different from the northern situation? Probably not much but in degree. Except that, I suspect it will take

some later reflection in that more demanding environment, before I might come to any more rigorous understandings, any more coldly logical conclusions.

2 December

Paradise . . .

Kalalau: the guidebook calls it "the most beautiful beach in the world."

I sit spellbound, facing three thousand miles of blue ocean stretching northward to the Bering Strait. At my back as I write, a hundred-foot-high waterfall threads down the cliff. Further behind, an amphitheater of sculptured peaks rises in a grand palisade. It's all eerily like, I am tempted to say, a cathedral; when no cathedral could emulate this richness of natural red-brown and green, this choral background of thundering, soothing surf, this comfort of finest, olive-colored sand. Nashira and I both sense, having paid the tangible price of an eleven-mile hike to get here, that it doesn't get any better than this.

A lone walker appears carrying a surfboard which he has had to pack in over the arduous trail. He crosses the beach to its far side, where the trail ends and nothing but sheer cliff and pounding sea continue around for twenty more miles to the next beachhead. He looks at us, at the cliffs, and out at the rough sea with its crashing waves, as if uncertain what to do next.

Where do you go after you have arrived?

*

For a week we drove around this small island like cornered North American tourists looking for the next endless highway. We made short work of an island whose area would fit nicely within a couple of our B.C. mountain valleys. This week of motorized grace allowed us to carry around our excess clothes and gear until we got a feel for what we'd need most when relying on our feet and our thumbs. Pared to the essentials for the five-day outing on the wild Na Pali coast, our packing list included tent, sleeping pads, a sleeping bag to spread as an occasional blanket during the warm nights, and a modest supply of rice cakes, bean flakes, nuts and dried fruit. Why pack a stove, fuel and cookware when you can just add water and stir?

At the government office in Lihue where we went to obtain a camping permit, we ran into Tony, our acquaintance from Polihale. He spoke in a distracted way about the essential boredom of the beach life, which finally had moved him to pack all of his stuff and head for home early. But he wished us well on our outing to "the real paradise thing."

Giving up the rental car and stowing our extra gear in a Lihue mini-storage locker, we headed out for Haena and made the forty miles in two hours. We got rides from a young surfer, a middle-aged horse-owner in a big pickup, and a Hanalei housepainter, riding in the back in the open air each time. I saw more of the island in those two hours

than in 300 miles behind the wheel. Our last ride, a retired Navy man and wife, put us in the back seat and took us to the campground a mile from the trailhead, where we spent a stormy afternoon and night. The woman told us that there were "crystal pyramids" inside the green, fairy-tower mountains at our backs.

For the first two or three miles of the Kalalau Trail, father and daughter slogged at a mile per hour up and down the mud-slimed ruts. But by mile seven we were past the constant jungle and into open dry hill country reminiscent of California or Scotland. Tracks of red earth led us over rolling hills that dropped off to the ocean to our right, and we passed numerous small family groups of feral goats. In a couple of places the trail narrowed to three-inch-wide ledges falling away to the sea. Because of these tricky passages the trail had a "difficult" rating and was worrying to me at the outset. But when it came to it, they were easily, if carefully, stepped over.

Fearful also, at first, that we'd miss the six o'clock sunset and have to finish the precarious hike in the dark, we arrived at Kalalau Beach with an hour to spare. Our eight-hour hike was rewarded with a soak of tired, blistered feet in the surf (we both had worn new boots), an awestruck gazing at the wild parapets above, and a gratitude at reaching clear skies at sunset.

The Kalalau Valley, a broad green basin rising gently from the coastal trail a mile before the beach, was once home to five thousand Hawaiians subsisting from fishing and taro cultivation. There was also abundant fruit to be had from the lush forests.

Looking forward to as much as a week here, Nashira and I had hoped that some of this legendary bounty would supplement our meager rations. But an exploratory forage up the valley yielded only a few more of the small variety of guavas that grew plentifully along the trails. So our beach days here would have to be sustained by the dried snacks we packed in, and by local fresh water treated with food-grade peroxide.

*

Under shifting silver skies, we spread our towels on the soft sand and sit rapt in the absence of everything we are used to. Without the distraction of school, shopping, movies, books, or even other tourists, Nashira is almost teen-bored. Yet the magic here is pervasive, and she sits calm and reflective under the floating mists.

The first helicopter of the day comes buzzing into view; its passengers are able to scan with video cameras the entire spectacle of this famed coastline. In her trail guide, Kauai Trails, Kathy Morey paradoxically recommends this aerial approach, likening our ground-eye view to that of "a flea on a horse's back." But now already the copter is

gone and gives way to another . . . while we linger at our ease on the sand, the swish of waterfall mingling with the churning of waves.

Being there . . .

Building castles in the sand: a pyramid; a church with a cemetery; a cottage leading to a zen-rock-kiva-shrine; castle walls carved with totem faces, a mouth-cavern, a turret-cone, walls leading nowhere.

A scuttling sand crab scurrying sideways out of our reach, eye-stalks waving wildly.

Practicing scales and Irish jigs on a Sioux love-flute on a deserted Pacific beach facing north, to clearing skies that never quite arrive while clouds are stacked against the cliff wall behind us.

Food supplies running low.

Twelve-hour nights taking a toll on our backs, while dreamscapes stretch to cover all our life's intentions.

Drifting day after day, from aimless tossing slumbers in windy surf-heavy nights, to merely mild walks and wanderings.

Thinking of the stores of food and firewood waiting back home, amid piles of snow and dense forests, our mountain fortress protecting us there (as here) from the masses of humans elsewhere clamoring . . . for what, we cannot any longer imagine.

We dream of baseball, the Beatles, our respective courtships and hobbies, our social dramas unconcluded, career starts false and true, endings and new beginnings. Our unfettered reflections range beyond sand and wave to snow and colder rain.

Our appetites and budgets will grow beyond this glimpse of bare necessity into the realm of entertainments and acquisitions, comprising food for mind and body and civilized soul, experiences to buy and sell.

How simple life is at its core: food, clothing, shelter. At this rate I could live on three thousand a year. The rest is gravy, luxury, pleasure.

To come by the extra income is an adventure, a sacrifice, an entrainment with the desires of others to unsimplify their lives.

Without caffeine, dope or alcohol, fuel for warmth or cooking, social distraction or obligation, we watch the waves and weather, sufficient to this moment.

We go for a brief swim in the treacherous pounding surf that surrounds us waist-deep in one moment, then tears at our ankles with an undertow of stones in the next. We decide to bomb our careful constructions of sand and thereby become enlightened. We stroll to the beach's end where the vertical cliffs send waves back to meet the oncoming waves in a smashing display of force uniting with force in high spray like the high-fiving of triumphant superstars.

A lone beachcomber wends his way slowly down the beach, stooping to inspect the occasional shell, while I, observing, ply my more obscure trade, my legacy of schoolroom and library, city publishing-house and deserted beaches of the mind.

Wave-foam reduces all in its path to smithereens, even the hardest stone cliffs, those black children of the volcano goddess. In the shadow of such cliffs I am but a crab, a jellyfish, a hippie seeking bright shells of my own craft-making, on a misty day in December in the wide Pacific.

I croon my lonely tune here to the Gaelic wind, the African sand, the civilized roar of the copters. Beyond all the surf crashes its relentless bass line. This is the movement of the mother, the beat of her heart, the sound of her blood. The wind itself is more fickle, father-like, remote in its origin and hostile in its effects. The waves call us only back to origins, to home.

Here I am content, for now. Though I've enjoyed the odd conversation with fellow travelers such as Tony, I have not investigated the spiritual seekings of others, on this trip, as counseled by my astrologer. Nor have I made cold calls to potential business customers from local calling areas and thereby qualified my travel expenses as business-deductible. I have only remained true to myself, my nature, in keeping a more or less regular written account of this journey in its outer and inner dimensions, and played the flute twice, and read half of two good books. In this consists enough work to satisfy my

drive for self-importance, my – what's the Fukuyama-Hegel-Greek term – thymotic? urge.

I do my three pages, and then I am free to rot, to vegetate, to beach-bum, to kick back, to dream, to walk, to bask in the misty rain, to write more, to nap, to slumber.

If there is a paradise on earth, I muse predictably, this must be it.

Except . . . I am fearful of swimming here, because the surf is heavy and the undertow treacherous.

Except . . . the "fresh" water in the waterfall is unsafe to drink, due to leptosperosis, a giardia-like disease spread by the feral animals and requiring disinfection by boiling or chemical treatment.

Except . . . with the sparse fruit supply, our days here are numbered by our rice cakes, as well as by our camping permit.

Where then is Paradise, and where is home?

Paradise this may be, yet perhaps with a lower-case "p."

The surfer has gone back down the beach now, still carrying his board.

Maybe it's time now, already, to get back to the highway, the grocery store, and a couple of last days of sunshine on the dry side, where all the tourists go.

4 December

It was a seven-hour hike out from Kalalau. Nashira, who had irritated me with her whining, slow pace at the beginning of the hike on the way in, now kept up an incredibly steady pace, uncomplaining on short rations and striding gracefully through near-constant rain and rivers of mud.

The most trying moment came at the crossing of the major creek, where a group of other hikers timidly looked on, wondering which string might hold them above the surging current. Three behind us tried the high wire but waded nearly chest-deep. I attempted the small low string and found the current formidable, but only thigh-deep; left my pack on the far bank, returned for Nash's pack and, holding her hand, helped her across. Following our example the others began wading in.

One woman in panties, heavy-hipped, stalled for an agonizing minute in midstream, while a male companion valiantly stumbled in face-first trying to help. A third in the party called out, "Don't, you're only making it worse for her!" – while nearly pulling her over himself by tugging her line downstream. Still another man on the far shore held the cord taut – another mistaken strategy, as the line thus forced her over a path of large, slippery boulders. She bravely made it in the end, despite all this "help."

Nashira and I slogged onward for the last two miles of the tail, wet and bedraggled. But coming out of the trail and into the scene of sporty tourists milling around their shiny rental cars at Kee Beach, I suddenly felt superhuman, or more human – or more animal

and less human, if human was what they were – or simply one with the wilderness, with Nature, with the cliffs and sun and rain and streams and rocks and trees and sea. It came as kind of a sudden yet gradually familiar shock to have to take on the human role again, the social face, the interactive identity. On the trail with others of like mind and spirit, it was different – and these comrades of the trail shared a kinship that was evident by the shelter at Kee, where several of us cleaned up and changed into dry clothes. Yet in a half hour we were on the road hitching, riding in vehicles ourselves, conversing happily with our drivers of every stripe, and eating in style in the welcome town.

In Hanalei we went for a big meal at the Mixed Plate – sweet and sour mahi mahi and ginger shoyu chicken with brown rice for me, a vegie-burger and waffle fries for the hungry teen. She found a used book for a dollar and we loaded up with forty dollars' worth of fresh groceries from the health food store, and set out on the road again, bound for the campground at Annini.

A guy in an old truck picked us up – gray hair, electrician's tools and workman's cap. Though he looked to be around my age, fiftyish, he described himself as "an old-timer: been here since '68, before the rush of the eighties." After the two- or three-year boom in electrical work after the hurricane, he turned to repairing computers. He once lived three months in a cave at Kalalau. When I asked if he ever got bored there, he said no, he enjoyed the company of a Chinese Hawaiian woman who brought him there.

Another woman, he told us, was known to swim the distance to Kee Beach with a two-year-old strapped to her back, in two and a half hours. When our driver saw how impressed Nashira and I were with this story, he added the information that he himself, in those days, would run the trail in an hour and a half – to replenish food supplies, 30-35 pounds a load – presumably carrying them at a walk on the way back.

I spent a restless night there at Annini, as I was strangely, preternaturally refreshed by the exercise, the four days in the wilderness, the full moon. I arose at one a.m. to pee, eat fresh bread and pesto, and sit and walk on the beach. A sudden rainstorm caught me down the beach but I waited it out under the leaning trunk of a large tree and returned to bed.

The moonlight in the tent caused Nashira, still sleeping beside me, to appear in ivory repose as the infant she once was . . . or as a corpse, with clawed yet delicate, aesthetically fingered hand. Both images reminded me of her precious uniqueness – enough for my life, I trusted, while I considered the imminent murder of her already conceived half-sibling, a boy, I imagined, in my own image.

"There are no mistakes." Which is the mistake, that bumbling of the condom, or the later decision to terminate a life once begun?

I pushed the moral dilemma aside and slipped into a limbo world of mingled visions from recent past and near future: emerging from the dripping Kalalau fastness to the

mall-carnival, the human wilderness of Kukui Grove Shopping Center, then on to another holiday crowd of partying Hawaiians at Salt Ponds Beach.

That sense of being out of place stayed with me into the daylight hours, onto the bus we rode back to the sunnier side of the island. Where, I had to wonder, is my appreciation of fundamental humanity here? The residue of a communal hunting and farming culture did exist; it was in my face – on the beach, the bus, and in the mall.

The din of voices, of cars, of partying droned on, day and night. Meanwhile I hung out apart, with my daughter, on the beach reading or swimming . . . until it was time once again to retreat from the wind or cold or social noise to the shelter of my tent, my book.

6 December

The very message of life is to trust itself, in the whole and in every part. Thus I come to state my purpose, to stake my spot of beach, to describe my slice of personal paradise, here on a windy beach in December, facing west into the broad Pacific.

And I can let the stragglers and strollers and snorkelers pass me now unresented, as I have found my niche and comfortable ground on which to sit.

My journey of outward discovery has become a journey of discovery of myself, though without the solitude of a solo journey per se. With Nashira I have still been myself – readerly, writerly as we both are in habit and conversational style.

I feel complete here in these final two days, despite the restless wind moving me on in the slow sure calendar's passage. I have found my "place in the sun," my time of reckoning.

Whitman is quoted by Collis as saying there is no time more perfect than the present. Now with a tour of the island behind me – along with a long invigorating hike, practice on my flute, shopping for gifts, even brainstorming new business ideas to implement when I return home – I feel content. It's all fine, it's all good. I cut none of it out; I resent no years or hours wasted; I love Nashira's blessed company here, and Oiseau's at home. I love my well-tuned computer waiting there for me, my shelves of books, my shaky business network, my files of unfinished papers and projects, my baseball obsession, my pages of music to learn, my inconstant daily habits of yoga and meditation and exercise, the trees recently downed still waiting to be hauled up and trimmed and cut. Life is all of this, rich and full and satisfying; and so it is even within the universe of a single one of those books on the shelf, or projects on the to-do list, or trees on the ground waiting to heat my winter days. So it is within each grain of sand, and infinite numbers around me.

I believe Nashira and I started a trend this morning, with our foray to the far end of this crescent beach for a semblance of solitude. The area is now scattered with other sun-bathers every fifty meters or so, where yesterday we were all piled together on the one public beachhead, a cluster of stifling voices and eyes. Now we all have these paradises

to share separately, and this is good because it's why we came here, and not to listen over each others' shoulders.

The palm trees ride the wind gracefully; they are built for this. In all humility I thank them for the inspiration of their grace and beauty, and look out with them onto the vast invisible horizon.

Somewhere out there in space and time is an Asia teeming with its own brand of possibilities. For now I am content – to be who I am, who I have been and will become. Perhaps only a version of the Bill Gray of DeLillo's Mao II, or a more minor recluse yet, who is amused by projects only dreamed, notes played in the windless silence of a snowy mountain retreat. Let this remoter vision be my guide, though, and not the distracted busyness of a community man, a family man, a man with too many faces, jobs, responsibilities, self-made tasks and obligations.

I have only myself to answer to, and let my own wisdom guide me. At this time, at least, of relative freedom from binding relationship, I need to learn to keep it simple. The rest – the workshops, gatherings, parties and sharings, the dinners and gifts and holiday events – I will also enjoy but circumspectly, as from afar. For at heart I am not a party animal, but an observer, a reflective soul, a commentator, a silent and invisible discoverer of truths and beauties unlocked by language, by life in nature, by life alone. I need to come to closer terms with this my curse, my badge, my companion, my chosen mate, my path of liberation and communion.

7 December (Pearl Harbor Day)

The Polihale Blues.

When are blues private, and when public?

Public, when made into art.

For now, mere complaint – nobody's entertainment – a cloud-smeared sun, windblown pages, a beach in afternoon glare. We had wanted to return to the lovely solitude of Polihale, but found that our permit to camp there was not renewable. So we're stuck at the public campground in the town of Hanapepe instead. Last night the local Hawaiian jam band kept us more or less awake until four, playing nonstop, with reasonably good vibes (as my rasta friend says, "It's all in the vibes, mon") but without great talent. Then the wild roosters began their rousing chorus at five, continuing into midday.

The dead reef spoils the incoming waves into tame ripples arriving at our feet, a strange colorless gray-green. There is broken glass in the sand we lie on; a lone slow swimmer under the chilling wind; planes droning in the background like the Zeroes of fifty-seven years ago. Beside us a sick mangy emaciated orange-furred cat is staring listlessly out to sea, having been spurned after its attempt to salvage our styrofoam-shielded deluxe nacho dinner leftovers from the tiny swarming red ants who sting like pinpricks of fresh rain and old sand biting into my aching back in the constant breeze.

Nashira's still upbeat; she wants me to take her picture with her movie-star look – the affected casual beltless jeans, the bellyless gray T-shirt over bathing-suit top, the purple shades, the blonde ponytail, the pursed lips of the tight rosebud mouth – as she sits beside me otherwise writing now like Father Time myself. Earlier I got a shot of her standing under the sign on the palm tree reading, "Danger: Falling Coconuts."

These blues I sing against the drone of planes in the gray Hawaiian sky, the drone of history, the clanging of electric chords and a cheap ukulele, the faded dreams of paradise and the realities of conquest, rape and slaughter, sick cats and fire ants, permits denied, expensive food, a depressed economy, the monsoon here to stay. In summer the tourists will return in force, and we will be at home in the northern land of mosquitoes, gardens to tend, more firewood to cut.

These are the Last Day Blues: when history reclaims its wandering children, when hurricane-released cocks will wander ceaselessly over the terrain free of all natural predators, when goats will trample the lambent cliffs, when pigs will gut the forests, when mud and waterfall alike will infect with the kidney-destroying germs of the urine of cat and goat; and the reefs, once dead, always dead, will continue to cut surf and skin, making feet unfit for unsafe fresh water until healed under pain of salt and biting sand. The sun bravely continues its attempt to find clarity before its fall in the western sea, its appointment with Japan, our appointment at dawn; then we will ride the island bus, open

our vault in the city, ride the plane over the waves, and ride snowy roads home to the chiropractor and the abortionist.

In the singing of these blues I am finally happy. The sun breaks through; the money passing through my fingers like sand loses all meaning; my ambitions to be famous or rich lose all meaning; my relationships take on the nature of grace. And alone or in company, as words flow in and out like water or food, I find myself at home.

8 December

In the Lihue airport we encountered a number of familiar faces. Among the passengers from an incoming flight appeared Jeff, an old acquaintance from my treeplanting days. He was here for a month's vacation with Leeza, another friend I knew from back home, who was here on the island already.

Next, Nashira and I recognized a fellow from Vermont whom we'd met briefly on our first night at Polihale. Waiting for his flight home, he was playing his djembe with a sweater on the head to dampen the sound. He spoke of the healing he had experienced at Kalalau some years ago, which had set him on a new course in his life, and this year had drawn him back there with friends, to a kind of completion. A note in his voice sang out as he spoke – like a sudden tuning-fork whistle, quick as a bird or flute – then passed as quickly. An inner chord had been touched by that magic place, in him and in me. His plane departed for San Francisco.

Finally we passed the black waiter who'd served us at a restaurant two nights before. His son was flying to the Big Island for an operation on his knee, a football injury. The man looked like an ex-football player himself, and said he was, but no longer – bouncing a little girl on his lap.

I return to my journal once again, in the guise of simplicity. This music alone in its sufficiency is a balm I treasure – not solely a gift of the island, but reinforced here, in its power to soothe like waves, to bring sun when there has been only cloud and harsh wind. I sing, if only to myself, as if playing a lonely flute on a deserted shore . . . like the Hawaiian youth under fluorescent light riffing chords through his amp to the moon and waves long after his listeners had gone to bed. Long past the dancers and other jammers, to me and to himself he played in the silence of the night . . . as I play now for myself and for you, and for the beauty of these waves that roll yet in my soul, your soul, the soul of present travelers, and of those who stayed at home.

Red Rock Road, Light Blue Sea

Part One: Finding Water

2 September

Oiseau and I made a pact at the very beginning of our journey to Spain, to begin each day by finding water. Water had long held a sacred place in Oiseau's world of ritual, her inner terrain. It symbolized life, the flow of universal energy, the blood of the goddess. A few droplets of it on an anxious brow, or a few moments of fingertips trailed in a mountain creek, could serve to bestow grace and transcendence upon the most disturbed or congested psychic condition, could liberate corresponding tears from an emotional reservoir needing to burst.

In Nelson before leaving we took a walk in the morning down Bealby Point Road, all the way to the end. Through a crumbling rock wall we entered the woods. She cupped her hands under a trickling waterfall and brought water to my lips to drink. I traced droplets of the sacred element over her closed eyelids.

Later that day, walking in the salt-fresh air outside the Vancouver airport, already we felt the absence of the things we were leaving behind, including parts of ourselves. I had the sensation of passing through a membrane to the future. Out of reach now are children

and books, friends and music, projects and jobs. We have chosen to live for the next three months with nothing but what we could fit into thirty-pound backpacks. We would compensate for a lifetime of overabundance with small bites of chocolate, moments of soft touch. Along the way we would discover Spain, southern France, and Portugal.

Dark clouds roiled the open horizon, covering mountains which loomed grayly behind. Oiseau and I sat down with our packs, awaiting our departure, on a long green traffic island on the busy airport boulevard. We stretched out on the grass, idly reading, eating, leaning up against a big shade tree like kids out from school.

It felt to me as if I were living out the New Age cliché, "Today is the first day of the rest of your life." In three hours I was to take off on my first trip to old Europe. My longtime dream was to cross the Atlantic by ship; but that was more for the journey than the destination. In fact I had spent most of my adult life avoiding a tour of Europe because of the negative judgments I gave to its oppressive, imperialist history. Western civilization itself was a suspect concept; though I had long grown to acknowledge and accept its undeniable role in everyone's life in the contemporary world – whether we liked it or not, whether it was politically correct or not, and no matter how "natural" were our ideals of alternative ways of life.

The contrasting freedom embodied in North American history was deeply rooted in my value system and backwoods lifestyle; and so, while newly open to the possibility of enjoying a trip to the Old World, I was curious as to how I would handle the inevitable

clash of values. In this respect, Spain and Portugal, and the plan that Oiseau and I had made to travel on foot through the undeveloped coasts and mountains of those countries, were well-considered choices. Engaged in such a journey, we were bound to feel somewhat at home, while still enjoying new vistas both geographical and cultural.

The plan was to start by washing our skins in the Mediterranean, then to walk west up the height of land between Spain and France, into the Pyrenees. Hiking the dry high ground between villages, we'd be cold at night, perhaps – but not as cold as the English author Laurie Lee who in December of 1936 took a twenty-pound rucksack with no tent: just books, a blanket, and a violin.

The poet Ryoko, our friend Dale had advised us before we left, knew how to do it: "A robe, a bowl, that's all I have."

Before boarding the plane, I jettisoned a boring paperback book. Better nothing, I thought, than to fill one's mind with trash. Oiseau threw away her battered old daypack, and replaced a worn money belt.

In an ambience of opening, we left the ground of our old world behind. We felt ourselves to be parts of a melody singing itself, a new rhythm already drumming in our moving bones.

3 September

Passing quickly through a rainy Heathrow, and over the quilted fields of France, we came to the red-brown hills of Spain. From the air we could see thin white tracks of roads and trails winding over the dry hills. In contrast to England and France, most of the landscape beneath us appeared uncultivated, even wild. This topography was rougher, less amenable to fencing and farming. The prospects for a vacation in the comforting folds of nature seemed good. Running water, though, looked scarce. We would perhaps not find it every day, after all, except in plastic bottles on store shelves.

Upon landing in Barcelona, I marveled at the vast and roseate, polished marble floors of the airport, my first taste of the never-ending stonework which above all other features would mark the Iberian landscape. We bought bottled water from a kiosk and took a train into town, then navigated the old streets looking for a cheap hotel. Tourist crowds filled the Ramblas and spilled into the neighboring districts, and Oiseau and I wandered with them past churches, shops, and restaurants, keeping a sharp eye out for the pickpockets for which this city was notorious.

We found a youth hostel where we were warned not to stay out on the streets past ten. The clerk, who with his tall strong body and long black hair looked like an American Indian, spoke English and sounded as if he knew what he was talking about. He drew a finger across his throat for emphasis. As newcomers we felt it was only wise to pay him heed, as we were tired from the long flight and had no special desires for city

entertainment anyway. We went around the corner for a tunafish pizza and returned to the room by ten. We left the city early the next morning with our funds and heads intact.

Except – I realized on the train north to Llança – because of a botched conversation in my rudimentary Spanish, I had managed to pay the rail station clerk double the required fare. The clerk had taken the extra money, amounting to twenty-five Canadian dollars, with hardly a shrug.

6 September

We set out like eager pilgrims on the first long day's walk with full packs, over the fire-blasted hills from Llança to El Port de Selva de la Mar. We had located a map which showed a marked trail running through and around the hills of the rugged Cap de Creus. Hiking this loop through an area which was largely protected would give us our first taste of "wild Spain." The route would allow us to tune up our hiking muscles in gently rolling terrain before venturing inland along the spine of the Pyrenees. It would also allow us to take advantage of the balmy September weather with more swimming along the unpopulated coastline. We had already enjoyed a couple of days of blissful splashing in the Mediterranean while camped outside Llança.

As we rose higher and higher on the blackened goat paths of ancient vineyards and olive orchards, where all the vegetation was razed and scorched, we both felt as if we were once again carrying bags of tree seedlings up B.C. clearcuts. But these hills were

terraced with rock walls right up to the heights of land, and that sense of long human history lent an eerie permanence to the scene so marked by recent devastation.

A solitary hiker came up from behind, passed us with a brief "Hola," and strode ahead on a path going straight up the mountain, while Oiseau and I stopped for lunch. We consulted our map while he disappeared over the heights. The trail we were following branched at this point and we weren't sure if we wanted to follow the young man's route. One trail marked on the map led to a monastery, but which of the actual trails did it represent? And where would we end up if we chose the wrong trail?

Rested and replenished by our lunch, we decided to take the other hiker's lead. The steep path led us up and over to a neighboring mountain, the highest point in the visible landscape. At its top was a ruined castle, which overlooked the enormous restored monastery. Both were incredible compositions of massive quarried stone, all the more impressive for their remoteness.

Everywhere I saw questions without visible answers: When was that once-magnificent castle laid waste? When and why did the lords or slaves or monks who built these monstrosities, do so? Were the great stone buildings erected only after centuries of remaking these hills acre after acre, terrace upon terrace, rock by rock – or did the fortresses come first?

How was the countryside burned black as far as the eye could see? The lingering sharp smell of smoke and ash told of a recent conflagration, a fire evidently more massive

even than the runaway wilderness fire which had peeked over the ridge behind our home in Argenta, with glowing eyes in the night like a mad cougar, just that summer.

We two dusty travelers had no more information than what our senses gave us, and with that we would have to be content. Down from the fortified hills we came, passing a clutch of whitewashed houses nestled in a high valley below the monastery. Beyond the village we passed a prehistoric dolmen, a burial site composed of giant stones and bordered by a rock wall of more recent vintage. Here a small sign informed us that these stones had been placed there some seven thousand years before. The way this hoary monument stood framed on the hillside by the blackened remains of olives and pines gave a Gothic view of a classy bay village further below: with sepulchral fingers lacing an image of white-splashed luxury by the rippling sea.

Oiseau and I were a little uncertain of the availability of food and water in the next part of our journey around the isolated Cap de Creus, as the villages we expected to pass through were small and far apart. One village indicated on our map proved not to be a village at all, but a Club Med resort. We chose to bypass the access road with its guardhouse, in favor of a longer walk toward the end of the cape, where there was a lighthouse and, we hoped, a water tap.

The lighthouse came with an ugly restaurant, perched together at land's end. A water truck was parked outside the restaurant filling its storage tanks through large ribbed

hoses. I took a handful of empty water jugs from our packs, and went inside to fill them from the washroom sink. As bad luck would have it, a sign on the washroom wall stated, in plain English:

"Warning: this water is not potable. It comes from a well and has been treated with chlorine, but is not legal."

My heart sank. We had an evening and another long day's walk out of here, and no other water. Well water didn't sound too bad, though, and the addition of chlorine sealed it. Legal or not, it was worth the risk. For insurance I added a few drops of food-grade hydrogen peroxide, of which I'd packed a small supply for just such contingencies, and we walked away content, if still somewhat nervous.

That night we made camp in the wild, a forbidden practice on the protected cape. Our rationale was informed partly by the general advice of the guidebook to be discreet when camping wild, and partly by common sense, given our low-impact camping style. We needed only a small bed-sized space on the ground; we cooked on a one-burner butane stove; we packed out whatever we brought in; and we'd be gone by daylight the next day. We found a relatively level patch of bare earth shielded by brush beside the narrow, rock-paved road, a Roman byway bordered on both sides by the ubiquitous stone walls. Discreet enough to postpone until dark the laying out of our sleeping gear, we felt also free enough, in that isolated location, to play music under the pink sunset.

It turned out that this ancient road was popular for local foot traffic; and so the recorder-and-Turkish-drum jam, tending naturally toward Moorish airs, attracted interested looks from assorted passersby: two small boys heading up the path, then women walking in town shoes and dresses (headed to the restaurant for cocktails?) The evening's parade ended with a man and boy, the stocky, gray-haired man barely hiding an amused and enigmatic smile.

Tired from the long day's walk, we slept undisturbed under a sky full of stars, and woke to a brimming red sun. The next day we walked into Roses, from the wild and undeveloped rocky cape to a sudden white city of high-rise resorts, appearing all at once around a bend of the cliffs. It was like walking through a doorway in time . . . except that we had some warning along the way, when we came upon a series of half a dozen strange seaside forts. These were fairly modern, identical in appearance, constructed of concrete and stone the same as ever, but in a forbidding, fascist-futurist mode. Set into the hillside, each fort offered a low, rounded profile opening outward to the sea, yet also beckoning inward to a central dark doorway behind the short baffle of a wall. We ventured into one of these mysteries by way of a rear tunnel, down long corridors of steel and stone, past chambers that yielded no secrets, whether locked, or open and empty.

Were these strange constructions built as prisons, armories, or gun emplacements, during the Spanish Civil War? The questions and answers hardly mattered any more. I

had to take the enigmas in stride, as just more evidence of architectural genes responsible for the millennia of stoneworks in this ancient land. It was the same impulse, over and over, wall upon wall, to build bulwarks against the sea and sun, against pirates and restless neighbors. We, meanwhile, as adventures of more recent and innocent intent, had a different sort of agenda to follow, on our way to the next sandy beach.

8 September

We've arrived in the bustling tourist town of Cadaqués, former home of Salvador Dali. There's a small, pebbly public beach right downtown, not too crowded at this time of year. The water is clean and warm, Oiseau is catching some rays, and I'm enjoying a relaxed swim in the small sunny harbor, when I notice that the techno dance mix coming from somewhere on the shore has been pumped up to high volume. Peering under a pedestrian bridge where a crowd has gathered to watch, I see bustling feet and bare legs cavorting. Getting out of the water to have a closer look at what all the fuss is about, I see a small square just beyond the bridge, full of dancing, frolicking bathing-suited children, with a giant cannon spurting yellow and pink suds like clouds of cotton candy all around them. This throng of kids has been energized into a chaotic frenzy of movement – dancing, hopping, jumping, running, laughing, squealing, capering full tilt with arms and legs akimbo; and their faces shine in amazement and delight at the sheer

surreal spectacle of it all – and, no doubt, at the lavish attention paid to them by the ranks of onlookers in this, the very heart of the town.

Europe – I say to myself, shaking my head in amusement. So this is what Western civilization has come to. It could be worse.

I slip back into the comforting detachment of the waves, eager to maximize each opportunity to swim in this mesmerizing Mediterranean Sea, with its gentle waves, its enchanting color, its comforting and buoyant warmth. The circus scene continues but as a backdrop now, to the soothing serenity brought on by the water.

Back out of town, and now refreshed, we resumed our relentless walking over the hills riddled with relentless, seemingly endless rockwalled terraces. It appeared that every inch of this countryside was covered with them . . . mile after mile, as far as the eye could see. It was at once sobering and mystifying, to realize that these lands were at one time developed and worked so intensively, and now lay almost uniformly abandoned to occasional walkers on Roman roads and long-distance hiking trails. If the still-living trees and vines were tended and harvested, there was no evidence of anyone out there doing the work.

This stone-wall culture had the effect, I observed, of making two pedestrian tourists, and all the current works of our contemporary culture – all its words and music and media glitz – seem trivial, puny, irrelevant. Yet those stupendous stoneworks, in scale

unimaginable, sculpting the whole earthen landscape whether by means of great or tiny building blocks, in turn seemed impossibly overambitious, perhaps even logically unnecessary. Was the whole vast unlikely enterprise constructed of slave labor? To this newcomer who was used to being a modest pioneer, a mere homesteader in the wilderness, all this effort of construction seemed arbitrary, or worse, obsessive; especially the castles built upon pinnacles which themselves were natural fortresses of rock.

On this day the ongoing mystery took another Dali-esque twist when Oiseau and I followed a dead-end road to a crazy one-hotel resort where cruise ships came and went and people danced to one-man Spanish schmaltz-rock music played live on a standup techno five-instrument layered synthesizer keyboard. The swimming, as it happened, was ideal: warm and clear, with just enough wave action to be interesting, just cool enough to be refreshing.

On the way down to this carnival-cove south of Llança, we saw our first standing water, a putrid algaefied pool by a dried creek. Nearby, a green-stained bathtub was fed by a green hose dangling from an ivied cliff. Though the hose didn't appear to be running, a slick of recent runoff still wet the road.

9 September

No cyber-café this side of Figueres, the bar boy told us. But I was still wired in, one way or another. Part of my equipment was a pint-sized laptop computer with a small but

workable keyboard. As it weighed only twelve ounces and was essential to documenting the trip, it made the cut, no question. Also I carried a small aluminum drum weighing only a pound and a half – which together with an ultralight pennywhistle adequately covered my musical needs. Oiseau was packing a plastic recorder, a bound journal, a watercolor kit and sketch pad, and knitting needles. We had no books except two ebooks stored on the computer. The guidebooks we had wanted to bring seemed useful but heavy, so Oiseau had carved out the relevant sections with a razor, and photocopied whatever other pages we considered necessary.

Perched on the seaside rocks at Cap Raz, north of Llança, I leveled my flimsy laptop with a small flat stone. The surf pounded its patternless rhythm while Oiseau played a minuet against the panchromatic water, and the sun rose sideways, from behind a jutted rock. I turned my attention back to the dim gray screen, bemoaning in words the fact that in our haste to depart the city of Roses, I had missed a chance to browse the ruins dating back to the ninth century B.C. I was intrigued that there was a colony in Spain established that long ago by Greek explorers. And I was perturbed that I had not really recognized my fascination with the ancient history of the region, until a prime opportunity to study the evidence firsthand had passed.

But true to my innate spirit of looking forward rather than back, I was able to recover a sense of excitement about the new discoveries this day would bring. Today we were

bound for France by foot, across the low Pyrenees where the mountains handclasp the sea.

The original plan to go west into the higher Andorran ranges had been scrapped, as the inland trail meant steeper climbs, colder nights, longer distances between villages, uncertain water supplies, and tight timing before a rendezvous we'd been planning with a friend from home who was presently walking in France. The trail Oiseau and I decided to follow instead would put us in the French town of Cerbères in a couple of hours.

Climbing the coastal hills, though, which rose four hundred meters above the sea, proved tough going in the noonday heat with heavy packs. Breathing hard and covered in sweat, Oiseau called for a break before we reached the top. "I remember now why I don't like climbing mountains," she declared in a voice that carried an unstable mixture of determination and despair.

I soothed her by sprinkling water on her blazing face; silently I reconsidered the wisdom of our planned traverse of the eastern Pyrenees in a week's time. "We've got all day today," I said. "We don't need to push it."

Slowing to a more sustainable pace, we crowned the ridge that lay ahead of us and so finally crossed the deserted border to Cerbères, still hugging the coast. As we descended into the outskirts of this first French town by way of an old alley by the railroad bed, I was shocked by the sense of poverty and ugliness that greeted us there. On the hillside to

our left was a long series of patched-together buildings and pens, loud with the sound of angry, barking dogs. The buildings were constructed of scrap metal and wood, tarpaper, stone and tile; the pens were fenced by a similar hodgepodge of old bedsprings and rusty wire, and covered by ragged nets. Was this unsightly jumble somehow caused by the misfortunes of the last war, I wondered; or was it the result of some other, more personal adversity?

Maybe, on the other hand, everything was fine – and the reaction of one spoiled tourist was my own problem. But as we came into town, I couldn't help feeling the same about the public bridges, the railway trestle, the light posts, the other buildings. It was an effect of old wrought iron; of pieced-together, obsolete equipment; of Victorian-era decay. I was reminded of that weird French video which I 'd seen earlier that summer – The City of Lost Children – a macabre nightmare vision of the stealing of children's dreams.

11 September

I sat with my pack beside me on a low stone wall in front of a fashionable house in Perpignan, France, while Oiseau shopped in the supermarché. Traffic pulled up to the curb to park, and people strolled and drove by, and I watched the daily urban life proceed here as in any North American or, for that matter, Spanish city, different only in cultural details like pay toilets, the ages of buildings as displayed on cornices and foundations, or

the regional variety of Romanesque language. This Euro-urban culture was everywhere rather homogeneous compared to the variant my partner and I brought from the hills of either continent, with our scraggled hair and dusty sandals, our trail-worn clothes and packs, our loose-limbed stride, our eyes of the sun and sea. Our hearts were open, but by our appearance, we were open to judgment by the hard squinty questioning eyes of the townspeople stuck in traffic. No doubt we appeared to be suspiciously, if not dangerously, free.

We had made some concessions to the road: fresh short haircuts for both of us, and a long-sleeved blouse for Oiseau when entering towns (the guidebook warned her of the taboo against bare female shoulders). But my beard was still unfashionably long and unruly. I wasn't sure whether its silvery grayness made it better or worse; but it hardly mattered, as any facial hair was extremely scarce in this part of the world. And the trimmed hair was still shaggy by local standards.

My wardrobe for the trip consisted of a new pair of lightweight pants with zip-off legs, handmade silk shorts with bone button, a beige T-shirt with Picasso-style Kaslo Jazz Festival logo, a navy-blue silk T-shirt with long sleeves, a casual coarse-woven cotton shirt and an ultra-light, blue-green fleece. I also had a sea-colored rain shell, thick wool cap, and blue long underwear bottoms if needed. On my feet I wore sturdy canvas shoes with hiking soles for daily trekking, or Teva sandals for lighter use.

Oiseau normally wore blue hiking trousers with a long-sleeved teal blouse or sleeveless silk top. She also carried a tight-fitting jacket of black velour with a row of bright buttons, a lightweight black fleece, and a somewhat sheer, short-skirted black-and-white sleeveless dress to wear over black leggings and a black sports bra. She had just one pair of light hiking boots for footwear.

All in all, we were obvious, if somewhat offbeat, tourists – with just enough spare clothes to keep from smelling bad, and enough style to appear respectable. Not that we cared terribly much; after all, we were just passing through.

Playing drums and flutes in the park by the youth hostel later that day, we were the only ones around, except for a couple of young soccer players scooting by curiously. We sat on a bench in the soft evening light and played lively dance tunes in three and four, but no one else appeared. The streets were empty except for cars – like Spokane, I thought, only prettier. There was no village culture here, around the dry fountain; no evening dancers had come to the call of pipe and drum. This archaic music was likely not even heard above the hum of the automobile.

We slept poorly in our tent at the hostel, thanks to the persistent sharp barks of a dog in the police kennel next door, all night long. In the morning the beast had fallen silent, giving over its domination of the noise bandwidth to the morning rush-hour traffic.

Oiseau and I had weak coffee and sugared milk with dry white bread for petit déjeuner, and a soothing hot shower before departing for the train station in the humid morning. We would enjoy a day off from extensive walking, with a five-hour train trip to Pau, our planned embarkation point for the Somport Pass through the high western Pyrenees.

14 September

Up into the higher mountains we went, climbing on a road with increasing grade, still a day from Col de Somport. The trails we'd been following, the GR 653 and the Chemin de St. Jacques, were more difficult to trace as they collided in the narrow valley with the rail line, the highway, and the GR 10 coming in along the peaks from the west, along with a number of more local trails.

Today Oiseau and I started late and spent much time in the towns of this beautiful region of southwestern France, the Béarn. In Bedous we were lucky enough to come across a bustling Thursday morning farmers' market, where we bought herbed sausage, soft cheddar, mushrooms, red peppers, almond-honey nougat, a melon, a bag of juicy fresh figs, and two loaves of crusty local bread, and were entertained by a lone standing fiddler playing classical.

We walked back out into the countryside and ate our market lunch by a huge spreading chestnut tree loaded with nuts, beside a sheep meadow. There we speculated

on the historic transformation of this land, presuming that original chestnut forests had been cut down and replaced with meadows for sheep and cattle. The Visigoths (or whoever was here when such a transition occurred) evidently preferred meat and cheese and centuries of hard work over interminable eons of chestnut paste and boredom.

Meadow track and trail gave way to highway in the narrowing valley. Between villages, in the hot afternoon, an old rail station appeared. White graffiti painted on the highway had already indicated local resistance in these parts to a tunnel construction mega-project; and the funky exterior of the station, with its green paint and homespun signs, gave hints of its current incarnation as an Anarchist-Green-Rasta café. Standing on the highway in the baking sun, Oiseau and I made the compelling decision to stop in for a cool beer.

The quartet of young men in the large, high-ceilinged room continued playing cards, hardly looking up at us newcomers. I thought I heard one muttering a reticent bonjour, under the more welcoming sound of local folk and world beat on the stereo. Oiseau and I ordered a beer and sat at an empty table and looked at the resistance posters with hippie paint covering the walls. What a welcome change of scene this was, after a steady diet of straight-laced conservatism. It was a window back to the alternative culture we'd left behind in the British Columbia mountains. But on such a day, in such a place, the milieu wasn't exactly lively. A djembe sat unplayed on the floor; the barechested bartender in

dreads stared absently and wandered in and out. Finally, bored, Oiseau and I moved outdoors to a shaded table in the sunshine, where we quietly finished our beer before hoisting our packs once more.

There was water everywhere around us in these French mountain valleys, flowing from every hillside and in every town fountain, running full-time for the taking. We'd been carrying too much of it in our packs, from town to town, not really calculating distances or trusting that we could count on fresh sources.

One fountain in front of a church, like others we'd seen, brought forth running water over a planter of flowers, at the feet of a stone Virgin. Her hands were outstretched in offering, freely giving these gifts of her grace.

In the old church behind her, from the 1660s, Disney-like graphics at the altar (appealing to the public need for glitz and shimmer) presented, as a backdrop for the crucifix, a giant painting of St. Jack himself or similar hero about to hack the head off (or skewer the neck of) a hapless Moor or other mortal enemy laid prone under his foot. The Lady of Mercy was nowhere to be found in this tableau, but her Son's head beamed beneficently from above it all, in gold and blue spangles.

15 September

After passing through the town of Urdos first thing in the morning for groceries, Oiseau and I found ourselves at a spot further back on the hillside trail, via a wrong turn. Crossing the river once more, we became lost on looping trails and roads, and after an hour and a half, found that we'd still progressed no further up the valley. Finally, exhausted from carrying heavy packs in the thirty-degree heat, and still lost despite directions from two local ladies (both claiming the way ahead was "facile"), Oiseau began complaining of severe abdominal cramps, and lay down unable to continue.

Trying to comfort her and get a sense of what the problem might be, I feared the worst. Appendicitis? A collapsed uterus? Maybe it was just a bad case of flu, or food poisoning, or contaminated water.

While chiefly concerned for Oiseau's well-being, I couldn't help worrying about the rest of our trip. If her condition was serious and required an operation, we would probably have to fly back to Vancouver. Even local treatment could wipe out our remaining budget, since we'd gambled and decided not to take out extra health insurance.

A half an hour of rest in the shade seemed a good idea, for starters; but it didn't really help. Oiseau wasn't hungry and already had drunk plenty of water. There was nothing more I could do or think of, and she was still suffering. Finally I decided to leave her beside the road and walk to the highway, where I would hitch back to Urdos and try to contact a doctor.

Just then a car approached us on the road, and on an impulse I jumped up and motioned for the driver to stop. It was a facteur, a young man driving a postal car on his suburban rounds. I stumbled through an explanation in French of what the trouble was and asked if he could call a doctor for us. The man appeared to get the sense of it, agreed to make the call, and drove off.

Five minutes later a stout middle-aged woman came charging down the street, huffing and puffing, asking in French if the lady was all right and what did we need. At once I could tell that her persistent and overbearing energy, well-meaning as it was, just added stress to Oiseau's plight. But Oiseau's French was better than mine, and so it was up to her to explain that perhaps it wasn't an emergency. She just wasn't sure. When the woman calmed down enough to listen to Oiseau describing her symptoms, she uttered the confident opinion that the trouble must be "la chaleur": the oppressive heat.

We accepted the woman's suggestion to come rest in her cool house just nearby, and were offered there a bewildering choice of foodstuffs and drinks, which Oiseau patiently refused except for a sweet mint syrup mixed with cold mineral water. There was an older man in the house, her uncle, very short and quiet, who watched the Olympics on TV below his old stone fireplace hung with an ancient musket; we were also introduced to the man's ninety-year-old wrinkled mother, also short but lively and less intimidated by this strange intrusion. Everyone hoped that the refreshment would do the trick, as the nearest doctor, back in Bedous, was deemed unreliable.

Eventually, Oiseau said she was feeling better, and we accepted a ride back to Urdos, where there was a campground and telephone. She lay there with me under a tree in the shade, until late afternoon; and then, with Oiseau feeling considerably stronger and without much pain, we hit the road again – this time choosing the unambiguous highway. We made a resolution from that moment on to avoid walking in the midday heat, having learned some respect for that subtropical custom, the siesta.

16 September

We rise an hour before dawn, and breakfast and pack by the light of the full moon. Once more we have transgressed the law, this time by enjoying a perfect natural campsite by a clear stream in a national park, a few kilometers from the mountain crest and a reentry into Spain. Heading up the last stretch of highway to the Somport Pass, we gape around at the pink peaks, as high as B.C. mountains and lit wondrously in the pearly high-altitude air. Knowing the history of this range from the guidebook, we can see firsthand the results of a big geologic squeeze: the Iberian landmass pushed up against Europe by the African Plate.

At Canfranc Estaçion, there is a Gothic railway station and massive tunnel works under construction . . . more of the same of what stoneworkers have been doing here for centuries. This time, crews are pounding massive curved wall forms into place. A

welding team is cutting apart, meanwhile, a section of modern but now obsolete iron fencing . . . a change of direction.

Near the Somport Pass on the French side there is an old fort with ramparts built straight up from the formidable sheer cliffs. Vertical slits range all along the route, for guns to fire on advancing troops. And all along the cliff a horizontal trench has been cut and then embedded in the rock, providing another slim channel from which defenders could fire down upon the narrow pass.

Where do the age-old works of Nature end, and the massive works of Man begin? In such an historic landscape, it is often difficult to tell. Earlier we saw an old decayed tree by a farmyard, still green and alive in its outer branches, whose trunk was half composed of rockwork, with carefully mortared stones replacing the rotted wood. In the terraced fields on Cap de Creus, the aged rock walls, built of numberless reconstituted fragments and shards like those still scattered about on the ground, flow without discrimination or apology over pre-existing ledges and boulders.

In the mountains above Canfranc, there is a vast bulwark, a rampart of rock cliffs, behind which rises a formidable tower of higher rising rock. This whole geologic complex is built like a castle, with forbidding walls defending an inner building rising above, in majestic rulership over all. Such must have been the inspiration for the human attempts to do the same and more; to go the earth's constructions one better; to crown every rocky outlook and promontory with a cross, a castle, a monastery, a fort.

Are these architectural afterthoughts really as obtrusive as they seem to a person like me, who discounts the ethics of the empires that created them along with the prodigious pride of their builders? Or are they simply – like life itself – extensions of the earth's own geologic process? Where does the inorganic stop and the organic begin? Is limestone, formed from the skeletons of microorganisms, a product of the earth, or of the earth's creatures? What about the burrows of gophers or marmots, and the excavations of the grizzlies who eat them? The tunnels of earthworms, the growth of mosses on rocks, or of ivy on stone walls?

Is a forest of planted trees really a forest or just a farm?

17 September

On the train to Galicia, we retire straightaway to our shelf-like, narrow bunks in a shared compartment, pulling tiny sheets over our clothes. The rocking train like ocean waves proceeds to lull me into, at best, a kind of half-sleep, in which my steps flow like terraced rock across the hillsides, across the centuries of this rolling land. Earlier when the sun was still rising on this long journey of a day, we stopped by a stream near Jaca, and speculated how far the muddy water in the stream had come since we arose – from as far as the high pass where, the day before, we had marveled at the view in a clear puddle of "<u>cielo desde la terra</u> all upside down"?

It is wondrous indeed how far we have come in this day . . . from sleeping in a ditch, like gypsies in the hedgerows, through the ancient ciudad where the gardens grow well-tended right to the walls, down the paved strip through the flatlands where the ancient haunted inns once stood, and at last to a crossroads like Denver, gathering traffic and taxes: Zaragoza.

The chief attractions of this city for Oiseau and me, during an evening's walk while waiting for a train departure, are a cathredal mass we happen upon briefly, and a mysteriously seductive, stalwart Moorish palace that we miss going in, because of indecision and poor route planning. Zaragoza on the whole is a modern ciudad with layer on layer of history over rock, where everyone dines to TV Olympics, where the hard land and its hard history show in the hard faces and curt replies of the tightlipped people; where Oiseau and I pass like Cocacola and Barbie on our way to the Celtic Galician coast and its remnants of peoples gone not one, but ten thousand years before.

18 September

Being tourists is much like being in relationship. In both cases it's a gift, a portion of grace, to be settled for a time. In between, there's just coming and going, with the stress of trains and buses and airports and cities and hotels and expensive food. Each new stop has its orientation phase, where you buy maps and learn the new local dialect and find your way around, getting used to the place. Then for a brief time you're there, just there

enjoying what it's like where you are. But that contentment passes as quickly as the fullness of the moon, and then the weather has changed too, and you're thinking about where you're going next, and before you know it, you're on your way again.

Our overnight train journey is a moving dream, into the unknown. A leap in the dark from the high country of the interior, from standard Spanish to a dialect closer to Portuguese, into new green forests with wolves and snakes and mist-cloaked surprises.

The succession of days has been finding placement stone by stone into a journalistic wall through which a new history is being marked, with or without the mortar of permanence. There is, meanwhile, the recurrent matter of finding a place to sleep – whether a nest in the rocks and soft grass under the pines; or, as in this train-of-the-moment, a short and narrow bunk where I am a too-close fit, snug like a brick in a wall.

Reflecting on our experiences thus far, I realize that this journey has become more than I forecast. I'm discovering a compelling interest in the early history of this region, of the era before the dominating figure of Christ came on the imperial and architectural scene. More and more I find an affinity for the alternative, the Moorish influence; the mysterious "dark ages" of the first millennium, and of the thousand and more years before that.

It's my pioneering counterparts that I seek out through our works, in this roughly beautiful land still so wild in appearance – if only because, like them, I built the first stoneworks in a certain corner of the woods. I continually wonder: Who terraced these

hills and first planted olives and grapes here? Who cleared the forests for fields and fuel for ironworks? Who carved mines for copper and laid the first paving stones? Were these historic acts all the idea, if not the exclusive work, of "man," which is to say, of males, who abandoned the search of once-abundant game as it diminished inexorably behind the successful childbearing of the other half of our species?

And meanwhile did the creative spirit of the uncelebrated women find expression not so much in those rows and walls and towers of stone but moreso in sweet rosebud mouths – mouths first sucking tenderly but then voraciously, endlessly hungry for the dwindling meat and natural fruits and finally the scratched-in, ploughed-in crops planted on the terraced fields? At times the two sexes worked with harmonious purpuse, no doubt, in that dry thin soil, until it could be depended upon in fertility and irrigation and choice of crop and long-improving method, to provide sustenance to the growing crop of humanity itself.

Next chapter: monoculture, phylloxera and famine, exodus.

And then, a kind of turning inside out, through the magic of tourism, with its superficial admiration of these works of the past . . . its postcard flow, yes even its flow of journalistic prose, like water over the ancient stones.

For her part, Oiseau is looking forward to the lushness of the Galician hills, and the rugged beauty of its seacoast; to getting through the necessary transition phase of train

and city, back to the self-sufficiency of the trail. First on her agenda, upon arriving, is to find a map so we can plan our next week's itinerary.

*

When the train deposited us finally in the blustery Galician port of A Coruña, Oiseau and I found ourselves disoriented and discouraged. Nowhere could we find a map with trails, and the city itself was a hilly maze that left us weary after a morning scouting for a bookshop that might sell us one. By afternoon the weather was turning gloomy; a wind-ruffled newspaper predicted rain.

Sitting down on a bench by the harbor, we took stock with a list of needs, keywords for improving our presently abject condition. First, of course, was "to cry," followed by "to get clean." Then, with no particular order in mind, we wrote: laundry, food, water, private space, safe-keeping, sea not city, better map, independence, plan/direction, bathroom, nourishing activity, walking, dry shelter, plan for today/tonight, find/hold our center, clarify our intentions, a settled path, giving ourselves credit for coming to where we are so far.

We followed this inventory with a consideration of options, ways of meeting these various needs, which boiled down to a more manageable list: hotel, train south away from city, walking north toward campgrounds, hitchhiking.

Through this simple exercise we were able to come out of our cloudy confusion and to see our way clearly to a decision. We would go for the hotel, and tomorrow head south.

So much for finding water – now we were chasing sun.

22 September

Today's adventure begins on a narrow ledge, barely big enough for two, which Oiseau and I have scratched out of the dirt and shored up with rocks, in a thicket on a hillside by a Portuguese highway. Yesterday, by contrast, we rose from a lumpy mattress in a decrepit hotel in Arcos de Valdevez where, the evening of our arrival, the landlady had to hush up an old drunk singing in the bath. We took a bus from Arcos and got off at Soajo, which one map told us served as access to a national park. Few living souls were in evidence there in the hot afternoon sun. We wandered through the medieval streets, past a clutch of raised rock ratproof corn crypts which at first we thought housed bodies. Seeing no signs or other evidence of the national park or its trails, we asked a young woman in the town square for help. She was a student from France – a lucky circumstance considering our poor Portuguese – and she led us to the Café Paris, where the French owner gave us instructions to go up a narrow, unmarked stone road. I added a few sober words of caution regarding the wildlife, the legendary wolves and snakes and wild boars; but when we told him we came from Canada and were used to coexisting

with cougars and bears, he scoffed at the local dangers, saying, “Ah, then you have no problem. Enjoy your holiday.”

We celebrated our good fortune with a refreshing dip in a clear creek pool which appeared twenty minutes outside the village. After that long and twisting road from Soajo became a paved highway, we found the hiker’s shelter advertised on our map, but it was closed tight, with a sign beside it saying no campismo clandestino.

Thus we were compelled to fight our way in the gathering dark through a burnt tangle of sticks up from a hairpin corner around a creek and onto our stony ledge, widening it somewhat with the help of large rocks from a nearby fallen wall, and squishing our Thermarests together for two tired but loving bodies, under the clear and mild, starlit night. We slept fitfully until 2 a.m. when some wild or domestic animal, on the loose in the woods nearby, interrupted my dream of being chased by a grizzly, and Oiseau’s dream of a myriad of snakes. But we slept all right again until dawn, when the highway traffic began, and it behooved us to pack up and move.

We climbed steadily up a valley of Precambrian rock standing out in great megalithic humps against a dry wilderness of mountains beyond which lay interior Spain. Along the way we passed through more tiny villages, attracting mistrustful stares. The adjoining hillsides were pocked with rock huts of mysterious lineage, shaped like igloos. The people here seemed, like the Inuit, to dwell in that state of old and solid culture just

bordering on the modern world but not of it, simply partaking of its satellite TV's here and there, its odd tractor and suburban car. Otherwise: otro mundo. We the foreigners tracking through . . . not of this place, not of these people.

Cultures may be compared at different levels not defined by nationality or border but by their ecological context, or their stage of historical development. Precambrian rock will provide a consistent backdrop whether to a Canadian or a Portuguese valley; and in terms of basic lifestyle, these hill-tribe Portuguese appear closer to the Inuit than to their own neighbors, the urban-suburban residents of Arcos a dozen kilometers away.

The village of Pendera announced itself in advance by a modernist highway sign evoking architectural visions of a futuristic mega-mall. In reality it was just another hill-town, with the distinction of hosting a bona fide cathedral.

Today, as luck would have it, was a Sunday. Oiseau and I were properly awed when we came upon the broad grand steps, built of Precambrian stone fallen from the gigantic mountain of age-rounded rock hovering above the town. And looking up, we gazed through an arch of Roman proportions to a vault of blue heaven. Our awe gave way to fascination as we proceeded up the steps, flanked by a series of Disneyesque stations of the cross – dioramas depicting variations on the use of Christ's suffering before, during, and after the Crucifixion. During this ascent we began encountering more and more

tourists, who from the top of the stairs could be seen spilling from busses lining the great plaza at the foot of the cathedral.

As soon as we attained that vantage point we saw approaching the square a pair of white-robed priests followed by a singing throng of pilgrims, celebrating a mass or festival of this Santo Año, the Holy Year. Feeling somewhat Christly out of place in beard and backpack, I took Oiseau by the hand and stepped nimbly ahead across their path, up the final course of stairs for a glimpse inside the cathedral, then down the other side and into town for our main objective: extra food. Our rations, boosted only by the earlier purchase of half a dozen eggs and a tin of tuna from the Café Transmontana, were marginal for an additional day's walk through the national park, as the villages were few and far between, and Monday was a holiday. We managed to conjure a thin loaf of bread from a gift shop freezer.

Chill baguette safely strapped in for the ride, we set out again, tempted at the outskirts of town by those elusive yellow arrows meant to be markers for the reputed Truilho de Longo Courso (long distance trail). Our previous attempts to use this trail had proved futile as it petered out in the stony ground, or forked into a confusion of goat paths. Here where a dirt track left the road and skirted a pasture, we stopped for a lunch of omelet and bread, supplemented with handfuls of the always reliable blackberries, before giving the trail one last try. Soon enough we abandoned it to the blackberries and broom. Returning to the highway, we continued up the long valley through a succession

of twisting passes which gave breathtaking views of hill villages – sometimes five, six, seven at glance, nestled into green and terraced pockets in the distant landscape.

Two hours out of Pendera, at the crest of what was to be our day's twenty-kilometer walk, the valley on the other side opened to view. Swirling dark clouds filled a low sky. The landscape there was more convoluted, the mountains greener. We sensed our crossing as an entry into another region, another phase of our trip, and stopped to play our flutes. In a short while coming down from the pass, we stopped again when we came to a grove of cedar trees shrouded in peaceful mist, a sanctuary much like the dense silent forests back home. There we took a longer rest, stretching out on the soft ground and massaging one another's sore backs.

Oiseau said, "You could play your drum here." There had been little opportunity to do so on our trip thus far, without broadcasting the sound conspicuously over the countryside. Here the shelter of the trees offered a welcoming enclave.

But at that point it seemed more important to find shelter from imminent rain, as the mist was thickening, the clouds darkening by the minute. I also told Oiseau that I felt compromised in my freedom of expression by the proximity of other people, whose voices could be heard from somewhere down the road.

We got up and shouldered our packs again as the mist turned into a light drizzle. Just down the highway a white van was parked, with four people picnicking under the

shelter of a raised rear door. As we approached, we were assertively beckoned over to join them, and were heartily offered a variety of picnic dishes: fish cakes, roast chicken breasts, thin veal cutlets, homemade corn bread and store-bought rolls, peaches and apples, red wine. These people – a rotund man of about sixty, his wife and her younger sister and niece, all wearing glasses – knew how to picnic; and they took no refusals on our part. Speaking to us in a haphazard mixture of Portuguese and French, they told us they had come two hours from Caminha on the coast, to the special church service at Pendera, and had in fact noticed us there, walking by the cathedral with our backpacks.

The rain started in earnest now, and as our hosts urged more meat and wine on us, they convinced us to stow our backpacks inside the van to keep dry. Finally, it seemed eminently sensible for us to take them up on the offer of a lift. Where did we want to go? Valença? Melgaço? Caminha?

The remains of the picnic were wrapped up and put away, and Oiseau and I piled into the van's rear seat, still considering our options as we drove off into the downpour. The white-haired man continued to offer a genial pastiche of conversation from the driver's seat, while the three women chatted over the various religious souvenirs we'd bought in Pendera. During a stop for coffees all around, Oiseau and I settled on Valença da Minho, our original port of entry to Portugal, and a good choice for train connections south to Porto and beyond.

When we arrived at the station, Oiseau and I took our leave with a full course of thank-yous and good-byes, embraces and double-cheek kisses all around. We complimented our new friends on their food and hospitality – nay, on their saintly charity. Having expected short rations and marginal shelter in a torrent of rain in the desolate wilderness, now we found ourselves, warm and well-fed and comforted by human fellowship, bound for a snug hotel on the coast, headed south again.

26 September

Down the coast of Portugal we go: for three days walking the sea-edge on an endless succession of smooth sandy beaches, beside pine forests just over the dunes. No rocky inlets here: it's all sand and wave and tide along a straight shoreline stretching all the way to Lisbon. Unlike the calm blue Mediterranean, the Atlantic surf is cold, gray, and rough. We keep our steps moving just above the water line, for maximum firmness underfoot.

We're not inclined to talk much on this daily trek. Instead we are mesmerized by the expanse of the sand behind us and in front of us, the simplicity of the lines between earth and sea and sky. We walk with the steady rhythm of the pilgrim, the nomad, the athlete, the monk.

Each afternoon we come to a single seaside town providing us with fresh food and water for the evening and following day. Each evening we find a spot in the dunes to

pitch our tent, with only the stars for company. On our flutes we play "Blackberry Bramble" and "The Wren's Hornpipe."

Today we have passed a few scattered fishermen with upright poles stuck in the sand, a flock of gulls, a strand of dead fish, a live crab I boiled for two tiny tasty bites, a small browned man seated on the sand mending nets, a rainbow-colored Phoenician-style fishing boat. In the tourist-dead town of Torreira, the bright wide streets are deserted but for a few old men loitering by the shuttered seaside cafés. In a tiny grocery on the main street, a Bronxlike boy in an orange "Kiss" T-shirt sells us rolls and chocolate, camping gaz and a few slices of veal, half a dozen eggs and a handful of leeks. I find the church bells too clangy, my partner too clingy, my skin too clammy. We stop in a restroom by the beach on our way out of town to wash our clothes and hair.

The people we pass tend to ignore us, or simply stare. They offer to speak French or English, when spoken to in our minimal Portuguese. They have a curious habit of hanging out around the seafront – whether lining the wall of the crowded Sunday promenade, with their backs to the sea; or sitting alone in parked cars in the dune grass, as if at a drive-in movie, watching nothing but the westward drift of the moon.

*

Our Portuguese idyll was short-lived. A chilling, day-long Atlantic downpour put us in serious danger of hypothermia and drove us to take a train all the way south to the sunny Algarve. In that region camping is strictly illegal, so Oiseau and I recuperated in high-tourist style with a small rented villa for a week in the small seaside village of Santa Luzia. There our daily beach-walking was unencumbered by large packs, just as the skies were unencumbered by clouds. Africa lay tantalizingly just over the southern horizon.

September passed into October, and finally it was time to hit the road again. For the final leg of our hiking tour, we would stick to the southern portion of Spain, first arriving in Granada for a visit to the famed Alhambra, then settting off on foot into the Andalucían mountains.

10 October

The sky, from the very start of this trek into the high country, was a clear blue. We had a twenty-kilometer hike ahead of us heading south, clear across a pass through the lower summits of the Sierra Nevada range, to the village of Laroles. Despite the onset of cold symptoms (my stuffy sinuses, Oiseau's sore gums, and a low level of energy for both of us), the packs felt so good on our backs, and our feet so well rested, that we began with a quick detour up the hill above La Calahorra to a massive fortress – unfortunately, we discovered, closed during the hours of our arrival. Walking then finally out into the

open countryside, far from other tourists or, in fact, anyone at all, we rediscovered the central motive of our journey. Just to walk was enough – the walking in and of itself, pure and simple – through the wild and natural landscape of sunny Andalucía, in bright October.

In this new setting I felt so happy, so relieved from the stress of Granada, from my stuck obsession about these silly Moorish palaces. The La Calahorra episode that morning was by now an afterthought to a bad joke. As if it wasn't unpleasant enough to nurse a three-week grudge about our arriving at the Zaragoza palace at closing time, my two-day efforts to see the more elaborate palace complex at Granada had proved downright maddening. After two attempts, in the face of herdlike crowds of tourists, baffling signs, and another bout of unexpected closing times, I gave up trying. Now walking free once more into the hills with my mate, I felt like a cougar released from the city zoo to wander in my native habitat, the tawny gold and dry open hills, which are forested just enough for shelter.

12 October

After a day and a half of walking in the clear, healing air of the Sierra Nevadas, we have found more rain in the southern foothills, the Alpujarras. The drizzle started in the middle of the night and has lasted, on and off, till late morning. We are still camped in an otherwise lovely green spot by a creek with a tumbling waterfall, beyond Laroles.

Waiting for the clouds to break, and for our bedding to air out, we find ourselves already wishing for the latest national holiday to pass so we can escape by bus, it hardly matters where: to Órgiva, the coast, any old town with a hotel.

There is a break in the misty clouds before noon, and we decide to pack our damp gear and move on. Next stop: Válor.

As smoke drifts up from clay and slate chimneys, grapes and almonds are gathered and brought in by the donkey load to dry. There are also figs, pomegranates, chestnuts, walnuts, apples, oranges, peaches; and long strings of hot red peppers hung over whitewashed walls. While these ancient hill villages built by Moors overlook dry badlands like Montana, in the upper canyons the water trickles through vine-covered crannies as lush as Hawaii.

We set up camp this time on an open hillside at dusk, in an orchard facing the tiny hamlet of Nechite. The wind is fierce but without rain. We huddle in all our clothes behind a makeshift windbreak of air mattresses, to cook and eat our pasta-and-sausage supper, and then crawl into the shelter of our tiny tent. The night is cold around the single, thin down sleeping bag we use for a comforter, and we wonder if this is the last night we'll be able to camp at all.

*

In order to fill more of the day with the warming activity of walking, we embarked on an arduous circular day trip that would carry us from our hotel room in Bérchules through three more old Moorish villages: Cádiar, Tímar and Juviles. Cádiar was attractive to us by virtue of its cash machine, which on this overcast Sunday would provide us with the means of our escape by bus on Monday morning. While we lunched in the park there, a small bearded man with a backpack came up to us and began a friendly conversation in English. Lorenzo had just returned from a year in Australia, and was on his way home to his holiday house in another nearby village. This world traveler, a veteran of the Alps and Himalayas, was German-born and now based in England. He told us of the coming of hippies to this area twenty years ago. He had later trained and now worked, sporadically, as an anaesthesiologist. He'd bought his house nine years ago, for five thousand pounds, together with a woman who was now in Switzerland. With both of them gone for the past two years, he was worried today about the deterioration of their clay roof.

All of the houses here had flat slate roofs covered with clay. We'd read in the guidebook that according to tradition, the best time to lay new clay (besides during rainstorms when leaks would appear) was during the waning of the moon, when presumably the clay would shrink tight. Lorenzo was unaware of this practice, but glad to realize that his arrival at this time of the month was a propitious one for a roofing job.

He would have to spend some days arranging help, however; as the work required lifting dozens or even hundreds of buckets of fine clay dust up to the roof. He wasn't much good for it himself, as he had injured his left wrist falling from a horse in a rocky creekbed some years ago.

We told Lorenzo of the appearance of snow on the nearby peaks, and of our plans to move on in search of warmth.

"Yes, it is unseasonably cold right now," he agreed. "But as for snow, these villages used to see two or three meters a year, and now just a few flakes. The constant snowpack in the mountains has greatly diminished and remains now only on the highest peaks. The climate is drying out so badly, in fact, that some of the creeks and fields are dying."

For the continuation of our hike Lorenzo suggested a shortcut from Cádiar to Tímar and Juviles over a little-used secondary road. This was a welcome option, since the GR trail route Oiseau and I had planned to use looped around to the south for nearly ten kilometers before arriving at Juviles, and we weren't sure we had enough time or energy to go that way and still get back to Bérchules by dark.

It became even more evident during our hike that day, that our jaunt through the Alpujarras was finished, after just one week. The high elevation, untimely winter weather, and lack of warm accommodations were conspiring against us.

We had already made the decision to move on to Órgiva, where we had a tentative arrangement to stay on an organic farm; and if the farm option fell through, there was always the southeast coast, where Lorenzo had spent half of the previous night sleeping "comfortably enough" between two pieces of cardboard. He warned us that our final destination, the island of Formentera, would be cold in November. If it was warmth we were after, he recommended the Canary Islands – specifically Geroa, "where hippies still sleep on the beach," or another island whose name he couldn't remember, "long and thin and full of sand dunes."

As Oiseau and I kept moving over the cold hard ground in the pale sunlight, we tried to consider how we might muster some extra budget for such a sunny side trip. Two weeks remained before our month's house rental began on Formentera. If the farm option didn't pan out, and the weather in this region remained cold, we would need either to get to a warmer place where we could camp again, or to seek out a heated pensión.

Being at the mercy of our environment and the weather was psychically as well as physically taxing. Oiseau at least was stoic, if at times desperate. I was less forgiving of our own responsibility for this predicament, constantly wondering, "Where did our planning go wrong? How could we have ended up stuck here on the verge of hypothermia, when the whole idea was to vacation somewhere warm and pleasant?"

Such complaints, when I voiced them, didn't make Oiseau's coping any easier, as both of us were implicated in my charge of poor decision-making. But at length my

reasoning led me to some small consolation. "We made the right choice of time and place, in theory, but were just foiled by the fickle weather, an untimely cold front. Even if you do everything right, the breaks don't always go your way. As my old friend the I Ching would say, 'No blame.'"

There was another phenomenon at work, too, which helped us get through that final day in the chilly mountains: the finding of grace. Through Lorenzo's intervention we'd discovered a perfect compromise for our walking route, as well as a chance to enjoy the simple pleasure of meeting and conversing with a fellow-traveler. There was the welcome comfort of a café in Juviles where we are able to sit at our leisure, even after finishing our coffee, and write in our journals, with a background of upbeat music and lively Spanish chatter at the bar. There was the clarifying focus of our plan to catch the bus to Órgiva early the next morning. Finally there was the sheer surviving of another day, and the moving into another small phase and larger cycle of our journey.

17 October

We are bound to Formentera suddenly, following two decisive phone calls we made from Órgiva. The people at the organic farm have informed us that in the end, the timing isn't right for us to come and work there. Luckily we have connected with a call to Germany, however, and Sophia, the owner of our Formentera cottage, has generously agreed to let us have it for two extra weeks, at winter rates.

Between us and our destination lies a day-long bus ride on a winding highway around the rocky southeast coast of Spain. On our left, sun-bright desert mountains; to our right, a beckoning expanse of light blue sea.

Readers are like tourists, I suppose, wanting monuments to plan for and signposts to mark the way, photographs and postcards to take home as keepsakes. Thus: Benidorm, arising out of nowhere on the road to the ferry port of Denia. What it lacks in history it makes up for with location. A Fistful of Dollars was shot in the badlands just over the hills. On the sun-splashed coast, proliferating high-rises proclaim the pull of people to other people, clumping together like a determined bacteria colony amid a vast wasteland of arid rock and scrub, with a view to the sea and a lock on year-round sun.

Unclouded sunlight – it is apparent here by the direct competition between resort hotels and sprawling plastic greenhouses, which between them cover every inch of flat land between mountain and sea – is the world's last great diminishing resource. Here the containers of souls and the containers of tomatoes sit side by side facing the sea. The souls are determined to turn their bodies tomato-red, while the tomatoes are bound to be transformed into human soul-flesh. Oiseau and I gaze out at the passing show, bound up in another, more private symbiosis.

Part Two: Tame Lizards

We sat a little ways inland from the cliff, beside a grove of large pines giving shelter from the wind, but far enough from the trees so we could still be in the sun. Oiseau brought out a carton of leftover lentil burgers, lettuce and bits of cheese, and a few small slices of German bread. I unwrapped the baguette we'd bought that morning in the Formentera town of El Pilar where we'd got off the bus.

We enjoyed our lunch quietly overlooking what we could still see of the blue water in the far distance. Lounging on the cool mossy open ground, I imagined us both in a similar scene merged from our separate pasts, as treeplanters on a cutblock in B.C., overlooking Duncan Lake, in the spring, fifteen years ago. Oiseau said she was glad that we weren't in fact doing that, but instead were enjoying lunch just as we were, on a honeymoon in Spain.

As we leaned back to reflect on our paradisiacal condition, a small thin green lizard appeared on my sunny pants leg. It had just caught a fly in its mouth, and was attempting to swallow it. The fly was a little larger than the lizard's sharp-pointed mouth; but finally with a series of gradual gulps the task was accomplished, and in the blink of an eye the lizard had taken a leap at another fly straying six inches away – just grazing it with the tip of its nose as the fly took off again. Finally the lizard lay contentedly on my leg, its flanks beating arhythmically with its ephemeral breath, its shimmering skin brilliant iridescent green in the sunlight, its sinuous tail snaking out behind it longer than the rest

of its body. Every now and then another fly chanced by and the lizard snatched at it in a flash. These flies were always quicker, though: perhaps our lizard had lost a millisecond of reaction time, in the digestion of its current meal.

The lizard began to explore this new territory of the human body, likely never having experienced one before. Up and down and around the pants leg, the shirt; over to Oiseau, sniffing at the ends of her hair; back over to me in a little jump onto my hand. The lizard had put out a tiny plump gray-brown tongue to taste Oiseau's skin on the wrist, and now it tasted mine too. It continued up, around, and over my body, explored my beard until Oiseau nudged it away, then came back up my neck to contemplate the earlobe. There the lizard paused and, taking a closer interest, began to nibble.

It tickled.

I wasn't sure whether to worry. Did this lizard even have teeth? Could it bite through human skin, and if so, would I contract some latent prehistoric disease?

When the nibbling became more insistent, Oiseau and I instinctively decided in the same instant, that enough was enough. We shooed our poor pet away into the rosemary bushes, and rose to go on our way.

*

During our walk along the high cliffs of El Pilar de la Mola – the wedge-like northwest arm of this scrawny island – a number of mysteries baffled us. A naturalist or local history buff might have been handy to have along to help us penetrate these riddles, but as it was, we were forced to accept the whole enigmatic fabric of an expanded reality unfolding before us, step by step. We wondered, for instance:

Why did flocks of seagulls follow our progress along the cliff edge, wheeling and crying in an arabesque of aerial dance and vocal percussion?

Where were the caves, which were marked on the map we were following, but didn't appear anywhere on the land?

Were the frequent squared or rounded depressions we came upon, remains of old quarries, or were they natural basins in the rock?

Where did all the small stones come from which littered the bedrock surface of this plateau four hundred feet straight up from the sea? And likewise, what made all those squiggly little worm-marks in the otherwise smooth solid rock; and why were there many small white snail shells littered about; and why was there, mingled among the innumerable small stones, a mixture of stone-sized fragments of plastic or tile, colored black and white and spray-paint orange, scattered on and on underfoot . . . giving way then to a more distinct but still mysterious dumping of old gray plastic tubes three inches long, and then to colored shotgun shells?

Why were there numerous ruins of cinder block, like incongruous remains of ancient houses left on the cliff?

Why did some (but not all) of the builders of the thigh-high stone walls that crisscrossed this high plateau and indeed the entire lizard-shaped island, feel compelled to carry the ends of our constructions neatly but precariously balanced right to the very edge of the cliffs?

Why did some naturalists see fit to expend vast amounts of energy and research and funding to make known to the public, in a lonely outpost such as this, the plight of the beleaguered Balearic Shearwater, an endangered subspecies of dwarf albatross who was threatened by, among other things, rats on offshore islands, when every day in the Brazilian Amazon some dozens of species of known and unknown flora and fauna perished from the face of the earth forever?

*

The Casa Sophia, our long-awaited "cottage by the sea," stands in humble perfection with its small whitewashed walls, its rounded edges, its blue doors and shutters, at the edge of an open field within sight of the sea. Thatch covers one terrace, red clay tiles the other. The tile roof and flat-tiled terrace floor both serve to catch and funnel the occasional rain toward the underground cistern. A small solar panel gamely gathers the

yellow light, this dark early morning in late October, while a strong warm wind blows in from the Mediterranean.

Each day of our stay in this house, we take turns working the wooden handle of the pump, which brings water up from the cistern to the roof. Ten minutes a day. All of the writing and painting and reading and music we do here aside, this has become our unspoken practice, along with our daily walks to the shore. We're still finding water, day by day.

*

On the way to the sea and all along the shore stretches a surface of red-tan rock, bare and smooth as pavement until, in range of the incessant waves, it becomes as gnarled and craggy as the inside of a limestone cavern. The waves wildly crash this morning, as they have for the last four days after that first day of warm and sunny welcome.

Here and now, at such a time and in such a place, there is truly for me nothing to do but write, or give voice to the constant pennywhistle tunes that ride my head throughout the day and night. To take moments of pounding wind with my drum and beat us silly, where no one can hear. To read the greatest book far into the night without guarantee that there will be any worthwhile reading to follow it through the remaining weeks here.

More and more, I see the possibility of doing less: to sit straight up by candlelight in the predawn stillness and watch my easy breathing thoughts; to bring the mad spinning pennywhistle music to a stop – like a stuck record – then reduce it to a tiny beeping, receding into the distance. If again it intrudes, then it is something other, distant from over the hills as from a shepherd's pipe. In the meantime my attention is fixed on the moment, and what is has to offer. I listen to the wind.

*

On our walk along the shore this morning, the waves were glassy green and clear, playfully calm as they came into our leeward side of the island. But Oiseau and I remained bundled in synthetic fleece and wool garments as we lay on the soft sand beach, coterminous in our longing for a more genuinely beachly existence: where, as Oiseau put it, she could have me where she wants me.

I'm not arguing. The word "Fiji" has cropped up in our conversations at least twice in the last two days of cold, strong northwest winds.

We did the best we could today to ward off the chill of oncoming winter, by way of a lunch of potatoes and cheese fried in bacon fat, and a pot of hot decaf. But the last of that insipid brew now sits congealing in a mug on the flapping plastic tablecloth as I write. Oiseau has retreated blue-lipped to the interior of the house. And as the steel-wool sky

thickens behind me like the plot of a conventional novel, I linger but for one last stray ray of sun, and follow her inside.

*

Glorying in present sensations of visual splendor, I sit nestled in an eggshell of weathered rock, looking down at clear sea water washing in to shore. Oiseau sits opposite me clothed in black and green, her face lit by sun as she rests against a concave sponge of latticed ancient sand. This rock is crenellated, pockmarked and perforated, a blonde honeycomb of geologic art on display for our eyes only, while the water laps sonorously around us, stretching away in the near distance to an impossible aqua green which we reason is an illusion of light and distance, and the clear light of momentary ecstasy shines at our feet, within our breathing reach.

I recall our conversation of last night, in which art and love were defined in a single breath from her love-red lips: not a matter of being good enough, nor even merely good; but of being simply open, available for interaction with beauty.

For my part, I seek to go beyond the journalistic goal of accurate reportage and photography, which is not only limited but unattainable. I prefer attempting the translation of the essential live element, of actual light and movement, into a medium wholly other: a world beside the world I want to represent. I'm looking for a way inside

and then a way to bring back outside, the world inside the surfaces we see so clearly but fail to depict precisely as we see them. Seeing, after all, depends on the reception and interpretation and integration of that which is perceived, and isn't simply a cut-out snapshot of the image itself, image only, an arbitrarily selected slice of pixels in a sea of swirling color.

This morning we walked over a landscape that could have been Martian, or lunar. The very light was alien, filtered by haze and casting long red-brown shadows from the weird rock formations, like sepia-tinged moonlight. The ground was a picture broadcast from space, of dry, jagged stones and abstract shapes across a sandy waste. Only a few scrub plants designated our actual, terrestrial location; and just to our left a live blue-green sea sealed that testimony.

Yesterday in a similar spot we found a portion of overhanging rock configured as a fine lacy lattice of hardened sand. A small piece broke off in my hand for closer inspection. Within the lacework was an even finer mesh of spider web. We wondered whether the sand had once collected around a primeval web and then hardened and thickened, over the eons; or if instead, by action of wind and surf, the sand which composed this soft rock had simply been eaten away, leaving only the fragile filigree we found. Either way, the effect of this delicate tracery struck me as more impressive, more beautiful in its inscrutable complexity, than the ornate and celebrated baroque Moslem

carvings in the ceilings of the palaces of the Alhambra . . . which, of course, I was never able to glimpse firsthand, but instead knew from postcards displayed in the tourist kiosks.

The question of whether such a structure was formed by a geologic process of addition or subtraction, struck both Oiseau and me, later that night, as emblematic of the challenge facing us with an imminent return home to our crowded life. We have on this journey been subjecting ourselves to a steady process of subtraction: an emptying out, a paring away, an exploration of what it is to live without the familiar equipment and preoccupations of our lives at home. Now with the colder winter weather, and with the lack of fresh reading material, we are facing more and more time indoors with less and less to do.

And we aren't sure how to react. Is the prospect scary, or just boring?

For me it is rather exciting, to venture into this unfamiliar realm of nothingness, of darkness, of emptiness of purpose and identity. In the same breath I realize that I have enjoyed immensely finding, in the contrasting absence of other diversions, a new a stronger, purer commitment to music and writing; and I have at the same time been filling up with the richness of my love for Oiseau: our love for each other, our comfort with each other, our ability to share in all things, our willingness to accept and embrace so totally whatever the other person finds to explore in their own path of opening and growth.

It is with these basic and simple treasures already in hand and heart, that I look with some amazement and trepidation at the cornucopia of additional freight that my life is liable to take on when I return home: walls full of shelves of unread books . . . unlimited Internet time . . . writing projects and drum rhythms and workshop ideas and editing work . . . videos and social opportunities and childcare and domestic duties and homesite maintenance and gardening and firewood and . . . the usual infinite to-do list. It seems from this privileged distance, that that way of living is rather normal where I come from, that it's just a conventional sort of worldly, materialistic existence where the consumer ethic is nothing other than a process of infinite addition.

We seem to have found here (more or less by intention), by contrast and through a process of subtraction, a more spiritual kind of existence. This emptying out of material things and responsibilities and activities, and of social and cultural associations and obligations, has left us alone in this stark world of earth-moon-mars-sun-sea, with what counts most to us: simple food, clothing, and shelter; basic tools for practicing our chosen arts; and the open territory of our inner growth as individuals and partners in love.

Naturally, it's relevant to remember that we've been able arrange such a happy circumstance by accumulating a handy nest-egg of earmarked funds, which it has been our North American privilege to accumulate and wield with all our plastic power. By the same token, it's that very world which draws us inexorably home, as the budget dwindles.

Clear water laps at our feet as the hazy sun mounts in the sky. It is still possible we may swim today, November though it may be. We live, after all, in Paradise, where anything we imagine may come to pass, according to our innermost desires. If we are empty enough, there is always room to add more of what is most essential. And if adding a hot sunny beach doesn't occur today, there is always more subtracting to do: an opening to a cold starry night, retreat to the soft sheltering womb of a bed. For now, my lover sits relaxed before me in the half-opened egg of rock, sketching. A breeze stirs at my back, but I still have a hankering for that swim . . . maybe later, maybe farther down the shore.

*

For hours we would sit and look at the sea. As Oiseau gazed out in rapt concentration on the shading and texture of the colors in the water, I transduced my sense impressions into a kind of interior music. At times the serene environment simply formed a backdrop or accompanying drone for my shifting thoughts about form and motion, tense and tension. It seemed to me a futile ambition to try to capture the crystal vision of the outer world in words, despite the ineffable charm of its beauty. But how else to carry it back with us into the rest of the world, into the rest of our lives, into the world of other people?

I knew already the pitfalls of photography: from simple bungles like forgetting the film, to the hassle of advanced settings and filters. And there was always the limitation that came from composing within a small frame.

But her watercolors . . . now that was another matter.

All the elements conspired here into one fluid splendor. Under the green water and the blue air were the brown rocks, and the white sand, and from such simple truths the greater complexity of the scene, and of Nature herself, might be successfully conveyed. These colors mingled in the moving breath of air into a rippling phantasm embodying the very mystery of creation. These earth and air and water elements were lit and shot through in their ceaseless dancing with a brilliant clear fire from the sun. On the surface of the water danced whole palettes of blues and greens and olive browns, and even the muted darker colors were made bright with the clarity of the sunlight. In the rolling, fluid motion of the waves was a smaller, faster, more ephemeral rising of the surface into a texture of smooth green glass dancing into tiny peaks of clear crystal, all blended with shadow and reflected colors from the rocks below and the sky above – pale, rain-washed, clean; an air-brushed surface of pastel, baby blue.

At all of this we gazed as at a performance or spectacle, unable to move or speak. We sat comfortably enough on the gnarled flat surfaces and rounded knolls of the craggy shoreline sandstone, which offered its own strange, pale gray-brown beauty to the sea. A

strange beauty indeed, when the words and images that could best describe it had to do with rotted flesh, worm-eaten wood, or ratty cheese.

What had these metaphors to do with the sandstone itself, which had borne for millennia an uneasy marriage with this restless, warm salty sea?

That rocky shore endured with humble and stoic persistence, brooding over eons of light and darkness, immune to words while invisibly crumbling. It found itself content to catch and hold small pools of clear water from the storms of the passing night. From the pools emanated small shows of flickering reflected light which played, with equal impish pleasure, upon the corresponding hollows of overhanging rock.

*

In the afternoon, Oiseau and I took off by foot across the island to one of the few remaining beaches we hadn't yet visited. It was a twenty-kilometer walk; and I was just recovering from a brief bout with another cold; but fortified by a café con leche in Sant Francesc, and periodic snacks of mixed nuts, bread and butter, chocolate, and oranges, we set a smooth, relaxed pace down the ancient rock roads, finding the groove we'd enjoyed during our hiking tour of the mainland.

Oiseau talked of her burgeoning plans for a fabric design business. We shared our mutual frustration with the dilemma of getting so many new ideas during these long

walks; there just wasn't enough working time left to process them all and bring them to fruition. Yet we both still appreciated the value of the walking itself, the free flow of unharnessed ideas, the companionable exercise in the fresh air and beautiful countryside.

When Oiseau and I reached the beach at the end of the road, at the Cap de Barbaria, the waves were breaking straight into shore with a west wind. We could look straight out west across the water to see the craggy, volcanic island just off the coast of Ibiza, with its cliffs and spires rising fifteen hundred feet or more, straight up out of the sea. It was a vision in present time of the prehistoric past: the island of King Kong, or the Lost World still ruled by dinosaurs. This utterly uninhabitable shaft of hardened fire formed a monument to the four elements, mocking man and woman and proudly giving meaning to the mystic philosophy, of my recent nightly reading, that proclaims "I am That."

Meanwhile, to the south as we turn to face an unseen Africa and its "barbarous" shore, the sea is molten silver. Waves sweep rippling across it, but this is no passing illusion. The longer I look, the more I am taken into its spell . . . a mirror that can hold no face but the shattered, spilled and splashed plasma of the crucible sun.

We walked home along the red rock road as the sun began to set. The morning's transcendental gold-orange glow was repeated in the western sky. We saw the green pines beside us light up in splendor. We held up our own hands to the light, and I glimpsed once more that vision which had so captivated me while swimming out from Es

Calo the last day of October, with my hands and wrists and forearms absolutely golden, shining in the sunlight and the clear clear water. Here, in place of the water was the clear clear air, and still my hands and arms, as I raised them up to catch the light, shone supernaturally golden.

The splendor increased all around us, in field and wood and barnyard. A pile of stones came alive like rocks in a sweatlodge pit glowing red from the fire. We both stopped to take notes – Oiseau in her sketchbook, I in my trusty brown notebook. I observed and wrote: "golden-tinged white doves perched in olive tree's dead top." This image reminded me to take retrospective note also of another dead olive trunk we'd witnessed on another road, days before, "painted red growing through electrical tower from middle of rock wall."

The sun went down that day leaving a pastel legacy across the cloud-streaked sky: from yellow and gold to red, pink, violet, purple, charcoal gray. Oiseau and I observed it all with a kind of rapture, awed and humbled, burned clean by the transformative colorings of fire. When it came right down to it, the earth and air and water we found so nourishing on this trip, were not the whole equation. Fire was the one essential, the often invisible factor that made all the rest come alive. It might be only a candle or two in the evening by our supper plates or beside our bed. It might be the gas furnace warming the room at the coldest times, so we could relax and be comfortable there together. Finally, it

was the breath that made our bodies move slowly together and brought sparks of light to our eyes.