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Where Women Become Bears and Children Speak to Birds

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> "It is not down in any map; true places never are." Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*

We pick blackberries from the head-high shrubs arcing toward the trail. My fifteen-month old daughter, whose spoken vocabulary consists of "dog," "bird," "owl," and "book", learned to identify blackberry bushes on our first outing a few days ago and now she makes an eager squeak when the plump, glossy berries loom into view. Today I want to just walk, to get a little further on this path I recently discovered in the hills near our house. A ridge sprouting a line of white oaks entices me onward. But summer insists that we stop.

As we lean into the shrub, my legs buttress the baby on either side to keep her from plummeting head first into the jungle of thorns. We weave our arms around the clawed boughs and pince midnight-colored fruits from their perches. We work silently in the hot, still afternoon, our lips and tongues turning violet, and I am nearly faint with happiness. For a few moments, I imagine we are a mother bear and her cub, this hill our home and the valley beyond a wilderness. I pretend I am teaching her how to forage, how to find her way along this golden slope.

When we turn around, I am once again a thirty-one year old woman living on the outskirts of an urban area inhabited by 300,000 people. I am three thousand miles from my childhood home, to which I fly once a year for a visit. We get our food from the store. The paths we take most days are paved with asphalt or concrete.

We are not wild creatures. We do not live in wilderness. But Summer, for a few more years, will know that we do.

In his book, *Beyond Geography: The Western Spirit Against the Wilderness*, Frederick Turner asserts that the story of the European conquest of wilderness throughout the world is fundamentally about the substitution of history for myth as a way of understanding life. Throughout nearly the entire course of human existence, people believed that the Earth is a living being, that time moves in circular pathways, and life is ultimately a mystery that cannot be fathomed. Magic and monsters were real. Every place and every thing was wild because people themselves were not separate from the wilderness.

In the Western worldview, however, which originated in the movement away from hunting/gathering lifestyles to agriculture, the locus of things sacred and mysterious moved to a singular God, residing in a far-removed heaven. The view of the Earth and all other nonhuman inhabitants as soul-less things - what Morris Berman calls the "disenchantment" of the world - was cemented with the triumph of rationalism and science in Western epistemology. Whereas people

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of oral traditions had seen themselves wrapped in an infinite spiral of time, in which past and future were not so very different from the present, Western culture adopted the historic vision, in which time was linear and nonrepeating. With the rise of technology and the promise of science to make all things known, the march of time also became a march toward "progress," that radiant destiny where life would be devoid of struggle.

I consider the pictures we hold in our minds, of the places we inhabit, travel to, or dream of visiting. My daughter presently dwells in a world that is pure magic, but so normal, there is no mystery in it. A flock of geese sweep out from the horizon, then swirl away, gone completely. She is old enough to remember birds when she sees them, but I do not think she wonders yet where they come from or where they go. They are simply there. Her "mental map," as geographer Yi Fu Tuan calls it, her conception of the landscape she dwells in, would be nothing any cartographer could recognize. It would be a rhythm, like slow ripples on a river, and she would be the passenger on a tight little boat floating with the current. At one time I was the boat itself, but no longer. Now, I am usually the captain, but that is changing, too. In this vision of her world, her daddy, her home, her toys, our dog, would be on the boat with her, and flashing through the sky or leaping occasionally out of the water would be moments of brilliance and tragedy, such things as blackberries and a drop of bitter medicine.

The landscape of a child is one marked by stories. In my memory, the Vermont farm where I spent most of my summer vacations is an enormous anthology, filled mostly with my own adventures, but also containing the stories my father told me about his boyhood, and the quirks and disasters of ancestors. A maple tree is no simple organism, but the graceful matriarch on which Dad hung three swings, one for each of his daughters. A brook running through brushy woods was the dwelling of a benevolent witch who befriended two orphans, otherwise known in life as Mollie, Ruthie, and Carol.

Not every place was wild to us. Certainly the forest was more mysterious and exciting than our backyard in town, but no piece of the world lacked potential for magic. It seems to me that this mythical view must be organic, as natural to the human mind as speech and symbolic thought. To a young child, fairies and the bogeyman under the bed are not fancies of the imagination - though they might say so to an adult, in order to please and sound mature. In my bedroom, where I slept alone, a tall, black monster with menacing, outstretched arms stood in the corner. I cowered from him, though he never came closer. I think sometimes that he hasn't left me, but has just disguised himself as angst, self-doubt and indecision. It might be nice to have him back, so that in the morning I could have the relief of seeing him gone, and the bedroom corner lit by sunshine.

Stephen Trimble and Gary Paul Nabhan wonder in *The Geography of Childhood* what will happen to the children of today, when so many are exposed only to human-made objects, experience only human-dominated landscapes. Instead of cataloging the songs of different birds, they memorize the sounds of different

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automatic weapons, as one child in south-central Los Angeles reported he could do following the 1992 riots. Jared Diamond discusses the intimate knowledge New Guinea forest dwellers have of their environment. Children learn to distinguish numerous snake species at an early age, so they know which ones they can eat and which ones are poisonous. Most American children would flunk a snake species quiz, but would ace an exam on the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers.

Frederick Turner contends that it was the Western view of wilderness that not only impelled European conquest of other peoples and land - it is what allowed it. Just as a person must envision a house before they build it, so the Western mind had to envision a world it was meant to explore, claim and improve before it would take steps to do so. The myth-believers, those whom some call "indigenous" peoples, did not invent the technology and social organization to domineer and develop because their worldview did not allow it. There have been critics of the "aboriginal myth" (myth here meaning a "lie" instead of a story structured by mystery and the unknown) who take umbrage at the notion that American Indians, or other "primitive" peoples were somehow altruistic in their ecological restraint. This seems not likely to have been the case, as humans have had significant detrimental effects on animal, and probably plant, populations for millenia. The earliest human arrivals on the shores of New Guinea, 40,000 years ago, were able to severely alter the native biota, wielding only stone tools, according to Jared Diamond. Two species of large wallabies and a group of rhinocerous-like marsupials are among those animals known only through the fossil record. They went extinct thousands of years ago.

In North America, many researchers have suggested that Indian hunters either facilitated or precipitated the extinction of large Pleistocene mammals such as wooly mammoths. Even before the acquisition of guns, tribes may have suppressed specific populations of prey species, such as bison and bighorn sheep.

Still, the extermination of species by *Homo sapiens* has no equal to that of the last few centuries, particularly the last two hundred years. While not necessarily living in balance with nature, in the idealized sense, people who lived and believed in a mythical Cosmos were not driven to eliminate wilderness. It was not their goal to exterminate whole species to serve their own interests, as the Western rancher did to the wolf. To the Koyukon Indians, for example, as described by anthropologist Richard Nelson, humans and nature are engaged in a relationship structured by specific rules of conduct and a code of mutual respect. "All creatures, no matter how small and inconspicuous, carry the luminescence of power," he says. To violate these rules would not be a matter of being simply impolite, or even inviting retribution upon the violator and his family. To take without giving back, to pass by without noticing, would be to challenge the laws of the universe itself and to abandon one's own soul.

The Western mind was freed to approach the world as a raider because it was an outsider. By placing God in heaven, Western peoples (by which I mean, those holding the views of Western civilization, not ethnic Europeans alone) did not

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have to concern themselves with the revenge that might be taken against them by the wounded spirits of trees, bears, buffalo or whales. To them, that idea was laughable.

Out of the disintegration of ecosystems and the discontent of society that has been the legacy of this centuries' long trend away from an "enchanted" world, has come the stirrings of awareness that something was left behind. In North America, the 20th century wilderness movement grew out of the places, not surprisingly, where bits of wildness still remained to be experienced. Like a melody heard momentarily when a door in a hall swings open, the rhythm of the wild was entrancing and hauntingly familiar to those people lucky, and open, enough to have caught a snatch of it. The idea of wilderness, to anyone who has grasped it, is really not an "idea" at all but a stirring in the belly, a releasing of the heart. A wild place grabs the soul because the spirit of one senses it in the other, and they are pulled together like two streams in a valley. If both still flow strong and full enough, they may meet at a confluence where women become bears and children speak to birds.

There is danger, then, in perpetuating the sterility and utilitarian mindset of the Western historical-scientific approach when those wishing to preserve and recover wilderness employ predominantly rational, scientific, and quantitative arguments. For example, maps have been key tools in the effort to preserve wilderness areas around the United States. On maps are displayed the lines dividing wilderness and not-wilderness. In the debate over how much wilderness should be allowed to remain, groups squabble over these lines, where they should be, how big an area should they encompass. Lines may become a means of keeping out thought and the opportunity to enlighten, as much as a boundary on the land. When we are arguing about lines instead of showing what wildness means to our souls, we have already lost.

Similarly, the drumbeat of biodiversity is being pounded out today. This species will disappear, that one is becoming rare. The maps are pulled out to display more lines - for proposed corridors, for possible refuges. Wilderness is lost and becomes a confusion of numbers and lines and circles.

I have been trained as a biologist, and am training to become a geographer. I am quite thoroughly in love with the power of science and reasoned thinking to tell me about the world. The thought of species tumbling into extinction around the globe makes me desperate and I know that the efforts of those who ask and demand that places be set aside will be crucial to slowing the chain reaction. Still, I believe that the change in mind that we are hoping for is more radical, and more simple, than we can imagine. I look at my daughter and think that I see the mind of a young girl from a thousand, from ten thousand years ago. She does not have to be taught to laugh at a dog flinging a stick into the air, or to stare in silent wonder at a pair of owls weaving a gyre against the dying light of the day. It is there, the wild still in her recognizes it in the world. She is no wilderness "snob," a plastic cup is as interesting as an acorn, but nothing

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catches her attention like the dash and flutter of an animal. No fruit has been smashed and gulped with quite the gusto of berries picked by her hands under a loitering afternoon sun.

In speaking for the wild, I want to put the maps away, at least for a while. The charts, graphs, reports - I will stow them someplace, where I can find them again, but for the moment, I want to remember the stories. I will speak for the little stream that was to me a wild river, taking me down in a flatboat to my frontier home. I will explain the way the willow tree branches hung to the ground on the tree in our backyard and how we became a family of birds when my sisters and I stepped inside the space formed by the leaves and limbs.

I once lived in a place where magic was normal, and I want to say that in wild places is our best - our only - hope for preserving the source of that wonder and engagement. We cannot go back to the lives of the hunter/gatherers, but neither can we continue in this estrangement from the home of the spirits. A god in heaven is too far away. I don't pretend to know how we will live when we try to re-enter the world of myth. I only hold on to the hope that to bring back wilderness means to live as a wild being, and this will only happen as I re-discover the wild places in my heart. A child and sweet berries on the tongue are as good compasses as I have found.

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