

Wyoming Journal

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Writer Gretel Erlich calls it “the planet of Wyoming.” It is an apt characterization of a land that feels more distant from the world and its events than can be accounted for by geography alone. Nearly two years ago, I moved from Dallas, Texas, to a town in northwest Wyoming, near Yellowstone National Park to begin a teaching job at a small college.

It is easy to insulate oneself from the outside world in Wyoming. Forces of cultural change arrive slowly. Tradition weighs heavy. Inhabitants of Wyoming, as a rule, are not receptive to the idea of animal rights. I ask a student in my philosophy class why he shoots feral cats. “I kill ‘em because my father killed ‘em,” he shrugs. “They don’t belong here.”

Fall 1989

One Saturday morning, my first autumn, I go to see wild horses. In northern Wyoming, only ten miles south of Montana a herd of wild horses roams the Pryor Mountains. The wild mustangs of the West have endured in my imagination since early childhood. They possess for me a near mythical status; I half hope I don’t find them. I wander up several hills, the Pryor Mountains

on one side, a canyon on the other. Everything resembles a horse, the large white stones, the mountain shrubs. Through binoculars I scan the creek bed and the jut of flat land that nears the canyon wall. Out of breath from climbing, I rest on a rock. Hoofprints are everywhere. I head down the hill, sliding over rocks. I look across a horizontal expanse of land. The canyon calls me, and I walk toward it. It is there they appear.

One is white with a silver mane and tail. The small black stallion summons the three mares by some bodily telepathy. They turn and walk away from me, toward the mountains. It is an ancestral bond that holds them as one, a holy family the four of them comprise. They move off into the veils of space and are hidden there. They are in the visible world, and belong to the invisible.

I am relieved and saddened. I have found my guides.

As I go to sleep that night, I see them again against the mountains. They haunt my dreams, these ghost horses.

Winter 1989

At sunset I feed apples to a pair of bay horses across the road. Icicles are formed inside their nostrils, larger ones descend from their manes. Their hooves are balls of ice. While watching the chunks of Macintosh apples vanish into their mouths I think of the herd of wild horses that roams in the nearby McCullough Peaks, and wonder how they survive on nights like this when fierce



COMMENT

blasts of Arctic air plunge the wind chill temperature to seventy below zero.

A friend tells me how her pregnant mare disappeared from the corral one day. Two weeks later she was found in the McCollough Peaks. She had foaled, and a mule colt ran by her side. She had traveled twenty miles, crossed a highway and several ranches to get there. A wild stallion guarded the two of them; the three horses fled from the men and women on horseback who after several days of pursuit, finally caught the mare by lassoing the mule colt.

My hands become numb as dusk falls, and the lights of the feedlot a mile away begin to glow. The lights burn all night long. I hear low bellows, and further away, the yelping of coyotes. The frozenness of my hands and feet, the icicles on the horses' manes, the cattle penned into immobility. Winter hardens everything. Frozenness is a measure of my distance from earth.

It is my first winter, and I have never felt cold like this. Nothing moves right. I am stiff all over. Resisting the paralysis of the cold, I go for a walk. I keep moving, disbelieving my senses as the night stiffens around me. I am in a land that does not hear my commands.

Geologists say that the volcanic eruption that formed the mountains and caldera of the Yellowstone region is likely to have been the greatest eruption to have ever occurred on earth. The mud pots and geysers of Yellowstone make visible the original impulse to exist, to be matter. The *prima materia* is not far beneath the earth's crust. Gnostic myths say that soul, wounded by love for its own reflection, descends into matter and is entangled forever. Two temptations of soul are the legacy of this wound—to take flight into spirit, into space, via moon rockets, or to stay with matter, with unconsciousness, with incurable love for the creature that is Earth.

In early winter I take a trip to San Francisco. At nightfall I walk through Chinatown and see a man sitting on the steps in front of a church holding a sign, "Please Help. I Have AIDS." My stomach knots as I approach three young panhandlers who call out to passersby. I stare straight ahead and walk quickly by.

I have not used defenses against psychic intrusion or such vivid encounters with human suffering in a long while; I am startled at needing them again. My eyes are no longer habituated to not seeing.

My last impression of the city is through the window of an airport shuttle van. I watch a man retrieve a styrofoam container from the trash. Finding

nothing left inside, he returns it and proceeds to the next trash bin.

On the way home from the airport, a spotted horse stands by the roadside, icicles hanging from his mane. Frozen wild, frozen so as to not feel. Horses are invisible against the landscape. In Wyoming the love of nature is masked by indifference. It would hurt too much to love it openly.

It is not uncommon for women in Wyoming to hunt. When asked, most say that they hunt to feed their families. I wonder if it is so simple. One woman tells me how her family just succeeded in killing an elk. They were exultant. She butchered it, put most of it away for the winter. She prepared dinner that evening, a French dip made of elk, and no one would touch it. For days afterward, none of those who had killed it would touch the elk meat. She does not know why. Perhaps between killing and celebrating and consuming, an unconscious taboo was stirred.

Rules for hunting say don't maim and eat what you kill. Out-of-state trophy hunters violate these rules and so are regarded with contempt. A friend tells me that it has been nearly a decade since he hunted. On his last hunt he shot into a herd of deer, aiming at a doe. When he retrieved his kill, he discovered he had instead killed her fawn. He gave away all his guns, and now doesn't even keep one around the house.

Spring 1990

Wyoming artist Lynne Hull's sculptures remind me of how earth calls to the imagination for awakening. Her structures made entirely of natural objects are works of art that remember earth, and feed both the wild creatures and the human spirit. Hull calls her work "trans-species art." Her raptor roosts provide a place to rest for eagles and hawks. Marten havens shelter the pine martens through the winter. She carves crescent moons, "hydroglyphs," in the desert sandstone. Water trickling down from the mountains in the springtime pools in these hollows. "Images are our keepers, and we are theirs," says psychologist James Hillman. I am sustained by the image of moon in stone, as are the antelope who drink there. It is geomancy—earth magic.

At the end of the nineteenth century Chief Washakie gave the land that is now Thermopolis to the Wyoming government on the condition that the sulphur springs remain available to whomever wishes access to them—no admission fee shall ever be charged. Commercial

pools dominate the Hot Springs State Park, but one small bath house honors Chief Washakie's stipulation. The springs draw tourists and natives alike, to play in the pools, or sit in the healing earth waters. The proprietor of the Holiday Inn in Hot Springs State Park is a big game hunter and has decorated the hotel and bar with photographs of African hunts and wild animals, as well as trophies. On one wall a sequence of four photographs shows a lion attacking a gazelle. The lion lands on the gazelle's back and embraces her. They fall together to the earth. In the last photo, the gazelle's head is pressed to the ground and her eyes are closed. She appears at peace.

More photos—a mountain lion reaching out for a snowshoe hare, an eagle clutching a fish. A glass case displays antique ashtrays, one made of an elephant's foot—grey, sturdy—and a smaller tawny one—of a lion's.

In the bar, patrons are surrounded by mounted animals—coyotes, a wolf, caribou, a fawn—and then my eye catches a creature I have never seen before. It has bright red eyes, and I keep staring to decipher its features. I am looking at the backside of a deer. Its tail has been made erect to resemble a snout, its anus has been stretched open to look like a mouth, and two eyes are affixed above the tail-snout.

Summer 1990

At Crowfair, in Crow Agency, Montana, I watch the rodeo. Quarter horses and thoroughbreds race. Their red, yellow, blue racing colors stream by as hooves pound the track and raise billows of dust. Horses with one or two small children on their back trot around the fields until nightfall.

When the stars come out, I listen to drums synchronize to earth's heartbeat. Voices, sharp and then low, become one, and then many, and then one again. Multiplicity and unity, full moon and new, leaving earth and returning. Dancers are attired in plumes of feathers, skins, antelope teeth as they move through the night. In the low bleachers surrounding the dancers and drummers sit spectators, dressed in shorts, baseball hats, and cameras. I wonder how many generations ago I became a spectator in relationship to earth.

The McCullough Peaks are on my left as I drive down the highway. Silhouetted in the pickup truck ahead of me are a man's shoulders, topped by a cowboy hat, and to his right, the back of a dog's head. They are shoulder to shoulder, the dog seated in the traditional

place of the girlfriend. Dogs are nearly a religion—they're rarely discussed, but evidence of devotion is everywhere. Chihuahuas ride on the driver's shoulders—not a working dog, by any means.

Dogs and Wyoming go way back. The first statute passed in Cheyenne in the 1880's was to levy a fine for dogs barking at night. A tax on dogs funded the first public school in Wyoming, at Fort Laramie. (The 1991 Wyoming legislature repealed the status of dogs as taxable private property.) A young man who grew up on a cattle ranch tells me about the rancher saying, "The reason I keep a dog around is so I can feel smarter than someone." Not all dogs are venerated. In the towns some dogs are tied up outside year round without companionship—sentinels to a penetrating emptiness and gnawing boredom, punctuated by an infrequent visit from their master.

Fall 1990

In hunting season, many horses leave their pasture for the only time during the year. They strain during the annual trek up the steep mountains, having had little exercise. They endure the bitter winter without shelter. When offered protection from the elements some refuse it, preferring the vault of sky overhead. A rancher shakes his head in disgust after having attended the Morgan Horse Nationals in Oklahoma City. "They're not horses, they're not allowed to be horses," he says, referring to the hothouse equestrian techniques and confinement of the show animals.

A formerly wild horse in a nearby pasture, part draft horse, had her ears frozen off. Her misshapen head is set off by a coat of luxurious black hair. She was captured near Rock Springs, transported to the Honor Farm in Riverton where she was halter broke by a prisoner. She is shy with people, but gets along well with the Tennessee Walkers and Arabians with whom she shares a pasture. A lot of cats are missing parts of their ears, too. It is not only winter that is tough on cats. The animal control officer in Lovell, Wyoming, became famous for having killed so many feral cats. Some were not so feral—an elderly woman lost her calico. It was collared and had a rabies tag, but was killed anyway. For his success in slaughtering so many cats, the townspeople conferred on him the title, "Top Cat."

The Wyoming license plate is decorated with the image of a cowboy atop a bucking horse. It awakens

fantasies of cowboys on the range, the drama of rodeo, fighting off Indians and the winning of the West—all the high flying adventure of a culture that has fallen for its own myth. We cling to this image, as if for deliverance from the pain and sometimes failure of existence.

In Ten Sleep five thousand sheep had their throats slit by twenty masked men some eighty years ago. This incident was one in a series of battles between the cattle ranchers and the sheep ranchers. I imagine what five thousand dead sheep might look like, how they scattered, bleated, and dropped. The herders were murdered, too. And before that, bison carcasses littered the plains. Their tongues were cut out, and served as delicacies in Delnonico's restaurant in New York, enjoyed by both General Custer and Buffalo Bill Cody. Last year a horse at a college rodeo competition in Cody broke its leg coming out of the chute. It lay there nuzzling its leg, mouth frothing. No one shot it, no vet came for over an hour. The image of the bronc and cowboy reveals the fantasies that nourish the myth, yet it conceals the labyrinth of images—truer images—that constitute our soul.

I drive with a bucking horse on my license plate. I teach animal rights philosophy, and invariably falter. I look into the youthful faces before me and try to say why it is wrong to use animals. Why it depends upon psychic numbing, and when that fails, as it always does, why it is unjust. I hesitate because I know that earth persists despite my protests—the gazelle succumbs to the lion, the fish to the eagle. Philosophy is the wrong tongue in which to discuss such things. Western philosophy has always distinguished itself by cartwheels of ratiocination that vault the spirit away from body and earth.

We have never been generous toward difference. The spiritual dislocation of the black, the female, the native, in the dominant culture attest to this. Animals, too, suffer dislocation, and not only in zoos or circuses or on racetracks. Animals are our spiritual beasts of burden. They suffer the human fear of difference. We recognize ourselves in their mammalian bodies—their teats our breasts, their hooves our fingernails; the hair on a man and a gorilla's chest is not so different. Our imagination is alive with creatures in which human beings and animals merge identities. The goddess Circe was so feared because she turned men into animals. Werewolves and vampires rouse the fear that we are too much alike. We seek to forget this, but these chimeras return

to haunt us with our kinship. We are diurnal; they are nocturnal. But in the darkness, in the unconscious, we are the same.

Winter 1991

A war is happening a world away. I read in the newspaper how the Iraqi soldiers ate nearly all the animals in the zoo in Kuwait city. Television news showed an injured Israeli man clutching his small dog as he was loaded into an ambulance. There is comfort, too, in our similitude.

Animals are burdened with the vicissitudes of human history. If they no longer carry us into war, they will set underwater explosives for us or be subjects of our experiments. We experiment upon them because they are not like us. We believe the experimental results because they are so much like us. I wonder if when I fight for animal rights I burden animals with suffering that is not theirs, but my own—the suffering of my body and my own ambivalent relationship to earth. Henry Beston said that animals are “other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time.” I need ambassadors and translators, so that I do not impose too much.

The house I live in was one of the barracks of the Heart Mountain Relocation Camp, where American citizens of Japanese ancestry were imprisoned during World War II. Four families occupied the house I live in by myself. The house was moved to a knoll a mile from Polecat Bench, an endless, desolate bench still dotted with tepee rings that overlooks Badger Basin to the west, the Big Horn Basin to the east.

I am driving back home in a pickup after hiking up on the bench. A boy with a rifle is holding something in his right hand. As I drive by he looks at me, his eyes reveal shock and he holds up a rattlesnake. “You just shot that, huh?” He nods numbly. I wave and drive off. In the rear view mirror I see him, moving like a sleepwalker over the tumbleweeds and stones.

That night, the fetor of the feedlot reaches me, though I am miles away. The earth is warming. I look up at the moon, full moon in Virgo, the sign of the virgin—she who is complete in herself. The moon is our unconscious—paradoxical, inconsistent, abiding by its own rules. Lunar divinities are renowned for their simultaneous defense and destruction of life. Artemis is the goddess of the hunt, she protects the newly born, and guides the hunter and his prey. Loving and killing are not so different.

Lunar flight expresses the longing to reach what is wild, and untouched in the only way we know how. We are all astronauts, hurtled by civilization away from body and earth. Taking flight signals an openness to revelation; landing on the moon was a way of returning to earth. The pull of tides, of ancient memories, drew us there, oblivious to the conjunction of memory and technology. Things change, the moon reveals—wind, ice, time shape everything wholly—and everything returns to its source.

My friend and my dog went for a walk across the bench. When they returned six hours later Marge said the antelope played with them. They danced forward, two of them were especially curious, and then they ran, stopped, turned, and advanced again. A raven flew low and she said she was transported from the human realm. To be human is to return to earth. "Human" is related to humus, to rich dark soil, to "humiliate," to lower one's self. There is humiliation in returning to earth.

I watch the moon rise. I am undoing the whole of my training in civilization. I am trying to find where I was born, and where I lived before I was touched by my civilization's forgetfulness of earth, of body, and its fear of life.

The struggle over the wolves' return to Yellowstone becomes fierce. If wolves are restored to Yellowstone National Park, some ranchers promise to shoot them on sight. Rumors circulate that wolves have already been released covertly by environmental activists. Letters to the editor appearing in regional newspapers recount the deaths inflicted by wolves in years past—stories passed on from grandparents and great grandparents. Wolves eat lambs while the helpless creatures are still alive, they say. Wolves gut them and leave them to slowly perish. Ranchers write in to express their pain not at their financial loss, but at the way the lambs and calves will die.

A fresh snow has fallen, and a single engine plane flies low over the bench. They are looking for coyotes to shoot. In the spring, federal Animal Damage Control agents will kill coyote pups in their dens.

We have nearly created a world in which there is nothing to fear, a world without rattlers, grizzlies, coyotes. Wildness tames us, makes us human—it returns us to earth. Wolves recollect for us the animal we left behind. Both foes and friends of wolf reintroduction envy wolves' amber-eyed certainty about their place on earth.

Spring 1991

It is late spring now, and the mare who ran off to the McCollough Peaks has a new colt. She conceived while in the Peaks, in the brief fertile period that follows foaling. She moves quietly about her pasture now, colt at her side.

I head out on horseback with three companions, looking for wild horses to photograph in the McCullough Peaks. We ride for hours over steep sandy hills and ravines that give way underfoot. We spot a band of horses, but they smell us and head over a hill. By the time we get to the top of the hill, they are just dots moving across the flat.

Heading down the sheer hills, knees shaking and mouth dry I fight the urge to dismount and send the horse down by herself. "A rattler!" one of my companions calls out. We all dismount. The man approaches the rock with a gun drawn. The horses startle at the ping of the .22. He holds up the rattlesnake with its distinct diamond skin pattern, its head dissolved into a bloody mass. I watch, stunned by the nonchalance about taking a life. Stunned, too, by my silence.

The serpent is a lunar animal, chthonic and feminine; coiled in the earth, coiled at the base of the spine, she is our connection to earth and to deeper ways of knowing. I feel foolish for riding over this ground, with horses and guns and cameras, hoping to capture an image.

The mountains, the scarcity of water, the cold, and the capricious wind ensure that efforts to dominate nature will fail. These same elements have slowed my judgements. I live with fewer certainties about my relationship to animals, about whether or not there is a decent way to hunt them, eat them, wear them or ride them. I am outnumbered by ranchers, farmers, business people, all of whom seem certain in their understanding.

We share this part of earth with pronghorn antelope, red fox, deer, coyotes, and in the meadows and the mountains, rarely seen, are grizzly bear, moose and mountain lions. These animals live with certainties beyond human reckoning.

I often think of the mare who left her corral for the wild horse range. She knows what is forgotten by our human world—that earth is home. Both wild and tame, there is no place that is not her home. I recognize her wisdom and seek to emulate it, though it remains, like earth itself, close to me and beyond my reach.