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Writing personal stories about the landscapes we love is a radical act. A protective act. A celebratory act. Even an act of desperation. It is also an intimate and sensual act. Sometimes I crave the western earth like food, or breath, or sex, or water. I cannot imagine hungering for another landscape in quite the same way, nor can I imagine writing about another landscape in quite the same way.

I have watched the territory of my western homeland expand, from the mountains west of Denver, Colorado, to the suburban farmlands rimming the South Platte River, to the rounded peaks and short grass prairies of eastern Wyoming, to the purple skies and brittle landscapes of New Mexico, even to the red walls and muddy rivers that the canyon wrens of Utah call home.

When I first moved from the ranch in Wyoming where my son and daughter were reared back to Colorado, and then to the suburban desert near Santa Fe, I felt mute, disconnected. I looked outside the window to the desert beyond and saw nothing familiar. I found no comfort in the distant purple horizons—the Jemez Mountains, the Sangre de Cristo range, the Sandia Mountains. Nor in the vast desert. I missed the oak-covered draws and the sunlit meadows. The faces of the junipers and the piñons were not familiar. I found no elk tracks or porcupine tracks on my morning walks. Where was the bone-yard that cradled my old mare's brittle legs and the vertebrae of her hollow spine? Where were the cows and calves? Where was the hill with the grandparent trees?

I began to journal about this muteness. Soon, I heard coyotes at night. When spring came and the desert plants bloomed, I recognized penstemons and wild legumes, sand lilies and blue grama. Suddenly, the suburban wildness was speaking a familiar language. As I wrote, I listened to this unspoken dialogue and began to recognize myself within the landscape. One morning, while hiking a snow-covered hill to the east of the subdivision, I discovered three sets of coyote tracks and one set of frantic rabbit tracks. Soon, the tracks converged, racing around a piñon tree. Bits of fur and blood told the rest of the story. I named the hill "The Place Where the Rabbit Died."

Keith H. Basso, in his book *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache*, tells us that Western Apache place-names were created by their ancestors—

names like "Gray Willows Curve Around a Bend," "She Became Old Sitting," "They are Grateful for Water," and "She Carries Her Brother on Her Back." Each of these names tells a story.

Once, when hiking in the Big Horn Mountains of Wyoming where I spent a summer month alone in a remote cabin, I sat on a granite overlook prying apart cougar scat to see what the animal had been eating. The storm clouds gathering over the mountains spiraled above in dark gray swirls. The sun streamed through the clouds in one narrow break. A golden eagle rode the thermals. Golden eagles, abundant in the Big Horns, are found in mountainous areas on all continents. They will defend a territory as large as a hundred square miles. The bald eagle, found only in North America, defends a single cone-shaped section of air directly above his nest.

Do familial ties make a difference, I wondered, when defending territory? Often, back on the ranch in Wyoming, the females of three generations stood side by side waiting to be fed—grandmother, mother, granddaughter. The grandmother, whether Old Red or the Reiland cow or the longhorn, would defend her pile of hay against the other cows and heifers, but never against her kin. In what way do our stories defend who we believe ourselves to be?

It makes sense that a golden eagle needs to claim and protect a much larger hunting area than a bald eagle, for the mountains do not yield up nearly as plentiful a meal of mouse or snake or fawn, as the rivers and lakes yield up a bounty of fish. If writers of the West are predators hunting stories, perhaps we are Golden Eagles claiming the vast expanses of a shape-shifting land with ever-changing borders.

What happens when two writers claim different truths about the West? When our experiences lead us to different conclusions? I confess, I am both predator and protector, tearing at the flesh of stories that claim to know all the West, yet loyally clinging to the truth as I see it in my one corner of the West. The West is a landscape of deserts and mountains, lushness and aridness, great rippling plains and blinding white sand dunes. No two ecosystems are alike. What is true for Utah's San Juan County is not true for the Black Hills of eastern Wyoming. All Native Americans are not Indians of the Great Plains, and they do not all live in tipis. Chicanos and Hispanics have different stories to tell, as do urbanites and suburbanites. All are unique. Yet the tension created by our differing and sometimes confrontational stories is vital to our survival. It hones our senses, keeps us alert, and energizes our life blood.

Perhaps, like the Aboriginal people of Australia, our stories keep this land alive and in a state of perpetual, mythical creation. James Welch said that the landscape in *Perma Red*, an exquisite novel by Debra Magpie Earling set on a Montana Indian reservation, "borders on mythic." Earling writes:

"She thought of rainbow trout, their dense eyes watching, the scales ringing along their backs as they bit up toward the small white wings beyond water. There was a pause in the reed grass as a deep breeze pulled dust toward a higher

place. The red-winged blackbirds were quiet. She looked closer at the bloated cottonwood roots that stretched to the pond edge. A slow current writhed silver and then green in the sleeping shade. She threw a rock toward the pond, saw a sudden lap in the water, then more waves, the smooth familiar wiggle parting grass, small hiss. She had come to know the language of the fields, the thin weave at the roots of grass. Snakes."

Sometimes, we must learn the language of the land through silence. In the chapter "Layers of Time in a Silent World" (In Search of Kinship), I write about my maternal grandmother who, at the age of eleven, discovered her mother had slit her own throat and who, at the age of eighteen living as an orphan with her aunt in northern California, became deaf because of a tragic error. In 1910, she was married off to a man whom my mother would later refer to as "the black sheep" of his family. A short time later, my newlywed grandparents headed south to homestead in California's relentless desert country.

"I see her, deaf, in the quiet stillness of the Mojave, searching her arid garden for a half-hidden rattler. A snake shakes a warning, but only the desert scorpion hears...was this why you loved the desert so, grandma? In the desert it was easier to forget your sudden growing up. Easier to forget that fateful day when the doctor poured acid in your ears. Easier to just be. Shed your memories, begin anew. Be reptilian for a while, let the new skin thicken."

My paternal grandmother's sudden growing up was of a different kind, her silence a culturally imposed one. There are some things it's better not to talk about. Her birth certificate read simply: Helen Denishia Terry. Born November 11, 1894. Potapo River. Choctaw Nation. Indian Territory. I longed to find this place and to stand on its shores, to hear some whisper of her long-ago presence.

Finally, in the summer of 2007, I traveled east with my partner John, a member of the Cherokee Nation, on this long-awaited pilgrimage. At the Confederate Museum near Stringtown, Oklahoma (an old logging town), we browsed through history books and discovered my great-grandfather's name within the pages. Apparently, he hung out with the notorious Starr clan, a group of renegade Cherokees who bootlegged whiskey, stole cattle, and thieved horses. In 1889, he was with the outlaw Belle Starr when she was murdered by a shotgun blast from a dirt farmer. He later testified at her murder trial. This was the same year he married my great-grandmother, whose mother's name is listed only as "Mahala" on court records.

We left the Confederate Museum and headed for the back-country road that would lead us to a wildlife management area and hopefully to Potapo Creek, one of dozens of tributaries flowing into a 10,000 acre wildlife management area eleven miles east of Stringtown on Greasy Bend Road. When the railroads expanded westward, dozens of small sawmills sprang up along these branches. To discover the creek where my grandmother was born meant to also discover a family legacy, for years later my father would be born in a logging camp in Trail, British Columbia. These are stories of motion, each begetting the next, each a part of the mythic creation of the West.

Thick brush and tall grass flanked the backwoods Oklahoma road down which we drove. Giant trees—pines and deciduous trees, hardwoods and evergreens, embellished the hillside. One flamboyant tree (a Mimosa, I later learned) spread out huge, flower-laden branches like the spines of a pink umbrella. Scissortails. Mockingbirds. Cottonmouths. Copperheads. Red tail hawks. Opossums (southern roadkill). According to a wildlife brochure, bobwhite quail, eastern wild turkey, white-tailed deer, cottontails, coyote, bobcat, raccoon, doves, wood ducks and mallards, fox and gray squirrels, and screech owls all made their homes there. In the winter, bald eagles roosted in the trees near the banks of the reservoir and largemouth trophy bass, catfish and crappie populated the waters year-round.

When we found Potapo Creek, there was no drum roll of ancestral celebration, only a narrow bridge, a meandering creek which quickly disappeared into the dense brush, the sticky feel of humidity on my skin, and the flutter of birds flitting from tree to tree. I stood on a bridge overlooking the creek and tried to imagine a logging camp set up along its banks, tents pitched, women cooking over open fires, horses and mules harnessed up to hauling chains, the sound of trees being felled in the woods. I imagined my great-grandmother washing clothes at the creek with an infant wrapped in a shawl beside her.

The creek yielded up only these few hints of earlier times. Yet there I was, one hundred and fifteen years after my grandmother's birth, hundreds of miles east of my western birthplace, surrounded by trees rooted to a landscape which served as a bridge between generations. I inhaled the muggy air and could almost feel my family stories and the boundaries of my perceived homeland expand as the heavy air filled my lungs. My breath felt languid and slow, like a silty river moving over a bed of alluvial rock. If I were to name that place as the Western Apache name their places, I might call it The Place Where Memories Lie Heavy.

Where I live in Colorado, at 8000 feet with thin air, regal mountains, and open vistas, inhaling is an act of survival. Writing stories about the West feels like an act of survival. During times of war, humans couple with the abandonment of survivors, as if the intimate act of making love counterbalances the threat of extinction. In fact, it does. In the West, where nature is besieged by development and drilling and the homogenization of culture, we make love to the land through our stories. We flirt with the land. We court it. We tease it into the bed chambers of our hearts. We explore its inner realms. We massage the flesh that layers its mythic bones, all the time feeling as if we are accomplices in an ongoing betrayal.

Some imply that when we feed the stories of the past, we create a serpent that circles around and devours its own tail, that the future of the West should no longer be anchored to a mythic past. Yet the future of the West is not a stagnant or linear thing. It rises up out of the same soil in which the past is grounded, then returns, a breathing circle of motion. And each story that we write about the land, whether we love it or hate it, whether we agree or disagree, is part of that perpetual creative manifestation.

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