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Into the Body of Another: *Eros*, Embodiment and Intimacy with the Natural World

DOUGLAS BURTON-CHRISTIE*

Introduction

On this late summer afternoon in California's Santa Lucia Mountains, a thick fog from the Pacific Ocean drifts up into the steep narrow valley where I sit. Rising, as if filled with a kind of yearning, the pearl gray mist pours through the Redwood trees and ferns that fill this deep ravine. But it rarely crosses the ridgeline or touches the sage and scrub oak of the burnt ochre chaparral, except at the edges—which is where I am now, fog swirling around me, blue sky appearing and disappearing, at the meeting point of two worlds, in the fluid space where they mingle and dance together.

In biology, such a transitional area between two different communities is called an ecotone. It is, notes Barry Lopez, “a special meeting ground, like that of a forest's edge with a clearing; or where the fresh waters of an estuary meet the saline tides of the sea; or at a river's riparian edge. The mingling of animals from different ecosystems charges such border zones with evolutionary potential.” One becomes alert, in such a place, to the movement of species across conventional habitats and to unexpected changes in the evolution of species. Lopez observes how at Admiralty Inlet in the Arctic for example, “flying creatures walk on ice. They break the pane of the water with their dives to feed. Marine animals break the pane of water coming the other way to breathe.”¹ To understand such a world means learning to accept its vital, insistent dynamism and its organic evolutionary developments as basic features of the landscape. To inhabit such a world means learning to dwell in a landscape where borders are fluid and permeable,

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¹ Barry Lopez, *Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape* (New York: Bantam, 1987), pp. 109-110.

where life unfolds in unexpected ways in the continuous movement of species back and forth across borders. It is easy to miss these subtle movements. Yet to do so is to risk missing the very life of the place.

So it is with other ecotones that we inhabit, those fluid, often-contested spaces between the human and the “more-than-human” worlds, between matter and spirit, body and soul, heaven and earth, humanity and divinity. It is not easy to move across the borders between these worlds, or to inhabit that charged liminal space that joins them together. The mental habit of dualism is, for many of us, so deeply ingrained that it is difficult even to imagine doing so. Yet we must, for the sake of the world as well as for the sake of our own souls, try. Unless we are able to imagine these different worlds in relationship to one another, drawn together in a subtle, rhythmic dance, we will be condemned to live a thin, impoverished existence, bereft of intimacy, empty of feeling and spirit. And we will continue to visit our own sense of alienation upon the living world.

How are we to rehabilitate our imaginations, reweave what has been rent asunder? Perhaps we can begin by learning, as Alaska writer John Haines suggests, to listen more carefully to the living world itself. “I have come to feel,” he says, “that there is here in North America a hidden place obscured by what we have built upon it, and that whenever we penetrate the surface of the life around us that place and its spirit can be found.”² This observation is a kind of response, I think, to a question being heard with increasing frequency within American culture: can we recover a sense of place? Or, in the more explicitly spiritual terms in which the question is often phrased, can we learn to see the places we inhabit as charged with the presence of the holy? And can we recover an attitude of respect and responsibility for these places? At the root of these questions, at once ecological, spiritual and ethical in character, is an ancient longing, nearly extinguished from our imaginations but gradually being recovered, for intimacy with the living world.

The recovery of such intimacy requires the rehabilitation of language, in particular the recovery of the language of *eros*. It requires learning to articulate the character and shape of our desire for a deeper sense of relationship with the living world, with particular places. This, I think, is what Barry Lopez means when he says that we must

² Cited in: Kevin Bezner and Kevin Walzer, eds., *The Wilderness of Vision: On the Poetry of John Haines* (Brownsville, OR: Story Line Press, 1996), p. 28.

work to cultivate a “more particularized understanding” of place. This means seeking an understanding that is grounded in the shape and texture of a given landscape, and expressive of the distinct cultural patterns, narratives and myths arising from that landscape. It means listening and responding to the entire life of a place, allowing ourselves to risk being swept up into, even consumed by that life. It is just such a “particularized understanding” of place that one finds in the literature and poetry of nature currently unfolding on this continent.³

This poetry and literature of place is itself a kind of literary-spiritual ecotone, drawing upon and moving between such varied fields as natural history, philosophy, ecology, literature, natural science, anthropology and spirituality to create a rich, organic vision of the living world.⁴ It inhabits and searches out those charged borderlands, those

³ I am thinking, for example, of: Richard Nelson’s intimate portraits of the Alaskan wilderness (*The Island Within* [New York: Vintage, 1991]); the vivid poetry of place Denise Levertov has created under the shadow of Mt. Rainier in the Pacific Northwest (*Evening Train* [New York: New Directions, 1992], *Sands of the Well* [New York: New Directions, 1996]); Terry Tempest Williams’s searching essays on the Great Basin region of Utah (*Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* [New York: Pantheon, 1991]); Scott Russell Sanders’s evocation of limestone country in the Ohio watershed in Indiana (*Staying Put: Making a Home in a Restless World* [Boston: Beacon, 1993]); Linda Hogan’s seamless renderings of the spirit of the Rocky Mountain region (*Dwellings: A Spiritual History of the Living World* [New York: Norton, 1995]); Barry Lopez’s ethically demanding and imaginatively rich probings of relationships between human beings, animals and the Arctic landscape (*Arctic Dreams*); Wendell Berry’s essays, poems and stories set in the tobacco fields of Kentucky (Wendell Berry, *Collected Poems: 1957-1982* [San Francisco: North Point, 1995]); Gary Snyder’s lifetime of poems and essays rooted in the Yuba watershed on the Western slope of the Sierra Nevada Mountains (*The Practice of the Wild* [San Francisco: North Point, 1990], *Mountains and Rivers Without End* [Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 1996]); Annie Dillard’s luminous and theologically acute meditations on the Appalachian Mountains (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* [New York: Harper, 1974]); Mary Oliver’s intricate renderings of embodied spirit near Provincetown, Massachusetts (*New and Selected Poems* [Boston: Beacon, 1992]); Norman Maclean’s evocation of the rugged landscape around the Big Blackfoot River in Montana (*A River Runs Through It* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976]).

⁴ On the fundamentally interdisciplinary character of this literature, see: Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995); Robert Finch, “Being at Two With Nature,” *Georgia Review* XLV, Number 1 (Spring, 1991), 97-104. On the convergence of science, literature and spirituality in the literature of nature, see: Douglas Burton-Christie, “Interlude: The Literature of Nature and the Quest for the Sacred,” in *The Sacred Place*, ed. by W. Scott Olsen and Scott Cairns (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1996), 165-177; “Mapping the Sacred Landscape: Spirituality and the Contemporary Literature of Nature,” *Horizons* 21: 1 (Spring, 1994), 22-47; “A Feeling for the Natural World: Spirituality and the Ap-

places of encounter where longing gives way to relationship, communion, intimacy. Here, in this liminal space, it becomes possible to imagine the apparently impermeable boundaries that separate one place from another, spirit from matter, ourselves from other living species, ourselves from God, as permeable. It becomes possible to imagine ourselves no longer as standing aloof and distant from the world, but as caught up into, transformed by the intimate presence of the living world within and around us.

“[A]ll this life going on about my life, or living a life about all this life/going on.”⁵ This simple, radical relationality—everything understood and experienced as being in relationship with everything else—lies at the heart of the theopoetic vision of *eros* and place I wish to explore here. It is a vision that can help us, I believe, to retrieve a palpable sense of intimacy with the living world and with the spirit who lives and breathes among us.

Eros, Spirit and the Natural World

It may seem surprising, given the depth of our alienation from the natural world, that the language of *eros* should figure so prominently in the contemporary conversation about place and identity. In fact, it would appear that the acute and widespread sense of displacement from the natural world has itself contributed significantly to the rediscovery of the language of desire. Increasingly, the note of longing sounds as a cry for a recovery of what has been lost, or is in danger of being lost. In poetry and literature, as in philosophy, theology and anthropology, one encounters the recurring question: can we recover the erotic heart of our relationship with the living world? *Eros*, in this context, refers to the longing to share in the life of another, whether that “other” be a person, a place, a non-human species, or God. This expansive, inclusive sense of *eros* is characteristic of much contemporary critical discourse about the natural world. Careful attention to this discourse can help us retrieve a sense of the cultural, ecological and spiritual significance of *eros* and provide a framework within which the language of longing within the literature and poetry of nature can be better understood.

peal to the Heart in Contemporary Nature Writing,” *Continuum* 2: 2-3 (Spring, 1993), 154-180.

⁵ Robert Hass, “Iowa City: Early April,” in *Sun Under Wood* (New York: Ecco, 1996), p. 35.

One of the great virtues of Susan Griffin's *The Eros of Everyday Life* is to have drawn our attention once again to the fundamentally relational sense of the word *eros* and to have resituated it at the center of the intricate web of relationships within which we live. Drawing on Hesiod's ancient cosmogenic sense of the word, she considers *eros* as that which draws us toward those highly charged meetings, encounters with the "other," that which makes possible the fluid, dynamic exchanges that take place in such encounters, and the very life that emerges from them. Such meetings are immensely complex, and move toward ever greater complexity. They are inclusive of the biological, the emotional, the linguistic, the socio-political and the spiritual dimensions of our lives. To inhabit the world of *eros* means recognizing that borders—between oneself and another, between human beings and the more-than-human world, between matter and spirit—are permeable, that life emerges nowhere else so fully and deeply as it does in the exchange across these borders. But we create and perpetuate, says Griffin, a world of impermeable borders, a world marked by divisions and obstructions, a world where such exchanges become unimaginable.

This is not how we came into the world, nor is it how we first came to know about our world. Consider, says Griffin, how easily a child, newly born, turns toward the mother's body. "Groping with cheeks and mouth, the infant burrows over the mother's breast in search of her nipple. Finding this, her tiny lips must explore at the same time both the contours of the mother's nipple and their own movement, new, uncharted. With his first small acts the child finds nourishment, knowledge and love all in the same efforts." It is only later that the child learns from culture to divide these things. "Eating, he is no longer aware of taking life into his body. Even if she takes sensual pleasure in a meal, she has lost the memory of the mouth as an instrument of intelligence. He has forgone a deeper knowledge of his own existence as part of a continual process of transubstantiation, *bodies becoming bodies*; she loses the *eros* at the heart of becoming." Such a division, claims Griffin, "is not really possible." It is not, ultimately, sustainable. "All that is severed returns."⁶ Providing of course that we learn to open ourselves to this world of intimacy, exchange and encounter.

⁶ Susan Griffin, *The Eros of Everyday Life: Essays on Ecology, Gender and Society* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), p. 69.

Such openness can only come from a more supple, generous and wide-ranging imagination. It is precisely this capacity to imagine ourselves as entering continuously into transformative exchanges with an “other” that interests Lewis Hyde and leads him to explore the ancient tradition of gift giving. His book *The Gift* contains the odd-sounding subtitle, *Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*. Its oddness comes at least partly from our habitual sense of property as something inert, something that comes into our possession through a payment of some kind, an exchange, to be sure, but one with fairly strict rules and mechanisms. Certainly each of us knows, if not personally then at least at second-hand, the frenzied desire to possess that often fuels buying and selling in our culture. Still, to suggest that property itself has an erotic character seems a strange kind of anthropomorphism. Hyde, however, draws an important distinction in his book between two kinds of property, the commodity and the gift. A commodity is bought and sold in a relatively dispassionate way according to rules agreed upon by the two sides. Once purchased, a commodity comes into the possession of the one who has paid for it. And there it remains. The exchange is over. A gift, however, operates on a completely different principle.

The key difference, Hyde says, is this: “the gift must always move.” And it must always be used up, consumed, eaten. “The gift is property that perishes.” Yet, in perishing, life comes into being.⁷ These two principles, which Hyde arrives at on the basis of extensive research into traditional folk tales and into the cultural patterns of ancient indigenous peoples, suggest a life and dynamism that, while not inherent in the property itself, is mediated, kindled by the “economy” of gift giving, by the movement of property through the human community.

How does this happen? One can see it at work most clearly, Hyde suggests, when the gift exchange is not merely reciprocal (that is involving just two people) but moves into the circle of a larger community. Circular giving is richer and more complex than reciprocal giving. When the gift moves in a circle, no one ever receives a gift from the same person to whom she gives it. “[I]ts motion is beyond the control of the personal ego, and so each bearer must be part of the group and

⁷ Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (New York: Vintage, 1979), pp. 4, 8.

each donation is an act of social faith.”⁸ This relinquishment of the personal ego is a fundamental dimension of authentic gift exchange. It is also one of the sources of its creative power. Within this dynamic of exchange, one gradually transcends the hardened patterns of what Hyde calls the “ego-of-one,” or even the “ego-of-two,” that constellation of identity that forms when we fall in love. As one is drawn into the life of the gift-giving-and-receiving community, conventional ego boundaries begin to dissolve. It becomes easier and easier to say “we” instead of “me,” to know oneself as bound up intimately within the life of the community. As this process deepens and grows, the understanding of community itself can expand to include the more-than-human community. “The ego’s firmness has its virtues,” says Hyde, “but at some point we seek the slow dilation . . . in which the ego enjoys a widening give-and-take with the world and is finally abandoned in ripeness.”⁹

To allow oneself to be “dilated” in this way, taken up in the life of a larger community, requires imagination. It requires us to relinquish our imaginative attachment to boundaries and hierarchies that keep things distinct and separate and reimagine a world that is fluid, relational, organic. It demands that we discover a new language, supple enough to evoke and draw us into this dynamic world. This is why David Abram, in his book *The Spell of the Sensuous*, devotes so much attention to the influence of language upon the way we perceive and experience the world. The roots of our current sense of alienation from the living world, he suggests, are linguistic and philosophical. Drawing upon the research into oral culture conducted in recent years by scholars such as Eric Havelock, Jack Goody, and Walter Ong, Abram suggests that cultures that have developed within a predominantly written language tradition tend to divide the world more clearly and easily between the human and the more-than-human, the interior and the exterior, spirit and matter. In oral cultures, on the other hand, language mediates these worlds, joins them, creates a climate in which one can pass back and forth between them. The philosophical impasse, which can be traced back at least to the time of Descartes has, Abram argues, bequeathed to us a conception of the material world as almost completely mechanical and inanimate and an understanding of the human person as a detached, objective, isolated ego.

⁸ Hyde, *The Gift*, p. 16.

⁹ Hyde, *The Gift*, p. 16.

The phenomenological philosophical tradition of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, Abram notes, offers a more fluid way of understanding the self, the material world, and the relationship between them, a way that is more open to the sensual as a medium of consciousness and more attentive to the possibilities for “intersubjective” communication between human beings and the living world.

The implications of this way of speaking and seeing are profound and far-reaching: “As we return to our senses,” says Abram, “we gradually discover our sensory perceptions to be simply our part of a vast, interpenetrating web work of perceptions and sensations borne by countless other bodies—supported, that is, not just by ourselves, but by icy streams tumbling down granite slopes, by owl wings and lichens, and by the unseen, imperturbable wind.” Further, Abram notes, “this intertwined web of experience,” which Husserl referred to in his later writings as the “life-world,” “has been disclosed as a profoundly *carnal* field, as this very dimension of smells and tastes and chirping rhythms warmed by the sun and shivering the seeds. It is, indeed, nothing other than the biosphere—the matrix of earthly life in which we ourselves are embedded.” Still, it is not a biosphere that we can conceive of as somehow detached from us, viewed from the objective distance of science. It is, says Abram, “the biosphere as it is experienced and *lived from within*, by the intelligent body—by the attentive human animal who is entirely a part of the world that he, or she, experiences.”¹⁰

To inhabit such a world is to transcend the old dualisms, to know oneself as an embodied subject dwelling within a world of other embodied subjects, subjects who are capable of speaking and responding to us. It is to dwell in a living world of “multiple subjectivities,” a “collective landscape, constituted by other experiencing subjects as well as oneself.”¹¹ It is to inhabit a world charged with *eros*, where momentous encounters and exchanges are endlessly unfolding before us, among us and within us.

It is just such an unfolding that has long been celebrated within the Jewish and Christian traditions through their commentary on the *Song of Songs*. Jewish Rabbis early on recognized the power of the imagery of the two lovers drawn toward one another in an erotic em-

¹⁰ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Pantheon, 1996), p. 65.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

brace; they described this book as the “holy of holies,” the most sacred text in all of scripture. Yet its erotic power has been consistently redirected, sublimated by the tradition. The palpable and highly charged physical attraction of the lovers to one another has been allegorized—first to stand for the relationship between God and Israel, then for the relationship between God and the Church, and finally, from Origen of Alexandria onwards, for the relationship between God and the soul. To say that the text has been allegorized and spiritualized, however, does not mean that its erotic power was lost completely. The commentary tradition stretching from Origen to Gregory the Great, to Hugh of St. Victor, to William of St. Thierry, to Alan of Lille, to Denys the Carthusian and beyond reveals the fecundity of this metaphor for helping early and medieval Christians articulate the soul’s deepest and most subtle yearnings for God, yearnings that retained, in spite of the allegorizing tendency, much of the palpable, erotic power of the Song itself.

Denys Turner’s recent book, *Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs*, makes it clear that “the Song offered the mediaeval commentator something which only the Song could supply; and that something was precisely what was most specific to and characteristic of it: its exuberant celebration of *eros*.”¹² He suggests further that,

the reasons why the erotic model of the love of God so appealed to the monastic commentators of the middle ages . . . had to do with very fundamental preoccupations of the monastic theologian and that these, in turn, were intimately connected with the monks’ perception of their *Sitz im leben* . . . [they] are rooted in the monks’ theological eschatology, in their sense that their life of partial withdrawal from the world situated them at a point of intersection between this world and the next, between time and eternity, between light and dark, between anticipation and fulfillment. This meant that the concept of love as a “yearning” or “longing”—as an *amor desiderium*, or, in Greek, *eros* exactly expressed what they wanted by way of a language of love.¹³

Still, it was not this biblical, eschatological monastic theology *alone* that accounts for the vibrancy and dynamism of this Song commentary

¹² Denys Turner, *Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs* (Kalamazoo, MI-Spencer, MA; Cistercian Publications, 1995), p. 41.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

tradition, according to Turner. It was the fusion or cross-fertilization of this eschatological theology with Christian neo-platonic metaphysical eroticism—exemplified in the work of Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and Pseudo-Dionysius and mediated to the West through John Scotus Eriugena—that gave the medieval monastic commentary on the Song its particular character and force.

Two aspects of this argument are particularly worth noting in the present context. First, it is the monks' consciousness of occupying a liminal space, a physical, cultural, theological "ecotone," that makes the language of *eros* so attractive to them. They stand between worlds, know the kingdom to be "already" and "not yet," know their beloved to be now present, now absent. One might say that their consciousness of standing at the border between worlds makes them particularly attentive to the possibility of encounter, exchange between those worlds. *Eros* in this sense expresses a longing not to leave one world for the other but to draw them together in a tender embrace. The second point is that the medieval monastic tradition absorbed into its theology and spirituality not an eviscerated, completely spiritualized sense of the erotic but a powerful, highly charged eroticism capable of speaking to the deepest human longing and desire for union with the ultimate.¹⁴

These reflections on *eros*, nature and spirit raise important questions about the habitual distinctions we make between ourselves and the living world, between spirit and matter, between the mundane and the holy. If with Griffin and Hyde we understand *eros* as the capacity for communion with another—the capacity to encounter the other, to enter into the life of the other, and to receive life back—then we need to ask whether we are prepared to imagine the boundaries dividing one world from another as perhaps more porous than we have done until now. If with Abram we consider our imaginative, linguistic life not as disembodied and immaterial, but as part of a fluid, carnal "field," then we need to ask whether we are prepared to dig deeper to fathom the capacity of the living world to "speak" to us, and elicit a response from us, whether we are prepared to consider anew the possibilities for conversation between the human and the more-than-human worlds. And if with Turner we understand *eros* as a primary,

¹⁴ For a fuller development of this encompassing theological understanding of *eros*, see: Catherine Osborne, *Eros Unveiled: Plato and the God of Love* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

concrete and encompassing discourse for articulating the deepest human longing for the holy, arising from within our embodied experience, then we need to ask whether we are prepared to ground the language of spiritual longing more firmly in palpable, particular reality of *eros*.

Such questions lead, in turn, to others. How much intimacy with the living world do we want? How much intimacy can we bear? What are the limits and possibilities of language for articulating our experience of intimacy? What does it mean to speak of “losing oneself,” “crossing over,” “entering into” the living world, the world of the other? If we can “cross over,” what will happen to us on the other side? Who/what will we become? These are questions that surface repeatedly in the contemporary literature and poetry of nature. They form the basis of an ongoing struggle to imagine a fuller, deeper sense of relationship with the living world. In considering them, we are invited to risk participating in that most demanding of poetic tasks—to imagine one thing as another, even oneself as another.

Rekindling Intimacy: Eros, Place and Poetic Imagination

The contemporary literature of nature speaks as eloquently of loss and alienation as it does of discovery and embrace. If we are to rekindle a sense of intimacy with the living world, these writers suggest, we need to discover a language resonant enough to capture both. The rupture—between the human and more-than-human, between body and soul, heaven and earth, spirit and matter—must be named and acknowledged before the healing can begin. Only when we allow ourselves to feel the full weight of our exile will we be able to begin describing and imagining a world charged with *eros*, a world straining to be joined together in a web of intimacy. Let me offer here four examples, drawn from distinct kinds of writing but joined by a common concern to rekindle a deeper sense of intimacy with the living world.

Linda Hogan, a Chickasaw poet, essayist and novelist, expresses in her recent novel *Solar Storms* the depth of imagination required to transcend the boundaries that keep us from truly inhabiting the world and ourselves. The novel follows the story of Angel Jensen, a young native American woman, as she journeys by canoe back into the remote, brittle, cold world of her birth in the Boundary Waters between Minnesota and Canada. As a child she was abused and then abandoned by her mother. She now hopes, not without some trepidation,

to be reunited with her. But she is also determined to join together with her three traveling companions—her great-grandmother Agnes, her great-great grandmother Dora Rouge, and Bush, the woman who adopted Angel's mother and raised Angel when she was a young girl—on a quixotic quest to stop construction of a dam that threatens to flood their home.

Traveling through the Boundary Waters kindles in Angel's awareness the memory of a world nearly lost to her and a way of living in the world that has become almost unimaginable. It also leads her to reflect on the legacy she and her friends are struggling against, a sense of the world as strange and alien, bereft of spirit. "The Europeans called this world dangerous . . . they had trapped themselves inside their own destruction of it, the oldest kind of snare, older than twine and twigs. Their legacy, I began to understand, had been the removal of spirit from everything, from animals, trees, fishhooks, and hammers, all the things the Indians had as allies. They'd forgotten how to live. Before, everything lived well together—lynx and women, trappers and beaver. Now most of us had inarticulate souls, silent spirits, and despairing hearts."¹⁵ The European legacy, Angel suggests, is a suffocating web of fear and forgetfulness, a habit of mind that divides what cannot be divided. "Before, everything lived well together." The sense of the world as undivided, whole, the capacity to imagine and inhabit such a world—these have disappeared almost completely for Angel. The world and the imagination have become diminished together, leaving behind "inarticulate souls, silent spirits, and despairing hearts."

But the very ability to articulate this loss is itself a testimony that not all has been forgotten. If it is possible to remember a time when spirit animated the world, when "everything lived well together," perhaps it is possible to learn to speak again, imagine the world as whole. This is precisely what Angel struggles to discover as she journeys north. But she must begin with herself. For her body is covered with hideous scars, indelible marks of her mother's act of fury and madness years before: she had burned her child and left her for dead. Angel has grown up within that deformed body, unable to see her own beauty, unaware of her own soul. One evening at Agnes and Dora Rouge's house she accidentally cuts herself with a knife and goes to the bathroom to tend to the wound. The odor from the medicine cabinet provokes in her a violent response: "Something inside me began to move

¹⁵ Linda Hogan, *Solar Storms* (New York: Scribner, 1995), p. 180.

around, the memory of wounds, the days and weeks of hospitals, the bandages across my face, the surgeries . . . I saw myself in the mirror, and suddenly, without warning, I hit the mirror with my hand, hit the face of myself. . . . Glass shattered down into the sink and broken pieces spread across the floor. . . .”¹⁶ Angel lay broken with them.

Yet as Angel journeys deeper into the Boundary Waters, she begins to regain a sense of place. She also becomes aware of what she calls a new “kind of knowing.” And a new vision of herself.

I began to feel that if we had no separate words for inside and out and there were no boundaries between them, no walls, no skin, you would see me. What would meet your eyes would not be the mask of what had happened to me, not the evidence of violence, not even how I closed the doors to the rooms of anger and fear. Some days you would see fire; other days, water. Or earth. You would see how I am like the night sky with its stars that fall through time and space and arrive here as wolves and fish and people, all of us fed by them. You would see the dust of the sun, the turning of creation taking place. But the night I broke my face there were still boundaries and I didn’t yet know I was beautiful as the wolf, or that I was a new order of atoms. Even with my own eyes I could not see deeper than my skin or pain in the way you cannot see yourself with closed eyes no matter how powerful the mirror.¹⁷

Here is someone already beginning to find her way home. But the journey home comes only through immense struggle, for Angel’s new “kind of knowing”—a deeply imagined world in which she dances and sings among a chorus of other beings, in which there is no discernible boundary between the inner and outer worlds (or even language to distinguish between them), and in which she discovers a deeper capacity to see (she is “beautiful as the wolf”)—must contend with another, more restrictive “way of knowing.” Gradually, as Angel begins to cultivate this new language, this new “way of knowing,” she learns to “cross over,” “enter into,” “lose herself” and “find herself” in the living world. And she begins to find the living world within her. She is incorporated into the world, the blossoming of her soul and of the world around her no longer clearly distinguishable from one another.

A deep longing for just this kind of intimacy draws writer Richard Nelson to probe, explore, listen and give himself over to the life of a

¹⁶ Hogan, *Solar Storms*, p. 52.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

small island near his home in Sitka, Alaska. In his book, *The Island Within*, Nelson stretches the boundaries of language to express his gradual awakening to the “spirit” of this place, his dawning awareness of what it might mean to enjoy an intimacy with the island as deep as that enjoyed by the native plant and animal species, and by the indigenous Koyukon people. Years of living among the Koyukon, first as an anthropologist, later as an apprentice to Koyukon elders, initiated Nelson into the patterns and life of this place. Now he stands poised at the forest’s edge, listening, watching, hoping to be drawn further into this world.

However Nelson, like Hogan, must first learn the language of grief, separation, degradation. Parts of the island are wounded, the legacy of years of clear-cutting. He describes stumbling upon:

a sudden, shorn edge where the trees and moss end, and where the dark, dour sky slumps down against a barren hillside strewn with slash and decay. . . . The road angles into a wasteland of hoary trunks and twisted wooden shards, pitched together in convulsed disarray, with knots of shoulder-high brush pressing in along both sides. Fans of mud and ash splay across the roadway beneath rilled cutbanks. In one place, the lower side has slumped away and left ten feet of culvert hanging in midair, spewing brown water over the naked bank and into a runnell thirty feet below.

He begins traversing the “field” ahead of him, but soon realizes that moving across a clear cut is unlike anything he has ever tried before. “The ground is covered with a nearly impenetrable confusion of branches, roots, sticks, limbs, stumps, blocks, poles, and trunks, in every possible size, all gray and fibrous and rotting, thrown together in a chaotic mass and interwoven with a tangle of brittle bushes.” It is, he says, a “whole forest of stumps,” an “enormous graveyard, covered with weathered markers made from the remains of its own dead.”¹⁸

Here, surely, is a monstrous distortion of an ecotone. The edge between the actual forest and this forest of stumps is neither gradual, fluid nor marked by a vibrant exchange of life. It is instead sharp and unforgiving, providing a bleak demarcation of where life leaves off. Still, this place is now part of the history, even the spirit of this island. Language must somehow be found that can encompass what has happened in this place, that can capture the deathly silence that hangs over it, that can convey the depth of the loss.

¹⁸ Nelson, *The Island Within*, p. 53.

But this can occur only as a moment in the larger work of reparation—of the island as well as the imagination. It is this latter task that occupies Nelson most intently. He wants to understand what it will require of him really to inhabit this place, immerse himself in it, cross over that thin membrane separating and joining the human and the more-than-human worlds. It requires first a willingness to notice and describe the texture of the island. It is, he says, “a summer broth of living trees and soft mulch . . . a living hive.” Of nearby Kanaashi Island he says, “[there are] a thousand little climates. . . . The more I look, the richer it becomes, the more deeply penetrated with life, like a stone colossus touched and made animate.” He begins to catch the pattern, rhythm, spirit of particular places and species. The noise of the oyster-catchers, he says, “is punishing but beautiful, a pure incantation of this northern shore. . . .” He senses the “exceptional power and energy” of wrens, shrews and hummingbirds. Floating in his boat just over the blowhole of a great whale he says, “I can sense the *life* of the thing.” Sitting at the cliff’s edge with Glaucous-winged Gulls, Nelson comments, “I’ve never been so close to the dream of quiet flight. . . .”¹⁹

Gradually, he is drawn into the life of the place, imaginatively and palpably. “To hear a thrush song,” he says, “a person should inhale the air that carried it, taste the dawn that rained down over it, touch the cool forest that gave birth to it, drink from the clear stream that shimmered beside it.” It is, perhaps, this vision of participation that leads Nelson to act the way he does: “I try to find a few berries, an edible plant, or at least a freshet to drink from—some way to bring a bit of it into myself, a little communion, a physical sharing of body with that place.”²⁰ This is, in Hyde’s terms, a deeply erotic exchange, the body becoming the medium through which the gift of the island is passed on.

Still, even Nelson’s growing sense of participation in the life of the island hardly prepares one for the astonishing vision of immersion at which he eventually arrives. He imagines a final, ultimate incorporation, in which he passes on the gift:

Surrounded by the mountain walls, I drift off in daydreams, as if I’ve sunk into the island itself. Winds of an ancient dawn eddy over me. Dewdrops trickle across my face and seep into my opened pores. Blood flows like lava

¹⁹ Nelson, *The Island Within*, pp. 157, 169, 150, 200, 170.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 194, 157.

through a maze of veins beneath my chilled and hardened skin. Moss grows over my cheeks, covers my hands and legs. Tendrils and rootlets probe the cooling crevices of my flesh. A spider drifts down on a thread of iridescent silk, crawls across the bareness of my belly, weaves a web in the corner of my eye. Voles burrow toward the bedrock of my bones. A deer's hooves press into my chest. Fish swim in the black pools of my eyes. Birds nest in my hair. Runnels of water flow over my thighs, pool in the crater between my ribs, spill across my cheeks. The sea crashes at my side and wears them away. I become smaller and smaller, and vanish forever beneath the tide.²¹

Is this a description of oblivion? Of erotic, ecstatic union? It is difficult to say. What is not in doubt is the intensity of longing for intimacy with the physical world that is, for many of us, almost unimaginable. I confess to being uncertain about the possible meaning of such a "vanishing" or how it corresponds to what Christians traditionally affirm about the resurrection. This seems a different kind of "dream of the end." Yet, there is here a sense of returning, being reunited with one's beloved, after a long absence. And the promise, at least organically, of regeneration. As for the spirit, who is to say? In a vision of the world this tightly woven, this sacramentally rich, this relationally intricate, is not a spiritual intimacy at least implied in this physical conjoining?

Such questions cannot be answered easily or simply. But we need to pose them, I think, if we hope to discover a language supple and expansive enough to evoke and encompass the entire spiritual-physical-emotional-imaginative constellation of experiences that comprise our movement through this living world. The discovery of such language can illuminate the subtle movement of life across the charged space of our ecological and spiritual ecotones, can help us imagine the possibility of passing from one world to the other, and back again.

The possibility of such passage and the longing for reunion with a world from which we have fallen away are among the central and recurring questions in the poetry of Mary Oliver. As for Hogan and Nelson, so too for Oliver the imagined reunion with the natural world, with our own deepest selves, and with the "other" who hovers in and through all that is, emerges only on the far side of remembered loss.

²¹ Nelson, *The Island Within*, p. 221.

In an early poem, "The Family,"²² Oliver imagines:

The dark things of the wood
Are coming from their caves,
Flexing muscle.

They browse the orchard,
Nibble the sea of grasses
Around our yellow rooms,

Scarcely looking in
To see what we are doing
And if they still know us.

We hear them, or think we do:
The muzzle lapping moonlight,
The tooth in the apple.

In these opening stanzas, we are confronted with the suggestion of a mysterious, uncertain encounter. We inhabit, snugly and securely, "our yellow rooms." Yet, in the darkness outside, there is movement, ominous and powerful: "the dark things of the wood/Are coming from their caves,/Flexing muscle." Still we do not really encounter one another. They enter into our domestic space, to "browse the orchard,/Nibble the sea of grasses." But they "scarcely" look in—either to "see what we are doing" or to determine "if they still know us." *Did* they know us once? Did they once look to see what we were doing? Perhaps. But whatever threads might once have bound us together have now become frayed and thin.

Nor are we any more attentive to them: "we hear them or think we do:/The muzzle lapping moonlight,/The tooth in the apple." In a moment of stillness, we sense the faint traces of their presence among us, "or *think* we do." For a moment, perhaps, we even yearn to go out to "the dark things of the wood," to risk an encounter with them. But we think better of it. Maybe, after all, we are only imagining these sounds. Having lost the capacity, the willingness to hear them or to imagine their existence, we turn away and return to our "yellow rooms." We:

²² Mary Oliver, *New and Selected Poems* (Boston: Beacon, 1992), p. 215.

Put another log on the fire;
Mozart, again, on the turntable.

Yet, this is not the final word. Nor a final retreat from the world. Some trace of that older world remains within, alive in our memory.

Still there is a sorrow

With us in the room.
We remember the cave.
In our dreams we go back

Or they come to visit.
They also like music.
We eat leaves together.

They are our brothers.
They are the family
We have run away from.

Have we, can we run away forever? What of the “sorrow” that lingers “with us in the room?” What of our memory of the “cave,” that ancient dwelling we once shared with these “dark things of the wood?” Our dreamscape, where we still “go back” or where “they come to visit?” Do we not, all of us, carry with us this knowledge, this memory of an uninterrupted intimacy with the living world? Is this not part of what we mean when we speak of the dream of paradise? Can we, having given voice—however haltingly—to these faint traces of a remembered world, begin to imagine a reconciliation, a healing of this broken relationship? Can we imagine returning home to our family?

For Oliver, as for Nelson, this return is imagined as a kind of “vanishing,” or relinquishment, an immersion into something older, deeper, larger than the conscious, individual ego. It is also a return to some part of ourselves, long dormant, that lingers within, yearning to be reawakened. In her poem “The Sea,”²³ she describes how:

²³ Oliver, *New and Selected Poems*, pp. 172-173.

Stroke by
 stroke my
 body remembers that life and cries for
 the lost parts of itself
 fins, gills
 opening like flowers into
 the flesh—my legs
 want to lock and become
 one muscle, I swear I know
 just what the blue-grey scales
 shingling
 the rest of me would
 feel like!
 paradise! Sprawled
 in that motherlap,
 in that dreamhouse
 of salt and exercise,
 what a spillage
 of nostalgia pleads
 from the very bones! how
 they long to give up the long trek
 inland, the brittle
 beauty of understanding
 and dive,
 and simply
 become again a flaming body
 of blind feeling
 sleeking along
 in the luminous roughage of the sea's body
 vanished
 like victory inside that
 insucking genesis, that
 roaring flamboyance, that
 perfect
 beginning and
 conclusion of our own.

There is an ancient Celtic folk tale about a creature known as a “Selky,” a being capable of moving back and forth between the worlds of land and sea, that poses questions similar to this poem—about the

older deeper life we carry within us, about the acute sense of “internal exile” we often feel as we struggle to find our place in this world. We meet such a being in Scottish writer George Mackay Brown’s novel, *Beside the Ocean of Time* and in the John Sayles film *The Secret of Roan Inish*. In Mackay Brown’s book, a farmer in the Orkney islands named Thorfinn discovers a Selky on the beach one day. She has momentarily shed her skin and is, as the tradition held, vulnerable to anyone who might come upon her in that moment. Thorfinn, pierced with longing, seizes the skin, takes the Selky for his wife and brings her to live with him on the island. Over the years, they have several children and create a happy life for themselves and their family on the island. Yet Mara, as the Selky is called, never feels entirely at home on the island. Nor is she completely accepted or understood by her fellow islanders. For one thing, her manner of speaking is strange. Describing her cry of delight at seeing her children, Mackay Brown writes: “it was unlike any other utterance, her speech and laughter and grief. The speech of the islanders has the earth-graining in it, a slow rise and fall, like furrows, like the drift of horses and cows across the hillside. . . . Mara’s speech had something of the music of breakers in a cave-mouth, or far-off horizon bell-notes, or dolphins in the flood tide.”²⁴ She loves and is deeply devoted to her children. Yet, she is always down at the sea, gazing westward, especially when the seals appear. One day, Thorfinn returns home to discover the hearth cold and Mara gone. She had found her skin and fled, back to the sea.

Is this not precisely that “nostalgia” that “pleads from the very bones” of which Oliver speaks? An expression of the power of those bonds that join us to this living world, the tenacity of the body’s memory of those “lost parts of itself?” Yet we struggle, caught in the tides that move between land and sea, between the human and the more-than-human worlds, uncertain whether to hold to “the brittle/beauty of understanding,” or to “dive/and simply/become again a flaming body/of blind feeling/sleeking along/in the luminous roughage of the sea’s body.”

Is one compelled, finally, to choose between them? Or is there a way of dwelling deeply within both the “brittle/beauty of understanding” and the “flaming body/of blind feeling?” Is there a way of moving back and forth between them? There is, but not without imagination,

²⁴ George Mackay Brown, *Beside the Ocean of Time* (London: Flamingo, 1994), p. 164.

and not without metaphors, those fundamental tools of the imagination. “[W]hen you pick up something in the woods,” says Barry Lopez, “it is not only connected to everything else by virtue of its being a set piece in an ecosystem, but it’s connected to everything else by virtue of the fact that you have an imagination.”²⁵ Metaphors encourage us to get into the habit of seeing things in relationship, albeit ever-changing and freshly conceived relationship. The metaphorical imagination, says Edward Lueders, enables us: “To see things in terms of something else without losing sight of the thing itself. To seek the core of sameness, the shared identity. A world in which all is relatedness. Not *order*, which is limited to rationality, but *relatedness*. A world of relativity, with the metaphorical imperative at the active center, relating the parts and their movements.”²⁶

From this perspective, one can begin to experience the natural world as part of the self, and to see one’s own inner world illuminated by the natural world. The habitual divisions fall away. Entering into the metaphoric process and making connections with the imagination, says Lopez, means bringing “our own worlds to bear in foreign landscapes in order to clarify them for ourselves.” And this process is at least partly a matter of self-examination and self-discovery: “To inquire into the intricacies of a distant landscape is to provoke thoughts about one’s own interior landscape, and the familiar landscapes of memory. The land urges us to come around to an understanding of ourselves.”²⁷

In his book *Arctic Dreams*, Lopez enters into this metaphorical process as a way of understanding his attraction to the strange, haunting light of Arctic icebergs. It is in medieval cathedrals, in particular “the passion for light” which helped create them, that he finds an appropriate metaphor for thinking about the icebergs. The metaphorical influence moves in both directions: from icebergs to cathedrals and from cathedrals to icebergs. Lopez had been interested in cathedral architecture for a long time. But “what made it come alive for me,” he says, “was the contemplation of icebergs.”²⁸ The world of the gothic cathedrals also helps him to understand his *emotional response* to

²⁵ Cited in Stephen Trimble, *Words from the Land* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1995), p. 13.

²⁶ Edward Lueders, *The Clam Lake Papers: A Winter in the North Woods* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), p. 49.

²⁷ Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, p. 247.

²⁸ Cited in Trimble, *Words from the Land*, p. 13.

these Arctic cathedrals: an architecture of light, medieval cathedrals were monuments to a newly created theology of light. “The cathedrals, by the very way they snared the sun’s energy, were an expression of God and of the human connection with God as well.”²⁹ Is there something about our passion for light, Lopez wonders, that attracts us to these natural monuments of light, and that draws us out of ourselves in an experience of transcendence?

This question prompts others. Lopez asks how such natural wonders act upon us, what it is within us that is moved by them and how such an experience transforms us. Such questions call to mind another word from the time of the cathedrals, *agape*, an expression which refers to an intense spiritual affinity with mystery, or “sharing life with another.” *Agape* suggests to Lopez a new way of understanding his own response to the mysterious power and beauty of the northern landscape. It is rooted in longing: “Essentially, [*agape*] is a humble, impassioned embrace of something outside the self, in the name of that which we refer to as *God*, but which also includes the self and *is God*.” The experience of this affinity, which embraces God, self and the natural world, is undeniable. Yet it leaves unanswered the question of how it is that we know and what is the basis for this affinity that we feel. Is it the mind, the intelligence that responds in this way to the natural world? Or is it the heart, what we call desire? Such questions, the fruit of a metaphorical imagination, cannot be answered categorically. Indeed Lopez is left finally asking what is perhaps an unresolvable question: “We are clearly indebted as a species to the play of our intelligence; we must trust our future to it; but we do not know whether intelligence is reason or whether intelligence is this desire to embrace and be embraced in the pattern that both theologians and physicists call God. Whether intelligence, in other words, is love.”³⁰

Extending Lopez’s question, can we ask whether that which attracts us in the natural world, that which draws us in and calls for our attention, our intelligence and our devotion, is love itself? And if so, whether the ongoing response this requires of us in cultivating our relationship with the natural world is not akin to what the mystics call contemplation, or loving knowledge?

²⁹ Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, p. 248.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

Conclusion

Such questions may signal a new willingness to reimagine our experience of the fluid, ever-changing ecotone that is the living world. Perhaps we are coming to see that the boundaries we have drawn between the human and the more-than-human, between spirit and matter, between body and soul, between love and understanding, have been too simple, too neat. Perhaps we are beginning to recognize that our attachment to these boundaries has blinded us to the possibility of real intimacy with the living world. Perhaps we are coming to understand that the borders that do exist are permeable, capable of mediating an exchange of life and spirit between and among a vast array of life-forms. And maybe we are starting to see that the possibility of recovering a sense of spirit in our lives and in the world depends on our capacity to imagine and enter into this dynamic, fluid exchange of life.

If any of this is true, then perhaps too we are beginning to recover a sense of the texture of spirit, its irreducible and palpable particularity—what the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins called “inscape”—and rediscovering the possibility of sharing in God’s own life in and through that palpable particularity. This indeed is how the sixth-century Christian mystic and philosopher Pseudo-Dionysius spoke of our encounter with God in this world. As Rowan Williams has perceptively noted, for Dionysius, “God shares himself in creation because, just as we ‘yearn’ for him, so he eternally ‘yearns’ to give himself and be loved. . . . God comes out of his self-hood in a kind of ‘ecstasy’ when he creates; and his ecstasy is designed to call forth the ecstasy of human beings. . . . thus in the created order there is a perpetual circle of divine and human love, *eros* and ecstasy.”³¹ May we take this a step further and ask whether the circle of *eros* and ecstasy includes the whole created world, that which in St. Paul’s understanding is “groaning” along with us for the ultimate fulfillment of all things in God?

Sometimes we catch a glimpse of this fulfillment in our ordinary lives. Sigurd Olson, who probed the mysterious spirit of the Boundary Waters landscape with such delicacy and love, recounts a moment of awakening and embrace that unfolded within him one evening as he skated along a frozen lake. Within the glow of the northern lights, he suddenly knew himself as no longer separate from this world:

³¹ Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St. John of the Cross* (London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1979), pp. 118-119.

Shafts of light shot up into the heavens above me and concentrated there in a final climactic effort in which the shifting colors seemed drained from the horizon to form one gigantic rosette of flame and yellow greenish purple. Suddenly I grew conscious of the reflections from the ice itself and that I was skating through a sea of changing color caught between the streamers above and below. At that moment I was part of the aurora, part of its light and of the great curtain that trembled above me.³²

Medieval theologians used the word *perichoresis* to refer to the deep and mutual indwelling of God and the soul. Do we not see here something similar—a vision of relationality so profound, so pervasive, so intimate that it becomes impossible to discern the boundaries between oneself and the living world, impossible to imagine oneself as entirely distinct from the other?

One senses in such moments that intimacy, even union with the living world, and with the Holy One at the heart of the world, is not a distant dream but a real possibility. And that the language of *eros* can help us realize that possibility. Which is perhaps why we return again and again to that root metaphor of embodied union. “Everything else/can wait,” says Mary Oliver, “but not/this thrust/from the root/of the body.” Here, in this delicate and porous ecotone, where animal awareness and transcendent vision meet and mingle, we discover the union we seek. A union embedded within but also transcending the palpable reality of our bodies. How do we articulate and live within the charged space created by this tension? Only, I think, by acknowledging the complexity of the desire that shapes our lives: “[W]e are more/than blood—we are more/than our hunger . . .,” says Oliver,

and yet

we belong
to the moon and when the ponds
open, when the burning
begins the most

thoughtful among us dreams
of hurrying down

³² Sigurd Olson, *The Singing Wilderness* (New York: Knopf, 1956); cited in Robert Finch and John Elder, eds., *The Norton Book of Nature Writing* (New York: Norton, 1990), p. 458.

into the black petals,
into the fire,
into the night where time lies shattered,
into the body of another.³³

Into the consuming fire of the world. As metaphor for that larger, more encompassing intimacy we seek, the image of embodied union can serve us well. Perhaps we may yet learn to imagine ourselves as fully embodied, erotic beings, touching and responding ecstatically to the touch of another.

³³ Mary Oliver, "Blossom," *New and Selected Poems*, pp. 161-162.



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