

# Becoming Animal

AN EARTHLY COSMOLOGY

David

Abram




Vintage Books  
A Division of Random House, Inc.  
New York

## INTRODUCTION

### *Between the Body and the Breathing Earth*



wning up to being an animal, a creature of earth. Tuning our animal senses to the sensible terrain: blending our skin with the rain-rippled surface of rivers, mingling our ears with the thunder and the thrumming of frogs, and our eyes with the molten sky. Feeling the polyrhythmic pulse of this place—this huge windswept body of water and stone. This vexed being in whose flesh we're entangled.

Becoming earth. Becoming animal. Becoming, in this manner, fully human.

This is a book about becoming a two-legged animal, entirely a part of the animate world whose life swells within and unfolds all around us. It seeks a new way of speaking, one that enacts our interbeing with the earth rather than blinding us to it. A language that stirs a new humility in relation to other earthborn beings, whether spiders or obsidian outcrops or spruce limbs bent low by the clumped snow. A style of speech that opens our senses to the sensuous in all its multifiform strangeness.

The chapters that follow strive to discern and perhaps to practice a curious kind of thought, a way of careful reflection that no

longer tears us out of the world of direct experience in order to represent it, but that binds us ever more deeply into the thick of that world. A way of thinking enacted as much by the body as by the mind, informed by the humid air and the soil and the quality of our breathing, by the intensity of our contact with the other bodies that surround.

Yet words are human artifacts, are they not? Surely to speak, or to think in words, is necessarily to step back from the world's presence into a purely human sphere of reflection? Such, precisely, has been our civilized assumption. But what if meaningful speech is not an exclusively human possession? What if the very language we now speak arose first in response to an animate, expressive world—as a stuttering reply not just to others of our species but to an enigmatic cosmos that already *spoke to us* in a myriad of tongues?

What if thought is not born within the human skull, but is a creativity proper to the body as a whole, arising spontaneously from the slippage between an organism and the folding terrain that it wanders? What if the curious curve of thought is engendered by the difficult eros and tension between our flesh and the flesh of the earth?

Is it possible to grow a worthy cosmology by attending closely to our encounters with other creatures, and with the elemental textures and contours of our locale? We are by now so accustomed to the cult of expertise that the very notion of honoring and paying heed to our directly felt experience of things—of insects and wooden floors, of broken-down cars and bird-pecked apples and the scents rising from the soil—seems odd and somewhat misguided as a way to find out what's worth knowing. According to assumptions long held by the civilization in which I've been raised, the deepest truth of things is concealed behind the appearances, in dimensions inaccessible to our senses. A thousand years ago these dimensions were viewed in spiritual terms: the sensuous world was a fallen, derivative reality that could be understood only by reference to heavenly realms hidden beyond the stars. Since the powers

residing in such realms were concealed from common perception, they had to be mediated for the general populace by priests, who might intercede with those celestial agencies on our behalf.

In recent centuries, an abundance of discoveries and remarkable inventions have transformed this culture's general conception of things—and yet the basic disparagement of sensuous reality remains. Like an old, collective habit very difficult to kick, the directly sensed world is still explained by reference to realms hidden beyond our immediate experience. Such a realm, for example, is the microscopic domain of axons and dendrites, and neurotransmitters washing across neuronal synapses—a dimension entirely concealed from direct apprehension, yet which presumably precipitates, or gives rise to, every aspect of our experience. Another such dimension is the recondite realm hidden within the nuclei of our cells, wherein reside the intricately folding strands of DNA and RNA that ostensibly code and perhaps even “cause” the behavior of living things. Alternatively, the deepest source and truth of the apparent world is sometimes held to exist in the subatomic realm of quarks, mesons, and gluons (or the still more theoretical world of vibrating ten-dimensional strings); or perhaps in the initial breaking of symmetries in the cosmological “big bang,” an event almost inconceivably distant in time and space.

Every one of these arcane dimensions radically transcends the reach of our unaided senses. Since we have no ordinary experience of these realms, the essential truths to be found there must be mediated for us by experts, by those who have access to the high-powered instruments and the inordinately expensive technologies (the electron microscopes, functional MRI scanners, radio telescopes, and supercolliders) that might offer a momentary glimpse into these dimensions. Here, as before, the sensuous world—the creaturely world directly encountered by our animal senses—is commonly assumed to be a secondary, derivative reality understood only by reference to more primary domains that exist elsewhere, behind the scenes.

I do not deny the importance of those other scales or dimensions, nor the value of the various truths that may be found there. I

deny only that this shadowed, earthly world of deer tracks and moss is somehow less worthy, less REAL, than those abstract dimensions. It is more palpable to my skin, more substantial to my flaring nostrils, more precious—indefinitely more precious—to the heart drumming within my chest.

This directly experienced terrain, rippling with cricket rhythms and scoured by the tides, is the very realm now most ravaged by the spreading consequences of our disregard. Many long-standing and lousy habits have enabled our callous treatment of surrounding nature, empowering us to clear-cut, dam up, mine, develop, poison, or simply destroy so much of what quietly sustains us. Yet few are as deep-rooted and damaging as the habitual tendency to view the sensuous earth as a subordinate space—whether as a sinful plane, riddled with temptation, needing to be transcended and left behind; or a menacing region, needing to be beaten and bent to our will; or simply a vaguely disturbing dimension to be avoided, superseded, and explained away.

Corporeal life is indeed difficult. To identify with the sheer physicality of one's flesh may well seem lunatic. The body is an imperfect and breakable entity vulnerable to a thousand and one insults—to scars and the scorn of others, to disease, decay, and death. And the material world that our body inhabits is hardly a gentle place. The shuddering beauty of this biosphere is bristling with thorns: generosity and abundance often seem scant ingredients compared with the prevalence of predation, sudden pain, and racking loss. Carnally embedded in the depths of this cacophonous profusion of forms, we commonly can't even predict just what's lurking behind the near boulder, let alone get enough distance to fathom and figure out all the workings of this world. We simply can't get it under our control. We've lost hearing in one ear; the other rings like a fallen spoon. Our spouse falls in love with someone else, while our young child comes down with a bone-rattling fever that no doctor seems able to diagnose. There are things out and about that can eat us, and ultimately will. Small wonder, then, that we prefer to abstract ourselves whenever we can, imagining ourselves into theoretical spaces less fraught with insecurity, con-

juring dimensions more amenable to calculation and control. We slip blissfully into machine-mediated scapes, offering ourselves up to any technology that promises to enhance the humdrum capacities of our given flesh. And sure, now and then we'll engage this earthen world as well, *as long we know that it's not ultimate*, as long as we're convinced that we're not stuck here.

Even among ecologists and environmental activists, there's a tacit sense that we'd better not let our awareness come too close to our creaturely sensations, that we'd best keep our arguments girded with statistics and our thoughts buttressed with abstractions, lest we succumb to an overwhelming grief—a heartache born of our organism's instinctive empathy with the living land and its cascading losses. Lest we be bowled over and broken by our dismay at the relentless devastation of the biosphere.

Thus do we shelter ourselves from the harrowing vulnerability of bodied existence. But by the same gesture we also insulate ourselves from the deepest wellsprings of joy. We cut our lives off from the necessary nourishment of contact and interchange with other shapes of life, from antlered and loop-tailed and amber-eyed beings whose resplendent weirdness loosens our imaginations, from the droning of bees and the gurgling night chorus of the frogs and the morning mist rising like a crowd of ghosts off the weedlot. We seal ourselves off from the erotic warmth of a cello's voice, or from the tilting dance of construction cranes against a downtown sky overbursting with blue. From the errant hummingbird pulsing in our cupped hands as we ferry it back out the door, and the crimson flash as it zooms from our fingers.

For too long we've closed ourselves to the participatory life of our senses, inured ourselves to the felt intelligence of our muscled flesh and its manifold solidarities. We've taken our primary truths from technologies that hold the world at a distance. Such tools can be mighty useful, and beneficial as well, as long as the insights that they yield are carried carefully back to the lived world, and placed in service to the more-than-human matrix of corporeal encounter and experience. But technology can also, and easily, be used as a way to avoid direct encounter, as a shield—etched with lines of

code or cryptic jargon—to ward off whatever frightens, as a synthetic heaven or haven in which to hide out from the distressing ambiguity of the real.

Only by welcoming uncertainty from the get-go can we acclimate ourselves to the shattering wonder that enfolds us. This animal body, for all its susceptibility and vertigo, remains the primary instrument of all our knowing, as the capricious earth remains our primary cosmos.

I have no intention with this work to offer a definitive statement, much less a comprehensive one. The complicated and often terrifying problems arising at this moment of the earth's unfolding entail the widest possible range of responses, to which every one of us must lend our specific gifts. I've written this book, a spiraling series of experimental and improvisational forays, in hopes that others will try my findings against their own experience, correcting or contesting my discoveries with their own.

This venture will start slowly, gathering energy as it moves. Simple encounters from my own life—encounters unexpected and serendipitous—will provide a loose, structuring frame for each investigation that follows. The early chapters take up several ordinary, taken-for-granted aspects of the perceived world—shadows, houses, gravity, stones, visual depth—drawing near to each phenomenon in order to notice the way it engages not our intellect but our sensing and sentient body. Later chapters delve into more complex powers—like mind, mood, and language—that variously influence and organize our experience of the perceptual field. The final chapters step directly into the natural magic of perception itself, exploring the willed alteration of our senses and the wild transformation of the sensuous, addressing magic and shapeshifting and the metamorphosis of culture.

Many of our inherited concepts (our ready definitions and explanations) serve to isolate our intelligence from the intimacy of our creaturely encounter with the strangeness of things. In these pages we'll listen close to the things themselves, allowing weather

patterns and moose and precipitous cliffs their own otherness. We'll pay attention to their unique manner of showing themselves, attuning ourselves to those facets that have been eclipsed by accepted styles of thinking. Can we find fresh ways to elucidate these earthly phenomena, forms of articulation that free the things from their conceptual straitjackets, enabling them to stretch their limbs and begin to breathe?

The early explorations in this book will soon lead us up against some basic cultural assumptions, forcing us to ruminate a range of reflective questions regarding bodies, materiality, and the language of the sciences, as well as the manner in which our words affect the ongoing life of our animal senses. Such discussions will leave us freer to dance in the later chapters, able to follow our investigations wherever they lead.

Some might claim that this is a book of solitudes. For I've chosen to concentrate upon those moments in a day or a life when one slips provisionally beneath the societal surge of forces, those occasions (often unverballed and hence overlooked) when one comes more directly into felt relation with the wider, more-than-human community of beings that surrounds and sustains the human hub-bub. Awakening to citizenship in this broader commonwealth, however, has real ramifications for how we humans get along with one another. It carries substantial consequences for the way a genuine democracy shapes itself—for the way that our body politic breathes.

Why, then, is so little attention paid to the social or political spheres within these pages? Because there's a necessary work of recuperation to be accomplished (or at least opened and gotten well under way) before those spheres can be disclosed afresh, and this book is engaged in that work of recuperation. A replenished participation in the human collective, forging new forms of place-based community and planetary solidarity, along with a commitment to justice and the often exasperating work of politics—these, too, are necessary elements in the process, and the

What we later objectify as "awareness" is at first like an anonymous element that defines the very substance of existence, glimmering with strange pleasures and yearnings and pains. Only gradually does a kind of locus begin to appear within this floating field of feeling, an inchoate sense of "here-ness" emerging from the anonymous and omnidimensional plenitude. This crystallizing sense of one's body as a general locus of awareness does not arise on its own, but is accompanied by a dawning sense of the rudimentary otherness of the rest of the field of feelings. The earliest experience of selfhood, in other words, co-arises with the earliest experience of otherness. One's own awareness is born of a rift within a more primordial anonymity, as one begins to locate one's sensations in relation to sensations and feelings that are somehow elsewhere, and hence in relation to an awareness that is not one's own, but is rather the rest of the world's.

For a long while, the soft body of our mother, with her pliant breasts and warm belly, her deep eyes and gentle voice, is coextensive with the rest of the world. Slowly, however, this nourishing presence differentiates into a plurality of interpenetrating dimensions, into mothertouch and groundtouch and skyglow and night (into ticklegrass and bath and fathersong), all echoed by a deepening differentiation within oneself, as the body learns to coordinate the actions of its various limbs and to move within the cosmos.

The self begins as an extension of the breathing flesh of the world, and the things around us, in turn, originate as reverberations echoing the pains and pleasures of our body.

So the clustered trees, the bricks in the floor, and the sunlight are not first encountered as inert or insentient presences into which, later, the child projects her own consciousness. Rather, the inwardly felt sentience of the child is a correlate of the outwardly felt wakefulness of the sky and the steadfast support of the ground, and the willfulness of the caressing wind; it is a concomitant of the animate surroundings.

Only much later, as the child is drawn deeply into the whirling vortex of verbal language—that flood of phrases that earlier surrounded her simply as a beckoning play of melodic sounds contin-

uous with the cries of ravens and the rumble of thunder—only then is the contemporary child liable to learn that neither the bird nor the storm are really aware, that the wind is no more willful than the sky is awake, and indeed that human persons alone are the carriers of consciousness in this world.

Such a lesson amounts to a denial of much of the child's felt experience, and commonly precipitates a rupture between her speaking self and the rest of her sensitive and sentient body. Yet the pain of this rupture is quickly forgotten by the speaking self. There are more than enough discoveries and distractions to offset the trauma of this self-estrangement, since accepting and abiding by this odd lesson unlocks the gate to the curious universe that all the grown-ups appear to inhabit.

But the breathing body, this ferociously attentive animal, still remembers.

The foot, as it feels the ground pressing up against it, remembers. The skin of the face remembers, turning to meet the myriad facets, or faces, of the world. The tips of the fingers remember well that each sensible surface is also, in its own way, sensitive. The ears, listening, know that all things speak; they wander and browse in the intimate conversation of the world, and sometimes they prompt the tongue to reply.

Even the eyes know this, that *everything* lives—that the dull or gleaming surfaces they gaze at are also, gazing back at them, that the colors they drink or dive into have been longing to swallow them and to taste of their hazel, their bright hints of green.

Our chest, rising and falling, knows that the strange verb "to be" means more simply "to breathe"; it knows that the maples and the birches are breathing, that the beaver pond inhales and exhales in its own way, as do the stones and the mountains and the pipes coursing water through the ground under the city. The lungs know this secret as well as any can know it: that the inward and the outward depths partake of the same mystery, that as the unseen wind swirls *within* us, so it also whirls all around us, bending the grasses

and singing the clouds even as it lights our own senses. The vocal cords, stirred by that breath, vibrate like spiderwebs or telephone wires in the breeze, and the voice itself, laughing and murmuring, joins its song to the water gurgling under the grate.

Only our words seem to forget, sometimes—or is it the one who speaks and writes them who forgets? The contemporary person sits enveloped in a cloud of winged words fluttering out of his mouth, delighting in their colored patterns and the way they flock and follow one another, becoming convinced that he alone is in blossom—that his skull alone bears the pollen that will fertilize the barren field, that the things stand mute and inert until he chooses to speak of them.

Yet the things have other plans. Bereft of our attentions, their migratory routes severed by the spreading clear-cuts and the dams, their tissues clogged by synthetic toxins leaking into the soils and the waters, they nevertheless carry on. The rising temperatures seem to scorch their surfaces ever more frequently now, yet the things of the world continue to beckon to us from behind the cloud of words, speaking instead with gestures and subtle rhythms, calling out to our animal bodies, tempting our skin with their varied textures and coaxing our muscles with their grace, inviting our thoughts to remember and rejoin the wider community of intelligence.

The child's spontaneous affinity with the objects and entities that surround her is a pleasure to behold, but it remains only an amorphous and tentative solidarity. If it were allowed to unfold throughout the course of childhood, intensifying and complexifying as she herself unfolds through adolescence, this early collusion with things would quietly deepen and mature into a nuanced respect for the manifold life of the world, a steady pleasure in the profusion of bodily forms and the innumerable styles of sentience that compose the earthly cosmos.

For little Hannah, stumbling giddily across the ground, each stone that catches her eye, each bird that swoops or tree that rises

up before her is a ready counterpart of herself. If she chooses that tree as a friend for an afternoon, the tree will seem to express various feelings that she feels within herself, to display the sort of awareness with which she is most familiar. Particular plants, specific landforms, and especially other animals seem to incarnate and make visible, for the child, particular impulses that she also senses within herself, empowering the small human to begin to notice and differentiate among various elemental forms of feeling, enabling her to begin to navigate a sea of ambiguous moods, emotions, and impulses whose unruly power could easily overwhelm the child. Hence the centrality of other animals in childhood play across all cultures (including, in my culture, an outrageous array of stuffed rabbits and teddy bears and talking mice), and all the animal protagonists central to the stories and rhymed songs that we first hear and tell in childhood.<sup>9</sup>

If Hannah's fascination and friendship with an apple tree quietly growing in the old orchard is encouraged, and allowed to develop, then the spontaneous reciprocity of her early years, which at first assumes that the tree's experience is akin to her own, will gradually deepen into a discovery that the apple tree's rootedness—its inability to move upon the ground—must grant it a range of sensations very different from those that she experiences. Later, an awareness of the way its roots draw water from the soil, and the way its leaves metabolize sunlight, will lead her to acknowledge the tree's still deeper difference from herself—inducing her to stretch her sensorial imagination in order to fathom the odd sensation of drinking sunlight from the air. Perhaps she'll suspect that the pleasure of the sun's warmth on the skin of her shoulders provides a distant entry into the sensations felt by those leaves, or that the lushness of sinking naked toes into mud approximates something of what those hidden roots must feel after a summer rain drenches the parched valley. At each step of her inward unfolding she'll discover wider differences between herself and the apple

<sup>9</sup> I am informed here by the lucid research and insights of social ecologist Paul Shepard (1926–1996).

tree, yet she'll measure each difference as a difference in *feeling*, as a strangely different way of experiencing the same sky, the same ground, the same rain that she herself experiences. And so finally in adulthood any tree, for all its strange and unbridgeable otherness, will remain for her an animate and experiencing presence, another being, another shape of sensitivity and radiant life.

Such, at any rate, is the mature fruit of the human child's spontaneous affinity with trees, spiders, stones, and storm clouds, when that seed is allowed to grow and to blossom. Only after such an unimpeded childhood does a grown woman know in her bones that she inhabits a breathing cosmos, that her life is embedded in a wild community of dynamically intertwined and yet weirdly different lives. It is a cosmos no less puzzling, no less fraught with uncertainty and confusion, than the rather complicated world of inert objects and mechanical processes in which so many of us seem to dwell, and yet it is alive—a vibrant play of relationships in which our own lives are participant.

But in a civilization that has long since fallen under the spell of its own signs, the conviviality between the child and the animate earth is soon severed, interrupted by the adult insistence (expressed in countless forms of grown-up speech and behavior) that real sentience, or subjectivity, is the exclusive possession of humankind. This collective insistence could not displace the compelling evidence of the child's direct experience were it not for all the technologies that rapidly come to interpose themselves between the child's developing senses and the earthly sensuous, enclosing her ever more tightly within a purely human realm. The broken bond between the child and the living land will later be certified, and rendered permanent, by her active entrance into an economy that engages the land primarily as a stock of resources to be appropriated for our own, exclusively human, purposes.

Cut off in its earliest stage, dammed up close to its source, our instinctive empathy with the earthly surroundings remains stunted in most contemporary persons. Hence, whenever we moderns hear of traditional peoples for whom all things are potentially

alive—of indigenous cultures that assume some degree of spontaneity and sentience in every aspect of the perceivable terrain—such notions seem to us the result of an absurdly wishful and immature style of thinking, at best a kind of childish naïveté. No matter how intriguing it might be to experience the land as animate and alive, we know that such fantasies are illusory, and must ultimately come up against the cold stone of reality. We cannot help but interpret whatever we hear of such participatory beliefs according to our own stunted capacity for empathic engagement with the sensed surroundings—a capability that was stifled in us before it could blossom, and which therefore remains immobilized in us, frozen in its most immature form. Confronted with animistic styles of discourse, most of us moderns can only imagine it as a sort of childlike ignorance, a credulous projection of humanlike feelings onto mountains and rivers, which surely amounts to madness for any adult soul. Rocks alive? Yeah, right!

We fail to realize that such a participatory mode of perception, when developed and honed through, the harsh discoveries of adolescence and on into adulthood, will inevitably yield a complexly nuanced and many-layered approach to the world. We fail to recognize that over the course of hundreds of generations, such participation with the enfolding earth will by now have been tuned so thoroughly by both the serendipities and adversities of this world, by its blessings and its poisons, its enlivening allies and its predatory powers, as to be wholly beyond the ken of any merely naïve or sentimental approach to things. Our indigenous ancestors, after all, had to survive and flourish without any of the technologies upon which we moderns have come to depend. It seems unlikely that our ancestral lineages could have survived if the animistic sensibility were purely an illusion, if this experience of the sensible surroundings as sensitive and even sentient were a callow fantasy utterly at odds with the actual character of those surroundings. The long survival of our species suggests that the instinctive expectation of animateness, of an interior spontaneity proper to all things, was a very practical way to encounter our environ-



ment—indeed, perhaps the most effective way to align our human organism with the shifting vicissitudes of a difficult, dangerous, and capricious cosmos.

For one cannot enter into a felt rapport with another entity if one assumes that that other is entirely inanimate. *It is difficult, if not impossible, to empathize with an inert object.* One cannot feel or suss out the intention of another creature if one denies that that creature has intentions; one cannot anticipate the shifting mood of a winter sky if one denies that the sky has moods, if one begrudges things their their own inherent spontaneity and openness.

When we bring mindful awareness to the simple activity of perception, we may notice that what draws our attention to things—what enables our senses to really engage and participate with them—is precisely the open and uncertain character of those things. An entity that captures my gaze is never revealed to me in its totality; it presents some facet of itself to my eyes while always withholding other aspects from my direct apprehension. I never see a ponderosa pine in its entirety—I see one side of this wide trunk with its fissured bark, while the other side remains concealed. When I walk-around to view the other side, that first side is obscured. Nonetheless, I now have a fuller sense of this trunk—although its interior structure remains hidden. The corrugated furrows in its bark seem to recede into that interior; they beckon me closer to touch their various layers and to peer within the deep crevasses. Mmmm—there is a faint scent of vanilla emanating from this particular furrow. As my nose follows the scent closer in, a spiderweb snags on my face and is wrecked as I pull away; now the spider herself is racing up the bark just in front of me, climbing toward the heights. I tilt my head back, tracking the spider with my eyes. I can see only sporadic glimmerings of the upper branches; they're mostly hidden by the spray of needles, as the spreading roots of this pine are concealed beneath the ground. If, seized by an uncontrollable urge to know the whole of this being, I brought over a shovel and began to dig up those roots, I'd be endangering the vitality and beauty of this pine, interrupting the very mystery that draws me back to this huge tree day after day.

Although some aspect of any perceived presence is exposed to my eyes or my flaring nostrils, or to the touch of my fingers, there is always some further dimension that remains hidden. This tension between the apparent and the hidden dimensions of each being beckons steadily to my perceiving body, provoking the exploratory curiosity of my senses. Perception is nothing other than this open-ended relationship—the active allurements of my body by a sapling or a stretch of river, or by the crumbling wall of an old riverside mill—and the consequent reply by my limbs and my listening senses, to which the other responds in turn, disclosing some further aspect of itself to my gaze or my attentive ears. If and when I turn my attention elsewhere, I turn away not from an inert object but from a unique and unfinished way of being, an expressive, enigmatic presence with whom I've been flirting, however briefly.

No matter how long I linger with any being, I cannot exhaust the dynamic enigma of its presence. It is this reticence, the inexhaustible otherness of things, that enables them to hold my gaze, to sustain themselves in my awareness. I can never plumb all the secrets of even a single blade of grass—cannot fathom every aspect of its interior composition, or the totality of the relations that it sustains with the soil and the air. I cannot experience it from every angle all at once. And why not? Because I am not a pure spirit that could penetrate instantaneously every nook and cranny of the thing—because I am not a disembodied mind, for whom the world presents no obstacles and no obscurities—because, that is, I myself am a body, a material being of weight and density like this tree or that stone, and so have my own visible facets and my obscurities (my smooth skin, for example, and my calciferous bones hidden beneath a matrix of muscles), and so can explore the world only from where I stand, can encounter things only from my own thingly position in the midst of them. Because, finally, I am a thing myself, and hence have only a finite access to the things around me.

In fact it is difficult to imagine how a pure, immaterial mind could know even the simplest truth about a chestnut oak or a chunk of marble, since without any body—

Deeply

Wander over to that oak, or to a maple, or a sycamore; reach out your hand to feel the surface of a single, many-pointed leaf between your thumb and fingers. Note the coolness of that leaf against your skin, the veined texture your fingertips discover as they roam across it. But notice, too, another slightly different sensation: that you are also being touched by the tree. That the leaf itself is gently exploring your fingers, its pores sampling the chemistry of your skin, feeling the smooth and bulging texture of your thumb even as the thumb moves upon it.

As soon as we acknowledge that our hands are included within the tactile world, we are forced to notice this reciprocity: whenever we touch any entity, we are also ourselves being touched by that entity.

And it's not just the tactile sense that exhibits this curious reciprocity. The eyes, for example, these luminous organs with which we hunt the shapes and colors of the visible world, are also a part of the visual field onto which they open. Our eyes have their glistening surface, like the gleaming skin of a pond, and they have their colors, like the auburn flank of a horse or a patch of pewter-gray sky. When we stumble outside in the morning, rubbing our eyes free of sleep and gazing toward the wooded hillside across the valley, our eyes cannot help but feel their own visibility and vulnerability; hence our animal body feels itself exposed to that hillside, feels itself *seen* by those forested slopes.

Such reciprocity is the very structure of perception. We experience the sensuous world only by rendering ourselves vulnerable to that world. Sensory perception is this ongoing interweaving: the terrain enters into us only to the extent that we allow ourselves to be taken up *within* that terrain.

On some mornings I step outside before pulling on any socks or sliding my feet into their shoes. The soil presses up against my base feet and shapes itself to them; the clumped grasses massage and wake up my soles. Sharp pebbles stab the thick skin. Drier, more resistant grasses prick and sometimes break under my weight—

owl!—sending my feet back onto the smoother stones. Pale stones are cool to the toes, dark rocks warmer. My feet receive directives from the ground, turning away from the brown, brittle grasses, seeking the press of those green blades that tickle and play against the callused skin and then spring up again, slowly, after I pass. It feels good to bring my life into felt contact with these other lives, even if only for a moment.

But how does my weight feel to those grasses; how do my steps feel to the terrain itself as I walk upon it? As this question rises, I begin to sense the carelessness with which I'm commonly clomping around, greedily amassing sensations. My legs inadvertently slow their pace as the sensitive presence of the land seems to gather beneath my feet, the ground no longer a passive support but now the surface of a living depth; and so my feet abruptly feel themselves being touched, being *felt*, by the ground. My steps slow down further. Flat rocks and rough rocks, needles cast off by the pines, grit that clings between the toes as they flex against the land: each patch of ground requests a different kind of step, which my legs discover only in the doing. My feet are like ears listening downward, and a dark rhythm rises up into me from this contact—a pulse that slows down and deepens the private beat within my chest.

Try this when the mood strikes you: step out upon the solid earth without the intermediary of a rubber or leather sole—without another creature's tanned hide coming between your flesh and that of the earth. Notice the way your feet pressing against the coarse ground are also met by that ground, as your skin is probed by the soil and the pliant, bristling blades. How easy it is to sense that the terrain underfoot is the palpable surface of a living presence, and to allow that depth to feel your steps as you walk upon it! Watch how spontaneously your feet relax their pace in order to respect this odd otherness—in order to reply appropriately to the caress and the steady support of that depth, to avoid insulting the living land with your carelessness. An old, ancestral affinity between the human foot and the solid ground is replenished by the simple act of stepping outside without shoes.

and mysterious as my own sentient self, my animal senses began to shut down. My eyes were no longer dazzled by the turquoise beetles climbing the weeds by the train tracks, or by the high-stepping poise of the heron at the local marsh. As I reflect upon it now, it seems that my skin itself became less porous, less permeable to the abundant life that surrounds, as my conscious self steadily withdrew its participation from sensuous nature and began to live, more and more, in a clutch of heady abstractions.

This retreat from directly experienced reality accelerated in college. The human senses, as we were taught in our college science classes, were deceptive; they were not to be trusted. For the genuine reality of things was inaccessible to our unaided senses. The real truth was always hidden behind the scenes—whether tucked inside our skulls (in that dimension of firing neurons and neurotransmitters that ostensibly determines all our experience), or hidden within the nucleus of our cells (in the molecular realm of the nucleotide sequences, or genes, that presumably cause all our curious behaviors), whether in the supersmall world of electrons, neutrons, and quarks, or in that dimension—inconceivably distant in space and time—wherein the cosmos emerged from the primordial “big bang.” The world accessible to our senses, the visible world of hillsides and rain and flocking birds, came to seem a secondary dimension, a largely illusory field of appearances waiting to be penetrated, and dissipated, by the human mind. The animate nature that our senses revealed was no longer fundamental; hence few people seemed very upset about the rapid destruction of forests and wetlands, or the accelerating extinctions of diverse creatures. Observable nature was a derivative reality—a realm useful for its extractable resources, or as a dump site for the toxic by-products of human progress, but not worth worrying about, really, since we could replicate whatever we wish of this domain with our virtual technologies, and would soon engineer the rest of nature, using gene splicing and nanotechnology, to suit our desires.

Such was the heady atmosphere in which my fellow pre-medical students and I were immersed. Few of us understood, back then, that all these technological dreams—like all those abstract dimen-

sions hidden behind, beyond, or underneath the apparent surroundings—were still, secretly, rooted in the immediate world of direct experience, and hence were dependent upon our everyday encounters with the local earth. We did not suspect that our instinctive awareness of the winds, the waters, and the soil underfoot provided the necessary ground for all those abstractions, the sole guarantee of their coherence. It is only now, as we find both our lives and our high-tech laboratories threatened by severe fluctuations in the weather, as we watch coastlines disappear and foodwebs collapse and realize that our own children will not be exempt from the violence that our onrushing “progress” has inflicted upon the earth, only now do we notice that all our technological utopias and dreams of machine-mediated immortality may fire our minds but they cannot feed our bodies. Indeed, most of this era’s transcendent technological visions remain motivated by a fright of the body and its myriad susceptibilities, by a fear of our carnal embedment in a world ultimately beyond our control—by our terror of the very wildness that nourishes and sustains us. To recognize this nourishment, to awaken to the steady gift of this wild sustenance, entails that we offer ourselves in return. It entails that we accept the difficult mystery of our own carnal mortality, allowing that we are bodily creatures that must die in order for others to flourish. But it is this that we cannot bear. We are too frightened of shadows. We cannot abide our vulnerability, our utter dependence upon a world that can eat us. Vast in its analytic and inventive power, modern humanity is crippled by a fear of its own animality, and of the animate earth that sustains us.

So those ways of speaking that refer to nature only as a set of determinate objects, and random or mechanical processes, steadily isolate us from our senses and from the sensuous surroundings. They deepen the distance and opposition between ourselves and the grasses, between our conscious reflections and the gusting winds that bend and sometimes break those grasses.

Yet there are other styles of discourse that stir the senses from

their slumber, other ways of speaking that can resuscitate the forgotten solidarity between the human animal and the animate earth. Words and phrases that respect the ultimate unknowableness of things—not only of other people, but of turtles, and juniper pollen, and the shifting progress of a rainstorm; ways of speaking that accord a certain enigmatic otherness, and uncertainty, even to shed antlers, and rocking chairs, and switched-on lightbulbs that startle us with their sputtering—to the moon, of course, but also to dwindling rivers, and well-made bicycles, and even to words themselves—such are the kinds of speaking that wake up our skin, calling us back inside the body's world.

There are innumerable distinctions to be drawn between the palpable phenomena of this world, yet each particular presence partakes of a common mystery: the unfathomable upsurge of existence itself. Each thing expresses this mystery in its own manner and style, yet each is equivalently outrageous, a clump of dirt no less than a roaring, marauding brown bear—each enacting its own tenuous and improvised way in the world, each gifting its own rhythms to the riot of life that surrounds it. Every gust of wind, every note ringing forth from the bell tower, each staccato step of a water strider along the stream's surface, has its own subtle influence upon the beings around it. Simply to exist, or continue existing, is already active—already a doing—and hence no phenomenon is utterly passive, without efficacy or influence. To allow this influence into our speaking, to affirm the unique dynamism of the various entities we meet in the course of a day, to acknowledge that whatever snags our attention has its own agency, or life: such a way of speaking inevitably begins to open our stifled senses.

Why is this so? Why should such an animistic style of speaking—one that assumes some modicum of creativity in even the most obstinate of phenomena, and which therefore speaks of things not merely as objects but as animate *subjects*, as living powers in their own right—why should such a way of talking renew and rejuvenate our bodily senses?

First, because it opens the possibility of interaction and exchange, allowing reciprocity to begin to circulate between our bod-

ies and the breathing earth. If we speak of things as inert or inanimate objects, we deny their ability to actively engage and interact with us—we foreclose their capacity to reciprocate our attentions, to draw us into silent dialogue, to inform and instruct us. As soon as we allow things their own enigmatic openness and otherness, then our sensing bodies find themselves accosted, affronted, massaged, and ensnared by a host of chaotic powers vying with one another for our attentions. We're suddenly surrounded by a crowd of alluring beings, some of them shy and some of them shameless, each of which provokes the imagination of our eyes or the curiosity of our ears, coaxing our senses into a new conviviality with the local earth.

Second, such a language makes evident the consanguinity between ourselves and the enfolding terrain, invoking an explicit continuity between our lives and the vitality of the land itself. It implies that the creativity we find in ourselves has its correlation in the surrounding cosmos, and, too, that the relative stubbornness and solidity we associate with the things around us have their correlate in the weight and inertia of our own lives, in the density of our flesh and the intransigence of our habits. By implying that each mountain, each cloud, each wolf or oak or hive of bees, is a distant variant of our own texture and pulse, and, conversely, that our own sentient organism is itself a variant of these things—an intensification or fluctuation within the sensitive flesh of the world—such a way of speaking situates the human intellect back within the sensuous cosmos. It subverts the long isolation of the thinking self from the perceptual world that it ponders, suggesting that we and the sensorial surroundings are woven of the same fabric, indeed that we are palpably entwined with all that we see, and hear, and touch—entirely a part of the living biosphere.

Third, by describing the myriad things as unfolding, animate beings, we bring our language back into alignment with the ambiguous and provisional nature of sensory experience itself—with the fact that we never perceive any entity in its entirety, but only encounter partial aspects according to the angle or mood of our approach. We may *conceptualize* the eroding cliffs and the bracket

fungi as determinate phenomena, as fixed and finished presences resting complete in themselves, but we can never really *perceive* them as such. We cannot experience any entity in its totality, because we are not pure, disembodied minds, but are palpable bodies with our own opacities and limits. We are in *and of* the world, materially embedded in the same rain-drenched field that the rocks and the ravens inhabit, and so can come to knowledge only laterally, by crossing paths with other entities and sometimes lingering, responding to a thing's sparkle or its calloused coolness, slowly becoming acquainted with its characteristic tenor and style, the unique manner in which it resists our assumptions. All our knowledge, in this sense, is carnal knowledge, born of the encounter between our flesh and the cacophonous landscape we inhabit. We know the things of our world not, in truth, as determinate objects, but as acquaintances and strangers, as trusted familiars and as troublesome neighbors, as allies and misfits and moody, dangerous comrades. Some, like the night sky, command my stunned silence and awe. Others, like my house, I tend to take for granted, although it steadily shelters me, and holds my toothbrushes. Still others, like the pages of a manuscript I'm slowly writing, are both alluring and inscrutable; I know not whether their apparent aloofness is because they disdain me or because they are shy, whether I should approach them or keep my distance. All of these beings are participant with me, in the ongoing emergence of the real. Not one of them, in my direct experience, is utterly inert or inanimate.

Or is it? What of the plastic spatula in the sink, or the tax return we have yet to fill out this year, or the computer dozing, unplugged, by the wall? I mean, really, let's face it: that computer is not, in actuality, really *sleeping*—it's just turned off, and hence not computing—not really functioning at all, at the moment, except as a fancy paperweight, with all its complex and compacted circuitry immobilized and, well, inert. It is just *there*, an ingeniously fashioned mass of plastic and silicon that could never have been built were it

not for the cool detachment of the analytic mind with its propensity to step back from the world, to hunt for underlying mechanisms, to objectify and tinker with things. An understanding of the world in analytic and objectlike terms is part and parcel of our reality; it is by now built into many of the artifacts we use, and many of the institutions we rely upon. It seems unlikely, therefore, that the detached, objectifying stance toward the things and processes of this planet will dissipate anytime soon.

And for heaven's sake, why *should* it dissipate? Think of the astonishing insights and capabilities that this stance has brought us: the chemical table of the elements, the power of rapid transport and even flight, instantaneous communication links to almost anywhere on the planet! Not only technologies that might deaden the mind or deplete the earth, but many sustaining ones as well: the conquest of debilitating diseases, bioremediation of toxins, sophisticated solar and wind-driven engines, my eighteen-speed bicycle . . . Isn't there something worthy and right, then, about our objective understanding of nature, and about the manifold insights that have been garnered from that perspective, the many useful facts and explanations harvested from the careful practice of our sciences?

Certainly there is! Nothing I write in these pages is meant to disparage the elegant disclosures revealed by our sciences, or even the detached states of mind necessary to derive those insights. I mean only to point out that the detached stance proper to science is itself dependent upon a more visceral reciprocity between the human organism and its world. It is this primordial and ongoing participation that has gradually shaped the glistening eyes with which we now view the lights and shadows of this sphere, as it has shaped our listening ears, able to detect a wide range of sounds vital to human life while oblivious to many others. This ageless intercourse between the body and the earth—this *coevolution*—has shaped the organs and tissues of every earthly organism, deepening the color of our feathers and the power of our claws, intensifying the bitterness of our leaves, outfitting our seeds with cotton sails so they'll blow far on the summer winds.

glean some sense of how those hidden worlds really function—how “quarks” are held within a proton or neutron; how particular stretches of DNA influence other stretches of the same chromosome; how the neural lattice of branching axons and dendrites continually interacts with itself; how black holes twist the fabric of space-time. Our experts construct a hypothetical image of what’s unfolding at those other scales only by extrapolating from their fragmentary findings, and creatively filling in the holes between them. Yet the manner in which they fill those vast gaps in the empirical data is inevitably shaped by intuitions, expectations, proclivities, and perceptual habits borrowed from their ongoing (and taken-for-granted) engagement with the one realm that they inhabit with the whole of their animal bodies—from this enigmatic, earthly cosmos of ground, wind, and rain that commonly meets their senses as they daily go about their lives.

Every coherent image we can have of those other, ostensibly more objective dimensions of reality is secretly rooted, then, in the ambiguous, ever-shifting terrain of our ordinary experience. Everything we have come to believe about those presumably more fundamental scales of reality is tacitly dependent upon our everyday engagement with the world at this scale—the very scale of existence to which our animal senses are tuned. In the open expanse of our full-bodied experience, the entities that meet our senses are not quarks and protons, but rather brambles and mushrooms and slowly eroding hillsides; not DNA base pairs or neuronal synapses but rather children, and woodpeckers, and the distant sound of thunder. Although we regularly try to explain this ambiguous world by appealing to those more mathematically precise realms hidden behind the perceivable surroundings, it is ultimately our ongoing relation to the capacious earth that holds the key to all those abstract and provisional worlds.

Let’s reprise this reflection from another angle, leaning for a moment upon the work of one of the most lucid observers of the world that meets our unaided senses, a scientist who rarely let his

ponderings swerve too far from the earth of his direct experience. For more than two millennia, alphabetic civilization had claimed a special origin for humankind, asserting that humans were divinely fashioned to serve as God’s representatives on earth. This presumption was challenged and largely overturned by Charles Darwin, whose painstaking observations provided convincing evidence that humankind, on the contrary, had taken shape like other species over the long course of evolution. The theory of evolution by natural selection made evident that we, too, are animals, created not by an external divinity but evolved from a group of primate ancestors, and more anciently from a lineage of small mammals, themselves derived, much earlier, from an ancestral line of fish long immersed in the ocean depths.

Darwin had rediscovered the deep truth of totemism—the animistic assumption, common to countless indigenous cultures but long banished from polite society, that human beings are closely kindred to other creatures, and indeed have various other animals as our direct ancestors. Here was a form of totemism transposed into the modern world—the totemic insight now translated into the language of “descent by natural selection from a common ancestor.” This modern version no longer saw different persons as descendants of different totemic animals, but recognized all humankind as derived from a common lineage of creatures. In the wake of Darwin’s bold insights, we have learned to consider all humans as members of a common family. But the wild, animistic implication of Darwin’s insight has taken much longer to surface in our collective awareness, no doubt because it greatly threatens our cherished belief in human transcendence. Nonetheless, it is an inescapable implication of the evolutionary insight: we humans are corporeally related, by direct and indirect webs of evolutionary affiliation, to every other organism that we encounter.

Moreover, it is not only other animals, plants, and simpler organisms that have contributed, during the course of evolution, to the unique character of the human creature, but also the fluid ocean, and the many rocks that compose the soils, and the way the mountains gather clouds above the high ridges. These planetary

structures are not extrinsic to human life—they are not arbitrary or random aspects of a world we just happen to inhabit. Rather they are the constitutive powers that summoned us into existence, and hence are the secret allies, the totemic guides, of all our actions. They are as much within us as they are around us; they compose the wider, deeper life of which our bodies are a part.

If we accept Darwin's insights, and concede that the human species has been shaped by the creative flux of evolution, then we must acknowledge that the enfolding biosphere is the very matrix within which our organism came to acquire its current form. Our senses have coevolved with the chemistry of these waters and this air, shaping themselves to the particular patterns of the animate earth. Our human eyes have evolved in subtle interaction with other, non-human eyes—as our ears are now tuned, by their very structure, to the howling of wolves and the thrumming of frogs. While gliding in huge, undulant schools through the depths of the amniotic oceans, or later, while crawling upon our bellies from puddle to puddle (our scaly skins glinting in the sun)—while racing beneath the grasses as tiny, nocturnal mammals, or leaping from branch to branch as long-tailed primates—our brainy bodies have steadily formed themselves in dynamic interaction with the textures and rhythms of terrestrial nature.

Our nervous systems, then, are wholly informed by the particular gravity of this sphere, by the way the sun's light filters down through Earth's atmosphere, and by the cyclical tug of Earth's moon. In a thoroughly palpable sense, we are born of this planet, our attentive bodies coevolved in rich and intimate rapport with the other bodily forms—animals, plants, mountains, rivers—that compose the shifting flesh of this breathing world.

So it is the elemental Earth that has lent us our particular proclivities and gifts, our specific styles of behavior. Our ways of moving, our modes of perception, our unique habits of thought and contemplation, have all been informed by the variegated nature of this wild-flowering world. Thus, the enfolding biosphere provides the inescapable template for our experience of any other realm we may discover or devise. Whether we are pondering the unfathomably

vast galactic clusters revealed by a new generation of radio telescopes, or mathematically exploring the submicroscopic realm of vibrating, supersymmetric strings, we cannot help but interpret whatever we glimpse of those worlds according to predispositions derived from the one realm in which we uninterruptedly live—predispositions necessarily instilled, over the marathon course of evolution, by the shapes, the patterns, and the other inhabitants of our terrestrial environment.

For example, our surmises regarding the subtle function of neural processes within the brain are profoundly constrained by the fact that the brain did not evolve in order to understand itself. The complex organization of the brain evolved as a consequence of our sensorial and muscled engagement with the complex, dangerous, and ever-shifting landscapes that surrounded us. The brain has thus a natural proclivity to help us orient and interact with those enigmatic surroundings. Whenever we attempt to focus the thinking brain back upon itself—upon its own neural structure and functioning, or upon other dimensions similarly hidden from our common experience, whether subatomic or cosmological—it cannot help but bring those predispositions to bear, anticipating gravity, ground, and sky where they are not necessarily to be found, interpreting data according to the elemental constraints common to our two-legged species, yielding an image of things profoundly informed by our animal body and its accustomed habitat.

There is much to be gleaned from our investigations into other scales and dimensions, yet we constantly err by assuming our studies provide an objective assessment of the way those other scales really are in themselves, independent of the very partial perspective that we curious primates have on those dimensions. The super-small and ultravast spaces steadily explored by the sciences can never explain this lovely and problem-ridden world that we daily inhabit, since those abstract spaces are largely woven out of the perceptual fabric of this very world. Certainly our forays into those abstract dimensions can offer us clues, new approaches to the land around us, new ways of looking at a forest or feeling a volcanic tremor. They can spark new insights into the lives that surround us, new ways of under-

standing ourselves, or—if we choose—of altering ourselves. Ultimately, however, it is only the lived, felt relationships that we daily maintain with one another, with the other creatures that surround us and the terrain that sustains us, that can teach us the use and misuse of all our abstractions.

Despite all our giddy technological dreams, this vast and inscrutable land—drenched by the rains and parched by the summer sun—remains the ultimate ground, and the final horizon, of all our science. It is not primarily a set of mechanisms waiting to be figured out, this breathing land. It is not a stock of resources waiting to be utilized by us, or a storehouse of raw materials waiting to be developed. It is not an object.

It is, rather, the very body of wonder—a shuddering field of intelligence in whose round life we participate. And if, today, this dreaming land has been forgotten behind a clutch of glowing screens that intercept the fascination of our focused eyes—if it has been eclipsed by styles of speaking that deaden our senses, and by machinic modes of activity that stifle the eros between our body and the leafing forests—then it is time to listen, underneath all these words, for the animal stirrings that move within our limbs and our swelling torsos. It is time to unplug our gaze from the humming screen, walking out of the house to blink and piss under the river of stars. There are new stories waiting in the cool grasses, and new songs . . .

## DEPTH

(Depth Ecology II)

I only went out for a walk, and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in.

—JOHN MUIR

A certain blue of the sky is so damn blue that only blood could be more red. Actually, the French poet Paul Claudel was speaking of the blue of the *sea* when he made that curious observation, but up at this altitude, the sky itself is the sea I'm swimming in. Relentless blue fills every hollow, snuggling up against the outline of each boulder, drinking aspen sap straight from the bruised bark of these groves, pressing in on my eyes, rounding my nostrils and seeping in through my sweating pores as I walk down this slope. Maybe I'd better say that I'm loping rather than walking, since gravity's granting a long, fluid stride to my legs that they never have on level ground. Spruces and firs and clustered aspens glide past me as I descend, all heading in the other direction. But I pay them scant mind; I'm watching the shifting dance of the hills just in front of me.



that cottonwood nor those clouds, but simply "the scenery." Only when I take a break from the writing and launch myself from the desk, walking to the door and yanking it open, the cold air shaking my brain loose from its verbal exertions—only then does that scenery begin to breathe, the barks of sundry dogs stretching open the visible landscape as their contracting nearness or distance registers in my ears, and the hulls stand up one in front of the other, and branches dangle near my head—and so my body finally remembers itself back inside the mind and life of the local earth.

The more we spend our days staring at screens, taking our dreams and directives from the signs and shapes that play across their smooth surfaces, the harder it becomes to make this transition, the easier to simply stay ensconced within a universe of images neatly honed to meet our needs. Even if we venture beyond the walls of our office or metropolis, we often find ourselves merely staring at the scenery. Accustomed to peering at flat representations, we've begun to take the palpable world itself as a kind of representation—no longer a limitless field in whose boisterous life we're participant, but a set of determinate facts arrayed in front of us, upon which we gaze like detached and impartial spectators. We no longer peer into the enigmatic depths of a terrain that encompasses and exceeds us; the land has now become something that we look at.

For example, today many educated folks have ceased experiencing the earth as the rough ground that supports their steps and the wind pouring past their ears; for them the earth has become, first and foremost, that blue sphere flecked with clouds that they have seen in various NASA photos—images that were reproduced countless times and became the basis for a thousand corporate logos. For a great many persons the earth is now equated, in other words, with the earth *seen from outside*—with our planet as it might be seen by a transcendent god, or by a surveillance satellite. This "objective" view of the earth now conditions and supersedes our immediate experience of the rainswept land that enfolds us and drenches our shirt as we run to the mailbox. Such soaked and shivering experiences, we now realize, are secondary, mere "subjective"

distortions of a factual reality that has already been mapped, measured, and monitored. It may indeed be raining, but we can best clarify this by turning on the Weather Channel.

To our animal awareness the land remains ambiguous, open-ended, and always prone (as we saw earlier) to unexpected metamorphoses. But such visceral experiences seem arbitrary and ephemeral next to the "hard" facts yielded by the impersonal instruments now surveying the real. Most of us moderns pay scant attention to our directly felt impressions of the world. We hardly notice such impressions anymore, or we straightaway translate those qualitative sensations into the quantitative world of facts, and information, that is the primary object of faith in our era.

It is a faith partly held in place, I'm suggesting, by our ever-growing participation with screens of all kinds, by our steady subjection to flat representations and spectacles. The belief in a thoroughly objective comprehension of nature, our aspiration to a clear and complete understanding of how the world works, is precisely the belief in an entirely flat world seen from above, a world without depth, a nature that we are not a part of but that we stare at from outside—like a disembodied mind, or like a person gazing at a computer model.

When we consider the things from a disembodied position outside the world that they inhabit, the ambiguous effects of depth dissipate: we seem to encounter the things as they really are, naked and exposed to an all-seeing awareness that, freed from any limited perspective, is able to penetrate every opacity, able to register every aspect of the real. By renouncing our animal embodiment—by pretending to be disembodied minds looking at nature without being situated within it—we dispel the tricksterlike magic of the world. We dissipate its mysterious concealments and transfigurations, dissolving at last the confounding limitations that the dimension of depth had imposed upon all our knowledge.

And yet it remains a pretense. Whenever we view the natural world as a set of objects, whenever we perceive the terrain around us as a clear and determinable set of facts, then we are in truth not really perceiving the actual terrain at all, but only a representa-

tion—a projected concept—of that terrain. We may *conceive* of earthly reality as though we were not ourselves of it, but we can never really *perceive* it as such.

Although he lusted for the hard matter of reality, Henry Thoreau, exemplary animal that he was, knew well that the living, breathing body could never encounter a wholly determinate and defined object, and hence that we never really meet a naked fact:

If you stand right fronting and face-to-face to a fact, you will see the sun glimmer on both its surfaces, as if it were a scimitar, and feel its sweet edge dividing you through the heart and marrow, and so you will happily conclude your mortal career.<sup>a</sup>

Yet we've convinced ourselves that the land around us—generously abundant at some moments, ferocious and unforgiving at others—is really a set of sheer facts; we hold ourselves apart from the world in order to subdue its wildness.

The mechanical and mindless nature that we ponder under the cool guise of objectivity has proved outrageously useful, a model that has enabled the most audacious manipulations undertaken in the name of betterment and progress, from the diversion of rivers and their transformation into electricity, to the mining of genomes and their transformation into prestige and profit. Moreover, it's now clear that the objective model of nature will be necessary for the careful mending of the many world-wounds brought about by all this progress. We will not get by without it. Yet it is a model nonetheless, a flattened representation of nature. It is not the wild world in its living actuality—not this mystery that we contact with our own breathing and bleeding bodies. It is not the cottonwood branch now tangled in my windblown hair, or the flock of cranes swirling far overhead in midmigration, their ratchetlike croaks filtering down through the tumult of sky. Strand-by-strand, I ease my hair free from the branch. Near the base of the tree, a small stone

<sup>a</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1910), p. 82.

glints silver against the dark soil. It is not that stone, nor the sunlight on that stone.

The density of these woods must be muffling the soundscape—I've heard neither birds nor the wind for a long time, only the sound of my footfalls as they crunch along the deer trail. The sun is much lower than when I first noticed the hills dancing before me; I'm in the thick of those hills now, following this faint trail strewn with needles among the tall pines and firs. It's led me over large outcroppings and into rock-strewn arroyos, where I commonly lose the path and have to wander back and forth on the other side of the ravine hoping to find it again. The late afternoon shadows are what throw me off, disclosing apparent passages through the undergrowth that dead-end as soon as I try them. Only by blundering up and down do I happen upon the right angle from which to glimpse the actual way through, and so my feet finally rejoin the crowd of hooves and paws that have passed along this route.

This animal road, slight as it is, is more inviting than the alternative—following one of the ravines down to where it would join a larger streambed. These steep gashes are too cluttered with jutting roots and tumbled rocks to allow ready passage. So I keep cutting across the ravines, wending my way laterally along these wooded slopes, trusting the trail. I know I'm walking vaguely westward since the sun glimmers and glints through the canopy in front of me, its long rays slanting through the trees. Thin trunks and thick-saplings and elders, and middle-aged trunks as well—all glide past me as I walk, though at different speeds. Those nearest to the trail rush past, their limbs brushing my shoulders or slapping my legs, while those a few yards off move with less haste. Farther still from the trail are trees whose gait is leisurely, even stately. And beyond even those are the grand but distant trees, that seem to linger with me as I stride; now and then one of them catches and holds my eye—I glimpse it again and yet again through the rapid syncopation of nearby trunks.

Farther off to my left, darkly green behind all of these gliding

verticals, are the needled trees that blanket the hillside across from this one. The forest on that facing slope appears to keep pace with me as I stroll, while all these nearer conifers slide past at their different rates. It's as though all the trees on that hillside were gliding forward—or is it just the contrast with the nearby woods rushing backward that makes the distant slope seem to stride in the opposite direction?

But wait! What am I saying? None of these trees is actually moving! I alone, among all these upright bodies, am actually locomoting along the ground. All their apparent movements, fast and slow, are merely a consequence of my own physical motion, the illusory effect of my own activity in the midst of what is, in fact, a fairly quiescent and passive topography. "Motion parallax" is the technical term for this dynamism that my own movement seems to induce in the landscape, this apparent roaming of things in relation to myself as I wander.

As soon as I reflect upon this, the land's activity seems to subside. A certain vitality I had sensed in the forest has now dissolved. The dynamism has withdrawn from the surroundings and has concentrated itself within my skull, where all these thoughts are now churning (calculating the way that these hills and carved ravines must look to a detached eye situated above the landscape, pondering how that more objective view is distorted when the terrain is seen from a particular position within it, moving at this particular pace). I am lost in my figurations. My bodily senses blunted, the land around me has become a passive field of shapes, some of them neatly defined ("Douglas fir," "blue spruce"), others obscure and unnoticed as my thinking self plunges past. I am now staring at my watch, worrying about my broken-down car. I am wondering when I might emerge from these wooded valleys and find my way to the highway . . .

A spiderweb collapses across my face, sticky and strange, like a Bazooka bubble-gum bubble that I once blew to bursting and had to peel, paper-thin, from my cheeks. I wipe the web from my nose and from the edge of my baseball cap; but before I can place the cap back on my head I notice the spider, so close I have to cross my

eyes to see her brown body clearly, suspended by a single strand from the beak of my cap. Dangling upside down with her legs folded inward, the spider is falling away from the cap on the rapidly lengthening span. "Hello there," I say hopefully, raising the baseball cap high so the spider dangles again at eye level, but she keeps riding the end of that thread down and away. I carry the cap over to a nearby scrub oak, and transfer the cap's end of the thread to an upper leaf. The veins in those leaves are clear and crisply articulated to my gaze, as are the tiny nodules toward the end of the branch where next year's buds are already preparing themselves. By holding my eyes for a few moments, the spider has drawn my senses into another scale of experience. Which opens up endlessly. On a neighboring bush the leaves are different, the lobes rounder; here several branches have had their tips broken, or rather—given the frayed ends—chewed off. Deer, I guess, passing by in the early summer when the shoots were still green. I look down on the ground, brushing aside the fallen needles to glimpse some dried-out pellets, but find none—only a line of black ants in momentary disarray as a result of my sweeping. Three of them are scrambling, their antennae taut and probing, to find again the scent. Which they do straightaway, two of them bumping into each other and brushing their antennae together, briefly, before rejoining the line.

I continue along my own path, following not a scent but a vague absence of obstacles, the path more a visual hunch at this point than a clear passage, although as I walk it becomes more obvious, senses tuning themselves to the trail. Soon my peripheral awareness takes over the task of keeping me on track, and my gaze opens outward to touch the needled shadows and the sky above the balconied branches and the slope glimmering through the trunks to my left. That neighboring hillside, steeper now, is again gliding forward, accompanying me as I tramp, while between here and there the trunks move backward in their respective gaits, the farther ones slower and the close ones swifter, the nearest grabbing at my jacket as they rush past, and I realize that all this motion is not at all an illusion: it is the way the world lives, the way the world

shows itself to itself—for there is NO view from outside! The layered dynamism of all these gliding trajectories has overcome a threshold in my self; my thoughts dissolve into my breathing body and I awaken as this striding form, this sentient flesh utterly immersed in the sensuous.

Nostrils flaring, arms swooping, I feel my animal solidity and grace as I lope down the trail.

The way that all these other bodies—trees, bushes, hillsides—shift in relation to one another as I walk *compels* my thorough inclusion in the landscape; when I really notice and pay attention to their transformations, I'm forced to discover myself utterly inside the physical world. These shifting gradients and angles of alignment—the multiple tree-lined corridors that seem to open around me as I move—all converge and cross here, at this animate creature that is me, ambulating through this forest. There really *is* this huge world going about its business independent of me, and yet I am *in* it, alive in its folds!

High above me, the upper branches jostle and bend in gusts that I can't feel way down here, while the massive bulk of these hills shifts around me—I feel my own smallness among them. Yet no matter how minuscule, I also feel my own agency, my own autonomy within this massively real world. I'm embedded in this world, yes—but I am not bound, not imprisoned. There's a new freedom I feel, a looseness, an improvisational openness between myself and the beings around me. As if only by dissolving the distance between my mind and my body is this other, richer distance able to make itself felt—the open stretch between me and a far-off boulder, or the tension between my hand and the black scar burnt by lightning into the bark of a passing ponderosa. There's a dynamism to these distances, a palpable magnetism between my torso and that steep slope over there—an allurements made possible by the distance between things. Depth is not a determinate relation between inert objects arrayed within a static space, but a dynamic tension between bodies, between beings that beckon and repulse one another across an expanse that can never be precisely mapped—across a gap that waxes and wanes according to the mood playing

through one's limbs or the limbs of the forest itself, according to the whoosh of the wind pouring through the needles, or the way the sun spills its warmth upon the soil.

Or now: the way that sun is sliding behind the trees in front, casting these woods into a denser weave of shadow, its rays no longer filtering down like white gold through the needled roof. The mood of this place alters, gently. A red squirrel is chattering off to my right, distressed by something. Perhaps by me. Animals less at ease in the daytime are also stirring throughout the forest. I can not see them, yet there's a new wakefulness to the woods that sparks along the surface of my skin.

As the squirrel's staccato dies down, there remains a faint, high-pitched chirping reaching my ears from the upper canopy. Nut-hatches? I'm not sure—the sound is so ephemeral, rising and fading. . . . A jewel-like gleam flashes through the trunks in front of me, then vanishes, and then the sun flashes through again, steady-ing itself: the forest is thinning. Or rather, I am coming to an edge. As the last trees part around me, I step into a meadow of clumped grasses and wide swaths of barren rock. The breeze is stronger here, pouring upslope from the southwest as the low sun beats on my face. But it's the open sky above that halts my steps, that ocean of blue crashing down upon the rocks and the grasses, and upon my shoulders as well, scooping me up above the pinetops to soar and tumble in its deep expanse, then depositing me here where I stand, half floating, staring up.

The sky is not as clear as when I first stepped onto this deer trail two or three hours ago. A few clouds loaf overhead, their western edges gilded and glowing; others punctuate the blue toward the south. Watching their slow transformations in the silence of early evening, feeling the drift and loll of these porous, breathlike beings made of mist and yellow light, I realize the error of our common belief that we live *on* the earth. The rough-skinned rock beneath my feet is earth, yes, but what of those clouds, and the unseen sea in which those clouds are adrift? Are they not also part of earth? And if so, would it not be more true to say that we *dwell in* the earth, rather than on it?

tion. At once intensely rational and deeply spiritual, Spinoza was possessed of a remarkably empathic insight into the emotional lives of others. His radical identification of God with nature (and his insistence, starkly original at the time, upon the necessary separation of church and state) earned him an abundance of scorn throughout Christian Europe, ensuring that very little of his work could be published while he was alive. Yet such was the originality of his insights that some of the most innovative theorists of our own era claim Spinoza as their progenitor and inspiration.

Still, in one important respect Spinoza remains ahead of even those researchers who today claim his heretical insights as their own. Most of those who now assert the centrality of the body in any understanding of the mind—those who argue that it is really the body as a whole, and not an isolated brain, that is the true locus of awareness—still remain trapped within the confines of an unnecessary presumption. It's a presumption that lingers as our deepest inheritance from the Cartesian tradition: the assumption that awareness, or mind, is a special possession of our species, a property that isolates humankind from the rest of material nature.

The primary dichotomy in Descartes' philosophy, after all, was not the division between mind and body, but rather the divide between the mind and the *whole of the material world*. It was this more profound bifurcation between mind and matter that had ensured the rapid ascendancy of the Cartesian worldview and its long success in the West. By conceiving of itself as something entirely distinct from palpable nature, the rational mind of the Enlightenment was empowered to pursue its giddy dream of comprehending, and mastering, every aspect of the material cosmos. Descartes' segregation of the mind from the body, in other words, was but a means to a grander end; it authorized the modern mind to reflect upon the material world as though it were not a part of that world—to look upon nature from a cool, detached position ostensibly outside of that nature.

And so, today, if the long-held distinction between our minds and our bodies is disintegrating in the face of researches from a

wide range of disciplines, we may wonder whether this other, deeper segregation—between mind and materiality, or between sentience and the sensuous cosmos—is itself beginning to crumble.

Very few of those participant in the current "turn toward the body" seem to notice the wider, more subversive implications of their work. While they assert that the entirety of the body is integral to the mind, surely (they assume) it is only the *human* body that has this privilege, and not the body of an elk, or an aspen grove, or the dense flesh of the ground itself. Surely the gushing body of a river, or the ebb and flow of the breeze, has no real part in intelligence!

It is here that their timidity contrasts with the far-seeing audacity of Spinoza. He alone saw that the human mind could never be reconciled with the human body unless intelligence was recognized as an attribute of nature in its entirety. To Spinoza, every sensible phenomenon had its own mental aspect; every tangible body within the material world was also an idea within the vast, encompassing intelligence that was known inwardly (to some) as God and outwardly (to all) as nature.

Despite his outmoded methodology, laden with geometrical terms (with numbered definitions, axioms, propositions, and corollaries), the heart of Spinoza's intuition remains prescient. For once we acknowledge that our awareness is inseparable—even, in some sense, indistinguishable—from our material physiology, can we really continue to maintain that mind remains alien to the rest of material nature? Consider how completely your sentient body is entangled in the crowd of creatures and elemental forces that enfolds you. Consider how thoroughly your organism is dependent upon these other lives: how your flesh is nourished and sustained by the plants whose leaves or fruits you ingest, by the other animals whose muscles you may eat, or whose milk you may drink, or whose carefully laid eggs firm the chocolate cake you nibbled on last night. And ponder, too, how your life sustains others in turn. Consider how your breath is taken up within the green chemistry of these grasses and whispering conifers, and how their exhalations add themselves to the swirling winds that embrace you, from

which your lungs must drink, again and again, to fire your gestures and your streaming thoughts. Notice the pleasure that your fingertips find in certain wave-polished stones, the giddy thrill that your open palm, held out the window of a car, draws from the rush of wind that blasts against it. Notice the way your ears empty themselves toward the song of a wood thrush, or the manner in which your eyes are lured, like bees, by the interior azure of certain blossoms. The human body is not a closed or static object, but an open, unfinished entity utterly entwined with the soils, waters, and winds that move through it—a wild creature whose life is contingent upon the multiple other lives that surround it, and the shifting flows that surge through it.

Of course, our awareness is hugely informed by the exchange we carry on with those of our own species. Profoundly so. Yet the unique savvy of the human creature—the goofy grace of our gestures and, at times, of our thoughts—has also been shaped by our relation to the countless other earthly powers, both familiar and frightening, with whom we have coevolved. Throughout the obscure eons of our species' unfurling, it was these darkly dangerous and many-voiced surroundings that necessarily compelled our body's curiosity and desire, posing disturbing puzzles for our senses, prompting the human creature to pause, to ponder, and ultimately to reflect. And so it is misleading, today, for cognitive scientists to focus solely upon the human body in isolation from that larger matrix—as though our capacity for conscious reflection were somehow born only in interaction with ourselves, rather than with our world.

Today's intrepid researchers have yet to notice that the human body, in itself, is no more autonomous—and no more conscious—than an isolated brain. Sentience is not an attribute of a body in isolation; it emerges from the ongoing encounter between our flesh and the forest of rhythms in which it finds itself, born of the interplay and tension between the world's wild hunger and our own. The impulse toward thought grows from the gap between our thirst and an unexpectedly dry creekbed, as our curiosity finds consummation in the magnetism between our tongue and a prickly

hedge studded with blackberries. Human awareness could not exist without a human body, true, but it could no more exist in the absence of ground, leaf, and flowing water. Mind arises, and dwells, between the body and the Earth, and hence is as much an attribute of this leafing world as of our own immodest species.

My first two years at college left me ensnared in words, in snatches of text and snarls of argument that gripped my thoughts but smothered my ability to feel the world in ways less verbal. I walked out after the second year and spent the next wandering as a street magician through the cities of old Europe, imbibing the twang and rumble of other languages, letting those odd styles of speaking loosen my gestures and shake up my perceptions. How big the world was beginning to seem! Returning to college, I again felt pressed into a too tight pattern by the texts and taxonomies, and found myself yearning for a way back out of the words into the wildness of things. When classes ended that year, I walked onto a New England highway and stuck out my thumb, catching a series of rides westward across the continent. Once the snow-decked ridges of the Rocky Mountains lifted themselves from the horizon I stared in happy amazement and stepped out of the last truck, thanking the driver and making my way into a town where I began performing magic, for tips, in the local bars. After a fortnight I'd earned enough to purchase a decent tent and a sleeping bag. I shouldered my backpack and walked into the mountains.

I had camped a fair amount with friends and family when growing up, but had never pitched a tent alone in the backcountry. As my legs carried me past the last of the phone lines and into the thick of the forest, as the shadows deepened and the exclusively human world fell behind me, a great remembering shuddered through my muscles, as though a soul long buried were striding to the surface. My own real creaturely life, at last, was what was smelling those dank scents and hearing the pines rub against each other. Over the following days and nights, camping under high passes in snowfields agleam with moonlight, or hiking among

the fly weaves, again and again, trying to catch its trajectory in my gaze, waiting patiently for the serendipitous moment when I will manage, for an instant, to focus my eyes upon the fly. As soon as I do so, in that split second of visual contact, I offer my vexing thought to the insect. At which point the fly—to my considerable amazement—buzzes away! Sometimes my eyes have been able to follow the fly as it departs into the distance before me, becoming smaller and smaller until it dissolves. I am left sitting on the rock, unburdened of both bug and bothersome thought, released into the ringing silence.

I suppose it was only by leaving behind, for those weeks, the compulsion to communicate with words that I became so vulnerable to the expressive power of all those other-than-human styles of sensitivity and sentience. It was not merely the polymorphous play of rhythms, the syncopation of shapes that swerve and sprout beyond the confines of the city, but also how startlingly immense the land became when I encountered it without the steady filter of words, the discovery that I was palpably immersed in a field of unfoldings so much wider than myself and my intentions. It was not just the resonant metaphors offered by stones and grasses and muscled creatures, but also the rightness, somehow, of recognizing mind as a broad landscape within which I was wandering, a deep field with its near aspects and its distances, its moods shifting like the weather. For surely mind has its depths: memories buried, for instance, beneath the ground of our current awareness, or recent insights momentarily concealed behind the close matters we're obsessively stuck on.

There seemed something *more than metaphorical* here, something strangely right about this resonance between thought and the earthly terrain. For clearly there's something about the psyche that exceeds us and overflows all our knowings, confounding every notion of mind as a self-contained space within our head. Certainly, I still felt that there was an interior quality to the mind. But

my encounters with other styles of sentience were loosening the conception of my own mind as a closed zone of reflection, stirring long-slumbering memories from my earliest years of life, bringing faint whiffs of a forgotten intimacy between awareness and the elemental earth. As though the leap and vanish of a deer into the forest or these other movements of shadows and grass and rain were not merely metaphors but part of the very *constitution* of the mind, of its real structure and architecture. And it was then that a simple thought burst upon my awareness—not like a bolt of lightning, but rather like a gentle rain beginning to fall around me, soaking my head and my chest, moistening the ground and raising its mingled scents to my nostrils: What if mind is not ours, but is Earth's? What if mind, rightly understood, is not a special property of humankind, but is rather a property of the Earth itself—a power in which we are carnally immersed?

What if there is, yes, a quality of inwardness to the mind, not because the mind is located inside us (inside our body or brain), but because we are situated, bodily, *inside it*—because our lives and our thoughts unfold in the depths of a mind that is not really ours, but is rather the Earth's? What if like the hunkered owl, and the spruce bending above it, and the beetle staggering from needle to needle on that branch, we all partake of the wide intelligence of this world—because we're materially participant, with our actions and our passions, in the broad psyche of this sphere?

It was a thought that sparked and rippled along the whole surface of my skin, as though all the pores of that smooth membrane were opening at once, as though the skin itself were coming awake. Or as though I myself was awakening as that shimmering membrane at the outer bound of my body—as this luminous shape resonating with the other shapes that surround me: rocks, grasses, trees—each contour a sparkling surface of metamorphosis and exchange between that being and the charged air around it, as a sort of eros played between us, an electric tension binding us all into the expansive Body of the place. The sensations along my skin were subtly shifting. I realized, in tandem with the changing scents

low layer of air swells in volume and then fades as their shapes dissolve back into the distance on the other side of my kayak.

The islands draw closer with each flex of my arms, widening their span and soon filling my gaze with green, gentling my ears with the liquid lapping of water against rocks. I sense vaguely that I am being watched. So I scan the rocky shore and the dense wall of forest above the high-tide line on each island, but can see no one. Only when a flash of white snags the corner of my eye do I notice the eagle perched high on a dead trunk jutting out from the coast of the more northerly island. Its lustrous head is cocked slightly—a single eye following the glints on my paddle blades. And perhaps the gleam off my glasses, as well, for when I turn my face toward it the bird launches with a few flaps of its huge wings, banks, and soars off through the passage between the two islands. I adjust my direction and follow it, gliding beneath the needled woods on either side. After a time I emerge from the channel; the echo of my paddle-strokes off the double wall of trees widens out and dissipates, giving way to a muffled sound drifting up from the south, a faint but dissonant clamor that rises and falls in intensity. Curious, I swerve the kayak to the left and begin paddling down the west coast of the southernmost island. When I round a spit of land, the noise gets louder, a low-pitched, polyphonic rumble that I cannot place at all. It fades to silence as I stroke across a broad bay, and then rises to my ears as I glide around another peninsula, although more intermittent now, and as I listen to this dark music I realize that it's an entirely organic cacophony, a crowd of ram-bunctious grunting tones vying with one another. As I cross the next bay it fades again. Only when the kayak slips around the next point and I see the long, rocky spit on the far side of the following cove—its jagged terraces and angled rocks bedecked with a jumble of sleek, brown humps—do I recognize that I'm entering the neighborhood of a large sea lion colony.

Oddly, the brown bodies opposite are mostly quiet as I come into view; a few grunts reach my ears as they negotiate places on the rocks. I can't make out any pups, and so this cannot be one of the rookeries where sea lions gather to breed and give birth, but

must be one of their communal haul-out sites. A very popular haul-out site: I count over eighty adult sea lions as I paddle slowly across the cove, and know there must be many others hidden from view. But it's their immense bulk that startles me as I gaze through my binoculars. These are northern, or Steller, sea lions, far larger than their southern cousins; later I learn that the bulls can weigh up to 2,500 pounds, and can reach over eleven feet in length. I see some of them staring in my direction as I paddle. When I'm halfway across the cove, one such bull on a slab of a rock near the water raises himself up on his flippers, dips his head a couple of times, and begins roaring in a deep, guttural voice that resounds in the hollow of the kayak and reverberates in the cave of my skull. Soon two other large bulls lying on a ledge above the first raise their torsos and begin hollering as well, and within a few moments it seems every sea lion on that rocky outcrop is sounding its barbaric yawp over the waves. The raucous din is unnerving, and an upwelling of fear rises from the base of my spine. I lay down my paddle, and in an effort to quell the oncoming panic I do the only thing that I can think of, the single savvy act that might ease the tension in this encounter: I begin to sing.

This was a response to animal threat that I discovered some years earlier when, cross-country skiing along a snow-covered stream in the northern Rockies, I emerged from the woods into a small, frozen marshland—and abruptly found myself three ski-lengths away from a mother moose. She'd been feeding with her child among the low willows. The moose looked up as startled as I; she was facing me head-on, her nostrils flaring, her front legs taut, leaning forward. Her eyes were locked on my body, one ear listening toward me while the other was rotated backward, monitoring the movements of her calf. My senses were on high alert, yet somehow I wasn't frightened or even worried; I took a deep breath and then found myself offering a single, sustained mellifluous note, a musical call in the middle part of my range, holding its pitch and its volume for as long as I could muster. As my voice died away I



already sensed the other's muscles relaxing. Drawing another breath, I sang out the same note again, relaxing my own body and pouring as much ease as I was able into the tone. Within a moment the moose leaned her head back down and casually began nibbling the willow tips. I sounded that liquid tone one last time, finally pushing off with my poles and slipping on past.

The simple appropriateness of what I'd done slowly made itself evident to my thinking mind as I glided through the woods. For the timbre of a human voice singing a single sustained note carries an abundance of information for those whose ears are tuned to such clues—information about the internal state of various organs in the singer's body, and the relative tension or ease in that person, the level of aggression or peaceful intent.

And so, floating in my kayak, assailed by a chorus of bellowing grunts sounding from throats large enough, it seemed, to swallow me in a few gulps, I find myself singing back. Although not, this time, in a particularly mellifluous tone. If I had offered a gentle, calm note, the sea lions would never have heard me through the clamor of their own growling, and in any case I could never have generated such a soothing tone from within my already freaked-out organism. Instead, the musical tone that I utter forth is as loud and as guttural as I can manage, with my head thrown back in order to open my throat—a kind of low-pitched, gargling howl: "Aaarrrrggghhh . . . Aaarrggghhh . . . Aaarrggghhh . . . Aaarrggghhh . . ." I hold each guttural howl for as long as I can, finally pausing to draw a deep breath, at which point I notice, amazed, that the sea lions have stopped growling. I lower my head to look at them; they're now sniffing the air toward me, shoving one another to get a better glimpse of this large, brightly colored duck that can make such an ugly racket. My ears pick up the sound of fifty or sixty noses snorting and snorfing (and sometimes sneezing) as they sniff the breeze. My own nostrils can hardly sort the thickly mingled scents of salt spray and sea lion breath and the dense, floating beds of kelp as I take up the paddle and begin, like a fool, paddling

closer. My own creaturely curiosity has gotten the better of my reason; I cannot help myself, enthralled by my proximity to these breathing bodies so weirdly akin to, and yet so different from, my own. The smell of them grows steadily stronger as I ease my kayak between the strands of kelp. When I get within about twenty-five feet of the rocks, that large male on the lower ledge—the same bull who initiated the alarm the first time—lifts his torso up on his flippers and starts bellowing. Straightaway a few others join in, and by the time I've laid the paddle across the kayak nearly all of the sea lions are hollering bloody murder. And so I am gulping air and mustering myself and about to launch into my own guttural harangue when, directly between me and the sea lions, the water's surface begins to bubble. Small bubbles at first, which soon give way to larger ones, and then a huge upwelling of water as, without any further warning, a gargantuan body blasts! through the surface into the sky—flying on outstretched wings that, as I stare wide-eyed, resolve themselves into the splayed pectoral fins of a humpback whale. The whale twists almost belly side up before its bulk crashes down, drenching me with spray and sending a huge wave rolling over the hull of the kayak, slamming the paddle against my life-jacket and almost sweeping it away before I catch hold of its end and drag it back. In front of the kayak, the long, pleated folds of the humpback's underside are slipping slowly beneath the surface. . . . and then the whale is gone.

I grab the paddle and desperately begin to back-paddle, thinking that the giant may try to capsize me, although after a few moments I realize that I've no idea what the whale is up to, or where in the depths it might now be. So I brace the paddle across the hull, gripping it tight with both hands, and simply wait. After a minute I hear the *pip, pip, pip* of tiny bubbles breaking, and by the time I locate them the water to my left begins boiling, and then upwelling, and before I can prepare myself that massive bulk explodes through the surface like a fever-mad hallucination—barely eight feet from the kayak—right side up this time and parallel to the boat although lunging in the opposite direction, immense pectoral fins dangling before it slams down. The swell catches my

boat sideways and damn near flips me over, except that I counter-lean hard to the left, rocking back up in time to glimpse an inconspicuously small, almost human-like eye peering at me as it glides just above the waterline. The whale spouts, and a breeze blows its exhaled spray into my face, drenching my already sopped body, and then I'm overcome by the rousing stench of its breath. "Sewage-like," I think at first, but then it occurs to me, "What a blessing, to inhale the breath of a humpback whale!" The smell's intensity is jangling my neurons as the enormous apparition slides back down, leaving only a slim dorsal fin visible for a last moment before it vanishes beneath the surface.

I am left stunned, my entire body shaking in the kayak—the visual field trembling around me as I try to calm the tremor in my muscles. I feel as though the great god of the deep has just intervened between me and the sea lions, surfacing as a kind of warning, as if to say, *Not too close, mortal, to these kinsfolk of mine!* Unable to quell the shaking, I lower my head to offer a mumbled prayer of thanks to these waters—but jerk my head back up as a loud SPLASH! sounds in my ears. My eyes widen in alarm. For the sea lions, apparently agitated by this visitation from the humpback god, are starting to dive off the rocks en masse. They're sliding down from the upper ledges and waddling over to the lowermost brink, where they're now plunging into the water in bunches, clusters of them tumbling into the brine and swiftly surfacing, and then surging—with their torsos half out of the water and with a holy clamor of guttural bellowing—straight toward *me!*

There is simply no way that I can escape their rapid advance: the fluid sea, after all, is *their* primary element, and not the customary milieu of this oafish stranger struggling to maneuver in his plastic prosthetic body. I do not know by what wisdom, or folly, my animal organism chooses what to do next. Of course, there are not many options, and no time to think: my awareness can only look on in bewilderment as my arms fly up over my head and I begin, in the kayak, to dance. More precisely, my upraised, extended arms begin to sway conjointly from one side to the other, with my wrists and

my splayed fingers arcing to the right, then to the left, then to the right, to the left, right, left, left, right....

As soon as I begin these contortions, the clamoring sea lions rear back in the water and fall silent, as their their heads begin swiveling from one side to the other, tracking my hands with their eyes. Astonishing! Seventy or eighty earnest mammalian faces twisting this way and then that way, this way and that, over and again. And all in perfect unison, like a half-submerged chorus line. After a couple minutes I drop my hands down to take up the paddle—but straightaway the sea lions start bellowing and surging forward. No! My hands fly back up and I resume the dance, my taut arms swaying left, then right, then left again as the whiskered crowd falls silent, their necks craning from side to side yet again, over and over.

My arms keep up their ritual, the kayak rocking this way and that. As I consider the situation, my happy relief at finding a way to save my skin gradually yields to a deepening dismay. For I can find no way out.

Whenever I even *start* to lower my hands the dark-eyed multitude lunges forward—so halting my dance is not an option. I examine my predicament from every possible angle, but cannot discern any exit strategy. And so I keep my arms high, inclining from one side to the other, smiling rather feebly at all these attentive, whiskered faces while the muscles in my upper arms grow more and more exhausted. After a long while the ache in my shoulders has become intolerable; I can no longer think. My right arm is giving out.

Slowly I bring that arm down while the left keeps up the rhythm. The sea lions, weaving from side to side, are now focused on the single, swaying metronome of my left arm. My right shoulder rests. An idea dawns. My gaze stayed fixed on the sea lions off in front of me as with my right fingers I begin groping around for the shaft of the paddle. On finding it I heft it slightly, balancing it as best I can in an underhand grip. Then, awkwardly, with my left arm rocking side to side above my head, I cross my right arm

in front of my chest and begin rowing as best I can on the left. My right hand scrapes the unwieldy paddle against the left side of the kayak to get some traction. I do all this blindly, for my eyes are locked on the weaving faces of the sea lions, my left arm still swinging above my head. Slowly, arduously, my clumsy rowing manages to maneuver the kayak around the right flank of the floating mob. When most of the sea lions are off to the side, I bring down my left hand as well, clasping the shaft now with both sets of fingers, and begin paddling, *hard*, into the open water, without looking back. After seven or eight minutes I sneak a quick glance behind me: sure enough, a few sea lions are still trailing me, but at a respectful distance, and with little more than their noses above the surface...

Something in that charged encounter changed me. I notice it, sometimes, when I'm playing with my two children, or when the howling of coyotes wakes me in the middle of the night. My confrontation with the sea mammals brought home to me something crucial about language—something mightily different from what I'd learned at school and at college. I'd been taught that meaningful speech is that trait that most clearly distinguishes us humans from all the other animals. We have meaningful speech, while other creatures do not. But my unnerving meeting, in the wet, with the humpback and the mob of sea lions showed me otherwise. It made evident, in a way I could no longer ignore, that there exists a primary language that we two-leggeds share with other species.

When we speak of "language," we speak of an ability to communicate, a power to convey information across a thickness of space and time, a means whereby beings at some distance from one another nonetheless manage to apprise each other of their current feelings or thoughts. As humans, we rely upon a complex web of mostly discrete, spoken sounds to accomplish our communication, and so it's natural that we associate language with such verbal intercourse. Unfortunately, this association has led many to assume that language is an exclusive attribute of our species—we, after all,

are the only creatures that use words—and to conclude that all other organisms are entirely bereft of meaningful speech. It is an exceedingly self-serving assumption.

Other animals, commonly possessed of senses far more acute than ours, may have much less need for a purely conventional set of signs to communicate with others of their species, or even to glean precise information from members of *other* species. My encounter with the sea creatures had initiated me into a layer of language much older, and deeper, than words. It was a dimension of expressive meanings that were directly felt by the body, a realm wherein the body *itself* speaks—by the tonality and rhythm of its sounds, by its gestures, even by the expressive potency of its poise. A near-catastrophic confrontation had plunged me into a space of earnest communication that unfolded entirely without words, a carnal zone of articulations broadly shared across species. It was a dimension wherein my verbal self was hardly present, but where an older, animal awareness came to the fore, responding spontaneously to the gestures of these other animals with hardly any interpolation by my "interior" thinking mind. It was rather as if my body itself was doing the thinking, trading vocal utterances and physical expressions back and forth with these other smooth-skinned and sentient creatures. Their flippers and fins were obviously shaped to a liquid medium very different from my own primary element, yet the most basic sensations of threat, or calm, or pleasure could still be swiftly exchanged—via the tautness or relaxation of various muscles, coupled with the tone of our uttered sounds—by virtue of our mutual existence as kinetic and sonorous beings inhabiting the same biosphere.

Sure, we were all mammals—the sea lions, the whale, and I—yet the sense I was left with was of a still more basic commonality or community of bodies, indeed of a communication shared as well with the waves shuddering under the kayak and splashing their speech upon the rocks. To the fully embodied animal *any* movement might be a gesture, and *any* sound may be a voice, a meaningful utterance of the world. And hence to my own creaturely flesh, as well, everything speaks!

Certain sounds that reach our ears convey the felt intent of other persons, while certain other, rumbling sounds bespeak a change in the weather. A rippling sequence of whistling tones expresses the exuberance felt by a thrush as the sun climbs above the horizon; other tones convey the dark magic of the night itself, speaking through the hissing tires on wet pavement.

Our human conversations are regularly influenced by this carnal layer of language, the apparent meaning of a friend's phrase altering with the pace of her speaking. The tenor of a spoken exchange may be transformed, without either of us noticing, when a break in the winter clouds allows the sun to spill its song over the muted hues of the city street where we stand, or by an abrupt and escalating argument of honking vehicles on the same avenue.

I began to notice this animal dimension in my own speaking—conscious now not only of the denotative meaning of my terms, but also of the gruff or giddy melody that steadily sounds through my phrases, and the dance enacted by my body as I speak—the open astonishment or the slumped surrender, the wary stealth or the lanky ease. Trying to articulate a fresh insight, I feel my way toward the precise phrase with the whole of my flesh, drawn toward certain terms by the way their texture beckons dimly to my senses, choosing my words by the way they fit the shape of that insight, or by the way they finally taste on my tongue as I intone them one after another. And the power of that spoken phrase to provoke insights in those around me will depend upon the timbre of my talking, the way it jives with the collective mood or merely jangles their ears.

Such was the linguistic dimension into which I was borne by that meeting with the lions of the sea—an initiation seared into my memory by the shock of being swamped by a humpback whale, and by the exchange of fetid breath with that wild intelligence. I now found myself more porous to other shapes, to smooth-surfaced desks and motley dogs, more aware of the conversation my animal body was carrying on with the other bodies around it, how it tensed in certain office buildings and loosened in dialogue with adobe walls. I noticed the skin on my skull tightening under

the hum of fluorescent lights, and—once while cycling—felt my shoulder muscles open and expand as a red-tailed hawk took wing from a passing telephone pole. I heard more keenly how much my voice borrowed the rolling lilt of the person I was talking to, or took on the staccato stiffness of her syllables, and I noticed that she, too, was infected by the inflections of my voice, such that each conversation was also a kind of singing to one another, like two blackbirds trading riffs between the catrails—or like two humpbacks sending their eerie glissandos back and forth through the depths.

I've already spoken of my songful method for diminishing the threat posed by another, larger creature unexpectedly encountered in the backcountry—a simple way to convey that I intend no harm to the other. I should now report that my clumsy attempts at more nuanced communication with a wide range of animals, over many years of getting myself lost in the wild, have also made evident a uniquely efficacious way to bring one's specific intentions across to a member of another species. The technique—obvious, I know, yet only stumbled upon after much costly trial and error—consists in bringing your wandering attention entirely back to your own limber and sensitive body, becoming at ease with yourself and the slow rhythm of your breathing, and then just commencing to talk to the other animal in your mother tongue—in English or French or Inuktitut, or whatever language is really most comfortable. For if you speak honestly, then the audible modulations of your voice, along with the alterations in your visible musculature, and the olfactory emanations from your skin, will all be of a piece with the patterned meaning of your words, and so will readily convey something of your intent at a palpable, visceral level to the keen senses of the other animal.

Even when simply addressing a maple tree, or a boulder-strewn hillside, you can be sure—if you are honest, and so relaxed within your flesh—that there are sensate presences out and about that are affected by the sound and the scent and perhaps even the sight of your gestured intent, whether they be squirrels, or a swarm of ter-

mites chewing its way through the resonant hollow of a fallen trunk, whether a small, silent bat flapping erratically through the night air, or the airborne insects that the bat is hunting, or even the impressionable air itself, absorbing your chemical exhalations and registering in waves the sonorous timbre of your voice. And so your loquacious utterance is heard, or felt, or sensed—and it would be wrong to believe with certainty that you are not being understood. The material reverberation of your speaking spreads out from you and is taken up within the sensitive tissue of the place...

The activity that we commonly call "prayer" springs from just such a gesture, from the practice of directly addressing the animate surroundings. Prayer, in its most ancient and elemental sense, consists simply in speaking to things—to a maple grove, to a flock of crows, to the rising wind—rather than merely about things. As such, prayer is an everyday practice common to oral, indigenous peoples the world over. In the alphabetized West, however, we've shifted the other toward whom we direct such mindful speech away from the diverse beings that surround us to a single, all-powerful agency assumed to exist entirely beyond the evident world. Still, the quality of respectful attention that such address entails—the steady suspension of discursive thought and the imaginative participation with one's chosen interlocutor—is much the same. It is a practice that keeps one from straying too far from oneself in one's open honesty and integrity, a way of holding oneself in right relation to the other, whether that other is a God outside the world or the many-voiced world itself.

Nonetheless, the older, more primordial style of prayer sustains a very different stance toward the local terrain than that which resolutely directs itself toward a divinity beyond the world. While the latter feels the sensuous landscape as a finite and restricted realm relative to its transcendent source, the first experiences the sensible world as the *source of itself*—as a kind of ongoing transcendence wherein each sensible thing is steadily bodying forth its own active creativity and sentience.

To our indigenous ancestors, and to the many aboriginal peoples that still hold fast to their oral traditions, language is less a human

possession than it is a property of the animate earth itself, an expressive, telluric power in which we, along with the coyotes and the crickets, all participate. Each creature enacts this expressive magic in its own manner, the honeybee with its waggie dance no less than a bellicose, harrumphing sea lion.

Nor is this power restricted solely to animals. The whispered hush of the uncut grasses at dawn, the plaintive moan of trunks rubbing against one another in the deep woods, or the laughter of birch leaves as the wind gusts through their branches all bear a thicker of many-layered meanings for those who carefully listen. In the Pacific Northwest I met a man who had schooled himself in the speech of needled evergreens; on a breezy day you could drive him, blindfolded, to any patch of coastal forest and place him, still blind, beneath a particular tree—after a few moments he would tell you, by listening, just what species of pine or spruce or fir stood above him (whether he stood beneath a Douglas fir or a grand fir, a Sitka spruce or a western red cedar). His ears were attuned, he said, to the different *dialects* of the trees.

When I tell others of this man's gift, overeducated folks often object to his turn of phrase, protesting the foolishness of alluding to the different "dialects" of the conifers as if there were actually a kind of spoken discourse in question. The rustling of needles, they point out, can hardly be considered the speech of a tree, since the sound is created not by the tree but only by the wind blowing through the tree. Curiously, these clever persons seem not to notice that it is demonstrably the same when *they* speak. We talk, after all, only by shaping the exhaled air that rushed into our lungs a moment earlier. Human speech, too, is really the wind moving through...

But meaningful speech cannot even be restricted to the audible dimension of sounds and sighs. The animate earth expresses itself in so many other ways. Last night while I lay sleeping the old apple tree in front of the house quietly broke into blossom, and so when, in the morning and still unaware, I stepped outside to stretch my limbs, I was stunned into silence by the sudden resplendence. The old tree was speaking to the space around it. Expressing itself, yes,

and in the most persuasive of languages. The whole yard was listening, transformed by the satin eloquence of the petals. The spell quietly cast by the uttering forth of white blossoms was irrefutable and irresistible. (It has stayed with me all day, as a softness enfolding my thoughts, which is no doubt why I find myself writing of it now, late at night.)

So language, from the perspective of the fully embodied human, seems as much an attribute of other animals and plants as of our own garrulous species. Yet, as we know from many of the traditional, indigenous peoples among us, this is still too restrictive: language accrues not only to those entities deemed "alive" by modern standards, but to *all* sensible phenomena. All things have the capacity for speech—all beings have the ability to communicate something of themselves to other beings. Indeed, what is *perception* if not the experience of this gregarious, communicative power of things, wherein even ostensibly "inert" objects radiate out of themselves, conveying their shapes, hues, and rhythms to other beings and to us, influencing and informing our breathing bodies though we stand far apart from those things? Not just animals and plants, then, but tumbling waterfalls and dry riverbeds, gusts of wind, compost piles and cumulus clouds, freshly painted houses (as well as houses abandoned and sometimes haunted), rusting automobiles, feathers, granitic cliffs and grains of sand, tax forms, dormant volcanoes, bays and bayous made wretched by pollutants, snowdrifts, shed antlers, diamonds, and daikon radishes, are all expressive, sometimes eloquent, and hence participant in the mystery of language. Our own chatter erupts in response to the abundant articulations of the world: human speech is simply our part of a much broader conversation.

It follows that the myriad things are also listening, or attending to various signs and gestures around them. Indeed, when we are at ease in our animal flesh, we will sometimes feel that we are being listened to, or sensed, by the earthly surroundings. And so we take deeper care with our speaking, mindful that our sounds may carry

more than a merely human meaning and resonance. This care—this full-bodied alertness—is the ancient, ancestral source of all word magic. It is the practice of attention to the uncanny power that lives in our spoken phrases to touch and sometimes transform the tenor of the world's unfolding.

The sense of inhabiting an articulate landscape—of dwelling within a community of expressive presences that are also attentive, and listening, to the meanings that move between them—is common to indigeneous, oral peoples on every continent. Like tribal people I've lived with elsewhere, most of my Pueblo friends here in the Southwest are curiously taciturn and reserved when it comes to verbal speech. (When I'm with them I become painfully aware of how prolix I can be, prattling on about this or that for minutes on end.) Their reticence is not due to any lack of facility with English, for when they do speak their phrases have an uncommon precision and potency. It is a consequence, rather, of their habitual expectation that spoken words are heard, or sensed, by the other presences that surround. They talk, then, only when they have good reason to, choosing their words with great care so as not to offend, or insult, the other beings that might be listening.

Here are some observations made by a member of the Mattole Indians (an Athabaskan tribe that traditionally hunted and fished along the Mattole and Bear rivers near the northern coast of California):

The water watches you and has a definite attitude, favorable or otherwise, toward you. Do not speak just before a wave breaks. Do not speak to passing rough water in a stream. Do not look at water very long for any one time, unless you have been to this spot ten times or more. Then the water there is used to you and does not mind if you're looking at it. Older men can talk in the presence of the water because they have been around so long that the water knows them. Until

the water at any spot does know you, however, it becomes very rough if you talk in its presence or look at it too long.<sup>a</sup>

These injunctions bespeak a remarkable etiquette, the careful deference and decorum to be observed when around water. While this decorum may at first seem ludicrous to modern sensibilities, notice: such an etiquette ensures that those who practice it will remain exquisitely attentive to the fluid ways of water—from the shifting eddies along the river to the tidal swells and rolling breaks along the coast. Such deportment, with its linguistic deference toward the fluid element, inculcates a steady respect for that element, ensuring that the community will not readily violate the health of the local waters, or the vitality of the watershed.

Few of us today feel any such restraints in our speaking. Human language, for us moderns, has swung in on itself, turning its back on the beings around us. Language is a human property, suitable only for communicating with other persons. We talk to people; we do not talk to the ground underfoot. We've largely forgotten the incantatory and invocational use of speech as a way of bringing ourselves into deeper rapport with the beings around us, or of calling the living land into resonance with us. It is a power we still brush up against whenever we use our words to bless and to curse, or to charm someone we're drawn to. But we wield such eloquence only to sway other people, and so we miss the greater magnetism, the gravitational power that lies within such speech. The beaver gliding across the pond, the fungus gripping a thick trunk, a boulder shattered by its tumble down a cliff or the rain splashing upon those granite fragments—we talk *about* such beings, about the weather and the weathered stones, but we do not talk *to* them. Entranced by the denotative power of words to define, to order, to *represent* the things around us, we've overlooked the songful dimension of

<sup>a</sup> G. W. Hewes, as quoted by Alfred Kroeber and Samuel Barrett in "Fishing Among the Indians of Northwest California," *University of California Anthropological Records* 21:3 (1960), 1. I first found these lines in Freeman House's wonderful book, *Totem Salmon: Life Lessons from Another Species*, published by Beacon Press in 2000.

language so obvious to our oral ancestors. We've lost our ear for the music of language—for the rhythmic, melodic layer of speech by which earthly things overhear us.

How monotonous our speaking becomes when we speak only to ourselves! And how *insulting* to the other beings—to foraging black bears and twisted old cypresses—that no longer sense us talking to them, but only about them, as though they were not present in our world. As though the clear-cut mountainside and the flooding creek had no sensations of their own—as though they had no flesh by which to feel the vibration of our speaking. Small wonder that rivers and forests no longer compel our focus or our fierce devotion. For we talk about such entities only behind their backs, as though they were not participant in our lives.

Yet if we no longer call out to the moon slipping between the clouds, or whisper to the spider setting the silken struts of her web, well, then the numerous powers of this world will no longer address us—and if they still try, we will not likely hear them. They withdraw from our attentions, and soon refrain from encountering us when we're out wandering, or from visiting us in our dreams. We can no longer avail ourselves of their perspectives or their guidance, and our human affairs suffer as a result. We become ever more forgetful in our relations with the rest of the biosphere, an obliviousness that cuts us off from ourselves, and from our deepest sources of sustenance.

The propensity of our indigenous brothers and sisters to consult the animate earth around them, listening close to the land—carefully watching the patterned movements of other animals, attending to their diverse songs, signs, and gestures—all this is an obvious consequence of the expansive experience of language as a property that belongs to all things, and not solely to humankind. Given the near universality of this experience among native cultures, and given the fact that the abundant knowledge of indigenous peoples was traditionally transmitted *orally* rather than preserved in written form, we may suspect that literacy—reading and writing—

our verbal thoughts are commonly elsewhere. As Thoreau chides himself, "What business have I in the woods if I am thinking of something out of the woods?"<sup>a</sup> What business indeed! As soon as I call my errant spirit back home to its senses, my animal organism awakens from its slumber. Now the snap of a far-off twig brings a new alertness to my listening, as the hypnotic humming of insects and the dark squeak of two trunks rubbing against one another yields a keen awareness of my proximity to lives being lived at different scales from my own.

Here in the forest, all is body language. Tall spruces, orb-weaving spiders, a chipmunk poised on a fallen trunk rapidly gnawing something held in its forepaws, even the Jackson Pollock outbreak of bright lichens on a rock outcropping—all of these breathing beings are *bodies*, distant variants of my own flesh, as indeed my body is a distant echo of theirs. If each also has its sensations, its own experience of the world around it (which appears likely, since each responds appropriately to its context), it seems obvious that their experience is as weirdly different from my experience as their bodies differ from mine. We are almost wholly alien to one another.

Yet each organism in these woods seems to express itself directly, without the mediation of symbols or sentences. Hence the tension expressed by the sounds or movements of another creature will sometimes trigger a resonance in my own flesh. I've no doubt that my empathic sensations are dramatically different from those actually felt by the skittish deer or the squirrel, yet with regard to such basic experiences as fear, pain, and pleasure, it seems silly to assume that our feelings are entirely incommensurable. There is a subtle entanglement and confusion between all beings of the earth, a consequence not only of our common ancestry, and the cellular similarities of our makeup, but also of our subjection to variant aspects of the same whirling world.

<sup>a</sup> From the essay "Walking" in Henry David Thoreau, *The Natural History Essays* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1980), p. 99.

Taking a cue from my friend Jon Young, a remarkably gifted tracker trained in several indigenous traditions, I've begun to tune my ears to the discourse of the local birds. Jon pointed out to me that there are five basic phrases in the vocabulary of most perching birds—a simplification, perhaps, but one that has enabled my listening to gain a first access to the language of the winged folk. The five elemental phrases that Jon identified among the perching birds (or passerines) are these: the song itself, the companion call, begging cries, male-to-male aggression calls, and the alarm call.

The *song*, a melodic string of tones and trills heard especially in spring and summer, is often particular to the males of a species. The song is a prime way of attracting females, and also seems to function as a territorial display, proclaiming one's space and saying to others: keep out. Yet the songs of many species have also—to my ears at least—an exuberant and often celebratory quality unacknowledged by those who insist upon a strictly functional account of their intent. There's often a palpable feel of contentment in the song (even, at times, a sense of real pleasure in the song's production). It is this quality—the contented feeling-tone of the song—that instantly indicates, to a savvy listener, that there's no overt source of distress in the vicinity of the singer. If a bird is sounding its song, we can be reasonably sure that there's no evident danger lurking about.

The *companion call* is rarely indicated in my birding field guides. The call is commonly uttered by both the female and the male of a mated pair, usually in an alternating pattern. It seems a way of staying in close, auditory contact—a kind of *checking in* with one another—a brief chirping back and forth that lets each bird know the other's whereabouts while both are foraging. Slight variations in the call may serve to indicate that the caller has found a good food source—"come on over"—or any number of other nuances. Whenever we hear the companion calls of one species flowing back and forth in a regular rhythm, it's a clear indication that the birds are in a relaxed or "baseline" state, a condition of ease that expends little unnecessary energy. ~~If one male stops replying, then the other will call again in an irregular~~



impulses toward song and spoken language. And during the enormously long course of our history as foraging primates, they also aided our survival in a far more immediate and practical manner. For it's they whose cries often alerted us to the approach of dangerous predators. Further, by providing a cover for our stealth that was instinctively trusted throughout the forest, it was often the birds who enabled our best hunters to successfully approach and secure the prey that we needed to eat. They have been for us messengers, intermediaries, envoys from the forest and its wider life, bearers of intelligence we could not do without.

This ancestral sense of the winged as messengers, and as guardians of a sort, is preserved for many persons in the conception of angels. (The word "angel" itself comes from the Greek "angelos," meaning "messenger.") The iconography of angels has always shown them with feathered wings. Many contemporary mystics would have us view the wings of angels purely as a visual metaphor, as a way of imagining subtle energies that simply have no physical form. Yet it is likely that the wondrous qualities ascribed to angels were once associated with the elusive, winged presence of birds themselves.

Numerous hunting and gathering cultures have honored birds as emissaries from a more expansive field of intelligence. But with the rise of sedentary civilization and its written-down scriptures, intelligence—as we have seen—was gradually banished from the surrounding world and sequestered within our single species. It became more and more difficult to acknowledge or even recognize other animals as bearers of insight or sources of wisdom. If these winged singers still seemed to grant us a kind of grace even in our settled towns and cities—if there was something about their sudden, swooping visitations that still carried intimations of other dimensions, and something in their songs that touched a forgotten chord within our chest, a fleeting memory of contact with a wider, more ubiquitous awareness—well, then the uncanny nature of these encounters could hardly be attributed to the birds themselves. Since humans were now the sole carriers of consciousness in the earthly world, the unexpected meeting with a small, exceed-

ingly awake feathered presence could only be interpreted as a visitation from a higher, more rarefied kind of human: a little person with wings. Through a concatenation of traditions including Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Neoplatonism, such winged persons came to be viewed as messengers, envoys from a celestial divinity—ultimately as members of the heavenly host, the supernal attendants of God.

Nonetheless, the most common characteristic in the many descriptions of angels, apart from their feathered wings, is their musical nature. *Angels sing*. Indeed, a "choir of angels" regularly heralds the arrival of the Holy One with hosannas of praise, the singing of angels announcing such moments when the divine presence is about to manifest itself, or about to withdraw. This pattern closely parallels the swelling music just before dawn, at birdlight, when the blazing sun is about to enter the great hall of sky, and then later: the rising chorus of song as that same radiance is about to sink below the horizon, and so to depart from the celestial hall.

Is it not obvious, then, that long before angels were conceived as invisible heralds of an unseen deity, they were inseparable from these feathered harbingers of the radiant sun itself? From the winged choir offering up its hosannas of praise every dawn and every dusk? Can we doubt that for our primate ancestors, it was these winged singers, the birds themselves, who were felt to be intermediaries between our ground-bound world and that celestial resplendence, that source, the great god of the day-lit world—whose face, even today, we dare not look upon directly?

After a series of lectures in New England, I wander along the rocky crest of some low mountains above the Maine coast. As I come into a wooded cirque, the song of a hermit thrush rings down from the upper branches. Soon another hermit thrush sounds nearby, and then two more from some slight distance, their several songs overlapping in the needled air, each with a different inflection, yet all of them utterly ethereal. I choose a single singer upon which to focus my listening, and let myself be carried by the song. The first

planet, the rain of tears that somehow enables all this staggering beauty. Only after this encounter was I able, for the first time, to return the ferocious gaze of Makakala—the horrifying, wrathful form of the Buddha—who glared down from the inner walls of the small monasteries that I came upon in these high valleys.

At one such gumpa, the resident lama was startled into laughter by my sleight-of-hand metamorphosis of a simple, weathered stone into another, carved with prayers, that I'd found some days earlier. He took my hand and led me down a long trail to the river, so I could watch his two students as they worked with temple woodblocks artfully carved with Tibetan ritual verses. Normally these precious woodblocks were used to print out liturgical books. But now—amazingly!—the students were stamping the woodblocks over and over into the flowing surface of the river, so that the water would carry those printed prayers to the many lands through which it traveled on its long way to the Indian Ocean.

Here, remarkably, was a culture wherein written letters were not used merely as a record of words once spoken, or as a score for oral speech, but as efficacious forces in their own right. The letters were not just passive signs, but energetic agents actively affecting the space around them. Whether written on the page of a book or carved into woodblocks, whether etched into standing stones or printed on flags, the Tibetan letters held a power that could be activated not only by human beings but by insects crawling through their cracks, and by water flowing along their shapes, and even by the breeze gusting across them. Human intentions, carried in dreams and prayers, mingled here with the intentions of stones, trees, and rivers. Clearly, "mind" in this mountain region was not a human possession; it was a power proper to every part of the elemental field.

We participate in this encompassing awareness with the whole of our body, as other animals participate in it with theirs, the snow leopard with its tensed muscles and the hawk with its splayed wing feathers. Every creature here inhabits and moves through the same

field of mountains and melting ice, imbibing the same air, the same boulder-strewn awareness. Yet each animal filters this awareness with its particular senses, its access to the whole limited by the arrangement of its limbs and the specific style of its pleasures, by the way it obtains nourishment and the way it avoids becoming food for others. Each creature—two-leggeds included—has only a restricted access to the mystery of the real. As a human I may have compiled a great mass of data about the ways of the world, yet in a practical, visceral sense (carnal knowledge being the primary form of intelligence), an earthworm knows far more about the life of the soil than I do, as a swallow knows more about the wind. To be human is to have a very limited access to what is.

Science has tried to push past the carnal constraints on our knowledge by joining deductive reason to the judicious application of experiment. Traditional, tribal magicians or medicine persons take a different approach. They seek to augment the limitations of their specifically human senses by binding their attention to the ways of another animal. Steadily training his focus upon the patterned behavior of another creature—observing it closely in its own terrain, following and interpreting its tracks, becoming familiar with its calls and its styles of stalking or foraging—the medicine person renders himself vulnerable to another, non-human form of experience. The more studiously an apprentice magician watches the other creature from a stance of humility, learning to mimic its cries and to dance its various movements, the more thoroughly his nervous system is joined to another set of senses—thereby gaining a kind of stereoscopic access to the world, a keener perception of the biosphere's manifold depth and dimensionality.

Like anything focused upon so intently, the animal ally will begin visiting the novice shaman's dreams, imparting understandings wholly inaccessible to her waking mind. She may spend a whole night journeying as that other animal, stalking her prey and sometimes killing and devouring it, before awakening in this two-legged form. Most importantly, because the young shaman is now informed by two very different sets of senses, her allegiance to her own single species begins to loosen; she begins to catch glimpses of

a shimmering, ever-shifting lattice of affiliations and interdependencies—the filamental web that binds all beings. Now and then she may catch herself pondering matters less from a human angle than from the perspective of the forest or the river valley as a whole . . .

In the course of these first months in the Himalayas I came into contact with several *jhankris* of very diverse skills, and I lived for several weeks with two of them, a husband and wife who were both highly regarded as healers. The woman was suspicious of me at first, since rumors of my own craft had preceded me up their valley. I'd made the mistake of doing some sleight-of-hand for a ragamuffin band of children in a small village, changing stones into Nepali coins and then back again before making them vanish into the air. News of these simple feats had spread quickly among the neighboring villages, arousing both curiosity and some alarm among the adult Sherpas. While magic of various forms had a clear place in this culture, it was odd for a white Westerner to even *believe* in magic, much less to display any such rapport with the invisibles. So the female *jhankri* glared at me when I first made my way to their hut; I realized that I was not welcome. Only by returning day after day, offering to help carry water up from the rushing stream, was I able to ease the initial antagonism. When her husband finally challenged me to show something of my own skill, I produced a brightly colored square of Sherpa cloth out of the air, then formed a small, empty pocket in the middle of the cloth, letting it dangle down from my fist. I invited the *jhankri* to blow upon the fabric. Then, singing softly, I opened the folds to reveal a gleaming quartz crystal. (The crystal was a talisman of mine that I'd been carrying in my pocket for most of a year.) The shaman took the quartz in his hand, holding it up to the sun. Then closing one eye, he brought the crystal close to the other, peering at me through its facets as he turned it this way and that. He asked if there were other crystals wanting to appear. I told him that I did not know, but that I hoped he would accept that crystal as a gift from the spirits.

Perhaps I could teach him some of the mantras that I used for my magic? Of course I would, yes, if in exchange he would allow me to sit in on some of his healing sessions . . .

It was a deal.

I moved into their household from the smaller family home where I'd been sleeping, and soon found myself accompanying the man, Dorjee, to a range of healings—usually in the evening and sometimes lasting the whole night.<sup>a</sup> Some of the healings were much stronger, in their feel, than others. In the most intense sessions Dorjee, aided by the rhythmic pounding on his *shyangro* (a large two-sided drum), slipped into a kind of delirium.

Meanwhile, during the days, I shared with him some basic techniques central to my practice of legerdemain, painstakingly walking his fingers through the most elementary sleights. However, apart from letting me attend the healings, the *jhankri* shared little or nothing of his craft with me. There was a younger Sherpa man who sometimes assisted Dorjee; the shaman's comments or instructions were reserved for him. Much of what unfolded during the healing sessions was entirely opaque to my understanding; I could only witness the ritual gestures, letting myself be carried by the rhythms or distracted by the keen concentration in the faces of the others present.

But then, at the frenzied height of one such session, I was startled to see the shaman extract a bloody, tumorlike knot of matter from the side of a feverish woman's abdomen. It was a remarkable happening, and had a powerful effect upon those watching. Only then did I realize that certain sleight-of-hand methods were already a part of Dorjee's toolkit. For my conjuror's eyes had glimpsed that bloody gizzard hidden in Dorjee's palm for several moments before it was extracted from the client's body.

The more I thought about it, the more I wondered whether Dorjee drew upon such legerdemain that evening simply because I was watching, as a way of displaying his own skill ~~in something akin~~

<sup>a</sup> I have altered the names in this chapter and the next, in order to respect both the privacy and the practice of the individuals mentioned.

## SHAPESHIFTING

(*Magic II*)

The human body is precisely our capacity for metamorphosis. We mistakenly think of our flesh as a fixed and finite form, a neatly bounded package of muscle and bone and bottled electricity, with blood surging its looping boulevards and byways. But even the most cursory pondering of the body's manifold entanglements—its erotic draw toward other bodies; its incessant negotiation with that grander eros we call "gravity"; its dependence upon cloudbursts not just to quench its thirst but to enliven and fructify the various plants that it plucks, chomps, and swallows; its imbroglia with those very plants and a few animals, drawing nourishment from them for its muscles, skin, and senses before passing that chomped matter back to the world as compost that might, if we were frugal, be used to nourish the soils in which those plants sprout; its bedazzlement by birdsong; its pleasure at throwing stones into water and through glass; its mute seduction by the moon—suffices to make evident that the body is less a self-enclosed sack than a realm wherein the diverse textures and colors of the world meet up with one another. The body is a place where clouds, earthworms, guitars, clucking hens, and clear-cut hill-sides all converge, forging alliances, mergers, and metamorphoses.

We've already explored some ways that our body is altered and

transformed as it moves through different lands. If this is so, it is because the body is *itself* a kind of place—not a solid object but a terrain through which things pass, and in which they sometimes settle and sediment. The body is a portable place wandering through the larger valleys and plains of the earth, open to the same currents, the same waters and winds that cascade across those wider spaces. It is hardly a closed and determinate entity, but rather a sensitive threshold through which the world experiences itself, a traveling doorway through which sundry aspects of the earth are always flowing. Sometimes the world's textures move across this threshold unchanged. Sometimes they are transformed by the passage. And sometimes they reshape the doorway itself.

Despite the unending attempts to define and diagnose the body as a determinate object, the metamorphic character of our flesh makes itself evident in the most disparate contexts, whether when extricating oneself from the muddy suck of a swamp, or while caught up in the electric buzz and bustle of the city. Lest the experiences recounted in the previous chapter leave the impression that the capacity for metamorphosis is an entirely exotic affair, endemic only to peculiar persons dwelling in far-off mountains, allow me to provide a few very mundane examples, drawn from an ordinary life in North America, before taking up once again the matters that unfolded during my sojourn in the high valleys of Nepal.

The modern world of commerce and entertainment engages our corporeal susceptibility in multiple ways. I was in my late teens when I first became aware of the lingering influence that certain films at the local cinema had upon my organism. I am not referring here to the obvious trance we all fall into while immobilized before the big screen, but to the uncanny way that certain films would surreptitiously enter into my bloodstream, like a contagion. James Bond films were especially effective in this regard. When after the closing credits I filed out of the theater into the open air of evening, I'd naturally shift my thoughts to the practical matters of the moment. As I approached the corner of the block, however, trying to remember where I'd parked my car, my body would unex-

pectedly leap to the edge of the corner building and flatten itself against it, then slowly peer around the edge. Ascertaining that no one was approaching, I'd dash across the sidewalk to duck beside someone else's automobile along the curb. I would survey the street beyond by gazing through the side windows of that car, moving slowly to keep my body's contour from obtruding beyond the outline of the vehicle, and so from becoming visible to any eyes on the far side of the avenue. But from whom was I hiding? Whose presence was I hoping to glimpse as I slunk through the shadows, or later as I drove home, keeping the speedometer steady, slowing to stop at each traffic light with unusual precision, my peripheral senses keenly alert to the cars on either side of me? Who or what was I tracking? I had no idea. I hadn't really chosen to enact any of these instinctive behaviors, but simply became aware of them as they were happening, amused and slightly startled by the curious spell that my organism was under. After fifteen minutes or so, the weird veneer of secrecy tinting the whole of my perceptual field would finally dissipate, the possession of my bloodstream by a phantom agent of espionage now finally exorcised by the press of homework or taking out the garbage.

This curious capacity for being drawn, physiologically, into the terrain of certain stories—abducted into another landscape that would only belatedly release me back into the palpable present—would also show itself, now and then, in relation to certain books. Since I accomplished my most pleasurable reading in bed, late at night, the chemistry of sleep usually served to reorient my limbs and finally transmit me back, in time for breakfast, to the thick of the commonplace. But when I finished reading a fat, nineteenth-century novel not at night but on some morning in late summer, placing it carefully back on the bookshelf, the transition was not so smooth; present-day objects, like the disposal unit loudly masticating scraps beneath the drain in the kitchen sink, and a bus wheezing by on the street, all struck me as ludicrous anachronisms, unreal apparitions beamed in from another planet. The pattern of printed words in that novel had rearranged my neurons: time itself was out of joint, and remained so for several days.

really ~~needed before~~ after a while another raven seemed to join the conversation from somewhere on the ground behind me. I listened for a time, and then peered around the rock: it was Sonam himself standing there, talking with the birds. As soon as he saw me he stopped. Now he was just listening to them. I bowed silently and walked away, wondering if he had merely been copying them or whether—although I could not quite bring myself to believe it—he was actually exchanging specific meanings with those birds, and they with him.

What was clear was that he had learned to precisely shape his throat and tongue in order to utter sounds that seemed, at least to me, perfectly indistinguishable from those of a raven. I recalled that just before I witnessed his avian metamorphosis, I had heard a raven's loud caw coming from around the bend in the trail. It was only then, as I rounded that bend, that I caught sight of the raven, which cawed at me twice before, well, transforming into Sonam. And so I reasoned that Sonam had waited for a certain moment along the footpath (a trail whose twists and turns he knew intimately) when he would be out of my view for a long stretch. After positioning himself, he had used the loud croak of a raven to set up an expectation in my organism—an anticipation in my eyes—that as I rounded the bend I would encounter a raven.

Of course, there was much more involved. As a student of ravens, Sonam, I'm quite sure, had long practiced holding himself in the various postures of that bird, had practiced Raven's ways of walking, of moving its head, of spreading feathered limbs. Learning to dance another animal is central to the craft of shamanic traditions throughout the world. To move as another is simply the most visceral approach to feel one's way into the body of that creature, and so to taste the flavor of its experience, entering into the felt intelligence of the other. I have witnessed a young medicine person in the American Southwest summon the spirit of a deer by dancing that animal, have watched a Kwakiutl magician shuffle and dip his way into the power of a black bear, have seen a native healer dream her body into the riverdance of a spawning salmon, and a Mayan shaman contort himself into the rapid, vibratory

flight of a dragonfly. In every case, a subtle change came upon the dancer as she gave herself over to the animal and so let herself be possessed, raising goose bumps along my skin as I watched. The carefully articulated movements, and the stylized but eerily precise renderings of the other's behavior, were clearly the fruit of long, patient observation of the animal other, steadily inviting its alien gestures into one's muscles. The dancer feels her way into the subjective experience of the other by mimicking its patterned movements, and so invoking it, coaxing it close, drawing it into her flesh with the subtlest motion of a shoulder, or a hip, or a blinking eye.

A key element in such kinetic invocations of another animal is the magician's ability to dream himself into the wild physicality of that Other, allowing his senses to heighten and intensify as he becomes possessed by the carnal intelligence of the creature. The shaman himself must be convinced of his transformation if we who watch are to have a chance of experiencing the animal's arrival. There is no room for fakery or mere illusion here; if the magician does not feel himself undergo a full metamorphosis into the other, then we who watch will never be convinced of the change. Yet this is not to say that there are not specific techniques employed to loosen our senses, particular perceptual methods used to enhance the invocation of the animal. Merely calling to the creature in one's imagination will never suffice; one must summon it bodily, entering mimetically into the shape and rhythm of the other being if the animal spirit is to feel the call. One must unbind the human arrangement of one's senses, and those of any humans watching, if the animal is to feel safe enough to arrive in our midst.

And so I was sure, now, that Sonam had timed his transformation along the trail so that it took place close to dusk, a moment when our eyes are less certain and more apt to confuse things. Further, he knew precisely at what distance he'd have to situate himself in order to appear, from that bend in the path, like a much closer figure about fifteen inches in height. He may well have chosen in advance the very boulder on which he'd stand, a rock whose plain surface, seen when rounding the bend, would allow it to appear as a much nearer and much smaller rock than it was, with not a man

but a raven perched upon it. Sonam had waited till he was well out of my sight around that turn in the trail, had climbed onto that boulder and faced the path, bending his knees sharply so only the lower legs were evident. He had leaned his torso steeply forward while extending his arms straight back alongside that torso, his wrists and straight-fingered hands jutting past his rump like folded wingtips, entering the feathered mind of the raven by dancing that long-beaked form. He squawked very loudly as he heard me approach the bend, and then again LOUD, forcing the expectation in my organism that I was about to meet a raven at close quarters.

As I rounded the bend he simply kept up his dance, hopping on both legs together as he turned, swiveling his head in jerking movements, blinking his eyes like shutters and opening his beak to squawk one last time before hopping to the ground. During that descent to the ground Sonam lifted his arms and came out of the trance, or rather I started to slip out of the trance, for the way in which the raven dropped seemed incongruous. As my brain worked to make sense of what it saw, it first concluded that the raven was somehow much LARGER than a normal bird. This sudden growth in perceived size made it seem that the bird was swooping rapidly toward me (for such is often the case when a thing appears to grow rapidly larger), and so my hands flew up in front of my face. But then as it landed on the ground the sound was all wrong, somehow, and what had been a much-too-large bird resolved into a much-too-small person, until I realized that it was Sonam standing there, though much farther down the trail than the bird had been.

It had taken some time for my senses to recalibrate themselves. The shock of the encounter, my first wholly conscious witnessing of a full-bodied metamorphosis, was extreme. Certainly the transformation was made possible by Sonam's rapport with the ravens. But it was also enabled by a strange contortion of spatial depth—by a temporary reversal of near and far along a precipitous trail in the mountains. The metamorphosis was activated by a momentary slackening of the grip that my eyes and ears commonly have upon

the space around me. A momentary derangement of my senses, provoked by the precisely timed utterances and antic contortions of Sonam's body.

And so not merely a confounding of my sensory organization, but an alteration of Sonam's as well. In order to take on the attributes of Raven, in order to feel the hollowing out of his bones and the feathers sprouting from his flesh, Sonam had necessarily to alter his own organization. Only thus would he have been able to discover the flight muscles within his breast, and the precise posture for his head and neck. I believe it was his thorough immersion in the experience that so completely compelled my own participation in the metamorphosis.

Sonam and I gently but carefully avoided speaking directly of the event. It had happened; this I knew, and he knew that I knew. The transformation on the high trail had clearly been a demonstration of sorts, but it was also a lure, a suggestion of skills to be attained, a visual conundrum that served to clear my mind of distractions and train my attention on the simple tasks that Sonam now set for me.

These tasks mostly took the form of perceptual exercises that Sonam instructed me to practice in between various daily chores. The most consistent of these involved sitting or squatting on the ground while steadily focusing my eyes upon an arbitrary spot on the near surface of one of the huge rocks in front of his house, and doing so for long stretches without wavering, and preferably without blinking. This was easy enough for a few minutes, but then increasingly difficult; my eyes would begin itching, and fill with tears, and so I'd have to blink if I wanted to see anything at all.

After a single blink I'd keep them focused there, at that spot composed of flecks of gray and black and tan and silver, gazing and gazing, until the surrounding surface of the stone appeared to melt and started to writhe, while the still point where I was focused maintained its circular quietude, a calm pond in the midst of what now seemed a seething nest of serpents. A series of blinks, or a minute shift of focus, would suffice to return the rock to its solid

We made our way down slowly, with Sonam showing me where to place my feet. After a time, the wind fell silent and stopped. We reached the house as the dark itself settled around us.

On the next day, Sonam changed the exercises. I was no longer to gaze into boulders, but to train my vision—gently but unwaveringly—upon ravens. What if there were none around? No matter: I was to wait for them, to stay attentive to them, to be ready. While a few individuals seemed to hang out often enough near Sonam and Jangmu's home, there was a particular place that Sonam showed me, less than a mile along the slope to the southeast, and just a short way above the main footpath, where the valley's ravens liked to stop and linger. It was at the edge of a small patch of forest with assorted large rocks strewn about nearby, affording me several good sitting places, as the complexly bent and spreading branches of the low trees afforded perching for the ravens.

As before, it was a matter of the precise confluence of my eyes. Sonam asked me to try to focus upon a point just beneath the head of a raven, between the shoulders of the bird (he showed me on his own body) or, if the bird was facing me, at the top of its breast. But the ravens there, I found, rarely perched very long in a single spot before flapping to another. Still, the instruction was to keep bringing my attention back to that spot on each bird's body, until I found myself gazing at an individual less nervous or ready to move, a raven that was more relaxed in the moment of our meeting. When such an opportunity arose, I was to sink my focus as best I could into the body of the raven, to a point midway between the top of its breast and its shoulders (near the base of the bird's wishbone) and hold it there.

Sometimes there were no ravens present; more commonly, there were several haunting that forest edge, but at a distance of twelve or even twenty feet from where I sat. So this sinking of my focus into the body of a bird was a mostly imaginative act; the ravens were at first too far away for me to register or physically feel such a slight shift in the focus of my eyes. But Sonam was after something specific: he wanted me to feel the experience of meeting up *with myself* inside the bird. To feel the two sides of myself joining up

with each other over there, in the torso of the raven. Although he spoke in simpler terms (constrained in part by my modest vocabulary), it seemed that Sonam was inviting me to notice the left and the right sides of my sensorium meeting up with one another over there, outside of myself, at that location in space where the separate gaze of my left eye and that of my right eye converged into a single focus.

The more I practiced this unorthodox meditation, the more I was able to sense what Sonam was after. If, while I was gazing one of the ravens, another swooped down and alighted somewhere between me and the bird I was watching, that interloper would hardly be noticed by me, or would be felt only as a vague ghost hovering between the solidity of my person and the solidity of the raven upon whom I was focused. It was as though I were no longer entirely located over here, where my body was sitting, for some piece of me had also gathered itself over there, beneath the purple sheen in the night-black feathers of the bird.

There was one male, however, who displayed a greater audacity than the others, swerving over to ponder me from close by (whether looking down from a near branch or peering sideways from the ground or—after a few days—from a perch on the same rock as I, although always just beyond the reach of my extended limbs). I at first thought there were several such individuals winging close to feed their curiosity, but soon realized that it was always the same fellow. If he was in the trees when I arrived in late morning, he'd soon swoop out of the leaves to look me over at close range. If he was out and about, then sometime later he'd likely drop in from elsewhere and bank onto a neighboring rock, squawking a few times, his clawed feet turning first one way and then the other, to scrutinize me from each eye in turn. If I tried to utter a raven-like croak he'd answer me back straightaway, as if correcting my diction, yet he was still more garrulous when I spoke to him in Sherpa or even English. I got to thinking about how, in many species, there are certain individuals who stand out among the others of their kind for their curiosity and cleverness.

Many months earlier, in a village near a wild forest preserve on



the south coast of Java, I'd been warned by the local fishermen that there was an unusually bold individual among the bands of monkeys that roam the forest canopy, a particular monkey much more daring and skillful than the others, especially at stealing things from humans. Because I wear glasses, I was urged by the fishermen not to enter that forest, for that sly monkey was known to silently accompany people in the branches far overhead, waiting for an opportune moment to swing low and snatch the glasses from their face. The villagers had had to organize several search parties for missing visitors who turned out simply to have been wandering half blind for several days, unable to find their way out of the woods.

Similarly, when I lived in the northern Rockies there was an old bull elk who was legendary among the local hunters. Larger than the other males thereabouts, he had once had the biggest rack of any bull in those mountains, although in recent years (folks said) his antlers were smaller. He was glimpsed often, yet no one had ever succeeded in planting a bullet anywhere on his person. His ability to elude hunters was uncanny, enabling him to melt away and vanish even as the hunter registered the glimpse. In earlier years the locals had taken the large bull's readiness to show himself as a challenge, with each hunter eager to finally shoot him and be able to boast about the fact. But after so many years, the old one's continued defiance of hunters had made him not only a legend but a revered spirit among the hunters and everyone else in the region. Hiking one October evening with a friend who'd grown up in that area—and hearing now and then the most beautiful of all earth-born sounds, which is the autumn bugling of elk—there abruptly sounded from far off the most heart-wrenchingly lovely of any call I'd ever heard, a bugling that was the most full-throated and deep and at the same time the most ethereal, ascending slowly upward through a sequence of clear overtones before ending in a series of guttural grunts. I looked wide-eyed at my friend. It was the unmistakable call, he said, of that great elder, the phantom.

In these cases, and I could mention many others, the uniqueness of the individuals seems to reside not just in their intelligence but

in their skill at interacting with other species. Since we notice their uncommon savvy in their dealings with us, we might assume that these animals display such chutzpah only toward humans. But this seems unlikely. That old elk doubtless relies on his remarkable wiles in relation to other predators as well, and (I can't help but suspect) in his relation to every aspect of those wooded slopes, to unexpected changes in the seasonal cycle, or the sudden arrival of roads, and clear-cuts, in a favorite part of the mountains.

The observation by indigenous peoples that there exist particular individuals—among other animals as among our own two-legged kind—who are in a strangely different league from their peers has led some native traditions to posit that there exists an entirely different species to which such individuals belong, a class of entities who are able to cross *between* diverse species, taking on the ways of various animals as needed—able to trade wings for antlers, or to forsake paws for scaly fins or even fingered hands. This is the class of those who are recognized, when they're in human form, as shamans—as magicians or sorcerers. But most contemporary persons, lacking regular contact with the wild in its multiform weirdness, have forgotten that such shamans are to be found in *every* species, that in truth they are a kind of cross- or trans-species creature, and hence a species unto themselves.

There was an odd thing about this one corvid whose curiosity led it to settle closer to me than the others dared. Its proximity, of course, made it the best possible subject for the practice Sonam had prescribed, fixing my gaze as best I could upon the feathers just below the bird's head and then, once it was stabilized there, sinking my focus into the center of the bird's flesh. Well, that raven had no problem with my gazing back at it, concentrating my eyes upon its ruffed feathers. But whenever I tried to accomplish the last step in the exercise, letting my attention penetrate behind the bird's feathered surface, it would squawk and flap away to some farther vantage, as though offended by my intrusion. ~~When~~ shortly after, the same bird would swoop back to gawk at me from a

comes that that rock is maybe a house. And there, off past the other rocks toward the edge of the precipice is an odd creature—no, two creatures, two clothed people crouched together on the ground. Their faces are upturned, staring steadily at us even as we glide downward, their heads turning together as they track us perfectly with their gaze. The eyes of mine are especially compelling, achingly so, staring straight toward me straight up into . . .

me.

## THE REAL IN ITS WONDER

(*Language III*)

We know what the animals do, what are the needs of the beaver, the bear, the salmon, and other creatures, because long ago men married them and acquired this knowledge from their animal wives. Today the priests say we lie, but we know better. The white man has been only a short time in this country and knows very little about the animals; we have lived here thousands of years and were taught long ago by the animals themselves. The white man writes everything down in a book so that it will not be forgotten; but our ancestors married animals, learned all their ways, and passed on this knowledge from one generation to another.

— A CARRIER INDIAN,  
FROM BRITISH COLUMBIA