

WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE: DREAMING THE BIOREGION

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If all the beasts were gone, men would die from a great loneliness of spirit, for whatever happens to the beasts also happens to the man. All things are connected. —Chief Seattle, of the Suwamish Tribe, letter to President Franklin Pierce

In all native tellings of animal stories the importance of landscape is paramount. As Barry Lopez has said, “The animal’s environment, the background against which we see it, can be rendered as something like the animal itself—partly unchartable. And to try to understand the animal apart from its background, except as an imaginative exercise, is to risk the collapse of both. To be what they are they require each other.”¹ Thus, we cannot begin to look or think about animals without placing them in their context: mating in the old growth forests, trotting on pine-needled pathways, loping along in snowy north woods, diving into ponds, drinking at woodland streams. Like us,

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animals too must contend with and come to terms with a particular geography, a landscape, a set of ecological conditions that supports their on-goingness in life. At one time humans learned how to live from the animals. We needed their knowledge in order to survive. Today, we understand that unless we grasp our interconnectedness at the deepest levels of existence, neither the animal's nor the human's survival is necessarily guaranteed.

I have lived in Maine for twenty-five years. Maine has become my chosen landscape, a bioregion where I live, work, and dream. For most of these years our home sat on thirteen acres of second or third growth forest. The house was constructed of local pine and our primary heat source in the winter was local hardwood. Woods surrounded us: birch, pine, poplar, and oak trees grew around our house in thick abundance.

We shared this landscape with animals: deer, fox, coyote, skunk, beaver, otter, rabbit, gray squirrel, raccoon, porcupine, woodchuck, and an occasional moose. Each of these animals could be seen in waking life, some only in fleeting glimpses and flashes of movement. I learned to recognize animal tracks and spore. The soles of my feet on the path in the woods touched where the fox has trotted. The snow bears the imprint of our movements like a text—the woman walked here alone, she stopped for a while by this rock; the fox, with her steady, straight-legged pace, jumped off the trail over there looking for a mouse under that tree. Our stories, the fox's and mine, overlap and cross each other. Although I smell her musk and see her paw prints, I almost never see her. She, on the other hand, has no doubt seen me many times. Her invisibility sets up a longing in me, what writer and naturalist Terry Tempest Williams has called an unspoken hunger.²

The land I walk is vastly different than the landscape the first European immigrants put their foot on. It is hard to imagine that on the eve of European colonization ninety-five percent what we now call New England was covered with forest canopy. Not only that, this heavily forested place was home to animals that have not been seen for almost two hundred years: the American elk, caribou, wolf, and cougar were once plentiful in this region. Although there had been earlier alterations in the landscape, the changes created by European colonization have been aptly called an “ecological revolution.”³ This revolution seems glacial in comparison to what is happening now.

Scientists concur that we are currently in the midst of the most rapid extinction of plants and animals the world has ever known. Many predict that one-fifth of our planet's species could disappear within the next thirty years. Scientists also share widespread concern that the rate at which we are losing species is unrivaled in the earth's 4.5 billion-year history as a result of modern humanity, especially the loss and fragmentation of wild habitat.⁴

Maya Lin, the artist and architect most famous for designing the Viet Nam Memorial in Washington, D.C., has recently installed what she claims is her last memorial piece at the California Academy of Science in San Francisco. Entitled "What is Missing," it consists in part of a large megaphone-shaped listening cone out of which emanates video images and sounds of creatures and their lifeworlds in a fade-in and fade-out cycle. Lin's research says that a species becomes extinct on average every twenty minutes, so the viewer can experience sensually what we have lost and stand to lose as birds, frogs, and primates are silenced and slip away from view. Lin makes clear the connection between the disappearance of endangered species and the survival of the habitats that support them.

I register these disappearances as surely as if I were losing sisters and brothers, mother and father, grandfathers and grandmothers. I feel anguish about our helplessness and our complicity, our lack of human consciousness, and I feel a desperate desire to do something before it is too late. I cannot allow myself the luxury of despair. I must cultivate my sensory awareness, locate the connective tissues, and find the actions that are within my grasp, the ones that are close to home.

I do not need to go far to explore, study, and investigate my relationship to the local landscape, to the other-than-human inhabitants, as well as to the human inhabitants who once lived on this land but are no longer here. As I search for fuller personal, cultural, and natural connection, I am actively seeking a change in my own consciousness. I yearn to touch the earth and her creatures as I touch my own skin or that of a lover's—with joy, respect, and tenderness. Deep in my own body I know and remember that our bodies—the earth's, the creature's, my own—are made up of precisely the same elements. I sense how profoundly interconnected and inevitable this relationship is. We are all evolving together, for better or worse. I am sixty-nine years old. I do not want to leave this earthly existence until

I have felt, as deeply as possible, my interconnection with those creatures whom I share life with, or until I have felt myself fully located on the landscape where I live. And I wonder where my unspoken hunger will take me. What will this desire demand of me? Where do I begin?

Dreams I have in the night leave their mark, their imprint, as surely as the fox makes her straight-legged printed pattern on the snow or the deer leaves her arrowhead hoof prints on rain-soaked ground. But it is not only nighttime dreaming that I am interested in. I want to make a record not only of the lynx who pounced on me in my dream, but also the one who meditated on her log in her pen at the Maine Wildlife Park: the one I sang a song to about my dream of her. And I want to note that we can count on a few fingers the number of living lynx in the state of Maine.⁵ This seems important to consider: the relationship between the dream lynx, the captive lynx, and the lynx trying to make her living in a fragmented habitat in the north woods.

Undoubtedly animals live deep within our psyches emerging unbidden in dreams, in stories, myths, and metaphors, in moments of crystal clarity, synchronicity, and revelation, those numinous encounters when species meet and spirits speak. But the imaginal animal is not enough. How can we think to appropriate an animal's spirit or power while that same animal is becoming extinct due to our human indifference? Don't we need the real animal going about her business in her wild habitat to hold us to reality, to keep us from profound alienation and loneliness? And don't the creatures need us to hold their wellbeing foremost in our minds? How forgotten, lonely, and wary have they become by our detachment, our estrangement, our lack of memory? And I wonder, can the boundaries of what we call reality thin and stretch so the membrane between dreaming and waking, animal and woman, nature and culture is permeable, passable, permissible, and unnecessary?

When I first moved to Maine, my experience of wild animals consisted of dead bodies in the backs of flatbed trucks. Early one crisp, brilliant autumn day I saw my first moose, a massive inert lump of brownish black muscle and fur, its long knobby legs and hooves hanging out over the edge of a truck bed. This creature was headed for some weighing station, there to be measured out and recorded, a statistic for the current hunting season.

Several weeks later in early November, a big storm came in the night and by morning a foot of soft, powdery snow lay on the earth, dressing the fir trees in mantles of sparkling, white lace. On my daily walk to the post office, I passed the country store on the main street of our small village. In the parking lot sits a truck, and in my peripheral vision I register a large tawny shape in the flat bed. When I stop, I see a buck deer with a resplendent rack of antlers lying in a pool of his own bright red blood. By the time I return from the post office this majestic animal has been strung upside down in front of the country store, being weighed and measured as the hunters stand around congratulating each other.

Looking at the deer, it occurred to me that this animal's perfect body, its new winter coat of dense buff and tan fur, had never before been touched by human hands. Now, after being shot, dragged from its forest home, and hauled onto a truck, he was hanging upside down putting his antlers into some perverse relation to the earth—roots instead of branches. The whole world turned upside down.

Surely the quest for food is an ancient one. But this event was occurring in front of a grocery store where plenty of food could be had. I could sense from their high spirits that the people who did this were after more than meat. They seemed infused with the animal's power, charged up with something akin to awe through their contact with this magnificent creature, something they could not find inside the white-steepled church across the street. But it was all happening without ceremony; no gifts offered to the spirit of the deer, no ritual of reciprocation for what the deer had given, no drawings on the cave wall in remembrance, no tobacco or cornmeal sprinkled, no silver or turquoise offered. It was the rupturing loss of sacred connection that pulled me down into grief.

Leslie Marmon Silko writes of the Navaho practice of honoring a deer that has just been taken.

When the hunter brought home a mule deer buck, the deer occupied the place of honor in the house; it lay on the best Navajo blanket with strings of silver and turquoise beads hanging from its neck; turquoise and silver rings and bracelets decorated the antlers.⁶

Reading her description, I notice my body relaxes. I feel the harmony of right relationship in my blood and muscles. My breathing deepens, the tenseness in my shoulders subsides. I discover it is not hunting I am against, but an unquestioned presumption of human right and need. It is not death I am resisting, but practices that are not reciprocally honoring, lack acknowledgment of sacrifice, without ritual bestowal of dignity to both the animal and the hunter.

I struggle with the way of the hunter as I have seen it. Yet, I recognize I am another kind of hunter. I, too, hunt for animals. I yearn for their appearance; I desire them; I quest and call for them to come to me in my waking life; I long to see them on the trail and in my dreams. When they do appear, I feel elated, blessed and honored, chosen and rewarded. I am not interested in snaring, trapping, shooting, or owning them; I merely want to feel my connection to them. I want to be reminded of the days when animals and humans spoke to each other. I want to experience what anthropologist Richard Nelson learned from his years of living with the Koyukon elders of Northern Alaska, that the animals themselves are imbued with spirit, power, and awareness and that humans in close communion are recipients of their powers.⁷ I want to touch the animal that lives inside me, to feel the texture of fur, the beauty of muscle and sinew working together, the intelligence of the senses. I want to assuage my human loneliness with their unselfconscious beauty.

I know the price of this longing for contact is high. To fully enter the enlivening world of animals I must also be willing to feel pain, anguish, terror, and despair—mine, theirs. The genocide of species; the torture of bears; the poisoning of coyotes; the over-trapping of beaver, fox, lynx, and other animals who are the bearers of rich and sensual furs; the killing of deer who are considered pests because of their numbers; the near-extinction of wolves who were their natural predators, but bore the stigma of human rapaciousness. One cannot approach the entrance to the animal kingdom without pausing to ask: Can I bear the tremendous grief and sorrow that lies in the passageway between humans and animals? If I wish to be a mediator, a translator, a rememberer, I must be willing to bear the unbearable in order to convey what has and is happening to them, what they have suffered since we have been so out of balance with them, all those broken treaties. I am ashamed, helpless, and very afraid of feeling mute terror.

Sometimes it is through human suffering that I am shown an opening into their world.

One Monday morning my friend, Anne, came to my house in the woods. She hadn't been to visit since her cancer diagnosis. Before she arrived I was aware of feeling very happy, anticipatory, excited, so glad she was coming. This was not, in itself, unusual. I have such deep respect and love for this woman who has been living with her cancer diagnosis for two years. Her living is sometimes profoundly high and holy and sometimes dangerously dark, filled with great struggle and despair. Either way, I think, she is always courageous.

The threads of our lives have been woven and tied at certain critical junctures. For over ten years we journeyed together in various modes of travel as the years of sitting in counsel with each other gave way to wilderness trips. We are both guides of a sort: I was witness and companion for her inner journey; she has been a practiced and knowledgeable teacher for me on journeys with backpack, dogsled, and canoe. I have been present as witness and friend through cancer surgeries, and helped preside over her commitment ceremony with her partner and a birthday celebration we all thought might be her last. Our meetings, although infrequent, are never casual and always packed with portent. We often share a simple meal as we make delicate probings along the edge of mystery, and sometimes we fall into it.

This day we sat on the couch making plans to meet once a month to share writing. She was searching for a form to hold all the wild, chaotic, and pure experiences of her cancer time. There was energy, a bubbling excitement, and a charge of hopefulness and joy when we got our calendars out marking the days we would meet. In the face of serious illness, we were counting on a future.

As we prepared to eat a late autumn soup of carrot and sweet potatoes, she tells me that on her way, by the side of one of the back roads, she found dismembered pieces of a deer—a foreleg and a severed head with the antlers sawed off—they were fresh. She had them in the flat bed of her truck. She thought I might know what to do with them. An unmistakable rush of mystery came into the room as if someone had opened the door in a windstorm. We ate slowly, much in silence. I felt myself drawn into the power of ritual.

I experience it physically at first—the shattering disorganization that accompanies extreme indifference and mindless disrespect. This

is followed by an internal effort of putting things to right, a re-ordering of chaos, a re-assembling of wholeness. We finish the meal and gather together a sage bundle and some feathers, a rattle, a small drum, cornmeal, and some flowers I cut from a bunch of fall asters, deep russet, purple, and yellow.

With these in hand, we go out to the back of her truck. The dismembered pieces of deer, the hacked-off leg with its perfect cloven hoof and the beautifully intact but severed head, lay like evidence of something surpassing crime. We each carry a piece and, with rattle and drum accompaniment, we process to the back woods. We make our way through the rough blanket of brown leaves and the jumble of blown down trees until we find a natural hollow in the ground with a flat stone in the middle. On the smooth surface of this stone we arrange the deer head facing east. We tenderly pull a flap of its hide over the severed spinal cord hiding the cruel cutting, and we gently lay the foreleg in front of it. We place the flowers all around the head and leg and light the sage and smudge. She drums. We pray: "May you go back to the great deer mother. May your spirit be joined with your people. May your journey be swift. May your wholeness be restored. May your people flourish. May our people be forgiven for this act of disrespect." Then we rattle and drum and sing a chant until a feeling of restoration and honor becomes deep and satisfying. Handling the harsh reality of dismemberment and finding a spontaneous ritual of re-membering strike me as deeply significant.

Two days later as I am driving home from my office along the same stretch of back road, my eye picks up on something. I pull over and back up. On the side of the road, crumpled up like an old piece of cloth, is a perfect deer skin: the hide is laying there as if the deer had just moments ago slipped away, leaving its pelt behind like a rummage sale coat. I gather the skin up, place it in my trunk, and head for home. Jim and I get out our rattles and walk back into the woods. I carry the skin like a mantle across my arms and place it on the same stone, arranging it so that now the pieces almost resemble a whole deer lying asleep in the leaves. We rattle and pray. When we finish we make our way back through the woods; the sun is going down leaving pink and purple smudge marks in the sky, the bare trees are etched in black against the luminous indigo sky, and a pearly moon is rising. These

chance encounters spark months of study and contemplation about our human relationship to wild animals.

Carolyn Merchant says that by 1800 most game animals in New England had dwindled considerably, many vanishing completely by mid-century. I find her litany of losses breathtaking: the white-tailed deer exterminated in Connecticut by about 1850 and wiped out in the rest of New England (except for Maine) by 1890; buffalo who had once roamed the Connecticut Valley before colonization, gone. The American elk vanished completely from Massachusetts and Connecticut; moose and caribou hanging on in unpopulated areas of northern New Hampshire and Vermont until 1900 when caribou ceased to be seen.⁸ I recall a small, sad, and unsuccessful attempt in the 1980's to restore caribou to Northern Maine. Not one of these animals survived.

The disappearance of these large mammals left their natural predators, the wolf and cougar, without their primary food sources, and so they naturally turned to domesticated livestock. Large bounties set by farmers soon contributed to their rapid disappearance as well. Carolyn Merchant tells us that cougars were gone by about 1888 except in Maine where only three were spotted in 1906-7. The last wolf was killed in Connecticut in 1837 and in New Hampshire in 1887. Wolves disappeared from Maine in 1900.⁹ Current reports from the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife say the gray wolf is making a comeback in northern Maine and efforts are underway to support their return. Not everyone is welcoming their re-appearance.

Some animal species rebound from near extinction, in part because of legislation and the breed's ability to survive, and in part because of lack of predators; deer and moose are the most populous. But other animals are simply gone from this land. They are not yet totally extinct; one can still see them, although not in their natural habitat.

One day in early summer I make a trip to what used to be called the Gray Animal Farm, recently renamed the Maine State Wildlife Park. Someone has told me that a lynx is there. It was Lynx that leaped onto my chest in a dream.

I am in our back yard with my cat who is staring up at a large oak tree. I follow his sight line and all of a sudden a lynx drops down on my

chest. I hold her head in both my hands so we are face to face. I can feel my heart pounding against her powerful furred chest.

Before this dream I had never really known anything about lynx. Now I wanted very much to see one in waking life. I soon learned my chance of viewing this extremely reclusive animal in the wild was near to impossible. It was not only her secretive nature that would make her hard for me to find—it is the fact that there are only about 800 lynx left in the lower 48 states.¹⁰ The Maine State Wildlife Park was probably my only chance of seeing one in waking life.

This facility, funded by the state of Maine, has been in operation for many years. It is a place where animals are taken if they have been wounded, orphaned, or made human dependent and cannot live in the wild. Instinctively I avoid places where animals are kept for the sole purpose of satisfying human curiosity—zoos, wildlife parks. But this place is promoted as a kind of sanctuary, a good thing for animals who cannot be let loose because they have lost their ability to survive in the wild for some reason. And, I admit, I am curious.

I brace myself as I make my way through neatly organized picnic tables, hearing the unmistakable chatter and squeals of groups of small children, punctuated by the crisp directives of supervising adults. I see what look to be dog kennels, open pens with cement floors, some with large tree logs, all surrounded by double chainlink fences. I see two coyotes. Although these animals are healthy looking, they are clearly degraded, pacing, pacing, pacing along the side of their pen; their eyes focused out to the far horizon toward some lost home. I pass by them and think of all the Coyote stories I have read. How Coyote is the creator and transformer, how he gets himself into so many bad situations, dies, and is reborn, and I wonder how he will be able to get himself out of this one.

I walk by a single little fox curled up on the cement; his nose tucked into his tail, one eye peeking out at me. I feel the insult of the cement and the lack of cover for this privacy-seeking animal, the offense of such exposure, and wonder how he must develop ways to deal with the hungry, prying eyes of all these curious two-footeds. Is this the same creature I have encountered in the woods or in my dreams?

When I finally make it to the lynx she is perched on top of a small enclosure made of logs in the middle of her round pen. Like some

ancient monk in a mountain cave, this most secretive, nocturnal hunter appears to be in some profound meditative state, where the indignity of her situation does not seem to touch her, nor do the human eyes disturb. I sing a soft song to her about the lynx in my dream. She never looks at me.

For the Koyukon hunters, the lynx is among the most powerful animals, not equal to wolverine, bear, or wolf, but even more potent. According to anthropologist, Richard Nelson, "This animal can afflict a person with a more complete and lasting alienation than any other, as the stories warn." Nelson relates one of these stories:

In the Distant Time, the bear and lynx were talking. The bear said that when humans began hunting him they would have to treat him right. If he was mistreated by someone, that person would get no bears until he had gray hairs on his head. But the lynx said that people who mistreated him would never get a lynx again in their lives.¹¹

A woman standing next to me, within easy earshot of the lynx, is telling her friend how she inherited her mother's lynx fur coat. I quickly move on, not wanting the lynx to associate me with such a scandalous story. It occurs to me that if humans can have a lynx coat but never encounter a real lynx in the wild, our collective human mind eventually forgets, loses something crucial: who a lynx really is. Not the captive animal, humanized, stereotyped. If the lynx's power to mediate the unknown is so diluted and weakened, don't we lose a large portion of the depth and mystery of life? Won't we suffer from the lynx's curse: complete and lasting alienation? In our current state of estrangement we have judged the animals to be less important than humans. In the Koyukon tale the bear and lynx are known to have the power to curse and also, one assumes, to bless humans for their actions. These animals act as a conscience, arbitrating ill treatment with a swift, uncorrupted justice.

As I continue past the rest of the creatures, I see a panting, pacing bobcat; four ragged, molting brown bears; two eagles, each without a wing due to being shot; many assorted deer; a pair of hawks and some other endangered birds. Certainly all of these animals are here not because of their own doing but because of some human intervention in their lives.

The ethics and obligations of a place like this plague me. There is an ethic of care which requires us, as humans, to protect life, but isn't there also guilt and shame? Aren't we trying to assuage our culpability by caring for animals that some others of us have put in harm's way? The arguments usually run this way: One side says these animals should be turned out and let nature take its course. Nature in this case is not a benevolent good mother, and we know that returning these animals to the "wild" means, in effect, letting them out in territory unfamiliar to them to die a "natural" death by starvation or as food for other predators. The other rationale is that since some humans have caused these animals to be captured, we other humans have the duty to care for them; since they have been made "human-dependent", we are now responsible for them. If they are kept in a place like Maine State Wildlife Park, we are assured they will be well fed and they can pay their way by being a part of an educational program.

Later I learned that the lynx in this park had been mated with another captive and that she recently gave birth to kittens that will also spend their whole life in captivity in another wildlife park. This attitude toward animals in captivity, that they can somehow serve us by "educating" us, is suspect to me. It is easy to recall with horror how, in the late 19th century, Admiral Peary brought back two Inuit families to the Museum of Natural History for study. These people lived—and quickly died—in the basement and upper rooms of the museum, their skeletons remaining as exhibits. It is this particularly arrogant error of perceiving the "other" as an object of study that leads to no good. And in the case of the Maine State Wildlife Farm, who has bothered to ask these animals what they want? The very idea sounds ridiculous. In the case of Minik, the surviving Inuit child, he knew what he wanted: a traditional burial for his father. Insead, he was given a "mock burial" by the museum director who wanted to retain his skeleton. One hundred years later, the bones of these people were finally repatriated. Developing consciousness takes time—and time is what we may be running out of.

Most of us have little in our heritages that would help us establish a spiritual tie with the creatures of the land we live on. We have no animal ancestor, no Grandmother Woodchuck like the one who taught the Abenake people ways to live, no coyote trickster to learn from. It is a sad truth that other than our history of colonization, most Euro-

American people are neither deeply rooted or spiritually connected to the land on which we live nor its animal inhabitants. I often wonder as I wander my bioregion, on whose land do I walk? To answer this question, I find myself being drawn ever farther into history—and mystery.

Over 10,000 years ago Paleo-Indians ventured up New England's rivers for summer hunting with flint spears they brought from farther south. Archaic Indians, who followed them 7,000 to 5,000 years ago as the tundra was being replaced by pine forests, hunted caribou with spears and fished with harpoons and hafted hooks. Do the spirits of those ancestors still live on the land, I wonder? Do they care about how the land is being used and exploited? Or have they been washed away by all the many passing centuries? Has the power of red ochre, which signaled the presence of the Red Paint People, been bleached out of our present-day consciousness?

It is late August and I am co-leading, along with a Maine guide, a Dreamquest canoe trip on Lake Aziscohos in western Maine. We are eighteen women in nine canoes. The lake we enter was once an ancient river. Since it has been dammed its shape has become a long lake with fingers of land reaching into the water. Does the river object to having her shape changed by the will of some people who make it their job to do such things? The lake is silent on this matter. The water level is raised and lowered during the summer months leaving stretches of smooth, white sand populated with large sculpted driftwood tree trunks. We pitch our tents on these welcoming shores.

Over the course of days we paddle our way to the very end of the lake. The feeling is one of going deeper, past veils of mist and islands, into the mystery. We go close to the mouth of the lake that once was a river. Despite the man-made changes, the place retains its ancient aura. We have come here to be close to the beauty of nature, to listen to our dreams, to become a community of women traveling by canoe, sleeping in tents, swimming naked in the lake. We go to recover ourselves from our busy lives and to touch the wilderness so we don't forget.

This particular trip is arduous. The weather is hard, windy, making the lake full of choppy waves and our paddling full of effort. The group is choppy, too, filled with factions, tensions, and friction. The dreams we dream at night and gather during the day are ominous, full of argument, weather, big winds, storms, betrayal, evil. As dream-tender,

I feel concern and know we are opening a conversation about the darkness that lives within us and around us.

At sunrise our guide sends her voice out in a beautiful chant as we gather for a morning meditation. Suddenly we spot two deer swimming across the lake heading for our tents. When they see these strange objects and human shapes on their shore, they startle and instantly turn in the water swimming back to the other side of the lake. I don't like this, the feeling we have disturbed the familiar landscape of these beautiful creatures with our presence, the fact that they are so afraid. That night I have the distinct sensation, while asleep, that someone is at the head of my tent trying to suffocate me. I wake up in a panic.

The next morning, while wading in the shallow water as we load up our canoes, we come upon bones on the bottom of the lake, many bones. We pick them up—thigh bones, femurs, knuckle and hoof bones. Like little kids on an adventure, these bones excite us. Some of us take them as souvenirs. The ominous feeling from the night before remains with me, although I, too, against my own nature, pick up several knucklebones. We determine these bones belong to a moose and head off for the far end of the lake. That night the sky reddens and gives the water a skin of blood.

Early the next morning as we gather in a circle for our meditation, a lone motor boat makes its way up the lake, an unusual sound as this lake is almost always vacated by late August. We have not seen or heard people, much less people in boats with motors. As the boat becomes more visible, we realize that whoever is in the boat is looking for us. When the boat reaches the sandy shore, two of us go down to meet the man to see what he might want—to tell us we are illegally camping? to warn us of something? As we get closer we recognize the man from the country store where we put in our canoes a week ago. As he approaches us we see he is visibly upset. In a low voice he tells us that the son of one of the women on the trip has been killed in a car crash. We absorb the shock of this news, letting it shake our bodies as tears spontaneously run down our cheeks.

We dread the task ahead as we make our way back to the circle of waiting women. We kneel next to the woman and tell her the news that is every mother's nightmare: "Your child is dead. He has been killed in a car crash. We don't know anything else. Your husband is on his way." Women cry out, we hold the woman whose tragedy this is, she

is in terrible shock. Women help her pack and I agree to make the long trip back down the lake with her, where her husband will pick her up.

The man in the motorboat takes us. The wind has made the lake treacherous with whitecaps and the metal boat pounds hard against the water. It is a jarring, teeth-rattling, heartbreaking journey. The wind makes the woman's long, white hair go wild and she is raving, trying to make this insane information fit into her world. She keeps crying into the wind, "We don't belong here! We should never have touched those bones!" She is raging, she is mad, a female Lear, and, I think, maybe she is right!

Upon my return to camp at dusk I find our once fractious group deeply bonded over the tragedy, forgetting their petty differences, and letting the sudden death of a child inform them of our mutual vulnerabilities.

The next day we paddle down the lake heading towards home. I am carrying a driftwood doll that the woman had handed to me at the last minute before she left with her husband. I don't know what to do with it. Where to put it? It feels uncanny, like a fetish loaded with danger. The group energy shifts as we head back. The women become self-oriented as we return toward the familiar, the comfort and security of homes and loved ones awaiting us. They want distance from the frantic disaster that melded them into a community of mourning women. I do, too.

I return home carrying my gear, some moose bones, a rattle that I picked up at our final giveaway, and the driftwood doll. As I enter the house, Jim meets me. I tell him briefly what has transpired; I show him the moose bones. He looks at me and says, "There are spirits of the dead all around you." This is not what I expect to hear. But the minute he speaks these words, I feel seen, my fatigue understood. I feel located on the right plane. I ask, "What should I do?"

We decide to open all the doors to the house, sweep the spirits gently out with a broom, and sprinkle a trail of cornmeal outside. Then we smudge the house and each other. I place the moose bones, the rattle, and the doll out on the back deck. But that night I tell him it would be better if we did not sleep together in the same bed. He agrees and goes upstairs to sleep in his study.

Sometime in the middle of the night I dream that I am in my room in bed when I hear a loud rattle being shaken close to my ear, followed

by a long, piercing human cry. Then someone is shaking me so hard that my teeth chatter. Terrified, I try to call out. I wake up in a sweat with my heart pounding. It takes me hours to go back to sleep.

In the morning I quickly wrap up the driftwood doll in a box and send it back to the woman who made it. I take the give-away rattle and the moose bones and drive to a swampy area. I read somewhere that it is best to take these things to a place where people are not likely to walk. I step through some tall grasses and hunker down at the edge of the marshy water and begin a prayer to the swamp to receive these things and transform them. I look down and see a very large green frog staring up at me, watching my actions. I take this as a positive sign and dispatch the things into the swampy water.

Once I am relieved of these artifacts, I realize that I have to do two more things: first, I must go to the Maine State Museum and research this particular lake and the ancient people that once lived there, and second, I have to go back to the lake and make peace with the spirits of that place.

I go to the museum that houses a big diorama of Lake Aziscohos, which was once really a river. I notice that one place where we camped, the middle campsite where we found the bones in the water, was once the site of the paleo-Indian people's big hunt.

I make a trip to the lake in October. The trees are ablaze and their vivid colors are perfectly reflected in the flat serenity of the lake. I go down to the water's edge where I sing, chant, and cry out to the silent waters. I ask for permission to be there, I want instruction. I enter a place of deep stillness within myself and wait.

The spirits respond that they want honoring, and they want food. Of course, this was their hunting ground, their place of food gathering. Of course, they want food. I know it was hopelessly naive of us to go to this place on a Dreamquest without addressing the spirits of these people and the animals who once lived on this land without acknowledging their history. I feel their spirits angry and full of outrage.

The paper companies have logged these forests leaving the forested edge as a so-called "beauty strip," creating an illusion of the once thickly treed forest; low-flying planes carrying poisonous weed-killers spray the trees and all the creatures that have their homes there; the engineers have dammed the river; the once plentiful animals have been killed, many species exterminated. This place of the great hunt is no longer

honored as a sacred, food-giving site. As a people we have severed our primal connection with this land and the animals. Now we go back in hopes of finding what has been so lost. The woman's words come back to me: "We don't belong here." And I suspect that in her madness she may be right. And I wonder if the spirits will allow us to return if we are honoring, respectful.

Even after many months I feel hounded, dogged by whatever had shaken me in the night. I catch glimpses of something out of the corner of my eye; I have intrusive thoughts, particularly when I drive; I fall off the back edge of my deck, or am I pushed? I feel in danger. It takes almost a year to get back into synchrony with myself. I still do not completely understand what happened. I have no elder, no native person to guide me or instruct me in these matters. I have not been back to the lake. I have not forgotten what happened. I am no longer innocent. I continue with my bioregion study-project.

My dream of the lynx energized a very powerful call to travel further north as if my internal compass had been permanently set in that direction since having the dream. The lynx with its tufted ears, facial ruff, and deep-seeing eyes pulls on my imagination, magnetically drawing me toward her. I read and study; I look at pictures on my wildlife calendar. I especially notice her long legs and great, furry paws which let her travel easily through snow. In many tales these paws are likened to snowshoes. It is her snowshoe paws that send me on my first winter-camping snowshoe trip.

Alexandra and Garrett are Maine Wilderness Guides. In the winter they lead a small number of people on winter snowshoe trips. Their knowledge, skillfulness, and deep appreciation of traditional native ways come from living and traveling in Labrador where they apprentice to native peoples.

In February a small group meets on Pine Stream, a flowage that runs between Moosehead Lake and Chesungcook Lake. Through their example, our guides teach us the benefits of using traditional equipment as opposed to all the high-tech gear available now. I feel the utility and beauty of my white canvas anorak with braided trim; it shields me from the wind and lets my body breathe. I love wearing the white Egyptian cotton mukluks with their moosehide bottoms; my feet are never cold. I take to the traditional, wooden, gut-strung snowshoes as if I had always worn them. They please me aesthetically and are highly

efficient in helping me cross deep snow without sinking. Such a piece of brilliant technology. Long, narrow wooden toboggans, *kamiks*, are loaded with our personal and group gear, a leather tump-line slung across my chest allows me to pull the sled behind me. Our guides choose this indigenous method over dog sleds because it is so much more efficient if one doesn't have to travel great distances. The pace of snowshoeing is distinctly human, almost leisurely. The snowshoes make a beautiful overlapping pattern on the snow, one that feels ancient, delicate, and natural.

Our group travels in a sprawling line across the flat, frozen surface of Pine Stream, stopping to notice animal tracks—mostly fox at this time of year—and we stoop to sniff the strong musk of fox urine on any little protrusion or branch that sticks out of the snow. This is the mating season for fox and the zigzagged patterns of their trails, first one, then two together, tell the story of their courting.

In the late afternoon we pitch our Egyptian cotton tents on the snow pack. We dig a square pit at the entrance of the tent for the wood-burning stove, and form a raised sleeping platform. We place fresh pine boughs down in the pit and the tent instantly fills with the aromatic fragrance. Tarps, sleeping pads, and sleeping bags get rolled out, a fire gets made in the small, iron woodstove, mukluks get hung up on the center tent line, and we have ourselves a tidy, warm, and cozy shelter. In the night we hear a hooting owl and two barking foxes who have come close to our tents letting us know they know we are here and that we are in their territory.

I feel exhilarated to be living outside for most of the day in the sharp winter air. The pace of life slows to meet the needs of the body: cooking, eating, and cleaning up, making camp, taking it down, snowshoeing to the next encampment. These are our primary occupations. I have never eaten so much in my life. It is important, Alexandra says, as she points out the obvious fact, calories are heat. If you want to stay warm you must eat. I eat food that never passes my lips in my ordinary day-to-day life—bacon, “bunkers,” pieces of dough fried in bacon fat, lots of butter on my flapjacks, chocolate. If we get cold at night in our sleeping bags, Alexandra tells us to pull out our bag of “gorp” and eat. In the evening we loll around in the warm tent in long underwear and tell stories. Winter is the natural time for story telling. I begin to have the smallest glimmer of how native people must

have lived during the winter. How survival is in direct relationship to the amount of good food available. How fat is the best insulator against cold. How a well told story feeds the spirit.

I expected to have dreams on this trip and I did. But not the kind I thought I would have. I had only one remembered dream.

I am with my mother. She is very old, wrapped up in a sheet. She is clearly dying. I am caressing her, pouring love into her from every cell in my body. I am telling her how much I love her, how happy I am to be loving her in this way. How glad I am we have this time now at the end to express all this love, something I could never do before.

How strange it is to have this dream. My mother has been dead for years. And I feel sorry I did not pour all this love into her in waking life. Is it my personal mother? Yes, I think, it is my personal mother but, there is this, too. It is the mother of the earth, the earth mother, who I am loving so deeply—before it is too late.

NOTES

1. Barry Lopez, *Arctic Dreams* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1986), p. 177.

2. Terry Tempest Williams, *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991).

3. Carolyn Merchant, *Ecological Revolutions: Nature, Gender, and Science in New England* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989).

4. Kathryn S. Fuller, "Focus," *World Wildlife Inc.*, Vol. 20, No. 4, (July/August 1998).

5. In June 1999 wildlife biologists found two lynx kittens in northwestern Maine. They had radio-collared the mother in March and after she denned they tracked through dense overgrowth in a part of timber company land and found her two healthy kittens.

6. Leslie Marmon Silko, *Yellow Woman and the Beauty of the Spirit: Essays on Native American Life Today* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), pp. 85-86.

7. Richard K. Nelson, *Make Prayers to the Raven* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

8. Merchant, *Ecological Revolutions*, p. 67.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Because of their low population, lynx have been given recognition under the Endangered Species Act.

11. Nelson, *Make Prayers*, p. 156.