

**Palette's Playground of Pick-nicks:
A multi-dimensional look at creature interdependency**

Moksha Rainbowlight

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One need not study the history of the domestication of cats to see the evolutionary masterpiece that has resulted from this age-old animal-human friendship. My cat, Palette, is as near to a perfect specimen as one could imagine. She is the very picture of grace, quickness, and elegance. She is friendly, talkative, patient, empathetic, loving, tolerant, trusting, faithful, and trainable. She takes particular care to respect her human companions. Even in play, she will not bite, scratch or otherwise harm a human body – she is, in short, the perfect domesticated animal. In the introduction to his book, *The Botany of Desire*, Michael Pollan suggests that what humans term as the “domestication” of other species could be just as easily viewed as the other species working with our weaknesses and/or needs in order to gain an evolutionary advantage. Indeed, he says, “If you could read the genome of the dog like a book, you would learn a great deal about who we are and what makes us tick” (xvii) Pollan points out that in the canine world, “domestic” dogs are far more successful than their wild cousins. By the same token, my cat is much better off than most wild cats. Ever since the day my cat found me in the woods near our house she has been, in her own way, training me, bending me to her will. She did not even have to think about what she was doing because the instructions on how to master me are in her genes. My family members often tease me. They say my kitty has trained me very well. They are right - somehow this little creature manages to con me into letting her sleep in my bed – on my pillow no less. She has gotten me to spend money on getting other animals slaughtered, served up into convenient little pellets and put into a bowl on the floor of my room for her to eat at her leisure. She even gets medical care!

So, is my kitty a sweet, tame, little ball of fuzzy, furry love? If you watched her cuddle up in bed with me purring, licking and nuzzling my face, and listened to me croon and coo over her, calling her “little girl kitty” and “baby doll,” you might think so. Or, you

might look at it from her point of view. To her, I am the domesticated monkey, a mere servant to the most successful feline species in the history of the planet. She has found a way to tap into my as yet not fully utilized mothering instinct. And so, she has made quite a comfortable life for herself.

My mother is not fooled by the guiles of kitty love. She is an avid bird watcher. Among the myriad of birds which nest on our land there are woodpeckers, Lazuli buntings, swallows, goldfinches, western bluebirds and robins. When we moved into our house, my mom and dad built a half a dozen birdhouses specially designed to attract bluebirds. My mother fancies our land to be a bird refuge. She recognizes the carnivorous killing instinct of my cat and, as a natural pacifist, vegan, and Buddhist by practice, it is her desire to minimize killing and suffering in all aspects of life. She does not allow me to let my cat outside of the house without supervision lest the cat happen to kill a bluebird. If you did not know my cat, this would seem like a trivial issue, but it has been a point of contention between my mother and me for about 3 years. Despite her charming human relationship skills, Palette is by no means devoid of the spectacular coordination, grace, and talent for killing that she inherited from her wild cousins. She can whip up a tree – or birdhouse – faster you could say tuna fish! She is an adept hunter; she has killed everything from rabbits to moles to chipmunks, and yes, even a rare, baby Lazuli Bunting. My mother insists that her bluebirds take precedence over my cat because cats are an introduced species, a human influence on the ecosystem.

I, like many children of my generation, was taught to “step lightly on the earth.” I was told that saving the environment was among my chief tasks in this life. I was taught to recycle so that we might save trees and other resources. In elementary school we had a fundraiser to save the rainforest. The idea was to buy up rainforest land so that we could set it aside for preservation. Save paper. Save water. Reduce. Reuse. Recycle. Eat Organic. Consume less. Don’t litter. These phrases have been hammered into the core of my psyche

since I was five. Yet, now, at age 22, I still don't understand where my species fits into the natural order of the world.

The environmental moral dilemma presented by my cat can be addressed in many ways. Should I keep my cat inside all the time in order to minimize my impact on nature? But my land is not even nature – my house is sitting on a clear-cut! Where do we humans draw the line between what we term as “wild” as what we define as domestic? Is it even possible to draw that line? What exactly is my impact on nature anyway?

David Oates offers an interesting perspective on the definition of wilderness. In his book, *Paradise Wild: Reimagining American Nature*, he discusses the concept of a pristine wilderness in terms of the Garden of Eden Myth. Like our exile from the Biblical Eden, Oats suggests that many Americans see themselves as exiles from an idyllic wilderness – exiles because we are not worthy of living in true nature (1). We are not worthy because everything we touch is tainted and virgin land is becoming rarer by the day.

Two dogmas addressing these questions exist in environmental thought: Some view humans as consumers of the earth's resources, and some see humans as parasites. Those of the parasite mindset see the ever growing and out of control human population destroying everything that was once good on the earth. Those of the consumer mindset also see this; however, they tend to be slightly more prone to hope for the best despite everything we know.

Many such as myself, who have grown up with an ever-present, weighty awareness of the environmental crisis our planet faces see the world this way. We know we are consumers of the earth's resources, and because we know, we try not to take too much. We strive to minimize our impact on the “wild.” To the consumer, the earth's land is divided into two categories: “nature” and “civilization.” Civilization traditionally includes agricultural land and cities – places where humans live. A consumer is often well educated in the culturally prevalent environmentalist attitudes. The struggle to preserve biodiversity – the movement to “save the rainforests” – is a common theme among even the most unaware consumers in

America. In their book *The Forgotten Pollinators*, Stephan L. Buchmann and Gary Paul Nabhan discuss the Biodiversity crisis:

When people do finally hear about the biodiversity crisis, too often it sounds as though it is happening far away in some exotic rainforest, and not in our own suburban backyards, our neighborhoods, our vegetable gardens, our agricultural croplands, in our supermarket produce department or at the local fast food, taco, or pizza joint.” (5)

Such was the case with my elementary school rainforest fundraiser. A consumer of this type might decide that since I own the land where my cat lives, it is not really wild, not some far away beautiful rainforest, so whatever I do there is ok. Letting my cat run free and kill birds is just part of what happens in a land where humans live. To this kind of consumer bluebirds are not as important as tigers, parrots, and sloth. We are preserving the “wild,” but the cities and farms fall under “our” dominion. Even among environmentalists this consumer mindset is prevalent. It is represented by an ad on the “Rainforest Crunch” sold at Sundance Natural Foods. According the cereal box, a certain percent of the profits go to rainforest preservation.

Many people do not understand that they will have just as much effect on global biodiversity by choosing to compost their kitchen scraps or recycle their plastic water bottle, or deciding to eat local organic products, as they will by buying special “rainforest” brand cereal, just as they do not seem to see that the preservation of our own habitats, the parks, waterways, and even personal gardens that surround us is equally important as that of exotic far-away places.

In her essay, “Looking for Nature at the Mall: A Field Guide to the Nature Company,” Jeniffer Price writes of a rather disturbing trend among “Baby Boomer” environmentalists, people who “have tended to invest a lot of human social authority in [their] encounters with nature” (179). The Nature Company is devoted to selling material goods which are nature themed but are otherwise generally useless products – marketed toward an affluent

consumer base who see the nature as “a distant and untouched realm, a solitary refuge from the modern city, which is ideally as unpeopled (and as devoid of cows and cats) as The Nature Company’s poster collection” (174). The “human social authority” that can be gained by striking out into the wilderness, by leaving the safety of civilization to adventure in the wild has nothing to do with real world actions that might have a lasting positive impact on global ecosystems. Rather nature, in our society, has become an elaborate game of pretend. A game where the white collar worker who wants a weekend vacation will pitch a tent in a remote stand of alder trees and imagine what life would be like if civilization did not exist.

And upon return from such a sojourn into nature we are apt to “graft meanings onto nature to make sense out of modern middle class life” (Price 177). A modern life full of traffic jams, deadlines, and appointments – But the nature company has a solution for stress as well. There you can find relaxation CD’s featuring “dreamlike” music and sounds from faraway rainforests (Price 189). However, Price writes, “I have been to a rain forest... the jungle is not relaxing. It requires alertness; it has mildew.” Thus the definition of nature becomes just that: a definition. And sometimes the idyllic definition we attach to a concept can distract us from the reality of a situation. Indeed the products so successfully sold to “nature lovers” are useful “Not just to escape the system but to act more effectively within it” (Price 189).

A similar ironic disconnect between the meanings we attach to things and the situational reality exists in the idealizations commonly attached to Native Americans. Jane Tompkins, a historian and professor, characterizes her childhood understanding of Native Americans’ wilderness interaction: “My story stands for the relationship most non-Indians have to the people who first populated this continent, a relationship characterized by narcissistic fantasies of freedom and adventure, or a life lived closer to nature and to spirit than the life we lead now” (674). Her research into the actual history of the Native Americans led her to confront a “moral problem.” Just as nature seems to exist in our minds

as much as in reality, Tompkins realized she had been “diverting attention from the original problem and placing it ... on ‘the mind of man’ ... [ignoring] what happened and is still happening to the American Indians.” Perhaps patrons of The Nature Company should take a lesson from Tompkins. If this company truly does what it professes to do – connect people to nature – then consumers would go come home from their trip to “Nature at the Mall” and plant a tree in their backyard, or make a compost pile. Maybe some of them do, but, as Price points out, there *is* an irony to a company that markets representations of nature – products that are manufactured from nature – to the “anticonsumer consumer” (198). Price sums it up in her discussion of a CD that is supposed to instill in the listener feelings of freedom:

Looking for meanings of Glacier Bay from my living room, I so readily lose track of real facts about the actual arctic landscape – yet doubly ironic, its oil might be in a stereo system, or in the CD itself. Who thinks of the whale calls on the *Glacier Bay* CD as Petroleum more than freedom? (199)

But The Nature Company sells more than just plastic knickknacks and posters – They also sell human themed artifacts so long as those humans are indigenous or tribal – In other words, not part of modern society. Here, writes Price, “Nature is available for purchase above all as what is Real: what is enduring, nonreplicated, non-mass culture” (175). Indeed, “Zulu baskets and African jewelry associate Nature nearly interchangeably with indigenous people” (Price 175). So the stereotype of a “life lived closer to nature” endures not only in our concepts of Native Americans tribes, but rather as blanket generalization usually applied to all indigenous peoples. Although we may be hasty in making these generalizations, I believe many ancient peoples must have known something that we have forgotten.

Buchmann and Nabhan relate the story of the ancient honey gathering rituals of Malaysia in *The Forgotten Pollinators*. The “honey hunters,” as they are called, are guided in their work by ancient stories. One such story explains why the use of metal is forbidden to

the honey hunters. The honey hunters of Malaysia show a great respect for the bees, which provide this rich source of food and income. "They always refer to the [bees] with great tenderness... they... show their respect ...by referring to them only indirectly, through poetic nicknames like 'Blooming Flowers' or 'fine friends'" (147). Buchmann and Nabhan write of the ritual they witnessed: "Here, I sensed, humans had learned to face the ferocity of social bees with their own magic, as they have done for untold millennia" (146). Only in more recent times has this traditional human-bee relationship has been threatened due to deforestation and a lack of floral resources for the bees (151). We see here how humans learn to both use and coexist with the creatures in their natural environment. Americans, trapped in the modern consumerist world, long for such a connection, but believe that way of life to be something out of the past. They see it having been lived out on this continent long ago by Native Americans, an impossibility in our modern world.

We consider indigenous peoples to be closer to nature because we feel ourselves to be so removed from it. We don't kill a deer, tan the hide, cut it into sheets and strips, and sew ourselves a pair of shoes. We go to the shoe store and buy shoes made from materials that have made a long journey from their original "nature". We don't raise the cow, milk it, inoculate the milk, and make the yogurt before we eat it. We reach into the cooler, buy it, eat it, and toss the container. We have forgotten that our food comes from the earth, that our ancestors herded goats who climbed hills, and munched on grass all day. We are disconnected from the sources of our sustenance.

Yet we do remember. We crave what we have lost, but are somehow unable to pinpoint where we have gone wrong. Because the broken link is invisible, we look to avenues to which we are accustomed to satisfy our cravings: we look to the merchants as if buying more things will bring us closer to nature, give us back what we have lost. Because we are so disconnected from nature, we don't perceive the irony of this.

And when we do begin to perceive how the context of our existence has been taken out of context, when we start to notice how not only the useless artifacts we purchase and

collect, but the very nourishment we consume are often the indirect cause of the unnecessary suffering of countless other creatures, we become disgusted with ourselves and with the world. This awakening, this realization that the world in which we operate is diseased beyond comprehension, fuels what I have called the parasite mindset. We lose hope.

We are sickened by the sickness of humanity. We flee from the poison in the water, the soil, and the air while at the same time we cannot help but add to that poison through our own consumption. Nor can we help drinking, breathing and eating that poison – because it is everywhere. We are like seeds in the wind. We hover over oceans of concrete, carbon monoxide, and steel. We long to put down roots. Our hearts know that something is wrong, but we don't know where to go, or what to do. In the immortal words of Joni Mitchell's "Woodstock" we cry: "We have got to get ourselves back to the garden." But to one of the parasite mindset, there can be no more garden. To one who has already eaten the poisoned fruit, the "Garden of Eden" is forever surrendered to the "cancer of civilization" (Oates 5).

Those of the parasite mindset see humans as destroyers. Those people view themselves, along with all humanity as parasites to the earth, as creatures unnatural and suspicious. To them, the tragedy of my kitty's murderous tendencies becomes just an extension of the generally evil, insidious, poison of humanity's lust to dominate. To one of the parasite mentality it would be best if humanity and humanity's associated domestic creatures were simply wiped off the face of the earth.

Thinking from the parasite mindset for a moment, I wonder what would happen if humans did magically disappear from the face of the earth? Just how many other creatures who are associated with us would go too? Only dogs, cats, and a few agricultural crops, right? Or, has our historical impact on the earth been a bit more widespread than most people realize? And if so, what is it exactly that attracts us to ancient indigenous cultures and the supposedly idyllic life they led?

Oates points out that the American wilderness that Europeans inherited from the First Peoples was not actually even a wilderness. He challenges what he calls “our cherished idealizations of nature.” Indeed, he says America was “‘Eden’ until the Europeans arrived ...except that so many people were already here. [America] was ‘pristine’ and ‘untouched’ ...except that it was already rather heavily altered and managed”. It is these “exceptions” that interest me. How were the Americas managed before Europeans arrived? Why do so many of us have the idea that America was so pristine before Europeans came here?

I will venture to answer this claim in part: Usually we DO recognize the existence of prior humans here, the Native Americans – what we generally tend to gloss over, however, is the extent to which the Native Americans altered the American landscape. In their article “Camas: Essential food and trade Item for Northwest First Peoples,” botany student Katherine Neall and instructor Gail Baker discuss the land use traditions employed by native Americans: “Controlled burning was ... used as a means of maintaining and encouraging new growth” (12) Michelle L. Stevens, a botanist and professor, writes of traditional land use practices of Native Americans: “Intermediate scale anthropogenic disturbance, including both species and habitat management by indigenous peoples, are likely to be key factors in influencing biodiversity, sustainability, and optimum resource utilization” (7). Stevens has also observed that the native people maintain a respectful relationship with the plants they harvest: “Traditional relationships with plants include asking permission to harvest and being grateful for the opportunity to gather and tend plants in the area” (8).

Buchmann and Nabhan discuss the habitat conservation efforts for rare butterflies and other pollinators in England. “British conservationists have begun to realize that maintaining traditional land management techniques is more important to butterfly conservation than simply setting aside protected areas” (210). This finding suggests that throughout history humans have played a key role in maintaining “wild” ecosystems. “Were it not for the human modifications that have kept these habitats warm and open over the last five millennia, many pollinators would surely have disappeared from the British isles

altogether" (212). Thus the separation mentality does not hold true in places where humans have traditional ancestral patterns of coexistence with nature. Buchmann and Nabhan also point out that in the United States the land management techniques of the Native Americans doubtless had an effect on the "natural" distribution of wildlife (213).

An interesting, and slightly more modern tale of a human participation in natural ecosystem exists in the Mormon legends of the Great Salt Lake. Terry Tempest Williams, a naturalist who was raised in Mormon traditions writes about her spiritual connection with the birds of the Great Salt Lake in her book *Refuge*. One legend tells of Mormon settlers who were dismayed, and fearful when they noticed that their wheat crops were being devoured by crickets. Their dismay was furthered when they saw vast numbers of gulls approaching on the horizon. If the crickets didn't finish off the wheat crop, surely the gulls would. However, when the gulls descended onto the wheat fields, it was not the wheat that they were intent upon devouring, but the crickets. In this way, the wheat crop, and thus the lives of the settlers were saved (70). The gulls, the crickets, the wheat, and even the humans were all part of a small dynamic "ecosystem" that ended up more or less in balance at the end of the story.

Are we humans, as a species, separate from the trees, grasses, birds, insects, and fungi? In the introduction of their book, Buchmann and Nabhan raise questions about the role of humans in nature; they remind us of the huge degree to which our survival as humans is dependant on the survival of the life around us. As much as we enjoy seeing ourselves as separate from our environment, as onlookers, users, consumers, and even parasites, we can no more separate ourselves from the life around us then we could stop ourselves from breathing. We are part of our environment. Because we are alive, we are connected to all life.

David Oates writes: "A thousand and one books of nature writing have announced some form of this message: we are one with nature. That's a nice thought, except that, at the same time, we threaten and consume nature... we are also two with nature, in other

words" (3). Oates continues, "but this twoness is also natural: we're not the only creatures with minds, with inner patternings that persist against the world's continual counter pressures"(3). How do you define a creature's interaction with nature? My kitty is an example of the oneness and the twoness:

The ecosystem, in which my kitty might operate without my assistance, can be more easily understood than that which supports the life of a human. Like all life forms on earth, her energy comes from the sun. Her story begins with a plant photosynthesizing, creating food from sunlight. An insect, a mouse, or a bird – which has also been eating the insects – then eats the plant. Palette's favourite meal consists of a fat mole. I think she must be talking about moles when sits by my ear at 5 am every morning whining incessantly, telling me to let her out of the house. I don't let out because of her other favourite food – what have become known in my house as "birdy-snacks".

Whether it is moles or birds, the food that sustains her is built up through many incarnations of energy-bundles before she can use that energy to snooze on my couch all day. Her life is built upon the success of other life forms – she is one with them. And yet, she also has an "inner patterning" which tends to destroy other life. She strives to live, just as the berries, birds, snakes, mice, beetles, grasses and trees do.

Her destructive tendencies and her "twoness" are amplified by our friendship. Yet, I too, am a creature created by nature. What I do can be wild, unpredictable, and destructive. I can also make choices that foster harmony and support life. Like Palette, I compete with, and destroy nature, but unlike her, I can also plan, and think ahead. I know my choices can make an impression on the future; all she knows is the moment she is in, now. Oates writes: "It is easy to point fingers and depict the other guy's faults, the developers, the greed-heads. What's hard is to see the self clearly. To choose who and how to be" (5). My choices of who and how to be affect the creatures around me more than I would like to admit. One night I succumbed to my kitty's 5 AM pleas for freedom. The next morning, I found the dead swallow.

It was lying in the grass a few feet away from one of my mother's birdhouses. I picked up the little bird and carried it down onto the land, in the bushes, out of sight. I stared at it for a long time. Its head and neck were chewed and broken, but the tail feathers, downy belly and wings were intact - beautiful in fact. I pulled one wing out; the feathers extended out perfectly, as if the swallow were still alive flying, living. The other wing was broken at the base, and would not extend. I remembered the day before I had been watching the swallows fluttering playfully about outside my window. Swallows have a unique way of flying.

The next day I visited the swallow it was sunny. Ants had discovered the body. They were gathered around the chewed up head, feeding. I had never looked at a bird in such close proximity before. The tail feathers were an iridescent purple in the sunlight, and the feathers in the bird's back were shiny yet subtle dark green.

A few days later, the swallow's downy feathers were escaping from its body, blowing away. After the swallow was a few days dead, Palette, who follows me everywhere when I am outside, showed little interest in the body, but in my thoughts the swallow lived on. I witnessed how my action caused the death of a wild creature.

Regarding wildernesses, nature lovers follow the edict: "Take nothing but pictures, leave nothing but footprints. Kill nothing but time." This is a valuable guideline when working in the familiar separatist concept of nature and humans, but what about the borderline? What about my land, which is neither urban development, nor nature refuge?

Not only is my land not a classic example of a nature refuge, in many ways it is the opposite – a clear-cut dominated by rampant, allergenic, non native, scotch-broom and Himalayan black berries. Although it is the epitome of a "disturbed" landscape, it is far from lifeless: The Himalayan blackberries don't have the beauty of the bluebird, nor the picturesque leaves of their native cousins, but they are by far the most abundant blackberry species on our land and they produce the juiciest fruits. They grow as a pest here because they are adapted to harsher environments, but also, humans brought them here because

they taste good. The ubiquitous yellow, orange, and red scotch broom is not only brilliantly beautiful; it is also home to countless birds and deer. I know this because as I slice my own path through the scotch broom forest, I have encountered many a hollowed out deer home, and when I am quiet, I can hear where the birds are nesting. I find the scotch broom beautiful, but because I know it is an invasive species, I have no qualms about cutting it down. I do carry a camera with me at times, but I almost always carry a machete as well. I am no tourist on my land. Certainly I am leaving more than footprints in my wake.

But my impact on the web of life as a whole goes far beyond the steps I take on my little piece of property. I buy gas, and drive a car. Most of the food I eat comes from farms. I usually buy from organic farms, but when I eat fruit in the winter, I am aware that it can come from Mexico, California or even Chile. My cat no longer roams our countryside by day killing rare bluebirds, but she has yet to accept the vegan diet my mother has been so eager for her to adopt. Her cat food comes from the cast offs of the meat industry. As an environmentalist, I can comfort myself somewhat because the tuna fish I buy for her is "Dolphin safe." But, I am still choosing the dolphin and the bluebird for their beauty, I am a still a human making the judgment that bluebirds and dolphins are worth protecting, and that tuna fish and chickens are for eating.

In *The Botany of Desire* Michael Pollan suggests, "human desires form a part of natural history in the same way the hummingbird's love of red does, or the ant's taste for the aphid's honeydew" (xvii). The landscape of my home is shaped by my mother's love for bluebirds. My kitty may be one human's companion, but because another human vouches for the life of the birds, the birds are gaining an evolutionary advantage over the cat on our small piece of land.

Ironically, the wild bluebirds, the dolphins, and any other wild things that have captured the heart of a human or group of humans, now depend on those humans to defend them from other humans. Pollan writes, "Partly by default, partly by design, all of nature is now in the process of being domesticated – of coming, or finding itself under the (somewhat

leaky) roof of civilization. Indeed even the wild now depends on civilization for its survival" (xxiii).

And the "roof of civilization" is nothing if not "leaky." The clearing of land for agriculture, the unchecked use of pesticides, and the sheer rate at which habitats that have endured for millennia are being altered, degraded and destroyed has caused scientists to predict mass extinctions in the coming years (Buchmann and Nabhan 140-142). Due to what is termed "habitat fragmentation," Buchmann and Nabhan state, "fewer 'islands' these days are tropical paradises for pollinators, and nothing about forest, prairie, or desert patches in seas of degraded landscapes will remind us of a bygone once pollinated and fruitful Eden" (143).

So, science tells us we really are losing our cherished Eden. Science tells us paradise is slipping away. But, perhaps David Oates is right when he says, "It seems to me that science alone can't do this thinking for us: for this we need story, parable, koan. We need myth." Perhaps by seeing our connection with the earth from a more spiritual stance, we can find hope despite the ever-mounting store of scientific data telling us our planet is being destroyed. A scientist is objective, separate from that which she studies: separate from nature. Science deals in facts, statistics and proofs; religion is poetic, mysterious, and creative. Science asks questions and demands answers; religion asks us to have faith in the unknown; science captures the logical mind, spirituality captures the heart.

We need both heart and mind to solve the problems we face today. A common thread runs through these stories of traditional land management - the bees, the camas, my mother's bluebirds, and perhaps even the pagan tribes that once managed England's ecosystems. In all of these cases, humans were an integral part of a sustainable dynamic ecosystem. These people had a spiritual connection with their land. They saw themselves as neither destroyers nor consumers; rather, they were just another force of nature. They passed on the knowledge of how to interact with the environment through stories and legends. They had myths.

A growing number of scientists, theologians, writers, artists, and musicians are combining ideas from evolution and spirituality, weaving myth and science into brilliant paintings, soulful songs, and passionate lectures. Amy Hassinger, a writer for the Unitarian Universalist church tells the story of a “husband and wife team [who] call themselves evolutionary evangelists” (27). She writes, “Dowd and Barlow say, we need a new story based in scientific discovery, but also reverent of the awesomeness of the universe.” Dowd and Barlow travel the country giving “sermons” on evolution. In her article, Hassinger explains how before she heard Dowd and Barlow speak, “I subscribed to evolution, but it did not inspire me – it seemed a cold hearted vision of the universe” (Amy Hassinger 28).

“Seize the Day,” a group of British folk musicians brings the science of ecology to life in song and poetry. The stories they tell can be as horrific, satirical, and sadly realistic, as Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughter House Five*, or as dreamlike and utopian as Huxley’s *Island*. In one poem, sounds of the ocean wash over the senses and from this ocean... “Creature by creature cell by cell, this web of life was wished and woven.” The poem is not a relaxation mantra; it is a call to action. The poet asks, “must all our ground be shocked and shaken,” are we “too numb to act or too dumb to cry,” or can “we act now and act together [so] our children’s children...we flowers of Gaia... may yet survive [?]” These myths-in-song, like ancient myths from traditional ecological sources, recognize our connection to other life forms. One singer addresses the earth directly: “You are the life that grows in the flesh I am weaving; Life that blows in the air I am breathing.”

The more I learn about the life around me, the more complex my understanding of this connection becomes. I am beginning to understand what David Oates means when he writes, “I hope that by reforming the language and thought of environmentalism, we can do a better job of treasuring our forests, wildlands, and peoplelands, right down to the last square centimeter of backyard garden, the remotest juniper snag on a unnoticed cliff, the least cell in the body” (7?). The more conscious I am about the fact that I am a force of nature, maybe distinct in some ways, but nevertheless similar to the trees, birds, bacteria,

and bees, the more symbiotic my interaction with my environment becomes – a mutually beneficial dance with the world I inhabit. I am learning to literally and figuratively “Step lightly on the earth.” As I walk around on my land these days, I can recognize more and more of the plants growing there – the plants I am stepping on or choosing not to step on. I have enjoyed the chances I have gotten to intimately, physically, explore the details of nature, pulling cottonwood fluff out of dry capsules, looking at grass pollen under a microscope. I remember reading a story about cottonwood fluff and grass pollen. I dug it out of a box stacked with papers saved from my elementary school. Scrawled in childish handwriting on heavily yellowed notebook paper, my friend Kalinda had written:

There once was a wise old woman who lived upon a sunny hill and breathed in the smell of flowering herbs and they kept her healthy. She spent all her long days alone but not alone because she had birds and bees and butterflies and most of all, the fairies. The fairies lived in an old dead stump and helped baby trees grow. They spread their magical love through grass pollen and cottonwood fluff and they played all day in the shade. The old woman loved the fairies and they loved her. So whenever you see cottonwood or sneeze from the grass pollen remember the old lady and the fairy love.

It is not science, but myth that can fill in our lost connection with wilderness. Children understand myth, and even before they learn to speak, they see the beauty of the complex, natural world. A friend of mine inspired this inquiry. Two months ago, he told me quite seriously that he wished all humans would be wiped from the face of the earth. My friend has a baby. He likes to call her by a nickname: “Future.” A few weeks ago, I had the privilege of watching this baby squeal with delight as her heightened child-awareness sensed for the first time the complexity of a small patch of earth on my land. The ants, beetles, grasses, tiny flowers, wild oregano, rich moist ground, all within the reach of her tiny hands. Joan Baez wrote a song “In time we will move mountains...and it will come through our hands.” We may be small, our actions and thoughts may seem insignificant in

comparison with the whole of the universe, but we can be makers of our destiny. In the words of Joni Mitchell, we are “stardust, billion year old carbon” and we can again become keepers of the garden.

Child of the Universe – Theo Simon

Here's a little history of a bigger mystery,

I have written this story into my song.

If it isn't what you are used to I hope it will amuse you,

And maybe if you choose to then you'll sing along

It goes...

Chorus:

I am a child of the universe,

I've been here before and I'll be here again,

I am a child of the Universe,

A part of all women and a part of all men.

Once upon a sometime and once upon a somewhere

And once upon a somehow there was a big bang!

Energy revolving and energy dissolving

And energy evolving – and that's what I am.

Chorus

I'm a little flower that blossoms for an hour,

But in me there's a power that grows on and on,

Power in the roots of me, power in the shoots of me

Power in the fruit that will pass my seed on.

Chorus

I am not a somebody, I am not a nobody,

I'm a cell in one body filling all space,

All I ever could be and all I ever should be

And all I ever will be is here in this place.

Chorus: I am as old as the universe,

I've been here before and I'll be here again,

I am a child of the Universe,

A part of all women and a part of all men.

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