Post-Nature Writing

Blair Braverman

One summer, in college, I worked as a naturalist on a mountaintop in Aspen, Col- orado. The mountaintop was a bustling place. A gondola emptied onto a gravel plain, where photographers in red polo shirts rushed to shoot each disembarking party. Behind them, an ornate lodge served customizable $14 stir-fries, and a short trail led downhill to a Frisbee golf course. There were beribboned Hula-Hoops lying around for anyone who wanted to hula, and sometimes there was a bungee trampoline set up for the kids, and sometimes a bluegrass band, and sometimes croquet, and sometimes a woman with a boa constrictor in a plastic tub that she let people touch with one finger. Occasionally she'd let me wear the boa around my neck, for naturalist cred. I sat at a booth between the gondola and lodge with a painted sign that said "Ask a Naturalist!" People often took me up on the offer, but their questions were rarely nature-related. Did I happen to know the time? When was the last gondola down to the valley? If one went into the lodge, would one be obligated to buy food? I tried my best to be helpful. Three times a day I stood on my stool and announced a short nature hike—a "hike," I always called it, though the distance was half a mile round trip and took less than an hour, going at a "naturalist's pace." I could usually persuade three or

four good sports to venture out along the ridgeline, leaving the boa and bluegrass behind. I taught the differences between fir and pine, flax and phlox; I pointed out tiny alpine lupine and cinquefoil. We stopped at the decaying foundation of a min- er's shack from the 1880s silver boom, snapped pictures, and passed into a pine grove where the walkers crossed their arms in the chill and I'd reach under squirrel mounds to pull out handfuls of hidden snow.

The trail ended in a clearing with views on either side of the ridge. I led everyone to the left side, which looked down into a valley. It was green. “Look at this view,” I would say, as my boss had instructed me. “This is the same view that the silver miners saw 140 years ago. It’s the same view that the Ute Indians saw 1,000 years ago.” Then, lowering my voice: “And this land is pro- tected, so it’s the same view that people will see hundreds of years from now. When you look into this valley, you step outside your generation. You can see the past and the future at the same time.” It was a nice story. Even I thought it was nice. But it wasn’t true. I took people to the left side of the ridge because the right side told a different story. The land there was still protected, the valleys steep and uninhabited, with rocky cliffs and pine forests. But stretching from the far horizon, an orange shadow had begun to spread over the slopes. The pine bark beetle, a parasite brought to epidemic proportions due to a drought and climate change, had crossed the mountain West, leaving swathes of sick and dead lodgepole and ponderosa forest in its wake. Now that it had reached Aspen, no human could stop it from sweeping over the mountain and attacking the next valley. The view from the ridge may not have changed for a thousand years, but it would be changing soon. I am part of a generation that grew up in the narrow window of the 1990s: young enough to learn about climate change in second-grade science class, but old enough not to get cell phones until high school. I spent much of my childhood playing with anthills and making frog houses out of mud, or sneaking into the bird sanctuary behind my parents’ house to crouch in tall grass and spy on geese—the kind of childhood that is dying out, at least if the nostalgics are to be believed. And yet I was never not aware that nature was in collapse, that the woods I played in were fragmented and polluted, that the wolves in fairy tales were a kind of villain I was unlikely to encounter myself.

I don't remember the first time someone used the "grandchildren" line on me, but I was already familiar with it by the time—I must have been ten or so—when a classmate spit her gum into a bush during recess and I, jealous of the confidence with which she propelled the gum from her pursed lips like a popped champagne cork, tried and failed to do the same. The teacher spotted me with drool and gum on my shoes and took the opportunity to teach an afternoon lesson on littering. She raised pink fingernails to her face, rubbing her temples as if unconsciously. "Don't you want to keep the planet nice for your grandchildren someday?" she

said. I would hear that line echoed throughout my adolescence and college years. How would I want my grandchildren to see me, as a hero or as a destroyer? Don't humans have a duty to pass an unspoiled planet on to our grandchildren? How could we live with ourselves, delivering to our grandchildren a world in such a state of disrepair? Just ask James Hansen, the NASA scientist who in 1988—the year I was born—testified before a congressional committee that global warming was the result of human activity, and two decades later published *Storms of My Grandchildren*, arguing t hat the planet—and the well-being of future generations— lay in "imminent peril." That means all of us, of course, but once again, grand- children stand in for all that is innocent and suffering and hypothetical. Having committed no crimes of their own, our grandchildren—in the silent springtime of their own lives—must reckon with an inherited catastrophe. Grandchildren! I am sick to death of those perfect forthcoming grandchildren. You know what? I am a grandchild, an infant when Bill McKibben declared in 1989 that humans had "stepped over the threshold" to the end of nature, and nobody has ever apologized to me. Like the rest of my generation, I am no longer a hypothetical innocent sufferer; I am, rather, a cause of the problem, an inheritor of both the environmental crisis and the requisite senses of duty and guilt. "I didn't ask to be born!" whined Roma- nian philosopher Emil Cioran, and to that I'd like to add: I didn't ask to be born

now. God, no. If I am responsible for my grandchildren's inheritance, then I'd like an apology from my grandparents, thank you, for destroying the species and open spaces I might have wished to share the planet with, or for the synthetic chemicals I've carried in my body since I was a fetus. But then again, why would they apol- ogize? After all, I've also inherited all the benefits of our abusive globalized produc- tion system: the road trips and cheap computers, strawberries in December and nifty leaded-paint knick-knacks from China. A friend asked a climate scientist what we should really do to prepare for cli- mate change, and the scientist responded, "Teach your children to fight with knives." So maybe those children are the kids we should really apologize to, not me with my laptop and my melodrama. I didn't inherit a postapocalyptic world. Not yet, at least. My employer in Colorado kept a library of nature books, and I snuck into the small room each morning to choose a book for the workday's downtime. I hadn't read much nature writing before, at least not intentionally, and associated the genre with textbooks and field guides. I remember the exact moment when I pulled the first book from the shelf—Annie Dillard's *Teaching a Stone to Talk*—and my eyes caught on the opening lines of one of the first essays: "A weasel is wild. Who knows what he thinks? He sleeps in his underground den, his tail draped over his nose. . . ."

I felt a sensation similar to one I'd had months earlier, during the first lecture of Environmental Studies 101, which I'd taken to fulfill a requirement. The lecture cov- ered fisheries management. I had no interest in fisheries specifically, but I had tremendous interest, which I had never quite named or recognized, in how humans interact with their world. I sat very still in the third row, my heart racing. I felt a kind of desperate astonishment at having fallen into exactly the right place, one I hadn't known existed. It was almost frightening, in the way that falling in love is fright- ening—you can pretend, sure, but you're no longer in control. Still holding the book, I don't think I fully exhaled until after the essay's final paragraph (". . . it would be well, and proper, and obedient, and pure, to

grasp your one necessity and not let it go . . .") and by then I was late to the gondola and stuffed the book in my bag. I read the essay twice more that day and the rest of the book that night. Over the next weeks, I read Thoreau and Terry Tempest Williams, Rachel Carson and Ed Abbey and Rick Bass. Because I had not heard of most of the books, I didn't realize they were famous; because few other people seemed to use the library, I felt that I had discovered a secret that no one else knew. But something didn't match up. The older books tended to treat nature as if it were inherently perfect, and focused their energies on praise and description, or perhaps philosophizing about human relationships to the outdoors. The writers turned to nature to find solace and shelter from civilization, or because they were drawn to wildness, or both; nature was a place of awesomeness and respite, often

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civilization, or because they were drawn to wildness, or both; nature was a place of awesomeness and respite, often at the same time. From Arne Næss to Aldo Leopold, Ed Abbey to Thoreau, a great many of the older nature writers in the library—men in particular—took the time to go to the woods, and to diligently record the thoughts that occurred to them there. But over time, I found myself growing bored with their reverent prose, with their leisurely walks and months of contemplation. I took enough leisurely walks of my own, I didn't need to read about them, too. Despite my inclinations toward spending long days in the woods, or perching on boulders for hours, or—yes—exploring at a "naturalist's pace," I have no patience to read about others doing the same. I prefer statistics, analysis, calls to action. Even as I recognize the literary skill that goes into distilling a lonesome afternoon into three crisp paragraphs—complete with emotional setup, observation of biological phenomena, and tidy lesson—I prefer Rachel Carson's beautiful warnings and Sandra Steingraber's toxic science, David Gessner's schoolboy astonishment, and Annie Dillard's thrilling revulsion. I want drama and action. Some might say that my impatience is generational, stemming from a child- hood of flashing screens and instant messages; Næss would probably revoke my naturalist gig entirely. And sure, it's generational; I'll buy that. But my impatience— in this case, at least—is not the result of a carefully cultivated short attention span. It's a result of growing up with the overwhelming knowledge that we're running out of time. Leisurely, reverent nature writing made me uncomfortable, and since that

summer, my discomfort has only grown. It feels indulgent to me, and blindered, like complimenting a friend's silky hair while she's being stabbed to death. I could have taken the hikers to the valley on the right. I could have swept my arm over the creeping orange shadow, told them how the beetles bored into tree trunks and left them drafty as Swiss cheese, just like the silver miners had left the very mountain on which we were standing. I could have explained about the beetles leaving dead

trunk after dead trunk, dead forest after dead forest, then moving to the next. I could have told the hikers about how the pheromone packets and pesti- cides and every other desperate attempt to stop the beetles had failed, because the only thing that could really stop them, the one thing that had always kept their population in check, was cold winters, and there simply weren't enough cold win- ters anymore. I could have told the hikers that, frankly, the beetles are the least of our problems. I could finally have let out my frustration with the quiet euphemisms of my elders, with their references to a "changing planet" rather than a "planet gone to fuck." But I didn't. I didn't even let myself think about giving *that* talk, because then I would have had to answer to myself, to why I didn't. Every day I led the tour group past the log cabin, through the cool forest, and out onto the ridge, and every day I steered them to the left and stood back for the gasps. The view never failed to elicit gasps. And the gasps were wonderful. They warmed me; they rose like bubbles. I was hooked on them. For a few minutes, standing there on the ridge over the green valley, surrounded by people who believed it, I could almost imagine I was looking into something pure.