Contact! Rediscovering Our Humanity through the Ancient Language of Wildness

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The Oldest Language of All

Plastic chairs. Neon lights. Linoleum floor. The meeting is being held in what looks like a classroom. Alaska state biologist Randy Kacyon is up front explaining that the state and feds are concerned about the diminishing moose resource up toward the Kilbuck Range. It's October 4, 1994. Bethel, Alaska. I'm sitting in on the biannual meeting of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta Subsistence Regional Council.

There are maybe a dozen men in the room, most of them in green shirts—fish & game personnel. They look official. The rest, dressed in faded flannel shirts and jeans, arms folded across the chest, look inscrutable and frankly out of place, as if they know they are party to a charade. They look like they belong in the pages of a National Geographic article. They're Yup'ik Eskimos. Four of them, Harry Wilde, Paul John, Steven White, Antone Anvil are members of the council, appointed by the US Secretary of the Interior. Their role is spelled out in one of the handouts:

> The objective of the Council is to provide an administrative structure that enables rural residents who have personal knowledge of local conditions and requirements to have a meaningful role in the management of fish and wildlife and of subsistence uses of those resources on public lands in the region.

Randy has just explained an elaborate plan, illustrated by charts and graphs, whereby state and federal wildlife managers propose to regulate the annual moose hunt to restore their population to sustainable levels. The men in the flannel shirts have been listening intently. Randy invites their comment.

I lean forward, every neuron in my brain on high alert. Randy has been speaking English; he neither speaks nor understands Yup'ik. Neither do I. Thankfully, there is a native interpreter, Sophie Evan. Like all Yup'iks, Sophie speaks quietly. (Yup'ik is notably glottal and guttural, as if one is choking on one's tongue. Imagine seal, walrus, and caribou vocalizations mixed together into a mucilaginous mishmash—seaweed with syntax.)

Paul John, elder from Toksook Bay, stirs as if awaking from reverie. His hand floats up into the air. This man lives 50,000 years deep into time. This man refuses to speak English because it's

the wrong words for this sentient conscious intelligent place and its animal beings. This man will likely go out and buy bootlegged vodka and get drunk after this meeting because it deadens the pain and the memories. This man easily shape-shifts into seal, moose, caribou or walrus when he dances to the singing and the drums. This man calls himself a Real Human Being rooted within the mind and spirit and soul of this place. This man is about to participate in the "decision-making process affecting the taking of fish and wildlife on the public lands within the region for subsistence uses" (from the "US Dept of Interior Charter for the Yukon/ Kuskokwim Delta Subsistence Regional Advisory Council").

Listen carefully. You're about to make contact with a consciousness that is nearly extinct. Let me rephrase this. You're about to experience the oldest language known to mankind. "We should be talking about this quietly," he warns softly yet earnestly, "since, as we all know, *tuntuvak* [moose] hear us when we talk about them." Pause. "They might take offense at what we're saying and not cooperate or disappear altogether." Adding, "We know this from experience." (I took notes. It's pretty much what he said, word for word.)

He's done. I count the seconds of silence. One. Two. Three. Up to 10 or so. The biologist is grinning. He knows this is moonshine. More charitably, it's anthropology. It's not biology. He offers no response. Ten seconds tick by and Randy continues as if nothing—nothing at all—was said.

This is what this book is about: Contact with a language and consciousness that to western ears is moonshine. It is the language of "full presence." It's neither moonshine nor anthropology, nor is it dead. Knud Rasmussen witnessed its still glowing embers among the Netsilik in the early 1920s. Megan Biesele encountered it among Kalahari Bushmen in the 1970s. I have experienced it among the Navajo I lived with for the better part of a summer, and in two years of living with Yup'ik Eskimos, "Raven's Children," by the Bering Sea.

I believe I know what was going through the biologist's head. It's the dogma of all scientists schooled in the Aristotelian tradition coupled with the biblical doctrine of human exceptionalism. "We, the managers of the ecology, . . . understand the greater dance, therefore we can decide how many trout may be fished or how many jaguar may be trapped before the stability of the dance is upset." (The words are Elizabeth Costello's, the animal rights champion in John Coetzee's fictional "Lives of Animals.") "The only organism over which we do not claim this power of life and death," adds Costello sardonically, "is man. Why?

Because man is different. Man understands the dance as the other dancers do not. Man is an intellectual being."

Focus on "trout," "jaguar" and, in Randy Kacyon's presentation, "moose." There is no phenomenon that is "trout," "jaguar," or "moose"—separate, beyond and outside us. The biologist's "moose" made absolutely no sense to the Yup'ik elders in the room. Same with "bear," "salmon," "caribou." What exists, the old man was saying, is something else—something perhaps best called Presence, where language and consciousness become participatory within a kind of Mind at Large (Aldous Huxley).

It is the Presence that farming man (*adama*: "the farmer") renounced and buried in his subconscious when, in an act of breathtaking betrayal, he named the animals, thereby "annihilating them in their existence as beings," observed Hegel. Thus did *Adama* ominously collapse the conversation of grace (the gift) between mankind and his animal kinsmen, transferring it now to a conversation on good & evil, cosmos & chaos, between man and his sky gods—all of them nothing more than narcissistic human projections.

> Since Adam, being free to choose,
> Chose to imagine he was free
> To choose his own necessity,
> Lost in his freedom, Man pursues
> The shadow of his images . . .
>
> — W.H. Auden, from "For the Time Being"

We struggle with what to call this Presence and, even more confounding, how to engage it with our consciousness and speech. Poets frequent this realm. Rainer Maria Rilke, Wallace Stevens, Ted Hughes, Mary Oliver, Randall Jarrell immediately come to mind. Writing to his Polish translator, Rilke described his encounter with it. (Notice how he identifies himself, below, in the third person.)

> He remembered the hour in that other southern garden (Capri), when, both outside and within him, the cry of a bird was correspondingly present, did not, so to speak, break upon the barriers of his body, but gathered inner and outer together into one uninterrupted space, in which, mysteriously protected, only one single spot of purest, deepest consciousness remained. That time he had shut his eyes, so as not to be

> confused in so generous an experience by the contour of his body, and the infinite passed into him so intimately from every side, that he could believe he felt the light reposing of the already appearing stars within his breast.

The purpose of this book is to demonstrate that the convergent consciousness Rilke experienced is ancient and hardwired in us, and that it speaks a universal language. I call it the language of wildness—the eerily participatory conversation of grace. This conversation is the birthright of all humanity and, dammit, I am hereby reclaiming it, clawing it back from the arrogance and totalitarianism of humanism, scholarship and science.

"The limits of my language mean the limits of my world," writes Wittgenstein in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. (*Logico*, derived from *Logos*—Greek for "word," "speech," "discourse," or "reason." In Christian tradition it refers to Jesus and God.) This book smashes those limits to restore the original and only legitimate and sane *Logos* whose name is neither God nor Reason. If it had a name, it would be the Presence Where the Wild Things Are. Where grace dwells.

Anticipating Wittgenstein by nearly a century, the German linguist, Wilhelm von Humboldt, famously observed that "man lives primarily with objects, indeed . . . exclusively, as language presents them to him. By the same act whereby he spins language out of himself, he spins himself into it, and every language draws about the people that possess it a circle whence it is possible to exit only by stepping over at once into the circle of another one."

Join me as we step into the circle of the oldest one of all—where grace dwells.

Chapter 1, Confessions of a Fugitive

The stories say he was a formidable leader, till he lost his grip on language. (No one remembers how.) Once a man of wisdom and gravitas, words meant absolutely nothing now. They say his mind snapped, that he became a madman in the fastness of this very wilderness, where he preyed on unsuspecting travelers—and ate them.

This is the man, part mythic, part historical, whose presence I sense as I stand on the shore of this lake, wrapped in early evening. I feel the anguish of someone grown inarticulate and numb, and dangerous.

The water is calm in the gentle rain. I reach up and turn off the headlamp to stand in darkness. Suddenly I am fully here with this lake and its powers. Suddenly I am susceptible to this place.

In the dark I shall tell you that I am a fugitive, not unlike this man. It is why I canoed across ponds and lakes and beaver dams to this spot this evening. It is why I resigned my professorship and moved to this wilderness far-flung from the metropolis.

Like my silent companion, I am empty of living, breathing words. The words that cling to me are no longer a presence, no longer "part of the *res* itself," no longer "part of the reverberation of a windy night as it is" (Wallace Stevens). I am a man made of metaphors, codes and symbols. I speak a language dissociated from the world, occupying the space "left vacant by the world's disappearance" (Gerald Bruns). I have become one of the men whose life "consists of propositions about life" instead of life itself.

"The human reverie" continues Wallace Stevens, for it is his poem I refer to,

> . . . is a solitude in which
> We compose these propositions, torn by dreams,
>
> By the terrible incantations of defeats
> And by the fear that defeats and dreams are one.

The final stanza is deadly:

> The whole race is a poet that writes down
> The eccentric propositions of its fate.

Rilke takes up the theme in the Eighth Elegy. We are onlookers, "looking at, never out of, everything! / It overfills us. We arrange it. It falls apart. / We rearrange it, and fall apart ourselves."

> Who has turned us around like this, so that
> always, no matter what we do, we're in the stance
> of someone just departing?

Who has turned us around like this? Language has. "As soon as mankind ceases to 'reverberate' to the world, the sickness penetrates language" (Detienne). The disease of the Great Forgetting.

It is this that drove me to an appointment with this man's spirit by a wilderness lake this evening, as if I might find an answer—the beginning of healing, a restoration. Perhaps something of the redeeming vision vouchsafed to Wallace Stevens in "The Idea of Order at Key West."

> She was the single artificer of the world
> In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,
> Whatever self it had, became the self
> That was her song, for she was the maker. Then we,
> As we beheld her striding there alone,
> Knew that there never was a world for her
> Except the one she sang and, singing, made.

Stevens. Rilke. Add Emily Dickinson, G.M. Hopkins, T.S. Eliot, e.e. cummings, W.H. Auden, Dylan Thomas, Ted Hughes, Vasko Popa, Gary Snyder, Mary Oliver, Arseny Tarkovsky, and many others who have struggled to find a way out of the solipsistic discourse of humanism. "Alas, where are we?" implores Rilke lost in the labyrinthine echo chamber that defines the modern age. "Drifting freer and freer,

like kites torn loose from their strings
we lurch about in midair, frayed by laughter,
ripped by winds.

Were I a real scholar I could tell you that I am conducting scholarly research on language, hoping to find better words within the flasks and smoking test-tubes of a laboratory or digging an ancient tomb to uncover lost powers of speech. But that would not be the truth of it. The truth is I am a man ripped by winds, a man who abandoned research and dismissed the class and shook hands with colleagues to be here tonight in a spring rain. To turn off this light and listen.

For what? I confess I don't know.

Throw away the lights, the definitions,
And say of what you see in the dark

"But do not use the rotted names," chides Stevens. "How should you walk in that space"—this wilderness, this night—"and know / Nothing of the madness of space?" "Throw the lights away"! He means it. He's desperate. "Nothing must stand

Between you and the shapes you take
When the crust of shape has been destroyed

That's it. The crust of shape. Shaped by language more and more removed from this space where I now stand in darkness, in wildness. In spring rain. Just—listening.

A magician who became a philosopher once told me that to hear is also to be heard. He said: This is the way of the universe, whether we comprehend it or not. An observation like that recasts the whole proposition of human discourse. I turn off the light and try to believe him that my anguish over words is listened to by the lake in this rain.

There are loons out there in the darkness. I paddled by several earlier in the day, cruising the surface. Loons suddenly stab the water with their bill and vanish beneath the skin of the world. Eskimos have told me that loons will speak to you if you are troubled—they are powerful and healing.

These wise red-eyed divers are my companions tonight on the skin of the lake and beneath it. Listening, they hear (I think) my quarrel with words and begin their conversation. From lake to lake they are speaking.

This is the kind of language I crave this evening: There was an Eskimo who set off one spring day looking for eggs. As he guided his kayak he heard two loons calling. He turned his boat toward their call and after much searching found the nest, tucked the eggs inside his parka and continued on his way.

Then he heard them behind him. "That man," they called, "—that man who was going that direction in his kayak! Why has he taken our eggs? Why has he taken our eggs when we have fed him?" (For the man had just caught a muskrat.) They fell silent. Now they spoke again. "That man who is going away in his kayak! Why is he taking our eggs when we have given him a long life? We have granted him a long life!"

But he kept on going. The Yup'ik woman who told me this added, "It's a true story."

Loons call again this evening, lake to lake in this rain. They hear me and see me and must know that I am looking for a true story.

For years I have told my students stories of the world as aboriginals lived within it. Stories of animals who are at once people. Animal-people. Like us human-people except they are moose-people or loon-people or beaver or bear-people. But the modern age tells me it is certain the stories are not true. Oh how I wanted them to be true. Yet I was never able to prove them truthful, after all. I felt I was a fraud. I imagined that one day one of my students (I sensed it would be a young woman) would knock on the office door and ask if we might talk. I see her quietly seating herself and gazing out the window at the blue winter sky, then saying softly that the myths are wonderful. "But they can't be true, can they —" Just dreams, her eyes would say, meeting mine.

I resigned before the knock ever came. I felt like the Wizard of Oz bailing out ten minutes before Dorothy unmasks him. Even so, I can hear her reproach as I flee the campus: "You're a bad man," she scolds in her youthful disappointment. And I knew I would answer as he did. "No my dear, not a bad man. Just a bad wizard."

I stand by this lake this evening, a bad wizard. Wondering if there is any truth to these stories after all. Wondering if their seeming improbability is a result of their inherent wildness. (For isn't wildness always incalculable, immeasurable?) Wondering if there was ever a language of wildness: a language humans once shared with a sentient, conscious earth. And if so, can the modern mind ever know it again?

As I write this I contemplate the loon feather that floated by my canoe earlier that day. I plucked it from the water and have cherished it ever since. The curious thing is how it has two eyes. The tip is black save for these two white circles of eye, as it were, on each side of the shaft. They are translucent; peer through the white patch and you can see through the finely spaced barbs. A loon has white spots—eyes—on its back and wings.

The loon is a vision allowing us to penetrate beyond the membrane of human perception into another realm of knowledge which only it discerns. "That man! Why has he taken our eggs when we have fed him and given him a long life?" Loon plucks us out of ourselves through its language which I heard this evening as that Eskimo in his kayak heard it too. Though with a difference: Eskimo hears loon in the same place of mind where language literally speaks to him, whereas I hear loon someplace else—as the call of a wild creature, yes, but as actual language, no. I doubt loon will ever speak to me as we normally imagine speech. Even so, that possibility is of little concern to me right now. The task is not to bend loon speech around so it can duplicate human speech; the goal is to bend human speech so it is harnessed again to the speech of the earth.

I have come here this evening to begin a conversation with wildness—Homo's beginning. To gaze through the eyes of a feather and listen through the voice of a lake diver to begin to understand what Thoreau called the Common Sense. Hoping to learn an origin of human tongue that is not merely human after all. Something tells me this will happen not on a university campus but in a wild place like this. Where mankind confronts a consciousness that devours our own, incorporating us but not defining itself by us alone.

This is the lesson of mythology: that we are part of a much larger consciousness than we currently know; that man was created to participate in the earth's language with itself. The sorrow—our anguish—is that in our conversation of science and modernism we have dropped out of this vast wild discourse. An anguish born of the greatest separation of all: modern man's exile from the conversation of the earth. The Eskimo who understands loon and wears loon's masked face at his dances and sings loon songs does not suffer that pain of separation,

for he is not a modern man at all. It is I who suffer the pain; I who am possessed by a voice that is mine alone.

In the dark I close my eyes and see myself as a child. We lived surrounded by wild woods and marshes and by a vast river, a place fit for a child's turn of mind. I grew my voice here in conversation with winter storms, autumnal winds, spring peepers, the flood and summer cicadas and crickets.

It was only when I became a man and "put away childish things" (St. Paul) that I was led to speak and write of things with no cicada or cricket rasp to them, no limb-cracking wind about them. No red wings, no blue lake ice, no ruby-throat. Texts without mergansers and goldenrod; a language with no waves or curious shoreline. As a man my words died and became empty shells, impotent and void of the sea and earth and sky. For words surely die when they no longer carry the signature of hummingbird, trillium, mud, moonlight and aspen. We are left with mere husks. Symbols, metaphors and codes.

My shadow by this lake stirs uneasily.

Nobody remembers what drove him into the unpredictable world beyond the communal hearth. Beyond geography. Beyond the reach of names. Where language is its own definition as loons speak lake to lake. Then silence. Stillness. As if there is a waiting. Listening. A Presence that focuses everything upon the still point of meaning. The meaning we no longer understand.

Here something uncanny happened. He was visited by a Christ-like figure known to the Iroquois as Peacemaker, the genius behind the Great Peace that binds together their League of Six Nations even today. His name was Deganawidah—but Iroquois won't speak his name, considering it too sacred to say aloud. (I shall write it and not speak it.)

Deganawidah was born of a virgin in Huronia on the north shore of what is today Lake Ontario. In a dream his mother and grandmother learn that he will grow up to be an instrument of righteousness and peace. And indeed the boy fulfills prophecy. He was different, say the Iroquois, from other children.

There is a day when the young man tells his mother he will soon be leaving on a long journey to find the soul of discord and fear and heal it. His mother watches in sorrow as he hews out

the white stone canoe that will take him across the great lake. When it's done and all is ready he embraces his mother and grandmother. In tears they ask how they will know whether he is dead or alive. Take a knife and cut into a tree, he replies. "If the sap flows, I am alive. But if blood drips . . . "

So far this sounds to our ears like the story of the Eskimo and the loon. A fantasy. A child is miraculously virgin born, he grows older and travels in a stone canoe and his life is somehow incorporated into the tissues of a tree. Anthropology dismisses the whole thing as a myth: an ancient tale probably grounded in fact that has taken on supernatural embellishment through repeated telling. The anthropologists and folklorists point out that such tales provide a necessary validation for the society that believes in them. And so on—the social scientists have plenty to say about this kind of story. But in the end they don't for a moment imagine them to be literally true: Deganawidah was certainly not virgin born, it would have been impossible for him to cross Lake Ontario in a stone canoe, and there is no way his fate could be revealed by a tree.

I caution, however, that the Iroquois do believe this story, including its supernatural details. Many still believe it. I had one of my students, a Mohawk, retell the story to the rest of the class. The young man grew up with Mohawk tradition, including the language, and as he spoke he made it clear that this was not fiction. I glanced around the room and noted the look of incredulity on the faces in the class.

The issue again is language. Notice how Deganawidah can communicate with the earth in what seem to us extraordinary ways. Not just extraordinary but incomprehensible and incredible. It is not enough to say these feats validate Deganawidah's authority while guaranteeing his message's longevity among zealous followers. The power of the story travels deeper and is more alarming than this. I shall return to this later; for now I merely want to draw attention to the breadth and potency of Peacemaker's language.

Arriving in the country of the Iroquois on the south shore of Lake Ontario, Peacemaker is told by a group of fugitive hunters that the Five Nations are slaughtering and eating each other. Here is the heart of darkness. The Huron sets off through the forest in search of the most notorious cannibal of them all.

Eventually he reaches the man's lodge. It's empty. He climbs onto the roof to await the monster's return.

Soon enough a lone figure approaches through the thickets, bent under the body of another man. Eyes watch in tears as he butchers the corpse and drops the morsels into a large cauldron of boiling water. As the surface of the water settles, the murderer notices something startling—a perfectly mirrored face gazes back at him. A markedly handsome face. A face of serenity and goodness. (It is the Huron's gazing down through the smoke-hole into the cauldron.) The fugitive mistakenly thinks it must be his own. He is smitten. "How can such a face belong to a man who commits the evil I do?" he mutters, overheard by his secreted visitor.

In an instant the reflection vanishes. With a loud crack of splitting wood a man leaps from the roof of the lodge and lands, catlike, several feet away. Slowly the stranger uncoils to his full height, holding the monster steadily in his gaze, refusing to relax his grip on the eyes.

The stranger had unusual powers, murmur the mythtellers. He had—language. A different language. Incarnate language. Performative language. Words of grace. Improbable, ridiculous words of grace. He called it the Good News. He seemed to speak from somewhere deep inside things—the ground and trees and wind—and as preposterous as his words might be, his listeners wanted to believe him.

This is the man who held the hissing, cursing cannibal in his gaze, refusing to release him. Refusing to let him reach for the knife. Slowly, evenly the stranger speaks from someplace primal. He says a man can eat only what he is given, just like the suckling infant. He says: grace abounds and fear is illusion. He speaks with the force of mountains and trees and myriad lakes and all the animal host.

They must bury the dead man's body, says the stranger. He directs the mesmerized cannibal to bring a cauldron of fresh water to boil while he, the man-made-of-healing-words, goes off to find proper food.

When the fresh pot is starting to bubble, Peacemaker returns through the clearing with a buck slung across his shoulders. This is mankind's food he declares, as he eases the deer to the ground: the gift of animal flesh. The fleshy coat of our kinsmen the Deer People. Flesh that must always be treated courteously.

Like a fever, the witchery breaks. The monster, bathed in sweat, is cleansed. The horror passes. Peacemaker now does something curious. He sings to the empty man, filling him with

a new name. E-a-watha, he pronounces him. Hiawatha: still remembered by the Iroquois as a magnificent leader.

The two part ways. Hiawatha returning to Onondaga to take up domestic life once more, and Peacemaker going east to the land of the Mohawk to preach his cause.

Hiawatha returns, rejoicing, to his wife and daughters.

But evil is still abroad; witchery is not entirely vanquished. As Evil turns its baleful gaze upon this man clothed and in his right mind in the embrace of his family, Death memorizes his name. As each daughter reaches marriageable age, she is conjured against by the sorcerer, Thadodaho. One by one they perish. When only Hiawatha and his wife are left, the pitiless sorcerer hurls one more curse, causing the accident whereby his wife, too, is killed.

She was pregnant.

Splitting the sky with his grief, the Redeemer's disciple becomes a woodland wanderer once more, dangerous and irrational, for this is how the Iroquois explain those overwhelmed by grief. The only utterance for him, now, are words of sorrow and revenge. This is his language even as he refuses to speak it. No, not a cannibal this time, for he is decisively defeated. This time even the will to live is erased. He will carry his wound, alone, till death overtakes him, an old bull moose gently lowering itself to the ground beside a lake. Hoping the distemper will finally release him.

The man who walks to his death walks firmly though in a haze. A dark, inexorable logic drives him on.

Two years after our ghostly lakeside encounter, I make this walk.

Chapter 2, This Autumn Night I Shall Die

Low on the northern horizon, a faint white light forming. Even as the night unfolds, this light forms. Amid myriad stars. Pleiades dance in the east. Seven—I count seven.

Black except there on the northern horizon, low: faint white light gathers itself. Constellations wheel slowly. Night sinks into darkness. The light grows, glows brighter, sending silent fingers arching across the sky to the very dome of heaven. Then—ripples. Huge cosmic ripples. "Now it ripples, now it murmurs, ripples, it sighs, hums" (Quiche Maya, Popol Vuh). The aurora comes alive, flowing into the vault of heaven, sending long jets, volleys of light. Rippling, discharging, immense. White, green, some red. Half the night a shimmering tissue of light—jets, streams of cosmic matter.

All this above this mountain pond this autumn night. Loons call—a rippling. Barred owls growl and scream, echoing strangely through spruce forests.

Was it this way at the beginning of creation? The Maya say it was. The wise men, they say, remembered and wrote it down. "Whatever might be is simply not there: only murmurs, ripples, in the dark, in the night."

This autumn night I witness creation. This autumn night I shall die.

In the dark just before dawn, the woods quiet and still. Nina sleeps nearby; I hear her rhythmic breathing.

Something awakens me. The messenger. In the strong time when the old gods walk again among mortals. Pan the piper at the gates of dawn: Is it he who summoned me awake, then snatched away my hearing? A roaring like wind in my right ear and the hearing vanishes. Just like that. Only a god would do that.

I shout for Nina to wake up. She's groggy, trying to follow what I'm saying. Squinting at the sky and trees above me, everything begins spinning. Left to right the universe scrolls past. I close

my eyes. The vertigo continues beneath the eyelids. “Nina everything is spinning!” She gently urges me to go back to sleep. By now I’m getting nauseous. Terrified at what’s happening, I peel off my sleeping bag and stand up. But I can’t keep my balance. I tell her I can’t stand and I’m about to vomit. I feel her seize my arm, steadying me. No I can’t walk to the car: I have no balance. She throws my arm over her shoulder and virtually carries me.

While she goes back to gather our gear, I lean out the door and vomit. The moon’s brightness hurts my eyes.

I black out.

This is how it begins, exactly as I have told it. My encounter with Something that would lead me by the hand through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. Or is it the spirit of Hiawatha taking me where he had gone in his rage and grief? Over the next six months I, too, would become a woodland wanderer, splitting the sky with grief, wishing to die, barely able to eat or sleep. Cloaked in darkness and filled with inchoate fear.

To tell about the experience is painful, "so tangled and rough and savage,” wrote Dante of his own dark woods, “that thinking of it now, I feel the old fear stirring. . . . Death is hardly more bitter."

> And yet to treat the good I found there as well
> I'll tell what I saw. . . .

I was in a realm of tremendous power which seemingly had control over me, rather than the other way around. I was in the grip of the universe insofar as mortal man can experience this. I was neither truly dead nor truly alive. I was utterly vulnerable. Something had sliced me open with a filleting knife and bared my soul to the gaze of any passing man or woman. I was a spectacle.

Only one power remained to me: the power to denounce or assent to this. Denunciation, I somehow knew, would mean annihilation. Assent, though counter-intuitive, would lead me out of the darkness and back to the conversation of mankind.

I chose assent. This is not what I would call faith, for I had no faith in any particular outcome. This, after all, is the insidious gyre of depression. All I knew was that I was captive to

something of vast, incalculable strength and that whether I lived or died this mighty thing would continue to enfold me, if not crush me. This was surrender, not faith; the difference is consequential. Very slowly I began to learn my first lesson: Faith is not something I create. Faith is created within me, reinventing me even as it is given form.

> Whoever was beaten by this Angel,
> (who often simply declined the fight),
> went away proud and strengthened
> and great from that harsh hand,
> that kneaded him as if to change his shape.
> Winning does not tempt that man.
> This is how he grows: by being defeated, decisively,
> by constantly greater beings.
>
> — Rilke (trans. Bly)

Everything I cherished was on the line; the stakes could not have been higher. I was painfully aware that the words of comfort and assurance I had delivered in lecture halls and written in books and letters were springing back upon me and seizing me by the throat, demanding meaning—the meaning of my life. I felt like the Old Testament patriarch Abraham commanded by Jehovah to sacrifice his son Isaac. Abraham and Sarah have been told by the deity that Isaac will be the founder of a great nation, and now in a seemingly terrible contradiction the father is instructed to slaughter this very child. As the old man proceeds with his preparations does it not occur to him that this is insane? That indeed he, Abraham, has gone mad? Yet some force larger than he is has brought him to this awful state devoid of human reason. Abraham surrenders; he does not have faith in a particular outcome—that Jehovah will stay his hand before he plunges the knife. (We know the outcome only because we live after the event.)

So I, too, watched my mind and spirit become bound and stretched on an altar for something incomprehensible to me—my mind and spirit that I cherished more than life itself. Like Abraham, I knew I was in the presence of the Knower. Like Abraham, who realizes in that awful moment that his beloved son is not his, so I realize my mind and spirit are not mine, after all.

Loons call—a rippling. Barred owls growl and scream, echoing strangely through spruce forests. Hiawatha knew he couldn't heal himself; he knew that someone else would have to fathom his torment and utter words that actually, literally, carried the substance of healing.

By and by he came to a lake, as if summoned there. He is beside himself with grief. There are mergansers and loons out there on the water. He has met Peacemaker and embraced the gospel of peace; he has been released from his cannibalism. Even so, evil has attached itself to him once more. Yet he refuses to speak its story. Mostly he is mute. Except, now by this lake in the mountains and standing before these waterfowl, his heart finally spills forth. With arms raised, he booms out over the water: "You probably wonder why I am standing here before you!" It's all he can say.

The birds gaze at him and they see horror. Suddenly they flee. Flapping and slapping their wings, they sprint across the surface as loons do. Soon they lift clear and as they do, say the mythtellers, they lift the water with them as one would lift a blanket from a bed.

The astonished man is left standing at the edge of an empty lake bed. Gingerly he steps forward. This is amazing, he thinks to himself. Looking down he notices lovely purple and white shells glistening all about him. Stooping, he gathers a handful.

I make it a habit to carry one of these shells in my pocket. It is quahog (Mercenaria mercenaria), a large clam commonly found on the beaches of the Atlantic coast. Iroquois call it wampum. More accurately, it is the shell from which the cylindrical wampum beads are drilled. Whatever shell it was that Hiawatha found on the lake bed, the Iroquois have for centuries remembered it as quahog.

Hiawatha, meanwhile, has a gathering sense that there is something remarkable about these shells. Somehow he senses they are literally a different language; they derive from a different story. Absurd, we would say. A category error. A shell surely cannot have powers of speech, says the modern mind.

He carefully strings them together and hangs them on a stick. By now he is convinced there is definitely healing power within them, a healing that will reach him through the words of the shells speaking through someone conversant in their language —someone who shares their consciousness. He yearns to hear the words locked within. Till then, he merely hangs them wherever he is camped, hoping for someone to speak the words of requickening.

Faithfully carrying the mysterious shells, he continues wandering, eventually winding up in the Adirondack wilderness where I, too, have arrived many years later with my pocket of shells and my yearning for something to unlock their speech.

Preaching nearby among the Mohawk, Deganawidah senses Hiawatha's crisis. He sets off in search of him. Once he finds his camp, Peacemaker conceals himself to take the measure once again of this volatile man.

Soon the fugitive begins speaking softly to himself. He says that if he could, he would grasp these shells and read them aloud. With this the Peacemaker approaches him. Taking the distraught, astonished man by the hand he picks up the shells and miraculously begins declaiming their words, their power, their genius.

> Now then we say we wipe away the falling tears so that peacefully you might look around. And then we think something stops up your ears. Now then with care have we removed this hindrance to your hearing; easily then it may be you will hear the words to be said. And also we think there is a blockage in your throat. Now therefore we also say we remove the obstruction so that freely you may speak in our mutual greetings.

This speech is sacred among the Five Nations. They call it the Condolence and Requickening Ceremony. In the old days, the words were nothing without the shells; wampum, they say, "propped up" the words. Hiawatha realized this. Peacemaker's genius was that he could speak the “words that live in a shell." Words that were inherently healing. As if the words were living, breathing Good News. Possessed by them, Hiawatha is reborn into “clear-mindedness,” as the Iroquois still put it.

This is what I have come to find: the power of the incarnate word. Not metaphors, not symbols, not logic or persuasion—the redeemer speaks none of these. He speaks the words that live in a shell.

It has been a long journey. It’s taken many years to arrive at this shore in this darkness. To reach up and turn off the headlamp. To stand in the presence of a great silence that somehow had waited for me since time out of memory. To experience myself spoken by the unfathomable voice of loon in whose presence I am inarticulate and uncomprehending.

Alas for me, no redeemer materialized out of the darkness. Just a vague sense of the tormented, silent creature who preceded me centuries ago—Hiawatha, in whom mankind's ancient fluency with the earth was rekindled here in the uncanny womb of wildness.

"Time stirs with her slow spoon," writes the poet Mary Oliver. Two years would pass before that redeemer made itself known in the mythically-charged time before dawn, here, right here, in this same wilderness. What comes to me is no Christ-like epiphany. What comes is the terrifying Angel of Rilke's Elegies. Something with no name that will guide me through a living death. A journey I could not decline.

"Give his light hands nothing to hold / of your burdens," warns Rilke, "otherwise they'll come at night to you,

> to test you with a fiercer grip,
> and go like someone angry through your house
> and seize you as if they'd created you
> and break you out of your mold.

Like Thoreau descending Mount Katahdin, I felt myself seized by Chaos and Old Night. This was no benign Walden Pond; this was the maelstrom of the "unhandseled globe."

Chaos and Old Night. Thoreau borrowed the phrase from Paradise Lost, the epic that brought me to tears of recognition when I read it as an adult. I was raised a 17th-century Puritan on the rolling cadences and "thou shalt nots" of the King James Bible. My catastrophic name is a birthmark I shall carry to my grave. John Milton and I speak the same language, except that I'm desperately trying to escape it. Like Nietzsche, another minister's son who went mad in his quest to bury the language of Good and Evil, I am driven to find the unhandseled realm where language and consciousness were born, before this knowledge was swallowed by the black hole of the Middle Eastern Combat Myth of Good and Evil and Greek hyper-rationalism.

It's worth pausing over Nietzsche. Nietzsche's mistake was to use the language of God to write His obituary—the serpent swallowing its own tail. His philology doomed his agenda from the beginning. Try as he may, the man couldn't bluster or reason his way out of the solipsistic discourse which I too was fleeing when I encountered the spirit of a wisdom-keeper named Hiawatha who fled here centuries before when he, too, realized that language as he knew it was a death machine.

Nietzsche's dilemma is neatly summarized by e.e. cummings.

> when god decided to invent
> everything he took one
> breath bigger than a circustent
> and everything began
>
> when man determined to destroy
> himself he picked the was
> of shall and finding only why
> smashed it into because

There is truth in the poet's sly humor. Like the philosophers he railed against, Nietzsche was hopelessly imprisoned within the last four lines. Only poets escape them. Only they speak the language of Presence: Eros. Eros knows nothing of Good and Evil—the death machine.

In the beginning was this lake in spring rain. That is to say, in the beginning was Eros (Presence), not God, and no man alive or dead can ever write its epitaph. The tension between these two chthonic forces in Paradise Lost is huge, ambiguous, complex, pornographic and exhausting—and worth pondering. It took another poet, W.H. Auden, to blow up Milton and the Yahwist author of creation and point us to the far older, authentic, totemic narrative of Eros (Presence) that is mankind's natural birthright and proper home.

> As long as the apple had not been entirely digested, as long as there remained the least understanding between Adam and the stars, rivers and horses with whom he had once known complete intimacy, as long as Eve could share in any way with the moods of the rose or the ambitions of the swallow, there was still a hope that the effects of the poison would wear off, that the exile from Paradise was only a bad dream, that the Fall had not occurred in fact.

Ironically, Nietzsche's steel-trap mind shattered in a spontaneous gesture eerily congruent with Auden's lines. Nietzsche's landlord, David Fino, was interviewed about the event several years later.

> One day when Mr. Fino was walking along the nearby Via Po—one of the main streets of Turin—he saw a group of people drawing near and in their midst were two municipal guards accompanying "The Professor." As soon as Nietzsche saw Fino he threw himself into his arms, and Fino easily obtained his release from the guards, who said that they found that [sic] foreigner outside the university gates, clinging tightly to the neck of a horse and refusing to let it go.
>
> It was then that the Finos persuaded the professor to take to his bed and sought the assistance of a mental therapist, Professor Turina. But as soon as Nietzsche suspected a doctor was involved, he rebelled, exclaiming, "Pas malade! Pas malade!" The doctor had to be introduced as a family friend before Nietzsche would let himself be treated. . . .
>
> Noticing that Nietzsche [had] sent frequent messages to a certain Professor Overbeck, . . . the Fino family thought of telegraphing Overbeck on their own, to inform him of their tenant's illness. A few days later Overbeck arrived and went up to Nietzsche's room. It was nightfall and the philosopher was lying in bed. As soon as the two friends saw each other they embraced and wept. Nietzsche wished to get up, sat at the piano and played Wagner.
>
> Two days later, with Overbeck leading him back to his country, Nietzsche left Turin forever, seen off by the Finos, the doctor [Prof. Turina], and the German consul. A while later a letter from the family informed the Finos that Professor Nietzsche had in large part lost his reason and was in a nursing home.

As long as there remained the least understanding between a man and horses with whom he had once known complete intimacy, such a man was capable of going stark raving mad.

And frankly he did. (As a young man Nietzsche had been an accomplished equestrian in the Prussian artillery. Only an injury kept him from rapidly rising through the ranks to senior officer. By his own admission he adored riding, he was a natural, and even found cleaning the stables congenial.)

Language and consciousness and our sanity are gifts from animals "woven into us, deep and magical" (Rilke). That a philologist/philosopher should seize upon Equus and cling to it in a spectacular gesture of lucidity and, yes, Eros—or was it insanity?—is worth exploring.

We will come back to Equus. Before revisiting Equus, we must encounter Ursus, the Dark One whom Eskimos refuse to talk about. The Dark One who, they tell me quietly, takes care of them.

Chapter 3, The Great Forgetting

It was a grizzly bear track. Huge and fresh in new autumn snow. What's more, I knew the author of this message was hunting me. I had lived with Raven's Children—the people we call Eskimos—who had been hunted by walrus and moose and even blizzards, so they told me.

I was alone with no gun. It knew that, too. Just as Old Ben, the massive Dark One in Faulkner's "The Bear," knew young Ike McCaslin was alone without a weapon.

Like McCaslin, I was vulnerable.

Dark One? Eskimos won't discuss bears. At least not without considerable resistance and, what to call it? Agitation? Maybe that's the best word. "Bears got ears on the tundra," Charlie Kilangak confided in me one day quietly yet forcefully. Meaning they were listening as we discussed them that moment.

For two years I had lived in Raven's world, where I began to see reality as "the real people" (they call themselves) view it.

> I know noble accents
> And lucid, inescapable rhythms;
> But I know, too,
> That the blackbird is involved
> In what I know.

Blackbird. Raven. Same thing. The lines belong to Wallace Stevens. Their reality however belongs to Charlie Kilangak, a thickset Eskimo with the bearing of a walrus who taught me there's no such thing as talking about animal people. Talking about them is no different from speaking to them. (There are human people and animal people in Raven's world. Jarring, yes, to modern ears.) People like Charlie Kilangak know it's always better to use a vague, indirect yet respectful term. Like Dark One. Or Grandfather. Or Old One.

I had studied this strange cosmology for decades as an academic. Studied and taught it. Still, I was not prepared to live within its uncanny terms.

Recall the meeting with the Alaska Fish and Game Department, described earlier, where the Yupik elder, Paul John, warns the state biologist that moose are powerful, and if the moose don't support the *kass'aq's* plans for managing them, they won't cooperate. (Yup'iks call all whites *kass'aqs*. Pronounced "gus-sucks." From the word "cossack," the first Europeans they met.)

The *kass'aq* grins. He doesn't believe a word of it. (Over time I will get to know this man. A nice man. Genial and a superb field biologist. He knows the old man's veiled warning is for all practical purposes nonsense.) There is more to this story than I disclosed in the preface. Two years after this meeting, soon after I had left Alaska for good, the biologist and his pilot crashed their light plane while conducting moose "management." They died. It was perfect flying weather. The pilot: one of the best.

Maybe it wasn't nonsense.

There are no coincidences and no accidents. And certainly no such thing as "luck." Eskimos convinced me of this. Somehow they know it's all orchestrated. Choreographed. Wallace Stevens's phrase "the amassing harmony" seems appropriate. That's why one must be a real person living there—"real" meaning someone who participates in the Mind at Large of the place.

I didn't. Obviously neither did my biologist friend. We were not real people on this vast featureless treeless bog afloat not on rock but frozen mud sand and water, with the wide-open sky like eternity, dreaming upon it.

So it was in the beginning. The place with no name. It had contours and living, replicating plants and animals. Still, it was nameless. The place of tundra cotton blueberrries cranberries, creatures furred feathered and finned, air stones water, and eventually human beings. Even so, it bore no name. When humans arrived it was "the place where we are." *The place that feeds and altogether takes care of us. The place of our being*.

The Navajos and Eskimos I have lived with have a term for such a place. In fact virtually all aboriginal societies use the same expression. They call the place "themselves." We are The

People. The Real People. What they mean is, *We are this place. We are the real place. This place defines us and we define it. We live because of this place and it thrives because of our ceremonies and courtesies. This place is alive—sentient, conscious, and intelligent. It has Mind. We share this mind.* (Apache Indians will tell you that "wisdom sits in places" within this mind-space.)

I repeat, the place is who we are, the people who have lived here since time immemorial. (Ethnologists might dispute this ancestral claim. Understand that their objection is meaningless; the People will tell you they've lived here forever even though you can "prove" their ancestors moved here, say, 20 generations earlier. Our western perception of time means nothing to them.)

One can take this definition a step further. The Real People don't make sense outside or removed from this place. They live by the grace of animal and plant beings and the powers of this place. They do this in part through the relationship anthropologists call "totemism," an unsatisfactory, 19th-century bourgeois academic term for what really transpires between humans and animal brethren. Totemism (see the Puffin, below), the vision quest, medicine, food— the universal intercourse is mediated through *The Place Who We Are*.

A Real Person of This Place is absolutely present and participatory, and knows how to discourse with moose bear caribou seal walrus ptarmigan tundra swan cranberries blueberries herring and, ah, salmon—the swimmer.

Oh yes, my biologist friend and I knew Yup'ik cosmology academically, theoretically. In fact he was married to a native, an Athapaskan woman (as I recall). He and I could talk *about* this place and its animal host, but we couldn't *speak them or be spoken or dreamed by them*. We had no sense whatsoever of Aldous Huxley's Mind at Large.

"I know noble accents and lucid, inescapable rhythms"—yes I can lay claim to this. But to say "I know, too, that the blackbird is involved in what I know"—is beyond me.

Which is why I write all this down. I am long retired from academia and at the point where I don't need to read newspapers or yet another good book or, frankly, sit through another Bach recital. More than anything I need to know if the Dark One is involved in what I know. I need to know if Huxley was right and there is such a thing as Mind at Large. (Perhaps this drive is related to my fourscore and ten years approaching the end.) What fascinates me is the sense

that living in the amassing harmony comes naturally when we are children. And if it does, I want it back. The only problem is, I'm not sure I can find or recognize that path, again.

> There are two paths. Neither takes you.
> Sometimes, though, lost in thought, the one
> lets you go on.

Rilke's lines mock me. (I apply them to myself, even though he wrote them with another purpose in mind.)

Bears got ears on the tundra. Moose hear us when we discuss them. This isn't anthropology; it's what I witnessed and what I was told. What I say, in the pages that follow, is an effort to come to terms with two massively different realities—mine and theirs.

Now, before me, the Dark One's imprint, offering a return, a restoration to a fugitive armed with all the wrong words. And since they were the wrong words, they were dangerous, and I was dangerous. The Dark One knew this.

Gingerly I lifted my foot, paused, and plunged into—contact!—as "a streak of reality / broke in upon this stage." (No, not fear. I want to be clear about this. The sensation was not entirely comfortable. Let me be clear about this, too.) It was a force ancient and essential to the shaping of human nature that suddenly enveloped me. I knew I was standing on the sacred ground of wildness, within the precincts of a consciousness vaster than my own. Undulating, loose-limbed wildness had passed this way just moments before, leaving its clawed imprint to devour me with the terrible, ancient question, *What is man if not the handiwork of wildness?*

I am not alone in being seized by this question. In the crashing tonnage of a sperm whale Herman Melville experienced "some colossal alien existence without which man himself would be incomplete." For Faulkner, the question loomed in the figure of an old bear in a Mississippi wilderness. "So I will have to see him," resolved the boy Isaac McCaslin, "without dread or even hope. I will have to look at him." What was this boy "born knowing and fearing too maybe but without being afraid, that [he] could go ten miles on a compass because he wanted to look at a bear none of us had ever got near enough to put a bullet in and looked at the bear and came the ten miles back on the compass in the dark"? Faulkner frames the question through one of his characters. Surely it is the oldest existential question of all. The one that refuses to be silenced by modern man's faculty of reason.

What was I born knowing and fearing (but without being afraid) that compelled me to seek out the “wild immortal spirit” of a huge bear? "Not even a mortal beast," continues Faulkner, "but an anachronism indomitable and invincible out of an old dead time."

Or is it the other way around? Did the wild immortal spirit seek me? “Lost in his freedom, Man pursues / The shadow of his images," warns Auden. And yet it need not be this way. Perhaps on some long forgotten axis of reality, it is never this way. Perhaps, as Auden writes in his next line, "the Unknown seeks the known."

The Unknown. “Hardly are those words out / When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi / Troubles my sight.” Surely this Unknown (Yeats’s Rough Beast, Eliade’s Mysterium Tremendum, Blake’s Ancient of Days), surely this is divinity? A great Middle Eastern sky god? A towering, wrathful Jehovah!

No. None of these. The Unknown is wildness.

Thoreau would discover this on the camping trip into the Maine wilderness, mentioned earlier. Alone in the swirling mists at Katahdin's summit, he felt a great energy moving near him. "What is this Titan that has hold of me?" "Contact! contact!" he shouts into the pages of his journal. "Who are we? Where are we?" The sober author of Walden was in a place not controlled by man—“untouchable, impenetrable and impalpable” (J.A. Wheeler).

The mountain awakened with "a force not bound to be kind to man," Thoreau noted chillingly. So did the untouchable, impenetrable, impalpable uncertainty that wrestled with Jesus of Nazareth for forty days and nights. (*That kneaded him as if to change his shape*.) Forty days in the presence of something language cannot reach. Carl Jung, in search of the primal mind on a trip through equatorial Africa, found himself perilously close to the same experience. "The trip revealed itself as less an investigation of primitive psychology . . . than a probing into the rather embarrassing question: What is going to happen to Jung the psychologist in the wilds of Africa?"

> This was a question I had constantly sought to evade, in spite of my intellectual intention to study the European's reaction to primitive conditions. It became clear to me that this study had been not so much an objective scientific project as an intensely

> personal one, and that any attempt to go deeper into it touched every possible sore spot in my own psychology.

"I had wanted to know how Africa would affect me, and I had found out," he muses years later to his biographer. Africa's message to the distinguished leader of the Bugishu Psychological Expedition was stark: "The primitive was a danger to me."

So it is to all of us, Dr. Jung. A scientific investigation into primitive psychology backfired into an explosive encounter with the First World of totemic consciousness, where "all things are crouched in eagerness to become something else." Where the psychologist risked becoming something changed. Jung found himself poised to know as he was known. The phrase is the Apostle Paul's and it is a bombshell. It marks the watershed separating where the wild things are from where the domesticated things are.

The First World bubbles just beneath the surface in each of us. C.G. Jung would agree. Jung would also agree that, as children, we are born into this chthonic consciousness (ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny) and, he would add, we ignore this deep, wild-visaged consciousness at the peril of our sanity. "Whenever we give up, leave behind, and forget too much, there is always the danger that the things we have neglected will return with added force." (The buried self "of fossil infancy and the festering remains of a past that refuses to die," Huxley called it, echoing Jung [Tomorrow & Tomorrow & Tomorrow, pp. 9-10].)

Notice that with wildness the fulcrum of consciousness shifts ominously. Thoreau senses the mountain thinking him even as he thinks it, an experience he finds confounding. The man who was eager to have "intelligence with the earth," who famously believed that "in wildness is the preservation of the world," had reached the border of strangeness—the nameless, boundless, ravishing consciousness of the Unknown—and found it terrifying. For Jung, "the spell of the primitive" meant chaos. There was no telling (read "no controlling") what it might do to him if it had its way. To a mind that ran like a Swiss watch, this was unacceptable. Jung closes a letter home to his wife with these words: "I do not know what Africa is really saying to me, but it speaks."

Except, I don't believe him. He knew all too well what Africa was saying. More truthfully, Jung lost his nerve and fled its searing message.

> It was as if . . . I knew that dark-skinned man who had been waiting for me for five thousand years. . . . I could not guess what string within myself was plucked at the sight of that solitary dark hunter. I knew only that his world had been mine for countless millennia.

"There was," he continued, "the danger that my European consciousness would be overwhelmed by an unexpectedly violent assault of the unconscious psyche"—the same Unknown that wrestled with Thoreau on Katahdin and Jesus in the Judean wilderness. All three confronted by "some ancient, inexhaustible, and patient intelligence" that dwelled within the landscape itself and now demanded their attention. (Only one of them had the courage to pause and inquire, "*What do you want?*" and stayed to listen to the response. Unfortunately his followers and posterity turned the encounter into a militant religion founded foursquare on the myth of good and evil.)

"Why should life tremble before the unexpected," asks Loren Eiseley recalling a mountain descent not unlike Thoreau's, "if it had not already anticipated the answer? There was no order. Or, better, what order there might be was far wilder and more formidable than that conjured up by human effort" (Eiseley, The Innocent Fox).

This, I know now, is what drove me into the wilderness that spring morning. My need to encounter this far wilder and more formidable order. The need to literally stand within its "warped indentation in the wet ground which," continues Faulkner, "while he looked at it continued to fill with water until it was level full and the water began to overflow and the sides of the print began to dissolve away."

And so I stood.

Chapter 4, The Tragedy of the Garden

With a name like mine I can be forgiven for being reminded of Moses before the burning bush. Or Jehovah reaching out and touching Adam's finger on the dome of the Sistine Chapel. Except that the conversation I joined was far older than that of a man before his god.

Long before the Middle Eastern invention of sky gods, our ancestors followed labyrinthine chambers down into the entrails of the earth to stencil their hands on smoky walls, reaching across a membrane of stone to touch and be quickened by the spirit of wildness. Chauvet, Cosquer, Gargas, Pech-Merle, Cougnac. Later Lascaux, Roc-aux-Sorciers, Trois-Frères, Altamira and La Mairie. Subterranean halls whose walls rippled with bison, horses, oxen, lions. On the other side of the equator herds of eland, kudu and springbok thunder by on open-air boulders in Namibia and Botswana. In Australia's Arnhem Land marsupial and man dream the same dream.

It is the conversation mankind has had with wildness since time immemorial. And it is not over. "Bears got ears on the tundra," Charlie says quietly, and as he does I hear ten thousand years of western history come crashing down like a thousand plates tumbling off the kitchen shelf. Ten thousand years of the terrible fiction born of the great grain and livestock-fed civilizations of the Middle East—the lie that wildness is finished—shattered by this one phrase.

The same thing happens when I witness Paul John discreetly deliver a message to the state biologist from the moose—not to interfere with them. (I would hear the same warning about radio-tagging grizzly bears, the Dark One, and about fishing for the Swimmer—the salmon.)

Living with Eskimos shattered a lot of my cultural dishware. Wildness clearly had not ended for them. The deep ecology of wildness (totemism and its corollary, the Gift) worked, or did till Moravian and Russian Orthodox missionaries showed up and informed them they were depraved and deprived, adding tuberculosis, whiskey, guns and boarding schools to drive the message home. They succeeded, though only to a small degree. Even with forced dependency on the *kass'aq* (white man) world it was clear that in some uncanny way wildness still defined them.

As in the masked dances where I watch Joe Chief, Jr., the broken-down drunk regularly locked up in the Bethel prison—watch him transform into a breathtaking creature before hundreds of Eskimos. They are thrilled. The auditorium throbs with the beat of skin drums and men singing as this felon effortlessly shapeshifts into, I swear, Le sorcier of Trois Frères.

Adam's Wall—mankind on one side, beast on the other—is demolished this evening.

Or the long story told one winter afternoon at the Bethel Senior Center by that master storyteller Maxie Altsik. Speaking Yup'ik, sometimes barely audibly, while the elders listen spellbound. I feel intrusive, as I did when I stepped into the grizzly bear print, yet the storyteller insists I tape-record him. The man is now dead, yet his voice and story remain alive on my tape and I listen from time to time to his conversation with the wild things.

Or the shamanic masks collected from villages all over the Yukon-Kuskokwim delta and displayed one week in Toksook Bay, the village of Paul John, the elder who warned the biologist. The old people gather for one last grand conversation with these wild beings whom missionaries had declared evil. Quietly, secretly they survived the missionary bonfires.

They survived because Raven's Children never truly believed in the Great Middle Eastern Combat Myth where cosmos (order) eternally fights chaos. Where good and evil "lurch, wrestle, and twist in their purposeless war." (A paradigm so embedded in me, I was named after two of its greatest champions, John Calvin and Martin Luther.) The man who told me bears "got ears" told me with great emotion that he was, of all things, Puffin. His exact words (he wrote them down), "I am a puffin . . . from my ancestral tree and in blood." "And my son is too," he added, eyeing me, just in case this Son of Adam standing before him might get the mistaken impression that Puffins might disappear anytime soon.

Does a man who is Puffin go to heaven? Does he have a soul? Did Jesus die for his sins? Come to think of it, does he have sins? Should I have explained to him that I am the man made of good and evil, born again of Middle Eastern sky gods?

In my two years I never met an Eskimo who I thought would understand the Egyptian agrarian god Ra crawling out of the chaotic undifferentiated ocean (Nun), the two locked in eternal combat thereafter. Or the Mesopotamian agrarian storm god Marduk defeating freshwater (Apsu) and saltwater (Tiamat). Or India's agrarian Indra battling the great chaos of the cosmic

waters (Vritra). Or agrarian Ahura Mazda (Zoroastrian Persia) battling evil Ahriman. Or the mighty Baal, Canaanite god of agrarian order and cursed in Hebrew scripture, pitted against the sea serpent Yam and Mot: the desert, the underworld, and death.

The reason is simple. Puffin was not created by gods of domesticated field and flock that lurch, wrestle, and twist in their purposeless war of good and evil. Which explains why the prison where I met him was incomprehensible to a man who handed me a slip of paper whereon was penciled mankind's oldest consciousness: *I am a puffin.*

"With all its eyes the animal world / beholds the Open," writes Rilke.

> Only our eyes
> are as if inverted and set all around it
> like traps at its portals to freedom.

When John Kilbuck arrived, Bible in hand, among the Children of Raven he showed them chapter and verse how they were horribly wrong—and thousands of years of Puffin, Salmon and Seal came crashing down. The Word of God (being the word of guns, whiskey, tuberculosis, matches, flour and sugar and crackers and, of course, hymns and Bible verses) clearly showed them to be the fallen children of that other agrarian sky god, Jehovah, slayer of Leviathan and Rahab (the waters) and implacable enemy of Satan, the Prince of Darkness holding them in thrall. The shamans, dances, drums, masks, labrets, tattoos, skin clothing, men's houses, sod houses and all the other weird demonic fantasies of the animal world—would have to go.

Let there be no more of this Puffin nonsense. They were human beings, Adam's sinning offspring pure and simple. They were instructed to put on trousers, send their kids to boarding school, buy a gun and fight the Good Fight—and behave like honest-to-God Anglo-Saxon men and women they were obviously meant to be.

> And did those feet
> in ancient time
> Walk upon England's mountains green?
> And was the holy Lamb of God
> On England's pleasant pastures seen?

And did the Countenance Divine
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here
Among these dark Satanic mills?

Bring me my bow of burning gold!
Bring me my arrows of desire!
Bring me my spear! O clouds unfold!
Bring me my chariot of fire!

I will not cease from mental fight,
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land.

—William Blake

From England to America to the banks of the Yukon and Kuskokwim, the Good News flowed and seethed like hot lava.

Kilbuck, a Moravian, founded his New Jerusalem in a one-room seminary where I myself taught many years later—taught the agrarian Combat Myth capped by Christ's final triumph over Satan’s evil. And on a sunny spring morning, before a throng of their hymn-singing relatives and friends, I graduated seven Eskimo men and women as warriors of the cross.

But we were no match for Raven, "The One Who Is," despite my liberal theology. Most of them figured out that "warrior of the cross," in whatever shape or form, was turning them into warriors against the old totemic ways, and in typical Eskimo fashion, without confrontation or explanation, they disappeared back to their native villages far-flung across the vast brooding solitude we call tundra. Back to bears moose caribou geese ducks ptarmigan seals walrus salmon herring cranberries blueberries and salmonberries—who listen to us.

I am talking about mankind's earliest religion: the conversation with wildness. The conversation that was counterfeited by the Middle Eastern Combat Myth of cosmic good versus evil, when Bronze and Iron Age man treacherously manufactured sky gods to certify mankind's dominion over animal kinsmen now offered up in sacrifice to the nostrils of Yahweh, Baal, Marduk and Ra.

If not sacrificed, then yoked to plow and chariot while fertilizing tilled field with manure and yielding, by force, their flesh and hide and fur and milk. And reckoned of course as property and wealth.

"There was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job," reads the Hebrew Bible. "And that man was perfect and upright, and one that feared God, and eschewed evil."

> His substance . . . was 7000 sheep, and 3000 camels, and 500 yoke of oxen, and 500 she asses, and a very great household; so that this man was the greatest of all the men of the east (Job 1:1, 3).

Contrast this with a man in the land of Raven whose name was Puffin, and that man had nothing to do with God and Satan dueling over mankind's allegiance, as they did over the man named Job. The reason, as I say, being disarmingly transparent: the Combat Myth of good and evil is irrelevant to someone not at war with the earth and its creatures.

At its core the story of Job is an ancient Semitic sermon on the righteousness of man's dominion over the earth. The book begins with the bland observation that a man owned 7000 sheep 3000 camels 500 oxen 500 asses—and ends, 42 chapters of pious rhetoric later, with the same man now owning 14000 sheep 6000 camels 1000 oxen 1000 asses.

To claim ownership of 22,000 assorted fellow creatures by divine right is a marked departure from the language of wildness. By the time the Book of Job was composed, something terrible and fantastic has happened to Middle Eastern man's conversation with the earth. In the little books we call the Bible, a sky god named Yahweh proclaims sovereignty over animals, and at the end of the day a farmer (the man made in Yahweh's image) has doubled the size of his herds.

Compare this to the little stories passed down into modern times among the Kalahari Bushmen (Ju/'hoansi), where men say they shapeshift into springbok. And at the end of the hunt (which is in fact a complex courtship), springbok becomes human and a human becomes springbok, and neither owns the other since they are endlessly translating into one another—and this is the essence of totemism.

Unlike the agrarian Hebrew Bible, where man is said to mirror God, man and animal in the Kalahari seamlessly, fluently mirror one another. "We have a sensation in our feet as we feel the

rustling of the feet of the springbok . . . making the bushes rustle. . . . We have a sensation in our face on account of the blackness of the stripe on the face of the springbok. We feel a sensation in our eyes on account of the black marks on the eyes of the springbok."

From the Kalahari to the Bering Sea there are people who still speak this bedrock language of mirrored, totemic wildness. The Danish ethnographer Knud Rasmussen heard it when he visited the Netsilik shaman Orpingalik and wheedled some "magic words" out of him. "In communicating them to me," Rasmussen recorded in his journal,

> Orpingalik uttered them in a whisper, but most distinctly and with emphasis on every word. His speech was slow, often with short pauses between the words. . . . When I had received them Orpingalik declared that these secret words which we owned in fellowship almost made us brothers. The spirits of life would regard us as one, as it were, and treat us the same if only we closely observed all the taboo that life required.

The linguist Lucy Lloyd heard it too when she casually asked a young /Xam San (Bushman) to throw away a fungus plant she had brought home to examine.

> Shortly afterwards some unusually violent storms of wind and rain occurred. Something was said to him about the weather, and */Han=kass'o* asked me if I did not remember telling him to throw the fungus away. He said he had not done so, but had "put it gently down." He explained that the fungus was "a rain's thing," and evidently ascribed the very bad weather we were then having to my having told him to "throw it away."

On hearing such claims my culture raises its eyebrows, sucks in its breath and mutters "Charming, yes, but utter fantasy." The stuff of juvenile imagination. Teddy bears and fairy tales.

At which point in the conversation I am liable to lay a yardstick on the table. Imagine the entire history of our kind being carried within those thirty-six inches. Start at zero (Australopithecines) and run the eye along inch by inch, spanning hundreds of thousands of years. Loren Eiseley called it "the immense journey." Homo habilis, H. erectus, H. sapiens. Neanderthal, Cro-Magnon, modern man—finally modern man, Homo sapiens sapiens, no different from you and me anatomically or in brain capacity or brain function. (Even fully modern man may be well over 100,000 years old.)

You and I embody the yardstick. Every inch of it. These ancestors are not bones on a shelf in a museum; they are our immanent kinsmen. We carry their genes, their errands, their psychology and spirit and consciousness.

Let me put it more vividly: they are alive in us. Not vanished, not even remote.

Stretch out your hand: they are alive in that hand. Speak: they are your voice and speech. Tell me your fears and I shall tell you mine, writes the poet Mary Oliver—and know they are alive in your fears and mine.

We carry their genius of speech and reasoning, their unparalleled manual dexterity, their dreams and host of stories that compelled them.

Scholars know this. Carl Jung spent a life-time exploring those dreams and fears (he called it the unconscious), linguists debate the origins of Homo's speech, archaeologists catalog the craftsmanship wrought by those hands—but it was I who released the genie of that wild world when I lowered my foot into its clawed signature that spring morning.

It is I and it is you and it happens to us all the time. Think of it as our birthright. Think of it as coming home.

Like the hard drive on a computer, though far more powerfully, the human mind has been whirring away for hundreds of thousands of years. Mind is cumulative and it is a storehouse; it is memory that absolutely refuses to be cut off at the knees. When a limb is lost to amputation the lost hand or foot becomes a neurological ghost; the mind insists on sensing its presence. Likewise the paleolithic mind in each of us remains a neurological ghost, although the memory I speak of is even more insistent and tenacious than the shadow of a lost limb. "Past upon past has been planted in you," exhorts Rilke, "in order out of you, like a garden, to rise."

Consider those hands on cave walls, reaching through the membrane of rock, and imagine the mind behind all this. The danger is that we fail to notice the huge and waiting consciousness that spans the octave of creation. Is this not what Charlie Kilangak (the Puffin) invoked when he told me that bears hear us? Or the Bushmen who feel the approaching springbok? And what about the fellow who refused to throw away the fungus, a "rain's thing"? Or Marie Meade recounting the Eskimo hunter and the loon eggs. "That man," they called,

> That man who was going that direction in his kayak! Why has he taken our eggs when we have fed him? Why is he taking our eggs when we have given him a long life?

The disturbing part was Marie's assurance: "It's a true story!"

It is the truth of the First World: the human yardstick up to the last one or two notches when, in Mesopotamia and several other hotspots around the world, my ancestors lurched into the Second World.

Expounding on this First World an Inuit woman put it this way: "In the very first times both people and animals lived on the earth, but there was—" I imagine her turning and glancing at Rasmussen, her interlocutor "—there was no difference between them. A person could become an animal and an animal could become a human being. . . . Sometimes they were people and other times animals, and there was," she emphasized, "no difference."

Put in the modern idiom, Nalungiaq the Netsilik is describing totemism: symmetrical consciousness. Consciousness shared perfectly between human people and what people of the First World call animal people. Which explains why Orpingalik the shaman whispered.

I have heard this consciousness affirmed repeatedly by Yup'ik Eskimos on the Alaska tundra. To put it starkly, for at least a hundred thousand years my forebears and yours spoke certain words in a whisper, knowing that "a word . . . would suddenly become powerful and what people wanted to happen could happen and nobody—" added Nalungiaq "— could explain how it was."

Nobody can explain it, unless of course we acknowledge that consciousness in the First World was convergent between mankind and the natural world, particularly the animal world. A natural world that was wild: it is essential that we understand this. Not domesticated, not tamed, not owned—absolutely wild.

How different from the consciousness of the Second World. Picture René Descartes in dressing gown and slippers seated comfortably before a fire amusing himself with the puzzle he has toyed with for years: How do I know anything at all? Slowly, painstakingly the parlor philosopher strips away all knowledge ("I resolved to doubt all things," he effectively wrote), like peeling layers off an onion, till about him on the floor lie scattered the facts of a lifetime. Discarded now as illusions. (It is a courageous act to disassemble one's mind like that.) Just

before tumbling headlong into madness he finds what he's after. The simple yet perfect truth blazes forth: "I think therefore I am." Here is the Word, the Logos upon which he will rebuild the modern mind. Descartes has collapsed all knowledge and thought and being upon himself. With this bold declaration he has laid the cornerstone of modern philosophy.

For years I have hunted for the crackup of our ancestral, symmetrical, convergent consciousness—the shattering of the flawless sheet of glass. When the mind that thought in conversation with the earth collapsed into the mind that now observed the earth. Mankind apart. *Cogito ergo sum* distills it in purest, crystalline form. Descartes did not originate the crackup of course; he merely refined what he inherited from the Greeks.

Socrates, Plato's teacher, illustrates the point. The Socratic method. We're all more or less familiar with it: teaching by questioning. But it is more radical than this; it is a clue to the beginning of the modern mind. The teacher would have his students recite truth and mystery and perforce they would recite myth: the ancient thing, the unquestioned thing, the thing that got its power through the telling, the repeating—the power within the words themselves. The thing that never happened; *it just is*.

Now Socrates questioned it. "How do you know?" Over and over he sowed doubt. They were dumbfounded, his students. There was no response. It is said he created an uproar in Athens.

"How do I know anything at all?" poses the philosopher gazing into the coals of his fire. Socrates and Aristotle had not journeyed far enough into Rilke's "nightmare of knowing" for this man's tastes. "I resolved to assume that everything that ever entered into my mind was no more true than the illusions of my dreams." I rejected "as absolutely false everything as to which I could imagine the least ground of doubt." "Like one who walks alone and in the twilight, I resolved to go so slowly and to use so much circumspection in all things that if my advance was but very small at least I guarded myself well from falling."

Good to go slowly and be circumspect—but it was too late. The fall had already taken place. It happened long before the Greeks. I refer to the fall from the First World. I am talking about Adam and Eve tumbling into agrarian consciousness and discovering the shame of their naked totemic selves. I am talking about the even older Mesopotamian epic wherein the wild man Enkidu is tricked out of animal kinship to join the demigod superman Gilgamesh.

"Then the eyes of both were opened," it is said of Adam and Eve, "and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves." The ancient texts likewise say the wilderness man Enkidu "became aware of himself" after being seduced by the temple "harlot" Shamhat, sent by Gilgamesh. "When he turned his attention to his animals, the gazelles saw Enkidu and darted off. The wild animals distanced themselves from his body."

What the Bible calls the fall of man obscures a deeper, more troubling fall: mankind setting its face against the wild things to make itself "master and possessor of nature" (the phrase is Descartes'). The fall is the wild man Enkidu, "offspring of mountains, who eats grasses with gazelles," transforming into *adama*—meaning literally arable, cultivable land.

Ha'adam (Adam) = farmer. Except, the man we call Adam didn't begin as *ha'adam*. The Yahwist author of the Hebrew creation story (considered older than the Elohist and Priestly versions) silently acknowledges that Adam originally knew a different consciousness—as if he knew a different species of language. Although what that was is obscure. The Gilgamesh narrative, possibly derived from older Semitic or Sumerian sources, is more revealing. With Darwin and archaeology and ethnology the answer becomes clearer: Adam's first consciousness was wide open to the boundless, seething consciousness surrounding him, free of good and evil (which apparently were irrelevant). Like Enkidu, the biblical pre-*adama* spoke with Serpent and the Mind of the Earth that walked "at the time of the evening breeze."

> Not only does adam cultivate *adama*, he is fashioned by God out of the land he farms. *adama* is the beginning and the end of human life. As the first human was derived from arable soil, so all humans are destined to return to it at death. adam is thus linked to *adama* in two important respects: *adama* is the stuff out of which adam is made and is also the primary object of his labor (Hiebert 1996).

Adam (*adama*) is a colossal, mind-blowing exercise in forgetting the yardstick—our wildness. The novelist Daniel Quinn calls it the Great Forgetting.

"You are beautiful, Enkidu," whisper the gods; "you are become" like one of us.

> You are beautiful, Enkidu, . . . like a god
> Why do you gallop around the wilderness with the wild beasts?

> Come, let me bring you into Uruk-Haven,
> to the Holy Temple, the residence of [the gods] Anu and Ishtar.

The words are given to Shamhat, yet they are the beckoning call of all sky gods wherever the *adama* heresy prevails. (Witness the Mayan "Dawn of Life," the *Popol Vuh*.)

And "Yahweh, God, sent him out of the Garden of Eden to cultivate the arable land from which he was [not] taken." As if to seal Adam's Great Forgetting of that First World of totemic origins, Yahweh placed "the cherubim and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life" (Genesis 3:23-4).

We have come a long way from the hand reaching into the entrails of the earth to touch the keepers of the game, to the hand reaching skyward in the dome of the Sistine Chapel to touch a hand not in the least totemic or chthonic. Being merely as Michelangelo depicts Him: a man, nothing more. A tragic redundancy whose only creation after all was the cunning sin named *adama*: domestication. A landscape "plotted and pieced—fold, fallow, and plough" (GM Hopkins).

Imagine a universal consciousness of wildness. Think of it as a kind of supercontinent of mind. A Pangaea of Wildness. There are no sky gods in this commonwealth, no Combat Myth of good versus evil. Reigning supreme are totemism (animal kinship and consciousness) and the Gift (the knowledge born of the womb and re-affirmed by totemism that mankind is taken care of).

Imagine that in the Middle East (not limited to the Middle East, though perhaps more pronounced here than anywhere else) a fault line forms deep within this consciousness. A rift—a doubt. "How do you know you're taken care of?"

Rilke revisits the doubt. ("The heavy thing," Mary Oliver calls it.) Rilke, the brooding solitary who gazed upon the womb-like totemic place known to child and animal alike, yet could not quite enter. In the Eighth Elegy he interrogates the dark angel with flaming sword that bars his way. "Who has turned us around like this, so that always, no matter what we do, we're in the stance of someone just departing"—departing the Open "that lies so deep in the animal's face." He presses on. "Where we see Future it [animal] sees Everything and itself in Everything and healed forever." The flawless sheet of glass.

The answer comes to him in "The Unfinished Elegy." Its name is Fear. Its signature is Doubt. It's the question that shattered the totemic looking glass in the Gilgamesh Epic: "You are beautiful, Enkidu, like a god. Why do you gallop around the wilderness with the wild beasts?" The answer given to Rilke by the angel guarding the Open is equally devastating and uncannily similar to the words of the temptress: "When the child measured himself against and distinguished himself from the You unselfishly created over there."

Shamhat's question, like that of Socrates and Descartes (and I confess, the question I implicitly drilled into my Eskimo seminarians), is the cold draft that "makes its way in through the cracks." The question that separates us from the You unselfishly created over there. The question which, once released—like the genie—can never be coaxed back into the enchanted lamp.

Am I truly taken care of? Will the animal bosses yield their brethren to me? Will geese return? Will herds of caribou and the moose up in the Kilbuck range and salmon in the Kuskokwim, and seals come back to the coastal waters? I asked these questions of a Yup'ik Eskimo. He answered squarely in the affirmative.

"Because I need them!" he exclaimed, as though nothing could be more obvious.

The man's answer is hilarious. Like Paul John telling the biologist that moose listen when we speak of them.

The cleft deepens. A new template forms, broken off from the Mother Continent, working at cross purposes to it. From Lascaux to Michelangelo the story of human consciousness is the tension between these two great continental plates slowly grinding past one another: wild (the Gift) and domesticated (the Controlled).

Chapter 5, *Pisuk·a·ciaq*: "The Little Walker"

One of *adama's* tasks was to name the animals. (Listen! The river of language is about to change direction.) "Out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every fowl of the air and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them" (Genesis 2:19). We must place Adam's seismic achievement within the context of the yardstick. Le cheval ("the horse") by the score shapeshift across the membrane of stone we call Lascaux. "Sometimes they were people and other times animals, and there was no difference." In the voice of an Inuit woman we hear the Logos betrayed by Adam. Only against this background can we properly appreciate Adam's revolutionary and treasonous act. *Adama*, First Agrarian Man, finds himself caught between two massive continental plates now, just now, beginning to move in opposite directions. The tension between wild and domesticated is tremendous. Literally untenable.

Adam's god screams at him to name them. It is modern man's defining moment.

Behold the Fall. Before it, for hundreds of thousands of years, language flowed from loose-limbed, undulating wildness moving like a flickering flame across rock walls and open-air boulders, moving like a Dark One in the autumn snows of Yellowstone Park.

Like hydrostatic pressure carving the chambers of the embryonic heart, language welled up within the womb of wildness to carve the mind of man.

The anthropologist Keith Basso witnessed this on the day he blurted out to an elderly Apache, "What is wisdom?" "Dudley [Patterson] greets my query with a faintly startled look that recedes into a quizzical expression." "It's in these places," slowly the old man replies. Then repeats himself: "Wisdom sits in places." This makes no sense to Basso. "Yes, but what is it?"

This time the man says nothing. He merely removes his hat, "rests it on his lap and gazes into the distance. As he continues to look away, the suspicion grows that I have offended him, that my question about wisdom has exceeded the limits of propriety and taste."

Several minutes tick by; the conversation shifts to other topics. But the old man hasn't forgotten Basso's question. "Wisdom sits in places," he begins once more. "It's like water that never dries up. You need to drink water to stay alive, don't you? Well, you also need to drink from places. You must remember everything about them. You must learn their names…. Then your mind will become smoother and smoother. . . . You will walk a long way and live a long time. You will be wise, people will respect you."[1]

The names make your mind smoother. Names like *Tsee Ligai Dah Sidile* (White rocks lie above in a compact cluster). *Tsee Bika Tu Yaahiline* (Water flows down on a succession of flat rocks). *T'iis Bitl'ah Tu 'Oline* (Water flows inward under a cottonwood tree). *Tsee Hadigaiye* (Line of white rocks extends up and out). "The names of all these places are good," affirms Nick Thompson. "They make you remember how to live right, so you want to replace yourself again."

Something strange transpires here. Basso is pinging another dimension of knowledge. "What sort of reasoning supports the assertion that 'wisdom sits in places'? Or that 'wisdom is like water'? Or that 'drinking from places,' whatever that is, requires knowledge of place-names and stories of past events?" Maybe, the suspicion grows in him, "—maybe I have gotten in over my head." Dudley Patterson's oration on wisdom "caught me off guard and has left me feeling unmoored. For a split second I imagine myself a small uprooted plant bouncing crazily through the air on a whirlwind made of ancient Apache tropes."

Tropes, Professor Basso? You think these people are talking in figures of speech, do you? How about when Annie Peaches (age 77 in 1978) further confounds you with: "The land is always stalking people. The land makes people live right. The land looks after us"?

Truth be told, Professor Basso doesn't know what to make of this species of language. He admits he's mystified—and that's the mark of a good scholar. "Are these claims structured in metaphorical terms," he wonders aloud, "or are they . . . somehow to be interpreted literally?"

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[1] "Once in is life a man ought to concentrate his mind upon the remembered earth, I believe. He ought to give himself up to a particular landscape in his experience, to look at it from as many angles as he can, to wonder about it, to dwell upon it. He ought to imagine that he touches it with his hands at every season and listens to the sounds that are made upon it. He ought to imagine the creatures there and all the faintest motions of the wind. He ought to recollect the glare of noon and all the colors of the dawn and dusk" N. Scott Momaday, The Way to Rainy Mountain, p. 83.

“She glided beautifully along,” a San (Bushman) woman is quietly telling an American with a notepad. We are standing in a parched village in the Kalahari Desert, eavesdropping on ethnologist Megan Biesele as she interviews a woman about Python Woman. Python Woman, *G!kon//'amdima*, happens to be the beautiful, sensual daughter-in-law of the creator *Kaoxa*. It would not be too much of a stretch to call her the Bushman equivalent of the biblical Eve crossed with the Virgin Mary. Like the Blessed Virgin among the devout, *G!kon//'amdima* is considered the ideal woman and very real.

“She glided beautifully along and sat down,” the woman is saying, “because she was a person, an elephant girl. Because a python is an elephant."

Something isn't right here; what we just heard is nonsense. “How can that be?” protests Biesele. “I thought a python was one thing and an elephant was another thing!” (Listen ! The river of language is about to be restored to its original direction.) "Yes, that's true," cheerfully agrees the woman, “— but people say that a python is an elephant anyway."

Basso and Biesele bear witness to another dimension of language and names. Where language and names sit in places—a conscious, sentient story resides there. Where *G! kon//'amdima* is not just Python Woman and Elephant Girl, she is also Beautiful Antbear Woman and Human Maiden and, for her final showstopper, she transforms into steenbok—an eerie fluidity of identity resides there.

Recall in Lucy Lloyd’s Logos it was perfectly reasonable to "throw away" a plant fungus, to */ Han=kass'o’s* distress. In the Logos of this San (Bushman) it was not a clear-cut, isolated object but a smear of probability—a force field of wind and rain and storm (and who knows what else) converging for the moment within this serene presence best called, after all, a "rain's thing." Vague, full of potential. Energy, after all.

Was not the prudent course to put this ravishing, breathing, sentient Logos "gently down"?

Before the invention of *adama*, the ravishing, breathing Logos had no name. How could it? Just a vague phrase. Adam gave it a name. Caught in the shearing forces of wild versus domesticated, Adam survived by giving every single living thing a name—and to this day we, his cultural heirs, have not stopped. "And whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof" (Genesis 2:19). Think of the new Yahwist Logos as a retina becoming

detached from the vascularized choroid of the World to become, now, isolated and necrotic by the world's disappearance.

On that day totemism vanished from consciousness, just as it fled Enkidu the hour he became "aware of himself." Imagine this ancient chthonic consciousness as the "distant heart" Rilke refers to.

> Who sings the distant heart
> that dwells whole at the core of all things?
> Its great pulse is parceled out among us
> into tiny beatings. And its great pain
> is, like its great jubilation, too much for us.
> So again and again we tear ourselves loose
> and are only mouth. But all at once
> the great heartbeat secretly breaks in on us
> so that we scream . . .
> and then are being, transformation, visage.
>
> — Rilke

Who sings that great Logos that dwells whole at the core of all things? Enkidu did. So did, frankly, the Yup'ik Paul John in the room full of fish & game managers. Best of all, so do we all as children. I must emphasize this. The great heartbeat woven into us, deep and magical.

Seen against this background, the new Yahwist Logos was more truthfully a counter-Logos, since it flowed in the wrong direction. I am not the first to point this out. When Adam named the animals, contended Hegel in his Jena lectures, "he annihilated them in their existence as beings." In this act, *adama* "had created his destiny and taken leave of his kindred" (The Unexpected Universe, pp. 164-5).

Nearly two centuries later, in the 1997 Tanner Lectures on Human Values at Princeton University, Nobel laureate John Coetzee unpacked Hegel's cryptic observation. Coetzee did so through the voice of a fictional alter-ego, Elizabeth Costello, who in this scene is giving a seminar on animal rights. "When we divert the current of feeling that flows between ourself and the animal into words," she explains to her audience, "we abstract it forever from the animal. Thus the poem [when it is merely descriptive of the animal] is not a gift to its object, as

the love poem is. *It falls within an entirely human economy in which the animal has no share*" (emphasis mine).

Rilke's "distant heart dwelling whole at the core of all things" is, for Wallace Stevens, "the essential poem at the center of things." Two breathtaking visions of the supercontinent of consciousness I keep referring to: the Pangaea of Wildness. The universal intercourse Paul John and Charlie Kilangak still participated in, albeit tenuously, as did the Apache Dudley Patterson, the San (Bushman) */Han=kass'o*, and Megan Biesele's Ju/'hoansi storytellers.

It is "as if the central poem became the world / and the world the central poem," writes Stevens, carefully taking soundings while peering through the fog-bank which, since Adam, has hidden this supercontinent from western consciousness. "We seek," he probes further,

> the poem of pure reality, untouched
> By trope or deviation, straight to the word,
> Straight to the transfixing object, to the object
>
> At the exactest point at which it is itself,
> Transfixing by being purely what it is . . .

This is where things get—may I use this word?—weird. *The poem of pure reality takes us, in fact, to something vague, something undefined in space and time, undefined yet filled with possibility*.

Stevens's poem of pure reality takes us to Knud Rasmussen's field notes from the Fifth Thule Expedition to Netsilik Eskimos in the early 1920s. Here he carefully recorded a list of ancient shamanic phrases whispered in his ear by a man named Orpingalik, mentioned earlier. Born to an Eskimo and speaking her language, Rasmussen finds much of what Orpingalik is telling him, unintelligible. A kind of verbal flotsam and jetsam cast up by the oceanic Logos of Sedna's world—the world of shamans lowering themselves through a hole in the ice to comb the tangled hair of the Keeper of Walrus and Seal. A world the dismayed ethnographer finds is growing increasingly remote and opaque, unable to withstand the counter current of rifles, scripture, sewing needles and shiny thimbles, and tuberculosis. The ancient totemic retina becoming unstitched.

This is what Rasmussen recorded in his notebook. (I have omitted the Netsilik words. These, below, are the literal English translations.) Notice that all the phrases are vague—intentionally, it seems—and spoken so as to be barely heard.

the jumper
the little walker
one who walks with his head bent down
the penetrating one
the flat one
the one who snorts loudly
the little one furnished with fangs
the one furnished with fangs
the one that gives soup

Something compels us to go over the list again, as though we missed something. Perhaps the murkiness of the phrases testifies to an ancient world going blind?

No, we missed nothing. The Logos of wildness is always ambiguous. Except "ambiguous" is not a good word. Take, for example, the phrase, *pisuk·a·ciaq*. (I have no idea how it's pronounced.) It literally translates as "the little walker." Rasmussen notes in the margin that it means "fox." (In fact he translates all of Orpingalik's phrases, believing he is clarifying what each refers to.)

Thus *pisuk·a·ciaq (Netsilik) = the little walker (Rasmussen's literal English translation) = fox (Rasmussen's English meaning).*

Had he consulted the German philosopher Martin Heidegger before adding his translations, Rasmussen might have realized these phrases are incapable of being clarified. Incapable of being made concrete. Incapable of being rendered into an object at the exactest point at which it is itself (to quote Wallace Stevens).

There is no exact point at which it is itself. Savor this for a few moments. I am going to repeat what I just said. *There is no exact point at which it is itself!*

Consider Heidegger. "Language alone," he wrote, "brings *what is*, as something *that is*, into the open for the first time. . . . *Language, by naming beings for the first time, first brings beings to word and to appearance.*" Notice: Unlike Adam and Rasmussen (Adam's intellectual heir), Orpingalik didn't name a creature. *In fact he wasn't trying to name a creature! Instead he invoked what physicists call a "field theory" of possibility*.

Thus, now corrected, *pisuk·a·ciaq* **=** *the little walker* **≠** *fox!*

The Logos of wildness is always capable of being anywhere (omnipresent) and anything (plenipotent). A smear of possibility and probability. Interestingly, the same phenomenon defines the world of quantum physics.

Nobel laureates tell us that subatomic matter, such as electrons, exist in all possible places and all possible forms at once (not unlike the Bushman's "rain's thing"). Only by an act of *measurement* (the operative word) do electrons and other forms of subatomic matter/energy become frozen into a single observable state (not unlike the linguist's "plant fungus"). Physicists have a name for this eerie omnipresence and plenipotency; they call it superposition. (Werner Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle and Niels Bohr's principle of Complementarity were early expressions of superposition.)

We have entered the world of Alice in Quantum Wonderland. Whereas many consider Lewis Carroll's Alice to be nonsense, this is not. (Whether quantum reality squares with our convictions or intuition of how the world works, of cause and effect, of before and after, matters not one whit. Physicists assure us that quantum reality is the Real reality. Yes, they may argue over details, such as whether electrons are both particles and waves or more like the vibrating strings of a violin, but few dispute the basic principles, like Heisenberg's Uncertainty and Bohr's Complementarity.)

The farther we travel down the rabbit hole of theoretical physics the curiouser and curiouser things become. Thus physicists know that the captured behavior of this endlessly transfiguring renegade, this eternally unfathomable elementary particle, is very much up to the observer. That is, whoever happens to be evaluating the performance of that particle with an instrument of any sort. Bizarre as it sounds, the instrument of measurement might be merely a thought. A word. A phrase.

(Let's pause here. Take a break. Maybe go outside and have a smoke, come back in and take another look at this.)

Quantum reality and the reality of wildness are but two halves of the same coin. So I have come to believe. Indeed I suspect wildness is but another name for quantum reality operating at the level of human experience, human phenomenology. The key is the untouchable, impenetrable, impalpable uncertainty that informs both the quantum world and the place where the wild things are, to borrow a phrase from Maurice Sendak.

"Where the Wild Things Are" is classic Sendak: disturbing, provocatively illustrated, and brilliant. Like his other stories, the tale is so short you could copy it out on the back of an envelope. It's about young Max who dressed up in his wolf suit one evening and "made mischief of one kind and another." Sent to bed without supper, the unrepentant Max (still in wolf garb) finds himself tumbling through a quantum rabbit hole into the realm where the wild things dwell—the ambiguous monsters of childhood. Totemic Max is ecstatic. "And now," he exclaims, "let the wild rumpus start!"

Max is right. Anyone who dives into the rabbit hole of quantum physics or wildness is in for a wild rumpus. And I can think of no better place to begin than the living room of a physicist named Lothar Wolfgang Nordheim.

This is a true story. Hang on tight. Professor Nordheim and his wife have just finished entertaining a dozen guests for dinner, and they're all sitting around the drawing room chatting amiably (the men quite possibly smoking cigars). They decide to play the silly old parlor game Twenty Questions. (Whose rules are: Someone leaves the room. The group in the room chooses a word, a single word, which the person who is "It" must guess upon re-entering. The interrogator is allowed just twenty questions, whereupon he must hazard a guess at the word. The people in the room reply to any of the twenty questions with only a yes or no.)

What's noteworthy about this game is the people playing it that evening Many were theoretical physicists (including Edward Teller, father of the hydrogen bomb, and Princeton's John Archibald Wheeler). When Professor Wheeler's turn came, he recalled years later, they took an awfully long time to call him back. When they finally did he noticed everyone was grinning.

"Is it animal?" "No," came the response, with a chuckle around the room.

Vegetable?
No.
Mineral?
Yes.
Green?
No.
White, perhaps?
Yes.

By now the merriment had stopped. "I found the answerer was taking longer and longer to respond. He would think and think."

"Finally, I knew, I had to chance it, propose a definite word." "Is it cloud?" A few moments of careful pondering, and the answer came back affirmative. "Then everyone burst out laughing."

Wheeler included this story in his opening lecture at the Seventeenth Nobel Conference (1981), a lecture he called, "Bohr, Einstein, and the Strange Lesson of the Quantum." He used it to illustrate how we live in what he called a participatory universe—how we literally shape reality by the questions we put to the universe.

Wheeler entered a room where the dial of reality had been re-set according to quantum principles. There was no word in the room, just a seamless consciousness of every possible word. His dinner companions had reversed the conventional epistemology. "I, entering, thought the room contained a definite word. In actuality the word was developed step by step through the questions I raised, as the information about the electron is brought into being by the experiment that the observer chooses to make; that is, by the kind of registering equipment that he puts into place. Had I asked different questions, or the same questions in a different order, I would have ended up with a different word, as the experimenter would have ended up with a different story for the doings of the electron."

Match this with what I am calling the language of wildness. When Wheeler summoned the word "cloud" into being out of the flux of endless possibility, everyone in the room laughed. When Adam called the word for each animal into being out of the flux of endless possibility, everyone vanished. So Hegel pointed out. The jumper, little walker, the one who walks with his head bent down, penetrating one, flat one, one who snorts loudly, little one furnished with

fangs, one furnished with fangs, and the one that gives soup—poof!— disappeared. They vanished because Adam, unlike Wheeler, occupied a chamber thick with totemic consciousness. Seamless convergent consciousness. That ancient, flawless sheet of glass.

They disappeared when Adam awakened the genie known to physics as the problem of "measurement." What appeared was a new reality, a special case of little walker we call fox, the captured behavior you and I interpret as unremarkable, day-to-day reality.

We are wrong; it is most remarkable. By the transformative powers of language, Adam and his offspring re-cast something existing along one axis of fact (little walker) into something now existing along a different axis of fact (fox). What we perceive as fox is more properly the end point of an event we participate in creating.

"All that's named is past and each being / invents itself at the last second / and will hear nothing" (Rilke)—a line that could have been written by John Archibald Wheeler or his former colleague, David Bohm.

Bohm would have described "the little walker" as follows.

> The best image . . . is perhaps that of the flowing stream, whose substance is never the same. On this stream, one may see an ever-changing pattern of vortices, ripples, waves, splashes, etc., which evidently have no independent existence as such. Rather, they are abstracted from the flowing movement [the little walker], arising and vanishing in the total process of the flow. Such transitory subsistence as may be possessed by these abstracted forms ["fox"] implies only a relative independence or autonomy of behaviour.[2]

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[2] "Of course, modern physics states that actual streams (e.g., of water) are composed of atoms, which are in turn composed of "elementary particles," such as electrons, protons, neutrons, etc. For a long time it was thought that these latter are the 'ultimate substance' of the whole of reality, and that all flowing movements, such as those of streams, must reduce to forms abstracted from the motions through space of collections of interacting particles. However, it has been found that even the 'elementary particles' can be created, annihilated and transformed, and this indicates that not even these can be ultimate substances but, rather, that they too are relatively constant forms, abstracted from some deeper level of movement"—David Bohm, from *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*.

For centuries native people have been trying to explain this "indivisible and un-analysable wholeness in flowing movement" to people like Megan Biesele, sitting cross-legged in the dirt, finding herself forced to choose between two cross-currents of fact.[3] Both real, mind you. Both there. Neither one fiction or fantasy. Each accessed through language. Above all, I repeat, through language.

Along the axis of wildness practiced by her hosts, the ethnologist discovers that python and elephant are a distinction without a difference. This does not match Biesele's western axis of reality, whereby python and elephant are two absolutely separate and distinct creatures, related only in the distant, irretrievable evolutionary past.

To her credit, Biesele suspends her cultural axis-of-fact and enters into the joy of mankind's oldest conversation. "I felt there was a kind of luminous equivalence—that is the only way I can put it—about the attitudes held toward the physical beings of these animals in their roles as heroines."

I believe we can make a quantum leap beyond Biesele's notion of luminous equivalence. Along the San axis of reality, python, elephant, antbear, human, and steenbok exist in superposition, which is another way of saying they exist in wildness. Reading between the lines of Biesele's field notes, the San appear to know that objects "ain't nothin' until I calls 'em." (At the close of the lecture on "Bohr, Einstein, and the Strange Lesson of the Quantum," John Archibald Wheeler asked his audience to picture three umpires comparing notes in a barroom. "One umpire says, 'I calls 'em as I sees 'em.' The next umpire says, 'I calls 'em as they really are.' The third one says, 'They ain't nothin' until I calls 'em.'")

Using the game of musical chairs as an analogy, things ain't nothin' until one stops the music, thereby capturing wildness in a discrete, often animal, form—whereupon of course it ceases to be wildness. (Rilke describes the process as "duration squeezed from transience.")

What's arresting about the San woman's narrative is that she speaks as if the music is always playing: "People say that a python is an elephant." Indeed, during the course of her interviews Biesele discovers that, generally speaking, the San refrain from "calling 'em." The result being (to invoke Wheeler's phrase once more) "they ain't nothin.'" (Which, as I say, is

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[3] Bohm, from *Wholeness and the Implicate Order.*

another way of saying they are everything. They remain part of the "unnamed shifting architecture of the universe," as Eiseley put it.)

"Speech," "tree-water," "sand surface," "fire medicine," and "soft throat." Biesele found hundreds of these words and phrases. It's interesting that she called them "respect words." "Ordinary implements, parts of the face and body, items of clothing, huts, encampments, areas of land—all have respect words associated with them." So many, in fact, that they form "almost a second language."

> Working on these words one day with informants, I asked for the respect terms for various animals. We began with carnivores. The terms for these were given as I asked for them. When we got to the great meat animals, however, I no longer needed to ask. The respect words for these were reeled off in rapid succession, in a kind of litany form I had heard used previously for the meat animals' regular names.

What Rasmussen discovered in pocket change in the high Arctic, Biesele found in abundance on the Kalahari. The currency of the original Logos. The remains of the First World. Oblique, courteous, powerful. Biesele listened, entranced, to the San invoking "night," "moonless night," "night medicine," "cries in the night," "calf muscles of nightfall" (or just "calf muscles"), and "jealousy"—each a metaphor for lion, Biesele tells us.

No. Let me repeat, this is not metaphor. Biesele, Basso, Rasmussen, and Lloyd witness a language antedating metaphor. In the First World of our distant forbears, metaphor is out of the question. Although they wouldn't have phrased it this way, they knew the universe forbids measurement and abstraction. They knew that it insists on full participation, as in birth and death and the experience we name "life" that happens in between. The living and intelligent Real I have been calling wildness insists on the joy or terror or, if nothing else, the courtesy of full presence. Behold Jesus and the Logos of the Judean desert. Behold the biblical Jacob and the Logos of a place he named Peniel, translated to mean, "I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved" (Genesis 32:30, KJV). Behold Jung and the Logos of Africa, Thoreau and Katahdin, McCaslin (Faulkner) and Bear, Ahab (Melville) and Whale, Hiawatha and Shells.

As he wrestled with this tremendous Presence, "Jacob asked him, and said, Tell me, I pray thee, thy name. And he said, Wherefore is it that thou dost ask after my name? And he blessed him there" (Genesis 32:29, KJV).

Ah, *Wherefore is it that thou dost ask after my name?* The problem of measurement.

Melville's Ishmael is stymied by the same impasse. "Ishmael first tries to get at the mystery of the white whale through the science of taxonomy. He heaps up fact after fact about whales. . . . The limit of his method are reached, however, and still Moby Dick remains sovereignly unknown, uncomprehended. . . . The quest, to be successful, must risk the observer's life" (Gerber & McFadden).

"Nothing is like something else," declares Rilke, master of language. "What is not wholly / alone with itself, what thing can really be / expressed?" So much for metaphor. As for names:

> We name nothing. All we can do
> is tolerate, acquaint ourselves
> with a single fact: here a sudden brilliance
> or there a glimpse momentarily grazes us
> as if it were precisely that in which resides
> what our life is. Whoever resists
> will have no world. Whoever grasps too much
> will overlook the infinite.

"I feel myself more trusting in the nameless," confesses Rilke, as though acknowledging the Pleistocene ancestors who seem to brood within us, silently reproaching us about an archaic past we cannot shed. Except, it's not past. It's hardwired like DNA into every child, just as it was into Paul John, Charlie Kilangak, Marie Meade, Orpingalik, Nalungiaq, */Han=kass'o*, Dudley Patterson, Annie Peaches, and the host of Ju/'hoansi interviewed by Megan Biesele.

Contrast the gospel of "trusting the nameless," with, "I, entering, thought the room contained a definite word." Imagine this as Adam's confession. It is his singular achievement. With it a stunning new consciousness and language are born. The Man Who Names the Animals controls and owns them (see the story of Job, above), although this is just one dimension of a larger cataclysm. Suddenly within the firmament of Paleolithic consciousness a black hole has appeared—the once unthinkable abyss of "mankind apart."

"Right from the start," reflects linguist Andrea Moro in *I Speak, Therefore I Am,* "we see that thinking about language is a complicated, stormy, and mysterious business. For now, however,

one certainty is clearly striking: however much veiled in mystery, the ability to name things is . . . the real big bang that pertains to us."

I disagree. It wasn't a big bang. What we see when we probe the Paleolithic is the birth of a voracious black hole within a universe of seamless, convergent consciousness—what I call the flawless sheet of glass. Nor was it a matter of *ability*, Professor Moro; it was a *choice, t*he choice that launched the long loneliness of modernity. The choice that haunted Loren Eiseley, though he never clearly understood its provenance.

In "The Innocent Fox," Eiseley recalls an encounter with a fox pup on a remote stretch of seashore. Awaiting dawn while hunkered down against the bleached hull of a wrecked fishing vessel, Eiseley is startled to see the tiny ears of a fox pup emerge from a den beneath the timbers. Too young to know fear, the pup picks up an old bone and makes it clear he wants to play. (Evidently its parents were elsewhere.) "It was not a time for human dignity," cautions Eiseley. "It was a time only for the careful observance of amenities written behind the stars.

> Gravely I arranged my forepaws while the puppy whimpered with ill-concealed excitement. I drew the breath of a fox's den into my nostrils. On impulse, I picked up clumsily a whiter bone and shook it in teeth that had not entirely forgotten their original purpose. Round and round we tumbled for one ecstatic moment. We were the innocent thing in the midst of the bones, born in the egg, born in the den, born in the dark cave with the stone ax close to hand, born at last in human guise to grow coldly remote in the room with the rifle rack upon the wall.

He called it a miracle. "I had seen the universe as it begins for all things. It was, in reality, a child's universe, a tiny and laughing universe. I rolled the pup on his back and ran, literally ran for the nearest ridge. The sun was half out of the sea, and the world was swinging back to normal. The adult foxes would be already trotting home" (Eiseley, p. 64).

A universe of boundless trust. A child's universe. Can mankind, he wonders, ever again experience "that mood of childhood innocence in which he talked successfully to all things living but had no power and no urge to harm"?[4] Adding, "It is worth at least a wistful thought

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[4] Paleolithic societies, living in symmetrical consciousness as I have described, defined hunting and fishing and gathering as gift- giving by animal kin, not as harm or violence. I heard this repeatedly affirmed when living with Yup'ik Eskimos.

that someday the porpoise may talk to us and we to him. It would break, perhaps, the long loneliness that has made man a frequent terror and abomination even to himself."[5]

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* These are the first five chapters of a book that will be at least six chapters long. I am presently working on chapter 6.

November 15, 2017

[5] This is the source of my use of the phrase, "long loneliness."