

Travelling Distances

Brece Honeycutt

20-9-22

Musings on naming & knowing & community in the natural world

Robin Wall Kimmerer, botanist, enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation and author of *Braiding Sweetgrass* notes, “Names are the way we humans build relationships, not only with each other but with the living world.”

A french ethnobotanist noted, ‘Because gathering means knowing the plant, knowing the season. A plant that is no longer looked at or named no longer exists’.

Amitav Ghosh posits in his book, *The Nutmeg’s Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* the following:

This is the great burden that now rests upon writers, artists, filmmakers, and everyone else who is involved in the telling of stories: to us falls the task of imaginatively restoring agency and voice to nonhumans. As with all the most important artistic endeavors in human history, this is a task that is at once aesthetic and political—and because of the magnitude of the crisis that besets the planet, it is now freight with the most pressing moral urgency.

‘Poetry is a tool for navigating transformation and we need poets and poetry to make community and inner change’ states poet Joy Harjo. (*Poet Warrior: A Memoir*, p.108). Harjo, member of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation and former Poet Laureate of the United States.

A few extracts from her poem, *For Calling the Spirit Back from Wandering the Earth in its Human Feet*,

Put down that bag of potato chips, that white bread, that bottle of pop.

Turn off that cellphone, computer, and remote control.

Open the door, then close it behind you.

Take a breath offered by friendly winds. They travel the earth gathering essences of plants to clean.

Give it back with gratitude.

If you sing it will give your spirit lift to fly to the stars' ears and back.

Acknowledge this earth who has cared for you since you were a dream planting itself precisely within your parents' desire.

Do not hold regrets.

Call upon the help of those who love you. These helpers take many forms: animal, element, bird, angel, saint, stone, or ancestor.

Welcome your spirit back from its wandering. It may return in pieces, in tatters. Gather them together. They will be happy to be found after being lost for so long.

Your spirit will need to sleep awhile after it is bathed and given clean clothes.

Now you can have a party. Invite everyone you know who loves and supports you. Keep room for those who have no place else to go.

Make a giveaway, and remember, keep the speeches short.

Then, you must do this: help the next person find their way through the dark.

Sources:

Amitav Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), pg. 204.

Joy Harjo, *Poet Warrior: A Memoir* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2021) p.108.

Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Milkweed Books, 2015) p. 208.

This is a recent poem, I wrote this summer.

'Nobody can embargo sunlight' Jimmy Carter

Solar panels + the oil embargo
The *Whole Earth Catalogue* + *Foxfire* series
The Folklife Festival + National Public Radio
200 years = the bicentennial
The 1970s coupled with, or contrasted to the 1980s
Wearing a cardigan sweater, or turning up the thermostat
Family sized station wagons vs. gigantic one-person cars
1972 and the first single use plastic soda bottle
Trips to the fabric store vs. buying off the rack
Mending that hole vs. throwing it away
Made in America transitions into made in China
and morphs into 'Who makes your clothes and where,
or does one really care?
What one needs rallies against one click shopping.

Real sugar in sodas vs. high fructose corn syrup
Pill pushers surpass aspirin, camphophenique and herbal remedies
Home gardens and backyard chickens vs. the booming age of Big Ag
My grandfather was a seed saver
My grandmother froze and canned their yearly food,
and in the 1970s, our family did too, along with our own beef, pork, chicken and
eggs

Looking back to look forward
Trembling at the prospect of the way back machine
Or traveling in real time to a planet rife with
fires, floods, tornados, droughts & plagues
All on a basis of extreme inequality

I wrote this poem after reading these speech extracts by former President Jimmy Carter (1977-1981):

'Nobody can embargo sunlight. No cartel controls the sun. Its energy will not run out. It will not pollute the air; it will not poison our waters. It's free from stench and smog. The sun's power needs only to be collected, stored, saved and used.' From a speech on Sun Day, May 3, 1978.

'A generation from now this solar heater can either be a curiosity, or a museum piece, an example of a road not taken or it can be a small part of one of the greatest and most exciting adventures every undertaken by the American people.' June 20, 1979.

Ronald Reagan removed the solar heater from the Whitehouse roof.

A bird 'over here'

Julian Lass

20-10-22

To add to 'a bird to overhear'

A bird 'over here'.

Over here a crow sits at the top of a hill. His head is up, his eyes are bright. This crow is black, but his feathers shine blue and purple rainbows that shimmer in the sun. I want this crow to be mine, just for the briefest of moments, in words, though I do not really own or possess him. I stop walking in order to look at him. I do not know why I stop. I think it is because he walks with a swagger, my crow, as though demanding my attention: 'Look! Look! Take a closer look!'

He turns his large, intelligent head towards me, briefly, but he is not interested in me, really, or the small dog at my feet; he is watching for something else entirely. What he is looking for, I have no idea, and I resist the temptation to try and guess. Instead, I think, I am right now, and for this briefest of moments, his audience. And we are in a conversation together, me and the crow, and the dog at my feet, and I might include the people walking along the path next to us, in the park, alongside the bench where I am now sitting. Mostly though, the people passing seem not to notice the crow, though a few occasionally turn their heads in our general direction.

I turn my body towards the crow. I want my full attention to be on the crow, yet, in the corner of my eye a man appears, walking up the hill, with a football and two jumpers tucked under his arm. He is quite tall this man who has appeared, and he is bent quite double because of the steepness of the hill. He seems to be heading for a row of cars parked along the road at the top. He also seems to be oblivious to the crow and to me, and he is striding up the hill with singular purpose.

I had noticed this man a few moments earlier. He had been playing football with two young boys and a young woman. The man appeared to be in charge, at least in charge of the rules of the game, and the boys and the woman looked as if they had been placed in their respective positions, and were now stuck in the mechanics of a game they were not sure they wanted to play anymore. As if to signal the rules no longer held, the older child ran over to the younger and jumped on top of him, whooping with joy, and thumping him in the arm, preventing him from receiving the oncoming ball. “Right! That’s enough!” the man shouted. This all happened a few moments before I catch sight of him again in the corner of my eye, striding up the hill with football and jumpers, jumpers which I now realise had marked goalposts. The man seems to carry in the tenseness of his bent over back disappointment and frustration. My crow simply hops out of his way.

Two things. Firstly, I worry that my crow will now fly off due to the purposed path the man beats with his walk. Secondly, I am worried that my dog, still sniffing around my feet, will spot the crow, who is still hopping closer. Usually when this happens, when sighting any crow, my dog’s ears will fold down over the back of his head and he will crouch into position, becoming for a moment a ‘bird dog’, and this crouch is presumably to hide himself, although hiding oneself is difficult in short grass in the open, and also because he is a black dog wearing a bright red collar. Hardly the camouflage and cover needed.

Usually, he will give a quick glance back to at me — I am never sure whether this is a call to join him, or whether he is asking permission — but regardless, he will then run at full tilt towards the crow, and although he runs very fast, he is never quite fast enough; the crow will always fly away. Sometimes with a sigh of *kuaar*, which is crow speak, I think, for ‘good grief, dog, did you really think you could catch me? I am a bird of the sky.’ Right now though, my dog is thoroughly disinterested in the crow and the crow seems to share his lack of interest and hops closer, boldly closer, so he is

midway between the man, who has now nearly reached the top of the hill, and the bench where I am still sitting. The crow is 10 metres near.

A second crow flies into the scene. My crow's attention flits for the briefest of moments towards this second crow. A rival? A friend? It is difficult to tell. My crow stops taking an interest. Two hops, three hops, he is good at hopping my crow, and he is coming closer still. He is now close enough that my unusually indifferent dog notices, as if for the first time, and his head and body lower into his familiar crouch. I loop a cautious finger under his red collar. I do not want to ruin this moment with the crow, not just yet. I feel a bond with this crow. And with my touch, my dog relaxes his body again, turns his head up and smiles at me.

Behind me two women are walking past, and I overhear snatches of their conversation. "We're not making any progress," the first says. "I find it so odd. It's so odd." "It's very odd," her friend agrees. The first begins to say "In my culture...", but I do not get to hear what she says next, although I strain my ears, as they are now too far away. I notice that they both carry heavy rucksacks, and wear raincoats tied around their waists, as if prepared for rain, although it is a sunny day.

My attention is caught again by the man who is now returning down the hill, without football or jumpers. Will he disturb the crow? The man's footsteps seem lighter, as if relieved of the gravity of the slope, the open vista before him. I watch my crow, and yes, this seems to be a cause to depart, and with a flap of his wings the crow soars high up to the nearest tree, in a straight line, and I lose sight of him at the top.

His flight is so elegant, a few rhythmic beats and a long glide. And the second crow flies off as well, to a neighbouring treetop, so I sit a while longer and watch the top of the trees, though I can no longer see my crow. And for a moment it feels as though part of me has gone up to the tree with him. Our conversation was good, we and crow, and although our short time with him is over, we are here, my dog and me, and we walk up the hill together, the two of us, and we head home.

I would like to end with a very short hymn to the crow, as sung by the Nuer people of south Sudan:

The mother of (air-spirit) *deng* brings life.

The mother of *deng* brings me life.

Life is revived.

She brings life and our children play,

They cry aloud with joy.

With the life of the mother of *deng*,

with the life of the mother of *deng*.

The crows are given life and are filled.

Our speech is good, we and crow,

Our speech is excellent.*

* adapted from a popular hymn recorded by anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard in *Nuer Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), pp. 45-6.

Travelling Distances

Jess Potter

20-9-22

My contribution for this evening's event and the wonderful film A Bird to Overhear— comes in the form of a small gift, a reflection, and the reading of a poem.

My gift is the dried head of a red clover that I have harvested and dried in preparation for this event. They are held in a bowl made by the ceramicist Richard Batterham. Please take one, this red clover heart of the meadow. Feel free to put it in the tea bag for safe-keeping, or perhaps to place in hot water and sipped or just hold it in your hand for a moment and feel and sense its form.

Red clover – Latin name: *Trifolium Pratense* – meaning 3 growing in the meadow, is a common plant that is found in all kinds of grass habitats. It is planted as fodder for livestock and as part of crop rotation systems due to its ability to fix nitrogen into the soil. It is loved by all kinds of bee the common carder bee, the honeybee, and the red-tailed bumble bee for the nectar of the flower, which you may remember sucking at as a child for the sweetness it contains. It has trefoil leaves that are collected by wood mice

It is used in herbal medicine to treat respiratory and skin disorders. It also contains isoflavones which the body changes to phytoestrogens, and so is used to treat the symptoms of menopause. Common names for red clover include Beebread, honey stalks and suck bottles. Clover symbolised the holy trinity in Christian religions due to the triform leaf. It has been used as a magic charm to ward off evil spirits. Native American herbalists that developed herbal and medicinal uses for the plant.

My reflections come in relation to the *becoming firefly's* edition that we are celebrating today, that span an extraordinary time of change and challenge. I so enjoyed looking out over the Mohican

landscape and hearing Breece's call to pay attention, to take note, to sense and respond to the lives of the birds that are contained within it. The work and observations are woven with the words and thoughts of Emily Dickenson and so I wanted to call on the voice of a poet that speaks of this urgent call to attention that we need to head in order to live alongside the material forms and creatures of the earth.

So, I wanted to give you Clover Heads, that look a little like hearts, they are forms that give off the most delicious sweetness and scent, that pollinate and that enrich the soil in a way that is time worn. I want to invoke the voice of John Clare to link to a previous gathering of Copy Press community and the give voice to a life and a poet to celebrated and observed and witnessed a land before enclosure, but who also witnessed and paid testament to the horror of the act of enclosure.

For my practice the space of a meadow has become a vital site of work over the past 2 years. I developed a relationship with a meadow in response to the experience of lock down, of the cycle of digital existence that was constituted by teaching across time zones and schooling my young children. Enclosed in the home the meadow space and the tending of the animals in it became an expansive escape and lifeline that delineated the cycle of the day and gave form to the spaces of light and darkness that the digital eroded through the necessity of caring and work. The meadow forms the ground and material elements of my current practice.

The meadow also constitutes a ground for a multitude of lives, the bird life, insect life and material life that embody a sense of narrative, or the flashes of light that *becoming fireflies* evokes. However, we must maintain the necessity of darkness that is essential for the fireflies to keep on shining out.

And so, I will end by reading the poem *To the Glowworm* by John Clare:

*Tasteful illumination of the night
Bright scatter'd twinkling star of spangled earth!
Hail to the nameless colour'd dark-and-light,
The witching nurse of thy illumin'd birth.
In thy still hour how dearly I delight
To rest my weary bones, from labour free;
In lone spots, out of hearing, out of sight,
To sigh day's smother'd pains; and pause on thee,
Bedecking dangling brier and ivied tree,
Or diamonds tipping on a grassy spear;
Thy pale-fac'd glimmering light I love to see,
Gilding and glistening in the dew-drop near:
O still-hour's mate! My easing heart sobs free,
While tiny bents low bend with many an added tear.*