

## THE SILENCE OF ANIMALS

Steven Morgan ([www.stevenmorganjr.com](http://www.stevenmorganjr.com))

Big Bend country in southern Texas is what the moon shall look like in a billion years after the prickly ones colonize its craters and colorize its mountains with yellow and brown and shamrock green, a sun-licked land of stone and hot sand occupied by only the most elusive of species—the fortified cacti, the cougar, the kangaroo rat who sleeps all day in his bunker underground.

I'd chosen this spot because it dodges a thousand orange bullseyes on AT&T's coverage map. Also, because I'd read, after an embarrassing amount of research into the matter, that no airplanes fly overhead, and what I needed above all to understand my dilemmas was clean silence, the liberty to think and feel without the peopled world buzzing atop. Most of us conjure wilderness as a primeval forest or a dripping valley, but these days silence is a wild one, too. To be in the presence of silence—not just the absence of noise—is to tune your ears to the patience of air quietly nourishing the world. You hear space, literal, as in a cathedral.

The night before, having driven, slightly psychotic, straight West for twenty-two hours but still two hours away from a campground, I'd slept in my car on the side of the interstate. Above me: a-SWOOSH a-SWOOSH a-SWOOSH: towering windmills chopping the air. It was my first evening on the road, much anticipated, but I'd felt miserable, mistaken, running to nowhere as usual, unable to leave behind what I'd hoped to leave behind, for in those windmills I heard the future, and it was still machines.

Indeed, it'd been the noise that finally broke me down. A grunting lawnmower, a garbage truck beep, a motorcycle motor, a thunderous airplane, a splash off a tire, a sizzling lamp, a drill and hammer, a squeaking bulldozer claw, a chainsaw that splayed my cherry tree into red clouds. To remedy this problem, I'd tried the following: construction headphones, noise-cancelling headphones, ear plugs, more meditation, less meditation, drugs, embrace, hostility, air-gunning the machines, flicking them off, different drugs, FUCK YOU, smiling, crying, distraction, smoking, staying indoors with a pillow over my face. No matter, the noises found their way into my skull, just like the mosquito zips his way past your armor of repellent clothes to buzz outside your ear.

But it was the emotional noise, too. Modern life asks too much of a body to navigate dozens, hundreds, thousands of emotional streams a day, to retain anchorage amidst the flood of others' moods. To do that—to stay stable, or sane—one has to retain a psychic distance in their relations, allowing in only so much: no one can survive global empathy.

The result is constant detachment, a “self” harbored inside a world of thoughts instead of the immediate surrounds. I felt the loss of my porousness, of my senses to actually make sense. And I found then, as always, the world of thoughts to which I’d been banished, lonely, dangerously so.

For there was intellectual noise to flee as well. I don’t know about you, but having looked a bit too far into the state of human affairs, I was ransacked. Nearly every thing or freedom I enjoy, I’d discovered, was brought to you by exploitation, often brutal, always unjustifiable. Reconciling this paradox with even a lazy set of morals was impossible. If you harbor certain privileges, it’s easy enough to just cruise control on happiness by consuming only the veneers of what makes reality so, but ever since my about face with Christianity a decade before, when my entire meaning-making system was revealed as a wash, I’d committed to peeling up the asphalt and grinding into the bedrock, even at the cost of my sanity (a tab that came due every couple of years). I simply could not handle thinking along such lines anymore.

And then there was the planetary noise. These days, however you approach understanding Earth, you’re approaching a cliff. It’s not just impending planetary doom for human civilization that’s so affronting, it’s the history of civilization existing only insofar as the willingness to destroy life. Fundamentally, inescapably, the survival of civilization, meaning cities, requires that land and water and creatures somewhere be depleted. Our tool-making capacity simply outpaces the ability of Earth and her minions to catch up. “Green” your apartment all you want, but your toilet, faucet, floors, walls, couch, lamp, dishes, dishwasher, and every thing in between were not, for the first time in ecological history, made by the sluggish and deliberate process of an evolution wherein species adapt together, but were ripped from a living biosphere where in their raw state they belonged, having carefully arisen over billions of years, and to reach your apartment, they were assembled in sad factories by arthritic hands and elaborate machines that require thousands of other ecological lootings, then transported along a vast steel and aluminum and plastic and rubber infrastructure made possible only by fossil fuels and all the horrors implicated in their removal and burning, and even if the entire infrastructure were run on the sun, you’d still need the mined panels and assembled batteries to store it, and asphalted roads and freight carriers and copper lines to transmit it, and militaries to protect the whole enterprise, and even then, your water is dammed, and your food had to be grown elsewhere, meaning atop a once-thriving ecosystem that belonged to the planet too, having carefully arisen over billions of years, and once you realize that you are only one of billions participating in this blitzkrieg, it becomes morally untenable to defend it continuing on, unless you veneer the heartwood,

are willing to say fuck the future, live in willful ignorance, or throw your hands in the air and say someone else will figure it out.

But they won't.

Once you realize that the futurist salespeople and hope dealers and technologists who place humans as supreme are either full of shit at worst or gambling maniacally at best when proposing we can keep civilization and a planet suitable for it, once you realize that those who say we "can't go back" cannot offer a way forward that logically works, if you decide then not to burrow down with the kangaroo rat or join the saved who don't care because HEAVEN, you realize that truly, the only ethical action is to participate in blowing the whole edifice up and seeing humans back to the Stone Age. Good luck finding friends.

At this point, you will be called misanthropic, a hater of our entire species, but really you just hate one form of us, and really, it's the proponents of civilization who are misanthropic, seeing as how they not only fear but denigrate the one and only form of our species that is historically, presently, and, if you must, scientifically sustainable (in the literal sense of that word). It's those proponents who will crash our species, and the home for millions of others.

You hear the planet wanting us back, wanting the songs sung, wanting our tending and tenderness and profound moral sensing to make the whole affair a more lively enterprise. You hear Earth saying, "I gave you and the whale and the elephant a gift so that I might know more of my place in the cosmos," and you vow to sacralize that calling.

And here, my friends, you will be locked up, if not literally (it happens, trust me), socially, accused of romanticization, of glorifying the past, as if the others don't glorify the future, and romance machines.

But it doesn't matter whether you're starry-eyed or not: no one has yet devised an equation for how billions of human beings can exist without their bodies being made of Earth. As such, there's a carrying capacity, an allotment of the planet that can make human bodies without the entire biosphere crashing in order to do so, and it's long been past, as ecologists have been yelling for decades, and as indigenous peoples have been warning since colonization. Ninety-six percent of Earth's land vertebrates by weight today are human beings, our farm animals, and pets. That's what's happened to our fellow wild creatures: they've been converted to us.

You'll find some economists and scientists dismissing the idea of carrying capacity altogether, or suggesting that if a limit on our species does exist, it might be upwards of one hundred billion, but you won't find many ordinary folk dabbling in such romance. Most of

us, if we try, can sense the obvious: each year, more people, less of a hospitable planet (for all creatures).

Others will proclaim that billions of people are sustainable if only we'd all practice permaculture and rewild and go local and drink from corn starch straws and fill the prairies with windmill SWOOSH instead of frackings. But they're going to have a real hard time explaining how Las Vegas and Saudi Arabia can exist on such terms without an industrial apparatus sustaining them, and last I checked, most of the world's civilizations aren't prepared to give up national sovereignty and migrate, let alone allow immigration on such scale. Don't forget nations have armies.

We have run exactly one experiment on this planet to make eight billion of us, and it's required, at every level, intensive industrialization—of food, shelter, medicines, trade and transport, fishing, waste removal, hydrology, textiles, buildings, heat, money, energy, mining, even our bodies. To imagine that we can just swap that industrial foundation of such expansive population growth for one that's ecologically sustainable, while growing the level of population that necessarily required that industrialization, and, while having enough of the masses in cahoots not to ignite war against the de-industrializing, nor to revert to intensive industrialization any time a group of people faces the inevitable famines and pandemics and hurricanes and other lots of life that industry can temporarily alleviate, is, well, imaginative.

A sustainable city has never existed. Instead, all across the globe lay the rot of civilizations that collapsed in large part from ecological overshoot, victims of an immutable law: you can't take more than what's available. Until now, some civilizations could kick the can down the road by conquering and exploiting new land, but that vacancy is gone. With every bit of land claimed, ten thousand cities now rely on billions of acres of collapsing countryside to maintain them. We are in a global drawdown, using up resources faster than they can be regenerated—particularly soil and water, both of which are irreplaceable—and there's no place else to source from. If we truly want to sustain our species, the number of our bodies has to match ecological reality, meaning, we'll have to understand abundance as a measure of restraint, meaning, we'll have to organize ourselves in a way where we won't follow the temptations, even when desperate, of city-making, meaning, many of us who currently enjoy industrial luxuries will have to be much more willing to die. There, I said it.

Not happening: civilization is here to stay, as long as humanly possible. Earth will be terraformed into an Atari world before the first world vanquishes the engine. In cash-rich countries, our realities are so industrialized that existence is almost impossible to imagine otherwise, and to many a life without machines is simply repulsive and dirty. So unless aliens

bring us elixirs or quantum physicists find a wormhole around math, the planet as our playground, and for the wealth of other species, is very likely fucked. Fight anyways.

And here, you'll be called a doomsayer, an apocalyptic drama queen, as if collapse were not just unimaginable but an impossibility rather than a cosmic equation borne out through history that we are attempting to subtract, but really, you've read the analyses and surveyed the landscape, and are just betting the odds.

Just after the ices retreated more than twelve thousand years ago, Earth was likely her most biodiverse in four and a half billion orbits around the sun, a remarkable, maybe unrepeatable, achievement. That's what's at stake.

Fuck it was a lot of noise.

When my head couldn't take the noise anymore, it coursed its way through my entire body. Enter Ankylosing Spondylitis, a disease wherein your immune system goes AWOL to chew at the collagen and ligaments slickening your bones, satiated only once the fodder is gone and your skeleton has fused into a pole. The assaults come in waves, but when active, flank you as you rest, meaning sleep is a bygone pleasure, and to add insult to injury, your guts often dissolve, releasing alien bacteria into your bloodstream that further aggravate your jittery watchdog, so you bloat, cramp, vomit, and spasm. The pros don't understand autoimmunity, but surely the microbiome—that constellation of bacteria, fungi, and viruses who conspire with cells to make you up—is involved. I often wonder, now that autoimmune diseases are skyrocketing, if the microbiome might be repurposing the human body into a barometer of Earth's manmade pressures: perhaps our pain is an alarm trying to break through the noise. Because imagine that, for the first time on Earth, a species whose bodies regularly attack themselves. Autoimmunity followed industrialization. What else should we give up for things?

And so it was that in a torrent of aches and shivers and bruising and piercings and explosions—as if my bones themselves were being mined—I finally collapsed, head in hands, unable to comprehend a simple sentence or compose an email. Click Send, Steven, click Send: that, my friends, is how I ended up vacating the good life in Vermont and fleeing the only direction I imagined to be less noisy, West.

I knew the West I conceived of was fantastical, the rune of an American settler restlessness and searching I found reckless and immature. I knew my ability to freely travel there followed in the footsteps of abhorrent ideologies like Manifest Destiny, backed by hard law, the plow, and Winchester. Nonetheless, I came to realize my presence anywhere on these tenured lands is a kind of trespass, as none of my people have done the generational work of building rapport with the surrounds (American settlers are the largest dislocated

people en masse in history, which is why we've all gone mad). So in that absence of place, of a language and therefore consciousness made by the land, I, having just as much need to connect with Earth as those peoples whose traditions facilitate it, knew my only shot at a sustained sanity was in the quiet, where I'd have time to pray in cathedrals. That meant West.

For my travels, I had:

fifteen thousand dollars (life savings working in mental health)

tent and sleeping bag

car with 175,000 miles

bicycle

woodworking tools

pencil and paper

two shorts, two shirts, one pants, long underwear, two jackets

cheap laptop, GPS device, flip phone

six months of homemade beef pemmican

coconut

cacao

white rice

olive oil

salt

I also had suicide. People underestimate the power of entertaining, even committing to, suicide. While certainly in my youth I'd had bouts of madness where such thinking was torturous and unwanted, over time I'd evolved a relationship with killing myself. Namely, when it came time to take big risks, I'd allowed suicide to be a legitimate option if things didn't work out. You'd be surprised how liberating that can feel: it can make a person courageous.

Beyond my first stop in Big Bend country, I'd no clue where I'd go, what I'd do, or who I'd become. I wanted to live on instinct alone, to prowl. If healing my autoimmune disease were a peripheral effect, so be it, but after so much time invested in trying to repair my body as if it were a lousy machine, I'd given up focusing on the matter, as at some point, when truly all else fails, you begin to wonder whether those scoundrels who claim your "disease" is a spiritual manifestation may have a point, even if they're just reciting ethereal tropes that cha-ching some guru's bank account. You'd be surprised how far a mind will travel in desperation: "sustainable" cities, remember?

Here's what happened in the Chihuahua desert of Big Bend: my barefeet cracked, my lips bled, my face bore sun lashes, my hair matted, my chin bristled, my teeth slimed, my skin

gave its water to the flesh of cacti and became ruffled paper, wrinkles cutting like arroyos beneath my eyes. The whole of my body fossilized. I became bone-hardy. My sense of self spread from my skull across my insides. Pheromones hung around me like a cloak of stank, announcing my presence to the migrating birds who'd left their steady tropics for the whimsical seasons of the North, for the glorious lime Spring. I got wet in the Rio Grande. I saw stars poke a thousand holes through absence. The full moon lit a path through the desert so bright I watched flecks of sand kicked up by my feet morph into sparkling little tornadoes, then disappear. I threw up in that light. I shrunk inside a canyon, sheer walls a thousand feet high framing the wild blue sky as a narrow passageway along which one squiggling amoeba cloud traveled towards...who can know? The water at my feet still chiseled. I heard echoes, rock songs. I heard the skittering feet of mice. I heard wind whip and whistle. I heard rattles. And alas, I heard silence, and friends, I got lonely as all hell.

What, you were expecting that I'd find myself? Me too. That was in the first draft, liberating, but a final draft must be truth-telling. Indeed, no matter how much I still want to believe that being alone in wildlands for extended periods of time will set me at ease and reveal all the Universe to my empty head: I really need people. Which poses a dilemma, because people and wilderness often cancel each other out.

Luckily, after a month of tramping alone, I found the right balance in Jack Rabbit Farm, in New Mexico's Catron County, the largest by acreage but with a population of eleven, including me. Let's visit...

Here we have a decapitated pig's head staring at the heavens from the dust with blank dead eyes. Three of them in fact—all in the chicken coop, arranged in a perfect triangle and carefully stood up so as not to tilt over: this is a mob hit, not quite what I'd imagined when signing up to churn out goat cheese everyday. A fourth head, sitting atop a vertical plastic tube, attracts maggots that fall through the hole dumping each little bugger into a red plastic bowl that the crazed chickens peck and heckle from all day long. We eat the chicken.

One evening, Genie cuts off a poor bird's head just outside the kitchen door, then lobs the bleeding body onto the dinner table where we pluck off the feathers right there, afterwards baking and serving him without anyone thinking to wipe off the blood that has by now soaked dark into the wood. Having battled parasites the year before, one of which came from the raw bird, I really really have to practice that "letting go" shit (cha-ching, guru, cha-ching).

The farm consists of a billion high desert acres of rolling juniper and pinyon pine forest interrupted by a one-story wood house with plywood add-ons and a shoddy roof that drains rain into plastic tanks for the animals, including me, to drink. Inside, a slanted

bookcase shelves original editions of centuries-old travelogues, one of which Nathan, a farmhand who won't shower but who will comb his hazel mane (swearing it's an apt substitute), recommends I read, but I just struggled through *Deliverance*. The stairway to the kitchen door that I'll eventually repair sways like a rope ladder, and it will sway again thereafter, as all farm fixes are temporary. And at dusk, if we're lucky, a moody solar panel juices up the radio just long enough that we gather on torn-up couches and wire-tap into traumas so far away.

To reach this off-grid ramshackle paradise, my now duct-taped car had bottomed out a dozen times climbing a "road" that I had to build with boulders. Nathan was cocksure that the road would be fine, but he is twenty-two when everything is fine (he has a Jeep), and I am ten years his senior trying my damndest not to morph into marble. I'd stressed to him that I really needed my car-home to continue working because I'd stopped—both economically and psychologically—but I'm not sure he registers analogies.

Genie, who owns the farm, is aged into tough cheese, her skin fissured by the neverending sunshine and wind. In the 60s, when hippies dreamed back to the land, she fled here from California with nothing but a pair of willing hands and a husband, Bill, now ex-, who lives up on the hill...still. This guy is a stick of dynamite, a replica of Santa Claus too—even wears red—who once a week comes down for the hour of chitchat that powers the other hundred and sixty-seven spent in solitude. Even this loner needs, in proper dosage, the assurance of other people.

I visit him once in his rigidly square cabin, a kind of yang to Genie's yin. I need to borrow his power tools to cut pine boards for the swaying stairway. (Years ago, as an amateur carpenter, I'd decided to carry only hand tools, nearly splitting myself in half the first and only time I swung a circular saw).

"Hey Bill, how do I use this thing?"

He patiently shows me, but I screw up.

"Like this?"

And here his cheeks blooden as he elbows his way past me to make the cut himself.

"Can't you understand?" he says, not asks. The procedure is obvious, and I, oblivious.

He huffs into a chair and calms himself down, folds his arms tight, sees the humiliation in my eyes, reflects an endless minute, and confirms in his head, "This is why I hate people." Now I notice hanging over him and his red shirt, a picture-less wall, how the polyurethane coating glistens over knotty pine. I wonder whether solitude makes him this way, or whether his way is allowable only in solitude. Maybe his isolationism is the result of



some kind of cosmic equation, some kind of voodoo, a subtraction along the way that rendered only one possible answer for his life. He seems forced.

Chickens high-step their chicken-funk in a wire-caged coop, pigs snort their silliness under a lopsided cabana, fluffy white Great Pyrenees patrol the grounds freely, and goats, stars of the show, stutter their one-syllable to each other all day long in a barn and yard that are each bigger than the house. At night us humans are treated to a gladiator event: two male goats taking turns leaping high into the air and crushing down onto the other's skull. Even in violence, the goats retain that indelible Mona Lisa smile, forever unreadable, just like their rectangular pupils—so disorienting for us humans used to finding comfort inside the sameness, the circularity, of other eyes.

In the morning, we milk, therefore inflame, the goats, then whip their cream into cheese inside a USDA-mandated stainless steel spaceship with walls so polished they double as my mirror when fishing out coconut flakes from my teeth. After a few hours, as we finish bottling up the mana, I can no longer resist the temptation to lick my buttery fingertips: plenty of space to throw up outside, I discover.

The goats, meanwhile, still smiling, forage the high desert hills for miles in all directions, and those four giant dogs, the only dogs I'll ever consider liking, round them up at dusk with a carpenter's precision. Debate looms in the air about whether the wildlife bureaucrats should bring grizzly bears back to these hills, once a corridor of their terrain that stretched from southern Mexico to northern Canada. Though Genie is no foe to environmentalism, she loves the liberty of her goats too dearly to fence them in. I, having no tenure with the surrounds, only a romance, vote bear, feral, danger.

For my hours off each afternoon, I too roam the hillsides, fashioning animal bones and stones into tools by sharpening their edges on sandstone, and harvesting long succulent yucca leaves that I soak, pound, then strip into threads for braiding into rope that serves no further purpose. Indigenous peoples weaved yucca's leaves into sandals, and soaked her roots to make a bath of tangy soapsuds. I sand a piece of juniper into an oval handle, wrap its head in yucca rope, and smear on gluey pine resin for two orange feathers so they stick out like jack rabbit ears. I feel possessed.

From an economic perspective, using my hands to shape raw materials into artifacts is inefficient and of little value, as I won't commoditize them, and like a mandala will eventually discard them back to the dust. They are made in my "time off," a quite shocking phrase in its suggestion that our time can otherwise be owned. Time off from what, exactly? Well, time off from someone having us produce salable goods and services all day, meaning machine-making, machine-servicing, or tending to people who use machines. Sniffing sap,

squeezing berries, whittling a bone knife: these don't qualify. Those animalizing acts used to enjoy a slightly more privileged status in the "fiercely egalitarian" societies that anthropologists tell us predicated all our current arrangements, but civilization quite literally destroys that possibility.

Because it's not just the land that has to be exploited to make the city, it's the people, too. Civilizations throughout history are rife with slaves: by 1800, three quarters of our species were in bondage, and a cynic might note that this arrangement changed only because fossil fuels supplanted the energy of hands. Without force, the labor for city-making would've never been available. No hunter-gatherer says, "I'd love to give up my mostly relaxed time in this old growth forest to dig holes so you can put in pipes that will poison the water so I can move far away into a square box with appliances spending all of my hours cleaning sewers for money that I can use to catch a train back to the now-clearcut forest and trespass when it's a federally-recognized holiday or my boss grants me time off."

We were all hunter-gatherers once. We didn't gather around a fire and agree to build Atlanta by consensus. Cities happened by brute force. First came a few of our roaming kin settling down over millennia into agricultural villages, which are not inherently unsustainable. But in areas where food access became less abundant and therefore controllable, particularly where grain production was possible, hierarchical thinking emerged that was transposed onto divisions of labor. Such hierarchies, later to become classes, were impossible in hunter-gatherer society, and brand new to our species in hundreds of thousands of years of living relatively equitably with one another. Soon enough, this rank-and-file social arrangement produced more labor (often slaves) that could exploit more land, thus bigger villages, thus armies who could conquer anyone smaller and living sustainably, and for those cultures whose practices did not accept limits, this growth pattern flowed into city-making, which is maintained necessarily through centralized state violence: a small class of people gets to enjoy free time and pleasurable things, and a large class of people breaks their backs "working" so those others can have their indulgences. Mutual relationships collapsed along the way. And then patriarchy, religion, philosophy, science, and now capitalism arose to brazenly justify inequality as either the natural order of things or the best we can do, with each one's moral imagination simply assuming civilization and its hierarchies as a given foundation from which to construct right and wrong. All in the name of progress.

So ownership, as an idea, has been and is the lifeblood of city-making: ownership of the natural world, including people. Today, even our time is owned, which modern economics teaches us we control as our labor and can "choose" to sell—how empowering!

—though few can choose not to. Clock in, clock out, repeat. What else should we give up for things?

One advantage, however, of our busying economics that so exhausts people, is that by contrast the slowgoings of Nature appear redemptive: after a hard week at work, a waterfall—or, say, a bucket of rain water perfumed by yucca roots—becomes baptismal.

Now that my hands are clean and tangy, I duck into my sleeping quarters, a baby blue step-van that a vagabond attempted to drive up the “road” years ago but that fell to pieces along the route and so is melding into the hillside, rotting in rust and sinking its way back down the tongue of Earth. As the desert cools, I toss slivers of juniper into its cast iron furnace, an unabashedly dangerous contraption in that six by ten shell, several times smoking me and my pajamas out onto the freezing sands. But the van is redeemed by huge windows on the sides and out the back, and just before my eyes fold, hearing little crackles of light, I gaze up through floating soot at the Milky Way seaming up the Universe.

I often wonder what most of us have lost at night, looking up to find a glowing vacancy where others found maps and stories and bodies and time, a reliable place-maker, a reminder. Soon enough, that vacancy will be filled again, everywhere on Earth, with thousands of hurried satellites beaming WiFi back unto us, an Internet of mirrors. Whereas once our gaze upwards traveled into infinity, we will alas see only ourselves. To all creatures with eyes, we’ll have capped the reach of imagination, calling it justice.

In the morning, I step off the van to check on the pigs we’d left in a small trailer overnight for transport to the butcher that day. As I open the door, I find three of them dead on the cold floor and a fourth standing with the resignation of terror deep in his eyes, eyes that I try to give empathy towards, circular eyes, but they are vacant. He is barely breathing, brain dead. Space in that metal shell doesn’t hum like inside a cathedral. Instead, I hear a ghostly wisp echo between the walls, fall to the ground, and disintegrate. Someone forgot to vent the enclosure.

During my mentally ill days, when I lived at my father’s house in Atlanta, my sister, who was in Los Angeles, had me take care of her part-bengal, fully-illegal cat, a striped and lean creature with shocking blue eyes. In her seven years on Earth, Porsha had never explored the outdoors without choking on a leash, so for months I watched her stare from the window sill at birds and squirrels and falling acorns. Such yearn in her circular eyes, such anticipation shaking in her legs, such hair-raising on her perked spine, such confusion as her claws reached and rescinded, such terrible restraint she had to endure. Unlike plants, animals are by constitution movers and shakers—that’s why they, we, were made—and as such desire the freedom to roam, autonomously. Wild ones never trade liberty for safety, which is why

you never find a boar squatting in a pen, or a chimpanzee locking themselves in a cage, or a hunter-gatherer welcoming the plow, or why a herder still needs dogs to bring in the goats even after millennia of their domestication into docile and dependent creatures. Each has to be forced, like Bill, like the city.

One day, I couldn't take the pain anymore and opened the door. Porsha immediately got into a brawl and had to be sewed up, but I trusted she would reacclimatize her senses. From then on, when I came home from work, she'd be waiting behind the front door, and just as soon as the crack was big enough she'd dart into the yard and rush up the tree and leap off with arms and legs stretched and kamikaze into the grass and tumble a few turns and then compose her body with a brisk little shake so she could get busy stalking the world, eyes pointed, on the prowl. I'd never seen such...deliberation.

During this time in my life, as I was being defanged in asylums and pills, a purple blemish appeared over my heart that tracked my psychic pain in size and color. Porsha would visit my bed at night, finding me stupored and sad, and she'd purr on this blemish, and I'd rub deep into her skull, and she'd caress my chin with her soft paw, claws retracted, and I'd scratch hard around the backs of her ears and beneath her neck, and she'd crawl up my body and lick my cheek where tears had dried into salt, and I'd wiggle my nose against hers until drool slid off her whiskers, and she'd stare deep into my eyes, and I'd stare back into those shocking blues, and we'd perform this acknowledgement back and forth back and forth until one of us slipped into sleep.

The first time Porsha went missing, someone in the neighborhood had thought her feral and gave her away. The second time, she disappeared. It never occurred to me to have regret. Her year outdoors was impossible to make safe, but worth the rest of her life. As in the mental hospital where even my shoelaces were confiscated, SAFETY FIRST, taking away all risk will keep a body breathing but straitjacket the rest.

So those pigs died a long time before their suffocation. Nevertheless, we must butcher them at once lest their bodies morph into vultures and bacteria instead of us. Nathan hangs them by their feet while I hone a fine edge on the farm's steak knife, which he then uses to slice their plump bellies and BOOM they explode like poked balloons, splattering odious gasses and slimy green tendrils all over the young lad. He stands wet with power. That evening he'll comb it all from his mane, then join us at the blood-soaked dinner table as we chew through carvings of the acrid meat, skin still on, hairs catching between our teeth, red juices spilling over our plates.

On a farm, nothing goes to waste, and so the next morning Nathan arranges the nutritious pig heads to stare at heaven from the chicken coop, ready to be pecked. I get used to the heads, actually, the way we're all used to slaughter, the way it's possible to ignore memories carried in blank dead eyes, the way it's possible to compartmentalize the grotesque that's right in front of your face so you can focus on other things. Like healing: which happens.

I smell citrus, the aromas of juniper left overnight in the wood stove, I see orange sunrays firing through the van that glow and swirl in the smoke. My body, for the first time in five years, is painless. I am so adjusted to hurting that I fail to notice its absence until breakfast, when we eat more pig.

(Three years later, Ankylosing Spondylitis will return, with a vengeance, this time with the power to truly cripple, and stay. But those three years, those three miracle years—I didn't waste a day.)

That night I realize what to call my travels: a quest. The more commonplace term, journey, is too vague and directionless, plus the parlance of floaty spiritualists who speak as if there's no physicality shaping our minds, only willpower. A quest is a venture, but may be purely interior, not necessitating that you traverse geographical space. What it does require is an ending, a retrieval—an epiphany—that by nature cannot be known ahead of time. So you engage the quest process, meaning, you loosen the fasteners holding down your beliefs such that truth may rattle your lid a little, that sunlight may sneak in, that in the space between what you know and what is possible to know you may fearlessly imagine anew. No one in good stead takes a quest: only when you have little left to lose does the unsparring task of admitting you don't know pig from boar become bearable.

A quest carries no guarantee of ending well. You may die. You may go crazy sense-making too much in the uncompromising pursuit of truth. More often than not, however, a quest doesn't end at all. Instead, it gets derailed as the quest-taker slips back into whatever meaning-making frame eases the pain of uncertainty.

The other farm I visit, in Southern California, is on the banks of the Salton Sea. Picture not the Mediterranean with her pleasant islands dotted by palm trees: this "sea" is a bowl of blue toilet water sitting smackdead in the middle of the desert, where it—it's an it—will never belong. Up high in the Rockies, the Colorado River drips from ice, gains bulk in the valleys below, mazes her way through the Utah canyons, sweats through the Californian desert and alas disappears into the glorious Gulf—at least, that's how it's supposed to go, but she's ruthlessly dammed. One of those dams broke in 1905, spilling huge buckets of water into the surrounds. Hence, Salton Sea. That once fresh water, having no outlet, has been

salinating ever since, from both evaporation and toxins dumped by farms and factories. As a result, the sea periodically poisons nearly everything within its belly.

I mosey along the beach at the pace of avoiding landmines, dodging piles of coughed-up fish bones, which for the record don't have the same aesthetic pleasure as shells, even though both are a play on calcium carbonate. Bondi, a lunatic fringe town of do-it-yourself shacks where you can still buy property for a grand, lines the bank, and beyond that is a mile of one-story houses with brown yards, plus a sleazy hot springs resort, and beyond that is a concrete vein carrying Colorado water so turquoise it appears as a mirage, and beyond that, fracturing the horizon, are the Chocolate Mountains, who earn their name sporting delicious hues of rust and ebony and red wine. Accustomed to searing heat, these jagged mega-rocks harbor virtually no life, barren even of humans, who would be bananas to cross the DO NOT ENTER—MILITARY RESERVATION—UNEXPLODED ORDNANCE fence lining the perimeter. I love these mountains. I climb them everyday after hardworking the farm.

Well, let's be honest: the "farm" is four date trees on a quarter acre of dust (thank the dams). I pick them all in a half hour. Really, the farm is an excuse for Peter, who lives there alone, to have visitors, which, let's be honest, without his deceit would never come. I love this farm, too.

Peter is lanky, freckled, orangatangy. He went to the dentist for x-rays, who made him bite down on a popsicle stick and show his teeth, and now his face is forever stuck in that posture, like this afternoon while he reads obscure internet gossip for the third hour in a row.

"Arnold Schwarzenegger is gonna juice Iraq!"

Peter hiccups on his own stomach acid, and yet, is right at home with a salinating sea. I have the pained sense that he is still, unwillingly, a virgin in his 50s. Maybe in some kind of post-modern Universe where everything actually is relative, therefore beauty in the eye of the beholder, Peter would get laid, but folks, last I checked we're still living in the deterministic one.

Peter lived in a cave for a year and a half. The flooring in his house is astroturf. He frequently asks, in Butthead's stoner drawl, "Whatever happened to the hippies?", as if this question has never been answered. Also, having hosted volunteer farmers for years, he's settled on a pithy stereotype of people from each state in the country, such as "Those North Carolinians will work til they fall over dead," or, oppositely, "Oregonians just want to be lazy, man." Of my home state I'll add: "Georgians see fiery Revelations underway in palmy California."

Peter, like Bill, is a loner, and I'm starting to worry I'm one, too. And yet, unlike these men whose resentment emanates from having fastened their minds, I'm trying my damndest to stay impressionable, which accounts for why I've come all this way to decide what the hell to do with my quest now that I've gotten tangled up with a lady.

A month before, I'd found myself in the southernmost reaches of the Sierra mountains along the Kern River. After so much desert—all so dry—that river appeared as a miracle.

This being March, the frogs were awaking from the snows, and at night, as I lay still in my coffin tent, I would rinse my skull of chatter, and in that clean emptiness came waves of ribbits, soaring and sinking, up and down, until the whole of my experience acquired a vertical dimension. While silence had been a necessary beginning for my quest, this crooning of a lush Spring felt like its homecoming.

The Kern valley also fulfilled a prescient dream from the Winter before, when, still iced-over in Vermont, I saw her hills of crooked oak trees, her grasses so green they stung my eyes, her butterflies flapping color, seeds twirling through the air.

One weekend, my best friend Dax escapes the big smoke to join me at Tenkara fishing, my newest passion. That I never discovered fishing before is defensible. Gutsy men splattered in lawn chairs slugging Bud Light, murdering worms, and waiting for something to happen that never does—this is an unattractive way to spend time (“spend time”...what a phrase!). By comparison, fly fishers looked serious, but combat serious—mean mustaches and dark sunglasses and surgical gadgets dangling everywhere.

Tenkara, on the other hand, was born in Japan of a Zen simplicity. Take a pool stick and tie string to its tip, hang a feather from the end...that's your setup. No reel. Just cast the string with a karate chop, follow it down the current, HIT!, pull the line in with your hand, unhook, repeat...congratulations, you're an angler. Because Tenkara fishers always use the same fly pattern as bait, they spend little time fiddling with boxes, instead honing in on what's important: presentation, that craft of orchestrating your rod so your artificial fly mimics real bug behavior. Poorly presented, refused by fish; beautifully-presented, delicious. I wouldn't know, however, as in a thousand tries and thousand dreams of trout rising from the depths and splashing on the water, I'd caught, and seen, only sticks.

We walk deep into a gorge, the thunderous roar of the Kern trapped between the walls, and the sagebrush is perfuming and the sequoias are soaring and the sun is baking giant cream boulders strewn about like naked libertines. Ever so often, a low rumble begins, escalates, and seconds later, a fighter jet appears around the canyon's bend, cocked sideways,

a hundred feet above water, then blasts past us with stunning speed and sound leaving an atmospheric vortex behind that causes our ears and the Kern to wriggle. Somehow this noise fits.

Miles later, we spot a run where the river halts into several boulders, producing the kind of gently-swiveling tail water that fish adore because they can pick off bugs from the surrounding current. One cast, and lo and behold, my pole bends.

“Dax, what do I do!”

I am giddy with stupidity, but really the intellect is a hindrance here. The Tenkara fisher’s guide to water is intuition: you “read a river” not like an essay of facts about where fish lie, but like a poem that masks the hidden. Same instinct with pulling in the line, I discover, and out of that river pops a rainbow trout, silver adorned with ruby red speckles and stripes of jade, his slime and stink on my hands. I am overwhelmed by beauty. Then I cut off his head. As we stand back to marvel at this lurid affair, Dax, wide-eyed and bare-chested, announces: “We’re MEN!”

That night, we bake the rainbow on a pair of stones, and around a fire, stay up late reliving the catch—feasting on him too—but as these things often do, our conversation veers into women.

“I don’t want one of those hooks that landed that rainbow landing me,” I affirm, having forgone romance since becoming sick so long ago.

“Yeah, you’re good. I’ve never seen you relaxed. You’ve got it made out here, man.”

It is an ominous sign.

The following afternoon, my birthday, I’m driving sugar-high from woofing down thirty-two individually-wrapped pieces of Dove chocolate when I notice another kind of rainbow arching over a mountain top and swerve into a turnout beneath it—to pleasure myself in my car. Just as I finish, an old blue sedan rolls up next to me. Pollen is falling from the sky and here she is, a beautiful woman in the middle of nowhere. We lower our windows.

She wears glasses, the funky purple kind.

“You look like a cute guy so I just wanted to stop and say hi.”

Impossible. I am literally caught with my pants down.

“Oh, I was just coming here because I saw a rainbow.”

Ten minutes later we’re in her car blasting Sargent Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band while she gets high and I rap and rave about...

“Do you want to kiss me?”

“Yes.”



That blessed first touch of wet lips, those nervy butterflies in my chest, painless. The moment is so surreal that I have to peek out the back window while our lips are locked to ensure I'm not being set up by hoodlums who will pull up any minute to rob the last of my cash.

We fog the windows, rent a room, cuddle and console, whisper secrets, laugh, the finite pleasures. She tells me she's a wolf, which I hear as good fun and so giggle, but she's poker-faced. Also, a decade younger, and apparently with my flip-phone consciousness I've failed to register that in social media there are no analogies and metaphors. People are wolves, packs and all, not just loners.

Cassie, or Casivella—which she tells me means Lioness of God—doesn't want to interrupt my quest even though she wants to, and is downright stoic in understanding why I need to depart the next morning to try my newfound luck at fishing. But the river is damn lonely after wet lips and held hands and the warm assurance of a breathing animal, especially when she won't lend a rainbow. Those oak trees with their million hands? Each one now pulls into an imagined life...

I definitely had to bolt far from the region. I was turning over scenarios in my head where Cassie and I would move to cheap land in Kansas and make a quiet life tending to our innocence while the Christians all around us went to Church. I wrote Genie, having remembered that her mother left her a patch of raw land further north in California, and she explained that Alaina (hippy, hook?) was up there braving the elements for dreams of homesteading. I'll go.

Driving up the center of California, through beige wastelands where soil blew off the face of Earth, where fruit and nut trees line in militant rows slurping up the last of underground waters, I pass road sign after road sign of farmers protesting that their allotment of choked rivers might be reduced by politicians who sip Perrier. Before Europeans invaded, central California was so watery with wetlands you could navigate a canoe from the southern Sierras hundreds of miles northwest to now-San Francisco without stepping out, watching flocks of birds so massive they blocked out the sun, admiring a thousand buck-toothed beaver dams engineered for frogs and waterbugs and splashing fishes, all the while cruising by people who made their homes in accordance, dozens of tribes and clans and nations, human beings who somehow got by without satellites in the sky transmitting the city noise.

With my windows down blasting Clap Your Hands Say Yeah, I take a long inhale and cringe. Fumes of manure ponds and impending death rise from nearby CAFOs—Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations. Their warehouses are designed with Soviet

efficiency, large as Wal-Mart and rigid as Bill's cabin, colorless too, and inside, the moaning cows or pigs or chickens tightly squeeze, swallowing antibiotics and pesticide-laden GMO corn grown a thousand miles away where the kaleidoscopic prairies of bear and buffalo and roaming human now sway in a single shade of gold.

A truck pulls in front of me on the way to the slaughterhouse, hauling a long enclosed trailer of silent cows. They are unable to turn around, but I can see their noses, moist and quivering, reaching through slits for the passing air.

I arrive at shining lime hills alas, where I am able, willing, to practice forgetfulness. I park my car at a gate to wait for Alaina and her truck, as this parcel, like Jack Rabbit, is also reached by a "road" (lesson learned). At the settlement camp, which comprises a tarp, outdoor kitchen, and burbling creek surrounded by oaks and manzanitas, Alaina, dazed, recounts the traumas of the previous weeks. She and the boyfriend, plant lovers, had unwittingly hugged and tugged batches of the ubiquitous poison oak, which is why she's now covered head to toe in loose-fitting garb, and why the boyfriend, who had to be hospitalized with pulping rashes all over his face, split.

In a quiet, trembling voice, she warns, "It's everywhere."

Somehow a pink van sits here too sinking down the tongue of Earth, and I endure two sleepless nights inside it through howling and shaking winds before finally admitting to myself that I have been poisoned as well, not from three-fingered plants, but from those sugar doves of imagination.

And so it was that my days morphed from rainbows and oaks and cacti and goats to navigating the smog of the most polluted city in the country, which just so happens to be chockfull of coccidioidomycosis, the fungus of valley fever fame. At night, I'll roll into a suburb, park my car on the sidewalk, turn off the headlights, slump down in my seat, and nervously wait for my new girlfriend, Cassie, to sneak out of her evangelical parent's house so we can go camping at the motionless reservoir on the city's edge. We have nothing in common. We can't hold a dialogue that includes a compound sentence. It's our paper mache bodies, I suppose, forced like voodoo dolls to obey some kind of cosmic equation, some additive property of love.

On this afternoon, having picked all the dates, having vomited up their mush only once, I join Peter in painting a shed (well, let's be honest...a lego sculpture), and here in the meditative motions of back and forth, up and down, he recalls his childhood. Not surprisingly, there are tons of unexploded ordnance: pretty much the hallmark of us lone wolves, I am realizing.

His mouth coughs up stomach acid as he recounts the violence. The brother, the sister, the parents, the spitting rage. He hates dogs, too. As his stoner's drawl sharpens into accusation, a tinge of madness, I dissolve into silence. Madness, in my view, is proportional to how many secrets you swallow, so I am happy to leave oxygen for these fiery revelations.

I had, after all, gone crazy myself in a previous incarnation (one might argue it persists), then for the better part of a decade worked in mental health using my lived experience to help others on the brinks. Beneath the guise of "peer support," a soulful practice diminished by its technocratic name—like calling a river "ecosystem services"—my aim had been rather simple: treat the brain disease narrative as a bear trap to avoid; be a good friend; have each other's backs, especially in the peripheral; build community; go with the flow; wander, firewalk, touch, trust, love. I would've guessed all that to be standard practice, but I fast discovered that inside the mental health system your body was conceived of as a machine, and as such, the mind mechanics were not really concerned with your life story, nor with how your anxieties and visions and cave-dwelling insights might inform the collective good; instead, they were laser-focused on altering how your nerve endings transmit cellular data, either through a rainbow of pills or rote therapies targeted at behavioral change (as opposed to, say, reaching epiphany). Building friendship between a worker and client was out-of-bounds, a violation of ethics, an erasure of the dividing line between the sick and the well that justified the whole system's existence. I did it anyway.

For wildness in thought and feeling and sometimes action were, in my view, a resistance to civilization's brutal violations and rational impositions that could be useful, if harnessed. The aim, then, wasn't to tame every tailspin or whirlwind, which may help but often doesn't last, but to take a quest along their concentric spirals of meaning onto richer layers of knowing. Because trauma and its ghosts often create madness, that process may well mean taking up arms against crazy-making circumstances (and civilization provides plenty, especially poverty and rape), but crises also lay down the gauntlet to widen the selves, work that can initiate you into a kind of secret society where you understand things others won't, and from which you might develop a confidence. To take such a quest, however, most of us need friends. And friends are exactly what's lost when your interiority provokes you to rant at voices, bunker in bed all day, stay up for a week puzzle-piecing the Universe, perform bizarre rituals in sets of three so your grandmother won't die in an airplane crash (okay, that's me), follow impulse too far, cry at nothing, act uncouth, speak suicide, or as with Peter here, say the unsayable.

After Peter's stomach acid, I walk into the Chocolates to tend my own, laying down on hot stone. Having left Cassie yet again, I am a smear of heartache and confusion. Here I

am stressing that my quest has veered off course, hoping that plucking dates will allow me to gather myself and get back to...back to? Here's what a Zen abbot once told me when I asked how to bring back the hallucinations that decorated my first meditations: "You'll never walk the same path backwards," or something like that. Nah, the path before me heads, riskily, in a new direction: diving—dying?—into a dyad, so be it.

We will travel the Rockies together, we will break up several more times, my car will fall apart too (that pigheaded "road" busted the undercarriage). I will receive a chance call about a desirable job and head back East to settle (whatever frame eases the pain). She will come two months later, we will try to build a home, and fail. I will last a year and a half, then West again—this time working remotely, this time for good. I will live in tents and video calls beamed from parking lots and coffee shops. I will try more romantic relationships, and fail, finally giving up on the  $1 + 1 = 1$  equation entirely. Alas, I will move into a six by ten trailer, and in committing it to my body as slug does to shell, I will enter the last cathedrals before they're torn down, take off my shoes, and listen intently for how to sing their silences back into the noise.

You may note, rightly so, that in today's world, taking to the road is a hobby for the privileged few. But if that's the stopping point of analysis, then truly technocratic civilization has won the discourse on what a human being is. For we are not bits of data in a political machine wherein all of our desires, abilities, and needs are algorithmically determined. Human beings, as animals, clearly have a disposition to wander, as do other, maybe all species over deep time. Why else did we end up making culture of both icesheet and jungle? Why else did slimy plants crawl from oceans onto desiccating lands? Why else will the Arctic Tern fly twenty-two thousand miles from pole to pole? In the oldest written story, Gilgamesh takes a quest past his city's walls into the wilderness, where monsters roam, but where untamed Enkidu lurks too, holding in his naked flesh all that civilization, and Gilgamesh, sacrifices.

A sane society would recognize, as plenty of Earth-centered cultures have, that rattle in some people's hearts to move into undomesticated territory, inside or outside, in madness or out of bounds, and would facilitate seekers retrieving their epiphanies—so they may give them away. That such venturing is hampered so by social bindings and oppression, and now shrink-wrapped in the travel and self-actualization industries, is yet another damning of civilization's trade-offs. What else should we give up for things?

You may note, rightly so, that from the future, a wandering built on the combustible engine will appear violently selfish, that thing-users are wrecking the world for our grandchildren, that antsy nomads with other options should've known better and sat down.

While sitting down usually means inside a mortgaged multi-box full of furniture and appliances—an ecological graveyard—I am, nonetheless, a crook by any Earth standard, seeing as how the metals to build even my computer from which I write are too numerous to track, stolen as always from where they belong. Of course, the totalizing overhaul for even the pretense of sustainability will not be accomplished through better consumerism, but I cannot yet reconcile milking the infrastructure of destruction in the interim.

You hope that the future generations have mercy, that they understand the near impossibility of dodging the extractive economy. That they grasp how pulverized our sensory mind is by electromagnetic clickbait. That a soul-crushing mismatch between the needs of our bodies and the demands of society leads many of us unaware to TV or Chuck E Cheese or slot machines. To cities. That the corpses of animals and plants and bugs stack so high everyday that empathy almost—almost—cannot handle counting them. That silence, so long a pause-maker in cultural acceleration, is inaudible in everyday life, and now must be traveled to. That there is no night. That if living in the wilds were possible—ownerless land, animals to hunt, aerated soil, clean water, and most importantly, willing comrades—some of us would jump off this titanic, even though at this late stage when all willing hands are needed on deck, that'd be irresponsible. You hope, too, that they're not as enamored with things, that Tesla isn't around, that shoots crack the asphalt, that the Colorado meanders, that pigs have become boars, that indigenous languages resound, that every lawnmower on Earth has long been welded into a whispering scythe, shared by hundreds, used with discretion, if at all. But if the future cares not for our justifications, only for a planet, therefore condemning all of us today who live first world lives, that may be a good thing, a sign that the bulk of our species finally got their priorities straight.

One early morning on the Kern, after I'd acclimated for weeks, I found, as you will only when patient in the wilds, a dead baby black bear on the trail. Her body was unscathed and appeared warm. Unlike those decapitated pigs, she wore a smile, and her eyes were gently folded as in a pleasant dream. Probably she died shortly after birth, yet she seemed at ease, ready to make hawk, lion, and fly. She was so silent. That fur—that wet black shining against the white boulder, that opposite of vacancy—I'd never been so close to a wild beast. I wanted so badly to tickle her feet, to poke her soft tummy, to open her mouth and peek at her teeth, to take her far off the path so the next inevitable human would not interrupt her transfiguration. But the more I considered, the more I became convinced that touching her at all would be a violation of the way things ought to be. Right then I heard, just down the hill, a splash on the water's face.