

THE CREDO SERIES

A *credo* is a statement of belief, an assertion of deep conviction. The *Credo* series offers contemporary American writers whose work emphasizes the natural world and the human community the opportunity to discuss their essential goals, concerns, and practices. Each volume presents an individual writer's *credo*, his or her investigation of what it means to write about human experience and society in the context of the more-than-human world, as well as a biographical profile and complete bibliography of the author's published work. The *Credo* series offers some of our best writers an opportunity to speak to the fluid and subtle issues of rapidly changing technology, social structure, and environmental conditions.

Writing the Sacred into the Real

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Credo

MILKWEED EDITIONS

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to the Cold Hollow Mountains in Vermont. But here I found a counterpoint to that experience. The other fellows were mostly urban animals—lovers of film, libraries, museums, clubs, and all “the pleasures of the depraved animal” (as Milosz has stated, echoing Baudelaire). I began to see that relationship with nature is not a given, not the same for each person, but a result of character, shaped by family and culture and experience. How had my sense of nature been formed? Why did I feel so drawn to it? Why wasn’t I terrified of nature, since I’d been attacked by dogs at a young age and knew what it felt like to be prey? Or was this experience the very reason I felt so intimately bonded with nature? The more I questioned, the more questions I found. I needed prose to ask and answer them—too much of a subject to handle with poetry alone. Why did intellectuals hold nature in disdain, as if wilderness were just a place to run to if you didn’t have the guts for the city, as if the city were the only mirror complex enough in which to see your reflection? Why didn’t everyone feel as I did that natural beauty raises the spiritual energy of the world? Why didn’t everyone rise up in panic and rage at nature’s ruin?

These questions made me feel as if my feet were stuck in sucking mud and my head was filled with black flies: to enter my ignorance meant going farther into the woods.

Tucson

You are right to require a conscious attitude from the artist toward his work, but you mix up two ideas: the solution of the problem, and the correct presentation of a problem. Only the latter is obligatory for the artist. In “Anna Karenina” and “Onegin” not a single problem is solved, but they satisfy you completely just because all the problems are correctly presented.

—Anton Chekhov

I’m living on a dirt road northeast of the city limits, just south of the Coronado National Forest and at the ankles of the Santa Catalina Mountains. It is the spring of 1999. Out my big picture windows I look up to the craggy bare ridge, slope speckled with saguaros and desert scrub. In the yard, bare dirt, one giant forked mesquite busy with Gila woodpeckers, and more saguaros, giant, many-branched elders that have presided over the scrub for more than one hundred years.

My place is a funky little studio, once a tack room, once a painter’s workplace, once a daughter’s hippie hangout, the landlady tells me. She’s sorry she doesn’t live in the attached house anymore. That’s rented out too. I can tell from her readiness with the stories that she misses the life she had here. The main house was built in 1937, the tack room added in the 1960s. Once she owned sixty acres. There’s an

aerial photograph in the main house labeled "High Saguaro Ranch." Now she's down to four acres, and next door a new paved street bears the sign "High Saguaro Road," following the time-honored custom of developers to name new neighborhoods after what they destroy in building them. For a while the owner's then-husband ran helicopter tours over the Grand Canyon. I think that was when things were coming apart for her here. Now she's married to someone else and works in real estate in—Tennessee, is it, or Kentucky? It's hard to remember when all of our business has been by phone, fax, or electronic deposit.

She sounds happiest telling the older stories—how they bought the place in 1970 from the president of Kraft Foods, how his wife used the tack room for a studio, how his pal Perry Como liked to visit because they kept those small horses here, how she used to have big parties and play the piano and everyone sang. I can't imagine the place as an executive getaway. It has a rough, handbuilt look, painted saguaro rib pillars on the porch, mortar slopped into place adequate for the job but with no sign of the refined craftsmanship going into the stone walls in the new gated community climbing the hillside to the north. Maybe that's the point. This really was a getaway, a place to loosen the formalities of the working life, not a place to show off.

The exterior walls of the house and studio are desert stone flecked with mica and grained with quartz. One of my indoor walls is made of the same kind of

stone, and one wall provides two picture windows that connect me with the desert's daily life. Each morning two rabbits hop across the yard, usually meeting the flock of Gambel's quail that skitter along like windup toys. Often there's a solitary roadrunner that stands still, staring, and several tiny veldins working the bark of the paloverde. In two months I've learned the difference, at last, between the Phainopepla and the Pyrrhuloxia.

And I've learned a great deal about the temperament of the latter, a wedge-headed cardinal-like bird, more gray than red and with a yellow bill. One determined male Pyrrhuloxia has discovered that a rival lives inside the sideview mirror of my car. Every morning at dawn he launches his attack, slamming his parrotlike bill into the glass again and again, wings in overdrive to keep up the assault until he retreats in exhaustion. The mirror is etched with his bill marks. It gives me pleasure, when stuck in the traffic jam I must endure twice a day in order to live here, seeing those battle scars on the glass and recognizing in them the futility of my anger.

My first night here I heard a scuffling in the gravel outside my door and opened it to find javelinas (collared peccaries) on the doorstep, a chorus of soft grunts that never quit, as if they could not move without vocalizing. Five of them in all, the two young ones hanging back in the darker night. The boar came close enough to sniff my hand, then recoiled. Again it approached, dared to take a whiff of me, then pulled away. Again—and this time I touched

the coarse black bristles on his forehead, the snout bubblegum pink, hairless, gleaming with moisture and vented with big round flexing nostrils. Grunt, snuffle, shovel along the ground; circle, approach, and jerk away. And then they were gone.

Some nights the coyotes wail and yip. The sound is not what I expect, more chaotic and shrill, pack noise, never individuals. I wonder if they cry out excited over fresh kill, or just to hear their freedom heckle the night. When the noise quiets, a lone dog chained in a neighboring yard replies, its bark an unconvincing posture of ferocity set against that wilder song.

Some nights I hear the great horned owl—*hu-hu-hu-hoo!-hoo!*—and I pray for the rabbits in my yard. One night I heard paired owls in conversation outside my window. I was talking on the telephone with my lover, and ours was a conversation I did not want to have. And all through it, the tenderness and the crying and the pleas, I heard the owls say with no confusion *hu-hu-hu-hoo!-hoo!* and then came the long silence.

Desert night. When the moon is full, everything is so white I wake startled in the dark thinking it must have snowed. And when the moon is empty, the stars are so white and numerous I think, Who needs the moon anyway?

I'm living in the desert to see and hear these things before they are gone. There's no pretty way to say it. The desert is filling up with condos, mansions, and golf courses. An acre of Sonoran Desert, according

to a January 1999 *High Country News* article, "much of it teeming with saguaro and prickly pear cacti and ironwood trees, disappears to development every two hours." Tucson has a strong community of artists, writers, scientists, and activists working for preservation and conservation, but so far every major zoning dispute over the past twenty-five years has been lost to developers. In the early 1970s the population of Tucson was 400,000; now it is 823,000 and growing. Another 400,000 people are expected to move to the metro area over the next twenty years. The city occupies a broad bowl surrounded by five mountain ranges, the sprawl climbing up the sides of the bowl. The total annual vehicle miles traveled in Tucson in 1970 was 2 million; in 1997, 16 million; expected in 2020, 28 million. Citizens have managed to prevent freeways from cutting through their urban neighborhoods. But this is a qualified victory, since the traffic is driving everyone, including at least one fervent Pyrrhuloxia, crazy.

Number of rabbits, mice, rats, birds, and reptiles eaten by a typical Tucson housecat each year: 80.

Number of toads, rabbits, snakes, lizards, small birds, javelinas, coyotes, and bobcats killed each year by automobiles in and around Saguaro National Park: 7,100.

Tucson's best hope for controlling sprawl is the proposed Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan. While

it will take several more years to complete and implement, the plan is visionary in its scope, aimed at protecting not only sensitive habitat and ecological corridors, but also the cultural and historic characteristics that make the region unique, including ranches as well as historic and prehistoric sites. Development of course will not wait for the plan. Indeed, my fear is that developers will hasten to reap their profits before new restrictions come into play, blading away the desert and slapping together more and more colonies (picture them as bacteria on a culture plate) of the bland and placeless sameness that has come to mean economic progress in the "New West." In the foothills northwest of the city, developers have spent two years bulldozing land for a proposed development of nine thousand homes, four golf courses, and three resort hotels. If the Conservation Plan becomes a reality, growth in the desert will look quite different from this wholesale transformation of wilderness into a microburst of human habitation. Instead, we might see pockets of intense development interspersed with sprawling ironwood and saguaro forest; riverbeds long dry restored to flow through the city and floodplain, nourishing stands of mesquite, cottonwood, willow, and the wildlife they harbor; and archaeological sites illuminating the twelve thousand or so years that human beings have lived in this valley made prominent enough to eclipse a few golf courses—all in all a more gracious balance between people and the land, between our moment in history and those that precede and succeed us.

Through the scrub beyond my yard I see the flicker of earthmovers, blades, and pavers carving into the foothills above me. Already five monster homes lumber into my line of vision—houses bigger than anyone needs, houses that boast, "I've got mine and I'm closing the gate behind me." Paved driveways wind up the incline, transforming wild land into building lots. In another year or two, the hillside will be clustered with mansions lording it over the valley, an enclave of secessionists at peace with their safe little world behind walls, while in the city that twinkles like starlight, toxic waste piles up, homeless people sleep on the sidewalks, and young men "wearing colors" play at war, bleeding real blood on the streets. Do I just hate the monster homes and developments because their owners are rich and I am not? Aren't they entitled to their comfort, pleasure, and safety? I don't care if people build houses in the desert. I just want there to be some desert left after the houses are built. I want one person's comfort not to ride like a cement mixer on the back of another. I want to have some place to go where I can celebrate Creation without having to lament. I want to get beyond elegy. I want my love for natural beauty to be a force for protection, and I want art to be the form for my love.

My life in Tucson is filled with contingencies, and living on the outskirts is one of them. I did not come here to return to the austere reclusiveness of my earlier years. For all my love of nature, I spend most of my days indoors, as I have done for the past

decade, working for a cultural institution. It's meaningful work, teaching writing and directing the University of Arizona Poetry Center, and it's what brought me to Tucson in 1990. When I first came to the desert, I wanted to live outside of the city and get to know the place through its wildness. I pictured a diminutive ranch with wagonwheels in the yard—something out of a Hopalong Cassidy movie. But I was forewarned by tales of sprawl and bought a city house five minutes from work. This winter, when my daughter and her family were casting about for a place to spend a few months refocusing—she on painting and he on letting go of his job as pastor of a liberal protestant church in Illinois—I offered them my house, thinking at last I'd seize my chance to get to know the rural neighbors—pocket gopher, scorpion, Gila woodpecker, and noble saguaro.

And I have gotten to know them within the context of my job, enjoying their company in my off-hours. I worry that I should be more of a conservation activist—piloting slow-growth initiatives, lobbying city hall, laying down my body (or at least my language) in the path of the pavers. But, as much as protection is my passion, it is not my profession, and I suffer as most people do trying to find the appropriate form for expressing what I believe so deeply. Instead of doing political action, I organize literary readings, send poets to teach in prisons and inner-city high schools, run a poetry library, and teach students how to write. I think of these tasks as cultural activism—nurturing lives devoted to creating meaning

rather than to amassing things—because the crisis between our culture and its natural foundations is a crisis of beliefs and values at least as much as it is a crisis of policy and governance. Nevertheless, I feel inadequate as an opponent to the destruction I deplore when asked, as increasingly I am, to address grassroots environmentalists—professionals with their hands in the dirt of ecological restoration, nature education, conservation planning, and wildlands preservation. What good is a poem or an essay when nature is dying and we are to blame?

This frustration that the work of writing and cultural advocacy is not enough to protect the things we love was what led me to collaborate with Richard Nelson and Scott Russell Sanders in an open letter to readers of *Orion* magazine in 1995. The letter was a call to transform the terms of the public discussion about our way of life, our home places, and the fate of the earth. It was a complaint that the dialogue about how we inhabit the earth has been taken over by the voices of money and self-interest, the loudest among them talking “mostly about property rights, economic growth, and the right of individuals and corporations to pursue profit without restraint.”

My frustration also called me to rethink my own role as an activist. I came of age during the era of three significant activist efforts: the civil rights movement, the antiwar (both Vietnam and nuclear) movement, and the women's liberation movement. These all erupted out of sleepy post-World War II complacency—the antiwar effort working to take apart

social systems that were unjustifiably brutal, the civil rights and women's liberation movements to take apart systems of oppression that deny equal opportunity for all people. The nature of oppression is that it depletes the oppressed of hope and energy, awareness becoming dulled in order that one can endure. *It's just human nature to be brutal. We can't change things, so why try?*

I confess I never had much stomach for the combative mode of activism—though I did march in the spring 1968 Mobilization for Peace in New York City, and I had peacenik friends studying how to build bombs so that they could be more effective insurgents. Rather than trying to dismantle the existing social order, I tried to invent a new one, moving to a farm as far away from ground zero as I dared go, working in alternative schools and women's health clinics, learning how to be a self-respecting single mother, and writing poems on a homemade desk slapped together from an old barn door. Those actions felt more radical to me than pouring blood on Pentagon walls, because they gave me a sense of agency in my life—I was an actor (the star!) in the play of my life. That sounds woefully individualistic to me now that I know human culture is the most powerful evolutionary force on the planet, and that it is folly to think any individual can be separate from it, but my intentions then were broader. "Radical" meant working "at the root," making myself a better person, working from scratch to create cultural institutions that were more humane than the dominant

ones. I'm thankful that others continued the public acts of demonstration. But I don't disavow my choices—they were in keeping with the goal of an artistic life: to wrest from the personal some form that speaks universally.

My work today follows that pattern, though what's changed is that I've found a satisfying role not only in art, but also in the cultural life of art—that is to say, I feel that my time is equally well spent in making art and in working to create a culture in which art can thrive. This kind of culture work can exact a toll, of course, on one's art practice. But it is important work to do, and particularly so if one can cultivate the perspective that neither of these two kinds of work is in opposition to the other. Rather, they are part of the whole in living out a commitment to art, an expression of one's citizenship. And I am convinced that it is a radically good thing to cultivate in others a commitment to artistic, intellectual, and spiritual pursuits. To give our inner lives the status of things, as Edward Sapir claims, is a step in the right direction for an overly acquisitive culture. Better to acquire a few more poems and prayers than a speedboat and plot in a subdivision on the bare flanks of Mt. Lemmon.

By now it will be apparent that geography has been a touchstone for my imagination, this essay having become so similar to other peregrinating works of mine—*Temporary Homelands* and *The Edges of the Civilized World*—for which travel has been a spur to

keener attention and intimacy with place. "Touchstone" is a word used almost exclusively these days for its metaphoric meaning—a thing which serves to test the genuineness or value of anything. The origin of this definition is mineral—a smooth dark stone used for testing the quality of gold and silver alloys by rubbing them against it and noting the color of the mark made on the stone. I know one of the pieties of nature writing says that one can only have intimacy with nature and form community by staying in one place, answering to it and for it against the culture's assaults. But when I have tested my own experience for its genuineness and value, I find that I have consistently deepened my understanding of the intricate weave between nature and culture by learning about them in different places. I consider it implausible that human culture will settle back into an agrarian way of life in which geographic mobility is shunned in the interest of staying put. Human beings are thrilled by the technological prowess that keeps them moving all over the planet and beyond. We are not going to stop these movements, unless, of course, disaster demands it of us. For those who wish to celebrate the agrarian way of life, I hold no antagonism. Indeed, there is much to admire in long study of one place. But what interests me, and what feels useful to me at this time in history, is to transpose what can be learned from more settled lifeways to the change and velocity of contemporary life. How, in a culture that is in love with its freedom and mobility, can individuals learn to conserve and

preserve not only their own backyards but what is likely to become someone else's backyard in a year or two or twenty? The essay, poem, or story can become a paradigm for reestablishing the spiritual intimacy with nature that we have lost from lack of physical intimacy.

I know that mobility can instill an ethic of impermanence, of leaving one's mistakes and failures behind, rather than fixing them and fostering healing. But America is no longer an unsettled land, and as it grows more crowded, its membranes more permeable to the rest of the world, one finds that pulling up stakes and moving on leads one to face the same mistakes and failures played out in a new setting. We live in the same old story of fallibility and over-reaching goals that has been the bane and boon of human existence from the start. It does us good to face up to that—our stunning potential for messing things up—for without such awareness, we don't feel the need for restraint. And we do need mechanisms—morality and law, plans and paradigms—to restrain us, because it is in our nature to dominate, control, and succeed against the competition. For all of our goodness, we are not benign animals. In the first era of global exploration and colonization, human mobility was at its most heedless peak: Go wherever you want and claim it at whatever expense to local nature and culture. Today, human mobility is more democratic. Granted, galloping capitalism can turn a place into the economic colony of a few monster corporations. Nevertheless, our mobility

has become less a way to run away from ourselves and more a way to see ourselves more clearly.

When I moved to Tucson in 1990, I had just begun to work in prose after writing poetry for twenty years. I had written an essay about Grand Manan and had realized in the writing how interested I was in the way the place and its people are one thing, as form and content are in a poem. I had also realized there was a good deal of content I wanted to explore that would require me to stretch out further into prose. And the questions I was asking at the time were all nourished by the move: How had my relationship with nature been shaped by family and culture? How does the human order fit into the larger natural order? How does nature act upon me as opposed to the dominant paradigm of people acting upon nature?

Of course, I fell in love with the West's magnificence, a scale and intensity of beauty that humbled me before its power. None of the sheltering blue hillsides, tidy seacoast villages, or fresh-mown velvet green pastures I was accustomed to swooning over in the Northeast. Here the mountains scraped up past the treeline to make their jagged statements to the sky. And the desert spanned into the shimmering edge of nowhere, its creatures adapting to harsh aridity with such inventive survival strategies that life seemed indomitable. Yes, there was sprawl, but in the spaces between the explosions of Sunbelt boom there was the serene and open space of wild land. That expansiveness invites a freedom of mind, I think,

and makes one challenge old assumptions about the meaning of nature. The geologic nakedness of arid land gives a vivid sense that human power is small beneath that of the larger planetary forces. Whatever damage we inflict, one can easily think while gazing into the Grand Canyon's gullet that, in the long version of Earth's story, nature will endure.

I find it ironic that the stereotype of the Westerner is that of the rugged individualist, because my move to the West did more to make me understand myself as a cultural animal than to enhance my sense of independence. As a member of the dominant cultural group, I do not often see my whiteness, which is particularly invisible to me when I move in the monochromatic social circles of my Eastern roots. But Tucson, like much of the West, is culturally permeable, and here I have had the chance to learn from a place where Mexican and Native American people give definition to the community. And that has made me more apparent, often humbly so, to myself. Not only is our mass culture one that denies the fact of ecological disaster. It is also a culture that denies the fact of cultural inequity and the ferocious wounds that the European conquest inflicted upon America's indigenous people.

My ancestors, as civic leaders in Puritan New England, had a hand in inflicting those wounds. One incident in particular haunts me. I learned of it only recently while researching family history for an article on the Salem witch trials. William Hathorne, a distinguished soldier in King Phillip's War (1675-76),

made his fortune in one day when he captured four hundred peaceful Indians who had gathered in Dover, New Hampshire, for trade and festivities. He arranged a ruse, telling them about a game his people used to play in England. The Indians should pretend to attack the soldiers and then the fun would start. When the game began in earnest, the Indians were captured and sorted out by strength and size like so much timber, with two hundred of the strongest chained body to body and loaded into slave ships that carried them to Bermuda to be sold. The crime earned the young soldier and his business partner close to a million dollars, and he was celebrated in a sermon by Cotton Mather for his bravery in inflicting such a stunning wound upon the savages.

I am deeply ashamed and sorry that my ancestors had a hand in these injustices, even more so because they were respected and pious civic leaders. This is a terrible grief we all must carry, a terrible remorse at human cruelty and blindness, now that we know more about the crimes committed by our own ancestors—and everyone else's—than did any other people in history. It is easy to feel compassion for the victims. But how do I feel compassion for my own ancestors? How do I honor and respect my elders when I am ashamed of them? The only way is to face up to them, to name the evil they did as evil, and to acknowledge that the capacity for evil lies in everyone. They were victims of the time in which they lived, blind to the injustices they caused. We too must be blind. When I try to imagine the deeds for which our

descendents will find it most difficult to forgive us, I am quite convinced that it will be our cavalier destruction of the natural world.

In 1997, I was asked by the Orion Society to lead a conversation at the colloquium convened in honor of Gary Snyder when he received the John Hay Award for his writing and activism. My assignment was to address the question, Does activism compromise one's art? The question was very American, as Snyder pointed out. In Europe and Asia an artist is a public person—seeing the responsibility to use some of his or her skills on behalf of society. I answered the question by saying, Yes, of course compromise occurs. The work of activism exhausts us and makes us grieve; it takes us from our studios; it makes us scholars, negotiators, combatants, administrators, and business heads when we would prefer to be makers, dreamers, healers, and dancers. And if art is made to serve our activism, it can lose its elemental engagement with the unknown; its freedom to be outrageous, obscure, absurd, and wild; its need is to speak the truth as it cannot be spoken in political discourse.

Asking this question is like asking, Does culture compromise nature? Does love compromise solitude? Does eating compromise prayer? Does the mountain compromise the sky? All of these are relationships of complementarity, correspondence, call-and-response, the mutualistic whole of existence. Gathering in Snyder's home place, listening to stories of the Yuba Watershed Institute and the building of

the Ring-of-Bone Zendo, and celebrating the poet's work provided a lesson in how radical an act it is in this culture to live a life devoted to something other than capitalism. Yes, we all participate in it. Yes, we are all complicit in environmental degradation and overconsumption simply because of our position in the global food chain. But we can make life choices that nurture more meaningful and sustainable relationships. To live a life devoted to art, to spiritual practice, to service to one's community and ecosystem, restores faith in our collective human enterprise. Work on the culture is work on the self.

Art can serve activism by teaching an attentiveness to existence and by enriching the culture in which our roots are set down. Culture is both the crop we grow and the soil in which we grow it. And human culture is the most powerful evolutionary force on Earth these days. The grief we feel at abuses of human power is the first positive step toward transforming that power for the good. Legislation, information, and instruction cannot effect change at this emotional level—though they play a significant role. Art is necessary because it gives us a new way of thinking and speaking, shows us what we are and what we have been blind to, and gives us new language and forms in which to see ourselves. To effect profound cultural change requires that we educate ourselves about our own interior wildness that has led us into such a hostile relationship with the forces that sustain us. Work on the self is work on the culture.

The reciprocating relationship between self and

culture was brought home to me recently when Chinese dissident poet Bei Dao came to Tucson to give a poetry reading. Considered by many to be China's foremost poet of the prodemocracy period, Bei Dao is currently living in exile in the United States, his work accused of inciting the Tiananmen Square uprising in 1989. He spoke informally with students and local poets about Chinese writing during the past thirty years. He was in high school, seventeen years old, when the Cultural Revolution began. His formal education ended and he became a member of the Red Guard. In 1969 he was sent several hundred miles south of Beijing to work. He was a construction worker there for eleven years. In the countryside he discovered poverty and backward conditions, seeing how different life was from the propaganda he'd been given, and he lost his enthusiasm for the revolution. Then he began to study literature and to write.

Books were banned, except those speaking the official discourse of the state, such as books on Marxism and Mao's thought. Bei Dao and his friends read whatever they could get their hands on—books stolen from closed libraries or banned books confiscated from houses: classical Chinese poetry, Lorca, Kafka, *Catcher in the Rye*.

Bei Dao founded the magazine *Jintian* (*Today*) published from 1978 to 1980 during the Democracy Wall movement, when people who had suffered during the Cultural Revolution came to the capital to express their dissatisfaction. *Jintian* was the first

unofficial literary magazine published in China since the Communist takeover in 1949. The first issue's sixty pages were posted on the Wall, with blank sheets of paper beneath each printed page so that readers could let the editors know what they thought. The magazine was also distributed to various cultural organizations in Beijing—publishing houses, universities, and literary institutes. There was tremendous excitement about this new writing, and poetry groups sprouted up all over the place.

"Writing was a forbidden game," Bei Dao explained, "that could cost one one's life." The poetry they published amounted to a new language, since "for thirty years in the Chinese language there had been no personal voice at all."

The official line on Bei Dao's poetry was that it was politically subversive because it expressed intimate thoughts, asserting the rights of the individual to his or her own private experience. And the more obscure Bei Dao's poems became, the more subversive the authorities considered him. What struck me most profoundly was how different this notion of the political was from the sensibility of most poets in the United States. For us, aesthetic subjectivity is considered an escape from politics. In Bei Dao's experience of Communist China, subjectivity has meant entering the political arena.

Once an interviewer asked Bei Dao to comment on his statement that "poets must not exaggerate their own function, but even less should they under-rate themselves." He replied, "On the one hand poetry

is useless. It can't change the world materially. On the other hand it is a basic part of human existence. It came into the world when humans did. It's what makes human beings human."

That language is a key tool for cultural change is evident in the long story of human evolution and in the short one of Mao's Cultural Revolution as well as in the manipulations of advertisement and the affirmations of prayer: language makes us the speed-learners among species, and this power can be used to good or ill. All good literature helps to renew language—to restore its capacity to link the inner life with outer experience, and to sing the song of the soul on the stage of history. And environmental literature, at least since Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, has had a remarkably tangible impact on both the ethics and the politics of conservation. This literature has created a common language with which to bear witness to, praise, and lament our wounded relationship with nature. It has made more sensuous, and therefore more real, our increasingly abstracted relationship with flora and fauna. It has made invaluable discoveries of science accessible to readers untrained in scientific disciplines, discoveries central both to understanding our predicament and to finding remedies for it. It has served as a collective act of preservation for places lost, lifeways lost, species and cultures lost, forests and mountainsides and rivers lost, and faith in our own kind lost.

I don't mean to say that when a forest is gone you can replace it with a poem. When a forest is

gone, you cannot replace it. But with written words you can bear witness, you can hold a memory of the forest for others to experience and celebrate, you can grieve over the loss and rage against the forces that have leveled the forest—and through grief you can fall in love with forests again, and through that falling you can believe again in the human capacity for love and in the faith that we might learn to protect what we love.

Poamoho

*I'm no longer at all sure where to draw the line
between art and nature, Becoming and Origin.*

—John Berger

The heart thinks constantly.

—The I Ching

The message on my machine said the hike would be moderate, mostly level, a group of high school kids led by Steve Montgomery, the naturalist I had recently met at an environmental education conference in Honolulu. Great, I thought, eager to get farther into the rain forest and especially to do so guided by an expert on bugs. Steve had discovered some twenty new species of insects. His business card sported a photographic image of "killer caterpillar new species 8"—a micro Godzilla captured in the act of consuming a fly. Being a bit bug crazy myself after a decade-long affair with monarch butterflies, I knew that he and I had a lot in common. We had exchanged bug books—his gallery of bug mugshots in *Hawaiian Insects and Their Kin* and my poem sequence *The Monarchs*. He had the cheerful good humor of one who loves his work and sees the comic aspect of it. I wasn't wrong in thinking he'd be good company in the woods, but I had no idea that the lesson I'd learn on the hike would be so close to the edge, literally, of