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“Nature Is a Stranger Yet”

Robert Morgan, Kappa Alpha Professor of English, Cornell University

Let's start with Emily Dickinson's poem "1400":

What mystery pervades a well!
That water lives so far—
A neighbor from another world
Residing in a jar

Whose limit none have ever seen,
But just his lid of glass—
Like looking every time you please
In an abyss's face!

The grass does not appear afraid,
I often wonder he
Can stand so close and look so bold
At what is awe to me . . .

But nature is a stranger yet;
And those that cite her most
Have never passed her haunted house,
Nor simplified her ghost.

To pity those that know her not
Is helped by the regret
That those who know her, know her less
The nearer her they get.

My earliest memory, I think, is of waking up on my father's shoulder as he carried me home from a prayer meeting where I had fallen asleep. I must have been about eighteen months old. We were walking through the dewy pasture lit by starlight. My mother and sister were stepping through the dark beside us. The motion of my father's stride made the stars above rock and swim. Far out in the mountains, away from any streetlights, the stars were so bright they appeared close enough to touch. They washed back and forth and seemed to whisper, whirling around my head like fireflies. I may have fallen asleep again and dreamed the stars were speaking to me. But my memory is of being out of the hot church, and floating between the close, confiding stars and the glistening grass.

“The book of nature is written in the characters of geometry,” said Plato.

“An artist makes his region universal,” said William Eastlake.

“Poetry is the image of nature,” said Dryden.

“I love the wilderness because there is no sham in it,” said Horace Kephart.

I have been described as a Southern writer, and though I am proud to be associated with the South and the southern Appalachians and Blue Ridge mountains, the real focus of my poetry and much of my fiction has been on one particular place, not even a county, just a community, part of Green River valley in western North Carolina. And really not even the whole community, but about a square mile of land on the banks of the Green River bought by my great-great-grandfather Daniel Pace in 1840.

My connection with this piece of earth where I lived the first sixteen years of my life is so close that in a way I have never left it. As a child I ran in its pastures, fished in its streams, explored its thickets and gullies, sweated in its fields, climbed the trees and ridges, gathered its chinquapins and blackberries. I was terrified by the rattlesnakes and black widow spiders, by flash floods and lightning storms. In the almost forty years since I left, I have continued to live there in the imagination, in the geography and landscape of language, the geometry of poetry.

I was raised among storytellers. My dad’s formal education had stopped at the sixth grade, but he was a great reader and a gifted talker and storyteller. My grandfather was a tireless teller of tales who had attended school only a few months in the 1880s, though he also had done a good deal of reading on his own.

In the summer evenings, before television, we often sat on the porch after supper. As crickets sparked their notes in the grass, and later katydids set up their mating roar in the woods beyond the yard, my grandpa told ghost stories, stories of panthers that climbed down chimneys, of giant rattlesnakes that got into attics, stories of people who had died a long time ago. There were stories of children marked in the womb because the mother had stared into the eyes of a snake or mad dog. As darkness gradually enveloped us, we children listened in thrall, as my grandpa told about Cold Friday when the world was frozen and the sun never came up, about the Confederate times when children left alone in remote cabins were robbed and tortured by bushwhackers, about the skeleton of a bride who had disappeared on her wedding night, found in a trunk in the attic eighty years later. One of his scariest and most memorable stories, showing nature’s revenge on human meddling, I later made into the poem “Mountain Bride.”

They say Revis found a flatrock
on the ridge just
perfect for a natural hearth

and built his cabin with a stick

and clay chimney right over it.
On their wedding night he lit
the fireplace to dry away the mountain
chill of late spring, and flung on

applewood to dye
the room with molten color while
he and Martha that was a Parrish
warmed the sheets between the tick

stuffed with leaves and its feather
cover. Under that wide hearth
a nest of rattlers,
they'll knot a hundred together,

had wintered and were coming awake.
The warming rock
flushed them out early.
It was she

who wakened to their singing near
the embers and roused him to go look.
Before he reached the fire
more than a dozen struck

and he died yelling her to stay
on the big four-poster.
Her uncle coming up the hollow
with a gift bearham two days later

found her shivering there
marooned above a pool
of hungry snakes,
and the body beginning to swell.

I was taught to read by my mother before I attended school, and around the age of twelve I became addicted to reading adventure stories. I sat in my room without a lamp on rainy days gorging my imagination on Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Farmer Boy* and the Hardy Boys series, whatever I could lay hands on from the bookshelf at the elementary school or borrow from friends.

A transformation in my life occurred when Henderson County began sending a bookmobile to the parking lot of the Green River Baptist Church the first Monday afternoon of every month. It was an old utility repair truck outfitted with book shelves. I

had never seen so many books. I quickly searched out the westerns of Zane Grey and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police stories of James Oliver Curwood. It was the latter I fell most in love with. For months I dog-sledded and snowshoed and canoed and galloped my way through the Yukon and Klondike and Northwest Territories, to Indian camps and trapper cabins. I lived and dreamed under fantasias of northern lights and midnight sun. I discovered the Arctic stories of Jack London, and paddled and panned and hunted my way through the northern wilderness propelled by London's vigorous prose.

I loved to read the Arctic adventure stories so much that I took the books to school with me and read them in class, inside a textbook. Once my sixth grade teacher, Mr. Ward, walking around the class as he lectured, lifted the book out of my hands and laid it on the shelf without pausing in his lesson. He was onto my game, but not entirely disapproving. I did my first writing for this same teacher. The class was taking a day off in spring to visit the Biltmore House near Asheville. George Vanderbilt's improbable chateau was and is a favorite tourist attraction in western North Carolina. The trip cost three dollars, which I didn't have.

Rather than let me sit idle in the classroom all day while the other students were gone, Mr. Ward suggested I write a story. Knowing how my tastes ran, he gave me a plot: a man is lost in the Canadian Rockies without gun or even a knife. How does he find his way back to civilization? I sat at the desk with loose sheets of paper and a pencil in front of me for an hour, puzzled about how to begin a story. Finally, I thought it might be done with details, details about the landscape and weather, the trees and streams. As I began putting down the details the story started to unfold. The hero has no knife, so he has to sharpen a stick by rubbing it on a rock. He has no matches so he starts a fire by rubbing dry sticks together, and he hardens the point of his spear by holding it in the flames.

I found that the life of the story was in the details, in the description of his efforts to catch fish and small animals, as he navigates by following streams and the North Star. I got so involved in the details of his escape from the wilderness that I lost track of time, and was disappointed when the other students returned from their excursion.

From the very beginning I connected wilderness and writing. One of the most exciting things about writing was that it enabled me to see the wilderness better, to create wildernesses I would never otherwise know, to live on the frontier. Text and wilderness mirrored each other and informed each other. The wilderness was a poem, and poems had the splendor and mystery and perhaps the danger of the wilderness.

As I got into my teens I read and read and thought about writing. And I took piano lessons and studied music theory and harmony on my own. I listened to the New York Philharmonic on the AM radio on Saturday nights, and I fell under the spell of Baroque music, especially Bach and Handel. Before that, from infancy, I had been exposed to hymn and ballad singing. I grew up among people who could sing shaped notes and old mountain ballads. My grandpa had been a banjo picker before he got married and joined the church. One of my great-great-grandfathers had been the most famous fiddle player in

upper South Carolina in the 1850s and 1860s. Before I could read, before I had ever studied music, I heard music in my head much of the time. When I looked at a mountain, or at a tree in the wind, or the sun on tall grass, I heard a musical equivalent to the scene in my head. As best I can remember, it was music made up of snatches of things heard on the radio and in church. I could play the music in my head for hours. There was a musical correlative to everything I saw or thought about, a melodic accompaniment, a harmonic enhancement to every mood or image. I looked at the clouds and heard the sweep of music. I thought of old, sad stories, and heard music. As I grew older I lost that ability to compose mentally and spontaneously. But in my teens I became convinced that I wanted to compose music.

As I looked across the Green River valley at the Cicero Mountain looming dark lavender in winter and tipped with ice on its cliff, I knew I wanted to compose a poem or piece of music as grand as the mountain. It would be an epic, or something like an oratorio, or fantasia and fugue for organ. I heard vast, deep chords like engines and heavy machinery inside the earth, and crisp notes sparkling in the high registers as though from beyond the Milky Way. My composition would be heroic, and it would be in the measure and wavelength of the mountain.

Though I had memorized poems in elementary school—"The Raven," "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," "The Marshes of Glyn," "Thanatopsis," "Old Ironsides," and parts of "Hiawatha"—I had never read poetry on my own until my sister returned from her freshman year at Bob Jones University with the anthology used in her English class, Cleanth Brooks's textbook of American literature. I pored through it from cover to cover, and came across the beginning of Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself." Never had I encountered anything like Whitman's lines. I would have thought it was illegal to talk that way. The long flowing verses, the sense of freedom and exuberance, the wildness, were exhilarating. I read and re-read the lines, and soon knew many of them by heart.

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

I loafe and invite my soul,
I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.

Reading Whitman, I saw possibilities in language and life I had not thought of before. As I continued to browse through the textbook, I discovered dozens of other poets and poems. But the one that made the deepest impression was Wallace Stevens's poem "Domination of Black."

At night, by the fire,
The colors of the bushes
And of the fallen leaves,
Repeating themselves,

Turned in the room,
Like the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind.
Yes: but the color of the heavy hemlocks
Came striding.
And I remembered the cry of the peacocks . . .

Out of the window,
I saw how the planets gathered
Like the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind.
I saw how the night came,
Came striding like the color of the heavy hemlocks.
I felt afraid.
And I remembered the cry of the peacocks.

The repetitions and music of the poem thrilled me. And the analogy of whirling leaves both outside and in the room, with the twisting fire and whirling stars, was a revelation. The synesthesia of cry and color, the onomatopoeia of the rhymes, the connection between the close-up fire and the faraway motion of the planets were an epiphany. But it was the weirdness, the wonder, the sense of doom in the poem that moved me most. Here was a poet who understood how fearful nature was, how threatening and mysterious its signs and sounds. Here was a poet who understood the cruelty of experience, the ambiguity of omens, the sadness of pleasure, the strangeness of the familiar. The poem haunted me then as it haunts me still.

Paradoxically, the more we study a place, the longer we know a place, the more mysterious it becomes. The more we respond to experience, the more we discover there is to respond to. When I began writing in my late teens, like everyone else, I had no idea what I wanted to write about. My favorite writer was Tolstoy, but his subjects were the Napoleonic wars and high society in tsarist Moscow. By comparison, I had no subject at all. I knew a little about history, but nothing at all about high society, except what I had read. Besides the small farm in the Blue Ridge Mountains, my only home had been the university campus. And I had spent more time thinking about how to escape the small farm than about going back to it. I wanted to be a writer the way Baudelaire was a writer in Paris or Pasternak in Moscow.

Imagine my surprise as I began to write story after story and poem after poem, at engineering school at North Carolina State, to find myself returning again and again to the work of a small mountain farm, to the intimate landscape along Green River, to the church and brush arbor where I had attended Pentecostal services. Had I escaped those things only to return to them in my imagination? To live there again through language? Imagine my even greater surprise at the enthusiasm my teacher and fellow students showed for the writing. When I brought a story about my great-grandmother to Guy Owen's writing class, he announced that the story had made him weep. I looked at my shoes, and I looked out the window, and I pretended I didn't care. But the fact was I was

filled with a satisfaction I had hardly dreamed about before: seeing the effect of my writing on a reader.

I found that I did not choose subjects: they chose me. And for the next fifteen years I wrote hundreds of poems and dozens of stories where I tried to communicate the mystery and fear, the terror and resentment, the harshness and futility, the contradictions and cruelties, as well as the loyalties and kinships and beauties of the world I had grown up in. I was never interested in portraying a pastoral world, a simpler world, but in dramatizing the complexities of the seemingly plain, the sharpness of the everyday, the cruelties of the conventional, the isolation of the rural. I wanted to show the thresholds of the theatrical in the ordinary. One of my earlier published poems was “Cellar.”

The air moves as if something just left.
Snake breath.
Cool razors circulate
touching the skin with wet silk.
Breathing clear cheese.
Mold flowers grow like plastered snowballs
on the walls, rust-lacquered pipes.
The heads of translucent shoots crawl out of the potato bin
and run like wires to the window.
Once cut straight and firm
the walls have dripped and rotted to black jelly.
Jam grows blue fur.
The light bulb flickers as if circled by moths
fanning its coolness
and lighting on my neck.
Walls sweating mercury, straining
to the weight.

As I continued to write, I found myself returning again and again to the poetry and poetics of work. I who had longed to escape the hard labor of pole-bean farming and pulpwood cutting, of house painting and carpentry and masonry, explored and relived those efforts again and again in language. I fell in love with work through words. I looked again and again at the details and discipline of work, at the drama of digging and hoeing, sawing and chopping, I had performed as a boy. The catharsis of work in the hot Southern sun became the central experience in much of my writing. I came to see that work was a purifying ritual, and the baptism of sweat a sacrament in the quest for meaning. The meaning of life on the small farm was its hard work. The most significant gift of labor was the ritual of labor itself. I will quote the poem “Mowing.”

A summer-long ritual for my father.
Half-dancing and half-rowing into a weed bank,
he gripped the handles of the snath
and swung, beginning high and back, and followed

through, running the blade true
 to the ground and then up to winnow
 away the cut ends. Snakes and field mice
 and my mother's flowers got beheaded
 in his rage to mow, and pokeweeds, briars
 around the pasture, were subdued to his measure.
 He even cut the shoulders of the public road,
 exposing beer cans and bags of trash,
 and once each season cleaned off the church yard
 and cemetery acre. Mowing met his first requirements:
 solitude and no monetary gain. As he swung
 he must have seen the heads of neighbors,
 deacons, wife and son, topple
 and the stubble bleed, for their intrusion
 on his long reverie. That blade,
 a wide wing of metal, tempered in Czechoslovakia,
 soared around and back, making its deadly time
 regular as a pendulum, touching its flame
 with a hiss to the green stampede.
 But there was no end, except frost, to the siege
 of tender growth. Suddenly he'd stop
 and holding the scythe upright, take the stone
 from his hip pocket and whet the blade brilliant,
 spit on his hands and return to the lone war.
 I see him there now, wading in rampant vines,
 turning quick as a matador in overalls and wrecked hat,
 reaching back with his instrument to let
 the next wave of summer plunge past and wilt.

From the time I was very young, I was fascinated by the presence of the Indians
 in and on the ground where I lived and worked. Arrowheads and pieces of pottery turned
 up in the fields where we plowed and hoed. A flood washing away sandy loam by the
 river exposed the charred sticks of an ancient campfire. The river and waterfalls and
 ridges had had Cherokee names. And before the Cherokees, the Catawbas had been there.
 And before the Catawbas, the Woodland tribes. A scree of chipped quartz on the
 mountainside above the river showed where there had once been an arrowhead workshop.
 Graves on the pasture hill were said to be Indian graves. The knowledge of herbs passed
 down from the first settlers was known to come from medicine men: snakeroot and
 tincture of lobelia for rattlesnake bite, foxglove for the heart, ginseng for old age,
 pennyroyal tea for fevers. And for my father and Uncle William, the treasure of the
 wilderness was not the metals and gem stones that could be dug there, but the fur of mink
 and muskrat, fox and raccoon, as the Indians had taught the first settlers. This is my poem
 called "Visitors."

The ground is haunted by the Cherokees.
 Ashes, teeth of arrows, pottery

work up in the Old Fields. Digging
for ginseng I'm afraid of cutting
a rotted hand. Half the boulders seem
scratched with messages. Over the rim
of the Craggies clouds lift signals.
In company with word and star all
weeds are medicine. The rivers
have names they repeat forever
just out of hearing. A doe
shows her thigh through the shadows.
The names Saluda, Oklawaha run
a secret stairway of the spine.
What one deity shall we
raise to speak to their powerful many?

Many of the things I have written contain images of the land as text. More like Emerson or Whitman than I realized at first, I have often seen nature itself as language, and the land as a text written on by runoff and wind, by floods and by time. And I have been intrigued by the way people inscribe their ambitions and greed, their dreams and pretensions, on the landscape. But just as mysterious are the ways we interpret the signs and signatures of nature. It is the essence of the human to see the accidental and incidental, the arbitrary and coincidental, as a correspondence, as message. When we read nature, we often over-read. We do not want to think anything is merely what it is. Everything may be taken as a sign. Everything is speaking to us. In the world where I grew up people often talked of the "Writing Spider."

When Uncle Wass had found the spider's
W woven between the limbs
of a dead chestnut over on
the Squirrel Hill, he said he knew
there would be war. But even before
Pearl Harbor he was gone himself
and my Grandpa, his brother, told
how the writing spider's runes could spell
a message to the world, or warn
of the individual reader's own
end with an initial. That web
was strung significant as lines
in a palm and the little webster,
spinning out its monogram like
the fates, put the whole dictionary
of a life in one elaborate
letter to be abstracted from
the Jacob's ladder of floss and dew
in the eye of the beholder,
a lifetime's work for it and all.

When I moved to Cornell in 1971, it did not occur to me I was moving from the southern tip of Appalachia to the northern tip. I knew I was coming to the university of Hans Bethe and William Strunk, Vladimir Nabokov and Baxter Hathaway. If I could have chosen any university in the world, Cornell would probably have been my first choice. Because of its outstanding agricultural school, its renowned physics and chemistry and engineering programs, its combination of state university and Ivy League intellectual tradition, Cornell seemed the ideal community to join: a stimulating cultural environment in a rural landscape.

When I began gardening in Tompkins County, I discovered a soil new to me, a soil with little sand or loam, clayey and hard when it dried, and haunted by rocks that appeared, were carried away, and reappeared the next year. I discovered the ground was haunted by the Cayugas, by the Iroquois, and the lake was haunted by the boom and echo of General Sullivan's drummer boy. I found farming a greater challenge than I had ever dreamed it could be, in a short, cool growing season, under a low northern sun, where the raccoons made free with the sweet corn, the deer ate the peas, and groundhogs feasted on lettuce just before it was ready to gather.

It was in my first year at Cornell that I discovered Emerson. I had been circling Emerson for years, reading Thoreau and Whitman and Dickinson. It was as though the landscape of upstate New York, and the climate, not unlike New England, demanded the white heat of Emerson's prose and poetry to temper its coolness and hardness. Reading Emerson at Cornell was like breathing pure oxygen. I was intoxicated in my first years here by the New Testament rhetoric, by the scientific imagery, by the Neoplatonic metaphors, by the love of the natural world in his sentences. Every sentence was a work of art in itself.

“Have mountains, and waves, and skies, no significance but what we consciously give them when we employ them as emblems of our thoughts? The world is emblematic. Parts of speech are metaphors, because the whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind. The laws of moral nature answer to those of matter as face to face in a glass. ‘The visible world and the relation of its parts, is a dial plate of the invisible.’” (from *Nature*, a book Emerson wrote in 1836, p. 35)

“Prayer is the contemplation of the facts of life from the highest point of view. It is the soliloquy of a beholding and jubilant soul.” (from the Emerson essay “Self-Reliance,” p. 162)

“The people fancy they hate poetry, and they are all poets and mystics! . . . there is no fact in nature which does not carry the whole sense of nature . . . Every word was once a poem. Every new relation is a new word.” (from the Emerson essay “The Poet,” p. 229)

In the early 1970s I got one further idea about mind and nature from reading Emerson's twentieth-century heir, Robert Frost. I'm sure many readers think of Frost as a pastoral poet, and so he is in some instances. And he is certainly our most accomplished and memorable poet of the century. But he is very much the poet of relativism, of pragmatism, of pluralism, and even skepticism and rebellion. And sometimes he is almost the poet of anti-nature, or of nature against itself, what he prefers to call contraries. In the poem "West-running Brook," he has the couple observing the stream, spot a white wave that appears to reach back upstream, against the flow.

"See how the brook / In that white wave runs counter to itself," the man named Fred says. "It is from that in water we were from / Long, long before we were from any creature."

It flows between us, over us, and with us.
 And it is time, strength, tone, light, life, and love—
 And even substance lapsing unsubstantial;
 The universal cataract of death
 That spends to nothingness—and unresisted,
 Save by some strange resistance in itself,
 Not just a swerving, but a throwing back,
 As if regret were in it and were sacred.
 It has this throwing backward on itself
 So that the fall of most of it is always
 Raising a little, sending up a little.
 Our life runs down in sending up the clock.
 The brook runs down in sending up our life.
 The sun runs down in sending up the brook.
 And there is something sending up the sun.
 It is this backward motion toward the source,
 Against the stream, that most we see ourselves in,
 The tribute of the current to the source.
 It is from this in nature we are from.
 It is most us.

It was almost two years after coming to Cornell before I really began to write poems again. The shock of living out of the South for the first time, of teaching full-time, of leaving the isolation of the mountains for a community where everyone I knew was a writer or literary scholar, took my voice away. If everyone else was writing poetry, there was no need for me to add to the surplus. When I did begin to write again, it was in a new voice, more conversational, more narrative, more formal, sometimes even discursive. And oddly enough, I discovered that I still wanted to write about the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina. I expected to write about Cornell, about my life in the Finger Lakes, about English departments, but kept postponing those projects until I had done more preliminary work about the farm where I had grown up, about erosion and the geology of the mountains, about family stories and ghost stories. The more I walked among the red pines and battlement-like gorges of Treman Park, in awe of the drama of

that landscape, the more I wrote about Green River, about the speech of the southern highlands. Cornell gave me a perspective from which to see and explore the world I had grown up in. The more I resolved to write about the North, the more I could only write about the South. And the more I wrote about family history and folklore, the more I discovered there was yet to write. The more I resisted those subjects, the more they claimed and possessed me. The poetry of the Blue Ridge stuck to me like an infection that I could not shake off. I could only cool my fever by writing more and more.

But suddenly, in the late 1970s, I discovered that I could write about the landscape of upstate New York. Maybe I had lived there long enough for the place to enter my blood and my dreams. One of my first upstate poems was “Yellow.”

May is the yellow month. At this
latitude the woods are a fog of different
yellow-greens as first leaves
open pages and new twigs on the willows
grow bright as chicken fat.
In every yard the daffodils and dandelions,
and clouds of wild mustard light
the open fields, even as wind
bruises cowlicks in the rye. Along
highways and parks forsythia
sprays its heat, and fire rinses seedbeds
of old stalks at dark. The day begins
in a golden antiquity, flushing
the ridges so they echo inside the room
where flesh stretches into flower, where
even the interior of night is saffroned
the most erotic color of touch and know.

For the first ten years I lived in Tompkins County and walked the trails and fields here, I wanted to write about the splendors of the purple asters that appear in such profusion in the autumn. Their colors are so intense, majestic, it is a privilege to be out among the asters and goldenrods and drying weeds under a hard autumn sky. Finally, in the late 1970s I wrote this poem, called “Purple Asters.”

In the months of lavender, late summer
and early fall, you notice the first purple
puffs on thistles, and out along
the creek and high banks of weeds the joe-pyes
lean like giraffes above the undergrowth
into tree level. Down by the branch, grass
darkens the same color Charlemagne had
his Irish scholars dye their pages for
jeweled lettering to play on like cities

in the desert sky. A purple butterfly
rolls its dice from chicory to burdock
to morning glory. And in the aging fields
ironweed opens bright fur to nectar moths.
Almost hidden at the edge of upland swamps,
lobelia and foxglove shake their sexual
pockets around bees. So much royalty
and ripeness! Foxgrapes fume the river woods,
and summer clots its ink in pokeberries
in the kingly time of sunsets and honey
trees and goldenrod. But all charge and color
are concentrated in this northern flower
the shade of the underworld and deep space
where stars begin, where the violent
and untraviolet become seen dark.

As I turned more and more to fiction writing in the late 1980s and wrote less poetry, the spark and life of poetry became more mysterious, and the intense experience of the natural world I had felt when young more elusive. As I grew obsessed with voices, with accents, with lives and relationships, with narrative and characterization, the natural world lost none of its power over me. If anything it gained drama and evocativeness. And seemed less and less renderable into language. In my novel *The Truest Pleasure*, the character Ginny walks down by the river and looks at the water:

The day I fell in love with the shoals I was standing with my feet in water, below the big rock. It was like the water was talking, quoting scripture or muttering a poem. The river pulled at my feet heavy and powerful. The surface appeared to sort and resort a puzzle, scattering pieces and gathering them again.

But I was looking at the tall hemlocks pointing straight up on the side of the mountain. I looked through the tops of the lower trees toward the pines further up, right to those on top of the ridge. And then I saw a cloud moving. It was just a little cloud in the clear sky, but white as snow. And it was like I was standing and looking right up the ladder of trees into heaven. (pp. 124–125)

After more than a quarter of a century of trying to fit language to landscape, and trying to fit word to thing, and discover the natural world through language, I was as mystified as I had been starting out. The natural world in its multiplicity had eluded me. I had failed to seize and fix its evolutions and processes in the crystal of lines. As I turned more to storytelling, I was proud of my attempts to be intimate with loam and puddles, flowers and clouds, but saw how far short I had fallen from my original intentions. I had looked into the well and seen the splash of a pebble shatter my reflection, but I had not been able to see what was under the water. I knew there were veins and secret passages,

shelves of rock and metal ores and lairs of great animals and serpents beyond, which I had not touched. And I had not written a poem as grand as the Cicero Mountain.

But the recognition of my failure was a gift. I came to see my previous work had only been a preparation. The more I studied my earlier writing the more hopeful I became. Far from being finished, my work had hardly begun. The real work remained to be done.

But nature is a stranger yet;
And those that cite her most
Have never passed her haunted house,
Nor simplified her ghost.

To pity those that know her not
Is helped by the regret
That those who know her, know her less
The nearer her they get.