Separation Anxiety
The Perilous Alienation of Humans from the Wild
Ellen Meloy

Ellen Meloy’s The Anthropology of Turquoise was one of two finalists for the Pulitzer Prize in nonfiction, a Los Angeles Times book of the year, and winner of the Utah and Banff Mountain Book Awards. In 1997 the Whiting Foundation honored her with a Whiting Writers’ Award. Other books include The Last Cheater’s Waltz and Raven’s Exile: A Season on the Green River. Pantheon will publish her next book, Eating Stone, in fall 2005. Meloy uses memoir, wit, and natural history to guide readers through landscapes of pure sensation—“There is no desert writer of greater depth,” wrote one reviewer. Ellen Meloy died suddenly in 2005.

It has been said that human joy is inseparable from wild places and wild things. A pessimist might add that, with our radically diminishing experience of the natural world, we shall soon become a joyless species. About this descent into lives of blissless artifice, conservation biologists and artists may be among the most fretful and vocal. Their anxieties about loss and separation—for one group, the loss of biodiversity and the declining health of life support systems, for the other, the alienation from mystery and experience—appear to be finding a common voice, one that is often shrieky with desperation but increasingly unified nonetheless.

To bring together such disparate fields is no easy task. Try to pry the scientist from his or her research or the writer from the desk and you might get bitten. However, I have created a metaphor for their emergence from their lairs and into joined public discourse. I call it coming out of place. We meet on common, perhaps exotic ground, we feel a bit awkward, and we bring much of our homes with us.

In my life as a writer and artist, “out of place” bears a double meaning. First, the sense of a misfit. Second, a voice that speaks from a place, a certain geography—in my case, the remote quarter of Utah’s slickrock desert. This makes me somewhat of an anomaly because unlike many “nature writers” who are urban and leave home for inspiring, natural settings—or, as someone said, they “drive to their poems”—I do not live in a city. My
neighborhood mixes the collective presence of coyotes, cacti, and cottonwoods; bighorn sheep, bobcats, peregrines, and people; red rock, dry washes, and roaring river. It is, relatively speaking, a wild place.

The word “wild” can immediately plunge us headlong into a million toothy pitfalls. Indeed, both the word and the place may lie in the eye of the beholder. The range of definitions is vast and we will strain to agree on them. Here is a short list:

“The wild” is land where natural forces still operate in relative autonomy, with human presence albeit the lightest of human influence; not a pristine ecosystem but one that is essentially still under nature’s control. (Based on that definition, and my own exploration in the field, I am here to report that these places shrink daily and that we must fight furiously to protect, restore, and expand them.)

For our nation’s leaders, “wild” are the places you hand over to the industries that helped you get elected.

“Wild” is a cultural concept called wilderness. The wilderness concept is rich fodder for the corporate barracudas who give us product—lurid alpine calendars, whale-noise CDs, and my personal favorite, a forty-minute video of a crackling campfire.

Wilderness is a therapeutic device. Not long ago I met another hiker in a backcountry canyon near my home. “I came here to get away and unwind,” he told me as he dialed a cell-phone call to his personal investment banker. This “wild” is the bag-a-peak, ego-buffing wild, nature simply out there to make us feel better—“wilderness as car wash.”

Let us abandon this thicket of subjectivity and use the simple pragmatism of a certain Londoner, who described nature as “a damp sort of place where all sorts of birds fly about uncooked.”

More than I worry about semantics I worry about separation. Environments of our own design increasingly shape our perception of the world. We have more contact with inventions of the mind than with creations of the planet. Nature is mediated and modified, secondary and barely experiential.

Time and distance no longer match our own biology. We seldom move at the speed of thought (walking) or rely on our sensory intelligence to feed our spirits. Our hominid bodies are Pliocene, still profoundly timed to the universe. We still grow food in dirt and we still breathe through the grace of trees. Yet in less than a hundred years we have surrendered several million years of intimacy with the earth. We have relegated nature to scraps of tiny, crowded real estate loaded with our hopes for solace and reconnection.
I fear grave consequences for this estrangement, for the loss of attentiveness, the atrophy of awareness. I try to think of this not as a terminal condition but as a stuckness. We are like a bunch of desert tortoises lined up on our backs, unable to flip over and live in the world again.

Obliquely, “nature writers” have been assigned the role of soothing the separation anxieties, of reunifying our lives with our landscapes. Our words are meant to remind people of the primary rhythms of life. We map the wild places and sometimes write their obituaries. We are the ones to help flip the turtles over again. Indeed this is a heavy burden.

An intriguing offshoot of this role is a kind of literary cross-dressing between fiction and nonfiction. As a great deal of fiction goes minimalist and indoors, into the terrain of culture and psyche, writers of nonfiction have become keepers of the deeper metaphors of wild places. They hold that nature, not just the mind, is the medium in which all life transpires.

With exceptions such as Gabriel García Márquez, whose novel *Love in the Time of Cholera* is one of literature’s great river stories, writers of creative nonfiction appear to be heirs to a mantle of traditional fiction, the fiction of Melville, Hardy, Faulkner, and others for whom *place*, as Eudora Welty wrote, is “the ground conductor of all currents of emotion and belief and moral conviction that charge out from the story in its course.”

Although the genre of nature writing is best cast in the broadest terms (in my mind, writing about the natural world offers an easy excuse and wide latitude to write about anything), critics, readers, and writers themselves have acquired certain expectations. We assume that art and activism are joined at the hip. Words must be deployed in nature’s defense. For every poetic wallow in a sunset, the wielder of the nature pen must also fire off letters to politicians and other moronic invertebrates. We must come “out of place” and use our art and our ferocity to affect social policy.

I accept this responsibility. Yet the best a person can do to change the world is to write from experience. Because I live where I live, the richest experience lies in the canyons and mesas outside my door. I can explore what it means to be human even as the world’s basic humanity seems to be unraveling. Thus, my two definitions of *wild* are the ground beneath my feet and the wild of ideas.

So here we are, we poor nature writers. You want us to write like Melville *and* save the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Blithering self-pity aside, this is precisely the kind of schizophrenia the world so desperately needs. As loud as their differences may glare, science, art, and activism arise from the same source: *passion*. Thus, into the symposium’s discussion of “common language” I would like to insert a plea for raw instinct, the uncooked act of creativity.
More than a year ago the editor of a literary journal asked me to combine art and advocacy, to pen an essay in service of a cause. Write it in the form of a letter, she said, a letter to anyone of your choice. Her request came shortly after the 2000 presidential election, when attention was riveted on the alarming schism in American civil life, on the national epidemic of nastiness. In my neighborhood the discord came as a frightening intolerance, a vitriolic hatred—often fought in a bumper-sticker war—of anyone who held different points of view, especially about the use and future of public lands.

At first I did not want the assignment to draw me away from my own demented little work world and force me to actually do something worthy and useful. Then out of nowhere I received an anonymous message. The message was about ants.

The ant message prompted me to write the piece and put it in the form of a sermon. Some may think it’s a diatribe, but I wrote it so I get to call it a sermon. This story illustrates the pull between the private fires of creativity and one’s public duty, the necessary duplicity of being “out of place” in search of a common language—out of science into art, out of self-interest and into community, out of silence and separation and into conversation.

Brain Damage

Received by fax, source unknown:
I’m not afraid of insects taking over the world, and you know why? It would take about a billion ants just to aim a gun at me, let alone fire it. And you know what I’m doing while they’re aiming it at me? I just sort of slip off to the side, and then suddenly run up and kick the gun out of their hands.

Dear Suddenly Runs Up,

Your fax came today. At first I thought you were wayward spam. Now I know you are a mentalist. Somehow you obtained an article of my clothing then held it to your forehead and squinted into the depths of the spirit world. You pronounced: This woman is caught in a rip tide of chickenshit-ness. And so you sent the warning.
You cannot recruit me for the revolution. You cannot pick on me like this. I wish I could offer medical reasons. I wish that someone would believe me when I say that I have evacuated my wits. I have lost my edge. I fit nicely in the company of head injury people. I have stopped waiting by the mailbox for my MacArthur grant. My god, the expectations of genius! No wonder they all spend their award money on Prozac and psychiatric help. One of them bought a Cadillac. If I had that kind of cash I’d run out and buy a Cadillac too, a self-bailing Cadillac. I would self-bail my Swiss cheese intellect straight into the delusion of wisdom—she hasn’t, uh, slipped, people will say in awestruck whispers, she is not terminally confused. She is a visionary. When you’re a visionary you’re no longer required to cope with such mystical concepts as shoelaces or the Denver Airport. You never tie them, you stumble off the plane and ask the pilot why the hell he landed in Kansas. Everyone thinks it’s poetry.

The brain fog wreaks havoc on my work. I lose my way two inches into a thought. I have developed a Byzantine neurosis about the width of my salsa-spattered notebook pages. If they are not precisely five and five-eighths inches, I start licking light bulbs. All of my stories look back, I risk chloroforming anyone in my path with the weight of memoir. The present flits away. Bits of the past float to the surface like detached kelp.

I remember a stuffed bear that was my best friend and all the teeth marks in its face.

I remember barricading myself in the bathroom because I was thirteen years old and eight feet tall with insubordinate hair.

I remember Keds with half-moon rubber toes and red canvas faded to soft pink, a lot of years being in love with Alan Bates, a vigorous interest in electroshock therapy, a D. H. Lawrence, Gaulois-smoking phase fired by a snappy Zippo cigarette lighter engraved with the word “Bliss,” gift from a friend who went to Vietnam and did not come back.

I remember an all-night hike across a playa in Death Valley, walking on snow-white, moon-drenched salt crystals from one jagged mountain range to another. I remember standing atop a Sierra waterfall in the bright summer sun, the heavy heat rising from the river, hummingbirds hovering near my fingertips, the feel of the air on the soles of my feet as they left the rock to make the leap.

Memory is like both feet stuck in cement-filled paint cans. It is oh so heavy, it has distracted me from my defense of nature and justice.

I am no longer capable of striking down Orrin Hatch with an essay. I wince at the cosmic squish that co-opts nature writing: the sensitive ATV riders, the mountaineers with laptops, the vegetarian dogs, the sacred pen-raised elk, the reincarnation fantasies—coming back as a wolf or an eagle with absolutely no self-esteem problems whatsoever—hell, I want
to come back as Aretha Franklin. The globe is being jerked off its axis by stratospheric sludge and melting polar caps. Rivers have been reengineered beyond their tolerance. The entire planet is zoned commercial. Viagra sales are skyrocketing in polygamt colonies. Dr. Science thinks he is Elvis. The rest of us think we’re reinventable. What an ingenious way to silence cries raised against the madness of power: suffocate them in self-help books.

“The resources available to us for benign access to each other, for vaulting the mere blue air that separates us, are few but powerful: language, image, and experience,” writes Toni Morrison in her essay, “Strangers.” More than others, it is said, artists have the capacity to seal themselves away in a private world, to retreat into a forest of mental forms which ordinary humans cannot penetrate, there to explore all that it means to be human. Without an unwavering fidelity to humanity—to language, image, experience—the creative process is bankrupt of its fire.

When we writers wake up and stop working in our pajamas all day, when, as a friend of mine advised, we put on our fleece neck gaiters to hide the claw marks we gave ourselves over the Bush-Gore election, when we realize that the profound questions of existence cannot be easily settled, we will be free to go out and do kind, practical things.

You are right, Mr. Not Afraid of Insects, it is time to put the brain fevers to good use. It is time to go out and commit acts of aggressive beneficence.

I am not the only one who wore Keds or watched King of Hearts ten times. I am no better than all the other selfish bloodsuckers who, in middle age, have let the terror of our impending demise distract us from dissent. We are a thousand voices, in Whitman’s vision, voices like and unlike our own. Each of us finds in love and life great squalls of the heart, and this grand and tender fellowship of emotion calms us. Most of us would gladly stop conversing in bumper stickers and start talking to one another about remapping the world with our better selves, sending across the blue air a gesture as light and sure as a spider’s thread. And there in the transformation of something rigid into something supple, we might begin to see the notion of expansion.

Why we are drawn to the odd things that we love? Like poetry and bowling, moonlit salt pans and romantic grief. Or ants. Billions of them. Abruptly startled, their little ant hands raised mid-aim and suddenly very, very empty.