

VALLEY  
WALKING

NOTES ON THE LAND

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WSU  
PRESS

Washington State University Press  
Pullman, Washington



## *Invitation*

*We cannot go to the country  
for the country will bring us no peace.*  
—William Carlos Williams, “Raleigh Was Right”

**I**T MUST BE ANCESTRAL, this longing for a landscape’s embrace. Roman patricians repaired to their vineyards; Elizabethan courtiers sought the greenwood. Thoreau camped at a lake, Mary Austin homesteaded the desert, and John Muir waltzed among California’s high peaks. Are we naive to wish for the same? The intimacy of trees and familiar flowers, the reassuring patterns of life among seasons fully experienced—these are no less our birthright than before.

But nature eludes us now. Yosemite is a parking lot, and Walden Pond rocks to the rhythm of the boombox. While our mountains recede ever more poignantly into the haze of auto exhaust, Wal-Mart claims every pasture. Once perceived as a healthy escape, the countryside disintegrates into fragments. If it’s wilderness you want, that far-away refuge of rock climbers, apply for your permit in advance.

We have come to identify with nature through packaging. For many people, equipment fetishes or ecotourism appease the appetites once gratified by daily living. Others, myself among them, would sooner don a straitjacket than enroll for a gourmet rafting trip. High-tech athletics are beyond my ken.

There must be a way to come home; enter the landscape unencumbered; be content with witnessing. What if, despite the momentum of late capitalism—its smug assurance that land and

people are commodities—what if we followed Edward Abbey's advice? Even now we could climb out of our cars, walk ourselves footsore (in concentric circles if necessary), but in the end let a patch of local terrain reclaim us. If the world looks diminished, look more deeply. I have tried to countenance my adopted home in a valley of the far West. But I am speaking of a way almost anyone may try, urbanites included. Distant national parks are inspiring places. Still, I'm searching for wildness in a state of mind. It comes to me when I step outside.

We are fallow fields after all, ripe for the seeding of volunteer growth. If the neighborhood watershed reclaims us, then we won't need to go to the country. We will already be there.

Robert Schnelle

Cattail Creek

Kittitas Valley, Washington, 1997



## *Part I*

### *Snakewalk*

**G**IVEN A CHOICE between inspiration and chilidogs, most of us will opt for lunch. The flesh is weak, and I am no exception to the rule. But life is not all one thing or another, and so the eclectic side is what I'm after when I walk in Umtanum Canyon, an east-west running gorge that slices through the heart of the Yakima drainage where I live with my family. We fill our daypacks with pickled herring, mushrooms in garlic sauce, and all the chocolate peanuts they will hold, then we make tracks into a pocket of wildness a dozen miles from town. There we find birdsong and creek rills tipping through a sleeve of greenery. Cottonwood and aspen groves, beaver dams, bunches of purple monkeyflower appear. And high above them all rise weird, basaltic rock formations as yet unknown to the makers of four-wheeler ads. These surroundings beckon the walker to take it easy, but take it.

My wife, Lori, our baby boy, Erik, and I forded the Yakima River on a cable-slung footbridge, clomping like billy goats gruff above the heads of rubber-shod anglers flicking trout wands. We crossed a section of the Union Pacific Railroad and found our trailhead in a thicket. Locals have dubbed the canyon "Rattlesnake Alley," but our little party agreed at the outset to savor the whiff of danger. Counting on vibration to warn of our approach, I beat time with my walking stick while Lori winnowed the grasses with a branch. Erik rode snugly on my shoulders. When he learns to speak he can call me Papa. For now, strapped to an expedition-weight ten month-old, I call myself Sherpa.

At a half mile we emerged in a meadow of sage. Lit by the morning sun, plumes of rabbitbrush let the earth say, "Autumn." Vine maples and golden willows spoke their piece beyond. In prairie country it is especially good to look at trees as tall companions, quiet guardians converting solar energy to food, who transform their leaves to fire at year's end. In fact, however, botanists know that the fall colors have been present since springtime. This Lori confirmed by quoting from our field guide as we walked. The brassy hues of cottonwoods, she explained, expose themselves only when their chlorophyll's green begins to fade in September. "Why here, then," I asked, "do aspen leaves always turn *yellow* rather than orange, say, like the leaves of Douglas maples?" We learned that this is so because they contain huge amounts of a pigment called xanthophyll. The umbers, ochers, and reds of other trees derive from chemicals equally worthy of intonation in a Gregorian chant: "*Tannin-carotenin-anthocy-a-nin!*" we sighed. Even after the leaves flutter to earth, however, they play an inspiriting role. As everyone knows, leaves make topsoil, and until the snow falls, they would protect this ground from eroding winds.

Like the cadence of the seasons, our pace found the rhythm of some unseen, geophysical clock. The day began to warm. We took sit-downs every half hour or so to accommodate Erik, Lori pouring cider from a thermos while I helped him stretch his legs. He likes to grasp my bony fingers in his pudgy ones and pace out spirals in the dust. The footprints he leaves appear aimless, but I intend to study them one day, suspecting they will trace out the algorithm for a walker's golden mean.

By late morning the trail had begun to turn back and forth, braiding itself across the brook repeatedly as if to improve our chances of meeting a water-seeking reptile. "Sinuous," "serpentine,"

“snakelike,” and similar words occurred to me later, though it was right then that the dust ahead of my feet coiled up and reared. Here, after all, was a rattlesnake. Too young to make much commotion with its tailpiece—and still too sluggish from the pre-dawn chill to beat it—the snake had to confront us in the most sincere fashion it knew, roiling its tiny head and hissing like a teakettle. Just a fingerling of fear with a pink mouth. I thought it was the most innocent creature I had ever seen, but Lori’s genes told her otherwise. Her revulsion at the snake’s dry-bones rattle suggested some primordial imprinting that I myself seemed to lack. We held our distance until the snake slid away.

At least as interesting as human phobias is the evolution of the rattlesnake itself, especially its well-known audible feature. According to the naturalist Janine Benyus, one theory about rattles states they were meant as a warning to predators, who, like the snake itself, would stand little to gain from a high-risk confrontation. A second hypothesis holds that rattles are alarm signals designed to keep bison from trampling the legless. Yet another idea is that the snakes evolved rattles to lure victims into striking range. Whatever the case (and I don’t see why it shouldn’t be all three), the western rattlesnake is deaf to its own rhythms. Without the benefit of ears, the only things it hears are earth-borne vibrations transmitted through the spinal chord.

The sun at its zenith hung low this time of year, but glances of sky above the canyon looked bluer than in summer. We ate cheese sandwiches on a log. I could see the creek spinning itself into whirlpools while waterstriders—those elegant, surface-riding bugs—began to circulate in eddies. Erik mouthed an alder cone. Beside him, Lori read aloud from our field guide. It turned out that snakes don’t need ears. Like all pit vipers, they’ve got heat sensors between the eyes and nostrils by which they can

take infrared soundings. Even in darkness, when a pack rat or a human ankle appears close by, it looks “hot” to the snake, who then calculates the object’s distance for an accurate strike. On our feet once more, we tapped along cautiously. I tried a syncopated tempo as a gesture of appreciation for whoever else might lie concealed.

Umtanum Canyon rises gently as you hike, and the landscape crumbles and reconfigures itself en route. Before you know it you are far in. We welcomed the sense of going deep that you get in a canyon hike. We welcome it anywhere for that matter, the hope being that by leaving constructed places behind we might glimpse another world, a scene of fresh possibility. Perhaps, I thought, as noon gave way to nap time, it is their otherworldliness that accounts for the beauty and terror of snakes. For centuries they have graced American rituals from Oraibi to Appalachia. Physicians preside over deaths as well as healings, and they, too, claim the serpent as their totem. We now inspected the ground for totems where the south rim of the canyon dissolved into broken slopes. Satisfied, we paused for another go at lunch. The spot was christened with campfire rings and grasses palatable to big-horns. We fingered heads of wild rye, grandmother to the grains baked in our sandwich bread.

Walking out again, I composed the day in my mind: a morning ripe with fall, a child bending ancient stems, and a snaky footpath just far enough from the manicured lawns of town. These would suffice to keep body and soul intact.



## *Back to Nature*

*Vladimir: (impatiently). Yes yes, we're magicians. But let us persevere in what we have resolved, before we forget.*

—Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*

ONCE UPON A TIME, nature was a harmless topic. Like interest rates or carburetors, nature could absent-mindedly break the ice in mixed company. The subject held no linguistic pitfalls. Wholesome trivia about songbirds had little to do with the rough stuff of grown-up talk.

For many in the 1960s, “conservation” was a matter entrusted to summer day camps. Like all the sensitive kids who didn’t drive power boats, my sister and I, along with a dozen other kids of conscientious parents, would spend our mornings in July fanning out over Cape Cod clam flats. In tidal pools we harried fiddler crabs, and then, settling our karmic debts, we would take flight from biting sand fleas, hollering like refugees from the planet Dune. My friends and I netted leopard frogs in murky backwaters. We let painted turtles languish in aquariums. With my mind’s eye I can see our counselor, Mr. Finch, a stork-like figure with sun-bleached eyebrows and ace binoculars, as he holds at arm’s length a castaway goosefish, exclaiming, “Here is a *very* interesting species.”

In the sixties, few among the adult public gave nature a second thought. If they did it was only to approve of children’s books featuring rabbits. Others, like Mr. Finch, found in nature objects



to appreciate or to study in scientific terms. But nature lore honed no edges. Our counselor seldom took risks with emotion, there being little reason to flap. At mid-century nature was a backdrop where even pollution could be considered a darned nuisance. "No swimming today, children. The lake is on fire." After all, the moon was about to be conquered. Natural resources were conveniently harvested for the good of our living standard, biologists had classified the creatures worth knowing about, and serious people could anticipate the dream of cyberspace.

Need it be said that our views have changed? I can't pinpoint a moment when the big tree fell that broke the forest's back, nor when the plankton expired that told us we'd rattled the food chain. When, for that matter, did drinking water start metastasizing in our cells? The world as we imagine it is now, once again, understood to be fatal, and nature has become a prickly topic. So often it's about people's jobs, family planning, or consumer choice—private matters with planetary effects. No one questions whether nature merits discussion. It's all we have, though by this recognition we come by our ambivalence.

*Time* magazine proclaimed the news a few years back when it named Earth the "Planet of the Year" and nature the year's top story. I don't know what superlatives *Time's* editors have chosen since, but I find myself blushing at such oracular prescience. Paging through that magazine, I felt like a government-schooled Indian reading of Columbus's windfall. O brave new world.

Yes, kicking and screaming, we have gone back to nature. Third graders unacquainted with local woodlands can recite surprising facts about the Amazon. In my town, some of the most avid recyclers are seniors, perhaps nostalgic for their days of wartime thrift. Even middle-aged professionals feel the occasional flutter of conscience while burning gas to rent a video or quashing take-out containers by the pound. If nature has reacquainted

us with guilt, we wonder, can repentance be far behind? Is the revolution of consciousness at hand?

Unfortunately, we look to national leadership in vain when seeking avatars of change. According to one congressional demagogue, environmentalism is a smokescreen for “ecosabotage” of the American economy. A popular talk-radio lout refers to the Audubon bird count as a rite of “pagan tree worshippers.” Yet, disgusting as it is, such rhetoric spellbinds as often as it offends. Unfettered by any petty regard for truth, pseudo-populists have so mastered environmental debates as to have them both ways. When suitable, they incite the God-fearing against heretics in Gortex, and then when convenient, they assure moderates of their respect for science. An ad for a foresters’ council promises, “We care! Northwest forests are healthier now than ever before.” Next to an illustration of smiling family members hiking under old growth, we read that “there are now *more trees* in the Northwest than there were a hundred years ago.” Yes indeed, thinks the skeptic, and if a few more of those trees exceeded ten inches in girth, we might be speaking a common language. Not that politicians and timber executives are the only ones doctoring words. Heralding the Ellensburg Rodeo parade a few years back, a Cadillac bursting with Stetson hats carried a banner emblazoned, “Kittitas County Cattlemen’s Association—Stewards of the Environment.”

Lately, doublespeak has veiled even more naked forms of destruction. A Southern congressman pledges to restore “balance” to farming regulations by legalizing the deadly pesticide, DDT. In sympathy, a senator from Texas argues, “There’s something more important than the environment, and that’s freedom.” Without pressing for clarification, we can hear in America’s anti-enviro discourse an absurdist’s patois. Polls taken during recent years show that 70 percent of citizens consider themselves

amenable to environmental protection, among us a healthy swath of Texas voters and agents for half the earth's resource consumption.

Awareness, if not behavior, has undoubtedly changed since the 1960s. Back then, exploiters lost as little sleep over the Sierra Club as over the fate of Esperanto. Birdwatchers, though lathered by the prophecies of *Silent Spring*, could still walk solitary beaches. There among the dunes, egg clutches of piping plovers might as yet be found uncrushed by offloading jetskiers. Caution was a matter for the future.

Now, with our future withering on the bough, Americans aspire to good behavior—whatever that is. So long as it doesn't touch our investment income or impinge on our fun, environmentalism sounds practical. Recycling, for instance, is a worthy practice, but reducing use we're not so sure about. Here in Washington, orange juice trucked from Florida outsells local apple cider. Ballooning square footage guides the middle-class housing market, while backyard burning is still "a way of life."

Yet, worrywart that I am, I recognize signs of progress, too, and anyway, it is self-defeating to abandon minority wisdom just because it hasn't caught on. Sooner or later necessity will sway the ruling powers. Of course, no one looks forward to change wrought in extremities, and I wish that my neighbor's xeriscaping were already civic policy. It would delight me no end to see cold-weather bus service for my bike-riding colleagues, the federal tax code revised to encourage small families, and wild habitats respected as we respect the authority of property lines.

But until a genuine land ethic takes hold, I will have to honor it in the play of my son, who haunts remnant marshes looking for leopard frogs—and other very interesting species.