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Extreme Gratitude

*On giving thanks
to wounded places*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
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BEFORE ME lies a slope of wild grasses, saturated in the copper light of early autumn. Insects dabble in wild asters and Queen Anne's lace, and animal trails wind through the dense greenery. But just where the terrain should plunge steeply through a woodland of maple, beech, cherry, and ash trees, it flattens out like a gigantic tennis court or helicopter landing pad. What just a few weeks earlier and for many thousands of years before had been a hillside in rural northeastern Pennsylvania has been sliced in half by a five-acre concrete slab. It is, in fact, the site of a new gas pad. The next step in the process of redefining this place will be the hydrofracking that will shoot 6 to 8 million gallons of water mixed with sand and chemicals a mile down, then horizontally through the bedrock, which, so punctured, will release its stores of natural gas.

Looking down, I can't help but feel sorry for this hill and everything associated with it: the birds and animals that lived in the woods, the water table that may be contaminated by the chemicals, the shapely hillside itself, the farm family that lives just a few hundred feet away, the soil, the rock, even the microbes that live in the rock and will receive a

lethal dose of biocide to prevent them from clogging up the pipes. I also feel sorry for myself, because I take the land around me personally. I wish there were something I could do to acknowledge what's happening here, what's being taken away.

Or maybe what I want is some way to thank the place for what it gave for so long and can give no more. Or—the thought strikes with conviction, if illogic—I'd just like to cheer the place up.

THE GIFTS A PLACE GIVES to people are abundant. A list of those that my own places have provided might include:

the angle of sunrise
the creek
the trail to the peak
ripe tomatoes in the garden
neighbors
the views embraced by windows
the calls of ravens
cherry blossoms in spring
the fox prancing over the grass at dawn
sidewalks, alleys, shortcuts that know me
a tree that looks like a candelabra in the meadow
birdsong in the morning
crickets at night
the New York City skyline
stars
green grass in the back yard
green grass in the neighborhood park
sunshine on dew
moonlight on snow
the angle of sunset

When I receive a gift I am acutely conscious of both the gift and the giver, and gratitude spreads through me. This gratitude coalesces into a wish to give something back. I long to please my giver, endow that generous benefactor with something that will offer comfort, nourishment, and delight equal to what I've received. When my benefactor is a place rather than a person, however, my role as recipient is less direct. I'm someone who has inadvertently stepped beneath a stream of beneficence not specifically intended for me but suddenly pouring all over me. If I wished to offer thanks, how would I do so? Does a place have consciousness, such that it can receive gratitude for what it has given just by being itself?

People of traditional cultures would say yes, indisputably, and moreover, that the expression of gratitude is not a single act taken in response to a single instance of bounty, but part of an ongoing cycle of giving and taking, taking and giving. In the late 1980s

and early '90s I spent a lot of time on Navajo and Hopi lands, writing about a land dispute and relocation issue. The Navajo families I visited would make a simple prayer to the plants they wished to harvest, the sheep they were about to butcher, explaining that they intended to take from them. They assured those living beings that what they were doing was necessary for the good of the human inhabitants of the place, and expressed their hope that the plant or sheep people might continue to flourish as well. Only then would they harvest the plant, draw the knife across the throat of the sheep. The reciprocity in this simple ceremony was implicit.

Contemporary non-natives might consider such practices touching but arcane, and rather irrelevant to our own lives. Pause in gratitude for each item we drop into our cart as we rush through the supermarket after work, inventing as we go the meal we'll put together for the family dinner? Thank the rare-earth minerals invisibly melded into our smartphones every time we open an app? Not likely. Most of us are far removed from that perpetual wheel of giving and taking.

DRIVING THROUGH rural Pennsylvania, a friend and I pass a large farm. Spread out on a green field, among an array of attractive white farm buildings with red trim, are dozens of small white plastic crates. We know that inside each one a veal calf is being raised. We know, too, that these young animals were separated from their mothers immediately after they were born and that they will spend their entire short lives tied up in these crates, which are so confining the animals can't even turn around. My friend and I fall silent as the rows of crates slip past the window and disappear behind us. Eventually we speak of how sad we feel to see animals treated like that. We affirm, as if trying to prove to each other that we're somehow addressing the problem, that we ourselves never eat veal. But we wish there were something more we could do to end their suffering.

When a beautiful place is rendered unbeautiful, when a generous place is exploited until it can give no more, when an animal is forced to endure cruel conditions, our tendency is to turn away. A polluted, disturbed, unsightly place becomes a castoff, like an old, threadbare item of clothing or a kitchen appliance that no longer works. Once a place bears this stigma of contagion, says author and University of Vermont environmental studies professor professor Adrian Ivakhiv, it becomes "taboo," off-limits, sometimes officially, sometimes just in the individual or collective mind. "Just as humans have set aside certain places for sacred or ritual events," Ivakhiv says, "other places have been set aside because they are too dangerous or damaged to be in contact with." Such a place seems to have lost not only its appeal but also its validity, both as a part of the physical landscape and of the psychological



landscape of the human community that once valued it.

Certainly these sad, toxic, taboo places deserve as much recognition and gratitude as their unmolested counterparts. They've taken on a burden that other places have been spared. An Oneida friend of mine once compared wounded places to veterans of war. "They've given a lot," he said. "You may not agree with the war, but you have to honor the warriors."

When I consider the places I've loved and lost, I long to bring them comfort. I wish there were some way to say, *I'm sorry. I appreciate you. I want to help.* Whether in gratitude or compassion, sorrow or delight, recognition of how things used to be or consolation for what's coming, I who have been gifted by a place wish to figure out some way to return the gesture. But what kind

of gift would be right for a scraped hillside slated for fracking? For calves confined to life in crates? For all the polluted rivers, clearcut forests, diminishing wilderness, and smoldering dumps? What I seek is a gift I can offer whenever it's needed. It has to be light enough to carry and affordable enough that I can easily stock up on a large supply. It must be specific, personal, portable, and rare.

ONE POSSIBLE ANSWER comes to me on a backpacking trip with friends in the canyons of southeastern Utah. On a clear blue and gold morning in late spring, I leave camp and go off to explore a particularly alluring side canyon. My eyes are dipping up and down between the cliffs, where I hope to spot Anasazi ruins, and the dry wash, with its smooth stones the colors of jade, blood, and

slate, when a tree moves into my line of vision. I am fully aware of it, as if it has suddenly stepped forth from its seclusion on the bank. Lightning-charred, ragged, gouged with holes, obviously a cottonwood in its former life, it demands to be reckoned with.

There is something venerable about a tree struck by lightning. Nakedly it bears its whole history: life, death, the cause of its death, and sometimes even its survival after death. I try to imagine this tree when it was alive. It must have been a formidable presence here in this stone canyon. Rabbits and deer would have sought it out for its tasty shoots, especially in the winter months, when the buds continued to develop. Many birds would have nested in the tree, and owls would have perched in it at night to watch for prey passing underneath. When branches fell off, which would have happened with increasing frequency as the tree got older, woodpeckers, bats, and even bears could have found food and shelter in the hollows. Without question, this tree gave a lot during its long life.

Impulsively I feel the urge to celebrate the abundance of gifts it gave by offering a gift of my own. From the wash I collect stones in the brightest colors I can find and ring them around the base of the tree. I pick wildflowers and place them in the holes pocking the trunk, select shapes of bleached wood and arrange them amid the stones. The bright colors stand out, jewel-like, against the shiny ebony char. When I have completed my ministrations, the tree looks resplendent enough to preside at some great ceremony. As for me, I feel I've formed a compact with this venerable being. "Sometimes it is necessary / to reteach a thing its loveliness," writes Galway Kinnell in his poem "Saint Francis and the Sow." I feel I've done much the same for this noble wreck of a cottonwood.

The discovery itself is a gift: by offering a bit of beauty to a being or place that has been felled, fracked, polluted, abused, or in some other way robbed of its dignity and purpose, I can replenish its loveliness. By believing—and then acting on—the conviction that a place is worthy of receiving some kind of gift, my consciousness shifts from anger, disgust, or sadness to one of compassion, engagement, and creativity. I realize that when my friend and I passed that veal farm, we could have stopped the car, gotten out, picked wildflowers from the roadside, and arranged them on the grass in honor of the calves. We could have sung a song or made a prayer.

Offering a gift to a damaged place is a burst of compassionate action like the splash a pebble makes when it's tossed into a pond. Only I don't ask myself where the ripples might lead; I focus on the splash. Making a spontaneous gift to a place doesn't require me to spend money, be an expert, mobilize people, or haul in supplies. No one knows I've given it, and I'll get no credit for it. Once I leave the place, the gift belongs not to posterity but to the



winds, rains, and animals. Its efficacy can't be measured, but, like a kiss, a laugh, or the instinct to rush to the aid of someone who's tripped and fallen on the street, it's an impulse I agree to act on because I'm a human being seized with the urge to respond to the world around me. My gift can be a first step to further activism on an issue, but it can also be an act complete unto itself—whimsical, wild, temporary, imperfect, and wonderfully impractical.

It's now MIDSUMMER, and industrial-sized gas drilling trucks have begun grinding up and down a graveled slope near my village. I feel the familiar heaviness and despair encroaching, but then it occurs to me that I could visit the place and see what, if anything, I might have to offer.

On a Sunday afternoon, when the crews have the day off, I slip past the NO TRESPASSING signs, duck under a metal gate, and start up the hill. The gravel road, wide enough for two trucks to pass without scraping each other, looks incongruous cutting through the mixed hardwood forest dotted with overgrown meadows. About half a mile from the main road both the hill and the gravel level off at the gas pad. A large rectangular plot has been cleared, and sheets of sticky, black, feltlike geotextile material lie over the entire area except the middle, where, a few feet above a hole about the size of a child's wading pool, pokes the gas well, neatly capped. Around the pad stand a generator; tall lighting structures; a few of the boxcarlike containers that the gas companies use to transport water from rivers and streams to drilling sites, where they mix it with fracking chemicals and sand; a port-o-john; and other pieces of equipment bespeaking the imminence of major activity. Yet all around, on the perimeters of the cleared area, life carries on as if nothing were amiss. Wild daisies, purple clover, orange hawkweed, and Queen Anne's Lace are already reclaiming the verge of the cut woods. Late

When the train lets its whistle go

and all the birds
along the river
rise in an exhale
of white –
milky whir
of a compass spun –
I think I've been
wherever they're going
once before.

—*Jaimien Delp*

afternoon sun suffuses the foliage with emerald light, and deep in the woods a hermit thrush sings its flutelike song. As I look around, a pair of bluebirds flits over the gas pad toward a tree.

There are moments when I find myself so seduced by the life of a place, carrying on in the way it must, that all I want is to abide there for a while. I want to be part clover, part maple leaf radiating sun, part song of thrush, and only enough human that I can relish and remember the experience. Yet because I can't be anything but fully human, I am unable to prevent my vigilant mind from interrupting that ravishment with knowledge of the imminent destruction of this place. I savor the moment and mourn the future, especially since the motivation for what is about to happen here is the extraction of fossil fuel to feed a world that is already cooking itself to death.

I don't know exactly what I have in mind when I step over the rolled edge of the geotextile. All I know is that I want to get closer to the reality of this newly industrialized site and my own responses to it. For a while I just wander, covering territory, looking around and looking within. Then it comes to me to form poses, something like yoga postures. First, arms outspread, body leaning forward like a masthead, I am a bluebird on the wing. Next I'm the massive metal wellhead, currently doing nothing but holding tight and waiting to be called into service. I am myself, bent over in sorrow for what will be lost when the fracking gets underway.

By now I'm swept up in this activity. Tilting forward, I plant my hands on the ground, then slide fully horizontal, like fracking liquid shooting into shale. I am a daisy turning toward the sun. I am gas bubbling through pipes, microbes flinching from the gathering biocides. Since I derive my new postures from the asanas of yoga, I name them "gasanas."

By the time I step back over the edge of my sticky, black, improvised yoga mat, I'm splotched with tarry goo, but the place itself feels different to me, less a lovely and innocent being facing a cruel future, more like a source of resilience and relentless creativity. Deep down I know it's really my attitude, not the place, that has undergone this transformation. But that itself is significant. Mourning what was, absorbing as best as I can what is, and expressing the two through a spontaneous, playful offering, I have implicated myself in the situation at hand. I'm still unhappy about the industrial activity that has happened and will happen here. But looking around at the daisies, the woods where the thrush still sings, the gas pad that—who could have guessed it?—can easily be transformed to a performance space, I realize that I love this place. I bow in gratitude before turning to walk back down the hill.

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