



Inner Ocean Fantasy 2011  
25" x25"

by John Babcock

Photo by Linda Babcock

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## Veronica Zaleha

### Joining the Caravan: One Pilgrim's Journey

*Dedicated to Cecil the lion. Killed in Zimbabwe, July 2015*

Early morning gray. The time of morning when the color of asphalt matches the color of sky, without much variation in between. Houses remain dark and sleepy as I make my way to work. I'd driven the same route to the same building for seventeen years, first when it was Les Bois Junior High, and then when it became Timberline High, both part of the Boise School District where I taught for twenty-two years. I like the fact that there is no traffic yet, and my direction heads east toward the horizon of foothills over which the sun rises, miracle of miracles, every single day. I like even more the fact that my morning route now takes me to spend the day in the school's library, which has windows up to the ceiling through which I can watch that sun rise each day. This after the twelve years spent in the school's windowless classrooms where I taught English before making my mid-career change to school librarian. I no longer take natural light for granted.

It is on one such gray, traffic-less morning that I notice a gray mound in the middle of the road. As my headlights get closer I see that it is a gray and brown duck that's been hit and killed by a car while it tried to cross the road. There are a lot of ducks about in the spring, and it's not entirely unusual to meet one that's met its demise at the wheel of a swift moving vehicle whose driver either didn't see or didn't care. But this time something more catches my eye. About a foot away from the gray mass stands a very alive duck with an iridescent green head and a more dramatically gray, brown and white body. I'm already a few yards past the scene before I comprehend: this male was the mate of the deceased. How long has he stood there? How long will he stand there? Should I have moved the corpse off the road to a safer spot for him to grieve? Pay final respects? Figure out that she was dead? All this as I continue on in the direction I am moving, too caught up in my own momentum to respond with anything more than my thoughts.

The scene triggers the memory of one I'd pictured in my imagination while listening to an NPR story in my car one morning. It was a story about the Toklat Wolf Pack in Alaska's Denali National Park: The tragic tale of the killing of the pack's alpha wolf at the hands of a trophy hunter. The hunt was legal as it occurred on a road just outside park boundaries. The rest of the pack had moved on within the protected boundaries of the park, but the seven-year-old black male had continued to frequent the area and behave erratically since its mate had met the same fate at the hands of another hunter outside park boundaries months earlier. I listened as this hunter defended his actions while criticizing those who had allowed this pack of wolves to inhabit the hearts and imaginations of generations of visitors to Denali. He felt that animals were lower on the food chain and humans should not form sentimental attachments to them. I might agree that humans are a predator species, and our own survival relies upon some degree of sacrifice of life. I even agree that our relationship with the rest of life should not be sentimentalized, but for different reasons. I felt saddened by the hunter's cavalier attitude, especially since this wolf's life was not taken for food. Further, meat could be provided through animals less endangered, had that been the purpose of this kill. No, this was a clear example of man's hubris.

Aldo Leopold poignantly narrates his own redemption from this attitude in his essay "Thinking Like a Mountain." In this selection from *A Sand County Almanac*, Leopold describes shooting a pack of wolf pups and their mother when "[he] was young . . . and full of trigger itch." His transformation occurs as he "watch[es] a fierce green fire dying in [the mother wolf's] eyes." From this, and his many experiences with nature, Leopold developed his "land ethic," which is now seen as an early expression of the philosophy of Deep Ecology. Within Deep Ecology humans are seen as part of the interconnected web of life. Creation does not exist for our use, but has its own intrinsic value entirely independent of us. Deep Ecology does not place humans at the anthropocentric center of the rest of creation, but promotes an ecocentric understanding of our place within what Leopold called "the biotic community."

Since we are merely members of this interdependent community, we need to recognize the sacrifices necessary to sustain our lives. Gratitude would be an appropriate response to the gift of life the planet provides. Nor should we anthropomorphize other animal beings in a sentimental fashion that would have them become more like us. Rather we should respect the rest of creation for its contributions, and model nature's cooperative relationships.



Veronica Daley Zaleha is originally from Boise, Idaho. She earned her BA and MA in English from Boise State University. Veronica taught English for seventeen years before becoming a teacher librarian. She has been the librarian at Santa Cruz High School since moving here six years ago. Books and reading have shaped her life. Veronica also began writing at an early age. Poetry is her first love, and she enjoys narrative non-fiction. She has tried her hand at crafting novels during these past three years' NaNoWriMos!

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This is not to ignore or romanticize nature, red in tooth and claw. Still, for all of nature's seemingly cruel dramas, from seals killing penguins or polar bears killing seals, to wild fires burning forests and tsunamis wiping out coastal villages, the entire planet has never before been more at risk. Currently, the human species consumes and destroys more of the earth's resources than any other, at the cost of other species' mass extinctions and a planet so polluted that the survival of all life is threatened. When nature takes, a sustainable balance is maintained, not so with humans. Here in the United States, five percent of the world's human population is responsible for twenty-five percent of the world's consumption. Large homes, cars, and lifestyles are our trophies. Perhaps we are all very much like the hunter that killed the grieving alpha wolf in Alaska. Or maybe we just thoughtlessly drive our cars too often, too far, and too fast to slow down for duck crossings on our city streets.

My personal work to transform my own anthropocentrism to a more ecocentric ethic is grounded in both practice and philosophy. My meditation practice of Centering Prayer and my adherence to the philosophy of Deep Ecology are the foundations of my work to reconnect. They provide me with both internal and external formative experiences. Through Centering Prayer and the works of Fr. Thomas Keating, I cultivate a contemplative lifestyle that grounds me in reality. The true self cannot be assuaged by power, control, safety, security, affection or esteem. Divine union, understood by me as recognizing our integral place in the interconnected web of life, is the only real source of joy. Silence is the language of this source, and it is in stillness and quiet that the voice of creation can be heard.

After rejecting the faith of my upbringing decades ago, I do enjoy the irony of finally finding my guru in a Catholic monk. Through my exposure to Keating, and other theologians, I have been able to reconcile the Christian aspects of my spiritual identity with my pantheistic views. One such scholar, Neil Douglas-Klotz, provides non-traditional insight into Jesus' teachings. When Douglas-Klotz was the featured speaker at the Kessler-Keener lecture series, he focused on Genesis Stories, or beginnings, rather than The Apocalypse, or endings. Douglas-Klotz used a metaphor I find helpful: a caravan. The caravan places those from the past in front of us, and future generations behind us. This less linear more circular sense of time appeals to me as more earth centered. It places us along a path that our ancestors have blazed for us and we now must keep clear for those who would follow. If we travel our spiritual path together as we learn from the wisdom of our elders, we may hope to leave a healthy, biodiverse world for our children.

While at a retreat with eco-activist, Buddhist writer, Joanna Macy, a similar vision was referred to as Deep Time. Part of Macy's powerful work to reconnect looks backward to the gifts of our ancestors and ahead at our responsibility to future generations. At a similar retreat with John Seed, the renowned Australian Rainforest Activist, he led experiential workshops that help participants realize our place as humans within the entire creation of the cosmos and within the evolution of all life on our planet Earth. It is humbling and empowering to recognize our species' small part in the history of the universe, and the critical responsibility we will have in determining its future.

There, in the valley of my bioregion, surrounded by foothills with a river running through its center, I continued balancing contemplative practice and environmental action with my busy daily schedule, always looking to nature for sustenance and inspiration. One quiet Saturday morning, as I stepped onto my front porch to retrieve the newspaper, an unusual sight caught my eye. Two ducks, male and female, were sitting in my neighbor's yard. We don't live near any ponds, and ducks in my neighborhood are far less common than along my route to work. Squirrels are a different story. They run rampant. I enjoy watching their high wire, acrobat antics. They have a canopy circuit from my walnut trees to the lilac bush to the cottonwood to the sycamore; the big, old trees that surround my little house. This same morning, one member of the circus family lay in the curb next to my yard -- road kill. Another stood nearby. Its mate? Grieving? I don't know. I do know that I'd created a personal goal for myself to never hit a squirrel. This goal, though it could be considered unrealistic, given the number of squirrel crossings throughout the neighborhood streets each day, forced me to slow down as I drove to and from work and errands. I don't like thinking that we live so fast that we can't make time for the non-human beings in our world. Squirrels might seem stupid because they dart this way and that before running the exact wrong direction to avoid getting hit, but what in their experience could prepare them for two tons of steel hurtling along faster than any predator can pounce? How can deer that need to get from the foothills to the river understand an interstate that has been built? How can the songbird comprehend that it only need cross the logging road to continue along its wilderness corridor? Human technology is now hurtling faster than even we who create it can comprehend. A nuclear bomb may have us darting and dodging in an irrational effort to save our lives one day. I managed to avoid the squirrels, and I continued to see ducks crossing the road as I drove to work. Happily they were all very alive. Sadly, I was feeling despair for our dying planet. Like a good environmentalist, I had my checklist: replacing light bulbs, recycling, joining a CSA. Yet, I was still driving my car to work each day, contributing to the environmental degradation of the Treasure

Valley's air quality.

In 2009, I relocated to Santa Cruz, California where I could continue my work as a teacher librarian in another beautiful setting at Santa Cruz High. I would once again have a peaceful, early morning commute along the river that runs through the town, this time with glimpses of the ocean, and an equally great view of the mornings' sunrises from the library's deck! Now though, I can really see the wildlife and natural beauty as I pass by, because I made bikable-distance-to-work a condition of where I would live. Mild temperatures and lack of snow certainly make it easier to bike commute, and the ride to work and home again are often the highlight of my day. Our beach town's smaller size allows travel by bike or foot for errands and appointments. Yet, there are times when it is late enough, and the busses are no longer running, that I still have to drive.

Within the first few years of my having relocated from Boise, Idaho to Santa Cruz, California, I hit with my car and killed a possum; a creature I'd never even seen before moving here. My first possum sighting was another one, dead, on the street, that I saw as I rode my bike to work. I was fascinated to get a glimpse of the creature up close when it was in no condition to run away. In death, it lay as if sleeping, with its naked little paws drawn up close to its matching pink snout: an adorable, giant rat. This must be a possum, I concluded, my mind apparently having run through some catalog of mammals I'd seen in pictures. That day I confirmed with colleagues that Santa Cruz is crawling with possums, but you rarely see them, alive anyway, because they only come out at night. Since then, I've caught glimpses of them running through the carport when I've flipped on the light switch, or when they are traipsing across the fence outside our office window. Still, it came as a shock to me when, one night as I drove to pick up my husband from a late night class, I heard a strange thumping noise beneath the car. It took a few moments to register. Did I hit something? I wondered while slowing and checking the rearview mirror. I could make out something waving in the dark, like the shadow of a plastic bag blowing up from the road in a breeze. I put my car in reverse and made my way back to investigate. As I got closer, I could see that it was a creature lifting its body from the asphalt, then collapsing. Fearing I'd injured someone's pet, I jumped out of the car and rushed to the spot just in time to watch the possum relax back from its final effort and die. Even in the dark I could see that it lay in an even darker, shiny pool of its own blood, and I could taste the warm, wet scent in the back of my throat. Relieved that I, at least, hadn't taken the life of someone's beloved dog or cat, I found myself at a loss as to what I should do. Standing in the street, in the dark, my car sitting in the middle of the road, driver's side door still open, I looked up from the corpse into the headlights of an approaching car, and momentarily hoped for confirmation, condemnation, counsel, but it swung wide around my little scene and continued on. I couldn't bring myself to grab hold of the possum's tail and drag it off to the side of the road, though I thought I should. I walked away, got back into my car, and drove on. I felt significantly changed, as though, even at my age, I'd had yet another piece of innocence sliced away. As hard as I had tried, I was responsible for the death of another being. Not even in the indirect way of when I occasionally ate a burger, but as a direct result of my driving a vehicle -- operating a machine too big and too fast to make note of a nocturnal creature living its innocent life. I didn't cry, though I felt like it, but I kept feeling that taste in the back of my throat long after I left the scene of my crime. This failure spoke to me of all the ways I feel inadequate in reaching my sustainable lifestyle goals.

So I'm left to wonder, what is all this experience good for? If someone with all of the learning opportunities that I've had about the need for change can't do enough, what can be expected of a less informed public at large? How and when will our knowledge transform our behaviors to be in alignment with our values? Here in Santa Cruz it's convenient to support local, independent businesses. Abundant, nearby agriculture allows consumers to buy organic produce grown in our region. The enclaves of liberal community I sought in Boise now surround me. As my husband describes it to those who ask how I have adjusted to the move, "Veronica has found her tribe." Here on the left coast, I find it easier to live by my favorite dictum: "Simple in means. Rich in Ends" (Arne Naess). But Santa Cruz is not the world, it's not even our nation or much of the rest of California. I welcome the larger systemic changes that will only occur when enough people exert the political will to create that change.

To look at the cover stories of news magazines, it would seem that "Green Consciousness" is gaining popularity. Naomi Klein's book, *This Changes Everything*, is proving influential, and Pope Francis' encyclical is creating quite a stir within religious communities and beyond. Santa Cruz's own Paul Fleischman's book for teens, *Eyes Wide Open: Going Behind the Environmental Headlines*, offers hopeful suggestions for our next generation. President Obama's recently announced *America's Clean Power Plan* lays out steps to reverse climate change by reducing carbon emissions. These are positive actions, but when there is simultaneous debate about drilling in the Arctic or extracting oil from Canada's tar sands and transporting it via pipeline, something is amiss. With all of the issues facing the world today that require our passionate attention -- assaults on public education, income inequality, rampant racism and violence -- why is this issue so important? As Thoreau so aptly put it more than one hundred and fifty years ago, "What is

the use of a house, if you haven't got a tolerable planet to put it on?"  
Anything else we hope to accomplish depends upon having a livable planet.  
Climate change is now affecting many things -- from extreme weather and wild fires to whether we have enough water. For ourselves and for our children we need to develop a lifestyle that supports a sustainable future; a future in which we can take on the other challenging issues that remain. In words attributed to another of my teachers, the Sufi mystic and poet, Rumi: "Ours is no caravan of despair." We can take heart in knowing that what we do for our own species will also support the continuation of biodiversity on our planet. The ducks, squirrels, possums, and wolves, not to mention the thousands of endangered species around the world, will thank us. As Edward Abbey reminds us, "The love of wilderness is more than a hunger for what is always beyond reach; it is also an expression of loyalty to the earth ... the only home we shall ever know, the only paradise we ever need -- if only we had the eyes to see."

Veronica Daley Zaleha August, 2015

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