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Glassy-eyed Reviewers and "What is Wrong with the World"

by Lois Phillips Hudson

The late Robert Morley, who played Katherine Hepburn's Anglican missionary brother in *The African Queen*, remarked that one of the things wrong with the world is that "school is all wrong. They ask you what you don't know, not what you know. When I took the test in sixth grade, 'Where is Cape Fear?' I said I didn't know but that I could give the names of the Twelve Apostles and I did."

I understand that I am supposed to be talking about the "Language of the Land: Journeys into Literary North Dakota," but most of what I'm going to say will be about language and the land, in general, and I hope I won't seem to have gone quite so far afield as did Mr. Morley in the sixth grade. I am currently trying to recover from a lifetime spent in school, which is not at all the best place for a writer to be, and sometimes I cannot suppress an involuntary shudder when I hear myself speaking the word "literary," so now I'll just move on to the land, which *is* the best place for a writer to be.

A "quaint" idea in many "primitive" cultures is that one of the major jobs of humans is to take care of their planet. In a number of cultures that means making the proper dances in world-renewing ceremonies—sending the correct messages through our bare feet speaking directly to the earth. In her book, *The Inland Whale*, which recounts nine legends of Northern California Indians, Theodora Kroeber describes sitting with an old Yurok doctor on her sea-cliff terrace a thousand feet above the Klamath River, which flows into a mile-long lagoon formed by a broad sand bar before finally entering the Pacific:

> [We were] looking down at the river which had only just broken itself a new opening through the bar. Fanny watched intently as the surf from an incoming tide seemed to push back the river and to overspread the wide river mouth. "You see there what is wrong with the world," Fanny said to me, pointing to the break-through. "The earth tips too far and the ocean comes up the river. That is not good. Even whales could come into the river when it is this way. It happens because there are not enough Yurok anymore; not enough people dancing and stamping their feet down hard on the earth. That is what used to keep it from tipping, and what kept whales outside where they belong."[1]

It would never have occurred to a Yurok that she or he was not responsible for his or her world—and much of the meaning in that person's life derived from that sense of responsibility. Part of a Yurok's fundamental sense of who she was came from her conviction that her faithful attentions were absolutely necessary to the health of her planet. And it does seem axiomatic, doesn't it, that human beings develop their definitions of what and who they are in the context of whatever language they hear their landscapes speaking to them. And it is equally axiomatic that how we live

our lives is largely determined by our definitions of ourselves.

When I think of the “Language of the Land,” I think of how we do so much defining of ourselves long before we've acquired the vocabulary to tell ourselves that is what we are doing. And when we begin to examine this lifelong process of defining ourselves, we find that we have literally engaged the whole universe. Our planet and our bodies are formed from the dust of exploding stars, and there are as many possible different combinations of human genes as there are atoms in the universe. When we try to tally the components that make up one human's unique identity, we get numbers that make the national debt seem minuscule. The human genome is made of two hundred thousand genes which, in turn, are made of three billion nucleotides which can arrange themselves in what seems to be a true infinity of unique combinations, and each of these genetically unique combinations interacts in uniquely complex ways with its environment throughout its life.[2] (Incidentally, about 98 percent of mouse and human genes serve approximately the same purposes, and about 99 percent of the DNA in our genes is identical with the DNA of chimpanzees. The more “civilization's” science discovers about us, the more we see that “primitives,” who invariably feel a complete kinship with all the other animals, have been so much more accurate than have we in recognizing our human place in the rest of Creation.) At any waking instant, the human eye and its brain vision center can be simultaneously processing one and a half million messages, and in one day the whole brain is making one hundred times as many connections as are made by all of the world's telephone systems on that day.

Yet in spite of this huge potential for variation and adaptation, human history of the last five or six thousand years strongly suggests that we are critters whose viable margins may actually be quite narrow. Most of our deepest needs appear to be immutable, and our denial of that immutability may well be the ultimate cause of our demise as a species. For example, apparently we are genetically programmed to need open space which is not overly cluttered with other critters of our species—but except for a tiny minority of the world's human overpopulation, such as most people who live in North Dakota—only the rich can afford to live in that space. In fact, one of the major ironies of our time is that the more we discover about a human genetic inheritance that unalterably connects us to the rest of the natural world, the more we deny what we know. And a further irony is that our greatest strength as a species—our “superior” adaptability—might well turn out to be our tragic flaw: we may be just adaptable enough to make short-term adaptations to any number of intolerable conditions which will ultimately add up to one more straw than our sagging backs can support. Just for one example: the more we discover about how essential natural light is to our physical and mental health, the more we plan taller and taller buildings in which to lock more and more humans away from the light. Fifteen thousand people work in New York's World Trade Center, and during business hours about another thirty-five thousand are there on business or just touring the Tower of Babel. The taller of the two towers is 110 stories high. Now we are told that architects and engineers have computer-generated plans for a five-hundred-story building, in which half the population of North Dakota can be stashed in fluorescent cubicles—except, of course, for the CEOs, who will be on the naturally lighted top floor, gazing out on the world from the height of a fair-sized mountain summit. They see only concrete, though, and even if they could glimpse a real mountain in the distance, it would not look like something sacred to them, but only like something to be mined or logged. Meanwhile, the millions and millions of humans who spend their lives locked in skyscrapers—both for their working and their living places—often seem unaware that they inhabit a living planet, much less ever developing a deep devotion to it. But those CEOs up there on the five-hundredth floor need a readily available surplus of workers and consumers; thus, to maintain the

status quo and those CEOs on the top floor, we deny our immutable need for natural light and supinely agree that humans can live normal lives when caged in concrete.

When we confine other animals in concrete, they generally respond with what we call "abnormal" behavior. They won't mate! Gosh, here's this giant panda male who has been suffering a fate worse than death—living without sex—and when his human keepers finally shove a female into his cage, what does he do? Do the two of them rush into each others' paws and start making up for lost time? Of course not. Their instincts are telling them that they must not bring offspring into this world where they have no means of caring for that offspring, and where they know it cannot live normally. So the pandas' human CEOs anesthetize them, stimulate the male with electrical shocks to produce sperm, and insert the sperm into the unconscious female with a syringe. Not surprisingly, the mother who is forced to give birth this way is often unwilling or unable to nurture her infant. The concomitant irony here is that human animals, being the most highly sexed organisms that we know of, generally respond to abnormal stresses by over-reproducing. I leave you to connect these ironies with what is happening in inner cities all over the world.

The word "civilization" comes from the same Latin root as "city," and here's an interesting thought on that subject: somebody said, "to be truly civilized is to embrace disease."3 So the question is: since we appear to do our deepest defining of ourselves in those early years when we are not conscious of defining ourselves, how may that definition be affected by having all our three billion nucleotides interacting not with clean air, natural light, and real earth beneath our feet, but instead with supremely ugly manmade landscapes?

Last fall I finally made the visit to Australia that I had dreamed of since I was about three years old and fell in love with kangaroos at Seattle's Woodland Park Zoo. During my three weeks in a little part of that wonderful continent, I became ever more convinced that "primitive" people are always grateful for the earth, no matter how godforsaken their landscapes may appear to people who spend their lives caged in concrete. When we were planning our trip, I told my travel agent that my friend and I, though painfully short on time, hoped to get some sense of the great Australian Outback. ("Outback" is a most revealing term, implying that only the east coast of that continent has any significance. It sounds like a term you might use in describing the micro-continent of a homeowner like myself; I have a nice high fence around my backyard, and I manage to keep the narrow lawn out front more or less presentable, but don't let anybody get a look at what's out back!) My travel agent, who lived on the Australian east coast for many years, reassured me. "Well," said he, "in order to get to Darwin from Sydney, you have to go to Alice Springs and change planes. You'll see more than you want of the Outback when you spend all those hours flying back and forth over it!"

Any North Dakotan is all too familiar with this view of the Great American Outback which appears to be held by the vast majority of citizens dwelling on our own East Coast. My guess is that there are still many big-city audiences from which comedians can get a cheap laugh just by uttering the words, "Fargo, North Dakota." I think I am as quick as the average human to catch on to a joke, but I have never been able to see what is comical about saying, "Fargo, North Dakota." Don't tell me it represents "the ends of the earth." Only people who do not really grasp that the earth is a sphere are ignorant enough to think our planet has "ends." So far as I can figure out, "Fargo, North Dakota," is comical only because its human population is only about one-hundredth the human population of New York City. Does all the space around Fargo prove that Fargo is insignificant and therefore "funny"? The answer may be that since all Establishments need people to manage, and the

more Managees the better, various Establishments over the last few thousand years have persuaded most of us to believe that the more of us we jam into one spot, the more "sophisticated" we are. The fact is that I have met some of the most truly sophisticated people I've ever known in Fargo, North Dakota, and some of the very most ignorant in New York City.

I don't know whether west coast Australians also think of the major portion of their continent as an insignificant and monotonous Outback, but I do know, from painful personal experience, that most West Coast Americans feel this way about their continent. As one of my graduate students says, "The West Coast is where the East starts all over again." He could not wait to finish his very distinguished master's degree at the University of Washington and return to his eastern Washington "wasteland"—a place that our East Coast rulers have seen as a perfect site first for processing the plutonium for the bombs we dropped on Japan, and then as a storage "reservation" for high-level radioactive wastes produced in providing electrical power for the East Coast. What better place to dump these dangerous "by-products" than somewhere in the Outback?

. . .

Now back to Australia and the Great Outback. Like any two typical travelers from the East—to be exact, I journeyed from about seven thousand miles east and my New Jersey friend came from about ten thousand miles east—we did, indeed, see the Great Australian Outback from about six miles in space, the way 99 percent of visitors to Australia see it. The difference between us and most of the others who fly over the Outback is that both of us now long to go back and walk it, smell it, touch it, feel every atom in our bodies responding to that mesmerizing red radiance of the most ancient earth now drifting above the seas.

You may remember that about fifteen years ago, a twenty-seven-year-old Australian woman traveled alone, with three camels and a labrador, across seventeen hundred miles of the Outback. She wrote a wonderful book called *Tracks*, and here is what she says about the land and one group of Australian Aborigines who live near Uluru—the largest and grandest monolith in the world, which whites call Ayers Rock:

> Their belief was that the earth was traversed in the dream-time by ancestral beings . . . [whose travels] formed the topography of the land, and whose energies remained on earth embodied in the tracks they followed. . . . There is no confusion in the minds of Aboriginal people as to who are the traditional caretakers of country. . . . The connection between the dream-time, the country, and the traditional caretakers of country is manifested in the complex ceremonies that are performed by clan members. Some are increase ceremonies, ensuring the continued and plentiful existence of plants and animals and maintaining the ecological welfare of the landscape (indeed of the world). . . . Once dispossessed of this land, ceremonial life deteriorates, people lose their strength, meaning, essence and identity. . . . No amount of anthropological detail can begin to convey Aboriginal feeling for their land. It is everything—their law, their ethics, their reason for existence. Without that relationship they become ghosts. Half people. They are not separate from the land. When they lose it, they lose themselves, their spirit, their culture.[3]

Later, she describes "Aboriginal reality":

> their vision of the world as being something they could never be separate from, which showed in their language. In Pitjantjara and, I suspect, all other Aboriginal languages, there

> is no word for "exist." Everything in the universe is in constant interaction with everything else. You cannot say, this is a rock. You can only say, there sits, leans, stands, falls over, lies down, a rock. The self did not seem to be an entity living somewhere inside the skull, but a reaction between mind and stimulus.[4]

What if it is true that none of us is ever separate from the world she or he inhabits—no matter how sterile and ugly it is? What if it is not really possible for any of us to be an independent "entity living somewhere inside the skull," but instead the human self is always "a reaction between mind and stimulus"? What if all human beings are genetically programmed to define and/or identify themselves principally through the "reaction between mind and stimulus"?

I will return presently to the Great Australian and Great American Outbacks, but first let me juxtapose Robyn Davidson's description of the Aboriginals' world with a description of the environs in which two currently famous ten-year-old boys defined themselves. I'm speaking of the Liverpool boys who abducted a two-year-old boy from a butcher's shop in a Liverpool mall—malls being the favorite hangouts of directionless city kids from all economic classes, who are there to get their most important education: how to be addictive consumers. After leaving the mall, the three boys walked two and a half miles along the railroad tracks in full view of any number of Liverpool citizens, most of whom later testified that they saw the two older boys abusing the little one. Then the two began to torture the toddler to death. First they threw paint in his face, then they sodomized him, kicked him, and threw bricks at him. When, at last, he died, they laid him across the tracks, and when he was found forty-eight hours after he disappeared, his body had been cut in half by a freight train.

The *New Yorker* author of this "Letter from Liverpool" gives us a detailed description of the two and a half wretched city miles traveled by the three boys, and he also reminds us of what happens to human beings whom the Establishment has taught to define themselves by the jobs the Establishment bestows on its more fortunate subjects. Blake Morrison writes:

> Between Breeze Hill and the railway tracks where James Bulger died, the only grass to be seen grows between the graves in Walton churchyard. . . . The view from the reservoir on top of Breeze Hill is as mean and dispiriting a panorama as you will ever see. The roofs of houses stretch to the horizon: pebble-dash semis, low prefabs, dirt-encrusted red brick row houses, mock-Tudors, a handful of high-rises, boarded-up shops. . . . This is a landscape emptied of energy and innovation. . . . Appropriately, one of the first buildings the three boys passed on their walk was a JobCentre, and one of the last, as they turned right by the City Road railway bridge, was another JobCentre. In Liverpool, the JobCentre is where you go not to find work but to confirm that there is none to find; in the month of the murder, unemployment was 15.2 per cent and around thirty per cent eighteen-to-twenty-four-year-olds are without jobs. The working class has become used to not working. None of these boys' parents had jobs in Liverpool in February, 1993. . . . Ralph Bulger (father of the murdered little boy) possessed a heavy-vehicle driver's license, had been on seventeen training schemes, . . . but hadn't found a job.[5]

Let me remind you of the official British adjective for a human being who is being laid off from her or his job: this worker is officially classified as "redundant." So when you don't have a job, you are defined as a "redundancy." As Richard Rubenstein says in *The Age of Triage*, "Those whose

labor fetches no price will be regarded as worthless. . . . [Thus] money has become more real than people."[6]

Being taught that a job is our identity also, of course, creates a boredom that is bound to cause explosions when children's natural energy and creativity have been intolerably repressed, locked in concrete, and directed into sterile horrors like Nintendo. As Robyn Davidson says near the end of *Tracks*, "Society needs it to be so. Because if people started. . . refusing to accept the fruitless boredom that is offered them as normality, they would become hard to control."[7]

. . . But of course Adam Smith's "classic" capitalism has all the answers, hasn't it? We must never let ourselves question this sacred doctrine! And our unquestioning allegiance to the "superiority" of a system that has given us the <u>real</u> wastelands of Liverpool and Watts and the Bronx leads me to an Australian problem that is all too familiar to Americans—namely, what sort of lies we should print about white "pioneers" and their treatment of aboriginal inhabitants in the textbooks we give to our children. An AP dispatch from Sydney a couple weeks ago begins:

> Was Australia discovered and settled by bold pioneers or conquered and occupied by ruthless invaders? The question is at the center of a textbook debate in Queensland state between critics of "political correctness" and educators who say traditional history books conceal the dark side of Australia's founding. . . . Teachers who are uncomfortable with the word "invasion" are told they may call the coming of the whites a "non-indigenous occupation" instead. . . . Rob Borbidge, a National Party conservative, demanded that a new set of [more truthful] textbooks be shredded," because, he charged, the new textbooks were "rewriting history."[8]

Robert Hughes, in his book, *The Fatal Shore*, tells the story of how England dumped the convicts its jails could no longer contain in Australia and Tasmania. Most of these convicts were in jail because of desperate acts they had committed in their attempts to survive in Britain's inner cities; they were, in short, the first batch of redundancies produced by the Industrial Revolution. And at the same time that the need for human workers was declining, human population began its astronomical increase; England nearly doubled its population in just the first four decades of the nineteenth century. I don't think it requires any great leap of our imaginations to connect today's Liverpool boys with their ancestors of two hundred years ago, who, as Hughes puts it, had a need to "kick a subject class,"[9] and so they kicked the Aboriginals. Hughes tells of whites in Tasmania who would capture an Aboriginal, tie him up, cut a chunk of flesh from his buttocks, and force him to eat it before killing him.

Now, I am perfectly aware that only deliberately "naive" Romantics embrace the notion that growing up in a natural environment guarantees that human animals will not behave cruelly toward each other, and I want to assure you that I am not among those naive Romantics. I am simply insisting that we have very little evidence that being city-bred causes us to behave in a "civil" manner toward each other, and quite a lot of evidence that cities probably do *not* "civilize" many consummate city dwellers. And only the most ignorant among us harbor the idea that one must be city-bred in order to know good manners. The fact is that we find some of the very most humane and sensitive manners in the world in "primitive" cultures. California Yuroks, for just one example, would not have tolerated the eating behavior of the average modern American child. Albatrosses observe a courtship ritual that makes most humans seem barbarous indeed. It may take a male albatross two years to get every subtle bending of his neck and every bobbing of his great beak

exactly right, and there is no mating till he does. Contrast that with how someone has described city-bred human courtship: “I don't know your name, but lay down. I think I love you.” In short, my point is that city dwelling not only does not “civilize” most of us, but it also appears to prevent most of us from developing the most rudimentary sense of, and love for, our only home in our only universe.

It seems to me that many of those who have grown up in cities have included in their definitions of themselves an arrogance of which they are often unconscious, and this arrogance, in turn, has a subtle yet enormous effect on the literary landscape. If what we read has a great influence on how we define ourselves, and if the urban and academic Literary Establishment is dominated by blind city arrogance, can we reasonably hope that the vast majority of us will even read about natural landscapes, let alone experience them? I could spend the rest of my time tonight describing stupidities of the urban and academic Literary Establishment, but I'll restrict myself to giving you just two or three.

I have taken the first half of my title for this talk—”glassy-eyed reviewers”—from an Oakland *Tribune* reviewer's own definition of herself. Here is the final paragraph of her long and glowing review of *The Bones of Plenty*: “It is a measure of Mrs. Hudson's talent that this reviewer, who usually becomes glassy eyed at the mere mention of farms, found this book absorbing. And, I think you will too.”[10]

Gosh, why can't I be more grateful for such kind words? I'm going to offer you an analogy now, but before I do, I want to make it clear that I don't put moronic statements like this reviewer's in the same hurtful and harmful category with racist remarks—but still, both remarks are definitely of the “backhanded compliment” variety, and the more you think about them, the more they deny the identity of the person to whom the “compliment” is addressed. My African-American friends and my Native American friends tell me that often a white acquaintance, thinking she or he is bestowing a generous compliment, will say something like, “You really *are* remarkable—not at all like most blacks. . . or most Indians.” In all cases the “compliment” redefines the complimentee and thereby invalidates her. So the glassy-eyed reviewer is happily surprised to find that, by jiminy, here is a “farmer” who is not at all like *most* farmers! And I have been told by more than one East Coast or West Coast person that I “don't seem at all like a Midwesterner”—I'm “much more sensitive.”

These are people who really seem to think that their food grows in plastic containers to be plucked when needed from the supermarket shelf or freezer. And farmers are the ignorant ones? As Jane Smiley puts it in her essay on the American prairie in the March *Sierra*, “The enormous superstructure of American society rests on the tiny point where fewer and fewer farmers with larger and larger machines mine as much food as they can from fields that are less and less what they once were. . . . “[11] It seems obvious that city folks, as exemplified by my glassy-eyed reviewer, would do well to take a much greater interest in their planet than most of them appear to do, so why don't they?

I submit that they lack basic earth sense because their planet did not seem to be an important part of the environment in which they first defined themselves. An extreme example of this very possibly fatal ignorance on the part of the world's rapidly increasing urban population came out of the mouth of an acquaintance who has a “distinguished” Ph.D. in American Literature from Harvard. “Well,” she said to me one day, “*I* just care about *people*! They can cover the whole earth with concrete for all I care.” I did not make this up. Here it is—the perfect statement of an “educated” “civilized” person who grew up defining herself in an environment of concrete. . . .

After I read Blake Morrison's "Letter from Liverpool," I thought about a two and a half mile walk I often took when I was about the age of the two young murderers. When I was six or seven or eight or nine, walking home from school in Cleveland, North Dakota, I never saw anything ugly, and I never felt redundant. And though I sometimes felt alone—which, after all, is an inescapable aspect of the human condition—I never felt boredom. As David Reisman observed in *The Lonely Crowd*, the loneliness one feels among billions of other humans all trapped in concrete is totally different from the grand solitude one feels when one is surrounded by sky in every direction. Barry Lopez, in his exquisite *Arctic Dreams*, says, "This . . . affinity for the land, I believe, is an antidote to the loneliness that in our own culture we associate with individual estrangement and despair."14

Bruce Chatwin, in his marvelous book, *The Songlines*, quotes a white Australian on the contrast between how white and Aboriginal children begin their defining years. "When an Aboriginal mother notices the first stirrings of speech in her child, she lets it handle the 'things' of that particular country: leaves, fruit, insects and so forth. . . . We give our children guns and computer games. *They* gave their children the land."[13] Chatwin goes on to quote Proust, who "reminds us that the 'walks' of childhood form the raw material of our intelligence." Here is the passage Chatwin quotes: "The flowers that people show me nowadays . . . never seem to me to be true flowers. . . . the cornflowers, the hawthorns, the apple-trees, which I happen, when I go out walking to encounter in the fields, *because* at the same depth, on the level of my past life, at once establish contact with my heart. . . . "[14]

Whatever imprints itself on us in our most imprintable stage appears to set our standard for what is authentic, and thus to define our own authenticity. "Primitive" peoples who live out their lives in the environments in which they first defined themselves never appear to suffer any doubts at all about their authenticity, but most of the rest of us seem to spend most of our lives looking for what is "authentic." If you suspect that the concrete you were raised in is not "authentic," and you don't dig being defined by your job, or, worse yet, you don't even have a job to define who you are, how do you go about discovering an acceptable identity? As Barry Lopez says, "The land makes the people real. . . ."[15]

When we move from the desert of the Southern Hemisphere to the far north of the Northern Hemisphere, we find among the "primitives" that same sense of human dignity in a landscape which the humans revere and for which they feel infinite gratitude. Lopez deals at great length with how Eskimos have defined themselves:

> In approaching the land with an attitude of obligation, willing to observe courtesies difficult to articulate. . . one establishes a regard from which dignity can emerge. From that dignified relationship with the land, it is possible to imagine an extension of dignified relationships throughout one's life. Each relationship is formed of the same integrity, which initially makes the mind say: the things in the land fit together perfectly, even though they are always changing. I wish the order of my life to be arranged in the same way I find the light, the slight movement of the wind, the voice of a bird, the heading of a seed pod I see before me. This impeccable and indisputable integrity I want in myself. One of the oldest dreams of mankind is to find a dignity that might include all living things. And one of the greatest of human longings must be to bring such dignity to one's own dreams, for each to find his or her own life exemplary in some way. . . .[16]

A few pages earlier, Lopez has contrasted what he described as the "primitive" view of the

land with the view held by the Managers at Prudhoe Bay. He speaks of “the sophistication of the technology, . . and the sullen, dismissive attitude taken toward the land, the violent way in which it is addressed. At pretensions to a knowledge of the Arctic, drawn from the perusal of a public relations pamphlet and from the pages of pulp novels.”[17] Ah, here we have “literature” and the landscape again!

What seems clear to me is that human animals, like all the other animals we know anything about, must be genetically programmed to love the earth. And all humans—even “primitive” humans, who have often been viewed as “children” by “civilized” people—seem to believe that it is during our earliest months and years that we experience some of our most revealing and authentic perceptions. Many Native Americans believed that before babies began to use human language, they could understand the languages spoken by the birds and other animals. We have Proust telling us that “nowadays the flowers never seem to me to be true flowers.” And we have William Wordsworth telling us in poem after poem how authentic and full of wonder are those first flowers. But then he says in “Intimations of Immortality,” “But yet I know, where'er I go,/ That there hath passed away a glory from the earth” (ll. 17-18). This has to be one of the most heartbreaking lines in all of English poetry.

I don't believe that “primitive” people feel this way about the earth after they grow up. I think they live out their lives seeing their familiar landscapes—whether desert or ice—as ever *more* authentic, seeing ever *more* glory in the earth. I think that it is no more natural for adult humans to lose this “childlike” awareness than it is for any other full-grown animal to lose it, and if I am right, then we had better stop letting Harvard Ph.D.s manage our planet. No one who defines himself or herself as a creature who lives happily in concrete should be allowed to manage anything or anybody!

I am guessing that most of you who have been kind enough to come and listen to me tonight have read what I have written, and therefore you must already have a pretty good idea of how I have defined myself. So now I will say only that when I think of what went into defining me, I rarely see myself inside any manmade structure. Sometimes I see myself tramping with my dog through the second-growth jungle in the hills above our Washington farm in the Sammamish Valley, but much more often I will see myself somewhere on the prairie, awe-struck by wind-waves frozen so hard in the snow that I can walk on the thinnest ripple without breaking it, dazzled by a lavender crocus that has ventured up on a two-inch stem just in time to decorate my mother's May basket, enchanted by the exquisite shape of a hill that shimmers with the mysteries I will find on the other side.

And I remember a gratitude so immense that the ache of it nearly exploded my chest—a whole galaxy of gratitude whirling inside my ribs, a gratitude simply that the sky was blue. I was about four when I realized how unbearable it would be if the sky was any color except blue. I don't want even to try to imagine how my three billion nucleotides might have interacted with the claustrophobic monotony of concrete city walls instead of the free horizons of the North Dakota prairie. How lucky, lucky, lucky I was to begin my defining years with so much sky around me. How grateful I am for that sky.

Now let me finish by telling you what I think is “wrong with the world.” This world suffers from a crushing redundancy of glassy-eyed reviewers petrifying in concrete, and a dangerous shortage of barefooted Yuroks dancing on the earth.

1. Theodora Kroeber, *The Inland Whale* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1959).
2. Mario R. Capecci, “Targeted Gene Replacement,” *Scientific American* 270 (March 1994), pp. 52-

59.
3. Robyn Davidson, *Tracks* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), pp. 171-172.
4. *Ibid*., pp. 196-197.
5. Blake Morrison, “Letter from Liverpool,” *The New Yorker* 69 (Feb.14, 1994), pp. 48-60, 50-51.
6. Richard Rubenstein, *The Age of Triage: Fear and Hope in an Overcrowded World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), p. 6.
7. Davidson, p. 238.
8. Associated Press dispatch, February 20, 1994.
9. Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore* (New York: Knopf, 1987), p. 281.
10. *Oakland Tribune*, August 5, 1962.
11. Jane Smiley, “So Shall We Reap,” *Sierra* 79 (March/April 1994), p. 77.
12. Barry Lopez, *Arctic Dreams* (New York: Scribner, 1986), p. 238.
13. Bruce Chatwin, *The Songlines* (New York: Viking, 1987), p. 270.
14. *Ibid*., p. 272.
15. Lopez, p. 266.
16. *Ibid*., pp. 362-363.
17. *Ibid*., p. 356.