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The Kite and the String: Why Philosophy Needs More Storytellers

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THE KITE AND THE STRING: WHY PHILOSOPHY NEEDS MORE
STORYTELLERS

By

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B.A. Philosophy, Augustana University, Sioux Falls, SD, 2014

Thesis

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These words are for you all.

Abstract

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Chairperson: Deborah Slicer

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The Kite and the String: Why Philosophy Needs More Storytellers

This thesis seeks to explore the relationship between philosophy and storytelling as grounded in their shared task of instructing readers in how to live a rich and moral life. Using a combination of narratives and the philosophical theories of Martha Nussbaum, Edward Mooney, and Iris Murdoch, I claim that philosophy and storytelling ought to be natural allies rather than territorial enemies as each reveals and attends to separate but equally important aspects of the good life in community with others. I then extend this claim into the context of environmental philosophy, using the work of writer Jason Mark as an exemplar for how such an alliance between philosophy and storytelling might be used to great effect to illuminate the many contours of our intimate relationships with place and to engage with the conflicts that arise therein in a full-blooded way. I conclude with a call to action for philosophers to take on the challenge of storytelling in order to reach a broader readership in this age of social apathy and ignorance towards climate change, which is the greatest problem of our time.

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The Climbing Tree

There was a tree in the backyard we called, “the Climbing Tree.” It was the one we climbed, after all. Rachel claimed the higher branches as her own. I set up camp a few rungs lower. Haley, the youngest, was assigned the thick slabby limbs nearest to the base where she wouldn’t fall far if she fell. We had our spots, but we shared the whole tree.

Our names changed once we left the ground. Rachel went by “Songbird,” and Haley by “Giggling Squirrel.” I don’t remember what I called myself. I think I changed my name a lot. None of them ever stuck for very long. We only ever used these names in the Climbing Tree. That’s where they were born, and where they remained. They’re probably still up there.

We whittled away the days and the hours of three seasons a year up in the tree. We told each other tall tales about how we earned our namesakes and what special abilities we had. We were each of us impressive creatures full of wit and sly and strength (and some of us were invisible, and some of us could fly, and some of us could change into different animals). Using sticks that we pointed off with rocks from the Down Below, we drilled holes the dimensions of baby carrots through the bark and into the hard pulp of the ashwood. The Climbing Tree didn’t seem to mind, and anyways we needed the holes to store dried leaves and pebbles in. These were our supplies that would get us through another hard Minnesotan winter. Some days we would crack a few sticky ears of the neighbor’s corn off the stalk and shell them high up in the Climbing Tree, making a “corn storm” that would rain yellow “corn drops” through the limbs and bring us good luck.

It must have worked, because none of us ever fell. This was good, because at the base of the tree ran a two-foot thick curb of concrete that would have broken us had we fallen just so

(hence, baby sis got the low limb suite). The square section of curb in the backyard was where customers once parked - a remnant of the property's original construction as a country steakhouse. During the fall, the curb was spackled black and white from the neighboring tree's fallen mulberries and bird turds. The two foot canvas of concrete looked dramatic and threatening from up in the Climbing Tree, like a Jackson Pollack that could shatter your spine if you slipped. Our poor mother.

We ate the mulberries in gobbing seedy fistfulls, smearing lines of inky purple juice on our cheeks and foreheads (warpaint, you see, although I couldn't tell you who we warred with). Mom mashed up gallons of the swollen black fruits and ladled goops of liquid sunshine into steaming mason jars to be served on toast and drizzled on vanilla ice cream. Those jars of jam, like our caches of pebbles and dried leaves, got us through winter.

Eventually, we did what children do. We got interested in Nintendo 64, jazz band, drive-in movies, boyfriends and girlfriends. Time passed, as it usually does. One by one, we left our house that was once a restaurant, and our other names up in the Climbing Tree. The mulberry tree became diseased somehow. The berries began to look wrong, less like fruit and more like spilled bits of tar. One autumn day, a tall wind blew the tree down and we burned it. Mom's gone, too. The cancer moved slowly, but without halting. Now the house is on the market and Dad's moving to Tennessee.

I'm glad to know the Climbing Tree will still be there for a while. Who knows for how much longer, though. The Emerald Ash Borer has not been kind to Minnesota. The adult borers actually don't do much damage. It's the larvae that tunnel in and chew up the inner bark, choking off the tree's life lines. The young jewel beetles have already claimed two trees on the yard,

which we also burned. Dad wonders if there will be any ash trees left on the property in ten years. Maybe some new tribe of children will come along in time and scramble up the Climbing Tree some day. Maybe they will sit where we sat and their fingers will probe the baby carrot tunnels we painstakingly drilled into its sides. Probably they will not. Why would they? It was just one in a row of a dozen plain, hard ash trees on a square section of Minnesota farmland.

Only, it wasn't to us. It was our secret, special place where we could be whatever we wanted. It was the kind of place only a child could enjoy. There's no reason for it. It was just outside our back door, and it was the first place I remember being completely, deliriously in love with the sheer experience of being held aloft and watching the world of the Down Below spin on around me.

It's likely the Climbing Tree will soon go the way of its world, falling to the teeth of the Borer who spreads slowly but without halting, another disease, another cancer of our time. With the falling of the Climbing Tree, a touch of wonder for three children now grown will be gone. And yet, the tree will still stand with firm footing in the marrow of what I am, with Songbird, Giggling Squirrel, Mom and her mulberries as good company. This humble ash tree will act as the solid center around which a childhood striped with swirling bands of radiant joy, confusion, tender love and grief will orbit.

I. A Kite Sting

Think of a place that has been significant in your life.

Perhaps some important and formative event happened here. Or maybe many small, but powerful moments. The first place to come to mind might not make obvious sense, but let it be.

In asking this question, I am testing out a theory that everyone has in his or her life at least one place like this. I am grateful to have found many in my life.

I ask you to hold this place in your mind as we go along. Consider your relationships in and with it. Consider how you might share this place with someone else without bringing them there. How might you wish to speak and to write about it? What kind of form, language, and feeling would you use to bring that place alive for your audience?

If you are an environmental philosopher, like myself, I ask you to consider what this place means to you in your work. Are such places important to our tasks as environmental philosophers? Should we write about them as part of our philosophy, and if so, how? Is there space in our philosophy for such intimacy? Is there space in our intimate relationships for philosophy?

I want to lay it on the line with no affectation. I believe the world needs stories now more than ever, and that philosophers - and especially environmental philosophers - should write some of them. Without our stories, without tethers fixing us solidly to the places we cherish and all that orbits around them, we will lose sight of that which matters and is worth fighting for. We will be like kites without a string, tossed about by the winds of abstract thoughtspace, and so become lost and lonely. But with a strong tether, a kite can soar, dip, and dive without fear of drifting away, and so attain rare heights.

I offer in these pages an exploration of stories as tethers for philosophical kiting. My aim is not to persuade but to invite, for those who do not already feel and understand the power and promise of storytelling are unlikely to be swayed no matter how substantial the philosophical scaffolding. The territory I am entering is one of ancient dispute regarding what philosophy is and what it is not, who we count as one among us and who we exclude. I am not interested in staking new claims and drawing battle lines. The stakes are just too high for that. Rather, in the

first section, I want to focus on what stories can do that arguments cannot in terms of illuminating our intimate connections with place and tethering our ethics back into the worlds we dwell in.

By exploring additional narratives of place in the second section, I hope to discover what philosophy has to uniquely offer in terms of storytelling. What does training in the philosophical mode bring to the storytelling medium that other modes cannot furnish? How might practice in the comprehending of philosophical theory and the crafting of arguments be brought to the page in the unfolding of a narrative? I hope to unearth answers to these questions along the way.

Lastly, I will take on the pressing question of why the world needs stories of place written by philosophers now more than ever. Suffice it for now to say the stakes are high, and the problem of social ignorance and apathy towards the looming calamity of climate change is a wicked one. And so I hope to end with hope: hope in the power of our intimate stories of place to escape the narrow confines of our particular experiences. We have to trust that we can take the bones of our stories and nourish them, breathe life into them and send them out into the world alight with courage and rich with purpose. We have to trust that our kite strings will hold us fast to the places where we first grazed the surface of nature's wonder, places that remind us why we should fight to save it, and perhaps inspire others to do the same. These are the kite strings that make all flight possible.

II. Life in Two Atmospheres

I didn't go to graduate school for environmental philosophy expecting to fall in love - or perhaps back in love - with stories. And yet stories and the topic of storytelling began to crop up almost everywhere from day one, and once I noticed, I couldn't look away. The practice of storytelling came up in a variety of settings: in books and in articles, in class discussions, in

casual conversations with fellow students, on the radio, on Facebook, you get the idea. I felt like I was privately bearing witness to a renaissance of storytelling, watching an old and noble craft being raised from the dead in an unlikely technological age. Although this is not quite right. The delivery mechanisms may have changed with the advent of the internet, social media and podcasting, but storytelling has never gone out of fashion, and I hope it never will.

Storytelling came into sharpest focus during creative nonfiction workshops I attended in the environmental studies quarter of campus. Here I was able not only to read stories but also to craft stories of my own; stories about places and the beings that dwelled in them. It soon became apparent that the content of these workshops was not so different from the content of my philosophy seminars. Critiquing a writer's story would inevitably lead us into shared territory. A story about crazy ants on a remote island prompted a discussion concerning the nature of invasive species and our relationships with them. Other stories brought up questions of identity and one's orientation towards the natural world. Others explored the roles of science and politics in guiding right action regarding land use and species preservation. Almost every story brought to light the horrors of climate change, illuminating a small but startling aspect of this calamity as seen in a particular place, and through a particular writer's eyes.

And yet while the territory explored in these workshops was in many ways the same territory being covered in my philosophy seminars, the atmosphere felt entirely different. Topics related to ethics, ontology, and the anthropocene would surface but never by these names, and never head on. They were always approached from the side and in their concrete forms: in real places, as experienced by real living beings, and seen and told by real people wholly present in the story itself. Critiquing such stories often prompted suggestions regarding the author's presence in the text: "there's too much of *you* in this passage," or, more often, "I need more of

you here.” There was no neutral viewpoint to write from. One was expected to step into the very thick of whoever and wherever they were with no safe retreat possible, and to tell honestly of the journey.

The breakthroughs for writers and readers alike were often spectacular. A story and the discussion that followed would cover an amazing amount of ground, sliding from the conceptual plane to the emotional, from the physical to the spiritual. Some stories were like magic acts or sleight of hand tricks, directing one’s attention *here* and then suddenly *there*, where here and there at first stood unfathomably far apart and yet appeared suddenly to be inextricably entangled with one another. These stories revealed truths I had never encountered elsewhere in my education; truths that take residence only in the fibrous bands that tie persons to places, invisible to the philosopher’s eye which too often only surveys a territory from above and afar, paying no mind to his or her presence therein.

I so enjoyed my time in these writing workshops, but that joy came at a cost. A fairly serious one, actually. The difference in atmospheres between these workshops and my philosophy seminars was stark. On the one hand, philosophy was roughing me up as philosophy usually does, making heavy demands on my rational intellect to stretch, to deepen, and to untangle conceptual knots I didn’t know existed and that needed untangling. The writing workshops taxed me differently, asking me to stay an alert and perceptive reader of others’ work and a creative and careful writer of my own. I left both kinds of classes feeling tired and a little disoriented, like a snow globe that’s been shaken up too much in one day. Unable to keep both ways of being in their tidy compartments, bleed-over started to occur. My philosophy was becoming more literary, and my creative writing more philosophical. It was unavoidable, I suppose. And it was - and is - a crazy-making state of mind.

Doubt seeped in, and I felt my sense of loyalty to my chosen vocation begin to shift. Soon enough I was in my advisor's office asking for advice on whether I had made the wrong decision in applying to the environmental philosophy program rather than to the MFA or EVST programs. I wasn't yet willing to abandon philosophy entirely, though. I just needed to know more about this tension between the different ways of reading and writing about the environment in its conceptual form as well as in the form of the particular intimate places in my life. And so, in her patient way, my advisor set theory in my path that she hoped would illuminate the contours of my psychic dissonance and provide me the means to make harmony instead. Enter Martha Nussbaum and Edward Mooney.

III. What Stories Can Do

Humans have always lived by stories, and those with skill in telling them have been treated with respect and, often, a certain wariness. Beyond the limits of reason, reality remains mysterious, as incapable of being approached directly as a hunter's quarry. With stories, with art, with symbols and layers of meaning, we stalk those elusive aspects of reality that go undreamed of in our philosophy. The storyteller weaves the mysterious into the fabric of life, lacing it with the comic, the tragic, the obscene, making safe paths through dangerous territory. - The Dark Mountain Manifesto¹

In her work *Love's Knowledge*, philosopher Martha Nussbaum gave me the language for making sense of this difference in atmospheres by drawing attention to the importance of form. *Love's Knowledge* is Nussbaum's exploration of the complex relationship between form and content in which she reveals the promise of the literary form and the limitations of its philosophical counterpart to express certain truths that matter to us, truths pertaining to our lives in intimate relationships with others. Regarding the significance of form, Nussbaum suggests the following:

¹ Dougald Hines and Paul Kingsnorth, *The Dark Mountain Manifesto*, <https://dark-mountain.net/about/manifesto/>

A view of life is *told*. The telling itself - the selection of genre, formal structures, sentences, vocabulary, of the whole manner of addressing the reader's sense of life - all of this expresses a sense of life and of value, a sense of what matters and what does not, of what learning and communication are, of life's relations and connections. Life is never *presented* by a text; it is always *represented* as something. This 'as' can, and must, be seen not only in the paraphrasable content, but also in the style, which itself expresses choices and selections, and sets up, in the reader certain activities and transactions rather than others.²

Seeing form in this way, we can begin to wonder: what do the forms of storytelling and philosophical prose tell us is worth valuing in ourselves and the world? What selections and exclusions do these forms make? What capacities in the reader are appealed to directly, and which ones are denied or completely ignored? Such considerations force us as writers - and especially as environmental philosophers - to consider carefully the nature of our work before we ever put pen to paper. For the forms we choose to write in will make their own sets of statements on how we see the world, who we choose to write for, and what aspects of ourselves, our readers, and our environments we value most.

In selecting a particular form, the writer chooses the kind of relationship he wishes to pursue with the reader, especially in terms of what the reader can bring to the page. To even think in these terms is to harbor respect for the reader's ability to engage with the text in a full-blooded way, bringing her skills of observation and deduction, her sensitive and discriminating ear, her wounds and scars, and especially her pressing questions to bear on the text before her. It is through the selection of form that one ropes off or opens up spaces for the reader to engage and to explore. Before a word is written, the writer must decide on a form with the reader in mind, weighing carefully her potential desire to come to and play within the text, what kind of work the text might require from her, and what tools she will need to unearth whatever truths

² Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, 5.

may take residence within.

According to Nussbaum, a reader's most important tool is that of *perception*. Borrowing the term from Henry James, Nussbaum explains perception as "seeing a complex, concrete reality in a highly lucid and richly responsive way; taking in what is there, with imagination and feeling."³ The writer labors to create such a space so that a reader may perform her own labor of perception, in the process sharpening and diversifying her ability to take in and respond to complex concrete realities in their many forms. To engage in perceptive reading is to read in the way Thoreau suggested we ought to: on the tips of our toes, straining for a better view.⁴ Reading in this way is no idle pastime, but rather, as Thoreau suggests, a noble exercise perhaps more taxing than any other.⁵ Such an exercise requires not only a nimble intellect, but also imagination, compassion, a sense of humor and irony, a willingness to wrestle with the uncomfortable and the ambiguous, and especially a sensitive emotional intelligence. These capacities are essential if a reader is to discover or perhaps even craft meaning in texts which represent reality in this Jamesian way. The reader's task, then, is to read as if for life, to bring her skill of perception to the text as a labor of love for the writer's world as well as for her own. The writer's task is to select a form which hews closely to his sense of reality, offering opportunity for the reader to strengthen herself through her labor, and so improve her ability to deftly navigate her own life as lived in a rich moral context.

By creating opportunity for perceptive reading, the storytelling form declares in its subtle way a certain notion of the good life and what kind of training best serves its pursuit. Following in the tradition of Aristotle and Henry James, Nussbaum paints a conception of the good life in relationship to others as one that requires a careful attention to the richness of our human

³ Nussbaum, 152.

⁴ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, 115.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 116.

experience. To live well, according to Nussbaum, we must learn to read and to react with a keen emotional intelligence and perceptive discernment to the delicate signals of the other: a flutter of eyelashes, a softening of tone, a slouching posture. We must also learn to navigate the intricate particulars of our relationships as best we can in order to make good on the commitments and obligations that emerge within them. Such a life is one of struggle, celebration, and loss as we learn to accept the sometimes cruel imperfections of our realities that prevent us from attaining every good and protecting every bond, especially as the unexpected and unlucky befall us. It is a life that holds “respect for the irreducibly particular character of a concrete moral context and the agents who are its components; a determination to scrutinize all aspects of this particular with intensely focused perception; a determination to care for it as a whole...to be guided by the tender and gentle emotions, rather than [those which are] blinding, blunt, and coarse[...]"⁶

As Nussbaum puts it, “only the style of a certain sort of narrative artist...can adequately state certain important truths about the world, embodying them in its shape and setting up in the reader the activities that are appropriate for grasping them.”⁷ For Nussbaum, these are the kinds of truths which affirm the reality of our lives as we live them in a moral context; that is, in relationship to the concrete particulars we are in contact with. They are truths that speak to our task to live as good but fallible characters in a good story do, caring about what happens, making difficult and sometimes tragic decisions and learning to live with the losses they incur.⁸ Perhaps such stories teach us something about how to choose the right gift for the occasion, when to laugh and when not to, how to die with dignity, or how to metabolize grief. In the context of our relationships to place, perhaps these truths speak to our encounters with humans as well as with other forms of vibrant matter in the world - how to be moved by the sounds of birdsong and

⁶ Nussbaum, 162.

⁷ Ibid., 6.

⁸ Ibid., 3-4.

chattering aspen leaves, to see the spanning of the ages in the polished faces of river stones, or to be humbled by the slight nodding of alpine meadow flowers.⁹ In short, they are the kinds of intimate truths that matter in the everyday rhythms of our lives, written for “nonexpert readers of many kinds who would bring to the text their urgent concerns, questions, needs, and whose souls might in that interaction be changed.”¹⁰ These are the truths perhaps only offered by the narrative artist whose frank appraisal of her reality and delicate emotional sensibility give voice to the inescapably wonderful mess that is life with others. They are truths inscribed with and unlocked by our labor of perception, which is, as Thoreau once said, to read a story as carefully and deliberately as it was written.¹¹

This was the atmosphere of the writing workshop, charged with imagination and feeling, brimming with excitement and anticipation as Writer and Reader bring their full selves to a text, discovering and even crafting together truths hidden in the knotty masses of a story. There were no hard and fast rules, no over-arching and over-reaching theories to determine or predict our conclusions. It was just us, our memories, our imaginations, and our concrete relationships not only with the people in our stories - as *Love’s Knowledge* perhaps unintentionally suggests - but with a wild host of other beings and places as well. It was an atmosphere created and sustained by the storytelling form that hummed with a rare and soul-changing vitality.

So, what’s the problem with philosophy? Why are these intimate truths out of reach for the analytical voice, and for the argument form?¹² This is not an area I want to linger in for very

⁹ This term “vibrant matter” comes from Jane Bennett in her work *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*.

¹⁰ Nussbaum, 20.

¹¹ Thoreau, 116.

¹² Some may object here that I am treating the philosophical voice and form as overly monolithic; that there is not just one voice or form but many. I concede the point, but ask for a patient appraisal of the philosophical mode in a gestalt fashion. What do the pieces in published philosophy journals read like?

long, since this thesis is meant to explore what philosophers *can* do as opposed to what they *can't*. And yet it is important to be clear on why the storytelling form ought to be taken seriously by philosophers and why the stories Nussbaum adores are more than watered-down, emotionally-indulgent philosophies shoved into a more entertaining package. Nussbaum provides a variety of questions that may be useful to ask while reading a piece of formal philosophy (or any piece, for that matter): which of the reader's capacities (intellectual, emotional, passionate) are being activated by the piece? How much freedom is the reader given to discover and to play? What kinds of truth does it offer, and how do they pertain to the rhythms of our lived experiences?¹³ Perhaps it might be productive for you, the reader, to take a moment and compare the "The Climbing Tree" section with this section of this very work with these questions in mind.

What are your conclusions? As Writer, I can attest to the differences in the experience of writing these sections. "The Climbing Tree" was a treat to write. It was the kind of thing I could write in a relaxed mood with a glass of hard cider close at hand, allowing the fibers in my brain and around my chest to soften. I smiled a lot while writing it; the kind of slow mellow smile that comes only when one dwells on the past. I felt myself at play, a participant in the game of the unfolding narrative, delighting in the images that came to mind and the words that rolled onto the page. If all writing felt like that, I'm not sure you could tear me away from my keyboard for all the hard cider in Missoula. This is not to suggest there was no effort involved. It took patience and practice to relax enough to let the story come on its own. And then it took a sensitive and sharp eye to notice the major elements of what was written and to pull those elements closer to the surface during the revision process.

¹³ Nussbaum, 33.

These last two sections, while not wholly unenjoyable to write, have felt entirely different. I am much more aware of being the captain of this vessel, steering the ship firmly to port or to stern, barking out orders here and there. I am pushing something in these sections. I have an agenda. I need to get you, the reader, from point A to point B before I can make point C, and so it is your faculty for reason to which I make my principal appeal. You can play a little perhaps, but not too much or both of us will lose the thread. Pick your cliché here: the pressure is on, I'm on the hook, the mantle is on my shoulders. Progress is slow, and the prospect of making an error is much more frightening. Where "The Climbing Tree" was an invitation for you to wander with me in an intimate place, this is brute analytical persuasion.

And then there is the philosophical voice, a voice I have done my best to hush as I move through these persuasive sections. Nussbaum is not overly kind to the philosophical voice, describing it as a voice "...remarkably flat and lacking in wonder."¹⁴ Where the narrative voice entones the messiness of our lives with deliberate balance and sensitivity, the philosopher's voice asserts itself as "...correct, scientific, abstract, hygienically pallid, a style that seem[s] to be regarded as a kind of all-purpose solvent in which philosophical issues of any kind at all [can] be efficiently disentangled, any and all conclusions neatly disengaged."¹⁵ The philosopher's voice is fastidious and emotionally reticent, driven by a clear and unambiguous view on the way life is and how it ought to be lived. The reader is treated at best as a spectator, and at worst as an outright adversary.

Could I have crafted a philosophical argument that communicated all the "truths" that emerged in "The Climbing Tree"? I really don't think so. I'm not even sure where I would begin. How could I argue for the connections between the diseased mulberry, the ash borer, and my

¹⁴ Nussbaum, 3.

¹⁵ Ibid., 19.

mother's cancer? In a very thin way, I could suggest that each is a particular manifestation of the climate change problem as a real and dangerous threat to an interconnected biosphere. It pains me to put it like that. I have deprived the reader of that joyful feeling of discovery. I have disregarded your ability to engage with the story as a participant, using your perception to notice and make sense of the connections therein and perhaps even to create your own meaning from what the story provokes within you. I have thinned and undermined the richness of the narrative form's rhythm and unfolding directionality. Most gravely, I have taken you, myself, and this cherished place out of the picture entirely, stripping its delicacy and intimacy. I have severed the string and watched the kite float away.

I want to soon return to the narrative form, but bear with me a moment longer. This point about intimacy is important. In his book *Lost Intimacy in American Thought*, Edward Mooney hones in on the importance of intimacy and what is lost when philosophy severs its intimate attachments to place in favor of creating critical distance between the writer, the reader, and the world. As Mooney sees it, philosophy in this mode tends to suffer from three fatal vices: Dryness, Divide and Conquer, and Impatience.¹⁶

In its rigorous pursuit of precision and clarity, philosophical prose grows cold and pallid, almost inanimate. In this mode, philosophy's terms and tone fail to evoke the presence of its ideals, leaving its reader thirsty and perhaps a bit numb. The aridity of its technical construction makes the philosopher's world a not quite human one - not a place capable of sustaining life, and therefore certainly not a place to dwell in for long. The dryness of this philosophical mode intimidates and then subdues a reader rather than invites and awakens him, resulting in

¹⁶ Edward Mooney, *Lost Intimacy in American Thought: Recovering Personal Philosophy from Thoreau to Cavell*, 33.

submissive sedation rather than animation. Where there is too much dryness, little life can flourish.

In philosophy's rigid appeal to the rational intellect, it carves the world into pieces and sorts them according to its projects, diminishing the abundant vitality of the whole of our human experience as more than the sum of its parts. In this mode of insatiable reduction, philosophy tosses aside much that is delicate and mysterious. Philosophy in this way becomes lean and professional, content to brood in its assigned academic compartment, staking claims and scrapping for its own quarter of intellectual territory. Philosophy in this mode eschews wholeness in favor of rivalries and battlelines, taking itself and its projects very seriously in hopes of being taken seriously in turn.

And in the pursuit of iron certainty, philosophy rushes through rather than dwells within the problems and questions where life's struggle is at its most exquisite. Where the storyteller often brings to the surface the ambiguities and paradoxes inherent in life with others as an invitation for the reader to wrestle and perhaps to create meaning within them, philosophy greets ambiguities and paradoxes with hostility, and sets about resolving them efficiently and definitively. Philosophy in this mode has little patience for the reader's labor at all, preferring instead to act as an authority on a particular subject and so adopt a form and a voice which brook little uncertainty. But philosophy forgets or denies many important features of our lived experiences in this mode. Firstly, as Mooney puts it, in a rushed pursuit of certainty, philosophy forgets "the truth dawns where she will, not on schedules we impose and frantically pursue."¹⁷ And most importantly, philosophy too often forgets that life is not a problem to be solved but a struggle to be embraced. The ambiguities and paradoxes of the storyteller remind us of this feature of our reality, inviting us to dwell in the tension of these spaces and these problems,

¹⁷ Mooney, 33.

uncomfortable though our time there may be, in hopes that we might learn something of ourselves and our worlds in that struggle.

The antidote, as Mooney sees it, is what he calls “a lyric philosophy of place.”¹⁸ In order to illuminate this alternative path, Mooney directs our attention to the fringes of the philosophical discipline towards Henry Bugbee, Henry Thoreau, Stanley Cavell and other figures whose status as philosophers seems to wax and wane according to the zeitgeist. Mooney sees in the writings of these men a lyric philosophy which he describes as such:

Lyric testimony gives voice to the very things its songs enfold. The truth to which it aspires is truth not of statements or propositions but of the realities it conveys, delivered directly to us, point blank: true generosity - care- flux- perishing. And indeed it is realities that we seek, not just words to stand in for something else.¹⁹

Lyric philosophy tunes into “a nexus of emerging significance...completed as we respond to its full presence, refusing the temptation to strip it down to lesser elements.”²⁰ It is a philosophy with sturdy legs built for and by walking through uneven terrain. Sometimes a guide and sometimes a fellow traveler, the writer provides a “sense of the ongoing wonder of philosophy as a reflective way of life, half-way between sense and nonsense, a venture in wilderness, sometimes a high-wire act, sometimes an assured simplicity, always a creative and humbling pursuit.”²¹ Philosophy as lyric arises within and tethers its witnesses to the radiant particulars of a place where she is but one among a plentitude of things alive and in motion, in a story which unfolds at the tempo of daylight, and sung in the key of the season.

¹⁸ Mooney, 31.

¹⁹ Ibid., 49.

²⁰ Ibid., 44.

²¹ Ibid., 107.

In *Lost Intimacy in American Thought*, Mooney sets out to write of lyrical philosophy lyrically. His melodic and unhurried language bathes the reader in a warm glow of recognition and invitation as he simultaneously delivers philosophy's prognosis as well as its most viable prescription. I hear in Mooney's words a challenge to be brave, to listen to that gentle, patient voice in your head which will say what you intend to say only with more pathos and resonance if you only let it. I have taken that unspoken challenge on in this work, resisting the safety and efficiency of the three vices he so deplores. There remains much more to be explored in Mooney's lyric philosophy as I continue to fiddle with these kites and strings, but not just yet. For now, I leave you with one of Mooney's keen and devastatingly simple messages: philosophy must not forgo intimacy for precision, and warmth for cold clarity. It must hold fast as a kite holds to its string, or else lose all tether to the world from which it was born and for which it claims to care deeply.

While I adore Mooney, I am left wondering what philosophy's role in the telling of intimate truths through stories actually looks like. In reading Mooney, one gets the impression that the form and style of the traditional analytical mode can only reduce and, more often, mangle reality into smaller, shabbier pieces. Mooney - and, in some places, Nussbaum as well - depicts philosophy not exactly as an enemy but neither as friend, and certainly as a force out to dominate the territory of moral truths. I am left wondering whether there is any hope for resolution, whether there remains some way to repair the relationship between these forms and these voices so as to be one of natural allies as opposed to territorial rivals. And I am left with many difficult questions.

Can training in the philosophical mode prove useful for a storyteller? Should philosophers merely be taking stories seriously as sources of important truths, or should philosophers write some of these stories as well? My aforementioned advisor Deborah Slicer - a philosopher by day and storyteller by night - says yes, philosophers ought to write stories as well as read them.²² I am inclined to agree with her for more than the purely selfish reason of hoping it will relieve my cognitive dissonance. Not only do I believe telling stories helps the philosopher make sense of her own intimate connections to persons and to place as well as reveals aspects of the good life in these spaces, but I also believe there are many unique and important aspects of philosophical training that enable the philosopher to tell stories that are both profound and thoroughly compelling for a much broader readership.

Before exploring these last two points, I want to tell you about another story. This story, I now realize, was the reason I decided not to defect from the philosophical tradition. This meditation of place, of life with an Other, of what it means to eat and, perhaps, to be eaten, acts for me now as another kite string, holding me in intimate contact with the more-than-human world and housing in its fibers embedded truths lying in wait for the discovering.

IV. Finding Common Ground

I was in Dr. Slicer's seminar on critical animal studies discussing a piece called "Eating Meat and Eating People" by philosopher Cora Diamond. In this piece, Diamond attempts to draw some provocative connections between our eating norms and taboos in hopes of isolating a few profound inconsistencies in our dietary value systems. The logic is simple: if we don't mind eating meat, why don't we mind eating people, or our companion animals? The discussion around this piece was, I remember, quite heated, although I can't remember precisely what was

²² Deborah Slicer, "Ethics and the Environment, 8 (2) 2003," 2.

the cause for disagreement. What did stick with me was one of Diamond's questions: why don't we eat our nonhuman familiars, our companion cats, rats, lizards, mice, and dogs?²³

A nexus suddenly formed around that philosophical question. My wife Sarah and I had just adopted a 70-pound dynamo of unbridled canine charisma we call "Bear" from the Humane Society. I had been reading stories involving Sherpa death practices on Everest and K2.²⁴ And I had a story of my own due in an environmental writing workshop. I took that question and subverted it ever so slightly, asking myself for what reasons and in what context I just *might* consider eating Bear, this Other who went from a stranger to the closest friend in my life almost instantly?

It was Diamond's question that prompted me to look at him as I had never looked at any Other before, and it was a look that made me deeply uncomfortable. I could have run away then. I could have let it drop, or retreated to some safe philosophical highground which would assure me that dogs simply weren't things for the eating. But I felt certain that in doing so, I would be stripping Diamond's observation of its heft. The weight of Diamond's question is not to be found in the abstract of cultural taboos, but in the concrete moral context of a human individual in relationship with an actual doggy Other. To think of eating a dog in the abstract would be one thing, but to think of eating *this* dog, this one that lays at my feet while I write, that breathes long sighs of air into my face as he falls asleep next to me, that sometimes pees himself with excitement when I walk through the door after a long day on campus...that would be something else entirely. The traditional philosophical form simply wouldn't do. My relationship with Bear is simply too messy, too rare and far too personal for the tight confines of the argument form.

²³ Cora Diamond, "Eating Meat and Eating People," *Philosophy* 53 (206), 465 - 479.

²⁴ For more information on these fascinating practices, I recommend *Buried in the Sky: The Extraordinary Story of the Sherpa Climbers on K2's Deadliest Day* by Peter Zuckerman.

I turned instead to the storytelling form, a form better suited for attending to my particular relationship with this friend of mine. I trusted this form would allow space for the activities of the imagination and intimate emotional engagement to lead me and my reader onward, allowing the truth to dawn as she would as my meditation on Diamond's question took on mass and therefore gravity. I wanted to see where such a question might take me and my reader if I simply let it, and "On Last of Borrowed Days," - which became my first published story - is what tumbled out.²⁵ I close this work with that story in its entirety.

This story and its philosophical genesis revealed to me new possibilities for my writing. While writing this story, I had somehow managed to breathe in both atmospheres at once, or at least to find safe passage back and forth between them for a time. In an odd way, I had rediscovered in philosophy what had drew me into the discipline as a younger man; that there were *questions*, strange, revealing, and intimate questions about myself and my world yet to be asked, and doing philosophy was a great method for stumbling upon them. But now, at this later stage, I had come to realize that once a question was stumbled upon, I could choose to explore it in a variety of forms beyond conventional argument. I realized that by providing a position from which to notice the oddity in the familiar, philosophy could be an astonishingly diverse breeding ground for reaping seeds that could be nourished into stories. This capacity for furnishing seeds of inspiration was, I suspected, just one among many ways in which philosophy could be allied to my work as a storyteller.

I have so far laid out a case for stories as sources for intimate truths, as tethers holding us to our places, to the moral contexts in which we live. I want now to make a case for philosophy as a kite for these strings, pulling them taut to see how much tension they can take,

²⁵ This story was first published in *The Timberline Review: Issue 7 - "Rebirth,"* 96-100.

and in the process carrying them to heights and vistas a kiteless string never achieves. I want to frame the philosopher and the storyteller as natural allies rather than rivals, whose shared bond is the pursuit of a carefully examined and deliberately lived life. I want to urge not only philosophers to learn how to craft stories, but for storytellers to take up the challenge of learning the way of philosophy as well. And so I hope, however wildly, to move this ancient quarrel into a space where the merits of a partnership might be put on the table for discussion.

For such a partnership to be even entertained depends greatly on how one makes sense of the tasks of the storyteller and of the philosopher. To be partners is to share in common some kind of goal or project in a substantial way. A partnership formed on any other terms will seem contrived and will therefore be fragile. Unfortunately, most of the discussion surrounding the relationship between these two disciplines has been focused on their many differences rather than the similarities that might afford a productive partnership. In what has become a famous interview with philosopher Bryan Magee, philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch carves out separate spaces for philosophy and literature based chiefly on their significant differences. For example, Murdoch suggests that while literature has many tasks and functions, philosophy principally has but one, which is “getting hold of a problem and holding on to it and being prepared to go on repeating oneself as one tries different formulations and solutions.”²⁶

While Murdoch primarily provides a variety of useful ways for distinguishing the philosophical from the literary mode - many of which I will use to illuminate the contours of their potential partnership - she also provides what I believe to be a productive launching point for assessing their similarities. Despite their many significant differences, Murdoch concedes that both philosophy and literature are “truth-seeking and truth revealing activities.”²⁷ While

²⁶ Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, 6.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

philosophy pursues truth in the mode of analysis, literature pursues its truth in the mode of imagination, producing truths that are “sensuous, fused, reified, mysterious, ambiguous, [and] particular.”²⁸ This, for me, is square one. This shared terrain of truth - and especially moral truth - seems fitting ground on which to build a cautious alliance.

V. What a Kite does for a String

Before setting off in this direction, I think it best to acknowledge and accept the risks. In allying the philosophical and storytelling modes, perhaps the worst damage I could do would be to allow one to cannibalize the best qualities of the other. Stories tend to be delicate things, and philosophy - at times - a bit bullish. To find the right arrangement so as to give each mode a presence without occluding or compromising the other is a supremely difficult task. And yet, I want to suggest, it has been done, and done exceptionally well. We have exemplars. We will not have to go this alone, with no guides to follow.

This is Edward Mooney’s strategy as he directs our attention to the figures and texts which present us with “a walking meditation of place...where landscapes, ships, and philosophic streams and sloughs seem to intermingle wildly...”²⁹ Mooney looks, quite rightly, to Thoreau, Bugbee, Cavell and others who have attempted to traverse this rough and relatively unexplored terrain between the well-trod paths of storytelling and philosophy. While reading *Walden*, *The Inward Morning*, or even Aldo Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac*, one must constantly be asking, “what *is* this? Is it a story? A journal? A personal philosophy? All three at once?” These texts earn their places on our bookshelves and in our classrooms at least in part as a result of their refusal to answer these questions cleanly and definitively for us. They simply don’t rest comfortably in any of our genre compartments, which is perhaps why so many readers coming

²⁸ Murdoch, 11.

²⁹ Mooney, 32.

from diverse backgrounds find them so captivating. They keep us on our toes, straining for a better view, and so demand and reward no small amount of labor from their readers.

Even more compelling than their rich and deliberate ambiguity of form is the power of these texts to evoke the presence of their ideals in a way that makes me - and I suspect other philosophers as well - the brightest shade of envious green. As Mooney puts it, Thoreau's and Bugbee's greatest successes are found in their ability to indicate plenitude in their meditations, giving voice to the tremendous variety of vital presences in a spirit of gentle awe. They are philosophers who write "intimately, personally, for the love of the world," and so raise life from decline.³⁰ We as readers are invited to participate alongside these writers as they encounter a place, sometimes wild and sometimes domestic, but always abuzz and ablaze with life in its myriad forms, each particular a fleeting yet somehow total expression of the world in that moment, entoned into view by the gentle precision of these writers' voices.

And yet for the remarkable intimacy and immediacy of these writers' voices, their words have a way of producing a more-than-personal resonance with me, the reader, in a way I still cannot fully comprehend. Their words gesture beyond the personal, touching on aspects of our shared American condition, or perhaps even further to what it means to be human in a more-than-human world. *Walden* was, after all, not written for Thoreau's private reflection but rather as a wake up call for those living lives of quiet desperation, who by reading his words may have their souls changed in that interaction.

Thoreau's writing is exceptional in this way as he manages to be both wholly engrossed in his experience and yet somehow also at a careful distance from it, catching two fish when he seems to catch only one. The main bulk of *Walden* is comprised mostly of ambiguity and paradox, which allows every new reading to feel like its own adventure, which is why I tend to

³⁰ Mooney, 7.

read it at least once a year. There are whole chapters of *Walden* throughout which I am unsure whether my attention should be directed downward and outward, as towards the small movements of ants on the floorboards, or upward and inward, as towards life's necessities, or somehow both at once. It is this aspect of Bugbee's and Thoreau's works that reminds me of the crucially important fact that *these men were philosophers first*, practiced in the ways of observing and attending to the features of our human existence that are shared in common at a bit of a distance from their personal, intimate experiences in the world. Where they find excellence is creating just the right amount of space, just enough distance to see a greater swath of the terrain without severing their intimate connections to it. This is what a kite does, and, I believe, what training in philosophy can do as well.

From Nussbaum and Mooney, we hear a warning and condemnation for traditional analytical philosophy's detached, impersonal assertion of itself as an authority on truth. While such a warning is certainly necessary, I fear it can also be taken too far, and too seriously. I suggest that the success of such texts as *Walden* and *The Inward Morning* is found in their authors' ability to rise ever so slightly above the wonderfully rich but necessarily occluded view of their experiences as individuals in their particular contexts. In sliding ever so gently into and out of the philosopher's mode of seeing, Bugbee and Thoreau craft relationships between the personal and the more-than-personal, between the soft and sensual and the hard and abstract, and between their experiences as individual selves and as members of a greater moral community. At certain moments, these seemingly opposite modes sit in comfortable ease next to one another. But more often and far more interestingly, these modes are found in *tension*, each seeking to pull the other downward or upward into the other but neither succeeding.

An accomplished storyteller may object here to the necessity of philosophy to deliver a story from the confines of the overly particular. A capable storyteller knows all too well that a story which indulges too deeply in the particularity of a character's or author's experience will fail to produce resonance with a broad variety of readers. But the tension I am referring to between these different modes is of a slightly different kind. Perhaps the best way to understand this tension is in terms of the different levels of awareness and sets of skill needed in order to attain a well-rounded moral education.

Nussbaum gestures towards the importance of this tension between the philosophical and literary approaches as each attends to different aspects of moral life by appealing again to the work of Henry James. Nussbaum considers Bob and Fanny Assingham - two characters in James' *The Golden Bowl* - as representations for the roles of rule and perception in moral life.³¹ Bob in many respects acts as a stand-in for the philosophical mode as he exemplifies devotion to rules and to general conceptions. Bob cultivates in himself a kind of plain and stern detachment, preferring general classifications to nuanced distinctions, and a commitment to duty over and against his emotional desires. Bob sees himself as one who dwells on safe ground, removing himself to the distal perimeters of a given situation in order to save Fanny from drowning in the immensity of her particular moral context.³² As a result of this detachment, Bob remains unable to engage in a fine-tuned way with the concrete reality of his context, precluding the possibility of appreciating nuance, surprise, mystery, and delicate emotions in his relationships.

Fanny, as implied, exhibits the literary mode of perception but to a "dangerously rootless extreme."³³ She adamantly refuses to heed any guidance from general rules, choosing instead to

³¹ Nussbaum, 157.

³² Ibid., 159.

³³ Ibid., 158.

invest her attention in the “complicated people and predicaments of her world...”³⁴ She thus allows herself to be thoroughly engrossed with the particularities of her moral context but without adhering to the generality of rules, and therefore not paying mind to the moral obligations demanded of her in her relationships with others. Where Bob stands safely (if obtusely) on the hard sands of the beach, Fanny voyages in a fragile boat, constantly battered by rough water and at risk of capsizing.

Their marriage is in many respects defined by the radical tension between their incongruent moral orientations, with Bob pulling out from the messiness of moral life and Fanny utterly flailing within it. And yet in the end, they are able to find wholeness in and with one another. Bob’s stern and deliberate attention to the level of generality, to duty, to thinner but broader conceptions of what it means to act decently keeps Fanny honest, preventing her from finding “an evasive or self-deceptive reading of the situation,” an easy exit from her moral obligations.³⁵ Fanny improves Bob’s ability to perceive and react with a fine awareness for the particulars of his situation, therefore mitigating his emotional and moral aloofness and making him intimately aware of the concrete particulars within their shared moral context. And so by moving towards one another, they begin to fill each other’s gaps, moving from incongruence to “a shared picture that expresses a mutual involvement in moral confrontation and improvisation...”³⁶ Crucially, Nussbaum notes that this movement of these differing modes towards one another as exemplified by Bob and Fanny’s coming together is fundamentally motivated by love.³⁷ For if we as members of a moral community wish to achieve a shared

³⁴ Nussbaum, 158.

³⁵ Ibid., 159.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 160.

picture of the good life, we must first desire to improve and be improved by one another, which is, I think, to choose to live by love in one of its grandest and most difficult forms.

Neither I nor Nussbaum wish to imply that such a relationship between these two approaches to moral life is utterly simple or harmonious in nature, just as a healthy marriage between two people is neither simple nor purely harmonious. A writer who wishes to employ both the philosophical and literary modes within her text will be in a state of constant peril with one voice or form threatening to undercut or overpower the other. As Nussbaum notes, for the philosophical style to be an ally of literature, it must direct a reader's attention towards the variety and complexity of a moral context rather than away from it, illuminating and supplementing a story's rich character rather than mining it for its nuggets of philosophical gold.³⁸ And for literature to be an ally to philosophy, it must acknowledge and accept the importance of theory and general conceptions of duty in moral life as necessary guardrails designed to keep a story from plunging too deeply into self-indulgence and so escape its moral obligations. This kind of partnership requires each mode to observe and accept its own deficiencies, and so understand the limits of its contribution.

This is the junction in the trail at which Iris Murdoch and myself part ways. For Murdoch, the differences between the philosophical and literary approaches in terms of the skills and mindset each requires are so fundamental as to be wholly irreconcilable. According to Murdoch, what distinguishes the philosophical from the literary mode is philosophy's unapologetic narrowness, its bullish and uncompromising pursuit of a solution to a given problem.³⁹ The philosopher must stay radically awake, resisting the impulse to indulge herself in the imaginative and emotional quarters of her consciousness, as such detours more often muddy

³⁸ Nussbaum, 49.

³⁹ Murdoch, 6.

than clarify a throughline into the heart of a problem. She must grab hold of a problem and by the process of reduction strive to articulate truth in its coldest and most elemental form, and so leave little to no room for her own presence in the text.⁴⁰

The project of the literary artist, according to Murdoch, is much more expansive as he is not tethered to the strict rudiments of the philosophical method nor concerned with a specific problem. Literature is allowed to do many things, such as entertain and mystify, whereas philosophy at its best does only one.⁴¹ The literary artist must cultivate his imagination and explore the more mysterious and intimate parts of himself in order to produce the kind of art that resonates and captivates its beholders. For Murdoch, art of this caliber is necessarily born of self-expression but always with room for the reader to come and to play within.⁴²

I am able to accept Murdoch's dichotomy, to an extent. Philosophy more often than not will likely choose to operate independently of the literary mode in order to further its specific projects, most of which require the rigorous reduction and robust logical argumentation that are the hallmarks of the philosophical tradition. And literature, generally, also tends to pay little attention to the (often) mind-numbingly uninteresting scribbles of philosophers. But by my reckoning, Murdoch's dichotomy does not hold absolutely, nor should we desire it to. Despite the many differences between these modes, there yet exists texts like Sartre's *Nausea*, Voltaire's *Candide*, and certainly *Walden* and *The Inward Morning* as well, which radically confound this dichotomy and still achieve groundbreaking success. These texts are possible and successful not because the philosophical and literary modes are perfectly compatible, but rather because of the dramatic and provoking dialogue between them as they struggle in tension to accommodate one

⁴⁰ Murdoch, 4-5.

⁴¹ Ibid., 4.

⁴² For a more in-depth analysis of Murdoch's dichotomy, see her interview with Bryan Magee in the introduction to *Existentialists and Mystics*, 3-30.

another. For this dialogue to be possible, these two modes must act together in good will towards the shared goal of supplying a more holistic representation of moral life as it exists on many levels, and through the tension between them invite a reader to undertake the Herculean labor of reading well.

This tension, this animated, frustrating, sometimes maddeningly confusing tension between the particular and the general is, I think, what a partnership between philosophy and storytelling can achieve and should aspire towards. It is this tension in Thoreau and in Bugbee that calls us as readers to return again and ever again, like a pilgrimage, as we engage in our own chronic struggles to negotiate life on these terms. We are all in some capacity striving to flourish in this tension between modes of being as selves listening for our individual vocations and as good and decent members of a greater community, and perhaps this is painfully and exceptionally true of philosophers. In *Walden* and *The Inward Morning*, we are invited into this tension, to wander for a time in this rough and wild terrain between paths alongside capable guides and fellow travelers, and to catch in glimmers a vision of the good life.

If, as I have suggested, philosophy and storytelling are to share the terrain as truth-seeking and truth-revealing endeavors, then perhaps what philosopher-storytellers such as Bugbee and Thoreau offer is truth in its many wonderful varieties, some slight and close at hand, others a little more distal and conceptual. Perhaps these texts are themselves a bit like Thoreau's bean rows, home to a remarkable admixture of the cultivated and the wild, a nexus visited by many bodies seeking nourishment in the form they need. These texts invite the reader to come as she is - whether she be a philosopher, or someone who aspires to be one, or otherwise - and bring to the text her burning questions, concerns, and most importantly her desire to live her life just a touch more deliberately. With trust in the writer's voice and a little hard labor, perhaps she finds

in the text some small nourishment, some small reprieve from life's bewilderment, and leaves the text for a time to grow as she will, perhaps to someday return to labor a little more.

Some may argue that in extolling the greatness of figures such as Bugbee and Thoreau, I have simply allowed myself to wallow in nostalgia, pining for a bygone era. The world has certainly changed since these men last wrote about it. Our societies and landscapes have shifted drastically, so drastically that perhaps the words of these exceptional philosopher-storytellers no longer ring quite true, or produce the thrumming waves of resonance they once did. I, for one, do not see this to be the case. However, I acknowledge the dangers in looking too narrowly to the past, however near, to address the evolving challenges of the future. Fortunately, I have yet another exemplar to turn to, one alive today, not much older than myself in fact, who I think expertly illustrates the kind of healthy relationship attainable between philosophy and storytelling.

In *Satellites in the High Country: Searching for the Wild in the Age of Man*, writer Jason Mark utilizes both the forms of personal storytelling and more straightforward theoretical explication in his pursuit of wildness with the impending beginning of the Anthropocene epoch looming on the horizon. Mark's search takes him on a journey through the American West to the mountains of California, the Gila Wilderness, Olympic National Park, and even to my beloved Black Hills and their neighboring Badlands, to name a few of his stops. His quest is to try to find the wild in what has been deemed by some environmental philosophers and journalists to be a "post-wild" world.⁴³

Much has been written on wildness by environmental philosophers. The topic of wildness intrigues and inspires like few others can, and so attracts to it a host of critics and advocates

⁴³ Jason Mark, *Satellites in the High Country: Searching for the Wild in the Age of Man*, e-book location 182.

alike. But what makes Mark's project stand out from much of the philosophical literature on the subject is his bodily commitment to his task.⁴⁴ Rather than rely on theory and empirical data to drive his search, Mark chooses to really *go* there, to place himself in a selection of concrete moral contexts in which the subject of wildness has real significance. He guides a few urbanite friends into the high country of Tuolumne Meadows to learn from their experience as they enter "wilder" terrain for the first time. He hunts for silence in Washington's Hoh Rainforest. He stands a stone's throw away from a roaming grizzly in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

Mark also engages with members of the communities in these places who are actively trying to open up or choke off spaces for wildness to endure, or who are striving to reframe the concept of wildness itself in order to dissolve these boundaries altogether. Mark speaks to the locals in Point Reyes and from the Pine Ridge Reservation as they struggle to make sense of the role of wildness in their lives in the face of immense economic and political pressures. These concrete, localized discussions concerning wildness reveal to both Mark and the reader the intimacy and complexity of the topic as an inroad for the community to grapple with its very identity. How a community views the importance of wildness as a presence in its everyday rhythms bears on how its members view themselves and their place in the world in relationship with one another, with non-human others and with the land itself. The stories Mark tells of his time in these landscapes and amidst their communities makes clear to the reader that in searching for wildness, there is much more at stake than mere theoretical progress. One is left wondering if perhaps in wildness exists the preservation or destruction of the character of the land, and the identities of those who dwell with it.

⁴⁴ I owe this notion of "bodily commitment" to journalist Richard Manning, who impressed upon me in his writing workshop how crucial it is for a writer to engage with a topic in a more than theoretical way: "You must really *go* there if you wish to write well and write honestly."

If Mark's contribution to the wildness discussion was nothing more than these stories, it would still earn its place in the canon of wildness literature. But *Satellites in the High Country's* enduring success will be found in its ability to furnish also a careful and philosophically fruitful explication of the theory of wildness and its evolution throughout American history. Mark does not shy away from asking the big philosophical questions along his journey:

What do we expect from wild nature?...Does wilderness have to mean "pristine"? How can we include history and memory in our idea of wilderness? Where do we draw the line between human actions that are beneficial and those that are harmful? And the biggest question of all: with the human insignia everywhere, is there any place or any thing remaining that is really, truly *wild*?⁴⁵

These questions prompt a detailed yet remarkably accessible explication and critical examination of the major events, periods, and ideologies of American environmentalism. Sometimes these sections are set aside from stories as distinct detours into the generality of wilderness theory. Other times they are interwoven into the stories themselves either to illustrate harmony or disharmony between the theoretical understanding of wildness on a general, philosophical plane and the felt, intimate, intersocial experience of wildness in concrete moral contexts. Mark guides the reader gently but firmly through both kinds of terrain, providing both his stories and his examination of theories space to unfold in their own time, and noting the changes in his own understanding of wildness throughout his journey.

Mark's multivalent approach to investigating the meaning of wildness speaks volumes to the potential benefits of an alliance between the philosophical and storytelling modes. By asking some of the important big questions, Mark puts just the right amount of space between his experiences as a character and a storyteller and the more general arena of philosophical analysis without sacrificing any of the beauty and keen insights of his stories. Mark's writing also

⁴⁵ Mark, e-book location 268 of 5026, original emphasis maintained.

expresses a rare patience to let conflicts go unresolved, to allow the tension between the theory and the reality of wildness to hang in the air, and to be content with some questions being left without clear answers for himself or his reader. While Mark's work perhaps lacks the layers upon layers of ambiguity and allusion found in the writings of Thoreau and Bugbee, *Satellites in the High Country* speaks with clarity and fidelity to the complexities of our current relationships to our environments and especially to the important conflicts we are and will continue to face in the dawning of what will perhaps be an all-too-human epoch. Mark's writing inspires in me confidence in the possibility and promise of an allied approach to seeking truth as an environmental philosopher and storyteller. His balance of kite to string is one I hope, with much more practice, to emulate in my own work.

Much has been said about what I take to be philosophy's chief and most important contribution to the storytelling alliance, which is its ability to withdraw ever so slightly from the relative narrowness of our intimate experiences in order to gain a better view of the broader moral territory. I want to gesture now in other directions that might be worth exploring in terms of what training in philosophy can bring to the storyteller's table.

As I have already mentioned, philosophy is an incredibly fertile breeding ground for new and unexplored questions and concepts as a result of its ability to observe oddity in the familiar. These can be seeds for stories. I believe training in philosophy also improves one's plasticity of perspective as it often forces us as writers and as participants in discourse to adopt and explore orientations often radically different than our own. Through the study of various cosmologies, ontologies, and brands of metaphysics and epistemology, philosophers become acquainted with

the vast plurality of perspectives in the world that bring to any given problem their own contribution towards resolution. I believe this plasticity could prove incredibly useful for the storyteller as she breathes life into her characters and sends them forth into the unknown. Understanding the way in which a given ontology or cosmology might impact a character's disposition and perspective - especially in light of conflict - may prove a useful tool for the storyteller's toolbox.

Philosophy also furnishes us with the ability to observe and articulate what may be at stake in a given problem. Philosophers are adept at envisioning and anticipating untoward consequences of a particular ideology or commitment when extended into the future that may help a writer see forward into a plot's future based on its theoretical trajectory. Training in philosophy may instill in the storyteller a healthy amount of skepticism and hesitation in endorsing a particular worldview that on the surface may appear unproblematic but on closer inspection may do more damage than good to its readership. Philosophy in its more humble and patient moods acknowledges the complexities of our problems and so resists solutions which appear too simplistic or shallow. Training in this mode may help the storyteller to remain alert to superficial or tidy explanations to the conflicts she presents.

Additionally, the philosophical angle can be an interesting and productive way to approach literary criticism, which is in part what I have been engaging in throughout this very work. The philosopher's criticism of a particular literary work is capable of making stronger, more blatantly normative claims than the work itself might be capable of making. A good story never overtly persuades a reader to act or believe in a specific way. To do so would be to slide headlong into the ditches of cheap propaganda. A good story invites investigation and interpretation, allowing a reader to discover and to create meaning as appropriate to the story's

content. Philosophy, on the other hand, has little reluctance to make stronger claims on behalf of what it perceives as being profound and important. Bernard Williams suggests in this way, philosophical training can open opportunities for a unique variety of play by providing another lens through which certain concepts and perhaps normative claims enmeshed inside a literary text can be interpreted and teased forward.⁴⁶

More than anything, I believe the best and most interesting storytellers are those who have dual expertises and bring this wider range of knowledge and perspective to their stories. A good storyteller will of course be a student of the craft and of the canon, but if she is also a studied mathematician, or dancer, or chef, or soil ecologist, or - heck, why not? - a philosopher, her work will show for it. Writing is, for me, the most daunting and most personally taxing activity a human person can partake in. The more curious, agile, alert and multifaceted one's mind becomes, the stronger and less intimidating the writing gets. Philosophy demands from its pursuers a degree of rigor, dedication, and occasional humiliation seldom found in other disciplines. It has made my skin thicker by inches, making it easier (though still not easy) to receive the constructive feedback I so desperately require to improve my stories. I am glad I stuck with philosophy, and I believe my future stories will show for it.

VI. A Conclusion and Call for Action

So far, too little has been said about this alliance between storytelling and philosophy as it pertains to the work of the environmental philosopher. This is regrettable, but also necessary. The relationship between those modes is complex enough without including the additional layers of complexity that go with investigating our relationships to our environments. By choosing to

⁴⁶ Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, 14.

use the work of Jason Mark, Edward Mooney, Henry Bugbee and Henry Thoreau as exemplars when I could have used so many others, I have attempted to hew a little closer to the environmental line.⁴⁷ Mark's work in particular elegantly demonstrates the great promise of this alliance as it bears on environmental questions, such as what wildness is, and what it still means to us in this modern age. But I want to close this exploration of the relationship between stories and philosophy with a more direct and urgent tone.

Every philosopher and storyteller alive today is walking, thinking, and writing at a moment where the stakes are high. Perhaps they have never been higher. Our climate is in a state of chaos, and perhaps already in its death throes if the most dire reports are to be believed. We as environmental philosophers now find ourselves in a situation few philosophers before us have faced; with an immense and wickedly complex problem looming on the horizon, and the fate of many human and non-human lives hanging in the balance. I know some but not much of the world and of philosophy, but I know this: we need help.

My worry is that while our training as philosophers has equipped us well to write and to discuss these pressing environmental issues with one another, it has not taught us as well how to invite the rest of the world into that conversation. We need more voices, more angles, and more eyes on this problem, especially from the communities already suffering the worst of the effects. If we cannot find a way to communicate where we have made progress and where we continue to struggle to a greater audience of readers, thinkers and writers, then I believe we as philosophers and as a species are bound to failure.

This is why I believe in stories. We are *Homo relator*, the storytelling species. It is through the stories read to us on the laps of our parents that many of us first began to make sense

⁴⁷ The works of Wendell Berry, Robin Wall-Kimmerer, Annie Dillard, Robert Pirsig, Kathleen Dean Moore, David Abram and John Kaag are just a few other outstanding examples of a hybridity between the philosophical and literary modes.

of this world we were born into. We respond to stories because they respond to us, calling us to come as we are with our dreams and fears, our wandering streams of thought, and our little secrets. As Deborah Slicer puts it, a good story grabs us by the nape and just won't let go.⁴⁸ Every so often, a story has the power to rattle us to our very foundations, and we can never see the world the same way again. I am grateful for the many stories and their writers who have shaken me in this way, awaking me to the plentitude of wonders all around me, and to the forces that threaten to diminish them.

I still believe the argument form is important and has its uses. Through their rigorous pursuit of hard analytical truth, philosophers expand our conceptual horizons, and deepen our understanding of the world in a special and important dimension. Philosophical arguments have moved the wheel of history more than a few degrees in ways all of us alive today should be thankful for. We will still need experts to argue in our classrooms, courtrooms, and in congress. But by god we also need storytellers, poets, filmmakers and artists who paint with shades of grace, grief, and exaltation to bring us into intimate contact with the greatest problem of our time, and we all need to work together. If we can expand our gaze and be attentive to the importance of form in our writing, I believe we as philosophers stand a much better chance of enduring these hard times.

As we attempt to navigate these wicked and pressing problems, I suspect we will often encounter fear, confusion, and discouragement. Writing stories about the places that I love, that I have intimate relationships with, has helped me to remember why I decided to pursue work in the field of environmental philosophy, and why I should continue to heed this calling. Writing these stories reminds me that there is no Environment, only that which *environs* - which is to say

⁴⁸ Slicer, 4.

surrounds - us.⁴⁹ When I think about the Climbing Tree, my friend Bear, and my beautiful Black Hills whose stories I have yet to write, I am reminded that climate change is not happening *out there*, but right here, right where I am. Writing stories reveals to me that which I love, that which I stand to lose, and that which I will, to the best of my abilities, defend with the faculties of both my mind and my heart. These stories are my kite strings and my life lines, keeping the focus of my philosophy on the intimacy of my relationships with the places in my life. Philosophy is my kite, firmly but adoringly putting these strings under tension, and so keeping them honest. And so I hope, because there is nothing else to do, that just maybe my work as a philosopher-storyteller can remind others that life together is not a problem to be solved, but a struggle to be embraced, abundant with loves, losses, and stories waiting to be told.

⁴⁹ I first encountered this insight in Steven Vogel's *Thinking Like a Mall: Environmental Philosophy After the End of Nature*.

On Last of Borrowed Days

I'm thinking about eating my dog.

I've only known him a few weeks and already we've grown quite close. I would say at this moment that he has become my best friend. So, I'm thinking about eating him.

Bear is one year old now – seven years old among his kind – and already a tenth of the way through his lifespan. Over the next eight to ten years, barring any kind of early departure for him or myself, his arch of life will coincide with my own. From now on, every time my wife and I sit down over mugs of coffee or glasses of wine to talk “big picture stuff,” he will be a piece of the puzzle we will try to assemble. We will be his source for food, shelter, and belly rubs: he will be our source for tufts of coarse black fur, pockmarked t.v. remotes, and resigned laughter. In sharing a home, we will become entangled in one another's narratives – the basis for every good American sitcom over the last thirty years or so. We will breathe and sigh the same recycled air. We'll perk our ears up at the same abrupt wood-saw screams of neighborhood crows, throb of decelerating airplanes, or any other damn thing that dares to interrupt our moments of quiet. We'll teach one another daily lessons concerning the nature of our needs and desires.

Over the next eight or ten years, no matter what I am eating, I predict with confidence that upon looking up from my plate a mere ten degrees, I will find a pair of golden eyes like freshly-minted pennies that seek to prevail upon my constant generosity. How many meals will I eat with those eyes on me? How many mornings will I take him out into the catholic light of dawn, sleep still in my eyes and bare feet cold on the concrete, to listen to his pee douse the same miserable bush outside the door? How many times will we mosey around the same white bread neighborhoods with their cookie-cutter houses and gaudy lawn ornaments, stopping every 20 feet to cover up some other dog's graffiti?

We're going to share a lot in this life, Bear and I, with the time and the energy that we're borrowing.

For most of his life, Bear will be subject to me and I to him. Our needs will clash at inconvenient times. We'll often take walks too late and he'll pee on that same miserable bush because I'm tired and he's not and that's all that can be done in the daylight we're allotted. But there have been and will be times when both of us, together, are totally free. It's those afternoons on the trail where I can be a man, he can be a dog, and we're both loving bumping along, rough and wild. We stride and trot rather than merely walk, smelling and smiling and seeing and

discovering: monarchs in our own rights. We'll run, jump, separate, come together: celebrate his dog-ness, my man-ness and all this great glorious ground beneath us. I'll see him as he is. He'll see me as I am. We'll know that this is truly where he – where we – belong.

So that's why I'm thinking about eating him. Because when the day comes when he no longer watches me eat, or lifts his head in alert, and can no longer make it around the block of white bread houses, what will become of him? The city tells me when that day comes, he is to be disposed of – with dignity, sympathy, and all that, but still – *disposed of*. What remains of him will become material to be dealt with, removed, eviscerated. I need to call it like it is – his flesh and bones and copper penny eyes will be burned to ash. All the meals. All the kibble and rawhide bones and occasional dollops of peanut butter out of my palm. All the pee breaks and lazy walks and games of fetch. All the hours with my hands in his fur, his drool saturating my jeans. *Ash*.

Maybe that's ok. They're saying by 2020 more of us will end up as ash than not. Back in 1960, only three out of a hundred Americans opted for the oven. I'm not surprised. That generation inhaled, walked through, and wept over enough ash to last several lifetimes. Funny how many of us alive now were born out of those fires of victory and revenge, only to someday be turned to ash anyhow.

Still, the image of being handed a container of Bear ash from the veterinary office receptionist...the drive home with the container in the passenger's seat...rambling through the garage for an old metal Folger's can because it suits him better...surveying the living room for a resting place that doesn't violate my wife's well-crafted feng shui...finding no suitable place and resigning the can to my closet next to pairs of old shoes...god, what's the point? Bear never would have resigned himself to a closet, contained.

So maybe not ashes. Maybe I don't have to eat him though, not right away at least. There's always the freezer. They say there are over 200 bodies still on Everest: human statues in tacky whacky multicolor jumpsuits, skin as smooth as porcelain. Bodies don't break down up there; not very quickly anyways. It's too cold and dry, like my freezer. Apparently some of the bodies are useful as landmarks if one is lost on the mountainside – a pretty macabre facsimile for a common cairn, if you ask me. But for anyone but the rich and bored and deranged, is ending up a human cairn any more useful than a coffee can of ash? I wouldn't be sparing Bear by freezing him, only delaying the inevitable.

Now the Sherpa – or to be more politically correct, the “high altitude porters,” given that Sherpa is an ethnic group rather than an occupation – are accustomed to a different way of dealing with the dead on the mount. Instead of leaving a trail of human popsicles, they prefer a “sky burial.” It’s got a good ring to it – “sky burial”: it’s hard to conceive of a more romantic-sounding way to go. The reality of the practice contains very little romance.

Born into a world of thin dry air, jagged rock, scraggly grass and few trees, the people of the Khumbu region are left with few means by which to remove human remains. The most common practice left to them is a form of excarnation – literally “removing meat,” or “defleshing” – in which corpses are left at sacred sites to be gnawed at and eroded away by the scavenger birds and the elements until all that remains is a smattering of small polished bones. I wonder how many generations of high alpine vulture owe their lives to the Tibetan Dead. I wonder how many of the Tibetan Living have dreams of flight.

I don’t want to give the impression that I’m being completely tongue-in-cheek with the subject matter here, that I have no reverence for the established tradition. When we bury one of our dead, we behold the darkening of one future and the illumination of another – our own. Funerals are like crystal balls in that way.

As children, my siblings and I used to walk a country mile up old MN 15 to a small seemingly abandoned graveyard. Someone continued to mow the grass, but we never saw signs of freshly-dug earth. We would watch the sun melt into the ocean of corn or soybeans before us, our long thin shadows filling the spaces between tilted headstones bearing old German and Scandinavian names, like our own. We never lingered long.

On our walks home, we carried season passes to another sort of light show: Indra’s Net Live in the Country. The ditches pulsed in eerie silent crescendos with the fluorescent bodies of fireflies. Since leaving home, I have returned many summers and walked that country mile to find the show’s cast has steadily dwindled. The last time I walked it, there was no show at all. Maybe the show skipped town, or maybe the farmer’s pesticides just got too effective over the years. The only lights that remain are the ruby eyes of distant cyclopes that blink in the night. They transform back into windmills with the dawn light somehow. Everyone gives old Don Quixote too hard a time.

Years later in another graveyard not thirty miles away, I would help my father select the proper stone for what remained of my mother, which bears both of their names. During my infrequent visitations, I've walked over the twenty or so feet of green grass purchased for my sisters, my brother, and for myself. I understand where I'm meant to be and what I lose if I forfeit my place.

I would have family and community there, and a place of my own. The burial would be proper, dignified. But I would be so *contained*, the monarch of a box, swaddled in fine clothes I currently cannot afford and wouldn't buy if I could, a point on the matrix of the dead. My purpose would end there. I would serve no other. To imagine Bear, laid in a sanded pine box, lowered past the manicured grass into the damp dark...I might as well bury him in the white bread neighborhood next door. Headstones are just fancier lawn ornaments, after all.

So I won't let him burn, I won't freeze him, and I won't bury him in a box. What is left to me? If I were stronger...I would eat him. I would borrow his body like I've borrowed so many others – beef, pork, chicken, fish – and carry him with me until one day I give it all away. There would be honor in that for him and for me. I would use his doggy energy and charisma well. He could watch the world through my eyes, smile with my teeth, jump with two legs for a change. And above all, we could stay together a while longer.

Yet if I'm honest with myself, I'm too weak to do it.

I think when that day comes, the day his copper pennies tarnish beyond recognition, I'll carry his body *out* – out of the neighborhood, out of this city, beyond any freezer, furnace or graveyard, beyond any trail – to a place that hums and wishes and washes with life, with bodies small and large that wait and pray for sacrifice. I'll lay him over root and earth and stone, uncovered, and see him one last time in all his glorious dog-ness, an offering. In the borrowed days that follow, when I see the black body of the faraway hawk, hear the howl of the nearby coyote, or see the glimmer of a penny in a stream, I'll recognize my Bear. I can hope for nothing more for this borrowed body.

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