

ABSTRACT

WOMAN HIKING SOLO: FINDING A PERSONAL CONNECTION WITH NATURE

Blending personal narratives and critical theory, this thesis explores a female connection with nature that is marginalized in modern society. The focus begins with a personal account, examining the difficulties of hiking solo as a woman, and how the social constrictions of our culture has made it difficult to do so. Subsequent chapters draw on Cheryl Strayed's *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*, exposing the challenges of being a woman alone in nature and the benefits of hiking solo. Through an ecofeminist lens, *Wild* reveals a deeper female connection that harkens back to pre-Christian archetypes of Mother Earth and how revisiting these connections enrich the life of a woman. This thesis also explores a posthumanist approach. The trail itself holds an intrinsic value that acts upon Strayed and helps her to find a personal connection with nature, resulting in a resolution of critical crises in her life. Because American Nature Writing holds a history of male explorers and theorists, this thesis considers a woman's perspective, what has been left out of the conversation and why, all to better connect with nature and respect our most sacred space.

Wendy Anne Batey
May 2018

WOMAN HIKING SOLO: FINDING A PERSONAL
CONNECTION WITH NATURE

by
Wendy Anne Batey

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Wendy Anne Batey
Thesis Author

John Hales (Chair) English

William Arce English

J. Ashely Foster English

For the University Graduate Committee:

Dean, Division of Graduate Studies

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This thesis is dedicated to my dad, whose love of outdoor adventure still lives on through me.

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CHAPTER 1: LEARNING TO HIKE ALONE

Warm sunrays dapple through the Ponderosa Pines as I round the switchback trail to the top of the hill. It's midmorning and I have been hiking on the foot trail to Big Baldy for almost an hour. It always takes me a good thirty minutes or so to get used to the trail by assessing the incline, the dampness of the dirt, and taking notice of the inhabitants of the trail, human or otherwise. Within the ever-present alertness that I keep vigilant on a hike, I think about my son. I left him at home with his father and worry that my son may miss me. I am still pumping milk for him, but it's starting to wane as his major source of food. Guilt rides my concerns, but I push them aside for gratefulness. I am grateful that I can have this moment, to see the valley below even though it's obscured by midsummer particulates in the air. I am grateful for the opportunity to stroll through the wilderness and have a moment to myself on the exfoliated dome around me. I consider the fact that there are many people who have a hand in allowing me this moment; most of all, myself.

Until now, I have not been able to hike alone since before I became pregnant. I begin to reflect on how I arrived at this point. Before the pregnancy, hiking alone was a pleasure I enjoyed, but it wasn't always so. It took quite a bit of self-encouragement to step out outside and into the woods by myself. So many mental hurdles stood in my way to even begin to enjoy an unaccompanied experience, let alone hiking solo in the woods. I continue the hike to the top and ponder the support network of people who assisted my ability to come to the forest for a solitary hike. It begins with a divorce.

As soon as I see my partner through the restaurant window, her arm wrapped around familiar woman's waist, my lungs deflate like a hot air balloon's final ride. As the air expels in an elongated sigh, so does every ounce of empathy I have retained for my marriage. We'd arranged to meet at the restaurant for a late dinner. I arrived early.

I pull her outside and tell her in choked breaths what I'd known for some time. Our relationship is over. I sit down to rest on an oversized planter, recently wet with the west coast rain, as she tries to explain away the vision that I witnessed. Her words do not land. They muffle over with the street scene of cars passing, splashing up rain puddles over the curbside. Streaming car lights blind my view of her. I silently look down the Victoria, BC street that leads to the Black Ball ferry and back to the States. Dimly lit hanging baskets of propagated petunias and pansies on each lamppost hold my gaze as Tiara's voice strains to be heard. The less I listen the louder she becomes until finally I attempt to shut her down with the words, "I'm done." She of course continues as I turn my head back to the street scene and back to a white pansy dangling out of a basket, a tiny detail that is meant to be a friendly greeting to the American tourists as they arrive onto Vancouver Island. The moonfaced flower glistens in the mist and glows out of the dark rain drenched basket. Why is the name pansy synonymous with the word weak? In that moment, a pansy is holding my entire world together.

Tiara called herself Phil when I married him and came out as a trans-woman, three years into the marriage. I waffle on the gender pronouns, because, as I've come to know the true and complex life of the trans person, through hours of group therapy and trans community meet-ups, I believe my ex to have something more akin to multiple personality disorder. Being female is just one of his personalities. Throughout the five-year marriage, he shifted into different

characters, holding no less than eight jobs. Each job represented a new personality and she would dress and act accordingly. When he worked as a dairy hand, he bought Carhart overalls and Wellingtons and played the part. As a roofer, an exorbitant amount of money went to safety supply stores that sold harnesses and hardhats. But when we met, he was a long-haul truck driver and picked me up from California's Central Valley along with the fresh vegetables to import to the dark emerald forests of Vancouver Island, Canada. The excitement of living in a different country with a seemingly charming, interesting man was too great to pass up.

In those first days of easy long-haul trucking, the route took us up and down the I-5, and out to the coastal areas of California. We passed through the towns that Steinbeck made famous through his novels of the farm labor trail. I wanted to stop and take a longer look at all the historical landmarks where my childhood stories were created, but there was never enough time. Deliveries needed to be made. Waiting at each warehouse took up hours of downtime. We were beholden to the truck and each landmark site seemed just out of reach. The plains of the landscape expanded further outward as the truck plowed through Washington and Oregon. Mountain corridors flew by like strobed movies out of the window.

Phil yarned grand stories of his adventures hiking in Canada as we careened up and down the highways. "When I lived in Banff, I'd hike all the time with my dog Rufus," he reflected wistfully as he lit up another cigarette.

"I've only camped with my family in the Sierras," I answered passively as I snack on chips and gut souring gas station coffee. "My father loved to camp, but we just stayed in around the campsite. We didn't hike very far into the mountains. I'd love to take a real trip, just like Jack Kerouac in *Dharma Bums*."

“I love Jack Kerouac! We should pick up an audio book of *On the Road* while we drive! We should hike the West Coast Trail. It’s like the Pacific Crest Trail, but it starts in Victoria and goes up the coast of Vancouver Island. We could do it in six weeks!”

I believed him.

Heading back to Vancouver Island and through the mountainous regions, the passer-by meets the sign for Goldstream Park just out of Victoria at the beginning of the Malahat Highway. Up island, tourists observe notices of ferries to Denman Island, a site the Coast Salish natives carved bowls out of large rock slabs along the coastline to mash rye into flour for bannock bread. Billboards beckon, “Come See the Prehistoric Petroglyphs of Nanaimo!”

When I saw the sign, I asked him to stop and began to devise a plan of how to park the truck for a couple of hours of exploration. But the excuses, the justifications, the defenses that begun to weave the grand tapestry of our marriage, and ultimately line its coffin, started to take shape. There was always time to break at an easy to park shopping center, but anything that involved nature or actual physical activity suddenly became an inconvenience to stop.

After the night at the restaurant, I make the decision to leave Vancouver Island, but it’s going to take almost a year to save for the move home. Tiara racked up an extravagant amount of debt to pay for wardrobe changes, so I settle my financial ties and begin to build my savings from scratch. I work at a greenhouse making a decent wage, and within a hot minute, my ex moves out and in with her new lover. For the first time in my life, I live alone.

When I was six years old, my father had a young friend named Joe who lived alone. He was recently divorced and would leave our house late at night to

his old dilapidated home further out in the country. The house was battered and whitewashed with cheap paint. He'd inherited the home from his deceased grandparents and had no other family members surrounding him. I wondered, with my six-year-old brain, if he felt scared at night being in a house by himself. I thought it was terribly sad that he had no one to greet him, to turn on the lights when he got home. Was he scared of the dark, like I was? I was still afraid of my closet, let alone being home alone.

At age six, living alone seemed like a leap of faith, but this memory sticks with me and lingers on as part of the background framing for my future relationships. My fear of living alone never completely departs. My father's friend was divorced, a rarity to me at the time. Because of Joe, the words divorce and alone became synonymous and frightening. However, when I find myself coming home and opening my front door to an empty house, as it turns out, it's not that bad. Honestly, I start to enjoy it.

I am now accountable for my own domestic sphere. I am responsible for my own dish washing. I buy the food that goes into my refrigerator that I eat and cook for myself. I am the sole cat litter cleaner. The money that is in my purse is mine to spend and curiously accumulates quicker than usual. The television is on because I turn it on and I turn it off whenever I chose to do so. I play the music that I want to hear. I can go to bed early!

I am 36 and I've lived out of my parents' house for many years, but always with a boyfriend. Living with someone involves compromise. Compromise creeps into the living room and turns on the television when you're deep into reading a 19th century novel. I then move to the bedroom, but that T.V. is still on. The presence of another is always felt in the appliances they touch, the floors that

they creak, the food that is eaten, and the toilet flushing. The energy of the room changes, and one always is acutely aware of the other.

In the novelty of living alone, I begin to consider other points in life where being alone is discouraged, especially being female. The fear of being alone is perpetuated by society in seemingly innocuous ways; such as, seating arrangements in a restaurant or travel magazines with pictures of couples holding hands on a tropical beach. Why is going to a concert rocking out solo to your favorite band such a hard thing to do? In these early days of vibrant enthusiasm, I begin a personal campaign to challenge so-called naturally coupled experiences with going it alone. I start by going to the movies.

I'm shocked to learn how hard this turns out to be. I gather the courage to drive myself to the theater and choose the aptly named film *Brave*. I buy the ticket at the box office, but even in those moments before entering the darkened theater, I feel the unease of being alone. What do I do with myself? I do not need to tell anyone that I must use the restroom before I go in. I just do. Should I buy popcorn? I don't. Where do you sit in a theater when you are alone? Should I sit in the middle? I chose an aisle seat just in case I need to suddenly leave.

As the film begins, I start to feel the presence of everyone in the house. My eyes grow wide with awareness and I cannot get comfortable in my seat or become engrossed in the movie. I watch others, mostly families of wiggly children with light-up shoes and wonder why they would choose to wear light-up shoes in a darkened theater. I sit fully aware of my solitary state of being. I churn in my seat, but I force myself to stay. This is good for me, I think to myself. I need to learn how to be comfortable alone. As soon as the credits begin to roll, I am up and heading to the store to buy a bottle of wine to console myself. I sit with my thoughts and drink on my couch, with my wine glass, in my home.

At the time, I didn't understand the fear. What did I think was going to happen at the theater? That I was going to die because I am alone? I'm sure no one in the history of the world has ever died from being unaccompanied in a movie theater. Perhaps, embarrassment that I am alone plays a part in my tortured psyche? As if being coupled is a more socially accepted state of being. I would like to think that I am above such petty constructions. I don't think a little embarrassment is the end of the story. This fear comes from a place deeper than I can begin to fathom.

As I peel back the first layers of the fear, here I am in a foreign country where I've made acquaintances that I know will naturally fade, by no fault other than distance, as soon as I leave. I have no family within a thousand miles. While married to Tiara, her personality demanded attention, from her clothing to her hyperbolized stories. Her presence took up space, which made her absence all the more palpable. But, my ex no longer blinks on my radar as a beacon of refuge. My marriage is over. I am absolutely, profoundly, alone.

But in the long view, I know that my solitary state is temporary. I am heading back to live with family come late autumn and this is my one real chance to be alone. My history with relationships tell me that it never takes long to find another partner. There is an inevitability of another lingering over me. Or, if another partner did not appear on the horizon, it's natural to build up an interweaving for friends and acquaintances. Sometimes, more than you care or want. I took advantage of singlehood and took on more solo excursions. My aloneness starts to become a part of my new identity. I start to frequent café's alone, dine in restaurants, but these events were small expeditions. The thrill of newfound experiences invigorates me. There is one last thing that I want to do before I leave the island. Go hiking.

Vancouver Island invites the hiker to the surrounding coasts, high mountain peaks and valley trails that weave through the damp fern laden forests. Within the marriage, I managed to convince Phil to take me on a sampling of local hills, but nothing too substantial took place. Cobble Hill Mountain, near his parents' home became a go-to for a couple of hours of exploration. It is a 3k hike, straight up with views of the mainland from the top. It's just enough to satisfy the craving for forest bathing. Tiara never hiked because, in her latest incarnation, she took on a stereotypical female character. In her mind, real women don't hike.

There are a few key sites that I want to see before I leave Vancouver Island. The first is a well-known site, Gold Stream Park, the spot at the beginning of the Malahat Highway, where we regularly drove by with never enough time to stop. I pick a Sunday and drive 30 minutes south with my backpack, lunch, and work boots. I see the familiar sign and park off the side of the road.

As soon as I put my backpack on and walk up to the trailhead, the uneasiness of being alone overrides my senses. This time I am not heading into a climate-controlled theater. Hiking, being an outdoor sport, is a whole other animal and with it a different set of fears. The fears come in from multiple angles, and conscious memories of cautionary tales.

My mother's story that she loved to tell of how she and my father, in their first year of marriage, backpacked in Yosemite to Half Dome, immediately comes to mind. It is now buried deep within my psyche. They encountered a bear with disastrous results, which left my parents without food. They returned home with their tails between their legs.

My parents hiked all the way to the first campsite on the trail. They spent a cold night in a pup tent and woke to a bear lurking around the campsite. They jumped out of the tent and broke camp within seconds. Or, as my mother puts it,

“You never saw me and your dad move so fast,” and left their food hung in a tree. They hiked further on to the beginning of Half Dome where my father climbed the cables, but my mother stood behind. She was too afraid and waited. He came back down; they hiked back to the campsite. The bear was still there along with her cubs and tore into their canned food with razor sharp claws. They went home scared and stuck to camping within well-secured official campsites from then on. The end.

At home, it’s known as The Bear Story. Curiously, The Bear Story accumulates new details over the years as it becomes appropriate for my age. From a young age to about high school the story has this framework. The tale is told around the campfire, always with an air of caution to the vast unknown beyond the campground. The basic story never changes, but interesting plot points emerge as time goes on. For example, Mom finally confessed that they hitchhiked there, which is a real shocker to think that my parents had the guts to thumb a ride. Later, Mom admits that they didn’t string up the food high enough. Each time the story is told, the fear of the experience taps the cadence of the story.

Modern adventure books and movies thrive on expeditions gone wrong. Aron Ralston, a man who fell into a crevice in Blue John Canyon, pinned his arm in between a boulder and a wall in a slot canyon. The image of him remains as he later removed his own forearm with a pocketknife after it began to decompose under the weight of the boulder. Even my own adventure hero, Jack Kerouac met his fear on Matterhorn Mountain by losing his footing and nerve to reach the top. Most importantly, as a woman, I never have the luxury of letting my guard down around male strangers, especially in the wild. I am pushing back a wall of fear that society tells me that I should suffer.

I fight the fear of my parents' story, every movie that I've watched about hiking, and talk myself into putting one foot in front of the other on the trail. My breath heaves like the night that I broke up with Tiara, but not out of exertion. Panic overtakes me and settles into my chest, but I press on, head down and darting my eyes at each hiking couple, forcing a friendly smile. Single men and women stand out to me now and I wonder how they manage. There aren't many.

The waterfall reveals itself only a few meters into the woods. The size of it breaks my heaved breaths and I gaze at the shooting water as it falls hundreds of feet to the stream below. It's not wide but discharges a long continuous freefall that fills the ravine with white noise. I draw closer, but the large boulders of the stream below hold me back. I blink away the spray of the mist and my breath evens. Pine and arbutus trees gently sway in the breeze created by the thrust of the fall. Early Spring flowers of wild purple orchids jut out of the rocks. As I pause, to take in the sight, I notice the other tourists mill around for something else to see.

I sit on a boulder and stare long into the billowing gushes of collected rain water spilling out and over the fall. Each bulge melts and swells into the stream several times before the water hits the ground. The wind raises swaths of water up and layers the surrounding forest in its mist. I begin to shiver as beads of water collect on my jacket, but I take my time to leave. The rock turns cold under me and that same coldness creeps into my boots, as it always does on Vancouver Island if you sit too long. I begin to look around and notice a trail that climbs up the side of the mountain and off into the woods, in the opposite direction of my car. The beauty of the waterfall encourages me to keep exploring. I get up, brush off the layer of water and start hiking.

The waterfall turns out to be the mark of the tourists' cut-off. From this point, only the locals or curious hikers continue. As I reach the top of the hill and

face the forest, I am on my own, and with it, the unease of being alone. An imaginary hand seems to hold me back as I start down the trail. My thighs waver under the anxiety and ache in the pull of walking. My boots suddenly feel as if I wore toe grooves into the wrong pair and heavy like I've collected mud caked onto each shoe. I push on fighting the urge to stop and turn around. Sheer determination of will keeps me going.

I honestly don't know where the trail leads. I have only a vague notion that it parallels the highway. The trail seems to dip down then up into a series of ravines as I traverse the side of the mountain. The sun shines down on the peaks only rarely and then just as quickly, the trail cuts into a deep V-shape den where the vegetation grows sparse in the absence of sun. I smell the humus of the soil and dead pine needles that shed from cedar branches in the natural die off. I can still hear the muffled sound of the waterfall in the distance.

I do not encounter any bears, although I admit, I am vigilant. The trail is not long, and I finally reach the highway again, but now east of my parked car. Since the Malahat Highway divides the entire park, I decide to continue my adventure and cross the road to the north, the popular side of the park, where the trail to Mt. Finlayson begins.

Mt. Finlayson is the main attraction on the north side of Gold Stream Park. It draws tourists and locals to its craggy peak more out of exercise than any sights you may see at the top, which turns out to be the grand view of a golf course. That day, the population of the trail rivals my small hometown and is just as slow. Not for the incline, which is daunting, but for the number of people who I have to maneuver through to get to the top. Some people, dressed in their finest gym outfits, are scaling the mountain like highland goats. Tourists are carrying toddlers and pulling other family members up the sides of the boulders. I witness

one shirtless young man run down the mountain with a Camelbak of water strapped to his back, turn around at the trailhead, and run right back up the trail. I hear in passing that this is his third time today to conquer the mountain. It is a theme park without the cartoon characters and overpriced ice cream.

Moments earlier, bumbling my way through a blind trail and forcing a smile to hiking couples as I rack my brain through the mire of hiking alone, I am now confronted with an explosion of people and trying to find my own way through the crowd. I honestly forget that I am in a forest.

Back in California, Yosemite sees this level of invasion every summer and the congestion of people clogging up the valley makes me wonder what they are there to see. I blame John Muir. Many of his writings are intended to bring people to the Sierras in his books and articles exaggerate the mountains as a playground. It works. He brought hordes of people to the Sierras with ostentatious sentences, such as:

After ten years spent in the heart of it, rejoicing and wondering, bathing in its glorious floods of light, seeing the sunbursts of morning among the icy peaks, the noonday radiance on the trees and rocks and snow, the flush of the alpenglow, and thousand dashing waterfalls with their marvelous abundance of irised spray, it still seems to me above all others the Range of Light, the most divinely beautiful of all the mountain-chains I have ever seen. (2)

Who could refuse such an invitation? Unfortunately, his well-meaning intentions that occurred to him in the solitude in The Mountains of California, neglected to envision the grotesque overexposure of the land merely by the presence of humans.

It's easy to lament the loss of an authentic natural experience in nature, but, that song has been sung for thousands of years. Sages such as Lao Tzu or Socrates will say that nature should be experienced purely and without pretension. Considering human nature, is this possible? Everyone harbors ulterior motives while sojourning into the forest, whether it be conquering the fear of hiking alone, or to gain miles in a travel log. Even though I could critique motivations of hiking, I am there too, hiking up Mt. Finlayson as a tourist. I want to say that I did it. I conquered the mountain. The experience becomes a proud entry in my journal.

But, I want to experience the beauty too. Inspired by the Transcendentalists and Beat Poets who talk of nature as the highest calling, I consider if it's possible to have an authentic nature experience within the modern world. An unnamable feeling that occurs while hiking that seems to tap into something beyond the physical realm, motivates the poet and hiker alike. When Mary Austin talks about it in *Earth Horizon*, she says:

There was something else there than what you find in the books; a lurking, evasive, Something, wistful, cruel, ardent; something that rustled and ran, that hung half-remotely, insistent on being noticed, fled from pursuit and when you turned from it, leaped suddenly, and fastened on to your vitals. (187)

Ultimately this is my goal, to find that elusive feeling and deeper connection with nature. Hiking solo is a part of the recipe to have this experience, but I do not yet know exactly why.

On my way back to the car, I think about the two sides of Gold Stream Park. The echoes of compromise creep back into my mind. The population of Mt. Finlayson reminds me of the invasive and ever-present personality of my ex.

There is never an opportunity to tune out the masses and sit with nature like I do with the waterfall. Being alone, however uncomfortable, feels real. I am free to enjoy nature and free to be afraid of it. With the crowds overpowering the experience, I cannot investigate my own thoughts on why hiking solo is so difficult for me.

Nevertheless, I come to an important insight on this first solo hike. I conclude that hiking solo, without the hordes of tourists, will help me tap into an elusive feeling, which seems to call to me. I do not know why it's so important to me within these early days of hiking, but I know that there is something that connects me to nature. My personal campaign of going it alone turns into a search for a feeling of interconnectedness with the earth.

I hike a few more peaks and points of interest around the island before I leave. Each time, it is a little easier being on my own. My boot soles wore in proper grooves, but the elusive transcendent feeling never reveals itself while I am still on the island. Not until a year later, while hiking through the foothills below Yosemite on the Hite Cove Trail, I experience my first moment of transcendence. Before dawn on the Vernal Equinox, I spontaneously decide to take drive to Yosemite. Just before the entrance, a sign post reads, "Hite Cove Trail" and I stop to investigate. The trail leads into a great canyon, but the real reason to hike the trail is for the wildflowers. Sitting on a rock and surrounded by acres of California Poppies, Padre's Shooting Star, and a myriad of others in full spring bloom, I eat my breakfast next to the south fork of the Merced River. In that moment, the fear that has kept me from hiking alone dissolves. I am home.

CHAPTER 2: AN ECOFEMINIST LOOK THROUGH CHERYL
STRAYED'S *WILD: FROM LOST TO FOUND ON
THE PACIFIC CREST TRAIL*

In Cheryl Strayed's memoir, *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*, she writes from her perspective as a woman hiking a significant portion of the Pacific Crest Trail (the PCT). She fills her chapters with quotes by the feminist poet Adrienne Rich; carrying Rich's book *The Dream of a Common Language*, she takes note of the dangers and joys women face hiking solo and works through the grief over the death of her mother, with whom she holds a powerful bond. While Strayed focuses on what it is like for a woman to hike alone, she also reveals how it is an act of transgression to the standards of a male-dominated outdoor activity. Because many hiking memoirs are from masculine achievements through nature, *Wild* offers a counter narrative. Her narrative as a woman enriches the diversity of American Nature writing. Looking at *Wild* through an ecofeminism perspective, the reader can reach further into her memoir to discover the male domination within nature as she hikes through the PCT; as well as, see the profound connection that she holds with nature.

I propose that her story reaches back into a historical narrative of women in nature that has historically been subdued by male dominion. Carolyn Merchant, an ecofeminist who focuses on the way in which women are culturally defined through nature in *The Death of Nature*, explains, within pre-Christian societies, nature is female, and I will expand on how this trope has lived on through the language of western consciousness and is expressed in Strayed's writing. Also, women are depicted within nature in specific ways, such as healers through herbal medications, or pre-Christian Goddesses. Archetypes like Mother Earth did not die by the patriarchal hand of Judeo-Christian ethics. She still resonates through

time to live within the epitome of modern society. As a result, Strayed engages the archetype of Mother Earth to work through the grief of her own recently deceased mother. By the end of the hike, Strayed realizes that not only does her mother have a special connection with nature, she too has that bond with nature that sees her through a difficult time in her life. By hiking solo, Strayed works through the grief over the death of her mother, suffers male imposition on the trail and evokes the archetype of Mother Earth to connect with nature and achieve her own sense of self-empowerment.

Before exploring the literary critique with an ecofeminist approach, it is important to note that while writing of connection with woman and nature, I stop short of biological determinism. Just because one is female, does not mean one must connect with nature. Ecofeminist Mary Mellor warns to not fall into this fallacy, as she explains:

To argue that women as biologically sexed or socially gendered beings are connected with, or in some way represent, the natural world is seen as dangerous by many feminists. It undermines the struggle that they have waged against the way the identification of women with nature has been used to justify women's subordination.

(Mellor 2)

Women struggle to maintain their choice in their own identity under the thumb of male domination. To add biological determinism to women and nature weakens the hard-fought ability for women to live out their lives as they see fit. Cheryl Strayed's relationship with nature stems from her mother, who, in turn, evokes the archetype of Mother Earth. When Stray's mother dies, looking to Mother Nature

is her way to deal with the loss. Eventually, Strayed realizes her own connection with Mother Earth and as a result, find her own sense of empowerment.

The literary critique of woman hiking solo in nature is thin. To fill the gaps, I include psychology and therapy of hiking solo, such as the collection of essays in the book *Wilderness Therapy for Women: The Power of Adventure*, edited by Ellen Cole et al., to gain insight into the benefits of hiking alone. Encouraging a woman to hike alone for the benefit of literary inspiration is apparently taboo; on the surface out of safety, but once one digs deeper, the concerns are out of stereotypes that a woman alone cannot travel well in the natural world. A literary canon of men Thoreau, Muir, and Abbey, take on solo excursions for literary purposes, and with it, a vast scholarship of literary critique has emerged. But for women, the act of hiking solo for literary purposes is still an evolving subject. The literary critique is still forthcoming. As women gain footing outside the domestic sphere, I am confident the scholarship on hiking solo will increase.

As it stands now, many scholars writing on Strayed's *Wild* shy away from a direct approach of proclaiming that there is something that connects a woman to nature. The scholarship on Strayed's memoir remains forthcoming, because the book was published only four years ago, in 2013. But as it stands now, the scholarship seems divided into two positions: some critics focus on the physical aspects of her journey, such as her ability to withstand the arduous climes and cold nights, while others focus on the psychological journey, such as working through the death of her mother while hiking. It is rare to see these two positions overlap.

Where scholars find common ground is in recognizing that Strayed's memoir enriches what they are professing to be a newfound genre. But again, they differ in defining the new genre that fuses self-discovery and nature/travel, the

way Strayed's story branches out from the roots of American Nature Writing. For example, Leigh Gilmore wrestles with trying to define Strayed's work and concludes, "As much as *Wild* will be at home in the company of nature writing, it is not only or even primarily a wild place that is Strayed's subject, but the wildness within that has shaken and will save her" (190). Gilmore's point of view reveals that not only is Strayed a nature writer, but a writer of self-discovery. Gilmore writes that nature is secondary to Strayed's journey into her new identity. It is a catalyst through which Strayed transforms.

Megan Brown agrees and expands the claim that Strayed's memoir is written as a tool of self-process. She asserts, "Many reviewers of *Wild* point out, readers will find more mundane details than exciting exploits, or even portraits of majestic landscapes... In this way, the memoir does not merely inspire" (Brown 364). She believes that by writing the memoir, it acts as means to come to terms with Strayed's troubled life. Drawing on Foucault, Brown focuses on Strayed's concern for self-care, the psychological attributes, and hardships of the through-hike, or what's known as hiking for days on end and backpacking through alternating climates and undulating terrain. As these scholars work through the definition of exactly what *Wild* is and where it fits within the canons of nature writing, some have moved on to enrich the conversation of what *Wild* does.

Through a personal account of her own struggles of dealing with a difficult pregnancy, the critic Shelly Sanders offers a sympathetic connection to the physical struggle that takes place within the memoir. After considering both the grueling athleticism and the therapeutic writing of the memoir, Sanders says, "For Strayed 'being found' seems to take place through both activities, since the writing allowed her to lyrically connect to her embodied challenge with her eventual transformation" (10). She also contemplates the idea of "athletic esthetics," where

the reader appreciates the athleticism and the beauty of the spectacle. To read of Strayed's arduous climes, one appreciates her ability to see it through and be inspired through her struggles and athleticism. Sanders maintains that there is "beauty in the pain" and in that Strayed's labors are transformative (16). Susanne Koven agrees that the bodily aspects are key to understanding Strayed's personal revolution. She notes that "She [Strayed] comes to understand that the sensory intensity of the hike is inseparable from its meaning" (176). The effort of the hike becomes undeniable and plays an essential role within the novel. Through blisters, because of small shoes, eating bland cold cereal for breakfast every day for months, falling, scraping legs, being bitten by bugs, and enduring freezing cold and excruciating heat, Strayed's physical suffering becomes an experience for healing the destruction in her life.

In Tanya Kam's essay "Forest of the Self," Kam echoes Julie Graham by writing that "Women's travel narratives differ from male narratives in that female travels are more likely to be spurred by emotional upheaval, and the act of traveling alone is more commonly connected to self-esteem and therapy" (365). Strayed falls exactly into this claim. Not only does the act of hiking alone help Strayed find self-empowerment, but she hikes the PCT to overcome psychological turmoil. Kam also claims, "while women hiking solo on the trail are likely to be asked what propelled them to do so, men's escapades do not need to be explained or legitimized to the same extent" (365). Strayed is asked many times by passerby's and fellow hikers throughout her hike whether if she is alone, and why? Since the core of *Wild* is female empowerment, it is not only through the psychological torment of the trail, but the societal pressures against her that propel her just as much as the challenge of the hike itself. As these scholars have only explored two different ways to approach *Wild*, physical, and mental effects of the

thru-hike, they cohesively maintain that the thrill is in the challenge to overcome all these obstacles. The largest struggle that she works through is grieving the death of her mother.

The all nurturing, ever caring, archetype of Mother Earth helps Strayed as she copes with the death of her mother. Merchant reminds the reader, “Not only was nature in a generalized sense seen as female, but also the earth... was universally viewed as a nurturing mother, sensitive, alive and responsive to human action” (20-21). Her image endures through time and lives on, not as a passive symbol, but is alive, interactive, and responsive to human connection. She is also full of unconditional love and Strayed seemingly, unknowingly, is pulled in by the force of this symbolism within Mother Earth. Strayed seeks love and Mother Earth gives without the need for reciprocation. Most of all, Mother Earth is a creator that inhabits every resource that humans need to maintain a healthy life. Not only does she provide the minerals mined within her womb for the use of scientific discovery, which has since been exploited to a massive degree, she also provides the metaphors for transformation and renewal (Merchant 25). Mother Earth offers symbols such as the changing weather patterns, butterflies, and the grand perspective of the cycle of life. Within Strayed’s consciousness, she knows that by immersing herself within the images provided by Mother Earth, she will cope with the grief of her mother’s death and emerge anew.

Cheryl Strayed’s descriptions of her mother portray her as having a significant bond with nature. In Strayed’s formative years, she explains “[She] forbade us to use DEET or any other such brain-destroying, earth-polluting, future progeny-harming chemical. Instead she instructed us to slather our bodies with pennyroyal or peppermint oil” (18). Her mother’s concern harkens back to Rachel

Carson's *Silent Spring* that launched an ecofeminism approach to environmentalism. Carson believes that not only did DDT get passed down through the food chain, but she claims, "The poison may also be passed on from mother to offspring. Insecticide residues have been recovered from human milk in samples tested by Food and Drug Administration scientists" (23). Carson's concern for children goes beyond breast milk. She further tells of the horrific connection of DDT to childbearing as:

The chlorinated hydrocarbon insecticides freely cross the barrier of the placenta... The quantities so received by human infants would normally be small, they're not un-important because children are more susceptible to poisoning than adults. (23)

Strayed's mother, like Carson, by her actions considered the connection of nature to human relationships, not only of the ground upon which we grow our food, but the bond of mother to offspring. Strayed's mother was motivated by a nature-based philosophy and saw her children just as much a part of nature as her garden. Her roots are grounded in a woman's depiction as healer, using herbs and natural ways to tend her garden, like "Earth... a nurturing mother: a kindly beneficent female who provided for the needs of mankind in an ordered, planned universe" (Merchant 2). The link that connects Mother Nature to human lives is easily dismissed when chemical companies are vying for profits and when the connection to nature is ignored, so is the health of families. Strayed's mom saw fit to keep the nature connection alive for the benefit of her family.

In Mary Mellor's book *Feminism and Ecology*, she states that "The government and chemical industry's response to Carson's warnings was to mock her as an emotional fanatic, a spinster in galoshes who worried about birds" (15). But, Carson persevered, and DDT was banned in 1972. Carson's love of the

environment sparked an environment-conscious revolution and Cheryl Strayed's mother is a part of that movement.

Strayed's family moves into a ramshackle house on open land when she turns 13 and throughout her teen years, her mother and step-father build the house and pasture lands for chickens and horses. Her mother grows and cans vegetables from her garden. She loves to pause to take in the smell of rosemary between her hands to inhale its aroma (16). To Strayed, her mother embodies nature itself and this bond comes through in lines, such as: "I'd spread her ashes... in the little rock-lined flowerbed we'd made for her in a clearing on our land" (265). It is fitting to spread her ashes in the field that nourished her children and return to the life cycle of depicted in *Mother Earth*. Strayed's mother loves the earth as much as she loves her children and the connection of the two is not lost on Strayed.

Strayed's word choices in her descriptions of her mother are on equal footing with nature and evoke the images provided by *Mother Earth*. Whenever Strayed thinks of nature; the woods, flowers, and animals, she thinks of her mother. Carolyn Merchant asserts that "Descriptive statements about the world can pre-suppose the normative; they are ethic-laden... The writer or culture may not be conscious of the ethical import yet may act in accordance with its dictates" (4). By drawing on its historical context, as Merchant insists that connotation of each word, is imbued with the ethics associated within western culture.

Therefore, when Strayed describes the wildflowers along the trail and thinks of her mother she is using the tropes to fortify the connection of her mother and *Mother Earth*. Strayed reflects, "My mother would sometimes stop the car and pick a bouquet from what grew in the ditch," which describes her mother as more than just a wildflower enthusiast (193). By reading into her mother's appreciation for the wildflowers, that grew despite a manmade ditch, off the side of a civilized

road, not only does Strayed's mother prefer the natural world to a constructed one, but the connection of Strayed's mother to Mother Earth solidifies.

Strayed never overtly states that her mother represents nature. She encourages the reader to see the connection by placing her mother, in the best of times, in a natural setting and at her worst in a cold, sterilized, hospital. For example, when Strayed confesses that her mother's back-to-nature lifestyle proves difficult to her as a modern teen, she remembers how her mother would say, "You'll thank me for this one day," and she later realizes that her mother was right (16). As Strayed realizes her mother's connection with nature, nature and her mother become synonymous.

When Strayed decides to hike the PCT the inspiration seems, at first, to come from nowhere. At this point, she is unaware of her own profound connection to nature. On a particularly hard day of emotional upheaval, she happens upon a travel book for the PCT. This serendipitous event strikes a chord within her. She confesses that her mother's comment of "thanking me for this later... Was the thing that grew in me that I'd remember years later, when my life became unmoored by sorrow. The thing that make me believe that hiking the Pacific Crest Trail was my way back to the person I used to be" (17). The person that she used to be involved the inexplicable bond with her mother. Since her mother has passed, she cannot reconnect with her in the physical form. She seeks out the next best thing; Mother Nature.

Considering Mother Nature, the archetype lives on and in Strayed's mind she may have never been conscious of the fact that she looked to Mother Nature to work through her grief. The words "Mother Nature" spark images of a fertile woman who unconditionally gives love to everyone and everything. Strayed's mother's legacy is love and writes, "My mother considered that love was her

greatest achievement” (268). Even though she never considers why she looked to the PCT to work through her grief, the Mother Nature connection is a safe space for her as it is imbued with love. Merchant states, “The metaphor of the earth as nurturing mother was gradually to vanish as the dominant image as the Scientific Revolution proceeded to mechanize and rationalize the new world view” (2). However, she remains a symbol of provider and something to call upon whenever the need arises.

Merchant gives the example of King Lear’s daughter Cordelia as embodying that of Mother Earth. She writes, “She [Cordelia] was strength and gentleness hewn into one: ‘passion and order, innocence and maturity, defenselessness and strength, daughter and mother, maid, and wife’” (7). The ambivalence of nature is seen within the aspects of Cordelia as well as how Strayed describes her mother. Each of these aspects, unconditional love, nurturer, etc. further define Strayed’s mother having and embodying the same traits as Mother Earth.

Without fanfare or logic, Strayed’s mother dies of lung cancer at a desperately fast rate, underlining the fact that Mother Nature is not only beneficial, but destructive and chaotic. Merchant states, “The images of both nature and women were two-sided.... The earth mother offered nurture and fertility, but nature also brought plagues, famines, and tempests,” and albeit early in life, Strayed’s mother takes part with that natural cycle of life (127). Like the quote above to describe Cordelia, nature has many facets that effect the human condition. It is both provider and destroyer in one. There is no initial cause for her lung cancer, however cancer manifests in nature as well. Her mother is not a smoker and Strayed consistently emphasizes that her mother chose wheatgrass to treat a cold over harsh man-made chemicals. And yet, the cancer overtakes her

body so quickly that Strayed has no time to cope or prepare to grieve. After her mother's death, Strayed's anger drives her to carve out a path of self-destruction. She breaks away from her natural life in the throes of her mother's death and dismantles any connection that she has with nature.

On the PCT, Strayed begins to properly grieve the death of her mother in a way that she was never able to do before. As she encounters different aspects of the trail, her mother's visage comes through, as an avatar from Mother Earth. For example, she has an encounter with a fox that surfaces the grief that requires release. She is startled and enamored by the redheaded creature, but as soon as she tries to lure the animal closer, the fox shoots off into the forest. She begins to yell, "MOM MOM MOM!" and collapses in silence (144). The text, in the memoir, breaks after her experience to a scene of the following morning and she does not stop to analyze what has just happened to her.

Tanya Kam notes the therapeutic aspect of the trail within Strayed's writing by affirming that "Nature can inspire and increase women's confidence, allowing them the courage to confront whatever psychological problems they might experience... the momentum of walking, thinking and focusing on survival allowed her to come to terms with her mother's death" (Kam 365). The hike, as therapy, triggers an overwhelming emotional response within the encounter with the fox. Psychologically, transference of the fox as her mother is instantaneous. Strayed sees her mother as nature personified and the fox is just another part of her mother, however, ultimately a being from Mother Earth. This event pierced through her and touched a part of her that needed to be exposed. Strayed confessed that "I didn't know the word was going to come out of my mouth until it did" (144). Her reaction was involuntary; thus, she is unaware at this point of the connection of Mother Earth and her own mother. Although no grand conclusions

appear at this time, for her the encounter stays with her as she wanders through the hills and valleys of the PCT.

When the fox encounter fails to fully complete her grief, as if overcoming grief is truly ever possible, Strayed begins to work through her grief while reaching Crater Lake in Oregon. She mentally makes a list of the all the things her mother had done wrong, ranging from smoking pot in front her and her siblings to spanking them with a wooden spoon. Strayed works herself up into a frenzy of thought and abruptly says, “Fuck her!” (267). She becomes so angry that she stops to wail in a tearless moan, but the anger rages on. As she continues down the trail, in her mind she chants, *fuck her, fuck her*, and confesses:

My pace quickened by my rage, but soon I slowed and stopped to sit on a boulder. A gathering of low flowers grew at my feet... Crocus, I thought the name coming into my mind because my mother had given it to me. These same flowers grew in the dirt where I'd spread her ashes. (267)

Like the dueling sides of nature, her mother is a source of pain and of comfort. Mother Nature takes a hand and offers the crocus, a symbol, not only of the coming spring, but in the early autumn and the coming of death. There is beauty in the bittersweet moment, moreover the beginning of acceptance of her mother's death. The effect of the flower allows Strayed eventually come to a personal resolve.

Surrounded by crocus and reflecting on the scenery, Strayed realizes that she had a fantastic mother, and her misdirected anger is the result of becoming an orphan too soon. In front of her, Crater Lake emerges as a mountain, as she describes in detail, with its heart removed and turned into a bowl (273). To her, filling the bowl becomes a metaphor for filling herself with love. She returns to

the metaphor of a bowl representing her mother in her book *Tiny Beautiful Things*. Strayed writes of her absent parents, “Like two empty bowls that I had to repeatedly fill on my own” (307). The lake is another bowl that Strayed fills on her own. A shift in thought takes place here. Where she normally would see her mother in nature, she begins to see herself. She resembles Crater Lake, filling herself with the love lost from her parents. Like her mother’s transference into nature, she too finds her own way into nature and her own sense of empowerment. She begins to tap into nature as a source of comfort and benefit from the reflections as she works through her grief.

The death of her mother is only one of the challenges that needs solvation from her psychological turmoil. Strayed writes about her father being a brute of a man and in her early years she witnessed her father, “smashing our dinner plates full of food against the wall in a rage...[and] my father choking my mother while straddling her chest and banging her head against the wall” (Wild 132). Her mother manages to leave him by the time Strayed is six, but the damage to her perception of men is done. Since her mother is synonymous with nature, as she encounters the men on the trail, they are representations of the impact her father had on her mother. The imposition of men becomes a dominant theme and one Strayed explores in detail.

Strayed’s encounters with men on the PCT for the better part are obliging and encouraging, but even in their well-meaning encounters, there is an air of judgement and the imposition of “mansplaining.” She paints a picture of Albert, a fellow hiker, Eagle Scout, in his late 40s helping her to relive the extraneous weight from her monstrous pack. He encourages her to leave her razor and deodorant, a seemingly positive gesture, by granting permission to become herself

without the male-construction of beauty in a forest setting. That is, until he holds up a large role of condoms. She writes:

'Do you need these?' Albert asks... whose wedding band glinted in the sun... He looked at me stone-faced as a soldier, while the white plastic wrappers of a dozen ultrathin non-lubricated Trojan condoms made a clickity-clack sound in his hand. (106)

His attitude laden question becomes a judgment, not only her body, as she is perceived to be unsexy and could not date a man in a sweat-stained, under manicured state, but that of her private sexual life. Implied by his wedding band, he can have socially accepted sex, but she, being unmarried cannot. In short, he sees her has a slut that needs to be controlled. By a preconceived notion, he sees himself as protecting her virtue; however, he imposes his own values in the name of protection. He shames her while trying to control her and she responds in embarrassment. She never responds verbally, but just nods away the condoms. Strayed comes to the woods to overcome grief. His grief is not one she had anticipated.

Vera Norwood helps to explain how a male gaze and judgment continue to function as an imposition to women while in nature. She states:

The issue is freedom. At the core of the restrictions on women's movement into the wilderness is the masculine fear of 'the other.' Women are more likely to express this 'otherness' in an untamed environment than when they are controlled, restricted by cultural bounds. (343)

When Strayed starts to shed conventional beautification techniques, i.e. shaving, wearing deodorant, well washed and kept hair, she begins to express a wilder, more carefree version of herself. The further into the wild, the more her own body

reverts back to nature. However, the masculine need to control, exemplified in the judgmental fellow hiker, causes Strayed to repress her true self yet again. Her sexuality is a threat and “Disorderly women, like chaotic nature, need to be controlled” (Merchant 127). Although he initially helps her to relive her of her socially-accepted beauty products, this would also convert her back to a child, as pre-pubescent children do not need these products. Seeing her as a child relieves him of any sexual impulses that he may have on her. Her sexuality challenges his belief and he shames her like a child as a result. He does not see her as the adult woman that she is with her own sex drives. As much as she is accepted as a woman hiking alone, his acceptance is conditional.

Albert’s preconceived notions have a deep history in Judeo-Christian ethic that gives power of dominion over nature. In the King James version of the bible, for example, it states, “God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth” (Gen. 1:28). This line proclaims male domination as a God indorsed mandate. Mellor asserts that “Woman’s subordination has also been justified through her historical blame for the ‘fall’ of man from ecological and social grace in the plentiful and peaceful Garden of Eden (178). As a ruling force in history, the morality of Christianity centers on the subjugation of women and Albert follows suit within his dominating presence over Strayed.

Merchant also addresses the Old Testament and its ethics imposed onto nature by stating, “The expulsion from the Garden into the wilderness equated the wilderness with the evil introduced when Eve submitted to the temptation of the serpent” (131). Women are blamed for The Fall and with it the association of wilderness and evil hereafter remains connected. Although these are ancient

views, they have manifested into the consciousness of western human development and are just as much prevalent today. Strayed still suffers because of these so-called ethics which impede her self-driven goal of personal empowerment.

When Strayed sees herself unable to keep up with socially accepted beautification, she justifies letting go of these conventions as a working self-defense mechanism. Her tone is that of resolve that she cannot maintain her appearance. She says, "It was just as well, that I simply look and feel smell the way that I did," expressing disappointment that she would not be a viable candidate for sex in her unkempt physical state (111). At the same time, she has mixed feelings, expressing through tone that she should not have to maintain a certain upkeep in appearance. She settles on defending that the way that she looked would fend off unwanted attention, because the threat of assault is always a present thought.

Within these statements reveals Strayed to be less enlightened within the scope of feminist ideals. At this time, she does not challenge the offending fellow hiker. Also, the more sinister side of her disappointment is an internalization of socially stigmatized standards of beauty. As she internalizes male dictated beauty standards; the result is self-correction. She still believes that there is a certain way to look, even in the wild, even after days of hiking alone that should please a male guest if she happens upon him. The judgment does not need to be overt from a passing comment from a male. She already anticipates male judgment.

Although, now she is getting her comeuppance by painting his portrait in an unfavorable light within her memoir. As passive as this move may be, she gains the upper hand by exposing his trivialities.

By rationalizing her looks to justify the protection against possible assault, she makes it clear that rape is never a thought far from her mind, especially while hiking solo. She states, “by necessity, out here on the trail, I felt I had to sexually neutralize the men I met by being, to the extent it was possible, one of them” (111). In contrast, men are as free to be as stinky and unkempt as they chose without the imposition of females. The fact that she must sexually neutralize herself to men speaks of a threat not only to her body, but to her mental well-being. She cannot be herself, even in the most remote parts of the world, without the oppression of the male gaze and the threat of male violence.

The May 2017 edition of *Outside Magazine*, provides a few statistics from a survey that questions women on their experiences hiking solo in the wilderness. To the question: “Is the outdoors a welcoming place for women?” 84% say true. 16% say false. To the question: “Have you ever been sexually harassed during your sport or outdoor activity?” 54% say yes. 46% say no. To the “yes” answer: 19% were flashed, 92% catcalled, 56% were followed and 4% were attacked (98). The statistics report that most women deal with someone that compromises their experience in the wilderness. Sadly, it is a contingency that women will receive some unwanted attention as soon as they step out doors.

To put Cheryl Strayed’s hike into context, her journey took place in the summer of 1995 and with the popularity of her book, as well as the movie, the population of the PCT has exploded since her initial trek into the woods. It should be noted that she does not meet as many people on the trail as there are now, but even with the smaller numbers, she experiences her fair share of hassle as she meets many men on the trail.

As Strayed continues along the trail, she encounters two men that take advantage of her generosity which results in a heightened sense of possible rape.

She is dirty and a few days out from a shower. When the men see Strayed, they instantly see her as “the other,” freed by social constructions and wild as the nature around them. As a result, they feel free to objectify her. One male observes, “I can’t believe a girl like you would be all alone up here... She’s got a really nice figure, don’t she?” leaving Strayed out of the conversation (285). Within this line, mentioning that she is alone confirms that it would be improper, in his mind, for her to be so. Strayed stays friendly, careful not to break the code of conduct and to possibly anger the imposing male, but she clearly depicts the scene as a violation of space and lack of respect. She endures the comments, careful not to expose her vulnerability, and helps them with the process of decontaminating a bottle of water. She then shares her water, giving in to the role of the female/mother nurturer.

She evades the men, continues the trail, sets up camp, and changes out of her clothing into comfortable nighttime wear. She does not know she is being watched. One of the males comes back, finds her, and says, “I like your pants” (286). The oppressive gaze and heightened sense of possible assault only perpetuates the narrative of fear that women should have of hiking alone. Strayed muses within the scene:

That no matter how tough or strong or brave I’d been, how comfortable I’d come to be with being alone, I’d also been lucky, and that if my luck ran out now, it would be as if nothing before it had ever existed, that this one evening would annihilate all those brave days. (286-287)

She escapes a potentially dangerous situation, but even though male social conventions and the threat of sexual assault confront her, she strengthens her resolve to continue her hike. Moreover, she still insists on hiking alone.

Being alone in the wilderness offers an opportunity, especially for women, to become more self-reliant, to build confidence, to connect with nature, and a myriad of other empowering opportunities. In what has been established as a male dominated sport, women are not free to experience unimpeded emotions without shame or guilt. The full title of Strayed's memoir is *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*. She comes to the wilderness lost in life and seeks out a compass that brings her back to the woman she used to be. Although this is a prevailing theme within her own writing, she comes out a different woman; a stronger, more resolved, and empowered woman. While she makes friends along the way, she maintains that hiking alone is a priority to her and her benefit is in her own improvement. She proudly states, "I'd made it through miles of desert, ascended and descended countless mountains, and gone days without seeing another person (*Wild* 81). Her achievement beams through her words as she completes a significant section of the PCT with newfound confidence in her life.

Personal identity plays a part in how Strayed sees herself as she solo hikes the PCT. Jean Angell offers her insights as a psychological-spiritual guide and educator to women in the wilderness. She asserts, "For too long women have come to believe that it is necessary to validate their identity externally, through culturally predominant Eurocentric patriarchal system, in order to survive and thrive" (93). To revisit the bowl metaphor, for much of her life, Strayed has seen herself as an empty bowl or a mouth that is hungry for love. She looks for love outside of herself, by the infidelity she commits, in the addiction and self-deprecation, to fill the void. Her identity that she manufactures in the shadow of male oppression is detrimental to her well-being.

Hiking solo allows her to employ skills that she could not develop on her own, such as her own moral compass and intuition. Of course, the threat of assault

with the males looking for water, is only one case where she can learn to rely on her intuition. However, something as simple as building a fire or making breakfast on her own builds a skill where she can rely on herself in the outside of the wild. Angell continues, “as a woman’s intuition is validated, her self-esteem improves,” and this comes out as the memoir unfolds (94). Each step towards her goal of reaching The Bridge of the Gods and the conclusion of the PCT, represents another step towards a stronger sense of self.

Throughout the memoir, Strayed notes the different aspects of being by herself. For example, she considers the contrast of being alone to feeling lonely. Just before she embarks on her journey, she ends a turbulent marriage and remarks how lonely she felt towards the end. She provides a scene of her and her ex-husband in-between two tall buildings “and us between them, alone together in a tunnel” (101). The oxymoron of the term alone-together exemplifies her marriage. But, in contrast she does not consciously feel alone on the trail when she is traversing ranges and powering through flatlands. Only, when she reminisces about her husband, she feels alone or lonely. When she remarks about her solitary endeavors, she is proud in these cases. Loneliness implies that she needs another person to fill a void. Solitary hiking is its own reward.

Strayed addresses being alone and the fear of either being hurt by accident, for a genuine concern of attack by animals, or by what Strayed calls “the wilderness savvy serial killer” (51). She explains:

It was a deal I made with myself months before and the only thing that allowed me to hike alone. I knew that if I allowed fear to overtake me, my journey was doomed. Fear, to a great extent is born of a story we tell ourselves, and so I chose to tell myself a different story from the one women are told. I decided I was safe. I

was strong. I was brave... And it wasn't long before I actually wasn't afraid. (51)

The courage that Strayed must conjure up is no small feat. Not only is she overcoming two thousand years of impenetrable social stigma that women should stay within their domestic sphere, but she braves the possibility of assault or other practical concerns. Unfortunately, assault, or at the very least, harassment is always a serious possibility.

Ironically, compared to the dangers of urban environments, there is safety in hiking alone. Nature provides shelter and camouflage as well as the feeling that one can be one without the threat of danger. Statistically, women are more likely to be assaulted by someone they know than a random attacker. While hiking alone, she is free from a possible imposing companion with ulterior motives. When Strayed writes of days on end where she never meets another soul, there is pride and confidence in her tone. By being alone, she can come to nature on her own terms and find that connection within herself to pull her into the next phase of her life.

Towards the end of the memoir, Strayed narrates:

I was thrilled by the prospect of reaching Cascade Locks and also saddened by it. I didn't know how living outdoors and sleeping on the ground in a tent each night and walking alone through the wilderness all day almost every day had come to feel like normal life, but it had. It was the idea of not doing it that scared me. (306)

She finally reaches a point where nature is synonymous with home. She finds her own way to nature by breaking away from her mother's means of connecting with nature to find her own. Strayed's is not the connection through gardening and

taking care of family through feeding her children with the food that she grows. Strayed's mode is through the forest as it offers peril and redemption.

In the same scene, hiking towards Cascade Locks, Strayed bends down to wash her face in the river and the question comes to her: "Where is my mother?... I carried her so long, staggering beneath her weight." She realizes that she mentally left her on the other side of the river and pronounces, "something inside me released" (306). The death of her mother and her grief comes to fruition. She knows that her journey is ending and in that she can release the grief of her mother, while she begins to become a new woman through Mother Nature. "It was really over, I thought," Strayed decides, "There was no way to go back, to make it stay" (307). In these last thoughts on the PCT, she realizes that getting back to the person she used to be is impossible. Her original idea and inspiration behind the initial travel into the woods is not her outcome. Through hiking solo, she has come to herself in a whole new light. There is only the person she has become.

Looking at *Wild* through an ecofeminist lens impresses upon the reader the layers of challenges and triumphs the PCT gives her to reach self-redemption. Judeo-Christian ethics eclipsed the feminine in nature to dominate and control the wild in favor of the masculine. Although the archetypal Mother Earth had become overshadowed, she shows herself in the aspects of Strayed's mother as she tends to her garden and feeds her children. Strayed's connection to nature comes from her mother, but until she hiked the PCT, she was unaware of her own connection as well. Strayed then looks to nature to reconnect with her mother and to grieve over her mother's premature death. Nevertheless, she is unable to avoid male domination. Strayed endures confrontations with men and works through the male imposition posed by both a seemingly innocuous male, as well as, overt sexual

threats by terrifying men. And through the better part of the hike; she is alone. By being alone, she confronts the male opposition to the cultural norms of the outdoors. Her hike is an act of transgression against that norm, however she prevails to push through and overcome the objectifications placed upon her. While insisting on being alone, she is rewarded with a new-found sense of empowerment. She learns to rely on herself, and eventually, she makes peace with the death of her mother by connecting to Mother Earth. Strayed bonds with the natural world on her own terms and with nature's guidance, she becomes the woman she is meant to be.

CHAPTER 3: WHAT HOLDS WOMEN BACK

I am 24 weeks pregnant and traveling with my boyfriend on what is our last road trip before we become parents. In the hotel room, I elevate my swollen feet resulting from a long car ride into Death Valley. My body senses the aches and hip separation as it makes room for a growing and very active child in my womb. Flipping sensations become normal within my midsection as I shift my body and pull out Cheryl Strayed's *Wild* to read before bed. I prop myself up with my elbows and try to get comfortable, while reading Strayed's free-to-roam hike on the PCT.

The following day over breakfast in the Forty-Niner Cafe, Jon and I decide to hike through Desolation Canyon. As big *Star Wars* fans, we want to see where Obi Wan Kenobi's hermitage was filmed for the first *Star Wars* movie. Jon eats his scrambled eggs and toast, while I sip my decaf coffee and talk over the plan of action, like we do many times before a hiking trip. However, this time we talk about contingencies.

I bring ski poles and for the first time in my life, I need them. They feel cumbersome to pull and push into the sand as we begin the trail down the wash and into the canyon. My feet widen within my boots, overcompensating for balance and I work hard garnering a rhythm with the poles. Pull, spike, push, step, pull, spike, push, step and on I go smiling with a determined grin at Jon. He smiles back and looks down at the bump emerging from my waist.

We make our way up into the dry alluvial fan as the walls begin to rise around us. Strikes of blue green, the color of copper rusted over much like the Statue of Liberty in the salty Atlantic air, vein through the sides of the canyon adding a contrast to the constant tan of the wash. I push on as we talk idly of

middle names and baby wish-list items. Just six months before, our hike to Pear Lake in Sequoia National Park facilitated a different conversation. On that hike we chatted on, mostly about food and the dinner we were anticipating after the hike. But in the Death Valley, every push, step, spike kept the pulse of thought about our new life as parents. There isn't much room for anything else.

Hiking alone at this point is not an option. Strayed's hike becomes a life I vicariously live every night that we are on the road. She passes through Oregon, meeting cows along the trail, and I see them within my imagination, in a firm strong body that I vow to get back at it as soon as the baby is born. However, hiking after the birth of my child brings about a challenge that I did not anticipate, the critique of others.

A year and a half after giving birth, I keep my promise to myself and take solo day trip hiking into Kings Canyon. I pick an easy trail, park off the side of the road and hike up to Big Baldy.

The trail proves uneventful, but it's a lovely getaway for the day and I take a few pictures to share on a popular social media website. Later that day, after posting a particularly stunning shot of a life size bonsai shaped pine, a comment appears.

"Do you hike alone?"

"Yes," I answer plainly, waiting for my friend's response. Of course, she obliges.

"I'm not sure I'd feel safe," she says, which is a coded response. She means, women shouldn't hike alone. I come back in a brief explanation of how I love and even prefer a solitary hike, and then she installs the granddaddy of all comments. She continues with her coded responses but reveals the real reason women shouldn't hike alone.

“I watch too many crime shows.”

Ah, there it is. I appreciated her honesty, however skirted, but her answer is more telling about the stigma against women that dare to brave the wilderness on their own. It's well-known that it's more common for a woman to be murdered by a person who she knows, in her own home, than on the trail. However, for some reason the wild harbors this image of killers just waiting around every Ponderosa Pine for their next victim. Also, I am now a mom, which adds another provocation for a sneering side eye.

In the age of social media, I am forever wrong with nearly everything I do as a parent. Articles on social media tell me that I should hug my child no less than 20 times a day, feed him only organic food, read, and sing to him constantly, but not too much. Everyone has an opinion and they love to give it.

So, I used this compulsion of opinion-giving to my advantage and asked the people on my friends-feed what they thought about the fact that I am a mother and take lone trips to the mountains. I lied and told them that they won't hurt my feelings and to please be brutally honest. They did not let me down.

The answers broke down like this:

1. Eight, both male and female, say that no one, man or woman, is safe. The buddy system is best.
2. Seven, both male and female, said they would trust me to be alone.
3. Two females admired me and were jealous of my pursuits.
4. One female was oblivious that being alone was a challenge.
5. One male said to bring a weapon, but didn't elaborate why, or what kind.
6. One female said camping alone would be scarier.
7. One female brought up the possibility of human trafficking.

8. Only one said directly that being a woman alone brought up its own unique challenges. She is female.

This survey of course is unprofessional and even though I asked them to be honest, many curtailed their concern, I'm sure, out of politeness. However, it surprised me that almost half thought that a buddy system was best. Was this a roundabout way to say that they didn't want me to hike alone? Maybe. There are, after all the practical reasons for wanting a partner on the trail. Falling off a cliff is a genuine concern. Most of all, the human trafficking comment caught my attention. Her comment came from a dark place. I pondered why this person would consider such a remark. Would Mary Austin, as she hiked alone in the eastern Sierras near Death Valley, consider the possibility of human trafficking?

Desolation Canyon begins to narrow as Jon and I approach the wash. The layered walls of topographic history naturally close in as we push through on a slight incline. My body carries an extra 15lbs of blood, visceral matter, placenta, and baby as I maintain the spike, step, push pattern down the trail. I feel large as the trail shrinks into a slot canyon. I can reach out to touch the walls on both sides at the same time. I look above, and the robin's egg blue sky looks flat without a cloud to break the skyline. I start to breathe in deeper, but my lungs struggle to bring in oxygen. The sides of the canyon, that once seemed soft and dissolvable with the next monsoon, start to harden without forgiveness. My focus narrows to the layers of the canyon on the walls. The repetition of tans and sand seem to multiply the longer I look. Jon gains speed ahead of me and turns a corner out of my sight.

"JON!" I stop and yell trying to catch my breath. "I think I'm having a panic attack!"

He comes back, hopping over small boulders and says, “Panic attack?”

“Yes! Everything is closing in on me. I feel claustrophobic!” We can’t turn around. We’ve stepped too far into the canyon to turn back and there is no way to tell if there is a clearing further on. I am stuck. I cannot find the will to move. I lean against the wall of the slot canyon and look up to breathe. The stale air carries no life to give me. I close my eyes and do my best to force myself to calm down.

My friend, who mentioned human trafficking, was African American and I began to take her perspective of hiking solo into consideration.

In the Spring of 2016, Rahawa Haile, an African American woman in her early 30’s solo through-hikes the Appalachian Trail, at the height of Trump’s political rise as the top Republican ticket. While resting on the trail, she encounters a man that grills her on where she is from. After she confesses that her ancestry comes from Eritrea, a small country in the Horn of Africa, he is relived and says, “You’re African, not black-black. Blacks don’t hike” (94).

As a white woman of Irish/Germanic decent, I do not face these types of comments, or even fear them. My fears come in the form of men leering a little too long at my ass, or anxieties over animal attacks. I receive coded comments about hiking after birthing a child, but when I see a confederate flag, my reaction is of disgust; never a threat. When Haile sees a bumper sticker that reads, “April is Confederate Flag Month,” it not only harkens back to the slave owning Confederacy, but back to KKK’s glory days and Jim Crow laws. She is constantly reminded of her skin color, gender, and how these things make her a target of modern day lynching or other heinous acts of bigotry.

Evelyn C. White, an African-American woman's studies scholar, and author, once took on the challenge to overcome her fear of water in the wilderness. She describes the way she found herself "explaining to the river guides the complex, and psychological role that water has played in the lives of most African-Americans." White continues:

Our ancestors were stolen from Africa and brought here on boats...we had to drink from 'colored' fountains... lynched black people were fished out of rivers. Firehoses were turned on us in the 1960's. Whether we're conscious of it or not, water holds a lot of wounding memories and imagery for black people. (381)

She then turns to her well-meaning, white female group and confesses, "In my stunned amazement, I see acknowledgement of a never-considered truth" (381).

My skin color never causes confrontation. And even though I am a woman, I am somehow more accepted on a trail, even solo hiking, than a person of color. Hiking is a leisure activity and anyone darker than a potato chip still seems out of place on a trail. As much as Americans would like to think that we've come a long way since the Civil Rights Movement, there are still areas that need a push towards equality. As Haile notices that the National Park's brochure marking the centennial, she states, "The poster salutes, '100 years of getting away from it all.' The parenthetical is implied if not obvious: for some" (94). So often, people of color, especially women, receive a backlash that is absent from the popular narrative, and unfortunately relegated to the realm of "never considered" among even the savviest of hikers.

Nevertheless, through her perseverance, Haile makes it to the end of the Appalachian Trail to Mt. Katahdin. The picture in *Outside Magazine* shows her atop the Katahdin sign holding up her ancestor's flag with one hand and steadying

herself with the other. She says, “The Appalachian Trail was the longest conversation I’d ever had with my body, both where I fit in it and where it fits into the world” (124). And in this, we have common ground.

Back in the slot canyon, it takes time to settle my mind. My pregnant body bugles under my grey t-shirt and in this moment, I am fully aware of the transition that I am in. I’ve been hiking as if I wasn’t pregnant. It’s easy to dismiss something that comes on gradually and divorce it from reality. In that moment, my will and determination to hold on to my life as a young maiden begins to fade into the walls around me. My mark as I lean on the wall carves out my place in history. I am now facing my future as a mother with a body in transition. Life is changing right before my eyes. I finally find something within me that gives me willpower to calm down. Taking pause in my surroundings and being in the moment brightens my attitude. I catch my breath and keep going.

The trail opens into a larger canyon and my relief is palpable. My poles move easy as they are more of an extension of myself now. They push me up and over some of the larger boulders and scree that fill the wash. We come to a fork in the trail and consult the *Falcon Guide* trail book on which way to turn. It reads to stay left so we do, but up ahead there is a three-pronged fork. We continue to stay left and immediately start heading up. Up and up and the trail fades into the crevice of hill. Even though it is obvious that this isn’t the right way to go, we continue to the top of the large pebble covered dune. I’m stepping into ankle deep sand, but I am too curious to see the view to stop. I tell Jon, “We are never telling anyone that we are doing this!” Pregnant woman should not be scree climbing, but I am.

We reach the top and immediately we are rewarded with the views of the vast landscape called the Artist's Palette. The road down below cuts through a mineral rich terrain of oxidation and wind erosion. The view is breathtaking. Reds and tans marble through the mountain sides as if a paint brush swiped cream and red ochre along a canvas. More lightning strikes of green and blue dash the hills. I pause and sit down into the rubble and take in the landscape. I have a front row seat to a vantage point few, if any, have ever seen.

Change is the only true constant; a point Emerson makes in his essay "Nature." He reminds the reader that "To the attentive eye, each moment of the year has its own beauty, and in the same field, it beholds, every hour, a picture which was never seen before, and which shall never be seen again" (44). I ponder the fact that I have become that attentive eye and realize the universe is conspiring to create this moment that I can see only in this time. If I had showed up a day later, the winds may shift the rocks and the falling talus will make another stroke onto the Artist's Palette. Not only is this view completely brand new, it is humbling that what I see in this exact moment will never be seen again.

Jon finds his own hill and I sit on mine, alone, to see the magnificent view. We remain silent, respectful of each other's space, but the chance to truly be alone is also fading. My body demands the reliance of others as I make my transition into motherhood. On the hill, I am alone with my thoughts, but that is the extent of it until many months after the child is born. These thoughts and many others skip through my psyche as I trace, with my attentive eye, the striations of paint on the Artist's Palette.

And then I realize, I must find my way down.

As I considered my survey question on the website, particularly my friend's human trafficking remark, I began to realize the arrogance of my question. I considered other ways that a woman may not take a step into the woods. In addition to not being welcome by the color of their skin, there are those that simply can't afford to go. In film or the media, one never encounters an image of anyone from Latin countries on an outdoor adventure. If they are outdoors, they are working in the fields. I also thought of Virginia Woolf and how she was asked to speak about women and fiction. Her response, after contemplating the canon of male writers and consulting their opinions of women in general, declares, "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (4). In other words, a woman must have a modicum of independence to write as she pleases. The same is true for a woman to hike alone. Independence, not only of physical assertiveness, but wealth and support are needed to gain access to outdoor space. And to follow her logic, this independence is forsaken after giving birth. A woman is vulnerable at this time. Hiking alone, for most women after having a child, is the least of their concerns. The reasons stopping most people from hiking in the woods never end. However, for women, societal pressures at every turn discourage a woman from stepping out her front door.

My lovely uneventful solo hike to Big Baldy requires that I secure my child's well-being by feeding him and making sure he is comfortable before I leave. Child care, that happens to be his own father that day, would otherwise have to be, either by a family member, or bought, as in a babysitter. I also do not have a paying job, so the money to get there comes from my boyfriend's support. All these things must be in place just for a short half-day hike on my own. And, of course, when I depart, I rush to the hills to shorten my time spent away. I never fully leave the thought of my child. The guilt of my personal excursion constantly

haunts me. Experiencing any kind of transcendent moment in nature under these pressures proves impossible. One could rightfully question if these early days of hiking as a new mother are worth it. It's not out of the ordinary to question, why go?

In the same *Outside Magazine* where Haile bravely solo hikes the Appalachian Trail, the magazine cover itself tells the story of gender discrimination within outdoor activities. The issue focuses on what it calls the "XX Factor" and promotes six women in their respective nature-based areas of expertise. Four are white; two are women of color. And as much as this is a nod to the now being recognized female presence within outdoor activities, the issue is set apart as a counter narrative, because women are presented immediately in opposition to the norm. Outdoor sports are very much a male dominated venue; women are still seen as an anomaly.

The only other headline besides the "XX Factor" title of the page on the cover of the magazine is a line typed in bold font at the top right corner of the page. It reads, "How I Escaped My Kidnapping." If one is looking for a magazine lined up within the others on a tiered rack, this would be the line that he or she would see. This line is the magazine's hook, not the brave woman on the cover. The editor, a man named Lawrence J. Burke, does not think the brave and prominent woman are enough. Moreover, the line perpetuates the fear that women face as they dare to step outside, just like my one respondent friend expressed about watching too many crime shows. *Outside Magazine* shamelessly exploits this fear and perpetuates it at the same time.

Childbearing most certainly plays a role in this equation as woman have gained more control over their bodies. Being able to plan for children and holding on to their independence has allowed women to enter outdoor excursions.

However, in the grand perspective of cultural norms, planning parenthood is a very recent development and still met with stifling opposition. My hiking narratives, as I confront crowds on social media, help to break from tradition, but only because I have had the opportunity to use birth control and chose when to have a child. Once a child is born, however, it takes a village for a mother to hike alone.

Back on my perch in Desolation Canyon, Jon crosses over to my hill and offers his hand as we head down the crumbly hill. I decline his help. I still maintain a pull of independence and justify this by saying that I feel sturdier under my own weight as I sink the poles in deep to balance myself. The heel of my boot crushes into the dark brown rubble and buries with every step down. I take my time and step onto the hard pan of the wash with relief. It is obvious to us now where we should follow the trail and continue into to the belly of the canyon.

The trail closes in again, but up ahead is clearly the beginning of the wash and the trail's end. A black soot of tiny lichen microorganisms cakes the sides of the walls as we approach the V-shaped point. We travel back in time to the birth of the wash. Water flows from this collected point and carves out the canyon in the monsoon season. We are in the shadow of a ghost, standing witness to the ancient current of a river. I feel as if at any moment the rain will collect again and carry us out into the alluvial fan. The energy of the flow brought to this point after an epoch worth of time vibrates like a magnet. The minerals in the soil: sliver, tungsten, copper, iron all gravitate to the dry fall and I feel the electricity in anticipation.

The turnaround point of every trail is bitter sweet, but we have no other choice but to hike an out-and-back trail. As we walk slowly out of the wash, I

pause to take picture at a particularly steep vantage point. I pose as Jon steps back to make sure and illuminate my moon belly for dramatic effect.

I post the picture on a social media website. It is met with encouraging comments.

CHAPTER 4: THE POWER OF THE TRAIL: A POSTHUMANIST CONSIDERATION

As I've mentioned in chapter two, critics focus solely on either the physical, or mental transformations that occur on the PCT. I depart from those beliefs by considering a posthumanist perspective. I posit that the trail itself: the foot path, the encounters with a bull, a fox, cold frost on the tent as she wakes from a startling night of freezing temperatures, and the thirst igniting heat of the long desert days that interact with her, help resolve the unmoored upheaval within her life. To do so, I weave through Jane Bennett's posthumanist concept of "vital materialism" found within her book *Vibrant Matter*, as it appears in abundance within Cheryl Strayed's *Wild*. I tease out the concept of what Bennett means by "thing-power" and how that provides a lens for a better understanding of the encounters with human and non-human aspects of the PCT. Once I establish what "thing-power" is, I explain what it does, and congruently, how things present themselves. It is not only a chance encounter, but vital to our survival to interact with these "things." These things reveal the interconnectedness of our bodies to the outside world. Finally, I will expose the meaning of this interconnectedness to the PCT and how it helps absolve Strayed's turbulent life. She hikes into the wilderness broken and lost with a vague notion of what she wishes to accomplish. Once exposed to a vast array of natural elements, she walks away enlightened to the vibrancy of the things around her and understands how these things help resolve the turmoil within herself caused by the various crises in her life.

Bennett suggests that to better understand our interconnectedness with everything around us, we can begin by considering the microorganisms that inhabit us. She writes of the ecosystem that dwells in the crook of her arm. Once we begin to realize that there are things not only outside of us, but in us as well,

we see the importance of maintaining that interconnectedness. Bennett explains, “My ‘own’ body is material, and yet this vital materiality is not fully or exclusively human. My flesh is populated and constituted by different swarms of foreigners” (112). It is easy to dismiss the bacteria that live within us, mostly due to squeamishness, or believe that these organism are unhygienic, but they benefit our bodies in helping us digest our food, clean up our sloughed off skin, and do the work that our bodies have come to rely on, and therefore cannot do themselves. Bennett continues, “In a world of vibrant matter, it is thus not enough to say that we are “embodied.” We are, rather, an array of bodies, many different kinds of them in a nested set of microbiomes (112). We must realize that we are not wholly ourselves and if we seek to destroy or harm these other bodies, we harm ourselves.

Humans travel a liminal space between what is in us and what is without. Bennet refers to Felix Guattari and “His particular articulation of the impossible fact that humans are both “in” and “of” nature, both are and are not the outside” (114). Strayed begins to express this kind of language towards the end of the memoir as she reaches Mt. Hood. She echoes, “From afar, the sight of Mt. Hood had never failed to take my breath away, but up close it was different, the way everything is” (305). Strayed acknowledges the difference in what we perceive and what is actually there. Her biases paint a broad stroke of gentleness and awe, but as she looks closer, she starts to see the finer details of the mountain. She writes from experience about the mountain at this point and she is more aware of her relationship with it; moreover, she anticipates the things she cannot see. Strayed matures to perceive everything in its entirety.

Bennett continues by remarking on the level of complexity in our connection with nature, considering urban vs rural living spaces, and writes:

The modern, urban self on the one hand feels more and more removed from nature, as family farming becomes agribusiness, hands-on food preparation becomes the consumption of fast food, bloody wars are waged from high altitudes, fuel is consumed with little recognition of the violence of its extraction and distribution, and so on. (114)

For these reasons, it's easy to dismiss our connection, but in doing so, something will feel amiss. Missing pieces in the concert of things will sound awry. Strayed knew that there were missing pieces within herself and it's by no accident that she looks to nature to find them. She came from a disjointed world, orphaned by a deceased mother and absent father, displaced by divorce, her family strewn about like leaves in a windstorm. Conscious or not, she knew nature would fill the gaps, not only mentally, but act on her physically to mend the broken pieces. But, ultimately, she knows that she will return to the urban world and continue her connections there. Bennett continues, "The modern self feels increasingly entangled—cosmically, biotechnologically, medically, virally, pharmacologically—with nonhuman nature" (115). What begins in nature on the PCT, translates to the urban world and how to function within it.

Before I begin to draw out the definitions within Jane Bennett's posthumanist approach, it must be noted that taking a posthumanist critique to a nature writing text is still in the early stages of academic writing. I have found a very limited scope of articles to address a posthumanist approach. In fact, most articles that I have found focus on cyborg, or other advances in technology as it relates to human interaction. My aim is to focus on the environment and our relationship to everything around us. One author astutely adds to this conversation while commenting on posthumanism and nature writing. He notes:

Posthumanist life writing expresses what humanist life writing has historically repressed or denied—the reality that, individually and collectively, humans are deeply dependent on each other (especially, but not exclusively, at the beginning and end of life); on other species (for sustenance, labor, raw material, and companionship); and of course, to an increasing extent, on technology. (Couser 196)

It is with the aim of seeking out what is traditionally denied or dismissed that posthumanism reveals about life writing that becomes my motivation for this chapter. Since most critical theory places humans at the center in all matter of interests, everything else that inhabits the world does not receive any acknowledgment or respect. Posthumanism takes the time to consider what has been left out. For example, the following described scene in *Wild with Strayed* and a peach pit, exemplifies how the pit can easily be discarded, but in reality, it has motivations of its own.

In the late afternoon, weeks into her hike on the PCT, Cheryl Strayed happens upon a picnic table. Perched on top sits a ripe peach with a note, a gift from a friend she met on the trail. She takes her monstrous pack off her careworn shoulders and writes, “I sat on top of the picnic table and bit blissfully into the peach, its exquisite juice seeming to reach into every cell.” Overwhelmed by the richness of the peach, it acts as an analgesic to her feet as Strayed continues, “The peach made it not so bad that my feet were a throbbing mass of pulp” (232). The language reflects that she not only takes in the peach in ecstasy, it becomes a part of her. She then becomes like the peach in its pulp and flesh. The peach brings her to a moment of rapture in a brief flash of bliss on the trail. The substance becomes a balm for the senses as her world turns from a hardened existence to a moment of peace. As her gaze widens from the peach to her surroundings, she

reflects on the beauty in the shades of pink and purple azaleas around her and passively tosses the peach pit away from her. Strayed muses:

As difficult and maddening as the trail could be, there was hardly a day that passed that didn't offer up some form of what was called trail magic in the PCT vernacular –the unexpected and sweet happenings that stand out in stark relief to the challenges of the trail.
(232)

Within this statement, she recognizes the forces that affect her, and writes herself into the scene as she merges and interacts with the objects around her.

The peach exhibits what Jane Bennett would call “vital materiality.” Posthumanists believe that there is a world outside human cognition that take place within the “things” that make up the universe, since humans have been operating extensively under the notion that humankind is hierarchical within the scope of the world. A tenant of posthumanism is that humans are not the center of the universe. In reality, humans play an integral part of a complex and ever multidimensional universe. And when the recognition of our reality in the space that we occupy sinks in, our view of the universe changes to accept all the vital materiality that is just as active around us.

Bennett draws on the French philosopher Bruno Latour, as well as many other philosophers, to help illuminate the power of a thing. In Latour's essay, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?” he expounds upon the basis of his relativism. He believes in the morality that develops within a system of culture or society only exists in the context for which it is created. He explains his position in “Things with a capital T” and gives the example of the attacks on the twin towers on 9/11. In a world post-deconstruction, Latour notes the shift in thought to bring back materialism. He explains, “My point thus is very simple: things

have become Things again, objects have reentered the arena, the Thing, in which they have to be gathered first in order to exist later as what *stands apart*” (2291). Things maintain their own efficacy with or without human interaction and are independent of human construct. Once established that the pendulum is swinging back to materiality, Bennett takes his philosophy and adds agency to things and labels it “vital materialism.”

As Bennett begins to develop a definition of vitality, she states:

By ‘vitality’ I mean the capacity of things— edibles, commodities, storms, metals— not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own. (viii)

The efficacy of Things is at the heart of vitality. Things exist without the need for human interaction or acknowledgement and with that they have agency to manipulate and affect everything around them.

Looking back to the scene in which Strayed devours her peach, the reader notices that she simply tosses the pit away from her, presumably into the dirt. In her unconscious actions she does not realize she is being manipulated by the peach. From the moment the peach is within Strayed’s sight, she is drawn in by the color, the texture, the aroma, and the anticipation of ingesting the succulent fruit. The peach, in its evolution in concert with humans has become tastier, more desirable, and easily propagated. In Michael Pollan’s book *Botany of Desire: A Plant’s Eye View of the World*, he proposes, “All those plants care about is what every being cares about on the most basic level: making more copies of itself” (vx). The peach is no exception. It has vitality; its own pull of influence as it sits drawing Strayed in. Not only does it become a part of her as she takes in the nutrients, but the pit, the part she does not eat, does not simply disappear as she

tosses it away. It still exists and still acts upon the earth, as the earth acts back, taking it in and breaking it down. In effect, the peach used Strayed for its own purpose.

Ultimately Bennett's aim is to recognize that by ignoring the pit and dismissing it, human actions will impact the environment negatively. It is easy to dismiss trash that is thrown away. It does not dissolve once the garbage is tossed out. It is our responsibility to recognize and place an intrinsic value on things so that we realize the influence we have on the world and how we affect it. Bennett surmises:

Why advocate the vitality of matter? Because my hunch is that the image of dead or thoroughly instrumental matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption... These material powers, which can aid or destroy, enrich or disable, ennoble or degrade us, in any case call for our attentiveness, or even "respect." (ix)

When humans respect that we are just as much a part of the environment, we begin to realize when we hurt the environment, we are hurting ourselves. It's easier to dismiss our interconnectedness to exploit or feel less responsible for the environment. But, even if we are not aware, or care realize, we are always intrinsically connected, and each thing persistently interacts with us.

Bennett borrows the term "actant" from Latour and defines it as: "A source of action that can be either human or nonhuman; it is that which has efficacy, can do things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events" (viii). This is not an exhaustive definition, but it is one of two terms that she uses intermittently. The other being "thing-power," which is: "The curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic

and subtle” (Bennett 6). For example, the pack that Strayed uses to carry the tent, food, clothes, etc., she aptly names Monster. Monster’s weight is unknown, but clearly makes Strayed’s journey difficult. By naming the actant, she solidifies its power. The thing-power of Monster chafes her backside into a chicken plucked skin scab, scrapes her shoulders bare, and leaves her “hunching in a remotely upright position.” (Wild 38). Add the backpack to the actant snow that she encounters while hiking above Lake Tahoe, Strayed writes, “I walked on, penitent to the trail, my progress distressingly slow... Everything was different in the snow: slower less certain (141). Strayed directly addresses the trail in this scene as a thing, an actant for which she feels a penance must be paid, as if she is beholden to its existence. With the heavy pack on her back, she exhibits the stance of a sojourner, a pilgrim in search of deeper meaning. She finds it through the actants with thing-power on the PCT.

Never does one actant with one straightforward thought-provoking element, solely present itself. Many things are always acting in a continuous fashion, constantly evoking a complex array of emotions. However, Bennett may not have considered that the ever-constantly evoking assemblage can be overwhelming to human consciousness. Michael Pollan, in “The Human Bumblebee,” posits that not only are we manipulating plants to our desires, the plants, in turn manipulate humans. While considering how much plants surround and interact with humans, he takes on the concept of engaging with absolutely everything at once. He writes, “At any given moment, my senses present to my consciousness –this perceiving ‘I’ –a blizzard of data no human mind can completely absorb” (160). He then tries to describe the moment from the frames on his glasses to the sounds that surround him and tea that is being digested by his intestines. He tries to exhaust the

moment, undoubtedly leaving details behind. Pollan concludes and begins with the quote:

“If we could hear the squirrel’s heartbeat, the sound of the grass growing, we should die of that roar,” George Elliot once wrote. Our mental health depends on a mechanism for editing the moment-by-moment ocean of sensory data flowing into our consciousness down to a trickle of the noticed and remembered. (161)

By quoting Elliot, Pollan demonstrates that each thing, as it presents itself, comes in a complex symphony of arrangements. But our mind can only process so much, and in that, we focus one or two things in greater detail. Bennett’s word choice of the arrangement things as they present themselves is an “assemblage.” Strayed’s input of this assemblage of things is illustrated within the scene in *Wild*, while hiking through the Modoc Plateau in Northern California.

Strayed bypasses a significant portion of the Sierras due to a high influx of snow and redirects to meet the trail further along the PCT at the Modoc Plateau. She, like Pollan, gives a plethora of detail in the flat spaces of the rough land. For her, the volcanic table sits above 4,000 to 6,000ft above sea level and echoes the oppressive heat she had already endured through the Mojave Desert. Within these lines, she describes the coursing heat, her parched tongue, the monotony of the trail, and finer details of the seemingly barren landscape (193). She writes, “I stared at the sky, watching the hawks and eagles that soared in serene circles above me, but I couldn’t quite relax” (192). Reading into the concert of the scenery, she is affected by each of these things both independently and within its context. The raptors flying above her signal death because of their role as scavengers of decay. The rattlesnakes below arouse danger and evoke the

possibility that she will become nourishment for the predators. As she hikes through the unforgivable landscape, the push back of each thing is felt acutely.

As she presses on through the high desert she describes, “Sagebrush and a sprawl of hardy wildflowers blanketing the wide plain. As I walked, scratchy plants I couldn’t identify grazed my calves” (192), showing the plants within their agency. Strayed then becomes a vehicle for these small plants to spread their seed. Each time she bushes against them, their pollen and seeds become airborne to intermingle and be sown in the next monsoon. She is the catalyst they need to replicate their species.

Considering Strayed’s distressed experience on the Modoc Plateau, Bennett notes that “There are... always a swarm of vitalities at play. The task becomes to identify the contours of the swarm and the kind of relations that obtain between its bits (32). Bennett would say that it’s not the eagle soaring in the sky on the hunt for carrion that causes the sense of danger; the sense of danger comes from the entire scene presented at once that alerts Strayed into cause for concern. There is no hierarchy of dangers, each one displays itself equally and in relation to each other. In the swarm of the actants, the sagebrush, the birds of prey and the heat, all act as one, leading the reader to recognize, as Bennett said, “relations that obtain between its bits” (32).

By understanding that each thing as it is presented is ultimately a part of a whole, it’s important to understand that humans are just as much a part of this construction. Humans are not a thing apart but integrate and weave into the narrative of things. Bennett references Theodor Adorno as she explains this concept:

[Theodor Adorno] claimed that it was not possible to “unseal” or parse a concept into its constituent parts: one could only “circle”

around a concept, perhaps until one gets dizzy or arrives at the point at which nonidentity with the real can no longer be ignored. (827)

Within the dizzying scene in the volcanic high desert, Strayed comes to a conclusion that she did not anticipate. She reflects:

I stopped walking and looked up at the sky. The birds of prey still circled, hardly seeming to flap their wings. I will never go home, I thought with finality that made me catch my breath, and then I walked on, my mind emptying into nothing but the effort to push my body through the bald monotony of the hike. (193)

She does not stop to consider the revolution that she experiences. She writes as if it was a passing moment and moves on. I believe this moment to be one of the more significant moments of her journey. The trail acts upon her by inspiring the grand thought that she already is home. She states that she will never go home, because she is already at home in the world. The actants of the sky and the bouquet of things around her connect the dots for her in such a way that she realizes that she, too is profoundly intertwined within nature. As stated by Adorno above, Strayed “arrives at the point at which nonidentity with the real can no longer be ignored.” Strayed is seemingly unaware of her grand moment, perhaps to harken back to Pollan’s deliberation that it is our psychological best interest to edit the scene into a digestible amount. However, something stirs within Strayed to provoke her to say that she cannot go home again. Her identity melts into the scenery as she reverts into survival mode. Either consciously or subconsciously, something moves her to moment of realization of where she fits into the world.

All the while, she hikes alone; in other words, without another human companion. And because of her solitude, undistracted by human actants on the trail, she can connect with the symbiosis of actants on the trail as they present

themselves. Other people on the trail become friendly and ask to hike alongside her. Because actants can be in human form, they are just as imposing to her as the trail itself. She prefers to hike alone; perhaps, because she is aware that once she is alone, the thing-power of the trail will take hold as she invites the encounters along the way. Bennett looked to Spinoza to acknowledge the physical interaction that people engage when they are near each other. She recognizes, “Spinoza’s conative bodies are also associative or (one could even say) social bodies, in the sense that each is, by its very nature as a body, continuously affecting and being affected by other bodies,” which acknowledges the interplay between not only things and people, but people to people (Bennett 21). Strayed’s journey would have a different outcome had she taken on a partner on the PCT, but as a solo hiker, she is able to interact with the trail on her own terms. Having a partner would produce a shared experience, but also drown out the finer details of the PCT by our naturally selective senses, as we can only process so much. Strayed would not be free to experience the trail and connect to nature unimpeded by another and she is fully aware of this fact.

When she begins her journey in June, she starts in the middle of the Mojave Desert. The desert, inhospitable on its best days and dire on its worst, reveals a truth to her early in the journey. By late spring, the heat sears down from a merciless sun above. Still a novice to the trail, she breaks in her monstrous pack through the dusty, blistered landscape, in the rain shadow of High Sierras. As she marches solo into the desert, her only accompaniment for miles are the unseen snakes, mice, and the spent flowers of spring. The heat softens the distinction between herself and her environs as she writes, “the parched scrub and scraggly trees stood indifferently resolute, as they always had and ever would... I was a pebble. I was a leaf. I was the jagged branch of a tree. I was nothing to them and

they were everything to me” (83). Strayed begins to realize that her identity as a novice solo hiker begins to fade into the landscape around her. The parched land blurs the barriers of her body and the environment around her.

Within this scene is a marked awareness that she is beginning to rewrite her own identity. Considering the form of the written word as it appears in the memoir, “I was a pebble...” stands on its own as a two-line paragraph and with it, carries the weight of words within it. She has an epiphany that she is much more reliant on the trail than the trail needs her. In fact, the trail does not need her at all. In its seemingly banal appearance, the trail brings about the consciousness that she is not necessary within the ecosystem of the trail. As much as this is a blow to her ego, she emerges aware of her need for the trail’s shelter. But, most importantly, she becomes aware of how penetrable the effect the PCT has on her, so much so that she becomes the things that are around her. She speaks metaphorically, but within the metaphor is a kernel of truth. She is free to weave directly into the trails existence and feel the presence of the earth.

The effect of thing-power becomes elusive once one tries to pin down exactly how it feels. The descriptions are akin to a mystical experience as it is steeped in intuitiveness. Bennett addresses the subtlety of thing-power and asserts:

The idea of thing-power bears a family resemblance to Spinoza’s conatus, as well as to what Henry David Thoreau called the *Wild* or that uncanny presence that met him in the Concord woods and atop Mount Ktaadn and also resided in/ as that monster called the railroad and that alien called his Genius. Wildness was a not-quite-human force that addled and altered human and other bodies. It named an irreducibly strange dimension of matter, an *out-side*. (2)

Bennett's reference to Thoreau's experience occurs in his essay entitled "Ktaadn." Thoreau scales a largely untouched mountain in Maine in September of 1846. This peak is the northern-most point of the Appalachian Trail, a sister trail to the PCT that traverses the eastern states from Georgia to Maine.

Within Thoreau's descriptions of his encounter scaling the treacherous mountain, all senses break down to the point of incoherent, non-sequitur phrases that confuse the reader. However, by applying a posthumanist lens, the outbursts begin make sense. As he approaches the top, after days of travel, scant food sources, and cold, Thoreau writes:

What is this Titan that has possession of me? Talk of mysteries!
Think of our life in nature, --daily to be shown matter, to come into
contact with it, --rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! The solid earth!
The actual world! The common sense! Contact! Contact! Who are
we? Where are we? (95)

The Titan is the mountain itself. At first, he as only his Harvard educated language and studies of Greek Gods to compare. However, he feels the pull exceedingly and pares the language down to the elements of the scene. He breaks down to the level of "rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks," which illustrate Bennett's vital materiality and understanding of connection with all things on the mountain. When he shouts, "Contact!" he is directly referring to that connection and the connection is powerful and overwhelming. He feels each thing, as they appear in a swarm, acutely calling them out by name. He then ends the paragraph, "Who are we?" which questions the breakdown of liminal space between things and himself. Thoreau acknowledges not only the connection, but the boundaries of his body and his environment breaking down. Who is he after such an effect on his entire being? He is someone new, a person who has physically taken in, literally and

psychologically, the full force of nature. Embodying the ambivalence of nature, he is both apart from and part of the whole.

With the threat of falling off the boulder capped peak, Thoreau is under extreme duress at the top of Mt. Ktaadn when he experiences this event. The duress exacerbates the pull of the force that thing-power has on him. While Strayed hikes through the Mojave Desert, under the pressures of the environment, she too feels that pull. She senses a connection acutely, which eventually brings her in and change her into another state of being. Extreme duress seems to be one way to ease the boundaries between things and humans. The physicality of the trail ruptures the margins of the physical world and work to enable the intuitive feeling of thing-power.

By illustrating what vital materiality is, how it has an efficacy of its own, and what it does, how it affects everything by arriving in a concert of interconnectedness, I will now turn to the importance of understanding that connection. After all, what does it matter that each thing influences humans, as well as everything around us? Strayed's journey into the forest shows the reader that she is affected by her environment at every turn, but what results from of her journey is a profound sense of self that had never occurred to her before. The trail provides an opportunity that cannot be found in other settings. Like Thoreau on Mt. Ktaadn, when Strayed is on the PCT, she is free to feel the raw open, blanketing effect of the trail. She then walks away perceiving herself in whole new light.

At the end of her hike, she reaches the Bridge of the Gods on the Washington/Oregon border and narrates:

I leaned my head back and closed my eyes against the sun as the tears I'd expected earlier... began to seep from my eyes. *Thank you,*

I thought over and over again. Thank you, not just for the long walk but for everything the trail had taught me and everything I couldn't yet know, though I felt it somehow already contained within me.
(310)

Because the lessons reveal themselves silently from the actants on the trail, it is impossible to know exactly what the trail says directly. The lessons are intuitive and thus elusive, but nevertheless effective to the point of changing Strayed's life. She walks away with a better appreciation of her environment, knowing the full force of nature and what she can endure. Most of all, she understands her own connection to the trail that could have only happened by taking a solitary hike. Paradoxically, in her solitude, she is not alone as she encounters everything on the PCT. Ironically, she is more alone while hiking with others, because she is distracted, and not as consciously affected by the trail's actants. The forest, desert, and climates in between, provide a companionship that is missing from her life. The subsequent title of the book is *From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*, and what she finds is herself and her place within the world. She finds that she already is home. The trail dynamically shows her the way.

As someone who has already, similarly, made the journey and understands the interconnectedness with herself and wilderness, Terry Tempest Williams illustrates the breakdown of space between humans and non-human bodies in her book *Red: Passion and Patience in the Desert*. She begins the chapter "Earth" by inscribing, "I am walking barefoot on sandstone, flesh responding to flesh" (Williams 195). She traverses the Utah desert and takes part in a nature-bathing, or a meditational journey into nature. Her sensual style illuminates the vibrant texture of the desert as she palms the rocks and caresses cheek to sandstone "cheek." Williams explains, "I climb the slickrock on all fours, my hands and my

feet throbbing with the heat. It feels good to sweat, to be engaged, to inhabit my animal body” (195). The force of the heat beats within her, not outside of her. She acknowledges her animalistic nature, writing herself into the landscape and erasing the hierarchical structure of humans over nature. To feel the effects is divine and she muses over the rest of her species in their inability to see the connection. She finishes the chapter by considering, “I wonder what it means to be human and why, at this particular moment, rock seems more accessible and yielding than my own species” (199). As she works through her own questions about a personal connection in the world, she finds that nature is the catalyst to an enlightened sense of being. She, she like Strayed, connects to nature to find her place in the world.

Now that Strayed must reenter the urban world, she is armed with the tools to proceed. Since Strayed can build on these new-found connections, Strayed’s enlightenment sees through the seemingly banal sense of nature. Bennett writes, “There is a cognitive dissonance between the everyday experience of this comingling and the rubric of an environment that we direct from above and outside” (115). As Bennett finalizes the importance of acknowledging the intrinsic value of things, her words branch out to give guidance to everyone that reads her book to make a personal connection with absolutely everything. Within her conclusion she urges, “Give up the futile attempt to disentangle the human from the nonhuman. Seek instead to engage more civilly, strategically, and subtly with the nonhumans in the assemblages in which you, too, participate” (116). After all, this essay translates beyond its pages, where the reader should not remain passive and dismiss the environment that surrounds the reader. Being more cognizant of the environment allows the conscious ambler to participate fully in the world, as well as maintaining a respect to everything within it.

Strayed understands her connection with nature, not only through Mother Earth, as mentioned in the previous chapter, but also through the actants presented on the trail. At the trail's end, she walks away with a more comprehensive and intuitive understanding of the powerful and profound interconnectedness everything has within her and without. She finds the missing link within her life, the nature connection, and precedes anew as she reenters urban existence. Bennett's critical approach to posthumanism reveals that the reader too will benefit from an enlightened sense of awareness of the things that occupy his or her space. Therefore, when humans understand their connection to the environment, the non-humans and human beings alike will benefit, by enriching our collaborative existence, and thrive.

CHAPTER 5: SPIRITUALITY AND CONNECTION WITH NATURE

I am proud of myself to have the forethought of making overnight oats. I pull the mason jar out of my backpack and watch the leftover almond milk that the oats did not absorb, slosh around on top of the taupe colored mass at the bottom. I search for a spoon amongst my provisional items for my short hike: an extra scarf, my well-worn light blue hoodie, my tea mug, and Thoreau's *Walden*. I unscrew the lid and place it beside me on the retaining wall that I find to sit and enjoy my breakfast. The spoon blends the oats, floating milk, and beige bananas. I take my first bite. It's bland. I forgot the sugar, but I mash the bananas into the roof of my mouth and take in the fructose to overcome the plainness of my breakfast.

The retaining wall where I sit holds back a small veined ravine cracked into the hill behind me. A pipe for the natural drainage collection of the ravine runs underground below the wall to the other side of the access road in front of me. If the wall and pipe were not there, the water that tracks down the ravine would wash out the road that I've been hiking for the last few miles. As I glance back, the sun is just about to make its debut above the hill. The sweet stillness of the morning is broken by the rustling of birds flittering within the oak leaves and tall golden grass on the ground. I catch only glimpses of them as they jump from oak tree to manzanita and down into the crack of the ravine, oblivious to my presence.

My seat is cushioned by forest green moss and lichen in shades of yellow and white and I look down to the fallen leaves of early Autumn that are scattered in the gravel of the road. If I stand up, I can see the San Joaquin River, but my view is obscured by the riparian of willow, sycamore, and other bushes and shrubs in names that I have yet to learn. But, I am content in my breakfast nook taking in the oats and breathing the cool air into my lungs.

When I look down to the Mason jar lid on a pillow of moss, I think to myself, *how cute*, and bring out my phone to take a picture. As I try to post the picture to a social media site, a red bar flashes on the top of the screen, *No Internet Access*. I instantly think, *Oh Thank Goodness!* And in that moment, I find peace.

My shoulders soften away from my ears. The space between my eyes widen as my gaze lowers. The heightened sense that I carry, the constant awareness that I maintain as I hike alone, releases just enough to allow other sensations to take hold. I look around me and begin to appreciate the finer details of the leaves balancing on the retaining wall next to me. The spine down the back of the sycamore leaf protrudes and indents my skin as I turn it over between my thumb and forefinger. A maple-sweet aroma perfumes the air triggering nostalgia of past hikes where feelings of transcendence arrive in unexpected places. One bird decides to investigate my breakfast and hops onto the retaining wall just long enough for me to identify the shades of brown and white in her feathers, a house sparrow. She springs off just as quickly as I bring my attention back to my breakfast. My oats taste a little sweeter as I sit within this moment of instant bliss.

Just an hour and half before, I had dropped off my toddler at the daycare and my moment of peace concludes once my mind wanders back to the time restraint that I have on my morning hike. The spell breaks and I consider the hiking back.

The Wellbarn Road trail that I travel snakes down the hill in a switchback fashion all the way to the river. It is an out-and-back hike of over 15 miles, and it would be a luxury to indulge in the completion of the hike.

At one point in my life, the mileage of my hike was important to me. The year before my son was born, my boyfriend and I racked up over 120 miles of trails, meticulously logging each hike and proud to conquer the next. In one long

road trip, we traveled through the Utah and into Colorado and rounded our way back to California through Arizona, visiting 5 National Parks 2 National Monuments, and a couple of side trails just for fun. The last hike that we took before he was born, I was eight months pregnant and waddled up the side of the Panoche Hills on highway 152 within the Coastal Range. I stopped at the base of a particularly steep hill. I had reached my limit and it was now a hike uncompleted. I agonized over my limitations, but it was my moment of realizing that my life was not my own anymore. Mileage has new meaning. My son was born six weeks later. Everything changed.

Two and half years later, I'm sitting on a retaining wall savoring a simple moment of bliss. On the scale of transcendent moments within nature, the event ranks on the lower end of the scale. I am not under extreme duress like Thoreau on Mt. Ktaadn or hiking in desperation to release myself from the heat like Strayed on the Modoc Plateau and come to some grand mystical truth. But the moment is significant. I can get away. Not just in the sense of getting away from the responsibility of a two-year-old, but to truly get away from the conventions of society. The *No Internet Access* sign is a trigger that brings on the transcendent moment. It is ironic that a modern item such as a cell phone activates my special moment within nature. But, it reminds me that in this moment, I am not tethered to anyone. I am not beholden to anyone. I can truly be myself in every sense of the phrase. The mileage of my hike does not matter. Above all, nature is the catalyst to bring about this moment of peace.

What is it about nature that evokes transcendent moments? As I look through *Wild*, I find archetypal images, such as Mother Earth that draw in women and inspire their own connection with nature. I consider the posthumanist view that recognizes nature has its own agency and acts upon humans in ways that help

us to find meaning within ourselves. What needs to be mentioned is the spiritual element that exists within nature. An energy exists that humans can tap into that can only be found in the natural world. Some call it God. Some call the energy the Goddess, or Gaia. Even though I look to nature from a non-structured, non-religious point of view, I still see that there is something, elusive and difficult to define as it may be, to nature that reaches into the core of each person as they step outside.

William James is helpful in identifying transcendent moments in his philosophy on mysticism. He notes that there are four qualities to such an experience.

1. "Ineffability" – "No adequate report of its contents can be given in words."
 2. "Noetic quality" – "They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect."
 3. "Transiency" – "Mystical states cannot be sustained for long."
 4. "Passivity" – "The mystic will feel as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power"
- (James 302-03).

My moment of bliss, while sitting on the retaining wall, holds three out of four of these qualities. The ineffability rings true. As I express the feelings of the moment, I can only explain the release of my muscles, and the movements that my body makes in response to the bliss. I cannot describe exactly what I feel. I might as well try to describe love. The moment's expressions reach beyond language.

The truth, or noetic quality of the moment on the wall is just a simple reminder of the connection between everything. It is easy to dismiss and employ a working cognitive dissonance. Or, as I've mentioned in the previous chapter, Michael Pollan reminds the reader of the inability to see everything as each thing

presents itself, all at once. The moment breaks down the barrier between myself and nature and made my space in time a liminal event, however brief, which brings me to the third quality of transiency of the moment. Obligations, drives, human desires, etc., pull us out of the moment and demand our attention. My attention immediately turns to my son, because being a mother adds its own challenges to feeling the full force of nature. I cannot, and should not, separate myself from my concern for his safety, even in my absence.

As to the fourth quality, the pull that James describes, I do not experience this sensation. I cannot say I feel out of control. I can always break the spell. However, in that moment, I do let myself feel what nature had to offer. I am living in the present and my identity begins to fade into the environment. There are no pretensions as give in to the moment.

Many nature writers describe profound moments that they cannot fully define. Annie Dillard describes many moments that seem to baffle and disorient her. She drives to East Washington State in 1979 to witness a solar eclipse in full view. As she witnesses the moon blocking out the sun, she writes, “The heart screeched. The meaning of the sight overwhelmed its fascination. It obliterated meaning itself” (19). But in the same paragraph she downplays the event. She reduces the moment to nothingness by underpinning that there is no meaning to it. She continues, “Significant as it was, it did not matter a whit.” (19). In her oxymoronic statement, she avoids projecting onto the event and making it into something that it is not. Freud would be proud of her for avoiding transference of herself onto nature. Dillard recognizes the force of the transcendent moment, but the deep truth that James claims takes place during such an event, she insists that no philosophical implications occur during her experience. For her, nature just is. Anything else would be a human projection onto its significance.

Nevertheless, I believe the nothingness of her experience encapsulates what happens during a transcendent experience, and, in turn, is significant in our overstimulated, societal influenced –distracted lives. These moments hold in a linchpin in the timeline of our existence. They are a break in the action, the profound silence before a storm, the moment a memory is made, and we collect them into our apothecary cabinets, later to be used as a balm to soothe our disconnection with the Earth. The memory of each one is revered, and is nothing, but above all, significant.

“I remember every hike that I’ve done,” my boyfriend says to me in a recent conversation. I agree and consider how easily I remember the hike we took through the underbrush on the trail overlooking the Black Canyon of the Gunnison River in Colorado. The skies began to darken with deep grey billowing clouds as soon as we started marching down the trail to see a different vantage point of the canyon. One drop, then a couple of drops, the size of cherries, started to pelt our shoulders. I hide my camera that swings from my neck inside my jacket, but the rain begins to come down without mercy. Everything darkens within seconds; the humus of the ground and the leaves of the spiny oak turn a rich green along the gradients of the trail. Rain adds a new element of difficulty to the hike, but we are determined to reach the lookout point. The canyon rewards us with views of marble walls in a matte black finish. White striations pop in stark contrast. The Gunnison River runs emerald pool green, the color of a human eye in surprise. As Jon and I reach the landing, we embrace, soaked indefinitely, and enraptured with the emotions of the moment.

I take a picture that fails to capture the depth of field of the expanse of the canyon. The picture proves redundant. I can clearly see it now with my mind’s

eye in more vibrant color. For James, my experience overlooking the Gunnison River may not completely meet his criteria for a transcendent moment, as again I do not feel a force or pull that overtakes me, but it is certainly a moment ineffable, where my words and photograph fail to capture the essence of the occasion. It is a short-lived moment and carries a weight that I will remember forever. The emotional content paired with the difficult hurdle of the rain within the backdrop of a magnificent canyon, certainly adds to the recipe to create life's cornerstone events.

It wouldn't be an adventure if there isn't an element of peril. Many moments of great truth come out in the direst of situations. My favorite story to tell on a long hike with friends is Jack Kerouac's moment on Matterhorn Mountain in *The Dharma Bums*. In the last stage of the overnight hike to reach the top, he is hiking with two friends. Both are well-seasoned hikers. One friend decides to stay behind and wait for Kerouac and Ryder to summit the mountain and come back down. As they push on harder and faster to reach the top, Kerouac lags. He fears for his life as the winds blow and the craggy hilltop proves too much for him. He clings to the side of the mountain and this poet, who has words for every occasion, fails to accurately describe the peril. He considers the Zen saying, "When you get to the top of the mountain, keep climbing" and writes, "The saying made my hair stand on end. It had been such cute poetry sitting on Alvah's straw mats. Now it was enough to make my head pound and my heart bleed from being born at all" (84). His truth comes in his relative position to his friends. He doesn't know who the better man is; Morley his friend who doesn't need to climb the mountain, or Ryder, who does and succeeds. All he knows is that his position comes in last.

However, even trying and failing holds its own merit. My mother's bear encounter that eventually becomes a point of pride and something she will remember forever.

But what is it about nature that brings about these memorable events? Why can't they happen in my back garden? Celia Laihgtton Thaxter, a poet and bird conservationist, writes about the noble art of gardening in her work entitled *An Island Garden*. Her brilliantly composed essays are just as stunning as her garden and she muses over the result of a tiny seed sprouting into a magnificent plant. She writes:

Take a Poppy seed...:it lies in your palm, the merest atom of matter, hardly visible, a speck a pin's point in bulk, but within it is imprisoned a spirit of beauty ineffable, which will break its bonds and emerge from the dark ground and blossom in a splendor, so dazzling, as to baffle all powers of description. (65)

Her descriptions of nature suggest that one can have moments of transcendence within a domesticated garden if one looks deep enough and consider the connection of a seed to the grand scale of the universe. The seed is always a seed in any setting and holds just as much intrigue in the act of creation in a garden as well as the forest.

Thaxter exhibits a connection with nature that is sacred, recognizing the spirit within a seed and what Starhawk, an ecofeminist in the Wiccan tradition, emphasizes as divine. Starhawk considers the sacred in nature and believes, "What is sacred has a value inherent in itself" (19). When humans recognize the divine in nature, it becomes a lot harder to destroy it, which may account for the cognitive dissonance when humans mine and discard trash into the environment. In her book *Webs of Power*, she speaks to the relationship of human domination

over nature, but turns the critique on its head by stating, “The attitude that human beings are somehow worse than nature, a blight on the planet, doomed to spoil whatever we touch, and that nature would be better off without us,” becomes an insidious thought (161). As backwards as this sounds, the philosophy that we are worse than nature removes our connection to it, as she states, “If we believe that we are in essence that we are bad for nature, we are profoundly separated from the natural world” (161). Nature is sacred. It holds the answers to every question from creation to death and the living in between. To separate ourselves, robs us of our spiritual connection that we long for deep within our psyche. Conversely, severing the tie makes exploitation of nature easy to do.

Car manufacturers take full advantage of our connection to the wilderness with advertisements that evoke a pathos to nature. Toyota drives their Camrys down pastoral country lanes, as Jeeps actively climb rugged terrain to conquer the mountain. They place their cars in a setting where humans wish to be. Our spiritual connection is abused by these manufacturers, as they are fully aware that our relationship to nature is meaningful. Even though our connection with nature diminishes in the modern world, nature remains as an archetype, a touchstone we all recognize and respond to, even within exploitative commercial contexts. Nature will always be seen in the afterglow of a sunset on a billboard or milk carton to evoke nostalgia and our profound connection with nature.

The best way to experience nature is on its own terms, and as Lao Tsu, in the Tao Te Ching proclaims, “A good traveler has no fixed plans and is not intent upon arriving” (Chapter 27). My son embodies this quote perfectly in his toddler eye view of the trail. My son and I hike on short nearby trails. And when I say hike, I mean I follow along behind him as he wanders up and down the trail pausing to look at a particularly interesting rock, possibly picking it up and hurling

it at the nearest bush. Emerson muses over the fact that adults lose the ability to see nature the way children do, with awe and wonder. Everything is new and interesting to him, from the ducks that create a cacophony of sound as we approach, to the mud that he steps in to try and catch them.

My son and I never finish the trail. Mileage has no meaning for him. Trails are paths that lead to secret places behind large eucalyptus trees or down to the water to look for bugs. When he finds a cove of underbrush and deadfall, he hunkers down, his arms akimbo at his sides, fists clinched, and neck outstretched. He exhibits a secret nook stance, protected by the surrounding brush. He reverts to animal-like state as he takes shelter in his cove. Urging him down the trail proves as an act of futility. Trying to control him to complete the hike only goes awry. It's best to let him explore. Controlling the nature within him, and as we encounter it along the trail, is futile.

For example, have you ever tried to control a garden? Fecundity is pervasive and inevitable. Once the plants take hold, pollen punctuates the air as bees and dragonflies work to fertilize the flowers, trees, and seeds into an allergen nightmare. The wild creeps in eventually, because that is what it's designed to do. In Michal Pollen's *Botany of Desire: A Plant's Eye View of the World*, he recognizes Dionysus as the god of both domestication and the frenzied furor of fecundity. The ambivalence of nature takes shape in Dionysus as he, "brought wild plants into the house of civilization, but by the same token his own untamed presence reminded people of the untamed nature on which that house always rests, somewhat unsteadily" (38). The reality of nature is that we are always in it. We continually try to control the settings, and in that, we lose a connection that is found in our own backyards. We fear what we cannot control, but what we gain in an uncontrolled environment harkens back to James' mystical experiences. There

are profound truths to be held when the wind plants the seeds and the floods of the San Joaquin River invigorate the land. Where, the view of the Gunnison River evokes a memory that will last forever. Where, the taste of my bland steel cut oats tastes a little sweeter by the fragrance saffroned oak.

In bell hooks essay “Touching the Earth,” she writes, “When we love the earth, we are able to love ourselves more fully” (360). Because, the earth is an extension of ourselves. We are a part of it at all times; even though the feeling of connection is severed in urban settings. The truth is, we are connected everywhere we go. The connection just happens to be more powerful while fully immersed in nature, where it reaches in within moments of transcendence to the point of bliss through connection. This is the reason I enjoy hiking alone. Just as Cheryl Strayed comes to her own connection with the PCT, unaffected by humans as actants, I too seek to find my own connection with nature, without the distraction of others.

I see merit in a coupled or team experience in nature, like the special moment in the Back Canyon of the Gunnison with Jon. But if my sister and I take a hike, like we did in a recent trip to Marble Falls in Sequoia National Park, we do not talk about the ineffable qualities of transcendent experiences. Our conversations turn into a gab fest of critique on what other people should be doing with their lives and confessions of our own concerns. We rarely acknowledge the echeveria that plants itself in the cracks of the marbled hillsides, or the elusive spiritual feeling of the pine and manzanita around us.

While hiking with another close friend, our hiking adventure lead to a therapy session, where I felt like a couple’s councilor. The more she released her own mental turmoil, the less the landscape meant to our hike. It was impossible to

pay attention to the environment around us, while simultaneously listening with intent to a well-meaning friend.

My boyfriend and I have a special bond with nature, where our hikes allow us to both experience nature together and on our own. When we hike, we understand that each person is in their own space and the barriers between us and the environment are free to intertwine. There are moments of silence as we hike to take in the landscape and enjoy or despise the environs as it presents itself. Jon recognizes the value within the thing-power of the trail. And as we wander through the forest, interweaving with the sights and sounds of the trail, our interactions weave within that same fabric. We acknowledge each other together, as well as remain an individual apart.

My son, ironically, shows me more about nature than I would have seen on my own. He teaches me the benefits of going slow, shirking the mileage, and enjoying the experience for what it is. With him, different experiences in nature allow for different outcomes.

However, nothing can replace the solo hike when it comes to having the full ability to connect with nature on your own terms. From the beginning in Canada, I break down mental internalized barriers to step outside and push back the psychological hurdles and walk into the forest alone. The baby steps that I take in Goldstream Park give me the confidence to go further, to follow that drive to connect with nature. Pulled by the force of the trees, mountains, and wildflowers, I know that if I built up the confidence to see the natural world alone, I will be rewarded with finding missing pieces because of living in an urban setting. The emotional connection that I feel while standing in the forest alone, after hiking in for miles, is overwhelming. It is personal and fulfills a part of the human experience that makes me feel complete.

I lift the Mason jar lid from its mossy pillow and screw it back into its levered incline, tightening the grip, and placing it back into my backpack. I look behind me as the sun peeks over the ridge. I blink into the light as the particles reach into the iris of my eye. Back to the view of the river, I lift my body into an upright position and I notice the pods dangling from the Autumn shorn tree in front of me. They resemble large bean husks, leather brown and velour to the touch. I crack open the pod and tiny pea shaped seeds fall into my hand. I wonder how easy it would be to plant the seeds and I grab a few more husks. I put them in a napkin and place them in a side pocket of my backpack. I could continue the trail down to the river, but I know the moment of bliss I that experienced has passed and I must get back to my son. The trail heads up and out of the ravine to connect back to the car. I start hiking.

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