

Veteran Writers Group

Quarterly

Some of **the** writings done in meditation at our **September 8** sangha.



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Invocation to Listening

We invoke your name, Avalokiteshvara. We aspire to learn your way of listening to help relieve the suffering in the world. You know how to listen in order to understand. We invoke your name in order to practice listening with all our attention and open-heartedness. We will sit and listen without judging or reacting. We will sit and listen in order to understand. We will sit and listen so attentively that we will be able to hear what the other person is saying and also what is being left unsaid. We know that just by listening deeply we already alleviate a great deal of pain and suffering in the other person.

Dear Friends in the Veterans Writing Group:

I. The Writing Prompt This Time: The Trees

It is my honor and pleasure to be writing again to you in preparation for our upcoming meeting on Sept. 8 in Sebastopol. We are going to be joined by two meditation teachers who will co-lead with me the day's activities with me. Their names are Kaleo Ching and Elise Dirlam Ching, and they will introduce themselves to you in the letter that accompanies this one. For now let me just offer a public welcome to Kaleo and Elise, and say to all that we have been in correspondence this past summer and have worked to establish a seamless connection between or among a combined set of practices and prompts for the day.

So, let me begin by recalling for all the magnificent eucalyptus stand, and the path through it, that we all know so well at Marg and Bill's. We've all done some walking meditation down that path, and many of us regularly find a tree trunk to lean against as we do our new writing. We all know and treasure the peeling bark, the duff and leaves all around and of course the extraordinary perfume of those trees. A note of slight idiosyncrasy: I like to take a seed pod or two home with me, and every once in a while during the year I will bite an edge of it, and that sharp eucalyptus smell and taste will be suddenly with me again.

I think you can all see where we might be going with this. The writing prompt this time is to write about a tree, or several trees, or a forest. It could be a tree right in front of you, or it could be a tree in memory. It could be a meditation on a tree, about a tree, in a tree, against a tree. It could be something the tree reminds you of, or it could be that something the tree teaches you. It could also be a really close and careful and attentive seeing of the tree in question, the tree itself as itself. Or perhaps you could write about an effort to save a tree or trees. Or at the other end of the spectrum, there are some trees that have been used for terrible purposes, and perhaps that too can be something you might want to write about.

As before, you are of course encouraged to write in any form you feel is resonant for you: poetry, fiction, essay. Since as you know poetry is my primary concern, I've put together a sampler of poems about trees, attached to this document. Any of those poems might prompt or help prompt or at least model how a given tree or trees can inspire your writing.

So too the movement and meditation practices of Kaleo and Elise will help and inspire. Their letter describing what they have in mind will follow, and you will see then a schedule for the day's activities.

As always, in peace, and in friendship,

Fred Marchant

II. Letter from Kaleo and Elise

Aloha, we're Kaleo and Elise and we're so excited about meeting all of you! We appreciate your service as veterans and your engagement with us in mindfulness practice through Chi Kung, meditation, and writing.

Kaleo was drafted into the Army in 1967 and served in Germany until 1971. Elise has worked for 25 years as a nurse in the San Francisco County Jail. We are acupressure/massage therapists, hypnotherapists, authors, artists, and Chi Kung practitioners, who have been teaching together for 22 years. We hope our collaboration with Fred of integrating Chi Kung and creative writing processes is inspiring and profound for all of you.

More information on the practices we will be sharing with you can be found in our book *Chi and Creativity: Vital Energy and Your Inner Artist* (Blue Snake Books, 2007).

<http://www.kaleoching.com>

III. Schedule of the Day's Activities. As always these are pretty good approximations of the time allocations, but as the day is rich with activities, we will definitely start on time!

Schedule:

9:30 Arrive and settle in.

10:00 Sitting meditation and group check in.

11:00—11:30 Fred's writing prompt.

11:30—12:00 Kaleo leads meditation.

12:00—1:15 Time to write, in silence.

1:15 Lunch (Potluck, vegetarian, and always incredibly delicious; the first half of lunch is in silence).

2:00 Sharing of the day's writings.

3:30 or so: Elise leads walking meditation (in the eucalyptus grove).

4:15 Sharing of responses to each other's writings.

5:15 Announcements.

5:20 Sitting meditation.

5:30 Put things back in order in the space, help clean up, and take the joy and insights of the day's work back to the rest of life.

A Baker's Dozen of Poems about Trees
Selected by Fred Marchant for the Veterans Writing Group Meeting
Sept. 8, 2012

Bristlecone

Sometimes a tree will be there
when you need it most, when
you realize that you've been
breathing too long in the high,

thinned out air. Maybe you've
staggered, tripped on a rock
you warned yourself about,
but tripped on anyway. Marmots

may be signaling your coming,
and you could answer with your
own set of clicks and whistles,
but all this would only deepen

the dizziness, the spin of nausea,
the dread combining with delight
at reaching the rim of the canyon.
Below, the rock shapes waver,

and you are not the first to think
they look like the dead. You want
to run after them, to tug and plead.
The feeling as it rises has its

own strong winds. You know that
lightning and rain will be coming.
You stand in one of the eroded
places, seeking out that tree.

--Fred Marchant

Native Trees

Neither my father nor my mother knew
the names of the trees
where I was born
what is that
I asked and my
father and mother did not
hear they did not look where I pointed
surfaces of furniture held
the attention of their fingers
and across the room they could watch
walls they had forgotten
where there were no questions
no voices and no shade

Were there trees
where they were children
where I had not been
I asked
were there trees in those places
where my father and my mother were born
and in that time did
my father and my mother see them
and when they said yes it meant
they did not remember
What were they I asked what were they
but both my father and my mother
said they never knew

W. S. Merwin

In California During the Gulf War

Among the blight-killed eucalypts, among
trees and bushes rusted by Christmas frosts,
the yards and hillsides exhausted by five years of drought,

certain airy white blossoms punctually
reappeared, and dense clusters of pale pink, dark pink—
a delicate abundance. They seemed

like guests arriving joyfully on the accustomed
festival day, unaware of the year's events, not perceiving
the sackcloth others were wearing.

To some of us, the dejected landscape consorted well
with our shame and bitterness. Skies ever-blue,
daily sunshine, disgusted us like smile-buttons.

Yet the blossoms, clinging to thin branches
more lightly than birds alert for flight,
lifted the sunken heart

even against its will.

But not
as symbols of hope: they were flimsy
as our resistance to the crimes committed

—again, again—in our name; and yes, they return,
year after year, and yes, they briefly shone with serene joy
over against the dark glare

of evil days. They *are*, and their presence
is quietness ineffable—and the bombings *are*, were,
no doubt will be; that quiet, that huge cacophany

simultaneous. No promise was being accorded, the blossoms
were not doves, there was no rainbow. And when it was claimed
the war had ended, it had not ended.

Denise Levertov

A Greenness Taller Than Gods

When we stop,
a green snake starts again
through deep branches.
Spiders mend webs we walked into.
Monkeys jabber in flame trees,
dancing on the limbs to make
fire-colored petals fall. Torch birds burn
through the dark-green day.
The lieutenant puts on sunglasses
& points to an *X* circled
on his map. When will we learn
to move like trees move?
The point man raises his hand *Wait!*
We've just crossed paths with VC,
branches left quivering.
The lieutenant's right hand says what to do.
We walk into a clearing that blinds.
We move like a platoon of silhouettes
balancing sledge hammers on our heads,
unaware our shadows have untied from us,
wandered off
& gotten lost.

Yusef Komunyak'a

Vertical

Perhaps the purpose
of leaves is to conceal
the verticality
of trees
which we notice
in December
as if for the first time:
row after row
of dark forms
yearning upwards.
And since we will be
horizontal ourselves
for so long,
let us now honor
the gods
of the vertical:
stalks of wheat
which to the ant
must seem as high
as these trees do to us,
silos and
telephone poles,
stalagmites
and skyscrapers.
but most of all
these winter oaks,
these soft-fleshed poplars,
this birch
whose bark is like
roughened skin
against which I lean
my chilled head,
not ready
to lie down.

Linda Pastan

Temple Tree Path

Narrow path sunless temple locust tree
 Deep dark much green moss
 Should gate except meet sweep
 In case have hill monk come

A narrow, sunless path to the temple tree,
 Deep and dark; abundant green moss.
 Wait by the gate when finished sweeping the yard,
 In case a monk should come down from the hill.

Wang Wei

translator: Mark Wagner

The Tree

I stood still and was a tree amid the wood,
 Knowing the truth of things unseen before;
 Of Daphne and the laurel bow
 And that god-feasting couple old
 that grew elm-oak amid the wold.
 'Twas not until the gods had been
 Kindly entreated, and been brought within
 Unto the hearth of their heart's home
 That they might do this wonder thing;
 Nathless I have been a tree amid the wood
 And many a new thing understood
 That was rank folly to my head before.

Ezra Pound

The Oak Tree

The oak tree:
 not interested
 in cherry blossoms.

Matsuo Basho

THE HAWTHORN TREE

ACROSS the shimmering meadows--
Ah, when he came to me!
In the spring-time,
In the night-time,
In the starlight,
Beneath the hawthorn tree.

Up from the misty marsh-land--
Ah, when he climbed to me!
To my white bower,
To my sweet rest,
To my warm breast,
Beneath the hawthorn tree.

Ask of me what the birds sang,
High in the hawthorn tree;
What the breeze tells,
What the rose smells,
What the stars shine—

Willa Cather

King Chestnut

Life of earthworm, seedpod, life hidden,
gleaming like skin on a horse-chestnut,

a sable-brown from the winter cold, half in
a moist ground littered with these I would

have drilled—my hand-twist awl—and hung
on a rawhide rope, the knot tied underneath,

to make a dangling, twirling weapon for a game
that taught us to hold the arm out steady,

while another one of us, all tense with instinct,
took aim and tried to smash the king chestnut

to pieces. It was a test of how hard, how aged,
wrinkled, and hard you could be, how much

you could take, and here in my palm is what I
would have called a keeper, bound for the cigar

box—the lid papered and gilded with old royal faces—
a palace for screws and washers, the sharp metal

worth saving—and where I hid too, surrounded and
at ease, curing year by year, getting ready. . .

Fred Marchant

Olive Harvest

It's true, the tree itself is scentless, but the gray green leaves,
Their slender fingers,

And the thick, infinitely twined trunk, and some riddle in the roots
That lets it drink from stones,

Even the place where a limb has been lopped off, and the shoot
That springs to life the next year,

The stumps that burn for hours and hours, and the thin, discard twigs,
Pliable as flesh,

That you can pick up and press to your face or your chest
Or inside the cover of a book,

And above all the fruit that hangs from young branches and old,
A green reddening to black,

This fruit that has seen enough bloodshed, enough twisted
And hardened human behavior

To make it turn away in disgust, year after suffering year
Comes back saying here . . . here . . . here. . .

Fred Marchant

Strange Fruit

Southern trees bear a strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

Pastoral scene of the gallant south,
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh,
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.

Here is fruit for the crows to pluck,
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop,
Here is a strange and bitter crop.

Abel Meeropol, as sung by Billie Holiday

The Wishing Tree – Seamus Heaney

I thought of her as the wishing tree that died
 And saw it lifted, root and branch, to heaven,
 Trailing a shower of all that had been driven.

Need by need by need into its hale
 Sap-wood and bark: coin and pin and nail
 Came streaming from it like a comet-tail.

New minted and dissolved. I had a vision
 Of an airy branch-head rising through damp cloud,
 Of turned-up faces where the tree had stood.

Trees – Joyce Kilmer (For Mrs. Henry Mills Alden)

I think that I shall never see
 A poem lovely as a tree.
 A tree whose hungry mouth is prest
 Against the earth's sweet flowing breast;
 A tree that looks at God all day,
 And lifts her leafy arms to pray;
 A tree that may in Summer wear
 A nest of robins in her hair;
 Upon whose bosom snow has lain;
 Who intimately lives with rain.
 Poems are made by fools like me,
 But only God can make a tree.

Gift

He waited until it was dark,
until everyone fell asleep
in the "re-education" camp.
He opened the package wrapped by his wife.

He opened the package in the middle of the night
and ate all the fried pork skins.

He had always loved fried pork skins -
the crunches, the fat, the aroma filling the tummy.
The goodness of this treat.

He ate the entire package of pork skins by himself.
He didn't want to share with anyone.
He was hungry and the package was for him,
from his wife, from her love. She made it.
She tenderly cut it up, fried it, watched as the skin
sizzled in the oil and became brown and crisp.
She thought about him as she stood next to the hot stove
and watched the skin cook.

She imagined how happy he would be.
How his face would light up, how he would be full and relieved
for a short time from his terrible hunger, from his near starvation.
How he would remember her and know of her love.

In the middle of the night, he opened the package slowly,
carefully, quietly, making sure that no one else heard the wax paper unfolding.

His first bite was heaven. It filled his hungry stomach.
For a moment, he felt some nourishment and a slight content.
He kept biting, bite after bite.
Chewing the savory pieces, he felt the love from his wife.
He is grateful that she thought of him, grateful for her love.

Each bite was faster and bigger than the next until
he finished the entire package
and what was left was the wax paper, crumpled and oily.

My father says that this is how his friend died in "re-education" camp
- by eating too much.

She didn't know that her love would kill him.

Teresa Mei Chuc

A Tree Grows in Sebastopol

Meditation girds the roots
and I follow you
and find my way.

Writing grows branches, leaves sprout
and I learn from you
and my shade increases.

Community is the fertile ground.
You are my community.
And I am yours.

Donedward

the english oak

the english oak, the mighty oak,
from which the ships were made
that scoured the world for treasures,
grew in a greeny glade:

the king's woods, the ancient woods,
where elves and fairies dwelled;
until the sawmen came with saws
and all the trees were felled.

gone! the dark and mystery,
the elves and fairies too;
instead a fleet, a powerful fleet,
from the powerful oak trees grew.

it bobbed upon the ocean wave
like a leaf on the spring flood;
it carried a cast of scoundrels,
and they were out for blood.

the english oak, conscripted,
was helpless in their hands:
it met and fought the god of storms,
far from its own green lands.

sometimes it won, sometimes went down
in the ocean broad and deep;
and with its crew of scoundrels
on the bottom still does sleep.

they plundered many a country,
and many a town did burn;
they conquered many a nation
of sandalwood and fern.

they made off with gold and rubies,
diamonds and sapphires too;
rare woods, and silks, and spices,
and tea they liked to brew.

with elephants and camels
they loaded the english oak;
with ostriches and zebras,
until she could hardly float.

and then they called on their mariners,

familiar with wave and foam,
and all the star charts in the sky,
to steer them safely home.

so home they went, the english fleets:
the english oak returned
to the shores where it grew from acorn to tree,
to the peace for which it yearned.

but being burdened with its wealth,
and its new-found knowledge too,
it could only gaze on merlin's woods,
on the place where it once grew.

though it was back, it couldn't go back--
its past was locked with a key;
where elves and fairies once had danced
would remain a mystery.

the english oak, the mighty oak
from which the ships were made,
now had to dwell in experience--
locked out of its own green glade.

Dennis Fritzing

Something Dies

That quick, something dies
(your mother, your goldfish, plans for the day)
and you get shit on your shoes
standing around
when you should be dancing
(a jig, a twist, high-stepping
to a funeral dirge)
frozen solid instead of
moving, moving, moving, letting go
always letting go
of that protective fist
wrapped around your heart like a plaster cast,
trying to immobilize life itself,
holding in place that
which has no place

William Larsen

Chestnut Magic Makes The Tears Go and Come

Gregory Ross

November in Lancaster, New York, near Buffalo, is bleak. Gray skies, bone bare trees that just a few weeks before were majestic in their spectrum of colors: gold, red, yellow, magenta; even a royal purple. But, by November, the trees are skeletal. The one last bit of flesh on the bones of these trees comes from the American Chestnut: some still bear fruit: the bitter “Horse Chestnut”. In November of 1970, three months out of the Navy; the weather, the landscape and my emotional state were in discordant harmony.

As a child these Chestnuts were prized for a game we called “Cracking”. You drilled a hole in the biggest Chestnut you could find and hung it from an old shoelace. If your dad's work boots were worn enough; you got a leather shoelace: sweet. The game went like this: you held your Chestnut out at arms length. Your opponent swung his Chestnut and hit yours as hard as he could. Then you reversed the order. Besides making a cracking sound when the Chestnuts struck; winning the game was delineated by the cracking or breaking of a Chestnut. It did not matter if yours was on the dangle or the swing; it was the cracking that lost you the game.

Walking to the unemployment office, two large Chestnuts I found brought a smile as, like prayer beads, I caressed them. It was early morning. Cold. Gray. Not many people about, when I saw the boy sitting on the steps of Saints Peter and Paul elementary school. He was clutching a book bag half his size and suffering racking sobs. He looked to be about six. No one was around; no students, teachers, priests or nuns. Just this little guy sitting on the school steps, crying. I walked up and asked what was wrong. He looked at me with “Don't Talk To Strangers” terror in his eyes and stammered unintelligible sounds. I sat on a lower step, made eye contact and asked again. He stammered between sobs, “My mommy...there is...no one...my mommy.” The school was closed and dark. I asked his name. He replied: Stanley Dombrowski. I said, “Well, Stanley, lets see if we can find out what is going on.” I offered him my hand and his sobbing slowed as he took it and we walked towards the Rectory, were the priests live. Passing the front of the school, I noticed a sign that it was closed for repairs before winter break. Mom, must have forgotten.

As we approached the Rectory, Stanley's fear of abandonment was superseded by a much more immediate fear shared by most Catholic children at the sight of the Rectory: Priests and Nuns in their secret lair; of which there were many myths and tales; all scary. It was a rare child who had been inside the Rectory. I felt a slight trepidation myself. The long sidewalk to the front door of the Rectory was populated on both sides by barren trees reaching skeletal appendages to the gray sky. Stanley's sobbing, turned to a resigned whimpering. This was a deeper level of fear. He could understand his Mom had made a mistake but, still loved him. The Rectory however; who knew?

Holding Stanley's hand, I realized there were two Chestnuts in my other hand. I took out the largest one and silently, handed it to Stanley. His eyes got big, he even smiled for a moment, took it and put it in his coat pocket with his hand tightly wrapped

around it. A talisman, a good luck charm, a weapon. I smiled at him; he smiled back, then whimpered.

The housekeeper grabbed Stanley and slammed the door before I could say anything. I gave her the finger and moved on. I had to get to the Unemployment Office before my time slot was gone and I lost my \$22.50. I felt an odd sense of wellbeing. I had helped Stanley. I was a productive member of society. The day brightened a little. The woman behind the Unemployment Office counter gave me crap about one of the jobs on the interview form. Quickly, the day again became bleak, cold, gray, skeletal.

In the first dark, cold, hours of the next morning; the war wouldn't leave me alone. I bolted out of my parents door and wandered the streets of my childhood until I found myself by a creek and cement levees; a favorite childhood shelter. I curled into a fetal position on the levee as my hand found the other Chestnut in my pocket. I thought of Stanley. For the first time since my discharge, in a childhood safe haven from a past impossible to reclaim; tears started to flow, until I was sobbing: alone.

A Heart Felt Thank You

Gregory Ross

Three out of five times it is a middle aged woman. One out of the other two will also be a woman; younger or older. The occasional man; well one in the total five, will invade my space; come up to me, like the women; grab my hand, shake it and begin to profusely, effusively, thank me for my "Service". If I hadn't already made a deal with the universe/god/my conscience to always have a pin or patch with Veterans For Peace on my body while in public to help assuage my guilt; survivor's and otherwise; I would think of going out in the World disguised as a "civilian", to avoid these heart felt thank you moments. As it is, part of my guilt is that I was never in direct combat but, anything identifying the wearer as a Veteran implies the worst to most citizens. At first I would try to explain my noncombatant/R.E.M.F. status to them. One more thing about the military experience they could not understand: why had it effected me so strongly if I wasn't in direct combat.

Over the years, I have responded in different ways. At first, I did not know what to think, what to say and would stammer something like, "No, don't thank me." and before I could say more they would insist on the thank you, over and over. Then I tried saying that I had not chosen to do the "Service", I had been drafted but, again, they cut me off. After a while, I got more adamant about getting my say. I tried things like, "You don't own me anything..." but, before I could get much more out; I was steamrolled with a salvo of heart felt acknowledgements of their gratitude. After a while, I got a thicker skin about it and would say, "You are welcome" and move on as fast as possible. But, then their feelings got hurt. Their intentions were, after all good; mostly. Some were suffering from their own version of survivor's guilt and were thanking me to make themselves feel better.

Then there was a short period were I thought of responding with this line: "You are welcome. You know I killed that one particular VC just for you." A couple of combat veteran friends laughed at that but, were relived when I told them that I never had done such a thing. But, some times I want to shock the World.

I wear the Veterans For Peace button/badge, as I had said to atone but, also to support the cause and then on the least altruistic level because; I can never stop being a Veteran; never let go of War, so, why should civilians have the privilege of forgetting about war. There is a little "In-Your-Face" aspect.

The answer I now offer to people with "Heart Felt Thanks" is to say, "I did not want to go to war and I would hope that no one ever had to go again; as unrealistic as that hope is. If you really want to thank me, work for Peace." and then I hand them a card with the Veterans For Peace and VVAW websites and suggest they get involved or at least donate. I can't tell you how any people push it back into my hand. But, some take it and a few of those probably do at least make a donation.

The other day, I got another twist. The University of Iowa Department of English, which publishes the Iowa Review put out a request for veteran writers to submit to a special

issue. I sent a few things in and waited the six or eight weeks for the polite rejection letter. The last line read: "Thank you for your service to our country..."



“Non-native trees”

Inspired by W.S. Merwin's "Native Trees"

Neither my father nor my mother knew
 About Chi Kung, and
 where I was born made us all
 unaware of our ignorance.
 What is it?
 I didn't ask and, of course my
 father and mother did not hear
 so they did not look where I didn't know to point.
 Instead, surfaces of furniture held
 the attention of their fingers, newspapers and shopping lists
 the attention of their minds.
 Across the room they and I could watch
 walls they had forgotten
 where there were no questions
 no voices and no shade.
 We didn't need questions.

But still I asked.

Was there Chi Kung
 where they were children
 where I had not been?
 Was there Chi Kung in those places
 where my father and my mother were born
 and in that time did
 my father and my mother know what it was?
 What was it, I asked what is Chi Kung,
 but both my father and my mother
 said they never knew.
 So maybe I should blame them—
 That I couldn't find my roots
 Or my branches
 Or my leaves
 Or my trunk
 Or my crown

I couldn't even find another tree to help me get oriented, as
 A voice kept telling me what I was feeling, but I wasn't.

Ellen Greenblatt

Claudi

Ellen Corcoran

“It’s green! Oh Mom, it’s GREEN! After living in dirt so long I forgot how awesome roadsides are when they’re green!” His voice cracked with excitement as the words poured out on top of one another without time for breath.

My son was calling me from a car, a car in Germany. Finally, after being hit by an IED in Iraq, after being helicoptered from a MASH tent to a military hospital in Balad, after being ordered to crawl under his bed when that hospital was attacked even though he had an IV in his arm and fractured bone sticking through his skin, after 3 days of paperwork foul-ups before being airlifted out, he finally had landed in Germany. Where it’s green.

When he was a little boy of 4 we had a young German woman live with us for the better part of a year. As a working single mom with two young sons I really needed help. Claudie was the perfect person. She’d help me around the house, yet mostly she played with them, read to them, laughed with them, did crafts with them. She deeply loved them, and they loved her. And on that sad day when she left our family to return home my younger son was heartbroken. He cried violently and inconsolably for days, then tenderly for weeks. We had others after Claudie, yet for my younger son, there was an emptiness that no one else was able to fill.

We kept in touch through the years, usually a birthday or Christmas card. She returned to the US for a visit when my son was still in high school. She knew he was serving in Iraq and now, through the magic of the internet, she knew he was safely in her country. Without hesitation she arranged to take a day off work and drove out to Landstuhl Medical Center.

He was doing one of those hospital plastic stain glass crafts when she walked in his room. Amazing how through the passage of years Claudie, who helped him with crafts as a boy, was sitting with him doing crafts once again. It was as though the branches of love extended across the countries, across the oceans, across the years to embrace him and give him strength.

I don’t know how long she stayed or what they talked about, it was a private visit between my son and his first love. And yet, I believe that visit helped to connect his past with his future. Helped him to clearly experience the value of family and deep seeded loving relationships, even when they may be separated by distance and time.

His Claudie, our Claudie, helped bring him home.

September 2012

Double Rainbows on I-5

Zoe Sheli Sameth

Luis has the same birthday as me. I don't know his last name, but I held him, tightly, by the side of the road, and in the back of a car. Meeting Luis woke me up, crashing into my heart, through my relentlessly driving mind. Worlds apart, coming together, just south of Santa Nella and north of Buttonwillow.

But this isn't where the story starts. It starts on a sunny spring afternoon in April – spring break time, Passover, Easter – new life, rebirth. Jeanelle & Zoe are on a road trip! Headed south, to spend the holidays with our respective families.

So we got started a little later than planned, at least this way we'll miss rush hour traffic in L.A. We're cruising along, 45 minutes out of Berkeley, when suddenly red lights and emergency triangles and exclamation marks are flashing all over the dash of my "vintage" Gen 1 Prius. "WTF Jeanelle?" I just picked up my car hours earlier from an oil change and thorough check-up. I have no choice but to pull over and find the nearest Toyota dealership in Pleasanton. Two hours and two hundred dollars in diagnostic charges later, we are on the road again. The diagnosis was a malfunctioning thermostat – they did not have time to do the repair but said the car would be okay for now.

Soon after leaving Pleasanton, we pass the windmills of Tracy waving goodbye as we finally make it out of the Bay Area and merge onto I-5. In the distance, heavy gray dripping clouds provide the first hint – visual – of the contrasts awaiting us on our journey. Moments later, splats of raindrops on the windshield cause me to turn the wipers on low, and the road ahead to be adorned with a beautiful rainbow over the freeway and adjacent fields. I pull over to capture on film this contrast – I-5 to LA, the most boring and visually unappealing freeway I've been on, where nothing ever seems to happen, decorated with a dazzling colorful arc of light.

We're on the road again, and the colors are getting brighter. We can see both ends of the arc now and there are two – a double rainbow! Jeanelle snaps shots as I drive. "Jeanelle, take a picture of my profile, with me driving, the rainbow in the background." I'm proud of my idea and of how the photo turns out, though I know neither I, nor Jeanelle, can claim full credit for that. Something beyond us orchestrated this show. But we are a good audience, appreciative and excited, comparing views with and without the added tint of our sunglasses. Slowly, as we travel down I-5, the rainbow fades...

One more unplanned stop, this time for dinner at Pea Soup Andersen's, and soon we are on the road. Again. Jeanelle is driving now, and I-5 is back to its normal neutral feeling. No rainbows, darkness setting in. Suddenly, Jeanelle slams on the brakes --in the middle of I-5. I give a startled gasp and she says "Sorry, sorry! I thought something was going on." And then we see, something is going on. Cars are all over the lanes and a truck appears to be jackknifed in front of us. Jeanelle pulls over towards the left lane, we get out of the car and walk forward. Jeanelle stops in her tracks – "we have to pray."

I see the overturned car, and a man being pulled out of it. I see other people on the road, talking on their cell phones. I grab mine and call 911. “Just to make sure,” I tell myself. I walk towards the overturned car, wondering if I am just being a curious, gawking bystander. But something propels my feet forward, bypassing the judgments in my head.

The man is now out of the car, on the ground, terrified, panicking, thrashing and turning his head, crying out in pain, in Spanish. Several people are examining his leg (or what is left of it) but I see that no one is talking to him. I approach and ask him his name – Manuel, and then do what comes most naturally to me, I ask him if he is breathing – “Estás respirando?” He answers, “sí.” I think he thought I was asking if he is alive, and I don’t tell him what I meant was for him to focus on his breath, that doing so may help ease his pain, his fear. Instead, I do what I can to calm him – stroking his head, talking to him in Spanish, making a call for him on his cell phone. While I tend to his head and heart, cars drive by and ask what they can do. One car offers a bottle of water, which I accept, because in part I see they, too, need to feel they can help in a helpless situation.

A woman arrives and makes a tourniquet for his leg, talking to him in a few words of basic Spanish, just the amount that a medical person might know in California. I ask her if she is a nurse and she responds – “I’m a doctor.” I feel embarrassed and remorseful about my sexist assumption, and at the same time, grateful and relieved that she is here. I then see a young woman standing by the side of the road, holding a boy. I hear her talking to him in English, and him responding in Spanish. I leave Manuel in the good hands of this clearly competent doctor and go over to see if I can help, by translating. I meet Luis.

Luis and I share the same birthday, but different years – he was born 38 years after me, in 1999. I don’t know exactly how many miles away, but he was born far south of my birthplace of Seattle, in Guatemala. I learn that the young woman, Angie, is the true hero of this terrible night, having crawled into the upside down car, and pulled – pried -- Luis off of his mother, who was in the car. Well, part of her was in the car. Other parts were scattered all around the road, which fortunately neither Luis nor I saw. Jeanelle described it to me later – pieces of scalp and hair, and globs of wormy red mush, that looked like hamburger meat. Also strewn up and down the road are colorful bits of Guatemalan clothing and bags – sacks, duffle bags, backpacks. The mother is dead, probably on impact, Angie tells me. I ask if Luis knows and she tells me he does not.

Luis is shivering and Angie goes to get him a blanket. I wrap him in my arms and he says “se murió mi mamá” – I think he knows, that he is telling me that his mother is dead. I realize later, when he asks “mi mamá?” that this was a question (“se murió mi mamá?”), not a statement. It’s been at least a half hour now, and although no ambulances have arrived yet, a couple police cars have. I ask a policeman if we can sit in the police car to get warm. Luis is shaking hard now, and the policeman kindly (I am so glad to meet a kind policeman here, on I-5) says yes. I ask, in English (which Luis cannot understand) “Where are the ambulances, why is it taking so long?” The policeman answers, “Don’t you know where you are? In the middle of nowhere.” He tells me that a helicopter is on its way to take Luis’s (dead) mother and Manuel to the hospital in Fresno, and an ambulance to take Luis. The kind policeman tells me not to tell Luis that his mother is dead – I realize this is the right thing – how could a twelve year old boy ride by himself

in an ambulance for hours, with no friends or family with him, and the knowledge that his mother just died?

Luis and I sit in the backseat and Angie arrives with a blanket, and goes into the front seat. With my arms around Luis and the blanket over his shoulders – he neither resists nor leans into me – I learn that Luis and his mother are visiting from Guatemala, staying with his 31 year old sister in Sacramento, and were on their way to LA with their friend Manuel to visit Luis’s aunt, his mother’s sister. Luis asks me again, “mi mamá”? I somehow manage to stop the tears behind my eyes from welling up and falling out, and my voice from cracking, as I tell Luis that Manuel and his mother will be taken to the hospital in a helicopter, and he will be going in an ambulance. Luis nods his head.

Finally, the helicopter and ambulance arrive, the medics put Luis in a stretcher, and as they wheel him towards the ambulance I feel my first moment of conflict. Up until now I did not question what actions I should take, what words to speak, if I should stay longer – everything came from some place deep inside and far from my usually busy and questioning mind. But in this moment I feel awkward – I’m not a family or a friend, is it odd to go up to Luis on the stretcher, to maneuver between the policemen and medics to get to him?

Once more, something other than my mind leads, and I approach the stretcher and say to Luis – “Your family will meet you at the hospital.” (I had called Luis’s brother-in-law earlier and told him that somebody must be at the hospital as soon as possible to meet Luis). “I will always remember you” I tell Luis. “I will always think of you on our birthday.” He nods his head and says “gracias” as they roll him into the ambulance. My heart breaks to think of Luis learning, when his sister arrives, about the loss of his mother.

It is six months later, and mysteriously, my car’s thermostat has not needed repairing and the flashing emergency lights have never come back on.

I am left with the shadowy and fading memories of seemingly random events that led me to my birthday little brother Luis, who will always have my heart.

And with the hope and prayer that this heart may grow big enough to encompass everything the world has to offer – from double rainbows to death on I-5.

Bringing Home The Bodies

by Julie Thi Underhill

By age 16, I hadn't lived with my mother in seven years, and she was scarcely in a position to offer me advice about anything. Seeking a mother's guidance while living with my father in Oklahoma, sometimes I'd call my mother in Texas with one concern or another. But often whatever was going on with me--a cheating boyfriend, for example--would be overshadowed by her war stories. "Whatever you've gone through cannot be worse than war," she once explained while dismissing a pain I was attempting to articulate. Each time I tried to turn to her with my own concerns, my hurt would be cast as something feeble and insignificant, because in my mother's mind I hadn't known true suffering, even if she couldn't even hear the end of my sentence. Throughout the years it made less and less sense to call her if I was facing any tribulation or heartbreak.

When my best friend Rachel disappeared one spring day which lengthened into weeks and then into months, her absence loosened my grasp on 'reality' so much, there was no way to make sense of the fear or pain I carried within. Each day and night, I was wracked with terrifying visions of her rape, her murder, her hasty burial in some barn, her rotting body. I sent my spirit out into the world looking for answers, and all I received in return was the sound of wind ripping through the trees, hushing their secrets. My most terrifying fear, articulated so well by the protagonist in Margaret Atwood's short story *Death by Landscape*, was that Rachel's body would never be recovered, that the mystery of her disappearance would never be "solved," and that I'd have to live with my wild imagination every night for the rest of my life. I reached a state of desperation so piqued, I must have thought my mother would be able to offer me some form of guidance.

When I called her, not surprisingly, her thoughts lingered briefly on Rachel, whom she had never met, to rest on her own experiences in war, the time someone close to her went missing. She described how when her first husband, Kip, was killed in action in Quang Ngai, she was determined to recover his body even though it would require a three-day trip through a war zone. He'd been dead for three months, and she exhumed his skeleton in order to bring it home through those same checkpoints, to give their children a place to mourn their father, to recover him from what is known as 'the army of wandering souls' in Viet Nam, those who've received an improper burial. This seemed to be the event which had haunted my mother the most, and she'd told me so many times I could practically tell the story for her. Years later I would learn that the US military used psy-ops--airplanes flown over areas of suspected VC activity, broadcasting recordings which mimicked the spirits of the unburied dead--in order to encourage defection. To my knowledge my mother received no such propaganda. She didn't need it. Her own grief as a military widow, those fears of his death finally realized, had propelled her to carry out her duties to him as a wife and mother. In Viet Nam, you do whatever you can to retrieve and bury your

own dead, yet you are haunted regardless, it seemed. It would have been so much worse, I imagined, if she'd never been able to bury Kip. But she remained haunted.

As she told me this story again, one I'd heard since I could remember, its contours were familiar to me. But with Rachel missing and not yet confirmed dead, I couldn't imagine bringing her home the same way. As with all the other war stories, I tried to learn from them, to apply them to my own life across the distance of over 10,000 miles, but could not apply the lessons so neatly into my life in the US. I feared that I would never even know if Rachel were dead or alive. The private investigator hired to find her had made little progress in finding her, so that over two months into the case, he still had never even visited the site where her car was abandoned in Wagoner County. After he questioned me I had questioned him, and I was appalled to learn that he'd failed to do such a basic and simple part of his job. "I'd think that in your line of work you'd rely more on your intuition," I said as calmly as possible, containing my outrage as best as I could. The man had the sense to follow through with my critique of his job performance, and less than two weeks later, he called me to report that he'd just come upon Rachel's remains on a rocky ridge about 500 feet from where she'd parked her car. She'd shot herself beneath the trees, and as animals had consumed her, she partially rejoined the earth. "She doesn't have blonde hair anymore, it's red. The back of her skull is gone. And she does have that black bag with her, as you'd said. You were right about that." Almost an apology to someone who'd made him do his job, he continued with a monotonous laundry list of features of her body which I dutifully wrote down as Rachel leapt from a missing poster to a pile of clothed bones on a lonely ridge.

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In considering my mother's loss of her husband with my loss of my best friend, in a sense it was uncanny that we'd both tragically lost people we loved, that they'd both decomposed into skeletons after three months dead, and that we'd both been responsible (to some extent) for bringing home their bodies. I thought she'd be able to help me get through it, so I called her to break the news. My mother had previously taught me something about death, which resonates with me still, yet which really 'hit home' only after the first person I knew to die had slipped beyond my grasp. Rachel isn't gone, she's just moved into the other dimension, but energy is like "radio signals" (as my mom puts it) and she's still there. I understood that and felt comforted by this interpretation, especially compared to the Christian perception of suicide. As my father later remarked, "She was a real pretty girl. Too bad she's in hell now." But what horrified my mother was not the destination of Rachel's soul. My best friend had taken her own life, which brought out a sense of rage in my mother. "What right did she have, to die?! To put you through all of this, huh?!" my mother asked bitterly. Although I was still struggling through the shock and grief of Rachel's decision, which I didn't quite fully understand yet, I also respected her enough to know that she had exhausted all other possibilities before making her final and fatal choice. Although we'd never seen a suicide note if she'd ever written one, her poetry left behind after her death had revealed the extent of her despair. I'd also known that her mother had

kicked her out, threatened to kill her (and her father, if Rachel took refuge there,) and forced Rachel to find another place to live. Just months before I'd met her, these events had happened. Yet Rachel had always appeared light-hearted about it all, and reserved for me her sense of nonchalance about the whole damned thing. In time I would learn how hateful and resentful her mom Ruth had always been towards her young, beautiful, brilliant, creative daughter--how Rachel's light was an affront her mother's darkness, and how the woman tried everything in her power to snuff that light. Even Ruth's resentment of me as the person closest to her daughter, her accusations that I'd contributed to her daughter's suicide, I later interpreted as her own avoidance of responsibility for helping to create a deep pain in her daughter which eventually made her place in the world too much to bear. I, too, was grappling with these factors when I defended my best friend from my mother, who was irate at Rachel for taking her own life.

So during my mother's tirade against Rachel, I defended my friend, and explained her life of abuse and abandonment by her mother. "Even though I miss her and want her here with me still, I am not going to blame her or resent her for this. She must have been in a lot of pain to take this option. So what's the point of asking her to stick around to live an unbearable life? Do I have that right just because I selfishly want her here still?"

My mother yelled at me in return. "It doesn't matter *what happens* to you in life, you have no right to die! You understand that, Julie?!" And as she insulted my best friend's cowardice and weakness, I saw my mother giving me orders--stay alive, you owe it to me, don't even think about doing this to yourself.

At that point in my life, my own depression and grief at losing family--at being removed from home at age 9, entering foster care, never returning to my mother and siblings, and eventually realizing that my mother had abandoned me to stay married to a husband who'd abused me for years--none of this had ever been a topic on the table between us. I visited my mother and siblings twice a year, at most, and generally seemed well-adjusted to her, and to most people. She had no idea about my own secretive use of bad drugs in my early teens, not really a cry for help as much as a cry for numbness, for oblivion, which had only been stopped by my first boyfriend's mother, who loved me too much to witness my self-destruction under her own nose. I'd never actively tried to kill myself, but the drugs were enough of an attempt, albeit more passive. As for active thoughts of suicide, I couldn't stomach them because I feared destroying my baby sister, who I reasoned would never, ever understand why her older sister chose to die. So to some extent, I agreed with my mother, but only on behalf of my little sister. Yet my mother's demanding critique that Rachel should have stayed alive for everyone else, the implicit demand that I stay alive *for my mother*, made me irate in return. "If the people who've brought you into this world have treated you as if you are disposable and worthless, what's the point?! What does she owe to them?! Nothing! It's her right! It's the last freedom anyone has, actually. The freedom to live or to die. I'm not going to take it from her, even though I miss her!"

So as we argued about Rachel and her mother, we really spoke of me and my mother. And as I defended Rachel's suicide, I defended the part of me that once, too, had felt my own abuse and abandonment too much to bear. But Rachel had been the one who actually couldn't live through hers. *There's no way I am abandoning Rachel too, I thought, by putting my own shit on her. She didn't owe it to me to stay here if she couldn't bear to be with her own thoughts anymore.* And as my mother and I continued to fight, foreshadowing our eventual coming apart completely a few years later, followed by the years after I stopped returning to visit, after we stopped speaking, I defended Rachel and myself from the demand that we owe it to our mothers to stay alive, to keep our mothers from looking too closely at their betrayals and abuse, and how our mothers had contributed to the loss of our will to live.

A couple of months ago, my mother called out of the blue, and we spoke for the first time in four or five years. With her first string of accusations that I am such a bad child because I don't love her even though she's done *everything* for me, we were fighting madly, as if no time had passed. "What have you done for me, mom!? You abandoned me, you treat me like a black sheep, you forced me to lie to my own siblings about the abuse, you create lies about me--" My mother cut me off with the old familiar script--that war is more terrible than anything she could have done to me, which made her dwell upon her own life of pain and how miserable she's been for years. She gathered her breath. "You think I don't understand why Rachel killed herself, do you?!" On the other side of the phone, I stood with mouth agape. We hadn't talked about Rachel in nearly twenty years, but our early conversations came rushing back, her criticism of Rachel's suicide. "Oh, I fucking understand Julie, I really do. I think about doing the same thing so *many times*, I swear to fucking god, I do!"

I drew in my own breath and looked across the room at Rachel's photo, her beautiful smile, her sitting on the snowman's lap, holding a flower. *Oh sweet girl*, I thought, knowing at last that my mother's tirade against her--"It doesn't matter *what happens* to you in life, you have no right to die!"--had in fact been my mother's script not for Rachel and me, but for herself. It wasn't Rachel's cowardice and cruelty towards her survivors but her decisiveness which frightened my mother most, requiring that my mother stand on the edge of her own abyss, while holding herself back from stepping forward into oblivion, into rest.

Trees Transform

Shepherd Bliss shepherd.bliss@dominican.edu

(The following was begun at the Sept. 8 gathering of the Veterans Writing Group, where our prompt was to write about trees. It was used on Sept 10 as a study guide to prepare students from my “Place and Identity” class for a walk into the woods beyond Dominican University of California.)

Morning: Listening

Trees transform, shield, shade and provide oxygen, fruit, and beauty. They offer many other gifts. Without trees, humans would not survive. Through the magical process of photosynthesis, tree leaves and other green plants release oxygen by transforming carbon dioxide and water.

As our human learning community walks into the woods here beyond the Dominican University of California, I invite you to experience the plant community. See and feel the trees and all that surrounds them—above, below, and around, in all directions. Feel the trees and what they hold and ground, together as woods and apart, individually. Each tree is its own self, with its own way of being and standing, or bending after contact with its dance partner, the wind.

Borrowing a phrase from forester Aldo Leopold, changing one word, I invite you “to think like a tree.” Consider this an exercise in critical, creative, innovative, clear thinking about our dwelling here on this one Earth. Allow that which is hidden and concealed to be revealed to you by those of the other-than-human world. We deliberately go outside the classroom to study the material of our two classes—“Place and Identity” and “Conservation Biology.”

Each tree has its own distinct, unique energy, as does each human. Trees together create a place. Trees of the same species, like humans, differ. Trees together are like a village. They form a community, with an upper-story, an under-story and a multiplicity of life forms that surround it and are dependent upon it.

Perhaps a tree will summon you. Be willing to incline toward it and connect. Listen to any messages that might arise within you evoked by that particular, individual tree.

Sometimes trees lean on each other and appear to be a couple, like the tall redwood and somewhat smaller incense cedar on my farm. Their branches mingle and appear to hold each other. Beneath them, on the forest floor, I sometimes nap or sleep, day or night, content with their protection.

Notice if the trees’ dancing partner arrives and takes them for a spin in the air. Notice if they shimmer. Notice if any leaves fall at this beginning of autumn.

If you feel inclined, greet a tree with a human sound, like “thank you,” or motion, like a salute or bow. At another time, let’s walk in silence, listening to our foot falls on the

forest floor, the rustling of leaves, and any other-than-human sounds that this forest and its many residents might make.

What is your favorite tree? Mine is the rainbow bark tree, which I planted where I lived in a jungle in Hawaii. Its trunk is many-colored.

I was raised alongside a jungle in Latin America. At night one could hear black panthers out there. Many howler monkeys would swing gracefully through the trees. Outside my small farm now, at night I sometimes hear coyotes, Great Horned Owls, and other evocative sounds from the woods.

As a boy in Panama, I saw a sloth up in a tree, which scared me, so I ran. Years later I learned how slow this herbivore moves, eating no meat. But those long claws, for digging roots, scared me. I saw a boa constrictor digesting some animal. I have these memories of trees and animals from long ago inside me. Do you have such memories from being in nature?

There are many trees on my farm, and I have planted more in the last twenty years. Redwoods create a rainforest and effectively bring moisture down from the sky and into the ground, benefiting my fruit. They surround my crops, providing habitat for beneficial insects, which can de-populate potential pests.

A redwood stand shares the land where I also live, along with dozens of oaks—valley oaks, live oaks, black oaks, blue oaks, coastal oaks, and hybrids. I especially like the arrival of wine-colored leaves as the black oaks leaf out each year. Most of the oak leaves will soon fall to the ground and I will gather them as mulch for my berries. The leafless trees enable me to see far-away hills. Most of these trees were here before I arrived and, hopefully, will remain long after I part from this Earth.

This year a mighty oak also fell, in the Cunningham Marsh at the foot of my place, a victim of sudden oak disease. I knew that tree, would often salute it as I walked by. I saw it prostrate, black fungus all over it, and fell to my knees weeping.

I have seen other trees fall to chain saws. The sound as they fell swiftly through the air and onto the Earth is unforgettable.

I share the land where I live with many kinds of trees—magnolia, mimosa, bay laurel, mayten, lilac, mock orange, eucalyptus, orange, deodora cedar, plum, apple, Italian Stone Pine, Monterey pine, and ones whose names I do not know. I consider myself part of their family and the community that we make together with our various species.

For many years deer ate and prevented the oaks here from growing up, retarding their growth, making them into small bonsai. They responded by growing down with their long taproots into the ground.

Then a mountain lion came through and thinned out the deer. The oaks, known as slow growers, suddenly grew rapidly, as much as ten feet a year. The lion and the trees are companions. I once again have too many deer and pray for the return of a hungry lion.

Years ago I made a promise to try to plant as many trees as I have consumed. That would be a lot of trees, since I have read many books, lived in wooden houses, and used nearly seventy years of toilet paper. Though I have planted hundreds of trees, I may never achieve that goal. Some goals are worthy, even if never achieved. How many trees do you think you have consumed? How many have you planted?

The ancient Greek god Pan is one of the divinities who offers blessings to trees. While at the Findhorn Foundation in Scotland I once sat without voice or movement beneath a tree in the woods for hours with the intention of seeing one of the little people. And see one I did. It might have been an elf, leprechaun, or even Pan himself, for he seemed to have hair under the chin, tiny horns, and a tail.

Have you ever seen a sick forest? It is not a pretty sight. I recently walked in one with forty members of my Veterans' Writing Group. A blight had struck the eucalyptus forest.

Imagine a world without trees. The Amazon is the Earth's lungs, along with all the other trees. They make the oxygen we need to survive. Without trees, there would be no humans. Trees bring more than fruit and beauty. They create the oxygen we need to survive.

Come back here again to this place beyond the Dominican campus for another stroll, ramble, meander, saunter into these woods—at a different time of year, at a different time of day. You will see different things, as the light will differ, as the sun draws trees toward it. So much is hidden, until one learns how to see deeper.

Afternoon: Gratitude

Trees protect and provide habitat and comfort. Blessings to them for all that they do.

This unconditional ground on which I recline, looking upward into the sky, always provides.

May we listen to the forest guardians—like poison oak—and keep our human selves and our pollution out of certain areas.

Your ancient air, beneath the infinite sky, infuses all our cells.

May we honor the winged-ones, the four-leggeds, and the crawling ones, including the maligned skunks, vultures, snails, and bats.

Thank you for these outreached branches, strong enough for us to climb and swing from, receiving us. After a day out among the trees, I think that when I get back home I will climb up a couple of my favorite trees. A sturdy wind has bent them downhill and made them even easy for an elder like me to climb into them.

You have not abandoned us. May we not abandon you. You keep us alive, alive, so alive. May we realize that by walking in the woods we are walking in beauty.

Thank you for your perpetual embraces. You give so much—nutrition, cover, beauty, protection, paper, firewood.

Trees are so hardy, yet so fragile.

We eat of your plenty. May we learn to give back more, and take less.

A long, long time ago, after crawling from the sea onto the shore and then moving deeper within the woods, we climbed down from you. We swinging four-leggeds then stood up and became two-leggeds. May we remember the long-ago homes you provided us, and still provide.

So why is it so many humans fear nature?

Evening: Communing

While driving home slowly in my car on a narrow, neighborhood road in our small town of Sebastopol, Northern California, I see a group of people from that block looking into the sky, as the light declines. I slow down and someone calls to me--“Shepherd, Shepherd.” It is my friend Carolyn. She invites me to stop, which I do.

“We’re watching the swifts,” she says. I look upwards and see small, fast-moving, migratory birds circling around a chimney, apparently on their way to South America. They make that part of the sky darker. They do not collide and sometimes move slightly out of sight.

Suddenly a larger, long-winged white bird flies into the largest tree nearby. “Egret,” Carolyn says, though I do not see it. Another egret comes soon, and then a third. “They often roost there,” Carolyn notes. Now I see them, high up in an evergreen.

Then through some mode of leadership and communication, the hundreds of flocked swifts, a community of birds, suddenly dive down into the thin chimney, where they settle for the night.

Animated, we dozen or so two-leggeds, having been blessed to enjoy the winged-ones and their flight, hang around for a while and chat. The inter-species contact connects us to the connection of everything.

As farmer Wendell Berry says, we live in a “miraculous world.”

Under the Trees

Under the eucalyptus trees
We walk together
We write our histories together
We grow old together

We find each other
We find ourselves
We change our destinies
We change our world
Together

An Afghanistan vet once said,
“This path of peace
that we are just starting
you have been walking it
longer than we have been alive.”

Under the eucalyptus trees
We change ourselves
We change our world.

Michael Wong
September 8, 2012
