

FREEDOM AND FEAR: WOMEN WRITE THE WILDERNESS

(Selected Works 1879 – 2003)

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Freedom and Fear: Women Write the Wilderness

(Selected Works 1879 – 2003)

The truth is that even the most distant man seems somehow more willing to fly his daydreams when his chest is pinned under some big, lonely expanse, under black skies shot full of stars. While women are able to take what happens on the job, at home, in the garden and weave a religion of it, guys seem prompted to such inspiration mostly when they're adrift in some grand stewpot of metaphor. Men are epic junkies. Responsive to those times when life is crushed only to rebound right before their eyes- as so often happens out here...

~ Gary Ferguson

I. Preface: A Girl in the Wilderness

My first wilderness smelled of rain falling on lake water, the perfume of campfire smoke, and musty surplus Army tents. It tasted of wild strawberries and just-caught rainbow trout. It lulled me to sleep with the gentle rocking of our wanagan tethered to shore. I was three and a half years old the first time I experienced the vast, remote lake in northern British Columbia, Canada where my grandfather had property. What I remember of that two-week trip comes mostly from family stories and slides – still, a deep sense of this wild place took root in my heart and grew with each visit.

The most memorable trip was a family summer vacation when I was eleven. My two younger brothers slept in the back of our old Datsun pick-up truck under a homemade plywood canopy, and my parents and I slept in a borrowed tent trailer. A shallow, rocky corner of the ice-cold bay served as our bathtub, the kitchen was a few boards nailed onto some stumps, and the best seat in the house was a plank wedged between two trees, over a slash trench, with an unobstructed view of the brilliant blue lake.

One evening a violent heat-lightning storm broke out. I cringed in my sleeping bag as white light flashed on the canvas walls of the trailer, and the deafening crackle and boom of thunder followed. The storm stopped abruptly, the warm air cooled, and an immense silence rested on the landscape. Across the lake, a small sound rose into the quietness. I held my breath, listened hard. Just as my mind registered “wolf,” but before I could whisper the word as a question, another one began to howl, and then another and another until it seemed as if wolves ringed the lake calling to one another in the soft misty rain. I still cherish this gift of absolute wildness...

II. "I Wanted to Be Like Him"

I wanted to be like him. I wanted to rise each morning before dawn, eat my breakfast of pancakes and bacon, pull on my caulked boots at the door, and go into the world that was waiting for me. *Out there* was the life of the lumberjack. *Out there* exciting things happened: the machinery racketed and grumbled, the saws pitched and whined, the trees hit the earth in *whumps* that rattled our windows. *Out there* was where the coyote began its song and the bear snuffled for wild hyacinth...

But I was *here*, in the small house with my mother and my brother, and though it was a good place with its warmth and closeness, smells of fresh bread and fried venison, it was not *out there*, where the stories came from. The stories were of danger and survival, split-second decisions, moments of courage – the stories my father and uncles told... ~Kim Barnes

One of my secret reading pleasures as a child was the stacks of outdoor sporting magazines next to my grandfather's chair - *Field and Stream*, *Alaska Magazine*, *Sports Afield* and others. During our regular summer beach visits, it was no secret that I gathered together his latest copies and flipped through the pages while I toasted myself on a flowered patio lounge chair - what I kept secret were my daydreams; *what if I caught a fish that big, what would I do if I came face to face with a bear, if I was lost in the wilds and night was coming on could I start a fire, what does it feel like to be a good shot?*

I distinctly remember the delicious thrill of my favorite section in *Outdoor Life* - 'This Happened to Me;' true life adventures of brave outdoorsmen, complete with colored drawings of a pivotal moment in the story (frequently the gaping maw of a crazed grizzly bear or snarling mountain lion) - but I have no recollection of women (let alone a young girl) in any of these first-hand accounts of outdoor daring. Still, I tried to imagine myself in the exact same predicaments.

The world *out there*, the one in my maternal grandfather's magazines, seemed so exciting, so enticing. Magazines were not the only literature which influenced my early

perceptions of the outdoors – books provided complete scenarios in which to play out my “what would I do if” wilderness imaginings. Stories like *Robinson Crusoe*, *Swiss Family Robinson*, *My Side of the Mountain* (a boy lives in a hollowed-out tree with his pet falcon), and non-fiction accounts of people and their “wild” animals; *Rascal* (a raccoon), *That Quail Robert*, and *Owls in the Family*, were just a few. I read the *Little House on the Prairie* series and visualized myself crossing the prairie in a covered wagon or riding my horse in a round-up (who hasn’t wanted to be a cowboy?!). Lying on the top bunk of my grandparents’ *Ideal* travel trailer - parked behind their beach house - I entered the strange magical landscape of allegory and journey quests through *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. When I was a young teen, I became enamored of Robert W. Service’s classic ballad poems of the North - and the notion of mushing huskies up the Yukon.

Only recently did I learn that my mother also read Grandpa’s outdoor magazines when she was a girl – copies were always at hand in his barbershop, where she spent a great deal of time reading and listening to men talk fishing and hunting. As an only child, with a mother who truly disliked the out-of-doors, my mom often accompanied Grandpa on his fishing and hunting trips when she was younger.

Mom spent her time in two worlds - a proper young lady who attended dances in dresses, stockings, and heels (with the ubiquitous string of pearls her generation wore), and an outdoorsman’s sidekick - sporting a red down jacket and wool pants, toting a gun or fishing rod, just “one of the guys.” On Saturday night, she could smoke with her father, but not on Sunday at “Rainbow Girl” functions with her mother.

An altered version of the dichotomy my mother lived passed easily to me – the oldest child and the only daughter. I loved all things outdoors - as well as my pearls. The

family beach property on Puget Sound, where my maternal grandparents and great-grandparents retired, was the foundation on which I grew this outdoor life - around men who were capable outdoorsmen and the women who supported those endeavors.

The men hunted and fished, knew how to handle a gun, run a chainsaw, swing an axe, stack a woodpile, fix machinery, build bulkheads and outbuildings, maneuver a boat, cast a fishing pole. The women prepared hearty breakfasts, brought out thick white china mugs of hot coffee and homemade date bread for coffee breaks; packed fishing lunches of meatloaf sandwiches and sugar cookies wrapped in wax paper, and, after a successful hunting trip, created suppers of wild game. Homemade preserves, cookies, breads, and pies filled their shelves and freezers. My mother, grandmother and great-grandmother also fished, dug clams, went berry-picking, and helped on woodcutting days.

My maternal great-grandfather grew up in the woods and on the waterways of the Pacific Northwest. Born in Nebraska in 1885, he was three years old when his family came west by train. They settled near what would later become Eatonville, Washington, and built a simple cabin on five acres of heavily wooded land – much of it cedars. During the early 1900's when Edmonds, Washington was a mill town, he became a “boom man,” and managed huge log booms floating near the sawmills – jumping from log to log, pounding in pitons, wrapping and unwrapping lengths of chains, and losing a number of fingers in the process. Even in later years his knowledge of timber, and skill with a chainsaw, axe, and maul, was impressive. He was also a great fisherman, and I have a memory of the rhythmic squeak and clunk of his oarlocks as he rowed through the quiet fog - and many pictures of him proudly holding up his catch.

In retirement, Grandpa continued his yearly hunting and fishing trips – bringing home moose, venison, and fish, to fill the freezer or smokehouse. One of his favorite pastimes was to search the local shoreline for salvageable beached logs or timber that had broken loose from a passing log boom, and when I was about ten I got to go ‘loggin’ alone with him.

The details of that day are clear: the green thermos of hot coffee and white powdered-sugar donuts, steering the boat along Hood Canal, the musical ring of the piton as it was hammered into the beached log, the glow of success as we carefully towed our prize back, and my grandfather wrangling the log with a peavey so it could be winched up the ramp and left to dry. I felt such pride when the chainsaws were powered up and huge slices of “my” log thunked to the ground to be split open, cut up, and carried off to the woodpile by my brothers and me.

The tinny whine of a chainsaw with its pungent blue exhaust, the intoxicating smell of fresh cut sawdust, and the staggering heft of an armful of wood, are deep enduring memories of my childhood.

My father was (and still is) an avid angler and outdoorsman. I was not quite three years old when he became a Boy Scout leader, and I constantly asked to go along on his “Scoutsboys” outings. His profession as a plant pathologist meant that any time my brothers and me stepped outdoors the mysteries of nature would be revealed - he taught us about weather, soil, trees, moss and lichen, plants, insects, animals, and fish. Raised in a household of faith, these scientific lessons also served as tangible evidence of an unseen Creator.

III. Good Girls Don't Go Into the Woods Alone

They came home smelling of balsam and diesel, smells I loved. At dinner they smelled of Old Spice and Lucky Strikes and Vitalis, and this, too, I breathed in and savored. There was comfort with my mother and my aunts and grandmother, comfort in their incense of Ivory and Emeraude, yeast and cinnamon. But it was the men I listened to, their strength and freedom that I envied.

I will be like them, I thought. I will go and not stay behind but take up my axe and shoulder my rifle and step out into the world beyond the clearing.... They would tell me, all the days of my girl's life, that I wanted too much, that it was not my place, that such thinking would undo me - where did I get such ideas? My imagination, they said, ran wild. ~Kim Barnes

For years, whenever I read about men heading off into the wilds, in whatever form - from local camping, fishing, or hunting trips to full-blown expeditions - I always asked the same two questions: *could* a woman do this, and *would* a woman do this? Could she arrange her life and the lives of those she cares about (and cares for) to accommodate her longing to step away from the lists, chores, and needs of others - those responsibilities that enfold more than a title or gendered role? Would she make the same plans, choose the same route, bring the same essentials, and take the same risks?

When she *is* able to get outdoors, does a woman's internal dialogue limit her sense of freedom in wilderness places; concern about (and guilt for leaving) family and loved ones back at home, worries that she is not capable of dealing with whatever challenges the natural world presents - and especially her innumerable fears? While the fear of physical danger; falls, overturned boats, getting lost, animal encounters, small plane crashes, and trauma is significant - the most cumbersome fear a woman must pack around is the fear of others, because that *is* how we are raised - to be wary of others, particularly men, particularly when we are isolated and alone.

Considering these realities, can wilderness mean the same thing - have the same value – to a man, as it does to a woman? I pondered this question for a very long time, worrying it like a small pebble in my coat pocket.

Like Kim Barnes, a woman of my own generation who grew up in a rural timber community, I closely identified with the idealized and romantic perceptions of how men experience freedom in the out-of-doors. Everything I read as a young girl, and experienced in my family, fueled a desire to “not stay behind but take up my axe and shoulder my rifle and step out into the world beyond the clearing” (Barnes 23). I had absolutely no intention of being able to “weave a religion” out of job, home or garden. As I grew into womanhood that yearning did not change – but my accessibility did.

A 1994 article in *Sex Roles*, which looked at single women and the built environment, concluded, “Women are socialized to have a diffuse fear, connected to potential attacks by unknown men. This fear, if internalized, prohibits women from transgressing social norms of where a woman without a man “should” be” (Chasteen 312). This is especially true of the outdoors - which is gendered as a male space. These fears limit a woman’s choices in leisure activities because “women have not been taught to be comfortable in outdoor/public spaces but instead have learned the private, domestic realm is their domain (Bynum 1992; Duncan 1996; Rich 1986; Valentine 1992)” (Wesely 653).

For many years, my outdoor activities *were* limited. I did not have a vehicle to get out to places I could hike, fish or camp, and even if I had, I would not have gone alone. At that time, I only knew a very few women who would have joined me – some were not interested in camping or were overly concerned about wild animals; but the primary

reason was fear of being hassled (or worse) by men on the trail or in the campground. As for hiking or camping on a date, our commonly held beliefs were that: “ ‘Good girls’ know that they should be at home rather than in the woods; otherwise, they might deserve what they get” (Wesely 648).

It was not until I turned thirty and had my first car - a small red pick-up truck with a canopy - that I ventured out on my own. Frustrated that I had allowed myself to be constrained by the idea that I should really “wait for a man” to accompany me, and desperate to be outdoors again, I disregarded my inner warning system and began camping solo.

I was struggling as a recent R.N. graduate working at University Hospital in Seattle that summer. The realities of my profession, and the addition of a new population of patients with bone tumors (who required chemotherapy and had poor outcomes) to our orthopedic floor, really challenged me – and I felt trapped inside the system. So, when I wasn’t at work, I was camping, planning my next trip, or packing and unpacking the pick-up. It was the 50th anniversary of Olympic National Park and I stayed at as many campgrounds on the Olympic Peninsula as I could get to – often I left my campsite at five in the morning and got home with only enough time to shower, put on my uniform, and be at work for the 3 – 11 shift.

I slept in the back of my truck, stayed at designated campgrounds, and developed safe habits that became almost ritualistic – if I followed them, nothing “bad” would happen to me, and since nothing ever did - I stuck to them. I drove through the campground a few times to get the lay of the land and some idea of who might be staying there, I was careful to choose spots that were private - but not too isolated, I backed my

truck into the site and hung curtains up along the windows of the canopy for privacy; and arranged my camp gear in such a way that it would be difficult for someone walking by to know how many people were camped there. As a way to size up my neighbors, I also made a point of being friendly; just a nod, a hello, a short chat about the weather – but I kept quiet about the fact that I was alone.

If I were feeling particularly vulnerable for some reason, I would search for an older couple in a trailer (who looked like they were going to stay a few days) and strike up a casual conversation as a way to have a connection with someone in the campground. I wanted to fish, but did not feel safe hiking local trails alone, so I searched for campsites along a river or lake. My friends thought me bravely foolhardy and we joked about my “protection” - I kept the long-handled axe that I used to chop wood inside the truck with me at night. My parents were concerned.

I don't think I ever met another woman camping by herself. Although there were occasionally groups of women, most campgrounds were full of families, retired folks in trailers or motorhomes, young couples in tents, guys headed off to go fishing, and sometimes men alone (often on a bike or motorcycle) who rarely stayed more than one night. I recruited women friends to join me and was finally able to get farther off-road in groups of two or three. Those times were never quite as satisfying as when I pushed past my fears and walked a few miles out to the ocean, or up into the mountains alone.

I enjoyed the company of good friends - but it was the solitude of my own campfire that I craved. It was the meditative quiet, the soul-refreshing peace, and a type of communion with the landscape and creatures that drew me back again and again – not

with an animistic perspective, but as when I was young, into a faith-based relationship with the created world.

By fall, I found a way to get myself to the mythic wilderness of Alaska - at least I would be able to see it from my “office” chair. I quit my job at the hospital and learned to drive a bus. May through September of the next year I drove a 40-foot Gray Line motorcoach, logging most of those miles back and forth between Fairbanks and Skagway along the Alcan Highway. I gave the highway tour, loaded and offloaded luggage, checked the tires, oil and diesel, and emptied the “Blue Lagoon” toilet. I had the best seat in the house, especially driving through the Yukon Territories - whose bleak emptiness and mottled purples, blues, and yellows I came to love. I was far from alone, but I was witness to mile after mile of wild landscape on a daily basis - and that filled my country-hungry heart. After that summer off, I went back to working as a nurse in Seattle but I never took a job inside a hospital again.

Now I am married, the mother of a small child, and the last extended camping trip my husband and I took (with our two huskies) was over ten years ago. We tented and car-camped through Alaska, the Yukon, and British Columbia, for three weeks. I have access to wilderness through my parents, but those visits are rare. My fly-fishing rod collects dust in the garage. I do not regret my choices to become a wife and a mom, but the only wilderness I can readily get to is my “wild garden” - the acre of woods surrounding our home.

IV. Women Write the Wilderness

Thus, women's circumstances have often kept them from doing the kind of nature writing that this culture has recognized as such. And in a culture that has developed a taste for nature writing of a sort that celebrated solitary contemplation or conquest and derring-do, environmental writing by women was inevitably undervalued and overlooked. ~ Lorraine Anderson

What did I even know of a woman's experience of wilderness apart from own? I had grown up reading a man's perspective – full of adventures and the use of brute strength to overcome nature. A woman's story of wilderness must pale by comparison. Even in my own writing, while spending time in a remote setting with family, I became frustrated at how mild my journal entries were; I titled one, "Waiting for nothing to happen." There were stunning pink and orange sunrises over the mountains, loons calling across the lake, and one very windy canoe trip; but no bear encounters, giant fish stories, or tales of survival, and though we were isolated, our cabin had a generator and running water – hardly fodder for a piece in *Outdoor Life*.

How did other women feel about wilderness, how did they use language to elicit those emotions, and how did they manage their fears? In reading to understand women and their bond to wilderness, I discovered voices that echoed my own, and the more I read and researched, the more fascinated I became with their lives. I was hungry to learn how the "girl in the wilderness"- whose deep yearning for wild places did not fit the outdoorsman template - might legitimize her experiences and embrace her own "woman in the wilderness."

Although their birthdates range from 1831 to 1947, each woman in this select group of writers seeks a freedom found only in nature – but to be in wilderness she must navigate the boundaries of convention and challenge her fears (real or imagined).

1. On the Ranch

He was already planning to go out and start a cattle ranch in Montana, and he asked me if I would be afraid to share that kind of life with him. I told him I wasn't afraid, and we became engaged... ~ Nannie T. Alderson

In her memoir, *A Bride Goes West*, Nannie Tiffany Alderson (b. 1860 in Union, West Virginia) writes about her decision to become a rancher's wife in the 1880 wilderness of Montana. At twenty-three, she had "romantic ideas of being a helpmeet to a man in a new country ..." (14) - but raised in a wealthy Southern family with servants: "Hot rolls, plus a vague understanding that petticoats ought to be plain, were [her] whole equipment for conquering the West" (19).

Alderson took her new life in stride though; she learned how to cook from the cowboys (the "boys") and roundup cooks who worked the ranch, and became fascinated with watching the men brand cattle and break horses - often leaving her tedious house chores half-finished. She noted that, compared to farming, raising cattle in Montana was "uncertain and exciting..." and "work on horseback, while dangerous and often very hard, wasn't drudgery. There was more freedom to it. Even we women felt that, though the freedom wasn't ours" (55). Aside from a few distant neighbors, men were her exclusive companions - a fact that Alderson warmed to: "I never regretted the arrangement whereby we shared our home with our own nice cowboys, and with every stray rider who came our way" (72, 73).

The new landscape quickly became home, and her affection for it is clear as she describes her first spring: "The ranch at Lame Deer was in a wide valley watered by a lovely little creek, between pine-studded hills. Our front door looked out upon a particularly symmetrical hill with one pine tree on it ... The banks of Lame Deer Creek

and farther down, of the Rosebud itself, were lined with the wild rose bushes which gave the Rosebud its name ...” (45, 46). Alderson calls September “glorious” when, despite cold temperatures at night, “the days were golden and full of sunshine” (81). Years later, in April, when one of her daughters is safely born on the ranch without the help of a doctor, Alderson finds her happiness reflected in the world around her:

It was the time of year when baby calves are beginning to show up, their little white faces so clean and new that they look like human babies; the time when the creeks are running full, and the mountains are dark blue and brilliant with melting snow, and the whole landscape is one of incredible brightness and rejoicing (198).

For Alderson, motherhood underscored the disparity that she felt between the freedoms the men had working outdoors - and her indoor obligations as a ranch wife. Growing up she loved to ride horses, and took every opportunity to ride on the ranch; she talks about being “free to have a good time” but that changed with family responsibilities: “Now I had only the hard work. And I didn’t like it one bit” (126). In another section of the book, Alderson admits to great fatigue and “the effects of isolation and living inside four walls...” (169). Once she had four children, opportunities to leave the ranch were limited: “there were weeks, in our long winters, when I scarcely left the house except to hang clothes on the line” (170). She becomes: “so tired of doing the same things every day – cooking and washing and ironing and making clothes for the children...” and concludes that “nothing helps a woman so much as working in a garden, just because its outdoors” (173, 174).

(Despite our proclamation of emancipation, the world of a married woman today often continues to be one of domestic ritual, predictable routine and, when there are children, she remains in a traditionally gendered role. In general, women carry the burden of childcare and household management - even when they also work outside the home. You might be hard pressed to locate a woman who makes all of her children's clothes these days - but women worn out by the daily tedium of cooking, laundry, and childcare are easily spotted in the local grocery store.)

For her children, the excitement of daily life on the ranch centered on that corral where the men were breaking horses, and Alderson confesses: "I was up there on the rail with them in spirit, far more than in the kitchen peeling potatoes or baking bread" (223).

Depending on the season, Alderson's husband was frequently away from the ranch - out working the cattle or on a business trip:

Perhaps it was being alone so much that made things work on my imagination.

Were other women on lonely ranches as foolish as I? I know that the worst ordeals I suffered were nearly all in my own head ... (213).

I have always thought that fear is our greatest sin. It shows such a lack of faith. It comes between us and the light; it keeps us from doing things (237).

Alderson was never left alone overnight, but in the charge of one or two of their cowboys - her "faithful guardians." She emphasizes that this was standard practice: "The men *had* to be with the women for protection and there was never a whisper of evil" and calls this the "splendid comradely attitude of American men toward women ..." (75, 76).

On one occasion though, she was alone at the house getting wood for the fire when a stranger walked up. Her husband had taken the children with him on roundup for

the day, so she could rest from one of her bad headaches. Alderson was unnerved by the fact that this scruffy man was not riding a horse: “If a man came horseback, he might be a horse thief or a murderer, but at least you knew he’d be a gentleman. On the other hand some very queer characters had gone through the country on foot” (214). He was looking for a job, and she directed him to where the rest of the crew was working, but not before she offered to feed him, as was their custom. Her fear got the better of her, so she strapped on her husband’s six-shooter and kept her apron over it while she cooked for the stranger. After the man had gone her anxiety grew - was he lurking close by now that he knew she was alone? She found her husband’s straight razor and hid it in her corset, but no harm came to her. (214, 215)

Even without the fear of men, there was plenty for Alderson to worry about. Besides the obvious concerns over illness, snakes, lost or injured children, and possible Indian attacks, her greatest fear was that one of the wild stallions they were raising might kill her husband – and that is exactly what happened in 1895. By then, she had faced many hardships, among them; a home burned and the contents destroyed by Cheyenne Indians because of a dispute with one of their cowboys (luckily, no one was home at the time), a miscarriage, terrible winter storms that meant loss of stock, and the bank failure of 1893. After her husband died she did an endless array of jobs to raise her family; even going back into cattle ranching with two of her teenage children – until the crash of 1919 when they lost their herd to the bank. Alderson was sixty then, and all her children married or working. She moved to a home on her son-in-law and daughter Patty’s ranch in Wyoming, where she lived out her life.

2. In the Mountains

But, above all, it was exciting to lie there, with no better shelter than a bower of pines, on a mountain 11,000 feet high, in the very heart of the Rocky Range, under twelve degrees of frost, hearing sounds of wolves, with shivering stars looking through the fragrant canopy, with arrowy pines for bed-posts, and for a night lamp the red flames of a camp fire. ~ Isabella Lucy Bird

Born in England in 1831, Isabella Lucy Bird became a world traveller and well-known author – visiting Hawaii, New Zealand, Australia, China, Korea, North Africa and many other destinations. While on a trip to America in 1874, when she was in her forties, she wrote extensive letters to her sister. In 1879, these were published as *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains*. Considered “her best and most popular” (Slung 152) book, it is a captivating account of her adventures on horseback in the Rockies - not what you might expect from a woman with chronic back pain, who had been an invalid for many years after spinal tumor surgery at eighteen. (Slung 144)

The well-read, home-educated daughter of a preacher, her language is poetic, effusive and often religious in tone:

Suddenly, as a dazzling streak at first, but enlarging rapidly into a dazzling sphere, the sun wheeled above the grey line, a light and glory as when it was first created. ... I felt as if ... I must worship. The grey of the Plains changed to purple, the sky was all one rose-red flush, on which vermilion cloud-streaks rested; the ghastly peaks gleamed like rubies, the earth and heavens were new-created.

Surely “the Most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands!” (Bird 106, 107).

Bird was one of a particular group of women in the late 1800's who “traveled well-protected by cumbersome Victorian clothing, comprehensive rules of etiquette, and

membership in the dominant white culture, which allowed them to travel westwards without excessive fear of degradation or peril” (Riley 20). Fear of violence from men as a significant deterrent to venturing into wild places was superseded by what Bird referred to as “the law of universal respect to women ...” (Bird 80). She called “Womanly dignity and manly respect for women ... the salt of society in this wild West” (19).

However, on one portion of her trip, Bird concedes to carrying a gun in her pocket - “a Sharp’s revolver loaded with ball-cartridge...” (207), but found it more nuisance than protection. “Its bright ominous barrel peeped out in quiet Denver shops, children pulled it out to play with, or when my riding-dress hung up with it in the pocket, pulled the whole from the peg to the floor...” (Bird 207).

Bird’s travels in the Rocky Mountains included guided, as well as solitary, horseback trips into the surrounding countryside – her ultimate goal, Estes Park, Colorado. She hired local horses and guides, rode astride (not commonly done even in such isolated areas) with a riding-dress acquired while in Hawaii, and stayed wherever she could find a place for the night – an inn, private home, ranch, or she camped. Bird seems to glory in even the worst misfortunes on the trail, and copes with setbacks to her plans; dealing with scorching heat, wind and snowstorms, insects, snakes, tedious companions, and being tossed off her horse because of a bad trail or a surprised bear. She expresses great contentment in her surroundings: “This scenery satisfies my soul. Now, the Rocky Mountains realise – nay, exceed – the dream of my childhood” (Bird 63).

It is not just a young girl’s fantasy that compels her to seek out isolation, but a “need for religious solitude. She constantly attempts to get far enough away from cities

and settlements so that she can experience nature alone” (Norwood 38), although the requisite “protectors and escorts” make that difficult. (38)

One such man becomes an unlikely friend and companion, the expert, but notorious, guide “Rocky Mountain Jim.” Quick to use a gun, infamous for his violent temper (especially when drunk), and sporting only one eye because of a tussle with a grizzly bear – he was ragged and rough, but treated her like a lady. (Bird 91 – 93)

“Jim” helps her climb Long’s Peak – the terrain was rugged and her will strong, but Bird’s physical abilities were not. Bird writes that he “dragged me up, like a bale of goods, by sheer force of muscle” (109). Despite the difficulty, she was thrilled: “A more successful ascent of the Peak was never made, and I would not now exchange my memories of its perfect beauty and extraordinary sublimity for any other experience of mountaineering in any part of the world” (118).

3. On the Lake

Just sitting on my dock through a summer's eve, watching otters cavort, and snowshoeing in a marshmallow white woods on a nippy winter day give me the sense of belonging to something vital and bigger than myself. Backcountry is the best place to feel useful, resourceful, vibrant, and whole. ~Anne LaBastille

Divorce propelled Anne LaBastille (b. 1938 in New York) to buy twenty-two acres on a remote Maine lake, at the edge of the Adirondack wilderness, and live out her childhood dream of building a cabin Thoreau-style. At twenty-something though, her practical skills were limited to what she had learned during her brief marriage to a lodge owner: “Coming from a populous suburb of New York City, I had never wielded an axe, revved up a chain saw, pulled a crosscut, or driven a wedge” (*Woodswoman* 48). She had many challenges ahead of her - and wrote four books chronicling her exceptional life: *Woodswoman* (1976), *Woodswoman II* (2000) - Reprint of *Beyond Black Bear Lake* (1988), *Woodswoman III* (1997), and *Woodswoman III: Book Four of the Woodswoman's Adventures* (2003).

LaBastille went on to become one of only a handful of licensed women Adirondack guides at that time, ultimately leading groups of women on wilderness trips; and she earned a doctorate in wildlife ecology from Cornell University. The author of many scientific articles and books, she also received awards and recognition for her environmental work. (*Woodswoman III* Forward). Her book, *Mama Poc: An Ecologist's Account of the Extinction of a Species* (1990), tells of her twenty-five year study of the, now extinct, giant grebe of Lake Atitlan, Guatemala.

Growing up in New Jersey, the daughter of a concert pianist and a language professor, LaBastille always wished she could be out “camping and hiking amidst forested mountains and clear lakes” (*Woodswoman* 7). Like my mother and me,

LaBastille lived those daydreams through literature: “Stories like *We Took to the Woods*, *Driftwood Valley*, *Enchanted Vagabonds*, *Quest for the Lost City*, *Two in the Far North*, *Lady with a Spear*, and, most of all, *The Yearling*, fueled my desire to find true backcountry” (*Woodswoman II* 17). The closest she got was the woods near the local golf course; and instead of the tent, pack, boots or .22 rifle she so desperately wanted for Christmas, she was disappointed “only to receive silk stockings and a dictionary” (*Woodswoman II* 16).

Her parent’s expectations circumvented any opportunities LaBastille had to become an outdoorswoman: “I was dragged to dancing school and art lessons rather than taken fishing and hunting. I dreamed and schemed of running away to become a wrangler in Wyoming or a trapper in Saskatchewan” (*Woodswoman II* 16). She was also told “Girls don’t go camping!” and “You mustn’t walk in the woods alone” (16). (My mom was born just three years before LaBastille, and with many of the same societal pressures – but she had a father who “allowed” her to participate in the “outdoorsman’s club”).

LaBastille gave her future home the name, “West of the Wind.” With forty-five spruce logs from a nearby timber mill (because she did not want to cut any trees on her land) and helped by two local construction men, she was able to build a 12 x 12 foot cabin with porches front and back, overlooking what she called “Black Bear Lake.” She had a Franklin fireplace for warmth, and bottled propane for her stove, refrigerator, and gas lamps. The lake water was clean enough to drink and she took her daily bath off the dock in front – out back was the outhouse. The nearest road was dirt, and ended at a public boat landing a mile and a half down the lake. Only one other couple lived out there year-round. (*Woodswoman* 9)

Once on the path to achieving her goal – the fear set in: “Would it be dangerous living under such remote conditions? Might an unwanted prowler break in at night? Although several private summer cottages dotted the lakeshore, no one could hear me if I screamed for help ... what if a wild bear came into my outdoor kitchen ... What if I slipped and broke a leg?” (*Woodswoman* 22). LaBastille knew these risks were the trade-offs to achieve the peace and quiet in wilderness that she had yearned for, and within a week begins to feel at home - but still took precautions for her safety: “Nevertheless, I kept my .300 Savage rifle and 16-gauge shotgun loaded and a chain on the door at night. Every tempting scrap of garbage went out by boat to the local dump 3 miles outside of Hawk Hill hamlet” (*Woodswoman* 23).

A research survey collected from women who frequented an urban wilderness park found that “An undercurrent of the women’s responses suggests that it is not nature itself (or the isolation from urban places and populated areas) that is feared but violent human encroachment and harm against humans or other living things” (Wesely 659).

LaBastille’s ability to make a life for herself on a remote lake gave her strength and confidence: “Solitude in the wild forces me to call on inner resources. I like that” (LaBastille *Woodswoman II* 238). On two significant occasions, she found herself in situations that were like something out of a chilling suspense movie, and managed to keep her wits about her both times.

The first occurred at her lake during hunting season. One evening she heard someone call her name from the direction of a nearby camp occupied by a number of hunters – but the men were strangers and she became suspicious. LaBastille went outside to investigate, realized they were drunk, and from what she could see across the water,

trying to get in one of the boats. They called her name again, and her response was to wait quietly in the dark watching the lake - with her shotgun. The men finally went inside, but she writes: "I held my vigil until almost midnight, considering that drunken hunters might be as unpredictable as rabid dogs" (*Woodswoman* 37, 38).

In order to prevent further harassment, the next day LaBastille dressed and acted the part of an "ornery, pistol-packing woodswoman" (38) and angrily confronted the first man who answered their cabin door. She threatened to "shoot first and ask questions later" if the men came on her property. (38) Her bravado worked because no one bothered her again. A few years later, she brought home a German shepherd mix puppy that became the first in a long line of deeply loved watchdog companions who shared LaBastille's life.

The second event occurred in early 2000, while LaBastille (then 62) was teaching a nature writing class near the Appalachian Mountains. She wanted to include a solo overnight camping trip for her students, and with her male student assistant spent time exploring suitable campgrounds. The night they found the ideal spot and decided to camp out, drunken men on horseback shot at them (and her treasured German shepherd) in the dark. Panicked, they managed to flee into the woods, cross a stream, crawl under the cover of massive rhododendron bushes and dig themselves into the leaves, putting the dog between them for warmth. LaBastille recalls it as "one of the longest, coldest, most frightening nights of my life" (*Woodswoman III* 118).

The horsemen used flashlights to search for them, but were unsuccessful. LaBastille, and her assistant (and the dog) were able to sneak back to the tents for a few hours in the middle of the night, but were afraid to make a fire and suffered near

hypothermia waiting for daylight. When they discovered that the men were drinking coffee near their trucks in the parking lot, she and her assistant went back into the woods to hide until the men left.

In the midst of this LaBastille draws on her previous success in a challenging wilderness setting to give her courage:

I had a moment of near panic. Then common sense took hold. It occurred to me this was a similar crisis such as I'd faced starting on my icy lake journey at Black Bear Lake. That peril was from Nature ... This peril was due to humans. From their display of drunkenness and machismo in the dark meadow. From some human perversity. Now I hoped the same skills I used at my cabin would get me through this crisis. Don't panic. Think it out. Be practical. Move slowly. Stay silent. Hide. Protect my dog (*Woodswoman III* 125).

The episode in Appalachia is one that I find most frightening because it touches on an idea I have long held. I believe that there is a greater chance a woman (or man) may be harmed in what I call "edge places" (parks, campgrounds, hiking trails) - public places that form a border between wild places and civilization. That campground backed up to the National Forest, the hiking trail just off the highway that rambles for miles to a lake or waterfall, or that perfect trout stream at the end of a long dirt road. I think there is a relationship between ease of access and random violence or opportunistic brutality – the more effort it takes to get to a particular place, the less chance for victimization.

In fact, crime in the National Parks (NP), and on National Forest Service (NFS) and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land, is very common and on the rise – but only recently has there been an effort to pull the numbers together in a meaningful way. The

lack of standardized reporting procedures, and multiple agencies and offices with different crime concerns have contributed to this. (Tynon 2006)

The range of crimes that are common in all three settings (NP, NFS, BLM) is astounding – everything from spill-over city crimes (murders, rapes, domestic violence, theft) to the more bizarre: satanic cult worship sites, other cult and gang activity (like EarthFirst groups) and plenty of body and/or body part dumping. Somewhere in between are the crimes you might expect – pot growers and people who illegally harvest forest products. Methamphetamine production and dumping of meth byproducts is a growing problem because of the toxic risk to people and the landscape. Physical threats to rangers and those who patrol the area have risen as well – and almost everyone seems to have a gun but the rangers. (Tynon 2001, 2005, 2006; Wing 2008)

My own experience with drunken campers was more light-hearted. I had settled down by my campfire and was writing in my journal when one of the three young men in a camper at the next site walked over.

“How are you tonight?” he said as he stepped into my firelight.

“Fine.” I continued to stare into the fire hoping he would leave.

He took a drink from his beer, stated his name, and proceeded to perform a monologue: “Sam. Are you from around here?”

“Not really.”

“That’s a great fire you have going, I saw you start it, it’s a great fire. We are going fishing ...” (he went on swigging his beer and talking about their great fishing plans). “If you get lonely you are welcome to join our fire – It’s a big one.”

“No - thanks anyway.”

He returned to his friends and they laughed, belched, and pitched beer bottles the rest of the evening, cranking their music before turning in. They were not true fishermen – at ten the next morning they were still asleep while the rest of the campground was already up for the day.

4. On the River

At last, I can feel the earth slowly and alone. I can savor the rough-barked trees and the bite of boot on rock. I can listen to the song of the river. I have been in many wildernesses, in many parts of the world. No matter how strange they are to me, I slide into their rhythms like a hand into an old glove. Their wonders and their intricacies make sense to me. ~ Chris Czajkowski

Born in rural England in 1947, Chris Czajkowski grew up a self-professed loner who “spent thousands of hours exploring the uninhabited woods and fields behind the house . . .” (*Cabin* 20). She came from a practical hands-on family who taught her “that almost anything we wanted could be made” and learned the use of tools in her father’s furniture workshop: “I played first with the thin, curled shavings swept into aromatic heaps beneath the benches and later with my father’s tools” (*Cabin* 20). Trained in the dairy farm business, she taught in Uganda, and from there travelled to Asia, New Zealand, the Andes, the Falkland Islands, and places beyond; finally emigrating to Canada where she was drawn to the Coast Range near Bella Coola in British Columbia. (*Diary* endnotes)

Czajkowski has written seven books, spanning some twenty years, about her life as a single woman in the wilderness of Canada: *Cabin at Singing River: One Woman’s Story of Building a Home in the Wilderness* (1991); *Diary of a Wilderness Dweller* (1996); *Nuk Tessli: The Life of a Wilderness Dweller* (1999); *Snowshoes and Spotted Dick: Letters from a Wilderness Dweller* (2003); *Lonesome: Memoirs of a Wilderness Dog* (2004); *Wildfire in the Wilderness* (2006); and *A Mountain Year: Nature Diary of a Wilderness Dweller* (2008). (She cleverly uses the word “wilderness” in all her book titles – a decision that is sure to have helped with book sales.)

Currently she supports herself with a fly-in ecotourism and guide business, *Nuk Tessli Alpine Experience*; as well as speaking tours and art shows to promote her watercolor paintings and books. A schedule of tours and pictures of *Nuk Tessli* (which means “west wind” in Carrier) are available on her website, www.nuktessli.ca. (*Diary* endnotes)

Initially written as letters for a CBC-Radio program called *Morningside*, Czajkowski’s *Cabin at Singing River* details the realization of a life-long dream – to build her own log cabin and live in the wilderness. An aging couple, who homesteaded an isolated area on the edge of Tweedsmuir Provincial Park for over 34 years, invited her to build across the river from them. They wanted a neighbor and someone to help with their animals when they visited family in town. Like LaBastille, once the plans are in place, Czajkowski’s worries begin:

I have not built a house before, nor fallen a tree, and I have had very little experience with a chainsaw. I know there will be difficulties I cannot yet imagine; the logistics of living so far from the road might be more than I can plan for. How will I move the logs across the ground? How will I lift them into place? How will I cope with living so far from the rest of the world? How will I get on with my neighbors? And how will I find the money to live? (*Cabin* 31).

Doing much of the work herself, with assistance from her neighbors and their horses to haul the largest logs and move boulders, as well as provide seasoned advice, she completes the cabin over the space of eighteen months. She overwinters in town the first year because there is not enough of her cabin up to live in. Self-sufficiency is one of her trademarks - as she learns many of her newfound skills from books: how to safely fall a

tree from *The Fallers and Buckers Handbook*, how to make lumber from *Chainsaw Lumbermaking*, and even how to sit in a canoe (another new experience).

Throughout the course of her many books, Czajkowski references a wide range of other authors. She writes that “Jack London and Robert Service ... inflamed the imagination of my youth” (*Cabin* 115), and uses epigraphs from authors such as Gary Snyder, Isak Dinesen, Annie Dillard, Catherine Parr Traill (*The Canadian Settler’s Guide*), and Anne LaBastille. Her epigraph from LaBastille is about keeping the door locked and guns at the ready in case of intrusion by bears or people. Czajkowski used this at the opening to a chapter in her book *Nuk Tessli* – about her new life in the high-alpine meadows where she staked a claim (after living for a few years by her singing river) and built more cabins, hoping to start a business and make a living off the land.

Due to how isolated her cabins are, harm from humans is highly unlikely, but Czajkowski has her hands full dealing with bears. When confronted with one persistent black bear, she reluctantly prepares to use the rifle she previously fired only twice in practice: “The cowboy stories I read as a child told me to seat the stock of the gun against my shoulder to minimise the kick, and to squeeze, not pull, the trigger. (From what strange sources our knowledge is gleaned!)” (*Nuk Tessli* 24).

Czajkowski successfully made a life for herself - and a reasonable livelihood - in the wilderness, despite the initial reaction of some locals:

The name “Spinster Lake” ... was given to a remote body of water in British Columbia’s Coast Mountains because an unmarried thirty-nine-year-old woman was crazy enough to think she could travel up there alone, on foot, and single-handedly build a couple of cabins along its shores (*Wildfire* 13).

Czajkowski has the last laugh – her business has done well enough that, according to her website, it is now up for sale so that she is free to travel and explore other alpine areas.

V. Belonging: "...into the world that was waiting for me"

If you have attempted to fit whatever mold and failed to do so, you are probably lucky. You may be an exile of some sort, but you have sheltered your soul.... It is worse to stay where one does not belong at all than to wander about lost for a while and looking for the psychic and soulful kinship one requires. It is never a mistake to search for what one requires. Never.

'Finding One's Pack: Belonging as Blessing.' *Women Who Run With the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype*. ~ Clarissa Pinkola Estes

If men are "epic junkies" and consciously or unconsciously seek out a mythic "hero's journey" in wild places - is there a parallel for women?

Every woman in this select group of writers faced multiple challenges in order to gain access to wild places on her own terms and, at times, struggled with physical and psychological limitations (strength and athletic ability, specific fears and vague anxiety) in order to remain there. Although there is a fair amount of feminist rhetoric in their work (overtly or in the subtext), none of the women had particularly antagonistic relationships with the men in their lives, in fact, each had an association with at least one man who helped facilitate her achievement in some way.

Raised with different expectations and opportunities, these men were gatekeepers of the knowledge and skills necessary for success in the outdoors, and each woman fully availed herself of that masculine experience: Alderson's husband and the "boys" on the ranch; Bird's "Mountain Jim"; LaBastille's ex-husband, and her Adirondack guiding mentors; Czajkowski's neighbors, and other logbuilders.

Of the four, LaBastille is most articulate about her efforts to be independent in the outdoors and maintain a serious relationship:

The process of learning how to cope as a woman alone had backfired to an extent. I had noticed that the more competent I became, the more insecure certain men acted, or the more aggressive others behaved toward me. It was as if their inferiority complexes were showing, as if they couldn't stand to have a female be better at anything than they. It happened with Nick (*Woodswoman* 258).

She had been with Nick for two years, and loved him, but in the end opted to stay in her Adirondacks instead of following him to Alaska. She chose her "pocket of privacy and peace" (*Woodswoman II* 251). LaBastille also addresses the question of children specifically, attributing her "rich, varied, and exciting ..." life to being child-free and "not tied down as a mother and homemaker..." (*Woodswoman II* 240).

As with many women nature writers - whose "modes of knowing the world [that] are centered in relationship, in the body, in intuition, mysticism, the emotions, the heart, as much as in the rational and logical mind" (Anderson 6) - the intimate language of belonging can be found throughout these selected texts:

LaBastille says she has "the sense of belonging to something vital and bigger than myself" (*Woodswoman II* 238).

Czajkowski happens on moose browsing in the lake: "My heart gives a lurch of excitement: this is why I am here, to experience one of the few places on the Earth where giant, wild creatures still roam free. What a privilege it is to be a part of the primal world" (*Cabin* 34). She watches as one hundred Trumpeter swans fly off a lake: "It is one of those moments when time stands still; I cannot move until the purple evening fills the valley and the last melancholy note fades away. I stand on the darkening mountain and think, "No one else witnessed this. It is mine, and mine alone" (*Cabin* 114).

Bird, whose dramatic poetic language I love the most, makes a delightful play on words when she - as a woman - declares her love for a “no man’s land:”

Such as it is, Estes Park is mine. It is unsurveyed, “no man’s land,” and mine by right of love, appropriation, and appreciation; by the seizures of its peerless sunrises and sunsets, its glorious afterglow, its blazing noons, its hurricanes sharp and furious, its wild auroras, its glories of mountain and forest, of canyon, lake, and river, and the stereotyping them all in my memory (Bird 120).

In the realm of Jungian archetypal psychology, a woman’s own journey into wilderness may represent many things, among them; a search for like-minded “others,” an opportunity to sever the monotony of gendered routine and release the creative, or a yearning for - and return to - one’s true self. (Pinkola Estes 3-7)

Research, both qualitative and quantitative, suggests that being in wilderness and participating in outdoor activities is therapeutic and empowering for women. It helps them attain a less constrained view of their physical bodies, their choices, and their proscribed roles because “wilderness recreation offers women freedom of body, freedom of mind, freedom of movement, and freedom from societal constraints” (Pohl 430).

Contemporary ecofeminists would have us believe that “Women’s relational sensitivities are crying out to be adopted by the culture at large, for it is these sensitivities that will guide us out of the crisis our species finds itself in” (Anderson 9). While I do believe that women have a unique wilderness voice to offer, on this point I have to agree with Dr. Sherilyn MacGregor (author of *Beyond Mothering Earth: Ecological Citizenship and the Politics of Care* and editor of *Environmental Politics*): “It seems counterproductive to sustain the myth that women are innately more peaceful and

ecologically responsible than men” because it implies “that women *should* be the ones to clean up after the party. This assumption simply expands an old domestic tradition to a global scale” (MacGregor 82).

In Vera Norwood’s 1984 scholarly inquiry; “Heroines of Nature: Four Women Respond to the American Landscape,” she compares the works of Isabella Bird, Mary Austin, Rachel Carson and Annie Dillard, looking to understand the emergence of women nature writers and how their environmental ethics might differ from a masculine perspective. She discovers that:

Feminine culture characteristically defines nature in a much more “immanent” fashion. Nature is: before culture there was nature, after culture there will continue to be nature. Their cultural drama is not one of successful challenge, nature overcome, but of full recognition, nature comprehended (Norwood 52).

Most interesting, I think, is Norwood’s conclusion that these women “are concerned not with action in the environment, but with understanding how nature (particularly wilderness) acts on them” (52).

That point strikes a chord with me – Kim Barnes did not write “into the world that was waiting for me to *conquer*” – for her, and Alderson, Bird, LaBastille, and Czajkowski, choosing the *out there* is not about overcoming nature but about pressing against the fears that limit a woman’s belief in what is possible - and then reimagining herself. As Czajkowski writes, it is also important to acknowledge that:

Nature is fascinating, beautiful, and uplifting to the soul. It is exciting, exquisite and miraculous. But it is also dirty, uncomfortable, itchy and cold, full of disinterested murder and terror, unnecessary cruelty, misery and waste. To accept

the wilderness you have to understand that both sides are valid, both are part of the intricate relationships that give us water, air, all life-support systems and sanity (*Nuk Tessli* 10).

VI. A Woman in the Wilderness

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
 Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge.
 There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard.
 Psalms 19: 1-3

I am well over 100 miles from the nearest city and arrived in a small 4-seater bush plane - each morning I reach my designated writing spot only to discover I am speechless. I do not have words to describe the wilderness before me. I take endless pictures; record the sounds of wind and rain, loons and eagles; and dutifully type up page after page – but language is inadequate. What words do come are stilted and cliché. It is beautiful, stunning, awesome, spectacular...

*

What does it *feel* like to be in wilderness? As if I am small and inconsequential, like those worries that consume me. As if I am emptied and then filled to overflowing by the solitude and peace that seeps into the marrow of my bones. As if some tiny tightly wound piece of myself at the DNA level, deeper still, at the spirit level, releases - untwists a helical spiral and reconnects to what is before me - bonds me to this wild country. It is always like this – finding and then losing parts of myself scattered across the landscape.

*

Standing under a black, black sky pulsing with silver-sharp stars I hear a pair of loons calling to one another from distant lakes – my chest aches with pleasure at the sound of their voices.

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I feared only the Bogey Man under my bed and the giant Louisiana cockroaches living in the backyard. I grew up with the solemn expectation that I had the right to speak my mind (and boy, did I speak it!) and to worship in any way I chose without fear of governmental censure. Thank you for that. I don't know when this was written, but we are fighting. Many of the current generation are fighting for liberty and freedom as Ms. Davis's father did. It is truly amazing that the brave men and woman in the US armed forces ignore the constant debasement of Duty, Honor and Country that is always in the media. I don't know about Alex, but there are many who honor their WW II fathers/grandfathers by stepping up to serve as Ms. Davis has done. And as my brother and I have done. They did not fear failure; they feared success. Their concern was not physical but spiritual. They did not want to leave the wilderness. They did not want to become just another nation among the nations of the earth. They did not want to lose their unique relationship with God in the reverberating silence of the desert, far removed from civilization and its discontents. Far from being the supreme height of faith, such a fear of freedom and its responsibilities is "the sin of the spies." There is a voice within the tradition, most famously identified with R. Shimon bar Yochai, that regards engagement with the world as fundamentally incompatible with the heights of spirituality.