Langscape Magazine is an extension of the voice of Terralingua. It supports our mission by educating the minds and hearts about the importance and value of biocultural diversity. We aim to promote a paradigm shift by illustrating biocultural diversity through scientific and traditional knowledge, within an appealing sensory context of articles, stories and art.

ABOUT THE COVER PHOTOS
Front: Caleta Douglas, Navarino Island, Chile.
Cristina Calderón collecting mapi (rushes) for traditional basketry.
Photo: Oliver Vogel, 2015
Back: North Pindos, Greece
The return of the shepherds and their flocks.
Photo: Stamos Abatis, 2015

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The second cougar-kill I’ve encountered in three days smells fresh: a sweetish, iron-tinged musk. The ribcage is red-stained and bare of meat; the neck has a tremendous bite mark. The deer is only partially covered with leaf litter and brush. I had not been expecting a carcass when I set off to praise and sing for the wilder Ones.

Recently returned from travel, I now crave a medicinal dose of this Southern Utah land, a reconnection with fragrant pinyon and sage, pale sandstone mesas and canyons. Offering elaborate praise to each being is a kind of ceremony of the wild—a ceremony that almost always unsticks humdrum psychic habits as attention and imagination are turned toward the splendor of the world rather than the hamster wheel of the everyday mind.
This is a practice, always beginning as an intentional act of imagination: I go forth as the Others are listening, as if they may be receptive. I go forth as if my capacity to perceive the animate nature of the Others—as well as their willingness to be witnessed—depends on the manner of my approach.

This kill is so recent the body has not been dismembered. I sing a blessing for the deer, another for the cougar—and for coyotes, eagles, ravens and the other creatures who share this flesh. My voice is scratchy and dry from lack of use; I sing anyway. It doesn't occur to me to be afraid; I lived for a long time in the habitat of grizzlies and wolves, mountain lions and moose and learned something of their habits. Where I live now, in the sandstone labyrinth, there are few predators but plenty of deer. The cougar who took down this deer is not hungry.

Downcanyon, I call to the Others as I pass, singing directly to them of my gladness to be among them again. I honor them as not only alive—even sandstone, even water—but also intelligent, participatory, and saturated with psychic depths. In this way, I honor the temple of the holy Earth.

I wonder if the lion-whose-belly-is-full-of-deer hears me. I sing steadily, with enough volume that I can't hear anything beyond my voice and the rhythm of a water bottle shifting with my steps. It occurs to me that I would never register the padding or loping of any other feet but my own. It occurs to me, as it has on other occasions, to wonder if I have ever obliviously walked beneath a mountain lion watching me from an overhead Ponderosa limb.

“The anima mundi is nearby, very near, if the doors of perception wobble and open. Engaging with the world as if rain and moss, cacti and scorpion, lightning and cloud witness and participate is a consciousness-changing act of imagination. The act itself helps open the perceptual portal to experience of an animate world.”

After a while, when I have passed by most of the sizable potholes where I might dip in monsoon season, I sit on a small ledge, in silence now rather than singing. The silence is vast, except for infrequent flock-flitters of juncos, raven caws, and the aum of a distant jet. The silence is deep enough to sense the rippling crackle and zings in the psychic field—a field in which all beings are entangled. The outer silence is immense, but the psychic field trembles and hums. Except for slow breathing, I am quiet, receptive to whatever might come in the phenomenal or imaginal worlds. Sandstone undulates softly, curvaceous as a body. Dark basalt boulders crouch in small herds.

A lion, eyes locked on mine, vividly springs into my imagination, accompanied by a visceral sense that I have invaded her private winter world. No surprise to be overtaken by an image of cougar in this place, yet the suddenness of the appearance startles, as well as the bodily sense that I may not be welcome on this short pilgrimage today. The guard
hairs on the back of my neck prickle. Unless she chooses to show herself, to distinguish herself from the tawny slickrock, I will not see her, though there is a feeling that she is near in body as well as image. She blinks and turns away.

“Imagination,” writes Harold Goddard, “is neither the language of nature nor the language of man, but both at once, the medium of communion between the two. ... Imagination is the elemental speech in all senses, the first and the last, of primitive man and of the poets.”

When my own imagination has gone dim, dulled by the ever-press of daily obligations, it’s especially important to wander onto the land in a practice of conversation with the wilder Others. The anima mundi is nearby, very near, if the doors of perception wobble and open. Engaging with the world as if rain and moss, cacti and scorpion, lightning and cloud witness and participate is a consciousness-changing act of imagination. The act itself helps open the perceptual portal to experience of an animate world.

If my mind is on taxes or politics while I walk, there is little opening or space for events and beings beyond my own skin—the normal state of awareness for most contemporary people. But when my attention is turned outward, to the other lives with whom we share Earth, it’s as if a green gateway opens and wilder images or impressions might blow in. I believe that sometimes the images are sent forth by the world psyche, or by the other presences—cougar, stone, lichen—with whom my own being is entangled.

The language whose disappearance may have greatest consequence for the human relationship with Earth is that of imagination or image—particularly, the images that arise unbidden when we are wholly present to the wilder world, a state of awareness that once was, perhaps, the everyday consciousness of human beings, and perhaps is still the steady-state consciousness for more traditional or nature-based peoples for whom the world is yet animate, filled with intelligent presences in the form of grasses or winged ones.

Above: Raven brothers. Photo: Bruce Howatt, 2012
In Western consumer culture, the universe is largely regarded as dead (if it’s regarded at all), and very few of our Earthly companions are held as sentient except for human beings—and maybe not even all of us. (Consider an unconscious Western view regarding “primitive” or very poor people, for example.) We have lost the enchanted universe, and we have also lost intimacy with imagination. Science, for all its revelation and wisdom, cannot bring the world alive for us; facts cannot bring the world alive. For that, we need radically regenerative acts of imagination.

In contemporary culture, the images we respond to are largely provided by commercial advertising, political strategists, and news media; our imaginations have been hijacked and filled with desires, fears, and ideas created by others. Most of us are not accustomed to attending the images (which include felt-sense or other perceptions) that emerge spontaneously into our awareness, and the significance of our own deep imagining is scarcely considered except by depth psychologists.

It was not always so. The great Sufi scholar, Henri Corbin, noted the three worlds of medieval times: the world of pure spirit, the world of matter, and the mundus imaginalis, or imaginal world. The imaginal dimension—the terrain of image—occupies the realm between matter and spirit. Each of these worlds is believed to be entirely, equally real. The importance of the imaginal world diminished and largely vanished from Western consciousness centuries ago, yet the imaginal is still present with us in the landscape of dreams, which most of us visit nightly.
Goethe identified imagination as a primary sense, even as an “organ of perception.” For Jung, James Hillman, and others, image is a primary way of knowing ourselves and the world. Ecopsychologist Per Espen Stoknes and others regard images that suddenly present themselves as the world, speaking.

When we miss the unexpected flood of images in wildish places, we may miss the world’s speech; we may miss conversation with the wilder Others. Recovering the capacity to hear the Others and Earth is possible, and perhaps essential for Western people whose power to either strengthen or extinguish Earth’s life-support systems is unprecedented.

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I make Earth pilgrimages in part to excite my imagination, to exercise an organ of perception, and to disrupt the ordinary thought train so that some other impressions might emerge. When I approach the Others as if all are alive, intelligent, and suffused with psyche or subjectivity, the world—sometimes—palpably breathes and trembles, as if in response. Sometimes my imagination ignites with possibilities that seem sourced in a psyche or mind far greater than my own, as if I have momentarily become, as poet A.R. Ammons writes, “available / to any shape that may be / summoning itself / through me / from a self not mine but ours.”

And sometimes it seems I am summoned for something small, as when I sit with a basalt boulder and suddenly “see” an image of the stone facing a different direction. Since I could not know if rock speaks to me in this way, nor could I know for sure it does not, I do my best to turn the stone accordingly, apologizing if I have misheard or mishandled. Then, sometimes it seems all the nearby boulders long for touching and adoration.

The world comes alive in response to our imaginative attention.

One lives differently in a world of presences. No casual, unthinking demolition of “weeds” or gophers. More curious engagement with stars, Jupiter, and Moon. Bodily recognition of the unspeakable miracle of life, of our lives, of the cosmos.

I return slowly to the place I began my wandering song of praise. No large creatures move away from the deer carcass as I approach, though the great cat could be very near, waiting for my departure. Almost certainly, she knows where I am. We both know she is not hungry. I praise her again, continually, and the deer who feed her, and all the other lives—eagles, ravens, coyotes, flies, eventually maggots—involved in this red dance.

On a pale expanse of slickrock, dark basalt boulders of all sizes crouch and huddle, wearing their coats of green lichen. I turn my head slightly and the boulders suddenly shift positions, scuttling this way and that before settling again. I laugh out loud, and turn aslant again. The basalt herd moves once more, like small dark bison bedding down for the night. I sing praises for the stone. I sing gratitude for glimpsing the secret lives of wilder Ones.

Further Reading


“The planet’s indigenous families are reaching out to us in their many native voices. What they’re saying speaks of survival, resilience, respect for the natural world, and respect for one another. It is not enough to simply listen. We should be standing beside them letting them lead us forward.”

--James D. Nations