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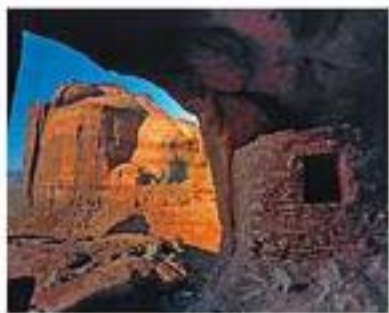
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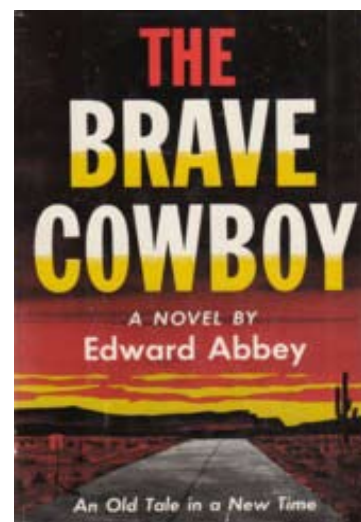
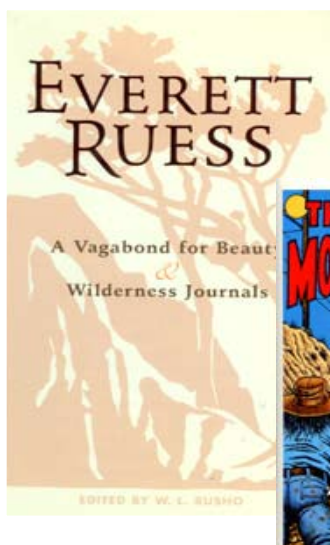
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LOSING SOLITUDE

By Martin Murie

The State of Nature...pt 1

The golden eagle was hunting, coasting near the ground. Seen from the edge of an ancient glacial cirque the eagle was a tiny brown motion at the bottom of a monstrous half-enclosed space. I had never felt so gripped by pure space. Not like looking at a far horizon. I suppose we grow accustomed to that kind of distance, awesome enough, but standing there at the abrupt edge of the great enclosure I felt intimidated, diminished. I sat down, braced elbows on knees and focused my monocular on the hunt, the leisurely tilt of wings creating turns to right or left, navigation of an unseen air current. Suddenly a bright brown patch showed, irregular in shape, partly hidden in low-growing trees that might have been wind-shaped pines or firs. Dead deer? The eagle dropped. For a tick of time all motion froze, eagle's talons hooked into the brown body, then a big buck rose, bearing the eagle on its back. The buck tossed its head, reached back with its antlers. The eagle seemed to require a second or two to unhook its talons before it flapped away. I kept the monoc on the buck who was still reaching; apparently the talons had left a wound, or at least an itch. The antlers seemed to not quite find it, but the buck kept trying. I watched the struggle for a while, the buck in clear and splendid view. I switched to the eagle. It had resumed the hunt, as though nothing much had happened, drifting low over the faraway rock and plant growth bottom of the great cirque. The buck disappeared in the trees.

Predators have a hard life. They make mistakes, sometimes they go hungry. Vegetarians, omnivores, and scavengers don't have it any easier. Do vultures find something dead to feed on every day of their lives? Does a pregnant moose in winter find shelter from wolves and vegetation nutritious enough to meet her body's extra demands? Do desert mountain sheep always foil mountain lions? Why do we go along with this notion that nature, when free of our messing it up, is pure static harmony, when we know better?

I want to follow one strand of the answer, the role of environmental outfits in their constant search for support (money), who habitually direct heavy fire on the badness of government and corporations while picturing Nature as harmonious paradise, a sublime goddess needing rescue. The word pristine occurs again and again in this genre, most notably in defenses of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

A fund-raising brochure from Yellowstone Park Foundation goes back to John Muir for a similar simplicity.

Look up and down and round about you! ... here is heaven and the dwelling-place of the angels. (1)

I don't mean to disparage extravagant language, but a deluge of fund-raisers from Green outfits in our mailbox, year after year, offering mainstream hype rather than letting us know one damn thing about reality, about the real State of Nature, that puts a different color on the whole Beltway enterprise.

There is a kind of harmony in nature, a give and take built into ecosystems that we might label Systemic Stubbornness, insistence on survival in spite of losses and chance and change. Each system seems to have enough redundancy and flexibility to maintain itself even as it changes in response to catastrophes. We can be everlastingly grateful for that. Without stubborn systemic persistence we wouldn't even be here wondering what it's all about.

As we wonder, we rail at each other for lacking vision, for not having a realistic goal that stands out from bland acquiescence, one that we can coalesce around, that we can work for with enthusiasm. What's holding us back? I think it's a give-up-and-give-in attitude, a kind of posturing that's especially shrill at the national level of Big Green "activism." Those Greens are terrifically radical in condemnation of government and corporations, but depressingly tame in action. It's a virulently infectious syndrome driven by a low level of confidence. That lack shows clearly in their abject, I use the word with care, abject acceptance of the rules of the political/economic system that has us hypnotized in other activist sectors as well. Failure of nerve. Michael Frome puts it in an eloquent nutshell:

(Many) national environmental organizations, I fear, have grown away from the grassroots to mirror the foxes they had been chasing. They seem to me to have turned tame, corporate and compromising, into raging moderates replac-



ing activism with pragmatic politics, and a willingness to settle for paper victories.

Sarah Stillman, winner of a student essay contest, suggests that activists need to give more permission to their right

brains, their "imaginative" mental territory. (2) Yes, but why not give both brains more scope, quit this cringing, this timid creeping around? And while pulling ourselves out of that mud hole, suppose we give the left brain, the analytic fact-chasing side, a little extra jolt, tell it to take seriously the State of Nature, how Nature is continuous history, never sleeping, always changing, operating by way of zillions of inputs and outputs, each of them having negative and/or positive feed-back. These are peculiar systems; just as our brains are peculiar, they have certain traits that we can't quite get a handle on, that don't quite fit computer modeling. (3) In spite of that, we do know an amazing lot about how brains work, how ecosystems work.



Going back to that ancient mountain cirque and the hunting eagle, there were other observers there too: wary ground squirrels and red squirrels, spruce grouse and fawns, toads and snakes and mountain moths and butterflies and untold Others not noticed by the lone human, all of us integral parts of a system that somehow maintained its character as a subsystem of one mountain range, one of many ranges in a part of the earth we call Nevada, each range somewhat different in location and character from all others, linked into and influencing a larger desert system. No computer network, ever, can track every individual in these systems and yet each mouse, each grain of sand,

each pebble plays a role. We could even think of the whole shebang as all alive, as does Milo Clark:

"For me, there is life in everything, absolutely everything, with no qualifications other than form. The life in this rock differs only from the rock in that mountain by degree of sensation. A valid question is: mine or the rock's? Don't worry about it, though. This perspective is not animism but it would take a wealth of explaining and show and tell to get the point through to most folks."

Can we draw a rigid line between the pebble and the gizzard of the spruce grouse where the pebble is temporarily housed, so intimate their interplay? And don't forget their respective familial backgrounds, tremendous adventures in evolutionary history.

Because of this stubborn intimacy, there's no hidin' place, we are a component, made of components, immersed in a planet's persistence. Can a component command the whole thing? We have learned the answer: NO. Can we now believe that that bit of knowledge is real? Careful now, it would entail a drastic new self image for our species; it would be a switch to accepting ourselves as intimates rather than top predators. It would open to us a more intense scrutiny of both individual and collective experience. We have a huge fund of experience to draw on, factual, mythic, mysterious. Let's use it.

Here's an experience; we were all in on it, we the generations of citizens of the United States standing by, watching the Army Engineers remodel water flows of the Everglades. It turned out to be a disaster for fauna and flora and a gift to agribusiness, courtesy of taxed citizens. Now the irony: Army Engineers, in effect a part of the coalition to bring back the Everglades, are trying to undo some of the damage. Whether this great effort will succeed is not known, probably won't save the Florida panther. Mississippi River, the entire drainage, including the mighty Missouri, New Orleans, the Gulf delta -- same scenario, monstrous past mistakes arising from intervening in a system without regard for its ties to others.

So, each of us knowing that left and right brains are always talking to each other anyway, and giving left analysis (respect for facts) a good run, what might emerge? A rather bare but fairly well-grounded, and on-the-ground, clearing upon which Vision might decide to step forth. Name of the clearing? Wait. Vision might want to name it.

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