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*being a collection of essays on the work of  
Scott Russell Sanders*

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In honor of  
Jane Hamilton

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## PREFACE

At the 2009 symposium of the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature, a panel was devoted to the work of acclaimed Indiana essayist and fiction writer Scott Russell Sanders, in which the author himself participated, on the occasion of his receiving the Mark Twain Award for distinguished contributions to Midwestern literature. The session recognizing his singular contribution to the literature of the Midwest has in turn given rise to this special issue of *Midwestern Miscellany*: a tribute to the writing of Scott Russell Sanders. In this issue a new piece of fiction authored by Sanders himself is accompanied by three essays, two critical and one pedagogical, each of which I will introduce briefly here.

My own essay, "Nature Remains: Scott Russell Sanders's *A Conservationist Manifesto*," was originally presented at the Midwest Modern Language Association as part of a panel sponsored by SSML. In this essay, I read Sanders's environmental essays in light of the land ethic posited in Aldo Leopold's seminal *A Sand County Almanac*, seeing Sanders's work as an extension of the ecological consciousness espoused by Leopold enriched by contemporary insights, with particular reference to the traditions of indigenous peoples.

In "The CD and the Wilderness: Scott Russell Sanders's *Wilderness Plots*," Elizabeth Dodd examines his collection of historical folk narratives from an ecocritical perspective. She contrasts the book itself—with its undercurrents of environmental degradation attending the first settlement of the Midwest in an era when the region was still a frontier on the edge of then relatively untrammelled wilderness—to a rendition of the work recently recorded by a group of Indiana singer-songwriters. Her reading reveals how this musical (re)interpretation in the vein of the acoustic folk tradition sometimes termed "Americana" effectively "re-revises" these narratives of settlement with sentimental overtones, muting the poignant environmental themes implicit in Sanders's text.

In "Places that Push and Pull": Scott Russell Sanders in the Midwestern Educational Landscape," Elizabeth C. Homan describes how she incorporates Sanders's work in the classroom and the ways her own high school students respond to his perspectives as an *Indiana* author. As a teacher in a rural public school in Indiana, she examines how students develop their perceptions of the places and

landscapes that have shaped their identities growing up in the Midwest while responding to literature that suggests the rich historical and cultural legacy of the region. As she explains, students in Indiana and neighboring states are typically exposed to a literary canon prone to neglect or denigrate the Midwest. Accordingly, she incorporates Sanders's fiction and nonfiction to inspire writing assignments and community action projects and describes how her students re-examine their own Midwestern identities with a deepened appreciation.

Finally, in the same generous spirit he displayed by participating in the 2009 SSML panel devoted to his work, Sanders has contributed a new piece to this issue, "Daughters," drawn from a novel in progress. As the author himself explains, "The principal settings are Indiana, Ohio, and Vermont, with the Upper Peninsula of Michigan as a secondary setting . . . . With flashbacks to events ranging from the Vietnam War to the US invasion of Iraq, the book explores a web of relationships broken by war, divorce, betrayal, or accident, and it traces various forms of healing and restoration." Such range, geographically and thematically, seems a perfect emblem of the vision that informs so much of Sanders's work, with its keen awareness of place and abiding concern with acting ethically toward the natural world and in relation to one another. We hope that this special issue of *Midwestern Miscellany* will in its small way offer a tribute to the legacy of Midwestern writing historically honored by the Society's Mark Twain Award.

## ERRATUM

In the preface to the Fall 2009 issue of *Midwestern Miscellany* (volume 37), the author of *The Legal Imagination* was incorrectly identified. The author of *the Legal Imagination* is James Boyd White.

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NATURE REMAINS: SCOTT RUSSELL SANDERS'S  
*A CONSERVATIONIST MANIFESTO*

CHRISTIAN KNOELLER

Scott Russell Sanders opens his twentieth book—the collection of essays *A Conservationist Manifesto*—with an epigraph from Walt Whitman that seems to frame the entire undertaking with an elemental truth: the simple phrase “Nature remains.”<sup>1</sup> Reminiscent of the clarion call sounded in Aldo Leopold’s seminal environmental tract sixty years before, Sanders explores the many senses in which human civilization—and, indeed, our very existence as a species—ultimately depends on the ecological balance of the natural world.

The relentless destruction of natural habitat by extractive industries such as mining and logging—in tandem with the conversion of woodland, wetland, and prairie for industrial-scale agricultural uses, whether for crops or livestock—has, in aggregate, continued to diminish the natural abundance of North America to a small fraction of its original, pre-contact extent. This is, of course, a painfully familiar story that has played out over centuries and millennia in a variety of geographic contexts: the early deforestation of much of Asia, including India and China; the Industrial Revolution radiating from Europe around the globe; the Dust Bowl erosion in the United States; and the ongoing deforestation in Southeast Alaska and the Pacific Northwest as well as in tropical rainforests. Sanders characterizes the severity and cumulative extent of damage to the environment with dismay: “Pollution from rivers has created dead zones in the oceans... Through the use of heavy machinery in farming, we have lost much of our topsoil to erosion, and through the application of poisons we have reduced the fertility of the soil that remains. Through the clearing of forests, especially near the equator, we have

enlarged the reach of deserts. By draining wetlands [and] paving fields... we are driving to extinction countless other species” (8).

From his vantage point in the upper Midwest sixty years earlier, Leopold had likewise deplored this ongoing process of environmental degradation: “A theme of loss, sometimes depicted with biting sarcasm, pervades [his] narrative” (Backes 247). Sanders similarly concludes, “In our time, the work of conservation is also inspired by a sense of loss” (211). Like Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac*, Sanders’s influential essay, “Imagining the Midwest,” reflects a perspective deeply rooted in a particular place: “Of all regions in America, the Midwest is the one most easily—if superficially—subdued, and therefore the one where the failure of our efforts, the waste of riches, the betrayal of promise is most painfully evident. If the literature of the Midwest began as the story of arrivals and departures, it has evolved into a literature of loss” (*Writing* 48-9). Moreover, he declares, “[T]he scale of devastation caused by human activity is unprecedented, and it is accelerating... The spreading of deserts, clear-cutting of forests, extinction of species, poisoning air and water and soil” (211).

It is a pattern that has been long lamented by American authors and naturalists from John James Audubon and Henry David Thoreau in the nineteenth century to Wendell Berry and Gary Snyder in our time. With *A Conservationist Manifesto*, Sanders is well aware that he is picking up the environmental torch passed down in our national literature for generations. He acknowledges this legacy, naming precursors who have informed his thinking and that inspire him still. “In America, one can trace a lineage of dissident souls—John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Anna and Harland Hubbard, Thomas Merton, Edward Abbey, Wendell Berry, Annie Dillard, and a great many others—who found in Thoreau if not the inspiration then at least the confirmation for their own efforts at rethinking the meaning and conduct of life” (172). “The roots of conservation go deep in America back through such visionaries,” he declares in the preface.<sup>2</sup> “I belong to this lineage of writers inspired by Thoreau,” he adds, “however humble my place may be” (172). And yet Sanders also distinguishes his project—and the imperatives of contemporary conservationists generally—from those of the nineteenth century: “Unlike Thoreau and his contemporaries,” he writes, “we now face problems that are global in scale” (190). Consequently, “Our ethical dilemma is quite different from the one Thoreau faced. He did not practice simplicity because he was worried about damaging the planet or depriving future generations” (179).

In our own time, by contrast, the environmental consequences have grown ever more profound and, as Sanders sees it, now approach the absolute: "The dynamic equilibrium of the biosphere...is the single most important factor in the continued flourishing of life on Earth. Any human activity that disturbs this dynamic equilibrium...is a threat not only to humankind but to every other species" (186). For Sanders, "this is the ethical imperative of the call to simplicity" (188). In this essay, I propose reading *A Conservationist Manifesto* by examining its philosophical kinship to twentieth-century natural history writing rooted in ecological perspectives, specifically Aldo Leopold's celebrated *A Sand County Almanac*. In what ways does Sanders extend Leopold's land ethic, particularly in light of perspectives derived from Native American cultures?

Leopold's *Almanac* has achieved nearly iconic status, "often referred to as the bible of the modern environmental movement" (Backes 247). Scholars such as Robert Finch credit Leopold's book with no less than "providing the core for modern conservation ethics" (Finch "Introduction" xv). Sanders himself acknowledges that "Aldo Leopold gave us the beginning of this new ethic nearly a half century ago, in *A Sand County Almanac*, when he described the land itself as a community made up of rock, water, soil, plants and animals" (*Writing* 84), likening the book to "an ark...ferrying an ethical vision through story times" (14). In fact, he writes, *Almanac* effectively provided "an ecological standard for judging our actions" (*Staying* 112).

Leopold's project was famously grounded in his experiences caring for and attempting to restore the sand prairies, savannah, and bogs of an abandoned Wisconsin farmstead in a landscape originally formed by the meltwater of retreating Ice Age glaciers (Lopez 313). This was at once a humble and audacious undertaking, perhaps even a visionary one: exploring the highest use of land deemed marginal for agricultural purposes. As Sanders recognizes, even such neglected acres provide a wellspring of biodiversity: "Every unsprayed garden and unkempt yard, every meadow, marsh, and woods may become a reservoir for biological possibilities, keeping alive creatures who bear in their genes millions of years worth of evolutionary discoveries" (16). Sanders argues that environmental health is contingent on "dynamic integrity not only in a big wilderness but also in farms and forests that have been cared for through generations" (50). He attributes virtues to even such seemingly ordinary ecological preserves that are reminiscent of John Muir's evocation of wilderness as a source of

spiritual inspiration: "Every such refuge may also become a reservoir for spiritual possibilities, keeping alive our connection with the land, reminding us of our origins" (16). For Sanders, moreover, a heightened appreciation for the natural world has moral implications as well: "We need to enlarge our conscience so as to bear, moment to moment, a regard for the integrity and bounty of the earth. There can be no sanctuaries unless we regain a deep sense of the sacred, no refuges unless we feel a reverence for the land . . ." (*Writing* 64). Sanders extends this philosophy as a rationale for preserving undisturbed tracts of wilderness: "In America today, the only land with any chance of remaining wild are those we have deliberately chosen to protect. We need such lands...as we need medication and prayer, to call us back to ourselves, to remind us of who we are and where we dwell" (164).

Writing in the 1940s, Leopold declared, "There is as yet no ethic dealing with [humanity's] relation to land and the animals and plants which grow upon it" (203). In *A Conservationist Manifesto*, Sanders, too, seeks fundamentally to reorient contemporary environmental discourse by re-introducing just such an *ethical* dimension. Indeed, sixty years on, Sanders's project follows directly from a central strand of Leopold's argument in an essay included in *A Sand County Almanac*, "The Land Ethic":

All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts...The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals...A land ethic of course cannot prevent the alteration, management, and use of these 'resources,' but it does affirm their right to continued existence, and, at least in spots, their continued existence in a natural state. (204)

Leopold distills this philosophy in his foreword to *A Sand County Almanac*, asserting both a scientific and an ethical basis: "That land is a community is the basic concept of ecology, but that land is to be loved and respected is an extension of ethics" (ix). By the 1970s, pioneering ecologist and environmental advocate Sigurd Olson recognized Leopold's land ethic as the founding principle of modern conservation movements: "There have been many definitions of conservation. Aldo Leopold said 'It is the development of an ecological conscience'...he implied unless we develop a feeling for the land and an understanding of it, unless we become one with it and recog-

nize love, stewardship, and above all an appreciation of its intangible values, we cannot fully comprehend what conservation means" (120).

This stance encompassing both biological processes and human perception of nature was conducive to the dual purposes of Leopold's argument, as Backes outlines: "to present fundamental ecological principle in a way that would hold the interest of a non-scientific audience, and to inculcate love and respect for natural communities through what he called 'the land ethic'" (247). Sanders similarly pairs science and ethics in the title essay of *A Conservationist Manifesto*: "If we are to foster a culture of conservation, we will need to draw on the wisdom and moral passions of religious communities . . . We will also need to draw on a full spectrum of science" (218). For science alone, Sanders reminds us, runs the risk of eclipsing the reverence rooted in the mystical dimension of religion since "the achievements of science delude many into thinking that we have graduated from nature" (*Staying* 161).

"Who supplies memory and conscience to the land?" Sanders asks. "We can only apply [an ecological] standard if, in every biotic community, there are residents who keep watch over what is preserved and what is lost" (*Staying* 112). Accordingly, Sanders frames his own land ethic in terms Leopold would have found readily recognizable: "It's about claiming kinship. When I say that I belong to this town or watershed or region, I'm declaring membership, as in a family, and I acknowledge my obligation to behave in a way that honors, that protects the whole of which I am a part. . . . bonds of affection and responsibility between person and place" (56). Sanders invokes a passage from *A Sand County Almanac* to characterize the ethical concerns still faced by contemporary conservationists: "We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see the land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect" (55).

While Sanders's *Manifesto* represents in many respects an extension of Leopold's land ethic, it also breaks new ground in contemplating Native America perspectives on the natural world: "In seeking a way of life that is durable, we have much to learn from those indigenous peoples who have lived in a place for many generations without degrading their home" (217). Elsewhere, Sanders cites Kiowa writer N. Scott Momaday to contrast utilitarian European perspectives with Native America reverence for the land; Momaday describes in lyrical terms the desire to cultivate a deep personal

attunement to place. Relationships of indigenous peoples to the landscapes of North America, as Sanders acknowledges, are truly ancient ones: "We glimpse a past reaching back more than a thousand years in the architecture and lifeways of Hopi pueblos or Tlingit villages, and we sense an even deeper past among the ancient earthworks of the Upper Mississippi and its tributaries, at Cahokia in Illinois or the Serpent Mound in Ohio" (99).

Scholars such as William Cronon and Shephard Krech have deconstructed romantic stereotypes of Indians as protoecologists credited with having left the supposedly pristine wilderness of North America completely unscathed. Still, Sanders recognizes that the languages, stories, and lifeways of traditional subsistence cultures represent an essential heritage for humanity as a whole: "[T]heir experience can enrich our common fund of knowledge about living wisely on Earth" (217). Moreover, "informed by a sense of natural history, we should be ready to learn human history," Sanders suggests, "the tales that have been told, the songs that have been sung; we should be able to see more clearly how the land has invited certain kinds of work and worship and community, and how in turn our presence has transformed the land" (*Writing* 20). In this light, preserving cultural diversity is analogous to preserving genetic diversity in the natural world.

Traveling by canoe with his daughter through the Boundary Waters Wilderness, traditional homelands of the Ojibwe people, Sanders witnesses the ancient paintings on rock outcrops, the same cultural legacy that Louise Erdrich explores in *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country*. He speculates about their original significance as the icons of hunters as well as their use in ritualized, spiritual purposes. "I felt a kinship," Sanders confides, "with those vanished artists even as I sensed in their drawings their own feeling of kinship with bear and beaver and moose" (*Writing* 129). He even begins to imagine participating in such a tradition himself: "If I were to mix red clay and fish oil and daub pictures on a granite cliff, I would begin with an otter and a loon, and when I came to represent the human tribe I would draw two figures, side by side, a father and a daughter" (*Writing* 129). Paddling through the area, he makes offerings of tobacco in the Ojibwe manner with his daughter, as he had done there with his father many years earlier. He reflects on the historical—and ecological—significance of such a gesture: "When America was all wilderness except for occasional villages and orchards and cleared

fields, a journey of any distance was a serious undertaking, whatever your ancestry...you prepared yourself with song and sacred tales and prayers. Traveling through forest or desert, over prairies, along rivers, you could never forget that your life depended on the wild web of creatures . . ." (*Writing* 118).

Traditional narratives, in this view, articulate an ancient relationship to the natural world based on reciprocity and respect and, consequently, as Barry Lopez observes, the "conservation" of such oral traditions reasserts a primal bond with the land. As Sanders observes, "Sacred stories arise from our intuition that beneath the flow of creation there is order, within change there is permanence, with time there is eternity....The Apache word for myth means literally 'to tell the holiness.' By telling the holy, sacred stories ground people or the individual, not merely in landscape, but in the power that creates and preserves the land" (*Staying* 154, 156). The cultural legacy of such stories reveals our profound connection to the natural world across time: "We need to be able to recite stories about hills and trees and animals, stories that root us in this place and that keep us alive...that will help us to see where we are, how others have lived here, how we ourselves should live" (*Staying* 169).

"In the world of hunters, gatherers, and planters...in traditional cultures," he points out, "people who lived on the bounty of nature understood the need to protect the resource" (47). Sanders cites the example of the Iroquois, who historically deliberated on "the effects of their decisions on the descendents who will dwell in their homeland seven generations into the future" and thereby "acknowledge that membership in community entails responsibility for preserving the health of a place" (49). Sanders contrasts the Iroquois tradition of long-term stewardship with the expediency of modern commerce and consequent disregard for environmental consequences: "Looking seven generations into the future, could a developer pave another farm? Could a farmer spray another pound of poison? Could the captain of an oil tanker flush his tanks at sea?" (*Staying* 119).

Writing in the 1990s, Sanders observes in *Writing from the Center* that "[i]n America lately, we have been carrying on two parallel conversations: one about respecting human diversity, the other about preserving natural diversity. Unless we merge those two conversations, both will be futile. Our effort to honor human differences cannot succeed apart from our effort to honor the buzzing, blooming, bewildering variety of life on earth" (137). Moreover, "It is also dan-

gerous to separate a concern for human diversity from a concern for natural diversity. Since Europeans arrived in North America," he reminds us, "we have been recklessly drawing on beaver and bison, trees and topsoil, petroleum, coal, iron and copper ore, clean air and water" (*Writing* 82). In Sanders's view, social justice ultimately depends on protecting the ecological integrity of the natural world. He expresses this principle as a maxim in *A Conservationist Manifesto*: "Concern for ecological health and concern for social justice are therefore inseparable" (21). Natural and cultural diversity are effectively intertwined by DNA's double helix, as if wound on a single spindle.

As one practical example of the place of indigenous cultures in contemporary environmental matters, Sanders elsewhere contrasts conventional commercial timber practices that drastically alter the ecological profile of natural woodlands with those pioneered by Indian tribes such as Wisconsin's Menominee:

Unlike forests, which provide their own nutrients, capture and filter their own water, and harbor high levels of biodiversity, tree farms are usually plantations of one or a few species grown in large stands of uniform age and cut down well before they reach the maturity characteristic of old growth. Concerned about the replacement of mixed forests with industrial monocultures, several organizations now certify management plans for tree farms aimed at preserving biodiversity, water quality, and wildlife habitat. The Menominee Indians of Wisconsin have shown what sustainable practices might accomplish by harvesting, over a century and a half, more than two billion board feet from their tribal lands while improving the health of their forest and increasing the amount of standing timber. (qtd. in Lopez 369)

From the perspective of a wildlife ecologist and professional forester, Leopold had been particularly well positioned to consider the environmental consequences of land use policies and wilderness preservation. Yet he also introduced a philosophical and, at times, even spiritual dimension to the discussion of environment ethics: "Leopold professes that knowledge of evolution deepens human perception and that an understanding of ecology—the communities and interdependencies—broadens perception" (Backes 249). Like earlier naturalists such as John James Audubon, Leopold often professed this deep-seated personal reverence for the natural world in narrative accounts of time afield. Both authors lament the wholesale destruc-



tion of nature, and advocate measures for its preservation. Speaking from a twenty-first century perspective, Sanders recognizes the magnitude of the issue, and the stakes environmentally:

We are born to the legacy of the common wealth, and we pass it on, either enhanced or diminished, to future generations.... For the past quarter century, American politics has been dominated by attempts to ransack the commons for the benefit of the few. This plundering takes many forms: below-cost timber sales in national forests, over-grazing of public lands by privately owned livestock, oil drilling in wildlife refuges, subsidies for the nuclear industry and agribusiness. (29)

Sanders recognizes that such damaging practices in aggregate threaten potentially irreparable harm to the environment. "Western aquifers such as the Ogallala, are being rapidly depleted," he warns, "and rivers such as the Colorado are being drained" (Lopez 185). And such environmental disruption, as Sanders observes, is all too often irreversible: "Once wilderness is cut up by roads, oil-drilling platforms, landing strips and toxic dumps, it will never again be wilderness, at least within many human generations" (186). Echoing Leopold, Sanders reminds us that "each species is vital because it embodies an irreplaceable store of knowledge accumulated over millions of years, and it interacts with other species in ways far more intricate than we could ever fathom let alone recreate" (14). The restoration of damaged habitat is a rearguard action, a course of last resort. Preservation of remaining wilderness in its existing state is unquestionably a far more efficient and effective strategy, but one politicized by developers who demand unfettered access to natural resources.

If there is in fact a chance to dispel the prospect of environmental depletion, it may well be a now-or-never proposition. Yet, as Sanders reminds us, "the integrity we perceive in nature is our own birthright" and, in his view, ultimately the basis of both biological and social well-being (214). To redress environmentally disruptive practices in industry and agriculture, as Sanders advocates, will necessitate thinking about our relationship—and responsibility—to nature in a fundamentally different way, one Leopold would have readily embraced. This relationship, which might be termed *stewardship*, Sanders characterizes as a "reverence toward the earth," an obligation "to protect the sources of nurture and renewal." Pondering Thoreau's dictum, "in Wildness is the preservation of the World," Sanders concludes that "'Wildness' here is usually understood to be

wilderness. But I think it has a larger meaning.... 'Wildness' is literally 'preservation of the World,' because without it there would be no world" (*Staying* 139). Enacting such a philosophy, of course, entails monumental responsibilities: "[I]n our time we're called on to protect the soil, the air, the rivers and lakes, the forests and prairies, and the whole magnificent array of wild creatures" (54). This process begins, in his estimation, by no less than "reimagining...our place in creation" (*Writing* 85).

"To restore balance and defend the source of well being," writes Sanders, "we need a countervailing vision that is at least as powerful as that of the unfettered marketplace.... Rather than defining us as consumers, this new story would define us as conservers... To live by such a story, we need not be sages or saints; we need simply to be awake to the real sources of the good life" (32, 36). The "good life," understood in such terms, can only be sustained through the preservation of ecological balance. Maintaining environmental quality becomes essentially an issue of "enlightened self interest." And this philosophical stance has direct practical implications. Consider, for example, the prevailing model for agribusiness in the Midwest, where the fundamental soil-plant-animal-human food chain depicted by Leopold is stripped of both its biological and spiritual integrity.

As Sanders describes "[T]he deep topsoil is devoted mainly to soybeans and corn and is liberally sprayed with pesticides and herbicides" (37). This monocultural regime steeped in petrochemical products, including fertilizers, wreaks environmental havoc in many Heartland watersheds, as Sanders describes in the case of the White River in Indiana: "The resulting stew of toxins has made it dangerous to drink straight from the river, swim in the river, or eat fish drawn from the river" (37). To make matters worse, governmental entities charged with safeguarding environmental quality do little more than preside over the ongoing degradation: "the word [environmental] *management* is a misnomer here... at best our state and federal agencies are monitoring its decline" (37).

Moreover, the practices of agribusiness involved in livestock operations producing the nation's cheap meat, a "value-added" by-product from great surpluses of subsidized corn and soy, compound the pollution from fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides by applying enormous quantities of hog manure to fields laced with contaminants ranging from antibiotic residues to heavy metals, building up dangerous concentrations in the soil over time that, in turn, pollute water-

ways throughout the region. The vast dead zone at the mouth of the Mississippi represents just one direct and especially devastating consequence, as Sanders observes: "Agricultural runoff flushed down the Mississippi River has extinguished nearly all life in an area of the Gulf of Mexico that ranges from 5,000 to 8,000 square miles" (86).

Because conservationists almost by definition must relentlessly buck the tide of exploitation, they inevitably cross swords with developers bent on self-interest. As Sanders flatly observes, "Our present economy is driven by the pursuit of private advantage.... As a result of the triumph of the market, the human economy is disrupting the great economy of nature.... [as] governments and business promote endless growth" (215). Accordingly, commercial interests are prone to caricature environmental movements as not only obstructive but *subversive*. Like Leopold before him, Sanders explores an alternative paradigm in which conservation is framed not only in pragmatic but also ethical terms, grounded in the common good: the future of humanity predicated on the integrity of the natural world. Both Leopold and Sanders espouse engaging in public dialogue about preserving ecological balance based on such ethical principles.

Yet those who seek to oppose conservation typically represent environmental concerns reductively, even derisively—disguising what is inevitably really at issue: the further destruction of nature. Perhaps this is why Sanders opens *A Conservationist Manifesto* with an account of environmental activism run amuck—thwarted by the all-too-predictable response of municipal authorities: "In muggy July, police showed up at dawn with bullhorns, bulldozers, chainsaws, and guns to force a band of protesters out of a fifty-acre wood in my hometown of Bloomington, Indiana. The protesters were upholding the right of the woods to remain a woods, one of the last parcels of big trees left within the noose of roads that encircle our city.... They believe that a civilized community must show restraint by leaving some land alone, to remind us of the wild world on which our lives depend" (5).

This is anything but an isolated incident, of course: rather, it is evidence of a pattern of unrelenting development that Sanders decries, like generations of conservationists before him. Indeed, it can stand as a parable for our times as Sanders widens the field of vision from local to national: "Similar conflicts," he acknowledges, "are being played out from coast to coast." The United States Department of Agriculture calculates that some 2.2 million acres of

farms, forest, wetland, and prairies are lost to development in this country alone every single year.

Ongoing development compounds the extensive destruction that occurred during the nineteenth century. To put this transformation of the American landscape into historical perspective, consider that "in 1800, the grasslands that we glimpse in tiny scraps would have stretched westward to the Great Plains; the glacial wetlands that we've almost entirely drained would have stretched north to the Great Lakes and beyond, up to the ice-gouged vicinity of Hudson Bay; the hardwood forest that we've reduced to rare pockets of big trees would have stretched eastward all the way to the Atlantic and south to the Appalachian Mountains" (150). In aggregate, while "the primeval forest which in 1800 had covered some twenty million acres of Indiana territory.... by 1865 had already become rare. In two thirds of a century, nearly all the forest had been cut, the prairies plowed, the swamps drained" (130). In *Staying Put: Making a Home in a Restless World*, Sanders elaborates on the impact of such settlement and development along the Ohio River:

The pattern of habitat destruction and relentless hunting has been repeated for species after species. Bison, whose wide traces offered routes through the woods for the first roads, were still counted in hundreds at salt licks near the river on the eve of the Revolution, and yet within a few years they had been killed off. The lynx, wildcat, panther, elk, otter, bear, and wolf disappeared from the region; the green parakeet vanished altogether. The whooping crane dwindled almost to extinction, and so did the bald eagles. By 1900, coal slurry and oil slicks from wells and mines on the upper river had killed off untold species of fish. (81)

In that era, deforestation preceded at an alarming rate that Sanders reports approached a staggering 70,000 acres annually, eventually felling an estimated *half a billion* trees by hand. Viewed in a broader historical perspective, Sanders concludes, the fragmentation of contiguous natural habitat has reached such an extreme that "after living for thousands of generations in tiny settlements surrounded by wilderness, over the past half century humans have reduced wilderness to a scattering of remnants surrounded by our own settlements" (*Writing* 61). Indeed, centuries of settlement and development have resulted in the epic diminishment of natural ecosystems throughout much of North America. The fertile farm-

lands of the Midwestern Heartland are no exception. Sanders laments that only “remnants...of land that have survived in something like their pre-settlement condition have been left undisturbed, and that ...less than 1 percent of the territory that became Indiana remains in our day relatively pristine, unaltered by saws and bulldozers and plows” (129). In our time only fragments survive: “some five hundred acres, never plowed nor paved is the largest remnant of grasslands that once covered a few million acres of Indiana” and this preserve ironically borders an industrial wasteland today (137).

As Leopold observes, if the discussion of land use is framed in strictly economic terms, the long-term, environmental costs of development too often factor out of the equation entirely. Yet Sanders recognizes the danger of overharvesting that actually outstrips natural processed of regrowth:

Up to a point, trees may be harvested from a forest, crops may be harvested from the fields, fish may be harvested from the sea, and the regenerative power of nature will replace what has been taken away. If pushed far beyond that point, however, forests give way to deserts, as in North Africa; soils become sterile, as in much of the Middle East; and fish stocks collapse, as has happened to dozens of species, such as cod, that were once the mainstay of the human diet. No form of consumption is sustainable, therefore, if it exceeds the capacity of a natural system to replenish itself. (185)

There may come, in fact, a point of no return when “[n]o amount of ingenuity or effort on our part could restore balance to a destabilized global climate, mend the tattered ozone layer, or revive an ocean fishery that has been depleted below the threshold required for biological recovery” (29). the alarm being sounded here is a dire one indeed.

Sanders reminds us—sixty-two years after Leopold’s classic book was published—that we *still* “need a story that celebrates the true source of our wellbeing” (25) namely ecological integrity. And such a vision might well be informed by the traditions of indigenous peoples who dwelled in the Americas for millennia prior to the arrival of Europeans. In environmental terms, our well being as a species is inescapably tethered to that of the natural world itself. Above all, he writes, “diversity of living things...is a moral vision, one informed by an understanding of ecology and a reverence for life” (20). For as Whitman, that irrepressibly optimistic prophet of America’s collec-

tive destiny maintained, when human institutions with all their attendant foibles fall away, *nature remains*.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>References to Scott Russell Sanders’s writings are taken from *A Conservationist Manifesto* unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup>An appendix identifies several dozen seminal works of environmental literature that are recommended for further reading.

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THE CD AND THE WILDERNESS: SCOTT RUSSELL  
SANDERS'S *WILDERNESS PLOTS*

ELIZABETH DODD

*Wilderness Plots*, Scott Russell Sanders's collection of "tales" set in the land that became the states of Ohio and Indiana, presents a bewildering example in any retrospective assessment of Sanders's work. The book, despite its keyword-specific title, has escaped the notice of ecocritics ever since its 1983 publication. It has, however, gained a more popular attention through adaptation by a group of singer-songwriters who have recast many of the tales into songs. Their work is recorded on a CD also titled *Wilderness Plots*, as well as a DVD of the same name; they periodically perform the suite of songs throughout the Midwest region. Ironically, these contemporary champions of Sanders's tales lose sight of the wilderness in their enthusiasm for the human characters who transform that presettlement landscape. Meanwhile ecocritics, the very readers who might be assumed most likely to focus on the plight of that wilderness and the subtext of its extinction from the North American continent, have overlooked the book altogether. Yet these "tales"—fictional narratives rooted in history—are an early and potent example of what has commanded Sanders's creative attention throughout his career: people and nature, and the ethical implications of how the former treat the latter.

"Through stories we reveal what we've come to understand about ourselves and the universe," Sanders writes in his most recent collection of nonfiction essays (*A Conservationist Manifesto* 71). As manifestos do, these essays argue directly for Sanders's most strongly held beliefs regarding the necessity to live within limits. The book dismantles the notion, purveyed by "Merchants and media, pollsters and pundits" that "the purpose of life [is] to devour the

world rather than to savor and preserve it" (xi). Sanders looks to earlier individuals who've articulated the primacy of the larger-than-human world, as well as contemporary figures—from tree-sitters protecting old growth to writers like Ursula Le Guin—for exemplars of conservationist ethics. But he also examines his own development as a conservationist author, arguing for the importance of "liv[ing] by stories—grand myths about the whole of things as well as humble tales about the commonplace" (71).

"Let me begin my defense of stories by telling you a simple tale," he writes (72). Yet the "tale" he recounts is not simplistic; Sanders describes his authorial quest in *Wilderness Plots* to present what is at heart didactic work, drawing upon his reading of early historical accounts of white settlement in the Ohio Valley. Within these stories, he seeks to correct the prevailing mythology regarding humanity's struggle to conquer nature. "In gathering the settlers' tales and fashioning them into a tale of my own," he remarks in the essay, "The Warehouse and the Wilderness," "I revised the original lesson about triumph over the beasts into a eulogy and a warning about extinction" (77). He elaborates in an interview, "I see them [the tales] as explorations of the sources of our present time."<sup>1</sup> For Sanders, the tales constitute revisionist myth-making, subverting the storylines of Manifest Destiny and heroic settlement. In the hands of the singer-songwriters, despite their enthusiasm for the book and for Sanders himself, the subversive revision is in turn revised away. For Carrie Newcomer, Tim Grimm, Tom Roznowski, Krista Detor, and Michael White, the CD *Wilderness Plots* is a collection of songs "inspired by" these tales and frequently quoting directly from the published text, yet the CD presents a rather different subtext from that of the text itself. "[T]hese nineteen songs chronicle the settlement of the Ohio Valley," the jacket copy explains, by "a host of high-spirited characters...the kind of people who, in all ages, have made human history." Sanders's "warning about extinction" has largely been effaced from the musical adaptations of the *Plots*, leaving behind a far more traditional portrait and eulogy of people—remarkable (though also ordinary) forebears. The musicians' project is more nearly to sing the unsung makers of human history, rather than to "speak a word or two for nature."

Here, of course, I'm referring to Henry David Thoreau's essay "Walking," as Sanders does as well in his own saunter through American literature, "Speaking a Word for Nature." I'd classify "Speaking a Word for Nature" as an essay in the form of ecocriticism

rather than creative nonfiction, the genre for which he is best known. In this piece Sanders traces a canon of work based in “the primitive, primal earth, where the instinctive life heaves up” (*Secrets of the Universe* 206, quoting D.H. Lawrence). He laments what he calls “the barrenness” of contemporary fiction, and he urges a re-engagement of writing that will “write about wilderness or about life on farms and in small towns” (227). The conversational style of his work has been compared to “the Montaigne essay’s take on the simple life and the plain style, shorn of doctrine and dogma, a no-nonsense and no-frills approach” (Atkins 171). This no-nonsense style appears as well in both his *Wilderness Plots* and his ecocritical article, enacting a kind of subtlety and understatement that are not born of life’s simplicity, but rather of its appalling complexity.

Four years after the appearance of “Speaking a Word for Nature” and twelve years after the publication of *Wilderness Plots*, Lawrence Buell laid out four classic tenets of what he termed “an environmental text.”<sup>2</sup> Sanders’s *Wilderness Plots* neatly fulfills them all and would have made an excellent example for close reading and environmental-critical analysis at the time. Buell has since reconsidered his early formulations, suggesting that it is “more productive to think inclusively of environmentality as a property of any text—to maintain that all human artifacts bear such traces” (25). Personally, I worry about this critical shift, as it relegates the world—nature, the environment—once again to a kind of pre-Copernican status of backdrop and orbit, compositional ground for the human figure that—as if naturally—draws the reader’s eye and the critic’s eye. However, if we follow Buell’s lead here (and many critics do), we still find the *Wilderness Plots* offers the scholar ample territory for exploration. Meanwhile, like scholars such as Joni Adams and Rachel Stein, Buell now privileges environmental justice—the critical perspective that once again places social concerns of race, class, and gender in the forefront of literary investigation about the relationship between humans and the natural world.<sup>3</sup> By this test, too, *Wilderness Plots* presents fertile ecocritical ground.

The *Plots* recount stories of the people who lived (and died) in the brief period of human history that saw the onslaught of Euro-Americans into the homeland of the Shawnee, Chippewa, Delaware, Miami, Erie, Illinois, Iroquois, Kickapoo, Ottawa, Wyandot, Potawatomi, Ofo, Honniasont, and perhaps others whose names I not only don’t know how to pronounce but have never seen written.

Native people figure sharply in Sanders’s accounts of this frontier land: from their seventeenth-century attempts to turn away Robert Cavalier de La Salle’s quest for a mercantilist pathway to China, through Anthony Wayne’s campaign to destroy tribal orchard and planted fields—“the Indians’ soft belly,” as the tale in *Plots* recounts—“Stab them there, hard, and their will to resist the advance of white men would bleed away” (40), on through decades of skirmish and fighting until, as the title of a tale late in the book says baldly, “The Indians Lose It All” (116). The book’s chronological structure implies this continuing dispossession and one tale explicitly recounts how the sentimental cachet of the vanishing Indian rose in value as the original inhabitants were removed from the scene. In the nineteenth century, Ohioan Jessamine Mooney wrote poems and gave paid lectures decrying this violence and, as Sanders writes dryly, “The fewer the Indians who lingered in the valley, the more popular her verses became” (117).

From the continuing critique of the commodification of wilderness to the bald, appalling details of wild animal slaughter in “*Hunt*,” the book suggests that the ostensible heroism of so many individual lives collectively casts a great ethical shadow across the landscape. Another tale gesturing toward environmental justice is “*Freeing the Waters*,” in which the Mercer County people, persuaded to sell their land to build a reservoir necessary to supply the Erie Canal and then hired for its construction, leave an entire forest in the waste of rising water, “in this earthen trap,” as Sanders writes (108). These local people, swindled of the land they lived on, then fall sick to the “miasma”—the supposed “poisonous vapors” that arose from their own handiwork (with the help of mosquitoes, of course)—until one Shirley Hatch led a people’s uprising to undam the impounded water and bring an end to the malarial fevers. The commodification of the land for the distant capitalists results, of course, in diminished health for the watershed, all those hardwood trees left girdled, waiting for rot, as well as ill health for the working class people—the locals, who became little more than minions for capitalist progress. This particular tale implies hope, however, for healing: Hatch escapes any indictment for destruction of property and her daughter returns to health. Carrie Newcomer’s adaptation of “*Freeing the Waters*,” a song titled “*One Woman and a Shovel*,” nicely illustrates this same human accountability towards the environment. Newcomer’s lyrics say pointedly, “they hung their heads with grief and shame. And

Martha said we've only ourselves to blame [...] It's time to stand up, time to set things right." (Newcomer has further personalized the message: she includes among the valley residents she rouses to action the names of some of Sanders's family: Ruth, Eva, Elizabeth, Scott.)

In its fundamental "environmentality" (to return to Buell's revised emphasis for ecocriticism), *Wilderness Plots* is clearly situated in a dominant field of American literature. "Our ancestors wrestled with the land and its creatures for two and one half centuries before there were any cities or industries to speak of. We have all been shaped in part by that prolonged wrestling," Sanders writes in the book's foreword (8). This is a view shared widely by Americanist scholars, from Frederick Jackson Turner's account of the role of the frontier in American identity to Perry Miller's examination of the American mind's genesis amid Puritan visions of the godless wilderness awaiting European entrance. Yet Sanders complicates this familiar view with an opening dictionary definition for *plots*: "1) a piece of ground marked off, set for a purpose, owned; 2) a chart or a diagram; 3) a conspiracy; 4) the plan of action for a narrative. This specific assemblage of meanings doesn't directly correspond to what I find in any of the dictionaries at my disposal. It's a pointed, tailored presentation of denotation, omitting several other senses of the word that are extraneous to his purpose, and with the stark inclusion of "conspiracy" among the more topographic meanings, it hints at his subtext.

This little epigraph neatly points to the narrative emphasis of the book—these are *tales*, each one marked off and distinguished from the others by specific locale—but more importantly, I think, it indicates the "conspiracy" of ownership that has brought such destruction and death to the banks of the Iroquois' Beautiful River. The Euro-Americans' "plan" for the land amounts to a steady refrain of commerce and commodity. Buell's invocation of both Leo Marx and Lance Newman might be useful here: what is a stake is "a 'historical consciousness' attentive to the 'coevolution of material social and natural systems that has produced the present crisis' of environmental endangerment" (27)—that is, the "eulogy and warning about extinction" which Sanders himself mentions (*Manifesto* 77). By the close of *Plots*, the wilderness is gone, and the pages tally the human dead, like the final act of a Shakespearian tragedy. This may be an intensification of what Kevin Walzer identifies as the "invisible landscape" at play throughout Sanders's work. In this case, the unseen landscape is a burial ground, with most graves unmarked,

unrecorded.<sup>4</sup> As Walzer says of Sanders's nonfiction, "Sanders's [work] bursts with both local and global knowledge" (118); these tales of what was once the Northwest Territory belong to a narrative the size of a continent.

In the published *Plots*, the point of view remains always third person, close perspective, following the actions and interests of the historical persons Sanders's reading has illuminated. But again, lurking in the shadows and indicated in the stunned silences that follow some of the tales' concluding sentences, other, nonhuman "interests" are clearly implied. "And so the war with the beasts simmered on," Sanders writes. "Within five decades after the first white settlers arrived in Pilgrim County, these animals were extinct in all that territory: Wolf, bear, wildcat, beaver, black and yellow rattlesnakes, bald eagle" (76). His method in these tales is not rhetorical; unlike the more overt argument and "manifesto" of his nonfiction, the "interests" of nonhuman parties can be glimpsed only on the periphery of the ostensible human interest. This subtlety is, however, quite effective, since it simultaneously allows both the presentation and critique of the settlers' limited scope of vision. Sanders has said that he wrote the tales to seek understanding of the sources of American society's obsession with violence—violence against one another through wars and gun culture, but also violence against the natural world. Essential to this quest is the implicit recognition that what he also calls "wasteful" behavior—"we have squandered vast amounts of natural richness"—is, indeed, violence against a whole range of nonhuman interests, whether trees, bison, birds, or rivers (living ecosystems).

The ability to read accurately the record of those living ecosystems in the geologic record lies at the heart of "Ice Mountains and Hairy Elephants." In this tale, a nameless "government surveyor" explains how a "mountain of ice...had swept over this country long ago"; he tells the local people about now-extinct creatures, including the woolly mammoths, the "hairy elephants" of the title (101-102). In extolling the power of natural processes, Sanders's tale satirizes the townspeople's scientific illiteracy. "No one who lived within a day's walk of Palmyra Wilson's store had ever heard of a glacier," Sanders recounts, and when they do hear, they are not interested in the little science lesson the surveyor attempts to provide. Instead, they rely on supernatural explanations such as "angels landing there in the long-ago-days" or simply "one of God's mysteries" (101). The

implication of this tale is not confined to the mid-nineteenth century in the glacial plains south of Lake Erie. The rejection of both evolution by natural selection (which, of course, is the mechanism accounting for any extinction other than that by contemporary human intervention) and geologic time scales continues in our decidedly post-frontier age.

The tale relies on contemporary readers to place the little human conflict—the locals who “spat in the dirt, unconvinced” by the outsider’s lecture—in context. By the mid-nineteenth century, James Hutton, Charles Lyell, and Georges Cuvier had all contributed to an understanding of the earth’s geologic features. Indeed, in 1845 Lyell published an observation that in an area north of Boston, “The surface of the rocks...is polished, furrowed, and striated, as in the north of Europe, especially in Sweden or Switzerland, near the great glaciers” (6). In 1799, a mammoth was found frozen in Siberia, and scholars ranging from Georges Cuvier to Thomas Jefferson were interested in the bones emerging from the Big Bone Lick along the Ohio River that seemed to belong to the same species. Nineteenth-century artist Charles Willson Peale had painted “Exhuming the First American Mastodon” by 1808. It was a young science, but certainly directly pertinent to the land the settlers were making home. Ohioans may also notice that the township in question is eventually named Palmyra, for the store owner—not Glacial Township or Moraine Township or some other impersonal but locally significant signifier.

The musicians on the CD dramatize this tale, taking turns singing so that the voice of the surveyor is in dialogue with various township residents who insist, in the song’s refrain, “It must’ve been angels, yes, that must be why.” The last voice heard on the track are those of children, who, unlike those in Sanders’s *Plots*, don’t demur from their parents’ view. “It must have been angels,” they warble, suggesting ominously despite the song’s humorous tone that an eighteenth-century worldview is being passed down to the next generation, unchallenged and unrevised. This is the only time I believe the musicians imply greater pessimism about the material than does Sanders himself; I find it deeply effective. As a resident of Kansas, where creationism still holds out against modern scientific literacy, I appreciate this political subtext the song offers. But it is slightly different from that presented in *Wilderness Plots*.

The written tale notes that “only children and old people”—presumably those without more pressing work-related concerns—

remained to listen as the surveyor continues his explanation; the store owner himself “believed none of it. But he did put a shed over the furrowed sandstone, and charged a penny to anyone who wanted a look” (102). Sanders’s narrative concludes, once again, with commodification—this time of the very thing that the commodifiers claim to believe is “one of God’s mysteries.” It’s not simple rejection of science for supernaturalism that is the subplot here—it’s the exhaustive pursuit of profit that results in a kind of hypocrisy, charging pennies for a peek at a mystery of God.

Sanders’s sustained reminder that “Profit and Loss” (the title of another of the tales) are major themes for the settlers and are therefore the *cause* for the destruction of the wilderness is softened throughout the CD. Granted, the opening song foregrounds the destruction of the old-growth forests. “Whenever I look at trees, I see cities,” is the refrain of a song that recalls, jacket notes explain, the tale “Clearing for Sunlight.” The speaker is lonely, desperately so—what he longs for is company, not capital. Yet whatever Ethelbert Baker’s inner vision may be for the lands he clears in what would become Portage County remains obscure in the written tale; Sanders simply recounts the fact of Baker’s labor—felling the forest to plant wheat and corn, building a mill and a still before his death in the War of 1812. The song recalls another tale, “Cutting Road,” which recounts Ebenezer Zane’s “magical eyesight” which “had a habit of turning forest into tilled field, seeing roads march through swamps” (31). That tale concludes with “marshals and justices on horseback [traveling] deeper into the wilderness” along with the mail, “a seepage of letters” allowing communication with the world back east. While cities would certainly come to the landscape, fields and roads wire the first inroads; and even today, in the forested wilderness that remains in the Pacific Northwest, roads remain a great threat, with their mute power to fragment watersheds and open previously isolated country to reduction and transformation.

Sanders’s *Plots* unfolds in roughly chronological order, with the early tales focusing on the undeniably courageous early arrivals into the territory, such as the little family who brave “one hellacious thunderstorm,” and make their way to an as-yet-but plotted townsite of Aurora, Ohio. “Aurora meant dawn, he knew that. And his family was the dawn of the dawn, the first glimmering in this new place. The next settlers did not come for three years,” the tale concludes (28). Their courage and love for one another claim the focus of the song,

but the text includes hints of what is to come: the land is “cheap” and the axes “glinted on the shoulders” of the men who arrive to help the stranded family remove downed trees from the wagon track. With the chronological order of the tales shuffled on the CD, the grim foreshadowing is lost, and it’s easy for a listener to adopt an uncomplicated admiration for the Sheldon family.

The closing pages of the book present “The Manner of their Dying,” a series of one-sentence epitaphs for dead settlers, suggesting that dawn for one family has led to a bloody sunset for an entire historical era. In the CD, this appalled recognition of death and destruction is parceled into one-person song interludes and scattered throughout the collection, thereby suggesting that the deaths are isolated occurrences rather than the aggregate conclusion in Sanders’s original vision. Instead, the CD closes with an amusing inter-song, “Jug Whiskey,” which implicates Eliakim Goss who was “warned not to drink too much jug whiskey,” but didn’t listen.

I do not mean to suggest that the CD is facile or broadly stereotypical. Both race and gender receive sensitive, imaginative treatment in the songs. White and Black women appear as complex, sensitively drawn participants in frontier history. (Native Americans do not appear with quite the same specificity. Tim Grimm devotes two songs to encounters with Native people, told through the compromised perspective of white men; Grimm himself clearly designs these voices to be somewhat unreliable.) Both CD and book include the story of an escaped slave, Rebecca Versailles, who finds that in Ashtabula County, blacks are barred from attending the local schools; though the phrase never appears in either text, the doctrine of separate but equal is a wall erected firmly to exclude her children from education altogether, since there are no other black families for twenty-three miles. She enters into an unusual form of indentured servitude, making quills for use in the schoolroom in return for being permitted to sit there quietly, learning along with the white children so that she can, in turn, teach her own. Krista Detor’s nuanced lyrics sensitively invoke the imagery of the constellations in “the northern sky,”—Cygnus and Pegasus, both of whose wings symbolically suggest Rebecca’s longing for intellectual as well as bodily freedom. Not only that, the symbols are seasonally accurate: the original tale concludes that “after seven winters” of her efforts, all four of her children “were set to become teachers” (120). And indeed, both of these constellations appear at northern latitudes during the fall and winter.

Still, despite Detor’s use of natural symbolism, the narrative features the “human interest” with a clear denunciation of racism.

In addition to his condemnation of racism and sexism, Sanders also condemns what Simon Estok has more recently termed “ecophobia”: “an irrational and groundless hatred of the natural world” which is always “about power and control; it is what makes looting and plundering of animal and nonanimal resources possible” (208). Certainly, that is the presentation inherent in so many aspects of the book: from the felling of the forests to the slaughtering of the beasts; from the contextualization of human ignorance about evolutionary processes to the last tale’s insistence on humanity’s participation in the material processes of the biological world—that is, death itself. “The Manner of Their Dying” concludes: “Their dying was as various as their living, such a compost of souls” (128). The choice of “compost” to denominate the passing of these “ancestors [who] wrestled with the land and its creatures for two and a half centuries” (8) is revealing: The material results of even mythic figures reside in this world, and even the possessors of “souls” cannot escape their shared identity as fellow creatures (and casualties) of the biosphere.

Ultimately, the musicians’ muting of Sanders’s original “warning against extinction” shifts the role of the “eulogy” back to an exclusive focus on individual human deaths. This shift means that the project of the CD promotes a much more traditional and anthropocentric portrayal of the role of wilderness in the story of American identity. Interviews with the following musicians—included on the DVD documentary—reinforce this intent. Roznowski remarks on his interest in the tenuous yet heroic efforts of settlers, their quest for “everyday survival. People, very often anonymous, who are working day to day in a struggle just to get to tomorrow.” Similarly, Detor muses, “It’s always been a hard place to be, this has always been a hard place to be—the world. But within it there’s so much beauty.” Both views are familiar and accurate, yet also limited, since those very struggles “just to get to tomorrow” have decidedly not resulted in ecosystemic equilibrium, but rather, as Sanders observes, in one of the interviews included on the DVD, in the destruction of the “wilderness continent that our ancestors entered.” Of the interviews on the DVD, only Michael White’s suggests a more critical view. He says he considers wilderness to be synonymous with nature, and that “back in those days it was something to be feared or conquered, in a way, but I think everyone knows it’s just a matter of ...”. He does not complete the



sentence, before moving on to remark, "We might think we have the upper hand . . . but we don't." The tales, he suggests, might not be just a portrait of the past but "a preview of coming attractions." However, despite White's qualifications, the resultant CD lacks Sanders's critique—no less significant for being implied, through its narrative structure, rather than overtly stated through critical jargon—of what Peter Singer has called "speciesism" or "a prejudice or attitude of bias toward the interests of members of one's own species and against those of members of other species" (15).

It's ironic that a folk-music presentation of an environmentally subversive text should be, in this case, reactionary, restoring the mainstream ideology. Folk music occupies a contradictory location in American culture.<sup>5</sup> Though one branch of folk is aesthetically conservative, preserving the centrality of ballad-style narrative and pre-colonial ties to England and Scotland, it nonetheless has long been an arm of progressive US politics and liberal sentiment. As David Ingram has pointed out, the liberal folk tradition shows "confidence in conquering and mastering nature" (115). For these musicians, too, human concerns obscure the interests of the more-than-human world.

Sanders himself does not fault the musicians' shift of focus. He says he is delighted that the tales have "given rise to music that now has a separate life of its own," citing the power of "the folk process" to both pass along and reinterpret historical or artistic material. Yet not only does the CD alone fall short of his more radical and wide-reaching rejection of the nation's fundamental devotion to capitalist exploitation of natural resources—a continuing menace we all face in the twenty-first century. The documentary produced by the local public television station, available as a DVD also titled *Wilderness Plots*, includes excerpts from an interview in which Sanders discusses the origins of the tales. However, his remarks concerning our culture's violence against nonhuman nature—that is, Estok's ecophobia—were not included in the edited whole. Instead they are "extras" available on the DVD as mere outtakes. Anthropocentrism—speciesism—is so deeply pervasive in the American consciousness that it goes unnoticed, like those default assumptions regarding gender or race just a generation ago, and even musical or documentary projects with "Wilderness" prominent in their titles do not notice their own margin-

alization of the constituents of wilderness—the myriad species who are not us.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Unless otherwise identified, the source for all interview quotations for Sanders and the five musicians are from *Wilderness Plots*. Produced/Directed by Susanne Schwibs. WTIU Indiana University 2008.

<sup>2</sup>The non-human environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history. The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest. Human accountability towards the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation. Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text." the *Environmental Imagination* 7-8).

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, Adamson, Joni and Rachel Stein, "Environmental Justice," *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 7.2 (Summer 2000): 155-70.

<sup>4</sup>Walzer applies the term from Kent Ryden's *Mapping the Invisible Landscape: Folklore, Writing and the Sense of Place*. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1993.

<sup>5</sup>For example, see Reuss, Richard A. and JoAnne C. Reuss. *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics 1927-1957*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2000.

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PLACES THAT PUSH AND PULL:  
SCOTT RUSSELL SANDERS IN THE  
MIDWESTERN EDUCATIONAL LANDSCAPE

ELIZABETH C. HOMAN

In January of 2008, water gushed into the fields and across the roads of north central Indiana, closing schools and devastating homes. On the day our school re-opened, I drove past fields scattered with debris deposited by river water, which had ripped through homes miles away from the river's banks. That day my students told stories about waking up in watery bedrooms; others were not at school because they had been evacuated and were living in temporary shelters. Today, many of these homes have been cleaned and renovated, but floods still threaten the area every spring. This is my students' and my own personal and educational landscape.

When I think about the landscapes that have shaped me as a writer and a teacher, I rarely identify the Midwestern landscape or the central Illinois landscape. More often, I think about the dirt and tomato juice between my three-year-old fingernails in my grandmother's large garden or about the muddy river that ran behind my childhood home—a river I fell into one day in a failed attempt to impress a homecoming date. These are the stories and places that have shaped my understanding of landscape. In "Beneath the Smooth Skin of America," an essay included in Scott Russell Sanders's *Writing From the Center*, Sanders urges us to consider landscape more intimately than our society typically encourages—regions and state lines are arbitrarily labeled or drawn to satisfy cultural or political motives, but the "particulars, the subtleties, the varieties of all our places" individualize us more than regional distinctions (18). Inevitably, and I would argue unfortunately, the sociocultural dis-

tinctions attributed to landscapes tend to shape us more than the landscapes themselves.

Sanders questions the curricular tendency to spend a year teaching students about their home state by asking, "Shouldn't they spend at least as much time studying their home ground?" (20). And indeed, should they not spend more time investigating the places—not the regional characteristics or state identities, but the *intimate places*—that shape their identities and will forever influence their approaches to the world? A search through an Indiana textbook will yield no Indiana authors and very few Midwestern authors, which suggests that a focus on local places does not burden the minds of textbook representatives or state curriculum developers. This leaves the incorporation of place-based content up to the classroom teacher. Through the study of place-based writers such as Scott Russell Sanders and by writing their own place-based narratives, essays, and poems, students in the secondary English classroom become more invested in their classroom experiences and more intimately acquainted with the landscapes that shape their personal and educational selves. More importantly, though, through the study of place-based literature, these students are able to form a lasting bond with a landscape that they have been taught to devalue.

The Midwestern identity, Sanders argues, is a conflicted one; as he notes in "Imagining the Midwest," Midwestern writers are often absentee writers—for example, T.S. Eliot, Toni Morrison, and William Stafford all write of their original Midwestern places from the distant shores of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans (24). When writers write about the Midwest, most of the time they paint a picture of a Midwest that is dismal at best, smothering at worst (29). Indeed, the Midwest has become—at least in literature—"a repository for values that Americans wish to preserve but not live by"; it is a "waste of riches" and a "literature of loss" (39, 49). When asked to discuss their opinions of the places they come from, my students almost always begin by painting a dismal picture of their landscapes: "this place is boring," "it's ugly," and "there's nothing to do here." A dreary landscape indeed for our Midwestern youth.

Though teachers may need to hunt in local libraries to find positive or problematizing literature about the Midwest, it does exist, and

it is imperative that it be included in the curriculum. Robert Brooke and Paul Theobald argue that “education can always be connected to a local place, once we collectively begin imagining ways to do so” (Brooke 6), and Sanders notes that “every thread you discover in the local web of life leads beyond your place to life elsewhere” (19). Connecting students to their places and landscapes, therefore, creates a scaffold upon which students can build as they learn about more global issues. However, this feat requires some creative imagining from the teacher since our fast-paced society is unlikely to focus on the microcosmic goings-on of small rural communities. This tendency is particularly unfortunate when one considers that students’ understandings of their environments first are small and local, and are only later concerned with the larger issues of national civic life.

Sanders’s work proves exceedingly promising for classroom teachers in the Midwest (and in other regions) because of its engagement in narrative argumentation through creative nonfiction. My personal favorites, chosen because of the analytical opportunities they provide to students, include “The First Journey of Jason Moss,” a short story published in *New Territory: Contemporary Indiana Fiction* in 1990, and “Loving the Land,” a short essay in the January/February 2002 issue of *Audubon*. Students use these two texts in my classroom to examine their relationships with their local landscapes; discussions about responsibility to the landscape and the desire to flee the landscape encourage students to consider their relationships with their local places. Sanders’s creative nonfiction also offers new possibilities for student writers; as a genre, creative nonfiction is rarely emphasized in secondary education, which is unfortunate given the adolescent drive to explore creatively experiences and draw conclusions from them. Furthermore, creative nonfiction offers students a new and different example of argumentative writing by exhibiting traits not often seen in canned five-paragraph essays about issues with which students feel little, if any, connection.

“The First Journey of Jason Moss,” hereafter referred to as “Jason Moss,” offers students a character with whom they can readily identify because Jason shares with Indiana students an uneasy connection with his local landscape. While picking apples, Jason slips from a ladder; on his way down to earth he promises himself that if he lives

through the fall he will “set out on a trip and not stop until he [has] circled the planet” (23). He survives the fall, packs a bag, and takes off on foot towards Ohio. Upon his eventual return to Buddha, Indiana, Jason finds a town “unchanged by the passage of a year,” which he looks upon with “altered eyes” (41). He realizes that his hometown, where he had grown up and where familiar faces linger, is “a spot on earth. Just one spot” (41). “Like many Midwestern students, Jason itches to be elsewhere; his town ceases to hold any magic for him, and so he responds to the pull of other places and leaves Buddha, presumably permanently. However, Jason takes a piece of Buddha with him. His friend Doris, whom he met on his way out of Indiana, accompanies him on his second journey. It is unclear, then, whether Jason ever truly escapes his Midwestern landscape or whether he simply takes that landscape with him, a place against which he will evaluate future places.

This text allows students to examine their own connection (or lack thereof) to their own places. When asked whether or not they would make the same decisions as Jason, many students say they would leave the Midwest—a result, no doubt, of the negative impression they have absorbed from literature and the media. However, when juxtaposed with other examples of Sanders’s work, “Jason Moss” offers different opportunities for classroom analysis; in the essay “Settling Down” in *Staying Put*, for example, Sanders argues that, unlike Jason Moss, we should consider standing our ground; after all: “How can you value other places if you do not have one of your own? If you are not yourself *placed*, then you wander the world like a sightseer, a collector of sensations, with no gauge for measuring what you see” (114). In “Jason Moss,” Jason is the sightseer, the “collector of sensations.” However, in *Staying Put*, Sanders argues that we need to become grounded and belong to a place. This conundrum offers intriguing questions for classroom discussion as students consider why these conflicting messages (if they conflict at all) appear in Sanders’s work. In class, we discuss these contradictions: what makes us want to “stay put?” What makes us want to flee our places? Can we experience both urges simultaneously, and if so, which urge do we listen to? Students begin to think about the implications of leaving or staying put, discussing the ties that would be

broken if they were to leave their rural Indiana towns for larger cities. Some reconsider their initial reactions to their places as dismal, boring, or ugly. One student said, "While the corn doesn't offer much to look at, sometimes I go outside on a breezy day, sit in a lawn chair, and fall asleep listening to the leaves rustle. It's really peaceful." I could relate; on a recent trip to Boulder, Colorado, a place that I recognized as beautiful and awe-inspiring, I felt penned in by the mountains and craved the flat, open fields of the Midwest. Encouraging students to explore the contradictions inherent in anyone's reaction to his or her home landscape helps students to analyze not only their understandings of place, but the contradictions and juxtapositions in the literature they read.

As Sanders acknowledges in "Settling Down," people in today's society are constantly faced with a choice: "whether to go or stay, whether to move to a situation that is safer, richer, easier, more attractive, or to stick where we are and make what we can of it" (102). As students will likely acknowledge based on their own experiences, "we are a wandering species, and have been since we reared up on our hind legs and stared at the horizon" (108). Many of my students' parents are immigrants from El Salvador or Mexico who came to the United States to make a better life for their families. The children of these immigrants clearly understand the potential value of uprootedness. We move to make life better, which is not a problem; the problem arises when students believe life is better everywhere but here.

"Jason Moss" offers students the opportunity to relate to someone who feels urges similar to their own: urges to leave, to make a presumably better life somewhere else, or (as my high school students might say) to live somewhere with palm trees and beaches. As Sanders noted in an e-mail correspondence with me in 2009, "Jason Moss, who had lived a thoroughly local life, and who had come from an isolated place, felt what I suspect every small town or back road American feels sooner or later, and finally he gave in to the urge and hit the road." My back road American students certainly relate to Jason's desire to pick up and leave; few of them have been to Indianapolis or Chicago, and so places like Vienna, Austria or Kyushu, Japan—places Jason visits in the narrative—prove particularly enticing and exotic to them, just as they do to Jason.

Sanders's arguments in his creative nonfiction emphasize that we should find value in our local places and embrace rootedness in order to enjoy our Midwestern landscapes. This is a foreign concept for students who are used to authors who denounce the Midwest as backward and boring. Sanders's dissonant voice disturbs messages students have received in literature about their places and sets the stage for social action, especially when they encounter some of Sanders's more recent conservationist work. In "Loving the Land," a short 2002 essay which reflects on the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks, Sanders argues against initiatives which would rip down Midwestern and other national wildlife reserves in the name of national security. This essay, which can be read quickly in a single class period, invites its readers to consider the Indiana landscape as precious and meaningful. It also contains a call-to-action, a plea for the reader to speak out against initiatives that would ruin those things we hold most dear—namely, the landscape and our ties to it.

Sanders's newest text, *A Conservationist Manifesto*, offers possibilities for classroom study—especially when it comes to applying Sanders's philosophy to our lives and our landscapes. In the essay "Common Wealth," Sanders notes the destructive nature of "American films, television programs, and advertising" which "proclaim that happiness, meaning, and security are to be found through piling up money and buying things" (30). He notes that advertisers tend to deliver a similar message: "You, the isolated consumer, are the center of the universe; your pleasure, comfort, status, looks, convenience, and distraction are all that matter . . . the entire Earth is a warehouse of raw materials at your service" (35). Sanders's critique of mainstream consumer culture in *A Conservationist Manifesto* sits uneasily with teenagers, who are the primary target of advertising campaigns and who grew up around cell phones and HD televisions. Teachers who engage students in reading and writing about their local landscapes are in a position to enable these technologically adept students to become more critical consumers. Exposing students to writers who do more than just write and who call on their readers to do more than just read inspires students to take action in their own communities, whether that be action toward preserving the

historical tradition of local places or preserving the landscape and its natural beauty.

In response to writing by Sanders and other Midwestern authors, teachers should encourage their students to discover information about and engage with their communities. In my classroom, this manifests itself as a folklore collection project. After reading examples of Indiana writing and experimenting with their own writing about place, students have considered their own connections to the landscape, have identified a few of their own important place-based stories, and have contemplated their desires to escape spiritually or embrace their surroundings. The folklore collection project calls on students to find examples of locally relevant folklore from the surrounding community. After defining folklore and brainstorming places where we might look for it in the area, students choose themes for their class collections and begin searching.

Students interview members of their community and invite them to visit our school and share stories, art, music, and crafts. As they collect examples through online research, textual research, and action research, they record their findings. They reflect on the relevance and importance of each artifact to the local community and share their artifacts with the class. At the end of the unit, students reflect in writing and in discussion about their experiences; they return to writing they previously completed about their local places and add their new ideas to their previous thoughts. Often, students find that their original evaluations of their small towns, home ground, or family farms need to be revised.

Community-bound projects are not only culturally relevant and immediately applicable to students, they are motivating and interesting for students who are used to reading canonized texts set in places they have never visited and that deal with types of people they have never encountered. Suddenly, the Midwest ceases to be, as Sanders puts it, “the blank space over which one must tediously fly on the way to somewhere important” (*Writing from the Center* 163). Instead, the students’ places *are* the “somewhere important.”

In *Staying Put*, Sanders discusses how leaving a place makes it more valuable. After leaving his hometown in Ohio, he reflects on it as “a primal landscape, imprinted on [his] senses, a place by which

[he] measures every other place” (4). Students are unlikely to recognize that where they are now will define every place they visit or live hereafter; Jason Moss hints at this reality, but as I discovered when I moved away from my hometown, experience speaks volumes. However, students are capable of seeing the beauty in the details of their landscape and “diving through memory” for place-specific moments that have shaped their identities (5). They are also capable, through the creation of folklore collections or personal place-based writing, of speaking up for the Midwestern communities that have been silenced in literature. While they may not fully understand the imprints they leave on a place—or the imprints that places are capable of leaving on them—we can, as teachers, remind students that the Midwest is not a bleak and dreary landscape, but a landscape filled with beautiful contradictions, inspiring personalities, and endless possibilities.

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## DAUGHTERS

SCOTT RUSSELL SANDERS

It seemed curious to Lillian that her new daughter-in-law, Aurora, gazed so longingly at children everywhere she went, and yet had resolved not to bear any children of her own. Lillian had learned this dismaying news from her son, Martin, soon after the wedding, when she asked him whether she could count on becoming a grandmother while she still had her wits about her.

"You have far too many wits to lose them any time soon," Martin said.

"Don't be so certain," Lillian countered. "Consider your father."

"Dad's ten years older. Besides, he's not demented. He's only had a stroke."

Lillian arched her eyebrows. "Only?"

"His mind's as sharp as ever," Martin said. "He has trouble speaking, that's all."

"You're evading the question. Why is Aurora determined not to have children? Tell me it's a medical concern this time, and not another wife obsessed with her career."

"Aurora isn't obsessed with a career, Mother. And she's perfectly healthy."

"So the reasons are psychological?"

"They're personal," Martin said. "Can we just leave it at that?"

Lillian patted the coiled braid of gray hair at the back of her head, trying to restrain herself, but she could not help inquiring, "Did you know this before you married her? Or did she spring it on you later, as Simone did?"

Martin closed his eyes, and Lillian knew he was counting slowly to five, as she had taught him to do when he was a boy to dispel his

anger. Opening his eyes, which were almost black, like his father's, he said calmly, "She made it clear early on."

"You didn't raise any objections?"

"I said I wanted children, yes."

"And yet you agreed to remain childless?"

"I married Aurora for her own sake, not to pass on my genes."

"Well, she isn't at all like Simone, thank goodness," Lillian observed. "So perhaps she'll change her mind."

"I wouldn't get your hopes up, Mother," Martin replied.

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But Lillian did get her hopes up. How could she avoid doing so, when she saw how Aurora gawked at every baby they encountered as the two of them strolled in the park or ran errands around town? How could she keep from hoping that Aurora would change her mind, after the disappointment of Martin's previous marriage, to Simone, whom he had first seen playing the role of Maggie in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and who had never ceased to perform, it seemed to Lillian, right up to the day when the starlet took off for Hollywood to seek her fortune in films? Simone had insisted that having children would hold her back, not to mention ruining her figure. It went without saying that marriage to an architect who'd rather restore old houses in southern Indiana than design mansions in southern California would also be a hindrance. So when Martin agreed to a divorce, Lillian was neither surprised nor distressed.

Lillian's hopes for this new wife encompassed more than the prospect of grandchildren. Unlike Simone, Aurora clearly enjoyed living in the hill country of Indiana, and in the college town of Bloomington. She said the place reminded her of Ithaca, New York, where she had spent the past ten or twelve years. She had put herself through night school there while working days as a waitress, and then had become a court reporter. On moving to Bloomington, she submitted her resume at the courthouse and at nearby county seats. While waiting for an opening, she seemed grateful to spend time with Lillian, a gratitude that Simone had never shown.

Simone had never feigned interest in what Lillian might know about life, but Aurora proved eager to learn. As soon as the newlyweds returned from their honeymoon—a canoe trip in the Boundary Waters Wilderness—Aurora sought out Lillian for instruction in cooking, canning, gardening, sewing, decorating, and other domes-

tic arts. She accompanied Lillian to the library and the farmers' market, asking for recommendations about novels or vegetables. She requested Lillian's help in shopping for clothes, wanting to know whether this dress or that blouse suited her. What makeup might she use to give a touch of color to her pale cheeks? What could she do with her unruly hair, which looked unkempt when cut short, yet tangled when allowed to grow long? She even asked, shyly, for advice about the safest methods of birth control.

The trust implied by such inquiries was gratifying to Lillian. Yet she wondered how a woman could reach the age of thirty without having already learned such things. It was as though Aurora had never had a mother of her own.

For that matter, how could such an intelligent and attractive woman not have found a husband before Martin came along? True, Aurora didn't possess the glamorous good looks of Simone, but her tall, slender figure was graceful and her complexion was as creamy and smooth as the satin of her wedding dress, setting off nicely her auburn hair and hazel eyes. What Lillian found appealing in Aurora had less to do with these outward shows, however, than with the curiosity that lit up those eyes, the energy that animated her long limbs, the playful mind. Surely Martin was not the first man to fall for her.

Perhaps, before Martin, Aurora had taken lovers rather than husbands, the way so many young women did these days, or perhaps some hurt had made her wary of men. Lillian could only guess. In the time they had spent together since the wedding, she had learned precious little about Aurora's background, education, or family. Aurora never spoke of her life prior to the years in Ithaca, and whatever Martin may have known he did not share with Lillian. The only guests Aurora invited to the wedding were friends from recent years—no relatives, no chums from childhood. When Lillian had pressed her about at least inviting her parents, Aurora said only that her parents were beyond reach.

"Beyond reach?" Lillian had asked. "Oh, my dear, have they passed away?"

"I don't honestly know," was all Aurora would answer, in a tone of voice that warned Lillian against pressing further.

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Before Lillian's own daughter, Yaffa, died of a cerebral hemorrhage at fifteen, they had kept nothing from one another. Or at least

so Lillian wished to believe. Yaffa, her firstborn, afflicted with epilepsy and subject to seizures, had always been frail, quite the opposite of Martin, who came along two years later. Because Martin was robust, Lillian could focus her attention on her vulnerable daughter. Not that she didn't love her son; she had simply counted on Martin to thrive, and he had done so, excelling in school and sports, working a paper route, riding his bicycle rather than begging for lifts, arriving home at the promised hour, cleaning up his room without being instructed.

Had Martin required more direction, it would not have come from Lillian's husband, Solomon, who took only a passing interest in all but a few adults, and only a puzzled interest in children, including his own. Solomon's detachment had been evident to Lillian from their first meeting, at Cambridge University, where he was earning his PhD in mathematics while she studied classics. He was a scholarship student from a village in Iran, where, she would learn, Assyrians had been living since the fall of their empire 2,500 years earlier, and she was a scholarship girl from Nottingham. They met at a Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament rally, and afterwards they walked along the River Cam discussing Aristotle's *Logic* and Euclid's *Elements*, which for Lillian were touchstones of Greek language but for Solomon were germinal efforts at disclosing the order of the universe. As they followed the river path, bicyclists cruised by, children dashed in and out of nearby shrubbery playing tag, bawling babies rolled past in perambulators, raucous students poled by in punts, and to all of this commotion Solomon remained oblivious. He was attuned only to ideas.

Smitten by Solomon's husky accent, the lion-like angularity of his face, the glossy darkness of his deep-set eyes and wavy hair, Lillian persuaded herself that she could bring him down from the clouds. She failed, of course, but this did not keep her from marrying him, or from staying married these thirty-odd years. Solomon's accent, strong features, and dark coloring derived from his Assyrian ancestry, as did his old-fashioned views on the role of wives. A wife, he informed her, was to be first of all a mother; she was not to hold a job, nor to deal with money, aside from the allowance her husband doled out to her; she was not to voice opinions on religion or politics; she was to dress demurely when she left the house, and was to avoid the company of all males except for close relatives. Lillian obeyed only those rules that agreed with her own preferences and

Quaker upbringing, such as dressing sensibly and treating faith as a private matter. Less by preference than by necessity, she held no paying job until after Yaffa's death.

The job that lured them from England to America was Solomon's appointment at Indiana University, where he published influential papers on topology and ascended to the rank of distinguished professor in record time. He was not yet forty when he began receiving offers of endowed chairs at some of the fabled centers for mathematics—in Berlin, Budapest, Princeton, even back in Cambridge. By then, however, Lillian had two young children to care for, and she refused to move. She might have uprooted Martin, but not Yaffa, who was under treatment by specialists at the university's medical school. Each time an offer arrived, Solomon huffed and puffed about accepting it, but Lillian would not yield, and he soon drifted back to his study. It troubled her that she might be hampering his work. To ease her qualms, she reasoned that Solomon did not conduct his work in ordinary three-dimensional space, where children skinned their knees and bills came due, but in a mental space populated by vectors, lattices, infinite sets, and other arcana, and he could enter that realm as easily in Bloomington as in Boston or Bucharest.

As the years passed, Solomon grew ever more abstracted, and Lillian came to accept his aloofness as the shadow side of his brilliance. He responded to Yaffa and Martin as if they were barbarians with whom he had somehow come to share a house—barbarians not because of their manners, as they were well-behaved children, but because of their obscure habits, moodiness, and irrationality. He could not imagine what to do with them or say to them, and so he left their upbringing almost entirely to Lillian.

What this meant, in practice, was that Martin looked after himself, because Lillian was busy taking Yaffa to doctors and therapists, monitoring her medicine, making sure she got enough rest, keeping her away from high places lest she tumble in the midst of a seizure, watching over her day and night. When a vessel burst in Yaffa's brain in spite of all these precautions, Martin had just turned thirteen. For Lillian, his childhood was mostly a blur. She remembered even less from the months following her daughter's funeral, when she sank into a numbing darkness that blanked out everything but pain.

Solomon responded to Lillian's turmoil by withdrawing further into his ethereal work. But Martin did everything he could to ease her out of her gloom. At an age when his friends were rebelling

against their parents, Martin offered to help her in the garden, to cook with her, walk with her, sing her a song; but she could not accept these gifts. With money from his paper route, he bought her a necklace, a pair of fuzzy slippers, a silk scarf. But she could not bring herself to wear them. She would not open the Greek and Latin volumes he brought her, books she had all but memorized during her studies at Cambridge. She would not go with him to Quaker Meeting. She would not touch the tapioca or tea he made for her. You've got to eat, Mom, he'd say. You've got to go outdoors, get some sunshine. His voice came to her as if down a lightless tunnel.

Then one day he brought word that a local cabinetmaker was seeking an apprentice. The news stirred a faint yearning in Lillian, for when she was a girl she had loved nothing more than to keep her father company as he made furniture in his basement workshop. Sensing her interest, Martin kept after her, as if he were fanning a spark in the ashes. At last Lillian agreed to clean herself up, dig out clothes that might look decent on her emaciated frame, and pay a visit to the cabinetmaker. The smell of sawdust transported her back to her father's shop, and for the first time since the funeral, her eyes filled with tears that had nothing to do with Yaffa. After noticing how she stroked a plank of walnut fresh from the planer, the cabinetmaker agreed to take her on. Month by month, as he taught her about the tools, the wood, the craft, she gradually worked her way back from despair.

When the cabinetmaker retired, Lillian took over his business, specializing in bookshelves, desks, and other fittings for libraries and offices, a dependable trade in a university town. Indeed, there was more work than she could handle, especially now that Solomon required so much looking after and Martin was too busy with his architecture practice to lend a hand. Over the years Lillian had hired apprentices, high school girls who had no ambitions for college, but each of them had married and moved on. What she needed was a partner, someone who would learn the trade and stay. What she needed was for Yaffa to be alive and healthy, fascinated by wood, happy to work alongside her mother. Lillian ached whenever this longing arose, but she could not keep it from rising.

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"No prospects yet in the courts?" Lillian asked Aurora on one of their Saturday morning walks, a few months after the wedding.



"Not yet," Aurora answered. "The clerks say there's hardly any turnover. It was that way in Ithaca. No reporter quit the whole time I worked there. I got my job only because a lady retired."

They had set out later than usual that morning, after dawdling at the farmers' market to select green beans and tomatoes for canning, and already the August sun was beastly hot. They were both slick with sweat, and Lillian was panting. At fifty-seven, she had a right to pant, for she was a quarter century older than Aurora, who never got winded. They kept up a good pace, except when they passed by playgrounds or the swimming pool in Bryan Park, where Aurora slowed up to look at children.

As they paused to drink at a fountain near the kiddie swings in the park, Lillian posed a question she had been turning over for some time. "Until there's an opening in the courts, what would you think of trying your hand at woodworking?"

"In your shop?" Aurora said.

"It's just a notion. If you'd rather not—"

"Oh, I'd love to. Only I don't know the first thing about it."

"Then let me teach you."

The offer hung there for a moment while Aurora watched a squealing youngster glide back and forth on a swing. Then she turned her green, shining eyes on Lillian and said, "That would be wonderful."

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The canning and pickling suffered that fall, because Aurora and Lillian both preferred working in the shop to working in the kitchen. Some afternoons, while gluing up bookshelves or truing the legs on a table, they lost track of time, and Martin brought them supper, after having fed Solomon. As he came in the door, Lillian would glance at the clock, exclaim at the hour, and wonder aloud what sort of wives would leave their husbands to fend for themselves. Martin would only laugh, give them both kisses, deposit the sacks of Thai or Indian or Chinese takeout, and slip away to his own work.

During the early weeks of her apprenticeship, Aurora vacuumed up sawdust, put away tools, learned to identify the various woods by their grains and smells, and watched Lillian's every move. Gradually she began working with the safest machines, the sanders and drill press, then she graduated to the planer and router, and by winter she was using the band saw and table saw and lathe. Lillian showed her how to measure with precision, how to use her fingers to judge incre-

ments too subtle even for rulers, how to sharpen blades. She taught her the art of finishing with linseed oil, varnish, and beeswax. She taught her how to choose a board from the stacks of cherry, walnut, maple, hickory, oak and other woods that filled one end of the shop.

Aurora agreed to accept an hourly wage only because Lillian insisted on paying her. Even if her daughter-in-law had not been so quick to learn, so meticulous, so deft, Lillian would gladly have paid for the pleasure of her company. As they worked, they listened to jazz and classical music on the radio, or to reggae, ballads, and blues on CDs. Aurora had taken to wearing her hair coiled in a braid, like Lillian, to keep it out of the machinery, but the wild cinnamon curls would often come undone, and Lillian would brush them out, lingering more than she needed to, and braid them anew. No matter how busy they were, Lillian insisted they stop work at midmorning and midafternoon to have tea. They laughed a lot. When listening to the news, they second-guessed the reporters, quarreled with the politicians, hooted at the military apologists, scoffed at the celebrities.

One day, they were assembling a dresser, squaring the joints and applying clamps, when the president came on the radio. They booed as soon as they heard his snarly voice, and they booed more loudly when he threatened to launch yet another Middle Eastern war, this time in Iran. Lillian knew their taunts would not deter the warmongers in Washington, yet it buoyed her spirits to share this moment of indignation with Aurora. After the news gave way to a Vivaldi concerto, Lillian told her about Solomon's rules for wives, including the taboo on talking about politics and religion.

"Really?" Aurora said. "Our sweet Solomon? He seems so mild."

"The stroke has mellowed him," Lillian said, "and so has his stubborn wife. He would have been a bullying old patriarch if I'd knuckled under."

"Martin's not at all like that. He talks with me about the news. He's always asking me what I think. I worry I don't think enough, or maybe I'm not smart enough."

"You've no shortage of brains," Lillian reassured her. "You just haven't read as many books as Martin has."

"You're right about the books. We never had any when I was growing up, and I never had time to go to the library." Aurora grunted as she tightened a clamp on the dresser. "There's a lot I didn't have time for. It was pretty much school, work, and sleep. The same for

my mom, I guess, but without the school. She wanted to be an artist, but she gave that up when she married my dad. I never heard her say a word about politics or books or ideas, or, really, about anything except what had to be done next. Not because my dad bullied her, I don't think. She just didn't have any spare breath."

This was the first time Aurora had volunteered information about her parents, and so Lillian proceeded gingerly. "Did you have a large family?"

"I'm the only child. Mom wanted a boy, and she kept trying. She miscarried a few times, but she never could get another baby."

"She must have doted on you all the more," Lillian suggested.

"She might have, if she hadn't been so worn out. She was always in the kitchen."

"Did you help her with cooking?"

"I was usually waiting tables, or sweeping up the place. And then I had homework to do."

"Your parents ran a restaurant?"

Aurora was slow to respond, smoothing her hand over the top of the dresser. And then, as if having made a decision, she said, "They ran a bar. Still do, I suppose. A place called the Iron Ore Tavern." She glanced warily at Lillian. "I never told you, because I was afraid you'd be upset to know your son married the daughter of a bar-keeper."

Lillian waited a few breaths before asking, "Was this in Ithaca?"

"No. In Cleveland."

"So that's where you grew up?"

"That's where I was a child. I did my growing up after I left."

The drop in Aurora's voice was a sign to Lillian not to ask any more questions just now. So she put on a CD of ragtime piano pieces, and the two of them moved around the workshop to a syncopated beat.

\*

Heartland Fine Woodworking occupied an old limestone mill that Martin had renovated, one of his first jobs after returning to Bloomington. His return had been precipitated by Solomon's stroke—"You'll be needing help, Mother," Martin had insisted—but Lillian sensed that he was glad of an excuse to set up practice in his hometown. Simone was not glad about the move, to say the least. She considered the local theatre companies unworthy of her talents.

She never set foot in Lillian's shop, and regarded furniture making as a hobby rather than a craft. But Simone's discontent and eventual departure for Hollywood were old history, easily forgotten now that Lillian had a new daughter-in-law who hummed along with the saw blades and whirling belts.

The shop was on the south side of town, near the high school where Martin had graduated and Yaffa had completed her one and only year. The mill, which had shipped stone to building sites from coast to coast, had itself been constructed of limestone, with walls two feet thick, as solid as a fortress. Designed to house giant machines and handle ten-ton quarry blocks, the space was much larger than Lillian required. The windows were set high in the walls, as in the clerestory of a cathedral. The steel roof trusses looked brawny enough for a railroad trestle. It was hard to heat in winter, and in summer, when the windows were opened to let in a breeze, pigeons and swallows flew in and out.

Martin offered to fix up a smaller building, or even to design a new one—quite a concession from an architect who believed that existing buildings should be restored and put to good use before we erected any more. But Lillian preferred to stay in the old mill, with its reminders of skillful work. In doing the renovation, Martin had salvaged blueprints from various limestone jobs—a portico for a statehouse, columns for a bank, window tracery for a church, the façade of a museum, an angel for a cemetery—and these he mounted on the walls, alongside graffiti where men had scribbled calculations. The thresholds in doorways had been worn hollow by the passing of boots. Rusty spots on the floor marked where huge saws and lathes and planers had once stood. Lillian's own machines were small by comparison, and the dust she made from sawing wood smelled sweeter than the dust from stone. Yet she felt a kinship with the old cutters and carvers who had labored here for so many years.

\*

In December, Aurora finally received an offer of a court reporter's job, from a neighboring county. When she hesitated over accepting it, Lillian asked, "Isn't this what you've been waiting for?"

"It's what I've been trained to do."

"Well then?"

They were staining balusters as they talked, quiet work that allowed them to take off their ear protectors. Still, there were long pauses between Lillian's questions and Aurora's replies.

"You know," Aurora said at last, "in all the years I worked in the courts, I never laughed. I barely looked up from the keyboard. I tried to hear only the words, so I could get them right, and not to follow the stories, which were always so angry or sad."

"I suppose people end up in court because someone's been hurt," Lillian said.

"That's exactly it." Aurora dipped her brush in the stain, held it poised above the wood. "I sit there all day recording quarrels and betrayals. There's cruel things, like boys mugging old ladies and people starving their dogs and mothers leaving babies in hot cars with the windows rolled up. There's knifings and shootings. Husbands beat their wives and wives cheat on their husbands. People get fired and lose their insurance. People sue one another just to be mean. Drunks plow into kids waiting for the school bus. And I type it all down without knowing who's lying and who's telling the truth."

Hearing the anguish, Lillian said quietly, "That must be terribly wearing."

"It is. It really is."

To fill the silence that followed, Lillian removed the last of the balusters from the lathe and compared it to the original provided by Martin. He had ordered seven of them, to replace those missing from a stairway in a farmhouse he was restoring. Although her hands were occupied, Lillian's mind was on her daughter-in-law, who seemed like a wary creature—a coyote or a fox—that might run and hide if looked at too directly.

Aurora laid down her brush and ran her fingers along the freshly turned baluster Lillian was holding. "As smooth as a baby's bottom," she murmured. Suddenly her eyes misted and the corners of her mouth turned down. "My mom used to say that."

"Do you miss her sometimes?" Lillian asked.

Aurora shook her head. "I can't talk about her."

"Well then, we won't. It was rude of me to ask." Lillian rubbed the baluster with a tack cloth in preparation for staining.

After taking several rapid breaths, Aurora said, "What I really want to do is go on working here with you."

Lillian kept her eyes on the wood and her voice calm. "You do?"  
"Could I?"

"Why, of course, dear, of course. But are you sure?"

"I'm sure. That is, if you really need the help."

"Oh, my word, you can see how I need your help. Orders are backing up. And Martin alone keeps me more than busy fashioning parts for his decrepit buildings."

"They are decrepit, aren't they?" Squeezing out a little laugh, Aurora wiped the back of a hand across her eyes. "They're wrecks, really, when he starts in on them."

"But it's amazing how he brings them back to life."

"Yes, I've seen that in photos. Before and after, and all the stages in between."

Now Lillian gazed openly at her daughter-in-law, who seemed less wary, her face brightened by hope. It was a look Yaffa used to get when some new therapy promised relief from seizures. The resemblance prompted Lillian to say, "I suppose I deserve some of the blame for Martin's devotion to fixing up wrecks."

"How so?"

"I couldn't bear to stay in the house where my daughter died. Every room was saturated with memories of her. So I badgered Solomon into moving, and the only place we could afford near campus was a shambles—an old Victorian that had been carved into apartments for students, who'd abused it for years."

"The house you're in now?"

"Yes, that one."

"But it's gorgeous."

"That's because Martin and I restored it, from the foundations to the weathervane, including much of the woodwork, which he and I replicated at the shop. It's what he did on weekends during high school while other kids were playing soccer or cruising the mall. It's why he stayed here in Bloomington for college. The work for me was a way of healing. I couldn't save my daughter, but I could save this battered house. For Martin it began, I suspect, as a way of caring for me. But it clearly got into his blood."

Aurora frowned. "What do you think he'll say if I turn down the reporter's job?"

"He'll want you to do whatever makes you happy," Lillian said.

The effect of Aurora's sudden smile was like a lamp coming on in a window at night. "Being here with you makes me happier than anything I've ever done before."

\*

Over the course of that winter, as they worked in the shop or sipped tea or took their morning walks, Aurora disclosed more of her story to Lillian. The Iron Ore Tavern was located near the docks in Cleveland, and catered mainly to factory workers and off-duty cops and crews from the Great Lakes ships. Her parents bought the place with a disability check her father had received when he left the Navy—ruined his back, although you'd never have guessed it from the way he broke up fights and threw drunken louts into the street. Her parents didn't know a soul in Cleveland, but that was where their Navy hitch had ended, and it was a port, with shipyards and sailors. Her father served drinks; her mother cooked; and Aurora, when not in school, waited tables and mopped the floor and cleaned the toilets. Once she was a teenager, she also helped attract customers, according to her father. Not that she was pretty, her father pointed out, she was just fresh, like any girl at that age, and men liked having her around. There never were quite enough customers, which is why her parents couldn't afford to hire any help.

Aurora got mainly Bs in school. She could have done better if she'd had more energy left over for studying. But by the time she climbed upstairs to the apartment after the bar closed, with maybe five hours before she had to get up again for school, she could barely keep her eyes open. Along about age sixteen, she began wondering what a girl with no money and a report card full of Bs could ever do for a living. The answer came to her one morning while she waited for the bus to school across Euclid Avenue from the Academy of Court Reporting. The Academy's plate glass windows were plastered with signs saying how much demand there was for court reporters and how much they earned. Back then, she had no idea what court reporting was, but when she finally got a chance to go to night school, all those years later in Ithaca, that is what she trained to do.

Aurora was waitressing at a hotel in Ithaca, she told Lillian, when Martin began his architectural studies at Cornell. The two of them attended Quaker meeting and occasionally spoke after worship, but they were no more than casual acquaintances, for Martin was already attached to Simone. Having seen Simone on stage, Aurora could understand why Martin, or any man, would be attracted to her. Of course Aurora was not invited to the wedding at the Meeting House, but she did serve hors d'oeuvres at their wedding reception, in the restaurant at the hotel. And she remembered seeing Lillian there, so

elegant in a pearl-colored dress, and Solomon so handsome in his tuxedo. When Martin completed his degree, and he and Simone moved to New York, that was the last Aurora expected to hear of them.

But then one day several years later she was stocking shelves at the Ithaca food co-op, where she worked when court was not in session, and who should come down the aisle but Martin. He was in town to give a lecture at the architecture school. He told her right away about the divorce from Simone, then asked her out to dinner. Over the meal, Aurora allowed herself to look at him as a man she might be allowed to love. She had been attracted to him in the earlier days, but had kept her distance because of Simone. And even now, with Simone out of the picture, Aurora smiled to think how unlikely it would be for Martin to love her in return. As they ate, talking of this and that, he began telling her about Yaffa's death. He'd known his sister was ill, he said, but had never imagined she could die. He seemed about to cry, but fought it back, the way men do, and he apologized for telling such a dark story. But Aurora said no, no, you needed to tell it.

Then he walked her home through the muggy midnight air—it was July—and they stood awkwardly on the porch, neither knowing how to part. Aurora said what a happy accident it was for them to have met again. And then Martin admitted it wasn't an accident. He had come searching for her, after hearing a song about a woman named Aurora, and then buying the album, and finding inside it a photograph of a woman who bore a striking resemblance to her.

The woman in the photograph lay in mourning atop a grave, Lillian knew, for Martin had shown her the picture. And this grieving woman bore a strong resemblance not only to Aurora but also to Yaffa, a parallel that took Martin by surprise when Lillian pointed it out. She knew from listening to the album that the Aurora of the song had become pregnant by a sailor who abandoned her and died at sea, leaving the girl to raise the child alone. What portion of the song was taken from life and what was art, Lillian couldn't guess, nor could she guess why the song and picture had inspired Martin to seek out this woman whom he had known only casually during his graduate school days. Whatever the causes might be, Lillian rejoiced in the outcome.

\*

Now and again Aurora would apologize for rattling on about herself, and would invite stories from Lillian, especially ones about Martin and Yaffa as children.

"Do you think about Yaffa often?" she asked one afternoon over tea.

"Nearly every day," Lillian replied.

"Is it always painful?"

"Not always. We had many happy times. She was a bright girl. A lot like you, really." Lillian stirred honey into her tea. "But there's an underlying sadness that never goes away. A sense of incompleteness."

"Would it be the same if Martin was the one who'd died?"

Lillian pondered the question before saying, "Of course I'd be heartbroken to lose Martin. But, no, it wouldn't be the same. I can't explain the difference, really. A mother and daughter are close in a way a mother and son never can be. You do so many things together because you're female, I suppose. You understand one another's bodies. You face the same pressures and fears out there in the world. You're allies, in a way."

Another day, they were sitting on a bench beside the playground at Harmony School, watching children clamber over the monkey bars. Whenever a child neared the top, Lillian tensed, her body retaining the fear that a seizure might lead to a fall.

"I can't get over their energy," Aurora said. "Just look at them."

"Yes." Lillian smiled to hide her unease. "If we hooked them up to a dynamo, they could light the whole neighborhood."

Aurora watched the children in silence. She and Lillian had eaten mulberries picked from a tree beside the schoolyard, and their hands and lips were stained purple. The color made Aurora's mouth look bruised, which unsettled Lillian.

Without taking her eyes from the children, Aurora asked, "Have you ever done anything unforgivable?"

"Unforgivable?"

"Something you can't ever undo."

Lillian thought carefully how to answer, for she could hear the tremor in her daughter-in-law's voice. She recalled the Greek word for sin in the New Testament—*Hamartia*—which meant "to miss the mark." Who hadn't missed the mark? Not just once but many times? You could only hope that as you matured your aim would improve.

How could you fully know, especially as a young person, even what you were aiming at? At length, she said, "I've certainly done things I deeply regret. For example, I neglected Martin terribly when he was a boy, pouring all my care into Yaffa. I've done things I'm ashamed of. But I don't believe I've ever done anything unforgivable."

"Suppose you'd hurt somebody so bad that nothing you did could make up for the hurting? You could never be forgiven for that, could you?"

"Maybe the person you hurt won't forgive, but you could still forgive yourself."

"I can't. I've tried." Aurora's eyes glistened. "If I believed in God, maybe God could forgive me. And I tried that, too, all those years in Quaker meeting. I loved those people, so kind and gentle. I loved the silence. But I just couldn't believe there's some power out there we can pray to who'll blot out the cruel things we do."

"If there's no power to blot out our cruelties, maybe there's no power keeping track of them."

"The persons you hurt keep track."

Curling an arm across Aurora's shoulders, Lillian decided to say what she had long suspected. "You had a child, didn't you?"

Aurora looked at her, bit her lip, and looked away. She nodded silently.

So Lillian went on. "And you lost her?"

"Him. It was a boy. No, I didn't lose him." Aurora's voice came out raw and hoarse. "I gave him away. He was four months old, and I abandoned him."

"To adoption?"

"To my parents. I wrapped him in a towel and left him on the bar with a note beside him and I ran away."

Lillian winced. She took a moment to compose herself. "You haven't been back since?"

Aurora shook her head. "Haven't been back, haven't sent a word. They don't even know if I'm alive. And I don't know a thing about them or about my son. He's named Harlan. He'd be sixteen now, a year younger than I was when I took off."

Lillian drew Aurora close, rocked her gently. "So much to bear. So much."

Now the tears were coursing down Aurora's cheeks, but she did not wipe them away, nor did she cease to watch the children swarm

ing over the monkey bars as she spoke. "If I'd gone back soon, they might have forgiven me. But I was sick in those days, the way you said you were after Yaffa died. Sick in my heart. Harlan's father was a sailor, the only man I ever slept with before I married Martin, and we only made love once. That once got me pregnant, and my sailor took off. I thought for sure he'd come back when I had the baby. But he drowned three months after Harlan was born. When I heard the news, I slid into darkness. I couldn't see or feel or think. I dropped out of school. I couldn't care for the baby. He'd cry, and I wouldn't hear him. When I tried holding him, his wriggling scared me. My milk dried up, and he wouldn't take a bottle. I was afraid I'd hurt him if I stayed, so I hurt him by leaving."

Wrapping both arms around her daughter-in-law, Lillian asked tenderly, "Is that why you're afraid to have any more children?"

Aurora yielded to the embrace, turning on the bench and pressing her cheek against Lillian's throat. "I was the world's worst mother."

"But you were only a girl."

"I had my chance, and I failed."

"Who says you get only one chance? You're not alone now. You have a husband who adores you, who won't ever leave you. Martin would be a wonderful father. He'd help you in every way."

"I know, I know," Aurora said.

"What would it take for you to forgive yourself?" Lillian asked.

"I'd have to know that Harlan is happy. That he doesn't hate me." She paused. "I'd have to tell my parents how sorry I am, especially my mother." Again she paused.

"What else?"

"I'd have to prove I can be a good mother."

"There's only one way of proving that."

"It's scary," Aurora whispered, her face warm and damp against Lillian's throat.

"Yes," Lillian murmured, stroking the unruly hair, which had come loose from its braid, hair so like Yaffa's, so full of life. "Yes, it has always been scary."

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