Sick of Nature

I am sick of nature. Sick of trees, sick of birds, sick of the ocean. It has been almost four years now, four years of sitting quietly in my study and sipping tea and contemplating the migratory patterns of the semipalmated plover. Four years of writing essays praised as "quiet" by quiet magazines. Four years of having neighborhood children ask their fathers why the man down the street comes to the post office dressed in his pajamas ("Doesn't he work, Daddy?") or having those same fathers wonder why, when the man actually does dress, he dons the eccentric costume of an English bird watcher, complete with binoculars. Four years of being constrained by the gentle straitjacket of genre; that is, four years of writing about the world without being able to say the word "shit." (While talking a lot of scat.) And let's not forget four years of being the official "nature guy" among my circle of friends. Of going on walks and having them pick up every leaf and newt and turd and asking "what's this?" and, when I (defenseless unless armed with my field guides and even then a bumbler) admit I don't know, having to shrug and watch the sinking disappointment in their eyes.

Worse still, it's been four years of living within a genre that, for all its wonder and beauty, can be a little like going to Sunday School. A strange Sunday School where I alternate between sitting in the pews (reading nature) and standing at the pulpit (writing nature.) And not only do I preach from my pulpit, I preach to the converted. After all, who reads nature books? Fellow nature lovers who already believe that the land shouldn't be destroyed. Meanwhile my more hardnosed and sensible

neighbors on Cape Cod are concerned with more hardnosed and sensible reading material (*People, Time, Playboy*—not a quiet magazine in the house), when occasionally resting from the happy exertion of gobbling up what's left of our neighborhood, selling and subdividing. Being honest (one of the nature writer's supposed virtues), I have to admit that an essay is a much less effective way of protecting the land than a cudgel. In other words, I have to admit to impotence.

Which isn't much fun. Today, the morning after yet another legislative defeat for conservation on Cape Cod, I find myself feeling particularly pessimistic about the possibility of affecting change. The original land bank bill, which marked my first minor foray into volunteer politics, was a modest and sensible proposal for putting aside some money to spare the remaining undeveloped land on the Cape, a still beautiful place that's quickly going the way of the Jersey Shore. But because that money would come from the profits of the sellers of real estate (one percent on sales over $100,000), conservatives (is there a more tediously ironic word in the language?) decided that the time was ripe for another Boston Tea Party. The real issue was that developers and realtors and builders wanted to keep on developing and realting and building, but of course they couldn't come right out and say that. So they pooled a big pile of money and called in a big telemarketting firm from Washington that proceeded to reframe the debate entirely in terms of that highly original catchphrase "no new taxes" (while also, just for the fun of it, scaring the bejesus out of the Cape's substantial elderly population).

The standard response to this unfairness of things is to curse and wave our little fists at the wicked telemarketers, but today I have a different reaction. I marvel at their effectiveness. Had the pro–land bank forces called in a team of essayists, what would we have done to help? Assembled, we'd have looked like a reunion of Unabombers: solitary, hollow-eyed, scraggly-bearded characters ranting against progress. Likely our strategy would have been to abandon the phone lines and take to the beaches to wander, alone and aimless, in search of terns and profundities. Not only that, but had we somehow—despite ourselves—won, the victory party wouldn't exactly have been a barrel of laughs. You can bet you wouldn't find a single lampshade-wearing party guy in the group.

Which is part of the problem, or, at least, part of my current problem. Throw an imaginary kegger and fill the room with nature writers throughout history and you'll get the idea. Henry Beston, looking dapper if overdressed, alternates tentative taco dabs at the cheese dip with Aldo Leopold; Barry Lopez sits in the corner whispering to Thoreau about the sacredness of beaver dams; Joseph Wood Krutch stands by the punch bowl and tells Rachel Carson the story of how he first came to the desert as Carson listens earnestly. In fact, everything is done earnestly; the air reeks with earnestness. As usual with this crowd, there's a whole lot of *listening* and *observing* going on, not a lot of merriment. Writers from earlier times drift off alone to scribble notes, modern ones talk into microcassette recorders. You might think Ed Abbey could spark the party to life, but until the booze to blood ratio rises he remains painfully shy. Everyone else merely sips their drinks; buffoonery is in short supply; no one tells bawdy anecdotes. In short, the party is a dud.

Perhaps in real life these writers wouldn't restrict their discussions to the mating habits of the spoonbill roseate (*Ajaia ajaja*). In my present state of mind, I'd like to imagine them talking about anything other than nature. Sex maybe. Certainly sex must have played at least a minor role in all their lives, even Thoreau's. Perhaps one reason for the retreat to Walden, unexplored by most critics of American Romanticism, was to have more time and freedom for masturbatory binges. We'll never know. We do know that Thoreau exalted in that most underrated aspect of nature appreciation: pissing outside. "I have watered the red huckleberry, the sand cherry and the nettle tree," he wrote. Hell, maybe Thoreau himself would be just the man to break the ice at my party. "Water is the only drink for the wise man," he said piously, but since I'm imagining I'll imagine having someone, Abbey maybe, spike his water. Perhaps for one night, throwing off his teetotaling ways, he could sing and dance, putting folks at ease by showing that even the great stuffy father figure could tie one on. And with Thoreau—Thoreau of all people, the one they respect the most, their God!—acting the buffoon, the rest of them could let their hair down and start to drink and talk about normal party things like lust or the score of the Celtics game.

I, a relative neophyte, wouldn't have merited an invitation to the big shindig, but, along with the rest of the Corps of Junior Nature Writers, I'd watch Thoreau's wild-man antics through the window. And maybe, just maybe, Henry would stumble out and bullshit with me late at night, and together, just two drunk guys, we could water the sand cherry.

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The preceding scenario may suggest that I am losing my grip (on this essay as well as my mind). Maybe so. Not long ago I moved from Col-

orado to Cape Cod to live in Thoreauvian isolation, and for a while I was convinced solitude was driving me insane. (I'll admit that, unlike Thoreau, I had a wife with me, but we still felt isolated together.) Since coming back, I have been a literary Euel Gibbons, subsisting on a diet of pure nature reading as well as writing. Assuming the mantle of genre, I began my adventure determined to deepen my connection to the natural world, inscribing the front of my journal with Henry Beston's words: "A year in outer nature is the accomplishment of a tremendous ritual." But at some point I cracked. I started writing pieces like this one, tossing aside the stage craft of birds and bugs and beaches, and focusing on what I really cared about—*me*. Usually I rate about an 7.3 on the narcissism scale, but suddenly, finding myself with long hours to contemplate an empty beach and my own deep thoughts, my rating shot off the charts. Working at a job in the city, it's easy to dream of the rustic life, but actually living it entails dangers. It's not just nature that abhors a vacuum. Deprived of its usual gripes, the imagination creates elaborate dissatisfactions and paints masterpieces of hypochondria. There's a reason Cape Cod, our seaside paradise, has such high suicide and alcoholism rates. Though it isn't fashionable to admit, I wouldn't have made it through the fall without television. ("Our only friend," my wife called it.) As the sages have long reminded us, when we get away from it all we still bring our minds along.

As I turned inward, I forgot about the beautiful world outside. Nature became, if not a malevolent presence, at least an irritating one. Gulls shat on my back deck, raccoons rummaged through the trash cans, and the powder post beetles (close cousin to the termite) drilled into the beams day and night with a sharp *tcckkk tcckk tcckk* noise that made me feel as if they were burrowing into the meat of my temples. And then, suddenly, I realized that I hated nature, or at least hated writing about it in a quiet and reasonable way. Why? Because the whole enterprise struck me as humorless, which in turn struck me as odd, given that comedy often draws on a strain of wildness. Gary Synder wrote that those who are comfortable in wilderness are often comfortable in their own subconscious. And it seemed to me that those who are comfortable with the uncertainty of nature should also be comfortable on the same shaky ground of humor. Why was it, then, that so often love of nature seemed to breed earnestness?

And then there was this: With only a couple of obvious exceptions, the modern nature writer is most often praised for his or her "restrained" voice. Restrained as in shackles, it seemed to me. "Quietly subversive," is

the phrase usually tossed out by critics when referring to nature writing. Well, while I sit here carving out my quietly subversive prose, the bulldozers down the street at Stone's bluff are loudly subverting the soil. Hollowing out the Cape just as the beetles hollow out our beams.

But I'm not telling the full story (which in this case is a crime since what this essay is really about is the frustration of not telling the full story). When we choose to do a thing, we in effect choose not to do many other things. The same with genre. As I complain about my previous genre's restrictions, I find myself bristling at my present constraints (those of the curmudgeonly personal essayist). Yes, Cape Cod can sometimes seem as desolate as Siberia, and yes, the sound of hammers banging is never far off, and yes, there have been plenty of times when, sitting in my cold room listening to the beetles *tcckk, tcckk, tcckk*-ing I longed for an escape from this drear peninsula. But something else has also happened. After my crack-up in early fall, I actually began to settle in. As the year sprawled on, moving slowly, ambling like no year I'd known before, I, despite myself, began to remember some not-unpleasant things about Cape Cod. Like October. A month when the tourists finally packed up and cleared out for good. A month when the full moon rose over the pink-blue pastel of the harbor sunset and the blue-grey juniper berries shone with chalky iridescence at dusk, and when masses of speckle-bellied starlings filled the trees (and the air with their squeaky-wheeled sounds). A month when the ocean vacillated between the foreboding slate grey of November and a summery, almost tropical blue (while occasionally hinting at its darker winter shades). Most of all, a month of color, a month when the entire neck caught fire in a hundred shades of red.

And though this is not what I intended to write about, these memories lead to other memories of the fall (a time that's becoming more romantic with each retrospective second). Like the first husky wisps of woodsmoke rising from my neighbor's chimneys, or the time I saw the seals playing tag between the offshore rocks or the haze of wood dust in the sunlight as I stacked the logs against the side of the house, fortifying us for winter, or the time I kayaked into the marsh and, sliding in through the channels, low and quiet, caught the great blue heron off guard and watched it walk across the spartina with its funky seventies TV pimp strut, head bobbing forward and back . . .

But there, you see. I'm going off again. Like heroin or nicotine, the nature habit's hard to break. I could, without much prodding, turn this

essay into a paean to the beauty of the past year on Cape Cod, on how the year has been a deepening, a wedging into the physical world, a slowing down. If that was my story, then I would, of necessity, edit out certain details (like any mention of those sustained periods when I was sure that the beetles were sending messages to me through the phone lines). It wouldn't be so much lying to exclude these, as much as it would be a genre choice. The sort of choice we make semiconsciously almost any time we open our mouths.

And maybe what I'm sick of isn't the birds and trees and beach or even writing about the birds and trees and beach. Maybe what I'm really sick of is making the same choice over and over again. Of being one thing. Of constraint. Maybe I'm rebelling against my too-safe self. Rebelling against the formulaic in me, the way we squirm uneasily at a too-pat Hollywood movie.

But I'm the one calling the shots, after all, so why keep calling the same shot? Much has been written about the modern tendency toward specialization, and I won't add another long-winded celebration of the amateur. But it *is* true that from a young age Americans are taught that there's nothing like success, and that the way to *really* succeed is to do one thing well. Having spent a half dozen years out West, I can say this is particularly true of New Englanders. We proudly celebrate our uptightness. Our heroes as a rule are monomaniacally devoted—Larry Bird, John Irving, Ahab—and whether these heroes focus on basketball, novels, or whales, they are praised for directing their energy toward one thing without wasting time on diversions. But as the good Captain illustrates, this isn't always the surest road to mental health. In my case, focusing on one thing (even a thing as seemingly benign as nature-writing) was an invitation to those beetles to crawl into my skull.

It is now the middle of February on Cape Cod, a time that I dreaded during the melancholy of late November. The odd thing is that I really *am* settling in, really starting to enjoy it here. Winter insists on its own pace, dispensing with ambition, and when I do write I turn to whatever takes my fancy. Specialists may bring home more bacon in our society, but the impulse to variety is healthy, even thrilling. The pursuit of only one thing eventually grinds down to a grumbling feeling of work and obligation.

In that spirit, I have been undergoing a sects change operation, switching genres rather than gender. To support myself, I work for half the week as a substitute teacher and when I go into school, the real teachers always greet me with the same question. Wondering which of their peers I'm subbing for, they ask, "Who are you today?" I like the question and have written it down and taped it over my computer. Each day I strive to be a different who. If I feel like writing a haiku about the chickadees at the feeder, that's okay, but if I feel like creating a story about lying naked in a lawn chair, drunk, and blasting the chickadees with a scattergun, that's okay, too. These days I write as I please. To use a simile that would be scorned by my fellow nature writers, it's like watching TV with your thumb on the remote, a hundred channels at your disposal (and, honestly, how long do you ever really rest on the nature shows?—one good chase and kill by the lion and, click, it's off to *Baywatch*). Or to turn to a simile the nature-writing gestapo might like better, the health of the individual, as well as the ecosystem, is in diversity.

"A change is as good as a rest," said Churchill, and I do feel rested these days, jumping from genre to genre. Letting different voices fight it out inside me, I'm ignited by the spark of variety. Tabernash, our adopted stray cat, is never more cuddly than right after he's killed something. The thing that the confirmed specialist neglects is the incredible stores of energy that remain in other parts of us once one part is depleted. Though heretical, it could be suggested that variety isn't only more fun, it's more efficient.

I have already mentioned Ed Abbey (note to New Yorkers: not Edward *Albee*), and it is thanks in part to his consistent irreverence that I've always been a big fan. One thing a nature essay isn't supposed to be is funny. Or sexual. In this regard, I remain an admirer of Abbey's, who insisted on constantly broadening the nature corral. Abbey fought against the nature label long before I did, lamenting, "I am not a naturalist" and complaining that what others called nature books were really volumes of personal history. He has been a kind of patron saint for my own efforts to break free. In his introduction to *Abbey's Road*, he complained that critics are always calling some nature writer or other the "Thoreau" of this or that place. He wrote of nature writing that it "should be a broader and happier field" and that, "Like vacuum cleaner salesmen, we scramble for exclusive territory on this oversold, swarming, shrivelling planet." It's only gotten worse in the years since Abbey's death: As the world grows more crowded, our fiefdoms shrink. Ten years ago, Cape Cod had only two living Thoreaus: Robert Finch and John Hay. Now there are a dozen more of us, scrambling and clawing for the remaining turf, happy to be called the Thoreau of East Harwich or the Thoreau of Dennisport. No less than the developers we revile, we try to make a living off the land

and scenery, and so it's necessary to subdivide and develop new areas. And it's not only our plots of land that are smaller. Step right up and observe that freakish character—The Incredible Shrinking Nature Writer. If you drew us to scale and made Thoreau a giant, and placed Leopold and Carson at about his shoulder, you could keep drawing us smaller and smaller until you sketched in me and my crop of peers at insect size. It may be, as some suggest, that our time marks a renaissance of nature writing. But it's a renaissance of ants.

Fear has always led to the taming of diversity and wildness, and, in writing, as in so many other professions in this increasingly crowded and competitive world, fear breeds specialization. With more and more of us competing for the same food source, it's wise to stick to one genre and to the specific rules of that genre. It makes you identifiable. Marketable. Commodifiable. After all, we don't want to buy *Lemon Pledge* once and find out it works—"Boy, this stuff can really clean!"—only to buy it again and discover it has transformed itself into an underarm deodorant. That wouldn't be convenient. Or neat. And neatness counts, now more than ever.

So maybe it's neatness I'm really sick of. A born slob, I admire writers who jump from genre to genre, break-out artists not content to stay in one pasture for long. But I better watch myself: The genre border guards never rest. When I first moved back East, the Cape Cod Museum of Natural History refused to keep my book in stock or let me speak there, apparently fearing both fart jokes and activism. "We really only carry *nature* books," the manager of the bookstore told me, to which I replied, for once, that mine *was* a nature book, it even said so on the back cover. "It's really more of a personal narrative, isn't it?" the manager asked in a scolding voice. Particularly damning, it seems, is the fact that some reviewers used the word "funny" to describe the book. You don't want to do anything as drastic or volatile as mixing humor with nature; that wouldn't be proper, wouldn't be safe. When I speak to someone else about giving a talk, she tells me that, "We only deal with nature here and we don't want anything political," as if, in this day and age, the two could possibly be peeled apart.

For my part, I'll take writing that spills sloppily over genre walls, always expanding its borders. We all pay lip service to Whitman and his famous "contradictions," but it's not all that common to see writers contradicting themselves on the page. "My moods hate each other," wrote Emerson. Amen. I love to see Thoreau overcome by an urge to strangle a woodchuck or Abbey take a break from celebrating the stark beauty of the desert to throw a rock at a rabbit or Annie Dillard admitting she wrote of the beauties of nature while locked in her windowless, cinder-block study. I admire Rick Bass, for instance, when he interrupts an essay to practically grab readers by the collar and insist that they write their congressman to save his beloved Yaak Valley, and I also admire him for the way his "nature writing" has permeated his fiction. Another writer I admire, Reg Saner, has warned me not to make the natural world a stage for merely personal drama, and these are wise words. He points out that Emerson's little book got this whole mess started. "The trouble with *Nature*," Reg said. "Is that there's very little actual *nature* in it. No rocks or trees or birds." But I *like* Emerson's self-contradictory title. And I want nature to occasionally act as a stage, as long as it's not only and always that. For instance, I want novels—where personal drama is imperative—set deeply in nature. After all, to write about humans is naturally to write about the things that matter in their world: weather, wind, plants, trees, animals, and water.

But today I want to make a plea not for wilderness, but for wildness. For freedom. For sloppiness. For the exhilaration of breaking down the Berlin Wall of genre. A plea for amateurism, variety, danger, spontaneity, and honesty in a world growing increasingly professional, specialized, safe, pre-packaged, partitioned, and phony. As novels are set more and more often in lands walled by style and concrete, it has been up to today's nonfiction writers to usurp the themes that have concerned us since the great romantics, reminding us that writing isn't some impotent, inert thing unrelated to actual life, and that stories don't all have to end with some subtle New Yorker flicker of hair that subtly signals something few of us get. On the other hand, there's no reason these larger concerns can't be re-invested in fiction, no reason other than prevailing fashion. We have all seen the damage done by the contemporary mania for partitioning. If nature writing is to prove worthy of a new, more noble name, it must become less genteel and it must expand considerably. It's time to take down the NO TRESPASSING signs. Time for a radical cross-pollination of genres. Why not let farce occasionally bully its way into the nature essay? Or tragedy? Or sex? How about painting and words combined to simulate immersion in the natural world? How about some retrograde essayist who suddenly breaks into verse like the old timers? How about some African American nature writers? (There are currently more black players in the NHL than in the Nature Writing League.) How about

somebody other than Abbey who will admit to drinking in nature? (As if most of us don't tote booze as well as binoculars into the backcountry.) And how about a nature writer who actually seems to have a job? (Almost all seem to be men of leisure, often white guys from Harvard.)

Of course, genres help critics box things (and not incidentally allow us to write), but breaking through genres can be as exhilarating and dangerous as waves crashing over a sea wall. And that's where the action is today, when writing spills and splashes over genre barriers. Not just the fictional techniques in today's creative nonfiction—which is exciting in itself—but letting the material go where it will, even if it's "bad" and misbehaves and trespasses in Old Man McGinty's fictional backyard (and makes our fictional parents mad). Thorny, uncategorizable writing. Of course, this is nothing new. Revealing myself as an Emersonian recidivist, I say let the pages fit the man.

After all, though it gives critics and marketers fits, it's where things get most fuzzy that they're most interesting. There are always those ready to wield the word "autobiographical" like a club, to claim the current interest in memoir signals the end of civilization, but the overlapping of fiction and nonfiction is ultimately freeing. "Consider Philip Roth's *The Facts*—which isn't the facts at all . . ." wrote Wallace Stegner. "*The Facts* is as surely a novel posing as an autobiography as *Zuckerman Unbound* is an autobiography masquerading as a novel." Or as the writer Luis Urrea said: "I tell the truth in my novels and make things up in my non-fiction." Genre confusion, like gender confusion, is disconcerting, but it's overall a happy development, a sign of play and freedom. As Stegner says, it doesn't matter if it's autobiography. It matters if it's art.

But it's time to reel myself in.

I'm willing to write manifestos, but I'd prefer having others act them out. For all my declarations of freedom, I, too, am constrained. If genre were an invisible dog fence, I would already have been jolted by several zaps, and would have retreated meekly. So here comes the traditional twist and summary that marks the end of a personal essay. Of course I'm not sick of nature at all. Just sick of being boxed in, and of the genre itself being boxed too narrowly. In fact, having declared myself done with nature, I suddenly feel the itch of the contrary. Hell, after three days of sitting in the attic typing this too-personal essay while listening to an endless loop of the Butthole Surfer's second-to-last album (*Independent Worm Saloon*), I'm ready to get down to the beach and commune with some semipalmated plovers. Maybe even to write about them.

"Bigger than Shakespeare,"

Or How I Weathered the Perfect Storm

My boat was well-caulked, tightly built of pine planking hung over an oak frame. Having failed for ten years to build a grandiose schooner of a novel, I settled finally on a small, quiet fiction-less vessel. Nothing spectacular, maybe some laminated mahogany for the stern and transom, but solid, a work of craft if not art. She was a good Cape Cod boat, a dory let's say, and when I launched her with little fanfare from Sesuit Harbor in April of 1997, I had great confidence that she was, if nothing else, seaworthy. But I didn't know there was weather coming in. Not just the usual nor'easter, mind you, but waves of the once-in-a-hundred-years variety. My little boat could have handled almost anything out there on the Bay. But it couldn't handle the perfect storm.

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From the first time I saw his picture I knew he was trouble. Our books had come out at the same time and we were asked to do a reading together down in Falmouth. The sponsors of the reading sent out a flier with both of our jacket photos on it. In mine I looked like a homelier, mildly constipated version of Jackson Brown, staring glumly at the camera, wearing a white T-shirt with arms crossed sternly. My wife took the photo and liked it, so I used it. But *his*! It was and remains to this day the undisputed king, the mother of all jacket photos. He stares out like some impossible mix of Jean Claude Van Damme, a Calvin Klein underwear model, and Dolph Lundgren. And the name matched the photo. *Sebastian Junger*! It was as if a computer had created The Perfect Author,