

TO THE WILD: EXPLORING FEMALE WILDERNESS MEMOIRS

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For now she need not think about anybody. She could be herself, by herself. And that was what now she often felt the need of—to think; well, not even to think. To be silent; to be alone. All the being and the doing, expansive, glittering, vocal, evaporated; and one shrunk, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others. Although she continued to knit, and sat upright, it was thus that she felt herself; and this self having shed its attachments was free for the strangest adventures. When life sank down for a moment, the range of experience seemed limitless . . . Beneath it is all dark, it is all spreading, it is unfathomably deep; but now and again we rise to the surface and that is what you see us by. Her horizon seemed to her limitless.
~Virginia Woolf

Just the other night I was out to dinner with my sister. Laura is six years younger than I; she has pink hair, tattoos, and a chic monroe-style piercing just above her pouty lips. We are nothing alike. At least that's what I always thought. As we ate bruschetta and eggplant pizza, she told me about her desire to go to make-up school in Los Angeles. Laura's been doing hair for a few years now but says she wants a change. She took a mouthful of pizza and said, "I just want to get away from this place. I want to experience something new, something different, something other than my life." Her short sentences, punctuated with want, were also punctuated with an almost melancholic longing and a fiery desire that swept from the ends of her pink hair to the center of her wild young heart.

Though the wilderness I once longed for (and still often do) was no Los Angeles, I know how she felt. At twenty years old I craved new experiences and took my first trip west to work as a wrangler on a ranch high in the northwestern mountains of Wyoming. I was not alone on that first trip; my dear friend Nicole felt the same unspeakable longings I did. We both dreamt of adventures, snow-capped mountains, challenges, cowboys, and

sage-swept plains. We spoke quietly about our fears of inadequacy—that the land, the wrangling jobs awaiting us might be too much for two eastern girls to handle. Together, as we drove those almost 2,000 miles west, our hearts burned for what lay ahead. Though I can't say either one of us knew exactly what that future looked like. We only knew that Wyoming and ranch work was an undertaking worlds different and distant from the Pennsylvania farm upbringings we'd happily left in the rearview.

Little did either of us know on that first drive west that the work, the land, the rawness of Wyoming would change both our lives—even our identities—and implant in us a longing for the wild and undefined. It's a longing that even now we don't fully understand. And so I know what it means when a woman says that she longs for something other than her life. I also know that I am not the only woman to ever feel that way.

Since my adventures in Wyoming a number of young girls in my hometown have come to me asking advice about how to find their own adventure. So I began to ask myself: what is it that draws women toward wild places? What is it that makes us believe we will find our adventure, our solace, maybe even our spirit, in a place opposite from the place we currently inhabit? Though Laura longs to leave a tired, small-town scene for the urban jungle, many women long to leave their urban and suburban lives for America's oldest, wildest places—the refuge of the deep wilderness.

American women have long been drawn toward wild places. Many women traveled west during 19th century as the men in their lives answered the call of Manifest Destiny. Such women found themselves forced to make a life in the harshness of the plains and mountains so different from the towns, villages, and rolling countryside they

left behind. In most cases it was not the women answering the call to the west and the wild. No, they simply followed the men in their lives.

Nannie T. Alderson's *A Bride Goes West* may have been one of the first western female memoirs I ever read. In 1882, twenty-two year-old Nannie Alderson left her West Virginia plantation home to follow her young husband west to Montana and their new life on a cattle ranch. She knew nothing of the life that lay ahead of her, only that she would follow the man she loved to find it. In the memoir she discusses her motivations for moving west: "He was already planning to go out and start a cattle ranch in Montana, and he asked me if I would be afraid to share that kind of life with him. I told him I wasn't afraid, and we became engaged" (14). Interestingly, Alderson never felt as though the adventure afforded her by a rugged Montana lifestyle was hers to own—the western ideals still belonged to the men: ". . . work on horseback, while dangerous and often very hard, wasn't drudgery. There was more freedom to it. Even we women felt that, though the freedom wasn't ours" (55).

It seems things have changed. Browse the nonfiction section of any local bookstore and it does not take long to notice the multitude of women writing about their adventures in wild places—places once thought attractive and suitable only to men. Places where freedom and adventure are ripe for a woman's picking. Rebecca Solnit, Terry Tempest Williams, Pam Houston, Laura Bell, Gretel Ehrlich, and, most recently, Cheryl Strayed have penned memoirs centered on their wilderness experiences. Each woman has a unique definition of wilderness and even more, a unique road into her own particular wilderness experience. The writers of these memoirs are united in some ways

by what they sought in the wild places but moreso in the longings and desires that drove them there to begin with.

In my reading of these six female authors, I will probe the reasons contemporary women turn to the wild as well as what they find there. What draws them toward the solitude, the danger—the mystery and romance—of a place untamed, unfettered, and in some cases completely unknown?

Rebecca Solnit

In her memoir *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, Rebecca Solnit speculates about what she has termed “the blue of distance.” Fairly early in the memoir, she notes that a certain light is only found at the distance of things just out of reach:

For many years I have been moved by the blue at the far edge of what can be seen, that color of horizons, of remote mountain ranges, of anything far away. The color of that distance is the color of an emotion, the color of solitude and of desire, the color of there seen from here, the color of where you are not. (29)

This idea of distance from—perhaps we could call it life-as-she-knows-it syndrome—propels the writer away from the circumstances of her life and toward a place where she can find refuge, escape, danger, quiet, or mystery: “This light that does not touch us, does not travel the whole distance, the light that gets lost, gives us the beauty of the world” (29).

Solnit’s memoir balances her multiple philosophical theories of what it means to be lost with her own life experiences, which first led her to question why we become lost

in both a physical and metaphorical sense. She is quick to make distinctions between becoming physically lost and losing yourself in a place or experience: “That thing of nature which is totally unknown to you is usually what you need to find, and finding it is a matter of getting lost” (6).

She further makes those distinctions with examples from history—the world’s and her own. She moves between instances when she personally felt lost—the death of a young friend, a forgotten great-grandmother, the death of her father and aunt—generations of stories lost with them. She then discusses instances when she was physically lost in landscape—in the Great Salt Lake, on a New Mexico cattle ranch, in the Mojave desert. Each of these experiences is connected to her philosophical musings on the idea of distance and its connection to wilderness and longing.

For these reasons, Solnit endeavors to discover the nature of wandering, of the unknown, and the state of being lost—a state that she considers necessary for artistic discovery and creation. She attempts to uncover not only why we desire to lose ourselves in unfamiliar places but also how those experiences inform the creative process:

To be lost is to be fully present, and to be fully present is to be capable of being in uncertainty and mystery. And one does not get lost but loses oneself, with the implication that it is a conscious choice, a chosen surrender, a psychic state achievable through geography. (6)

Solnit does not so much personally seek wilderness as she seeks to understand why we are drawn there. Through details of time she spent in wild places, both geographic and metaphoric, her own experiences are placed alongside the experiences of explorers, artists, search-and-rescue experts, and everyday people who have some idea of what it

means to be lost, in search of something, or both. Lewis and Clark, Virginia Woolf, Edgar Allan Poe, Henry David Thoreau, Daniel Boone, Cabeza de Vaca—Solnit studies each of their unique journeys and beliefs in search of a definition that does not so much define as form a collage of souls lost, looking for answers, and in many cases finding ways to create art in the spaces the answers might fill.

The book is structured in segments or chapters, one of which—“The Blue of Distance”—repeats, acting as a pause between histories and ideas. She begins the book by detailing a personal experience, the first time she got drunk as a young girl, and moves into a philosophy of art and artistry, of the ways in which inspiration is drawn from the unknown. While she does not spend a great deal of time on any of the wanderers, even herself, she supplies enough background to let readers know the ways and reasons they were lost. What seems most important to Solnit is to make connections between the wanderers, to always be linking her conclusions back toward the blue of distance sections. The book unfolds in a pattern of her personal experience, the experiences of others from history, connections between them, and finally a blue of distance section cementing the connections. This cycle repeats four times.

At one point she describes a trip to the Great Salt Lake. Solnit visited the lake in a drought year and walked the brittle, cracking ground. As she walked she considered how the landscape might look from above, about all of the people on cross-country flights who might wish to land in such a place but likely never would. I know I have often found myself staring longingly out windows on long flights considering the landscape below, the sweeps of mountain ranges, snowcaps piercing clouds, and the dots of lakes, thin squiggles of rivers that feel so accesible, a fingertip away, and yet unfathomable, viewed

as if in a dream. As Solnit walks she notes, “these nameless places awaken a desire to be lost, to be far away, a desire for that melancholy wonder that is the blue of distance” (41). While leaving the lake she noticed mounds of dried salt, which took on beautiful forms. She describes her foolishness in attempting to keep them:

I tried to cut away a small cluster of the pale brown roses to take with me, they immediately became less beautiful. Some things we have only as long as they remain lost, some things are not lost only so long as they are distant. (41)

Terry Tempest Williams

In her acclaimed memoir *Refuge*, Terry Tempest Williams supports Solnit’s definition of the blue of distance. She talks of beauty, imagination, and passion. Like Solnit, she is drawn to the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge, which borders Utah’s Great Salt Lake. Though Tempest Williams holds a full-time position as a naturalist with the Refuge, she spends a large portion of her free time there watching the birds, studying the landscape, and dealing with the emotional trials of her mother’s battle with cancer.

For Tempest Williams the desire to seek wilderness stems, as it arguably does for all women, from the truth of her life. Women seeking wilderness are often looking for an escape from pain. Whether it be the pain of quarter-life angst, the pain of a lost relationship, the pain of an undefined longing or, in her case, the pain of losing a mother, hard times push women toward a desire for self-knowledge and a sense of understanding.

Shortly after her cancer diagnosis, Tempest Williams' mother, Diane, describes a trip to the wilderness, a river, and the ways in which the land and the water, the wildness of both, gave her solace and answers:

The heat of the sandstone penetrated my skin as I lay on the red rocks. Desert light bathed my soul. And traveling through the inner gorge of Vishnu schist, the oldest exposed rock in the West, gave me a perspective that will carry me through whatever I must face. Those days on the river were a meditation, a renewal. I found my strength in its solitude. (29)

Wilderness seemingly offers no answers because wilderness is inherently filled with the opposite—darkness, solitude, mystery. Everything in wild places exists in fleeting moments, in shadows, in opaque tones. And yet, these distant, untouchable places are the very places women seeking answers are drawn toward. The Refuge becomes Tempest Williams's only retreat from the pain of her life—the pain of her beloved mother slowly dying.

Tempest Williams details the mystery surrounding the landscape and the wildlife—the aspects of the place that always seem just out of reach or just beyond sight. She tells about her first experience at the bird refuge as a child: After spending an afternoon lost in a world of salt marshes, distant hills, avocets, black birds and ruddy ducks, she says, “I dreamed of water and cattails and all that is hidden” (20). Her affinity for birds hints at the ethereal nature of wild places, the way bird sightings—like all wildlife sightings—are often so fleeting. Birds are innately mysterious. They are here for a moment and gone. There is a flash of feathers, of beak, of color, then nothing. The truth

of a bird is always just out of reach, always in the distance. It was not only what Tempest Williams saw that captured her interest, but what she didn't see. The unnameable birds just beyond reach captivated her imagination as much as every physical bird she saw.

Later in the memoir Tempest Williams tells of her relationship with Utah's salt desert:

In the severity of a salt desert I am brought down to my knees by its beauty. My imagination is fired. My heart opens and my skin burns in the passion of these moments. I will have no other gods before me. Wilderness courts our souls. (148)

Though she knows as much about the marsh as any Salt Lake City native, there is always another species to encounter and always a new place, a new way to encounter them. The emotions she feels as an adult support the longings she felt as a child. Both are largely fueled by imagination. The mystery and unknowing surrounding the hidden places continually draw her back.

Pam Houston

In her memoir, *A Little More About Me*, Pam Houston differs from many of the quieter, reflective female memoirists in her relentless desire to test her outdoor strength and prowess. Her search feels more active. Houston has made a name for herself as a female writer always hungry for a challenge. Whether those adventures came served in attempts to climb the Grand Teton, night-fishing trips in Michigan, or guiding hunters in Alaska, Houston is on a constant search for her next proving ground. She has traveled the world on freelance writing assignments and in pursuit of men and meaningful relationships

and those quests make up the bulk of her memoir. Though many of the trips were assignments, or misguided romances, it's clear Houston seeks out wilderness for highly personal reasons.

In one of the memoir's early essays entitled "The Blood of Fine and Wild Animals," Houston finds herself in a remote Alaskan Range guiding hunters for Dall Sheep. But it was a man, not just the guiding job that led her there. And though the man led her there, it's apparent she was not there only for him but also for the landscape, for the chance to prove that she was as capable as any male guide. Though she did not make such acute distinctions at the time, probably because—as Solnit points out—the rewards of wilderness for the artist don't often happen until long after the experience has passed. Early in the essay Houston reflects,

I describe those months in the Alaska Range now as the most conflicted time of my life. I would spend seventy days testing myself in all the ways I love, moving through the Alaskan wilderness, a place of such power and vastness it is incomprehensible even to my memory. (45)

The relationship ultimately failed, a thread that runs parallel to her description of guiding two bumbling hunters. But it is not the relationship, or the hunters, which demonstrate Houston's sharpest realizations about wilderness:

I learned from the animals their wilderness survival skills, learned, of course, a few of my own. I learned, in those days my place in the universe, learned why I need the wilderness, not why we need it, but why I do. That I need the opportunity to give in to

something bigger than myself, like falling into love, something bigger even than I can define. (45)

It is interesting that she connects what she learned about her need for wilderness to the sensation or state of falling in love. Houston clearly wanted her willingness to follow a man into the wilderness to be reason enough to make him love her. It wasn't. Because it wasn't, the desire to prove herself to a man turned into a desire to prove to herself that she could survive in the wilderness of Alaska and of her own searching heart.

Part of Houston's stark difference from other female memoirists rests in her keen sense of bravado, which likely served to place her in many of the dangerous situations she details. She differs in that she is not seeking answers in the direct manner Solnit and Tempest Williams do. Her tone does not indicate an attitude of melancholy longing or aching desire. Her searching feels as if it's fueled by pure defiance. And yet the gravitas is a thin veil masking her true motivations and constant uncertainties. In the essay, "On (Not) Climbing the Grand Teton," she admits her fear of heights and tackles her idea of challenges—the idea so often leading her toward, not away from challenges—head on. After a day of training with a renowned Exuum Mountaineering guide, Houston realizes that heights are still a source of fear for her, so much so that she decides to give up climbing the Grand.

While she is stuck, scared and shaking, on the side of a training rock-face the guide urges her on and up, "We all need challenges in our lives, Pam" (95). Her response presents her most self-aware assessment of the attitudes that continually propel her headlong into the next adventure. When the guide urges her to keep climbing, she says, "I don't know if you will understand this, but in my life right now, the bigger challenge is to

say I'm scared, I don't like this and I want to go down" (96). Though Houston is disconsolate over the climbing debacle, she does not shirk the idea of a challenge because, true to her nature, that is exactly what she went to the Tetons in search of:

The Rocky Mountains have been, since I have been old enough to think clearly, my church and my religion, and to fail in them, in whatever small or specific way felt much too much like a failure of my soul. I needed to create another challenge, something that let me be in the mountains the way I wanted to be there. (96)

The essays in the memoir continually find Houston in search of adventure, and as they evolve so too do her attitudes and approaches to adventure. The uncertain young woman from the early essays is repeatedly transformed by the situations she faces and the challenges she chooses. What does not change is her desire to find, create, and face those challenges. Her sharp reflections make it clear she is ever-listening and looking for the ways in which she might be laid bare. She begins to come to grips with the power of wilderness. At one point she suffers a near-fatal allergic reaction to a bee-sting and realizes its potential to break her. Yet at another she finds herself on a mile-long hike that pits her against a rutting bull moose—a challenge she feels confident to handle. She changes in her motivations from wanting adventure and challenge for their own sake to wanting adventure and challenge because she knows she will leave the experience transformed.

One thing that remains the same throughout the memoir is Houston's tenuous relationship with the men in her life. She addresses her outlook head on at the beginning of her essay "In the Company of Fishermen":

I can't remember the last time I envied a man, or, in fact if I ever have. I have loved men, hated them, befriended them, taken care of them, and all too often compromised my sense of self for them, but I don't think I have ever looked at a man and actually coveted something his maleness gave him. (103)

And yet her relationship with men becomes more complicated; the men still pull her into situations she seems unsure of taking on but is unwilling to turn down: "If Jack bothers to ask me to go fishing, I will say yes. I have always said yes, and as a result the shape of my life has been a long series of man-inspired adventures" (104).

Thus she finds herself in Michigan in early spring accompanied by a handful of her male friends—all poets, all die-hard fly fisherman looking to snag the spring's first rush of steelhead. As she stands in the freezing water in the middle of the night, her heart certainly not as lost in fishing as her male counterparts, she questions her willingness to take on the excursion:

What in the world are you doing here? a voice giggles up from inside me, and the answers sweep past me, too fast to catch: because I can't turn down a challenge, because my father wanted a boy, because touching this wildness is the best way I know to undermine sadness, because of the thin shimmery line I am seeing between the dark river and the even darker sky. (109)

Here we see only the vague hint of Houston's true motivation: the men, the wilderness, the challenges, the adventures are perhaps linked to a sadness whose source she never truly reveals—perhaps because she cannot utter it, or she doesn't fully know it.

The filling of the void, the suppression of the sadness, maybe this was the reason for the men, the mountains and rivers, the continuous search? Those shimmers of sky, the huff of the bull moose, the sight of a Dall ram on a far ridge—maybe they serve as answer enough for the moment, until the mysteries of the wilderness call and offer up another.

Laura Bell

As much as Houston sought wilderness in search of intentional challenges, Bell found herself in Wyoming looking for nothing more than an escape from what she might call a real life. In her memoir, *Claiming Ground*, Bell details a life led in the rugged mountains of northern Wyoming working first as a shepherd and later as a hired hand on a cattle ranch. Bell found herself in Wyoming while accompanying her sister on an archeological dig. She met a sheep-herder in the Big Horn Basin and, fascinated by the lifestyle—the seclusion and anonymity—she took a job at the same ranch on a whim. Though she would eventually face numerous challenges, the life she pictured in Wyoming's hills was one of picturesque solitude:

As a child I'd hidden within the pages of books, crafting my own particular fantasy of a life lived out, with mountains, horses, a cabin, animals that I alone could befriend. . . . I longed for it, so much so that when I went with Doug to retrieve canned drinks chilling in his spring, the words came blurring out, Can I stay here? Do you need any help? (10)

The ranch took her on, glad for the help but doubtful of her ability, perhaps even her motivation. Despite a string of often comical setbacks, Bell proved her staying power in one summer in the mountains.

Bell had obviously eased into life in the mountains and had become comfortable there, but she still felt as if sheepherding was only a temporary fix—a brief interlude of solitude. She returned home to Kentucky that fall, still searching for direction, and took a job unloading box trucks filled with packages. Her mother came upon her one day as she was getting out of the shower, bruised from long hours of heavy labor: “I stood before her, bruised and lost, a young woman meant to be a success in something but not. Unable to distinguish words of love from banishment or childhood dreams from a place to hide, I packed my things and headed back west” (13).

Bell goes on to explain many of the reasons she so ached to escape her rigid Kentucky upbringing and all the expectations her theologian parents had for her. She clearly felt as if she did not fit into their vision of a successful life:

I was at a loss as to how to live my life and where to dig in.
I saw people with companions, homes, meaningful work,
but I had no idea how to become them, how to spin that
web of comfort and belonging around me. I felt alone,
unmoored and unworthy. (12)

Early in the memoir she reflects on why she escaped back to Wyoming after the encounter with her Mother: “I’d gone because I was drawn to this nomadic life of horses and sheep and dogs. I’d gone because I was young and lost and had nowhere else to go” (13). But if the mountains couldn’t offer an answer, a sense of meaning, what could?

The concept of wilderness begins to take on a definition larger than anything mountains, deserts, rivers, or canyons can encompass, becoming many things at once—a hiding place, a refuge, a proving ground. For Bell, it literally serves as a state of being. She says,

Wyoming was my childhood's private world blown larger than life, with a horse, two dogs, a rifle, a wilderness. For this lonesome child, it was the perfect landscape, where isolation was sharp but safe. I had discovered a place where no one expected me to do or be much of anything. (54)

How ironic that a life of solitude, of being completely alone—save the sheep, two dogs, and a horse—afforded her the comfort and security she lacked in a life surrounded by people. Certainly it must have something to do with the idea that there is something to be found in that place, that it somehow might offer answers as to why she felt the way she did, as to why she could not fit in elsewhere. While Bell may have found the seclusion and anonymity she longed for in her wagon parked deep in Wyoming's Big Horn Basin, surrounded only by thousands of ewes and their lambs, it's unclear if she ever found what was surely hidden deeper in her desire for escape. Is it even possible to find what rests in the romance, the mystery of distance? Of course, it's not difficult to arrive in remote places, but is it possible to understand the longing that first begged the heart to go?

Being alone is not hard to achieve; all one has to do is remove oneself from society. Contentment in the state of being alone is a much more difficult order. Though it appears, for a time, that Bell has everything she needs in her life of withdrawal from society—that hiding really was the answer—true companionship cannot exist in a state of

perpetual wilderness of which you are the center. Bell admits, “There was a time in my life when I thought I lived at the center of the universe—would, in fact, say that I did—because I thought everything I needed was within arm’s reach: friends, horses, family, a sense of place, and a job to do” (113).

After years in Wyoming, Bell begins to question her satisfaction with the place that so long held her captive; not surprisingly her questions with her own contentment were spurred by her attraction to a man who came to work at the ranch. It was not until he expressed interest, offered kind words and gestures—something few had done for her in the decade she spent in the west— that she began to wonder if there was more to life than a daily routine that mostly satisfied her. She says, “I still believed then that I could hold myself apart and simply watch. That love was reasonable, something that could be chosen” (110). What’s interesting is Bell’s belief that love was a choice, a belief that mirrored her belief about engagement with the world and with her own emotions. She believed she could “hold herself apart,” could remain separate from the feelings, the desires, perhaps even the pain of an ordinary life. Only by retreating to wilderness could she control her desires for companionship, a deeper sense of meaning, even for love.

Gretel Ehrlich

It’s possible that Ehrlich experienced the same phenomenon Bell would years later upon her arrival in Wyoming. Interestingly, Ehrlich and Bell met not long after Bell’s arrival in Wyoming. The two women became fast friends, and Bell tells about playing hooky from the sheep wagon to attend a reading Ehrlich gave at a local

Community College. What conversations the two women might have had, comparing notes on solitude, on lambing, herding, and living the quiet life of a female nomad.

The similarities in the women's stories are startling. While Bell very clearly saw Wyoming as an opportunity to become lost, to create a life on her own terms, it's evident that Erhlich is in love with Wyoming itself. From the beginning of her memoir, *The Solace of Open Spaces*, she deals with both her own motivations for moving to the windswept state and the mindset of many native Wyomans that keeps them grounded there. Over time, Ehrlich too has become a native:

I came here four years ago. I had not planned to stay but I couldn't make myself leave . . . I suspect that my original motive for coming here was to lose myself in new and unpopulated territory. Instead of producing the numbness I thought I wanted, life on the sheep ranch woke me up. The vitality of the people I was working with flushed out what had become a hallucinatory rawness inside me. I threw away my clothes and bought new ones; I cut my hair. The arid country was a clean slate. Its absolute indifference steadied me. (4)

Is it possible that the "numbness" Ehrlich said she wanted from her move to Wyoming is also the same thing Bell wanted but never articulated? Could that also be true of Houston and Tempest Williams? Surely Houston experienced a physical and emotional numbness on her midnight fishing excursion in the freezing Michigan river. Surely Tempest Williams often felt an aching numbness when spending time at her beloved Great Salt Lake, watching the birds and contemplating her mother's impending

mortality. Is this numbness a quality of the emptiness, the urge toward a distant and unknowable wilderness that Solnit describes?

But for Ehrlich the numbness was gone, her spirit was woken up by the harshness, the brutality, maybe just the sheer physicality of ranch life. Both Bell and Erhlich were needed by the thousands of sheep they tended, and thus through seemingly simple tasks they became a part of larger causes—the herding giving their lives meaning, order, and purpose. Not only purpose for daily tasks but purpose within their exise—a reason to remain hidden in wilderness.

Many of the other female memoirists say their wilderness experiences gave them a sense of belonging, taught them facts of their own needs and desires; as Houston noted, she needed wilderness to feel a part of something larger than herself. The hunters depended on her for survival, and the animals lived in fear of her. Her presence alone became part of the delicate balance of power playing out in the Alaskan wilderness.

Maybe what she means, what many of the women mean, is that they need wilderness to feel necessary, to feel as though they belong somewhere. They long for wild places because they are the only places where they can be understood, can do work that has meaning for them and for the world around them, even if that world is confined to a herd of sheep, a group of hunters, a bird refuge. And yet, Ehrlich claims there is no wilderness left: “I try to imagine a world in which I could ride my horse across uncharted land. There is no wilderness left; wildness yes, but true wilderness has been gone on this continent since the time of Lewis and Clark’s overland journey” (8).

Ehrlich’s distinction between wilderness and wildness raises an interesting point. Have these female memoirists experienced what Ehrlich might define as true wilderness, or are

they only experiencing the last wild places—true wilderness a state of mind and being that only they inhabit?

Cheryl Strayed

It's not unusual to see male stories of adventure atop the bestseller lists. Jack London, Jon Krakauer, Ernest Hemingway, and countless others have made a living detailing their excursions. Men and women alike enjoy reading them. But to see such interest in a woman's story is both encouraging and intriguing for women who identify with the need for escape and distance—for wilderness, however it might be defined. Fiction writer and advice-columnist turned memoirist Cheryl Strayed might have something to say about the idea of wildness. Her memoir, *Wild*, topped the New York Times Bestseller list for weeks after its release, a startling feat for a memoir about a woman's solo hike across the Pacific Crest Trail. The outpouring of love for Strayed's memoir surely means something for the state of the female-penned wilderness memoir.

Strayed also knows a little something about distance. When Strayed's mother died suddenly and unexpectedly of cancer in her early forties, Strayed became broken with grief. She attempted to hold together the remnants of a family and her own fledgling marriage. Neither attempt worked. In an effort to distance herself from the pain, she began a downward spiral of destructive decisions, beginning with infidelity and culminating in a debilitating heroine addiction. Looking up from the bottom of the pit she knew that putting an incredible amount of space between her and her addictions would be the only way out, the only chance for escape. After struggling through a number of

emotional trials, she separated herself from the rest of the world by setting out to hike the newly forged Pacific Crest Trail.

Arguably, Strayed had the most at stake in her withdrawal from society. Given the tender state of her psyche when she set out on her journey, if her attempt at reclusion had been unsuccessful she might have never returned from her shattered emotional state. Like many of the other female memoirists, her idea to seek wilderness was not an idea gleaned from her vast outdoor knowledge or experience. Aside from growing up deep in the Minnesota woods, Strayed had never spent a night outdoors, much less spent days hiking in rough terrain. These were unknown territories for her—both literal and metaphoric—and yet she felt compelled to go, as if, to save her life, she had no other choice:

The Pacific Crest trail wasn't a world to me then. It was an idea, vague and outlandish, full of promise and mystery. Something bloomed inside me as I traced its jagged line with my finger on a map. I would walk that line, I decided—or at least as much of it as I could in about a hundred days. (4)

Despite her limited prior experience, Strayed knew spending time in a literal wilderness offered an answer to her pain. She knew it would offer challenges; it would test and scare her. But that is what she needed to change her life:

Nothing could ever bring my mother back or make it okay that she was gone. Nothing would put me beside her the moment she died. It broke me up. It cut me off. It tumbled me end over end . . . I would suffer. I would suffer. I would

want things to be different than they were. The wanting was
a wilderness and I had to find my own way out of the
woods. (27)

To the woods she went, which may not seem a surprise given the gravity of Strayed's circumstances—her fragile emotional and psychological state. Much like Tempest Williams, Strayed sought the wilderness to escape a crushing grief, though Strayed was not able to seek refuge through the process. Her mother's death arrived as a quick and sudden blow, whereas Tempest Williams was able to cope throughout her mother's illness. Perhaps the sudden nature of Strayed's mother's death prompted the extreme behavior, the downward spin and withdrawal from her life. Like Tempest Williams she felt an urge toward nature. As Solnit pointed out it was the unknown thing of nature that she needed to find in order to become lost in place in order to lose herself within her own damaged heart.

Even before she decided to set off on the Pacific Crest Trail Strayed had begun to seek distance from her life in the form of numerous one-night-stands and, eventually, heroine addiction. She wanted distance from pain, from regret, from memory, from all the reminders of her mother that constantly hung at the front of her consciousness. Eventually Strayed realized that what she needed, what she craved more than sex or heroin, was an actual wilderness—a place of rock and sky, of earth and water, and enough wind to sweep her grief into purpose. The need for distance, for escape, transformed from being the worst choice to being the only choice, a choice that returned her to the truest elements of the world and her being.

The memoir becomes the story of Strayed's transformation, of the way the wild changed her, brought her back to herself:

It had only to do with how it felt to be in the wild. With what it was like to walk for miles for no reason other than to witness the accumulation of trees and meadows, mountains and deserts, streams and rocks, rivers and grasses, sunrises and sunsets. The experience was powerful and fundamental. (207)

Interestingly, of all the female memoirists I've studied, Strayed seems to be the only one to have found exactly what she was looking for. She emerges from the Pacific Crest Trail a changed woman. Though her grief is not gone she has managed it, come to terms with her mother's death and the circumstances of her own life. She claims it was the physical experience of entering and exiting wilderness that made her transformation possible, the distance from the real world on the trail paired with the close proximity of her problems that forced her to face herself, to come to grips with the person she'd become. She ends the memoir by saying that she didn't have all the answers, but

That it was enough to trust that what I'd done was true. To understand its meaning without yet being able to say precisely what it was . . . To believe that I didn't need to reach with my bare hands anymore. To know that seeing the fish beneath the surface of the water was enough. That it was everything. It was my life—like all lives, mysterious and irrevocable and sacred. (311)

Perhaps like Solnit, like all of the other female memoirists discussed here, this is the revelation desired from wilderness. Perhaps this is the answer that rests in the blue of the distance.

Reading so many female wilderness memoirs and considering the success of Strayed's book begs the question of exactly how male wilderness memoirs differ from their female counterparts. At this point it feels fairly evident that women go to the wilderness in search of something and because they experience an intense sense of longing or desire. Can the same be said of men? What propels them toward wild places? Historically they are more likely than women to seek such refuge and adventure, but that may just be a result of strict gender roles, which have only recently loosened.

Though this may be a generalization based only on my early readings of male wilderness memoirs, it seems many men seek wilderness to prove themselves as men. They seek wild places to hunt, to fish, to explore, to make discoveries, to, in some way, conquer the land and prove their masculinity. They tend to look to wilderness as an opportunity to connect to nature and the land. Their urge is more primal. They seem to see wilderness as a question waiting to be answered. Wilderness writer Jon Krakauer, in his book *Into the Wild*, said, "The very basic core of a man's living spirit is his passion for adventure. The joy of life comes from our encounters with new experiences, and hence there is no greater joy than to have an endlessly changing horizon, for each day to have a new and different sun" (56). In both *Into the Wild* and *Into Thin Air*—his memoir of climbing Everest and losing four climbing partners in the process—Krakauer supports the male prototype of adventuring conquerer. Of climbing Everest he said, "Getting to the

top of the mountain was considered much less important than how one got there: prestige was earned by tackling the most unforgiving routes with minimal equipment, in the boldest style imaginable” (20). Krakauer seems to typify the conquering male stereotype, a stereotype that I believed to reside in most male wilderness memoirs.

But now, having read some other contemporary male memoirs, I perceive that it is far more complicated than I first assumed. Mark Spragg’s tender memoir of growing up on a working guest ranch in the northwest corner of Wyoming details the softer, quieter side of a man drawn to wilderness not because of what he has to prove but because of what he hopes to learn. Spragg’s *Where Rivers Change Direction* comprises independent, linked essays that work to tell the story of his boyhood and his transition into a man looking back on the lessons he learned and the life he’d left in the Wyoming wilderness. Spragg details the staggering responsibility he and his brother took on at a young age, leading pack trips of eastern dudes at fourteen and fifteen years-old. Spragg’s reverence for the land comes to life, his prose marked by a sense of awe and spirit of gratitude for his childhood lifestyle: “I loved being out in the mountains for a week with only mounted people, only the sounds of footfall, wind, rain, the squeal of leather and hemp, the snap of a fire” (11). Experiencing wilderness for Spragg is not about proving himself a man but about proving his ability to work in unison with the wild, to approach the place as an animal, a horse, might, and to leave it unharmed. The metaphors he uses in telling all the ways the dudes did not understand him and his brother make those goals evident:

They did not know that we were horseboys. That we looked for
hazard through the large dark eyes of horses. That we scented the
earth and the wind that moved across the earth, with wide, open

nostrils. That we felt the gravity in river water against our legs and stomachs . . . They did not know that we nibbled at the world with blunt, soft lips. (13)

Spragg's idea of experiencing the wild is more about connecting with the land in a meaningful way than it is about conquering it. He seems to understand that there are lessons to be learned, and although he may not seek them directly it's evident that even as a boy he possessed a clear understanding of the power hidden in the wild places just beyond his doorstep.

In later essays, dealing with his transition into adulthood, Spragg looks at the nature of solitude, a theme found in many female wilderness memoirs. While working as caretaker of a secluded estate, Spragg notes the way extended time amidst the wild makes one slower, more in sync with the world:

I sit and watch the land. Time leaches out of me into the snow and wind, loses its rote and civilized boundaries, becomes a whole and seasonal thing. I grow more comfortably wild . . . I watch the mountains at the horizons for complete revolutions of the planet and observe myself grow increasingly quiet and more gentle. (213)

Perhaps what most sets male wilderness memoirs like Spragg's apart from their female counterparts is the open acknowledgment of longing. Spragg's sense of desire rises as the memoir moves toward his maturation into adulthood, though little mention is ever made of those emotions. They are felt within the text, within passages like the one above. Women seem more forthright in their dealings with desire, in their ability to

acknowledge that something is missing from their lives and they are eagerly in search of it.

Like Krakauer, women too want to feel as though they have conquered the land, but that is not their first inclination, their truest motivation. Nothing about wilderness makes a woman more of a woman. If anything, the truths of wilderness—cutting wood, building fires, spending time in solitude, abandoning personal hygiene practices—make her more masculine. Maybe this means that women seek wilderness for reasons much different from men's.

So why, ultimately, do women seek wild places? What draws them toward the solitude, the danger, the mystery and romance of a place untamed, unfettered, and in some cases completely unknown? The writers of the above memoirs were not primarily seeking wilderness in order to prove something. They sought wilderness for two primary reasons—an undefined sense of longing and a need to escape the pressures, expectations, or demands of society.

One theme that appears to unite at least half the six female memoirists above—specifically Strayed, Tempest Williams, and Houston—rests in the catalyst for their withdrawal from society. They seek an escape from pain or trauma, yes, but they also consider wilderness a necessary aspect of healing. The interesting crux seems to lie in the fact that the women don't initially connect wilderness and healing; yes, they feel an urge to find respite and meditation there, but it is not until the artistic process comes into play that they fully realize the restorative power of the wild. Solnit points out the metamorphosis that takes place in the wilderness writer, in someone dedicated to turning experience into meaning and art: "They transform the unknown into the known, haul it in

like fishermen; artists get you out into that dark sea” (5). Perhaps there is something inherent in the nature of creation, specifically memoir, that is a wholly reflective process, that allowed the women to realize their initial motivations and become witness to their transformations through the work of creating art.

Though men and women are sometimes united in their motivations for wilderness—based on my reading—women more often see wilderness as the answer to an aching question. The other three women—specifically Bell, Ehrlich, and Solnit—are on a quest to discover their life’s purpose. The need to discover humanity’s essential question—why am I here?—led them away from a typical life and toward a place so elemental, so primal they believed they might uncover the answer to a timeless question burning anew in their ancient hearts. The move toward creation in their cases likely exists more as a recording of their discoveries, or the questions still uncovered, than a part of the healing process. Admittedly, the themes are not cut clean. Certainly Bell, Ehrlich, and Solnit experienced periods of pain, even trauma, just as Houston, Strayed, and Tempest Williams each wrestled with existential questions and sought an answer to the human question.

It might never be possible to determine what women are specifically in search of, or longing for, when they escape to the wilderness, but it seems that wilderness exists for them as both a place and an idea. One very naturally leads to the other. Wilderness first appeals to women in a physical sense; it exists as a place, a destination—in so many cases an escape. It seems, though, that after they have placed themselves in said wilderness they may find that the question has not been answered, the healing has not transpired, as though the wild may have held magic in its dark fingers.

Perhaps the very idea of distance is what first draws women toward their wild place. Yet distance alone is not enough to answer the questions. It is then that wilderness begins to exist as an idea, as a state of mind and being that the woman inhabits from within. The inner life becomes intertwined with the outward geography. She is lost to the world and to herself, lost on the trail, in a sheep wagon, on some distant, sage-swept vista, or in a sandy marsh. She is lost in the longing that prompted her to pull away and discover the wilderness of her own being—the depths and secrets it holds—which need only a wild place, and a searching heart to create art where once only questions existed.

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