

PREFACE

Hold out your hands and let me lay upon them a sheaf of freshly picked sweetgrass, loose and flowing, like newly washed hair. Golden green and glossy above, the stems are banded with purple and white where they meet the ground. Hold the bundle up to your nose. Find the fragrance of honeyed vanilla over the scent of river water and black earth and you understand its scientific name: *Hierochloa odorata*, meaning the fragrant, holy grass. In our language it is called *wiingaashk*, the sweet-smelling hair of Mother Earth. Breathe it in and you start to remember things you didn't know you'd forgotten.

A sheaf of sweetgrass, bound at the end and divided into thirds, is ready to braid. In braiding sweetgrass – so that it is smooth, glossy, and worthy of the gift – a certain amount of tension is needed. As any little girl with tight braids will tell you, you have to pull a bit. Of course you can do it yourself – by tying one end to a chair, or by holding it in your teeth and braiding backward away from yourself – but the sweetest way is to have someone else hold the end so that you pull gently against each other, all the while leaning in, head to head, chatting and laughing, watching each other's hands, one holding steady while the other shifts the slim bundles over one another, each in its turn. Linked by sweetgrass, there is reciprocity between you, linked by sweetgrass, the holder as vital as the braider. The braid becomes finer and thinner as you near the end, until you're braiding individual blades of grass, and then you tie it off.

Will you hold the end of the bundle while I braid? Hands joined by grass, can we bend our heads together and make a braid to honor the earth? And then I'll hold it for you, while you braid, too.

I could hand you a braid of sweetgrass, as thick and shining as the plait that hung down my grandmother's back. But it is not mine to give, nor yours to take. *Wiingaashk* belongs to herself. So I offer, in its place, a braid of stories meant to heal our relationship with the world. This braid is woven from three strands: indigenous ways of knowing, scientific knowledge, and the story of an Anishinabekwe scientist trying to bring them together in service to what matters most. It is an intertwining of science, spirit, and story – old stories and new ones that can be medicine for our broken relationship with earth, a pharmacopoeia of healing stories that allow us to imagine a different relationship, in which people and land are good medicine for each other.

BRAIDING SWEETGRASS

[...]

Gifts from the earth and from each other establish a particular relationship, an obligation of sorts to give, to receive, and to reciprocate. The field gave to us, we gave to my dad, and we tried to give back to the strawberries. When the berry season was done, the plants would send out slender red runners to make new plants. Because I was fascinated by the way they would travel over the ground looking for good places to take root, I would weed out little patches of bare ground where the runners touched down. Sure enough, tiny little roots would emerge from the runner and by the end of the season there were even more plants, ready to bloom under the next Strawberry Moon. No person taught us this – the strawberries

showed us. Because they had given us a gift, an ongoing relationship opened between us.

Farmers around us grew a lot of strawberries and frequently hired kids to pick for them. My siblings and I would ride our bikes a long way to Crandall's farm to pick berries to earn spending money. A dime for every quart picked. But Mrs. Crandall was a persnickety overseer. She stood at the edge of the field in her bib apron and instructed us how to pick and warned us not to crush any berries. She had other rules, too. "These berries belong to me," she said, "not to you. I don't want to see you kids eating my berries." I knew the difference: in the fields behind my house, the berries belonged to themselves. At this lady's roadside stand, she sold them for sixty cents a quart.

It was quite a lesson in economics. We'd have to spend most of our wages if we wanted to ride home with berries in our bike baskets. Of course those berries were ten times bigger than our wild ones, but not nearly so good. I don't believe we ever put those farm berries in Dad's shortcake. It wouldn't have felt right.

It's funny how the nature of an object – let's say a strawberry or a pair of socks – is so changed by the way it has come into your hands, as a gift or as a commodity. The pair of wool socks that I buy at the store, red and gray striped, are warm and cosy. I might feel grateful for the sheep that made the wool and the worker who ran the knitting machine. I hope so. But I have no *inherent* obligation to those socks as a commodity, as private property. There is no bond beyond the politely exchanges "thank you" with the clerk. I have paid for them and our reciprocity ended the minute I handed her the money. The exchange ends once parity has been established, and equal exchange. They become my property. I don't write a thank-you note to JCPenny.

But what if those very same socks, red and gray striped, were knitted by my grandmother and given to me as a gift? That changes everything. A gift creates an ongoing relationship. I will write a thank-you note. I will take good care of them and if I am a very gracious grandchild I'll wear them when she visits even if I don't like them. When it's her birthday, I will surely make her a gift in return. As the scholar and writer Lewis Hyde notes, "It is the cardinal difference between gift and commodity exchange that a gift establishes a feeling-bond between two people."

Wild strawberries fit the definition of gift, but grocery store berries do not. It's the relationship between producer and consumer that changes everything. As a gift-thinker, I would be deeply offended if I saw wild strawberries in the grocery store. I would want to kidnap them all. They were not meant to be sold, only to be given. Hyde reminds us that in a gift economy, one's freely given gifts cannot be made into someone else's capital. I can see the headline now: "Woman Arrested for Shoplifting Produce. Strawberry Liberation Front Claims Responsibility."

This is the same reason we do not sell sweetgrass. Because it is given to us, it should only be given to others. My dear friend Wally "Bear" Meshiguard is a ceremonial firekeeper for our people and uses a lot of sweetgrass on our behalf. There are folks who pick for him in a good way, to keep him supplied, but even so, at a big gathering sometimes he runs out. At powwows and fairs you can see our own people selling sweetgrass for ten bucks a braid. When Wally really needs *wiingashk* for a ceremony, he may visit one of those booths among the stalls selling frybread or hanks of beads. He introduces himself to the seller, explains his need, just as he

would in a meadow, asking permission of the sweetgrass. He *cannot* pay for it, not because he doesn't have the money, but because it cannot be bought or sold and still retain its essence for ceremony. [...] A gift is something for nothing, except that certain obligations are attached. For the plant to be sacred, it cannot be sold. Reluctant entrepreneurs will get a teaching from Wally, but they'll never get his money.

That is the fundamental nature of gifts: they move, and their value increases with their passage. The fields made a gift of berries to us and we made a gift of them to our father. The more something is shared, the greater its value becomes. This is hard to grasp for societies steeped in notions of private property, where others are, by definition, excluded from sharing. Practices such as posting land against trespass, for example, are expected and accepted in a property economy but are unacceptable in an economy where land is seen as a gift to all.

Lewis Hyde wonderfully illustrated this dissonance in his exploration of the "Indian giver." This expression, used negatively today as a pejorative for someone who gives something and wants to have it back, actually derives from a fascinating cross-cultural misinterpretation between indigenous culture operating in a gift economy and colonial culture predicated on the concept of private property. When gifts were given to the settlers by the Native inhabitants, the recipients understood that they were valuable and were intended to be retained. Giving them away would have been an affront. But the indigenous people understood the value of the gift to be based in reciprocity and would be affronted if the gifts did not circulate back to them. Many of our ancient teachings counsel that whatever we have been given is supposed to be given away again.

From the viewpoint of a private property economy, the "gift" is deemed to be "free" because we obtained it free of charge, at no cost. But in the gift economy, gifts are not free. The essence of the gift is that it creates a set of relationships. The currency of a gift economy is, at its root, reciprocity. In Western thinking, private land is understood to be a "bundle of rights", whereas in a gift economy property has a "bundle of responsibilities" attached.

[...]

Asters and Goldenrod

The girl in the picture holds a slate with her name and "class of '75" chalked in, a girl the color of deerskin with long dark hair and inky unreadable eyes that meet yours and won't look away. I remember that day. I was wearing the new plaid shirt that my parents had given me, an outfit that I thought to be the hallmark of foresters. When I looked back at the photo later in life, it was a puzzle to me. I recall being elated to be going to college, but there is no trace of that in the girl's face.

Even before I arrived at school, I had all my answers prepared for the freshman intake interview. I wanted to make a good first impression. There were hardly any women at the forestry school in those days and certainly none who looked like me. The adviser peered at me over his glasses and said, "So, why do you want to major in botany?" His pencil was poised over the registrar's form.

How could I answer, how could I tell him that I was born a botanist, that I had shoeboxes of seeds and piles of pressed leaves under my bed, that I'd stop my bike along the road to identify a new species, that plants colored my dreams, that the plants had chosen me? So I told him the truth. I was proud of my well-planned

answer, its freshman sophistication apparent to anyone, the way it showed that I already knew some plants and their habitats, that I thought deeply about their nature and was clearly well prepared for college work. I told him that I chose botany because I wanted to learn about why asters and goldenrod looked so beautiful together. I'm sure I was smiling then, in my plaid red shirt.

But he was not. He laid down his pencil as if there was no need to record what I had said. "Miss Wall," he said, fixing me with a disappointed smile, "I must tell you that *that* is not science. That is not at all the sort of thing with which botanists concern themselves." But he promised to put my right. "I'll enroll you in General Botany so you can learn what is it." And so it began.

I like to imagine that they were the first flowers I saw, over my mother's shoulder, as the pink blanket slipped away from my face and their colors flooded my consciousness. I've heard that early experience can attune the brain to certain stimuli, so that they are processed with greater speed and certainty, so that they can be used again and again, so that we remember. Love at first sight. Through cloudy newborn eyes their radiance formed the first botanical synapses in my wide-awake, newborn brain, which until then had encountered only the blurry gentleness of pink faces. I'm guessing all eyes were on me, a little round baby all swaddled in bunting, but mine were on Goldenrod and Asters. I was born to these flowers and they came back for my birthday every year, weaving me into our mutual celebration.

People flock to our hills for the fiery suite of October but they often miss the sublime prelude of September fields. As if harvest time were not enough – peaches, grapes, sweet corn, squash – the fields are also embroidered with drifts of golden yellow and pools of deepest purple, a masterpiece.

If a fountain could jet bouquets of chrome yellow in dazzling arches of chrysanthemum fireworks, that would be Canada Goldenrod. Each three-foot stem is a geyser of tiny gold daisies, ladylike in miniature, exuberant en masse. Where the soil is damp enough, they stand side by side with their perfect counterpart, New England Asters. Not the pale domesticates of the perennial border, the weak sauce of lavender or sky blue, but full on royal purple petals surrounds a disc as bright as the sun at high noon, a golden-orange pool, just a tantalizing shade darker than the surrounding goldenrod. Alone, each is a botanical superlative. Together, the visual effect is stunning. Purple and gold, the heraldic colors of the king and queen of the meadow, a regal procession in complementary colors. I just wanted to know why.

Why do they stand beside each other when they could grow alone? Why this particular pair? There are plenty of pinks and whites and blues dotting the fields, so is it only happenstance that the magnificence of purple and gold end up side by side? Einstein himself said that "God doesn't play dice with the universe." What is the source of this pattern? Why is the world so beautiful? It could so easily be otherwise: flowers could be ugly to us and still fulfil their own purpose. But they're not. It seemed like a good question to me.

But my adviser said, "It's not science," not what botany was about. I wanted to know why certain stems bent easily for baskets and some would break, why the biggest berries grew in the shade and why they made us medicines, which plants are edible, why those little pink orchids grow under pines. "Not science," he said, and he ought to know, sitting in his laboratory, a learned professor of botany. "And if you want to study beauty, you should go to art school." He reminded me of my deliberations over choosing a college, when I had vacillated between training as a botanist or as a poet. Since everyone told me I couldn't do both, I'd chosen plants.

He told me that science was not about beauty, not about the embrace between plants and humans.

I had no rejoinder; I had made a mistake. There was no fight in me, only embarrassment at my error. I did not have the words for resistance. He signed me up for my classes and I was dismissed to go get my photo taken for registration. I didn't think about it at the time, but it was happening all over again, an echo of my grandfather's first day at school, when he was ordered to leave everything – language, culture, family – behind. The professor made me doubt where I came from, what I knew, and claimed that his was the *right* way to think. Only he didn't cut my hair off.

In moving from a childhood in the words to the university I had unknowingly shifted between worldviews, from a natural history of experience, in which I knew plants as teachers and companions to whom I was linked with mutual responsibility, into the realm of science. The questions scientists raised were not "Who are you?" but "What is it?" No one asked plants, "What can you tell us?" The primary question was "How does it work?" The botany I was taught was reductionist, mechanistic, and strictly objective. Plants were reduced to objects; they were not subjects. The way botany was conceived and taught didn't seem to leave much room for a person who thought the way I did. The only way I could make sense of it was to conclude that the things I had always believed about plants must not be true after all. That first plant science class was a disaster. I barely scraped by with a C and could not muster much enthusiasm for memorizing the concentrations of essential plant nutrients. There were times when I wanted to quit, but the more I learned, the more fascinated I became with the intricate structures that made up a leaf and the alchemy of photosynthesis. Companionship between asters and goldenrod was never mentioned, but I memorized botanical Latin as if it was poetry, eagerly tossing aside the name "goldenrod" for *Solidago canadensis*. I was mesmerized by plant ecology, evolution, taxonomy physiology, soils, and fungi. All around me were my good teachers, the plants. I found good mentors, too, warm and kind professors who were doing heart-driven science, whether they could admit it or not. They too were my teachers. And yet there was always something tapping at my shoulder, willing me to turn around. When I did, I did not know how to recognize what stood behind me.

My natural inclination was to see relationships, to seek the threads that connect the world, to join instead of divide. But science is rigorous in separating the observer from the observed, and the observed from the observer. Why two flowers are beautiful together would violate the division necessary for objectivity. [...]

To walk the science path I had stepped off the path of indigenous knowledge. But the world has a way of guiding your steps. Seemingly out of the blue came an invitation to a small gathering of Native elders, to talk about traditional knowledge of plants. Once I will never forget – a Navajo woman without a day of university botany training in her life – spoke for hours and I hung on every word. One by one, name by name, she told of the plants in her valley. Where each one lived, when it bloomed, who it liked to live near and all its relationships, who ate it, who lined their nests with its fibers, what kind of medicine it offered. She also shared the stories held by those plants, their origin myths, how they got their names, and what they have to tell us. She spoke of beauty.

Her words were like smelling salts waking me to what I had known back when I was picking strawberries. I realized how shallow my understanding was. Her

knowledge was so much deeper and wider and engaged all the human ways of understanding. She could have explained asters and goldenrod. To a new PhD, this was humbling. It was the beginning of my reclaiming that other way of knowing that I had helplessly let science supplant. I felt like a malnourished refugee invited to a feast, the dishes scented with the herbs of home.

I circled right back to where I had begun, to the question of beauty. Back to the questions that science does not ask, not because they aren't important, but because science as a way of knowing is too narrow for the task. Had my adviser been a better scholar, he would have celebrated my questions, not dismissed them. He offered me only the cliché that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and since science separates the observer and the observed, by definition beauty could not be a valid scientific question. I should have been told that my questions were bigger than science could touch. [...]

Learning the Grammar of Animacy

To be native to a place we must learn to speak its language.

I come here to listen, to nestle in the curve of the roots in a soft hollow of pine needles, to lean my bones against the column of white pine, to turn off the voice in my head until I can hear the voices outside it: the *shhh* of wind in needles, water trickling over rock, nuthatch tapping, chipmunks digging, beechnut falling, mosquito in my ear, and something more – something that is not me, for which we have no language, the wordless being of others in which we are never alone. After the drumbeat of my mother's heart, *this* was my first language.

I could spend a whole day listening. And a whole night. And in the morning, without my hearing it, there might be a mushroom that was not there the night before, creamy white, pushed up from the pine needle duff, out of darkness to light, still glistening with the fluid of its passage. *Puhpowee*.

Listening in wild places, we are audience to conversations in a language not our own. I think now that it was a longing to comprehend this language I hear in the woods that led me to science, to learn over the years to speak fluent botany. A tongue that should not, by the way, be mistaken for the language of plants. I did not learn another language in science, though, one of careful observation, an intimate vocabulary that names each little part. To name and describe you must first see, and science polishes the gift of seeing. I honor the strength of the language that has become a second tongue to me. But beneath the richness of its vocabulary and its descriptive power, something is missing, the same something that swells around you and in you when you listen to the world. Science can be a language of distance which reduces a being to its working parts; it is a language of objects. The language scientists speak, however precise, is based on a profound error in grammar, an omission, a grave loss in translation from the native language of these shores.

My first taste of the missing language was the word *Puhpowee* on my tongue. I stumbled upon it in a book by the Anishinaabe ethnobotanist Keewaydinoquay, in a treatise on the traditional uses of fungi by our people. *Puhpowee*, she explained, translates as “the force which causes mushrooms to push through the earth overnight.” As a biologist, I was stunned that such a word existed. In all its technical vocabulary, Western science has no such term, no words to hold this mystery. You'd think that biologists, of all people, would have words for life. But in scientific

language our terminology is used to define the boundaries of our knowing. What lies beyond our grasp remains unnamed.

In the three syllables of this new word I could see an entire process of close observation in the damp morning woods, the formulation of a theory for which English has no equivalent. The makers of this word understood a world of being, full of unseen energies that animate everything. I've cherished it for many years, as a talisman, and longed for the people who gave a name to the life force of mushrooms. The language that holds *Puhpowee* is one that I wanted to speak. So when I learned that the word for rising, for emergence, belonged to the language of my ancestors, it became a signpost for me.

Had history been different, I would likely speak Bodewadmimwin, or Potawatomi, an Anishinaabe language. But, like many of the three hundred and fifty indigenous languages of the Americas, Potawatomi is threatened, and I speak the language you read. The powers of assimilation did their work as my chance of hearing that language, and yours too, was washed from the mouths of Indian children in government boarding schools where speaking your native tongue was forbidden. [...]

My sister's gift to me one Christmas was a set of magnetic tiles for the refrigerator in Ojibwe, or Anishinabemowin, a language closely related to Potawatomi. I spread them out on my kitchen table looking for familiar words, but the more I looked, the more worried I got. Among the hundred or more tiles, there was but a single word that I recognized: *megwech*, thank you. The small feeling of accomplishment from months of study evaporated in a moment.

I remember paging through the Ojibwe dictionary she sent, trying to decipher the tiles, but the spellings didn't always match and the print was too small and there are way too many variations on a single word and I was feeling that this was just way too hard. The threads in my brain knotted and the harder I tried, the tighter they became. Pages blurred and my eyes settled on a word – a verb, of course: “to be a Saturday.” *Pfft!* I threw down the book. Since when is *Saturday* a verb? Everyone knows it's a noun. I grabbed the dictionary and flipped more pages and all kinds of things seemed to be verbs: “to be a hill,” “to be red,” “to be a long sandy stretch of beach,” and then my finger rested on *wiikwegamaa*: “to be a bay.” “Ridiculous!” I ranted in my head. “There is no reason to make it so complicated. No wonder no one speaks it. A cumbersome language, impossible to learn, and more than that, it's all wrong. A bay is most definitely a person, place, or thing – a noun and not a verb.” I was ready to give up. I'd learned a few words, done my duty to the language that was taken from my grandfather. Oh, the ghosts of the missionaries in the boarding schools must have been rubbing their hands at my frustration. “She's going to surrender,” they said.

And then I swear I heard the zap of synapses firing. An electric current sizzled down my arm and through my finger, and practically scorched the page where that one word lay. In that moment I could smell the water of the bay, watch it rock against the shore and hear it sift onto the sand. A bay is a noun only if the water is *dead*. When *bay* is a noun, it is defined by humans, trapped between its shores and contained by the word. But the verb *wiikwegamaa* – to *be* a bay – released the water from bondage and lets it live. “To be a bay” holds the wonder that, for this moment, the living water has decided to shelter itself between these shores, conversing with cedar roots and a flock of baby mergansers. [...] Water, land, and even a day, the language of a mirror for seeing the animacy of the world, the life that pulses through

all things, though pines and nuthatches and mushrooms. *This* is the language I hear in the woods; this is the language that lets us speak of what wells up all around us. And the vestiges of boarding schools, the soap-wielding missionary wraiths, hang their heads in defeat.

This is the grammar of animacy. Imagine seeing your grandmother standing at the stove in her apron and then saying of her, “Look, it is making soup. It has gray hair.” We might snicker at such a mistake, but we also recoil from it. In English, we never refer to a member of our family, or indeed to any person, as *it*. That would be a profound act of disrespect. *It* robs a person of self hood and kinship, reducing a person to a mere thing. So it is that in Potawatomi and most other indigenous languages, we use the same words to address the living world as we use for our family. Because they are our family. [...]

Yawe – the animate *to be*. I am, you are, s/he is. To speak of those possessed with life and spirit we must say *yawe*. [...] The language reminds us, in every sentence, of our kinship with all of the animate world.

English doesn’t give us many tools for incorporating respect for animacy. In English, you are either a human or a thing. Our grammar boxes us in by the choice of reducing a nonhuman being to an *it*, or it must be gendered, inappropriately, as a *he* or a *she*. Where are our words for the simple existence of another living being? Where is our *yawe*? My friend Michael Nelson, an ethicist who thinks a great deal about moral inclusion, told me about a woman he knows, a field biologist whose work is among other-than-humans. Most of her companions are not two-legged, and so her language has shifted to accommodate her relationships. She kneels along the trail to inspect a set of moose tracks, saying, “Someone’s already been this way this morning.” “Someone is on my hat,” she says, shaking out a deerfly. Someone, not something.

When I am in the woods with my students, teaching them the gifts of plants and how to call them by name, I try to be mindful of my language, to be bilingual between the lexicon of science and the grammar of animacy. Although they still have to learn scientific roles and Latin names, I hope I am also teaching them to know the world as a neighborhood of nonhuman residents, to know that, as ecotheologian Thomas Berry has written, “we must say of the universe that it is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects.”

One afternoon, I sat with my field ecology students by a *wiikwegamaa* and shared this idea of animate language. One young man, Andy, splashing his feet in the clear water, asked the big questions. “Wait a second,” he said as he wrapped his mind around this linguistic distinction, “doesn’t this mean that speaking English, thinking in English, somehow gives us permission to disrespect nature? By denying everyone else the right to be persons? Wouldn’t things be different if nothing was an *it*?”

Swept away with the idea, he said it felt like an awakening to him. More like a remembering, I think. The animacy of the world is something we already know, but the language of animacy teeters on extinction – not just for Native peoples, but for everyone. Our toddlers speak of plants and animals as if they were people, extending to them self and intention and compassion – until we teach them not to. We quickly retrain them and make them forget. When we tell them that the tree is not a *who*, but an *it*, we make that maple an object; we put a barrier between us, absolving ourselves of moral responsibility and opening the door to exploitation. Saying *it* makes a living land into “natural resources”. If a maple is an *it*, we can take up a chain saw. If a maple is a *her*, we think twice.

Another student countered Andy's argument. "But we can't say *he* or *she*. That would be anthropomorphism." They are well schooled biologists who have been instructed, in no uncertain terms, never to ascribe human characteristics to a study object, to another species. It's a cardinal sin that leads to a loss of objectivity. Carla pointed out that it's also disrespectful to the animals. We shouldn't project our perceptions onto them. They have their own ways – they're not just people in furry costumes." Andy countered, "But just because we don't think of them as humans doesn't mean they aren't beings. Isn't it even more disrespectful to assume that we're the only species that counts as 'persons'?" The arrogance of English is that the only way to be animate, to be worthy of respect and moral concern, is to be human.

A language teacher I know explained that grammar is just the way we chart relationships in language. Maybe it also reflects our relationships with each other. Maybe a grammar of animacy could lead us to whole new ways of living in the world, other species a sovereign people, a world with a democracy of species, not a tyranny of one – with moral responsibility to water and wolves, and with a legal system that recognizes the standing of other species. It's all in the pronouns.

Andy is right. Learning the grammar of animacy could well be a restraint on our mindless exploitation of land. But there is more to it. I have heard our elders give advice like "You should go among the standing people" or "Go spend some time with those Beaver people." They remind us of the capacity of others as our teachers, as holders of knowledge, as guides. Imagine walking through a richly inhabited world of Birch people, Bear people, Rock people, beings we think of and therefore speak of as persons worthy of our respect, of inclusion in a peopled world. We Americans are reluctant to learn a foreign language of our own species, let alone other species. But imagine the possibilities. Imagine the access we would have to different perspectives, the things we might see through other eyes, the wisdom that surrounds us. We don't have to figure out everything by ourselves: there are intelligences other than our own, teachers all around us. Imagine how much less lonely the world would be.

Every word I learn comes with a breath of gratitude for our elders who have kept this language alive and passed along its poetry. I still struggle mightily with verbs, can hardly speak at all, and I'm still most adept with only kindergarten vocabulary. But I like that in the morning I can go for my walk around the meadow greeting neighbors by name. When Crow caws at me from the hedgegrow, I can call back *Mno gizhget andushukwe!* I can brush my hand over the soft grasses and murmur *Bozho mishkos*. It's a small thing, but it makes me happy.

I'm not advocating that we all learn Potawatomi or Hopi or Seminole, even if we could. Immigrants came to these shores bearing a legacy of languages, all to be cherished. But to become native to this place, if we are to survive here, and our neighbors too, our work is to learn to speak the grammar of animacy, so that we might truly be at home.

I remember the words of Bill Tall Bull, a Cheyenne elder. As a young person, I spoke to him with a heavy heart, lamenting that I had no native language with which to speak to the plants and the places I love. "The love to hear the old language," he said, "it's true." "But", he said, with fingers on his lips, "You don't have to speak it here." "If you speak it here," he said, patting his chest, "They will hear you."

Tending Sweetgrass

Wild meadow sweetgrass grows long and fragrant when it is looked after by humans. Weeding and care for the habitat and neighboring plants strengthens its growth.

[...]

Epilogue

This is our traditional giveaway, the *minidewak*, an old ceremony well loved by our people and a frequent feature of powwows. In the outside world, people who are celebrating life events can look forward to receiving presents in their honor. In the Potawatomi way, this expectation is turned upside down. It is the honored one who *gives* the gifts, who piles the blanket high to share good fortune with everyone in the circle. [...]

Generosity is simultaneously a moral and a material imperative, especially among people who live close to the land and know its waves of plenty and scarcity. Where the well-being of one is linked to the wellbeing of all. Wealth among traditional people is measured by having enough to give away. Hoarding the gift, we become constipated with wealth, bloated with possessions, too heavy to join the dance.

Sometimes there's someone, maybe even a whole family, who doesn't understand and takes too much. They heap up their acquisitions beside their lawn chairs. Maybe they need it. Maybe not. They don't dance, but sit alone, guarding their stuff.

In a culture of gratitude, everyone knows that gifts will follow the circle of reciprocity and flow back to you again. This time you give and next time you receive. Both the honor of giving and the humility of receiving are necessary halves of the equation. The grass in the ring is trodden down in a path from gratitude to reciprocity. We dance in a circle, not a line. [...]

When I close my eyes and wait for my heartbeat to match the drum, I envision people recognizing, for perhaps the first time, the dazzling gifts of the world, seeing them with new eyes, just as they teeter on the cusp of undoing. Maybe just in time. Or maybe too late. Spread on the grass, green over brown, they will honor at last the giveaway from Mother Earth. Blankets of moss, robes of feathers baskets of corn, and vials of healing herbs. Silver salmon, agate beaches, sand dunes. Thunderheads and snowdrift, cords of wood and herds of elk. Tulips. Potatoes. Luna moths and snow geese. And berries. More than anything, I want to hear a great song of thanks rise on the wind. I think that song might save us. And then, as the drum begins, we will dance, wearing regalia in celebration of the living earth: a waving fringe of tallgrass prairie, a whirl of butterfly shawls, with nodding plumes of egrets, jewelled with the glitter of a phosphorescent wave. When the song pauses for the honor beats, we'll hold our gifts and ululate their praises, a shining fish, a branch of blossoms, and a starlit night.

The moral covenant of reciprocity calls us to honor our responsibilities for all we have been given, for all that we have taken. It's our turn now, long overdue. Let us hold a giveaway for Mother Earth, spread our blankets out for her and pile them high with gifts of our own making. Imagine the books, the paintings, the poems, the clever machines, the compassionate acts, the transcendent ideas, the perfect tools. The fierce defense of all that has been given. Gifts of mind, hands, heart, voice, and vision all offered up on behalf of the earth. Whatever our gift, we are called to give it and to dance for the renewal of the world.

In return for the privilege of breath.