TABITHA SOREN

Lindsey, 2012
pigment print, 46 x 60 in

credit: Kopeikin Gallery, Los Angeles

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Into the Woods

A Tale of a Trail in the Sierra

I rented one from REI. When I saw the size, I balked.

"You expect me to carry that? In my pack?"

The REI saleslady shrugged. It made no difference to her. The bear canister was squat and roughly twelve inches round, and intransigent in its inability to be folded or rolled or just squashed into my backpack. Packing for five days is difficult enough if you haven't done it before; you take advantage of every unclaimed corner in your pack. The canister would have none of it. It sat there, stolid in the dead center of my pack, and forced me to work around it.

I was preparing for a five-day backpacking trip with four people I didn't know well—or at all—to a place called Wheeler Lake located in the mid-belt of the Sierras. I did not have most of the equipment. I borrowed a one-person tent from my sister. My sleeping bag was intended for car-camping. My pack was a hand-me-down from a male friend who is much taller than I am. Now I was shopping for a bear canister.

"You know, that's your food. Your food is *in* there," said my husband cautiously. "It's not 'taking up' room." He arranged the food in the canister while I watched, feeling intimidated and overwhelmed.

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I left San Francisco and drove down Highway 4, which cuts through the Central Valley and the small towns left behind in the wake of the Gold Rush. Copperopolis, a town famous for having no gold, boasted a large sign just outside the city limits. "Copperopolis!" it read, as if that explained everything. A newly redone section of its downtown was visible, complete with the same set of historic attractions that Gold Country towns use to attract Bay Area out-of-towners: preserved apothecaries, an ancient Wells Fargo with iron shutters hanging on its crumpled exterior, dusty and rambling hotels, and the local history museum. These tourist attractions rehash the endorsed version of the mining culture that took root throughout the southern mine region of the California mother lode. The narrative proceeds like this: we found gold—or copper—and took all we could get. Now and then the elderly docents, who are less invested in the sanitized version of the Gold Rush, will go off script with refreshing candor.

"There was a lot of Indians killed. Yep," one of them had told me three years before in Placerville.

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My destination was a cabin owned by a couple named Brook and Cypress, in Camp Connell, elevation 4,760, a small settlement up Highway 4. I arrived at their cabin feeling wary: who were these people and what was I doing? I knew partially what I was doing; I was going into the woods for lessons in magic and ritual work. Cypress and Brook were the teachers.

Over dinner, Brook told me about the cows. "There's a herd of them up there," he said. "They're making a lot of noise." I didn't know what this meant, what new unplanned element had been introduced by the presence of the cows.

Cypress had trekked in with another woman named Julia a few days earlier to make camp. Brook and I woke at 5:00, got into his battered Subaru, and raced up Highway 4 to the trailhead. We parked and ate oatmeal, sitting on a rock in the frosty morning air. At that elevation, the air is heavy with the smell of a small herb called "kitkitdizze" by the Miwuk Indians. I finished my breakfast and looked at Brook, a tall, lanky man with reflective brown eyes. Throughout the morning he had been pondering a multitude of issues: How long would it take Cypress and Julia to meet us? And what were the cows doing?

"We had to chase them off, you see," he said. "They were incredibly loud. I'm sure there's more cow herding in our future." His face brightened. I looked at him blankly.

"Cow herding?" I said.

In my mind's eye I saw the bulky outline of a cow. I heard its lowing call. I wondered how I would break the news to my fellow ritualists that I had a "thing" about cows.

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In the past, *cows* had herded *me*. They had blocked my movements and I had let them, because they were bigger than I was. Even though I knew they had no claws to gouge me or sharp teeth to bite me, their size alone had gained my respect. Most of the East Bay parklands are reclaimed grazing pastures, and it's a sure bet that if you walk the Wildcat Creek Trail in Oakland or go ambling through the grasslands of Sunol Regional Wilderness, you will encounter cows, and maybe, maybe—a bull. (Note to doubtful readers: once upon a time, I saw a cow with horns in Wildcat Canyon Regional Park. To me, this counts as a bull.)

Brook and I stepped onto the trail and began the gradual ascent toward the "top"—a nebulous place that was in front of us. We were going to meet Cypress and Julia at the crest of Woodchuck Basin Trail midday. I was at ease. The trail was dappled with sunlight, and the going was easy. My pack was heavy but balanced. My boots were snug on my feet. The trees and understory plants flashed by in my peripheral vision. Since it was August, there was much that was dried and dust-brown; but since it was August in the Sierra, there were flashes of colorful wildflowers that were still blooming: scarlet gilia, alpine aster, mountain arnica, buckwheat of all kinds. Taking over the olfactory space formerly occupied by kitkitdizze was mountain pennyroyal—huge spreads of it—with a top note of mint and a heart note of burning rubber.

Brook is a talkative man, discursive and tetchy in equal measure. We discovered a patch of wild currant, translucently red and tart. He waded into the patch, picking the reddest berries.

"Fresh Fruit!" Brook said. "Vitamin C. Get that one," he commanded, pointing to a particularly juicy berry. I obeyed, as if I was on autopilot.

Brook, for all his volubility, kept a few secrets up his sleeve. One was revealed when we entered the Mokelumne Wilderness. A few steps past the sign, I looked up and beheld a corona of metamorphic rock crowning the meadow below it.

"We're going into a caldera," said Brook. "Wheeler Lake sits inside an old volcano."

Caldera means "cauldron." Calderas form when the magma chamber below a volcanic orifice collapses; this causes the land to sink suddenly. A basin-like shape forms, and fresh water from a seep or spring collects and takes over the formerly fiery space. This is likely how Wheeler Lake was made: fire making way for water, proof that these two elements find ways of working together.

The sounds, smells, and sights of the Sierra accompanied me as I walked, each blending into one another, becoming mutable and radically merged: smell was color; vision was touch. Thus bedazzled by my senses did I trek up the ridge.

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At the crest of the Woodchuck Trail, elevation 8,400 feet, I fell asleep wedged between a rock and a stump. Dreamlets flitted through my mind: a place, a name, some emotional content too ephemeral to recall.

"This must be Elizabeth!" I heard a voice say.

Struggling to my feet, I beheld a lady striding towards me. This was Cypress, who had organized the trip, she to whom I had sent innumerable emails asking haltingly, *how will I, how should I, how, how, how?* She had handled my uncertainty with grace and now here she was, a petite woman with luminously blue eyes and a small pointed chin. Covered in trail dust, she radiated calmness, rectitude, and just a touch of steel. Julia was behind her, a woman born on the same day I was, as we would discover gleefully, who had steady gray eyes, and was trained as an EMT.

We proceeded up the "knob," as Brook termed it a small spur of land just above the trail that was high enough, at certain angles, to obliterate the sight of the landscape and replace it with the enormity of the Sierra sky. Up there, we seemed to be betwixt, not of the ground, nor of the sky, but hanging in space between. The four of us celebrated the sky and then began our descent.

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The trail was steep here and skittery going because of the skree. Walking down this section of the trail, I thought with apprehension of the moment I'd be walking back up it. But I had five days ahead of me and things to do and so I stopped thinking about it. This gave me the ability to observe: opportunity is not a lengthy visitor when you're in a hurry, and so it was that since we were unhurried, we could see everything as we walked down into the heart of the caldera.

I saw a patch of explorer's gentian, a rare wildflower. The blue of the petals was deeply saturated and the exact shade of the sky above us. It was as if little pieces of airy aether had dropped to the earth and taken root. Explorer's gentian: confirmation that I—all of us—were on a journey.

The sound of cow bells started intruding on my consciousness. At breakfast, Cypress looked grim. "I think they're coming back," she said.

We arrived at the lake midday, passing by the herd of cows. They looked at us without curiosity. In the medieval Irish text, the *Leabhar Ua Maine*, those who are born on a Tuesday like me are promised death by drowning and wealth from owning "small cattle." All the signifiers of the fate were in the meadow that day: the glimmering lake, the cattle. I had a headache, which was bothering me more than obscure medieval prophecies, and from what I didn't know: the altitude? The ill-fitting backpack that was bottom-heavy and torturing my rhomboids? I crawled into my tent that night clutching my head and tried to sleep.

I woke up with the same dull headache and the discovery that I had started my period. I was totally unprepared. Perimenopause makes a mockery of calendars; one's menses come and go at their whim.

"Use Usnea," advised Cypress. "It's that green lichen that grows everywhere."

When you're in the woods with no feminine protection, nothing to hand except the stuff you brought with you, it's natural to turn to nature (and also—what choice do you have?). The Usnea grew prolifically. There is one wrinkle in this tale of witchy complicity with nature: Usnea is easily confused—at least by me—with wolf lichen. This is problematic because wolf lichen has traditionally been used to poison wolves and foxes. It has a compound called "vulpinic acid" in it, which I noticed after trying to

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use the lichen as an ersatz tampon. It burned. I learned quickly to tell the difference.

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The cows had lumbered into the camp, the night before Brook and I arrived, and woken Cypress and Julia up.

"I heard a snuffling," said Julia, imitating the wet nose of a cow pressed inquisitively against her tent. "That's how I got woken up."

"There's a head cow. She's got a white face," said Cypress. "We call her Wilma. She's the matriarch. She totally challenged us. After we scared her off, she came back into camp with two bull calves with her! Can you believe that?"

I believed it. Like a respectable warrior queen, the cow had constituents—henchmen—which made sense for Wilma, who was obviously an avatar of Boand, the Irish goddess whose symbols include a white cow.

I felt compassion for the cows: they were not *of* the wilderness, but they were *in* it and vulnerable to it. But they caused great damage, munching everything in sight, leaving huge, chewed-up paths of turf in their grazing wake, thrashing the meadows that host high-elevation flora and fauna: musky monkey-flower, bush lupine, and innumerable Pacific tree frogs. The ground under the trees where the cows rested and grazed was shorn almost entirely of any understory.

Cattle grazing was banned in the Sierra in 1891 because of the impacts on the water quality, but reinstated in 1905 as a result of successful lobbying by the cattle industry. Grazing has led to high levels of *E. coli* and *Giardia* saturating formerly pristine water bodies. Phosphorus and nitrogen are plentiful, too. Streambeds erode, water turbidity increases, plant habitat disappears. The effects of twenty cows roaming freely in a fragile subalpine meadow are immediately obvious to anyone who cares to observe. The cows are the source of the "grass-fed" beef that appears on menus in San Francisco, Brook told me. This is an old story in California: the *contado* being imported into the city as the flesh of a cow, or as the wood of a venerable tree, or as a rare mineral scraped from the veins of the earth.

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After a few quiescent days, it was as Cypress predicted: the cows began to assert their grazing rights in the meadow across the lake from us. I was woken up at 4:30 in the morning by an unbelievably loud clanging.

"We have to shoo them away," said Cypress. "If we don't, they'll just keep coming back. They need to know they aren't welcome."

We set off. Brook had a drum, and I carried a pan and a stick, for counter-clanging.

"You have to look them in the eye," Brook told me as we hurried to the other side of the lake. "Don't look down. That's a sign of submission. We don't want to get stampeded."

Stampeded? My brain squeaked in fear.

As we approached the cows, Brook gave rapid directions. I heard none of them: when I'm agitated, I tend to lose my hearing. The ground underfoot was spongy and dented with enormous holes like the cloven hooves of the cows. There was a willow grove that blocked our view of the cows; the idea was, I think, to crouch down into predator position and begin to model that sort of behavior. We were all animals after all, and we were in fact predators. Why not remind the cows that we were the ones with opposable thumbs? Brook banged his drum and yelled. The action started.

At first the cows did nothing but munch their cud. Brook hit his drum again and gave another wild yell. A cow's face turned slowly toward us, with no expression at all. Another cow turned its head. One flashed us the whites of its eye. Then another. Then another. I saw Julia, crouched down, back tense, running low to the ground. Brook hit his drum: BANG. BANG. BANG. A cow snorted and tossed its huge head. Brook broke into a run, and, like magic, the cows ran, too—jogging at first, and then running flat out, tearing through the willow patch, away from the crazies with sticks and drums. They disappeared into the woods. We ran after them. The clanging of the cow bells grew fainter and fainter. Julia looked at me.

"You liked that, didn't you?" she said and grinned.

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That evening around the fire, Brook recounted what had happened that morning. "I saw Wilma," he said intensely. "And I scared her. I told her she better not come back here."

He began a detailed account of his actions: How he had lifted his stick just so, and how he had yelled. How he had rebuked the cow for its presence around our camp. How he had insulted it, satirized it. How his physical bravery would surely intimidate the cows from ever coming into the camp again.

As he spoke, he spun a tale, and a narrative emerged, one that would hold up well to retelling, a tale that needed the flames from a flickering fire to help animate it, needed an agile body moving in mimetic memory of the chase; that needed an audience to sit in rapt attention and listen to the story of the great exploits of the cow chasers; that needed, in fact, for the profiles of these cows to be painted in ocher and soot on the walls of some craggy cave, deep underground, that needed the hand prints of the human antagonists imprinted on the wall next to the images of cows and other wild beasts.

How else would we remember anything we did, without telling it and retelling it?

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We walked out after five full days of acknowledging just about everything: North, east, south, west. Earth, air, fire, water. The great gray owl, *Strix nebulosa*, which we heard one night hooting at us softly from just beyond the lake. The mysterious predator we never saw that skulked in the willow grove across from us, scaring the geese. The geese themselves landing in a tightly formation that was so balletic, it took our breath away. We made great, heartfelt gestures to all of this and more, and when we were finished, we walked out the way we came in, slowly, without haste.

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There's something about the woods. Entering them is difficult. Leaving them is, too. Coming back to the city after a six-day absence was bewildering—lights, noise, the density of buildings and human bodies. The taxi driver who picked me up at the Embarcadero BART station noticed my backpack. "Been camping?" he asked. When I said yes, he chuckled and said, not unkindly, "Now you have to get used to this bullshit all over again."

But I know things now, many valuable things that I never thought I would know. Do not ignore the difference between wolf lichen and Usnea. Put your trust in a good water filter but do keep it clean. Observe yourself, frequently, in relationship: to a bird, a human being, an element. Move like the things you love and face the things you fear with simplicity and honesty. Bang your drum loudly. Tell the stories that matter to you often, to everyone. And remember that, if something can work, it will.

Elizabeth C. Creely, a fourth generation Californian, writes about the land and waters of California. Born in a bio-region dominated by the ocean, she loves exploring all environments in California. Her work has been published in several anthologies and journals: the *New Hibernia Journal*, and the *Dogwood Journal*. Most recently Heyday Books published her essay "Daire Nua: the new oak grove" in their anthology *New California Writing 2013*. She authors a blog entitled *Dinnshenchas: Places, names and things in California*. www.dinnshenchas.wordpress.com.