

Writing Sample (essay)

Excerpt: *Love and Loss in a Post-Wild World: A Review of Emma Marris' Rambunctious Garden*

We stood at the edge of the Carson National Forest. From there we could see across and above, to the aspens of the valley just beginning to turn to their autumn gold and to the craggy peaks of the nearest range. Bill told us the names of the mountains and I practiced them under my breath. I wanted to know them, wanted to be near them, wanted never to have to look away. It was a kind of sight I'd never seen before. Growing up in the city, I took in whatever nature I could from the street trees and city parks.

But for Bill, this boundary between forest and valley was home. A writer and introspective soul, he treaded the line between the two worlds with careful intention. For an outsider like me, such distinctions of the land were imperceptible. One minute we were walking the perimeter of Bill's property, the next we were crossing onto national public lands. Back and forth we weaved, or so he told us, between those lines written into the earth.

Bill walks this part of the forest every day and has for decades. With such an intimate knowledge of a place, one begins to perceive the little things. Bill stopped then, at a small clearing in the woods, reached out for a nearby Ponderosa, and pressed his thumb into a familiar knot. And then he told us. The forest has changed, he said. The land is sick. Like so many others across the globe, this place is threatened by warming temperatures and erratic seasons and a host of consequences that accompany such climate change—fire, insects, erosion, harm to the watershed and to the people, plants, and animals that depend on it—the list goes on.

Bill told us these things and then he waited. He let our minds wander through the trees and out towards those far-off peaks. Did we think about the Ponderosas any differently? Did we hold them closer, dearer? Or did we think of our own special places? Could we picture what they might look like in twenty years, and could we love that picture? And if we held these places tight, close, was that a good thing? What would we do if that thing that we had held most closely were to be lost completely? What would we do then?

Bill spoke.

"Should you love the sick forest as much as you love the pristine one?" His words were piercing and unapologetic and uncomfortably so.

"Where does your heart go?" He paused, a piercing silence.

"You can love it and you can see it go. Then what do you love?" He turned, looked each of us in the eyes.

"Can you love the ashes?"

The question haunts me. Can you love the ashes? I've gone over it time and time again but I can't seem to find an answer in that memory, of Bill and I out on the edge of the forest, toeing the brink of change.

Like Bill, science writer Emma Marris sees loss, or impending loss, on every horizon. But she doesn't see environmental loss as a question of love, but rather, of inevitability. In her debut book, *Rambunctious Garden: Saving Nature in a Post-Wild World*, Marris asks not how we will feel about the loss of our special places, but how we will rebuild our world amidst such loss. Her work is a proposal for reconceptualization—in both the terms we use to think about nature and the ways in which we interact with it.

Marris argues that we need to stop putting nature on a pedestal, stop thinking of the natural world as some untouchable, untouched thing found only in small slivers of designated land. Instead, she asks us to understand nature through an expansive lens, to name as nature the grass growing up alongside a busy highway, Sandhill cranes stopping to rest overnight in an agricultural field, and the bees pollinating parking-strip plants. She tells us nature is the here and the now and the everything; the whole and the broken and the pieced-together. The old way of thinking—nature as the domain of the pristine—well, forget Muir and Emerson—Marris writes that the pristine is a construction of our dreams. "We imagine a place, somewhere distant, wild and free," she writes, "a place with no people and no roads and no fences and no power lines, untouched by humanity's great grubby hands, unchanging except for the season's turn." She argues that this traditional view of nature is limiting. Her book instead takes readers along on a global search for a new, forward-looking conservation strategy, one that is realistic about the inevitable tide of change, yet still finds a nature of value among the ashes.

Writing Sample (artist statements)

The following artist statements were written for artists-in-residence at Elsewhere, a three-story former thrift store-turned arts space located in the heart of downtown Greensboro, North Carolina. Statements were written while in residence as Program Fellow, based on conversations and artist notes. To read more statements and view corresponding photos, go to: goelsewhere.org/category/projects.

Slow Dance, Monique van Hinte (The Netherlands)

November 2017. Video projections, performance, recordings of vinyl singles.

Throughout her time at Elsewhere, van Hinte approached the museum's collection as a geologist, unearthing meaning between objects, people, actions, and place. *Slow Dance* is a series of ephemeral performances that weave together light, movement, and music that reflect van Hinte's investigations.

During the work's opening exhibition, van Hinte transformed the museum in its entirety at each three-quarter hour. Participants were invited to follow paths of light and music to discover more video installations and intimate, slow dance performances. In van Hinte's words: "Slow dancing captures moments of lives intermingling and unraveling, uniting and separating while the objects around us bear witness and record."

Songs for the performances were mostly recorded from Elsewhere's singles collection, which van Hinte listened to in its entirety. Much like the introduction of outside elements like the dancing performers and the neighboring café depicted in the video above, there were introductions of two, non-collection songs into the piece.

Martyrdom of Saint Elsewhere, Dorothy Melander-Dayton (Detroit, MI)

February 2017. Wedding dress, yarn, ribbons, toys, spray paint, plaster, wheelchair, crutches.

Martyrdom of Saint Elsewhere is a theatrical installation that draws connections between religious iconography and the sacred nature of the Elsewhere collection. Though the museum is a secular entity, Melander-Dayton observed religious tendency sewn deep into the organization's folds. Her work takes the sacred fragment as a point of departure to understand Elsewhere's approach to materials and art-making.

From this framework, Saint Elsewhere materialized—a figurative "saint" of the museum. Like any good Catholic martyr, Saint Elsewhere attains holiness through physical trauma. Baroque-inspired symbolism suggests a narrative of spiritual and sexual transgression.

Material choices and arrangements point to bodily injury and deprivation—pain imbued through wedding gown, red ribbon, gloves, crutches, and wheelchair. Martyrdom of Saint Elsewhere becomes a shrine, elevating the damaged and broken to transcendence.

Writing Sample (organizational copy)

The following writing is excerpted from *A Visitor's Guide to Blue Sky Center and Greater Cuyama*, a 2019 publication I wrote and designed for Blue Sky Center in my capacity as Rural Community Designer. To see full PDF, go to: t.ly/AqDI.

A Visitor's Guide to Blue Sky Center and Greater Cuyama Valley

An excerpt from the 2019 publication's section **What We Do: Our Five Focus Areas.**

RURAL BUSINESS

Our rural business initiative, Made in Cuyama, builds local capacity by supporting and incubating emerging and existing local businesses. Since receiving a 2018 USDA Rural Business Development Grant, we're working to offer technical assistance and job training across our communities in partnership with Rural Community Assistance Corp. (RCAC).

FOOD SYSTEMS

Working at both grassroots and systems levels, we collaborate with community members and regional partners to further Cuyama Valley food access and education, connect local producers, and support food entrepreneurship with our mobile, commercial-grade community kitchen, The Cuyama Kitchen / La Cocina Cuyama.

HOSPITALITY

In the past year alone we hosted over 1,000 visitors in our Shelton Huts. Our hospitality initiative, Explore Cuyama, aims to highlight the Cuyama Valley as a vibrant place to live, work, and visit. Hosting guests and events also provides an unrestricted revenue stream for flexibility in our programming and operational structures.

HOUSING AND COMMUNITY RESOURCES

Established as a company town, 94% of existing New Cuyama homes were built before 1953, with no major housing stock since the townsite's founding and 23% of current homes in need of major repair. Through housing research, advocacy, and outreach, we're committed to improving local access to healthy and affordable housing.

CREATIVE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

We host visiting students, artists, and creative professionals to work with and alongside our communities. From offering in-school workshops that build capacity for Cuyama Valley educators to hosting creative events that engage neighbors, we celebrate the many voices of Cuyama Valley experience and picture Cuyama residents as co-creators.

Writing Sample (social media)

Post written for Blue Sky Center's Instagram account, reviewing and celebrating June 2019 Desert Fellow Mayela Rodriguez' last week in-residence. All photography is my own. See the full post (including emojis) at: t.ly/VFK6. Please reach out if you'd like to see more sample social media content.

We all can be (and already are) artists and curators! Last week, our Desert Fellow Mayela Rodriguez (@_m_a_r) began renovating the display case behind New Cuyama's C & H Market. In collaboration with some teenage helpers and community volunteer curators, Mayela is converting the former window display into a public art gallery! Join us THIS THURSDAY, June 27th from 5-7pm in the back parking lot of the C & H for the grand opening exhibition, "Cuyama Cartonera!" The show will feature cartonera books made by Cuyama residents (with an opportunity to make your own to take home!), live music by Cuyama's Matt Galindo (@mattgalindomusic1), and sweet treats baked fresh for the occasion by chef extraordinaire, Maggie!

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In addition to this month's show, Mayela is collaborating with residents to set up monthly community-run exhibitions that showcase the expansive creativity of the Cuyama Valley. While planning ahead for the future, Mayela is also working to preserve the history of the past, archiving the previous display (which owner Nick guesses has been up for over 15 years!) that showcased historic National Forest Service posters and maps of Los Padres National Forest. Swipe for a look into the renovation process! #2-6: Cuyama 8th grader Kaylee, featuring helper Lyric. Poster illustrations by Cuyama 6th-grader Arturo and 2nd-grader Michelle.

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Are you a Cuyama Valley resident and want to host a show in the new gallery space? Send us a message, drop by our office, or talk to the cashier at the C & H to sign up for a month-long exhibition! Are you an artist or creative interested in creating work alongside Cuyama Valley residents? Apply for our upcoming October Desert Fellowship (link in bio) by July 7th! Many thanks to C & H for their enthusiasm and support, our resident collaborators, and cartonera workshop co-hosts at the Cuyama Valley Library and our favorite Ventucopa restaurant, The Place.

Writing Sample (podcast)

Excerpt: *HOLDING DUST: Biological Soil Crust And the Vanishing Aridlands of the American West*

MARY O' BRIEN: See those little dark things that look like dog poop or something? They're really little, but they are crusts.

RIMONA ESKAYO: Mary O'Brien is an ecologist who speaks up for the voiceless and downtrodden. Today she advocates for a group of tiny organisms that live on top of desert soils. Composed of bacteria, mosses, and lichens, Biological Soil Crust—or biocrust for short—holds onto the soil and keeps it from going anywhere. Although it is easily mistaken for just another patch of dirt—or dog poop, if you're feeling especially imaginative—if you didn't know what biocrust was, you might never guess its importance. What's so exceptional about this unsuspecting creature?

O'BRIEN: That's all crust out there, under that Pinyon and spreading out—and if the crust wasn't there, the thin soil on top of that slick rock would just blow away. But once it anchors it, more soil can come and anchor more, and so it expands habitat.

ESKAYO: Mary works in Grand Staircase-Escalante, where biocrust lives in its prime habitat. Today, like most days in Utah, it is hot and dry. From beneath the shade of a one-seed juniper, Mary points out the four-winged saltbush and sagebrush, scattered between patches of dry desert grass. Plants here have spread out, distanced themselves from one another so as to soak up enough water to survive. So most of all, Mary sees the dirt: filling the empty spaces of the desert.

{Soft acoustic music fades in, then out.}

It is a sandy, dusty kind of soil. Mary's steps have left exact imprints in the loose ground. Any crust that might have lived along this path has been trampled away.

O'BRIEN: [sound of footsteps in the background] You do these transects on crusts, and if you have crust, you're walk in on them. So you try to walk as carefully as you can, you know, [crunching of footsteps] with your feet, you try to be as light as you can on them.

ESKAYO: Mary has struck upon the achilles' heel of biocrusts. Though it withstands strong winds and harsh rains, when stepped on, it becomes little more than a pile of ashes. This is the heart of biocrust's troubles.

{Soft acoustic music fades in.}

Eighteen years ago, President Clinton announced he was going to turn Grand-Staircase into a national monument. Why was this land worthy of extra protection? Biological Soil Crust was one of the reasons Clinton offered. At the same time, he declared his new protections would not interfere with the land uses already in affect for the area. From there, the battle began: it has been ecologists versus ranchers ever since. Today, a majority of the monument is grazed by cattle. While livestock trample the ground in a matter of seconds, biocrust can take thousands to years to develop.

O'BRIEN: With the grazing, the crusts have been destroyed, and the sand's on the move.

ESKAYO: For the good of the crust, Mary thinks the Bureau of Land Management should change the way grazing works in Grand Staircase. But the ranchers don't see why they should take their cattle off land that has been grazed for generations.

O'BRIEN: If they allowed for some of the grazing to not be done in the monument, they're gonna be sued.

ESKAYO: Change grazing and the BLM will get sued, butt keep grazing as it is and the crust will be lost. The conflict between biocrust, ecologists, and ranchers goes far beyond what Mary works with in Utah. She shows a map of the United States.

O'BRIEN: See where our drylands are? That's where you're gonna have crusts.

ESKAYO: Aridity is designated on the map by a tan outline. Mary points to the American West.

O'BRIEN: They're in the Mohave desert, they're in the Sonoran desert, they're in the Colorado Plateau. They're in the Great Basin.