

THINKING AGAIN, GROUNDED DISCOURSE

By Katherine Savage

*Accept what comes from silence.
Make the best you can of it.
Of the little words that come
out of the silence, like prayers
prayed back to the one who prays,
make a poem that does not disturb
the silence from which it came.*
—Wendell Berry



Blue Ridge Mountains, Celo, North Carolina

Around 1809, Sequoyah began the work of creating a writing system for his people, the Cherokee. Despite their concerns and fears, he persevered in his task from having seen the usefulness for English speakers of communicating with those in distant places via “talking leaves.” Because Cherokee is a polysynthetic language using a single word to convey many ideas, he tried creating a character for each word, and then a symbol for every idea, but both proved impractical and problematic. After abandoning the notion of simplistically representing the complexity of a word and the context it conveys, Sequoyah developed a symbol for each syllable by fitting 86 characters from other languages to Cherokee discourse. With correspondence successfully made between sound and symbol, the Cherokee became one of the few native peoples to have the option of communicating outside the context of person-to-person, subject-to-subject.

I wonder if the first readers of Cherokee could still hear in their mind's ear the sounds of the landscape from which it was inspired. Once they lived where I live now, and when I listen to the broad vowels and rolling inflections of their language, I imagine I am hearing the South Toe Valley wind, river, and bird song. For oral peoples, language was the land's gift, and functioned to praise or appease the resident gods who had breathed its forms into being. There are maps that tell us areas with the greatest density of animal and plant species also have the greatest number of languages. Discourse began when the power of an experience or the beauty of a thing brought us out of silence, and sent us for a word to designate our reverence for the place gods. Is there a connection between the dwindling numbers of people who use the Cherokee language in any of its forms, and their removal from this landscape considered to be the cradle of their people?

The people who wanted the Cherokee removed from here were orphans of place too, doubly exiled by physical dislocation and use of written language. When once they belonged to a place, their sensorial interactions fed their understanding of what was necessary to mediate the landscape's needs and their own. What kept the world alive was the subject of their discourse, making the first language one of indebtedness. Writing, as an act of 'reflecting over' rather than 'being in' the landscape, removed them from the need to use this language, just as effectively as being physically exiled. For most on the planet, dislocation from the natural world lives on in our soul bones. The traumatized beget more trauma.

In suburbia where I'd lived from birth, sprawl was the word for the behavior of humans who'd lost the thread of conversation. Using bulldozers and earthmovers, it took over the Piedmont forest that had a heavy hand in raising me and made another Eden orphan. Though I couldn't know it then, those years of wandering and wondering with my open child mind had given the untamed voices ground in which to root, so that my ears would forever be tuned for them. I knew healing by its sound, and in search of it I've pilgrimaged to places where I could hear, including the river and mountains of Celo, NC. After decades of leaving for restoration, it was one day, not enough. I knew that suburbia, which squelches non-conformity to keep the masses seduced, would silence my wild voice too. This is the language of strangulation and suffocation, and I wanted no more of it.

Now I have come home, and I know it by how the deep well of feeling in me rises to meet the abundance in my surroundings. The language for this is euphoria, and the sound of spilling over is the language of gratitude. As a river of exclamations and praise flow during my wanders, the question rises over and over . . . *what is one to do with such abundance?* To my surprise, the language that is evolving out of two years of gushing, is silence. I feel a solemnity growing from regarding a dark vastness of possibility spreading underneath me. Its voice says: *You there, with full heart. We have answered your longing and returned you to Eden. Possessing full faith in sustenance everlasting, **who could you yet be?***

This question has come to me before, but in times when I was aching with an emptiness that just wanted filling. Now it comes in feeling full, being satisfied, not itching to *do*, just wanting to *be*. The thing about be-ing is, there's not much to say. This is the language of an animal who communicates everything, by using no words at all. The words that do arise are like the first ones, beautiful and nourishing by the pristine energy of the silence that inspired them. I'm learning this language from a landscape so intensely communicative in its beauty and power that it registers in my body as having full-on intent. Its mode of communication is sensual. *Who I will yet be* is the feast I experience, so that the ground I enter again one day recognizes me by what of it I have assimilated.

Sensual listening is a quiet behavior used by humans in rehabilitation from the noise of their creations. Until we go with our ears to the ground of our being, we are severed from the origin of words, unyoked

from that which supports and sustains our language, and unhinged from the wisdom that keeps the world alive. Even the beautiful words of authors and teachers can be a noise of distraction, if we think their wisdom can be ours just through an osmosis of reading or hearing. For wisdom to be made (r)evolutionary, the trauma residing in our bones has to be replaced with belonging, and that can only happen by experiencing true home.

After listening to the Earth's discourse, you no longer wonder why ours is so troubled, and full of the language of differences and separation. You understand why huge and cumbersome global initiatives that seek to move solutions to the ground never reach it. As David Abram says, we can only respond to the immediate needs of an animate earth through the scale of our own intimate sensorial interactions. The question a planet's abundance asks of us-*who could you yet be*-is answered in our rewilding.

In the mornings, I run through the woods to the river. At its edge I stand, opening my senses to the sound of it rushing over the earth, the sight of it dancing the first rays of light, the smell of it liquefying the mineral earth. Like a river's response to sky's overflow, I flood and fall, legless and gushing with praise. I join myself to the water and bring it to my head, my throat, my heart.

Anointed, I leave blessed. Connected, I leave peaceable. Filled, I leave silent.

There is nothing more to say.