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# *The Roof of the World*

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## Abstract

The Roof of the World: a story collection. *The Roof of the World* illuminates the struggles of explorers, expats, refugees, tourists, and others who don't feel at home in the world or in their own bodies. Ambition and yearning, love and loss drive characters on journeys—literal and figurative—to discover who they really are. What does it mean to be a hero? A parent? A person worthy of love? The flawed protagonists tackle these and other questions in their uncertain and sometimes reluctant quests to carve out identities and make meaning in the mundane, absurd, and transformative moments of their lives.

Human/Nature Otherness: An Ecocritical Examination of Stories by Andrea Barrett and Anthony Marra. This essay examines to what degrees the characters in selected stories of Barrett's *Ship Fever* and Marra's *The Tsar of Love and Techno* embrace a post-secular viewpoint (as outlined in Alexander Hampton's article "Post-secular Nature and the New Nature Writing") and achieve a meaningful relationship with the natural world. This essay explores the barriers that people (individuals as well as nations) construct to keep nature separate and assesses how concepts of awe and humility may contribute to maintaining or dissolving those barriers. Jane Bennett and Rita Felski's criticism concerning enchantment offers additional ways to consider how the characters fail or succeed to relinquish a sense of control and experience nature—and themselves—afew. Finally, the essay deliberates ways to bridge the human/nature dichotomy, considering questions of species modesty, anthropocentrism, exploitation, blowback, and the possibilities that language affords.

## Lay Summary

My stories follow the struggles of various kinds of travelers: explorers, expats, refugees, tourists, and others who don't feel at home in the world or in their own bodies. Ambition and yearning, love and loss drive these characters on journeys to discover who they really are. What does it mean to be a hero? A parent? A person worthy of love? My characters tackle these and other questions in their quests to carve out identities and make meaning in the mundane, absurd, and transformative moments of their lives. My critical essay examines how the characters in selected stories of Andrea Barrett's *Ship Fever* and Anthony Marra's *The Tsar of Love and Techno* view their relationship with the natural world. Do they see themselves as part of nature, or separate, or something in-between? How should we view ourselves in order to forge a meaningful relationship with nature and lead more satisfied lives? This essay considers what role awe and humility as well as the human urge to control may play in these relationships and explores ways to bridge the human/nature divide.

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# *The Roof of the World*

## Home From the Wars

When Mother came home from the wars, she made porridge for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. She always added protein: peanut butter, or cubes of cheese, sometimes a raw egg that cooked as you mixed it in, like a strange carbonara.

“Give her time,” said Dad.

Sometimes she held us so hard our ribs ached. Sometimes she disappeared without a word.

“Her car’s still in the driveway,” one of us would say, and we’d split up and search the house.

When someone yelled “Found her!” the rest of us would run to find her curled up under the sheets next to the laundry hamper or nestled in the narrow space between the living room sofa and the wall. We’d collapse on her, giggling and stroking her hair, enjoying the tickle of her breath on our hands.

One night Dad made dinner, not to prove that we didn’t need her, but just to give her a break. “You’ve done so much for us already,” he said. “For our family, and our country.”

The roast chicken glistened in the candlelight. Mother had taken a shower for the occasion, and brush strokes were still etched into her damp hair.

“Would you do the honors?” asked Dad, holding out a carving knife. Our stomachs grumbled. Mother dropped the baby carrot she had been inspecting. Dad looked at her looking at the knife.

“Never mind,” he said. “You sit back and relax.”

Mother cleared her throat. Dad handed it over.

“Did you know chickens can fly?” she said. We looked at the carcass, its crispy haunches enormous next to the wings. “Not very high, and not very far, but they can clear a fence if their wings aren’t clipped.”

Mother ran her finger along the knife’s edge.

“Chickens move their eyes when they sleep, like we do.” A drop of blood beaded on her finger. “Do you think chickens dream?” She sucked her finger and looked at each of us in turn.

She sliced the chicken expertly and let us eat what we wanted—white meat or dark meat, skin or no skin. She ate the gizzards, no sense in letting them go to waste.

We fought over the carrots and peas and hid chunks of uneaten chicken under our mashed potatoes. We all volunteered to do the dishes, and we took turns disposing the evidence—*we were the chicken's nightmare*—washing and drying our plates clean.

\*

Sometimes Mother slept outside in the backyard. No tent, no sleeping bag, she just pushed together a pile of leaves. If the night was warm, we might try to join her. We knew not to

get too close—if we startled her, we would regret it—but we would drag our sleeping bags to the edge of the patio, where we could still watch the glow of her phone screen.

At first light we'd wake, stiff from the concrete, or if we had rolled into the softer grass, wet with dew. Mother would already be awake, her eyes trained on a line of ants or a spider weaving its web. She would press oddly shaped stones into our hands and say, "You know I love you. Don't you ever forget it."

Dad would come out to the patio with two mugs of coffee. He would sip from one and leave the other on the arm of a deck chair for Mother. He would wave and watch us for awhile before going back inside. Only then would Mother retrieve her mug and drink her coffee as we watched the sunrise.

"The sun won't last forever," Mother said one morning. "Did you know that?"

We shook our heads.

She must have sensed the fear on our faces. "It will last longer than you."

We didn't dare ask how long that would be. We fingered our stones in the palms of our hands. We knew the sun wasn't moving, but rather the Earth, carrying us with it. Still, it was hard not to believe our eyes as the red orb of the sun peeled itself from the horizon and began its ascent. We had to close our eyes to imagine ourselves spinning—along with the ants and spiders, our neighbors and classmates, even our enemies across the sea—in the dark infinity of space.

\*

When we spent the night at friends' houses, their mothers served us pancakes and bacon for breakfast. "Pigs are as intelligent as dogs," we would chirp. "On some tests they perform as well as chimpanzees." We still ate the bacon, smothered in maple syrup. The pig was already dead, and we shouldn't let it go to waste.

After a while we weren't invited to other people's houses very much. We roamed the woods that bordered our house, catching grass snakes and climbing trees. When Mother was at war, Dad had worked hard to ensure we were clean and our rooms were tidy, and we followed a schedule of homework, sports, piano practice, etc. Now he let us come and go as we pleased. We'd come home late, covered in scratches, brambles in our hair, and he'd line us up, ready with a towel doused in antiseptic. After a quick wipe-down, he'd send us to collect our nightly porridge.

Teachers started asking us if everything was okay. "Why didn't you tell us," we asked, "that the sun won't last forever?"

One rainy day, Dad was in the garage, making another side table. The garage was full of sawdust that made us sneeze. Every room in our house already had a side table, sometimes two. We searched the house, twice, but Mother had done a particularly good job of hiding. We worried that she had figured out how to disappear altogether. To distract ourselves, we went into our parents' bedroom and snooped in all the drawers. We laughed at Dad's white underpants and pulled his argyle socks over our hands and up our arms like ladies' gloves from black-and-white movies.

At the bottom of one of Mother's drawers we found a lipstick and a tube of mascara. We flung the socks aside. We smeared the mascara around our eyes and smudged it with our fingers: war paint. Then we took turns stabbing each other with the lipstick, imagining it was blood.

We didn't hear her coming. She didn't yell. She didn't take us by the cuffs of our shirts and drag us to our rooms.

"You want to know what war is like?"

We didn't move.

She picked up Dad's socks from the floor. "War is not destruction, not really. It's an angry kind of birth. It just gives birth to more and more destruction."

The word *birth* made us feel guilty.

She put the socks over her hands, like puppets. We shivered as she stroked our heads, as if it was her, but also not her, touching us.

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"Are you sure?" said Dad. It was a school holiday, and Mother was packing a cooler with sandwiches and oranges. Dad was dressed in a shirt and tie, headed to work. "Call me," he said to Mother, but looking at us, "if you need me."

At the beach we raced to the wet sand in between waves and dug up fistfuls of sand crabs. We ran heavy-footed in the softer sand, dragging pieces of driftwood behind us, carving lines in the earth. We scrunched up our noses when we neared a pile of kelp, but the smell didn't stop us from popping the kelp buds. There were no rock pools here, no sea anemones to poke

until they squirted you. At last we charged into the sea, choking on the waves until it was deep enough to swim without bumping our knees on the sand.

When we couldn't feel our fingers and toes, we swam back and collapsed on the beach towels Mother had grudgingly brought, at Dad's urging. Even though Mother gave them to us, the sandwiches felt like a transgression. It was strange, to chew our food. She refused to peel our oranges for us, so we hacked away at their rinds until we unearthed the sweet wedges. When a stray beach ball landed in our midst, Mother squeezed it until she found a weakness in the seam. If we stared at it, we couldn't see it shrinking, but if we looked away and looked back, it grew smaller, and smaller still. When its owners came to collect it, we pretended not to see them.

We lolled and complained that it was hot, so Mother nudged us with her feet until we scampered back to the sea. The water was murky, and we jumped whenever we brushed against a clump of unseen kelp. We swam until we were past the waves and floated on our backs, listening to the distant hum of boats. When one of us yelped in pain, the rest of us felt it within seconds. Something was stinging the backs of our legs, our arms, our necks. Jellyfish. We twisted away, our tears mixing with the salt water as we swam back to shore.

"Crying isn't going to make the pain go away." Mother knelt down to inspect our wounds. "You have to own the pain. It's yours, and yours alone." She looked at the sea. "Are you done?"

We nodded, gulping down our sobs.

"Look after the car keys." Mother walked into the sea without looking back. She plunged under a wave and surfaced meters away then made steady strokes towards the horizon.

Our wounds throbbed. We compared each other's welts and searched the cooler in vain for snacks. We limped around our towels and made a sand castle, mixing seawater with the sand to drizzle elaborate turrets. Mother was gone a long time. We looked out to sea, scanning left to right, but we couldn't see her.

We picked up the car keys. We flung them into the sand.

A cloud covered the sun. We dug a moat and a channel to the water's edge, but the angle of the beach was too steep, and the moat remained dry. When our pain began to ebb, we felt a sense of loss. We probed the stings to make the pain flare.

Mother returned, dripping, breathing heavily. When she asked for the keys, we bowed our heads. She brought a clenched fist to her mouth.

"Well, then." She put on her sunglasses, lay back on the sand, and stretched out her legs. "I guess you better start looking."

We said she should call Dad.

"The phone is in the car." The sunglasses hid her eyes. "And the keys didn't *disappear*."

We stomped over where we had flung the keys and began sweeping the sand. The cloud moved on, and the sun came back. Sweat ran down our faces and into our eyes, stinging. Own your pain, we thought. *But how?* The sand was never-ending. We pictured ourselves on our hands and knees, digging through the night, for days and weeks, for months, a lifetime.

When one of us yelled, "Found them!" we were relieved but also annoyed. Mother had been right. They didn't disappear.

Back at the car, no matter how much we rubbed with the towels, sand clung to our ankles and the crevices between our toes.

“I’ll hose you down when we get home,” said Mother. She put the keys in the ignition but didn’t start the car. We leaned our heads against the window, breathing in the humid air. “Did you know?” Mother said. “Life began in the ocean.”

We nodded, sun-drunk and groggy. We knew what she meant: single cells, evolution. Fins becoming feet, etc. But we pictured *our* lives, starting inside of her, swimming and somersaulting in our own private sea. And we wondered, as the car drove and we began to doze, if life should have stayed in the sea. Was that why Mother had swum out so far? Was she trying to go back to where we belonged?

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We thought the wars had ended.

We were wrong.

“It’s time,” said Dad.

We hid in Mother’s favorite spaces: the laundry cupboard, between the couch and the wall, and in the backyard, covered with leaves, watching the light filter through their veins. We waited for her to find us. We waited and waited until we couldn’t take it anymore and burst out of our hiding spots and ran to find her sitting on the front steps.

For once, she hugged us gently. It took time for her to remember how to be gentle.

“There, there,” said Dad. “It’s only for a while. Your mother will be back.”

Mother’s mouth twitched. We clung to her arms and legs and begged her to tell us something.

“I love you more than anything,” she said. “But you know that. Or did you forget?”

We shook our heads and begged her to tell us something we didn’t know.

She let Dad carry her bag to the car.

“Some stars are so far away, it takes years for their light to reach Earth. When stars die, their light continues to travel. We don’t know if the stars we see are actually still there.”

We waited for her to say something reassuring, like the light is what matters, or even if we couldn’t see her, she would still be there.

“Well,” she said, standing. “It’s time.”

We waved until the car was out of sight, and then we went into the backyard and threw our oddly shaped stones over the fence into the woods. Later, when we tried to retrieve them, we couldn’t be sure if the rocks we found were the ones Mother had given us, and we cursed ourselves for not memorizing their contours.

We went back to our routine with Dad: homework, sports, piano. But we were more aggressive in sports, terrorizing our teammates when the coach wasn’t looking, and we only played piano pieces written in a minor key. We earned good marks for our schoolwork, but we were always getting in trouble for questioning the teachers’ authority.

The rare times Mother was able to call, her voice sounded far away. At night, we looked at the stars and tried to guess which ones were there and which ones weren’t. Then we wandered all the rooms in the house, kicking the side tables until they broke, to give Dad something to do when Mother returned.

## Night Swimming with Godzilla

From inside, you wouldn't know the El Paso Bar is five blocks from the beach. It's got warped walls and dark carpet, and the sole window faces a sign for the I-5. Every fifteen minutes, if no one puts in any coins, the jukebox automatically plays a random mariachi song.

We open at 10am, and it usually doesn't take long to get the first customer of the day. Today it's Godzilla. He's not as tall as you would think: maybe nine feet, ten tops. He stoops through the doorway and drags that thick tail of his across the floor.

He doesn't fit on a stool, so he sits on a crate next to the bar and asks for a pitcher. We only have Bud Lite on draft, so that's what I pour. I restock bottles of Pacifico and Modelo and try not to stare, but when I wipe down the bar, I sneak glances at the webbing between his fingers and the armor of scales on the backs of his hands.

"I'm a big fan," I say.

He shrugs. He sighs. I hold my breath. But he never breathes fire, or radiation, or whatever it is that burns inside of him. When Sandra, a regular, comes in, she gives Godzilla the once over and sits a few barstools down.

"White zinfandel," she says with a wink. She clears her throat. Godzilla looks up, and she flashes a smile. She's missing a tooth, not her front tooth, but one tooth over from that. I feel bad pulling out the jug of pink wine. Nothing good comes in a jug like this. Sandra moves one barstool closer to Godzilla.

"Where are you from, stranger?"

Godzilla doesn't look up from his pitcher. "Monster Island."

"Ooh. An island. That sounds nice."

Godzilla shakes his head. There's a scar on his face from his eyebrow to his ear. You don't see that in the movies. "There are no beaches. Only rocks."

Sandra shrugs. "I don't like the feeling of sand on my feet."

Horns blare. The jukebox always makes me jump. The music relaxes into a strumming of guitars. No matter how many mariachi songs I hear, they all sound the same: happy and sad at the same time.

Sandra stands and sidles up to Godzilla. "You wanna dance?"

Godzilla stiffens. "I can't dance."

"It's not rocket science." She runs her finger along the jagged plates of his spine.

"No." The muscles of his jaw clench. His bony plates stand erect. "Sometimes I don't know my own strength."

Sandra slumps back into her stool. She sips her wine and says she has a job interview at one o'clock: telemarketing. I look at the clock. It's almost noon.

"Do you like it there?" I ask Godzilla. "On Monster Island?" I picture the other monsters, enormous lizards and gigantic insects, multi-headed monsters roaring, multi-legged monsters stomping through the dense undergrowth, unclassifiable monsters slipping into dripping tunnels and caves or soaring overhead, flapping enormous leathery wings.

Godzilla frowns. "It's like an Indian reservation, minus the casinos." He drinks straight from the pitcher. "What about you?" He wipes foam from his leathery lips. "Do you like it here?"

I shrug. Six months earlier my mom almost died—insulin pump malfunction. That’s why I came home. That’s what I told myself when I left the big city along with a series of dead-end jobs and a girl who didn’t love me back.

My mom recovered quickly. She bought a bicycle and enough pairs of spandex shorts to clothe the Tour de France. I paid two hundred bucks for a week-long bartending course then dropped off a resume at every bar in a thirty mile radius, even the cowboy-themed lounge where they made the women wear bootie shorts and chaps. The manager took my application and looked me up and down. I was wearing baggy jeans, and my hair was cut short like a boy’s. He didn’t call. None of the bars called except the El Paso Bar.

When Cherry comes in, she doesn’t notice Godzilla, just orders a Dos Equis and takes it straight to the back behind the pool table. No baby carriage, like the owner warned, but when Cherry starts looking over her shoulder, I know it’s coming. Soon she’s talking to the empty space next to the pool table, and when she starts to scream bloody murder, I yell, “Cherry!” She looks up, her eyes wide. “It’s okay, there’s no one there.”

She nods and takes a sip of her beer and then covers it with her cocktail napkin. Godzilla looks at Cherry, then turns back to his beer. “Everyone is afraid of things that aren’t there,” he says.

“You don’t seem afraid of much,” I say.

Godzilla hiccups. It sounds like a tiny version of his iconic roar.

I wonder how long it took him to get here from Monster Island. I look for gills—he must breathe underwater—but the skin on his neck is gnarled, ropy, and his throat, while thick, is smooth and seamless.

Sandra orders her third wine. It's a quarter to one.

“Is your interview in person, or is it by phone?” I ask.

She shrugs. “I'm going to get my hairdressing license back.” She holds out her hand for the wine. “It was all a big misunderstanding.” She takes a drink. “Do you ever get the feeling that nobody understands you?”

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Human/Nature Otherness: An Ecocritical Examination of  
Stories by Andrea Barrett and Anthony Marra

In 2016, I had the privilege to spend two months in Maliau Basin and Danum Valley conservation areas in Malaysian Borneo. Few areas of primary rainforest remain on the planet, and it felt like an honor to enter such a rare and wild environment. I befriended some scientists who were tagging and identifying bats. They had identified over one hundred unique species and were seeing more species daily. One British ecologist told me the number of bat species in all of the UK was only eighteen. A Malaysian botanist said, “the shameful part about losing biodiversity is not knowing what could have been.” As a fiction writer, that sentiment struck me to the core. Violence against nature is a violence against possibility: what could have been. Part of my concern is empathetic, sorry for the species who have been lost. Another part is entirely selfish: I want to live in a world with a greater possibility of bats. I want to live in a world where as much as possible is possible.

I also feel the need to live in a world where I can have access to nature: exposure to the outdoors. I love hiking. I love being immersed—for a few hours or a few days—in the wilderness, in places little touched by humanity, or at least places that give that illusion. Whether in a primary rainforest in Borneo or on top of a hill in Skye, being in nature offers for me what Leo Mellor describes in “The Lure of the Wilderness” as “a recalibration of self in the world – and indeed the universe” (105). I am no longer a person among people; I feel connected to an earth that is hyper-present to my senses and yet timeless. Is my desire to preserve nature selfish?

After doing some research, I worry that I am falling into a trap that Timothy Morton has identified: “putting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman. It is a paradoxical act of sadistic admiration” (Smith 13). Am I reducing the natural world to an object to appreciate and ignore at my leisure?

Although I am concerned with the state of the natural world, as a writer, I wrestle with the concern that a morally explicit motive in my fiction might somehow compromise the literary quality of my work. Writer Arundhati Roy explains why she objects to the term “writer-activist,” which she claims “diminish[es] both writers and activists. It seeks to reduce the scope, the range, the sweep, of what a writer is and can be...conversely, it suggests that activists...are by profession ‘position-takers’ and therefore lack complexity and intellectual sophistication” (Huggan 35-36). Roy doesn’t object to writing that compels people to take notice of the injustices of the world or to take action; she objects to the language that oversimplifies, diminishing writers’ abilities and their scope. The authors I intend to study, Andrea Barrett and Anthony Marra, have not been mistaken for “writer-activists,” but do we have an obligation to be more conscientious in our portrayal of nonhuman concerns? In her book *Animal*, Erica Fudge exhorts people to consider the consequences of failing to consider other species: “What is at stake ultimately is our own ability to think beyond ourselves, to include with the orbit of our imaginations as well as our material existences, those beings of other species” (22-23).

When I began contemplating what role the environment plays in my own writing, I asked: to what degree does the landscape inform a character’s understanding of herself? To what degree does a character’s understanding of herself inform how she views the landscape? These

questions demonstrate an anthropocentric point of view, reinforcing the belief that the world revolves around people, real or fictional. On the other hand, ecocriticism strives to “[unsettle] the nature/culture aspects of this separation and its innumerable environmental and social consequences” (McFarland 153). Therefore, in an effort to take a more ecocritical stance, I ask: to what degree does describing the environment reinforce or challenge notions of human/nature otherness?

Much of the Western literary tradition has marked a divide between humans and nature. Binaries abound: nature versus humanity, nature versus culture, nature versus reason. Nature as an idyll, nature as a threat. Humanity as a threat. I intend to study two short story collections, Anthony Marra’s *The Tsar of Love and Techno* and Andrea Barrett’s *Ship Fever*, to analyze the ways in which these stories potentially corroborate or undermine the human/nature dichotomy.

Not everyone believes that fiction can contribute to the field of ecocriticism. Some scientific purists resent the intrusion of literary writers: “Once facts are despised, fancies replace them, and fancies are poisonous companions to the enjoyment and appreciation of nature” (Smith 23). However, some critics contend that fiction might occupy a unique role for reimagining the relationships between humans and everything else. Roman Bartosch insists, “An environmental consciousness cannot be grounded on environmentalist or ecological discourses alone” and wonders, “Can fictional literature transcend its own imaginative boundaries in order to affect and change consciousness?” (11)

At first glance, *The Tsar of Love and Techno* and *Ship Fever* are not obvious candidates for an ecocritical critique when other literary genres such as nature writing or climate fiction tackle our changing natural world head-on. But the audience for nature writing and cli-fi might

consist of people who are more likely to already have active concerns about the environment; texts from such genres might be preaching to the choir. Barrett's and Marra's collections revolve around human concerns and emotions. The characters in Marra's *The Tsar of Love and Techno* are subjects of (or are otherwise subjected to) various incarnations of the authoritarian Soviet State, and *Ship Fever* is populated with aspiring scientists from the 18th through 20th centuries and people who have crossed paths with scientists. Both story collections revolve around characters' access or lack of access to the natural world. Barrett's stories about scientists invite considerations of humans trying to understand and appreciate nature but also humans trying to control and conquer nature. In Marra's stories, the natural environment has been decimated in pursuit of industrial progress or war, but wilderness finds a way to enter the characters' lives via man-made forests, paintings, memories, and mystifying returns. What can these two disparate texts reveal about the complex relationships between humans and the natural world?

There are several ways I can consider framing the division between human and nature as I study these story collections. Before I go further, I would like to clarify my use of the word *nature*. Nature is a slippery term, but Meliz Ergin elegantly organizes two major ways we see nature, as an essence or a substance: "When imagined as essence, nature designates what is inherent and normative. When imagined as substance, it often denotes the immediate material reality and the physical environment that surrounds us" (13-14). For the purposes of this essay, I will be focusing on the latter term, including nonhuman species that populate that environment. This by no means completely clarifies the designation: does nature only refer to the environment untouched by humankind? Air pollution, microplastics, and climate change render this definition no longer possible. Does nature refer to any kind of greenery, even a pasture or a garden or a

houseplant? For now, I will maintain that nature refers to the physical environment and living organisms and includes, to varying degrees, those aspects that may be shaped by humanity (pasture, pets, etc.) but are not manmade.

My impulse is to analyze how Barrett's and Marra's fiction criticizes civilization's power over nature, and how this power ultimately represents a human failure. Barrett's stories abound with characters who act out of hubris, and Marra's stories are laced with a violent absurdism. Although these stories reveal humanity's urge to conquer and control nature, the individual humans rarely triumph. However, such a framework tends to promote the dichotomy of humans v. nature, so instead I will aim to adopt an approach that invites more complex ways of analyzing the relationship between humans and the natural world.

I found Terry Gifford's concept of the post-pastoral a useful starting point for considering how texts can suggest "a collapse of the human/nature divide while being aware of the problematics involved" (26). Over the past century or so, the pastoral tradition in Western literature has been understood to represent a kind of artifice, painting a stark division between the natural world and the civilized world, prompting criticism about the genre's tendency towards "idealization, nostalgia, and escapism" (Gifford 18). If the traditional pastoral "perpetuate[s] fantasies about rural lifestyles" (Ergin 15), the anti-pastoral directly criticizes the pastoral's ignorance of or willingness to gloss over humanity's impact on natural spaces. The post-pastoral, according to Gifford, refers to any text that follows in the pastoral tradition of contemplating the countryside while "'reach[ing] beyond' the limitations of pastoral" (26), raising questions about the repercussions of human activity while maintaining the pastoral's "yearning for ecological wholeness" (23).

Gifford provides examples of questions a post-pastoral text may raise, including “Can awe in the face of natural phenomena, such as landscapes, lead to humility in our species?” and “How, then, can our distinctively human consciousness, which gives us a conscience, be used as a tool to heal our troubled relationship with our natural home?” (27) Ultimately, I found the concept of the post-pastoral too wide-ranging to pinpoint any kind of specific response. However, I did find a similar impulse to challenge the human/nature divide in Alexander Hampton’s concept of the post-secular. Hampton traces the argument made by Charles Taylor that premodern people believed in a sacred relationship with the world outside themselves, in which both nature and humans were controlled by supernatural forces; the Enlightenment era prompted the beginning of a more modern people who adopted a secular relationship that “sets the self over and above nature” (455). Post-secular writing, Hampton argues, rejects a purely secular relationship and yet does not fully return to the sacred. Rather these post-secular texts engage in a kind of hybridity, combining elements of the sacred and the secular and frequently blurring the lines between human and nature.

One important dichotomy the post-secular aims to unsettle is the concept of nature as either enchanted or disenchanted. Hampton explains that the “enchanted world...was a participatory universe in which all things, and particularly nature, were animate, connected, and potential in ways that could only partially be understood, and only partially controlled” while the disenchanted world is one where we believe that everything in nature is capable of being calculated and understood through scientific inquiry, excluding any force deemed supernatural (464). Bennett paints a picture of a disenchanted modern world ruled by rationality, science, individualism, and bureaucracy, leaving many people hungry for a more personal relationship

with the world around them. The post-secular does not aim to dismiss scientific progress, but it does imply the urge to seek something beyond human control.

The idea of disenchantment and the post-secular urge to seek or acknowledge something beyond human understanding led me to consider the sublime. The concept of the sublime emerged in the Romantic era and came to represent, according to Edmund Burke, “a feeling of awe and wonder, astonishment and terror one feels when confronted with the immensity of the natural world” (Ergin 17) (and Rebecca Solnit argues that a new, technologically-induced version, the revised sublime, has replaced nature as a source of awe and fear). Although the sublime represents an extreme experience, that moment of recognizing something larger than ourselves, it prompted me to think of a subtler moment in Charles Taylor’s introduction to *A Secular Age*. Taylor quotes an experience by priest-turned-yogi Bede Griffiths, who found himself awestruck one evening by the sound of birds singing and the sight of hawthorne trees. Taylor describes this as a moment when “a sense of fullness...unsettles and breaks through our ordinary sense of being in the world” (5).

Barrett’s and Marra’s characters, and some of the characters in my stories, yearn for something beyond the ordinary. For the most part these characters are not religious, and they do not, like Griffiths, ascribe their awestruck sensations while immersed in nature as a glimpse of “a veil before the face of God” (Taylor 5), but they are drawn to a quality that Taylor and Hampton describe as “porousness,” a quality in which people are open, or willing, or even eager to suspend their autonomy and mingle with forces outside of themselves, including forces of the natural world (Hampton 460-61).

The idea of being awestruck reminded me of Gifford's first question that a post-pastoral text may address: "Can awe in the face of natural phenomena, such as landscapes, lead to humility in our species?" (Gifford 27). Gifford implies that we *should* have humility, and he is echoed by Anthony Hilfer, who encourages a "species modesty" (Hilfer 291). Hilfer warns us about the consequences when "[n]ature becomes the unrecognizable other." He quotes the wilderness philosopher Max Oelschlager:

...the relation between the human species and the 'other'--that is, the wilderness itself--is not simply one of exploitation and domination. Instead, wild nature and culture are understood as organically related. So viewed, the destruction of things wild and free entail the collapse of any civilization that rests upon them. (291-92)

Hilfer insists we cannot separate ourselves from nature, and if we try, we will bring about our own destruction, an unavoidable cause-and-effect consequence that he terms "blowback."

The idea of exploitation and domination leads me back to my original impulse to analyze how Barrett's and Marra's fiction criticizes civilization's power over nature. Although I initially feared such a framework would promote a dichotomy of humans v. nature, these stories wrestle with the dichotomy. The descriptions of the environment alternate between reinforcing and challenging notions of human/nature otherness, demonstrating how individuals and societies can consciously yearn for autonomy from and power over nature and still subconsciously yearn for a connection with nature. Barrett's and Marra's stories reveal that the natural world will never be fully knowable, and human attempts to entirely know, control, and exploit the natural world will only lead to personal or species-wide "blowback."

In the following chapters I will demonstrate how the characters in Barrett's and Marra's stories are dissatisfied when they see themselves as separate from nature. They long for a

fullness or richness that a human-dominated world cannot provide. First, I will outline Hampton's concept of the post-secular, which analyzes a historical shift from a sacred viewpoint to a secular one and acknowledges a contemporary movement, in nature writing, to find middle ground. In a sacred outlook, supernatural forces control the world, supernatural forces reign in a hierarchy with humans and nature underneath, and supernatural forces are mysterious. In a secular outlook, humans are in control, humans are at the top of a hierarchy over nature, and everything in the universe is ultimately knowable. While Hampton does not contend that humanity should revert to an entirely sacred viewpoint, he suggests that an entirely secular viewpoint can lead to people feeling alienated from the natural world.

Next I will demonstrate how Barrett's and Marra's characters, when trapped in a human-dominated mindset, feel alienated from the natural world and consequently divorced from themselves. In selected stories, I will examine the barriers that people construct to keep nature separate, and I will show how persistent human attempts to conquer the natural world are mutually harmful and frequently futile as the natural world cannot be kept separate indefinitely. I will also explore how concepts of awe and humility may contribute to maintaining or dissolving those barriers. Ultimately I aim to establish that Barrett's and Marra's characters can only feel fulfilled when they embrace a post-secular mindset, when they challenge the human/nature divide—when the characters, yearning for ecological wholeness, abandon presumptions of human dominance, break through ordinary ways of seeing their environment, and negotiate a sense of belonging with the natural world.

## The Post-Secular

Alexander Hampton is concerned with writing that challenges the human/nature divide in what he terms a post-secular shift in views. He traces the argument made by Charles Taylor and others that premodern people believed in a sacred relationship with the world outside themselves, in which both nature and humans were controlled by supernatural forces; the Enlightenment era prompted the beginning of a more modern people who adopted a secular relationship that “sets the self over and above nature” (455). Post-secular writing, Hampton argues, rejects a purely secular relationship and yet does not fully return to the sacred. Rather these post-secular texts engage in a kind of hybridity, combining elements of the sacred and the secular. When applied to texts about nature, the post-secular frequently blurs the lines between human and nature.

Hampton outlines three components that illustrate the historical shift in society from a sacred outlook to a secular one, and he illustrates how the contemporary post-secular movement destabilizes the dichotomies that divide the two. The first dichotomy concerns the self: are we, alongside nature, controlled by forces outside of ourselves? Or do we believe that humans can control and shape our societies, placing the natural world in a separate category? Hampton borrows heavily from Charles Taylor, who proposes in *A Secular Age* that the “premodern self... was thought of as open to supernatural forces and in general to powers beyond itself; it was ‘porous.’ The modern self, by contrast is ‘buffered’ against those things; thoughts and feelings belong to minds and selves conceived as independent and autonomous” (460-61).

The second dichotomy concerns ontology: who creates reality? According to Hampton, the premodern, sacred view was that a divine force made everything we know. The modern,

secular understanding is that “it is the mind of the individual that is responsible for structuring reality” (463). And “when the transcendentals were in effect transferred from the mind of God to the mind of the human, the hierarchy remained, but without its divine component” (463-64). In the sacred view, the supernatural was at the top of the hierarchy, grouping humans and the natural world below, and in the secular view, humans replaced the divine at the top of the hierarchy. When societies discarded notions of a higher power, they allowed humankind to fill in the power vacuum and presume superiority over everything else. This sense of superiority increased the sense of distance between humans and the natural world.

The third dichotomy concerns the concept of nature as either disenchanted or enchanted. Hampton explains that the “enchanted world...was a participatory universe in which all things, and particularly nature, were animate, connected, and potential in ways that could only partially be understood, and only partially controlled” while the disenchanted world is one where we believe that everything in nature is capable of being calculated and understood through scientific inquiry, excluding any force deemed supernatural (464). Although poet Friedrich Schiller introduced the term and concept of disenchantment in 1788, “referring to the demise of a pagan, or animistic, apprehension of nature” (Lyons 879), the concept gained traction in the early twentieth century when Max Weber discussed in greater length the role modern science has played in disenchanting the world. If scientists can measure and break down the known world into its constituent parts and conduct rational experiments to explain how everything works, then we lose the possibility of mystery and enchantment. Jane Bennett explains the “powerful and rather pervasive narrative in contemporary politics and political theory”:

There was once a time when Nature was purposive...human and other creatures were

defined by a preexisting web of relations....Then, this premodern world gave way to forces of scientific and instrumental rationality, secularism, individualism, and the bureaucratic state—all of which, combined, disenchant the world. (7)

When scientific inquiry and calculation trump any other way of describing or experiencing the natural world, we risk stripping nature of any meaning other than a clinical description.

Hampton discusses a recent cohort of what he terms the “new nature writers” who blur the lines between the secular and the sacred. They do not hearken back to a viewpoint in which a god or gods control the natural world through inexplicable means, but neither do they believe that rationality will break the world down into completely knowable forms. “Informed by both their semi-porous self and a reticently metaphysical outlook, the new nature writers resist any disenchanted narrative that would claim to be capable of fully understanding and controlling nature. Instead, they encounter nature anew.” Hampton acknowledges that there are many ways these writer re-encounter nature, but he pinpoints two major trends:

The first is the irreducibility of nature, whereby the natural world possesses qualities that resist description and articulation. The second, the transverse form of this resistance, is descriptive proliferation, a kind of lush prose or thick description, oftentimes evoked by these moments of resistance. Both express the same uncircumscribable quality of their natural objects, manifesting the restlessness of the new nature writing at the boundaries of the secular social imaginary. (464-65)

The social imaginary, Hampton explains, according to Taylor, is “a framework that allows a community to ‘imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others...the expectations which are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images which underlie these expectations’” (459). The social imaginary refers to a worldview, or perspective, a shared set of values and societal framework, but the term itself draws attention to the fact that this communal understanding is a social construct: it is only as real as the community or society

imagines it to be real. A sacred or secular viewpoint is not fixed, and the new nature writers have not entirely abandoned a secular viewpoint, but they do push its boundaries, imagining other possibilities, forging a post-secular relationship with the natural world.

Although Hampton identifies the British “new nature” movement as “primarily a genre of non-fiction nature prose” and confines his analysis to non-fiction (455), his reference to John McClure’s study of a post-secular contemporary fiction acknowledges a shared “ontological indeterminacy, a disruption of the way the secular social imaginary constructs reality, and its replacement with hybridized idioms that are partial and open” (460). McClure describes post-secular fiction as “a mode of being and seeing that is at once critical of secular constructions of reality and of dogmatic religiosity” (ix), and Hampton responds that “[t]he post-secular is set apart from traditional religion because it does not provide, or even aspire to offer, a fully articulated vision of a re-enchanted cosmos” (460). While Barrett and Marra’s texts are fictional, I found Hampton’s work more relevant than McClure’s to my argument because McClure focuses on characters who wrestle with the sacred in more explicit religious terms while Hampton focuses on the sacred in terms of the natural world. Hampton argues that “McClure’s characterization of post-secular fiction can equally be applied to the creative non-fiction of the new nature writing” (460) because both literary forms encompass hybrid middle ground between the sacred and secular; conversely, Hampton’s characterization of the post-secular in creative non-fiction can be applied to fictional texts.

Hampton’s new nature writers—as well as Barrett and Marra—portray the natural world as a world of possibility. Nature isn’t something “we can measure and master” but contains “incomprehensible forces...with which we must negotiate....as readers, we encounter something

irreducible, which cannot be exhausted by a disenchanted, subject-centered immanent narrative” (466). Barrett’s and Marra’s stories may be considered post-secular in so far that they resist the dichotomies of self, ontology, and nature as enchanted or disenchanted. When characters feel trapped in an entirely secular worldview, they are dissatisfied; when they let go of aspects of the secular, or embrace elements of the sacred, or fuse elements of both, they transcend the ordinary and find meaning in the natural world.

### **Alienated from the Natural World—Barrett**

In Barrett’s stories, a secular outlook maintains human superiority, perpetuating the human/nature divide, which leads the protagonists to feel unsatisfied, adrift, and alone. In her stories “The English Pupil” and “Birds with No Feet” Barrett shows us two scientists—one famous, one not—who strive to understand but also to exploit nature for their own ends. “The English Pupil” takes a glimpse at an aging Carl Linnaeus, father of modern taxonomy, and “Birds with No Feet” follows the tribulations of a young naturalist who ends up in the shadow of a more accomplished scientist. These scientists admire the natural world, but they sometimes see nature as something to be “discovered” or tamed, a means to put their stamp on the earth or make a name for themselves. In these stories, at best, notions of (or desire for) human superiority lead to a sense of dominance; at worst, they lead to exploitation. This sense of dominance may, for a

while, give the illusion of success, but ultimately, the protagonists feel cut off from the rest of the world—the natural world and human society—and they lose a sense of their own identity.

In a sacred outlook, supernatural forces control the world, supernatural forces reign in a hierarchy with humans and nature underneath, and supernatural forces are mysterious. In a secular outlook, humans are in control, humans are at the top of a hierarchy over nature, and everything in the universe is ultimately knowable. A post-secular outlook combines elements of both, blurring the lines and offering a hybrid state. In “The English Pupil,” the character of Linnaeus embraces elements of the sacred and the secular, but his shifting views compete with rather than complement each other. His outlook is further complicated because a series of strokes has “eroded” his “once-famous memory” (Barrett 35). His inability to connect with with the world—natural and otherwise—erodes his sense of self.

In one way, Linnaeus represents a secular outlook as he reduces a wild and fecund world to something he can classify and contain. Linnaeus, who formalized the system of binomial nomenclature (Latin names used to identify organisms), reflects at the end of his life: “Now he had named almost everything and everyone knew his name. How clear and simple was the system of his nomenclature!” (38). Linnaeus feels proud, even smug that he has ordered the natural world and put everything in its place, and he is equally pleased that he is famous. He controls the perception of plants and animals by categorizing them, naming everything as if he were a modern-day Adam. The fact that he has named *almost* every living thing implies that the remaining unnamed organisms are ultimately nameable and knowable. For Linnaeus, nature has become abstract: a puzzle, a prize.

However, a part of Linnaeus doesn't see nature as a system to solve but rather as a wondrous, dynamic ecosystem. Before Linnaeus is successful and famous, without the barrier of an ego, he is awed by nature and appreciates its untamed glory. He recalls a visit to Lapland in his youth: "At night, under the polar star, the sheer beauty of the natural world had knocked him to the ground" (35), and he remembers "the cries of a ptarmigan, which had sounded like a kind of laughter" (36). He continues to be impressed by natural splendor, even places he's only read about, like Venezuela: "Birds so brightly colored they seemed to be jeweled and rivers that pulsed, foamy and brown, through ferns the height of a man" (41). These are moments of fullness or richness that a human-dominated world cannot provide, spaces that beckon for porousness or enchantment. The "sheer beauty" of a night sky cannot be contained in scientific terminology, and natural beauty "knocked him to the ground," literally uniting his body with the earth. Ptarmigans have a sense of humor, and birds that looked "jeweled" are best described with figurative language, a poetic leap. Metaphors suggest enchantment: what cannot be known must be compared and approximated, imagined. Even when Linnaeus is collecting specimens, it is clear that he loves and respects the natural world: "on the hill he'd built a small museum for his herbarium and his insect collection and his rocks and zoological specimens. In his study and bedroom the walls were papered from ceiling to floor with botanical etchings and prints" (36). He surrounds himself and immerses himself in nature. Knowledge isn't merely a means to gain mastery but a way to gain intimacy with the natural world.

In another important way, Linnaeus represents a sacred outlook because of his Christian beliefs. He believes that "the world was an alphabet written in God's hand, which he, Carl Linnaeus, had been called to decipher" (39). He recognizes a sacred ultimate power. According

to Linnaeus, God is the almighty author of the world, and this metaphor acknowledges a mysterious, all-powerful, divine Creator. Linnaeus sees his duty as a naturalist as a calling. He has a responsibility to translate God's plan and make the natural world accessible to everyone: "Two names, like human names: a generic name common to all the species of one genus; a specific name distinguishing differences" (38). Above his bedroom door he has written the motto "Live blamelessly. God is present" (44). His belief in a higher power dictates how he lives.

And yet Linnaeus does not resolve his sacred and secular beliefs in a way that is post-secular. His belief in a higher power does not put Linnaeus in a category with the rest of God's creation. He sees himself as separate from and superior to nature: Linnaeus's version of God is a gatekeeper, and Linnaeus, through his mental prowess, has gained access to His plan. Linnaeus doesn't sustain his sense of wonder at the natural world, and now, at a late stage in his life, he emphasizes his accomplishments and the importance of names over the actual organisms: "In Spain and Russia and South America plants bore names that he'd devised, and on his coat he wore the ribbon that named him a Knight of the Polar Star" (39). He emphasizes his award and doesn't celebrate the plants themselves but the fact that they bear *his* names.

However, hubris may not be entirely to blame; a hazy memory and end-of-life anxiety encourages his fixation on names and achievements. Because of his strokes, Linnaeus no longer has complete control over his memory: "he forgot where he was and what he was doing; he forgot the names of plants and animals...[s]ometimes he forgot his own name." His crowning achievement of a universal classification system is now cruelly undermined by his inability to recall names. He grasps for names that "[dart] like minnows" (35) as if they will remind him of his place in the world or resurrect those no longer there. The fact that his coachmen is named

Pehr leads him down memory lane to all of his former students named Pehr, and then later to all the students “who had come by the hundreds to the great botanic excursions he’d organized around the city” (37). Linnaeus is old and alone now, his reputation under attack from some critics—as well as his wife—which may be why he strives to remember those who admired him.

There are a variety of reasons Linnaeus may obsesses about names. Perhaps his desire to name all the organisms in the world is less about domination and more about equality, ascribing value to each and every living thing, making them all known: “He liked names that clearly described a feature of the genus: *Potamogeton*, by the river, *Drosera*, like a dew” (38) or about improving knowledge and education: “Generic names, he had taught these pupils, must be clear and stable and expressive. They should not be vague or confusing; neither should they be primitive, barbarous, lengthy, or difficult to pronounce” (43). The term *barbarous* is problematic, implying that Linnaeus intends to have a civilizing, perhaps colonial impact on our view of nature, but he seems to have an earnest desire to make his system clear and inclusive.

Linnaeus also grasps at names as a way of grieving. He doesn’t refer to his pets by their Latin names but by their personal names: “his monkey Grinn, a present from the Queen, was dead; and also Sjud the raccoon and the parrot who sat on his shoulder at meals” (39). His system of classification endures, but individuals perish. Many of his former students and colleagues have died on their travels to implement his system around the world. Linnaeus spends the afternoon in a delirium, picturing these men who, in far corners of the earth, died of fever, or drowned, or succumbed to madness, or killed themselves, or simply disappeared. His confused mind moves seamlessly from his instructions on generic names to a litany of the dead: “His apostles had died in this order: Ternstrom, Hasselquist, Lofling, Forskal, Falk, and then finally

Kahler” (43). Linnaeus is constantly striving for order. Order can be way to organize, but it can also be a way to control, to corral, to contain. By simply naming them, is Linnaeus honoring the dead, or is he creating a buffer from guilt and grief? In the penultimate lines of the story, he laments, “The death of many I have induced to travel has turned my hair gray, and what have I gained? A few dried plants, accompanied by great anxiety, unrest, and care” (46). His orderliness cannot stave off guilt and grief forever.

Ultimately, although Linnaeus demonstrates both a secular and sacred outlook, he fails to unify the two. Although he is in awe of the natural world, and he cherishes his colleagues, his need to feel important and in control takes precedence until it’s too late. For much of his life, Linnaeus’s sense of self-worth is justified by his prestige, but eventually such notoriety feels hollow. Linnaeus, or Carl von Linné—“the Queen had ennobled him” (44)—is famous, his legacy immortalized in gardens created by kings, but at the end of his life this knowledge does not bring him satisfaction. On the last page of the story, he pictures the dead holding plants he had named for them: “Arteria, an umbelliferous plant, and Osbeckia, tall and handsome; Loefflingia, a small plant from Spain; Thunbergia with its black eye centered in yellow petals... There were more, he couldn’t remember them all. He’d named thousands of plants in his life” (46). It’s a haunting series of images, and Linnaeus clearly treasures these memories. One could argue that the twinning of his peers with flora signifies a kind of post-secular blurring, where people and plants exist together, but his thoughts do not linger on the plants or the people he has lost but rather on his achievement and his failure to fully recount all he has done. Even with a high-functioning memory, he could not recall thousands of names, and hubris mingles with mournfulness. An enchanted, post-secular viewpoint might celebrate that humans can’t

know everything, but Linnaeus is frustrated. His prolific achievements do not, in the end, sustain him. All his success has withered to “[a] few dried plants,” lifeless, plucked and preserved, removed from their habitat, mere shells of their former selves. He realizes, too late, that the cost of losing people is greater than the benefit of leaving his mark on the world.

Although “The English Pupil” reveals a world flush with possibility and unspoiled nature, Linnaeus’s narrowing gaze limits his ability to participate fully in this world. This story follows a lineage that Leo Marx describes as a “complex American pastoral” in which the ideal is accompanied by a “counterforce’ that undermines the idyll” (Gifford 25). Marx cites the endings of *Walden*, *Moby-Dick*, and *Huckleberry Finn*: “the American hero is either dead or totally alienated from society, alone and powerless, like the evicted shepherd of Virgil’s eclogue... And if... he pays tribute to the image of a green landscape, it is likely to be ironic and bitter” (Gifford 25). In “The English Pupil,” this counterforce is Linnaeus’s loss of his memory, loss of his colleagues, loss of his connection to nature, and a loss of his sense of self. Even though Linnaeus’s natural world is stunning, he—due in part to an increasingly secular viewpoint, or dementia, or both—is unable to appreciate the beauty and power of nature, reducing it to a catalogue. He succeeds professionally but fails in his personal life. His tribute to the natural world is misguided—it feels more like a tribute to himself—and thus in the end he suffers.

Barrett’s story “Birds with No Feet” follows another protagonist who ends up “alienated from society, alone and powerless” (Gifford 25). This story highlights the tension between Alec Carriere’s dependence on the fantastic richness of the natural world and his overwhelming desire for recognition from the civilized world. Although he never achieves fame like Linnaeus, he ultimately mourns his wasted life. However, unlike Linnaeus, he eventually feels guilty for

exploiting nature, and he reconciles himself to an unfulfilled existence only because he doesn't know how to repair what he has done.

Recall that in a purely secular outlook, humans are in control, humans are at the top of a hierarchy over nature, and everything in the universe is ultimately knowable. The first paragraph of the story establishes the first two facets of this point of view: "Between sky and sea lay Alec Carriere, sprawled like a starfish in his hammock and imagining how the treasures packed in the holds were about to change his life" (103). Alec is on a ship, returning from a trip to South America with his collection of animal specimens, which he hopes to sell to wealthy collectors or natural history museums. Here he views the specimens he has collected not as creatures in their own right but as "treasures" that will make his fame and fortune. He fantasizes about his future glory, impressing his parents by returning "dressed in a new suit and laden with more money than they'd ever seen" (106) and impressing the scientific community with his discoveries:

They would be thrilled...the hush inside the Academy, as he lectured to the men who had taught him. Holding up a perfect skin from one of those rare umbrella-birds, he would point out the glossy blue tufts on the crest-feathers...The men would give him a desk, Alec thought, where he might catalogue his treasures. (106)

Like Linnaeus's, Alec's specimens are also reduced to items in a catalogue. More than anything Alec yearns for wealth and status. Ambition, more than a love for nature, drives him to devote years of his life to wandering the natural world, collecting and "discovering" species (that already existed without human interference).

There was a time when curiosity drove Alec to seek out exotic animals, but his subsequent efforts to achieve acclaim drive a wedge between him and the natural world from which he cannot recover. His belief in his superiority means he believes he can dominate,

exploit, and own wild animals: “His desire for possession seemed to carve a line in the air between his gun and his target; he aimed and a moment later the orangutan was his” (111). All that matters is what these animals can provide for him: professional success. When his colleague Alfred Russel Wallace, who was in Borneo at the same time as Alec, receives renown for a paper on the possible origin of species, Alec, still struggling to succeed, is jealous. He wonders why he hasn’t thought of anything like that. Disheartened but still determined to make a name for himself, Alec travels to the Aru Islands to “narrow his gaze” on the Birds of Paradise, still hoping to “make both his reputation and his fortune” (117). He narrows his gaze at the expense of appreciating the wider natural environment: “He shut his eyes to the fabulous trees, the astonishing moths and ants, and sought singlemindedly the Great Paradise Birds” (118). Here Alec has access to a wondrous world, a jungle virtually untouched by western civilization, and yet he ignores all the wonders, focusing on one type of bird, hoping his observations will coalesce into a theorem that will garner attention, like Wallace’s. By shutting his eyes to the natural world, Alec restricts himself. He is not true to his own nature, which wants to drink in the whole spectrum of the environment. Alec also suffers from a disenchanting view of the natural world, an outlook he forces himself to take. He believes that mankind can uncover the processes and mechanisms that drive the natural world even if he can’t figure them out, a belief that contributes to his compartmentalization of the natural world. He consciously chooses to “shut his eyes” to all that is “fabulous” and “astonishing” (118), all that is beyond human understanding and control, selectively seeing only that which he thinks he can master and mold into a kind of currency for his reputation.

Alec continues to assert superiority by killing the birds, learning from the natives how to shoot them with blunt arrows—to preserve the plumage—before wringing their necks. He doesn't do so in order to advance scientific knowledge, only in a desperate attempt to win recognition, and when a hypothesis continues to escape him, he soothes his ego by imagining his specimens in the Smithsonian Institute and saying, "Look. *I* was the first to bring these back" (119). The birds aren't important. Only he matters, but only in the unscientific scheme of being the first to colonize and export the exotic specimens.

And yet while Alec consciously yearns to master and dominate the natural world in order to make his fame and fortune, the narration reveals that beneath his ambition lurks a sense of awe and wonder. Alec yearns for a connection with animals, and when he allows himself to do so, he enjoys seeing the natural world as enchanted. The language of the story suggests that nature is mysterious, beyond human understanding. Although Alec chooses to look away, there are elements of nature that are "fabulous" and "astonishing." The original meaning of "fabulous" is imaginary, and "astonish" means to strike with wonder or surprise. On Alec's first trip abroad to South America, he sees "miracles," sights that cannot not be explained by human reason. The narrator's description of the Amazon jungle inspires fear, awe, and mystery:

The mouth of the Amazon was like a sea, and could be distinguished from the ocean only by its extraordinary deep-yellow color. The Rio Negro was as black as the River Styx. Jet-black jaguars and massive turtle's nests, agoutis and giant serpents; below Baiao, a crowd of Indians gathered, laughing and curious, to watch Alec skinning parrots. (105)

This majestic and eerie river defies classification. Although it's a river, it might as well be the sea. It's black as myth; the River Styx is otherworldly, beyond life as we know it. The jungle teems with unfamiliar animals, and then suddenly we learn in this world the animals are not

exotic—Alec, our European protagonist is. He is the one regarded as unusual. Mystery goes both ways, and Alec himself can be enchanted.

Most of the time, there is very little psychic distance between the third-person narration and Alec's point of view, but at times the narration takes a step back and suggests a more omniscient viewpoint that is eager to see the natural world as enchanted. The story opens, "There was no breeze that night. The sea, lit by the full moon, shone smooth and silver; the Southern Cross turned above the ship and below it squid slipped invisibly through the depths" (103). There is something magical about that image of squid slipping *invisibly* through the water. They are unseen, out of reach, beyond our grasp. Later the narration describes a scene in the Amazon jungle when a more experienced Wallace helps a young Alec find his footing, and the scene also feels enchanting: "Around them the toucans yelped and the parrots chattered and the palms went *swish, swish* in the evening breeze" (105-6). The narration uses onomatopoeia to convey the sounds of the forest: yelp and chatter mimic the different cries of the birds, and there is no verb to relay what the palms are doing, only noise: "*swish, swish.*" Onomatopoeia is a kind of synthesis of the trends Hampton noted in the new nature nature writing, a proliferation and yet also a resistance to describing nature. Sounds replace words when words fail to capture the sensation, and yet the sounds fill the page, determined to recreate the visceral experience.

Even after Alec vows to ignore anything extraneous, focusing solely on the Great Paradise Birds, the narration suggests that these creatures are magnificent in their "strangeness":

In a huge tree, deep in the forest...[t]hey raised their wings, they arched their necks, they lifted their long, flowing plumes and shivered them as if to music, darting now and then between the branches in great excitement. Their beauty and strangeness beggared that even of the lyre-tailed drongo-shrike or the Amazonian umbrella bird. (118)

The birds have been broken down, not into scientific terms, nor into preserved bodies, but into figures of speech. A plume can be a feather or a cloud of smoke that resembles a feather; here their feathers, as plumes, are both real and an illusion. Shiver means to shake, but usually in response to cold or fear, not to music, so to shiver “as if to music” conveys something unexpected, extraordinary. Furthermore, shivering is an involuntary response, suggesting that the birds have succumbed to forces beyond their control. The assumption that the birds are darting “in great excitement” might well betray an impulse to anthropomorphize, and may rather reflect the human excitement at witnessing this display. The explicit “beauty and strangeness” invites the reader to marvel at what is strange, or unknown, and the narration elevates these avians beyond other beautiful and strange birds. For a reader who is not familiar with such jungle fowl, birds that resemble a lyre or an umbrella already sound like a fantastical creature. This strangeness suggests that the wilderness will not yield to humankind’s expectations and that awe for the unknown can inspire reverence, excitement, and satisfaction. And that is what Alec is missing in his dogged pursuit of success.

Although Alec is immersed in the jungle, his secular outlook, both subconscious and purposeful, maintains that he is separate from the natural world around him. And yet, as I suggested in the introduction to this essay, persistent human attempts to conquer the natural world are mutually harmful and frequently futile as the natural world cannot be kept separate indefinitely. The idea that Alec is somehow in control of the natural world is an illusion. Again and again nature gets the better of him, reducing him to a body helpless to prevent the ravages of the environment. In Borneo, Alec is stricken with ague, and throughout his journeys “[r]ain,

fungus, aggressive ants, and the ever-ravenous dogs of the region all plagued him” (119). Alec cannot escape discomfort and disease as nature consumes him physically.

But in the end it is emotional distress that consumes Alec. He never earns prestige or prosperity, and he ultimately realizes that he has not contributed to science and probably never will. Exhausted after recovering from the ague, concerned about his dwindling resources, Alec wonders “why his journal had deteriorated into little more than a tally of species... why all he’d observed and learned had not crystallized in his mind to some shimmering structure” (117).

When Alec eventually returns home to the U.S., he acknowledges that “[h]is crates lay uncatalogued at the Academy of Sciences” (120). All he has managed to do is kill. He cannot maintain his sense of superiority and separation from nature because he grows emotionally attached to his “treasures”. He increasingly values them not merely as objects to exhibit but as living beings in their own right. When the ship returning from South America catches on fire, Alec begrudges his bad luck for a moment but then panics as he thinks of the fate of his animals: “[h]is sweet sloth, no bigger than a rabbit, with his charming habit of hanging upside down on the back of a chair and his melancholy expression; the parrots and parakeets and the forest-dog; the toucans; the monkeys: already, they were calling through the smoke” (107). He adores his sloth, and he is touched by the fearful cries of his other animals. As the men flee on a small boat, Alec begs the captain to row back to save some of the birds, but the birds, confused and terrified, won’t let go of their hold on the bow. Alec is devastated, even traumatized, not by his loss of potential fame and fortune but by their gruesome deaths: as “a souvenir he was given nightmares, in which the smell of singeing feathers filled his nostrils and his sloth curled smaller and smaller, and closed his eyes, and died again and again” (109). Eventually an animal becomes his closest

companion. In Borneo, after he has killed several orangutans to preserve their bodies, Alec discovers an orphaned infant and feels responsible for its care. His adopted orangutan, whom he names Ali, “clung to his clothes and beard and sucked on his fingers as he might at his mother’s breast. For a long time no one had touched Alec” (112). When Alec catches the ague, so does the Ali, and Alec weeps when he dies. One could argue that these animals, removed from their natural environment, actually represent a schism between the human and natural world. But these interactions force Alec to acknowledge that these animals deserve to live, that nature should be preserved. He has begun to experiment with empathy, as Fudge describes, to “think beyond ourselves, to include with the orbit of our imaginations as well as our material existences, those beings of other species” (22-23). If Alec fails to include other species in his orbit, or if he hovers above them in a hierarchy of his own design, he is utterly alone.

This sense of empathy prompts Alec to question the purpose of his expeditions. He has justified conquering and killing so many animals in the name of science, but when he fails to earn recognition, Alec’s worldview begins to crack. When Ali dies, he dissects the baby orangutan to preserve the corpse: “Separating the skin from the bone and muscle beneath, he reminded himself that in doing so, he served science. Was this science?” (115). He is acutely aware that this scientific act reduces Ali from a friend to a specimen. He was content to preserve unnamed animals, but his personal connection to Ali forces him to confront what he’s really doing. Later he manages to kill and capture many birds of paradise, but after returning home to the “civilized” world, he discovers that Wallace has beat him to the punch. Wallace’s birds of paradise already inhabit the royal gardens in London, rendering Alec’s specimens less significant. Only then, in the aftermath of yet another failure, does Alec truly contemplate his

actions and their impact on the earth. He recalls a line from a letter Wallace wrote: “*Each bird we shot and butterfly we netted was in the service of science.*” Alec realizes “this was only ever true for Wallace, not for him...he has never been the scientist he’d believed himself to be, perhaps is no scientist at all” (122). When he finds himself conscripted to fight in the American Civil War, “he packs his bags and readies himself for another murderous journey” (122). *Another* murderous journey—he acknowledges that in his previous journeys, he murdered his animals. Only when Alec sees the futility of his endeavors does he consider the deaths of the animals he has killed to be a tragedy.

In “Birds with No Feet,” Alec fails to make an impression on the scientific community, and he ends up feeling useless and worse—his quest for fame renders him a killer. In “The English Pupil, Linnaeus makes a lasting impression on the scientific community, and he still ends up full of regret. If feelings of superiority are a driving force behind the human/nature divide and Linnaeus and Alec’s feelings of alienation, can a sense of humility restore a sense of wholeness and bridge the divide? If Linnaeus had been more humble, perhaps he would have spent less time gloating about his achievements and more time nurturing his relationships with people and the natural world. If Alec had been more humble, perhaps he wouldn’t have felt entitled to kill so many wild and wondrous creatures. But for Linnaeus, pride is ingrained in his identity, and as he is nearing death, it is too late for atonement. And for Alec, humility is provoked by bitterness and guilt, and although he may feel responsible for killing the animals, he doesn’t intend to stop.

Gifford asks, “Can awe in the face of natural phenomena...lead to humility in our species?” (27), and these stories suggest that awe alone is insufficient. Linnaeus’s awe of the natural world does nothing to diminish his belief that he can conquer it. Alec sees awe as a

distraction from his work, and although he eventually recognizes the error of his ways, he feels helpless to change them. Alec doesn't feel humility in the face of natural phenomena; he only feels smaller in contrast to another human's achievements. But this humiliation changes his perspective of the natural world and his place in it. Only when he accepts that he will never get the recognition he yearns for does he consider the negative consequences of his actions. He could ignore his complicity in killing specimens when he was doing so in the name of science, but his professional failure eliminates the prospect of absolution: "All the animals he's collected, sure that more would spring forth from the earth, are gone and will not rise." He thinks of the dead animals, not his own plight, as he packs and prepares for another "murderous journey" (122). His failure to achieve fame and money prompts self-pity and bitterness: a humility that is humiliation. This humiliation paves the way for a more empathetic view of the world: with the prospect of fame and money out of his view, he is able to see the damage he has inflicted. Awe does not inspire humility, but affection plays a role. He thinks of "his orangutan, his birds with no feet" (122). Some might argue that he is taking ownership over nature here, that "his" ownership is another extension of human greed, or human superiority. But one could also argue that Alec has bridged that human/nature divide. Only by recognizing these animals as "his" has he taken responsibility for his crimes. He feels guilty for all the animals he has killed. In his case, awe in the face of natural phenomena does not lead to humility; humility results from professional failure and the loss of animals to whom he feels a kinship.

In "Birds With No Feet," a sense of humility arrives too late to restore a sense of ecological wholeness. Although Alec recognizes his culpability, he doesn't do anything to change his actions. There is no healing here. "The English Pupil" ends on a similarly dark note. Linnaeus

is left with a “few dried plants”; Alec is left with carcasses. Barrett’s stories are not stories of redemption; they serve as a kind of warning. A Dyak boy in Borneo tells Alec that the dead animals will rise “[w]hen the forest is empty and needs new animals” (122), a wishful optimism that absolves humans of responsibility. Alec takes the first step, acknowledging that nature’s bounty is not limitless, that humans can have a significant impact on destroying the natural world. These stories *almost* feel like parables: if you use nature as a means for personal gain or glory, misery awaits. But Barrett’s stories are not really parables. They are not simple or one-sided; they do not teach us any one way to live. Science isn’t pitted against Nature; eschewing science will not initiate or renew an appreciation for the natural world. A passion for science can bring characters closer to the natural world, dissolving the human/nature divide.

Barrett’s story “Rare Bird” demonstrates how science doesn’t necessarily promote feelings of superiority. Science can be tantalizing, a vehicle for enchantment. Sarah Anne’s unexpected mentor Catherine quotes from the poem “Night-Thoughts” by Edward Young: “Nothing can satisfy but what confounds...Nothing but what astonishes is true” (74). Scientific discoveries unlock new ways of understanding and seeing the world, paving the way for more mysteries to be revealed and unraveled. Although science may render the world increasingly knowable, science continually reminds us that there is always more to know.

According to Jane Bennett, the prevailing Western narrative assumes that an increase in rational scientific thinking has led political order away from an “organic community” to a modern world ruled by the “forces of scientific and instrumental rationality, secularism, individualism, and the bureaucratic state.” This worldview “depicts the modern self as predisposed toward rationalism, skepticism, and the problem of meaninglessness” in which

nature is disenchanting because “a spiritual dimension once found in plants, earth, sky is now nowhere to be seen” (7-8). However, this tale is not a simple story about a decline in enchantment. Bennett explains that “[t]he tale is flexible...it is told both by those who celebrate it as the fall of superstition and confusion and by those who lament it as the loss of contact with a meaningful moral universe” (8). Still Bennett concedes that even those who consider the movement towards a secular worldview a victory “convey a sense of loss: the inevitable price for rationalization or scientization is, they say, the eclipse of wonder at the world” (8). How, then, can we recover a spiritual dimension or recapture a sense of wonder in the natural world?

Bennett suggests this “tale” can be retold, and we can reclaim the modern world as a place brimming with enchantment. Bennett’s use of the term enchantment “entails a state of wonder, and one of the distinctions of this state is the temporary suspension of chronological time and bodily movement. To be enchanted, then, is...to be transfixed, spellbound” (5). Charles Taylor describes a similar sensation in what he terms “moments of experienced fullness,” exemplified earlier in Bede Griffith’s memory of hearing birdsong that temporarily rendered him awestruck. Both Bennett and Taylor agree that these enchanted moments share the following characteristics: they must be surprising; they must be pleasurable; however, they frequently also inflict a more “(uncanny) feeling of being disrupted or torn out of one’s default sensory-psychic-intellectual disposition” (Bennett 5) and can be “unsettling and enigmatic” because “ordinary reality is ‘abolished’” and the individual is left “deeply moved, but also puzzled and shaken” (Taylor 5-6). Bennett describes the “overall effect of enchantment” as “a sense of having had one’s nerves or circulation or concentration powers tuned up or recharged—a shot in the arm, a fleeting return to childlike excitement about life” (Bennett 5).

In Andrea Barrett's story "Rare Birds," the protagonist Sarah Anne accesses moments of enchantment by practicing science. In eighteenth century England, Sarah Anne yearns to engage in scientific enquiry but is discouraged by her brother and the masculine climate that deems such activity unladylike. She wants to determine the truth about where sparrows go in the winter. The reigning hypothesis is that they hibernate underwater, but she suspects that they migrate. Unlike Linnaeus and Alex Carriere, Sara Anne remains genuinely curious, driven by intellectual curiosity, not arrogance. In an effort to satisfy her own curiosity, she first imagines what it must be like to be a sparrow, and then she performs an experiment in which she dissects the body of a sparrow. In both these moments she experiences enchantment.

Sarah Anne's first moment of enchantment occurs when she considers the world from a sparrow's perspective. Although she finds it difficult to believe that swallows can hibernate underwater for months on end, she doesn't dismiss the idea without thoroughly considering it. She takes an empathetic leap and imagines the possibility, trying to perceive the experience from a sparrow's point of view:

The cool damp air washes over her like water. She folds her arms around her torso and imagines lying at the bottom of the lake, wings wrapped around her body like a kind of chrysalis. It is cold, it is dark, she is barely breathing. How would she breathe? Around her are thousands of bodies. The days lengthen, some signal arrives, she shoots with the rest of her flock to the surface, lifts her head and breathes. Her wings unfold and she soars through the air, miraculously dry and alive. (66)

Her imagined experience is surprising. Although Sarah Anne makes the choice to imagine what it's like to be a sparrow, she doesn't know what her imagination will unlock. As she feels the wet and cold and dark, she grasps at sensations she cannot yet decipher: "How would she breathe?" Her imagined experience is pleasurable: her wings keep her safe like a chrysalis; she is

surrounded by her flock, thousands of bodies; and when all the birds emerge together, it feels like a celebration as she soars, *miraculously* dry and alive. Sarah Anne's own chronology and bodily movement are temporarily suspended as she inhabits the body of a sparrow, living in an alternate timeline that moves from winter to spring in a matter of seconds. Ordinary reality has been abolished—a woman has become a bird, and we, the readers, metamorphose with her.

But Sarah Anne is not satisfied with her thought-experiment, and she endeavors to find a more definitive answer by scientific methods. By dissecting a sparrow Sarah Anne also achieves an enchanted state. When she meets an educated widow who shares her enthusiasm for naturalism, they conduct an experiment, trapping a few sparrows under water in a tub to see if they survive. When the swallows drown, the women dissect one, and Sarah Anne marvels at what she finds inside the body of the bird:

A four-chambered heart inside its pericardium; small, rosy, lobeless lungs. From the lungs, mysterious air sacs extend into the abdomen, up into the neck, into the bones. There is no sign of a gill-like organ that might allow the bird to breathe underwater. Sarah Anne is quite faint, and yet also fiercely thrilled. (76)

The body is a miracle in itself. The diction is both clinical and poetic, precise and yet suggestive. The rosy hue, mysterious sacs, the enticing syllables of “pericardium”: science mingles with art. The narrator describes what is there and also what is not there, at once dispelling a myth and yet retaining a sense of mystery. Sarah Anne is transfixed, her body momentarily spellbound and disturbed as she feels faint. Her pleasure is not gentle; she is fiercely thrilled. This moment of enchantment has empowered and emboldened her.

According to Rita Felski, many scholars feel that Max Weber “famously claimed that scientific progress has leached the world of any sense of the sacred, of ultimate meaning” (Felski

57). Weber shared his concept of disenchantment in his 1917 lecture “Science as a Vocation” as “part of his pessimistic vision of modern life as a rationalized...iron cage” (Lyons 879).

However, Sara Lyons argues that the English word disenchantment is not the most accurate translation and that “the German word *Entzauberung* more precisely suggests the demagification of the world, and Weber apparently extrapolated it from a moment in Schiller’s poem [“The Gods of Greece”] that refers to the un-godding or de-divinization of nature.” In Schiller’s poem the Greeks “perceived the cosmos as holistic and magical, suffused with divinity” (Lyons 879), and Weber claims that over thousands of years Western culture has lost this perception. According to Lyons, “Weber believed that Protestantism had been extraordinarily successful at ridding the world of pagan magic, spirits, and demons, and that science only took over the ascetic, rationalizing work that Protestantism had begun” (876). In “Science as a Vocation” Weber argues that science is both a “constituent part” and a “driving force” (Weber 342) for this loss of magic:

...increased intellectualization and rationalization do not bring with them a general increase in our knowledge of the conditions under which we live our lives. What they bring with them is something else: the knowledge, or the belief, that if we wished to we could at any time learn about [the conditions of our life]; in other words: that, in principle, no mysterious and unpredictable forces play a role in that respect, but that, on the contrary, we can – in principle – dominate everything by means of calculation. And that, in its turn, means that the world has lost its magic. (342)

This loss of a mysterious or supernatural meaning in the world may be experienced as an emotional or spiritual loss.

However, Felski argues that Weber’s ideas about science are often oversimplified, misrepresented, or misunderstood, and that he believed science itself can be enchanting. In that

same lecture Weber insists that scientific progress is not a product of soulless calculation but a combination of hard work as well as inspiration that cannot be controlled:

...the idea is apparently very widespread that science has become a matter of calculation; that it is produced as if 'in a factory': in laboratories and statistical card indexes, not with the whole of one's 'soul', but only with cool reason...the right idea – has to occur to a person if he is to achieve anything worthwhile. But that [process of ] inspiration cannot be forced; and it has nothing to do with cool calculations of any kind[...] And on the other hand, work does not eliminate the need for inspiration, nor can it force it to appear – any more than passion can. Both of them – and especially both together – can entice it. (Weber 339)

Weber concedes that scholars and artists may have different outputs, but he insists that they have similar methods. He argues that “the mathematical imagination of a scholar...is quite differently oriented, in terms of its nature and its results, from [the imagination] of an artist; and qualitatively, the two are fundamentally different. But not as far as the psychological process is concerned. Both are intoxication” (Weber 340). Following this idea, and quoting from Weber’s 1904 essay “The ‘Objectivity’ of Knowledge in Social Science and Social Policy,” Felski explains how the act of science itself can be enchanting:

...scientific progress is driven by the magic of inspired ideas rather than plodding calculation...For Weber, science is in many respects analogous to art: success in both fields is driven by unpredictable surges of creativity, inspiration, frenzy, mania. Indeed, he deliberately disenchantments the idea of disenchantment by pointing out that “only a hair line separates faith from science.” (59)

For most, this notion that “only a hair line separates faith from science” seems incongruous, but Weber and Felski point out some striking similarities. Science requires proof, and faith doesn’t, but a common denominator is a sense of wonder or rapture at something beyond immediate human understanding. Sarah Anne, who embraces “rationalization” and “scientization,” does not lack for “wonder at the world.” For her, science actually generates wonder. While her experiment

is logical, and her observations are objective, her overall approach to understanding the sparrows is fueled by yearning and passion and is studded with creative visions and impulses.

In “The English Pupil,” although Linnaeus’s insistence on classifying every organism in the world seems to demonstrate a disenchanting view, his descriptions suggest that in practice, science offers him a sense of enchantment. He feels animated and joyful when he recalls his scientifically devised system:

How clear and simple was the system of his nomenclature! Two names, like human names: a generic name common to all the species of one genus; a specific name distinguishing differences. He liked names that clearly described a feature of the genus: *Potamogeton*, by the river; *Drosera*, like dew. (38)

Linnaeus’s purest impulses are inspired by science, a way of seeing the world that is organized and precise, and yet that clarity becomes an art form in its own sake. The Latin names read like miniature poems, simultaneously literal and figurative. For Linnaeus, in one sense, the natural world is disenchanting, as every organism is wholly understandable, a puzzle that he can solve. “Nature was a cryptogram and the scientific method a key; nature was a labyrinth and this method the thread of Ariadne” (39). However, this explanation is conveyed in two metaphors. Greek mythology allusions are not the language of pure science. Figurative language, by definition, reaches beyond the scope of literal meanings. The figurative language in Linnaeus’s mind suggests a gap between the real and the understood. His knowledge is infused with imagination.

Let’s consider Weber’s claim that “only a hair line separates faith from science.” Science stems from the Latin word for *knowledge*. Most definitions describe science as a systematic pursuit of knowledge, based on evidence. Faith stems from the Latin for confidence or trust.

Most definitions define religious faith as belief in the supernatural, regardless of evidence. Yet Weber argues “that scientific progress is driven by the magic of inspired ideas rather than plodding calculation. Such ideas have their own mysterious and unfathomable rhythms, descending when least expected or refusing to appear at all” (Felski 59). People experience religious faith and scientific inspiration similarly. Scientific veracity requires evidence supported by “plodding calculation,” but a sudden revelation or an epiphany often cannot be explained. Evidence alone cannot dictate when or how a scientist will arrive at a new understanding based on the evidence. Both Alec Carriere and Alfred Russel Wallace collected and observed vast quantities of biological specimens in similar parts of the world, but only Wallace was struck by the insight that the natural world was sculpted by evolution.

Drawing parallels to literature, Felski examines how the act of reading can be enchanting. Her descriptions of an engrossed reader echo Bennett’s and Taylor’s descriptions of enchantment. A reader absorbed by a book can be “transfixed, spellbound,” and the “effect can be uniquely exhilarating, because of the sheer intensity of the pleasure being offered.” However, the experience can also be “unnerving, in sapping a sense of autonomy and self control.” Enchanted readers are so overwhelmed by sensation that they have an out-of-body, out-of-mind experience: “you are sucked in, swept up, spirited away... You are mesmerized, hypnotized, possessed” (Felski 55). But while Bennett and Taylor’s descriptions of enchantment suggest a heightened or otherworldly experience, Felski exposes a more negative connotation, as enchantment in literature or the arts is “often compared to the condition of being intoxicated, drugged, or dreaming” (55). The language of drugs and dreams suggest that rather than

glimpsing something extraordinary, enchanted readers are merely distracted, disoriented, or stupefied.

The modern, secular outlook longs to exert control, and Felski confirms that people want to exert control because they fear losing control. Just as scientists want to control their relationship to the natural world, literary critics want to control their relationship to the text. Many literary critics fear that “[t]o be enchanted is to be rendered impervious to critical thought, to lose one’s head and one’s wits” (Felski 56). These critics mistrust enchantment’s “mysterious and unfathomable rhythms” because “[e]nchantment is bad magic, and the role of criticism is to break its spell by providing rational explanations” (Felski 57). Because the “analytical part of your mind recedes into the background,” an enchanted reader loses their “inner censor and critic,” and “[r]ather than having a sense of mastery over a text, you are at its mercy” (Felski 55). These critics see the relationship as a power dichotomy: if you’re not controlling the text, it is controlling you.

In order to maintain a sense of control, these critics resist enchantment. Enchantment has an “association with passivity, submission, and surrender,” that “[t]o speak of being overwhelmed by a text is to admit to a fervency and helplessness of response” (75). Felski traces a modern lineage of literary criticism that leads to the “default position of contemporary criticism [that] is best described as one of ‘standing back’ – keeping one’s distance from a work of art in order to place it in an explanatory frame” (57). They can’t let the text speak for itself; they must corral the subject into their framework and eliminate any sense of ambiguity or mystery. However, the ability to exert control or remain purely logical is questionable. It’s a presumption that placing ourselves at an appropriate distance ensures a rational, correct response. How far

back must one stand to remain detached? How far is far enough? The mechanism to maintain distance, the “explanatory frame, whether drawn from politics, psychoanalysis, or philosophy” (Felski 57) is an intermediary that could unduly influence critics’ perspectives.

These critics assume that we must remain separate from our subject in order to remain uninfluenced, but doesn't denying themselves the experience of enchantment limit their scope?

These dichotomies—control versus surrender, powerful versus powerless, enchantment versus logic—are false. According to Felski, being enchanted, in the modern sense, does not entail a complete surrender of one’s self or one’s wits but rather represents a hybrid state between self-control and abandonment:

Modern enchantments are those in which we are immersed but not submerged, bewitched but not beguiled, suspensions of disbelief that do not lose sight of the fictiveness of those fictions that enthrall us. Such enchantments are magical without requiring the intervention of the supernatural, reminders of the persistence of the mysterious, wondrous, and perplexing in a rationalized and at least partly secularized world. (74-75)

Felski recognizes that enchantment enables us to collapse these dichotomies. You can suspend your disbelief while monitoring your experience, retaining the ability to return to a more critical state. Wonder is not necessarily illogical; surrendering yourself can sometimes allow you to access a new source of power. Being captivated doesn’t literally make one a captive—it is a choice to surrender that rigid sense of control and allow yourself to experience something beyond a normal state of consciousness. According to Felski, critic and queer theorist Joseph Boone champions “the intense human desire to let go – to be released, to yield to an ‘other’” (Felski 51). A loss of control doesn’t have to entail a loss of self; being absorbed by something “other” can be experienced as an expansion of self. Boone’s use of the word

“released” suggests that maintaining a constant state of self-control leads to a sense of feeling trapped. Relinquishing that stubborn, egocentric mindset can set us free.

Felski’s description of enchantment also invites comparison with Hampton’s sense of post-secular porousness. Felski intimates that a reader can become fused with a text the way Hampton suggests writers can become fused with nature. Felski writes, “There is no longer a sharp line between self and text but a confused and inchoate intermingling” (55). Here the word *confused* doesn’t mean puzzled but rather suggests that the self and other have become blurred. Recall that Hampton quoted Charles Taylor, who wrote, the “premodern self...was thought of as open to supernatural forces and in general to powers beyond itself; it was ‘porous.’ The modern self, by contrast is ‘buffered’ against those things; thoughts and feelings belong to minds and selves conceived as independent and autonomous” (460-61). Hampton claims that “the works of new nature writing are populated by moments that seek to tear down the buffers that Taylor describes... re-wilding the self and re-integrating it into nature” (461). Felski and Hampton suggest that a sense of self should not necessarily be clearly delineated, that we can and perhaps should strive to merge with something outside of ourselves.

Surrendering that rigid sense of self and control is a necessary step, according to Hampton, to feel connected to the natural world. Returning to Barrett’s stories, while the characters of Sarah Anne and Linnaeus both find themselves enchanted by science, only Sarah Anne fully embraces the first dichotomy in a post-secular outlook, the question of being “porous” or “buffered” in relationship to nature. Hampton professes that in a sacred outlook, “both nature and the self are held together by the transcendent forces that shape them,” and in a secular outlook, “nature and the self are separated from one another, and shaped by forces

immanent to a now de-mystified cosmos.” Hampton suggests that a post-secular outlook is a hybrid form, not a return to worshipping “uncontrollable supernatural forces” but rather “an opening up of the buffered self, and a desire to overcome its alienation from forces within nature” (462). Sarah Anne’s approach to studying the sparrows is post-secular because in her experiment she seeks objective, provable facts, but also, by imagining the world from a sparrow’s point of view, she allows herself to be swept away in the sensation of being other-than-herself, shaped by forces she can’t yet understand.

Hampton’s cohort of nonfiction nature writers are aware of a growing human/nature divide and consciously seek a sense of reintegration. Hampton argues that this wave of writers “seeks to return readers to a sense of interconnectedness, or what John Lewis-Stempel describes in *Meadowland* as ‘a way of thinking about nature which is not Us and Them, but We together’” (461). Hampton quotes Roger Deakin, who in *Waterlog* outlines his desire to swim the Corryvreckan whirlpool in Scotland: “I wanted to ‘take part in its existence’, to feel part of it, to swim with it, not against it” (461). Deakin also references a letter by Keats, in which Keats wrote, “If a sparrow come before my window, I take part in its existence and pick about in the gravel” (461). Keats predates Deakin by two hundred years, but the sentiment is the same. Keats yearns to unite with the natural world. He doesn’t merely muse about the sparrow at his window; like Sarah Anne, he takes part in the sparrow’s existence, using his imagination to join the body of the sparrow, to do whatever the sparrow is doing. In Deakin’s and Keats’s examples, the line that delineates the self and a sparrow or a whirlpool dissolves, resulting in what Felski terms an “intermingling” (Felski 55) and what Hampton describes as “an unbuffered self takes part in a natural existence that is greater than the self” (Hampton 462). In order to take part in the

existence of a whirlpool or a sparrow, a person must temporarily suspend his or her own human ego, “to swim with it, not against it.”

Connecting with nature requires a degree of humility, of letting go, and this ability to let go of her sense of self enables Sarah Anne to achieve a connection with the sparrows. Unlike Hampton’s nature writers, she is not rebelling against a tradition of nature writing that sets nature apart, nor is she consciously trying to re-wild herself or reunite with nature. Rather, a thirst for knowledge fuels her impulse to take part in the sparrows’ existence. While Hampton’s nature writers consciously seek a connection, for the sake of a connection, Sarah Anne, in pursuing answers, un-self-consciously glides between worlds, a human and a sparrow existence, demonstrating a sense of porousness—the line between human and nature is one she can erase at will. In contrast, Linnaeus’s thirst for knowledge, limited by his strict adherence to categorizing the world, has de-wilded nature itself and has de-wilded himself in the process. His ego acts as a buffer that the natural world can no longer penetrate. Sarah Anne doesn’t have the same kind of buffer. As we’ve seen, Linnaeus sets himself at the top of the hierarchy, even above other humans, as the sole interpreter of the natural world. He wants to assert knowledge where Sarah Anne wants to uncover knowledge. Because she’s a woman living in a time when she cannot expect professional success or recognition of her achievements, Sarah Anne doesn’t prioritize her own sense of superiority, and this humility enables her to temporarily suspend her sense of self and participate in the sparrows’ existence.

Barrett’s stories don’t dismiss scientific ways of thinking, but they do suggest that an anthropocentric viewpoint—privileging human narratives and knowledge (especially those of individual egos)—can be dangerous as well as unfulfilling. If humankind controls the narrative

and shapes knowledge of the natural world, the natural world cannot interject and disagree.

Hampton quotes Nina Lyon's *Uprooted*: "For as long as you believe that humans are special, you cast all activity relating to life at large as an act of largesse on the part of humankind" (464).

Hampton claims that "the possibility of narrative abundance, and the rejection of anthropocentrism, discourages the privileging of any one position and with this the establishment of hierarchies" (463). Lyon discusses the symbol of the Green Man, a centuries-old, worldwide motif that enjoyed a revival in nineteenth-century Britain. Lyon writes, "If you wanted to call this God, fair enough, but if you wanted to avoid all that you could call it something else instead. You could say that Nature had a soul, or a will, or consciousness. There were options" (Hampton 463). Lyon and Hampton suggest that the existence of options implies that there are multiple ways to understand our world, and we cannot assume any current incarnation of society's default version is the only, or most accurate, or best version. A single way of seeing the world narrows one's view and results in an understanding that is incomplete, restricted. Barrett's Linnaeus establishes an anthropocentric system through which to filter the natural world that he never questions. Alec Carriere assumes he has the right to dominate specimens he considers inferior to him. They both end up feeling guilty and alone.

Only Sarah Anne, who makes an effort to see the world from a sparrow's point of view, who embraces the post-secular, potentially finds salvation in her pursuit of science. She and the widow disappear one day, and her brother believes they took a ship to America to start a new life:

Once he overheard the two of them waxing rhapsodic over Mark Catesby's *Natural History*, talking in hushed tones about this land where squirrels flew and frogs whistled and birds the size of fingernails swarmed through forests so thick the sunlight failed to

reach the ground. Catesby, Sarah Anne said, believed birds migrated sensibly; they flew to places where there was food. (77)

Sarah Anne respects the rational explanation for how and why birds migrate, but she allows herself to be enchanted by flying squirrels and near-magical forests. Multiple lenses and narratives coexist as Sarah Anne abandons presumptions of human dominance, breaks through ordinary ways of seeing her environment, and negotiates a sense of belonging with the natural world.

Hampton argues that the new nature writing rejects a “hierarchical, subject-centred” theory of knowledge, “which it understands to be the source of modern alienation from nature, the underlying justification for its exploitation” (464). The impulse to pursue knowledge isn’t dangerous in itself, but as Hampton points out, anthropocentric assumptions about knowledge can contribute to assumptions of human supremacy, which leads to exploitation. Alec Carriere, while failing to determine any scientific truths, best represents the problems that result from privileging humans’ “truth” and thus humans themselves above all else. When Alec laments the thousands of animals he has killed, the story hints at the much broader destruction of the natural world by humankind. Barrett’s stories examine varying degrees of anthropocentrism and exploitation in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, but Alec’s tally is dwarfed by the decimation of countless animals and habitats (including humans) depicted in Marra’s collection in twentieth century Russia and the Soviet Union. In Barrett’s stories, human superiority leads to individual ruin; in Marra’s stories, human superiority results in large-scale blowback.

## **Alienated from the Natural World—Marra**

In Barrett's stories, the characters are frequently surrounded by the natural world, but their own hubris can prevent them from having authentic connections to nature. In Marra's stories, the characters rarely have access to the natural world, and government oppression is the biggest culprit that perpetuates the human/nature divide. Natural landscapes have been devastated by human activity like mining, war, and urbanization, and the violence inflicted on the natural world mirrors the violence inflicted on people: various regimes have unfairly imprisoned large swaths of the population, polluted the environment so much that it endangers human lives, and conscripted people to fight in wars that only benefit the ruling class. Marra's absurd humor highlights individual and collective struggles to persevere in a largely hopeless world in which characters have only fleeting encounters with a semblance of nature.

A purely secular outlook maintains human superiority, but in Marra's stories, individual notions of human superiority have been replaced by notions of national superiority, and although governments change names and hands, they retain a continuity of ruthless domination, controlling and manipulating citizens while perpetuating the human/nature divide, forcing the protagonists to feel frustrated, trapped, and alone. In these stories, notions of national superiority promote the illusion of success, but the exploited and tortured individuals, although they know better, are powerless to protest. Cut off from the rest of the world—the natural world and freer human societies—they lose a sense of their own identity, which they only recover in fleeting moments when they feel connected to nature.

Throughout the collection *The Tsar of Love and Techno*, twentieth and twenty-first century Russian and Soviet government forces do their best to erase natural spaces in their efforts to exploit natural resources and maintain power. These efforts pollute the environment and poison human bodies, simultaneously separating humans from nature while also proving how interconnected we are. While Barrett's character Linnaeus reduces a wild and fecund world to something he can classify and contain, Marra's regimes *physically* consume and eliminate natural habitats in their pursuit of profit and power. In the Siberian city of Kirovsk, a nickel mine has ravaged the landscape:

A parachute of yellow smoke, tethered by thick billows to the smokestacks, hangs permanently over Kirovsk. The twelve smokestacks...encircle Lake Mercury, a man-made lake of industrial run-off whose silvered waters are so veined with exotic chemicals they lap against the gravel-pocked banks year-round, unfrozen even in February.... Kirovsk is in annual competition with Linfen, China, to hold the title of the world's most polluted city. (157)

Smoke literally obscures the sky, creating a tangible buffer between humans and their only access to nature. Any resemblance to a natural environment is a coincidence: the "lake" is a product of chemical waste ringed by gravel, and it doesn't follow natural laws like freezing in sub-zero temperatures. Here, the setting alienates humans from nature. The scene is beyond unnatural; the extreme pollution renders it perverse. And yet the narrator makes a joke, alluding to an imaginary competition for the most polluted city. When you're powerless to challenge an authoritarian regime, humor is one of the few ways you can fight back.

In these stories, everything in the world is only valuable insofar that it can be exploited by the state. This large-scale endeavor to conquer the natural world is mutually harmful; the devastation humanity wreaks on the planet also wreaks havoc on human bodies. In a labor camp

in the 1930s and 40s, prisoners worked “fourteen-hour shifts in the mines, inhaling so much nickel they sneezed silver glitter” (55-56). This type of work poisons them in mind and body. A generation later, prison camps have ended, but a city has grown around the mining industry, and the inhabitants willfully work in the mines because those jobs are the best they can hope for: “We measured economic prosperity by the spread of rashes on our exposed skin” (62). Another generation later, women complain that their family members, though not technically imprisoned, are trapped in a cycle of abuse by the state-operated mine. “Our fathers died of lung disease and our husbands and brothers replaced them” (72). The prison camps are gone; trouble-makers are simply shot. The mining company no longer provides health care or any stake in the company: “The benefits the combine had once provided its employees had gone the way of the sickle and hammer” (72). The government does not care if it annihilates the natural world, nor does it care how many people it kills in the process as long as those in power reap the benefits and keep everyone else powerless. The suffering these characters endure reflects an extreme version of a disenchanted world, in which increasing technology and mechanization enable selfish and senseless bureaucracies to control and abuse everything in their grasp.

But it is not only the Soviet state to blame. Marra’s narrator points out, tongue-in-cheek, that these atrocities are enabled by supposed do-gooders: “Ninety-five percent of the world’s catalytic converters are made with Kirovsk palladium and our town prospers beneath dense layers of pollution thanks to the efforts of American and European environmentalists hell-bent on keeping their skies clean” (82). Although these environmentalists may have good intentions, they still benefit, consciously or not, from the Siberian mines. Industrialized Western countries reap the advantages of globalized markets and don’t seem too concerned about the loss of the Siberian

landscape or the shrinking life expectancy of the people who live there. Marra's dark humor points the blame not only at the regime that procures and manufactures the metals through toxic processes but also at the rest of the world who turns a blind eye.

In a secular outlook, everything in the universe is ultimately knowable. But Marra's governments tweak the secular premise: they don't care what is knowable or not. Instead they make up knowledge that suits them. These stories are populated with facades and falsehoods as those in power struggle to hide the ugly truth or create the impression of something better, frequently disguising their impact on the natural world. Governments lie to keep populations under control, and individuals, powerless to protest, lie to themselves to justify their actions or to cling to hope of a better future. Marra's stories satirize the blatant ways people hide, ignore, or revise acts of violence. Although these human systems may succeed, to varying degrees, at manipulating the natural world, they ultimately fail to rewrite or remake the natural world.

In "The Grozny Tourist Bureau," the government manipulates the natural world through words, art, and physical regulations, replacing war-torn unsightliness with false notions of natural beauty. In battle-scarred Chechnya, the protagonist Ruslan, previously the deputy director of the regional art museum, is pressured into leading a new campaign depicting the ravaged city of Grozny as an attractive place for visitors. The minister, in a bid to impress Chinese investors, claims that "[n]othing suggests stability and peace like a thriving tourism sector" (89), so Ruslan invents a natural world that no longer exists. As the new head of the Grozny Tourist Bureau, he prepares a pamphlet and describes increasingly absurd euphemisms for the "urban hellscape" (91): "Upon seeing the empty space where an apartment block once stood, I wrote *wide and unobstructed skies!* I watched jubilantly as a pack of feral dogs chased a man, and

wrote *unexpected encounters with natural wildlife!*” (92) When he is unable to find appropriate photographs, he substitutes nineteenth century paintings of landscapes taken from a decades-old calendar, in which “swallows frolic over ripening grapevines and a shepherd minds his flock beneath a sunset; they portray a world untouched by war or communism” (92). Although Ruslan is clearly trying to preserve his job (and his life) by pleasing the powers-that-be, his portrayal of a pristine pastoral world is complicit with erasing the truth, establishing a false narrative, and absolving people of their violent acts.

The story “The Grozny Tourist Bureau” demonstrates that despite human efforts to hide or mask acts of brutality, violence always lingers, continuing in a vicious cycle. The persistent efforts to maintain a false narrative reflect the human urge to dominate the natural world as a way of exerting control. The story revolves around one field, the setting for the most famous regional painting, *Empty Pasture in Afternoon*. It was painted by the only nineteenth century Chechen artist to gain renown, Pyotr Zakharov-Chechenets (the painter is a historical figure, but the painting is a fiction). Zakharov was orphaned as a toddler in 1819 in the Caucasian War, and despite restrictions due to his Chechen ethnicity, he rose to prominence as a court painter in St. Petersburg. According to Ruslan, he was “a Chechen who learned to succeed by the rules of his conquerors,” which deems him “a man to be admired and pitied” (96). Zakharov—like Ruslan—could only succeed by pleasing the people who oppressed him. The painting depicts a rural scene outside of Grozny, “a meadow, an apricot tree, a stone wall in a diagonal meander through the grasses, the pasture cresting into a hill, a boarded well, a house” (96). The painting is a simulacrum of a pastoral scene, but then the actual scene becomes a simulacrum of the painting. The field, despite becoming part of a state-owned farm, was unused, unplanted, and “flocks were

banned from grazing because nobody liked the idea of sheep relieving themselves on Zakharov's pasture" (96). The local people preserve the scene because it is their only claim to fame, and yet in doing so, they create another layer of artifice. The field remains empty; it is not used, but neither is it allowed to re-wild. Humans exert control to make a real field resemble a painting. This takes the expression "life imitates art" to a whole new level. These people aren't influenced by the aesthetic of the field; they cling to the status the painting imbues. This admiration for a pastoral scene does not reflect a sincere "yearning for ecological wholeness" but a yearning, nonetheless, to belong to something greater, something refined and revered, something beyond the ordinary drudgery of state repression and the extraordinary trials of war.

Although this story presents two different types of pretense—the tourist bureau's campaign is an act of deception, and the preservation of the pasture in *Empty Pasture* is an act of wishful thinking—the painting functions less as a vehicle for duplicity and more as a kind of palimpsest on which Ruslan struggles to find truth and make meaning. Ruslan isn't merely a puppet of the state. He "saves" the painting from another form of government manipulation and pretense. In 1937 a censor "painted the figure of the Grozny party boss beside the dacha." The censor had inserted party leaders into thousands of paintings and illustrations to make the leaders seem omnipresent. This particular intrusion served as a reminder until the 1980's, claims Ruslan, that while "Soviet dogma...already pervaded the whole of the present...the past was no less revisable." When the Berlin Wall came down, Ruslan asked his colleague to restore the painting and take the party boss out of the picture, fighting back the only way they knew how: "We didn't take to the streets; we didn't overthrow governments or oust leaders; our insurrection was ten

centimeters of canvas” (96). Ruslan removes the invader and restores the original scene, suggesting that removing humans from the environment is an act of rebellion and hope.

But the story does not perpetuate the trope that nature can heal or repair what’s been lost. Ruslan doesn’t share his countrymen’s desire to see the pasture empty. This story is not about the field but what is missing, or buried, or glossed over. In the post-Soviet, pre-war years, Ruslan purchased the dacha, and when the war began, he stayed in Grozny to protect the museum while his wife and child stayed on the dacha, away from the active war. Thousands of land mines were planted in Chechnya, and although Ruslan warned his family never to go into the pasture, in 1996 they somehow triggered an explosion and died. During the war the museum was hit and the painting was damaged, and as Ruslan restores the painting, he “search[es] the painting for two familiar figures,” which of course aren’t there. The pasture’s emptiness masks the violence that has unfolded there. Although he removed the party leader from the field, he reinserts his loved ones and “draw[s] them as silhouettes. The boy’s arms are raised, his body elongated as he makes for the crest, his hands thrown open” (101). At the end of the story, a wealthy Russian industrialist offers to buy the painting for his wife Galina. Oblivious to Ruslan’s suffering, Galina says, “You wouldn’t understand, but someone I once loved died in this field” (110). She does not imagine a happy ending for her former lover; she is content to be reunited with a ghost.

In Marra’s stories, the natural world—or the idea of it—offers a bittersweet reprieve from the unfeeling machinery of war. Because Ruslan will never know what drove his family into the field, he can only invent possible reasons. Although Ruslan suspects the worst happened to his family and fears “they fled masked men,” because “the mined field was a sanctuary compared to the depredations of their pursuers,” he prefers to imagine a more enchanting ending: “I’d like to

believe it was a day so beautiful they couldn't be kept from the crest of the hill, the open sky, that radiance" (98). While Ruslan obviously mourns this unrecoverable loss, if his loved ones had to die, natural splendor is the only thing worth dying for. Nature cannot repair, but perhaps it can console. As Ruslan painstakingly restores the war-damaged *Empty Pasture in Afternoon*, determined that the "grass, turned emerald by sunlight, must be flawless" (101), the pristine scene helps him imagine the best possible final moments for his wife and child, and when he paints them into the field, "[t]he sun rakes the grass and ripe apricots bend the branches. No one chases them. They run from nothing" (101). Misery and majesty are intertwined as the beauty of the natural world offers a moment of enchantment that replaces and eclipses the moment of death and destruction.

Human attempts to control nature—to preserve or remake pastoral landscapes to disguise or correct acts of human destruction—cannot succeed, but when people suspend a sense of control, genuine encounters with nature offer moments of enchantment. In the following story "Prisoner of the Caucasus," we learn about Galina's ex-lover, Kolya, a conscripted Russian soldier who is captured by Chechen rebels and forced to repair the field until it matches the painting. War is an act of violence that seeks to seize control of land and human lives, but ironically, imprisoned, Kolya finds more peace in the daily rituals of working the field than he ever has before. Marra illustrates how we can experience moments of enchantment when we abandon presumptions of human dominance, break through ordinary ways of seeing the environment, and negotiate a sense of belonging with the natural world.

Before he was captured, Kolya led an entirely secular and disenchanting life: nature existed elsewhere, and human existence was defined by human-controlled corruption and

violence. When Kolya was growing up, he was entirely alienated from natural rhythms: “food came in cans delivered to the arctic by transport truck and ice-breaking barge. He still can’t say what goes into a loaf of bread” (134). Kolya’s role, whether as a gangster or a soldier, was to kill people. He “tries to remember how many people he’s killed. A baker’s dozen, maybe but who knows?” (132) Kolya didn’t want to be a killer, but the government and organized crime exploited people like him who didn’t have other options. Whatever meager pay and “war loot” Kolya earned, he saved to bribe university officials so his younger brother wouldn’t suffer the same “moral failure” and wouldn’t “ever have to keep count” of the people he has killed (132-3). Kolya doesn’t live in a porous world; his world is determined and bound by human systems and biases. His fellow soldier tells him, “Someone like you? You’re born a killer. The army doesn’t make you shoot people. They make you shoot the right people” (133). No one is born a killer, but Kolya isn’t even afforded the opportunity to imagine a different way of life, a better identity.

For Kolya, gardening—direct contact with the earth—disrupts his sense of self and his place in the world. Kolya is able to dissolve his old sense of self, remove buffers and mingle with nature, and become porous, enchanted—invigorated, reborn. When he is first captured and given a shovel, he thinks he’s digging his own grave, and he is pleasantly surprised to discover that only seeds will be buried in the earth. Even though he’s a prisoner, his new surroundings offer him a whole new world, and soon he grows “fond of Chechen Julys with the languid green color scale, the birds without Russian names” (134). The birds don’t have Russian names; he is free of his known world with no ties to his old life. His hometown of Kirovsk was dominated by the colors of the toxic mines: “the snow was tinged with...the red of iron, the blue of cobalt, the eggy yellow of nickel” (63), but here he can rest in the gentle green of new growth. In this

natural setting, Kolya finds a new identity, one that isn't intrinsically linked to violence. While Kolya's fellow captive complains that they are slaves, Kolya is content to spend his days working in the garden: "He does his work, eats his bread, and he sleeps with the knowledge that today hasn't added to the sum of human misery" (132). For Kolya, being a captive means he has gained freedom from being a perpetrator of violence.

In the following weeks, Kolya gives up any sense of control, and in return he is enchanted by the raw, organic richness of the earth, seeds, and shoots. Recall that Felski said enchantment is "associat[ed] with passivity, submission, and surrender" (Felski 75), and here Kolya literally succumbs to his fate as a prisoner. This surrender of his sense of self frees him to be absorbed by something other than himself, the natural world. When he touches the dirt, he is "amazed by its looseness, its warmth" (135). On a literal level, the dirt is warmer than the frozen ground back in Siberia, where in order to bury a body, "he had to empty a clip into the frozen ground to break it up enough to begin digging" (135), but warmth here doesn't merely refer to the temperature. Kolya is comforted by the unanticipated pleasure of interacting with something natural, something that generates rather than destroys life. When his trowel breaks, he doesn't complain. He revels in working the earth with his hands, and "at the end of the day they are so dark with dirt he no longer recognizes them as his" (134). His relationship with the earth is visceral and transformative. The line between him and nature dissolves as his hands literally take on the appearance of the earth.

Kolya's experience meets Bennett's criteria for enchantment and echoes Taylor's description. Kolya is surprised by the jolt of awe that the earth inspires. He feels a combination of pleasurable fullness mixed with something uncanny and unsettling. Bennett noted that modern

critics tend to claim that nature is disenchanted because “a spiritual dimension once found in plants, earth, sky is now nowhere to be seen” (7-8), but Kolya recovers a spiritual dimension from the earth as he “watches earthworms and roller-upbugs...promenade on his open palm, and he’s drawn back to that time in his life when he still had the chance to become someone else and is momentarily freed from who he is” (127). He observes the worms and roller-upbugs without a sense of control or hierarchy. They do not function as a metaphor, but they provoke a change in Kolya. His exposure to the natural world makes him more porous as he transcends the boundaries of himself. His “ordinary reality is ‘abolished’” and he is left “deeply moved, but also puzzled and shaken” (Taylor 5-6). The natural world allows him the opportunity to see the world differently, to realize that an environment can be peaceful, and consequently to see himself as someone different, someone who is not a killer.

These daily encounters with nature offer Kolya what Hampton describes as “moment[s] of participatory porousness, where an unbuffered self takes part in a natural existence that is greater than the self” (462). Kolya is reintegrated with the natural world as he takes part in the existence of the soil, insects, and new growth. Unlike Deakin and his whirlpool, or Sarah Anne and her sparrow, Kolya didn’t seek this reintegration. Deakin actively sought to become part of the whirlpool for the sake of experiencing the whirlpool itself, something wild, and the character of Sarah Anne actively imagined herself as a sparrow in order to contemplate a scientific problem, to see the world through her subject’s eyes. Kolya is forced to work the earth, and only direct physical contact prompts him to experience something “greater than the self.”

Kolya fulfills Felski’s description of being enchanted in the modern sense: he loses a sense of self and is absorbed by something other, but he doesn’t lose himself entirely. He

negotiates a hybrid state between self-control and abandonment. He performs his daily chores, remembers the past, and remains acutely aware of his plight, and yet, when he feels the dirt or watches roller-up bugs, he experiences moments of enchantment that are “magical without requiring the intervention of the supernatural, reminders of the persistence of the mysterious, wondrous, and perplexing in a rationalized and at least partly secularized world” (Felski 74-5). Marra, of course, paints a picture of a secularized world that isn’t rational at all. Although the world of Marra’s stories is realistic, absurdity reigns. This is a story about a man who yearns to remain a prisoner and recreate a garden to match a painting to assuage another’s loss and re-foster regional pride. And yet Kolya’s yearning makes sense in light of the alternatives: a life of violence inflicted by government regimes or ruthless gangs.

Although Kolya does find satisfaction by shifting from a secular, disenchanting outlook to a post-secular, enchanted outlook, his spiritual awakening doesn’t provide him with a long-term solution. When his fellow captive Danilo attempts to escape, Kolya doesn’t join him. Kolya “considers the endpoints of escape—reenlistment, death, home—and the happiest outcome he can envision is this, right here, recaptured and resented to work a peaceful plot of land” (135). If being a prisoner is the best possible life he can foresee, then something is really wrong with the world. Although Kolya changes his perception of the world and his role in it, society doesn’t change. His captor is not intent on reforming or rehabilitating his prisoner; he persists in coercing Kolya to remake the landscape to match the painting, as if restoring the landscape will somehow erase or undo the violence that has been enacted there. But this is a superficial kind of reparation, one that only begets more violence. After Danilo escapes, he watches the field from a distance as Kolya’s captors fire shots, not aimed to kill Kolya but rather

to force him “to extend the herb garden up the mined hill” (143), which could force Kolya to trigger a land mine. Like Barrett, Marra does not offer redemption to his characters, and his stories reflect the harsh reality of our world. However, this story illustrates how an appreciation for nature and a post-secular worldview can transform an individual, which begs the question, if society at large were to make this shift, could characters like Kolya achieve redemption? What kind of more peaceful, more natural world might we envision?

In “Prisoner of the Caucasus,” Kolya has a rare interaction with the natural world. It’s not the wilderness; it’s a garden—nature tempered by human intervention—but Kolya does have a sense, for the first time, that he is part of something other than an industrial, criminal, or military complex. In most of Marra’s stories the natural world exists only in fabricated spaces: zoos, paintings, a man-made forest and man-made lake. These facsimiles demonstrate a yearning for ecological wholeness when the characters cannot access the “real thing.” Sometimes these facsimiles offer alternatives to human-dominated spaces and inspire the characters to envision other ways of being, and sometimes they function as a poor substitution that prevents a connection to a more authentic version of the natural world.

Whereas Hampton’s new nature writers yearn to be re-wilded and re-integrated into nature, emerging with the natural world and taking part in its existence (Hampton 461), in the world of Marra’s stories, with the exception of Kolya, people rarely try to join the natural world but rather to try to recreate it. Marra, with his signature dark humor, exposes how this impulse can go horribly wrong. As we’ve seen in “Prisoner of the Caucasus,” the Chechen rebels attempt to remake a pastoral landscape to mimic a famous painting, reclaiming their local claim to fame from the Russian army, thus condemning another person to possible death by land mine. Several

of Marra's stories refer to or revolve around an artificial forest in a more earnest but misguided attempt to fabricate and experience a "natural" environment.

The story "Granddaughters" introduces us to the White Forest, an imitation of a forest that illustrates a human failure, through ineptitude and hubris, to genuinely interact with the natural world. In the polluted city of Kirovsk, where decades of mining have removed any sign of nature, a Soviet party boss's wife had "grown nostalgic for the birches of her youth" (61), so the government constructed a human-made forest with trees fashioned from steel and plastic. This fake forest is a superficial substitution that does not offer any semblance of genuine connection to nature. Decades later, in the titular story "The Tsar of Love and Techno," we learn that although the White Forest looks convincing enough in photographs to lure engineers from Moscow and Leningrad, the leaves "neither grow nor die. No animals hibernate in their trunk." White Forest is artificial and devoid of life, a flimsy decoration, not an ecosystem. Over time the materials have deteriorated, turning White Forest into "a field of rusted antennas, harboring the city's de facto garbage dump beneath its naked branches" (157). What began as an effort, however earnest, to correct or replace the lack of forest, results in a facade that devolves into a farce.

Marra's stories demonstrate the human urge—and inability—to understand and control the environment in and around Kirovsk. "The Wolf of White Forest" illustrates how human activity like prison camps and mining interrupts the natural world where the prior apex predators were wolves. Marra's narrator ridicules the human incompetence in facing or understanding a natural adversary that doesn't operate by human rules or submit to political pressure:

Before there had been a gulag, a mine, a city, there had been wolves. An early scientific

expedition had reported multiple encounters with a roving pack that had never before encountered prey as portly and pusillanimous as academics. Ten of the thirty-two geologists who had discovered the first nickel vein had been killed by wolves in 1928. In the late 1930s, when engineers had hastily assembled a gulag around the nickel mine, the Red Army had hunted the wolves nearly to extinction. It became well established in university biology departments that wolves were the capitalist imperialists of the animal kingdom, and so the army went to great lengths to be rid of them. (226)

By naming the wolves “the capitalist imperialists of the animal kingdom,” the Soviet forces construct an enemy that fits into their preexisting perceptions of threat. The prerogative of biology departments is not to advance scientific knowledge but rather to reinforce state propaganda, which vilifies anyone or anything that refuses to submit to government control. Humor highlights the absurdity of that narrative and undermines the government’s authority.

Marra’s sense of humor offers a kind of enchantment. The concept of wolves as “capitalist imperialists” startles and amuses the reader, who pauses to laugh while puzzling out the implications. In a way Marra’s Soviet forces offer a vision of people and wolves as part of a continuum as they assign the wolves a distinctly human ideology, and yet the Soviet forces continue to Other the wolves, not as sub-human animals but as representations of the human opposition. The metaphor only makes sense through the twisted perception of a willfully close-minded regime.

Although the government will never publicly admit defeat, Marra’s mockery of the inability to understand and control the wolves suggests a post-secular yearning for a partial return to enchantment. The humor—exposing the label “capitalist imperialists” for wolves as ridiculous—demonstrates a logic that is clearly secular, and yet the passage also exposes the need for enchantment, the recognition that some things may be beyond human understanding. People shouldn’t pretend they can explain all the forces that shape the natural world, and people

shouldn't determine where other species should exist. When wolves return to the area and make White Forest their habitat, the narrator celebrates the ability of the natural world to mystify people. People are powerless to explain why, after so many decades, the wolves have returned to inhabit a fake forest:

Biologists arrived with honorifics and plastic binders, departed with unpaid hotel bills and findings so disparate it was a wonder they could agree a wolf had four legs, two eyes, and one nose. Some blamed an irregular cycle of population growth and decline. Some blamed global warming and intense logging of woodlands in the distant southwest. Most blamed their mothers, for one thing or another. (223)

This caricature of ineffectual scientists represents a kind of enchantment as the wolves' behavior remains beyond human understanding. Humor exposes the incompetence of the scientists, especially their unwillingness to admit that they don't understand the reason the wolves have returned and don't know how to deter them. Honorifics and plastic binders point to egos and displays of knowledge rather than any genuine desire to learn about the natural world. The wildly disparate theories demonstrate the human urge to explain because explanations are a way to tame the unknown, to maintain a tenuous illusion of control. The scientists are reluctant to admit failure; they do not strive harder to find the truth but instead try desperately to divert the blame. The natural world remains elusive, and mystery preserves a kind of power.

When the wolves return to White Forest, Marra's narrator does not propose that the human-made forest—a poor simulacrum of nature—can replace the original, but this grotesque forest ends up being more than a bad joke. White Forest is not so much an imitation of a natural forest as a counterfeit, a tame version of wilderness, an artificial playground that keeps “real” nature at a distance. However, nature does not submit so readily to human expectations, and the line between the human and natural world cannot be so easily drawn. Even in a place as

unnatural as White Forest, nature finds a way to re-insert itself. The wolves and other animals make this “defacto garbage dump” (158) their home. A young woman campaigns to turn the artificial forest into a nature preserve. As she petitions for signatures, she explains, “Whatever its origin, a rich and vibrant ecosystem has emerged. Feral dogs and cats, yes, but also arctic rabbits, foxes, and even wolves. This biodiversity, unlikely as it may be, deserves state protection” (253). A rusty, peeling garbage dump is not an ideal nature preserve, but it’s what they have. An ecosystem is a community of living organisms and their physical environment, living and nonliving parts, and White Forest, absurdly, fits the bill. Humans cannot maintain a human/nature divide, even in an environment so radically altered by human activity.

Is this how we move forward? We cannot go back in time and resurrect a more pristine environment. Marra offers a distinct alternative to Hampton’s cohort of new nature writers who yearn to be re-wilded and re-integrated into a natural world that exists beyond human control. In Marra’s stories, where the natural environment has been erased, it is nature instead that proves it can re-wild and re-integrate itself into a landscape shaped by humans. And yet this concept presumes that humans and nature are separate entities. Where does the natural world end and the human begin? Is this a false dichotomy?

Our contemporary understanding of nature as a linked, evolving entity is a relatively recent one. Historian Andrea Wulf argues that our current perception of nature wasn’t introduced until the early nineteenth century when the naturalist Alexander Von Humboldt “revolutionized the way we see the natural world...he invented the web of life, the concept of nature as we know it today” (5). An editorial in *Nature Ecology & Evolution* asserts that “Humboldt’s vision was that everything in nature was interconnected — a concept that he called ‘Naturgemälde’”(1265).

This marked a radical change in perception as “[t]his idea of a holistic web of connections presented a dramatically different vision to the dominant scientific ideas of the time, which focused on organisms at the level of the individual, with humans set apart — ideas influenced largely by Carl Linnaeus” (1265). And Timothy Morton rejects the idea that nature can be deemed as something separate or fixed: “there is no such ‘thing’ as nature, if by nature we mean some thing that is single, independent, and lasting” (Ergin 21). Ergin proposes that “we may benefit from an understanding of ecology as a complex tangle of natural and social systems that continually shape human and nonhuman environments” (22). Marra’s stories illustrate that humans and the natural world co-exist, one way or another, and our relationships with the world are always fluctuating.

Failing to see or admit how humans are connected to the natural world can have disastrous consequences for all. Morton argues that if we conceive of nature as “either an abstract principle or a purely material realm,” we “save ourselves the trouble of thinking about our complicity” (Ergin 21). If people believe they are separate from nature, and then they alter or damage an environment, then the human-impacted area is no longer viewed as “nature.” The world map is reduced to growing regions of human activity and shrinking regions of nature. If humans don’t feel complicit, we will continue on a trajectory that is mutually destructive. A secular viewpoint separates humans from nature, giving the false impression that we can draw a line between us. If we only see nature as only the “untouched” regions, then when we admire the natural world, we ignore the consequences of human impact.

Ergin argues that it’s our duty to face our complicity in disfiguring and contaminating the natural world. Drawing on sociologist Ulrich Beck, Ergin explains that when there is an

“industrially forced degradation of ecological foundations of life,” we must re-think “our relationship between nature and society . . . nature can no longer be understood outside of society, or society outside of nature” (24). Ergin argues that “[a]ny ideal of nature as pristine sanctuary untouched by economy, history, and politics risks turning into a fable” (25-6), and he insists that ecocritics should expose invisible threats. He urges writers and artists to tell “ecological narratives that go beyond the kind of poetry, painting, and photography which portray the pristine land of Colorado, but fail to articulate the radioactive contamination from the Rocky Flats Plant” (22-23). He uses the example of the photographer Richard Misrach who takes pictures of scenes, for example, where chemical refineries bleed into swamplands. Misrach uses “stunning colors to capture images of ‘unnatural violence’ (Solnit 1999, 46), to show that ‘what is beautiful is often deadly, damaged, evil’” (47). Instead of providing viewers with a beautiful escape, Misrach forces his audience to confront and acknowledge ecological devastation.

What Misrach does with photographs, Marra does with words. Marra’s narrator exposes the horrors of unsustainable industrial practices and depicts scenes where society has merged, destructively, with the natural world. The narrator describes the effects of pollution from the nickel combine in Kirovsk, creating a ghastly and yet eerily beautiful image:

In the summertime, the devastation of the earth permeated the clouds. Yellow fog enshrouded the city like a varnish aged upon the air. Sulfur dioxide rose from the Twelve Apostles, the dozen nickel smelters ringing a lake of industrial waste. Rain burned our skin. The pollution congealed into a dense ceiling blocking the starlight. The moon belonged to the past our grandmothers spoke of. (61)

The pollution is horrifying, and yet Marra’s description renders the scene in such a way that it is aesthetically pleasing. The language is poetic, the imagery divine: *enshrouded*, *rose*, *ringing*. The moon is otherworldly, belonging to an earlier era. The clichéd vision of a starry night is turned on

its head. Readers are simultaneously repulsed yet fascinated. Marra is exposing an invisible evil of which Ergin spoke: nickel is used in many alloys and is used in any variety of industrial and everyday products around the world: wire, coins, batteries, pipes, vaults, machine parts, jet engines, medical equipment, cutlery, etc., and yet very few people know the negative consequences of unearthing and developing this material. Marra is not contributing to “conventional environmental writing’s silence toward the socio-political and its clear-cut distinction between nature and society” (Ergin 24). Marra may not be hailed a “writer-activist,” but his implicit denouncement of these industrial practices is unmistakable. Scenes like this of “blowback” illustrate Oelschlager’s point that “wild nature and culture are...organically related,” and “the destruction of things wild and free entail the collapse of any civilization that rests upon them” (Hilfer 291-2). How long can this society persist, enveloped by such pollution, bathed in toxic rain?

And yet Marra’s tone is not entirely pessimistic and offers glimmers of hope. The lurid but beautiful images are enchanting, and the narrator celebrates how the exploited people of Kirovsk find whatever solace they can in the contaminated landscape. When the Soviet authority collapses in 1990 during the warmest summer on record in Kirovsk, the elderly inhabitants begin swimming in the toxic Lake Mercury:

A man with a mustache as wide as his waistline, whom all the world had nicknamed Walrus, took his first tentative strokes, marveling at the cool rush against his skin, the freedom of movement, and began weeping right there in the water for the countless times he had prayed for death in the mines, in the prison camp, and now, now gratitude cracked him open, and he thanked God for ignoring his prayers, for letting him live long enough to learn to swim. (174)

He feels a jolt of awe at the sensation of water, and he recovers a spiritual dimension from his baptism. His ordinary reality is abolished, replaced by a freedom of movement he has never known. The chemicals in the water should cause the swimmers harm, but in this enchanted world, no one can explain why “the chemical mélange restored to them a long-ago dissipated vitality” (175). Similarly, a young Kolya and Galina escape to the outskirts of the city beyond White Forest and also find the sensation of freedom:

On the forest’s far side we looked across the expanse of sulfurous waste stretching to the horizon. We shouted. We proclaimed. We didn’t need to whisper out here. For a few short weeks in July, red wildflowers pushed through the oxidized waste and the whole earth simmered with apocalyptic beauty. (61)

The closest they can get to nature is a field of toxic sludge, but they experience a kind of liberation they can’t find anywhere else. The young lovers shout with a childlike glee, reinvigorated and exhilarated. The natural world may be tainted, but wildflowers persist and reclaim their place. It is a mystery how anything can bloom in such a toxic wasteland, but nature defies expectations and bristles with indignation, suggesting that humanity can never completely destroy the natural world, nature will always find a way to persevere, and we can reunite with the natural world to recapture more fulfilled versions of ourselves.

## **Bridging the Human/Nature Divide**

Barrett's and Marra's stories expose the need to recognize how humans are connected to the natural world. But what is the nature of that connection—should we aim for re-integration, or do we need to be respectful of our distance? Barrett's and Marra's stories illustrate how awe, humility, and hubris can contribute to maintaining or dissolving barriers between humans and the natural world. In Barrett's stories, awe for the natural world can lead to genuine curiosity and respect, but it can also lead to an anthropocentric desire to capitalize on nature's wonders. In Marra's stories, humility doesn't help repair the connection when people are powerless to effect change. Hubris is always a problem. But how do we expunge ourselves of hubris?

Anthony Hilfer suggests that in order to have a kind of "species modesty," we should *not* aim to bridge the human/nature divide. He claims that in order to "feel small in relation to the mountain—or the ocean, or the desert--we need to recognize it as other and as real" (291). This echoes Gifford's implied answer to the question, "Can awe in the face of natural phenomena, such as landscapes, lead to humility in our species?" Both Hilfer and Gifford suggest that humans should feel modest or humble compared to the vast natural world. When Gifford discusses Ted Hughes Poem "Crow Hill," he points out how the poem belittles human impact: "'between the weather and the rock/ Farmers make a little heat.' Climate, geology, bird, and animal survival are such strong forces that human achievement is diminished to 'a little heat'" (Gifford 17).

Hilfer also echoes Hampton's post-secularism, although he offers a slightly different framework. Whereas Hampton focuses on the sacred/secular dichotomy and new hybrid

versions, Hilfer examines the difficulty of understanding our relationship to nature in terms of Christian, modern, and postmodern perspectives. He asks, how can we view such natural phenomena as both other and real? According to Hilfer, the Bible tells Christians that God made Nature for humans to use. Modern thinking reduced Nature to a system of quantifiable characteristics, as well as a tool for human purposes. Postmodern thought insisted that everything is culturally constructed and thus nothing, including nature, is “real”. Hence, says Hilfer, contemporary selves experience a disenchantment, and “nature becomes the unrecognizable other” (Hilfer 8).

Hilfer thinks nature should be the *recognizable* other. He fears that human attempts to describe or unite with nature are anthropocentric and dangerous. Quoting and responding to Suellen Campbell, he warns that blowback—negative repercussions to human culture because of negative human impact on nature—will “grow in frequency and severity so long as we remain oblivious to ‘the way the rest of the world—the nonhuman part—exists apart from us and our languages” (Hilfer 291). Hilfer takes a more extreme stance than Hampton, who suggests that one way writers can “resist any...narrative that would claim to be capable of fully understanding and controlling nature” is to write about “the irreducibility of nature, whereby the natural world possesses qualities that resist description and articulation” but another way is to employ “descriptive proliferation, a kind of lush prose or thick description” (Hampton 464-65).

Barrett and Marra find a middle ground. At times their descriptions of the natural world are lush, but at other times they refer directly to the mystery of the natural world. In Barrett’s story “Rare Bird,” when Sarah Anne dissects the sparrow, she does not yet possess the language to describe what she finds. She notes the “mysterious air sacs extend into the abdomen, up into

the neck, into the bones. There is no sign of a gill-like organ” (76). She recognizes the mechanisms that make them operate differently than mammals with lungs or fish with gills, but she does not attempt to describe in any detail what the mysterious organs are like. However, because Sarah Anne is determined to understand the sparrows’ habits and abilities, the term “mysterious” here is less an acknowledgment that the sparrows cannot be understood in human terms and more of a challenge to be overcome, a deficit of knowledge that she aims to fill. This is a joyful mystery of discovering what is Other and very real.

Marra’s story “The Leopard” more fully conveys the sentiment that nature—a wild animal—lies beyond our grasp. The narrator Roman is an artist turned Bolshevik state censor who erases government-deemed traitors from paintings and photographs and inserts high-ranking officials wherever his superiors dictate. A faithful servant of the state, Roman failed to protect his brother, who was arrested for religious radicalism (21). In this political climate, those who are arrested do not reappear. Later Roman is imprisoned for a crime he didn’t commit. In his confinement he recalls a time from his childhood when his parents took him and his brother to the zoo, where the most memorable creature was the leopard, “an inconceivable creature at which Vaska and I first marveled, then threw bread crumbs” (24). There is an obvious parallel between the incarcerated animal and the incarcerated protagonist, and yet the leopard serves less as a direct comparison and more as a motif to raise questions. What else, in this world of censorship, betrayal, failure to connect, is inconceivable? At the end of the story, as the guards lead Roman towards a dark road, presumably to his death, he remembers his brother “racing toward the leopard cage....Even now, I don’t know what that leopard was beyond an indefinable, nameless mystery” (50). For Roman, this mystery is a kind of enchantment, a gift: “A weary

leopard in a zoo... this vision I shared with my brother has grown into mystery so unlikely and lasting I can only describe it as a mercy granted by some magnificent wholeness to the world that was already breaking between us” (45). Roman, in his role as a censor, painted an endless series of lies, rendering the world unknowable. But state-sanctioned deception is no mystery: the powers-that-be do everything they can to discredit possible critics and celebrate their own eminence. A leopard, another species, remains the true mystery, and Roman is grateful for the enigma that is beyond human control.

Hilfer claims “the rest of the world—the nonhuman part—exists apart from us and our languages” (291), but if we do not use our languages, how can we try to understand them? How will we understand ourselves? Hilfer quotes a section from Robert Frost’s poem “Desert Places” as an example of a text that successfully avoids anthropomorphizing nature:

And lonely as it is, that loneliness  
Will be more lonely ere it will be less -  
A blanker whiteness of benighted snow  
With no expression, nothing to express. (Hilfer 251)

According to Hilfer, “Nature’s non-expressiveness is, naturally, its ultimate expression” (251). And yet the image of nature in Frost’s poem is entirely relatable to humans. The non-expressiveness serves to emphasize the very human feeling of loneliness.

Merlin Sheldrake, in his book *Entangled Life*, warns how anthropomorphic assumptions reflect cultural biases. When discussing fungal mycorrhizal networks and trees, Sheldrake points out that “[s]ome portray these systems as a form of socialism by which the wealth of the forest can be redistributed” while “[o]thers take inspiration from mammalian family structures and parental care, with young trees nourished by their fungal connections to older and larger ‘mother

trees” and still others “describe networks in terms of ‘biological markets’, in which plants and fungi are portrayed as rational economic individuals trading on the floor of an ecological stock exchange” (235). These frameworks shift over time, reflecting changing trends and political philosophies and cannot be trusted to reflect scientific accuracy without further study, or as Sheldrake puts it, “[o]nly with hindsight can we see which metaphors are most useful” (236).

However, Sheldrake explores ways language can possibly blur the line between anthropomorphic and mycomorphic (fungus-centric) or phytomorphic (plant-centric). He muses, “[i]f you say a plant ‘learns’, ‘decides’, ‘communicates’, or ‘remembers’, are you humanising the plant, or vegetalising a set of human concepts?” (237). Sheldrake refers to anthropologist Natasha Myers, who suggests that “Charles Darwin seemed quite ready to vegetalise himself” (237). Describing orchids in 1862, Darwin compared the flower to “a man with his left arm raised and bent so that his hands stand in front of his chest, and with his right arm crossing his body lower down” (238). Although Sheldrake acknowledges that this description could be a “sure sign of anthropomorphism,” he points out that Darwin “is also reimagining the male body—including his own—in floral form, suggesting that he is open to exploring the flower’s anatomy on its own terms” (238). Language opens up the possibility of exchange.

Therefore, language itself is not to blame; the real threat of anthropomorphism is anthropocentrism, a sense of ego. Recall that the wilderness philosopher Max Oelschlager argued that “the relation between the human species and the ‘other’—that is, the wilderness itself—is not simply one of exploitation and domination. Instead, wild nature and culture are understood as organically related” (Hilfer 291-92). Organically related. Other but not wholly separate. Both Gifford and Hilfer quote the Scottish-American naturalist John Muir. According to Gifford, Muir

explained, “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe” (28). According to Hilfer, Oelschlager shares George Santayana’s meeting with John Muir:

A Californian whom I had recently the pleasure of meeting observed that if the philosophers had lived among your mountains, their systems would have been different from what they are. Certainly very different from what those systems are which the European genteel tradition has handed down since Socrates; for these systems are egotistical; directly or indirectly they are anthropocentric, and inspired by the conceited notion that man, or human reason, or the human distinction between good and evil, is the center and pivot of the universe. That is what the mountains and the woods should make you at least ashamed to assert. (Hilfer 288-89)

These critics, philosophers, and naturalists raise a moral or ethical call to avoid anthropocentrism. And yet, there have been human societies with alternate models for relationships to the natural world. Luther Standing Bear describes his Native American Lakota outlook, which does not separate human civilization from the natural world:

We did not think of the great open plains, the beautiful rolling hills, and the winding streams with tangled growth as "wild". Only to the White man was nature a "wilderness" and only to him was the land infested by "wild" animals and "savage" people. To us it was tame. Earth was bountiful and we were surrounded with the blessings of the Great Mystery. (Forbes 23)

In Barrett’s and Marra’s stories, when characters are anthropocentric, they exploit the natural world to promote their own ambitions, but they are never satisfied. While these stories show us how individuals—products of their larger society—can be profoundly unhappy when alienated from nature, they also hint at ways to achieve more satisfaction. A post-secular outlook shifts away from the three anthropocentric urges that rule a purely secular outlook: 1) that humans are separate from and should control the natural world 2) that human knowledge is at the top of any hierarchy of knowledge and 3) that humans can know everything. Rather, a post-

secular outlook seeks to reintegrate humans with nature, acknowledges that the human mind is not the only arbiter of reality, and embraces moments of enchantment, all of which contribute to a de-anthropocentralization (my term).

Bennett thinks that fostering moments of enchantment not only increases individual satisfaction but also provides a more ethical way to live. According to Felski, Bennett is concerned that “the discourse of disenchantment reiterates and reinforces the very condition that it describes, sinking us ever deeper into the void of a dispiriting, self-corroding skepticism”. But we don’t have to follow this course, and “Bennett urges us to cultivate and cherish experiences of enchantment, to wean ourselves from an endemic mindset of pessimism and critique. An affirmation of wonder is potentially enlivening, energizing, even ethical, encouraging a stance of openness and generosity to the world” (Felski 58). A world of mystery is a world of possibility, and a world of possibility is generous, allowing for all kinds of experiences and existences, including those we haven’t yet encountered or imagined. Bennett claims “that presumptive generosity, as well as the will to social justice, are sustained by periodic bouts of being enamored with existence, and that it is too hard to love a disenchanting world” (Bennett 12).

Disenchantment can lead to a sense of detachment and apathy, but moments of enchantment always invite us to participate with and celebrate the world.

## Final Words

We determine how we want to view our relationship with the natural world. We are influenced, of course, by cultural attitudes, but these are social constructs that shift with time. In the preceding chapters, I have demonstrated how the characters in Barrett's and Marra's stories are dissatisfied when they adhere to a strictly secular, disenchanting worldview and see themselves as separate from and superior to nature. In Barrett's stories, the notion of human superiority leads to individual despair whereas in Marra's stories, the notion of human superiority results in large-scale blowback that devastates whole communities and countries. When we assert dominance, we reject the possibility of a rich, wondrous, and fulfilling relationship with the natural world, and we lose the part of ourselves that thrives on such a communion.

A secular mindset encourages a sense of human/nature otherness, and Barrett's and Marra's stories illustrate various barriers people construct to keep nature separate. Individuals and nations endeavor to control and consume the natural world for profit, for fame, or for a sense of security. Greed drives people to see the natural world as a valuable resource to plunder. Barrett's character Alec sees his exotic specimens as "treasures," and Marra's mining town of Kirovsk "prosper[s] beneath dense layers of pollution" (Marra 84). Hubris can have negative effects for multiple reasons. Hubris fosters a sense of entitlement or ownership that motivates people to exploit the natural world. Barrett's characters Linnaeus and Alec feel no compunction at having plucked and removed animals from their natural habitats as they travel the globe, collecting (and killing) thousands of organisms in order to make a name for themselves. Hubris

also causes Linnaeus to see the natural world as something wild and uncivilized, in need of taming: “Now he had named almost everything and everyone knew his name” (Barrett 84). Hubris can lead people to see the natural world as not inherently valuable and thus fair game to eliminate or defile as when Marra’s armies riddle the Chechen landscape with mines. Hubris can also lead to an unrealistic belief in the human ability to replace the natural world, as seen in Marra’s disturbing manmade White Forest. Finally, fear of the natural world can lead people to destroy the threat, or at least try to control it. In Marra’s stories, the Red Army did their best to eliminate the wolves, “the capitalist imperialists of the animal kingdom” (226). And fear of failure prompts Barrett’s character Alec to focus solely on hunting birds of paradise in the hopes that a museum will display their lifeless bodies (119).

Barrett’s and Marra’s stories demonstrate that despite human attempts to profit from conquering the natural world, any fleeting gains are replaced by physical and emotional distress: loneliness, dissatisfaction, a lack of identity, disgust, anxiety, and a greater likelihood of bodily harm. Alec never receives fame or fortune from his “treasures”; Linnaeus earns both yet dies full of regret. The average inhabitants of Kirovsk remain poor and pay for any financial success with shortened lifespans, and Chechens and Russians alike suffer the consequences of lingering landmines. Furthermore, while human efforts to subjugate the natural world can cause lasting damage to ecosystems, humans are never capable of complete domination, as seen when the wolves, hunted to near-extinction, return to White Forest and when wildflowers bloom in a field of toxic waste. Nature has a way of re-asserting and re-inserting itself in ways that humans fail to predict or understand.

Although advances in science perpetuated the cultural shift from a sacred to a secular outlook, science itself doesn't promote a human/nature divide. The way science is practiced and interpreted reflects and sometimes perpetuates dangerous biases. Science is supposed to be clinical, factual, and free of bias, but scientists are humans, humans who yearn to make discoveries. Problems occur when people want to assert mastery rather than pursue knowledge, illustrated by Linnaeus and Alec, who allow their egos to trump their scientific curiosity, as well as the incompetent Soviet biologists who refuse to admit they didn't know why the wolves returned. The Soviet and Russian governments and businesses use scientific knowledge to build mines and manufacture weapons without considering long-lasting implications. Even well-meaning scientists and people who respect science may unwittingly make anthropocentric assumptions that privilege human knowledge and foster a sense of human supremacy. We are human; it is a challenge to see the world through any other lens. But we must acknowledge that an anthropocentric outlook is incomplete, and we should strive to look at the world through multiple lenses. Both Hampton and Sheldrake warn that anthropocentrism may mask the truth, hiding it behind explanations that feel familiar to us, and so we jump to the conclusion that what we recognize is true. The scientific process can lead to a richer, more accurate understanding of the world if we liberate ourselves from the "trap of anthropomorphism" (Sheldrake 46) and "[discourage] the privileging of any one position and with this the establishment of hierarchies" (Hampton 463). By considering the world from non-human perspectives, we may find new and improved ways of seeing and seeking knowledge.

Throughout this essay, I have explored how awe and humility may contribute to maintaining or dissolving the barriers people construct to keep humans separate from nature.

Awe and humility can help remove the barriers, but they do not guarantee respect for nature. While awe for the natural world may inspire some people to protect nature, awe may incite a desire in others to control, curb, exploit, or take ownership. Gifford asks, “Can awe in the face of natural phenomena, such as landscapes, lead to humility in our species?”, but Barrett’s and Marra’s stories suggest the relationship goes the other way: the more humble people are, the more receptive they are to awe. Barrett’s character Sarah Anne, the budding naturalist limited by society’s restrictions on women, is more awestruck by the natural world than her male counterparts. Marra’s character Kolya, the captured soldier, is more awestruck by the natural world than his captors. These are extreme examples, but they do suggest that a degree of humility is a prerequisite for the kind of awe that leads to a healthy respect for nature.

But awe can do more. Awe can be a vehicle for enchantment, causing us to be mesmerized, taken out of our ordinary selves as we see the world in a new and exciting light, allowing us to momentarily mingle with or merge with the natural world. When we are enchanted, we are not entirely ourselves, and thus our anthropocentric assumptions are, at least temporarily, silenced, prompting new ways of seeing and interacting with nature as well as new ways of seeing ourselves. After Sarah Anne is enchanted by her encounters with sparrows, she leaves her controlling brother in search of a new world, a new life. When Kolya, the former gangster and soldier, is enchanted by gardening, he transforms into a peaceful version of himself who appreciates the abundance of life that surrounds him.

Even when characters fail to be thoroughly enchanted, the narration frequently enchants the reader, inviting a wider audience to be spellbound and transported. Felski has described how the act of reading can be enchanting—language can transform a disenchanting world into an

otherworldly place. When Linnaeus forgets how enchanting the polar night sky was, or when Alec consciously resists the enchantment of the shimmering paradise birds, the reader submits willingly to the wondrous descriptions. Even if the characters, driven by their egos, resist enchantment, I, as a reader, can feel the magic of the natural world pulsing through the pages. I am struck with a renewed appreciation for nature, and I, like Hampton's new nature writers, yearn to take part in its existence. For a moment the buffers recede, and I am knocked to the ground by the arctic stars; I am entranced by the strange dance of the paradise birds.

Enchantment exposes the reader to possibility, which is a kind of generosity. This generosity of vision can, as Bennett suggests, inspire us to better take care of the world and each other.

However, Barrett's and Marra's stories at times illustrate the dark side of enchantment that can expose the consequences of divorcing ourselves from nature. When Barrett reveals the Dyak belief that dead animals will rise "[w]hen the forest is empty and needs new animals" (122), the reader is struck by the enchanting image of resurrected creatures, an image that collides with the harsh knowledge that the animals will remain dead and that increasing numbers of species will continue to face extinction. When Marra describes the chemical waste that envelops the city of Kirovsk, the reader is enchanted by the horrific scene, shocked into recognizing that the toll we take on the earth will haunt humanity, too. These moments of enchantment generate a kind of painful pleasure, and they force us to confront the consequences of our impact on the natural world and on each other, inviting us to do better.

Viewing nature as Other harms us as much as it harms the natural world. We are more content when we challenge the division and sense of hierarchy and work towards ecological wholeness. We must reconsider Western society's secular outlook that assumes humans are

separate from and superior to nature, capable of understanding all and entitled to take whatever we want. However, we need not return to a pre-modern, sacred outlook in order to properly appreciate our connection to the natural world. Rather, we can negotiate a hybrid outlook that resists the dichotomies of self, ontology, and nature as enchanted or disenchanted. We can strive to be more porous without abandoning our sense of self. We can seek to establish knowledge while acknowledging there might be other ways of knowing. We can be rational and still celebrate moments of enchantment. Humans have always been and will always be a part of the natural world. A post-secular outlook encourages us to eliminate divisions and embrace possibility, thus ensuring a sense of belonging in a world where as much as possible is possible.

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