THE INNER WILD

Just as a snake sheds its skin, we must shed our past over and over again.

BUDDHA

I run my fingers along the silvery backs of mugwort leaves as the wolves howl. It's late September, harvest season, and the untamed land at the Wolf Conservation Center in South Salem, New York, is lush with tall perennials, blooming goldenrod, and carpets of diverse groundcover. Hours slip away as I study the unique shapes, textures, and colors of plants like chickweed, violet, mugwort, lobelia, burdock, and mullein, whose hair on their fuzzy leaves, like the cilia in our respiratory system, protect them from harsh and drying winds. The study and practice of herbalism has lifted a veil that stood between me and the natural world. Land that was once just a wash of green is now vivid, animate, and full of wonder for me. As I crouch among the plants, I put a mugwort leaf in my mouth to taste the familiar bitterness of her spear-like leaves. This fierce plant thrives among the wolves and, like Artemis, guards the boundary between the wild and the domesticated. I exchange breath with the plants, grateful for all they have helped me heal.

Breathing was a struggle for the first twenty years of my life. Diagnosed with severe asthma at age two, I learned that my lungs were weak and unpredictable. My inhaler, my lifeline, was with me at all times. If I couldn't find it, I

panicked. When my bronchi seized up among friends, I snuck away into bathrooms or dark corners to inhale my lifesaving puffs like I was using an illicit drug. I was embarrassed to be so broken. I had a daily dose of pills, weekly shots, monthly visits to a specialist, and frequent home treatments from Mom when I woke up wheezing in the middle of the night. She would turn our bathroom into a steam room, pound my back to break up mucus, and sit with me, both of us exhausted, until I could breathe. Night after night, I fell asleep listening to the soothing sound of her voice saying, "It's okay, honey, you'll get through this."

Out of school for weeks, and sometimes months, at a time, I grew comfortable being alone. I even enjoyed it. With a piece of paper and pencil, I entered into imaginary worlds where mushroom gnomes and wise old trees melted pain away.

We lived in a green duplex in Western Massachusetts with two beloved dogs—one Newfoundland and one terrier—until I was twelve years old. The Mill River Conservation Area was just beyond our backyard. Wild raspberry bushes surrounded the perimeter of the forest, and at the far end, a narrow doorway between their dense thicket of thorns led to a world of woodland trails, brooks, and mysterious creatures. I wandered into those woods every day I could, listening to the brook and looking for evidence of a mystical world that seemed just beyond my reach.

At dusk, I called to the bats living nearby with high-pitched clicks and squeaks as they swooped down and circled above me. Who knows what made me think it would be a good idea to call bats but I've always had a special place in my heart for liminal realms and misunderstood creatures. In summer, I circled the perimeter of the forest, picking the ripe wild raspberries, and in autumn, I buried myself in the fiery colors of fallen leaves. In this early part of my childhood, I was never lonely because so much of nature was a friend to me.

What I didn't know then was that mugwort grew in and around the forest in Western Massachusetts. I wouldn't work with this wild, bitter medicine until I was living in Brooklyn, New York, fifteen years after a car accident I suffered in high school shattered me. When my spine and neck fractured in the accident, it was as though I was cracked open and trauma I'd been stuffing inside in my body subconsciously throughout my childhood was released all

at once. Fifteen years on, in Brooklyn where I would discover mugwort for the first time, I still had much healing to do.

LATE OCTOBER, EARLY IN MY JUNIOR YEAR OF HIGH SCHOOL, I WAS ON MY WAY to a party in the backwoods of Belchertown with Ian, my high school sweetheart, and my best friend, Tonya. Ian was driving and I was leaning in close to him from the passenger's side as I turned around to talk to Tonya. We were following a friend whose lights we kept losing on the dark rural road, and then it started to rain. As Ian sped up to rejoin the caravan of our friends, the rain became a torrential downpour. Sheets of water made it impossible to see where we were going and suddenly Ian swerved the car to avoid an embankment. The car slid on layers of fallen leaves and flipped. I don't remember any of that. But Tonya told me that she remembers the moment it happened: "I looked up and all I saw was a tree speeding toward us."

She was knocked out by the impact and as she slowly woke, she heard the faint and then urgent sound of Ian yelling, "Get out! The car is going to blow!" She tried to revive me and couldn't. I had been thrown into the back seat and was upside down and unconscious in a car that now looked like a crushed tin can. It was smoking and she knew she had to get me out. Tonya later told me that as moved me, she thought, *I could have just paralyzed her.*

When I remember regaining consciousness, I was looking down as if from a great height at my body leaning against a police car. They were asking me questions and though I could speak, I didn't remember my name, who I was, where I lived, nothing. I was in and out of consciousness, and in and out of my body, until I finally found myself in the hospital, connected to machines, blinking into the glare of fluorescent lights and staring up while worried faces stared down at me. It was not an unfamiliar scene for me after all the asthma hospitalizations, but the difference was this time I had been thrown out of my body and when I returned, my body was broken. My spine fractured in three places. Ian walked out of the hospital that night and so did Tonya. They had glass in their heads, a number of bruises, but otherwise they were okay. I, meanwhile, was in for a longer journey.

The weeks in the hospital were a drug-induced haze. They strapped me

into the bed before fitting me with a fiberglass back brace, afraid that if I moved at all, the fractures would get worse. So I lay there, frozen. Despite knowing that I came close to being paralyzed, the thing I feared most about my hospitalization and recovery was getting fat. According to Tonya, they tried to force-feed me with a feeding tube because I refused to eat. I don't remember that at all. But at the time, I was good at forgetting.

MY FLESHY FEMININE CURVES BEGAN TO APPEAR AS EARLY AS AGE ELEVEN and I immediately wanted to flatten them. My new body was a landscape that seemed beyond my control and brought the wrong kind of attention my way. I was hypersensitive to older men's stares that tripped unsettling emotional triggers. I hated those men and wanted to lash out, but instead I turned the anger inward. By age fourteen, I decided to tame my body by controlling the strongest impulse I could—hunger. I successfully arranged my days around avoiding food and obsessed about the carefully constructed "meals" I did eat. Lying awake at night, I made lists and counted calories: *the apple, 100 calories, the quarter of bran muffin, 75, the strawberry preserves on the muffin, 30, the salad with vinegar, around 175* . . . Denying hunger is very distracting, and moving beyond the intense desire for food each day gave me a twisted sense of strength. Somehow I felt more secure being close to the solid structure of my bones.

IN *WOMEN WHO RUN WITH THE WOLVES*, JUNGIAN PSYCHOANALYST CLARISSA Pinkola Estés begins with the tale of La Loba,[1] a story from the deserts and mountains of northern Mexico about an old woman who lives in the hidden place that "everyone knows, but few have seen." La Loba collects what she believes to be the indestructible force of all animals—the bones. Each day, she scours her landscape for skulls, limbs, ribs, vertebrae, and claws and brings them into her cave, which is crammed with the remains of all wild creatures. Her favorite, though, are the bones of wolves. On certain days, when she has found all the pieces she needs and the moon is full and the wind is just right,

La Loba sequesters herself deep in her cave and begins her work. She assembles skeletons but, most importantly, chooses a song to work with: an ancient, guttural howl that will sing flesh back onto bone. As she sings, the ribs, limbs, skull, and spine fill out and a wolf with lush fur and twitching tail begins to breathe. Suddenly, the ground trembles and the wolf opens her eyes and bolts out of the darkness of the cave, into the endless expanse of wilderness. As she runs toward the horizon, the wolf transforms into a laughing woman, feral and free with all of her animal instincts intact.

WHEN I WAS ABLE TO HEAD HOME IN MY FIBERGLASS BACK-AND-NECK BRACE, I moved slowly, tenderly, using the arms and support of others to sit and stand. I felt like a malfunctioning robot, rigid and covered in plastic. Worried friends and family got together and cooked meals to help out. I had to depend on others for my most basic needs, and so I had to eat. Feeling the food enter my body made me feel in ways I didn't want to and stirred intense underlying discomfort.

Unable to move or to distract myself, memories of sexual assault that I'd forgotten through denial of hunger and distraction of young love began to break free and invade my dreams. My nightmares were brutal. I was preyed upon night after night by men I thought I trusted, and began to remember. The power of those memories was excruciating. I turned to art, my instinctual form of release, and wrote and drew incessantly to liberate the tidal waves rushing through me; I couldn't get words and images out fast enough. My inner ecosystem had erupted. I was unloading, unpacking, releasing—with no idea where to put it all. The pain of my broken bones was nothing compared to the force of the memories, shame, and self-loathing rising up in their wake. Trying to bury what I'd been through had only made the wounds more insidious. Trauma therapist Dr. Peter Levine says, "Trauma is not what happens to us, but what we hold inside in the absence of an empathetic witness."[2] If I had been able to talk about the abuse instead of hiding it away, even from myself, perhaps the assault wouldn't have held such power. But I had done what my young mind told me was safe and right. If I didn't speak of it, I had told myself, it would disappear.

EVERY NIGHT FOR WEEKS, SOMEONE CAME OVER AND DROPPED OFF A DELICIOUS home-cooked dinner, and my family and I ate together. It sounds amazing now, but then, it was absolute torture. So I discovered a new method of control. When I was able to shuffle from my bedroom to the bathroom, I began to purge. I figured if I threw up most of what I took in, I wouldn't get fat. I didn't want to feel fleshy. I wanted to waste away. I wanted self-control. After a while, though, after training my body to regurgitate like a mother wolf feeding her young, I could hardly keep food down. My digestive system was a mess. I had no idea what I was hungry for.

My boyfriend was the only thing keeping me afloat. He'd come to my house immediately after school every day, bring me schoolwork to catch up on, stay there as late as he could, and call once he was in bed, so we could fall asleep on the phone together. He was my lifeline. In the early months after the accident, I slept through most days, barely numbing my pain with the codeine I was prescribed while waiting for him to arrive. This went on for months until I was able to go back to school, wearing my brace and walking very tenderly. Some teachers got on my case for being late to class when simply walking there was a chore. I never liked playing the victim card, so I just sat and stewed. I couldn't keep up with papers or homework, was still in pain and barely holding it together, but, slowly, I was healing, and I had my love. Until the inevitable for teenage love: he broke up with me. The car accident consumed him with guilt and he wasn't living his own life. He had to "break free," he said. It was true. He was right. But losing our connection was the final rupture for me. I fully fell apart.

My previous distractions—my boyfriend, starving myself, or purging—were either gone or no longer working. As far as my food antics were concerned, everyone was onto me. Tonya confronted both me and my mom about my eating disorder, but I denied it. It took my mom a while to see that Tonya was right, that I was spending way too much time in the bathroom that was, unfortunately, in the hallway where everyone could hear me. I ran the water, the fan, everything I could to block the noise of throwing up. I did strange things like wash my face every time I entered and came out dripping. I shuffled

food around on my plate. My incredible discomfort was obvious. I was still wearing the back brace and had to be extremely careful about how, when, and where I moved. I felt trapped. At night, images continued to surface through disturbing dreams, showing me things I didn't want to see. But somewhere in my psyche, something in me knew I needed to examine my inner world more closely. When I woke, I began the routine of purging my dreams through writing or visual art to get them out of my system. I did this night after night, day after day. I wrote and drew incessantly until I began to experience a little peace, and some clarity. My sweet and nurturing mom was always there too, in the background and steady. I entertained suicidal thoughts, but when I thought about her—how much we loved each other, and all that we'd been through together—any thought of suicide evaporated. With her help and Tonya's support, I scoured local bookstores and found writing to support me, including books on eating disorders. I was ready to admit I had one.

Crumbled in the cocoon of my fiberglass back brace, I had no choice but to eat, be in my body, and face the shadows I had desperately tried to avoid. I had admitted I was struggling, and now, lying in bed with a shattered spine, I felt overwhelmed, exposed, and panicked. Survival became my full-time job. I dropped out of high school and began to question everything.

And that is where my journey of healing really begins.

IN THE CHRYSALIS STAGE, A CATERPILLAR TURNS INSIDE OUT AND BECOMES liquid before transforming into a butterfly. That's exactly how I felt during my year of virtual stillness and intense inner transformation. Like goo. I woke up each morning and poured my insides out through stream-of-consciousness writing and drawing. I drew pictures of myself trapped in cages, cowered in corners of dark rooms while the walls around me wept. I studied wildlife photography in *National Geographic* and spent days drawing the details of fierce wolves, confident lionesses, and nervous rabbits, trying to master their body language, the textures of fur, and the fire in their eyes. Art and writing translated my pain, freed me, and brought me to a new level of awareness where I could, with regularity, empty out and enter a state of timelessness. I didn't know it at the time, but the creative release was beginning to reveal the root causes

of my mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional challenges. With the eventual help of talk therapy and continued creative exploration, I created space within myself and began to tend to those intensely uncomfortable, wounded places. Somewhere within the abyss of my broken body, my inner wisewoman was at work collecting the scattered, yet indestructible, fragments of my spirit.

ARTEMISIA

My journey of healing has been an ongoing, spiraling journey of rewilding—peeling back layers of social conditioning, limiting personal narratives, and deep trauma. Just as plants grow in spirals—following Earth's rotation, reaching toward the light of the sun, resting in the dark of the night, ebbing and flowing with the pull of the moon—we heal that way too. When we go inward to uncover the root cause of a mental, physical, or emotional challenge and release it, we create space within us and expand outward. Eventually, we grow stronger and are ready to dive inward again . . . deeper this time, to expand further. This journey of depth and expansion goes on and on. Along the way, we might have to revisit pain we thought we'd overcome, only to find there's another layer of that same trauma yet to be lifted. Raw all over again, we must tend to our wounds and listen to what they have to teach us.

Bitter describes difficult experiences and also a taste that most despise. But like difficult experiences, bitter herbs like mugwort can increase our resilience and make us stronger. They can protect us from harmful microbes while creating a sympathetic nervous system response that increases blood flow to our abdominal organs; awakening our instinct. Ninety percent of our serotonin—a chemical that impacts our mood, memory, sleep, and stress—is created in our digestive system, so it is clear that psychosocial factors are impacted by the physiology of the gut.[3] Mugwort's unique bitterness also relaxes the nerves, calms fires of inflammation, and eases anxiety to bring us into states of presence and receptivity and as tension is reduced and blood flows, we enter into a relaxed state, and our innate wisdom, or what Jungians might call the unconscious, is more accessible.

In her book *Goddesses in Everywoman*, Jungian analyst Jean Shinoda Bolen explores a feminist revision of Jung's theory of archetypes by linking

them to more goddesses from Greek mythology. According to Jung, archetypes are universal symbols that derive from the collective unconscious and seek actualization. Bolen criticizes Jung's theory for stereotypical and polarizing examples of the feminine: the maiden or the mother, and offers women instead the integrated and complex archetypes of the goddesses.[4] The Artemis archetype is the original "wild woman" who cannot be tamed. She is a moon goddess, a fierce defender of nature, and a virgin in the old definition of the word, meaning a woman unto herself who is complete with or without a partner. Women who are in abusive situations have called upon Artemis for centuries as a protector, and women giving birth can call upon her to ease their labor.

In Greek mythology, Artemis's mother was Leto, the beautiful Titan who in some versions of the myth represents motherhood for all she endured to protect Artemis and her twin brother, Apollo, from Hera's wrath. Hera, the goddess of childbirth and marriage, was married to Zeus, the philandering Olympian god and Artemis's father. Leto was condemned because of her relationship with Zeus and could not find a stable place on Earth to deliver her children, so Leto was on the run. At one point Leto shape-shifted into a she-wolf, finding refuge among a pack of wolves until she made it to Delos, a floating island, where she shed her wolf's clothing and gave birth to Artemis under a palm tree. Nine days later, Artemis acted as a midwife to bring her twin brother, the sun god Apollo, into the world.

Artemis would choose the wild as her domain, cultivate sisterhood, attend births of all kinds, provide refuge for women, the young, and nonhuman animals, and seek revenge on those who harmed her mother.

LIKE THE MOON THAT MOVES TIDES, MUGWORT HAS A RELATIONSHIP WITH THE water element, and when taken can dive into the subconscious, bringing forth buried experiences, patterns, and stories that we need to see in order to heal. As a potent oneirogen, mugwort delivers this important information to us through our dream life; when we are asleep, the subconscious stirs. As someone who has had vivid dreams my whole life, I was skeptical of this medicine at first, but while working with mugwort, I dreamt of things I thought I'd worked through, only to find more to confront and to heal.

While living in Brooklyn, I slept with mugwort by my bed, took drops of the tincture under my tongue, and burned dried mugwort before sleep, inviting the plant into my dreams. Each night I asked, "What do I need to see in order to heal?" In one experience, I dreamt of myself as a young child of seven or eight years old standing upon a tall tower, suspended in darkness, looking down at my life. In the dream realm, I was both the child and the dreaming self looking down on her, an experience much like the one I had after the car accident. As the child, I wasn't scared so much as bewildered and alone in response to confusing memories that separated me from myself. As the dreaming self, I felt deeply pained for her years of isolation. I woke up grieving for the bewildered and confused young part of me that had been stranded for so long. Though I'd done years of work to heal the secrets and shame of sexual abuse I experienced at that age, I realized there were parts of me that I hadn't accepted, nor fully integrated. It was time to uncover the remnants of that experience that were still embedded in my body and do the work necessary to bring the young me down from the isolating tower. I did this through talking to loved ones, journaling, and allowing the emotions to move through my body, with the help of mugwort as a dream-time ally and internal medicine. In doing so, pain and tension in my reproductive system, and menstrual irregularities that I assumed I had no control over and that had no medical explanation, began to shift.

Whether we like it or not, we must look honestly at every corner of both the dark and light within in order to heal. I see this dichotomy expressed in the leaves of mugwort, for one side is silvery and the other a dark green. The silvery, downy back of the mugwort leaf symbolizes the full moon—the tide-like ebb and flow of menstruation, the rise of subconscious emotions to the surface—while the opposite, dark green side symbolizes the new moon—a time to go inward, plant seeds, harvest roots, and conceive. This contrast becomes more pronounced as the plant ages. To me, the contrast symbolizes essential polarities—dark and light, masculine and feminine, dreaming and waking. The leaves change shape as they age and represent the three stages of womanhood: the maiden, the mother, and the crone. The look, feel, and taste of the young leaves contain the innocence of youth. They contain only a hint

of her bitterness. The leaves of the crone stage are jagged and fierce, trident-like spears, the color darker and the bitter taste more intense. Mugwort at the crone phase in autumn is a medicine of self-confrontation. She must cut right to the chase, for time is precious.

Tinctures, teas, oils, steam, and other extracts of the plant are used to release tension that may have accumulated in an effort to protect us. Mugwort's power, that bitterness, is moving energy, and is thus essential for life and for healing. When things stagnate, they eventually disintegrate. As an emmenagogue, mugwort moves the waters of the body to ease the pain of childbirth and reinstate the flow of blood between our legs when menstruation is irregular or interrupted. I had phantom reproductive issues and intense menstrual pain for years after the sexual assault. Doctors assured me there was nothing wrong, but I experienced otherwise. Mugwort helped me release tension that had accumulated as my body made an effort to protect herself and process or at least bottle up my residual trauma. As Clarissa Pinkola Estés says, "where there is a scar, there is a door." I would add, where there is any imbalance, there is a door.

THE INNER WILD

We can describe how we feel in the most vivid detail, but in the end, we must traverse our inner landscapes alone. Our inner landscapes are forged by our unique experiences and the ways we handle them. They're formed by our ability to maintain boundaries, let them dissolve at the right moments, and rebuild them when they've been crossed without our permission. Our personal narratives and stories shape and influence our inner ecology, the way we see the world, and how we interact with everything in it. Our inner world is shaped by religion, media, culture, experiences, education, and family. From this infinite space within, we decide, consciously and unconsciously, how we relate to our body, and to others. Deep listening can be our greatest tool for healing. With consistent practice, we can separate the surface-level noise from our unwavering core of truth. As I heal, I spiral ever deeper toward my truth and my starring role in my own narrative: from victim to survivor to warrior.

One of the first assignments I give my herbalism students is to check in with themselves each day to become better acquainted with their inner terrain. I ask that they devote time, as little as five minutes a day, to tune into their body and journal about what they find. Physical symptoms are a message that something in the body, mind, soul, or spirit is out of balance. When we simply treat the symptoms of that imbalance we might mask them but we're not getting to the root of why they're happening in the first place. To move beyond this pattern, I always recommend meditation. Here, we can begin to witness our thoughts and can develop a practice of watching them with curiosity. We need this curiosity when it comes to rewiring our relationship with symptoms, and it is our curiosity that gives our body a chance to be embraced and heard. Some of my students use sensory reminders—Nathalie carries stones in her pockets, uses Post-it Notes, and creates mini altars at work and at home, reminding her to pause. Eventually, with practice, she learned to attune to the subtle nudges within and respond when her body is whispering to her instead of ignoring her body until symptoms and sensations scream out for attention.

Over the years, I've opened doors to all corners of my mind, spirit, and soul and created practices to help me cope, and eventually thrive, in the face of what I found. Disciplined meditation brought awareness to patterns of thought and calmed my mind; training as a professional boxer released anger and revealed innate strength I didn't know I had; visual art and writing helped me peel back layers through creative expression; and the study and practice of holistic herbalism transformed my relationship with my body in collaboration with the natural world. Throughout the years, I've integrated these practices to help me navigate empty, abandoned, or frightening places within me. I write from those places, I draw them, and tune in to find what's lurking there. When we push pain away, those wounds build in intensity and explosive power. There is really no "away" anyway until something is composted: transformed into a new state of being. From wood to charcoal to fertile ground. Still, the bones—the indestructible life force—always remain. Sometimes when I venture inward, I find empty rooms whose doors were closed years ago. The stale space needs airing out. It can be scary to create more room within, but on the ever-deepening and expanding spiral path of healing, I venture further—expanding, contracting, and learning—and broaden the scope of my inner horizon.

WHEN I SEE MUGWORT NOW, A PLANT THAT KNOWS MY BODY AND HAS HELPED me with profound healing, I feel love and a sense of belonging. This is the power of common wild plants. Each carries profound medicine, history, and connection to centuries of human and plant relations that many have forgotten. But we can remember. Conscious, direct encounters with nature are not only healing, but can help us develop a sense of the sacred and deeply affect our lifestyle choices. It's more difficult to care about something if we're detached. Experiencing interconnection and relationships create eco-defenders and sacred warriors—roles that are so necessary at this time.

Mugwort's rhizomes are relentless, continuously growing underground stems that allow this perennial to spread in dense, protective armies, creating a threshold. They thrive around forests and provide protective thickets for creatures like rabbits, who calm themselves on the bitter leaves. Mugwort, *Artemisia vulgaris*, has spread far and wide, at forest edges and seasides, in vacant lots and city parks, even through cracks in concrete, and in rural farmland, thriving along the boundary of wild and domesticated spaces.

Like the cycling seasons of nature and the waxing and waning moon, life is an ebb and flow of joy and pain. "The part that appears above ground," writes Carl Jung, "lasts only a single summer. Then it withers away—an ephemeral apparition."[5] Underneath the surface of it all, resilient rhizomes endure, ready and waiting to emerge. This is the power of mugwort. I've learned that true, everlasting life exists below the surface. And like the tenacity of our wild soul, it is difficult, if not impossible to destroy.

YEW TREE

Taxus spp.

Family: Taxaceae

Yew trees can live to be thousands of years old, rooting and forming new trunks where their branches touch the ground. In many Earth-centered traditions, this tree represents death, resurrection, and immortality. Native Americans of the Northwest coast used Pacific yew, *Taxus brevifolia,* as medicine and harvested branches and staves for bows and canoe paddles, whenever possible collecting sustainably from living trees. They made spirit poles, death masks, shaman's wands, and other ceremonial objects from the sacred wood. Some tribes call the yew the "Chief of the Forest."[1]

The English yew, *Taxus baccata*, was sacred to the Celts and is said to contain the experiences, knowledge, and understanding of the ancestors. In Ogham, the Celtic writing system, the yew tree is *iodhad*, the twentieth letter of the alphabet, and in the Gaelic spoken language, the yew is the ninth letter, *iogh*. Both systems of communication are embedded in the natural world and each alphabet is based upon trees.

BELONGING

Old Yew, which graspest at the stones
That name the under-lying dead,
Thy fibres net the dreamless head,
Thy roots are wrapt about the bones.

ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON

I arrive at my cabin, Eagle's Crag, and outside, a cavernous quiet echoes back where it should reverberate with wild noise. It's early March and I'm two hours north of Inverness at Alladale Wilderness Reserve among rugged, snow-capped mountains, rivers, and lochs. I'm the only human among 23,000 acres of wilderness, but I'm not alone.

Scattered Scots pine trees stand in the distance, a welcome sight amid the naked grassy expanse dotted by heather and gorse. The pines look like giant Moyogi bonsai trees, with curved trunks slithering toward the sky, and are the oldest living inhabitants of this land. These particular pines were "too twisted for felling," Innes MacNeill, native Highlander and head ranger at Alladale tells me. Their relatives that grew up straight and narrow like they were supposed to were cut down and used, among other things, as masts for English warships.

I walk along the pebbled road from my cottage and down a frost-covered hill to visit the Scots pines—descendants of the first pines to arrive in Scotland

in about 7000 BCE. They once lived with a thriving multispecies family of aspen, juniper, oak, rowan, hawthorn, countless species of fungi, lichen, and medicinal herbs. Bear and lynx may have climbed their branches while wolves roamed the land. Roman naturalist and army commander Pliny the Elder—whose infamous book *Naturalis Historia*, written in 77–79 CE, includes myths and folklore, and information on trees and medicinal plants[2]—named the dense temperate rain forest the Caledonian Forest. The Roman army tried in vain to penetrate the wilderness whose surrounding land was inhabited by wild warrior people the Romans called the Caledonians. Historian James Hunter writes in *Last of the Free: A History of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland* that native Highlanders resisted the Roman Empire under warrior chieftain Calgacus, who called his people "the last of the free" and said of the Roman army, "They make a desert and call it peace."[3]

But the Caledonians couldn't defend the land for long, and over centuries people pushed their way through the dense woodland and the pines' family was destroyed. Wolves, bears, and lynx were hunted to extinction, trees were felled for building and cleared to make way for farmland, and indigenous Highlanders were forced from their homes and replaced with livestock. The Highlanders went from communal townships to planned single-tenancy crofting strips of land owned by absentee landlords based in England. These crofts are remnants of traditional townships or bailtean, which had common grazing, arable open fields, and sustainable subsistence farming. In the Isle of Harris, people were cleared from extremely fertile lands to the east side of the island, which has been compared to the surface of the moon.

Over centuries-long British colonization, and most dramatically during a period of time known as the Highland Clearances, native Highlanders were separated from the land that contained their stories, medicine, lore, and livelihood. Even the language that described their philosophical underpinnings and deep reverence for place was gradually silenced to the point of near extinction. People were shamed for speaking Gaelic, a language that embedded them in rhythms of the natural world. The language defined how they perceived themselves, their communities, and concepts of possession. There is no Gaelic word that can be easily equated with "ownership."

Colonization of Scotland has been subtle. Gaels are white Western Euro-

peans and look no different to the casual observer from the Lowland Scots or English. Assimilation was thus achieved relatively smoothly when compared to the integration of marginalized people elsewhere in the world. The Gaelic language is one thing that made them different and potentially rebellious, so like other native languages during periods of colonization, its erasure was enforced as people were systemically "civilized." In schools, the teacher's armory included measuring sticks, belts, soap in mouths, and even human skulls, which were placed around children's necks. Using insidious methods of "self-policing," the last child caught speaking Gaelic by their peers had to wear what was referred to in Ireland—where the same treatment was meted out—as the "tally stick" and subsequently received the final beating of the day. As Irish poet and philosopher John O'Donohue said, "When you steal a people's language, you leave their soul bewildered."[4]

IN GAELIC, IT IS NOT THE USUAL PRACTICE TO ASK A PERSON "WHERE" THEY are from, but "who" they are from: Có ás a tha sibh? From whom are you? If I had been asked that question ten years ago, I wouldn't have known how to answer. Like many immigrants with mixed ethnic backgrounds, there were periods of time when I mistakenly thought that it didn't matter where my ancestors were from. My ancestors—Scottish and Russian Jewish immigrants with a mix of Irish, English, and Eastern European family thrown in too—had a desire to let go of hardship and assimilate when they set foot on so-called American soil. Some were peasant farmers who worked the land and wanted a perceived better life, some escaped persecution, and others, like the Gaels, were forced from their land. But as they reinvented themselves, the transmission of their stories and Earth-based cultures (which in most cases were lost long before they came) was ultimately lost in what became the homogenous melting pot of American culture.

My parents chose to raise me in the liberal college town of Amherst, Massachusetts. With a reputation for a good school system and its rich music scene in the early '70s, it aligned with their progressive sensibilities. With the help of my father's brother, they bought a large house that became a hippie, communal household after my parents divorced. In order to pay the mortgage, my