A poetics to keep us on edge, or: An ecophilosopher's reluctant ode to virtual reality

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Michelle-Marie Letelier, *The Bone* (2019)

Today seemed a day like many others, almost. I sat by the bus window, daydreaming, when the bus began climbing the steep zig-zag road up towards the neighborhood where we live. The climb is my favorite part of the commute: Suddenly, as if summoned by a magic spell, the Oslo fjord begins stretching out beneath you, growing increasingly more magnificent as the bus labors against gravity. My mind's eye was bathing aimlessly in the magnificence when suddenly, from the periphery of my vision, a swift movement out in the fjord seized my full attention. It cannot be! Or can it? Surely not here? I've never … not since I researched killer whales off the Lofoten Archipelago one Arctic winter during my graduate days … but here? I pushed the stop button, the driver pulled over, I jumped off, I looked, and sure enough: dolphins, a whole large pod

of them, were plowing joyously through rough water. A rare sight indeed! I later learned that their kin, Atlantic white-sided dolphins, had been observed in the inner Oslo fjord only twice in recorded history, most recently in 1974, and before that as far back as 1842.

Elsewhere, Oslo might have been christened Los Bordes, for it is a city of edges: the edge of the ocean forever laps against the edge of vast evergreen forests; the edge of the sky perpetually brushes across once-volcanic bedrock; diehard edges of winter may hold their snowy breaths far into summer months. The resounding eloquence of all of Oslo's edges oscillates as a fully unique topolect, a place-tongue at once wildly dynamic and serene, vibrant and stunningly beautiful. No other place articulates itself quite with the same blend of qualities as does the more-than-human communion of subjects that composes the inner Oslo fjord. Salmon are spawning again in once-polluted downtown streams; midsummer nights may find humans in a state of light-drunken daze; chanterelles litter coastal forests with mouth-watering splashes of yellow; beaches attract seals and otters and staggering toddlers alike. And beneath all, the rocks are sighing the sonorous groan of deep time.

And yet, and yet. Here is a life lesson I may never stop apprenticing myself to: How easy it is to get caught up in the web of human meaning-making! How easily the inevitable, the delicious, the shadowed more-than-human context of our lives is crowded out in a daily life spent grading papers, negotiating meeting schedules, communication through screens, sipping coffee, buying groceries, paying bills, or running for kindergarten before it closes for the day.

But the family of twelve or more dolphins graced me with a gentle but urgent reminder: how easily the web of forgetfulness can be penetrated! Most days, it doesn't happen quite as spectacularly as today. Some days, pileated woodpecker knock-knock-knocks in the small stand of pine and ash and hazel behind our house on the hill. Other days, mother doe will taste her way through our garden with her two fawns in broad daylight. Spider may weave her dew-dappled silk between two leaves of a

chestnut seedling my daughter and I planted last fall. Just a moment ago, tiny bug silhouette materialized out of nowhere on the white glow of my screen, here in the August dark. Each encounter with the Other speaks a truth so simple it is easily overlooked, yet so profound I may never reach the bottom of it: This human story is nothing without the stories of insects, rain showers, geese flocks, tidal forces, or dawn skies. Each encounter with the Other keeps me on edge. And edges matter. Curiosity is heightened near them. Inspiration flows more dynamically around them. Discovery lurks behind them. We need edges to remind us, as Westcoast bard Gary Snyder once put it, that the land ever yearns to *sing through us*. In this time of rampant technological overkill, of screen-induced alienation, of necrophile lawmaking, this may be one of our noblest and most urgent tasks: to nurture the countless ways in which the land still, as it always has, yearns to sing through us.

Some time ago, Berlin-based Chilean artist Michelle-Marie Letelier invited me to collaborate with her and the Interactive Media Foundation (IMF) on the virtual reality project *The Bone*, commissioned by the Screen City Biennial in Stavanger. What brought us together was a mutual love for life in all its unruly and wild expressions, and a long-standing commitment to give expression to this love through the various crafts we practice: teaching, writing philosophical papers, art installations, nature writing, digital storytelling as well as on-stage-in-the-flesh storytelling. In my book *Being Salmon, Being Human*, I explore both the rich and irreducible sensual inner world of salmon and the tragedy of our self-absorption. The fine folks of IMF have recently breathed life into the incredible work *Inside Tumucumaque*, an immersive world that invites the visitor to dream their ways into the inner lives of such Amazon rainforest dwellers as the arrow poison frog, the caiman, or the harpy eagle. And Letelier has recently turned her artistic practice toward chronicling and mirroring the forceful introduction of feedlot salmon—a northern species—to the southern hemisphere. For *The Bone*, Letelier has chosen to approach the subject from an intriguing angle: through virtual reality technology to search for possibilities to evoke a greater sensitivity for the inner lives of fish!

I'll admit to harboring a certain skepticism toward virtual reality technologies. Their promise of immersive experiences inside worlds summoned by cascades of zeros and ones raises alarm bells within. Can fully virtual worlds possibly arouse a renewed sensitivity for the immediacy of the actual world-in-the-flesh? What possibilities for encountering Otherness do we have when the entirety of that virtual reality has been interpreted, refracted, mirrored, computed, and programmed by human intention? Will not the (justified) awe at the sheer brilliance of human accomplishment overshadow any awe we might experience for the life of the Other, however caringly and carefully we may have striven to include them?

Letelier's invitation to join her project brought back a critical moment of my PhD research. The research had begun as a critique of the exploitative practices of Norwegian aquaculture. I had soon understood that part of the work of writing a compelling critique would involve a keen attention to language, or, more precisely, to the poetics of perception as well as to what I have since come to think of as the ecology of story.

Norwegian aquaculture is often framed as a Norwegian Dream or Fairytale; problematic moral issues blur behind a screen of technophile, managerial, human-centered bluespeak. The black hole at the center of that cunning storytelling is the creature himself—the salmon, the breathing, cold-blooded, intelligent animal able to make out the distinct taste of his home river in an ocean of tastes, the sentient subject who may navigate by the sun and the moon and the constellation of stars, the feeling body who experiences a passion to return back home so overwhelming no obstacle may stop him. Once I had identified this conspicuous absence at the heart of the hegemonic story, the next step became to turn to language itself, to craft a poetics of perception so precise, so attentive, it would invite us to try and fuse our own perceptual horizon with that of a fish! This again would train our attention for the reality of the creature, so much so that it would become virtually (as well as analogously) impossible to ever deny their existence, whether in theory or practice. Like a school of mackerel that makes the fjord boil like a witch's cauldron, or like a lone raven's hoarse caw-caw-caw one foggy

November dusk by the shore, such language would keep the reader on edge for a shapeshifting reality which we are not set against, as in the influential Enlightenment assumption that humans are but disinterested observers outside the phenomenal world. Rather, such language would gush and spill and surge right through us; it would puff across the upright hairs on our forearms as cold shivers of recognition; it would accentuate the tangible taste of every salt-sprayed ocean inbreath; it would ebb and flow within our own saltwater-saturated flesh; it would invite of us to attune our emotional landscape to the touch of swaying kelp on our cold skin, or to the explosive arousal we feel one split-second before we spill our seed, or to the frenzied determination of wanting to succeed against all odds. Such poetics is not metaphoric as much as it is metamorphic, as my mentor David Abram puts it in his book *Becoming Animal*—it is a language not of representation but of participation. Its measure of accuracy is not the degree to which it allows us to describe the world as if it were an objective, determinate reality outside. Rather, it is accurate to the degree to which it allows us to find ourselves partaking of an animate Earth: to inhabit this world as feeling bodies rocked by tidal forces, tugged by the moon, pounded by midnight rains. This is how we can grow increasingly aware of, curious about, and caring towards the many *other* styles or dialects of being a feeling body, whether they are winged, tentacled, barked, rubber-skinned, furry, or cold-blooded.

Now here's the critical moment which these deliberations led me to: One winter afternoon, in a campus room with no windows or direct access to the sensuous land beyond the white walls, I presented the latest chapter of my monograph-in-the-making to fellow researchers during a work-in-progress seminar. The chapter culminated in a fifteen-page stream of inwardness written from the point of view of one salmon. This! It could not be. Not in a serious academic publication. If anything, my colleagues pointed out, it was a piece of art, but it had nothing to do with academia's search for truth. The room was in a rare state of consensus. Keep this, and your dissertation will be destined for rejection.

Except, I knew that I had no choice. To summon the salmon's inner life

was the keystone of my critique, the original impulse which brought all other, more straightforwardly rational argumentation to life. Rejection or not, the metamorphic passages had to stay.

I have since continued experimenting with metamorphic speech both inside and outside academic halls: in teepees, on theater stages, in barns, community centers, pubs, school halls, city parks, wood workshops, museums, conference auditoriums, open-air amphitheaters, by rivers' edges and ocean fronts, to audiences both academic and others. I've typically not done it alone but joined forces with the gifted storytellers Georgiana Keable and Tiril Bryn, as well as the joiker and sound-artist Torgeir Vassvik. Together we've been pooling our expressive styles to search for that elusive poetics of metamorphosis, that possibility to allow the human body to grow increasingly porous towards the inner lives of Others. We've summed the possibility for metamorphosis not only through words, and not only through the timeless alchemy of story, but also through Vassvik's relentless drumming and beastly overtone growling, through the flicker of the fire at the center of a teepee, or through swooshing bare feet on black-painted wooden planks illuminated by ruby spotlights. Not once since that work-in-progress seminar have I encountered a room in agreement that such shapeshifting was unfeasible!

Why should we principally disallow ourselves to sound out the inner lives of other beings? My practice—decidedly a practice of community and convergence—has shown me that the impossibility lies, not in trying, but in our attitude towards knowing. A strict separation between academia and art can become an obstacle if it makes us stop short of seeking fresh approaches to old problems. It matters where, how, and when we do the work. It matters that we create conditions to help release the thinking mind back into the wilder life of the body, and the body back into the wider life of this rainswept biosphere. Once we experience ourselves through the immediacy of our somatic participation with August heat waves, hailstorms, or morning dew, we know that humans are not alone under this sun but one of Earth's myriad styles or dialects. My practice

has shown me that a poetics of metamorphosis rides more easily on waves of spoken words than on lines of typed letters, and that it helps to create ceremonial or sacramental settings which invite breath, rhythm, eye contact, sweat, silence. All this brings me back to my skepticism toward virtual reality: Can a technology so unambiguously of human design possibly help pierce the web of forgetfulness? Can a virtual reality experience possibly materialize as one of the countless ways in which the land yearns to sing through us?

If virtual reality could be understood only as an escapist project, as yet another alienating screen between the world of humans and, well, the world, then my skepticism would not waver. But it seems to me that there is a different possibility. The kind of virtual reality Letelier and IMF have created is strangely porous to the gravity that ever tugs on the soles of our feet, or to the oxygen-rich air our lungs ever yearn for. It opens an experiential space richly resonant with the ocean's larger and more mysterious inwardness. It itself is not the goal as much as the way: it invites us to journey from the flesh of the world through weirdly invisible digital curtains and forward again into breath, heartbeat, thirst, curiosity, yearning! It can stir in our bodies a new craving to push that stop button, jump off, and to see for ourselves! That thrust or forward movement makes *The Bone* a truly remarkable achievement. Even as I remain a stubborn skeptic, I dare say: *The Bone* puts me on edge. It demands of me to remain vigilant, and to ask myself: What is it I see? Whose voices am I hearing? Who am I in relation to magnetic fields, winter's dark, or continental drift? Make no mistakes: *The Bone* will give no easy answers. But then again, that's not the point. The point is to endure the delicate edge itself.

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