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Where I Live I Hope to Know

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Where I Live I Hope to Know

You must forgive me, dear friend. I'm a lover of learning, and trees and open country won't teach me anything, whereas men in the town do.

—SOCRATES IN DIALOGUE WITH PHAEDRUS

In March 2006, I moved from Seattle to Eldorado, New Mexico, where I rented a house about fifteen miles southeast of Santa Fe. Within a couple of days I found a male house finch that had hit one of the large glass windows in the house and died. I photographed it with a six-megapixel camera and named the picture *Dead Bird: Tribute to Ryder* after the famous painting of the same subject by Alfred Pinkham Ryder. In the United States, somewhere between three hundred million to a billion birds die each year by crashing against windows. This is the second largest cause of bird deaths, next to habitat loss. I also found that each day when I would drive from my home into town, all along the way I would see vast numbers of dead piñons, New Mexico's state tree, on both sides of the road.

Finding the dead bird and seeing the dead piñons resulted in a desire—I wanted to know where I live.

In late spring 2007, Nora, my partner at the time, noticed a bird nest on a cholla cactus during one of our walks. I was intrigued to see this elaborately built nest in the midst of an incredible bed of thorns. The following year, I began walking whenever possible around my home in about a five-mile radius. I photographed cholla cactuses during these walks. There is always a bird nest in the cholla, unless the cactus has fallen on the ground. What I see in these photographs is the simultaneous juxtaposition of being alive and being dead. From a distance chollas always look half-dead, but as I get closer, they come alive. In harsh places like the Arctic and the desert, the gap between being alive and being dead seems rather small to me.

I have been thinking about the idea of revisiting—and of the possibilities that the medium of photography offers. When I revisit a cholla in real life, again, and again, and again, I am always moving forward in time. I can never go back. Each revisit enables me with new things and interconnections I see, but I can never go back to see the many subtle things I inevitably miss. With photographs, however, I can move forward and go back in time, and I can notice the subtle things that I missed on the first viewing. This is a key strength of photography.

What I mean by missed on the first viewing is not an object or even a relation that exists within a photograph. For example, when I see a photograph I took in late spring, I realize I barely noticed at the time the droopiness of the cholla branches; even if I did notice it, it barely registered as much of anything, except perhaps something structural. On examining a later summer photograph of the same plant, I realize the importance of both photographs in capturing a significant ecological transformation. Summer rain made the plant's branches straight and plump; the cholla tightened up and reduced its spatial expanse—a drought-stricken plant that could have survived

Looking Outside I Saw Dead Birds and Looking Inside I Saw How They Died, 2009

or not now promises to live for another year or more. When I took the first photograph, such ecological relations did not enter into my intention. It only became visible for me on such forward and backward viewing of the photographs.

For me there is no idea in the beginning, just a desire. Then a combination of lived experience and thought, each informing the other and evolving in an intertwined manner that eventually helps me to define a conceptual framework in which I work. But it is the lived experience that is the essential part of my creative process.

A photograph is an object that I must name, and I do so to remember a place—either through an object or through an experience. For example: *Near the House with a Dog, Near the Dead Piñon Where Birds Gather in Autumn, Where I Thought I Would Eat the Fruits in Autumn but Didn't Know How.* As time goes on, I see some names lose their meaning. *Two Nests Underneath the Powerline* may only have one nest when I see it in late winter as the top nest was blown away by wind while the bottom one survived, slightly decayed. This way of naming helps me thread together ecocultural relationships among plants, birds, animals, and humans, and it also helps me remember things that otherwise I would forget if I named it *Untitled.*

When I revisit a cholla several weeks or months later, it's like revisiting an old friend. Photographs of the same cholla taken over time ought not to be presented in sequence, but spread widely in a noncontiguous manner, because we must first forget to remember. The names help with such remembering.

In May 2009, I noticed that the piñons were blooming, something that happens once every four to seven years. The first piñon photograph I made was from inside my living room. It shows a tall glass window that looks out onto a mature piñon, a male house finch on the tree, a small rectangular window on the guest bathroom, and black hawk decals on both windows to discourage birds from crashing against them. I named the photograph *Looking Outside I Saw Dead Birds and Looking Inside I Saw How They Died.*

For the cholla photographs I walked wherever possible, but for the piñons the walks became more deliberate, with three specific paths: *On My Way to the Powerline, On My Way to the Railroad,* and *On My Way to the Cholla (Near the House with a Dog)*. Later, revisiting my photographs, I realized that these paths are essentially small ecological corridors that support a wide variety of wildlife, from small underground dwellers like pocket gophers and pack rats to large avian predators like Great Horned Owls. These walks and my photographs led me to discover small visual clues leading to more visual clues—I became a detective of the desert.

In 2008, I photographed many fallen though healthy chollas. My immediate reaction was that these were felled by humans. But probing it further prompted me to question the below-the-surface world of the desert. Pocket gophers that live underground are a nuisance to humans as they destroy vegetable gardens by eating the roots of the plants. Humans, in turn, flood their intricate networks with water, hoping to kill the animals, only to realize it is a futile attempt. Pocket gophers also uproot chollas, sometimes living right underneath the plant. But these small creatures also serve a critical ecological function as each small gopher moves up to one ton of soil each year, helping to aerate the desert ground.

I also found cut cholla branches up inside the bark of a dead piñon and wondered who would move these thorny branches across such a distance, only to discover it is the job of small pack rats. While these creatures are a nuisance to humans and carry the deadly hantavirus, they also serve the critical ecological function of seed dispersal. They cache large quantities of piñon and juniper seeds that result in later germination of these trees. Also, by cutting and moving cholla branches they aid in that plant's reproduction.

When I started my walks, I did not realize that the piñon-juniper stands across the Desert Southwest are actually old-growth forests, ancient woodlands that support an amazing diversity of wildlife, including 250 bird species, 74 species of mammals, 17 species of bats, 10 amphibian species, and 27 species of reptiles.

Sadly, as I continued my photography, I began to realize that the old-growth piñon forest in New Mexico is mostly dead due to recent climate change. Between 2001 and 2005, *Ips confusus*, a tiny bark beetle, killed 54.5 million piñons—90 percent of mature piñons in northern New Mexico. When healthy trees become stressed from severe and sustained drought, they become subject to attack: the beetles drill into their bark, lay eggs along the way, and kill their host.

From a distance, on seeing the twenty-foot spread of a dead piñon canopy, I can determine that the tree was more than 600 years old when it died. Piñons take nearly 300 years to mature and can live up to 1,000 years. As I get closer to a dead tree, I notice its damaged skin has many protrusions that look like soft yellow globs. Such skin is visual evidence that the tree did not die a normal death, but instead put up a fight against the beetles by sending out sap to drown them in resin. In the end the tree lost, as the number of beetles the tree was fighting was surely far too many.

Even after death these trees continue to provide home and food for a wide variety of species—insects come to the trees to break it down; woodpeckers come to eat the insects and create perfectly circular cavities; bluebirds come to build nests in these cavities . . . and the cycle of life continues. As you can see, I learned all this from the trees and open country of the desert.

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