



“To Live”

by Gretel Ehrlich

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No longer safe anywhere, I don’t care if I live or die, nor would I act only for my own safety, but I would like to visit a favorite place” the water-stained revetment, the copse of aspens, the small river flowing through a valley of willows filled with moose and birds. I will walk there and stay for a while. My family of one. The kelpie and me.

I take off as soon as the half-moon appears. Clouds dissolve and Venus is rubbed bright. I walk on dead leaves and crumbling grass—a charnel ground of mashed up beauty—up and up, past a cluster of wild raspberries, the fruit all gone, past the waterfall. Heat has drained couloirs of their plugs of old snow. I climb up to the open plateaus above and lie on spent wildflowers pillowing my head on pine boughs. When daylight comes, I sleep. There was no way to see when the dew arrived. It was just there. Gift of the night air, I harvest it because there’s no water elsewhere.

When it’s time to leave, I walk backward, a contrary clown, back, back, up, up, until, on a ridge where bits of glacial ice remain, I gnaw at a chunk and swallow then-thousand-year-old meltwater.

Much later, maybe days or weeks, I descend. Welcome to the nightmare, the kelpie barks in greeting.

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We are born on a road or beside it or in some hospital near a big river that becomes a road, leading to smaller unpaved ones that reach into the heart of a mountain or a dry savannah or a plain of melting sea ice, places where it’s said we have an innate longing to be.

In western Zimbabwe recently, I entered a parched world. The road to my friend’s camp was covered with wind-blown orange-colored Kalahari sand, and the rivers were dry. A lid of smoke wreathed the sky: millions of hectares are burned each year—creating heat-absorbing bare ground and polluting the air.

Near my thatched-roof mud hut, great trees spread shade, but because of the drought, the seedpods were empty and the animals that came for that food went away hungry. A rock enclosure was made in the dry streambed and filled with fresh water from a borehole. Birds, bushbuck, kudu, impala, warthogs, baboons, monkeys, giraffe, water buffalo, and elephants came to drink. Only the primates and elephants had young. Most of the others not because they were unable to sustain a calf or baby with so little forage and water. The die-off had long since begun.

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An editor asked me to write about hearth—a flat place where a fire can be built. A floor. A solid space on which we can stand, sit, or warm ourselves, and cook food. How absurd the task seems



now as the Arctic crashes and we are being fast-tracked politically toward accelerated albedo loss and its many consequences.

The glaciologists I've talked to since 1997 understood two decades ago that the time to stop or mitigate global heating was limited and that doing nothing was tantamount to suicide. The whole concept of home and hearth now seems like a cruel joke. We've run out of time to settle down, to make a place for the unborn, to plant a sequoia tree that will live three thousand years, to sire, mother, transmit, pass on. Forget Oxford and Harvard, forget the great libraries, forget we even heard about the burned Library of Alexandria with its five hundred thousand scrolls, its visiting scholars, lecture halls, and gardens. Forget discussions of a future. Erase all that. We are navigating our way toward ruin. At the Paris climate conference, the rapper Akumatu from Kaktovik, Alaska, sang: "I am the Ancestor of the future. Why is it so hot here?"

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In that delicious moment before waking before we can imagine we are still living in the interglacial paradise in which we were born and have thrived. When we dare, we indulge ourselves and remember how it was. Then the Trumpian horrors that await us come into view.

I grew up in a modern half-glass redwood house in California. Its three fireplaces had raised hearths where, in winter months, we warmed ourselves by the fire. Much later, the ranch I lived on in the Big Horn Mountains was heated with wood. We burned ten or eleven cords a winter. The centrality of fireplace, woodstove, or cookstove shaped how we lived in that space. Time was measured in logs, not hours. The hundred-year-old house was made of gyp block—akin to a dissolving aspirin—and the floors, walls, and ceiling were uninsulated. Most important was the fire itself—the hearth—because those were the days when winter came hard and rarely was a night warmer than twenty below.

I lost that ranch after an accident and a divorce, and began traveling by dogsled with subsistence Inuit hunters in northwest Greenland. My Greenland friends became a family of sorts, and I spent months with them for twenty-three years until the sea ice had become unpredictable. At seventy-eight degrees latitude north their Wilsonian longing for home was not for green savannah, but for great expanses of white—of ice and snow-covered ice. Intense cold was not considered an enemy. They had no wood to burn. Hearth was a calm frigid place where sea ice could form, where the panting of sled dogs was the national song.

Earth House Hold, the poet Gary Snyder titled a book of essays. It could have been *Ice House Hold*. We lived on the ice for weeks at a time, eating what the men caught—ringed seal or walrus boiled in melted multiyear ice. Camp consisted of two dogsleds pushed together with a canvas tarp thrown over a ridgepole, and four of us: Jens, Gedeon, Mamrut, and me, squeezed together on frigid nights. In storms we slept in tiny huts with a haunch of walrus dripping blood by the *ileq*—the platform where we lay down caribou skins with our sleeping bags on top. Ice, snow on ice, the mounded, gleaming Greenland ice sheet filled our eyes and minds with delight.

But the ice didn't hold. That hearth—the culture of the extended family groups that coevolved with and was dependent on ice—is gone. So is life as we have known it everywhere. First, ranch grief besieged me, then ice grief. I've been on my hands and knees pounding on the floor and sobbing as the ice melts, as we lose albedo, as die-offs mount up, and though there's



been no doubt that life is transient, chance, and change, I hadn't anticipated the scale of loss, of the many worlds, cultural and biological—wholes within wholes—gone with no hope of return.

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I've moved a lot. It started slowly, then accelerated to something like twenty-three moves, as if mimicking the accelerated collapse of the Greenland ice sheet. Maybe that's why the Greenlanders said I must have been born on a moving dogsled, and why the traditional architecture of Japan has always appealed: the shoeless glide on tatami that still smelled like grass, and shoji doors that slid, opening onto emptiness.

The frail houses, shacks, and tents I've lived in have been more home than any house, and I've loved them all" canvas-wall tents fitted with foldable woodstoves; backpackers' tents, easy to put up, take down, and lightweight; tipis of sewn-together reindeer skins, raised on poles; or sheep wagons that can be pulled from place to place, ship tight and simple with a rounded top. Or a bivy sac perched on the ledge of a vast mountain.

Home is the horse I rode fifteen hundred miles a year, the cow dogs who traveled alongside, slept with me, and for whom I cooked scrambled eggs, elk steaks, and buttered toast. Or the sled pulled by three reindeer across the melting tundra of the Russian Arctic, or the Greenland sled dogs that often saved our lives.

Home is anywhere I've taken the time to notice. Where there is no "I." It shouldn't be called a sense of place, but a flat-out, intimate sensorium where Emerson's dictum suddenly makes sense: "I am nothing. I see all."

Intimacy requires time. Time requires devotion. Devotion demands surrender. Surrender means sponging in the whole: season, light, smell, moving shadow, every dark place, every one that is bright.

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Nostalgia is the ornament with which we decorate memory. Parent, house, car, horse, beach, sidewalk, school, sibling, boyfriend. We tangle with love and loss, injustice, disappointment, with inexplicable birth and certain death, with illusion. Finally able to drop personal history from our minds, it pops up again, if only to keep us on our toes, to make us laugh.

I was the night calver at the ranch and checked heifers on cross-country skis. Other years I moved through the seasons on the back of a horse, by sailboat across the Barents Sea, or by a pack canoe in arctic Alaska.

I spent three months in a tent on a glacial moraine where a friend was building a cabin for me and developed an aversion to "home" as I watched the walls go up, the windows arriving. When I told him that a closed-up house seemed like poison, he didn't stop to put the hammer down, just laughed and kept building.

Every camp, sled, tipi, or boat has been a kind of home, a place to perch, the wilder the better, with rocks holding down the edges of the sleeping bag to keep it from being blown away. Above tree line in the Brooks Range or out a New York City door, wildness shows itself.



Cockroach and grizzly, the month-long hides into the Sierras, Bighorns, Winds, and Crazies, the macadamia nut farm in the North Pacific Ocean, and the wind-shorn prairie homestead.

Every step outside is a complete meal. The old Navajo directive toward “beauty and harmony” has been there for us. Up all night in a New England forest during sugaring, it was explained to me that the maple’s streaming sweetness courses upward, a sap flow that depends not on stasis but fluctuation, of warmth and cold pushing sap up and out a wound in the trunk, boiled for hours, and drunk down like nectar.

Movement is everything, and so with us. We don’t need the stable in any sense of the word, nor does the horse. We can no longer demand what we want and get it. The horse tried to teach that to us long ago, but we went on with our undisciplined needs.

We pour foundations without asking for permission and expect the mountain to bow down, the stream to fill, the grassland to stay green. We search catalogues for the generative sprouting seed engineered for fruition. We grasp and reject, we stumble from forever inept and desperate for this paradise in which to embed ourselves, yet can’t empty and open our minds, or find the interior door through which a mountain can enter.

At best, home is a momentary thing. Under the rugs at the long-ago ranch house were taped-together topographical maps of the entire region. We often rolled the rugs back, not to dance—though we did that, too—but to try to understand exactly where we lived and who our animal and botanical neighbors were. Soon it became clear that no static point on a map, no home address, no parental house, no structure or furnishing could locate us. Only elevation, water course, meadow, mountain, seasonal shift, animal migration could tell us where we were. But not why, now was that question necessary.

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Hearth is a time as much as a place. The time it takes for three pine logs to burn. It is historical context times birth hour. We are each nonspecific and utterly unique, scurrying for a slot in a city or for a patch of meadow in some untrodden place in an overcrowded world. Yet sometimes we long for home. For a moment by the fire, a cuddle under a down quilt, a kerosene lamp on a dark night, or, when very hungry, a plate of food, or a plea for unconditional love. Don’t look back, Dylan reminds us, or was that Theseus?

These days, I wear red jeans and black shirts: red for fury, black for grief. But what color signifies our indisputable integration with the mountain under our feet—or the subway stairs?

In the beginning there was exile. From fetal intimacy to polluted air. From a vade mecum womb to an ambivalent or serially absent mother and father. Family is a cultural construct that can be elusive. Blood-links can vanish or sour. When things get very difficult, which elder will instruct us? What animal or song or dance or place will teach us how to behave?

Once, seriously hungry in northern Greenland, I was shocked by my atavistic behavior. I hoarded a tiny piece of salami—not from others, but from myself—saving it for a day when I was hungrier, then found it had rotted. I dreamed about lavish meals but on return home couldn’t eat solids. I swam through constant hallucinations as I trudged along, not quite sure in which mirage I was drowning.



So much of our privileged lives consist of flyovers. We wander, not as the ancient Chinese hermit-poets did, but in jets and commuter planes, a Cessna or caravan, wondering how we will recognize the proper site on which to build the hearth. We lurch from place to place, supplanting alpine vistas with desert, sand dune with cityscape, urban comfort with brutal open oceans, and back again, forgetting that to cut through habitual thought so we can see what's actually there.

Flying for hours over virgin forests, rippling grasslands, whitecapped oceans, we can't seem to get close enough. The eye grows hungry. The road grows hungry for our feet. But on arrival at our destination—one of our many “there's”—we find we've already exhausted a world we haven't taken the time to touch.

So much has gone missing: abalone, giraffe, snow goose, reedbuck. I applaud the lawyers who advocate for the rights and “personhood” of a river, mountain, desert, or animal—humans last, please. When talking about “saving the planet,” which we have failed to do, people speak only of saving it for their grandchildren, never for the sake of the Earth itself. Why bother to save it for humans who will just destroy it again? We live in a culture of abuse and untruth, a carelessness so profound it has the power to kill us off in a way more sorrowful than any disease.

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In my Greenland “home” the conditions in which sea ice can form have disappeared. In west Antarctica, Pine Island Glacier cracks and slides into an ever-warmer sea. At Dibangombe, in Africa, the river is thirsty, the great herds diminished, and the trees dead. Last week in Montana, seven hundred snow geese, lost in a storm, landed on a toxic mine pool and died.

Takuss, a Greenlander might have said once. It means “see you soon” in a loving way. Maybe not. I still try to grow vegetables, herbs, and fruit. At dawn, I collect dew and sprinkle it on my garden.