

INTRODUCTION

Between the Body and the Breathing Earth

Owning up to being an animal, a creature of earth. Tuning our animal senses to the sensible terrain: blending our skin with the rain-rippled surface of rivers, mingling our ears with the thunder and the thrumming of frogs, and our eyes with the molten sky. Feeling the polyrhythmic pulse of this place—this huge windswept body of water and stone. This vexed being in whose flesh we're entangled.

Becoming earth. Becoming animal. Becoming, in this manner, fully human.

This is a book about becoming a two-legged animal, entirely a part of the animate world whose life swells within and unfolds all around us. It seeks a new way of speaking, one that enacts our interbeing with the earth rather than blinding us to it. A language that stirs a new humility in relation to other earthborn beings, whether spiders or obsidian outcrops or spruce limbs bent low by the clumped snow. A style of speech that opens our senses to the sensuous in all its multiform strangeness.

The chapters that follow strive to discern and perhaps to practice a curious kind of thought, a way of careful reflection that no

longer tears us out of the world of direct experience in order to represent it, but that binds us ever more deeply into the thick of that world. A way of thinking enacted as much by the body as by the mind, informed by the humid air and the soil and the quality of our breathing, by the intensity of our contact with the other bodies that surround.

Yet words are human artifacts, are they not? Surely to speak, or to think in words, is necessarily to step back from the world's presence into a purely human sphere of reflection? Such, precisely, has been our civilized assumption. But what if meaningful speech is *not* an exclusively human possession? What if the very language we now speak arose first in response to an animate, expressive world—as a stuttering reply not just to others of our species but to an enigmatic cosmos that already *spoke to us* in a myriad of tongues?

What if thought is not born within the human skull, but is a creativity proper to the body as a whole, arising spontaneously from the slippage between an organism and the folding terrain that it wanders? What if the curious curve of thought is engendered by the difficult eros and tension between our flesh and the flesh of the earth?

Is it possible to grow a worthy cosmology by attending closely to our encounters with other creatures, and with the elemental textures and contours of our locale? We are by now so accustomed to the cult of expertise that the very notion of honoring and paying heed to our directly felt experience of things—of insects and wooden floors, of broken-down cars and bird-pecked apples and the scents rising from the soil—seems odd and somewhat misguided as a way to find out what's worth knowing. According to assumptions long held by the civilization in which I've been raised, the deepest truth of things is concealed behind the appearances, in dimensions inaccessible to our senses. A thousand years ago these dimensions were viewed in spiritual terms: the sensuous world was a fallen, derivative reality that could be understood only by reference to heavenly realms hidden beyond the stars. Since the powers

residing in such realms were concealed from common perception, they had to be mediated for the general populace by priests, who might intercede with those celestial agencies on our behalf.

In recent centuries, an abundance of discoveries and remarkable inventions have transformed this culture's general conception of things—and yet the basic disparagement of sensuous reality remains. Like an old, collective habit very difficult to kick, the directly sensed world is still explained by reference to realms hidden beyond our immediate experience. Such a realm, for example, is the microscopic domain of axons and dendrites, and neurotransmitters washing across neuronal synapses—a dimension entirely concealed from direct apprehension, yet which presumably precipitates, or gives rise to, every aspect of our experience. Another such dimension is the recondite realm hidden within the nuclei of our cells, wherein reside the intricately folding strands of DNA and RNA that ostensibly code and perhaps even “cause” the behavior of living things. Alternatively, the deepest source and truth of the apparent world is sometimes held to exist in the subatomic realm of quarks, mesons, and gluons (or the still more theoretical world of vibrating ten-dimensional strings); or perhaps in the initial breaking of symmetries in the cosmological “big bang,” an event almost inconceivably distant in time and space.

Every one of these arcane dimensions radically transcends the reach of our unaided senses. Since we have no ordinary experience of these realms, the essential truths to be found there must be mediated for us by experts, by those who have access to the high-powered instruments and the inordinately expensive technologies (the electron microscopes, functional MRI scanners, radio telescopes, and supercolliders) that might offer a momentary glimpse into these dimensions. Here, as before, the sensuous world—the creaturely world directly encountered by our animal senses—is commonly assumed to be a secondary, derivative reality understood only by reference to more primary domains that exist elsewhere, behind the scenes.

I do not deny the importance of those other scales or dimensions, nor the value of the various truths that may be found there. I

deny only that this shadowed, earthly world of deer tracks and moss is somehow less worthy, less REAL, than those abstract dimensions. It is more palpable to my skin, more substantial to my flaring nostrils, more precious—infinately more precious—to the heart drumming within my chest.

This directly experienced terrain, rippling with cricket rhythms and scoured by the tides, is the very realm now most ravaged by the spreading consequences of our disregard. Many long-standing and lousy habits have enabled our callous treatment of surrounding nature, empowering us to clear-cut, dam up, mine, develop, poison, or simply destroy so much of what quietly sustains us. Yet few are as deep-rooted and damaging as the habitual tendency to view the sensuous earth as a subordinate space—whether as a sinful plane, riddled with temptation, needing to be transcended and left behind; or a menacing region needing to be beaten and bent to our will; or simply a vaguely disturbing dimension to be avoided, superseded, and explained away.

Corporeal life is indeed difficult. To identify with the sheer physicality of one's flesh may well seem lunatic. The body is an imperfect and breakable entity vulnerable to a thousand and one insults—to scars and the scorn of others, to disease, decay, and death. And the material world that our body inhabits is hardly a gentle place. The shuddering beauty of this biosphere is bristling with thorns: generosity and abundance often seem scant ingredients compared with the prevalence of predation, sudden pain, and racking loss. Carnally embedded in the depths of this cacophonous profusion of forms, we commonly can't even predict just what's lurking behind the near boulder, let alone get enough distance to fathom and figure out all the workings of this world. We simply can't get it under our control. We've lost hearing in one ear; the other rings like a fallen spoon. Our spouse falls in love with someone else, while our young child comes down with a bone-rattling fever that no doctor seems able to diagnose. There are things out and about that can eat us, and ultimately will. Small wonder, then, that we prefer to abstract ourselves whenever we can, imagining ourselves into theoretical spaces less fraught with insecurity, con-

juring dimensions more amenable to calculation and control. We slip blissfully into machine-mediated scapes, offering ourselves up to any technology that promises to enhance the humdrum capacities of our given flesh. And sure, now and then we'll engage this earthen world as well, *as long we know that it's not ultimate*, as long as we're convinced that we're not stuck here.

Even among ecologists and environmental activists, there's a tacit sense that we'd better not let our awareness come too close to our creaturely sensations, that we'd best keep our arguments girded with statistics and our thoughts buttressed with abstractions, lest we succumb to an overwhelming grief—a heartache born of our organism's instinctive empathy with the living land and its cascading losses. Lest we be bowled over and broken by our dismay at the relentless devastation of the biosphere.

Thus do we shelter ourselves from the harrowing vulnerability of bodied existence. But by the same gesture we also insulate ourselves from the deepest wellsprings of joy. We cut our lives off from the necessary nourishment of contact and interchange with other shapes of life, from antlered and loop-tailed and amber-eyed beings whose resplendent weirdness loosens our imaginations, from the droning of bees and the gurgling night chorus of the frogs and the morning mist rising like a crowd of ghosts off the weedlot. We seal ourselves off from the erotic warmth of a cello's voice, or from the tilting dance of construction cranes against a downtown sky overbursting with blue. From the errant hummingbird pulsing in our cupped hands as we ferry it back out the door, and the crimson flash as it zooms from our fingers.

For too long we've closed ourselves to the participatory life of our senses, inured ourselves to the felt intelligence of our muscled flesh and its manifold solidarities. We've taken our primary truths from technologies that hold the world at a distance. Such tools can be mighty useful, and beneficial as well, as long as the insights that they yield are carried carefully back to the lived world, and placed in service to the more-than-human matrix of corporeal encounter and experience. But technology can also, and easily, be used as a way to avoid direct encounter, as a shield—etched with lines of

code or cryptic jargon—to ward off whatever frightens, as a synthetic heaven or haven in which to hide out from the distressing ambiguity of the real.

Only by welcoming uncertainty from the get-go can we acclimate ourselves to the shattering wonder that enfolds us. This animal body, for all its susceptibility and vertigo, remains the primary instrument of all our knowing, as the capricious earth remains our primary cosmos.

I have no intention with this work to offer a definitive statement, much less a comprehensive one. The complicated and often terrifying problems arising at this moment of the earth's unfolding entail the widest possible range of responses, to which every one of us must lend our specific gifts. I've written this book, a spiraling series of experimental and improvisational forays, in hopes that others will try my findings against their own experience, correcting or contesting my discoveries with their own.

This venture will start slowly, gathering energy as it moves. Simple encounters from my own life—encounters unexpected and serendipitous—will provide a loose, structuring frame for each investigation that follows. The early chapters take up several ordinary, taken-for-granted aspects of the perceived world—shadows, houses, gravity, stones, visual depth—drawing near to each phenomenon in order to notice the way it engages not our intellect but our sensing and sentient body. Later chapters delve into more complex powers—like mind, mood, and language—that variously influence and organize our experience of the perceptual field. The final chapters step directly into the natural magic of perception itself, exploring the willed alteration of our senses and the wild transformation of the sensuous, addressing magic and shapeshifting and the metamorphosis of culture.

Many of our inherited concepts (our ready definitions and explanations) serve to isolate our intelligence from the intimacy of our creaturely encounter with the strangeness of things. In these pages we'll listen close to the things themselves, allowing weather

patterns and moose and precipitous cliffs their own otherness. We'll pay attention to their unique manner of showing themselves, attuning ourselves to those facets that have been eclipsed by accepted styles of thinking. Can we find fresh ways to elucidate these earthly phenomena, forms of articulation that free the things from their conceptual straitjackets, enabling them to stretch their limbs and begin to breathe?

The early explorations in this book will soon lead us up against some basic cultural assumptions, forcing us to ruminate a range of reflective questions regarding bodies, materiality, and the language of the sciences, as well as the manner in which our words affect the ongoing life of our animal senses. Such discussions will leave us freer to dance in the later chapters, able to follow our investigations wherever they lead.

Some might claim that this is a book of solitudes. For I've chosen to concentrate upon those moments in a day or a life when one slips provisionally beneath the societal surge of forces, those occasions (often un verbalized and hence overlooked) when one comes more directly into felt relation with the wider, more-than-human community of beings that surrounds and sustains the human hubbub. Awakening to citizenship in this broader commonwealth, however, has real ramifications for how we humans get along with one another. It carries substantial consequences for the way a genuine democracy shapes itself—for the way that our body politic *breathes*.

Why, then, is so little attention paid to the social or political spheres within these pages? Because there's a necessary work of recuperation to be accomplished (or at least opened and gotten well under way) before those spheres can be disclosed afresh, and this book is engaged in that work of recuperation. A replenished participation in the human collective, forging new forms of place-based community and planetary solidarity, along with a commitment to justice and the often exasperating work of politics—these, too, are necessary elements in the process, and they compose a vital

part of my own practice. But they are not the primary focus of this volume.⁹

Writing is a curious endeavor, swerving from moments of splendid delirium into others of stunned puzzlement, and from there into stretches of calm, focused craft. The writing down of words is a relatively recent practice for the human animal. We two-leggeds have long been creatures of language, of course, but verbal language lived first in the shaped breath of utterance, it laughed and stuttered on the tongue long before it lay down on the page, and longer still before it arrayed itself in rows across the glowing screen.

While persons brought up within literate culture often speak *about* the natural world, indigenous, oral peoples sometimes speak *directly to* that world, acknowledging certain animals, plants, and even landforms as expressive subjects with whom they might find themselves in conversation. Obviously these other beings do not

⁹ The phrase that titles this book, “becoming animal,” carries a range of possible meanings. In this work the phrase speaks first and foremost to the matter of becoming more deeply human by acknowledging, affirming, and growing into our animality. Other meanings will gradually make themselves evident to different readers. The phrase is sometimes associated with the late-twentieth-century writings of the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995) and his collaborator, the psychoanalyst Félix Guattari (1930–1992). Like many other philosophers, I have drawn much pleasure from Deleuze’s endlessly fecund writings, which are fairly brimming with fresh trajectories for thought to follow. We share several aims, including a wish to undermine an array of unnoticed, other-worldly assumptions that structure a great deal of contemporary thought, and a consequent commitment to a kind of radical immanence—even to *materialism* (or what I might call “matter-realism”) in a dramatically reconceived sense of the term. My work also shares with his a keen resistance to whatever unnecessarily impedes the erotic creativity of matter.

Despite the commonality of some aims, however, our strategies are drastically different. (One of my meanders through the backcountry will sometimes cross one of Deleuze’s lines of flight at an oblique angle, but our improvised trajectories are rarely, if ever, parallel.) As a phenomenologist, I am far too taken with lived experience—with the felt encounter between our sensate body and the animate earth—to suit his philosophical taste. As a metaphysician, Deleuze is far too given to the production of abstract concepts to suit mine. By choosing for my title a phrase sometimes associated with Deleuze’s writing, I nonetheless find myself paying homage to the burgeoning creativity of his work, even as I hope to open the phrase to new meanings and associations.

speak with a human tongue; they do not speak in *words*. They may speak in song, like many birds, or in rhythm, like the crickets and the ocean waves. They may speak a language of movements and gestures, or articulate themselves in shifting shadows. Among many native peoples, such forms of expressive speech are assumed to be as communicative, in their own way, as the more verbal discourse of our species (which after all can also be thought of as a kind of vocal gesticulation, or even as a sort of singing). Language, for traditionally oral peoples, is not a specifically human possession, but is a property of the animate earth, in which we humans participate.

Oral language gusts through us—our sounded phrases borne by the same air that nourishes the cedars and swells the cumulus clouds. Laid out and immobilized on the flat surface, our words tend to forget that they are sustained by this windswept earth; they begin to imagine that their primary task is to provide a *representation* of the world (as though they were outside of, and not really *a part of*, this world). Nonetheless, the power of language remains, first and foremost, a way of singing oneself into contact with others and with the cosmos—a way of bridging the silence between oneself and another person, or a startled black bear, or the crescent moon soaring like a billowed sail above the roof. Whether sounded on the tongue, printed on the page, or shimmering on the screen, language’s primary gift is not to *re-present* the world around us, but to call ourselves into the vital *presence* of that world—and into deep and attentive presence with one another.

This ancestral capacity of speech necessarily underlies and supports all the other roles that language has come to have. Whether we wield our words to describe a landscape, to analyze a problem, or to explain how some gadget works, none of these roles would be possible without the primordial power of utterance to make our bodies resonate with one another and with the other rhythms that surround us. The autumn bugling of the elk does this, too, and the echoed honks of geese vee-ing south for the winter. This tonal layer of meaning—the stratum of spontaneous, bodily expression that oral cultures steadily deploy, and that literate culture all too

easily forgets—is the very dimension of language that we two-leggeds share in common with other animals. We share it, as well, with the mutter and moan of the wind through the winter branches outside my studio. In the spring the buds on those branches will unfurl new leaves, and by summer the wind will speak with a thousand green tongues as it rushes through those same trees, releasing a chorus of rustles and whispers and loudly swelling rattles very different from the low, plaintive sighs of winter. And all those chattering leaves will feed my thoughts as I sit by the open door, next summer, scribbling and pondering.

These pages, too, are nothing other than talking leaves—their insights stirred by the winds, their vitality reliant on periodic sunlight and on cool, dark water seeping up from within the ground. Step into their shade. Listen close. Something other than the human mind is at play here.

SHADOW

(Depth Ecology I)

Brushing past spruce boughs and ducking the low, brittle limbs of firs, you are walking south along a faint deer trail when it enters a grove of whispering aspens—tall, sun-dappled trunks like elegant giraffe necks leaning this way and that, their heads hidden among the leaves. Your legs carry you upslope through darker, needled limbs and then down as the trail opens abruptly onto the eastern shore of a mountain lake. Keep walking. To your right, the skin of the tarn ripples with a dazzle of sunlight, suffusing the air with reflected rays like an army of swords flourished aloft, their gleams passing through one another, cleaving the depth between you and the rock-ridged slopes rising from the opposite shore. So it's hard to see clearly the grand mountain toward which those ridges ascend, or the trees clustered on those slopes; your eyes feel only a vague intimation of green behind the exultation of light.

The cry of a red-tail hawk echoes off the rock faces—then just the gleaming silence. The silence is not perfect; now and then the faint, papery rattle of a dragonfly sounds near the lake's surface. There's also a suspicion of leaves scattered and rocking on the water, though your eyes can hardly focus on them among all the shifting rays.

To the left, however, your gaze easily marshals itself; here the spruce trunks are etched by the sun streaming through the needles, the bark illumined so crisply that you can feel the texture of the scabbed and shingled surfaces, and so your eyes move among the trunks, translating the patterned light into tactile sensations that ride along your skin.

The afternoon light, like the aspen leaves, is slowly deepening into gold, and soon there's a gilt edge to the grasses and the stones underfoot. Mosquitoes dance above the water, and bees swerve past, drawn to the color of your shirt or the scent of your sweat as you make your way past broad rocks that've been drinking the sun all afternoon. Keep hiking. This air thick with light is an enveloping spell, a trance into which the whole place has now fallen, a viscous state of mind shared by you and the spruces and the bees in this honeyed moment.

And then something shifts: a chill breeze against your face draws you to a different awareness. A swift glance around reveals that the sun is now perched, like a kingfisher, upon the high ridge of the mountain. Stillness everywhere, as though the world itself teeters on the edge; a great transformation is afoot. The breeze stirs . . . and falls silent. Everyone—the dragonflies, the dangling needles, the stones and boulders scattered along the shore—every entity seems to hold its breath. The radiant eye of the kingfisher still watches, but its stare is steadily growing less intense. Everything waits upon the quiet metamorphosis now spreading toward you from across the lake. The sun's gaze grows fainter still; soon it's possible to stare back at it without wincing, as it slowly slips behind the ridge. A final glare, a flaring gleam between two trees silhouetted on that ridge—and then the sun is gone.

Cooler now, to be sure. But not just cooler—there's a new texture to the air, a moistness: water suspended in the medium, unseen, though you can feel its presence as the air washes against your face in waves. And riding those waves, vaguely enticing at first, then too pleasurable to resist: smells! Dark, stygian smells gliding over the rippled glass of the lake to mingle with the aromatic dank of the soil underfoot and the high-pitched scent of

the green needles, and a faintly fermented fragrance prying open your nostrils (the recent scat of some creature still steaming in the near woods). There's also the musty decay of a collapsed trunk, and the darkly laughing scent of cool water lapping up against the shore (infused with the chemistry of tadpoles and trout and the tannin of drowned leaves), and a host of other whiffs sometimes merged and sometimes distinct, all sparkling like wine in some part of your brain that had earlier been rocked to sleep by the soporific dazzle of sunbeams, but has now been startled into attentive life by this more full-blooded magic, as though your mammalian intelligence has abruptly dropped anchor and suddenly found itself really here, bodily afoot in these damp woods.

That celestial daze you'd been drifting in has receded to the far periphery of your awareness, the last trace of those ethereal phantasms fading before the robust breath of these deeper colors and obscene odors—chthonic powers whose pungency echoes the sweat and strength of your legs as they push, one after the other, against the ground. In company with the clumped grasses and the frogs, you have crossed a threshold whose influence, although unacknowledged in the current era, remains as potent as ever. And so you have slipped into a different realm, a different mindscape.

You have entered the country of shadow. And a vast and brooding presence that had been hiding, moments earlier, behind the gauze of light is now slowly walking toward you through the clarified air. It is the breathing body of the mountain itself.

One of the marks of our obliviousness, one of the countless signs that our thinking minds have grown estranged from the intelligence of our sensing bodies, is that today a great many people seem to believe that shadows are flat. If I am strolling along a street on a cloudless afternoon and I notice a shapeshifting patch of darkness accompanying me as I walk, splayed out on the road perpendicular to my upright self, its appendages stretching and shrinking with the swinging of my limbs, I instantly identify this horizontal swath as my shadow. As though a shadow was merely this flatness,

this kinetic pancake, this creature of two dimensions whom one might peel off the street and drape over the nearest telephone wire.

We identify our shadow, in other words, with that visible shape we see projected on the pavement or the whitewashed wall. Since what we glimpse there is a being without depth, we naturally assume that shadows themselves are basically flat—and if we are asked, by a curious child, about the life of shadows we are apt to reply that their lives exist only in two dimensions.

Suppose, however, that on that same afternoon a bumblebee is making its way from a clutch of clover blossoms on one side of the road to another cluster of blooms in an overgrown weedlot across the street, and that as it does so the bee happens to pass between me and the flat shape that my body casts upon the pavement. The sunlit bee buzzes toward me, streaking like an erratic, drunken comet against the asphalt sky, and then it crosses an unseen boundary in the air: instantly its glow dims, the sun is no longer upon it—it has moved into a precisely bounded zone of darkness that floats between my opaque flesh and that vaguely humanoid silhouette laid out upon the pavement—until a moment later the bee buzzes out the opposite side of that zone and emerges back into the day's radiance.

Although it was zipping along several feet above the street, the bumblebee had passed into and out of my *real* shadow. Its visible trajectory—gleaming, then muted, then gleaming again—shows that my actual shadow is an enigma more substantial than that flat shape on the paved ground. That silhouette is only my shadow's outermost surface. The actual shadow does not reside primarily on the ground; it is a voluminous being of thickness and depth, a mostly unseen presence that dwells in the air *between* my body and that ground. The dusky shape on the asphalt touches me only at my feet, and hence seems largely separate from me, even independent of me—a kind of doppelganger. The apparent gap between myself and that flat swath of darkness is what prompts me, now and then, to accept its invitation to dance, the two of us then strutting and ducking in an improvised pas de deux wherein it's never very clear

which one of us is leading and which is following. It is now obvious, however, that that shape slinking along on the pavement is merely the outermost edge of a thick volume of shade, an umbral depth that extends from the pavement right on up to my knees, torso, and head—a shadow touching me not just at my feet, but at every point of my person.

This living shadow is born afresh every dawn, or rather, the shadow is what remains of the night as the night's gloom flees the advance of the rising sun. Visiting a friend's home in the outer suburbs of a large city, I stand at dawn in his yard, patient and still like the trees across the road. Facing away from the sunrise, I see that as the night slips away it leaves behind a slender part of itself, a splinter of dusk reaching from my body to the western horizon—a piece of night that slowly detaches from the mother darkness, gradually gathering itself toward the spot where I stand. This shard of residual night draws in closer to me throughout the morning—its visible edge on the ground slowly congealing, its limbs widening—until I can see by its proportions that it is a clear echo of myself. We mimic one another's movements across the umbral realm that stretches between us. All around me I glimpse other leftover slivers of the night gathering themselves toward other standing bodies—toward trees and telephone poles, toward houses and hydrants and a momentarily pensive squirrel. I continue standing as cars pass and children play. A flock of starlings alight on a telephone wire, whistling and rattling, then move on. Toward noon, I notice that my shadow seems to be seeping into my flesh; by midday it has been almost entirely absorbed through the pores of my skin, and—apart from a smidgen of shade on my northern flank—is nowhere to be seen. The winged insects in the bright air lose nothing of their sunlit radiance as they hum or flutter past. The shadow, my personal night, has been enfolded within me, become indistinguishable from me.

Do we notice this? Do we feel somehow different at high noon, when the darkness has seeped into us? Do we feel the weight of our own shadow, the press of its difficult knowledge against the inside of our torso and skull? Is it the shadow itself that looks out through

our eyes at midday? Small wonder that so many traditional peoples give themselves over to siesta, and sleep, for an hour or two at this time, letting their tissues and organs respond to this interior visitation by the night, allowing the many cells or souls within them to be tutored by the darkness that has taken temporary refuge within their flesh. But I will not let myself succumb—not now, for I am waiting to glimpse the night-fragments as they begin to leak out from the trees and from the neighbor's half-repaired motorcycle poised upside down on the ground. I am waiting to feel the quiet release as my shadow slips the confines of my skin and slides its fingers, ever so gently, into the afternoon air.

Ahhh, there. One cheek seems cooler. I look down. On that same side, my body now offers shade to eight or ten blades of grass, and to a beetle swaying near the top of one of those blades, its antennae sweeping the breeze, tasting the microclimate. Within a few moments, four further blades have stepped within the shadow. Then several more.

No longer am I so thoroughly under the scrutiny of the sun. Released from the insistent gaze pouring down from the sky, my left hand flexes and scratches the skin above my knee. The dark reflection on the ground—which I will call my shadowflection—does not register this exchange, which takes place entirely within the bounded volume of my fuller shadow. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the shadowflection is extending along the ground, as the triangular zone of shelter emanating from my body deepens, lengthens, never violating its Pythagorean proportions, expanding imperceptibly toward the eastern horizon.

I step inside the house to prepare some food—slicing a ripe tomato, interlacing the slices with fresh mozzarella cheese, dribbling olive oil on top to hold the ground pepper that finally falls like darkened snow. The flavors intersect, burst, and blend into one another. Afterward I record the results of my morning's experiment. Several hours later, I walk outside to ponder my shadowflection: a slender giant of a man, honed like a sword, lies prone in the golden light. As the sun sinks behind me, he elongates still further, his shoulders narrowing, his head climbing the wall of

a far-off house. And then it has become birdlight—all the wingeds calling and chattering as the giant's contours become blurred, indistinct, granting his penumbral powers to the dusk and the oncoming night.

Has my shadow now dissolved and dissipated? Or is it still present but hidden, swallowed within the wider shade of evening? Or is the evening itself nothing other than a garment woven from all our disparate shadows, from those separate darknesses that walk on their own during the day, yet gather themselves into a common thickness as the sun slides behind the hills? So that our individual shadow, as we have said, is our own private patch of night, torn from the black cloak every morning as we stumble out to greet the day?

For the moment, let's venture simply this: the shadow, this elegant enigma, is always with us. Whether at high noon or at midnight, whether it stands quiet within our skin or envelops us as our milieu, the shadow is an inescapable consequence of our physicality—a disruption of the sun's dominion, a disturbing power that we hold in common with boulders and storm clouds and the corpses of crashed airplanes. There do exist a few members of the bodily community that thrive without the dark companionship of shadows—the various winds, for example, or the pane of glass newly set within the window frame. But for most of us material beings, the shadow is a part of our makeup. Our clearest thoughts are those that know this—those that remember their real parentage in both light and shadow, fire and sleep.

Gloop! The mouth of a trout breaks the near surface of the pond, snatching a fly and sinking back into the green depths. Ripples radiate out from that intersection of worlds, jostling the water striders and a few floating leaves. Stepping close to the edge, you peer through the murk to glimpse any fish that might be visible. A twig snaps under your foot, followed by a faint thump-thump, thump-thump of hooves bounding off into the needled distance. It's a vibration more felt in your torso than heard by your ears. You

walk more carefully now, glancing down to avoid the exposed roots and the angled, haphazard rocks with pointillist black and crinkly orange lichens spreading across their mottled facets. Cool air laced with amphibious exhalations slides down the back of your throat; the scent of beaver-gnawed saplings seeps up into your brain. Another trout breaks the surface. The water striders rock back and forth on the undulations.

Earlier the sun was gazing down upon this world, its warmth meeting the inner flame of the grasses, its beams ricocheting off the cliffs and the shifting mirror of the lake. Everything here stood in relation to that white fire as you walked in the dazzle of the gleams, your thoughts lured aloft by the royal request pouring down from the sky. But now that celestial imperative has withdrawn behind the mountain, and each thing's attention seems wholly taken by the life that surrounds it: a spider sussing the breeze that's billowing her web, waiting for a more abrupt tug; the stones hunkering close to the soil; the wind licking the water as it glides over the lake, sliding under roots and through striated furrows in the bark of these trunks, while needles comb the invisible rush. Eyes inhale colors, and your body responds to the pigments of lichen and fungi and cliff with your own ruddy colors, with the hue of your skin and your sweat-stained shirt, the dark undertones in your matted hair. For there is an intimacy here that includes you. It is a commonality that you really notice only when you turn your eyes skyward; high overhead, two ducks flapping southward, their feathers agleam in the golden light, are clearly of another world. They fly in the full gaze of the sun. You realize then that the convivial intimacy of this shadowed world does not extend infinitely upward. It is a bounded realm, a zone that breaks off at some distance overhead, where the sunlight spills over the mountain ridge and illuminates the upper air.

Down here, however, we dwell in a different medium: the coolness and clarity of shadow. A shared influence is apparent among the many beings of this bounded realm. The manner in which colors, sounds, and tastes all step forward into your presence, the way these robust qualities confer and converse with your body—

informing your limbs, for instance, about the waterlogged branches that now dream at the bottom of the lake—all this is a gift afforded by the sheltering shade of the mountain. It is that hulking presence, the many-folded mountain rising in wooded slopes and cliffed ridges from the far shore of the lake, scraped by glaciers and worn down by the winds, laden with ice in its high concavities and layered with stories along every rock slide and precipice—it is *the mountain* that lends its gregarious power to the multiple elements of this place. Whether or not you notice its active influence, it is the mountain that defines the mood of this moment where you stand.

To step into the shadow of this mountain is to step directly under the mountain's influence, letting it untangle your senses as the rhythm of your breath adjusts to *its* breathing, to the style of its weather. To step into its shadow is to become a part, if only for this moment, of the mountain's life. Just as shadows are not flat shapes projected upon the ground (but rather dense and voluminous spaces), neither are they measurable quantities, mere consequences of sunlight and its interruption. Shadows are qualitative attributes of the bodies that secrete them. They are time-dependent realms that change their contours with the hour and the season, momentary life zones where the shadow-casting mountain or boulder or body quietly envelops and gathers a range of other bodies under its sway. The shadow is a bounded space and time wherein the mountain is free to spread out of itself, making itself felt in all its unadorned frankness, drawing a cluster of other entities and elements into a common neighborhood—a zone of alliances and reciprocities enabled by the quiet shelter of the mountain's shade. The power of the shadow is like the action of a benevolent monarch who sets aside the gilt robe that he displays every day to the eyes of the world, donning some drab clothes and slipping out the back door of the palace to wander in the surrounding neighborhood as his own honest, simple self. Despite his humble garb the commoners sense his charisma, fall under the orbit of his royal bearing, and hence a new camaraderie, if only for a few hours, emerges among them. To find oneself in the shadow

of a mountain is to abruptly find oneself exposed to the private life of the mountain, to feel its huge and manifold influence on the local world that lies beneath it, to enter the gravitational power of its intelligence, a sagacity no longer dissolved in the dazzling radiance of the sun.

Yet the shadows of late afternoon are very different from those of early morning; the mood, the mode of awareness, the qualities imparted are richly different. Now, for instance, the breeze is dying down, and an ephemeral mist is gathering just above the lake's surface: wisps of vapor hover and drift like spirits. The silence is deeper, fuller; a tiny splash sounds now and then, yet no longer the rattle of dragonfly wings, or the chittering calls of squirrels. The trunks and the cliffs are darkening, the needles losing their distinctness. The shadow of the mountain, this vibrant life zone, is giving way to a power still vaster, darker, more profound. The myriad flows between insects and grass, between soil and stone, hawk and water and cliff, seem to be dissipating—the reciprocities and negotiations between neighbors all gradually subsiding. Sure, there are still encounters and exchanges, yet they no longer compose a tightly woven web. The encounters seem more desultory, more random, the inhabitants of this place by the mountain no longer so intimately engaged with one another. For the mountain's shadow is opening outward, losing its boundaries. As the long-hidden sun withdraws even its residual and scattered light from the sky, the mountain is taken up within the oncoming night, its shadow swallowed now by the darker shadow of the earth.

Night is the name we give to the shadow of the earth. This shadow that eats all other shadows. Slowly the wide planet rolls between our animal bodies and the sun; outlines blur, shapes and colors become uncertain, the proximate world loses its stark reality, while a new depth, gentle and beckoning at first, begins to disclose itself above the trees. A few specks of light appear in the thickening blue, like woodfires in a far-below valley. The bottomland of that valley soon gives way to a deeper canyon, then a chasm, then a fathomless abyss—its immeasurable distances lit by a thousand or ten thousand glimmering stars.

And just as the shadow cast by a mountain, when we step within its bounds, opens us to the brooding intelligence of the mountain, so the mammoth shadow of the earth, as it overtakes us, carries us out of ourselves into Earth's own awareness. It opens us to those beings, daily obscured by the sun-drenched atmosphere, who nevertheless populate the broad expanse that our Earth inhabits: the sibling planets with whom it shares the sun's house; and the countless other homes, some relatively near and most hopelessly far-off, that nevertheless compose, with us, the local neighborhood of the infinite. Or maybe we should speak of those sparkling lights as bodies, solitary yet exuberant lives who communicate via electromagnetic pulses across the inexhaustible deep, bending the fabric of space-time around themselves.

Or have our own bodies now shrunk to the scale of dust grains, and are those stars fresh dewdrops on a cluster of webs being spun by a nest of spiders?

The limitless immensity to which our eyes are exposed makes us dizzy, drunk with the pleasure of having our minds confounded and our ready logics exploded into an array of sparks scattered across the ocean of night. Such ecstasies are not easy for us to stand for very long; our habits of thought call us back to more familiar harbors. Perhaps if we were birds, and space were our medium, then this immensity would not throw us. Or if we were a different mammal—a fox, for instance, our nose tuned to smells that drift in ribbons along the ground—we'd hardly notice that alluring openness overhead, and night would be boon for us. But since we balance on just two legs, our heads are held already in the sky, and so we can't avoid the stunning puzzle posed by the stars. Beyond a certain degree of astonished gawking, our necks begin to hurt, and our legs to buckle; our bodies long to lie down horizontal on the earth. We lend ourselves to gravity, becoming adjuncts of the ground itself. Only by thus renouncing the vertical stance—dropping away our upright individuality and leaning back upon the earth, letting our gaze become the gaze of Earth itself—do we make some sense of the endless depths in which Earth dwells.

For those depths are not *our* habitat; they are Earth's. And so it's

only by unfurling our limbs and settling back into the body of Earth that the night sky becomes, for us, a steady comfort and a womb. Such, then, is the spell that the shadow of this planet casts upon our flesh. Sooner or later, we lie down. Eventually, our eyes close. We feed our individual lives back into the wider life of the ground itself. And we sleep.

We sleep, allowing gravity to hold us, allowing Earth—our larger Body—to recalibrate our neurons, composting the keen encounters of our waking hours (the tensions and terrors of our individual days), stirring them back, as dreams, into the sleeping substance of our muscles. We give ourselves over to the influence of the breathing earth. Sleep, we might say, is a habit born in our bodies as the earth comes between our bodies and the sun. Sleep is the shadow of the earth as it falls across our awareness. Yes. To the human animal, sleep is the shadow of the earth as it seeps into our skin and spreads throughout our limbs, dissolving our individual will into the thousand and one selves that compose it—cells, tissues, and organs taking their prime directives now from gravity and the wind—as residual bits of sunlight, caught in the long tangle of nerves, wander the drifting landscape of our earth-borne bodies like deer moving across the forested valleys.

HOUSE

(Materiality I)

My right hand is reaching for a book. Fingers are opening, stretching toward the binding, and suddenly the tome is climbing into my hand. It slips along my fingers and settles back against my wrist and the base of my thumb. My other hand is now prying back the front cover. The book falls open between two pages in the middle. At this point in the story, apparently, things are crawling with snails. The pages are filling up with snails—large ones, with fine spiral shells, tan and pink and spotted brown spirals; they're slowly oozing onto my wrist, some falling onto the pale maple wood of the desk. The whole book is now thick with these slow creatures, and my desk itself is now teeming with them . . .

I awaken, and sit up, the pungent smell of ooze slowly giving way to the light streaming in the windows and the sunstruck sheets tangled around my legs. Grinning dizzily at the fast-fading image of all those translucent, calcite spirals, I swivel my legs out and onto the floor. Yesterday's T-shirt is slung over the corner chair; I pull it over my head, stumble into some stiff new jeans, splash tap water on my face, and wander down to the kitchen, trying to decide between cereal and scrambled eggs. Then I lose track of my thoughts—distracted by a black cricket walking across the tiles—