

Santiago Chavez  
1243554

Dearest Nature, I Seem to Have Forgotten Your Name  
2016

In nature I created my early conceptions of my own identity. I understood what it meant to be a Hispanic, a brother, a leader, a friend, and a lover. In the wildernesses of New Mexico I was part of a community, of family, of friends, of scientists.

When I decided to go to college in New York, the role that nature played in my life drastically changed. Without being surrounded by easily accessible wild land, nature was no longer a given that could easily be found. Nature became a treat. While I was free from the strict rules of my parents' house, I found myself equally stifled by the skyline of New York. Nature then became my escape in a whole new way, from the endless sounds of sirens, passersby, and images posted on billboards – endless ways to spend money. Nature was free of these things, and any chance I had to visit nature resulted in a spiritually cleansing journey.

I felt most myself during these rare trips into the woods and hills of the East Coast. It was during such outings that I realized how important nature had been to my past life, and still is to my identity. Nature became a place of self-renewal, and if I ventured into it once in a while, my mind would be cleared, and my respiration reset with the sweet mountain air of upstate New York, or wherever I escaped to.

Then a couple things changed my views of nature even further.

In some of my college classrooms, my ideas about nature were challenged when we investigated natural beauty and aesthetics. I remember one teacher asked the class if anyone had experienced pure nature. I raised my hand and offered some images from my hikes around Carlsbad: there were certain moments on those hikes in the high desert that I felt as if I had been in a place that hadn't changed since the last extinction of the dinosaurs; nature at its purest.

My teacher challenged me, claiming that the purity was an illusion, more of an idealized image of nature than reality. According to my professor, if I thought about it, I would find that this type of pure nature, in fact, did not exist. During my next trip home, the teacher's words stuck with me as I ventured out on a day hike. I realized he was right. On an epistemological level, the fact that I could witness the nature meant that it was not untouched - I was there touching it all with my gaze, and my hiking boots. Upon closer examination bolts remained from past ventures, sticking out of canyon walls, and ribbons abounded from past hikers marking their way. Occasionally I would stumble across a piece of glass, or an old pipeline no longer in use.

Then I considered the ecological reverberations that humans had left on this seemingly untouched landscape. The prized cottonwoods along the rivers were once an invasive species. Mountain lions were once a major force in the ecosystems around Carlsbad; now they are endangered, and hide away deep in the wilderness. Along one hike I saw a dead cow in the bottom of a seemingly remote canyon. I recalled my biology teacher from high school, Dr. Cox, explaining that certain grasses that dominated the landscape had been tracked across oceans on the boots of traders hundreds of years ago. The proof was all around me; the idea of a nature free of humanity's mark eluded me. The lines between society and nature became vague.

This experience made me question the very definition of what I considered nature. It was no longer a realm that stood in direct opposition to human society. This supposition was at the very core of every idea I ever had concerning nature. Suddenly I felt at a loss. Nature, which I love so dearly, became something I did not understand. I took solace in the fact that if it was one thing, it was good, and that when I was in a forest, a desert, or a wilderness I would feel good, free, and it would cleanse me. Then my

assuredness was challenged once again by another experience, which I will come back to.

Eventually I lost all sense of what nature was. Its role in my life had changed so much since my first experiences, that I felt challenged to define it. How could nature, the most important thing in my life, become so confounded? How could nature lose its meaning? I was in crisis, and it was more important than ever to redefine what nature was.

## 2

When I was a child my family would often take trips from our home in Carlsbad, New Mexico to the more remote northern areas of the state. My grandma lived in Vadito, NM, among the rivers and wilderness of the southernmost Rocky Mountains. These visits usually included forays into lush forests, in the form of camping and fishing. Those experiences were the genesis of a love for nature that endures to this day.

The region we camped in is called Tres Ritos, located in Santa Fe National Forest. Tres Ritos means three rivers in English, and it is here that three smaller tributaries meet and join with the Rio Grande. Snowmelt and rainwater run off from Picuris Peak and the Cerro Vista Range, into the rivers and streams. We fished for rainbow trout.

The fishing was always difficult here – the streams are fast moving and shallow, with the deepest holes never measuring more than chest height. While my dad and older brothers had the stamina and faith required for long continuous effort, my little brother Nicolas and I usually threw in the towel after 15 minutes or a couple of unfruitful bites. Once we lost interest we would usually take the chance to cut away from the group and explore on our own. While Nico searched for big rocks to throw in the river, I would find suitable walking sticks. With the sticks for additional support we would cut through the underbrush, into less formidable terrain.

I remember very vividly one of our more dangerous excursions, when I was twelve, and Nico was eight. After leaving my dad and two older brothers we ventured upstream, along the riverbank. We were simply walking, following the river to see what it would reveal. We skirted the thin bank and hopped from rock to rock without a goal in mind, or any idea of what we might find. Then came a sharp right turn in the river. The bank we were traversing disappeared, and there was only a cliff, around which we could not see. We hopped onto a large rock in the middle of the river and jumped to the other side of the jutting cliff face, landing on a thin bank.

Downstream was the cliff just circumvented, upstream was another long rock cliff, traversable only by climbing. The river in this spot was flowing fast through jagged rocks, and was deep, creating rapids. Going back was out of the question, since jumping back toward the rock would be too difficult. We were stuck on a foot-wide beach with nowhere to go, between a raging river and a steep sandy incline.

Rain started to fall, and with it the river slowly began to rise. The rocky cliffs became too wet to traverse, and the necessity of choosing an escape route became imminent.

Nico began climbing the ten-foot ledge that was quickly turning from sand into mud. I stood beneath, watching his progress in terror. Frantically scrambling up the incline, he was able to get a hold on a medium-sized plant jutting from the side of the cliff. He took a moment to consider his next move, and then noticed some rocks sticking out of the dirt. He stretched out and grabbed on to the rocks; using them as handholds he pushed up a few more feet. Farther to his right was a young pine tree jutting out of the cliff, another risky move that made my heart leap. Nico jumped and lifted himself up onto the tree and was able to scramble to the top of the cliff. He made it.

Watching Nico go first did not make it any easier for me. From midway up the cliff I turned around to look down. The bottom looked miles away, and

the river roared like never before. Before paralysis could take complete hold of my small frame, I jumped into action and performed the remaining half of the climb with a fierce determination. That ten-foot cliff seemed gargantuan, and death seemed imminent.

This memory stands out in my mind as a formative moment in my relationship with my younger brother. We had lived through death, and been there for each other. Together we had overcome nature, the thing that threatened to destroy us. Extreme circumstances had made me jump into action, and clarified my role in our relationship. However, it isn't the sense of brotherhood that I now want to meditate on; instead I wish to articulate the roll that *nature* played in the experience, and how I envisioned nature there at the cliff face.

When driving down the road to find a fishing spot, nature was our destination. When we began fishing, the great outdoors became our playground – sort of an arena for our sporting pleasure. The river was also a food source (albeit we wouldn't starve without the fish). Nature, in all of its sublime power, seemed to be pitted against us, holding the reins of our powerlessness, and our lives. We entered the powerful veins of the Rio Grande, and escaped.

Nature provided the backdrop and fuel for this human drama to play out. We entered nature empty-handed, and returned with an experience that has remained vivid in my memory for twelve years after. Nature was the set, laid out with props and a mythological backstory, against which our drama was silhouetted.

Perhaps it was this mythological backstory that Nico and I were afraid of that day, not the water, or the sheer cliff faces. Perhaps I am feeding this mythological force now, by relating the terror of that day. Perhaps you should be terrified of nature; its cliffs and rivers could destroy you, and everyone you

love. There are forces there that we do not understand, and I was made to understand this early in life.

3

Occasionally, visits to grandma would include a night or two camping. My mother always told us stories around the campfire. These stories were some of my first encounters with my cultural heritage.

The stories my mother told were from traditional New Mexican folklore. They are known throughout the state, and kept alive through oral tradition. My mother recited the stories in a voice that sounded like the land they originated in: long expanses of flat quietude cut by raging torrents of sound, and suspense that climbed above the tree line.

One tale that is well known by every New Mexican is La Llorona, the story of a lady whose vanity leads her into a terrible marriage, which produces two children. When the relationship ends abruptly, and the lady is left alone with her kids, she can't handle this blow to her overgrown ego, and loses it. She goes to the river in a fit of madness, and drowns her children. Once she realizes what she has done, she throws herself into the river, ending her own life. The story of La Llorona ends with a warning, that I will paraphrase now:

Still, to this day, you can hear the ghost of La Llorona, crying out for her children. Crying, *mis hijos, mis hijos*. And some days, when the moon is out, and tide is just right, La Llorona will walk out of the river, to look for her children. Some say that many young children have gone to the river at night, and never returned. Some say, those children were taken down into the river by La Llorona, who mistook them as her own.

Besides being a warning against vanity, La Llorona is a warning to young children: Don't venture out too close to a river at night, when the wind is loud enough to sound like a voice, and the moon is out producing a tide. Furthermore this story alludes to supernatural forces that may be at work in nature. The powerful river becomes the home of ghosts, and a force that can claim the lives of those who come too near. The myth of powerful, terrible nature continues. There is something out there that is unexplainable.

Oh wait, I must be talking about God... is what my 14-year-old self would say. By now, any vague ideas of myth and mythology had been usurped by my faith in religion.

4

At 14 I hated going to church, but I believed in the Good Book, and considered myself a devout little disciple. I even led youth group from time to time, and I loved showing off my ability to interpret dense Bible texts. Yet, I really hated going to church, which was another reason why I loved going to grandma's house in the winter.

My grandma lived within an hour's drive of three of the best skiing destinations in the state. Since my mom taught kindergarten, our holidays from school aligned, and my immediate family would head up north. Once we arrived in Vadito we spent one day catching up with my grandma and my extended family, and at least one day skiing. Church would follow on Sunday. That is, until I learned how to convince my parents to let my brothers and me skip church. Then, Sunday became another skiing day.

I would plead, "Mom, I can experience God so much better in the mountains, where his creation is all around me." Other than an excuse to skip church and go skiing (double win), I sincerely believed this.

While riding the ski lift I could see out over the tree line to landscapes far beyond my reach. Countless peaks leading into one another, carpeted by spruce and pine, turned white, like heavy clouds, stuck to the ground. Nature

spread farther than I could see, or even understand; it seemed infinite, like God. I remember I always used to challenge myself to imagine what infinity looked like in my head, or what it even meant. I thought it was integral to understanding God, who has no beginning or end. Seeing nature roll on seemingly forever north of the ski lift seemed like the closest thing to that endlessness.

Then I experienced the feeling of intuition, while skiing down the mountain. I never was taught how to ski; I just did it. I knew how to move my body ever so subtly, in order to maximize my speed while dodging other skiers. I felt that I was in tune with a higher power that helped me know when to lean right, and left, and exactly how much of each.

Maybe I was just naturally talented at skiing, and maybe I learned a lot from watching others. Or maybe God had entered me through the landscape, and led me safely down the hill run after run.

## 5

My idea that nature was a direct conduit to God held tight in my mind until after I turned 16, when I developed a passion for science and became an atheist. My religious ideas of nature were quickly replaced with more scientific ones. One summer, and the school year that followed, stands out in my memory as a transformative time.

After freshman year in high school, my general science teacher, Beverly Mars, asked me to join a summer program, called SERP (Science and Ecology Research Program). The biology department at the University of New Mexico sponsored the program, which a few schools throughout the state participated in. SERP's mission was to familiarize high school students with the methods of field research commonly used in ecological/biology research. Additionally, researchers at UNM along with their colleagues at Syracuse University benefited from the group of high-energy-low-maintenance field

researchers. We provided the scientists with field samples, and in return they showed us the ropes, and paid for it all.

The researchers were looking into snail populations and their habitats, and this research was somehow connected to research in microclimates: zones in nature where the ecology changes drastically within a small geographic area. The Guadalupe Mountains outside of Carlsbad were perfect for both studies.

The Guadalupe Mountains have microclimates in the form of Arcto-Tertiary canyons: canyons carved into the limestone by massive glaciers during the last ice age. After the ice thawed, the canyons became tributaries for runoff, and blossomed with lush flora and fauna. Because of the unique topographic properties of some of these canyons, the flora and fauna remained unchanged as the rest of the landscape dried up. Certain springs took the place of the glacial runoff, and the lush deciduous forests, with ferns, mosses, and broadleaf trees remained in isolated pockets, up to the present day. When one steps into Devils Den Canyon it's like stepping into an alternate dimension. The cacti, shrub-oak, and small juniper trees disappear under a soil of rotting leaves and dense greenery. Springs trickle out of canyon walls, and one has the sense of being in the rainforests of Northwestern America, not the dry desert of Southern New Mexico.

12 students, including myself, would head to Bev's house on a Thursday, where we would meet Jason, our guide and research assistant from the university. Jason was in his early thirties, six feet tall, with spindly workers' hands, a shabby beard, and a long mane of hair, which fluctuated through states of dreadlock. Jason chose to deliver his wife's last child in the bathtub of their small apartment in Albuquerque. He was the hands and feet of the biology department at the University of New Mexico, paid to hike around New Mexico's various wildernesses and collect data and samples for

scientists. Jason was also paid to show us how to do the same, sans bathtub-baby.

The group that comprised SERP was my family for that summer. I looked up to Jason and Bev, and some of those students remain some of my closest friends. We came together to go out into the field, where we became close. We would share meals, and sleep next to each other in tents. During SERP I felt like I was part of a community, which gathered at campsites throughout New Mexico. I felt more at home here than in any religious body, and this group offered me something my family did not. To this day nature remains a place where I can commune with those I love, like I did with my family, and then my community.

We would pile into Bev's Ford Explorer and Jason's Ford Excursion, along with our food and gear, and drive out of town, towards Queen, New Mexico, into Lincoln National Forest. Following unkempt access roads, we trekked into the Devils Den National Research Area, where we would set up camp in any clearing without an abundance of cacti or larger rocks. Together we figured out how to set up tents, while some of us prepared dinner. The rest of us would go out and scout an easy route into the canyon, for the next morning, since there are no trails in the research area.

The next day we would rise early and head into the canyon to begin our research. For our UNM counterparts, we would search through leaf detritus along the canyon walls for snails. We would take note of living snails, and take the dead as samples. We placed small sensors for the Syracuse team, which recorded humidity, wind, and temperature, and other climate signifiers over time.

We learned how to use various devices, for measuring wind, air quality, temperature, etc. We learned how to identify various rocks and plants. Notes were taken in abundance as we named the nature all around us, as scientists in a lab, not as the subjects of God.

On hikes, Jason would lead our group. He hiked in his black-leather-thick-soled-government-issue-forest-service boots. I followed close behind in my sport hikers. His long stride and experience combined with my speed and endurance allowed us to hike a considerable distance ahead of the group, finding the path. Bev led the remainder in our wake. When we were alone we would travel along the canyon floor at a running pace, hopping from boulder to boulder with little caution. We would get to a cliff and fearlessly climb up or down, allowing nothing to hinder our speed or our path. I took pride in my role as a pathfinder, and found immense pleasure hiking and climbing around the land.

I remember one outing very vividly. After a strenuous hike deep into the canyon, the group became exhausted and called it in for the day. Jason and I, however, decided to keep hiking. The researchers wanted a varied range of sensor sites, and we could access the less formidable terrain.

We decided to take the beeline up a sixty-degree canyon wall towards the top of a mesa, and place sensors along the way. The route we chose was treacherous. Safer hikers probably wouldn't have attempted it without a rope. While it was too hot for rattlesnakes, the thicket of yucca and prickly pear cacti presented a minefield of obstacles. Then we were stopped by a twelve-foot vertical cliff-face.

Jason asked me if I was sure I could handle it. After all, limestone is renowned for crumbling under the hands of climbers. Professional climbers don't even bother. But I was 15, and overconfident, so I decided to give it a try. Jason shrugged his shoulders and let me go.

One of the cardinal rules of vertical climbing is to visually and physically check every handhold, to ensure that the hold is strong enough to support your weight, and that there are no scorpions, or worse. For some

reason, probably having to do with hubris, I neglected to check my line on this particular climb.

Nearing the top, I reached up over a ledge without a visual, and suddenly a searing pain pierced my hand and jolted my whole body. I quickly pulled my hand back from the ledge. A small agave plant growing near the back of the ledge had pierced the fleshy area between my knucklebones, on the palm side of my hand. The woody, hypodermic-barbed spine almost penetrated my whole hand, stopped only by the epidermis on the opposite side. A small amount of blood trickled out of the wound. I simply shrugged it off. Being more careful for the rest of the climb, I made it to the top, and Jason followed shortly after.

Then, while placing the final two sensors near the top of the mesa, my hand began to act up. A sharp pain started to spread from the incision left by the agave plant. It then began to swell as we hammered the final sensor into the limestone slope. We still had to climb back down into the canyon and hike out the other end to get back to camp. As we descended from the mesa, the pain slowly turned into numbness.

Using only one flashlight, four feet, and three hands, we made it back to camp after nightfall. Upon arrival Bev shed some light on my wound. The species of agave that lacerated me secretes a neurotoxin, which coats the leaves. Like most successful species in that harsh environment, this agave has developed an advanced defense mechanism against animals, which would otherwise attempt to eat its tasty center, or extract water from its leaves. The cactus' common name is the Century Plant, because it takes 100 years to bloom, according to native folklore. Its whole point in life is to survive long enough till the environment is just right for it to bloom, and for its offspring to thrive. Then it flowers and dies. I ended up at the losing end of that evolutionary trait. Bev assured me the poison wasn't strong enough to cause permanent damage, and I was fine the next morning.

During SERP I began to see nature less as a mythical stage for drama or the creation of an infinite god, and more as a physical, chemical, and biological system. This nature could be quantified, named, and understood. The speed of a raging river was no longer a supernatural force, but simply a collision of geological, topographic, and physical properties, acting to speed up the water in some parts of a river, and slow it down in others. The treacherous chasms became gorges, caused by erosion. The infinite expanse of a landscape could be parsed into microclimates, watersheds, and nuanced ecologies. The wound I suffered on the cliff face wasn't caused by a benevolent force beyond my understanding, but was the product of a process of slow natural selection, through time, and my own reckless abandon.

7

To end here would do little justice to my own experiences, and the nature that fascinates me. While I did lose my mythical and religious ideas of nature after SERP, nature still remains more than a field for scientific inquiry and explainable phenomena. Poetically, nature has always been a site of my ultimate freedom, compared to the self-imposed bindings of day-to-day life, or in my youth a life run by my parents. Nature was a place where I could let my imagination roam free; a place to escape the structured tradition of religion; a place where learning took place, and the veil of ignorance was lifted from before my eyes, again and again.

Later in high school, nature became a realm of self-exploration, where I was free from the watch of the small town I grew up in. I could go out with friends and we could pit our physical strength against cliffs and canyons, making a sport out of exploring the deepest chasms of wild caves. We would get spooked by the dark silence of the desert while camping, and allow the myths of our childhood to take a momentary root. We would shrug off science, ingest mind-altering substances, and experience awe in the face of an infinitely varied source of beauty and inspiration. I used to drive off with my

high school crushes, and make out on peaks before stellar sunsets, or inside abandoned Indian mescal pits.

8

Near the end of my second-to-last semester in college, in the fall of 2015, I went on a hiking trip with several of my classmates and some musicians. We took the train from Grand Central Station in Manhattan to a popular hiking destination north of the city. Musicians assembled the group, and one of my classmates was among the musically talented. We planned to hike to the top of a low peak, and have a small concert. People carried amps, guitars, and other small instruments in their backpacks.

Before the trip I had felt particularly bogged down by the immense amount of responsibility I had taken on. In addition to standard schoolwork, I was learning to use a new artistic medium, preparing a thesis artwork, working a couple jobs for my school, and trying to maintain my personal relationships. On top of all this I had increasing anxiety concerning my future, and was grappling with the choice of whether or not to attend grad school. I hoped that some time hiking around the forest and the mountains would magically clear up my anxieties, help me determine a plan of action, and ease my load, as it usually did.

It didn't.

The hiking was really fun, and much-needed exercise. The concerts the group staged along the way were enjoyable, and the company was great. Still, when I got off the train and made it back to my place, no epiphanies came rushing through the window of my apartment to show me my next move. In fact my anxiety had only gotten worse because of the time I spent doing something other than working out my problems. Furthermore, the hike was cold, and I felt myself drained of all energy from the long day. I expected my brief foray into the woods to heal me, and help me solve my problems. Nature failed me, I felt worse than before, and physically exhausted for the rest of

the weekend. Nature no longer seemed like a place of healing; in fact it had only made things worse.

Do not grieve for me; things eventually resolved themselves through thought and work. The existential moment passed, as such moments tend to.

9

When I began writing this essay I wanted to once and for all define what nature was. By recalling major past experiences I thought I could come to some conclusive definition of what nature means. I expected to pick off all my false ideas one by one, and be left with one idea. I expected to conclude with a blaring exclamation.

Unfortunately this is not the case. Ask me what nature is, and my best and most honest response, would be: *whatever you want nature to be.*

Perhaps the idea that nature will continue to elude our understanding, or a definition at all, is the best possible outcome to this exploration. After all, to discredit any of my many ideas concerning nature is to discredit my own experience. It is to discredit my self. There is no reason nature has to be defined at all. As a matter of fact, all the things I once thought belonged to nature are equally as valid and alive today, as they were eleven years ago, when I was terrified I would drown in Tres Ritos.

Nature consistently defies my attempts to pinpoint its essence, to give it a name, and to understand it as a single entity. However, this is one of the best parts about nature, and one that I embrace. After all it is this ambiguity that has allowed poets, artists, and philosophers to turn to the expanse of nature for endless inspiration, since the first cave drawings. Nature is the ultimate allegory, devoid of particularity, yet containing an endless multitude of references.

Nature is at once a library and factory, containing the chemical building blocks of our reality, and continually at work. Nature is a creative god, and an ambivalent myth. Nature is a refuge, and a threat. Nature is a

place for communion, and can be terribly isolating. Nature is a source of culture, yet may someday destroy us. Nature has many names, yet is unknowable. Nature is all that is outside of myself, and all that is within. And, perhaps nature has not even arrived yet.