

In the span of four days during the midsummer heat of July, I haphazardly packed my most essential belongings into my car and started my ignition in Colorado. In a haze of kicked-up dust, the western expanse of high desert and temperate rainforest swallowed me up and spat me out at the Anacortes Washington ferry landing: the edge of USA, as far as I was concerned. The four-day fatigue I had just developed finally hit me as I set my parking brake on the vehicle deck of the ferry, and sleep overtook me. I awoke to rushed gestures signalling me to get off the boat. Driving onto the exit ramp, I entered into what old sailor's maps would consider only a tiny dot among a stretch of sea, what native Salish people would consider a good place for a summer camp, what present-day locals and government documents would now consider Shaw Island.

Transitioning from a busy city to a tiny, quiet island in a matter of a few days was certainly a shock, but I was unknowingly about to find immense solace in the quietude of a 330-acre plot of preserved natural land. The living things in this place were going to find me out — sooner, rather than later. In my second week of living on Shaw Island, still reveling in its beauty, I had a surprise visitor.

7:30 am. Beep-beep-beep-beep-beep: the blaring sound of my alarm had gone off and I, still stuck in sleep, had turned it off and rolled over in bed with the full intent of returning to my dreams. But mere seconds before drowsiness took me under, I was jolted back to reality with a loud series of taps at my window. In the time it took me to roll back over to inspect the source of the tapping, I had already run through a list of possible suspects in my head. But I was on the second level of an apartment surrounded by a one-mile radius in every direction of undisturbed nature. There could be no way a person was tapping violently on the glass. And then — it became clear. Somehow, miraculously, a downy woodpecker had perched himself on the narrow rail of my window and had attempted to peck the glass like I was the little tree-inhabiting bug he wanted to eat for breakfast. I laid still, staring at him, not daring to move, wondering if it was me his black eyes were assessing. After an immeasurable amount of noiseless breaths, he pushed off against the window and flapped away into the morning sun.

It's a funny coincidence how a loud rap at my window shaking me from sleep was symbolic of a wake-up call. This woodpecker didn't care that the window rail he had landed on was a part of my shelter. Rather, it was an element existing among the trees in his boundaryless, forested home. It was then that I understood that I was dwelling in his domain, not he in mine. Mankind only comes secondarily here: these flourishing land masses that jut out of the Salish Sea feel like a magic place where flora and fauna are their primary population. The natural world exists in every corner and crevasse, functioning eternally, whether we are there to witness it or not. We are dwarfed by the sheer height of the trees and the vast waters that span out beyond us: reminding us of our place in this world. Here, one needn't seek out nature to find it.

But of course, human impact has its effects. While we can choose to walk along a trail in the woods and observe the natural state of the forest, or crawl down to the beach and survey the tide pools for sea stars and hermit crabs and anemones, sea stars and hermit crabs and anemones do not have the same privilege of roaming and foraging in neighborhoods devoid of natural spaces, in towering cities with man-made metals and clogged waterways.

There is a quote by Chief Seattle engraved in one of the headstones in the cemetery on Ellis Preserve. It goes:

“Teach your children that the ground beneath their feet is the ashes of our grandfathers,
That the Earth is rich with the lives of our kin,
That the Earth is our mother.
Whatever befalls the Earth, befalls the sons of the Earth.”

I've pondered this quote over many evening walks and come to the conclusion that in our current times this piece of knowledge has been underappreciated. In mankind's attempt to multiply and conquer, we have created a divide, an imbalance, between the natural world and our own manmade one. And like Newton's Second Law states, our actions in destroying natural things have an equally destructive effect on us. It is not our duty but rather our best interest to reinstate that balance in

natural places we still have. Our counterparts — trees, flowers, clean waters, animals and insects of land and sea, bacteria and fungi of all sizes — not only have an aesthetic value, but are what ultimately provide us shelter, food, and clean air. Whatever befalls the Earth befalls the sons of Earth: we must not only protect, but live in harmony with, the natural world to keep ourselves alive.

It's easy to feel distant from and unaffected by nature in places that people have decided to conquer. Forests of green too often turn into forests of concrete and steel. As I drove across western America to get here, I observed the metropolises pass me on the interstate, the eighteen-wheelers blowing clouds of black fumes behind them, the enormous billboards and fluorescent fast food signs towering in the sky, promising great lunches and great cars and great leaders. And suddenly, I arrived on the islands to see nothing much at all but rocky coasts and tree-lined roads and only the occasional dwelling. This is the San Juan Islands' magic: nature is, first and foremost, its primary governance, much more than many other places in the country; the ecology influences us just as much as we influence it. This magic is a gift that we cannot take for granted. To protect these islands is to protect nature for nature's sake, to keep the land wild — so that downy woodpeckers may wake us and our children and our children's children up for eons to come, reminding us and future generations of their equal importance in this life-filled planet.

By Emma Jacobs