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Closer to Nature: Exploring Environmental Summer Camp Experience Through Ethnographic Fiction

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CLOSER TO NATURE: EXPLORING THE ENVIRONMENTAL SUMMER CAMP EXPERIENCE THROUGH ETHNOGRAPHIC FICTION

by

Courtney Morgan Schofield

A thesis submitted to the Graduate College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
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Thesis Committee:

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This thesis explores the experiences of counselors and campers at environmentally-themed summer camps through the medium of ethnographic fiction. Research was conducted by examining the experiences and influences of two separate summer camps, the Midwest Nature Center Camp and Midwest Zoo Camp. Drawing on traditional ethnographic research methods, I explore the environmental messages emphasized during camp, the myriad of relationships individuals have with nature, and the impact of gender on the summer camp experience. Yet, while this thesis is based on ethnographic research, an emphasis is placed on the presentation of the information. By examining the way anthropology has been traditionally written and examining new avenues of anthropological writing, I argue that there is a need for social sciences to embrace ethnographic fiction as a way to engage broader audiences and humanize the subjects of research.
DEDICATION

Richard “Dick” Lane, my grandfather, did not live to see the completion of this thesis, but I know that he would have been thrilled that I chose to pursue a nontraditional writing style. Richard had unwavering faith in my writing. As an artist himself, in every sense of the word, he believed in the power of creative expression. He believed in its power to reach people, to broaden worldviews, and to evoke emotion. I dedicate this thesis to him.

Courtney Morgan Schofield
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to start by thanking three important women, Dr. Laura Spielvogel, Dr. Sarah Hill, and Dr. Kristina Wirtz, without whom this thesis would not have been possible. As mentors and as thesis committee members, their guidance, support, and input were instrumental to the formation of this thesis. Next I would like to thank Dr. Spielvogel and Dr. Lyon-Callo for inspiring me to pursue creative ethnography. Without their influence and encouragement to examine new forms of anthropological writing, this thesis would have been entirely different, and I would have missed a pivotal learning experience in my graduate studies. I would also like to thank Jara Sutton and Rachel Foreman for overseeing the fine tuning of this thesis. Their sharp eyes and mastery of the English language helped polish my writing and made this final draft worthy of public consumption. Lastly, I want to thank my family. My mother, Cynthia Schofield; father, Phil Schillaci; and grandmother (Nana), Beverly Henry have all helped me to “survive” the last two years. My mother especially has been a pillar of support and a force of encouragement. While I toiled at field work and locked myself away for days at a time to write these words, it was my family’s strength, love, and support that made this journey possible.

Courtney Morgan Schofield
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

During the summer of 2012, I began conducting my Master’s thesis research. I investigated the role of gender in the way boys and girls experience nature; for five weeks I shadowed environmentally-themed summer camps from two organizations (four weeks with a variety of age groups from a Midwest Nature Center, and one week with two age groups at a Midwest Zoo) in the hope of observing children negotiating their relationships with nature. The goal of my fieldwork was to observe the way boys and girls interact with their natural surroundings. I set out to explore how children react, play, and interact with the natural world, as well as to investigate whether there were any sex-based differences in those behaviors.

In most anthropological research, one enters a field site with a number of questions to explore and leaves the site with a different focus. The questions change over the course of the study based on what the researcher does or does not see. My own research experience has been no exception. My observations at the camps revealed a lot of patterns including the presence of camper gender roles, counselor influence on social dynamics, and the repetition of several environmental messages (i.e., the conservation, appreciation, and respect of nature), but I was still unable to see concretely if there was either an innate or constructed relational difference between boys and nature and girls and nature. Therefore, my focus began to shift, and my notes began to reflect different
questions. I noted the power dynamics between counselors and between counselors and campers. I reflected upon the way gender roles and/or gender segregation were reinforced by same-sex peers and supported by the actions and words of counselors. I also began to focus on the way the prevalence of those repeating environmental themes (themes of environmental conservation and personified nature) helped shape activities and camper-counselor interactions.

There were stories to tell about these new observations, small and large truths about these camps to be explored, but I was reluctant to produce any sweeping generalizations/theories that would risk inaccurately depicting these people and their experiences. Five weeks of observation is not, by anthropological standards, an extensive study. While my field research was eye-opening by providing me with a strong understanding of the camp formats, dynamics, and activities, the more I pored over my field notes and interviews, the more hesitant I became to theorize about the relationship between children, gender, and nature. Instead, the story that began to reveal itself was one infused with voices, anecdotes, metaphors, and even humor. It was a story that accurately revealed the research experience by reflecting the multiple facets of the field site instead of focusing on one overarching set of theories. It was a story that was not supported by a traditional thesis structure.

Most traditional thesis formats are composed of separate chapters for the introduction, literature review, methodology, main presentation of findings, and conclusion. For my project ambitions, this format felt too restricting, too distant. The trouble with traditional ethnography is that it often takes on the appearance of objective
science, removed from the emotion and individuality upon which the research is based. Following several weeks, months, or years with subjects, during which time the anthropologist has formed close relationships with the subjects and is emotionally involved in the experience, the researcher retreats to analyze and write about the field work. Suddenly the emotion is removed, those experiences are quantified and the voice of the subjects can often be silenced or muted. Despite the best intentions of an anthropologist, the subjects have the potential to become dehumanized and one-dimensional. This problem is further magnified by a heavy reliance on jargon and theory which make traditional ethnographic writing less accessible to broader audiences.

Classic ethnographic works like E.E. Evans-Pritchard’s *The Nuer* (1969) and Edmund Leach’s *Political Systems of Highland Burma* (1970) are told through the eyes of the anthropologists; these works are dense with theory and quantitative data. Margaret Mead’s work, *Growing Up in New Guinea* (1930), generated wide public attention, a unique feat for anthropologists both then and now. However, despite popular consumption, Mead’s work supported a Self vs. Them mentality common in many early ethnographies, and the subjects of her research appeared exotic, even ‘primitive’ while their individual voices were combined into one singular, often misrepresented, communal voice. More recent works like Beth Conklin’s *Consuming Grief: Compassionate Cannibalism in an Amazonian Society* (2001) and Patty Kelly’s *Lydia’s Open Door* (2008) are not exempt from these problems, as they too are dense with history, numbers, and theory. While the subjects’ voices are more present in recent ethnography, clinical descriptions unintentionally make the subjects appear as Other, and the style, theory, and
content remain inaccessible to a broader audience, the public outside of academia.

While the material embedded in these more traditional kinds of ethnography is interesting, informative, and theoretically relevant, the focus the anthropologist places upon the collective and the community has the potential to brush over the individual experience within a larger culture as well as the individual thoughts and feelings which enforce and sometimes contradict the over-arching patterns. The exclusion of specific voices helps support stereotypes and enforces distance from the subjects for the reader.

Works like Serena Nanda's *Neither Man nor Woman* (1999) and Marjorie Shostak's *Nisa* (1981) present more multi-dimensional characters and accessible material. They avoid many of the pitfalls of ethnography by including more narrative in their writing, and by offering a more personal approach to ethnography. These works attempt to put faces to cultural themes, and faces to individuals in the field, while also admitting the variability that exists within culture and the fallibility that exists within research.

The limitations of traditional ethnography have been explored in depth. There are a number of well-established anthropologists who have investigated the subjectivity of research analysis and the partiality of ethnography. Each author has highlighted a different dynamic in the representation of culture, whether it be power balance (Spivak, 1988), impartiality and perspective (Clifford, 1986), Orientalism, insider/outsider status (Abu-Lughod, 1991), or the inclusion/emphasis of emotion (Behar, 1997; Rosaldo, 1993). These dynamics are complex and have no easy answers. Still, the problems of past and present ethnographic trends are worth discussing.

In the introduction to *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography,*
James Clifford’s "Introduction: Partial Truths" (1986) explores the development of anthropological writing, and the difficulty of writing about culture in light of subjective experiences and partial representation. While Clifford reveals some of the well-known difficulties of ethnography, he is also careful to distinguish ethnography from works of fiction. Clifford explains that the introduction, and the works of ethnography that follow in *Writing Culture*, are impacted by rhetoric, style, and voice, and while ethnographic truths are inherently partial, they do require more self-analysis/criticism.

Clifford is not the only anthropologist to note the partiality of anthropological research following a surge of post-modern inspired anthropology. Lila Abu-Lughod’s "Writing Against Culture" highlighted the limitations of traditional research and the Self vs. Other writing style (1991). Abu-Lughod argues that there is not one static view of culture and condemns traditional ethnography for depicting a one-dimensional view of life. She also argues that the way anthropologists have written about culture in the past has helped to reinforce a cultural hierarchy which places Western culture over the “exotic” Other. Abu-Lughod explains that this separation is inherently problematic for anthropologists as it distances the reader from the subject.

Gyutri Spivak’s work underscores limitations in anthropology as well, focusing not on the history of anthropological Self vs. Other dichotomization, but its history of speaking for the subjects rather than letting them speak for themselves. In “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988) Spivak emphasizes the paradox of the field. Spivak demonstrates that while anthropology (and ethnography) is represented as providing a voice for the voiceless (those left out of history or marginalized), anthropological writing
often still speaks for them, choosing the subjects of exploration and the themes represented in writing rather than letting them speak for themselves.

Just as the voice of subject has been explored in literature, the voice of the writer, the anthropologist, has also been explored. Renato Rosaldo’s *Grief and a Headhunter’s Rage* is probably the most well known example of this investigation (1993). Within “Introduction: Grief and a Headhunter’s Rage,” Rosaldo explores how the life experience of the anthropologist can enable or inhibit him/her from understanding or “accurately” representing a culture and how the infusion of emotion in analysis can be beneficial to anthropological work. This was a groundbreaking piece which helped shine the spotlight on the author behind participant observation.

While one of the most recognized works, *Grief and a Head Hunter’s Rage*, is not the only source to explore the role of emotion within anthropology. Ruth Behar’s “Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart” from *The Vulnerable Observer* emphasizes the importance of emotion in anthropological work (1997). Behar has come to the realization that ethnography that triggers emotional responses and sparks identification or empathy is the kind of work that will make a difference and engage readers. According to Behar, “anthropology that doesn’t break your heart just isn’t worth doing anymore” (177). Behar also notes that this new trend of discussing the engagement of emotion in current anthropological writing is a reaction to the limitations of traditional research styles which needs to be viewed and interpreted separately from traditional ethnography and traditional anthropological critiques. She explains this exploration by stating: “I think what we are seeing are efforts to map an intermediate space we can’t quite define yet, a
borderland between passion and intellect, analysis and subjectivity, ethnography and autobiography, art and life” (174). It is a new medium that cannot be judged by the same guidelines as traditional anthropology.

As a result of the restrictions of ethnography, and in light of this budding intermediate space in ethnographic writing, the format of my thesis, like my research questions, began to change. I turned to creative ethnography, a genre of writing separate from academic journal articles and traditional ethnography. This genre allowed me to incorporate the voices and perspectives of my subjects into my writing, to reveal the inner workings of field work, and, I hope, to portray a more vivid, human experience. It is a genre that I believe will be essential to anthropology’s success in the future as departments in the social sciences, such as anthropology, struggle for funding, enrollment, and teaching positions. Indeed, the discipline’s survival may depend on its flexibility. Creative ethnography opens the door to the public and to the broader world which may help rejuvenate the field while benefiting from the research.

In a field based on tradition, many departments cling to the idea of anthropology as being a social *science*, while others mistrust emotion in field work. One program that allows/supports the exploration of alternative writing styles to express ethnographic truth is Western Michigan University’s anthropology department. There are a handful of professors in this department experimenting with short story, poetry, and autoethnography as mediums to represent their field work and oral history collections. These professors have turned to this new form of expression after being frustrated and disillusioned by the limitations and one-dimensional voice of traditional writing. In
addition to exploring creative ethnography for themselves, they have offered undergraduate and graduate courses in this area; exploring such themes as the presence of anthropological subjects in fiction, and how to compose creative ethnography. By introducing me to the variety of writing styles available to convey ethnographic fiction (short story, memoir, poetry, autoethnography, creative non-fiction, etc.), I was able to hone my own anthropological voice.

The seven short pieces of ethnographic fiction below are the result of this new "voice." The stories and poems are based on the preparation, literature review, participant observation, semi-structured, and informal interviews that went into my Master's thesis field work. The names of the organizations I worked with for this thesis have been changed to maintain anonymity. Within this thesis they will be referred to under the pseudonyms Midwest Nature Center, Midwest Zoo, and Midwest Bird and Wildlife Sanctuary. Furthermore, the identities of people have been altered and combined, experiences have been concentrated, and the time line of events has been changed for anonymity purposes, but the integrity of the stories remains intact. These stories, while works of fiction, reflect my experiences at nature-themed summer camps and the stories are meant to humanize both the fieldwork and the subjects of the study.
CHAPTER II

THE NATURE OF RESEARCH

Conversations with Nature:

Whisper 1

Shoes sink into the soft grass
The lawn is lush, green, damp
Soaked from the morning’s rain.
I stand holding the gate, watching
Waiting
The counselor brings the campers forward
One at a time
And Ms. Beverly’s grin matches theirs.
I watch, as the observer, the anthropologist,
Finally here.
One, eight, eleven.
Ms. Beverly waves them forward, leads them to the tortoise
The turtle is ancient. Huge!
Bigger than the campers’ torsos, legs, and arms
His shell is wide, ridged like mountains
And as the children press their hands against his shell
Feeling the tree bark roughness beneath their small bare hands
Against their palm and fingertips.
I can't believe I'm here.
I can't believe I've made it.
The observer, the anthropologist--
I drink it all in.
I press my own hand against the ancient shell.
And I feel it- what the campers feel
I feel whispers of Wonder. Awe. Respect.
No new messages.

Swell.

Sarcastic swell.

Is swell ever not used in a sarcastic way?

I throw my cell phone back into the black hole of my purse, pull the keys from the ignition, and climb out of my small green Honda, shoulders slumped and soul crushed. I walk across the mall towards the restaurant, the heels of my boots clicking against the brick walkway with each step and my mind plagued by my empty voice mail, my empty email inbox.

No new messages, really? Really?! It has been a month (a month!) since I’ve heard from the Midwest Zoo, the potential/tentative/hopeful field site for my Master’s thesis research. A month is a long time when your research success hangs in the balance, so ‘no new messages’ has me a little freaked out. I can’t help but wonder if they’ve changed their minds and are afraid to tell me. I worry that although I’ve been pushing so hard to make this field site fit, it may be one of those situations where it isn’t right if you have to try so hard to make it work. What if, after months of work, it isn’t meant to be?

The girls are already seated at the back of the restaurant (because we are college-aged women, hostesses like to place us by the kitchen doors). Jillian is poring over the menu, as I draw closer. She probably skipped lunch to work one of her many part-time jobs—she’s always starved whenever we have girl’s night. I notice that while her bright
blue eyes are wide and alert, she has shadows under eyes from those many part time jobs.

Lucy sits beside her. I can tell by her wild hand motions and the wicked grin that Lucy’s talking about a boy. She reaches out and grabs a piece of bread from the appetizer dish in the center of the table. She grins when she sees me and takes a bite of bread, pausing while Jillian and Candy laugh at her joke. Lucy has such a vivacious personality and she’s always got some story or “snap judgment” to share.

Candy is sipping from a wine glass. Her cell phone is resting on the table next to her napkin and I know she’s waiting for her husband, Ammon, to call. Candy spends so much time on campus that I always feel bad taking her away from what time she gets at home, but I also feel selfishly happy when we can pull her away for a two-hour girl’s night.

“Hey Courtney,” Candy greets me as I take up the empty chair at the round dinning table. “We ordered an appetizer and drinks, but we were waiting for you to order food.”

“Oh, you guys didn’t have to wait. I’m sorry!”

“Don’t be. We also ordered you a glass of Moscato. I hope that’s okay.”

“That’s perfect,” I say, picking up the wine glass and taking a big sip.

“So what’s new?” Candy asks. “I feel like we haven’t seen you in a while.”

“I know, and I’m sorry about that, I’ve just been busy working on my thesis proposal.”

“How’s that going?”

“Well…” I start, ‘no new messages’ flashing across my mind. “So you know that
feeling you get when everything goes according to plan, and you feel like you’re on top of the world?”

Lucy, Candy, and Jillian look back at me with matching looks of confusion and amusement.

“Yeah,” I sigh. “Me neither.”

“What’s the matter?” Jillian asks, taking a sip of her micro brew. Around us there is a hustle of dinner time traffic. From our table at the back of the restaurant we can see the clamor of patrons talking and laughing, hear the clink of fork and knife against pristine white plates.

“Oh, nothing. I just thought I was making progress, but now I’ve slid downhill and have landed on my ass again.”

Thesis work is a long, tedious process. First, you pick your research question and next you contact a field site, complete your research at the field site, and finally write about that research in the thesis. It is all part of the climb. With my question formed (the relationship between children and nature), I’ve been stalled at step two for three months now, struggling in vain to nail down my field site.

“What happened? I thought you were feeling really good about your thesis!” Lucy asks.

“I was! You know I had a great first meeting with the Midwest Zoo, and I thought they were really open to my doing my research there, but they aren’t really good about responding to my emails, and now it has been over a month since I’ve heard for them,” I explain, rubbing my face with my hand, feeling much older than 23.
“That sucks, Courtney, I’m sorry. What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know...I don’t want to rush them. They have their own obligations and responsibilities, so I won’t strong-arm them into participating,” I start. “But if I don’t start making progress on the human subjects research proposal, I won’t get approval in time to do my research this summer.” I pick up my wine glass and take another deep sip from my Moscato, hoping that the sweet peach taste will help calm my nerves. It doesn’t. Nothing does. I’ve had a nest of owls in the pit of my stomach for weeks now, the most severe case of “nervous butterflies” ever.

“Can you contact a different organization about doing your field research with them?”

“I guess… But think about how long it took me to get this far with the Zoo. All the meetings and appointments, and proposal changes....”

And that is true. There’s only a little over a month and a half left before the summer camps start—that’s a very short time to get things turned around. Not to mention that I’m worried it would be rude to ask another organization to let me do field work this close to the start of camp.

“I’ve done as much as I can while I wait to hear from them...I have most of my literature review completed and a draft of my proposal ready,” Although it is littered with holes while I wait for the Zoo to respond, I add silently. Wow is this day depressing.

“Would it really be the end of the world if you had to wait to do your research next summer?” Lucy asks. I know she’s just trying to think positively, look for alternative solutions, but I make a face anyway. Yes. Yes. Yes, it would!
“Maybe not the end of the world, but it would be the end of my credit score. If I don’t do my research this summer, I can’t graduate on time, which means more time, more money, more loans. You know the drill.”

“Yeah... I don’t blame you for panicking,” Candy says. “Well, if that’s the case maybe you should go in to talk to your advisor again. Don’t you think Dr. Rosalyn can help you?”

“Yeah, I know I need to make an appointment with her. I just hate running to her all the time with all my problems—I’m afraid that she’s going to start sprinting in the opposite direction when she sees me.”

Candy laughs, shaking her head. “She is not going to start sprinting away when she sees you.”

“She might!”

* * *

*I’m pretty sure the stress is making me look like a horror movie monster. I’d run away from me if I could.*

Lucy, Candy, and Jillian are all graduate students in the same program as I; because we are “in it together,” they are always willing to listen and comfort me as I share my frustrations and struggles, but sometimes it can be hard for them to understand. They are all scaling their own theses and are at different stages of that climb. And the thesis process is just as new to them as it is to me, so while they can empathize, they can’t provide guidance for what I should do and where I should go next. Our standby refrain is “go talk to your advisor.”

“Alright, well, someone else should share their problems,” I say, taking a piece of
bread from the appetizer we are sharing and dipping it in the artichoke and cheese mix.

“Make me feel better about my life,” I tease. Help me forget for a moment, just a moment, how much I have left to do and figure out by June 18th.

“Well, I don’t even have a thesis question yet,” Lucy grins, taking up the line. And the conversation continues from there.

~*~*~*~

The anthropology department is deserted when I arrive on campus. The hallway is dark and the office doors are closed. It’s still early. Most of the grad students and faculty won’t start rolling in until around noon.

Dr. Rosalyn’s door is open just a tiny crack. I stand outside for a good two minutes trying to get my head on straight, but my mind is a mess from all of the things I want and need to say. My brain feels foggy, like the owls are nesting up there as well as in the pit of my stomach. Should I email them again? Would that be harassment? Is it a bad sign that I haven’t heard from them? Is it possible they are backing out without saying they are backing out? My thoughts flutter. I have so many questions, so many doubts.

Finally, the nest still tangled, I give up and knock twice. She’s used to my rambling, and, as always (like magic), she’ll help me untangle the havoc of my brain.

I wait for her soprano voice to chime ‘come in’ before I push on the handle. Like most anthropologists, my advisor’s office is decorated with artifacts and art collected from her field research (as Dr. Rosayln’s regional focus is Japan, origami, kanji texts, and dyed textiles peek out from various surfaces). The bookcases are over flowing with

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ethnographies, textbooks, and research materials, and there are stacks of paper surrounding her laptop— piles of essays waiting to be graded. Dr. Rosalyn is at her desk, her chocolate hair pulled back with a clip, and her attire is her usual understated elegance; slacks and a sweater over a blouse. When I enter she spins in her chair and gives me one of her patented warm, patient smiles. I smile tentatively back, softly closing the door behind me.

"Have a seat, Courtney, I’m finishing this email and then I’ll be right with you,” Dr. Rosalyn says, turning back to her computer.

The clicking of her keyboard fills the air, so I take a seat and stare at my hands, reveling in how I already feel less crazy just being in my advisor’s office.

“So,” Dr. Rosalyn says, looking back up. “What’s going on?”

“Well, I was hoping to talk to you about my field site. I haven’t heard from them in a month, but I really need to start moving forward with my human subjects proposal and thesis proposal.”

“Okay... when was the last time you contacted them?”

“Um, two weeks ago....I came up with an excuse to email them and well, remind them that I’m still alive.”

She laughs. “Well, I’m sure they haven’t forgotten that you’re alive. They’re probably just busy, or they don’t have any answers for you and so are avoiding the questions... Have you called them yet?”

I shake my head “no.”

“Well, I think that’s your best bet. Call the Zoo and see if you can arrange a
meeting with your contact or your contact’s boss to talk in more depth and get some of these problems resolved.”

“And that’s not pressuring them?”

“I mean, it may be pressuring them a little, but I don’t think you are going to get anything resolved by email if it hasn’t been productive so far,” she says shrugging. “And they can always say no if the timing isn’t right. Plus, you can send them what you have of your proposal so far so that they can ask any questions about it that they might have.”

“Alright, sounds like a plan,” I say standing back up. “Thank you very much.”

“No problem, let me know how it goes.”

~*~*~*~

Walking down the boardwalk to the wooded office of the Midwest Zoo, my stomach flutters with every step. Ms. Emily Flowers meets me at the reception desk. Her round face is bare of makeup, except for a touch of brown eye shadow, and she’s dressed in khaki pants and a brown Midwest Zoo logo embroidered dress shirt—the same uniform she was wearing the last time we met.

“Hey, Courtney, good to see you again.”

“You too, thanks for meeting with me,” I say, straightening my blouse.

“Of course. Right this way. We’re meeting in the small staff room. We’ll be meeting with one of my other colleagues, I hope that’s okay.”

What? I’m thrown, I’m sure it shows on my face, but I quickly cover it with a smile. “Yeah, no problem.”

Much like my thesis work, the meeting pretty much goes downhill from there.
“I’m just concerned that you following the campers will be distracting. We can’t have you interfering with their summer experience. They are paying for camp,” Anna, Emily’s colleague, explains.

“I assure you that is not my intention at all! My research is based around observing the children’s natural behavior. It would actually hurt my project to interfere with how they behave during camp activities or during their interactions with nature.”

“Well, you couldn’t interview them during activities,” Anna persists.

“Of course not. I will respect any boundaries you guys want to set. Emily mentioned my using the lunch time to ask questions.”

“Well… that would work. But, there is still hesitancy from our bosses.”

WHAT? There’s a heavy silence. Shit. This is news to me. Shit. Shit. Shit.

I clear my throat. “Oh…Should I be concerned?” I ask before sucking in another breath. “Should I be looking into a back up field site?”

There are owls in my throat. No, not owls, they are more like bald eagles. I’m surprised I can speak without choking.

“No, no! I think we can work this out!” Emily jumps in. I can tell by her face that she means it, or wants to mean it, or thinks she means it. While the email correspondence has been sporadic, I’ve never doubted her commitment to my project.

“Anna and I will talk to the higher ups and work this out. We believe that you don’t want to interfere with the integrity of the camp.”

“So…I shouldn’t find a backup?” I probe.

“No, this will work out. I’m sure it will. We will work on the boss and will email
you when we know anything more.”

I know that I should give Emily a chance to contact me, but I’m in full panic mode as I leave the meeting. As I climb in behind the wheel of my car, I fish through my purse for my cell phone and immediately email my advisor to ask for the soonest possible meeting. I crave the security of that office chair, of sitting across from someone who knows what the hell they are doing because I certainly don’t. Not anymore, anyway.

---

The next day I show up at my advisor’s door, slightly panicky, but not hysterical. Still, there’s a string of questions flapping around my mind. The synapses in my brain must look like fireworks as I worry: What should I do? Should I wait? How long could I afford to wait? Should I back out? I trust that Emily is telling the truth, that she wants this to work, but it feels like it is out of her hands. And again: What should I do? Should I wait? How long could I afford to wait? Should I back out? I trust that Emily is telling the truth, that she wants this to work, but it feels like it is out of her hands.

Dr. Rosalyn sits me down. Again she is patient, calm, and supportive.

“I don’t think you want to pull out yet, Courtney, and you don’t want to rush the Zoo in case you risk putting your contacts in jeopardy with their bosses. That being said, it wouldn’t hurt to put feelers out to see if one of the other camps would be amenable to your project — the ones you contacted for interviews. You can reach out to see if one of them would be open to you doing a week or two of observation with them,” Dr. Rosalyn says, her smile sympathetic, but encouraging. “It might actually help your thesis, having
a comparative element to your research. Was there an organization that stood out to you?”

I remember the Midwest’s Nature Center’s representative, Lauren Oak. I remember how willing Ms. Oak was to be interviewed. How interested she was in my project. Her email responses had been automatic and enthusiastic: “Thank you for your interest in our program!” and “For over 50 years, the Midwest Nature Camp has worked to connect people with nature” and “I think that this would be a very good fit for both of us.”

“Yes,” I answer Dr. Rosalyn. “There is a camp that I think I can reach out to, but do you think it’s too late in the game to be asking to observe their camp now?”

“Well, you won’t know until you try. It helps that you’ve talked to them about your project before when you asked to interview them, so…”

“Alright,” I say, feeling slightly better now that I have a plan. “Thank you. Again.”

“No problem, Courtney. Keep me updated.”

“I will,” I agree. Mostly because I don’t know how to do this alone.

~*~*~*~

How do I start this? What should I say? I don’t want to beg, but... I stare at the computer screen, watching the cursor blink against the white page. Oh lord, I just want to go to sleep, but I can’t. Not until I’ve rewritten and deleted this stupid email at least two more times.

Dear Lauren Oak,
Dear Lauren,

I am excited that the Midwest Nature Center is willing to participate in my Western Michigan University Master's thesis project, and I look forward to interviewing you in the future, but I would also like to set up a meeting with you to discuss my conducting field research at the Center's summer program, Nature Camp.

Too presumptuous.

Delete.

Delete.

Delete.

I jab the backspace button with a little more force than necessary so that the key sticks and I have to pry it back up with the tip of my pinky nail.

but I am also hoping to set up a meeting with you to discuss the possibility of my conducting field research at the Center's summer program, Nature Camp.

Yes, better.

I am planning on observing the summer camps at Midwest Zoo for a few weeks between the months of June and August, but after discussing my project with my thesis committee, for accuracy, it was decided that I should expand my observations to look at the way children interact with nature at multiple field sites (multiple summer camp programs). I would appreciate the opportunity to meet with you in person to discuss the possibility of observing 1 or 2 weeks of your summer camp program. Is this something that your program would consider allowing, and are there any times that you would be available next week to discuss this opportunity?

Thank you for your time and consideration.
Best,

Courtney Schofield

Is best okay? Best? Sincerely? Best wishes? Namaste? No, best is fine. That's how I signed the last one...

Send.

The minute I press send I feel like I'm in an episode of *How I Met Your Mother*, chasing after the text as though I can catch it before it reaches its destination. But it's in the air, out of grasp. I can't take it back. All I can do is wait...

I don't have to wait long; I have a meeting set up with Lauren by the end of day.

My preference for doing fieldwork at the Midwest Zoo had been multifaceted. I figured a Zoo Camp would include more child-animal interactions, which would provide great opportunities for observation during my field work, and when I looked at the website, I saw that the weekly camp sessions explored a variety of environmental themes. The Midwest Zoo played a huge role in my own socialization with nature as a child; I have fond memories of going to family events at the Zoo while growing up, of petting goats, and walking the trails around the exhibits, staring at red pandas, running forward for a peek at a real fur-and-blood cheetah. And, with my grad student budget in mind, I was seduced by the proximity of the Zoo to my home. I would save a fortune driving back and forth to the Zoo for the summer rather than driving back and forth to the Midwest Nature Camp or the Midwest Bird and Wildlife Sanctuary summer camp. But, while I have been leaning towards the Zoo for my main field site, I am ready to go where I am wanted.
I would drive to Canada every day if it meant I could get my field work done on time.

~*~*~*~

Just as with the letter, I overthink my outfit. Because I suffer from the social distortion that dress clothes make me more respectable, I end up being overdressed for the meeting. Sitting on a bench in the front of the Center, I fidget with my skirt, smoothing the white lace with the base of my fingers while I wait for Lauren to come down to greet me. *Should I have gone with the plain black pencil skirt?*

My worries are forgotten as Lauren, a tall woman with a heart shaped face, walks in. She smiles brightly, shakes my hand, and leads me to the staff's lunch room.

Thank you so much for meeting me,” she says.

“Of course.”

We sit down at a small kitchen table. “So, you want to talk about observing the summer camp?”

“Yes, if you are open to it. I promise that I would be unobtrusive. I mean, I wouldn’t interfere with the structure of the camp or the activities. I would just follow, observe, and ask occasional questions. I know this is last minute…”

She waves my apology away. “Don’t worry about it. How many weeks were you thinking?”

“Two…if that’s possible,” I say. “And again, I promise that I have no intention of interfering with the camp structure…I just, you know, want to watch and see what camp is like, how the kids react to nature. That kind of thing.”
“Well, I think you’ll find that our camp is kind of unique,” Lauren says. She pulls out a colorful Nature Camp brochure and slides it across the table for me to see. “There are structured activities and lessons, but Nature Camp is very much about children discovering nature, so we give them free time to play in the water or in the fields. We let them voice what activities they want to do for the day. We go with the flow, let the day take them where it takes them—I should mention that we are outside for the majority of the day. 90% of the day at least.”

Oh my god, it sounds perfect! As she talks about the camp, I can’t help but think how amazing the structure sounds, how perfect it will be for observation. Those are exactly the kind of interactions I was hoping for a chance to see.

It sounds perfect. I think to myself again.

“It sounds perfect,” I say aloud.

We talk a little longer about logistics, HSIRB, consent, the dates of observation, etc., and all of the little unavoidable details that need to be discussed. As she walks me back to the front door, all of the arrangements are made and I have a two-week field-site.

“Thanks again. Really, Lauren, thank you!”

“Not a problem. We look forward to having you!”

Walking back to my car, I actually find myself thankful that the Zoo Camp has been silent. I really don’t think I would have reached out to the Midwest Nature Center otherwise, and I would have missed an amazing opportunity. Plus, now I know that, at the very least, I will have two weeks of observation under my belt by the end of the
summer. I can move forward with the information I have without having to obsess about the Zoo needing more time to get back to me.

~*~*~*~

I try not to obsess, I do, but after a month passes and there is still no more word from the Midwest Zoo, I feel close to tears. I have proposal approval. I have HSIRB consent. So, with less than two weeks before the start of camp, there aren’t words for my panic.

I reach out, desperate for contact, for some word from them.

“Dear Emily, I have received approval for my thesis proposal from my committee... I would like to request a meeting to speak with you one last time in person to finalize arrangements. I want to touch base, as I haven’t heard from anyone about the project... Three weeks until summer camps start... Thanks for your time...”

I try to keep the tone of the letter polite, but I can’t seem to keep the urgency out of any of the drafts I compose. I do exclude the sentence, “Please, please, just write me back. Put me out of my misery,” feeling that that may be over-the-top.

I’m kind of proud of my restraint.

But still no word.

Maybe I should have included that last sentence.

Instead of scaling new heights, suddenly I’m the little woman on the mountain hanging from a pickax, terrified of falling, but unable to find my grip to climb up.

I show up at Dr. Rosalyn’s door again, this time on the edge of hysteria. “What am I supposed to do? Camps starts in, like, two weeks? Less than two weeks? How am
I going to graduate on time if I can’t get my research done this summer? How can they leave me hanging like this?”

Today her magic office chair isn’t working. I don’t feel less crazy. In fact, I feel even more insane, like the chair is encouraging me to unleash my crazy. I try to put a cap on it, so that I don’t lose her respect by unleashing the horror movie monster in me, but I’m confident that I resemble a child who believes that the first baby tooth falling out means she will have nothing but gums by the end of the day. Oh god, I’m going to have nothing but gums by the end of the day.

Like a parent explaining that new teeth grow in, and that sometimes if you put the tooth under your pillow, the tooth fairy will leave you something amazing, my adviser talks me down.

“These field-site hitches are a normal part of ethnographic research.”

“This is a normal part of growing up. You aren’t losing all of your teeth.”

“Courtney, reach out to the Midwest Nature Center again and see if they would be open to you extending the length of your observations.”

“Courtney, put your tooth under the pillow.”

“This may be for the best, sometimes the field-sites pick you.”

“The tooth fairy may leave you something amazing.”

As I walk out, my mind whirling, a fuzzy cluttered nest again, I wonder if maybe I have been trying to make the Midwest Zoo fit into my thesis where it didn’t belong. It seemed so right at first, that in my tenacious, pigheaded effort to get them on board (helmet, seatbelt, brakes be damned), I didn’t realize that I was fighting for the wrong
thesis.

I decide to reach out to Lauren again. It's very short notice, and probably extremely rude to ask, but I'm hanging from a cliff if I don't ask. I really will have nothing but gums.

As I write my letter to the Midwest Nature Center, revising again and again as I type, I find myself feeling a little like Princess Leia from Star Wars sending a plea for help to Obi-Wan Kenobi right before being kidnapped by Darth Vader: “Help me, Obi-Wan, you are my only hope!”

I only hope that my desperation isn't as palpable.

“Dear Lauren...I realize that this is short notice so close to the start of summer camp...I sincerely apologize... my main field site may have to pull their participation.... I would like to discuss the possibility of my extending my observations at the Midwest Nature Center...an additional 2 or 3 weeks....I would be as unobtrusive as possible...I realize that this is short notice, so I will understand if it is not possible....more than happy to come to meet with you...Thank you for your time and consideration.”

I barely blink before I have a response from Lauren.

I quickly scan the letter, holding my breath as I pick out key words: “Fine to extend your observations,” “No problem,” and “let me know the weeks...I will make the arrangements.”

And there it is. The perfect fit. Or rather, the right fit.

I write Dr. Rosalyn right away, explaining the changes and then, too elated to not share my news, I call my mother.
“Hey Mom, I’m not interrupting anything, am I?”

“Not at all, what’s going on?”

“Well, I just wanted to let you know that I heard back from the Midwest Nature Center.”

“You did? And? What did they say?”

“That I can extend my observations.”

I can hear her exhale over the phone line. “Oh, Courtney, I’m so relieved. Aren’t you relieved?”

“You have noo idea. So, now I have to write the Midwest Zoo and let them know I’m changing field-sites. I know there is still a little bit of time before camp starts, but I don’t know if I can wait any longer for an answer, and it is not fair to make the Nature Center wait for my response.”

“I think that’s a good idea, and I think you’ll feel better if you have the field site figured out. It will give you time to prepare.”

“I know, I think I will feel better too, but first I have to figure out how to write it so that the Zoo will still consider participating in my project,” I explain, running a hand through my hair. “I think I can still learn a lot from the Zoo, so I want to leave the door open in case they still want to let me interview them. Or even just let me do a week or two of observation down the road.”

“That’s a good point...leaving the door open, I mean... Let me know if you want me to read the email before you send it. I would be happy to look over it and give you feedback.”
“Thanks, Mom, I might take you up on that offer. Well, I have to go start that letter.”

“Alright, well, I love you. And we’ll order Mexican this weekend to celebrate. Sound good?”

“Sounds great! Thanks again, Mom, I love you too.”

It’s a hard letter to write, especially since I’ve spent months trying to make the Midwest Zoo work for my fieldwork. I sit at my laptop, staring at the blinking cursor, wishing it was already August and my research was over. Wishing that I could see how it all ends.

“Dear Emily...I am writing to you not to rush your response...but to inform you of the changes in the status of my project...due to time crunch...I have made the Midwest Nature Center the main field site of my project...I am still very interested in working with the Zoo, so if during the next few weeks the Midwest Zoo decides to move forward with their participation, please feel free to contact me...I still believe working with the Zoo would enrich my research.”

I look over my email, read it two more times (once even out loud to myself) before calling it good. I push send and try to breathe easier. After all, I think Dr. Rosalyn was right, I think that sometimes a field site isn’t about what is planned or expected. Sometimes the field site picks you.

~*~*~*~

I meet Jillian, Candy, and Lucy the next day after our evening seminar for our girls’ night dinner. When Lucy and I arrive, Jillian and Candy are already seated.
Candy is texting and she smiles guiltily as we sit down. “Sorry, I was just telling Ammon I might be late tonight.”

“Not a problem, text away love bird,” I tease, taking a sip of water.

“Ugh, I’m so jealous of how cute you two are together,” Lucy gushes. “I want that! Did I tell you my date stood me up last week?”

“I know, and it’s terrible—he’s a jerk—but it took me years to meet Ammon and to start a life with him, you just have to be patient.”

“Patience isn’t exactly my strong point.”

“Wait a second, hold on to the good gossip until we’ve ordered. I’m absolutely starved—I’ve been at the office all day,” Jillian requests.

Lucy laughs. “Sounds good, I’m ravenous too, I only had a granola bar for lunch.”

Our orders placed, we shoot the breeze for a while before Candy turns the conversation over to me. “So, Courtney, how is your project going?”

I grin. “Well, you know that feeling you get when everything goes according to plan, and you feel like you’re on top of the world?”

“Are you serious this time, or did something go wrong?”

“Completely serious. In a week and a half I start my research.”

“Courtney, that’s awesome! Congratulations!”

“Thanks! I’m very excited,” I say. And I am. This time the fluttering in my stomach is from excitement, not fear or nerves. “Instead of being on my ass at the
bottom of the hill, I’m climbing the mountain.”

The right mountain.

“I can see the top.
CHAPTER III

GENDER IN NATURE

Conversations with Nature:

*Whisper 2*

Armored birds scribbled on construction paper
Drawn in waxy, sun-melted crayon
In fading marker
On the back of half-finished art projects.
Swords held in eagle talons,
Tiger tails clinging to spiked tools,
The boys draw poisonous snakes,
Poisonous frogs,
Poisonous anything.
Across the tarp, the girls color vibrant butterflies,
Flocks of birds, fields of flowers, and
Mermaids.
*So* many mermaids
With multicolored fins and flowing red hair.
Here, under the hot sun
In the fresh breeze,
With all the freedom of nature,
The crayons melt,
The markers bleed,
And girls draw butterflies
While the boys’ dragons bleed.
Forming a giant horseshoe around the flag pole, we sing out a specialized version of America the Beautiful, our voices booming as the Red Panda group struggles to raise the American flag.

“Mr. Jeff, look at this!” Nathan says, pointing dramatically to the lyrics of the song.

“Ice, I am your friend!” I mouth, still singing and moving along to the music.

With exaggerated body gestures, including a frog squat that makes the little ones giggle, I belt out the lyrics with the other counselors. The campers’ chorus is softer, more timid; they mostly mimic the movements, staring up at us rather than at the rising flag. Across the horseshoe, Jake finishes the last few notes in a soprano, causing his campers to laugh while he hits an impossible note with his “spirit” fingers waving wildly above his head.

I never thought I’d be any good at this. I’ve always been a little on the quiet side, but it comes easier than you would think. After two days, you begin to feel like one of the campers yourself. You get absorbed in the games, have a little too much fun playing in the mud, and get preoccupied hunting down frogs, turtles, and snakes. You kind of let your inner child out. I’m not anywhere near Jake’s level—he’s so good at being dramatic and over the top. Still, I think the kids get a kick out of my own brand of eccentricity. Last week, I had a whole group of second graders thinking I was a 1000-year-old elf.

The high notes finished, hands back at our sides, counselors wrangle the campers back to
the stage, to their multicolored benches and plywood platform to talk about the schedule for the day. I help shepherd the Wolf group to our benches and tap Ms. Miranda’s shoulder.

Ms. Miranda’s blond pony tail swings over her shoulder as she looks up at me. “What’s up?”

“Hey M, I’m going to go to the club house to grab the van’s keys and move it around to the front drive.”

“Okay, thanks Jeff. Sydney and I will keep our eyes on them here until you pull the van around. We don’t have to--- Chloe, stop that. We don’t hurt bugs, remember? Because nature is our friend,” Miranda says, breaking her sentence off mid-thought when she hears one of our campers squeal.

Chloe, one of our more timid campers, is practically falling off her bench while she stomps her pink laced tennis shoes against the woodchip covered floor. “But there was a spider on my shoe!”

Chloe cries. Like a flock of seagulls, her girl friends squawk and laugh, lifting their feet up off the ground like they are taking flight.

I see Ms. Miranda visibly flinch at the word ‘spider,’ but, like a pro, she offers a sympathetic smile and keeps her voice steady. “Well, then shoo it away, or get a counselor like me to help you if you are scared. You know the spider didn’t mean any harm, right?”

“Yeah, I know…” Chloe sighs, tucking her hair behind her ear and looking down at her lap.
“Sorry, Jeff, what was I saying? Oh! We don’t have to be at the Bird and Wildlife Sanctuary until 10:15, so we have time.”

As I’m leaving, I see one of the boys, Kyle, sneaks up behind Chloe and crawls his index and pointer fingers up her bare arm in imitation of a spider. She squeals and slaps his hand away while he returns to his friends, laughing. I can’t help but smile too. I used to do that to my sister all of the time.

Walking up the hill towards the camp, I’m surrounded by a mob of four-year-olds as the Grasshoppers make their way to the club house for story time. They are chattering and laughing as their counselors try and fail to form them into a single file line. It’s the last day of camp, so the kids are buzzing with the energy of a hive of bees. They swarm around me, practically running in circles.

“You look like a girl,” one of the boys exclaims, staring up with an open-mouthed grin.

“What?” I ask, startled. He points up at my head. I reach up and feel the soft strands of the blond wig. “Oh,” I had forgotten I was wearing a costume. I adjust the long platinum blonde wig on top of my head. The other counselors and I always have fun picking out costumes on Fridays and sometimes we get a little out of hand, egging each other on to make our outfits a little more dramatic—a little more outrageous. I was supposed to look like Justin Bieber, but my efforts to look like the floppy haired teenage singer had hit a bit of a snag: the wig length is just too long (and, according to this little boy, it is too long in a feminine way) and the oversized black sunglasses look a little more feminine chic than rock star. When I realized my costume wouldn’t be
recognizable, I’d added a Chinese field hat to make the look more funky and cool.

Apparently, I had failed.

“This is my fancy, for Fancy Friday,” I explain.

“Well, you look like a girl,” the boy says, obstinately.

Apparently I’m both un-cool, and an accidental cross dresser.

“Haven’t you noticed that all of the counselors are extra dressy today?” Ms. Kira, their counselor, intercedes, coming up beside the boy. She references the purple felt owls, sequin and feather headpieces, the multiple tiaras, cowboy hats, Chinese field hats, and Hawaiian leis that adorn the counselors. Kira is wearing a Mickey Mouse hat from the Fantasia Wizard. Or at least I think it’s the Fantasia wizard. That’s the one with the warlock hat, right?

“That’s just the costume he is wearing for Fancy Friday, Tommy,” Ms. Kira continues. I shoot her a grateful smile and push the oversized sunglasses back up to the bridge of my nose.

But she’s too late. The other children are already parroting Tommy.

“He does look like a girl.”

“You do look like a girl.”

“A Japanese girl.”

“Yeah! A Japanese girl!”

I don’t know why I’m embarrassed. This costume certainly isn’t the most embarrassing thing I’ve ever done at summer camp (in fact, the tiger face paint I wore for the last Family Day skit was the most embarrassing), but with each “you look like a girl”
I hear, the more I feel like I’m in the halls of my high school, not on the camp ground. Like Randy Mickelson is telling me that my purple backpack looks ‘gay.’

I sigh.

I’m only 16 years old, but I’ve spent thirteen summers of my life at Nature Camp. Eleven of the thirteen have been as a camper. And I loved it. Other than one time when it stormed most of the week I was at camp, I don’t really have any bad memories of Nature Camp. I remember playing in the mud, but not caring even as I stained my brand new khaki shorts or walking barefoot in the water to chase water striders and damsel flies, painting my face with mud rock at the gravel pit because the other boys and I usually chose war paint like an Indian, while the girls drew on flowers and ‘makeup’ and leopard spots. When we would get bored, we would turn on the counselors, using them as our canvas. It’s weird to think that I’m the canvas now, but when I started to get too old to go to camp, I wasn’t ready to let it go. Last year I just volunteered, helped run crafts and games around the club house, but this year I’m finally old enough to work as a junior counselor. Still, it wasn’t that long ago that I was a camper myself and so I really identify with many of our campers. Every activity we do reminds me of when I did the activity as a camper and I think the kids kind of like that about me—the fact that I can tell them what Nature Camp used to be like, and that they can relate to me.

I think the senior counselors like that about me too. While most of them are college students like Ms. Kira and Ms. Miranda, who have struggled to learn the bends and splits in the trails, I know the dirt paths by hearts. They’ve turned to me for shortcuts and timing estimates. But the thing is, even if they didn’t need my perspective, I fit in
anyway. That’s the great thing about Nature Camp counselors, it’s more than okay to be wild and loud and dramatic. In fact, it’s expected. I fit in here. We’re all, or were all, drama kids, nerds, and science fiction and comic book lovers. Even Mr. Marcus, our resident jock, enjoys animated films and was in the theater circle when he was in high school. I don’t have to worry about how a purple backpack makes me look with these people. With the counselors at least, I don’t have to think twice about wearing a blond wig.

At first, it’s just the boys teasing, but as I walk with the Grasshoppers up the slope, one of the little girls comes up alongside Ms. Kira and me, her small hand tugging at Kira’s obnoxiously bright yellow counselor t-shirt. “We’re following a girl,” she whispers loudly, confidentially, a big grin pulling at her lips and revealing a gummy smile with a missing a front tooth.

I look over at them. Ms. Kira’s mouth looks to be at war as she can’t seem to decide whether she wants to smile, laugh, or frown. She ends up doing some combination of all three, her breath coming out in a pfft of air. “I’m a girl. You follow me.”

“Yeah,” the girl says, blinking. “But he’s really a boy.”

Ms. Kira looks over at me, not sure what to say. I shrug at Kira who is fighting back a smile as she looks back down at the little girl, the small blonde dressed head to toe in pink. “Yep,” Ms. Kira agrees, for lack of a better response.

In the clubhouse the Grasshoppers gather on a red carpet while Kira pulls out a flimsy worn paperback called *Dogzilla* to read to them.
Still feeling self-conscious, I take off my hat, wig, and sunglasses, resting them on
the countertop before searching for the van keys. Another counselor left out a Sherlock
Holmes’ style hat, so I swap my costume for a more conservative look.

Ms. Courtney, the graduate student shadowing our camp this summer, approaches
me while I dig through the papers on the office desk for the keys to Van 2. Courtney is
following the Grasshoppers this week, but while she’s kind of mousey and quiet, she
seems to be everywhere at one time. “Do they do that a lot?” she asks, eyes on the
campers.

“How do what?”

“Do they make fun of people for wearing something ‘girly’?” she asks, blushing
as she makes air quotes with her pointer and middle fingers. “You know, stick to gender
roles?”

“I don’t know...” I start. I hadn’t really thought about it.

“Well, for what it’s worth, I liked the wig.”

I laugh, kind of startled. “Thanks.”

Ms. Courtney returns to story time, seating herself on the round red rug beside the
campers. I stand there for a moment, watching them, keys almost forgotten in my hands.

Do they stick to gender roles? I don’t think so, at least I don’t think it impacts
their camp experience. I mean, they’re children, they don’t think about things like that,
right?

The kids are still buzzing, squirming around on the carpet half-fascinated with the
story and Ms. Kira’s range of character voices, half-bored and looking for something else
to keep them entertained. Ms. Courtney points to Ms. Kira and the book while the little
boy on her left keeps trying to talk to her. At the front of the group, closest to where Kira
sits on a low bench with the paperback book facing out towards the children, two girls
hold hands, their fingers intertwined on the carpet between them. They listen to Kira’s
squeaky cop voice impersonation, tugging at each other, giggling. Behind them, three of
the boys are playing a not-so-subtle round of Ninja. Each boy gets a turn to make a
defensive move against another player before the other kid gets to make a single
offensive move. One of the boys, Tommy, keeps cheating and moving away before his
friend even makes a move.

“Tommy, Sean, pay attention to the story,” Shane, their junior counselor
chastises.

I smile because that used to be me. Whenever my camp-friend, Bronson, and I
would get bored of an activity, we would start a round of Ninja or of the moving picture
game. It drove my counselors crazy.

I clasp the van keys tight in my fist and leave them to their story.

When I pull the van up to the front circle, Miranda and Sydney lead the Wolves
over. I’m only a Junior counselor, so I swap seats with Sydney because I’m not allowed
to drive the camp vans when there are other passengers in the car. It’s a “liability” issue,
but it’s stupid. I mean, I’ve been driving on my own for over a year now and I’ve never
had any accidents.

Sliding around to the passenger side, I notice Sarah, one of our campers, standing
off on her own. The tall brunette fifth grader looks close to tears; her eyebrows are
scrunched and the corners of her thin lips are turned down into a deep frown. I’ve seen that frown a lot this week. The other three girls keep befriending her one moment and then exclude her from their circle the next.

“Hey Syd, what’s up with Sarah? Did the girls fight again?” I whisper, pulling her aside.

“Yeah, one minute they were all laughing about something together and then when Sarah came back from getting her water bottle, they started to exclude her from the conversation. You know, I don’t know what else we can do. We’ve pulled them aside to talk about friendly behavior, and we’ve tried doing group activities to keep them from forming groups, but we can’t make them include her. Well, not without making it worse anyway.”

“I know they are big girls, I just don’t want her experience to be ruined by this.”

“Give it another ten minutes, they’ll be friends again,” Sydney sighs, pulling at the plastic counselor nametag around her neck. Sydney’s is decorated with an array of frog stickers, the edges slowly peeling up from time and wear.

“You know, this sort of thing never happens when boys fight—we just aren’t that catty. We talk it out or brush it off and then move on.”

Sydney doesn’t reply, she just sticks her tongue out at me.

“Alright, everyone climb in,” Miranda calls, sliding the side door open so that the kids can access the rows of peeling leather benches. They slip in, boys pushing their way to the back of the van, while the girls sit together, snagging the front row. Sarah is the last to climb in and is not sure where to sit, so she pauses a moment before she slides in
next to the girls.

"Do you guys want to listen to music or just talk on the ride there?" Miranda asks, settling herself in the passenger seat while Sydney climbs in behind the wheel.

"Music!" a few boys from the back yell.

"Yeah, do you have any Lady Gaga songs on your ipod?" Veronica asks while her small fingers pick at a rip in the seat.

"No, I don’t have any Lady Gaga, but I do have The Beatles. Do you guys like them?"

"Who are the Beatles?" Kyle asks.

"It’s old people music," I hear Joe whisper to him.

"Hey Mr. Jeff, this van is really….um, old. Was it around when you were a camper?"

"Yeah it was," I answer, turning in my seat to look back at Kyle and the other boys. "And so was Wanda—that’s what we call Van 1. You see how the roof is like, a felt lining?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I remember this one time, someone reached up through a rip in the ceiling and they pulled out what I think was once a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, but it was so moldy and stale that it looked like—well, it wasn’t really recognizable."

I hear a chorus of "ewws" mixed in with laughter, but distinguish a "cool" coming from Kyle.

"My mom says that I’m not allowed to eat in my room anymore because last
spring she found a soup bowl that had turned green underneath my bed!” Kyle shares.

“That’s sick man!” Joe laughs.

For the majority of the van ride, the campers are almost silent, absorbed with the plastic lanyards they’ve been braiding since Wednesday. I hear the occasional laugh and whisper from the back of the van, but mostly it’s just us three counselors talking, discussing weekend plans while Miranda uses her smart phone’s GPS to figure out the directions to the Sanctuary.

When two of the boys start arguing about their same colored lanyards, Ms. Miranda intervenes, helping Stephen find his missing key chain. She’s a natural at this job. As an Early Elementary Education student at Michigan State University, Miranda is used to the sticky glue fingers, the lost lunch boxes, and the petty fights. She has the patience of a teacher and her smile, even when forced, never wavers. She even looks a little like a teacher, her long blond hair pulled back into a high pony tail and the black frames of her glasses were perched on the bridge of her nose.

We get a little lost for a minute, but after a quick turn-around we find the Sanctuary and park in the near empty lot. The kids stream out of the van, their eyes darting in all directions. There is really not all that much to see at the front gate, but because it’s new, the kids seem to burst with excitement and energy—like a water balloon that has finally hit its target. While Ms. Miranda goes to check us in and buy bird feed at the front desk, Ms. Sydney and I struggle to keep them all together. A group of the campers run up to the small koi pond by the front gate, peering in at the turtles and frogs that dart around underneath a bouquet of lily pads. Sarah and one of the other girls,
Veronica, seem to have made up because they wander off together when they see a
chipmunk scurry away. “Come back!” I hear Sarah call to him.

Corn buckets purchased, we shepherd them through the front office and into the
sanctuary. It had rained earlier, so the ground was still wet, the black pavement made
even darker from the water stains. Small puddles had formed in the small dents and
divits in the path and the campers waste no time in jumping in them, splashing each other
and soaking their water shoes. One of the boys drags behind. I look down at his feet;
he’s wearing tennis shoes. I feel bad for him. I mean, half of the fun of Nature Camp is
getting dirty, or at least it was when I was a camper. Still, I hope we don’t get any angry
phone calls from parents.

After we’ve walked down the trail for awhile, Ms. Miranda hands me two buckets
of corn feed and the frenzy starts. The kids run towards me and plunge their hands into
the string tied buckets. A group of the boys push forward. Shoulder to shoulder, they
crowd each other for a chance to scoop up the yellow feed. “Thanks,” one of them calls
over their shoulder while the others run away without looking back. I smile, watching
them toss their corn over the edge of wood and plastic coated fence in one swift motion
before rushing back towards me, practically colliding into my legs as they grab for
another handful.

“Aren’t you going to feed the birds too, Mr. Jeff?” Veronica asks as she grabs a
fist-full of corn.

“I might take a handful, but I want to save the bird feed for you guys.”

As Veronica smiles and rushes away to toss her handful to one eager bird at a
time, I can’t help but feel a little jealous. I miss the days when I was the one who got to feed the birds.

While the campers feed the hungry swans and ducks, I walk along the fence line, taking the buckets with me. I look out at the water, watching the white feathered and black beaked heads of the trumpeter swans duck under the algae green water, their beaks scraping the murky pond floor for the sinking corn kernels before popping up again, breaking the surface. I’m really glad I don’t have to get my food that way. It’s kind of gross.

The sun streams down in bright shafts through the cloud covered sky, but in the distance, over the pond, the sky is a deep purple grey. I don’t think another rain is too far off. I wonder if I should warn Miranda. We might have to move up our time table and get back to camp sooner than we thought.

The birds don’t seem to notice the grey sky because they are focused on the food and on the group of fourth and fifth graders who are their meal ticket. The swans circle below, chasing away the ducks by snapping at their tails so that they will get first dibs at the corn. Even the geese, who I think are probably the most antisocial birds ever, stalk the campers on land from a distance, their hisses saying two things: “stay away” and “feed me.” Two of our campers, Tyler and Rue seem to have fun chasing the geese, challenging each other to see who can get the closest before the geese retreat with a hiss.

The other boys are focused on the swans.

“Watch this, Joe!” Kyle yells, his fist overflowing with corn as he sprinkles the feed along a swan’s back. Another swan comes up behind and violently jabs at its wings,
grabbing at the feed in violent, hungry motions. Joe and Matthew burst out laughing.

“Cool!”

They follow suit, pelting the ducks or scattering the feed on their backs where they can’t reach, waiting for another bird to come along and attack, for the beaks to pull at feather as well as corns.

Do I stop them? Should I get Miranda? I don’t want to ruin their fun, but I also shouldn’t let them torment the birds. I pretend I don’t see anything, giving them a moment to stop on their own.

“That’s really mean, Kyle, stop it or I’ll tell,” Veronica says crossing her arms and scowling.

“Yeah, stop it guys!” Hannah demands, but her voice is kind of a whisper. She turns to one of the assaulted swans and offers a hand full of feed. “Here you go, little guy, it is okay.”

Sarah, who is off on her own again with a group of ducks, also baby talks the birds. “Hey there, aren’t you cute?” she asks, standing on the bottom rail so that she can peer over the edge.

“Wouldn’t it be cool if the ducks had fangs?” Nathan asks, watching one of the swans bite at the tail of a Mallard duck.

“Yeah, poisonous fangs,” Samuel agrees. I wander off, leaving the boys to their discussion of what other animals could be cool if they were poisonous.

Leaning against the fence, Miranda and Sydney talk, holding still while kids run up to them for more corn feed, the red plastic buckets hanging from the crooks of their
elbows. They gaze out at the water, occasionally tearing their eyes away from the floating birds to count heads. Because Joe, Kyle, and Matthew seem to be on good behavior for the moment, no longer lobbing corn at the birds, I decide to join them against the railing.

"Ugh, I’m dreading the family day event," I hear Sydney say. She tucks a loose strand of curly brown hair behind her ears, scrunching up her freckled nose. "I can’t believe they are having a reptile organization come in. I mean, all those snakes…"

"Coward," Miranda teases. "I kind of think snakes look cute, with their little tongues."

“You’re one to talk. I remember how freaked out you were by that spider the group found on Tuesday."

“You are both such girls,” I tease.

“Yeah, well, spiders are creepy. I can’t help that. I mean, can you blame me for being creeped out? It is all those legs and eyes and don’t get me started on their webs,” Miranda shudders, before smiling apologetically when she realizes that two of the girls have approached and are trying to reach the feed bucket. She tips it closer to them.

“Make sure you make that handful last, Amelia, Chloe, we are running out of food.”

I wonder for a moment if they heard what we were talking about. We’re not supposed to express fear about nature or animals in front of the campers, but sometimes it just slips out.

“Joe, I mean it! You shouldn’t do that,” Hannah’s voice booms. I turn my head and look to see that the boys are still harassing the birds.
I guess I have no choice but to step in.

“Come on guys,” I say, approaching from behind them. I tap Joe gently on the shoulder when he shows no sign of acknowledging what I said. “We want to respect nature, right? That means being kind to the animals.”

Joe makes a face, but he and the other boys start to plop the corn back towards the water rather than the animals’ feathered backs.

The campers keep rushing back to the buckets, scooping up the corn until their fingers brush the bottom of the bucket, grasping nothing but empty kernel shells and yellow dust.

“Hey, Mr. Jeff,” Matt says, looking up at me. “Where did your costume go?”

“Yeah,” Joe echoes. “When did you take it off?”

“Earlier,” I shrug. “Why, did you like it?”

“Uh-huh,” Matt laughs. “You looked like an Asian pop star or something.”

Joe and Kyle break out laughing too. I laugh too, feeling a little less embarrassed. I mean it was a ridiculous outfit.

I take off the detective hat I’m wearing and run my hand over my shaved head before replacing the cap. I don’t know why, but Ms. Courtney’s words from earlier reverberate in my mind. *Do they do that a lot?...make fun of people for wearing something ‘girly’? You know, stick to gender roles?* I still honestly don’t know. I don’t think gender impacts their experience. I mean, I don’t think my gender impacted my experience when I was a camper here. How can you tell? How can you see gender at camp?
“Alright guys,” Ms. Miranda calls out, stacking the buckets and wiping corn dust off on her khaki shorts. “Let’s keep hiking, we’re going to go see the birds of prey exhibit next.”

“Should we make it a game? See who can name the most bird facts?” Ms. Sydney suggests. There’s a mummer of approval. “Well then let’s make it interesting. Battle of the sexes style: boys versus girls.”

“Awesome!” Kyle says, nudging Veronica in the shoulder with his elbow. “You guys are going down.”

“Don’t listen to him, Veronica,” Ms. Miranda says, grinning. “We’ve got this in the bag.”

We start walking, falling into line along the narrow pavement. Ms. Miranda leads the group, the cluster of girls gathering with Ms. Sydney behind her. They walk, elbows locked together. Even Sarah is included again.

I take up the rear with the boys. We walk in a loose cluster. A few of the boys, Kyle, Joe, and Matt take up a game of play fighting while we walk, throwing fake punches and laughing.

I don’t know, but maybe gender does impact their experience of camp… I mean, I did take the wig and hat off, didn’t I? Then again, of course they are going to tease someone for cross-dressing.

I mean, it is strange having your male counselor look like a girl.
CHAPTER IV

RELATIONSHIPS WITH NATURE

Conversations with Nature:

*Whisper 3*

*Part 1- Oak*

He spends his days outside.
You can tell he’s a camp counselor,
By the sandal strap tan lines,
That streak the tops of his feet.
The rest of him is berry brown,
A deep tan earned from the weeks,
The days, spent beneath the hot sun.
He presses his back against the tree,
Closes his eyes,
Feels the sun on his face.
Warm beams stream down,
Filters through cracks between the branches,
Glistening on the heart shaped leaves
Of this old Capala tree.
The sun dances across his eyelids.

He hears birds trilling above
Crickets chirping in the distance,
Feels the familiar light summer breeze
Against his cheek.
A familiarity built from the months,
The years, spent exploring this wide world.
And the breeze carries with it a
Whisper of friendship

Part 2- Sapling

Earlier that day
Before the campers had been picked up,
Before counselors could escape
The forest overflowed.
Eager children wandered the dirt paths
The clamor of the voices carried in the breeze
Among them, little dark-haired Lilly,
A little girl,
Seven and three quarters years old.
New to summer camp.
New to Nature Camp.
Wide eyes,
Wide smile,
Lilly crouched to look
To see
A water beetle clinging to a low leaf
Fascinated by its alien appearance,
She giggled as it waddled
Along the serrated edge.
She moved on
Followed counselor Jake across a wooden bridge
Set loose at a stream,
Lilly peeled off her socks and shoes
The tops of her bare feet were pale,
Untouched by the August sun
Or the rushing water.
She waded in,
Splashed and played.
Felt the mud squish between her toes,
Splash and stain her clothes
She laughed out loud
Chased tadpoles and
Water striders.
And Lilly’s laugh carried with it a

Whisper of exploration
Where Have All of the Fireflies Gone?

The children swarm around the terrarium for a closer look, squeezing in as close as they can to the tank without physically pressing their noses to the glass. The Eastern Milk snake slithers through the leafy habitat so that its brown and tan striped skin peaks through, and its distinct checkered underbelly is hidden by the brush.

The snake moves with precision, each twist of its body controlled by the hundreds of bones and therefore the hundreds of muscles hidden beneath the smooth-scaled veneer. There is a murmur of excitement when its head is visible through the leaves, flat with dark piercing eyes and a flicking red tongue.

“You know, snakes smell with their tongue,” Ms. Elsa informs the counselors, couching down beside them to peer in the glass tank too. “That’s why they stick their tongue out so much. They are getting a sense of their surroundings.”

“Cool!” Tyler, one of the campers says, pressing even closer for a better look at its tongue. Tyler has been looking forward to Snake Day all week long. Yesterday, I think he brought snakes up more than a dozen times and managed to identify not one, but two imaginary snakes in the brush.

“I heard they see weird too,” Bryon says, standing on his tiptoes to see over the campers in front of him.

“That’s right, Bryon, they have heat vision, so this Milk snake can see us around him because of the heat coming off of us,” Ms. Elsa explains and the children are wide-
eyed as they listen, eyes transfixed on the serpent behind the glass.

I stand next to Leanne, a quiet seven-year old who seems hesitant to get too close to the glass. “What’s the matter?” I ask, leaning down beside her.

I’m scared of snakes,” she whispers. “My dad was watching this one movie and a big snake was eating people.”

“Oh…” I say, at a loss for words.

The truth is, it is hard to understand. Leanne’s experience with nature has been so different than mine. Her childhood has been one of video games, and organized sports (organized activities in general). She goes to an inner-city school that only offers rare field trips to local parks or zoos. The other day she was thrilled to see a chipmunk feeding from the bird feeder they have at camp. Ms. Daisy, Leanne’s counselor, says that this isn’t unusual as “several of the kids have never seen a squirrel up close before arriving at camp for the first time.” This exposure is new to them. It’s a new world. And it can be scary, thrilling, and overwhelming.

And it can be hard for me to understand.

Growing up, I spent summer breaks with the geysers, canyons, and buffalo in Yellowstone. I’d sleep on the hard ground with nothing but a sleeping bag and the thin nylon of a tent between me and the earth, feeling every bump and rock in the ground. I’d talk to the buffalo as though they could hear me, and lean out an open window during “bear jams” to attempt, like the hundreds of other tourists blocking the road, to catch a glimpse at a real life grizzly bear cub rolling around and playing in the long grass. At eight years old, I climbed a small mountain, walking on despite the protest of my muscles
and only stopping so that my dad could stuff moleskin into my hiking boots to ward off blisters. I looked on with awe at this protected land, always, always, feeling changed on the drive home.

Occasionally, as a rare treat (due to accumulated American Express reward points), my mother would pack us up to fly south to the Cayman Islands for a few weeks. I’d lie out on the white sand, warming myself beneath the sun, wet from the surf, and sticky from the salt water. I reveled in watching the crabs poke out from their sand dens between the concussions of the waves. They would race around to eat up the minerals left from the water, their sideways movements fast, but cautious.

I would swim for hours, my head submersed and goggles pressed so tight they would leave red indentations on my skin. I’d stare down at the vibrant yellows, blues, and reds of the coral reef, chase schools of fish, and stalk sea turtles and stingrays, singing to them as I deluded myself into believing I could be like Ariel from The Little Mermaid.

Most summers at home in Michigan, I played outside. I made mud pies in my back yard, decorated them with berries and leaves, climbed trees, and scraped my knees. When I was in elementary school, I spent hours at a time exploring the woods in the backyard. I pretended I was a guardian of the forest, a fairy, or Pocahontas depending on the day. I’d wind through the trunks and underbrush like it was a maze until I knew those trees.

Winter breaks from school enfolded in the snowy tree canopies of the Great Smoky Mountains, summers spent exploring Cades Cove, and childhood memories of
buffalo, sea turtles, and tree climbing all helped to form who I am. Those experiences informed the child I was, and helped to inspire the woman I have become.

But even my childhood was different from that of my parents. For them, nature wasn’t only a part of their childhood, it was their childhood. My mother, for instance, can drive me through her old neighborhood and point out houses that didn’t used to be there, houses that stand on top of the open fields where she used to play. She can point to entire neighborhoods that have cropped up where there used to be a forest. The woods she used to explore, the woods of her childhood are gone. She tells stories of collecting garter snakes, frogs, and bugs with her brothers, of bike rides that became adventures, of seeing the fireflies light up the night as far as the eye can see.

But due to circumstances, urban development, social changes, and who knows what else, the kind of relationship that my mom had with nature growing up, or even the kind of relationship I had with nature, are harder to experience. And it’s a vastly different relationship than the ones children like Leanne have with nature—Leanne who gets excited over the sight of a chipmunk and knows nothing about snakes other than what she has seen in horror movies.

I guess that’s why I find myself in awe of counselors like Ms. Daisy, Ms. Elsa, and Mr. Drew; I’m impressed by their ability to work with these children, to open their eyes to the ‘Great Wide World.’ It is important. I remember reading that distance or removal from nature can result in negative developmental, intellectual, emotional, and physical consequences, that children are happier when introduced to nature, less prone to things like ADD and stress. And children learn through touch, I remember reading that
too. So, it makes sense that by removing children from nature, surrounding them with concrete and videogames, that they would miss some of those important developmental moments, and that their creative energies might be stifled through the absence of trees and sky. I’m not sure if I would have been inspired to be a writer if I hadn’t had all of those experiences with nature. For instance, if I didn’t know what a flock of cranes looked like, swooping down from the sky, their wingspans casting shadows across the water, their feet sashaying and skimming across the lake’s surface, I would be missing an important memory. I would be missing a moment of inspiration. I’m not sure who I would have been if I hadn’t sat out in the woods for fun with a journal across my lap, writing elaborate stories for hours at a time sitting on the rotting trunk of a fallen tree. A trunk that wasn’t just a trunk, but a bridge. A bridge that would become the start of a short story.

So, while it can be scary, thrilling, and overwhelming, it is a world worth exploring. And it’s a world that programs like Zoo Camp and Nature Camp persistently encourage.

“...well this snake isn’t like that,” I say, trying to think of something to comfort Leanne who is still staring at the terrarium like it, not the snake, is going to jump forward and bite her. “In fact, he is actually friendly!”

I make eye contact with Ms. Daisy, the senior counselor, from across the room, subtly jerking my head to the side with a silent “help” in my eyes, which probably made me look like I was having a seizure. I’m not a counselor; I’m just a tag-a-long. I don’t want to say something wrong! But Leanne’s staring at me, looking for answers.
Somehow my seizure nod works and Ms. Daisy comes over, a warm smile on her heart shaped face. “Hey guys, what’s going on?”

“Well, Leanne was just telling me that she is scared of the snake.”

“Well that’s okay, you don’t have to touch it if you don’t want to, but I promise this snake is harmless,” Ms. Daisy says, her voice reassuring even to me—and I’m not even afraid of snakes. As an education major, Ms. Daisy has gotten a lot of practice working with kids this summer.

“Okay,” Leanne nods, taking a deep breath and then smiling a little, I think out of relief.

In front of us, by the terrarium, the snake trivia conversation ends and Ms. Elsa gets their attention. “Now everyone take a seat on the floor and Mr. Drew will bring the snake around for all of you to touch.”

Ms. Daisy helps them line up and Leanne, left with me, turns and asks: “Are you going to touch the snake?”

“Um…Yeah. Yes. I think I will. I’ve never really had the chance to pet a snake before, but you don’t have to.”

She nods. “I know. Will you sit with me?”

“Sure.”

I plop myself down on my butt on the hardwood floor, squished between the over-excited snake enthusiast Tyler and an anxious, wide-eyed Leanne.

“Now what are our rules when we deal with animals?” Ms. Daisy asks when all the children have been cajoled to sit in a line. “How should we talk? Should we yell?”
“No!” the campers answer in a chorus, their voices raised despite the question, and the answer.

“That’s right. We want to use our quiet voices, so that we don’t scare the animal.”

Behind Ms. Daisy, Mr. Drew reaches into the terrarium, wrapping his hands around the Milk snake. He grips it just beneath its head and at its middle. Mr. Drew is only sixteen, but he has a reputation among the counselors as being the go-to guy for handling animals. This is only his first year as a camp counselor, but already he’s thinking about a zoology degree when he graduates from high school.

“Now, show me how many fingers you use to pet them,” Ms. Daisy continues. She’s using a very distinct teacher voice firm, but happy.

Nine children hold up two conjoined fingers, the middle and index fingers.

“That’s right, either two fingers, or one finger,” Ms. Daisy says, demonstrating with her own fingers. “If you don’t want to pet the snake, that’s fine, just keep your hands in your lap.”

I’m more than three times their age and am a head taller than the children seated next to me, but like them, I have my two fingers out, ready to touch the milk snake. Mr. Drew walks slowly down the line so that the campers can see and feel the snake up close. The checkered tail is wrapped around Mr. Drew’s wrist, and he keeps the snake’s head pointing towards him, pinned gently between his thumb and index finger.

“Be careful, you don’t want to scare him, do you?” Mr. Drew softly warns as children reach after the snake, stretching their arms as far as possible long after their turn.
is over.

“Why would it scare him?” Kate, the most adventurous of the group, asks, dropping her arm reluctantly and sitting flat on her butt again. I can’t help but smile at her disappointed expression. Kate’s the one who always goes off exploring. She brings her own bug net to camp and earlier this week she tried to capture a chipmunk. I intervened, calling Ms. Daisy over, when I panicked that she might be bitten. She’s an unstoppable force and had only looked disappointed, not afraid, when Ms. Daisy and I pulled her away.

“Well,” Ms. Miranda answers, “wouldn’t you be scared if you were surrounded by a bunch of strangers and suddenly they all had their hands on you at one time?”

Kate pauses, her forehead puckered as she thinks about that. Then she nods her head: ‘Yes that would be scary.’

“Did you guys know that snakes have more bones in their bodies than humans?” Ms. Elsa asks, changing the subject. “That’s why they have such amazing control of their movements.”

As Mr. Drew reaches the end of the line, Leanne squirms beside me. I reach my hand out, slowly stroking the silky scales. When I drop my hand, thanking Mr. Drew, I give Leanne a reassuring smile.

Leanne looks hesitant at first, but after a moment she reaches her hand out and brushes her fingertips across the smooth scales. “Wow,” I hear her whisper.

I can hear the change in her voice, the surprise.
Plugged In

Halo. Lego Batman. Super Smash Brothers. I could even be playing that old
Street Fighter game Trey got me for Christmas, I think, remembering the old play station
game my older brother got me, the one with the crappy “old school” graphics. But nope,
I’m here at camp instead, walking until my feet hurt and forced to sing stupid songs
about beavers and caterpillars.

I can’t believe Mom doesn’t think I’m old enough to stay home alone. I mean I’m
eight! I’m totally old enough to watch myself, and I know that Dad doesn’t think I play
outside enough, but Nature Camp? Really? It’s not like he goes outside all the time
either. All Dad does other than work is play golf and read the newspaper. He doesn’t
even fish like Jim’s dad does...

My inner rant is interrupted, as Cal nudges my arm with his elbow: “Hey, did I
tell you guys about my dream last night?” Cal asks, his voice loud in my left ear.

Jim and I shake our heads ‘no’ and Cal rushes on. “It was awesome! I was
Indiana Jones, you know, like in the Crystal Skull, and we were in a car going over a
cliff—”

“—I remember that part! That was so cool!”

“I know! And it felt so real too—I didn’t know I was dreaming!”

“My mom won’t let me watch Indiana Jones. Or play the video game. She
thinks it’s too mature,” Jim says. He looks down at his feet.

His mom never lets him do anything cool.

“That sucks, man, that game is awesome,” Cal says.
“Well, if you come to my house this weekend, I’ll let you play it,” I offer.

“Cool!”

I kick the ground, smiling when I see a cloud of dust rise up. I start shuffling my feet, dragging the bottom of my tennis shoes against the dirt path so that the cloud of dust and dirt spreads like one of those explosion things. I think Trey calls it a mushroom cloud. I smile at Jim and Cal, and they grin back. Behind us, the dirt trails like a cape. Will I look like The Flash, that one superhero that was in an episode of Smallville, if I start to run, dust trailing behind me?

“Sam! Don’t kick the dust up, it gets into people’s eyes!” Mr. Luke calls from the back of the line. I sigh, but go back to walking normally.

“I can’t believe that my dad made me come here all week,” I mumble.

“It’s not that bad. It’s kind of fun to get to see all of the animals up close,” Jim says.

“Yeah,” Cal adds. “I come here every summer for a few weeks.”

“I know you do. Your mom is the one that told my dad about his place,” I say.

The path we are on twists through a forest and some of the weeds and bushes seem to hang over onto the path so that we have to duck down or curve around them. I reach out and wrap my hand around one of the branches that sticks out. I pull and the green leaves come away in my hand; they are cool and smooth against my palm and squish when I clench my hand into a fist. I smile and look over at the others. Perfect, Cal is looking the other way. Rolling them into a ball I throw them at Cal, pretending they are Dragon Ball Z “saiyin blasts.” He laughs and brushes them out of his hair, trying to
grab a few leaves to throw back at me.

I grab another handful to throw at Jim.

“Sammy, remember what I said earlier, about pulling leaves from the trees?” Mr. Luke is suddenly behind me and I jump, startled. “That it hurts the trees, remember?” Mr. Luke continues. “We don’t want to hurt nature, do we?”

I look away from him, “...no.”

“Alright, then keep your arms at your sides. Thanks, Sam.”

Mr. Luke walks ahead, passing the girls to talk to Ms. Rose, who is walking so far ahead I can’t see her around the bend. Cal and Jim wait until he is out of sight before they go back to talking about video games.

*I can’t believe him.* I keep my eyes on the ground, not really listening to their conversation about *Indiana Jones* and Xbox. My face is hot. *I mean, it’s a stupid rule.*

*This is nature camp, so I should be able to touch nature.*

I reach out and finger the leaves of a shrub...*can plants really feel?* I tug gently on the leaf, pulling just enough to make it move, but not enough to break the stem. *Can this plant feel that? I’ve never thought about that before...*

There’s a hand on my shoulder. I drop the branch.

“Come on Sammy, you don’t want to fall behind.”

It’s Ms. Courtney. I look up and realize that Jim and Cal have kept walking.

“Oh, thanks...sorry.”

She smiles and I run ahead, speeding past her. I fall into step beside Jim.

“Hey, where were you?”
“Sorry, I got distracted.”

We stop when we reach the small wooden bridge that crosses a running stream. Ms. Rose pulls her counselor’s pack from her shoulders and drops it on the ground beside a big tree. “Do you guys see all of the carvings on these trees?” she asks. I step closer for a better look. *Wow, look at all of those markings!* The thick white trunk has lost most of its bark and the surface is carved with people’s initials and “I was here!’s.”

“Hikers and visitors have graffitied this trunk because they think it looks cool, but what they don’t know is that a tree’s trunk is like its skin, so when you mark it up like this, you make it bleed and it doesn’t have a lot of protection from the surroundings.”

I suddenly have an image of blood slowly oozing out of one of the “KW loves BP” markings. *Gross.* When I play *James Bond*, the blood always splashes across the screen and it’s, well, it doesn’t ooze. *A quick bloody flash across the screen and then it’s over.*

“One of the mottos we live by here at Nature Camp is “Leave No Trace,” which means we don’t want to leave any indication that we were here other than our footprints. So we put things back, we don’t pick flowers or graffiti trees, and we try to respect our surroundings.”

Lecture over, Ms. Rose turns to us, hands on her hips and grins. “So we’re going to stop here for a little bit, so you guys can explore the stream! Just remember you need to stay within this side of the bridge and that fallen trunk,” she points over the railing to a thin tree that bridges the water downstream. “And remember to respect nature—alright, go play!”
Cal, Jim and I rush to the water bank. I plop down on the slope, pulling off my tennis shoes without untying the laces before peeling off the socks to stuff them into the toe of the shoes. Cal is wearing his water shoes, so he can wade right into the stream. As he splashes in he lets out a scream. “It’s cold!” I laugh and rush in to join him. Shit, it is cold. I’m not supposed to say that anymore, not since Mom overheard me yelling it at my DS, but people say it all the time on television, and when I play Halo online, the older kids say much worse...

The girls, Pallas, Jessica, and the girl with the pink sweatshirt—Quinn?—are already in the water, splashing around and laughing. A girl named Steph sits out on the bridge, dipping her feet in the water. She rests her chin and arms on the wood railing and splashes her toes in the water, but shows no interest in climbing into the stream. Jim, Cal, and I on the other hand start to wander in the other direction, exploring the length of the stream. We’re on an adventure like Indiana Jones. I wonder if there are any poisonous water snakes around here like in the movie...

“Guys, look!” Cal stoops down next to a patch of mud. “Water striders!”

“Cool!” I splash closer, feeling the water drench the legs of my cargo shorts. “What are they?” I lean forward and watch these black, long leg insect sail across the top of the water.

They look like they are dancing.

“Are they spiders?”

“No, they are some kind of water bug, I think.”

We keep walking. There are minnows or tadpoles or something with a tail that
swims away from our steps. They speed out of view, like the Flash, hiding behind big rocks in the water.

I try to keep up, but they keep disappearing.

We keep walking, all the way to the fallen tree that is our barrier. The tree is old and falling apart. It is covered in moss and has weird jagged lines marked everywhere, like someone graffitied it too. It’s not like anything I’ve seen before. I have nothing to compare it to.

“What are those?” I ask, pointing to the zigzags carved into the trunk.

“I think those are termite trails,” Cal says, leaning closer.

“Termites? Like in those T.V. commercials?”

“Yeah, they eat wood. I think I remember my counselor talking about them last summer.”

“Hmm,” Nature’s graffiti, I think, running my finger over the line.

“Come on, let’s head back.”

When we get closer to the bridge I see that the girls are making mud pies on an old log. They scoop up handfuls of mud from along the shore line and squish them into balls before patting them into little cakes on top of the log. Pallas is already decorating hers with little pebbles and twigs, her tan hands completely covered in black sludge.

It looks fun, but we should do something else. I don’t want the girls to think we are copying them.

Jim starts walking over to them, “I’m going to make a mud pie too.”

“No, come on,” Cal says quickly. “Help us build a dam.”
“A dam?” Jim asks.

“Yeah, you know, like a beaver’s home,” I say, nodding. I can’t help but grin.

*I’m not supposed to say dam (damn) anymore either.*

Cal walks away from the girls and finds a place where the water way narrows. It should be easy to block. “Alright, here is good, so now we need to find sticks and twigs to build it.”

“Do you know how to build a dam?” Jim asks, stopping to pick up a big branch.

“I think we just pile the sticks together and... I don’t know, just stuff the holes with mud or leaves or something.”

So we dip low, crouching and piling and building. I grab a hand full of mud from where the girls got theirs, feeling it squish and slip between my fingers, and carry it over to our dam, packing it into the pile of wood. It drips from my fingers and I fling it at the sticks, laughing.

My pants feel heavy on my hips; the back sides of my shorts are soaked all the way up to my butt, and there are splatters of mud dripping from my arms, staining my the knees. Still, I can’t fight my grin. *This is fun. I mean, it’s not Halo, but it’s still awesome.*

“I think we need some leaves, or maybe some more mud. Something more to stuff into the holes,” Cal says, observing our work with his head tilted to the side.

I wade over to the shore again, pausing at the edge of the stream. I have my hand wrapped around the branch of fern before I remember what Mr. Luke said about not
hurting nature. I uncurl my fingers and release the leaves, watching them perk back up.

I slush off to find dead leaves left over from last winter instead.

Cloud Nine, or a Mud Pit?

_Lanie_

The wooden beam of the boardwalk cuts into my chest as I lie on my belly, peering over the edge into the depths of the pond. It feels familiar. _Eight years worth of familiar._

“Do you see anything?” Jane asks, plopping down beside me.

“Nope. Just muck and some weird-looking minnow...do you remember that one time, that boy Alex, like, threw my name tag into water, and I, um, had to reach in there to fish it out?” I ask, wrinkling my nose as I remember the way the black goop had dribbled from my arm.

Jane laughs. “Yeah, and remember how bad that button stank afterwards?”

“Yeah, I had to literally wash it three times in the bathroom sink or something...do you remember our first year at camp, when our parents signed us up at the same time? I was lying just like this and a water snake rushed by right underneath my nose. Like seriously, right beneath my nose! It scared the crap out of me!”

Jane nods her head, laughing as she pulls her long blond hair back before the tips can touch the water. “I remember, I think you might have cried.”

It’s my turn to laugh. “Hey! I was, like, six-years-old. I’d never seen a snake in the wild before, or, you know, like ever. No joke.”
Bobby jumps up on the ledge beside us, balancing precariously on the thin wooden beam. I turn my head to see his two bright red water shoes literally inches from my face. He’s one wrong step from landing in the pond and I smile as I think about pushing him in. He’s a jerk and a clown, so it’s not like he wouldn’t deserve it.

“If Shia sees you up there, you’ll get in trouble,” I say, leaning away as he teeters for a second and his foot moves closer to my face as he regains his balance.

“Both feet on the board walk at all times,” Jane says in a perfect imitation of our counselor.

Shia

“Both feet on the board walk at all times,” I call out, looking up to see one of my campers, Bobby, balancing on the dock’s edge like it’s a tightrope.

“Sorry!” he yells back, looking less than sheepish as he steps back, returning to the solid boardwalk. I think I prefer working with the younger groups. They have less cheek.

I’m up to my knees in swamp. My left foot is stuck in a mud pit and the water net is heavy in my hands as the snapping turtle writhes, fighting against the wire netting. Nineteen pairs of eyes alternate from staring down at the water and staring at me from the wood observation deck. My campers, the Polar Bears, and Ms. Kara’s group of second graders, the Rattle Snakes, lie on their bellies, waiting for me to return with the prize: the “one thousand pound” turtle in the net.

I pull my foot free only to immediately place it in something equally disgusting. I
feel something squishy ooze through the holes in my water shoes. “God, this is gross,” I mutter to Ms. Grace who skirts the edge of the pond, trying to trap a frog with her bare hands.

“Better you than me,” she grins.

“Well, next time you are wading in, or, better yet, we’ll call Drew on the walkie-talkie to make him do it. He likes this stuff.”

I try to keep the disgust from my face as I pull my foot up from the quicksand-like mud because there are nineteen pairs of eyes on me; but I can see that the other counselors have noticed, as both Mr. Marcus and Ms. Courtney are laughing. Well Mr. Marcus is laughing. Ms. Courtney looks like she’s trying to fight her smile. I resist the urge to stick my tongue at both of them and slog forward. Each step is cautious and I’m careful not to take a wrong step for fear that I’ll find myself up to my chin in pond water.

When I took this summer job, I wasn’t anticipating that I’d be hunting for biting animals in opaque water. There was something exhilarating about slipping off of the dock and into the water the first few times, but after breaking one pair of water shoes and falling in deep enough so that my pants and shirt smell like an armpit for the rest of the day, the excitement has dulled. It isn’t as fun as it looks.

Lanie

“That looks fun,” I say, watching Ms. Shia and Ms. Grace scout the pond, slopping through the murky water.

“It looks gross,” Jane says, dragging her Jewelweed leaf through the water.
We’ve learned from our years at camp that Jewelweed is an anti-itch plant. You can literally use it to treat mosquito bites and Stinging Nettle breakouts. But today we aren’t using it to treat our bug bites. We just like the way the jagged green leaf looks silver in the water. It’s literally like magic.

“And the water smells weird,” Jane adds as an afterthought.

“No joke. I know the pond water’s stinky, but I think it would be kind of a fun job to have.”

“For real? You want to be a camp counselor?”

“Well, yeah,” I shrug. “I asked Ms. Shia at the beginning of the week, and she said that when I’m fourteen I’ll be old enough to work as a volunteer counselor.”

“Don’t get me wrong, I love nature camp, but why the heck do you want to work here?”

“I don’t know…like I said, I think it would be fun,” I say, letting my jewel leaf drop to the pond’s surface and float away. I watch Ms. Shia trudge towards us, struggling with the net in her hands, laughing at something Grace has called out from the water’s edge. “And, I mean, I literally know all of the animal facts and activities they do with the younger groups. And they get to work with the animals, which is totally cool…And I don’t know, I guess, um, I like that they do good. I mean, all of the animals at the Nature Center are “rescues,” you know? Rescued and rehabilitated and protected. I think that’s kind of cool. Not to mention they spend their days at camp and get paid for it!”

“That’s true,” Jane laughs, letting her leaf float away too. “And you have always
been good with kids and stuff.”

One of the little girls from another camp group runs up, her feet clomping against the boardwalk, probably scaring away any of the nearby animals. The girl stands on the edge of the dock like Bobby did, balancing dangerously on the tips of her hot pink water clogs. “Hey, remember to sit on your belly if you want to look over the edge,” I call, but she ignores me, too hyper to really listen. In fact, a second later she runs to the other side of us for a different view, still standing on the ledge. I turn back to Jane, rolling my eyes, “They never listen.”

“Hey, have you signed up for cheerleading camp yet?” Jane asks.

“Yeah, um, my mom signed me up for the August camp yesterday.”

“Awesome! I’m glad we’ll get to do it together. It’s going to be soo much fun.”

“For sure!”

When I was younger I went to Nature Camp for several weeks each summer. It was literally the highlight of my break. My favorite weeks were the Animal Friends and Water Fun themes. I’d also occasionally attend Zoo Camp. I loved that too because I’d get a behind-the-scenes peek at certain exhibits—like the jaguars training. I enjoyed pretending I was a park employee. Back then I went to camp 3-4 weeks of the summer and would fill the rest of my break at my grandparents’ house while my mom and dad were at work. I still go to Nature Camp for one or two weeks every summer, but I also have Girl Scout camp, cheerleading camp, and volleyball lessons competing for my time. I like the variety, but sometimes I get tired. I’m literally always on the go. Nature Camp is still for sure my favorite because I get to just relax and enjoy the outdoors. And now
that I’m older we get to take archery lessons and go on field trips to the local Bird and Wildlife Sanctuary and Fish Hatchery, which is pretty cool. But I never get sick of the pond, or of seeing what creatures the counselors can pull from the murky depths. I’ve seen half a dozen snapping turtles up close in my lifetime, but I’m still excited to see what Ms. Shia pulls from the net.

**Shia**

As I make it back to the deck, there is a chorus of “she caught a snapping turtle!” whipping up and down the boardwalk.

“Here, let me help,” Mr. Marcus says, reaching out to take the net from me so that I can climb back to dry land. I hand it off, grateful for the sudden weight lifted from my tired arms. But my relief only lasts a moment; a second later, I have to pull myself up onto the deck, struggling to lift my weight while the mud suctions my feet to the pond floor and my khaki pants hang heavy on my hips, soaked all the way up to my back pockets. Meanwhile, Ms. Courtney and Ms. Kira work to keep the younger kids on their bottoms instead of letting them rush the net. My campers, experts at the Nature Camp routine by now, are already seated by the railing, waiting patiently. Nope, I definitely prefer the older groups. There’s more cheek, but less chaos.

The strange thing about all of this is that, before this summer, I didn’t really consider myself a nature person. My family didn’t camp, I never really played outside, and I didn’t even particularly like my science classes while growing up. So, when I told my parents that I wouldn’t be coming home at the end of the semester because I would be
teaching at a Nature Camp, well, they were unsurprisingly surprised.

I mean it kind of makes sense. I do study Secondary Education at Ohio State University, so when I read the job description of a summer position where I could work with children for a few months, well, it was just too good to resist. I mean camp counselor? It’s a good resume booster. But even stranger than my taking a job at a Nature program is that I actually love this work. It’s not without its pitfalls, like having to trudge through smelly, swampish pond water for instance. But, at the end of the day I love my job. I’ve learned so much about nature that I’m starting to think of myself as one of those “outdoorsy people.” Sometimes, on the weekends, when we aren’t working, I’ve camped out with my coworkers. We tell ghost stories and stay up whispering late into the night. I’ve started going on night hikes with them for fun, and I even find myself volunteering to handle the snakes and turtles when we do the animal “show and tell” with the campers. It’s been my own personal game of *Fear Factor*.

“If you guys are quiet and sit still we will bring the turtle by for you to see close up!” I hear Ms. Kira say as I try to shake off the grey muck that is dripping from my legs and shoes. “Ally, remember what we talked about earlier? You have to sit quietly if you want to see the animals.”

I take the net back from Mr. Marcus and he rather bravely reaches in to grasp the snapping turtle at its hind quarters. “Are you sure this is safe?” I whisper as Marcus retrieves him from the net.

“Probably not,” Marcus shrugs.

Ah, the life of a camp counselor.
I think it is probably evident to the children why this particular reptile is called a *snapping* turtle the moment Mr. Marcus pulls him from the net. The turtle’s neck is stretched out and contorted as he lunges back to try and reach Marcus’s fingers. He wisely holds the snapper at a distance as he walks him down the line, while also staying arms length from the campers. The campers are absorbed by the sight in front of them, leaning forward as far as they can without actually raising off their backsides. Even the Polar Bears are intrigued, their eyes locked on the fighting turtle. Lanie, who I know is a camp regular, smiles to herself as Mr. Marcus walks by, her head tilted to the side as she watches quietly.

While the Polar Bears seem to be handling themselves well, with the exception of Bobby who keeps sitting up on his knees for a closer look, the second graders are a little wild. As children, their self preservation skills seem to be limited at this age. The children don’t seem to understand why can’t have hands-on contact with this particular animal.

“Remember to keep your hands in your lap, Amy,” I hear Ms. Kira say. “We can’t pet this animal.”

“Then why can Mr. Marcus hold it?”

“He can hold the snapping turtle because all of the counselors have had special training.”

I smile to myself because Ms. Kira’s comment is only half a lie. Technically we did get some practice before the camp season began, but it was nothing so extravagant.

Still drying, but mostly free of mud, I follow behind Mr. Marcus. “Does anyone
know how you recognize a snapping turtle?” I ask.

A girl at the end of the line, one of Ms. Kira’s campers, waves her hand. “Um, by their big heads, right?”

“Yes, very good. And do they have any other distinguishing features?”

“Their long tails,” Lanie offers. I smile, not surprised. Lanie’s been to camp so often that she probably knows her animal facts better than I do.

“That is exactly right, Lanie,” I say and Mr. Marcus turns the turtle so that the campers can see the long rudder tail extending from the shell.

Lanie

I wonder if that hurts, I think, watching the turtle’s head literally contort as it lunges for Mr. Marcus’s fingers. As he continues to walks down the line, slowly approaching me, Ms. Shia continues to explain snapping turtles to the eagerly listening second graders. The little Rattle Snakes literally provide a chorus of “wows” and “whoas” as Ms. Shia explains: “Snapping turtles are known for their size. They can grow up to 20 inches long. And they have such distinctive heads because their jaws can go through other turtle’s shells.”

As Ms. Shia talks, I watch the way the children’s eyes, no joke, widen. The kids almost seem to lean back when they realize how powerful the little writhing animal in Marcus’s hands really is.

I try to think about when I learned all of this information for the first time, but it’s seriously too long ago to remember. By now I just know that I know it.
I really like the idea of sharing what I know with the children.

And it seems like it would be a cool, super easy job to have.

*Shia*

The children really are completely enthralled by the snapping turtle. They hang on my every word while staring at the prehistoric looking beast. I smile to myself with a weird sense of satisfaction. This time last year I couldn’t have told the difference between a box turtle and a rock.

Having walked the line, Mr. Marcus moves to return the snapper to the pond. All of the campers gather around and are fascinated as he gently drops the turtle back into the water. A minute later, the spell of their fascination is gone and they are bored. We have 30 minutes left until the next activity, so suddenly I find myself trudging back through the pond again, hunting for another creature for them to observe.

My smile of satisfaction wanes a little as I step in another mud pit, the slime seeping through the holes in my water shoes and the water rising up to my waist.

*Lanie*

Ms. Shia wades back through the water looking for a new conquest.

It looks like so much fun.
Conversations with Nature:

*Whisper 4*

Baking soda and vinegar explosions
From replica factory silos
Soy sauce streams trickle into
The model stream
Channeling down to a model river.
A model ocean.
We laugh and joke
Beg for another baking soda explosion
But we understand.
The world we are only just beginning to know
The world of water striders, salamanders,
Shallow streams, and deep forests
Is in danger
Polluted by our cars, our buildings
By human hands
With nature’s last breath it is whispering.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The Research

While I have written this Master’s thesis in a nontraditional way, and I have occasionally grappled with an irrational fear that in doing so I have somehow hurt my credibility as a cultural anthropologist, the research and preparation behind this project corresponds to traditional anthropological fieldwork. For instance, like all anthropologists, I had to secure permission to observe the summer camps at both the Midwest Zoo and Midwest Nature Center before conducting my research. As Chapter 1 demonstrates, this process is not without its own trials and frustrations. There were times that I was unsure if I would ever even graduate. Furthermore, before starting the actual data collection, I needed to receive Human Subject Institutional Review Board approval from Western Michigan University. While this too was a lengthy process, both the HSIRB training and submission process helped prepare me for interacting with my ‘subjects’ in what I hope and believe was an ethical, nonintrusive way.

Prior to conducting my field work, I also conducted a literature review. In order to prepare for my research and to help me better understand the interactions I might see taking place between children and the environment, I turned to anthropological readings from a variety of subjects including feminist literature on the subject of women and
nature; literature on gender socialization; and literature on children, gender, and nature. Seminal works like Sherry Ortner’s “Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?” and Sandra Bem’s *The Lenses of Gender* helped guide my research questions, and undoubtedly helped structure my understanding of my observations. Still, while the literature review was helpful leading into my fieldwork, the finished thesis is largely experience driven.

For data collection, I relied upon techniques and methods that are cornerstones in ethnographic research: participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and informal interviews. It is these anthropological elements which allowed me to really see my surroundings, to immerse myself in the summer camp experience. The sore legs, the sunburned shoulders, and even the panicked moments of “I don’t fit in!” allowed me to “step in the shoes” of both camper and counselor alike. My attempts to walk in the shoes of the counselors became a reality because after my first day of observation I immediately went home and got online to buy a pair of Teva water sandals (mint green in case you were curious) because I didn’t want to be the only idiot walking around camp in hiking boots.

My research took place in the summer of 2012 between the months of June and August. I followed the Midwest Nature Center summer camp for four weeks during this time and the Midwest Zoo summer camp for one week. While I was only able to observe the Midwest Zoo camp for one week, the behaviors of the campers and counselors, as well as the activities they participated in, were similar enough in theme to complement my observations at the Midwest Nature Center. While both programs have different
approaches, with the Midwest Zoo focusing more on curriculum while the Midwest Nature Center emphasizes hands-on learning, some of the patterns I identified during my observation of Nature Camp overlapped with the Zoo Camp. This allowed me to incorporate and combine some of these camper and counselor behaviors into my depictions of the summer camp experience.

The five weeks of observation were scattered throughout these three months, allowing me to witness a variety of age groups and camp themes. Each week I participated in camp activities, playing more rounds of a “Sand Piper” mystery game than I can count and creating paper plate turtles. I also often helped supervise the campers. I also took copious field notes, thoughts, reflections, and observations of my days at summer camp that were later coded for repeating themes (another traditional anthropological research method).

Over the course of my field work I interviewed representatives of local environmental education camps, including the Midwest Zoo, the Midwest Nature Center, and the Midwest Bird and Wildlife Sanctuary. My interview skills were a little rocky at first (because I was nervous I had the tendency to stumble and lose my place), but these interviews proved to be instrumental to understanding the missions of these three environmental programs and the expectations the representatives have of both the program and their employees. Similarly, I conducted semi-structured interviews with camp counselors to learn of their views of the camp as well as about their own relationship with nature.

The majority of my data was collected through my daily interactions with camp
counselors and campers. As I said, these experiences are the foundation of my writing the stories and poems of this thesis accurately reflect my research experiences with nature, the campers, and the counselors.

During the four weeks that I observed at the Midwest Nature Center, my day started at 8:00 AM or 8:30 AM. While camp didn’t officially start until 9:00 AM, I arrived early to help set up activities and to observe the counselors’ preparations and interactions before the campers started to arrive. It was interesting to watch the change that rippled over the camp once the first camper arrived. Once the first car pulled up in the dirt circle drive, the music changed from popular radio hits to more “camp appropriate” Disney or lyric-less dance tunes and the coffee cups and tired faces were hidden away from sight.

It was in watching the counselors’ morning interactions that I realized how close they had become as a group. There was a wide age range among the camp employees. The junior counselors were as young as fifteen and sixteen and the senior counselors were in their late teens and early twenties, but despite the age difference between the high school and college students, counselor conversations were punctuated with inside jokes and shared memories. While they welcomed me, including me in their conversations and inviting me to social events after-hours, I was always a little on the outside, neither a camper nor a counselor, but falling somewhere in-between.

Following morning chores and a quick staff meeting, I would follow a group of counselors back to their group’s tarp to wait for the children to arrive. Slowly, the clusters of counselors broke apart as they moved to their designated stations and placed
both conversations and jokes on hold. Every week I would pick two groups to follow and would divide the week days so that I would have two days with each of the groups. For instance, on Monday and Thursday I might have followed the youngest group (three and four-year-olds) while on Tuesday and Friday I might have been with the oldest group (ten, eleven, and twelve-year-olds). While following the different groups, the course of my day would depend on the counselors that led those groups. Sometimes my role was simply as an observer: I would follow the groups, interact with the campers while hiking, and then watch the games and any activities that they participated from a distance, trying (and often failing) to discretely write in my journal. In other groups I played a more active role: the counselors would use me as an extra volunteer counselor, so I would help keep track of the campers, facilitate games, participate in activities with the campers and counselors, help enforce rules, etc. One week I even had a role in the closing ceremony of a Family Day skit (my proudest moment); the kids asked me to go on stage with them to help show the parents what they had learned about water pollution during camp.

Both roles, whether I was a quiet observer or active participant, were ethnographically rewarding, contributing to my insight into the camp experience. On the one hand, when I had the opportunity to sit back and watch, I could analyze behaviors and reactions more carefully. For instance, during a game of Sand Piper (a game in which children sit in a circle and one camper sits in the middle as the designated detective trying to determine who in the circle is the animal silently “eating up” all of the “ants”) I could see how a child would react when he or she was “killed” by the person who was “it.” Did they go down dramatically with gasping breaths? Did they have any final
words? Or did they go silently, so that the “detective” didn’t even know what happened? On the other hand, when I was participating with them, I could feel for myself some of the emotions or pressures the counselors and campers might be experiencing. Again with the game of Sand Piper, when I played with them I could feel that frustrating rush of curiosity as I looked around our circle trying to identify who might be “it” this time around. I might also get a burst of excitement when the sand piper stuck his tongue out in my direction and killed me (I personally alternated between dramatic and quiet deaths).

My time as a “sort of” counselor helped me to understand the responsibilities and experiences of the counselors. However, even when I helped run games of tag and reminded campers not to try to climb the trees, I didn’t feel the same sense of responsibility that the counselors did. Counselors were always on the move focusing on their lesson plan timelines as well as on the trouble-maker campers. I was able to experience some of the same charges while also having the time and freedom to reflect on the behavior of both counselor and campers playing out around me. I could identify things like the silent fights going on between peers or the unrelated-to-nature-video-game-conversations occurring during hikes. It was in this liminal position that I was able to identify the gendered behavior of both campers and counselors, like the tendency of campers to select same-sex groupings or the pattern of counselors expressing “war of the sexes” mentalities. By being neither camper nor counselor, I was able to pick up on social dynamics that the counselors, self-admittedly, did not always see.

While the counselors seemed to view me as a helpful outsider, often using me as an extra pair of hands, I believe that the campers saw me as a volunteer counselor, acting
with me in a way similar to how they acted with the other “big kids.” They decorated my
face and arms with clay paint, turned to me with questions, and enjoyed soaking me
during water games. It is perhaps because of this that some children became more
reserved when I was nearby. Occasionally I would walk too close to a group of campers
when we were hiking and they would grow quiet, perhaps believing they might get in
trouble for “not camp appropriate” conversations. I heard “shh, a counselor’s coming”
more than once and felt a pang of self pity as I realized that at twenty-three I was now
“old”.

But while campers seemed to see me as a “sort of” counselor, I sometimes felt
more like a camper than anything else. In each of the groups I learned animal and plant
facts along with the campers. I lay on my belly on the boardwalk with the children,
gazing in awe at murky underworld of the pond as they did, my eyes searching for the
shadow of a snapping turtle or watching in wonder as water strider’s “danced” across the
pond’s surface. I would pet snakes and turtles alongside them, sitting cross-legged on the
floor, sandwiched between children half my size. I looked under logs for salamanders,
walked barefoot along creeks, and raced around in games of tag. These hands-on
experiences, in combination with my daily interactions and conversations with the
children helped me get into the mindset of the campers. Conversations overheard
between peers, facial expressions and the silent body language of children during
activities, as well as the camper-counselor interactions, all helped me see commonalities
and differences among the children. I tried to illuminate the differences between Nature
Camp novices and Nature Camp “pros,” describing the differences in viewpoint and
knowledge within my stories by contrasting ages, perspectives, and experiences.

While five weeks is not an extensive study, a week was enough for me to realize how fundamentally the camp experience can change children’s world views. I saw, week by week, the way children’s minds opened up, the way they slowly began to think about their surroundings differently. The anthropological field work, interviews, and literature review have helped inform this thesis. They laid the groundwork for the themes I have explored in my ethnographic fiction pieces, including the presence of gender at camp and the repetition of environmental themes. By incorporating these components I have attempted to accurately represent my experiences shadowing nature camps. These stories are meant to be vivid, multi-dimensional representations of my research, humanizing both my field work experience, and the subjects of my study. Following five amazing, busy, exhausting, heat melting, exhilarating weeks of fieldwork, I sat down to begin to tell their stories.

The Writing Process

The task of taking data from field work and analyzing it for themes and patterns is an extensive process, but writing anthropology has its own difficulties. I completed my undergraduate work at Northern Michigan University, and while my minor was in anthropology, my major was in English Writing. In fact, the reason I first decided to take an anthropology class as a freshman, and the reason I decided to pursue a Masters following graduation, is that I wanted to be able to more accurately write peoples’ stories;
I wanted to be able to more accurately understand and explore the story of humanity.

Still, when I decided to write creative ethnography for my thesis, I struggled with how to begin. In fact, the first “non-traditional” thesis draft that I submitted to my advisor was, well, quite traditional. It turns out I devoted my entire winter break to a traditional thesis format with a few narratives intertwined. I didn’t even realize I was doing it, but I guess I just didn’t know where to begin. Despite all of my experience experimenting with forms of fiction and creative non-fiction in my undergrad, I was stuck in the anthropological, academic format and tone that I had always studied when it came to anthropology. It felt like an impossible cage to break free of.

But while I had led myself astray, the time I’d spent on that first draft did not go to waste. Rather, this failure gave me an outline of the themes I wanted to explore in my more creative works. For instance, the stories which emphasized gendered camp behavior were front and center in the original draft, and I knew that that was something I wanted to explore, albeit in a different format. It was an aspect of the camp experience that I thought was worth examining in more depth. I also knew that I wanted to explore some of the environmental themes that both Nature Camp and Zoo Camp emphasized, the concepts of conservation, respect, and friendship. I wanted to delve into how these themes impacted individuals’ relationships with the environment. Furthermore, I wanted to tell my story too, to help illuminate some of the struggles that occur during the mountain climb that is fieldwork.

My own story was the easiest to tell. Because the story is written from my perspective, in my voice, and based on my memories, it did not take me long to outline
the memoir that is Chapter One. The chronicle of my research fumbles took several rounds of editing. I had to work to flesh out certain characters and scenes while also condensing others, but my story came together rather easily. Once I realized that my writing really could be creative, and that it was truly okay to have fun with the tone and descriptions, I drew inspiration from the writing styles of authors like Rhonda Janzen and David Sedaris, incorporating humor into the story through a blunt, honest, and hyperbolic tone. The content of the story itself was inspired by Elenore Smith Bowens novel, *Return to Laughter*, which demonstrated the difficulty of anthropological research. Having experienced my own research struggles and obstacles, her work encouraged me to highlight my own research path as a comedy of errors.

Chapter Two’s exploration of gender roles experienced in camp took the most revisions. At first I wrote this story as memoir as well, but as I set out to use this thesis to show the thoughts, feelings and experiences of those I was studying, focusing on my own story seemed like a failing. I needed to be bold, to challenge myself, even if it was uncomfortable at times.

When I was worried about how to tell the story, what days and experiences I could pull from my fieldwork, my advisor, Dr. Spielvogel, reminded me that my stories don’t have to be strictly nonfiction. In fact, that is one of the advantages of creative ethnography, it allows the writer to combine characters and timelines, to create a new story that still tells the ‘truth’ of culture with many of the freedoms of fiction. Dr. Spielvogel suggested I pick one story or memory from my fieldwork to focus on that might demonstrate the theme I wanted to explore and then to go from there to see what
story I could tell. It was with that advice that I hit my stride as it were (even though I cannot walk never mind run on flat surfaces without tripping over my own feet). After a long struggle and a few awkward first drafts, the story of the wig, cold shoulders, and ducks came to life. I tried to infuse as many of the observed gendered behaviors as I could within that one character and that one day, to create a story that was neither fiction or nonfiction, but quintessentially ethnographic fiction.

The multiple viewpoint approach that I employed in Chapter Two and the vignettes of Chapter Three were inspired by the writing styles of Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* and Lee Smith’s *Oral History*. These books stood out to me because after reading both novels in an Anthropology through Fiction course, I was struck by the authors’ abilities to vividly represent characters of all ages, both sexes, and statuses. In Chapter Three I challenged myself to embody the voices of even more individuals, including male and female campers and another counselor’s perspective in my writing. It took a whole weekend of work to complete the first draft, and I pretty much locked myself in the house with Chinese takeout and a bottle of Moscato to do it, but I faced my fears and experimented with the voices of a seven-year-old boy and thirteen-year-old girl until the characters began to come to life for me.

The four poems which punctuate the longer fiction pieces came together surprisingly quickly. I wanted my thesis to demonstrate the variety of forms creative ethnography can take, from memoir to short story to poetry, but I don’t exactly have a background in poetry. In fact, the brevity of prose has always been a struggle for me. Still, I wanted to try. The “whispers” poems came to me on my long commute to school.
I remembered the vinegar and baking soda pollution activity I witnessed one day at camp and began to play with the memory. Turning down the volume of the radio, I experimented with the words, pauses, and breaks until the story was told. From there I chose a few other vivid memories from camp that I imagined might demonstrate the themes explored in the longer chapters. Once I had the idea that each poem could demonstrate a different whispered lesson, the poems could be read together as a narrative or alone as single poems.

It was Dr. Spielvogel who suggested that I use the poems to transition between the thesis chapters. The poems were meant to set the tone for the themes explored in each proceeding creative writing story. Therefore, the first poem explores the act of conducting field work, highlighting a tone of both pleasure and relief before Chapter One explores the challenges, fears and doubts of setting up field work. The second poem explores the hints of gender present in camp craft activities before Chapter Two focuses on the gendered worldview that surrounds and influences counselor Jeff. The third poem, which is divided into two parts, reveals the contrast between a child exploring a relationship with nature and a counselor who has a long friendship with the great outdoors. This contrast sets the reader up for the three vignettes of Chapter Three which explore the variety of developing relationships occurring through the framework of summer camp. I elected to end my thesis with Whisper Four because it highlights a reoccurring theme that was stressed by both the Midwest Nature Center and the Midwest Zoo. Both environmental camps wanted their campers to walk away with a respect for nature, and an awareness of our impact on the world. I think it’s an important,
worthwhile message to note.

These stories and poems are based on real campers and real experiences. The viewpoints I employ in these short stories are a result of spending a summer hiking the dirt trails with children of a variety of ages and summer camp experience. Taking more than a hundred real moments from my observations, I have combined these memories and expanded on these experiences to reflect the broader themes I saw and experienced during my time shadowing two separate nature themed camps. While the first story is more memoir than fiction, I deviate from the “truth” towards fiction by skipping over some experiences and embellishing other moments to make the story more concise and (I hope) more accessible to readers. Similarly, the first vignette in Chapter Three is based on my own personal experience and therefore is also inspired by memoir writing. While all of the stories are rooted in fact, the people who inspired these characters have been altered and merged, the time line of events has been shortened, and certain events have been embellished—all to help construct a story that will reflect the “truth” of my research experience in an engaging way. In this way, all of the stories above, memoir, fiction, and poetry, fall into the category of ethnographic fiction.

Further Investigation

While my thesis research was short-term, and thus not extensive enough for me to draw any theoretical conclusions, my experience at environmentally themed summer camps has pointed to questions that require further investigation. While some existing
research does focus on children and nature (highlighting the differences between how adults and children experience nature, the benefits of a relationship with the environment, and the contradictory research on the role of gender in this relationship), this literature is largely sociological, psychological, biological and ecological, rather than anthropological. I believe that children’s relationships with nature is an area where anthropology can be useful and indeed, further anthropological field work exploring the relationship between children and nature is needed, specifically research focusing on the role of gender in children’s interactions with nature. Additionally, I believe that further research is needed to engage the arguments made by feminist anthropologists with regard to the problematic associations between women and nature, namely the belief that women are innately closer to nature than men.

Further research surrounding the subject of children, gender, and nature would be useful and valuable to the field of anthropology. However, while compiling this thesis, I have come to the realization that even more important than the topic I have selected to explore is the medium in which it is presented. My experience with writing creative ethnography has demonstrated to me the importance of emotion, detail, and the subject’s voice in the anthropological writing. Creative ethnography has allowed me to demonstrate the differences that exist in the summer camp experience and in the views and viewpoints of my ‘subjects’. It has helped me to give life to the dynamic, colorful, and adventurous people that I have met over the course of my field work. Anthropologists need to explore alternative ways to represent the subjects of their work that will allow them to humanize the people they work with and to reflect the emotions
shared and the relationship forged during field work.

With the decline of tenure positions and other fields incorporating culture/foreign studies into their own disciplines, anthropology is at a precipice, a point where, as a field, we can either stand still, underutilized or, worse, obsolete, or we can find a way to scale to new heights. As we move further into the twenty-first century and anthropologists struggle to find their place within changing disciplines, graduate students should consider turning to new forms of writing for their theses and dissertations. It may be a little uncomfortable at first to break from the academic writing styles students are trained in, but it is possible, and creative ethnography can be a powerful medium of expression. At the beginning of this chapter I wrote that I have grappled with a feeling my thesis work is not as valuable as a traditional, academically written thesis, but I know that those feelings are irrational. When you are part of something new and different, it can be intimidating and overwhelming (like with Leanne’s exploration of the snake in Chapter Three), but that doesn’t mean that it can’t be rewarding, or that it isn’t worth doing. In fact, I believe that the inclusion of ethnographic fiction in the field of anthropology effectively changes the conversation, the representation of subjects, and opens doors for researchers to share their knowledge and observations with a broader public- all elements which are going to be pivotal to the survival of social sciences.
Date: May 17, 2012

To: Laura Spielvogel, Principal Investigator
   Courtney Schofield, Student Investigator for thesis

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number 12-05-07

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled “Closer to Nature: Socializing Gender Roles in Environmental Summer Camps” has been approved under the expedited category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note that you may only conduct this research exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date noted below. In addition, if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: May 17, 2013
RECOMMENDED READINGS

A literature review of sources relating to nature, gender, children, and creative ethnography was conducted prior to and throughout the course of research. These readings influenced my research questions, my orientation into the field, and my writing style. Included below is a list of these influential sources to help guide further reading and aid future investigation.

-Courtney Morgan Schofield


