

EARTHBOUND

on solid ground

bell hooks

Kentucky hills were the place of my early childhood. Surrounded by a wilderness of honeysuckle, wild asparagus and sheltering trees, bushes shielding growing crops, the huge garden of a black landowner. Our concrete house on the hill, a leftover legacy from oil drilling, from the efforts of men to make the earth yield greater and greater profit, stood as a citadel to capitalism's need for a new frontier. A child of the hills, I was taught early on in my life the power in nature. I was taught by farmers that wilderness land,

the untamed environment, can give life, and it can take life. In my girlhood I learned to watch for snakes, wildcats roaming, plants that irritate and poison. I know instinctively; I know because I am told by all-knowing grown-ups that it is humankind and not nature that is the stranger on these grounds. Humility in relationship to nature's power made survival possible.

Coming from "backwoods" folks, Appalachian outlaws, as a child I was taught to understand that those among us who lived organically, in harmony and union with nature, were marked with a sensibility that was distinct, and downright dangerous. Backwoods folks tend to ignore the rules of society, the rules of law. In the backwoods, one learned to trust only the spirit, to follow where the spirit moved. Ultimately, no matter what was said or done, the spirit called to us from a place beyond words, from a place beyond man-made law. The wild spirit of unspoiled nature worked its way into the folk of the backwoods, an ancestral legacy, handed down from generation to generation. And its fundamental gift, the cherishing of that which is most precious—freedom. And to be fully free, one had to embrace the organic rights of the earth.

Humankind, no matter how powerful, cannot take away the rights of the earth. Ultimately nature rules. That is the great, democratic gift the earth offers us—that sweet death to which we all inevitably go—into that final communion. No race, no class, no gender, nothing can keep any of us from

dying into that death where we are made one. To tend the earth is always then to tend our destiny, our freedom, and our hope.

These lessons of my girlhood were the oppositional narratives that taught me to care for the earth, to respect country folk. This respect for the earth, for the country girl within, stood me in good stead when I left this environment and entered a world beyond the country town I was raised in. It was only when I left home, that country place where nature's splendors were abundant and not yet destroyed, that I understood for the first time the contempt for country folk that abounds in our nation. That contempt has led to a cultural disrespect for the farmer, for those who live simply in harmony with nature. Writer, sometime farmer, and poet Wendell Berry, another Kentuckian who loves our land, writes in his book *Another Turn of the Crank* that "communists and capitalists are alike in their contempt for country people, country life, and country places."

Before the mass migrations to northern cities in the early nineteen hundreds, more than 90 percent of all black folks lived in the agrarian south. We were indeed a people of the earth. Working the land was the hope of survival. Even when that land was owned by white oppressors, master and mistress, it was the earth itself that protected exploited black folks from dehumanization. My sharecropping granddaddy Jerry would walk through neat rows of crops and say, "I'll tell you a secret, little girl. No man can make

the sun or the rains come—we can all testify. We can all see that ultimately we all bow down to the forces of nature. Big white boss may think he can outsmart nature, but the small farmer know. Earth is our witness." This relationship to the earth meant that Southern black folks, whether they were impoverished or not, knew firsthand that white supremacy, with its systemic dehumanization of blackness, was not a form of absolute power.

In that world, country black folks understood that though powerful white folks could dominate and control people of color, they could not control nature or divine spirit. The fundamental understanding that white folks were not gods (for if they were they would be able to shape nature) helped imbue black folks with an oppositional sensibility. When black people migrated to urban cities, this humanizing connection with nature was severed; racism and white supremacy came to be seen as all-powerful, the ultimate factors informing our fate. When this thinking was coupled with a breakdown in religiosity, a refusal to recognize the sacred in everyday life, it served the interests of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.

Living in the agrarian south, working on the land, growing food, I learned survival skills similar to those that hippies sought to gain in their back-to-the-earth movements in the late sixties and early seventies. Growing up in a world where my grandparents did not hold regular jobs but made their living digging and selling fishing worms, growing food, and raising chickens, I was

ever mindful of an alternative to the capitalist system that destroyed nature's abundance. In that world I learned experientially the concept of interbeing, which Buddhist monk Thich N'hat Hanh talks about as that recognition of the connectedness of all human life.

That sense of interbeing was once intimately understood by black folks in the agrarian south. Nowadays it is only those of us who maintain our bonds to the land, to nature, who keep our vows of living in harmony with the environment, who draw spiritual strength from nature. Reveling in nature's bounty and beauty has been one of the ways enlightened poor people in small towns all around our nation stay in touch with their essential goodness even as forces of evil, in the form of corrupt capitalism and hedonistic consumerism, work daily to strip them of their ties to nature.

Journalists from the *New York Times* who interviewed Kentucky poor rural folk getting by with scarce resources were surprised to find these citizens expressing a connection to nature. In a recent article titled "Forget Washington. The Poor Cope Alone," reporter Evelyn Nieves shared: "People time and again said they were blessed to live in a place as beautiful as Kentucky, where the mountains are green and lush and the trees look as old as time." Maintaining intimacy gives us a concrete place of hope. It is nature that reminds us time and time again that "this too will pass." To look upon a tree or

a waterfall that has stood the test of time can renew the spirit. To watch plants rise from the earth with no special tending reawakens our sense of awe and wonder.

More than ever before in our nation's history, black folks must collectively renew our relationship to the earth, to our agrarian roots. For when we are forgetful and participate in the destruction and exploitation of the dark earth, we collude with the domination of the earth's dark people, both here and globally. Reclaiming our history, our relationship to nature, to farming in America, and proclaiming the humanizing restorative of living in harmony with nature so that the earth can be our witness is meaningful resistance.

When I leave my small flat in an urban world—where nature has been so relentlessly assaulted that it is easy to forget to look at a tree, a sky, a flower emerging in a sea of trash—and go to the country, I seek renewal. To live in communion with the earth, fully acknowledging nature's power with humility and grace, is a practice of spiritual mindfulness that heals and restores. Making peace with the earth, we make the world a place where we can be one with nature. We create and sustain environments where we can come back to ourselves, where we can return home. Stand on solid ground and be a true witness.