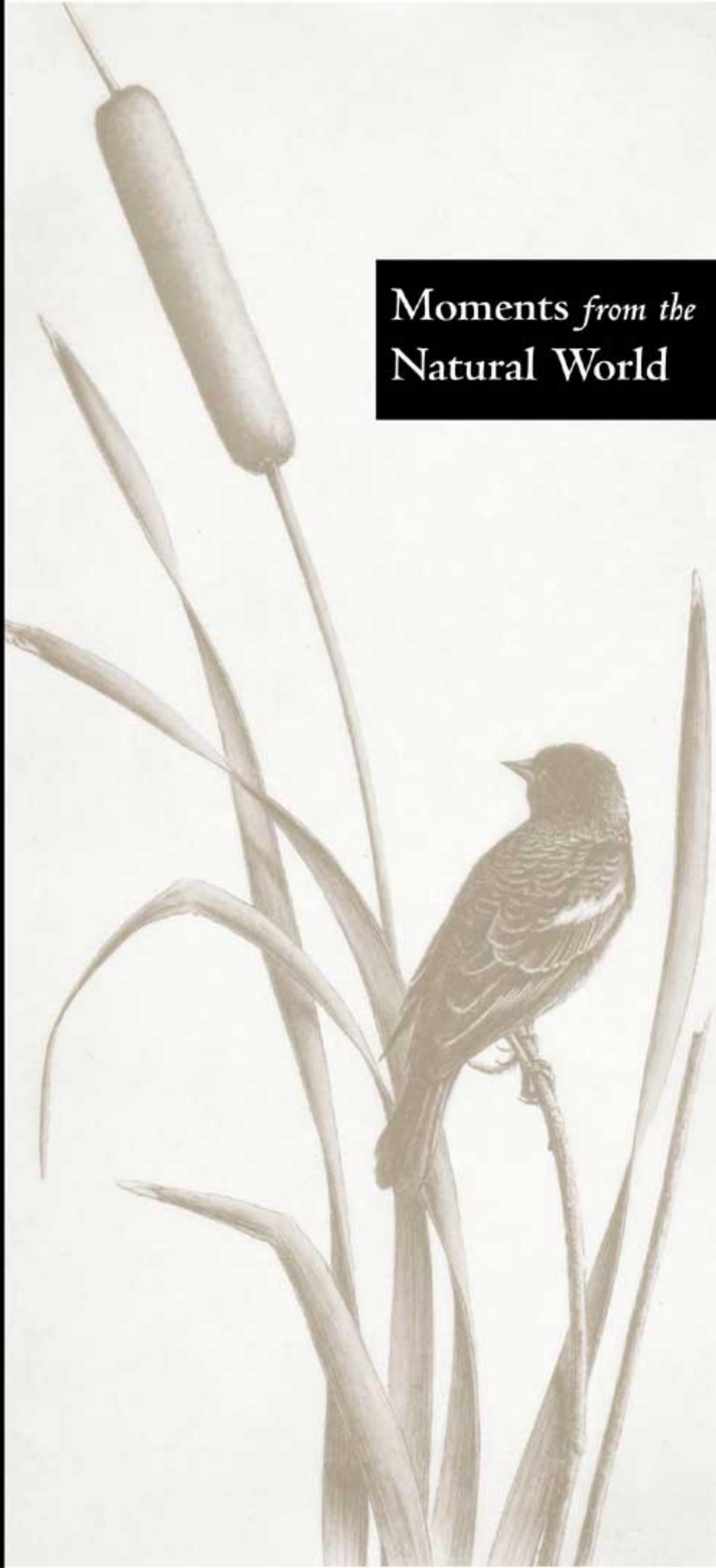


*Icons  
of Loss  
and  
Grace*

*Moments from the  
Natural World*

Susan  
Hanson



*Icons of Loss and Grace*







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Susan Hanson

*Illustrations by Melanie Fain*

*Texas Tech University Press*

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*For Larry and Erin*

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## Introduction

**M**Y FIRST EXPERIENCE with what is now called the literature of place occurred even before I could read. The book was *Animals under Your Feet!* and it belonged to my older brother, Charles. Written by Ivah Green in 1953, it had been a gift to Charles from my mother in the summer of that same year. I was just a toddler then, but by the time I was four or five I was mesmerized by this book. Not surprisingly, what intrigued me first were the photographs—particularly the close-ups of a grimacing brown bat and a trapdoor spider at work. My interest in the words came later.

Other books would have an equal or greater impact on my life, but this is the one that initially stirred my innate curiosity about the world. Though I had no experience of bats or moles or much of anything else that Green described—save for the earthworms and ants—I was gratified to know that such things existed. Even more thrilling was the possibility that they were living right under my feet.

Over the years, I frequently smuggled the book from my brother's desk and took it off to my room to read. After one such incident, I simply forgot to take it back. Today, the book sits on my study shelf.

Partly as a result of encountering this book, and partly as a result of things beyond my control—such as being an introverted child who found solace in the natural world—I grew up with a sense of kinship with what could be called the familiar wild. Though my family occa-

sionally traveled to see relatives in the Lower Rio Grande Valley or the southern Edwards Plateau, also known as the Texas Hill Country, the landscape in which I grew up seemed far more prosaic than these. Unlike my cousins, I had no clear spring-fed river in which to swim, no enormous trees to climb. And there were no subtropical thickets full of chachalacas and raucous green jays anywhere near my ascetic back yard. I improvised by playing on a ladder set up beside the clothesline pole, and imagining the rest.

Granted, I would eventually see the beauty of the Coastal Plain—the beauty of its marshes and estuaries, its shady pecan bottoms and live oaks hung with Spanish moss—but this recognition would take some time. Compared to more scenic Corpus Christi, where we had most recently lived, the small town I moved to in 1957 had no beach, no waterfront views, and little to endear it to a child. Roughly twenty miles inland from Matagorda Bay, it was a land of rice fields, rice driers, and pickups bearing bumper stickers admonishing all to “Eat Rice Today.”

Through my first three years of school, my family and I lived in a crackerbox house on an unpaved road just south of town. It was there that I learned to ride my bike on oyster shell and to keep my eyes open for snakes and bull nettle and “asps,” the stinging puss caterpillars that infested our neighbor’s trees. With a few neighborhood kids to play with, and a dog patient enough to wear a canvas army surplus backpack whenever I demanded, I roamed this less than idyllic landscape as if it were a true wilderness. Sometimes I suspect that being extremely myopic helped—and I say that only partly in jest: I was learning to see things up close.

As a result, I also began to develop the awareness that what is “other,” what is wild, resides not only in the exotic but in the familiar as well. It would be many years before I could articulate this sense, but in becoming intimate with the commonplace, and learning to value it, I was finding meaning in the ordinary things of this world.

Still, it is one thing to know and appreciate nature and quite another to write about it. For me, the latter began when I was in graduate school, working on a creative thesis in poetry.

Once again, the immediate landscape in which I was living was an understated one. Newly married, my husband and I could afford only the most modest of rent houses, the first on a treeless hill near a pasture full of cows and the next on a shady but neglected strip of land in town. Town, in this case, was San Marcos, a small community bisected by the Balcones Fault—Texas Hill Country rising sharply to the west and Blackland Prairie sloping eastward toward the Gulf. Located on what is now the booming Interstate 35 corridor between Austin and San Antonio, it was then a quiet college town, known primarily for its pristine river, its family-oriented theme park, and its schools.

While more dramatic natural beauties such as springs and caves lay just miles away from our home, the metaphors I chose for my poetry were domestic—new flowerbeds and muddy shoes, bats circling streetlights, the remnants of bean plants browning in the fall, the seeds of beggar's ticks, even the dead armadillo on the road. They might not be attractive in the usual sense of the word, but these were the things of my world—and any meaning I was going to find in nature would have to come through them.

Of course, this begs a very important question: Is there meaning in nature? I have long believed that there is. Perhaps this conviction comes from years of gardening and feeling the sun and soil on my skin. Perhaps it comes from those nights at church camp when I listened to the waves breaking against the shore on Tres Palacios Bay. Or maybe it's nothing more than temperament, a function of the intuitive-feeling type. I simply can't say.

What I do know, however, is that this is a way of seeing the world that feeds me.

In the culture in which I was raised, the created order existed pri-

marily as backdrop for the human drama of sin and redemption. Lovely and useful as it might be, nature was meant to be overcome, left behind in the final triumph of the elect. Indeed, the very word *nature* implied a failure of some kind; what was natural was tainted, inferior, and, most of all, deceptive—death in the guise of life. To me, the message seemed hopelessly mixed. How could the physical world be a reflection of its Creator and a millstone around our necks? This was the sort of paradox that negated rather than nourished. I longed for something else.

Strangely enough, it was in my college freshman English class that this something else first presented itself. Accustomed as I was to a piety steeped in emotion, I warmed quickly to my instructor's off-topic discussions of Christian existentialist thought, that of theologian Paul Tillich in particular. I appreciated the fact that in Tillich's mind, questions and doubts were not just tolerated but were actually welcomed and expected. More than that, I savored the discovery that one's sense of meaning in life is not so much found as made; the notion of meaning as an absolute, something akin to ore that must be resolutely pried from rock, gradually began to recede. In its place came a growing awareness that what Tillich called the Ground of Being was not disguised or buried. Indeed, this Ground was not only right there under our feet but also in front of our eyes.

Unlike the contradictions I had experienced previously, this was a paradox I could live with—that which cannot be spoken, communicated by all that exists; that which cannot be known, made as real to us as our breath. Disquieting though it was to think on such things, I found a good companion in the works of Trappist monk and poet Thomas Merton. Particularly through *New Seeds of Contemplation*, I began to see these apparent inconsistencies as sources of nurture and hope, rich with possibility, inexhaustible. To Merton, I discovered, faith was neither a feeling nor an opinion but rather an experience of immersion, the heart and mind integrated and living within the

divine. Meaning came not from rejecting the world but from participating in its ongoing creation. Mystery was encountered not in some ethereal realm but in the tangible things of this earth. As Merton put it, “Everything that is, is holy.”

To say that matter itself is sacred, and therefore capable of communicating the numinous, is, of course, to invite all manner of labels: Platonic, pantheistic, pagan. I am none of the above. Rather, I count myself as part of an ancient sacramental tradition that embraces the physical and the spiritual, that sees them as an undivided whole and therefore equally real. In “The Wilderness,” British poet Kathleen Raine announces:

*I have glimpsed the bright mountain behind the mountain,  
Knowledge under the leaves, tasted the bitter berries red,  
Drunk cold water and clear from an inexhaustible bidden fountain.*

The key words here, I believe, are *glimpsed* and *tasted*. Raine can make no claim to having seen the full picture or having satiated her thirst. All vision is partial, she acknowledges, and the image invariably arrives in pieces. There is a “mountain behind the mountain,” Raine would argue, but apprehending it requires that one first experience what Noel Dermot O’Donoghue has described as the “ordinary, very physical, very material mountain.”

In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, nothing captures this principle more aptly than the icon. An artistic and spiritual representation of a holy person or event, the icon does more than portray an image. It communicates a reality—the mountain behind the mountain, if you will. Often described as “a meeting between heaven and earth,” the icon invites the participation of the beholder; while maintaining its own integrity as a thing in itself, the icon functions as a window into what poet Gerard Manley Hopkins referred to as “the dearest freshness deep down things.”

To see the natural world as an icon, then, is to see meaning in the most ordinary of things. Embedded in all that is, the numinous communicates itself through encounters with the familiar wild—with titmice at a window feeder, with the butterfly caught in a spider's web, with gaillardia in full bloom. To experience such encounters is not to have visions or to hear voices but, rather, to catch a glimpse of that which animates all. For me, at least, these moments of awareness always come and go in a flash. There is nothing spectacular about them, and yet it is in them that I see how pain can evolve into grace.

Keeping a record of such encounters is a habit I developed many years ago. While working for the San Marcos *Daily Record*, I wrote not only feature articles and reviews but also a column called "Notes in Passing." Every Friday for roughly fifteen years, I shared my opinions, laughed at my latest failures in the classroom or at home, and tried to make sense of the losses in my life. In doing the latter, I frequently found myself returning to the images and metaphors I knew best—my garden, the local flora and fauna, the Texas landscape in general. This natural inclination on my part, coupled with the editor's injunctions to "write short," yielded a kind of hybrid—personal essays that relied heavily on the conventions of poetry.

What follows is a collection of those essays, many of which first appeared in very different form. Written as reflections, rather than full-blown arguments or exhaustive accounts of how one resolves the questions of love and loss, they are partial responses at best. Indeed, resolution itself is imperfect, taking us only as far as the next moment of disclosure, and the next. As Rainer Maria Rilke puts it in his *Book of Hours*, "I live my life in widening circles / that reach out across the world." We cover our ground not once, but again and again. The same birds, the same trees, the same slant of sun on a summer afternoon—they are all the signs we have.

If we choose to read them—and the choice is very much ours—we

must remember to do so slowly. We must be patient, reminding ourselves that whatever comes will arrive a piece at a time. And finally, we must bear the weight of paradox, recognizing that delight and sorrow are soul mates, that redemption and loss are a part of the same sacred ground.

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*Innocence*

