

LIVING WITH NATURE

by

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While I'm sitting on my balcony trying to find inspiration in the contrast of parking lots, ugly house walls and sparkling sea and trees that found a way to survive the smog and dog shit, I'm asking myself: Why do I love this country so much, with all the dirt, the poverty, the political, and also environmental problems?

When I have visitors, they tell me, breathing feels heavy here. I never recognized this, not even in the beginning. They ask, how do I sleep with all the noise around me? I answer, Thessaloniki never sleeps, and I love this. They realize that here are a lot of street animals, and they ask me if this is a problem. I say, at least it seems like the people live in peace next to the hundreds of street dogs and cats. The dogs are lying in the middle of the sidewalk, bathing in the sun. Most of them look quite healthy, even if this probably is a fallacy. The cats are watching you with curiosity, as if they know that you are a stranger in this city and you can see people going out of their houses just to put out something to eat for the animals. They have a rhythm that seems dynamic. When I came here, I was so fascinated by living in a big city next to the sea. I thought, how this city is built is amazing: nature just next to us, but only if we want it next to us and our take-away coffees. It felt like this city provides everything just for my mental needs. Do I need silence? Go to the forest. Do I need to calm down? Just sit at the seaside, and listen to the waves. Do I want to swim and lie in the sand? Go some minutes by ferry to the closest beach.

But when you think about it, all these are thoughts that contain the belief that humans are on top of everything. So, since I am leaving in less than a month, the question, what I actually will miss here, got louder very quickly. And that completely changed my thinking. What do I have here what I don't have in Germany? Actually, it is very obvious. I can find a city in Germany with nice nature, with a clean park, and with a river to swim in. But what I barely have is nature that is not touched by any humans. Where nature seems still to be the majestic thing that it is and should be. Above all. Probably outliving us all. The kind of nature that is so diverse, it is not even closely comparable to Germany or to every other country I visited so far. The kind of nature that has a personality. At first I was in love with the city, where everything is built for me. Then I fell in love with Greek nature, which is just there, not wanting to please anyone.

Mount Olympus

We walked up the mountain to a small refuge, slept there, and continued hiking in the morning to arrive to the highest top. There is no path to get there. No railing to prevent us from falling. The fear of falling somehow brings you so close to the stones that it feels like the mountain has the power to decide over life and death. And in the end, doesn't it?

Chalkidiki

On a hidden bay that we found absolutely unintentionally, the sea is so clear and blue, looking at it your mind starts to organize itself. You can't stop it. After you get out all the unimportant

things from your mind, it just rests in the rhythm of the waves. And then, when you go swimming in the nighttime, the milky seas effect makes the water shine. In a weird way, it feels like the sea is revealing all secrets. Everything becomes so real, so clear. (We went there again the other day, and now there are umbrellas and chairs and a van that provides food. We have no idea how they managed to get the van down there. There is no street or anything that makes it possible, you basically have to climb down to get there. It is supposed to make it more beautiful for us. I don't know how someone can be so stupid to really believe that this is an improvement.)

Peloponnese

We made bonfires every night, just taking the wood that the trees threw on the ground as if they would take care of us. We never slept one day at a place that was meant for camping. We did not do any harm to nature. We always took all our trash with us. We washed ourselves with natural soap in the sea—well, mostly we didn't even use soap.

Matala

The other day we went to Crete, and in Matala, a hippie village, we were able to visit caves in the rock where the hippies used to live. We were not allowed to bring anything to drink inside, and for a second we were so disappointed by that, frightened of not being able to enjoy the view without anything to consume. I thought, how can we be so spoiled?

When I sit on my balcony, I can see the sea and, far away but still impressive, the mountains. Sometimes the day is so misty that I can barely see anything, and the sea becomes one with the sky. On those days it seems like the weather is moody, maybe a little bit grumpy, trying to hide itself like a depressed person. My belief that the weather is strongly connected to our mind's happiness sometimes scares me. Germany is grey and grumpy most of the year, and it feels like there is no recovery from that, that it will stay like this forever. So that is why the weather started to determine my mood. When it rains, I am a different person. In Greece even in winter once in a while the sun says hello just to make sure we know it is still there, somewhere, not angry at us for not caring about it. So suddenly I thought: Maybe the nature is, like me, just trying to stay in balance. Maybe, if I see nature as a person, I can be more patient. I can handle it better. And I actually can. Now sometimes I think: This will pass, it's okay. Sometimes I think: This will pass, but still I have to be sad right now. But I never fall into the feeling of hatred towards the weather anymore.

When you read any kind of books almost always there are sentences that personify nature. And isn't it true? Are these personifications really metaphors or are they not real, because for me, after all this, they are. The nature is like a friend. Not always nice, not always as we want it to be, but most importantly, NEVER made for us.

Sometimes—to reconnect with yourself, to explore your emotions or to see things in different lights—you need to talk to a good friend. While reading the essays in *American Earth: Environmental Writing Since Thoreau* I started to think: But is nature not also capable of “giving” us the same things? Then I realized the importance of talking about nature in a more “human” way. The personification of nature creates a connection that is sometimes necessary for

us to see its value. Viewing nature as something that has to be protected because in the end it has to satisfy our human needs has the danger of still putting us in a higher position than everything else. So, even if the numbers and scales (that a lot of us don't even notice anymore) help us to understand the importance of our actions, giving nature a voice and emotions like an actual friend helps us to connect on an equal level.

So, like a lot of environmental writers do, I tried to put nature on another level: What does it actually do for me, what is not adjusted by humans to our needs? What effects does nature have to me, that nobody can control? While the thought of nature as a friend was still in my mind very abstract—and, to be honest, also seemed kind of too corny—writing about what actually happened to me in Greece, clarified this idea. I now can understand nature on a new level, which makes me more aware of the environment than ever.

Works Cited

Bill McKibben, Bill, editor. *American Earth: Environmental Writing Since Thoreau*. Library of America, 2008.