

## Foreword

### Welcome to the New Golden Age

Several days of rain have saturated the hills a few miles above the sand terrace where I squat. The river is swollen over its banks, brown with sediment, carrying debris, spilling out of the granite gorge. Clouds stream past in an atmospheric river that promises to deliver snow to the mountains tonight. Even here, in the high desert, this afternoon's wind has some bite.

I sit, paying attention to these simplest sights—clouds, sand grains, the color of water, direction of the wind. All this, part of the practice of attention we call “natural history.”

Natural history represents a practice of compassion, of “feeling with.” Too often, people—even those predisposed toward conservation—lump all of non-human life into one amorphous bundle and label it “Nature.” This is good as far as it goes, but “Nature” hides at least as much as it illuminates. We tend to have our deepest compassion for *individual* beings, not for general categories. Mother Teresa took on mass hunger by looking each person in the eye as she lifted a ladle to their lips. Look into enough eyes and some sense of caring for humanity as a whole can emerge. The same goes for “Nature”—we need to watch an individual bird struggle to stay warm as it fluffs up against swirls of snow, or contemplate the purple gentian flower blooming an inch above the grassland of the high Andes, tenaciously clinging to the ground as a fierce wind knocks human observers to their knees. Watching a particular bird sing—*this* redwing, from this fence post—or a particular flower blossoming—*this* lavender jewel we call *Penstemon*—helps us transcend the vague notion of “Nature,” or worse yet, “the environment,” and replaces it with texture, depth, and a realm of specificities. And in the process, *awe* suffuses our beings—from the

simple recognition that something like a paradise tanager *actually exists*. If this expansion of consciousness is not a spiritual practice, I don't know what is.

Natural history, too, is ultimately political in that its practice shifts relationships of value and power. We fall in love; we change the way we relate to the world. We foster this falling-in-love in ourselves first. Then, love by love, friend by friend, story by story, we engage hundreds, thousands, millions of others—and we just might make a brand-new world.

The great jazz musicians Wayne Shorter and Herbie Hancock, in an open letter to the next generation of artists, concluded, "Lastly, we hope that you live in a state of constant wonder." Natural history, more than anything I've ever experienced, yields recurring states of wonder—wonder in the familiar and the exotic, in the near and the far.

The author of the volume in your hands herein declares "a new golden age of natural history." A message that I approve, and applaud. John Seibert Farnsworth has contributed to this golden moment by his own ongoing practice of attention—in this book he recounts his practice of encountering, and befriending, new landscapes. His temporary encampments at field sites along the west coast of North America provide glimpses into the world as it really is, uncluttered by media masks, and liberated from preconceptions.

Yet what is the value of these brief relationships with landscapes and the field stations that concentrate their essences? Why does it matter, one might ask, for a grown man to, basically, just wander around and look at things? Well, for starters, it makes you, the reader, laugh, and it makes you wonder. And humor, insight, and curiosity are all too rare in our world today.

There is no match, of course, for years-long, deep connection with a place. Where one comes to know the scent of specific shadows, the sequence and timing—what an ecologist refers to as *phenology*—of flowers: which colors blaze forth with which others, which autumn leaf transformations precede which others.

But there's another type of value, too. Like the medieval minstrels who roamed from site to site, carrying the news from one village to the next, collating and curating stories from each—John Farnsworth's travels between field stations serve this ancient function. His observations become tales that enliven campfires, stimulate conversations, prompt listeners to lose themselves, to ponder, and to wonder. He has taken up residency—temporarily, but long

enough to peel away  
to share with us all.

Listen to these songs  
of your own special  
this big bear of a man  
work of the world, a

enough to peel away stories—and then moved on, building a bank of stories to share with us all.

Listen to these songs. Let the music lift you into your own stories, remind you of your own special places. Sit back and bask in these words. Let the narrator, this big bear of a man, show you five ways to befriend a new place. This is the work of the world, and he's a fine guide.

THOMAS LOWE FLEISCHNER

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