



WALKING LIGHTLY WITH INTENTION

Anita Wetzel

stories and poems

This selection of stories and poems from Anita Wetzel's writing binder was made by Gary Wetzel, her brother, in 2021.



Untitled, acrylic, gouache, and graphite on paper, 30" x 22" (1999)

Harkening

I've seen the least bittern again. I think there are two, perhaps a couple.

It occurs to me today that I am in their neighborhood, that they live at the beaver pond the way I have lived, remarkably, for 28 years, in my neighborhood.

Right now, there are two downy woodpeckers on a tree beside me and two mockingbirds in the bushes. I saw these birds right here the last time I walked this trail. I must be in their neighborhood.

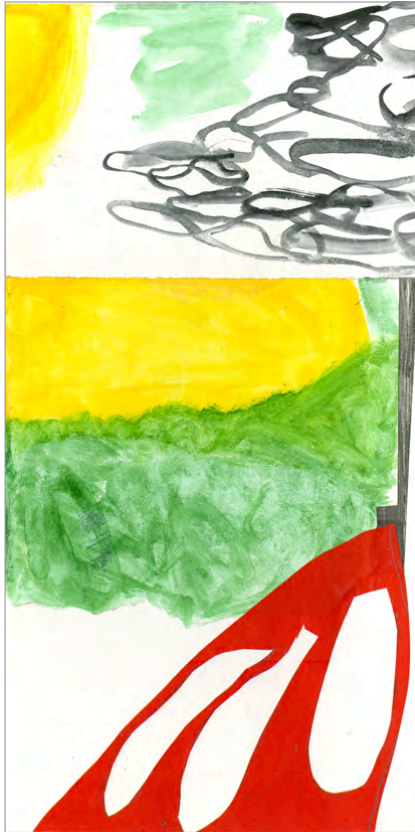
Are the birds as needful of the familiar as humans? Is it necessary, like bread and water? Do they want to return to the same berry bush the way I return to the same grocery store?

As I watch the birds there is this reckoning, and awe, the feeling that I am oblivious to so much of what is going on around me.

Every spring I anticipate the return of the wood thrushes to the forest by my house. I love their many songs and hearing their conversations at twilight.

It sounds like there are questions.

It sounds like there are answers.



Untitled, acrylic on board, 11" x 6" (2017)

The Sticky Taste of Happiness and Grief

I. We are walking up a very steep hill. It is slow going on account of the incline and because — *semillas*. With the enchantment such things hold for her, at eight years, each seed is a treasure, each one with a different color, shape and shine. One by one, with this harvest, there is also the allure of accumulation, a handful, then a cupful of seeds, like pennies in a piggy bank.

I recall this sweet fascination, my dresser, as a child, covered with colored stones, needle clusters from the pine trees, tissue-thin shells from the ocean, all gathered one by one... each with a special magic.

We are climbing the hill with Nancy who is caring for Luciana today. Our mission is a harvest, too. “The *mandarinas* are ready!” Nancy calls to me. “Come along.”

Nancy knows the surroundings well. She has lived on this land for years, on the edge of the Cordillera Central, a range of mountains running through the center of Costa Rica. Everything is green, lush to my eyes, though it is summer here, hot and dry, in great contrast to the northern winter I have left behind.

The orange tree is on even steeper ground. The globes of fruit are glistening, lit up by the early morning sun.

Nancy has a *palo*, a sturdy pole of bamboo, with a wire basket attached to the top. It has prongs to rake the branches and catch the fruit stems. For now, the pole is needed just to manage the slope. I have found a sturdy branch to lean on; Luciana scampers on all fours.

I reach for fruit close enough to grasp by hand. I am peaceful, happy to be included on this adventure. Nancy, a confident and gentle presence, surprises me with the invitation. We have discovered we understand each other's Spanish well enough to converse and share our love of the outdoors. As we walk, she pauses to tell me about a favorite tree, or consider why some leaves are dry and turning color. Then there is the consternation about the squirrels; they take one bite out of a cashew apple and toss it, ruined, to the ground.

As I pick the oranges, a character in Edwidge Danticat's book *The Farming of Bones* comes to mind. "It's a hard thing to know that life will go on one day without you," says a woman not so old, yet ill and old enough to know the proximity of her own death.

Luciana is content. She has found a sheaf of bean vines lying on the hillside, the beans already dried by the sun. Each pod, broken open, holds a line of dark red beans. She harvests them, singing to herself.

"Do you speak English?" Luciana asks shyly, in perfect English, as I sit beside her to rest. She's a sprite of a girl, agile, bright-eyed. I'm adding beans to her trove.

"Yes," I say and venture in Spanish, "Are you on vacation?"

"Yes," Luciana replies.

"What year will you be in school?"

"Third," Luciana says proudly.

"What a wonderful basket of beans," I observe, and Luciana nods with a smile.

Nancy is shouting, "*Aquí*, Anita! Here, you can reach."

Called back to task, I struggle to catch on to the firm and

uncompromising branches. As many *mandarinas* as land in my hands roll down the hill and I slide down after them. The aroma of the plucked fruit, the fruit already fallen and stewed on the hot hillside, penetrates the air. My hands are covered with the fragrant, sticky juice.

I imagine who might like a share of the harvest... the artists here where I am living for the month, the neighbor down the road who has befriended me, Carlos, who lives on the property and left a clutch of bananas on a tree near the house this morning. He probably won't struggle up the hill to gather oranges.

I wonder if I'll be alive in a year to return to this beautiful place, where the *mandarinas* will be ready for picking once again; if the winds will be the same, strangely fierce in January; if I'll be strong enough to climb this hill.

Nancy is pulling the dark green leaves and stems off the fruit, "So the branches won't pierce the bag." We stumble and slide down the hill to the main path. Turned horizontal, the *palo* becomes the transporter, a bulky bag of oranges tied to it. Nancy and Luciana, each holding an end, begin to walk the harvest home.

My pockets are full of oranges, my shirt a basket, too, the hem turned up and tied around my waist. I break open the husk of a fruit. The rich sap of orange juice flutters on my tongue, a powerful curative of this earth, or so it seems to me in this moment, along with the healing grace of the sun, and the continuum of time out-of-doors.

II. The light is instant and full at six, when the sun rises over the mountain. It fills the studio with glowing light. I feel strong and well. Soon, I'm at the big work table, paper rolled out, doors and windows open.

I have risked making this trip, returning to a place I love. When the taxi turns through the gate, follows the drive bordered with palms, climbs the hill, stops near a grove of flowering ginger plants, my heart is flooded with joy and peace. I'm not old, but ill and old enough to realize I am in the place I need to be.

Nine o'clock and Nancy comes by, eager to continue the harvest. I abandon my work to join her. Luciana isn't along and Nancy sets a fast pace.

This time she launches herself up into the tree, pulls the ten foot *palo* up after her and asks for the small bag with sturdy straps I've brought along. Her focus is the very top, the fruit no one has claimed, 30 feet up.

Again, I gather the lower fruit by hand, and chase the oranges escaping Nancy's wire basket, rolling fast down the hill. I recall my own love of climbing trees.

"Nita, la bolsa. Venga!"

I'm summoned as the cotton bag, already bulging with fruit, is lowered down on the pole. I empty it and pass it up again.

"Did you climb trees when you were young, Nancy?" I shout up to her. She's younger than me by a decade, for sure, but she has climbed the tree like a kid!

"Sí. Always. Did you?"

I feel the smile on my face as I share the recollection. "My brother and I climbed the pine trees in our yard. They were 50 feet tall. We climbed them to feel the wind, to look out over the fields. For me, it

felt like being in a secret place. I loved it up there, especially when the wind was strong and the trees swayed."

Another basket of fruit comes down, and another. It's getting hot. When Nancy finally climbs down, we share a *mandarina*. "The workers here could harvest the fruit," she says, speaking of the young men who help on the property. "They're invited. It's too much work, there's no interest." I take this as a clue.

I can return and pick from time to time.

"How long will you be here?" Nancy asks me. She is used to her itinerant neighbors, artists and writers who come to work for a month or two at a time.

"Just for the month."

"When will you come back?" she asks.

"In a year, *ojalá*." God willing.

Nancy pauses, "I probably won't be here."

"You won't stay?" I ask. "You have been here so long."

"I came for Carlos," she says. A heartbroken sadness settles on her face, the buoyant tree climber now lost in thought. "I am waiting for the divorce to come through. Then I'm going back to Columbia, to my family." I stand sorrowful.

We are quiet as we load the heavy bags of fruit, this time on two bamboo poles. Each holding two ends, like a palanquin, sharing the royal weight and the spectacular bounty, we walk through the forest to what, in this moment, is home.

III. Luciana is back today. I hear her laughing and running on the road. When she comes by later, I am outdoors drawing.

I set her up next to me with paper, brushes, and paint. I draw the bamboo forest below me on the hill, the thicket of yellow green trunks clattering and clanging together in the wind, the high branches curling and swaying. Luciana makes a painting of the sea and the sky, and a girl in the water. She tells me she is going to the beach tomorrow with her mother.

“Can I have your phone number?” Luciana asks, shy once again.

“Are you coming to visit me then, Luciana?” We have been talking about where I live in the United States.

“S̃, I go to Columbia, to visit my grandparents. And I want to go to New York City.”

“You like to travel?”

“Oh, yes. I want to come to see you and I want to visit New York City to go to the M&M’s factory. There are M&M’s as big as plates! You can make M&M’s with your own message on them!”

I am laughing in wonder. I had no idea there was such a place, and not so far from where I live. I’m an M&M’s fan myself, at least during road trips. Here I am, with dear Luciana, recalling their irresistible spell.

“Oh yes, Luciana, you must come to visit me. We’ll go to the M&M’s factory together.”

Our harvest there will be those tiny chocolate treats. We’ll gather them together, one of every color. They’ll melt on our tongues. They’ll taste so good.



Untitled, acrylic on board, 12" × 12" (2016)



Untitled, acrylic and graphite on board (2003)

Winter Wail

All through the woods there is a tangible feeling of the changing light.

It is not quite twilight.

The sun, just below the horizon,

Casts a glow up through the leafless winter trees.

Even the air is pink.

The mountains form a silhouette against a blue-gray sky.

Ice forms idiosyncratic shapes on the lake, patterns in black and white.

A periodic moan rises from below the ice.

At dusk, as the temperature drops, phrases from beneath the ice speak
ever more clearly...

A wheeze, a gunshot crack, a sound of puncture;

A wail pierces the dropping night, both sharp and tender.



Untitled, acrylic, gouache, and graphite on paper, 60" x 80" (2007)

Back Yard World (excerpt)

We called it a ditch. It was a channel, maybe three feet deep, cutting through the yards in the neighborhood. The water running through there didn't smell too good. I'm not sure what was really running there, but it was an interesting feature for me, riding my imaginary horse. In my seven year old imagination, the channel was like a canyon. The horse had to be directed carefully; its footing could be a matter of passing safely across or plunging us fifty feet down the rocky walls in to the watery mess.

I often played by myself at this age, taking my horse on elaborate adventures which turned several adjoining backyards in to a magical world. Horse and I would visit the asparagus patch to see what progress there was with the thin shoots coming up and the veil-like feathery greenery on the lower stalks.

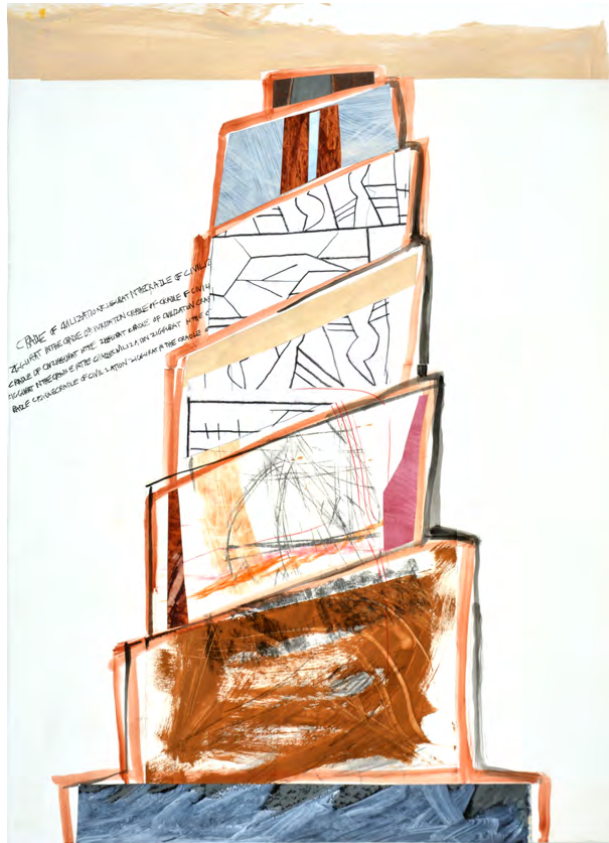
We'd move on to examine the rocks in the soft and fragrant needles below the long row of pine trees which ran at the very back of the yard. There was a barbed wire fence there, separating the yard from the big fields beyond where cows were usually grazing. Sometimes I could entice the cows to approach so I could get a really close look up at them.

I was always trying to get up my nerve to climb those trees. Their branches were just about close enough together and as I got a bit older and a bit taller I could manage to get started on the lower branches. By the time I was eight or nine, I could climb the favorite tree, the one with the best-placed branches, all the way, thirty feet or so, to the very top.

This tree was much smaller in girth at the top, and I loved hanging on up there to feel the tree and its branches swaying if it was a windy day. It was pretty much a solitary operation, climbing the tree; there wasn't much room at the top, and there was the problem of navigating up and down, as only some of the branches were close enough together to be a ladder. Up top, my brother and I installed a tin box tied to a string where we would leave messages for each other written in code. It took a wonderful long while to decipher these, hanging on, swaying in the wind.



Tracks, mud, charcoal, graphite on paper, 25" x 42" (1998)



Ziggurat, acrylic, graphite on paper, 30" x 22" (2000)

Just About Laughing

It's 1971. I am 21, and hitchhiking through Western Europe with a friend. For the two of us, fledgling artists, it is the great art mecca, the mesmerizing journey to see with our own eyes the architecture, the artifacts that we have been studying in art history. We have arrived in Venice to meet up with friends who are part of an international study program.

There is a loud rap at the door, then a commanding voice speaking in Italian. We stand mute, unmoving. There are three of us in the room, all refugees from the youth hostel enjoying the luxury of a pristine convent bedroom. We are making our lunch; lettuce leaves are floating in the bathroom washbowl.

Ann and I are hitchhiking from city to city, carrying 30 pound packs, amazed that we can actually camp on the edge of the old European cities and villages, surrounded by buildings dating back centuries, walking to visit museums and cathedrals. David, another friend, traveling solo, has turned up in Venice as well to visit with pals in the study program.

Just before the group has lunch together, a friend sneaks Ann, David and me up to her room; we'll have lunch together then venture out with the others to explore the city.

More strident rapping. We sweep up the lunch things. David dashes in to the bathroom. I open the door.

A nun, in full black habit, confronts us, furious words hurtling from her mouth. I don't understand Italian but I'm pretty sure she thinks there is a man in the room.

Ann and I hold her off for a minute with mumblings and hand gestures, a sort of explanation about lunch and waiting for our friends. She pushes me aside, charges across the room and flings open the bathroom door. Her voice pitches up to a wild scream.

As fast as we can, we gather up our belongings, shoving salad greens, tomatoes and cucumbers in to a plastic bag, and run out the door. The sister continues shouting, her floor-length robes swishing, the beads at her waist clacking, as she strides behind us vehemently. We rush down the stairs and past the long table where our friends are enjoying lunch. At the convent door, we step on to the street, the huge wooden door closing resoundingly behind us.

The three of us collapse on to the front steps; our suppressed laughter, mingled with astonishment, is unleashed.

There we are, looking on to a beautiful plaza filled with Venice's great and ancient beauty. Putting our salad together, we sit and enjoy the hilarity of our situation and the colorful scene before us.

Our encounter with the nuns is not over, however. A day later, the students are leaving Venice, crossing the Adriatic by boat, to return to their home base in Tuscany. The professor has invited Ann and me to go with them and we have to be ready by dawn, so the teacher requests permission for us to stay overnight in the convent.

We arrive with our backpacks and are met at the door by the same sister who chased us out the day before. She leads us to our room, follows us inside and, when we have put all our belongings down, steps out and turns the key in the lock.

Ann and I collapse in laughter again. In fact, we are feeling extremely privileged. The beds are super comfortable. The bathroom

has water, very hot and abundant. We have brought good snacks for our dinner.

After a good sleep, we are up and packed by 5:00 a.m., and still locked in. Eventually, the sister comes down the hall, the key turns in the lock and we are escorted to the front door. Such scandalous behavior; such harpies at a young age.

God bless us on our journey.



Untitled, acrylic on canvas, 11" x 14" (2000)

Mojácar, May 2001 (excerpts)

In this photograph I am gleeful. I see now that Elisa took this picture and sent it to me. It is May 2001. I am on my first international artist residency in Mojácar, a small town in Andalucia, Spain. I turn 52 while I am here.

I remember the whole adventure as a fantastic challenge... making reservations in Spanish and using the fax machine... almost being bumped from the overbooked flight on a tiny plane from Madrid to Almería... the suitcase with my art supplies going missing for a few days.

I feel so honored to travel as an artist to a foreign country, to work with other artists in an unfamiliar environment, to meet people here who welcome us as artists and are curious about what we will create in the focused work time which is offered.

The foundation hosting us-three other visual artists and four writers-is housed in a historic building originally used for olive pressing. Ceramic amphoras for the oil and wooden parts for the presses sit in the building and on the grounds. The site is surrounded by olive groves on an arid, desert-like plain situated between the Sierra Nevada and the Mediterranean Sea.

My work is always rooted foremost in place, the place where I am at that moment or the effect a place has on my spirit. Outside the studio in Spain, down below the olive groves, is a vast river course, parched at the moment, like the Rio Grande. And to the west, directly

behind the studio is Mojácar La Vieja, a steep, short mountain with a mesa-like top where the village originally stood. Now it is a barren yet dramatic form, abandoned when a better water source was discovered nearby at what is the village today.

I draw La Vieja almost every day. She magnetizes me. I love her form, her austerity and mystery, the different colors she displays, turning blood red, then gold in the sunrise, a featureless pink at midday, and rich purple at sunset.



Lines for Spain I, acrylic and graphite on paper, 27" x 39" (2003)

Heartbreak

I pass quietly along, unseen and taking comfort in the woods and the leaf fall under my feet, naming seven leaf forms for sure, jumbled together, studying their juxtaposed shapes. Several small woodpeckers are flying around near me, pecking and chatting.

Then I hear the crows. Usually, in these woods, I walk to the cliff top where the crows gather.

They broadcast my arrival, announcing raucously as I walk the last eighth mile.

The storm-broken cedar is the sentinel whose arms I stand under at the top, enjoying the strong wind. The crows cling to the tops of the fir trees growing out of the stone crevasse of an old limestone mine. They are below where I stand, moving with the trees, or they let go and sail with the wind through the rock gap, exclaiming.

Today, I'm only halfway up the cliff, hidden in the woods. I'm below the crows. I hear them! I feel at home with their presence.

I'm sitting on a rock, looking at devastation.

The big sycamore tree sticking out, as it never did before, when it was surrounded by forest.

Trees are cleared, land bulldozed in to roads, ditches, trenches, and what looks like a huge parking lot. Big machines, silent at the moment, dot the landscape. There's more rending of the land yet to come.

I know this land.

Here I've seen the red fox scampering among the boulders, watched the pileated woodpeckers set up house every summer, kept track of the painted turtles lined up on downed branches in the pond, wandered over the hillside on foot and skis, heard the owls talking back and forth, smiled as I walked by the undergrowth full of berries in the fall, the small birds hiding, eating and communing there.

And the crows, companions winter and summer, ubiquitous and powerful, their woods, their lake, their cliff, their trees, their wind song! The cacophony which has disturbed this landscape breaks my heart.

May the crows remain.

May the wind song reign.

MAY THE CROWS REMAIN.

MAY THE WIND SONG REIGN.



Untitled, acrylic, mud, and graphite on paper, 36" × 148" (2004)



Cover: Ragged Pathway to the Remarkable, acrylic on board, 36" x 37" (2017)
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celebrate her art and life.

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