

I've spent most of my life navigating the wilds of dive bars and punk houses with little more than my instinct and lazarus tree... Once rooted in Bavarian soil, then culled and reformed by luthier's hand, it is alive again beneath my fingers and bow. Every so often, it meets me in the unseen forest between us to sing the hymn of our lives intertwined. I can't be sure if I am its conduit, or if it is mine...

I'll elucidate how my experience as a traveling cellist is relevant to this statement of purpose, as unorthodox as it may seem. There is quite a bit about it that is admittedly beyond my comprehension, but it strikes me as poignant that wooden stringed instruments must be played or they'll degrade. Musicians I've known speak of instruments having souls, and if there is any truth to that, then my instrument's is exceptionally wilful.

As a young adult, my calling was to the natural world. I spent summers backpacking throughout North America with the Audubon Society's youth ecology camps, and worked my first summer jobs as a counselor assisting with raptor and wolf rehabilitation efforts through the Audubon Society of the North Woods in Minnesota. Trips to the Badlands and Black Hills of South Dakota inspired a love of geology by day and a deep reverence for the coyote's song by night. After crossing the country to visit Mt. Rainier and St. Helens, I discovered my affinity for the Pacific Northwest. I felt my mind opening like a bloom to the writing of John Muir, John G. Neihardt, and Walt Whitman.

This interest in literature begot an irresistible fascination with the arts. I dabbled in creative writing and excelled at the cello, committing my first tracks to wax at age thirteen. As an undergraduate, queer and feminist critical theory redrew the map for me and I devoted myself to acquiring as much knowledge as I could within those disciplines. I had pivoted from my early interest in ecology, but not for long.

I graduated college in 2008 and took a job in marketing at an alt-weekly print publication, *Philadelphia Weekly*. Within six months, I was laid off and the paper had gone digital. Unable to find steady employment in Philadelphia's barren recession economy, I hit the road with my cello in search of a new path, playing upwards of 200 shows annually across North America between

2009 and 2018. I lived the life of a rambling musician, supplementing with seasonal work as an administrator at the Sarasota Film Festival, but was only able to afford it by camping as I went.

In the decade I spent criss-crossing North America, I weathered heat waves and ice storms, and slept through earthquakes where natural gas extraction by fracking disrupted long-settled soil. I saw the devastation of California wildfires firsthand, narrowly escaping the Tubbs Fire of 2017 hours before it jumped the 101 and severed my only route away from camp. I caught my breath peering into sinkholes where West Virginia roads lay just days before the flooding of 2016. Gratefully, I dodged more near-misses from tornadoes than I can count. I thought I had learned my lesson after a white-knuckled spring tour through the Great Plains in 2015, but was troubled to find such extreme weather events commonplace throughout the North Atlantic and coastal Southeast with the expansion of Dixie Alley.

I became fascinated by meteorology and Climate Change throughout all of this -stemming from a place of genuine curiosity, self-preservation, and, yes, existential dread. This certainly found its way into the music I was making at the time, writing songs directly inspired by my experiences living so close to Nature, their tone shifting from dark to abyssal...

Then, in March of 2020, the Big Bookmark of my lifetime fell like a guillotine on my plans of being a traveling musician. I began to restrategize. I moved back to Pennsylvania where I was fortunate to have access to the rich ecosystem of Delaware River country, taking long daily hikes with Corva, the feral dog that had adopted me at the Crow Reservation in Montana a few years back. I kindled a passion for mycology and enjoyed taking spore prints of local fungi, examining them under my old microscope, making extravagant meals when determined safe to consume. I took it upon myself to appreciate the exceptional biodiversity of the area (birds and reptiles in particular) every day, and some nights, too... Upon one of which, I was delighted to hear an uncannily familiar call with a completely novel twist. The song sounded a bit like barking or yipping at first but evolved into long mournful howls. Could it be that after three centuries of persecution, *wolves* had returned to their native North Atlantic forests?

As it turns out, almost... The Eastern Coyote was here, lo-and-behold, in my own backyard! What a privilege it was to patiently and unobtrusively observe their hunting and denning behaviors over the two-year period I spent there. I felt inspired to go deeper and began volunteering at AARK Wildlife, assisting at first with the feeding and cleaning of birds and small mammals, and eventually working my way up to intake and caring for rabies vectors (after requisite vaccinations of course). At AARK, I earned a reputation for both my patience and my keen eye for details. The latter helped me to identify nesting and fledging birds, the former helped me safely remove the glue from their feathers.

Southeastern Pennsylvania was experiencing an epidemic on two fronts in 2020 -one carried by droplets, the other by wings. An invasive species, the Spotted Lanternfly, had been infesting the region. As soon as the weather warmed that spring, the pests emerged to blanket the trees in staggering numbers. The Department of Natural Resources put up signs, and word spread quickly about the invasion. With over 70 host plants, the Lanternfly is an indiscriminate killer, posing a major threat to native and commercial flora. Glue traps became the weapon of choice in the community's fight against them. As barbaric as they were inefficient, the traps would fill quickly with Lanterflies, as well as other insects and small vertebrates. The queue of song birds from glue traps would often take my entire night at AARK to work through. The hope was always that the birds would not suffer any broken bones from fighting to escape the glue, or remain trapped for so long that their malnourishment passed the point of no-return. I felt extra responsibility for their well-being in this state, as they would typically come in with near-critical stress levels and needed particularly sensitive care to survive the ordeal of becoming unstuck. The satisfaction of seeing them fly again was always well worth it all.

If I've learned anything from the experiences detailed above, it is that I must honor my passion to serve and preserve the natural world as an act of reverence: an answer to a higher calling. My cello, born of the forest, led me back to the source, and I am compelled to continue my education along a path that will unlock my highest potential to engage my creativity for the health and harmony of our natural world.