

FEELING BETTER THAN MOST PEOPLE THINK: NATURE
AND THE BODY IN WALLACE STEGNER'S ALL
THE LITTLE LIVE THINGS AND
THE SPECTATOR BIRD

by

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ABSTRACT

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Much of the critical scholarship on Wallace Stegner has focused, and continues to focus, on his role in the conservationist movement, on his environmental non-fiction, or on his skill as a teacher of writing. While these elements of his artistry are undeniably important, even vital, as subjects of scholarly study, there is a surprising lack of criticism on his novels. Stegner the man, conservationist, teacher, and historian often seem to overshadow Stegner's writing itself.

In an effort to further the scholarly conversation on the literary elements of Stegner's novels, this study examines two of his later works, *All the Little Live Things* and *The Spectator Bird*, in order to show how Stegner's depiction of the body, and especially the female body, establishes what it means for an individual to have a definite sense of place. Joe Allston, the novels' narrator, looks to the female body to try to discern how connections between place, history, and future are created. This positions the female body as a dynamic force that rejects classification and so is reinvented outside of the culture/nature dichotomy that is so troubling to

contemporary feminist theorists. In a way, Stegner's re-envisioning of nature as a feminist space positions his writing in a proto-feminist context, anticipating and counteracting what Stacy Alaimo has termed "a feminist flight from [the] troublesome sphere" of nature. Drawing on theories and philosophies of Alaimo and Susan Bordo, among others, this study explores what it means for Stegner's characters to be able to claim a place for themselves, thereby complicating the relationship between the body and nature.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In his 1990 essay, "The Female Body," John Updike claimed that "[f]or male and female alike, the bodies of the other sex are messages signaling what we must do – they are glowing signifiers of our own necessities." Almost 25 years previously, Wallace Stegner was already voicing these same sentiments, calling into question both the relationship between male and female bodies as well as the relationship between the body and the "necessity" of nature. In his now-famous *Conversations* with Richard Etulain, Stegner says that "we live a three-generational life," meaning we interpenetrate past, present, and future associations constantly. As a writer, Stegner aimed to "syncopate time, to bridge from a past to a present" (Stegner and Etulain 78). The difficulty in creating those bridges, a difficulty most writers wrestle with, is especially apparent in Stegner's novels through the anxiety over reproduction and the body that many of his characters exhibit.

An examination of two of Stegner's later novels, *All the Little Live Things* and *The Spectator Bird*, shows that Stegner's depiction of the body, and especially the female body, establishes what it means for an individual to have a definite sense of place. Joe Allston, the novels' narrator, looks to the female body in order to try to discern how connections between place, history, and future are created. This positions the female body as a dynamic force that rejects classification and so is reinvented outside of the culture/nature dichotomy that is so troubling to contemporary feminist theorists. In a way, Stegner's re-envisioning of nature as a feminist space positions his writing in a proto-feminist context, which opens a whole new spectrum of theoretical frameworks that can and should be used to expand and enlighten scholarly study of his fiction.

Though this study focuses on the relationships between the female body, nature, and place, it also explores the ways in which several important male bodies are constructed in the texts. Discussion of male bodies is critical to this argument for several reasons. First, because both texts are narrated by a man who is primarily concerned with the connections between his own body and place, to ignore Allston's body would be to ignore the epicenter of his anxiety. Since Allston is looking towards other bodies to gain understanding he lacks, he does not often focus on his own body as an epistemological tool, but when he does, the conclusions he draws (or fails to draw) are vital steps in his quest to feel a sense of place. In addition to Allston's body, I also examine two other major male figures – those of Jim Peck in *All the Little Live Things*, and Eigil Rodding in *The Spectator Bird* – in order to provide contexts in which the female body is situated in relation to the male body. In Peck's case, he stands as the embodiment of natural disorder that threatens to disrupt both the idealized natural setting Allston precariously clings to and also the idealized connection between the reproductive female body and nature. In contrast, Rodding figures as an overly-ordered threat to female reproduction – his imposition of “unnatural” order objectifies reproduction (and the female body) and relegates it to its most mechanical form, which also threatens Allston's quest, because, as we see in both novels, the objectified female body holds no new insight.

Much of the critical scholarship on Stegner has focused, and continues to focus, on his role in the conservationist movement, on his environmental non-fiction, or on his skill as a teacher of writing. While these elements of his artistry are undeniably important, even vital, as subjects of scholarly study, there is a surprising lack of criticism on his novels. Stegner the man, conservationist, teacher, and historian often seem to overshadow Stegner's writing itself. This is not to say that his novels have not had critical or popular success – a Pulitzer, National Book Award, and many other commendations are proof of his position in the American canon. However, scholars have been strangely reluctant to examine Stegner's work as a novelist without so closely tying it to his other crafts.

Some scholarship has, indeed, focused on Stegner's fiction. One of Stegner's biographers, Jackson Benson, devotes sections of *Wallace Stegner: His Life and Work* to addressing the major themes and issues in Stegner's novels, though it is not within the scope of Benson's project to give much in-depth textual analysis. Richard Etulain, in his *Conversations with Stegner*, asks quite a few questions about Stegner's novels, but in this case we have Stegner talking about his own writing – his motivation, thoughts while writing, and other self-reflective topics – rather than formal scholarship. Also, there have been several good discussions of Stegner's novels, most notably Richard Moseley's 1973 article, "First-Person Narration in Wallace Stegner's *All the Little Live Things*," and Kerry Ahearn's 1977 article, "Heroes vs. Women: Conflict and Duplicity in Stegner," as well as a more recent (1998) published dissertation by Dian Saderup, entitled "Stillness in Motion: Marriage in the Novels of Wallace Stegner." However, given that Stegner is acknowledged to be an important 20th century American author, and given that he was prolific, writing over 30 books in his lifetime, these few studies seem woefully inadequate (if only because of their number) in representing Stegner to the scholarly community.

Despite the fact that some scholarly discussion has occurred, the majority of scholarly studies on Stegner's novels tend to focus on either the autobiographical elements or the historical contexts of his writing. For example, a central controversy in Stegner scholarship has been whether or not Stegner gives full credit to the writings of Mary Hallock Foote, the woman on whom he bases his main female character in *Angle of Repose*. Quite a bit of back-and-forth scholarship has been generated on this topic, such as Janet Floyd's influential 2001 article, "A Sympathetic Misunderstanding? Mary Hallock Foote's *Mining West*," but this line of scholarship seems to be reductive in several ways. First, questions of historical authenticity are all well and good, but they privilege a discussion that is centered outside the novel rather than within it. Second, these discussions serve to further assert the status of Stegner's novels as "historical fiction," a term I believe applies only marginally to some Stegner's novels, and certainly not to all of them. And third, the lack of scholarship based on other theoretical frameworks serves to

solidify the notion that Stegner the environmental, historical and regional writer is more worthy of study than Stegner the novelist.

In "Postfrontier Horizons," Stephen Tatum notes that the dichotomy of literature and history is a false one, and he claims that contemporary scholarship is contesting what "the West" really is:

[T]he newer field imaginary for the American literary West involves subaltern voices and alternate histories [...] the "new" western literary studies has begun to focus on the migrations of peoples (and narratives) across borders and has begun thinking through or beyond the Turnerian organicist assumption that a stable isomorphic relation between a (literary) culture and place or region exists. (Tatum 461)

If it is reductive to pinhole Stegner's writing into that one category, then we as scholars would be sadly mistaken if we assumed that because the majority of his novels have historical significance, or lend themselves to historical analysis, that his craft of fiction is somehow lessened. As Etulain notes, no "student of literary artistry" should "overlook the aesthetic complexities" of Stegner's work. Etulain observes that "In 'syncopating' past and present, Stegner skips through time, invokes shifting viewpoints, and creates interior monologues to tangle the chronology and texture of his fiction. These literary devices allow him to add complexity to his story, a dimension often missing from more traditional western histories" (Etulain, "Western Stories" 9). While he is explicitly referencing *Angle of Repose* here, Etulain's observations stand true for many of Stegner's works, including the two I am analyzing, *All the Little Live Things* and *The Spectator Bird*. If, as Chester Eisinger, in "Twenty Years of Wallace Stegner" concludes, "Stegner is a representative figure" of "modern American fiction" (111), then it is vital that we examine his fiction through the same theoretical lenses which we observe other modern American fiction, with the lenses of feminist and embodiment theories particularly making for a complicated yet fruitful examination.

In *The Spectator Bird*, Astrid responds to the question “What do you think?” with a surprisingly complex and problematic answer: “‘Think? In such matters I do not think. I do not live in my head. I live down here.’ She slapped her hand melodramatically against her belt, or below it. ‘Ever, all my life. I feel better than most people think’” (*The Spectator Bird* 82). This is more than a simple statement muddied in translation from Danish to English; Astrid’s claim raises questions about the relationship between knowledge and the body. Throughout both this novel and *All the Little Live Things*, the body is an epistemological tool, a way of knowing, that troubles and enlightens the characters. Joe Allston examines both the male and female bodies’ connection to nature and place in order to try to discern a way in which he, too, can feel as connected as others seem to be. He specifically focuses on the female body for much of his narration because of its literal connection to past and future (women literally gave birth to history and will give birth to the future), and he explores the relationship between the female body, reproduction, and nature with the hope that if he understands the relationship, he can appropriate it for himself.

This issue – the relationship between women and nature, is not a new one, nor is it unique to any facet of literature or science; it pervades Western culture. As Stacy Alaimo points out in *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminist Space*, the connections between women and nature are “historically tenacious entanglements” (2). We cannot easily extract one from the other, since we are positioned inside the social structure and have always already been a part of the mechanism that entangled them. “The body [...] is a medium of culture,” Susan Bordo claims, and we cannot escape the influence of the body on either culture or the literature that culture creates (Bordo, *Flight* 90). Because the female body, culture, and nature are so intermeshed, Allston finds himself struggling to conceptualize their parts. As he examines the female body, either nature, such as cancer in *All the Little Live Thing*, or culture, such as scientific inbreeding in *The Spectator Bird*, is always muddying the water and he can never get a clear view.

As Bordo says in *Writing the Body*, “The body, as anthropologist Mary Douglas has argued, is a powerful symbolic form, a surface on which the central rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysical commitments of a culture are inscribed and thus reinforced through the concrete language of the body. The body may also operate as a metaphor for culture” (Bordo, *Writing the Body* 90). In addition, “The body is not only a text of culture. It is also, as anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu and philosopher Michel Foucault (among others) have argued, a practical, direct locus of social control” (90-91). Because of this duality, it is especially complicated to discuss the body in theoretical frameworks or in creative, literary contexts. Anne Fausto-Sterling also argues in *Sexing the Body* that we have to acknowledge that the body is a cultural product if we are to discuss it with any sort of authenticity:

[E]very time we try to return to the body as something that exists prior to socialization, prior to discourse about male and female, Butler writes, ‘we discover that matter is fully sedimented with discourses on sex and sexuality that prefigure and constrain the uses to which that term can be put. (Fausto-Sterling 22)

So we cannot talk about the body without necessarily talking about it in its social context. This only serves to complicate, not simplify, the discussion, and, as Fausto-Sterling notes, “if viewpoints about sex and sexuality are already embedded in our philosophical concepts of how matter forms into bodies, the matter of bodies cannot form a neutral, pre-existing ground from which to understand the origins of sexual difference” (22). We struggle to understand the body as both matter and philosophy, but we must remember that our understandings are grounded in our understanding of culture, not in empirical fact.

Because of this necessity for cultural context, discussing theories of embodiment necessarily must include a discussion of the historical origins and relevance of such theories. In Susan Bordo’s exploration of the historical origins of objectivity and how our current concepts of body and space came to be, she notes that, in the pre-enlightenment period, “the dominating ontological metaphor was of the universe as a single ‘organism,’ whose domains (although

hierarchically ordered) were characterized by interdependence and interconnection rather than mutual exclusivity” (Bordo, *Flight* 60).

However, with the enlightenment and the emergence of scientific thought, this understanding changed dramatically. A division was created between science and the soul, which had particularly significant implications for practices of embodiment. Before this split, “A ‘stock description’ of biological generation in nature was the marriage of heaven and earth, and the impregnation for the (female) earth by the dew and rain created by the movements of the (masculine) celestial heavens” (Merchant, qtd. in Bordo, *Flight* 102). After the split, “that female world-soul [as imagined by, for example, Plato] died – or more precisely, was murdered – by the mechanist re-visioning of nature” (Bordo, *Flight* 102). The patriarchal structure was reinforced because the masculine (reason) was given scientific privilege and governance over the feminine (nature). Nature, including the female body, was something to be acted upon, dissected, understood, and controlled – all of which had dire consequences for female subjectivity.

Bordo emphasizes that the split between objective and subjective thought falls along spiritual/physical lines:

By Descartes’s brilliant stroke, nature became defined by its lack of affiliation with divinity, with spirit. All that which is God-like or spiritual – freedom, will, and sentience – belong entirely and exclusively to *res cognitae*. All else – the earth, the heavens, animals, the human body – is merely mechanically interacting matter. (102)

Alaimo also notes the perception of nature changed as a result of this split, and “the scientific revolution replaced an organicist worldview with a mechanistic one and envisioned nature as an even less appealing figure, a female to be controlled and dissected through experiment” (Alaimo 2). The female body, then, may enter the realm of science only as something to be studied; it may not be a participant in any inquiry, only the object of inquiry.

On the surface, Stegner’s treatment of the female body’s connection to nature may seem to reify the Cartesian mind/body split. After all, Allston does center the women he

observes in their bodies, and much of his description of their bodies seems to equate femaleness with nature. However, upon closer examination, it becomes clear that Stegner is troubling the mind/body split by creating a narrator (Allston) who is struggling with the contradictions between his idealized (Cartesian) views and his own direct observations that allow the female body to exist both within and without nature. At times, Allston seems to be unaware of these contradictions, and he repeatedly admits that he is adverse to change, but we, as readers, are able to observe that it is these very contradictions that trouble traditional modes of thought; the ability for the female body to exist in contradiction places it in a complex, subjective space and implicates a failure of the Cartesian mind/body split.

Another important concept Bordo discusses is that the changing vision of the universe was accompanied by a changing understanding of place. If we, as humans, are no longer one with the universe, we must figure out how we are located in relation to this thing that is not us:

The development of the human sense of locatedness can be viewed as a process of cultural parturition, from which the human being emerges as a decisively separate entity, no longer continuous with a universe which has now become decisively 'other' to it. That universe no longer beats with the same heart as the human being; it has its own laws, which control and contain (in both senses of the word) the activity of the self. (Bordo, *Flight 70*)

We see Joe Allston exhibiting an anxiety over this separation from a continuous universe. Marian's philosophy, that all living things are connected and that all life is good life, allows her to feel a connection between her body, her place, and the nature she is surrounded by. Allston, however, in his cynical way, feels he doesn't have any connections, and so is left anxious about his relationship to nature and to his body.

Bordo further clarifies her concepts by outlining the two different ways of situating this new "self" that is separate from the universe. She notes that "location" and "place" are vastly different concepts, with location replacing place when the universe and the self diverge:

The sense of locatedness, as I've described it here, is related to what Whitehead has called 'simple location,' [...], the 'perfectly definite sense' in which something 'can be said to be here in space and here in time, or here in space time ...[without] any reference to other regions of space time' (1925, p. 49). [...] The sense of 'place,' on the other hand, is the experience of 'fit,' of belonging where one is, of having a home. It is the assurance that where one is, is appropriate or meaningful or of value within some larger context (71).

This concept is central to my discussion of Allston's anxiety about being pastless, futureless, and hence placeless, and gives insight into why his act of looking to the female body for a sense of place is a significant feminist act. When the Enlightenment caused a shift in epistemology, the universe became a chaotic, unordered place. The Earth was no longer at the center of an orderly, "heliocentric" system, and there was now no "spiritually proper 'home' for anything," which created anxiety for people experiencing a new world view (72). This anxiety, and the desire to return to an ordered universe, Bordo claims, is at the "heart of Cartesian doubt," and we see this same anxiety expressed by Allston. Hence, his desire to place, not simply locate, his body, and his belief that observation of various female bodies will help him do so, means that for Allston, the female body has the potential to exist in a holistic, pre-Cartesian sense. Consequently, through Allston's belief, Stegner is breaking the mind/body dichotomy and promoting a view of the female body that reclaims all space as its own; feminist space then can include, but is not limited to, nature.

Seeing Allston's exploration of women as active agents, able to define their own place through their bodies and nature but not limited to these physical characteristics, is undoubtedly a feminist exploration, especially for the time in which Stegner was writing (1967 and 1976) because it both accepts nature as a valid realm for the female body and rejects nature as the only valid realm. In this way, Stegner seems to be anticipating not only a feminist shift away from nature towards culture, but also the counter-shift, which reconnects the two.

Traditionally, the female body is tied to the representational, the natural, while the male body is free to situate itself in a larger context that privileges interiority and objective rationality.¹ Alaimo echoes Bordo's observations about the Enlightenment when she says, "Defining woman as that which is mired in nature thrusts woman outside the domain of human subjectivity, rationality, and agency" (Alaimo 2). Because Allston observes the female body, in part, to try to understand why he, a rational agent, feels no sense of place while some women around him seem to exhibit that sense, both Bordo's discussion of place and objectivity, along with Alaimo's discussion of the female body's relation to nature, are central to understanding the two works of fiction.

In reaction to the epistemological shift that so objectifies women, "feminists have identified the pervasive association of woman with nature as itself a root cause of misogyny and have advocated a feminist flight from this troublesome terrain" (Alaimo 3). Alaimo argues that this dis-identification with nature only serves, in ways, to reinforce those very ideas feminist theorists would fight against:

By attempting to disentangle 'woman' from the web of association that bind her to 'nature,' however, nature is kept at bay -- repelled -- rather than redefined. It is not only ironic but deeply problematic that the 'aggressive, intellectual "flight from the feminine"' that motivated Cartesian rationalism has been followed by feminist flights from all that Descartes attempted to transcend -- 'impure' matter, bodies, and nature. (Alaimo 4)

The solution, then, is to re-envision woman's relation to nature rather than try to abandon or ignore it all together.² Alaimo notes that "Rather than relinquish the concept of objectivity, many feminist theorists have radically revised it, underscoring -- not denying -- the situated position of the knower and her relation to the 'object' of knowledge" (147).

Wallace Stegner, to my knowledge, has never been identified as a writer of progressive feminist literature, but by considering his fiction in this context of the relationship between women and nature, we are able to see how his discussion of the body, and especially the

female body, questions the patriarchal view that the relationship between women and nature is both natural and limiting. The ways in which Stegner situates his female characters forces us to reexamine our assumptions about what feminist writing looks like, and about the functions it serves. Alaimo claims that “Because women have not been authorized as subjects or as knowers, there is a possibility that they will formulate different ways of being and knowing [...] By emphasizing the subject in the object, feminist epistemologies radically reconceptualize the very category of nature” (Alaimo 155). However, I do not feel that this reconceptualization is limited to the female writer, and that male writers can explore “feminist epistemologies,” though undoubtedly with different motivations and parameters. Wallace Stegner ultimately reconceptualizes the female body as beyond the nature/culture split, placing it in ambiguous relation to both, and so seems to be at least attempting to challenge both the traditional objectification of women and the feminist flight from nature.

All the Little Live Things is a novel in which Joe Allston, a retired literary agent and the novel's narrator, is obsessed with history's relation to the present. His existential crises stem from his grief over his surf-bum son's untimely death, which Allston suspects may have been closer to suicide than accident. They also stem from his friendship with his young, passionate, pregnant, and dying neighbor, Marian, and his anger/guilt at Jim Peck, an idealistic yet destructive hippie who is squatting on Allston's property. While there are large, dramatic events in this novel, it is the little things – chatting with Marian on lazy summer afternoons, attending an Independence Day party, watching gophers destroy his garden – that most clearly show Allston's anxiety over the fact that he has failed to successfully place himself. As a man without offspring, nearing his old age, without any family besides his wife, Allston is a man without bridges to the past or future. His attempt to understand what it means to have a history (and a future) center on the pregnant Marian, and her body becomes the focus of his struggle to create and understand his own history.

When we next see Joe Allston in *The Spectator Bird*, seven years have passed. Allston receives a postcard from Astrid, an intriguing and mysterious Danish woman he and his wife

met years before. He decides to read through his journals from their trip to Denmark. Much of *The Spectator Bird* really exists in this previous time, as the majority of the text is from these journals. As in *All the Little Live Things*, Allston is struggling with the death of his only son and with his feelings of rootlessness. The trip to Denmark was an attempt to find his roots and, hopefully, to find a feeling of belonging to a specific place. What he finds is much more ambiguous than that, and the Allstons are thrust into Astrid's world, where inbreeding is good scientific practice, family connections are particularly tricky, and the physical body is the ultimate manifestation of history. Again, Allston studies the female body and its relation to nature in his attempt to "place" himself in his own history.

Viewing Stegner's writing through the lens of embodiment theory can be very productive. Perhaps the common thread that runs between the texts and characters is that of reproduction – questions of, anxieties over, sacrifices made for – and examining theories of embodiment allows us to see not only how reproduction functions in the novels, but to connect those observations to larger epistemological frameworks that let allow us to draw significant conclusions about the texts' treatment of the body and its relation to place. This can lead us create interesting, original, and important scholarship, not only about Stegner's writing, but also on larger issues of Western representations. In "A Memory Sweet to Soldiers': The Significance of Gender in the History of the 'American West,'" Susan Lee Johnson argues that "[o]f all the regions people have imagined within the boundaries of what is now the United States, no place has been so consistently identified with maleness-particularly white maleness-as the region imagined as the American West" (Johnson 495). If there is any region in which we must be consciously expanding our understandings of the body in, it is Western literature, and Stegner is an author whose fiction we need to explore more fully.

CHAPTER 2

ALL THE LITTLE LIVE THINGS

All the Little Live Things takes place in what Allston calls the “paradise” of California. Allston, a retired literary agent, and his wife, Ruth, have created a safe space in which to live out their lives. This safe space has been dearly bought, and is only precariously safe, as history has a way of never allowing Allston to be content in the present. His son Curtis, a man who spent his life shifting from one place to the next, who “settles down” in midlife to the life of a surf bum, drowned in a surfing accident several years prior to the novel’s events, but the guilt over their strained relationship and the question of how “accidental” Curtis’s death really was continue to haunt Allston. The safety of Allston’s life is also threatened, and ultimately shredded, with the arrival of two very different neighbors: Jim Peck, a man much like Allston’s son, who sets up camp in Allston’s woods, and the Caitlin family, who moves into the house down the lane. Peck is a threat to whatever order Allston has managed to create in his life and the idealized natural setting he has constructed. Marian Caitlin is also a threat to order, but she is a threat to the order Allston has imposed on his own emotions, and her illness and subsequent death leave him ultimately feeling both less and more connected to place and history.

Two main questions plague Allston: How can he understand his own identity if he has neither heir nor ancestor, and what is it about certain women that gives them such a strong, seemingly intrinsic connection to nature and their bodies, and hence such a strongly identifiable place? As mentioned in the introduction, the problem for feminist theorists with associating the female body and nature is that these associations limit the female body and deny it agency; it can be studied and understood but only if it is objectified. Allston, however unconsciously,

contradicts his own misogynistic upholding of this objectification by observing the ways in which Marian defies objectification.

Allston is anxious over the fact “[...] that for sixty-four years I have inhabited this skull which from the inside seems comfortably habitual, but which I might not even recognize if I could stand six feet away and see its hairless shine in the starlight. That old baldpate I? [...] And if I am so strange from the outside, am I so sure I know myself any better from within?” (11). That awareness of location, purpose, and connection to a place and past, are all called into question through the body, as Allston shows here as he equates the “twilight sleep” of an unexamined life to being under anesthesia:

For two years I cultivated the condition that Marian called twilight sleep. Now my eyelids flutter open, and I am still on the table, the gown is pulled away to reveal the incision, the clamps, the sponges, and the blood, the masks are still bent over me with an attention at once impersonal and profound. (11)

For Allston, the answers to the philosophical lie in the physical, and perhaps because so much of his thought is taken up with issues of mortality, he feels a deep anxiety that he will not be able to understand his body and hence will never be able to understand his place.

Marian is the constant object of Joe Allston’s gaze for several reasons. Because of the deep connection she professes to feel to nature and place, Allston seems to want to dig inside her and come up with a solution to his own disconnection. In addition, Marian is the literal embodiment of his anxiety – she is fertility battling infertility, life battling death, identity battling the evil of nothingness. His deep emotional involvement in her plight is caused, in part, because of his genuine affection for her, but it is also caused by the fact that she IS the story – what happens to her will be, he fears, the final judgment on his own life. If Marian can live, if she can sustain her connection to the future, and if Allston can understand how she does so, he hopes that he will be able to create that connection for himself. When Marian dies, Allston reasons that her death wasn’t for nothing since he now realizes his life is sweeter for all the pain

his love caused him. However, we never see an Allston whose anxiety is abated and who feels serenely pinned to the clothesline of history; He is still drifting.

Even when he is discussing matters seemingly unrelated to Marian, the very fact that this novel is told in the past tense means everything is viewed through the lens of the grief-filled present. Allston acknowledges this influence in his narration by admitting the possibility that his memory may be changed by his present knowledge. He says, "If I am really remembering, and not inserting feelings I had later, every movement she made troubled me with its intimation of the mutilation she had suffered. I could not help wondering if it was her scarred side she held the roses to" (*All the Little Live Things* 95-96). Looking back at history through a scarred lens of grief, Allston gives the reader a melancholy awareness of death even as he observes the joyfulness of life.

However, this is not to say that the reader is not treated to the unabashed joy of Marian's spirit, though no doubt Allston's love for her makes it shine brighter in his narration. Through Allston's eyes, Stegner has created a singular character. As Allston descriptively notes, "[h]er vividness troubled the air as the blur of the returning hummingbird troubled the corner by the orange tree" (211). Marian is the most "alive" character in the novel, perhaps made more so by "her two inward guests" (285), her desperate pregnancy and the growing recurrence of breast cancer. If Allston is yearning for connection, Marian is the vortex where death and life meet, where "all the little lymph nodes" (89) meet all the little live things, and it is not so easy to distinguish life from death. This chaos of living and dying frightens and excites Allston, as it both reminds him of his own mortality and yet allows him to feel truly alive for the first time in years. Marian begins to break the gendered binaries he has held as self evident his entire life, showing him that what he thought was truth is really just social construction.

Similarly, Allston has anxious feelings towards Jim Peck, whom he describes as "a delayed adolescent projecting his uneasy virility into whiskers and motorcycle, both absolutely standard, and his dramatized alienation into dirtiness and long hair, likewise standard, and his lust for visibility into that orange suit" (25). Peck and his friends are as "promiscuous as a camp

of howler monkeys” (153), and Allston sees them as having none of the right to or need of life as Marian. However, they are both a threat to the walls Allston has erected.

Peck is also associated with nature; he is a primitive, a threat to order and culture who is a major cause of anxiety for Allston. Allston often envisions Peck as non-human, perhaps in part because Allston dislikes the philosophy and lifestyle Peck embraces, and perhaps in part because Peck, with his virulent sexuality and questionable morals, poses a threat to the idyllic, controllable paradise Allston is trying to create for himself. If Allston describes Peck as an animal, Peck is then a body to be studied, dissected, even loathed, but never feared. As an outsider to rational thought and organized culture, Peck’s philosophies and opinions can then be dismissed as the gibbering of an animal and cease to be threatening.

Peck’s body is not just dirty; it is otherworldly, even demonic. In his first encounter with Peck, Allston says, “His hair was long and tousled, even matted where the helmet, now hung on a handlebar, had crushed it down. It crawled over his collar, and was pushed forward on his forehead, hiding his horns” (21). The immediate feelings Allston has for Peck go beyond general distaste, and Allston comes right out and calls Peck disorder incarnate:

If I ever saw the incarnated essence of disorder, this was it. He emanated a spirit of erratic, reckless, and Dionysian as his smell, and I had not seen eyes like his since one day in the suq in Beirut, when a Bedu boy whom I knew for a pickpocket watched me buy Ruth a gold chain. (22)

Even much later in the novel, when Allston has had quite a bit of time to associate Peck with more than his physical appearance, Peck is still equated with his body – his shape still defines him:

Most orderly and neoclassic that pastoral grove, those noble trees, those gracefully disposed figures; most romantic the touch of gaiety and aspiration as the child soars upward in the swing. But also, inescapably part of the picture, the shape of Disorder stands a little apart, in shadow, gleaming darkly, the orange suit like a gross flower against the brown spring-fallen leaves. (103)

As the shape of disorder, Peck is identified as “a satyr come to the picnic” (102), who can “play the bacchant with the best” (104). Allston wants the “pastoral grove” and the “romantic” nature, a nature that is controllable, predictable, and objectified. Drawing on classical forms of bodily disorder, Allston is bringing in a myriad of associations for the reader, trying to persuade his audience, and himself, that Peck is a figure who has a pre-defined role, a disorderly, “gross flower” that has no place in this idyllic setting.

Allston is critical of any attempt on Peck’s part to be more than the body of disorder. Allston limits Peck to what Bordo terms, “merely mechanically interacting matter. (Bordo, *Flight* 102), the result of higher thought being reserved for those (rational, scientific men) who act upon nature rather than those who exist within nature. In Allston’s eyes, Peck’s spirituality is still just an expression of his physicality. When the Allstons and Caitlins observe Peck meditating in his tree house, Allston comments that “Peck was a long way from true meditation, that he couldn’t have been more conscious of being watched, that down below there, wink! was going his little old anal sphincter, the window of his soul. Wink! Wink! Rubber you squares” (142). Allston’s anxiety over Peck’s disorderly body (and disorderly conduct in Allston’s “paradise”) causes him to equate even the highest form of consciousness with nature, hence the necessity for Peck’s “spiritual rectum” (143).

In a move that ultimately proves futile, Allston attempts to use his own body as an epistemological tool. Bordo notes that the Enlightenment brought about a greater sense of interiority and located history (*Flight* 201-203), as well as an anxiety about separation from the God-ordered universe. Allston attempts to describe history by using his physical senses, perhaps attempting to recreate those connections between the body and history. Allston says, “Sometimes I have felt that I could smell my way backward down my life from stranger’s house to stranger’s house, like a homing dog, by little tokens left on maple or elm or light pole” (191). Because rational, objective thought has failed him in his search for place, he turns to the physical with the hope of finding new connections that rationality cannot explain.³ He claims, “My memory hunts by scent, like a beagle, among a banquet of smells: the rich aroma of Lucio’s

carving, odors of green concrete and adobe dust, a whiff of acetylene gas, the faint chlorine scent that the young had brought in their wet hair, the tang of gin and lime from my glass. In those odors is the whole jammed patio, the sticky, fading afternoon” (242). Smell is a powerful sense often detailed by authors to create a scene, and any reader can no doubt recall a time when a smell has brought back a memory so strongly that the past and present seem momentarily confused. Allston wants to use his body to understand the conflation of past and present, to hunt out the connection between who he is and where he was. He makes the following analogy between his feelings of rootlessness and the physical sense of smell:

Lose a dog in the woods, no matter how oscura, and he will follow the back track to the place where he went in. At past sixty, rather deep in the woods, I was lifting my nose from among the mold and mushrooms to sniff at any cold scent that promised to lead me somewhere. But I could find no place that was mine. The crisscrossing trails of my mother’s life had confused all the scents. (195)

In this analogy, Allston is the dog, and, strangely, life both the trail and the prey. In recalling his trip with Ruth to Denmark (a trip he further details in *The Spectator Bird*) Allston concludes that this feeling of rootlessness is unique to Americans – the American body is a unique form, different from the European, and for Allston this is a whole new anxiety; even if he found the “place that was mine,” he fears it would not be recognizable, would not be his, that he is a creature who has no home to return to:

In the end, we made, one after the other, the two moves that are possible to Americans and lost dogs. We smelled our way back to the old country and sniffed for a while around Copenhagen and around the little island of Taasinge in the southwestern Baltic where my mother was born. We learned something, perhaps, but that is another story, what matters is that I didn’t smell one thing that was familiar or that meant anything personal; not a person, not an echo, not a whiff from the past. Europe was cut off, no longer anything to me. (195)

His exploration of his own body does not lead him to any comforting conclusions about his identity or place, but it does allow him to establish himself as having an American body, and in this way he creates a connection to all other rootless, history-less Americans: a connection based on lack of connection. For Allston, what it means to be an American, to be able to claim that unique history-lessness, is indivisible from the ability to claim a physically American body:

If I had had a home town, I would have gone straight back to it on one of those middle-aged pilgrimages to search out the boy I was, the man I started out to be, and might have half expected to find myself barefooted and with a fishpole, like a Post cover by Norman Rockwell. Young America, freckled and healthy, the finest crop grown in the soil of democratic institutions. [...] we lived in shallow, laborious, temporary ruts, and over their rims [my mother] was always seeing some dawn or rainbow, the kind of rainbow that had brought her into the States, only now it was one that always promised something better for me.

(190)

However, if his goal is to find a way in which he can assume his own unique past and future, then his exploration of his own body is unsuccessful.

Complicating this idea for Allston is the fact that the very bodies that cause him the most anxiety are often also the most “American,” or at least are more American to Allston than he himself feels he is. Allston says that Peck is “a very American product, authentic Twentieth-Century Mixed Style, mass-produced with interchangeable parts from five or six different machines” (26). Marian, trying to sell a good side of Peck to Allston, argues, “There’s a lot of frontier, pioneering enthusiasm in Jim, did you ever realize? He’s sort of like a homesteader over there.” Allston replies that Peck is just a “Squatter” (160), divulging an anxiety unique to the colonizer: Allston wishes to be native, and so in turn sees the native as an intruder. He is anxious about his perceived indigenoussness and the right he has to claim this paradise of California (in the form of orderly, controllable nature) for himself.

Curtis is also an American body that troubles Allston. Allston describes his son as “the very face of kicks-crazy America, unlined by thinking, unmarked by pain, unshadowed even by years of scrupulous dissoluteness, untouched by life – or by death either – except for a slight discontented droop at the corners of the lips” (185). The reconciliation of Allston’s dream of the American body (the body that can exist in what his mother terms “the rainbow” of America) with the physical reality of the human body, is one that Allston struggles with, and his extensive and sometimes obsessive observations and analyses of the bodies of those around him are, in part, an attempt to understand what it means to be an American.

Though these explorations lend insight to Allston’s perceptions of place, throughout the novel the main body he attempts to read is Marian’s. According to Allston, Marian’s philosophy, what he calls her “text,” is to “[b]e open, be available, be exposed, be skinless. Skinless? Dance around in your bones” (12). This skinlessness fascinates Allston because he himself is searching for what it is that lies under his own skin – what makes up Joe Allston. Marian’s femaleness is indivisible from her self – the fact that she is in the process of reproduction throughout their acquaintance ensures this. He is also fascinated because she exposes herself to Joe, and she claims to be located in the most profound way – her philosophies go beyond the “circle of life” mantra that an individual’s birth and death is part of a larger scheme, and she seems to truly feel herself a part of all that is around her, all that came before, and all that may possibly come after her. To Joe, an island, her light is alluring and he risks the burn by venturing so close. He says he “[has] been moved by that skinless young woman” (88) in a way that elicits awe and love, but, strangely, he also says that “[s]ensibility that skinless is close to being a curse” (67). The vulnerability and connection Marian has to all that is around her is both a blessing, since she claims it makes her happy, and a curse, since she is easily hurt.

However, at times, Allston realizes that the body “text” is often indecipherable, and so, as another technique, he turns to reading historical “place,” hoping he will discover a connection that he can then build an identity upon. For Allston, place has everything to do with history, and vice versa. Allston says that without history and without a future, he cannot be connected to

anything in the present. In this way, history is defined not only as what has happened in the past, but as a time line on which one stands, with past and future stretching out on either side. He reflects, "I grew to hate the thin dispersal of my relatives, my mother in Chicago earth and my son in Bucks County, each alone among strangers. And here was I, random and now childless, making meaningless orbits in the Madison Avenue void" (194). Allston's sense of place, or lack of place, is tied directly to his history, both past and future. He is "making meaningless orbits" because he feels no connection to history.

Allston notes that Curtis seems to have tried to find some connection with the past, but that like in Allston's own experience, it seems the connection was never made:

There was a long and relatively peaceful year when he was abroad living in an unheated room on the Nyhavn in Copenhagen, a place he was drawn to because he had heard it was the toughest of Europe's waterfronts. Yet I wonder. I had a Danish phase myself, I went back there too, looking for something and not finding it. I wonder if Curt was trying to follow some raveling thread back through his labyrinth? It saddens me to think so, for I'm sure it broke, he ended up lost in the same old mazes. (182)

So, for Allston, the connections between past and present are a labyrinth, a structure that one must employ special means to negotiate, and that if one becomes lost in the structure, it means certain death. Not only is the body otherworldly, so is any form of connection to the past, as we see in this example of mythological reference.

As a consequence, he is now negotiating both the body and the environment surrounding the body as his means for understanding himself. How the body interacts, mirrors, or affects the nature that surrounds it is a major mode of understanding. One major philosophy of body-in-nature that the book explores is Marian's – that life is all circular, that everything is a part of everything else, and that "There isn't good life and bad life, there's only life" (*All the Little Live Things* 86). Allston tries to separate out the various elements of Marian's "life" philosophy, making it more palatable to him, by assigning morality to it:

'My dear child, it's one thing to be fond of little live things – who isn't? – but you can't simply ignore the struggle for existence. There are good kinds of life and bad kinds of life...' 'Bad is what conflicts with your interest' she says. This is more acute than I expected from her, and I grant her the touch. (64)

This brings to mind Allston's penchant for quoting Shakespeare ("A touch, a touch, I do confess") as if they were playing a game that has deadly origins but is now just an imitation of danger without the consequences.

For Marian, history, body, and place are all connected in "the force down there, just telling things to get born!" (64). In her reasoning, order and disorder are constructs – Allston's hated gophers and his beloved garden are equally important, each just fulfilling their role. The blooming flower and the black root have no role assigned – one is not more worthy of life than the other, because nature has no moral hierarchy. Her adamant support of this philosophy, reasons Allston, is her way of dealing with the unfairness, the ugliness, that nature has dealt her, and while he admires her spirit, he notes, as he returns from Marian's funeral, that he cannot see life as "impartial and eternal and in flux, an unceasing interchange of protein" (8). In a way, we are never meant to believe Marian's philosophy either, as all her arguments are framed by a struggle with death that we cannot face objectively, just as Allston cannot. Observing Marian's life from a vantage point beyond her death, we feel that though this woman had agency and individuality, she was still beaten by the "evil" she professed not to believe in, and so we identify with Allston, who grieves for her.

Allston reasons that Marian's philosophy, which causes him so much anxiety because it implies a connection he doesn't feel, is illogical because he sees the nature he has strived to create as being different than Marian's nature. For Marian, while she acknowledges that nature is not idyllic in the traditional sense, it is idyllic for her because even the unpleasant elements are working together in harmony with the pleasant. Allston says, "I admire the natural, and I hate the miscalled improvements that spread like impetigo into the hills. But who can pretend that the natural and the idyllic are the same?" (20). Marian can, and does, with her assertion

that there is no good or bad life, just life, and so nature is idyllic in the sense that her view assumes a perfect harmony between man, animal, and environment, as all elements of each are equally important.

In his ordered, rational, and controllable view of nature, Allston closely ties the female body and location (reinforcing the mind/body split and underscoring the female body's objectification) through the ironic portrayal of the natural female body as less-than-idyllic. Allston is poking fun at an idealized relationship between the female body and location, but reinforces the concept just the same:

In Jackson Hole there is a Catholic church named Our Lady of the Grand Tetons by somebody who didn't know what tetons are. If we had a Catholic church here (we don't, it would be zoned out of this bedroom town) it would also have to be called Our Lady of the Grand Tetons. A real dumpling of a girl, a Boule de suif, our local Earth Mother, and her clefts are dark with oak and bay and buckeye, gooseberry and wild rose, and – appropriately – maidenhair, and – perhaps not inappropriately – poison oak. (*All the Little Live Things* 53)

This may play into the goddess movement that many feminist theorists see as a way to recapture and claim these nature/body ties as feminist spaces, but Allston's ironic treatment supports, though perhaps unknowingly, such strong connections between female body and location that have served to objectify the female body. He seems to think he is breaking some sort of mold here by venturing into ironical descriptions, but with his jokes about maidenhair (and its near homophone maidenhead) and poison oak (the female body is a dangerous, unpredictable space that must be controlled), he simply further sexualizes nature and further objectifies the female body.

The myth of the Garden of Eden plays heavily here because Allston has a glimpse of a nature that is random, mindless, and futile in its cruelty, and so he clings to the myth as a way of organizing and making sense of nature. As he reasons, "Where you find the greatest Good, there you will also find the greatest Evil, for Evil likes Paradise every bit as much as Good does.

[...] A place where Joe Allston hopes to enjoy his retirement turns out to be Tom Weld's ancestral acres and a place attractive to Caliban" (54). The good comes with the bad in nature, for Allston, but there is good and bad, which is reassuring and ordering. If one thing is good, we are right to value it above a thing that is bad, and so the myth is perpetuated in Allston's mind. In his dry humor, Allston even compares his "native" neighbor to a pre-creation Earth, musing, "God created Weld, and Weld was without form, and void" (15). Allston is even explicit in his acknowledgement of the myth, bringing his anxiety over the physical body (his sense of smell, again) and connecting it to Americanness, indigenesness, and order:

So we did the other thing that Americans and lost dogs can do, we quit trying to backtrack and went forward. We turned our backs on everything remembered and came out to make a new beginning in California. It wasn't a radical act, in a way. It was a habitual one, it conformed to twenty generations of American experience. We would have pooh-poohed the idea that we were living by the Garden myth, but we were, we are. (195)

The world, for Allston, exists in a split between going forward and going back. If one is unable to connect to history, as Allston feels he is, he moves forward to California, not only the most Western of possibilities, but also one of the most mythologically important in American society. If anywhere is paradise, it is California.

Of course, the Eden myth has its problems, and at the heart of these problems lies the relationship between the female body and nature. What we do to make the idealized myth a reality wreaks havoc on our bodies. Allston "[thinks] what a quaint idea it is to perfect Eden with poisons, and [wonders] (let us suppose) what Adam and Eve did without rotenone, melathion, lindane, chlordane, sodium ammate, and the other deterrents" (56). This observation, of course, is implicitly tied to Marian's cancer because the "poisons" are also carcinogens, but it also has larger implications for the West and the environment, as Allston later urges the reader to observe that "This is how the New World looks, this is what is happening in the vital madhouse of Eden, the vanishing Lotus Land. See it quickly before it is paved under and smogged out"

(129). It is this application of objective morality that comes with original sin and the garden myth that stands in opposition to the union of the female body and nature. It is because of the myth, which Allston finds simultaneously comforting and disturbing, that he cannot reconcile the morally laden female body with a morally void nature. He remarks that it is these morals that prevent him from seeing life and death as impartial, equal events in the cycle of being. He muses “that love, not sin, costs us Eden. Love is a carrier of death – the only thing, in fact, that makes death significant. Otherwise it is what Marian pretended to think it was, a simple interchange of protein” (91). In the garden myth, some acts, some events, and some outcomes are better than others (read it is better for Marian to live than to die), and this is the myth that Allston clings to.

In one particularly telling scene, Allston is watching his garden, fuming over thieving gophers, when he sees one of his flowers being pulled below the surface. In his anger, he takes a pitchfork and stabs it into the ground, hoping to pull up the pest. Instead, he pulls up something entirely unexpected:

The dirt broke away and left a knot of black and white coils that clenched around the tines. Right out of the earth in one motion, when I had expected only clods and hopefully the dark opening of the tunnel, came this king snake that had lain secretly under my feet. [...] I reacted as if to an enemy, or to evil itself. Yet he was the natural bane of gophers, mice, moles, rattlesnakes, all the pests hurtful to me and my garden. [...] the snake was an omen or symbol whose meaning I ought to catch but couldn't. (200-201)

The symbolism is obviously rich in this passage. A snake, the devil himself in Genesis, is instinctively reacted to as “evil itself,” but evil’s position is not so clear, as Allston notes all the good (again the myth of morality) the snake does. Allston finds himself anxious over the ambiguity of the snake’s meaning, and is frustrated that he cannot understand its symbolism. In Genesis, God curses the serpent, and says that there will be enmity between it and the woman, and between its seed and her seed. Symbolically, the serpent represents the devil and all the

evil in the world is his seed. The Woman represents the Church (and, ultimately, the savoir) and hence stands for all that is good in the world. Clearly, if Allston says the snake “was an omen,” he is connecting it to the evil of Marian's sickness.

However, Stegner doesn't allow Allston to keep this easy separation between good and evil. In the next section, Allston describes the bulge of the just-swallowed gopher that distends the snake's belly, and of course the reader, along with the narrator, makes the connection between the snake's body and Marian's:

For that single intense instant the image of the king snake glared in my mind, the blood coils bulging in the middle as Marian bulged. [...] It was no more than an association of shapes, but the cold spot in my guts contracted in a spasm, and on my arms every little hair bristled from its crater of goose flesh. (211)

This places Marian in a similarly ambiguous position. Not only do we feel, at the end of the novel, that evil has done all the head-bruising and has confused all our assumptions that good will triumph over evil, but because the woman's seed (her reproductive femaleness) is conflated with the evil of the snake, we are no longer sure what is good and what is evil. It troubles Allston that he cannot categorize everything in his life based on a moral standard.

Allston admits this complication, stating, almost as an assertion of some kind of moral growth, that he is “steadily tempted to poke around the garden looking for the snake. Sooner or later I shall find myself going (coming?) down my hole after myself. I do not forget the ambiguous serpent I dug out of the ground last summer, though I cannot make him fit any easy pattern of moral meaning” (92). This easy pattern of moral meaning, though, is an epistemological structure that Allston has difficulty questioning, and we do not see him ever entirely let it go.

One way in which Allston attempts to clarify his questions of morality (and mortality) and their relation to the body is through classic literature, a sort of consciousness or sensibility he assumes his reader shares with him. Allston uses *The Tempest*, a classic and well-known inquiry into the role of nature, to further clarify his questions. Again, he targets Peck as the “one

who isn't quite human" and is from that otherworldly realm in order to deal with his own anxiety. For Allston, Peck is a reminder that the Garden is fallen into chaos, and his overlaying and codifying of Peck as Caliban is an attempt to assuage his anxiety over this chaos. Prospero calls Caliban "A devil, born a devil, on whose nature nurture can never stick" (Shakespeare, *The Tempest* 4.1). Here Allston is positioning himself as Prospero, the opposition to chaos – we often see Allston gardening, pruning, and beautifying his land, creating order in his domain, though at the cost of exile, as Allston left his life as a literary agent in New York to move to this paradise.

In addition, Allston compares his location to not only the Garden of Eden, but also to the otherworldly island in *The Tempest* -- at least until the arrival of chaos. He says that "until a few months ago this place was Prospero's island. It never occurred to us to doubt its goodness" (*All the Little Live Things* 9). With the arrival of Jim Peck, suddenly Allston has reason to doubt the goodness of his little island, but paradoxically he compares Peck to Caliban, a "native" figure, not a colonizing, arriving one. In one of Allston's first impressions of Peck, he describes him as "this person in orange helicopter coveralls bulging all over with zippered pockets. The suit was unzipped clear to his navel, and his hairy chest rose out of it and merged with a dark, dense beard. Caliban." (21). The restraining foreignness of the jumpsuit cannot hide the native body. Again, Allston is relating chaos with physical being -- the disorder of body hair signifies a disorder in paradise, a disorder that give Allston the uncomfortable suspicion that nature and paradise may not be the same thing.

Marian, again, is the complicating agent in Allston's moral figuring. In the following scene, the Allstons and Caitlins invite Peck to join them in the Caitlin's yard, where they are drinking beer and having a civilized, neighborly visit. Allston is both upset and uncomfortable with Peck's presence, but he hides his unhappiness for Marian's sake -- he doesn't want her to think he is closed-minded. She, in turn, encourages Peck to become part of the group, and they watch as Peck pushes young Debbie Caitlin in her swing. Through Marian's eyes, Peck cannot

be simply “bad” -- he becomes both Caliban and Christ, disorder and order, each unconcerned with the other, in her reckoning:

Marian, glancing from her canvas chair, smiled at him [Allston] brilliantly. The taming of Caliban. See the rude jungle beast behave like a well-brought-up middle-class boy. See the motorcycle-riding sanyasi, the hot-rod Spirit of Contemplation in his helicopter suit, suffering the little children to come to him” (110).

Allston, still, cannot see beyond the physical “hairy grin of Caliban” (111), a grin that does not signify higher consciousness but only brute physical movement. As he observed earlier in the novel, Allston sees even the physical elements meant to create non-physical connection (a smile to signify friendliness, for example) only as bodily functions. He says, “Caliban’s smile modified itself as I spoke, until I couldn’t help being reminded again how much lips surrounded by beard look like another sort of bodily opening” (31). A smile becomes the most primal movement of the anus, and hence whatever Peck’s body could say about him (his idealism, his rejection of modern society, his philosophy) only says disorder.

We can see, through his treatment of the Garden myth and of *The Tempest*, that harmony between the body and an ideal nature is desirable for Allston, as the garden is a place of order, where good and evil, cause and effect, reproduction and sexuality, all have their assigned roles. This reinforces the Cartesian mind/body split by privileging a nature that is observable and controllable. This is particularly evident in women’s bodies, which are themselves dangerous areas that need to be kept from chaos. He often relates the female body to an ideal, ordered “natural” as, on the way back from Marian’s funeral he notes, “the sapling cherries were something out of Housman, or like young girls dressed for a lawn party in Charleston, S.C.” (55). His desire for order, especially in the face of Marian’s illness and death, manifests in his descriptions of her body, as he attempts to create her as an idealized, Edenic female body that will succeed in its plight to reproduce. It is important to note here that Marian has already succeeded to reproduce; she has a young daughter. However, the fact that she is

desperately trying to reproduce now, and is unable to do so, seems to cause the same anxiety for Allston as it would if she were not already a mother.

Allston continually compares Marian to a flower, saying “She looks as if she had bloomed into this spring day, she has a tremble on her like young poplar leaves” (57), and “she has a serene, promising, transparent look as if, just as soon as this little cloud passes, she will bloom out again in the sun” (59). Blooming not only has the garden allusion, but also the reference to female sexuality. Again, he is equating personality with body, sexuality with sex, and body with and idealized, ordered nature. He says that “Every thought that crossed her mind showed in her face like cloud shadows crossing a meadow” (163). Her thoughts become concrete elements, familiar and easy to understand, benign like clouds crossing a meadow (note that the clouds are harmlessly crossing over the meadow, which is itself an idealized setting). Her moods are “chameleon” (165) and her kiss is a “cobweb” (120).

When Allston does, at times, allow Marian to be more than her body, but it causes him great anxiety. He admits, “The physical details say nothing, and they do not recall the essential magic of her smile to me now. It was her spirit that smiled, it bubbled out of her like the bright water bubbling from the fountain. Remembering, I could knock my forehead on the ground” (210). Even here, though, at a moment of anxiety, he is attempting to quell any part of her that lies outside the physical -- her spirit is water, and it is water safely bubbling out of a man-made, perfectly controllable fountain, that makes up her smile. He is not completely successful, though, since her smile is still magic (something outside of the realm of Eden), and so she retains her subjectivity because she is not limited to the natural.

However, Allston must admit that the Garden is fallen, and hence the morality he clings to, the “good” body, is at odds with nature. In a very real way, Allston is witnessing the effects of the fall, and so his anxiety over the body is not only existential but practical as well. As Allston witnesses the effect of gophers on his garden, he says, “My hand began to shake and my eyes got moist – outrage, outrage. To take all that trouble of digging, fertilizing, planting, spraying, pruning, coddling, only to have a blind vermin come burrowing brainlessly underground to

destroy everything!" (6). The parallel between this anxiety and his anxiety over Marian's cancer is clear (perhaps the later anxiety even causes the former), and he sees nature as a battleground between good and evil. Marian's body is also a battleground for nature, and he gives moral value to her struggle to survive, saying, "I think of that girl, who is like a patch of sun-and-shadow woods, and of the obscene tendrils that have crawled through her, and of the withering that has already gone on" (89). "Obscene" is a morally-laden word, and lends a different understanding to his description of Marian as "woods." The woods are good, wholesome, and morally superior to the hidden "tendrils" that seek to destroy.

Also, as a result of this fall, the function of reproduction comes into question. If the female body is a focal point for Allston's anxiety, reproduction in Marian's body is ground zero.⁴ Of Marian, Allston says she "passionately and mystically bent herself to produce flower and fruit and create her [daughter] a brother or sister. If she had a religion, it was biological" (94). Again, Allston attempts to understand Marian through her body, and while he says that her religion is biological, he is also saying that her biology is ordered, moralized, like a religion, hearkening back to the garden myth and Allston's desire for the order morality seems to impose on nature. He is fascinated, and confused, at the fact that Marian's "biological confidence was so serene that she could accept even the blind coffin worm as an essential part of the biota" (290). What is it, he seems to be wondering, that allows Marian to feel such a connection to place, nature, and to understand her role in the cycle of past and future. Of her pregnancy, he says she is "distributing her seeds," a parallel he accepts, even while he adds his own overtone of morality to it, following with the reasoning that "It couldn't happen to anyone who'd appreciate it more" (89). Part of the conflict in Allston's mind over the morality of nature is played out in Marian's body, and, of course, evil ultimately wins, a thoughtless, indiscriminate evil that Allston comes to fear even more than a moral evil (evil with a purpose) and his attempt to script Marian's body into the Garden myth is an attempt to deal with his own anxiety that if evil is mindless, so is good, which undermines his entire conception of nature.

As noted in the introduction, Stacey Alaimo observes that the shift of feminism away from an objectifying association of the female body with nature caused feminists to privilege the cultural body over the natural one, and hence abandon rather than reclaim nature as a feminist space. Stegner treats this split by addressing the mechanized female body – the ultimate product of culture. This treatment may seem to be at odds with my ideas that Stegner is re-envisioning nature as feminist space. However, upon closer examination, it becomes clear that this mechanization is not an act of Stegner's in order to place the female body outside of nature, but is provided so the characters may react to such a mechanization and reject it as a non-solution to Allston's anxiety about the female body and reproduction.

Throughout the novel, Allston makes references to a mechanized female body, such as when he describes one of Ruth's moods as "the magneto headlights of an old Model-T Ford" (120). However, the most striking example, arguably a major event of plot and character development, comes when Allston and a neighbor discuss Fran LoPresti's sculpture on the 4th of July. Fran, whose voice reminds Allston of "a vision of pink new-born mice being lifted by their tails and dipped into honey and lifted out dripping and smoothly swallowed" (213-14), is a self-proclaimed artist, and while Allston privately thinks her artwork sentimental and junky, he is always polite, even enthusiastic, when she asks for his opinion on whatever piece she has recently completed. On this particular occasion, however, Fran is off entertaining the rest of her Independence Day guests, and Allston, after a long afternoon of gin and tonics, finds himself, along with neighbor Annie Williamson, face to face with the statue. He describes the thing as "frankly, even darkly, female" (220). It "leered" at Allston "with a knowledge that was sinister, sad, and accusing [...] its exposed torso shiny with welds like scars" (220). This frank, dark female body is a damaged one, sad and scarred, but despite this, the body is still sexual, and Allston says "the faceless teeth under the sunbonnet wore an indescribable look of coquetry" (221). The sexuality is unnatural for Allston, and he describes how "Fran had drilled a hole in which she had set a lens from a pair of eyeglasses. For some reason, it was inescapably obscene to look right through that thing's bifocal navel. Filthy X-rays" (221).

The sexuality of this non-natural being bothers Allston, and its frank anatomical presence seems not only disturbing but artless and vulgar as well. Allston, thinking back to a previous conversation he'd had with Fran in which she gushed about "thinking in the medium" and other artsy catch-phrases, dryly notes, "its necklace of rusty type hung down between ribbon spools like round rudimentary breasts. To enhance the resemblance, Fran, thinking in anything but the medium, had touched each spool with a bright nipple of solder" (221). Allston desperately attempts to describe the statue in a way that will allow him to make its presence comfortable; he describes the pelvis as "jutting," the "spinal column" linking "pelvis and thorax" (221) as if it were a metal cadaver (albeit a strangely sexual one) to be described with clinical objectivity. Allston, in discussing the piece with Ruth, asks questions about the nature of the statue:

'And why those white-hot titties? To emphasize femaleness in a dangerous, unpleasant way? Or those half-formed breasts that are like the scary outcrops on your adolescent child? And all those corrupt guts, and that window navel. Doesn't that say, in the voice of a furious and suspicious mother, "I can see right through you?"' (222)

These questions reinforce a deep anxiety over a possible break between the female body and nature by devaluing and de-humanizing the mechanical female figure. As Allston and Annie, a dog judge, ponder the statue, Allston envisions the mechanical body as again natural. He and Annie begin a mock dog-show, in which Annie "examined its rear end for a good while, hands behind her, head sunk, lower lip jutting. If she had had a cigar she would have looked like a transvestite Winston Churchill in a fright wig. She bent, and her bifocally magnified eye glared at me through the navel. She straightened, shaking her head 'It beats me. It's got points, like you say. It's got class. It could be Best of Show. But what the hell's the breed?'" (235). The fact that Annie and Allston are, essentially, calling the figure a "bitch" signifies that this is a body that Allston can understand – his observations of its physicality do not trouble him. Unlike Marian, he is able to pin this body to a corresponding category.

Perhaps Fran has unwittingly created a feminist form that defies cultural categorization, but if so, the lesson is lost on Allston. However, Stegner seems to be arguing that classifying the female body is a problematic, if not impossible, task. Allston's anxiety about the female body – its roles in nature, place, and reproduction (and hence in history making) – is not resolved in this text. On the one hand, he is resistant to change, constantly trying to place the female body and nature into pre-molded schemas. On the other hand, he is forced, at least in part, to admit that these attempts fail when it comes to Marian. She defies classification and hence exists in a unique space. She is a more holistic, pre-Cartesian figure, and, because she professes such a deep connection to everything around her, she embodies that tantalizing concept of place that Allston so desires. Though he has failed to understand and appropriate the connections she felt to place and nature, he has gained one insight: Marian cannot be defined by her body, and yet she cannot be defined without it.

CHAPTER 3

THE SPECTATOR BIRD

In *The Spectator Bird*, we once again meet Joe Allston, now seven years removed from Marian's death and the events of *All the Little Live Things*. Allston is feeling his age particularly at this point in time. Several close friends have died, and another has just received a grim prognosis. As he is busy feeling sorry for himself, he receives a postcard in the mail from a woman, the Countess Astrid Wredel-Krarup, he and Ruth met in Denmark not long after the death of Curtis. The postcard (and the memory of Astrid) prompts Allston to dig out his old journals from that trip. Ruth convinces him to read them to her in the evenings, and so the bulk of the novel is told from the perspective of an Allston 20 years younger. Thus, the narrative structure itself complicates issues of time, place, and history, as does the subject matter.

As in *All the Little Live Things*, the narrative gaze in this text is centered directly on a woman. This gaze becomes very apparent in Allston's journals, and Ruth even notes this as she listens to her husband read: "does it seem strange to you? [...] Do you have the feeling it's a story about someone else, not us?" Joe replies, "It is, [...] It's a story about the countess" (*The Spectator Bird* 174). This emphasis, along with the emphasis on Astrid's body, gives continuity between novels to Allston's character as well as providing interesting points of reference between events that take place years and continents apart. In the same way that Allston has explored Marian's body's relation to nature to address his anxiety that he will always feel disconnected, he has also used Astrid's.

In some ways, Allston's treatment of Astrid's body is much more accessible and recognizable because of his sexual attraction to her. While Allston loved Marian, it was in a less sexually overt manner. With Astrid, however, the stakes are much different, as he finally fully admits in the last scenes of the novel. In perhaps the most poignant scene of the novel, and

undoubtedly the most troubling for Allston and Astrid, the two meet by chance one night and decide to row to a small island where Astrid's father is buried. In the course of their journey, their hands touch and they finally kiss. Astrid sadly and calmly ends the encounter and they return to the cottage in silence. However, as Allston is going inside, he observes, "At the last second, as the door was closing, I saw her put her hands to her head and bend over from the waist in a wild, abandoned movement as purely physical as if she were vomiting" (*The Spectator Bird* 207). All that is tragic about Astrid's life (her traitorous, philandering husband, her alienation from society, her shameful family secrets) are expressed in that one bodily movement.

Allston's descriptions of Astrid, then, are perhaps more easily categorized, but this does not mean that they are any less complex. As Allston notes in his journal not long after he meets Astrid, "She will be nice against us, and she knows we will be nice against her. Well, Barkis is willin'. I have seen harder people to be nice against" (72). Astrid's limited English causes her to say she will be nice "against" rather than nice "to," highlighting her body in an unintentional but profound way. The sexual connotation is obvious here, but questions of embodiment through language, as well as anxiety over the body as a source of knowledge, serve to complicate the dynamics between these two characters.

Questions and anxieties surrounding the body in *The Spectator Bird* are focused on place and history. What does the body tell us about those connections between past and present? Is our body the only connection we have to our history? Allston specifically searches for these answers on his trip to Denmark, on which he hopes to find a connection to his past through the very body-centered practice of tracing lineage. He hopes that once he stands in the village his mother grew up in, the rootless, disconnected, drifting sensation he has had for years (all his life?) will finally stop, and that some sense of anchorage will replace it.

Though he ultimately doesn't find this sense of belonging, he does spend considerable time contemplating the role of the body in determining history and place. The most pervasive reason for his contemplation is the plot that surrounds Astrid's ancestral home, where her

brother, Eigil Rodding, still lives. Though the details remain enticingly vague throughout most of the novel, we finally learn that Astrid's father, before his suicide, styled himself as a geneticist who practiced inbreeding with his own family in order to perfect the family line, a practice Rodding is continuing. Allston finds this both repulsing and fascinating, and spends an afternoon with Rodding in which the man who seems to have a perfect sense of his own "place" shows Allston a world where one's tangible connection to history is central to one's identity.

As he did with Jim Peck, Allston identifies Rodding as an ambiguous sort of villain, though Rodding is the complete opposite of Peck. Rather than the embodiment of disorder and debauchery, Rodding personifies ultimate control over nature. As both the product and perpetuator of a controlled genetic experiment, he embodies reason's superiority and triumph over nature. And yet, Allston identifies Rodding in the same supernatural way he did Peck. Allston defines Rodding as an otherworldly animal, several times calling him a "Werewolf" (122), or characterizing their time together as "hobnobbing with the hobgoblin" (144). He is also careful to separate Rodding physically from Astrid, claiming, "[Rodding's] eyes had come from some other gene than the one from which the Countess got hers. His were yellow" (139). Allston seems to deem Rodding's obsession with controlling nature, and hence reproduction, as unnatural, and yet there is an anxiety present in Allston's descriptions that stems from the confidence Rodding feels. Allston interprets this as bullying, saying that Rodding is "a muscular bulldozer, a pusher-around," which he can tell from "something about the eyes and the shape of the head" (138), identifying Rodding with his physical self just as he does with Jim Peck. And yet at the same time he admires this man who has something that Allston craves – a sense of place. This is a man who knows his history, and who can trace his lineage back to the ancient, physical body of a mummy found in a nearby peat bog.

The mummy is a central figure in Allston's discussion of embodied history. Here is a body that provides physical connection to the past, a text that Allston attempts to read. As Rodding shows Allston around his family estate of Bregninge, he brings him to a small museum in which are various artifacts that have been found in the area. The most important of these

pieces is a mummy, its neck still bound in a strangling chord, encased in glass in the center of the room. Rodding introduces the mummy as his “first known ancestor,” a title he confers with much pride (149). Given Rodding’s scientific interests, he has a unique investment in the knowledge that, as he claims, “There’s no evidence of any immigrations or invasions. These people raided other tribes, but they don’t seem to have been raided. My tribe. Except for an occasional captive woman, an essentially unmixed strain for six thousand years” (149). The emphasis on the body, here, is one that allows Rodding to feel a sense of place, one that he ties directly to genes and breeding.

Allston describes how, “[s]impering, [Rodding] posed beside the bell jar, and by God, he did look a little like the mummy. I wondered if perhaps I did, but I didn’t want to ask. Because that thing was more likely to be my ancestor than his. My folks undoubtedly belonged to the class that got strangled, his to the class that did the strangling” (149). Though this is an astute observation on Allston’s part, he leaves out the fact that he himself cannot make a claim on the mummy. The “class that did the strangling” is the one to claim history and place, not a poor boy whose mother was a housekeeper and who has nothing to contribute to the furthering of the bloodline. Allston, ironically and somewhat bitterly, says that Rodding “figures as the Prince Orgulus, or Dragon Error, or maybe the windmill, or this romance – and damned of he didn’t look like it, with the same little smirking smile. Shrink him and dry him out, and he could have been the relative that he claimed to be. Maybe, in fact, he was. That was what a real past could do for you” (27). Rodding is, in some ways, an utter fool for believing that the past is so accessible, that one’s identity is cemented in one’s genes, and yet, despite his foolishness, Rodding does have a “real past,” one that gives him the sense of place that Allston desires.

Later, the men are driving around the fields when they spot a young buck, which Rodding says he intends to kill because the animal has bad horns. This bothers Allston in a way that all the talk about creating a pure line of humans didn’t. Perhaps it is the immediacy of the incident, or perhaps Allston is finally beginning to realize that in order to “perfect” a strain, the undesirable elements must be culled. For whatever reason, Allston decides to argue with

Rodding, saying that “[...] as an American I have to stand up for hybrid vigor” (150). Rodding replies by patiently explaining the ways in which he goes about creating the perfect specimen. He points out that if a line takes on undesirable characteristics of inbreeding (nervousness, cancers) “Then you have to breed out for a generation or sometimes two. Not mongrelize – you don’t let your bitches run in the woods and get mounted by anything that catches them at the right time” (*The Spectator Bird* 151).

Because, as we later find out, Rodding is not letting any of his bitches run in the woods, including his mistress(es), this quotation seems to embody all that is wrong with reason in this novel. Rodding argues that reason has triumphed so completely over nature that it is only a matter of time before all the variables are controlled, but not only does our social conscience shudder when we learn that he is breeding himself with his half sister, our nature rejects such control and objectification. Allston has pitted reason against nature here, and nature seems to be having the last laugh, given the infertility that plagues the family.

However, the lines cannot be so clearly drawn, and Allston complicates the issue through his depictions of the female body. He draws reason and nature together in the female body, and again seems to be challenging both the objectification of the female body and the culture/nature split that Alaimo claims just reinforces that objectification. For Allston, the female body is a locus for understanding history and place. He feels like he is outside looking in on these connections, as he notes when he sees a glance shared between Astrid and her sister-in-law (Rodding’s wife). He comments that it “was a speaking look if I ever heard one, though I didn’t understand the words” (*The Spectator Bird* 125). Not understanding the words, however, doesn’t stop him from trying to decipher their meaning. He remains convinced that the female body is in some integral way connected to its history, whether it is because the female body is the creator of history, or because the Countess thinks with her body and “feels better than most people think,” allowing her to feel her history in a way Allston can’t (82).

Allston observes the female body, analyzing it in hopes of figuring out how he can acquire a history of his own, because though Allston observes history in others, he still feels that

he himself has no history and no place. He quips that “The past is past, I can’t do a thing about it. The future is none of my business. As Mr. Jefferson said, the world belongs to the living” (*The Spectator Bird* 33), but we don’t believe him, and he doesn’t believe himself. For Allston, the world doesn’t belong to the living – the world is obsessed with the past and the future, the present is only a moment of connection between the two, and if one is missing a past and future, as Allston feels he is, then the present becomes meaningless. He says, perhaps using the third person construction to distance himself from painful observations, that he is unable to feel the connections between himself and history:

Young, middle-aged, or getting old, Joe Allston has always been full of himself, uncertain, dismayed, dissatisfied with his life, his country, his civilization, his profession, and himself. He has always hunted himself in places where he has never been, he has always been trying to thread some needle with a string that was raveled at both ends. He has always been hungry for some continuity and assurance and sense of belonging, but has never had ancestors or descendants or place in the world. Little orphan Joe, what a sad case. (23)

His “pitiful, grubby little story” started with his mother and ended with his son, both of whom are now dead, and his grief manifests as guilt because he feels responsible for their deaths; he feels he is to blame for his own disconnection (109). Of his son, he says that “like my mother’s, his death lay down accusingly as my door. He was my only descendant, as she was my only ancestor, and I failed both. Chop, chop, there went both past and future” (*The Spectator Bird* 25). In between is “Joseph Allston, the bright overachiever, his mother’s joy and treasure, his son’s alien overseer,” a man who is searching for some way to overcome his isolation.

This feeling of being “history-less” and “place-less” causes Allston to sometimes question the usefulness of anyone claiming a history or a place. One afternoon, Astrid takes him and Ruth to visit her cousin, Karen Blixen. Allston previously had expressed a desire to meet the famous author of *Out of Africa*, and Astrid excitedly revealed that Karen was her cousin and

she would arrange a meeting. They meet Karen Blixen in her garden, an idyllic little spot in which they sit and enjoy lunch and conversation. The talk quickly centers on why the Allstons are visiting Denmark, and Allston explains that his mother grew up in Astrid's family estate. Karen Blixen immediately zeroes in on Allston's motivations for visiting his mother's home. She asks, "[y]ou expect that closing a link with your mother's past will make you feel safer in some way?" [...] 'You don't expect to reverse your mother's emigration and come back to Denmark to live?'" (104). Allston has previously confided to the reader that "Denmark did no more than thicken the callus. It was something I survived" (91), and so he would answer "no" to Karen's questions, but that doesn't mean he doesn't wish that the link could be closed:

I suppose that an Indian on an Ohio mound might have the sense that down under him his own ancestors went in layers, generation below generation, all of them as native as corn. But all other sorts of Americans, even those whose families have been on this continent for many generations, seem to me deprived, hanging around the national parks that enclose other people's archaeology, or else, like me, tourists in a private graveyard hunting hopefully for their own names. (26)

Ultimately, Allston concludes that history is not just having safety, it's having a safe place, perhaps unattainable but desirable, like the Garden of *All the Little Live Things*. He says, "[...] what brought my mother and a lot of others to the New World was precisely the hope of safety, not any list for freedom. What do I want, a drawbridge between the continents, across which the cultures and hence the generations can meet, and pass, and meet again?" (110). Astrid astutely picks up on this in the conversation, and says, of their upcoming trip to Allston's mother's village, "We go there next week, all three of us, to see if that is his safe place" (103). And, we feel, that even with all his cynicism, Allston hopes he will find his safe place as well.⁸ Of course, as he writes in his journal after their visit, "I have made my pilgrimage to my mother's cottage. It was as meaningless as I knew it would be. The cultural vitamin deficiency is not appeased by nibbling the clay and plaster of the old home. The cultural amputee is still trying to

scratch the itch of the missing limb” (123). Again we see him relate his desire for a sense of place to a physical sensation, but for Allston, the “missing limb” is not on ice somewhere, waiting to be reattached. His history and place are irreversibly lost, though he cannot help trying to scratch the itch anyhow.

One way Allston scratches that itch is to observe how Astrid, a woman he sees as intimately and inextricably connected to her history, embodies that history. Allston often describes the female body as otherworldly, reinventing the body’s relation to nature in order to challenge its objectification. Specifically, Allston’s descriptions of Astrid’s body often frame her in this way – her body claims nature as a space while also claiming that which is the “god-like,” as Susan Bordo termed it, allowing for an embodied subjectivity. Astrid is “a Lorelei in sensible tweeds, a highly bred female who is subject to the giggles and who says she lives not in the head but below the belt and feels better than most people think” (182). She is a Lorelei (the rough German equivalent to Homer’s sirens) and yet she wears “sensible” clothing and often giggles, descriptions which resist sexual objectification. She is also a “Valkyrie” who swims so far out into the icy sea that Allston loses sight of her, prompting him to observe that “she was not kidding when she said she lives in her body, not her head” (107). Her body is not the idealized, feminine body, but a real body that is well-adapted to both her location (cold, Northern seacoasts) and her place (A Valkyrie, in Norse mythology, goes into battle in a most un-objectified way, though subsequent artists have idealized her beauty and downplayed the agency the gruesome job allotted her). Astrid’s body connects her to her history in a way that Allston’s generic, confused American body cannot.

The female body is envisioned as being unexplainable by nature, reinforcing its subjectivity. The women in the novel with history and place are envisioned as magical, namely as witches, as a way to reconcile history with the body that is specifically grounded in a place, a concept that is foreign to Allston. The witch-figure is one that has lately been reclaimed by feminist theorists and authors as an expression of female subjectivity. Stegner identifies women as witches in order to again subvert, as we saw in *All the Little Live Things*, the idea of the

nature-less woman and recast nature as a space in which the female body has subjectivity, especially in this case, that exists outside of a patriarchal structure. The mechanizing of the body fails⁵, as does the objectifying of it, and so Allston must re-envision the female body, as Stacy Alaimo terms similar characters who resist the culture/nature split, as “dichotomous and thus untenable territory” (Alaimo 146).

Early on in the Allstons’ friendship with Astrid, she relates that, in her family, “Men are mainly drunks [...] and the women all witches. She [Astrid] herself has powers. Several times she has had second sight. She has a gift for quieting unruly or maddened horses, and once, while visiting relatives near Kassel, in Germany, she cured a boy of warts” (*The Spectator Bird* 75). However, Astrid makes the distinction between herself and Karen Blixen, referencing the old woman’s intuitive conversation about Allston’s mother: “Karen knew – you remember, when she heard your mother was born in Bregninge? She is truly a witch. I can tame horses and cure warts, but she knows things” (185). Karen Blixen, the oldest female character, and the one with perhaps the most history, is also described as the most witch-like.⁶ When the Allstons and Astrid visit her, Joe remarks that “It was remarkable how witchlike, how malicious and gleeful, her face could be” as she told a story or asked a question (103). He connects her to her African history with his descriptions. He says, “Her eyes were dark, alive, and noticing. She stood very still. Witch, for sure. Shape-shifter. If you held a mirror behind her it would reflect not a little brown woman but a monkey, one of those ambiguous old-woman monkeys of her tales, or perhaps a still bird with a curved bill” (*The Spectator Bird* 102). When Karen looks up and quietly greets a stork that flies overhead, Allston remarks “They were two of a kind, as beady-eyed and as capable of stillness. Knew each other in Africa, no doubt, and in a lot of sabbatical doings. I looked for the broomstick, but the stork had hidden it among the nest twigs as she flew in” (*The Spectator Bird* 102).

In this way, Karen is not tied to nature, and yet is not excluded from it. She is an “ambiguous” figure whose knowledge is linked to her body and yet is not limited to it. She “knows things” that cannot be explained with reason (Rodding would have a hard time breeding

for this gene), and yet that are unnatural and conventionally unsettling to a white, male figure such as Allston. Karen Blixen's body is tied to a history and place of her own making, unique to her as a subject:

Under her old garden hat her face was bird-sharp, leather skinned. She was tiny, shrunken, her eyes as alive as snakes: as surely a witch as any old woman in one of her tales. In her hand she was holding a rune stone she had dug up only a few minutes before we arrived, and on her face was a look of glee, a smugness of secret knowledge, as if the murky world she visited every night on her broomstick had just sent her, in the cryptic markings on the stone, a daylight message that only she and her wizard and warlock friends could read. Sure enough, she looked like Rodding, and even more like that mummy of his. The same smile. (27)

Allowing, even emphasizing, a female subjectivity that does not exclude nature creates a space in which the female body can be placed outside of the nature/culture split. Astrid and Karen are very much agents in their own placing. Though the events of their lives, on the surface, seem to objectify them and remove their agency, it is through their bodies that they are able to reclaim that subjectivity. Of Astrid's plight, Allston says that "God distributes with an uneven hand" (212), but we know there are some things God cannot explain, and some things he has no hand in, such as her connection to nature that seems to go beyond what is considered natural.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSIONS

Marian and Astrid, separated by twenty years and several seas, are strikingly similar figures. In Allston's mind, they are inextricably connected to the nature that surrounds him, and yet can never be defined by that nature. As Allston and Ruth return from Marian's funeral, he says "[...] we rolled past the cottage with its weed-grown yard that I suppose expresses Marian without in the least resembling her" (*All the Little Live Things* 4). Similarly, Astrid's country cottage is "a place that expresses her – ten acres or so of wood and pasture, a clearing of unmown grass, a walk guarded by cypresses, a half-timbered thatched cottage as picturesque as something in a drawing" (*The Spectator Bird* 107). These places express the women – they speak of the women, tell their stories and bear witness to their sufferings and joys, but the places do not create the women any more than they create the stories – the cottages are texts where one can read the histories of these two women, but the women themselves – their bodies, their spirits – are centered in a less-definable space and cannot be defined through simple location.

What conclusions can be drawn about Stegner's positioning of the female body? Because Allston is grieving over his life, which he feels has no purpose or distinct identity because he has no ancestors or heirs, he fixates on those around him who he sees as being most connected to their past and future. Women, because of their connection with nature (through reproduction, in part) are the main focus of his attention. However, defining a woman's connection to nature as solely through her reproductive abilities is problematic, as Astrid is infertile. Infertility might explain why Allston never seems to examine his wife's body in his search for connection – she is, after all, post-menopausal and as heirless as he is. However, Astrid is infertile, and he spends most of his energy in *The Spectator Bird* trying to understand her connections. This may be the fundamental difference between Marian and Astrid: Marian is

Allston's connection to the future, and Astrid is his connection to the past. We learn nothing of Marian's heritage or ancestry, but we learn all about her desires for the future. Conversely, Astrid's future is as bleak as Allston's – she sinks into poverty, caring for an invalid husband she doesn't love – but her ancestry and sense of place is so rich and dynamic that it is enough to give her a subjective identity. The common thread, I would argue, is still reproduction, but perhaps not necessarily reproduction by the women Allston is observing. Marian is the continuer of history; Astrid is the continuation, since Allston is fascinated by the reproductive practices that create Astrid's history. In this way, Astrid's infertility is less problematic for Allston than Ruth's, since we are given no sense of Ruth's place or identity. Indeed, for a text that centers so much complex exploration on the female body, Ruth is a surprisingly static character.

At the end of *All the Little Live Things*, Allston concludes that he would “not for a moment” go back to the “twilight sleep” he was in before he met Marian in order to avoid the pain her death has caused him (345), and so we are left to conclude that these complications, these contradictions in philosophy and thought, these confusions over nature, history, and the body are necessary; Allston claims that he does not “accept the universe,” despite Marian's urgings, and it is because of his non-acceptance that he is able to re-envision the female body in a space that defies the culture/nature split, calls back a sense of connection with the universe, and demands that the reader question his or her assumptions about the relationships between the body, nature, and history.

APPENDIX A

END NOTES

¹ However, as Bordo notes, the complications that occur in the space (artificial or otherwise) between body and nature are a part of our larger epistemological frameworks:

The sundering of the organic ties between person and nature – originally experienced, as we have seen, as epistemological estrangement, as the opening up of a chasm between self and world – is reenacted, this time with the human being as the engineer and architect of the separation. Through the Cartesian ‘rebirth,’ a new ‘masculine’ theory of knowledge is delivered, in which detachment from nature acquires a positive epistemological value. [...] With the same masterful stroke – the mutual opposition of the spiritual and the corporeal – the formerly female earth becomes inert matter and the objectivity of science is intured. ‘She’ becomes ‘it’ – and ‘it’ can be understood and controlled. (Bordo, *Flight*, 108)

² In her discussion of Fredrick Turner’s *Beyond Geography*, Alaimo also points out that “Placing nature and Culture at opposite ends of a teleological spectrum, this passage asserts that the further we progress from nature, the closer women will be to liberation. Sexualizing conquest and colonialism naturalizes those processes while depicting women, the land, and indigenous peoples as mysterious zones that invite their own violation” (Alaimo 13)

³ Similarly, Allston uses his senses to place Marian, observing, “Watching the still unfamiliar changes come on, I can’t help realizing that nearly our entire acquaintance with Marian was on the other cycle. She smells in the memory of sun, sage, dust, the faint dry tannic odor of sun-beaten redwood, above all of tarweed. Her light is hot and yellow or warm and brown, never the damp green of this season. She moves from high spring to summer, and stops. In the chilly, fishy smell of wet mold or the freshness of a rain-cleaned wind of the skyline there is no trace of her. She does not go on. One must go back for her, and that means re-creating not only herself but the season she inhabited” (*All the Little Live Things* 126).

⁴ Marian is not the only one who highlights such anxiety. Julie, the neighbor girl who ends up pregnant after hanging out with Peck's crowd, is described as "a dark-browed girl, fifteen or sixteen, somewhat flat-chested, big in the behind. Off the horse she was rawboned and awkward; mounted, she was almost beautiful. She always rode bareback" (18). This connection with an animal nature is continued with Allston's description of Julie on the 4th of July, when he says "Her dark hair was lankly wet, her legs heavy, her hips wide. On her seat the slick stain of bareback riding was a part of her natural coloration, like the scut of a deer. [...] her haunch swelled like the haunch of a Percheron mare. Give her a year to discover she was female, and Fran would look back upon her present difficulties as the golden age" (240). Of course, the last sentence is prophecy (or commentary overshadowed by retrospective wisdom) and, of course, we realize that Allston speaks from a position of foreknowledge, but the merging of the human and the animal, with Allston describing her "haunch" as both a deer's scut and a mare's haunch, is significant in that it hyper-sexualizes the young girl in a way that, while still focused on reproduction, is directly opposite to Allston's descriptions of Marian. If Marian is the Madonna, then Julie is the whore. Or if not the whore, at least a female body that doesn't confuse Allston the way Marian's does; Julie fits perfectly into the Cartesian mind/body conception – she is all body and all nature. She highlights his anxiety simply because she is not a cause of it.

⁵ The mechanization of the body fails to allow for communication, as well. Allston lightly observes that "She [Ruth] was trying to send me some signal, but her machinery was so shorted out that I could not tell what she was trying to say" (*The Spectator Bird* 134).

⁶ The other elderly, witch-like figure we see is Astrid's great-grandmother, the matriarch of the family and a woman much concerned with propriety and form. Here, Allston imaginatively describes what happens when he mentions his mother's name at the lunch table: "Here she comes out tottering, propped up by pride and will to do her matriarch's duty to her granddaughter and her granddaughter's friends, and pow, said friend utters the forbidden name, smoke rises, there is a stink of brimstone, beautiful ladies turn into snouted beasts, the plates

slither with live eels, the family portraits reel on the walls, and the offending one saves himself only by laying his knife and fork crosswise” (*The Spectator Bird* 177).

⁷ Allston challenges Karen Blixen’s observations, asking, “‘Is it bad to have a place to come back to?’ I said. ‘An American, or at least one kind of American, would envy you. His parents or grandparents were immigrants, uprooted. He was born in transit, he has lived in fifty houses in fifteen places. When he moves, he doesn’t move back, he moves on. No accumulations. No traditions. A civilization without attics.’ ‘Or rubbish piles,’ said Karen Blixen. ‘Or dungeons. Or ghosts’” (*The Spectator Bird* 103).

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