

GOOSE MUSIC
by Karen Coulter

I heard them today
swinging past the pines
wings beating strong, sure
dropped my saw and kindling
to look for them
craning neck to deep blue sky
over soft deep white of winter
great boughs suddenly quivering
as white powder cascades in a cloud
falling and the limb shakes free
there— they must be rounding
behind our small hill-
funny I didn't see them
in that long stretch above the open pasture-
I take several steps quickly
for a view past the bend
goose music calling me
honking so clear now
I can hear the nuances of joy,
the one talking to another,
friend to friend
ecstasy singing of wild high flight
I can see them in my mind
long necks reaching
bright dark eyes far past the bodies
of the flock
following desire
visions from the past years
the warmth of vigorous movement
the invigorating chill
of minute ice crystals in the air
wheeling panorama of vast plateaus
deep winding canyons below
I can almost hear the atmosphere
through wingtips whistling
yet all at once the sound is fading
the distance between us
as tangible as a familiar taste on my tongue
I know without doubt
where they are
and the place is empty blue air
I blink but the last distant calls
where they should be
nothing but clear bright air
dazzling
stunning my mind into recognition
a vision-
I never saw their passage
across the vast, whirling sky
but they were there
where I looked
more real
than the modern megalomaniac
nightmares
of "downloading" consciousness
into computers,
doing away with our bodies
as with Nature
a world run by machines
producing more machines
nothing but empty gears
with no substance
for we- not abstract thought
but the spirit music
the feeling that carries us aloft
with the geese
our illogical shared ecstasy
of life
singing our creation

the blood pulsing
wings sweeping
eyes taking in
a breathing unfathomable world
the goose music
our music
irreplaceable, timeliness
Feel!

January 15, 1993

WRITING POETRY TO MAKE SENSE OF LIFE

an interview with poet and long time Earth Firster,
KAREN COULTER gathered and collected by grebes

There's a lushness about Karen's poetry. She has an ability to get inside a moment and stretch out a little bit, to feel into the corners of things, to present us with a delicious moment in time. This reminds me of something I feel like she was trying to explain to me about her solution to being able to do land defense for so long, taking time to completely immerse herself in nature not only as a way to learn and deeply know wild places, but to allow ourselves to become part of those wild places as well, and in that moment the healing comes, the strength to keep doing the work.

"Goose Music" is a great example of Karen's style. The poem brings us into a natural moment of the wild but is also able to speak to the horrors of machines, and something written thirty years ago is hauntingly familiar.

For this second issue of the EF! journal from the Athens collective, I wanted to do a more in depth interview with a poet. What follows is one EF!er's attempt at capturing the story of one of our own, in a way that does the story justice. It felt like a lot of pressure writing up this article, but I was finally able to find a place where I could detail all the important info Karen shared with me, and also the extra fat around the edges, the juicy stuff that maybe we don't realize is also "the work". This article contains mentions of some hard topics, like grief and death, so please only read if you feel like you have energy to meet that. But Karen's work is not just about grief, she has also written extensively about EF! gatherings and direct action over the years, themes of biocentrism, and has taken on still topical political issues such as capitalism, animal rights, immigration, corporate rule and relationships with the wild and wild animals. Her latest book of poems "Blue Mountain Poems" features many of these topics. The Blue Mountains are a region in the eastern Oregon and Southeastern Washington- a region where Karen has been hiking and field surveying timber sales for 32 years.

Karen will be reading poems in Ireland in the fall to be sharing about EF! movement, "ourstory". She's been pretty isolated with her work since feeling a little pushed out of the open mic style scene with the advent of slam poetry. She has been trying to improve on her poetic writing and Ireland will be a new opportunity for her to share her work.

As is true with many Earth First!er's Karen Coulter is a self-described recluse, so it was very exciting to spend over an hour talking to her about her life, the movement, biocentrism and of course, her poetry. Karen has been around for a minute. That's slang for a long ass time. As a fellow poet I have admired her and her work, and to be honest, was a little intimidated to do an interview with her. Just my own little "new to the movement" psychological issues and nothing to do with her as a person. I'm really stoked I got to spend

time with her. Karen, I'm grateful you sat with me and shared some wisdom that I hope other people can also learn from. This will read as part interview, part poetry and part instructional on the tactics that we need to stay skilled up on.

We all have our activist origin story and a lot of people of that generation came to organizing through the anti-nuclear proliferation era. Here Karen shares how she came to the work and how those early experiences continue to shape her approach today.

Karen: I was working against the MX missile primarily from an environmental standpoint. It was proposed to be based in Nevada and Utah. I grew up in Nevada. When I found out about it I took a break from writing my thesis and worked against the MX missile. The first position I had was with the American Friends Service Committee, with the Quakers. They were great. I went to a meeting for Nevadans opposed to the MX missile, where they circulated an application to work with the AFSC to work against the missile. AFSC staff explained "this is what it means to bear non-violent witness, what do you think?" I started working against the MX missile in Eastern Nevada with the Great Basin MX alliance. When I started working, about 70% of Nevadans supported the missile, and then by the time we finished 82% opposed it. It was a real alliance ranging from priests to Western Shoshone people. Even housewives in Ely, Nevada had a bake sale protest which was nationally broadcasted. They didn't typically do those things. We were all working within our own groups and then coming back together. I was a coordinator for that, taking notes at strategy meetings, answering mail, because I was an absolutely new activist. Then alliance members went down to New Mexico to show people how we stopped the missile basing in Nevada and Utah and they stopped it down there. Later on, I heard Regan make his decision not to base the MX missile in Nevada, Utah or the Southwest. I was inspired to continue my activism.

Awhile back, another EF! journalista hit me up and said we should feature Karen's new poetry book for the upcoming issue. I would call this a "high energy" article compared to some of the other ones we do where we just collect a communique from some far flung forest defense crew. Something I want to convey is that Karen is old school, in a way that I want younger EF!er's to pay attention to; she uses the mail. Now I don't mean to be funny, and I guess it kind of is, but for some reason I have this mental block around the post office. I think I finally realized it's because the vibes there are so intense, it's where humanity goes to send their bills and cards, it's the great equalizer. And mostly I just get agitated if anyone expresses any impatience while in line. I digress, but maybe you too don't like the post office and aren't using the mail actively in the way that I see Karen and many other activists are. It's an essential tool that we in the internet age need to be

using more, weekly, if not every day, in order to keep those lines of communication strong. Sending things through the mail is the best way to contact our homies, so take this as an assignment, collect your friends' addresses and get a solid mail habit going.

So Karen and I talked and we decided that she would mail me questions she wanted to cover and that I would mail her a few of my own. You guessed it, I did not make it to the post office but she did and there was enough there with a few of my own to get a zoom interview going. This was a cool way to do an interview but it also added a little pressure. Karen doesn't use a cell phone; she uses voicemail. She is in the field a lot as part of the Blue Mountains Biodiversity Project. So having people call her and leave a message is the best way to get in touch with her. So we set a day and time for the hour long zoom interview. She could do it while she was out and closer to service and not doing field work. For anyone that has gone to the Blue Mountains Biodiversity Project, you probably understand how this works. But for those of us who haven't, trying to set up an interview with someone who doesn't have a cell phone so therefore doesn't text, do email regularly, or stay in regular contact with their phone, was new for me. Again, these are great lessons on how to maintain communication and retain social connections off grid. (More on why Karen doesn't have a cell phone later.) So she sent me the questions and the book of poetry in the mail and I put the interview in my cellphone calendar, which I live and die by.

I suppose you came for the poetry, so I will touch on Karen's background and intention around being a poet. Karen has been writing poetry from a young age, and from other interviews I've been on with her (see EF! winter issue 2023), I know that nature has always been a refuge for her, growing up around Nevada and connecting deeply with that landscape and the plants and wildlife that live there. So from a young age she was writing poetry, not just about nature I'm sure, and as she entered into movement life, poetry was already there for her in her arsenal.

At one point Karen and I got into some more esoteric spiritual stuff, it made me realize that throughout history the poet is someone who is in touch with the mysterious or spiritual aspect of life.

She made sure to have a question about why she's a poet and not a novelist. I too lean more towards poetry as my mode of art, and less on short stories or long stories, so I thought this was an interesting point for her to make. Poems are a way for her to get across a message to people. She uses her poetry to craft stories, lessons or necessary information and she edits her poems until she feels they fit the right message. We discussed the idea of editing. I shared that I don't really ever edit my poems; I almost feel bad touching them again. She agreed that she definitely has work like that as well. So

it was interesting to hear about her process.

Karen: I find I am more suited to poetry than novels. I find good novels to be life changing, especially through science fiction and near future speculative fiction. This kind of writing deepens my humanity and compassion, but the problem is, I didn't get into a college that specialized in creative writing, and also I realized, as a really reclusive person I'm really not set up to be a novelist. I would have a huge problem carrying a plot through dialogue. I'm also more suited to shorter emotion-based writing because I don't have time, and it suits me better. I am conveying emotion through instance. I'm better suited to that form. I want to show things not tell things. I am still fascinated by novels but I just don't think I have the time or the correct way of doing it to write a novel.

(cw: death) This next section contains a content warning about death, I offer that so that people can engage with this in a way that feels safe for them. I asked Karen about grief as a theme in her work, and we started to talk about our friend Drea. The pair of poems which follow are poems that she wrote about our dear friend who recently passed away in April 2023. This interview was done in July of 2023 so some time had passed but it was still an emotional topic to cover, and I appreciate Karen spending time with me in sweet remembrance. Where I too shared a poem I wrote the day I heard the news about Drea, also printed here. We love you Drea xoxo

Karen: Drea was an extremely bright person and delightful to be around, and I got to witness some of her transition, and just have really stark memories of her. Here is the first poem, this was before I knew. This experience felt really weird; I didn't know why I was interpreting it the way I did.



RETURNING (FOR DREA)

by Karen Coulter

Returning from a Pendleton Court hearing
I approached a vast bank of black clouds,
blue-gray darkness touching the earth
with no light above or below.
Entering the driving rain
slashing against the windshield,
I emerged on the other side
to water vapors rising from the wet pavement
as eerie ghosts reaching arms towards me
bending, beseeching in my direction
grasping for my attention.
Then I witnessed the sheet lightning
illuminating the entire sky
in momentary flashbacks of a past life,
mine, I wondered, or the fate of the Earth,
other lives perishing in the mass extinction.
The lightning flared ahead of me,
all around me, then following me,
like the vaporous ghosts,
claiming my attention.
The next morning a friend called me
to let me know that our friend has died—
suicide, returning to the unknown
natural elements of wind and weather,
sending me messages.

May 6th, 2023

“DREA-”

by Karen Coulter

Your mind so bright
flashing sparks of your insights
your impish grin
with laughing eyes
your strength in a slight frame
moving through the forest
examining, identifying plants
recognizing the wonder of high desert
persevering with dedication.
yet I can't just remember you—
I want to talk to you—
so badly.
Look, Drea!
There's six Bighorn sheep rams
standing so majestically in the rocks
observing me,
massive, proud, and steadfast
as the basalt cliffs—
maybe you can see me through their eyes.

written May 6th, 2023, still grieving
I saw the Bighorn rams near where I live
May 5th, 2023

TO DREA ON HER FIRST DAY SPIRIT SIDE

by Grebe

I leave the green hymnal
Of the forest chapel
Where boughs are our bindings

I do not want to return
To a world without you

But I walk
Steadfast
Carrying this grief
with all those who treasured you

We hold you close
in forests
We wish
We could have carried your sadness

EF!J: Getting to hear about her from your perspective helps me, the grieving, the ways we metabolize or process grief. We all really loved Drea and it definitely was such a shock. I think about that too, what you said, maybe they can see us (through the eyes of big horn sheep), or getting to walk through a forest, I feel close to her in that way, and I hope that or I believe she's found peace now.

Karen: When I first heard, I was really stressed... and writing the poems helped me come to terms with it. I read something about this recently, you shouldn't be trying for "closure" or moving on, instead it's a way of coping, not dismissing the person, but coping for yourself and also remembering and making sure others

remember. ... I definitely find the writing to be helpful, both for me and for others.

At this summer's 2023 EF! gathering in so-called Vermont, there was a special memorial fire for Drea. It was nice to hear from Karen and from others and to hear about the memorial immediately following Drea's death on the west coast.

Karen: The memorial was really beautiful; a lot of trans folks gave testimonials about how Drea helped them and inspired them. The testimonials went on for hours. Maybe 86 people and at least 28 of them were past volunteers (of Blue Mountains), a number of people walked up to me, who I had never met before, and I would say my usual question there: "Do you want to go field surveying?"

Karen said that many people talked to her about wanting to go field surveying with Blue Mountains Biodiversity Project in honor of Drea, or that they had been out to Blue Mountains because of Drea. These both made her really happy, so please contact Karen and go out and do field surveys and honor our dear homie who was a total sweetheart and a plant whiz.

I was compelled to ask Karen about grief from seeing a poem called "Losing Avalon, Finding Avalon" in her book of poetry "Blue Mountains poems" that her friend and longtime editor of the EF! poetry section, Dennis Fritzinger, put together for her. You can get the book by calling Karen at (541)385-9167 and telling her why you want the book, and your name and address so she can send it to you. She doesn't have a lot of copies left of the book, but go ahead and request it. She only asks that when you are done that you pass it on to someone else. I think about all the books sitting on shelves in our various ramshackle dwellings and I like that idea. So pay it forward. What follows is that poem, and I will add that it also has another content warning on death. I add that as a gesture of respect to people who may not feel in a place to read another poem about death.

EF!J: I notice because maybe grief is on my mind, or I see that as a theme in some of your poems. Do you use poetry as a way to process grief for human and non-human energies?

Karen: Definitely, when I was first writing poetry it was like journaling, in other words to make sense of life, and to express it to myself more, and to put things into words. Later it became... more pointed for trying to send messages to a broader audience. As with the poem about Avalon, I've had a number of poems that have been spurred by dreams. I think you get deeper into the emotional heart of things through dreams. The poem reflects a dream I had, where Avalon said something to me; I had asked him if it was a suicide or a political murder, and I couldn't remember the answer

when I woke up but I knew that I felt better about it when I woke up. So that's why I wrote the poem, is that feeling. I included positive things to remember about Avalon because Avalon was a controversial person, so that's why I wanted to reflect the positive things about Avalon that people might forget.

I would now like to take a sharp turn into a more explicit discussion of Karen's history as an activist. I asked Karen a question about what keeps her going in the hard times, in the face of so many losses. Her answer surprised me. First of all, she said she has actually had a lot of wins. This was inspiring for me as a relatively new frontline activist who has had some major losses and some other current campaigns that feel very bleak like they will soon become losses. Karen's perspective pushed me to think on a larger scale, that in fact life is long and that there will hopefully be many wins along the way. But she also said what keeps her going is going into nature, physically and spiritually, deeply going into nature in a way that helps her leave behind the chaos of the city. For Karen, taking that time to immerse herself is a way not only to learn and know wild places, but to allow herself to become part of those wild places. In that moment the healing and strength to keep doing the work comes. I can see this in her poem "Goose Music" which we reprinted at the start of this piece. She said she takes trips with her son sometimes in order to totally unplug from the influence of everyday U.S. life. I offer this as another strategy from a long time activist, that maybe in order to do this work in any sustained way that doesn't break our hearts and crush our spirits, that yes, we need to have a ritual and a commitment around being deeply immersed in nature.

EF!J: I like to call myself a professional loser because I feel like we have to develop a tolerance for loss. In particular, how have you maintained strength of spirit in the face of losses in land defense campaigns?

Karen: I've actually had a lot of wins! But also Blue Mountains Biodiversity Project, that keeps me going. Right now we are fighting multiple timber sales of up to 50,000 acres of commercial logging or more, with 30 year turn arounds. And now they are doing virtual clear cuts; it's absolute forest liquidation right now. And when things seem really dire, another thing that keeps me going is the volunteers with Blue Mountains Biodiversity Project. We absolutely enjoy each other out in the forest. And I can't stop as long as I spend significant time in the wild. It's still wonderful; it's still beautiful, and even with climate change looming, we need to protect as much as we can, and we need to support wildlife habitat as much as we can. The work is extremely important. Where I spend most of my time out here, there's cougars, black bears, hawks, songbirds.

EF!J: That connection to nature...

Karen: Seven months of the year I am immersed in it, and I really recommend being as immersed in nature as much possible because I think about the disconnect and being inside, and being on screens. The only way to break away is to be out for long periods of time. Now there's something called forest bathing. I also have a connection with the ocean. In my poem, "Andrew's Spirit" he was the one who reminded me that the ocean is a wilderness.

Another lesson from Karen is the role of paper pushing and putting pressure on destructive projects before they turn into frontline direct action struggles. This may seem obvious to some people, but in my recent experience I am seeing a lot of emphasis on direct action, in person campaigns and less of a sustained awareness of what it takes to fight (and win!) projects when they are still in their planning phases.

A note on technology, as a young person deeply ensconced in the tech world, I appreciated Karen's reminder that programs like Pegasus are absolutely spying on us on our digital devices. Karen has never had a cell phone. I admire this and look forward to a day where I can take a step back from my reliance on cell phones not only for the surveillance factor but also for their continued use of lithium batteries. Karen has endured state repression through surveillance before, so her aversion to cell phones is one that is hard won through that survival.

EF!J: How long have you been writing poetry, and what role did it play in your life?

Karen: I have been writing since at least high school. The role it played in my life back then, was mostly personal journaling and clarifying my own impressions and ideas. I was forming my sense of self and my sense of the world. It's helpful to know I am a very reclusive person; I didn't have many sounding boards. Especially when I was young, I didn't relate much to the family with whom I was living. I didn't have many close friends. I was not popular in high school. So I was trying to work on things that were impressing me or bothering me a lot, that was the role then. But that kind of morphs into another question.

EF!J: What is your main medium for writing poems?

Karen: I always write it in a journal or on a piece of paper. A lot of my poems got lost because they were on scraps of paper. Once during the Cove Mallard campaign, I had a poem I read to people, about the blockade that happened, about the direct action that was happening, mostly about a night of people going out in torch light, and I think I referred to other things. And the funny thing about that, was I completely lost that poem, but somebody recorded me reading it, and it became part of a Cove Mallard campaign video.

There was a seven year campaign where there was no local support. This was in Idaho, very rural right wing Idaho. They were planning to log a big chunk of the country's biggest roadless area, other than roadless areas in Alaska. And that area, (because we won), still has wolves, wolverine, moose, lynx, probably fisher, everything. I think by now, at least, it has grizzly bears as well, seeing as there are grizzly bears elsewhere in Idaho now. It was a very important campaign and all the activists had to be imported. We had a lot of meetings planning it. I got arrested there basically in a sacrificial lamb kind of action. I was part of what was considered the "old farts affinity group", simply because I was over 30.

EF!J: Oh great, I'm in that group!

Karen: We sat down in the road and blocked them from building this road. Eight to ten people would roll a log down the road. What I wrote about was there were all these blockades made. I was able to see (the blockade) in the daylight, and I wrote it at the time of the gathering. And we won that campaign, and it took a lot of effort from a lot of people.

EF!J: Thank you so much for spending time with me, I'm at a hard time in my life, and I'm really grateful to hear your stories. I guess another question, poetry as expression of activism, and I kinda wanna roll that into this last topic, I guess for me I'm wondering, during times of loss or heartbreak what keeps you going as well. They are different questions, but I know you had wanted to talk about poetry as activism.

Karen: An expression of activism. I have chronicled my own impressions of Earth First! of national and regional gatherings. Purposely I now write with specific goals for communication and messaging about wild nature, biodiversity, climate change, and the wonders of non-charismatic wildlife species, (something that Dennis Fritzingler had suggested). The Warrior Poets Society, not only reads but also suggests topics. So I wrote a poem about slime mold. In other words, we are purposely trying to educate people about the wonders of nature. At every gathering I try to write a poem, as you can see in the book. As poets, we were trying to function as outreach, ways of dealing with grief, and celebrating.

BEHOLD

by Karen Coulter

Behold the lowly slime mold
neither plant nor animal
slithering along soundlessly
in stopped time
leaving ooze trails showing progress
movement over a log
from one side to the other
all we see is a bright yellow
or orange
or white
blob
that squishes flat
when we touch it
or a fried crust of death
small, seemingly insignificant
in its stopped passage
through the forest
yet the scientists say
it exhibits learned behavior—
it can create a new foot
out of its single cellular self
to push over an obstacle
she/he can learn a safe route
across a caffeinated bridge
to a food prize
on the other side
and traverse it more quickly
each time
but it's no accident—
new obstacles require new learning—
learning with no brain,
no nerves—
what does this say
about us humans
assumed center of the universe,
who wreck everything we see
in our arrogance
of brainful ignorance
while the slime mold
doesn't deviate
from its natural path
which we can't even follow
much less comprehend.

May 17, 2016

Karen has been a long time EF!er, and for those that caught this collective's first EF!J issue, we sat down with Karen and other long-time activists to discuss the changing tide of earth first! over the years. I like to think of her over the years at these different campaigns, or her involvement in bringing forth more radical and anarchist practices into these spaces, and her tenacity in sticking through some hard times. Over the years the role of poetry has been significant at earth first! gatherings and in the journal and it was nice to hear about a project years ago to write poems about “non-charismatic” species, something she said her friend Dennis (Fritzinger) suggested as a way for people to turn their attention to the sometimes overlooked species which are still important parts of our eco-system.



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call (541) 385-9167

leave a message with why you want the book, especially other writers,
no one turned away for lack of funds

you can also write to her (with no obvious ef! Markings on the envelope)

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