

## Artists for Nature in the Hula - David Lynn Grimes

April, 2009

By the River Jordan I shall rest my feet  
Mount Hermon's snowmelt tastes very sweet

And now they are with me waking or sleep  
The birds of heaven haunt all my dreams

Writing words in the sky I can't quite read  
Foretelling the future bitter or sweet

A spring migration and no turning back  
I shall live out my days

A craniac

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If there is to be peace in the world, somebody somewhere actually has to be at peace. Damn, this might even have to be me. In Israel and the Palestinian territories there were times when, through the blessings of wild nature and good company, the universe conspired to help me be at peace and feel at home. In those moments I felt my molecules were useful. In those moments I was spontaneously able, as the poet Wendell Berry put it, to "be joyful, though you have considered all the facts."

Art and music, laughter and grief are universal languages. Nature and birds, wind and water cross all borders. Through the universal language of art, Artists for Nature hope to reawaken hearts and minds to the importance of Nature in our lives, to remind us we're not really human without all the other critters. And so, organized by Zeveroo and Ysbrando, we gathered in Israel to celebrate the beauty and diversity of wild nature, to praise and protect habitat for migratory birds and Nature's wild creatures.

Artists for Nature is a non-political organization. I doubt however that anyone involved in the Hula project could escape thoughts of the political situation on the ground. If the universe is a great living art gallery, then the gallery includes tanks, barb wire and helicopters, and a history of warfare in the midst of one of the most remarkable bird migrations in the world. While the humans struggle to make peace, the land is simultaneously a vast energy meridian filled with countless winged ones following the timeless imperative of spring. Above the human travails of property and fear the birds of heaven connect the winds and water of Africa, Europe and Asia, offering gifts of feather and song.

In the Hula I was far from Alaska, but I recognized the basic ingredients of home—the snow on the flanks of storied Mt Hermon, the abundant meltwaters of spring and a profligate amount of wild nature, most significantly in the form of migratory birds. It reminded me of the Copper River Delta in Alaska, another critical wetlands that is also part of a globally significant flyway. The Copper River's wetlands are enormously larger than the Hula, but then the bird migrations thru the Hula are the same order of magnitude greater than those of the Copper. Holy cow, tiny Israel, politically crazy and smack dab in the middle of the largest bird migrations in the world, 500 million winged ones funneling south or north every autumn and spring thru the African/Syrian rift valley. If only the Jordan River had been full of migrating salmon I would truly have been in my element, busy inviting them to a barbeque.

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After days of invitation Amir and Zev had finally gotten all us jet- or life-lagged sluggards to leave the field school at 5am. Here we are in the Hula wetlands at sunrise, yawning and stretching in the midst of vast flocks of cranes, storks and pelicans. A few jackals pass silently along the edge of the storks and disappear into the wetland scrub. The rising sun begins to send out ridiculously dramatic shafts of rosy light over the Golan Heights. Denis says, "It is not possible to paint such a sunrise," but he nonetheless is giving it a go. Robin ignores the god-like sky and is instead absorbed in sketching the directional arrows of the bike path. I walk about the dewy malva and yellow mustard wondering what to do with my life. Birds by the thousands began to rise and take to the air, singing and wheeling in shifting formations that filled the blue gulfs of heaven. High overhead a kettle of several hundred storks was weaving a helix of intense complexity. From my perspective it is such complete and beautiful chaos I am thinking I will just lie down in the grass and happily watch the aerial circus all morning. But then squadrons of cranes from the south began to sail across the face of the sun. Their shadows race over the ground and sweep right through us thunk thunk thunk, a crazy and alarming feeling that heaven and earth are colliding inside our bodies in some unimaginable way that is wild and sweet. I forget all this nonsense about being human, about being separate from the rest of creation, or even that I have ever done anything to feel guilty about.

"Considering that, all hatred driven hence,  
The soul recovers radical innocence" -- W.B. Yeats

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The first morning at the field school I met up with old friend Bruce. I knew one of his daughters had died a few months earlier. He told me, "I'm a wounded animal." But as we say, create art or live drama, and he was out all day painting and melding his soul with dragonflies and crested larks. At night when we brought out the musical instruments Bruce would enthusiastically thrash out rock and roll, blues and jazz on the guitar. His playing was inspired, an offering of love without a safety net. It reminded me of something Aldo Leopold wrote in "A Sand County Almanac" about the season of spring: "A migrating goose staking 200 miles of black night on the chance of finding a hole in

the (frozen) lake has no easy chance for retreat. His arrival carries the conviction of a prophet who has burned his bridges."

We were the Ecstatic Wounded Animal Orchestra. I arrived in Israel limping as it were from life changes. And Greg, one of my favorite artists and friends, has been the last few years going in and out of deafness. It was disorienting for him, each morning waking up in the Hula wondering if he would be able to hear or not. I don't think he had played his saxophone for a year. But when he picked it up our last night at the field school and leaped into the unknown, it was religion. Free jazz, with eyes closed, the music pouring out wild and sweet. Then brother Ysbrand joined in on the djembe drum, his blurred hands making a driving rhythm that exhorted Greg to greater glory. There was nothing for the rest of us to do but smile like happy fools. At some point we all were singing "Oh When the Saints go Marching In" and Zev was playing electric guitar, no shit, like Carlos Santana. We were a merry flock of birds migrating into the night.

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A stream flowed out of the hills just south of the Hermon field school. I made a pilgrimage one day up to its origin. This boisterous, bubbling tributary contributes nearly a quarter of the Jordan's headwaters, an bursts full grown from a spring—the Banias—at the foot of Mt. Hermon. Alongside the spring is a towering cliff which forms an overhanging arch over an ancient cave dedicated to Pan. How cool is that? The Jordan River, celebrated in fable and song and legend, is from its very inception intermingled with the deity of wild places and wild creatures. Being a wild creature, and not wishing to experience the heavy traffic of the highway on foot, I made my pilgrimage to Pan's spring cross country. I picked my way over barbed wire fences, thru fields and forests of flowers in places long abandoned to land mines. I kept to the cow paths, the wild animal trails and bedrock.

At the exhibition that night, one of the paintings was a landscape overlaying a dreamy background design of Arabic filagree. That seemed to symbolize what was happening to me, the world of human design and culture interpenetrating the world of wind and water and wildlife, the lay of the land.

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The most festive of Jewish holidays, Purim, came in the middle of our week at the Hula. It is the Jewish Halloween as it were, when children and others dress up in costume and reenact the old legends. Purim, I am told, translates as "you must get drunk" until you can no longer tell the difference between good and evil.

I remember the scarlet flash of Kioko's tartan Masai shawl as he stands in the Hula Agamon headquarters against the backdrop of the green Golan Heights. And then later in the day I'm up on the Golan looking back down at the wetlands. The slopes and gorges above the Hula are covered with wild iris and cyclamen, lupine and yellow rocket, and shockingly red anemones dancing in the breeze like a thousand miniature versions of Kioko's tartan. I spent several days walking the Golan with nothing but wind and

flowers, sunbirds and chukar, hyrax and blue rock thrush, the cry of a pair of buzzards sailing the ridge. Other days, over the hill to the northeast came the unnerving sounds of airborne projectiles moving exceedingly fast, sheeeee-yow Wham! Tanks at a gunnery range were firing practice rounds where the Syrian neighbors could probably hear them, and certainly the artists and the Jewish settlers. That strange dynamic was mirrored in the wetlands below by the frenzied efforts of the trucks that run about all day in the agricultural sector, sirens and horns blaring to drive the cranes out of the crops. It was a curious sort of music, crane song and sirens, cannon fire and my guitar, echoing quietly over the gorge. I think I could use a drink.

Harriet's nutria sculpture employed for its body a Syrian soldier's helmet, an artifact from the 1967 war. For that matter, the nutria's forefeet were the bonnet clasps from an overturned military vehicle up on the Golan that I broke off with a rock. This all makes me think of Chiron, the mythical Greek centaur and Wounded Healer whose students included Achilles and Asclepius, the Greek God of medicine. But I most remember Chiron for his practice of turning weapons of war into musical instruments. Swords and machine guns into plowshares and harps.

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One fine day in Jerusalem Amir charmed the Ethiopian guard with the Uzi, and the other guards with their automatic weapons, and for good measure charmed a rabbi or two, and so he and I were at liberty to film at the Western Wall. While schoolchildren and pilgrims came and went, we filmed the wildlife that lives on the wall: birds, lizards, bees, flowers. And the swifts, birds of the air if ever there was, which leave their nests every day at dawn, just as the muezzin calls the Islamic faithful to pray, simultaneous with the Jewish morning prayers. The screech of the swifts mingles with the human clamor, and then the swifts depart and spend all day zipping thru the gulfs and clouds of heaven, returning to roost on the Wall at dusk. I bet it's the oldest continuous ritual at the Wall, far outliving Solomon and Herod, the Crusaders and Suliman the Magnificent.

Amir and I were interviewed for Jerusalem television about the importance of protecting habitat for migratory birds. After our interview, Amir told me the television reporter had asked him, "Do all naturalists have thick eyebrows?"

In Tivon, a few days later, I go on a nature walk with Anat and her 9 year-old daughter Imbara. Along the forest path are the ubiquitous yellow mustard flowers, very tasty on the tongue. I'm munching and we're walking and the sun is going down. Ahead, silhouetted against the evening sky is a big tree, its roots woven into slabs of bedrock on the edge of a small cliff. Imbara scampers up into a notch between huge limbs and settles in like a comfy cat. It's the magic hour of dusk when the veil between worlds is thin. We're all sitting in the tree, an ancient pistachio which Anat informs me is named in Hebrew Etz HaEllah, "the Goddess tree." Once again, out of the blue, I'm at peace.

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Peter was a fisherman for 20 years, a photographer for 20 years, and then put his

camera away and painted for 20 years. A few years before his wife died, she said, "Peter, you should start taking photographs again." He said, "Only if you're in every one."

On one wall, almost hidden beside Peter's abstract paintings, some tribal sculptures and pottery, is a photo of a woman. She looks to be maybe in her late 70's, and is walking down a garden path lined on either side by beautiful flowers taller than her head. The moment the photograph is taken she has raised the hem of her skirt to one side with a flourish, like a mischievous girl. It is utterly charming. Peter smiles and says, "Yes, that is my wife. One of the last photos I ever took."

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In January 2008 a three hundred year-old pistachio tree was transplanted at the front gates of the Hula Agamon Headquarters. The tree had been transported from the southern Galilee where it was about to be sacrificed to a road-widening project. The chilly day of the transplantation ceremony Varda painted a portrait of the tree and composed a poem:

Ancient Goddess  
Emergency ward

I watched you on a cold winter day.  
An ancient Goddess of beauty and years.  
Fugitive from black asphalt.

I watched you.  
Limbs hacked,  
roots exposed,  
hung shuddering between heaven and earth.

I saw you, Great Mother,  
interred in a motherly emergency womb:  
Agmon Ha'hula.  
My frozen fingers drew your portrait:  
Hollow trunk, orphan branches.  
And more,  
a prayer,  
May Hermon's snowcap be your savior,  
caress your weathered body, revive your  
soul.

And  
when we meet again,  
green buds will burst and singing birds

find rest in your  
bosom.  
Halleluyah,  
Agmon Ha'hula

The next day Varda was back at the tree when two men showed up with shovels and started digging around the freshly buried roots. Varda asked them what they were doing. They explained that one of them had taken hundreds of photos at the ceremony the day before, and then somehow left his camera on the ground where it must have been buried with the tree's roots. Varda watched them dig away. She said they never found the camera, so it's still there under the ground. I think of Peter Merom, chronicler of the death of the original lake Hula, whose last photographs always included his wife. And now, we bear witness to the Hula wetlands being reborn. They won't be the same as Peter's beloved lake, but a song of rebirth nonetheless, and a camera is buried with the roots of the goddess.

Mae West once said "The most pleasing distance between two points is a curved line." I see the arc of a feather, the soft shapes of human anatomy (well, Mae West's breasts), the green wave of the hills, the pleasing curves of beautiful old wood boats I've lived on, rocking on the water. One of Amir's paintings is of a jackal and what we see is the view from behind, its jaunty curving flanks and an almost hidden head with completely hidden jaws that nonetheless are grasping a crane leg which sticks far out to either side, like a tightrope walker with his balance pole. I want to be that happy jackal.

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I am told Jesus' words "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth", when translated directly from the original Aramaic rather than passing thru Greek along the way, are more like, "Blessed are those who soften the emotional rigidity within their hearts, for they shall have all the power of Nature."