

## Crip Nature Writing? Domestic Wildness in Elisabeth Tova Bailey's *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating*

Christian Hummelsund Voie  
University of South-Eastern Norway, Norway  
[christian.h.voie@usn.no](mailto:christian.h.voie@usn.no)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ECOZONA.2026.17.2.6114>



### Abstract

This article cautiously proposes the concept of “crip nature writing” as a subversive challenge to American nature writing’s troublesome legacy of ableism, or its “corporeal unconscious,” in Sarah Jaquette Ray’s terms, and its pattern of abandonment. Drawing on the eco-crip theories of Alison Kafer, Sunaura Taylor and Jaquette Ray, the essay analyzes the way Elisabeth Tova Bailey’s *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating* (2010) models an investment in what Barney Nelson terms “domestic wildness” as a generative space from which she levels a subtle critique of the genre’s cult of effort and remoteness, ultimately offering an approach to nature writing that is inclusive of underrepresented places and perspectives.

**Keywords:** Crip nature writing, corporeal unconscious, ableist ecologies, disabled ecologies, domestic wildness.

### Resumen

Este artículo propone con cautela el concepto de ‘escritura de la naturaleza crip’ como un desafío subversivo al problemático legado de capacitismo de la escritura de la naturaleza estadounidense —o su «inconsciente corporal», en términos de Sarah Jaquette Ray— y a su patrón de abandono. Basándose en las teorías eco-crípicas de Alison Kafer, Sunaura Taylor y Jaquette Ray, el ensayo analiza cómo la obra de Elisabeth Tova Bailey *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating* (2010) pone de manifiesto una apuesta por lo que Barney Nelson denomina «salvaje doméstico» como un espacio generativo desde el que la autora formula una sutil crítica al culto al esfuerzo y al alejamiento propio del género, ofreciendo en última instancia un enfoque de la literatura sobre la naturaleza que incluye lugares y perspectivas infrarrepresentados.

**Palabras clave:** Escritura de la naturaleza crip, inconsciente corporal, ecologías capacitistas, ecologías de la discapacidad, naturaleza salvaje doméstica.

The notion of “crip nature writing” may seem like a contradiction in terms. The ableist bias is on display right there in the title and substance of one of the genre’s foundational publications, Henry David Thoreau’s essay “Walking” (1851). Or in the legendary example of John Muir climbing a 100-foot Douglas Fir to ride out the wildness of a storm while clinging to its quaking crown as he describes it in “A Wind Storm in the Forest” (1878). Alison Kafer has also shown how ableist bias saturates Edward Abbey’s scornful exhortation for drivers to “get out of those motorized wheelchairs [...] And walk-walk-WALK upon our sweet and blessed land” (233). More

recently it can be seen in David Gessner's apology in *Leave It as It Is* (2020) for not strolling far enough outside of civilization on his evening walk to break free of its soundscape. Gessner does not walk far enough, in other words, to escape what Sunaura Taylor calls the "disabled ecology" of nature intermingled with humanity. Nature writing clearly comes with a fitness requirement that applies to both people and places, and near-perfect health is the minimal expectation. A hale and hearty—and often male—body capable of vigorous and extensive hiking is often simply taken for granted as a key component to unlocking the most moral and meaningful connections with an equally healthy nature.

Challenging this notion, this paper will show how Elisabeth Tova Bailey's *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating* (2010) models a form of what I tentatively call "crip nature writing" that centralizes the crip experience of nature in ways that fundamentally contest the uninterrogated hegemony of nondisabled wilderness experiences as well as the genre's ecophobic dismissal of both disabled experiences and impaired nature. The essay proceeds by first examining the corporeal unconscious of nature writing, before moving on to Bailey's inversion of its conventions, and then finally exploring the eco-crip ethic it suggests. In addition to the framework of crip theory, this essay also reads Bailey's project through Barney Nelson's concept of "domestic wildness," which troubles dichotomizations between the wild and domestic, showing how it introduces nearby, accessible and human-impacted nature as a worthwhile subject for nature writing in the Anthropocene. Together, these frameworks illuminate how Bailey's crip nature writing revalues the confined, hybrid and impaired as sites of genuine ecological connection and awakening.

## The Corporeal Unconscious of Nature Writing

In his foundational study of American nature writing *Dramas of Solitude: Narratives of Retreat in American Nature Writing* (1998), Randall Roorda defines what he perceives as "the central dynamic of the genre" as "the writer's movement from human society toward a state of solitude in nature. This movement and state I refer to jointly as retreat" (xiii). Roorda's condensing of nature writing to the retreat motif, is to some extent a first wave ecocritical perspective on the genre, and the point is neither here nor in Roorda, to suggest that it articulates an understanding sufficient to the breadth and scope of the present state of the genre. And yet, although nature writing has greatly diversified and branched out, Roorda is right to suggest that his definition covers what remains an essential—if not the essential—style of nature writing, when he claims that "readers of nature writing, like those of popular fiction genres, seek out repeated instantiations of a certain core story, and it is this I am concerned to delineate" (3). The phenomenal success of Cheryl Strayed's retreat narrative in *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail* (2012) supports Roorda's claim that this core story is actively sought by the genre's readership. Strayed's nature writing memoir of mental recuperation in the wilderness, itself

worthy of an eco-crip reading, is the genre's all-time bestseller, shifting more than four million copies in addition to being adapted into the blockbuster movie *Wild* (2014) starring Reese Witherspoon as Strayed. So even though there is more experimentation and innovation in the genre than at any previous point of time, the audience's thirst for reading reiterations of the traditional core story about solitary retreat into the wilderness is demonstrably stronger than ever.<sup>1</sup> This is why *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating*, as an exemplar of revisionary nature writing, positions itself in a complex relation to specifically this type of conventional core story.

The retreat, which Roorda refers to as an integral "narrative movement" (2) in nature writing, also implies a fairly comprehensive capacity for bodily movement. Roorda claims that "nature writing is most itself when its object is least human" (2), and this minimalization of the human sphere "must mean *entering* 'the wilderness,' however understood" (18).<sup>2</sup> While the phrase "however understood" leaves open a space for interpretation, in most of the example he discusses the mental movement outwards is sustained by bodily movement in the same direction. The able-bodied foundation that seems an essential support for this core story of the genre has been subjected to succinct eco-crip scrutiny. In "Risking Bodies in the Wild" (2009), for example, Sarah Jaquette Ray refers to "ablebodiedness" as the "corporeal unconscious" or "hidden attachment" of environmental thought and traces how this ableist unconscious disqualifies disabled bodies from partaking in what "adventure culture" (260) recognizes as truly transcendental wilderness spaces and experiences. She historicizes the emergence of this ideal in the Progressive Era, a period of social, political, and economic reform in the United States during the late nineteenth- to early twentieth-centuries, as a "romantic reaction to modernity" which privileged "an environmental 'ethic' toward pristine nature" and the ideology of retreating "into the wilderness as a palliative for both the individual and the nation." The notion of the ideal American testing and proving himself against an unspoiled wilderness was seen as "essential to moral, racial, and national 'purity'" (258). Physical fitness was interlaced with the notion of moral fitness in ways that would both exclude and cast doubt on disabled experiences of the natural world. Disability was seen as antithetical to the moral project of proving oneself in the wild, and Ray suggests that this logic has subsisted structurally in the logic of wilderness and adventure writing as unaddressed baggage in its subconscious.

Making a similar point in *Disabled Ecologies* (2024), Sunaura Taylor describes the standard narrative of nature writing as centered on ablebodiedness, fitness and

---

<sup>1</sup> See for example Lyanda Lynn Haupt's *The Urban Bestiary* (2013), which celebrates everyday nature experiences in urban landscapes, or John Marzluff's *Subirdia* (2014), which takes nature writing to the extremely modified setting of American suburbs, or Lauret Savoy's *Trace* (2015), which explores racial legacies in American landscapes, or David George Haskell's *Sounds Wild and Broken* (2022), which introduces readers to the soundscapes of nature.

<sup>2</sup> Critics like William Cronon have problematized the tendency in environmental thought to valorize untouched wilderness as "the natural unfallen antithesis of an unnatural civilization ... the ultimate landscape of authenticity" (np). Wilderness, Cronon argues, is often held to an ideal of purity that cannot tolerate human presence or interference at all, with the occasional exception of "contemplative sojourners enjoying their leisurely reverie in God's natural cathedral" (np).

physical achievement, presenting those as prerequisites for attaining “an authentic connection to the more-than-human world” (66). Unsurprisingly then, Taylor also notes that there are precious few examples of nature writing from a disabled perspective, and that those few narratives that do exist tend to focus on the figure of the “supercrip,” portraying individuals “overcoming their disabilities to climb an impossible peak or hike an endless trail while blind or paraplegic” (65), in other words presenting both nature and disability as something to be conquered through exceptional determination and willpower. While Taylor does not want to detract from the accomplishments of such writing, she troubles the waters by arguing that they preserve the narrative pattern in which nature “becomes a proving ground rather than a site for connection” and in which ability is “a prerequisite for having an authentic connection to the more-than-human world” (66). This entrenched narrative pattern prompts her frustrated question of “[h]ow was I to write myself back into nature? I am hardly capable of climbing or hiking” (66).

In *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (2013), Alison Kafer likewise suggests that nature writing holds what is considered worthy connections with nature hostage to “norms that were based on bodies, minds, or experiences unlike our own” (143). Like Taylor’s more recent “vision of living with,” Kafer goes on to question whether it is possible to imagine “a crip interaction with nature, a crip engagement with wilderness, that doesn’t rely on either ignoring the limitations of the body or triumphing over them” (142). She further maintains that “what is needed in ecofeminism, ecocriticism, and environmentalism in general” and this paper would add nature writing to this list, “are the narratives of people whose bodies and minds cause them to interact with nature in nonnormative ways” (135). While the nature writing genre is branching out and diversifying, having become far more pluralistic and inclusive over the past ten years, much of its popular mainstream remains invested in what Roorda defines as its core story and what Kafer refers to as “an exclusionary framing of nature” (132) that is doubly prejudiced against both the ways disabled people experience nature and against the types of nature they are able to access. Such a framing, Kafer contends, celebrates “walking as the only way to access ‘the original, the real’” (132). This framing is exclusionary in its very core because it essentializes both healthy bodies and healthy nature in ways that prohibit impairment of either. As Kafer suggests, “[i]n such a construction, there is no way for the mobility-impaired body to engage in environmental practice; all modalities other than walking upright become insufficient, even suspect. Walking is both what makes us human and what makes us at one with nature” (132). Impaired ecosystems, or what Taylor refers to as “disabled ecologies” fare no better in this construction. She defines disabled ecologies as “networks of disability that are created when ecosystems are corrupted and profoundly altered,” which means that on a definitional level a “disabled ecology” is not “the original, the real” that this exclusionary framing of nature seeks (7). The solitary retreat of the healthy body into unspoiled landscapes is cemented into the nature writing canon as the optimal, if not only, way of truly learning a place in its particulars.

While Ray, Kafer and Taylor unmask the ways that the corporeal unconscious of environmental thought leads to the exclusion and othering of impaired bodies from wilderness spaces, the next sections of this paper extend their less developed challenge to the notion of wilderness itself as the only meaningful site of connecting with nature through Taylor's notion of "ableist ecologies" (26). Talila A. Lewis defines ableism as "a system of assigning value to people's bodies and minds based on societally constructed ideas of normalcy, productivity, desirability, intelligence, excellence, and fitness" (qtd. in Taylor 27). For Taylor, ableism extends even further "into the more-than-human world as well, shaping how lands, water, animals, and ecological relations are valued, treated, and perceived" (27). The hierarchical enthronement of wilderness as the supreme terrain of nature writing is an expression of this form of ableism extended "into the more-than-human-world."

Drawing on these critiques in the following discussion enables an analysis of Bailey's crip nature writing that unveils how it challenges the supremacy of nondisabled experiences in nature writing while engaging with the question of what types of nature merit literary attention through purposeful subversions of central tropes. Ultimately it helps clarify how Bailey offers an alternate model of nature writing that rejects the logic of the proving ground, the hidden attachment of healthy embodiment, and the unimpaired wilderness, and instead embraces disability and domestic wildness as generative sites for a broader and more inclusive nature aesthetics for the Anthropocene, or "the Age of Disability," as Taylor reframes it.

### Regaining a Future: A Stationary Moral Migration

In *The Wild and the Domestic: Animal Representation, Ecocriticism, and Western American Literature* (2000), Barney Nelson traces how nature writing has construed nature as sacred and a space for "leisure time activity" since the time of Thoreau (8). Bailey's first point may be to do away with any such association of crip nature writing with leisure and luxury. Whatever lofty rationalization the nature writer tends to provide, sojourning in the wilderness comes with an aura of a wilderness vacation, a temporary visit that is contingent on a cash surplus and time off from work, later written up as a momentous pilgrimage. That is not the crip perspective presented in *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating*. Bailey is emphatically not a volunteer. Her project of reappraisal is forced upon her, and her mental wellbeing is at stake in the outcome. In this, and multiple other ways, her book reads like a subversion of the upright healthy body's solitary retreat into the wilderness that dominates the genre's popular core.

In a stunning piece of something as inconceivable as indoors bedridden nature writing, Bailey replaces the genre's conventional wilderness terrain with a terrarium inhabited by a woodland snail that sits on the nightstand next to the bed to which she is almost completely confined. The plot, centered on the bedbound author's yearlong cohabitation with an ordinary snail, is the very antithesis to the genre-defining machismo of the reigning Abbey school of nature writing, described by Tim

Hauserman in his review of Gessner's *All the Wild That Remains* as a "no excuses" love of wilderness, a desire to "run into the wilderness naked and alone" to experience its un-sanitized and unplacated dangers (n.p.). Nothing like the frivolity of an adult man running pell-mell into the wilderness exists in Bailey's crip nature writing. This is not because the author willingly relinquishes the adventurous "no excuses" mode of exploring the natural world to undertake random experiments with alternative perspectives and values, but because she is forcibly expelled from such an approach when she falls inexplicably ill. Her moral migration is, in other words, a necessity that is thrust upon her as she finds herself bereft of any other option. Her crip nature writing is not leisure, it is survival. What Amit R. Baishya describes as "an exercise in radical humility" ("Gastropods, Viruses" 63) becomes Bailey's mechanism for writing herself meaningfully back into the world.

Once a hiker and fitness enthusiast herself, Bailey struggles to come to terms with the "bizarre and bewildering place" (14) her body has become and the loss of access to the wilderness spaces that used to replenish her. Solitude, that celebrated ideal for Roorda's conception of a nature writer, has been warped for Bailey into the isolation that comes with living in "crip time" (Taylor 30) while the world marches on without her. Feeling as much a captive as the snail on her nightstand, trapped "far from the things that delighted me, the wild woods that sustained me, and the social network that enriched me" (15), Bailey must undergo a migration of the mind towards a space in which she "could still fulfill dreams, even if they were changed dreams" (146). This she can only achieve by bending the entrenched conventions of nature writing as a space of able-bodiedness and remote wilderness. Far from the conventional terrain of wilderness writing, her drama of solitude must play out in the bedroom. With an ordinary snail as her guide, and from the unlikely space of her sheets and pillows, Bailey claims her voice as a nature writer while proposing a series of overdue value-adjustments to the genre.

Nature writing is often referred to as the literature of place, and this ideal of embeddedness in location is among the first that Bailey troubles. While nature writing has long fancied itself as a tonic to a rootless and restlessly peripatetic culture by familiarizing readers with the natural environment and thereby somehow grounding them in it, creating a sense of at-home-ness in nature, Bailey's crip nature writing examines a life that has been reduced primarily to root and rest. She explores this situation contrastively through the concepts of time, of which she has been given an endless surplus, and speed which she has lost. An Emily Dickinson quote from a letter to Charles H. Clark stating, "[t]he velocity of the ill, however, is like that of the snail" (qtd. in Bailey 37, emphasis in original) serves as the epigraph to the chapter "Time and Territory," in which she ruminates on her situation in terms that strongly resemble Taylor's concept of "crip time" (30). Life lived at "the velocity of the ill" means being "homebound" (117), which for Bailey represents "a sort of vanishing" (117). The desynchronization of her life from that of others forcibly roots Bailey in place and imposes solitude on her in ways that have nothing to do with Roorda's conception of solitude and retreat as the chosen situation for nature writing

creativity. While Bailey herself never directly addresses the nature writing genre, her portrayal of her own experiences and situation seems to intentionally invite readers to reexamine what these ideals of the genre actually mean and how her crip perspective might diversify and reinterpret them. The immersive nature writing she is able to produce from her rootbound condition performs a timely and deeply necessary vindication of the rich experiential worlds that too often exist in wilderness nature writing's exclusion zones. As such, *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating* provides a broadly relevant reminder to practice wonder as a restorative way of everyday life, rather than a recreational activity reserved for visits to national parks.

There is of course the open question of whether *The Sound of a Wild Snail* can justifiably be called nature writing in the first place. Thomas J. Lyon's "taxonomy of nature writing" identifies three essential genre-defining features: "natural history information, personal responses to nature, and philosophical interpretation of nature" (3). Importantly, although he draws most of his examples from wilderness writing, Lyon does not prescribe a remote and unspoiled terrain for nature writing, and Bailey demonstrates how all three taxonomic features are as practicable from a crip perspective as from that of a hiker. The unassuming snail, the totem animal around which Bailey's narrative revolves, in and of itself, represents a challenge to the type of charismatic nature that usually occupies the center stage in nature writing.<sup>3</sup> Its confinement to a terrarium—a domestic space within a domestic space—makes it an even unlikelier vehicle for nature writing. Kafer notes the gatekeeping function inherent in the genre's strict ideals of "unmediated" experiences of primal, unspoiled nature (132). The snail browsing supermarket mushrooms in the entirely manufactured environment of Bailey's terrarium fails to measure up to an unmediated and obviously charismatic wild in any shape or form. It also represents a total reversal of the type of easily appreciable big and bold wildernesses that have reigned supreme in the genre. To make things worse, Bailey's encounter with the snail is stripped of that all-important ingredient of effort, ennobling toil, for rather than venturing out to meet nature in some remote and difficult location, the snail has been brought to Bailey. She did not seek it out, conquer it, initially connect with it or play any active role whatsoever in it coming into her presence. Both author and subject end up cocooned in states of domesticity they neither wanted, nor can escape. Even so, Bailey proves more than capable of gathering "natural history information," providing "personal responses" and "philosophical" perspectives on her shared situation with the snail.

Mirroring the accidental circumstances that caused her disablement, Bailey's intense relationship with the snail is born through happenstance. In part one of *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating*, shortly after the reader learns of how the author at 34 was struck down with what would turn out to be an undiagnosed chronic affliction,

---

<sup>3</sup> Charismatic nature possesses easily appreciable properties that coincide with cultural conventions for what is considered aesthetically pleasing. The concept is closely linked to conceptions of beauty and has figured centrally in nature writing because it appeals more readily to readers than uncharismatic subjects such as wastelands or scavengers.

the reader also learns of how a friend brings her this woodland snail along with a bouquet of wildflowers because the friend assumes both will bring her enjoyment. The gift, and the responsibility that comes with it, nearly precipitates a panic attack from Bailey, who at this point is not ready to care for another being and is struggling to adjust to her radically transformed circumstances: "Why, I wondered, would I *enjoy* a snail? What on earth would I do with it? I couldn't get out of bed to return it to the woods. It was not of much interest, and if it *was* alive, the responsibility—especially for a snail, something so uncalled for—was overwhelming" (4, emphasis in original). It is a crucial paragraph because in questioning and even dismissing the value of a snail, the author also questions and scoffs at the experiences it represents, both the limited wild in a broad sense and the type of nature experience that she can have in her new set of circumstances. The panic attack is, in other words, a crisis of values. The bedridden Bailey, who is first introduced to us as the very picture of physical ability "[h]igh on an outcrop" in the Alps, casually munching on "bread and cheese" (xi) after a strenuous hike, at this point represents a lingering ableist mindset confined to a now disabled body. She has not come to terms with her own situation, and she cannot conceive of a way to, as Taylor calls on readers to do, "make life livable and vibrant" when living "with disablement" (30). The snail seems almost a darkly satiric representation of what her possibilities have become in her own eyes, and she rejects it and everything it signifies on sight.

Even so, the snail will prove a more prescient gift than it at first seems. It represents an injection of nature into what amounts to a forced retreat, adding the natural component that has been missing for a nature writer to thrive. Bailey's crip nature writing is firmly grounded in changed and immutable corporeal realities. Her body anchors her in what resembles Kafer's concept of "crip time" (27), which Taylor crucially directs towards a form of perspectival "misalignment" based on diverging bodily realities: "a misalignment between a disabled person's capacities and experiences and the constant expectations of a culture that privileges uniformity, productivity, and predictive life patterns" (30). Bailey, for example, has a dog, which as the companion of her former hikes is now something of a living relic of her healthier life. In its energetic liveliness the dog cannot participate in the horizontal terrain of prone illness the way the snail, living in slow time, is able. The same goes for her human companionship, which has gradually been dwindling: "WHEREAS THE ENERGY OF my human visitors wore me out, the snail inspired me. Its curiosity and grace pulled me further into its peaceful and solitary world. Watching it go about its life in the small ecosystem of the terrarium put me at ease" (41, original capitalization). While Bailey is incapable of returning to the nature experiences she used to enjoy, there is also a sense that that kind of nature cannot fully enter her new world either. The snail, however, will eventually help prove that worthwhile connections can still be made as its snail time synchronizes better with Bailey's crip time. Bailey's challenge, then, is with rearranging her inner moral terrain into a state in which a sense of wonder can be drawn from other scales of perception and other modes of being.

Bailey's moral struggles do not last long before her curiosity wins out, but they are significant in laying the groundwork for the ethical migration her book performs. At the time when the snail is brought to her, Bailey wrestles with having physically become disconnected from what she believes as generative of meaning: "Given the ease with which health infuses life with meaning and purpose, it is shocking how swiftly illness steals away those certainties" (5-6). The casually effortless locomotion of the nature writer is key to the types of nature experiences that have enriched her life up until this point, and she cannot see her disability in anything but the most negative of terms as the thing that made "off with nearly all my plans for the future" (166). There is no question that Bailey experiences a genuine and dramatic loss of ability that would leave anyone grasping. But the barrier to seeing anything generative or positive on her future horizon is partly ideological. It is to some extent because of her own internalized ableism that Bailey feels as if she has been locked out of meaningful engagement with worthwhile nature, which is outdoors, remote and apart, and only reachable for the fit and healthy, and certainly not in any way represented by a snail in a flowerpot: "From where I lay, all of life was out of reach" (10). This is not a notion she will hold throughout her book, but importantly one she holds where the book begins.

Bailey's struggle to see meaning in the snail on her bedside table reflects her own struggle to find value in the disabled life she now leads. This challenge echoes Taylor's question of how to write herself into the natural world when the game is ideologically rigged against a disabled person being able to do any such thing. While her contemplative deliberations about her challenges are bookworthy in and of themselves, Bailey's involvement with the snail also speaks more universally towards what types of nature are validated and whose nature experiences are valorized in environmental thought and writing. As an example, Bailey's healthy hiking former self is unaware of snails in an almost contrived way, having never noticed them on her "countless hikes in the woods" (8). The crip nature writer she will later become elevates the previously discounted snail to the very highest importance and obsesses over it. The chapter describing the snail's arrival performs these contrastive values by staging a clear discrepancy between ways of experiencing nature with a shift from one paragraph to the next, formerly the "acres of forest" behind her house that stretched to "a hidden, mountain-fed brook" and now "the pot at my bedside" (8). With the easily appreciable charismatic nature that her able-bodied self is accustomed to now out of reach, Bailey must look to the diminutive "nondescript brown creature," an uncharismatic description if there ever was one, in her flowerpot and later terrarium, to generate a new set of values for herself (8). The wilderness writer's ableist scorn for mediated, nearby and easily accessed nature is an evaluative pose she can no longer inhabit. With few other options at her disposal, Bailey must look for a new type of Walden on her nightstand.

At this point it might seem as if Bailey is writing a bleak tale about someone confronted with such a radically altered embodiment that their experiential domain shrinks down to staring into a flowerpot, but this is only how it begins and not at all

where she is going. Bailey's reduced motility and her struggle to come to terms with it are of course essential features of the book, and she fully acknowledges how consequential they are for her, how disability is an "author" that "rewrote my life" (166). Among those consequences is the need for reorientation, discovering that her life is not without possibilities, and that those include meaningful contact with the natural world. She can only do so by overcoming the fervent dichotomization that undergirds wilderness nature writing. As Ray observes, "the wilderness body ideal" that underpins environmental thought, and I would add much of the most popular and influential nature writing, has cemented as canonical the idea that proper nature is characterized by its apartness and remoteness, and that a proper nature experience can only be attained through physical strain and effort, as a reward that stands somehow proportionate to the effort put in. It is the logic of an elite sport, one that implies that the longer and tougher the hike, and the fewer people who have, or would be able to make it, the better quality of nature and nature experience one is likely to receive. As Kafer puts it: "Nature, wilderness, mountain ranges: all are described as separate from 'us,' but we can bridge that separation by rugged, masculine individualism" (134). It is only through "the hiker's body" that the separation with nature can temporarily be overcome. Readers of traditional nature writing are somewhat condescendingly invited to experience overcoming separation from nature vicariously through the author's exploits and prose. There is little expectation that they should be able to emulate the author's example for themselves. To accommodate a common snail in a terrarium, Bailey's crip nature writing jettisons any such elitism, championing an inclusive and accessible way of engaging with nature, and the last page before her bibliography even provides instructions and encouragement for readers who want to get terraria of their own. These should be impossible subjects for nature writing, but Bailey shows how people of diverse bodies can experience nature in alternative settings.

In contrast to diminutive, captured gastropods in terraria, the ecosystems of typical nature writing are not merely expected to be remote, but also as close to perfect health as can be found in the Anthropocene. This exclusionist metric disqualifies far more landscapes than it qualifies. Kafer discusses how, in *Rejected Body* (1996), Susan Wendell raises the question of "how far one must be able to walk to be considered able-bodied" (7). The corporeal unconscious of nature writing similarly invites a double question regarding how far one must hike to have an authentic nature experience in sufficiently authentic landscapes. While there is a notable ongoing Anthropocenic turn in nature writing, its persistent preference for purity still devalues enormous amounts of terrain, ecosystems and countless organisms as insufficiently remote, apart or pristine. But while J.B. MacKinnon in "False Idyll" frets over a future in which we find all the wildness we need in the tamed, Bailey's study of her terrarium problematizes that proposition, and shows how constructive it can be to do precisely that—enjoying the tamed and nearby—especially when the option of exploring the remote locations MacKinnon visits is outside of one's physical capacities. Subverting the language of remoteness and

apartness, Bailey claims a voice of authenticity for her solitary observations of the nearby snail on her “distant planet of illness,” contrasting the recreational isolation of nature writers with the isolation of captivity that she feels she shares with the snail (34).

Although Bailey understandably pines for the active healthy life she used to live, and the nature experiences it used to offer, it is important to note that her dawning fascination with the snail is in no way presented as secondary to those experiences: “The tiny, intimate sound of the snail’s eating gave me a distinct feeling of companionship and shared space” (12). This sense of shared space becomes of inestimable value to Bailey, suffering as she is from a doubled sense of homesickness; she has been relocated from her home to a white sanitized space in the caregiving facility that provides virtually no stimuli to her hungry senses, and she has become un-homed in her own body, which has ceased to react and behave in the ways that were familiar to her. She writes that “[s]urvival often depends on a specific focus: a relationship, a belief, or a hope balanced on the edge of possibility” (15). Since becoming ill, Bailey has been rudderless and adrift both in her body and in her life, with no sense of anything to look forward to: “[w]hereas the future had once beckoned with many intriguing paths, now there was just one impossible route” (11). She spends her time immersed in the landscapes of her past, exploring old memories in the belief that she cannot fashion worthwhile new ones. The insertion of the small bit of wildness the snail represents provides her hungry mind with something to seize upon in the present, something to draw her out of her unhealthy obsession with what life used to be. More importantly, it begins to provoke a reappraisal of her circumstances: “I thought of the terrarium’s limited space, and how the snail had seemed content as it ate, explored, and fulfilled a life cycle. This gave me hope that perhaps I, too, could still fulfill dreams, even if they were changed dreams” (146). With the snail as her guide, Bailey eventually begins exploring the notion of “living with” as Taylor formulates it, of living a rich life with disability. In recognizing the possibility for new dreams, Bailey reclaims her ability to look forward. In this sense the snail shatters the despair that has held Bailey in backwards-looking stasis and returns a sense of progression and potential to her life.

### **Audacious Adventures in Bed: Subverting the Cult of Effort and Remoteness**

Effort is essential to the ennobling endeavor of wilderness nature writing. In Strayed’s bestselling *Wild*, her journey of emotional recovery is partly contingent on facing and overcoming the physical challenges presented by the difficult terrain of the Pacific Crest Trail. As Jaquette Ray observes: “Work displays correct the moral atrophy associated with bourgeois privilege; they fulfill a Puritan work ethic through bodily toil” (269). In nature writing, work displays function as purification ritual and they also places an ableist emphasis on sensory engagement with place, as David Abrams claims: “direct sensuous reality [...] remains the sole solid touchstone for an experiential world, [...]; only in regular contact with the tangible ground and sky can

we learn how to orient and to navigate in the multiple dimensions that now claim us" (x). Nature writers love putting on "work displays" for their readers as some form of reifying activity that is part purification and part ecological education, and which not infrequently borders on the braggadocios.

American contemporary nature writing continues this tradition. Robert Macfarlane's recent *Is a River Alive?* (2025) fronts effort as essential to his understanding of the rivers he explores. The chapter "The Living River" particularly foregrounds the drudgery of paddling for miles in his canoe as sacramental and gradually epiphanous:

Mile after mile. Our little line of boats spreads out again. We each enter a private cell of labour. Time and space begin to do odd things, expanding so that each hour seems surely two or three, each mile seems surely ten. The water is working on me. I am learning to recalibrate my eagerness, to settle into a present-tense state of not anticipating, of not-knowing [...] I pick a point on the shore, a mile or two distant, and make for it. Then another. Then another. I begin to discover a ritual aspect to the labour, a metronomic pleasure in the pain. (242)

Here Macfarlane exemplifies the close alignment between effort and receptive perception in nature writing. The toil puts him in a ready, almost trancelike state at the utmost extent of his physical capacity, a mental state that is somehow outside of normal time and space, in which the water is able to "work on him" through his recalibrated senses, teaching him.

The work display is a clear performance for Macfarlane's readers to demonstrate that the author earns what he receives. The waterscape he traverses is laid out as his proving ground, in Taylor's terms above, and the hand-blistering drudgery of paddling demonstrates his exertion and gradual worthiness. Macfarlane's reward is an eventual state of near-rhapsodic connection:

I realize again [...] that along with the exhaustion a deep, strange serenity, unlike any I have known before, is emerging, as if I am somehow being ... slowly flooded from within. That is the best account of it I can find. *As if I'm being slowly flooded from within.* (246, emphasis in original)

It is effort that puts Macfarlane in this state of connectedness. Only by struggling with wind and currents and portaging around rapids can he come to an intimacy with the river. His achievement, in other words, requires excellent physical fitness, and the author struggles heroically to measure up. Ability is the entrance ticket to Macfarlane's enlightenment. Ray critiques the narrative structure and self-sustained logic behind such embodied wilderness encounters and the work displays they rely on, suggesting that such narratives substitute "performance for the ecological sensitivity that the wilderness encounter *claims* to cultivate. Thus, there is no necessary relationship between the wilderness encounter and an environmental ethic" (274, emphasis in original).

There are times when Bailey's crip nature writing approaches deliberate parody of work displays of the type exemplified by Macfarlane above. In the chapter

"Time and Territory," Bailey puts on her own work display, but, for her, both scale and landscape are radically different from Macfarlane's remote wilderness:

Given its tiny footprint, the snail had plenty of territory in the terrarium to survey in minute detail, finding endless nooks and crannies of interest. I, on the other hand, rarely moved beyond the familiar section of my sheets. Occasionally, when the snail slept and an urgent need for change—no matter the cost—swept through me, I would slowly roll from my right side over to my left side. This simple act caused my heart to beat wildly and erratically, but the reward was a whole new vista. The other side of the room was spread out before me like a map with countless possibilities of faraway adventures, including the most tantalizing of things, a window and a door. Nothing, of course, was in reach. (42)

What constitutes effort is of course contingent on what kind of effort you are capable of putting out, and it would be possible to read this passage as Bailey staging her own work display based on what the realities of her physical limitations allow. But the way she appropriates the structures, vocabulary and tropes of adventure writing suggests that there is also both subversion and subtle critique. The passage is structurally reminiscent of Macfarlane's river efforts, hitting many of the same thematic beats. Like Macfarlane's, it begins with the urge to explore, followed by extreme exertion, intense bodily reactions, and the payoff of a sublime landscape unfolding before her. The parody lies in what the ennobling effort in this case is—rolling over in bed—and what the sublime vista it provides consists of, namely the most ordinary of things - doors, shelves, books and a window. Bailey describes the perfectly mundane view unfolding before her in tones reminiscent of an adventuring nature writer on the edge of discovery after a bold ascent to some panoramic outlook: "Across the room there was a shelf that held many books, each a cover of possible interest if I only I could decipher them, but the distance was too great" (43). Perhaps of most note is the way epiphany is withheld from Bailey's work display. The endeavor is undercut by the repeated observation that Bailey cannot get to any of the things she beholds, neither books, doors nor windows. The work display then is not only parodied but undermined as a meaningful endeavor because all rewards are ultimately withheld. The conclusion to the chapter expresses both parody and rejection: "Then, exhausted and empty from my audacious adventure, I'd make the slow roll back toward the kingdom of the terrarium and the tiny life it contained" (43). Describing the act of rolling over in bed as an "audacious adventure" is an act of drawing attention to types of nature experiences she cannot have and types of nature writing she cannot access. Stressing the fact that the audacious adventure leaves her empty is ideologically important, because the terrarium does not. Having yearned for the faraway bookshelves, bathtubs and windows, described in the language of someone viewing distant landscapes of endless opportunity, rolling back to the terrarium and its "tiny life" may strike one as an admission of defeat, an acknowledgement that her own life is now tiny. But that does not mesh with the type of nature writing that unfolds over the following pages as Bailey's preoccupation with that tiny life grows into a profound and invigorating study that draws on both direct experience of the snail and deep dives into libraries and archives to exhume its cultural footprint. A more likely

reading would be that this—the terrarium—is where life is. Perhaps as Bailey rolls over in bed, literally turning her back on “audacious adventure,” on doors and windows to the outside world, the reader witnesses a reorientation of values. It is not the trackless wilderness that sustains Bailey, but a piece of nature that is not only close to home, but inside of the home.

While Bailey does not refute that nature can be found outdoors, she also affirms that nature can be found inside, in the terrarium with her gastropod roommate. Rolling over in bed becomes her act of rebellion against work displays and fitness adventures that hold bodies to standards only the healthiest among us can ever measure up to. In refocusing on the terrarium, Bailey finally jettisons the toilsome wilderness adventure and, alongside it, the ecophobic disdain for the impaired or human-impacted landscapes that it codifies. Indeed, turning over in bed stands as Bailey’s literal turning point—over the course of the following chapters she begins her true crip nature writing, an immersive study of the snail’s life in its terrarium, that is as rich and lively as anything written by a sweaty hiker. The next chapter tellingly presents the most extensive study of snails up until that point. This reorientation towards the tiny and confined paves the way for an inclusive crip nature writing ethic that affirms domestic wildness and disabled ecologies without prejudice, qualification or reservation.

### **Shrinking Nature Writers, Domestic Wildness and a Sense of Wonder in the Great Indoors**

In *The Wild and the Domestic*, Nelson makes a persuasive case for how Mary Hunter Austin’s nature writing and fiction utilized “animal stories to reimagine” many of the central tenets and convictions of wilderness writing (132). Arguably, Bailey’s crip nature writing about her gastropod companion species furthers a similar project of reimagination, of pushing the boundaries of what constitutes a fitting and arresting subject for nature writing. Recent years have seen revisionist nature writers introducing settings and subjects that only decades ago would have been considered anathema to the genre. Going further than most, Bailey takes the genre to its perhaps most alien setting of all—the domestic sphere, the unnatural landscape of the great indoors. This aligns her work with explorative subgenres such as, for example, urban, suburban or new nature writing, and positions *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating* as another driver in the genre’s reluctant, but steadfast movement into the new and altered environments of the Anthropocene, reinfusing the genre with both originality and a deepened, diversified and more universally accessible sense of wonder.

Such experimentation with setting, literally transporting nature writing out of its tried-and-true comfort zone, situates Bailey’s work at a confluence between ecocritical and eco crip critiques of the genre. As an ecocritic, Nelson notes how the “wilderness worship” (18) of nature writing has erected “a hierarchical ranking of one landscape over another” (19). In this hierarchy the most striking wilderness spots reign supreme over less impressive locations. She also blasts the visual bias that

ungirds the wilderness adventure, citing Rebecca Solnit's claim that when landscapes are understood primarily as "visual spectacle" a touristic relationship with nature is the only possible outcome (7). Ann Ronald pursues an adjacent line of critique in her essay "Why Don't They Write about Nevada?" in which she lambasts the conservative impulse in nature writing to seek adventure and immersion in the same types of resplendent wilderness. Rather than accepting the American West as the spiritual heartland for the genre, Ronald provocatively questions whether, given the sameness of its aesthetic output, the wilderness genre possesses any spiritual facility at all anymore. In an entertaining, but pointed example of what Gessner would later, in "Sick of Nature," call "the Incredible Shrinking Nature Writer" (10), Ronald asserts that "[w]here John Wesley Powell and Everett Ruess once explored, Edward Abbey followed, trailed closely by Ann Zwinger, David Douglas, Rob Shultheis, and countless others –so many others [...] that their terrain begins to look familiar and what was once wilderness has become commonplace" (10). Anticipating Gessner's irreverent comparison of modern nature writers to ants when measured against their literary forebears, Ronald evokes the mental image of a queue of nature writers strung out across the same "spectacular untracked landscapes" (16), waiting for their moment to write about them in a process of steadily diminishing returns: "Using the imagery of their predecessors, they simply discover new arches, alcoves, glens and grottoes [...] each waiting to be pictured in the same words, more or less" (10). Seeking out the same setting over and over again diminishes the possibility of the genre to evoke a wild sense of wonder and shrinks the creativity of the nature writer. Ronald describes the process as unintentionally civilizing, a form of literary "overcrowding and aesthetic destruction," suggesting that "American wilderness writing is destroying the very places it loves" (19). The excessively monogamous fidelity to a few chosen places can thus be reconceived as a cause of creative paucity rather than imaginative enrichment.

Against this horizon, the thematic outliers like Bailey's crip nature writing represent a desperately needed creative reorientation. She successfully makes her featureless sickroom and terrarium vibrate with more originality than the commonplace terrain of wilderness writing. With her different core story and its sense of domestic wildness, Bailey injects some of the diversification ecocritics like Ronald and Nelson have suggested the genre needs. From her bedroom, she practices a sense of wonder that is vital specifically because it is ordinary and accessible, not in the sense of being lesser, but laying claim to wonder as something within easy reach of readers in their everyday lives, suggesting that Walden can be an everyday experience.

While ecocritics have targeted what amounts to an elitist landscape aesthetic in the core story of nature writing, eco-crip critiques approach wilderness writing along related trajectories targeting its implicit rejection of certain sets of experiences and many types of environments. Critics, such as Taylor, stress that the genre others differently abled bodies in a striking parallel to the way it others impacted environments. Through her transportation of nature writing into the domestic

sphere, Bailey dramatizes her challenge to what Kafer refers to as the assumption that “nature only exists ‘out there’ as opposed to in everyday spaces” (144). Kafer notes as highly consequential such a conceptual displacement of nature from “our houses and neighborhoods” (145), because it enshrines only a few landscapes and generally able-bodied behaviors in relation to those landscapes. Taylor’s eco-crip skepticism towards the wilderness branch of nature writing similarly probes deeper than its visual bias towards beautiful and unspoiled locations. She notes how wilderness writing performs near perfect health, both in the sense of nature writers putting on work displays and rigorously screened visually unblemished landscapes, in ways that gatekeep which bodily experiences and which physical environments are suitable. She further claims that ableist ecologies “purge disability and dependency from ecological futures” (26). Using Tracy Brynne Voyles’ concept of “wastelanding,” Taylor suggests that ableist ecologies classify people and places alike into categories of disposability along gradients of fitness, “constructing some landscapes and peoples as pollutable,” in the sense of “sacrifice zones” (25). Fitness, health, purity, and undisturbed wilderness are necessary qualifications for protection. What fails to measure up is more likely to be sacrificed or abandoned. Bailey’s celebration of the snail repudiates these biases as she performs her own gradual reorientation from them, towards a receptive state in which she becomes able to find the wildness she needs in domesticated circumstances: “The life of a snail is as full of tasty food, comfortable beds of sorts, and a mix of pleasant and not-so pleasant adventures as that of anyone I know” (98).

In place of the figure of the nature writer as a solitary—and usually male—wanderer, striding away from any location he deems unfit for his hiking boots, Bailey trains herself to see wonder in precisely the circumstances and places of which she was reflexively dismissive before. The chapter “Explorations,” which establishes how Bailey and the snail fall into a pattern of cohabitation, more importantly dramatizes how the snail functions as a swivel, shifting Bailey out of her accustomed pattern of despair and into a generative focus on the animal on her nightstand. Within the span of two pages, there are three instances of the snail transmuting Bailey’s outlook, not in a way that erases the challenging nature of her illness, but which enables her to recognize the ways in which her days still have meaning. The first is perhaps the most poignant, as Bailey details how each morning she awakens to an interlude of “pure, sweet, uncontrollable hope” that her health has “returned magically with daybreak” (21). Reality then reasserts itself in a pattern that starts every day with bitter disappointment. The arrival of the snail breaks this cycle, not as the fairytale healing magic she yearns for, but nonetheless as a meaningful point of engagement for a despairing mind that becomes fundamentally restorative through a gradual reorientation of values and perspectives. Bailey’s bleak moment of realizing that nothing has changed for the better is overcome in the very next sentence as she notes “And then I thought of the snail” (21). The pattern is the same in each three occurrences, starting out with a despair informed by her habitual outlook and entrenched values, which are then immediately derailed as her thoughts turn to the

snail, which “comes to her rescue” and gives her “a fresh perspective” (21-22). This trinity of snail-rescues concludes with Bailey’s recognition that they are “officially cohabiting” and that the snail has endowed her life with “a new focus” (22). Bailey’s fascination with this state of cohabitation signals her readiness to begin true domestic nature writing in Part II, titled “A Green Kingdom.”

Through her own developing sense of wonder, Bailey erodes the wild/domestic dichotomy that troubles critics from Nelson to Taylor. The opening chapter of “A Green Kingdom,” titled “The Forest Floor,” stages a meditative synchronization between the nature writer and her gastropod subject that seems as beneficial as the transcendence sought by others in remote wildernesses: “my often frantic and frustrated thoughts would gradually settle down to match its calm, smooth pace” (26). The chapter title itself seems almost ironic, as both author and snail are very far removed from any forest. And yet, it performs the deliberate positioning that can be seen threaded throughout *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating* against the more traditional subjects and spaces of wilderness writing. The forest floor in question is of course the terrarium, an anthropogenic space if there ever was one, fully crafted and designed through human intention. Importantly, Bailey insists on this microcosm and its denizen as an inspirational space for the nature writer’s contemplation: “While the snail slept, I explored the terrarium from my bed, letting my eyes wander through the miniature hills and dales of its fresh green landscape” (28). Unlike the satire that colors Bailey’s audacious adventure of turning over in bed, here the domestic nature writing she begins is entirely earnest. The language she brings to bear on this hand-crafted environment vibrates with an honesty that easily surpasses the repetitious “managed remoteness” and “planned romance” of wilderness writing (Ronald 11). While the terrarium exemplifies the very pinnacle of a “planned” and “managed” environment, Bailey subjects it to all of Lyon’s three features of nature writing, demonstrating how wild domesticity, and thus many other forms of human-impacted landscapes, may elevate the spirit if the mind is receptive: “The variety of mosses was so satisfying, from a deep, loose softness to dense mounds with fuzzy and velvety textures. Their hues ranged from bright grass greens to deep dark greens and from sharp lemon greens to light blue greens” (11). This is a landscape put together by Bailey and her caregivers within the four walls of her bedroom, and yet she visualizes it for the reader with an attention to tactile detail and nuance of color palette that rivals a wilderness nature writer’s enjoyment of similar features far away from human habitation. Bailey is tellingly not oblivious to this seeming incongruity. In the next paragraph, she performs a journey through memory, to describe how the same ferns that grace her terrarium live by the brook she used to hike along behind her home. Here she provides some classic natural history information about the ferns, acknowledging the magical nature of their survival and evolutionary adaptations. And yet, by taking her reader on this mental excursion into the terrain of conventional wilderness, Bailey brings the focus back to the domestic wildness of the terrarium, insisting that “[t]he fresh terrarium at my side was lovely all by itself—a green and growing ecosystem; that it provided a magnificent backdrop for the humble brown

snail was all the better" (29). The wilderness out there may be magical, but the domestic ecosystem of the terrarium is "magnificent" too. Bailey's placement of the botanical information about ferns next to her observations about the terrarium's plant life puts them on equal footing. The snail itself does not stay a "humble brown" for long either, as Bailey comes to write about it in increasingly glowing terms as their linkage grows.

Nelson argues that the transcendentalists saw a clear correlation between the character of a landscape and the writing to which it gave rise: "The wilder the landscape, the more romantically superior the writing would be" (3). Ronald similarly identifies a contemporary pattern in wilderness writing in which the visually biased hierarchy of settings determines the quality of the writing: "When a landscape calls for grandiose terms, an author will find the appropriate words; when a scene is less majestic, lesser language will do" (13) to the point of sometimes being "actually denigrating" (15). As Bailey's perspective on the snail shifts, as her values undergo their reorientation, she breaks from this pattern of denigration, and we see her descriptions undergo a commensurable adjustment towards celebration. Already in the following chapter "Life in a Microcosm," the snail becomes a being "that seemed to defy physics" (32). Here Bailey chronicles how the snail itself puts on work displays that beggar anything even the most physically fit nature writer would be able to perform as it moves "over the very tips of mosses without bending them, and it could travel straight up the stem of a fern and then continue upside down along the frond's underside" (32). Soon the humble brown has become "my elegant snail" (70), "a creature of Olympic caliber" (33) belonging to a more "critical" (87) ecological "niche on earth" than mammals (87). Bailey not only personally benefits from her change in perspective on the small-scale domestic wildness of the snail, gradually shifting from despair towards adjustment, acceptance, and, eventually, contentment. She also indirectly comments on the possibility of fulfilling the objectives of nature writing from a bedridden domesticity, where it should be doubly impossible.

Bailey's writing explores the potential for being open to finding unanticipated wonder in the unlikeliest of places and messiest of meshes between wild and domestic. Neither terraria nor horizontal confinement are commensurable with the popular core story the shrinking nature writer has sought while hiking in Abbey's shadow. Rather than copying an established script that relies on a prescribed aesthetic and codifies rugged individualism, Bailey's crip nature writing enacts a migration of the genre from its typical scales and terrains to foment values and perspectives that are stripped of exceptionalism and far more inclusive of ordinary experiences and human-influenced terrains than core wilderness adventure writing. Kafer notes the multiple unrecognized ways that nature reaches into the domestic sphere, such as through water in the tap (145). Bailey's terrarium is of course such a space, an oasis of profoundly altered nature within Bailey's apartment; the snail is of a common species and subjected to partial domestication, and Bailey herself is dependent on care and support from other people. Crip nature writing broadly might require more overt mediations of the human-nature experience than the wilderness

adventure which tends to downplay any diversity of experience, pretending the human is not there in every piece of equipment utilized by the adventuring writer from shoes to notebooks. And yet, the terrarium throbs with Waldenesque force and freshness in Bailey's sentences, and the snail asserts its wildness and lives its self-willed life in this space that also serves as a metaphor for wildlife more broadly in the Anthropocene. From her bedside, Bailey unapologetically shapes an aesthetic that dignifies different settings and different scales of perception, such as minute, ordinary, nearby and limited wilds.

Perhaps Bailey's accomplishment with her domestic wildness ultimately returns us to Thoreau's essay "Walking," briefly critiqued above as an example of ableism. Famous for its claim that "in wildness is the preservation of the world" (71), this essay especially may seem culpably implicated in the erection of the wild/domestic dichotomy, facilitating an evaluative separation of "the places where people live and a pristine, wild nature" that only a select few visit (Nelson 7). And yet that impression may be due to a legacy of distortive readings. While "Walking" may be part of the origin story of this troubling dichotomization, Nelson outlines how this stems from a sometimes deliberate truncation of "Thoreau's complicated wild ideas" that does "American literature a sad disservice" (7).<sup>4</sup> Contrary to what has become a conventional reading of Thoreau's thoughts on wildness, Nelson argues that Thoreau neither denigrated nor sought to expunge the domestic from his concept of wildness. Wildness was not a contrast to domesticity, but rather a force that could be found in all things just waiting to erupt (4). The snail oozing its way into Bailey's life triggers this eruption of wildness that both sets her on a path to spiritual healing and generates her crip nature writing. Thoreau's complicated wildness is more than spacious enough to productively align with Bailey's domestic wildness. It is precisely the capacity for wildness Thoreau believes is inherent to all things that Bailey taps into. Against the context of her illness, the most enduring contribution of Bailey's crip nature writing may be taking nature back home and showing just how powerful the tonic of domestic wildness can be if only you scratch the surface.

## Conclusion

In *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating*, Bailey's bedside becomes a site of profound genre-innovation and reappraisal of ecological values. The crip nature writing that emerges from her confinement to solitude and enforced rootedness provides a poignant and challenging alternative to narratives of able-bodied adventuring and physical transcendence in immaculate wilderness spaces. The disabled body, originally dismissed as a bizarre and unknowable landscape from which only one dismal avenue into the future could unfold, is inverted as a generative vantage point from which profound and meaningful meditations on nature are possible.

---

<sup>4</sup> Nelson analyses Roderick Frazier Nash's editing of "Walking" as an example of deliberately reshaping Thoreau's richer and more complex ideas about wildness into a simplified paean for wilderness.

Rejuvenation and ecological awakening come in the unlikeliest of shapes, the most ordinary and unassuming of woodland snails, whose swelling importance to the author stages an intervention in nature writing's favoritism towards organisms and landscapes with more traditionally obvious charismatic features. Far from being a passive object of observation, the snail becomes Bailey's "true mentor, its tiny existence had sustained me" (160). As Bailey's condition marginally improves, she finds that snail time requires more patience and concentration than before. This suggests that with improved physicality, the hard-won lessons imparted by the snail become trickier to sustain, so Bailey writes the following note to herself: "*Lots to do at whatever pace I can go. I must remember the snail. Always remember the snail*" (161, emphasis in original). Scott Slovic writes that one of the achievements of the Renaissance of American nature writing was cultivating an ability to "appreciate the unappreciated" dimensions of the arid landscapes of the desert Southwest. However, those landscapes have since been appreciated into tedium by shrinking nature writers producing iterative texts. Bailey's crip nature writing suggests ways of restoring nature writers to size by expanding the horizon of engagement to include ordinary creatures, local nature, limited wilds, other scales of being, alternate time frames, domestic wildness, disabled ecologies, and, most importantly, by learning to live deeply and meaningfully immersed in what surrounds us rather than in exclusionary sites of seemingly immaculate nature located so far away that only a privileged able-bodied few may experience them.

Submission received 23 February 2026 Revised version accepted 23 October 2026

## Works Cited

- Abrams, David. *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-human World*. Vintage, 1996.
- Bailey, Elisabeth Tova. *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating*. Algonquin Books, 2010.
- Baishya, Amit R. "Gastropods, Viruses, and Deep Time in *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating*." *Literature Interpretation Theory*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2022, pp 59-78.
- Comer, Krista. "Sidestepping Environmental Justice: Natural Landscapes and the Wilderness Plot." *Breaking Boundaries: New Perspectives in Women's Regional Writing*. University of Iowa Press, 1997, pp. 216-236.
- Cronon, William. "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature." William Cronon. [https://www.williamcronon.net/writing/Trouble with Wilderness Main.html](https://www.williamcronon.net/writing/Trouble%20with%20Wilderness%20Main.html). Accessed 21 Oct. 2026.
- Estok, Simon C. *The Ecophobia Hypothesis*. Routledge, 2018.
- Gessner, David. *Leave It as It Is: A Journey Through Theodore Roosevelt's American Wilderness*. Simon & Schuster, 2020.
- . *All the Wild That Remains: Edward Abbey, Wallace Stegner, and the American West*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2015.

- . *Sick of Nature*. Dartmouth College Press, 2004.
- . *My Green Manifesto: Down the River Charles in Pursuit of a New Environmentalism*. Milkweed, 2011.
- Haskell, David George. *Sounds Wild and Broken: Sonic Marvels, Evolution's Creativity, and the Crisis of Sensory Extinction*. Viking, 2022.
- Haupt, Lyanda Lynn. *The Urban Bestiary: Encountering the Everyday Wild*. Little, Brown and Company, 2013.
- Hauserman, Tim. "David Gessner: 'All the Wild That Remains.'" *Sierra Nevada Ally*, 12 Mar. 2023, <https://sierranevadaally.org/2023/03/12/david-gessner-all-the-wild-that-remains/>.
- Kafer, Alison. *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. Indiana University Press, 2013.
- Lewis, Talila A. "Working Definition of Ableism (English & ASL)—January 2022 Update." TL's Blog, 1 Jan. 2022, [www.talilalewis.com/blog/working-definition-of-ableism-january-2022-update](http://www.talilalewis.com/blog/working-definition-of-ableism-january-2022-update).
- Lyon, Thomas J., ed. *This Incomparable Land: A Book of American Nature Writing*. Houghton, 1989.
- Macfarlane, Robert. *Is a River Alive?* W. W. Norton, 2025.
- MacKinnon, J. B. "False Idyll." *The Best American Science and Nature Writing 2013*, edited by Siddhartha Mukherjee, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013, pp. 1-9.
- Marzluff, John M. *Welcome to Subirdia: Sharing Our Neighborhoods with Wrens, Robins, Woodpeckers, and Other Wildlife*. Illustrated by Jack DeLap, Yale University Press, 2014.
- Nelson, Barney. *The Wild and the Domestic: Animal Representation, Ecocriticism, and Western American Literature*. University of Nevada Press, 2000.
- Ray, Sarah Jaquette. "Risking Bodies in the Wild: The 'Corporeal Unconscious' of American Adventure Culture." *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, vol. 33, no 3, Aug. 2009, pp. 257-84.
- Ronald, Ann. *Reader of the Purple Sage: Essays on Western Writers and Environmental Literature*. University of Nevada P, 2003.
- Roorda, Randall. *Dramas of Solitude: Narratives of Retreat in American Nature Writing*. State University of New York Press, 1998.
- Slovic, Scott, ed. *Getting over the Color Green: Contemporary Environmental Literature of the Southwest*, University of Nevada Press, 2001.
- Strayed, Cheryl. *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*. Vintage Books, 2012.
- Taylor, Sunaura. *Disabled Ecologies: Lessons from a Wounded Desert*. University of California Press, 2024.
- Vallée, Jean-Marc. *Wild*. Searchlight Pictures, 2014.
- Wendell, Susan. *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability*. Routledge, 1996.