The rest of the trip passes in this way. We take turns riding the horses farther up the Middle Fork: here the rock walls loom a thousand feet above a canyon floor that narrows dramatically to the width of its river. Another few miles and the trail runs downhill, faster and faster, as the horses hurry to a grassy bottom land known as The Meadows. The scenery is breathtaking and we claim it as our own. No one has ever seen it, just this way, before. In the cooling twilights, we swim in the water hole. During an afternoon rain, we lie in our tents. We cook. We talk. We clean. Roberta and Carol take long walks together. Spouses, as usual, spar a little, and the children bicker. On our therma-rest pads, we all sleep well.

Later, driving home, I have to wonder why these four days have been such a success. Who was it—my husband, my children, my friends—who helped me to see, just a little more clearly, that I do not need to become more than I am to have a place in the wilderness? I do not need to love solitude more than the company of my own species. I do not need to become a man. Or a manager. The shrine is here already. The graves. The bowls and the baskets and the way we touch a baby or tell stories to children. I need only walk in.

EVELYN WHITE
b. 1954

Evelyn White worked as an editor and writer for the San Francisco Chronicle *from 1986 to 1995. She has also published two influential books relating to African American women's health and well-being. The first edition of* Chain, Chain, Change: For Black Women Dealing with Physical and Emotional Abuse *appeared in 1985.* The Black Women's Health Book: Speaking for Ourselves, *a volume which she edited, came out in 1990. Her essay that appears here, "Black Women and the Wilderness," makes an important and original contribution to the discussion of ways in which racial, sexual, cultural, and political factors affect people's experience of nature.*

Black Women and the Wilderness

> I wanted to sit outside and listen to the roar of the ocean, but I was afraid.
> I wanted to walk through the redwoods, but I was afraid.
> I wanted to glide in a kayak and feel the cool water splash in my face, but I was afraid.

For me, the fear is like a heartbeat, always present, while at the same time, intangible, elusive, and difficult to define. So pervasive, so much a part of me, that I hardly knew it was there.

In fact, I wasn't fully aware of my troubled feelings about nature until I was invited to teach at a women's writing workshop held each summer on the McKenzie River in the foothills of Oregon's Cascade Mountains. I was invited to Flight of the Mind by a Seattle writer and her friend, a poet who had moved from her native England to Oregon many years before. Both committed feminists, they asked me to teach because they believe, as I do, that language and literature transcend the man-made boundaries that are too often placed upon them. I welcomed and appreciated their interest in me and my work.

Once I got there, I did not welcome the steady stream of invitations to explore the great outdoors. It seemed like the minute I finished my teaching duties, I'd be faced with a student or fellow faculty member clamoring for me to trek to the lava beds, soak in the hot springs, or hike into the mountains that loomed over the site like white-capped security guards. I claimed fatigue, a backlog of classwork, concern about "proper" student/teacher relations; whatever the excuse, I always declined to join the expeditions into the woods. When I wasn't teaching, eating in the dining hall, or attending our evening readings, I stayed holed up in my riverfront cabin with all doors locked and windowshades drawn. While the river's roar gave me a certain comfort and my heart warmed when I gazed at the sun-dappled trees out of a classroom window, I didn't want to get closer. I was certain that if I ventured outside to admire a meadow or to feel the cool ripples in a stream, I'd be taunted, attacked, raped, maybe even murdered because of the color of my skin.

I believe the fear I experience in the outdoors is shared by many African-American women and that it limits the way we move through the

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world and colors the decisions we make about our lives. For instance, for several years now, I've been thinking about moving out of the city to a wooded, vineyard-laden area in Northern California. It is there, among the birds, creeks, and trees that I long to settle down and make a home.

Each house-hunting trip I've made to the countryside has been fraught with two emotions: elation at the prospect of living closer to nature and a sense of absolute doom about what might befall me in the backwoods. My genetic memory of ancestors hunted down and preyed upon in rural settings counters my fervent hopes of finding peace in the wilderness. Instead of the solace and comfort I seek, I imagine myself in the country as my forebears were—exposed, vulnerable, and unprotected—a target of cruelty and hate.

I'm certain that the terror I felt in my Oregon cabin is directly linked to my memories of September 15, 1963. On that day, Denise McNair, Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, and Carol Robertson were sitting in their Sunday school class at the Sixteenth Street Church in Birmingham, Alabama. Before the bright-eyed black girls could deliver the speeches they'd prepared for the church's annual Youth Day program, a bomb planted by racists flattened the building, killing them all. In black households throughout the nation, families grieved for the martyred children and expressed their outrage at whites who seemed to have no limits on the depths they would sink in their ultimately futile effort to curtail the civil rights movement.

To protest the Birmingham bombing and to show solidarity with the struggles in the South, my mother bought a spool of black cotton ribbon which she fashioned into armbands for me and my siblings to wear to school the next day. Nine years old at the time, I remember standing in my house in Gary, Indiana, and watching in horror as my mother ironed the black fabric that, in my mind, would align me with the bloody dresses, limbless bodies, and dust-covered patent leather shoes that had been entombed in the blast.

The next morning, I put on my favorite school dress—a V-necked cranberry jumper with a matching cranberry-and-white pin-striped shirt. Motionless, I stared stoically straight ahead, as my mother leaned down and pinned the black ribbon around my right sleeve shortly before I left the house.

As soon as I rounded the corner at the end of our street, I ripped the ribbon off my arm, looking nervously up into the sky for the "evil white people" I'd heard my parents talk about in the aftermath of the bombing. I feared that if I wore the armband, I'd be blown to bits like the black girls who were that moment rotting under the rubble. Thirty years later, I know that another part of my "defense strategy" that day

was to wear the outfit that had always garnered me compliments from teachers and friends. "Don't drop a bomb on me," was the message I was desperately trying to convey through my cranberry jumper. "I'm a pretty black girl. Not like the ones at the church."

The sense of vulnerability and exposure that I felt in the wake of the Birmingham bombing was compounded by feelings that I already had about Emmett Till. Emmett was a rambunctious, fourteen-year-old black boy from Chicago, who in 1955 was sent to rural Mississippi to enjoy the pleasures of summer with relatives. Emmett was delivered home in a pine box long before season's end bloated and battered beyond recognition. He had been lynched and dumped in the Tallahatchie River with the rope still dangling around his neck for allegedly whistling at a white woman at a country store.

Those summers in Oregon when I walked past the country store where thick-necked loggers drank beer while leaning on their big rig trucks, it seemed like Emmett's fate had been a part of my identity from birth. Averting my eyes from those of the loggers, I'd remember the ghoulish photos of Emmett I'd seen in *JET* magazine with my childhood friends Tyrone and Lynette Henry. The Henrys subscribed to *JET*, an inexpensive magazine for blacks, and kept each issue neatly filed on the top shelf of a bookcase in their living room. Among black parents, the *JET* with Emmett's story was always carefully handled and treated like one of the most valuable treasures on earth. For within its pages rested an important lesson they felt duty-bound to teach their children: how little white society valued our lives.

Mesmerized by Emmett's monstrous face, Lynette, Tyrone, and I would drag a flower-patterned vinyl chair from the kitchen, take the Emmett *JET* from the bookcase, and spirit it to a back bedroom where we played. Heads together, bellies on the floor as if we were shooting marbles or scribbling in our coloring books, we'd silently gaze at Emmett's photo for what seemed like hours before returning it to its sacred place. As with thousands of black children from that era, Emmett's murder cast a nightmarish pall over my youth. In his pummeled and contorted face, I saw a reflection of myself and the blood-chilling violence that would greet me if I ever dared to venture into the wilderness.

I grew up. I went to college. I traveled abroad. Still, thoughts of Emmett Till could leave me speechless and paralyzed with the heart-stopping fear that swept over me as when I crossed paths with loggers near the McKenzie River or whenever I visited the outdoors. His death seemed to be summed up in the prophetic warning of writer Alice Walker, herself a native of rural Georgia: "Never be the only one, except, possibly, in your own house."

For several Oregon summers, I concealed my pained feelings about the outdoors until I could no longer reconcile my silence with my mandate to my students to face their fears. They found the courage to write openly about incest, poverty, and other ills that had constricted their lives: How could I turn away from my fears about being in nature?

But the one time I'd attempted to be as bold as my students, I'd been faced with an unsettling incident. Legend had it that the source of the McKenzie was a tiny trickle of water that bubbled up from a pocket in a nearby lake. Intrigued by the local lore, two other Flight teachers and a staff person, all white women, invited me to join them on an excursion to the lake. The plan was to rent rowboats and paddle around the lake Sacajawea-style, until we, brave and undaunted women, "discovered the source" of the mighty river. As we approached the lake, we could see dozens of rowboats tied to the dock. We had barely begun our inquiry about renting one when the boathouse man interrupted and tersely announced: "No boats."

We stood shocked and surprised on a sun-drenched dock with a vista of rowboats before us. No matter how much we insisted that our eyes belied his words, the man held fast to his two-note response: "No boats."

Distressed but determined to complete our mission, we set out on foot. As we trampled along the trail that circled the lake we tried to make sense of our "Twilight Zone" encounter. We laughed and joked about the incident and it ultimately drifted out of our thoughts in our jubilation at finding the gurgling bubble that gave birth to the McKenzie. Yet I'd always felt that our triumph was undermined by a searing question that went unvoiced that day: Had we been denied the boat because our group included a black?

In an effort to contain my fears, I forced myself to revisit the encounter and to reexamine my childhood wounds from the Birmingham bombing and the lynching of Emmett Till. I touched the terror of my Ibo and Ashanti ancestors as they were dragged from Africa and enslaved on southern plantations. I conjured bloodhounds, burning crosses, and white-robed Klansmen hunting down people who looked just like me. I imagined myself being captured in a swampy backwater, my back ripped open and bloodied by the whip's lash. I cradled an ancestral mother, broken and keening as her baby was snatched from her arms and sold down the river.

Every year, the Flight of the Mind workshop offers a rafting trip on the McKenzie River. Each day we'd watch as flotillas of rafters, shrieking excitedly and with their oars held aloft, rumbled by the deck where students and teachers routinely gathered. While I always cheered their adventuresome spirit, I never joined the group of Flight women who took the trip. I was always mindful that I had never seen one black person in any of those boats.

Determined to reconnect myself to the comfort my African ancestors felt in the rift valleys of Kenya and on the shores of Sierra Leone, I eventually decided to go on a rafting trip. Familiar with my feelings about nature, Judith, a dear friend and workshop founder, offered to be one of my raftmates.

With her sturdy, gentle and wise body as my anchor, I lowered myself into a raft at the bank of the river. As we pushed off into the current, I felt myself make an unsure but authentic shift from my painful past.

At first the water was calm—nearly hypnotic in its pristine tranquility. Then we met the rapids, sometimes swirling, other times jolting us forward like a runaway roller coaster. The guide roared out commands, "Highside! All forward! All back!" To my amazement, I responded. Periodically, my brown eyes would meet Judith's steady aquamarine gaze and we'd smile at each other as the cool water splashed in our faces and shimmered like diamonds in our hair.

Charging over the river, orange life vest firmly secured, my breathing relaxed and I allowed myself to drink in the stately rocks, soaring birds, towering trees, and affirming anglers who waved their rods as we rushed by in our raft. About an hour into the trip, in a magnificently still moment, I looked up into the heavens and heard the voice of black poet Langston Hughes:

"I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins. I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young. I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep. I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it. My soul has grown deep like the rivers."

Soaking wet and shivering with emotion, I felt tears welling in my eyes as I stepped out of the raft onto solid ground. Like my African forebears who survived the Middle Passage, I was stronger at journey's end.

Since that voyage, I've stayed at country farms, napped on secluded beaches, and taken wilderness treks all in an effort to find peace in the outdoors. No matter where I travel, I will always carry Emmett Till and the four black girls whose deaths affected me so. But comforted by our tribal ancestors—herders, gatherers, and fishers all—I am less fearful, ready to come home.