MY MAGIC MANIFESTO
By Katherine Savage

Katherine Savage lives next to the same patch of woods in which—as a child—she played, dreamed, and learned about being wild. Though this patch is thin now, the woods continue to speak; and she, in love with listening, keeps paper and pen with her at all times. She translates what she hears into invitations to others to join her there.

Since the moment I identified a metaphor at Mrs. Allgood’s blackboard in junior high English, it has thrilled me to see that two things appearing different on the outside can stand together in meaning. Finding the link between an experience and its abstract meaning began with a pleasure in knowing I could, but has since become my gateway into mystery and magic. Magic, by definition, is an act which startles our senses and shakes us loose from our boundaries of what to accept as real. To drop below my perceived experience to see what meaning can be made was and is a magical act—a suspension of belief that my direct experience is all. To make metaphor, or connect what “is” with how and why, is a way of saying, “this is instructive, and worthy of my notice.” In each small jolt of joy where significance is found, I am unhinged from my impoverished views of what it means to be “me.” Making meaning at the blackboard required the brain maturation to perceive how an object’s physical characteristics could be representative of a deeper truth about how life “is,” and also a spiritual desire to lean in to the mystery of being human. To feel the thrill of magic, I also needed seemingly unexplainable experiences that contrasted with what I knew to be standard and ordinary. I was blessed to have a childhood where love and security were predictable. I was given time to play at magic with toys, and pretend to be somewhere and someone else. My parents lovingly offered the seeds of magic through the promise of rich rewards if only I believed in what I could not see—Easter bunnies and fairies and Santa and an interventionist God.

But I was also given a small patch of woods, seemingly boundary-less to my young legs, in which to play behind my childhood home. It was here that I encountered the first tinglings of real magic, in the form of visible communication from the other side and through the thin membrane that separates us from the numinous. This communication from the more-than-human world would eventually become the wand and ink for the story by which I told my life, that would inform how I was to “be.” As a child however, the first magic of the woods was its mystery, and how it stood in contrast to the controlled experiences of my home—with predictable parents and siblings, predictable expectations of being fed and sheltered, and predictable experiences of going to school on weekdays and church on Sunday. Entering the woods was a transaction in which I traded safety, predictability, and knowing—for risk, wildness, and wonder.

In the tension of the contrast—between wildness and control, between safety and surrendering—I took in what was and had no need of explaining it or making metaphors. I saw beauty for beauty’s sake in the garments of berries, leaves, wildflowers, and nuts. I felt on and
under my skin the changes in the seasons and the rhythm of being and doing. I shivered with fear at the copperhead not shy about appearing with poisoned fangs; the crawdad’s fending off capture with scissoring claws; the spring-flooded, raging creek washing away the life of a neighbor’s dog; the looming dark sending me scurrying for a lit, warm home. I squealed with delight in the surprises of a salamander under an overturned rock; the tiny brown jug beneath the heart-shaped, ginger-scented leaf; the white bloom turned green apple in the fork between fringed umbrellas; the stark singularity of a ghostly white lily against the groggy April forest floor.

I tried to merge my controlled, predictable world with that of nature—rearranging wildflowers to make gardens, and rocks in the creek to make patterns. I designated rooms by what grew where and the availability of light. Studying field guides, I bestowed honor by learning and greeting the flowers, trees, and creatures by name. I participated in magic by making houses for the fairies and mud cake offerings to their spirits. These were the meanings I’d made from my experiences with other humans, and by bringing them to wildness, I made an offering to the wild world. And in turn, it responded. When I controlled by moving wildflowers, it washed away what I’d planted in the creek’s flood path, and allowed the finicky lady slipper to slip away rather than go on without her pine tree companions. For my rock and acorn designs, it showed me patterns of bark and snake skin. There were experiences beyond words for every word I offered. To my offerings for unseeable beings, it showed me the abundant generosity of things to one another—like leaf cover for shade, or shafts of air space for sun.

For each human construct I made and offered, it showed me the derivation of those gestures, and in its doing so, I came to know the Source of all that is worth knowing. In studying the nuances of creaturely and plant behavior, I touched my own animal nature and was changed. The tension with which I’d played—of knowing and not knowing—lost its tenseness, and became instead the magic that is being alive now in what “is” before we die. I was a witness there to the shared impulse to gracefully rise out of the earth and then return. I could not have become a believer in magic without these experiences, as the gift of hearing the direct communication of life forms here or gone on is not mine.

At the age of nine, my patch of woods was taken from me and leveled to build homes for others. What had been borderless in its abundance became thin. I saw the earth bleed red rivulets of clay into the creek; I smelled the sour stench of earth rent unnaturally; I saw the inconsolable grief of my mother as she desperately dug in front of huge, earth-moving machines to save rare beauties.
In this my first lesson of true sin, I learned that what was holy to me was not necessarily recognizable to others, that humans will destroy what they don’t know to love. Nature for most was a mystery solvable by science, and magic was only slight-of-hand tricks in Las Vegas. I understood that human unknowing was huge and blind in its power, my parents could not protect me from its effects, and it would be all I could do with my whole life to stand in its way and point in the other direction.

I had played in a magical garden of blessing, and it was no longer. And with that loss, the meanings I’d made of my life began comingling in consolation, finding in conviviality the ones that aligned with the only question that has since mattered—how do I return? Will this path take me to another thin strip or to deep abundance? Might this person go with me, or will they divert me into a false world of human constructs? How can I offer a vision, and a hand into it? Does this action express gratitude for the mystery of my being, or suspicion that I am an accident of enormous proportions?

And because of that loss, wild nature has nothing to prove to me about its right to be; humans on the other hand—myself included—do. The instructions I received in wildness became the crucible by which I would decide what was worthy of bringing along and what to lay down. How could I know what of human behavior, of my own behavior, was reflective of the Source from which mystery was speaking its meaning? How could I believe that communication from the numinous was intentional, that there is something that wants to imbue my life with meaning? Only from what I had seen of nature’s porous boundaries. Are you animated by the communications of the more-than-human community, which say that we are all—rock, tree, bird, and human—going to dissolve from this form to feed another?

And what to make of other people’s experiences of magic that are not mine? If the communication of meaning is the moment in which magic becomes visible and palpable, then its form matters not. If your magic is about and for humans alone, or signifies your exceptionalism to other’s inferiority, then it won’t receive my reverence or faith in its ability to shake us loose of experiential boundaries. But if your magic keeps the flow of communication with wild nature open in all directions, I say “yes.” If your magic is a response to the invitation to fully embody the rising up of our best animal selves and returning ourselves as seeds to the ground, I say “yes” again. I believe, without seeing, the many expressions of faith in that very magic.

Therefore, I say yes to astrology, and to attuning our life choices to the movement and alignment of planetary bodies. Yes to shamanism, and feeding the spirits of nature lest we forget to maintain a reciprocal connection with the rest of creation. Yes to synchronicity, and setting an intent to expect magic when we send our best intentions out into the world. Yes to plant and animal whisperers. Yes to seers of auras and those who have passed, whose sensitivities open us directly to communication with human form turned pure energy. The magic is that we can express our faith in so many ways, and that we are all saying the same thing:

    Thank you, thank you, thank you.