

From *The Key Room* at Headlands Center for the Arts by Carrie Hott

NAVIGATION

MEMORY

SEA

SEEDS

GHOSTS

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A FOG BATH
AND SEED SEARCH
IN THREE PARTS

Since the spring, I have taken an interest in rare/endangered native California plant species. As of October 2020, the California Native Plant Society (CNPS) listed 132 rare or endangered native plant species in Marin County, with 37 species found in survey quads containing the Marin Headlands. On walks around the Headlands, I have enjoyed keeping an eye out for these plants in particular. Of the 37 endangered or rare native plant species found in or near the Headlands, five still bloom in October: Carlotta Hall's lace fern, ocean bluff milk-vetch, Point Reyes bird's-beak, congested-headed hayfield tar-plant, and water star-grass.

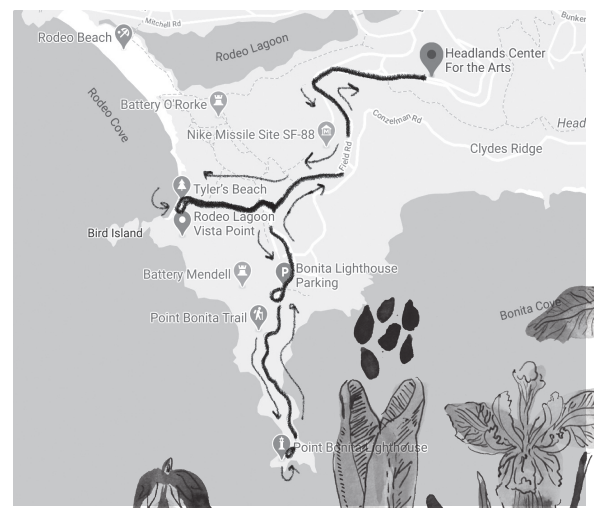
Of the October bloomers, I was especially drawn to the ocean bluff milk-vetch (*Astragalus nuttallii* var. *nuttallii*), for its name and vaguely cephalopodic appearance. Rooted loosely in sandy coastal soils, this perennial herb bears a conical cluster of cream-colored blooms resembling the heads of squid, with tiny maroon veins and a vaguely cortical patch of pale yellow at their tips. Its leaves are arranged in a branching pattern similar to that of ferns, and it produces downy, blush-colored seed pods that look papery to the touch. The plant is endemic to California and ostensibly threatened by foot traffic and road maintenance; its range is limited but it is not in danger of disappearing just yet. I have never seen it in person and suspect I maybe never will.

II: Not Knowing

I looked out for *astragalus nuttallii* var. *nuttallii* during a recent walk along one of my favorite routes, the loop from the Headlands Center for the Arts to South Rodeo Beach and Point Bonita, and back. While walking past the juicy carpets of invading ice plants around the South Rodeo Beach Trail, I spotted a spray of vines that bore some resemblance to the leaves of *astragalus nuttallii*. Similar branching pattern, the same tapered little leaves, like the fingernails of elves. But I could not imagine that the endangered ocean bluff milk-vetch would give itself up so easily. I uploaded a photograph onto my iNaturalist app, which suggested that I was looking at the giant vetch (*Vicia gicantea*) instead. I could not tell the

difference between the two vetches. Yet there was something comforting about thinking that *astragalus nuttallii* lay hidden in that bush, commingling with its vetch cousin and pretending to be something it was not in order to be left alone.

At low tide, the artist Judit Navratil and her daughters once showed me a buffet spread of fleshy pink blobs, as smooth as silicone and hard as glass. Were they plants? Animals? What do you call an animal that looks like a seed? We later learned they were colonies of filter-feeding zooids, tunicates called sea pork. During low tide, the water at Rodeo Beach cove retreats far enough to reveal rocks glistening with barnacles, mussels and anemones, some as big as saucers. Ever since I learned that some anemones can live for over 100 years and theoretically can self-propagate in perpetuum, I have looked at them with new respect. As anyone who has propagated a branch or succulent leaf knows, many plants possess a similar talent for perpetuality. Perhaps it is the quietest, most un-spectacular beings that will outlast all else.



III: A Love Letter to Fog and Unfindable Plants

As I approached Point Bonita, the pelagic fog began to wrap me in a pale feltlike grey diffused with a nacreous white light. The sun looked like a full diurnal moon framed by a ring of fuzzing ivory. Foghorns bellowed in the distance. Due to Covid-19, the passage to the Point Bonita Trail was closed, although I was happy enough to bathe in the fog and look for the telltale clustered blooms, seed pods and tendrils of *astragalus nuttallii*. I saw none, but my close inspection of the sandy soil revealed other treasures: thistles, fennels, wormwoods and sagebrush. Roots of Monterey cypress dangled from flaking sheets of cliff like creatures passing between two realms, half-buried within stone yet poised to take flight.

I like a clear blue sky yet I love the Headlands fog more. It is like an entire valley of ghosts rising to meet you, and it receives you like a cautious animal, giving you just enough detail with which to discern your basic surroundings but not enough for you to feel as if you know a place, because this place is not knowable completely, never will be. We will never know what it looked like 400 years ago, when it was inhabited and tended to by the Coast Miwok; we will never know how the hills and meadows and forests and valleys were shaped by fire, wind and stone at that time. Will we ever really understand the deep ecologies of a place when we don't even know exactly which animals, which plants, were birthed and died in this place, decomposed into molecules and atoms,

later reassembled as stone and absorbed by hungry roots?

Fog is essentially the product of cold and warm fronts colliding, condensation born of barometric difference, a cloud so low-lying it appears before us as skeins of diaphanous liquid hovering just above the ground. The fog troubles certainty, occludes it visibly. It reminds us that we are encountering a space of indeterminacy, of palimpsestic temporal registers, where histories across time and space collide to produce haunted atmospheres. Karen Barad defines hauntings "not [as] mere rememberings of a past (assumed to be) left behind ... but rather [as] the dynamism of ontological indeterminacy of time-being/being-time in its materiality," which extends the definition of haunting from simply being a manifestation of one's subjective response to a site. Rather, it seeds the ground for a conception of landscapes as a geological skin, on which time is nonlinear and constantly collapsing, ontological binarism is nonexistent, and a valley holds both the scars of its wounding and the seeds yet to germinate.

In Braiding Sweetgrass, Robin Wall Kimmerer writes that when we listen in wild places, "we are audience to conversations in a language not our own." The Marin Headlands are hardly wild, despite their green splendor: they are landscaped, organized. Yet there remain many pockets of strangeness, of unsettling animacy, of weirdness, of ghosts and in-betweens. What do you see and hear when the fog rolls in? Which plants, animals and stones call to you? What do they ask you to attend to, what do they ask you to love?

