



Falling into Place

An Intimate Geography of Home

CATHERINE REID

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Beacon Press, Boston

To the memory of my grandmother

H. Ruth Dwelley

(1904–2005)

and to Holly Iglesias

Oh, earth, you are too wonderful for anybody to realize you. Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it—every, every minute?

—FROM EMILY'S SOLILOQUY IN *OUR TOWN*,
BY THORNTON WILDER

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Song Heart Rail

ICE UNFURLS FROM THE window in the steam of morning sun, and we move into the day with coffee, with dreams, with whatever scenes we can remember from the night. We've had this ritual since we first woke up together, a way to linger over the life we cohabit in sleep, though our very different imaginations mean we never fully share it. My dreams are fairly straightforward, a reliving of earlier dramas, while Holly's—cinematic and multilayered—is part of the reason I read little fiction these days. It would be tough to find action wilder than her subconscious produces.

I tell her how I moved between worlds when an owl called in my dream and was still calling as I awakened. A second owl answered from deeper in the pines, a pair of great horned owls, keeping track of each other. I could feel them in a night sharp with stars and bitter air and knew the nesting had begun, their eggs timed to open on a cold February day.

Holly laughs; she can't believe that owls incubate eggs under a blanket of snow. She is more amused, however, at my selective hearing, that a noise I care about might wake me while another will not. She makes her point by updating me on her son, who is seaming together the pieces after an awful rift with his dad. I'm not sure why she is bringing this up now, and then I get it: She talked on the phone with him in the night, and I never even heard her rush from the bed to the kitchen. I hadn't caught that other sound that gladdens my life—the tenor of her voice when she talks to one of her kids, like the softening air of April in a house still locked in winter's chill.

I slept through it all until the hooting of that owl.



I understand the mechanics of hearing; I even know most of the vocabulary—the tiny bones of hammer, anvil, and stirrup that vibrate in response to a sound wave; the fluid-filled cochlea that registers those vibrations; the hairs that relay the messages along nerve cells to the brain. I understand how discerning we are, too; that the sounds we prefer are the ones our bodies know best, like our fondness for the iambic foot that beats our heart rhythms.

But not all sound enters through our ears, at least not in my understanding of the world. I can't explain how it happens, how some sounds catch us and others don't, but it's on my mind when I show up for the first meeting of the Wetland Birds Project, believing that, as a volunteer, I will simply head out to some designated site with binoculars and a bird guide to make a list of what I hear, and then go home for lunch. But it's not that simple. First I will have to pass a quiz. I will have to sit inside a small room with other would-be volunteers and identify birds solely by their songs. To prepare, we're each given a tape of fifty likely calls and told to come back in several weeks for the test.

At home, I pull on headphones and close my eyes. Almost immediately I'm back inside the wildlife refuge I frequented when living in North Florida, surrounded by the jostle and bickering of ducks and egrets in an orgy of feasting before the day's heat hardens the salt flats. Coots and moorhens whinny as they skitter in and out of the reeds. Herons and ibis clonk and grunt through the shallows, jabbing and shoving with a roughness they will repeat at dusk, when they fly into already crowded trees, hundreds of ungainly purple-black or white birds

elbowing a space in the dark crowns of oak and cypress.

I have to stop the tape. I had never thought about the ways the refuge and its noises might have crept into my own life. An upheaval in my days as a graduate student at Florida State and I would head for the Gulf for the quiet of endless flat water. Yet in that land where oak and marsh meet pine islands and sea, even the fiddler crabs scabble at high speed, and the alligator groans sound restless and haunting. All that resonance must have seeped into my cells. In a land teeming with the most primitive of needs—eat, sleep, mate, shove, scratch, pule—the sounds had to have entered me, permeating skin and lungs, ratcheting joy into full-bodied exuberance, a tumbling taking place in the same weeks when Holly's and my paths first crossed, she, too, a new graduate student, she, too, attending Quaker Meeting, she, too, on the editorial board of a newly launched literary journal.

Here in western Massachusetts, where we moved several years later, everything is quiet—at least on the surface—the woods, the ponds, the fumbling, my heart. Most of the time, I like the familiarity of it; I like having to work to find the source of some noise. But sometimes the silence confuses me; I miss the bump of bodies, the thrash of wings and feet, the wrangling of high-volume Carolina wrens. Here, a great blue heron feeds by itself, and we nod at the shared solemnity. A raven calls from a rocky ridge, and we listen as though we were a sage.

This tape recording, however, suggests that north-south distinctions can't tell the whole story, that the wetlands contain a world of sound that I haven't fully experienced. I rewind the tape and start again. This time I find myself in a mosquito-filled dawn, the kind of hour when few of us choose to visit such sites, yet my body responds with a hunger to see and smell such a place, to know what lifts from the cattails and stirs from the silt.

I open my eyes and see the cat pacing in front of me, her eyes focused on my ears. I hear Holly's laugh and realize I repeated the hooded merganser's call out loud, *awww, whaaa*, a drawn-out, guttural sound, conjuring a creature more reptilian than avian, something low-bellied and unable to get airborne. As I compare the list of names against the calls I just heard, I imagine the birds' cries drifting over people living close to them, sleepers exposed in the deepest hours of their dreams. I see how impulse might grip them later in a day, having nothing to do with their workplaces, their gene pools, their lists of chores to be done. I imagine artists and musicians, drifting toward swamps before dawn and finding new themes for their work in the way air is sucked and poured by these elusive, secretive birds.

A few days later, a friend comes to visit, puts on a new CD, and I hear such a process made real. Composer Lee Hyla has interwoven ivory-billed woodpecker and piano and baritone. The bird's hard cry is a percussive surprise—like “the high false note of a clarinet,” as Audubon once wrote—and the sound takes us to the southern swamps and old-growth forests that the bird last inhabited. While the bird is probably extinct, its voice never again to be heard in the wild, for the moment, here it is, in this room, a call provided to Hyla by the Smithsonian, and maybe finding a place right now, inside each of us, to come forth sometime later when we are least aware of the reason.



Late-winter storms have left a foot of snow where I should be seeing garden, and I pass my free time with the headphones on, repeating voices I hadn't learned as a kid. It's a competitive thing, wanting to do well on the quiz, but mostly it's an odd experience, listening

to a call isolated from the bird itself, with no hint of habitat or season, no sense of whether I'm looking into the crown of a tree, a tangle of marsh grass, or the scrub at the edge of a meadow. It's simply a call and then a man's voice, reciting the bird's name, as disconnected from its source as listening to a heartbeat and not taking into account breath and hair and skin.

I work to affix visual images that will help me remember each call—the wood duck squeak like air through a party favor, the king rail's click like a hammer on metal, the Virginia rail's wheeze like a windup toy losing speed. The method works and I pass the quiet though a few names won't surface as fast as I want, refusing to slip off my tongue the way a song recently surfaced for Holly, when I shouted out of a bad dream, and she started humming a lullaby before she was fully awake, the soothing tune returning both of us to sleep. She had years of practice, however, through the raising of two children, and I am still figuring out the many levels at which we listen.



It's cold when I conduct the first survey, even though it's already two hours past dawn. But the rain has stopped at last, after nine days of powerful storms and an afternoon of hail. In the stillness, every twig and blade of grass is mirrored in quiet water. Across the small pond two fat ducklings paddle and spin, no parent duck in sight, while three swallows dart above. A muskrat angles away from me, its swath of ripples distorting every image, but little else moves in this post-storm cool.

I arrange the gear I'll need to make the necessary field notes—compass, thermometer, binoculars, clipboard—check the time, and start the tape. Each of the eight birds selected for this study depends on cattail marshes like these for its survival, and such marshes are being destroyed at unprecedented rates. For too long wetlands seemed undesirable—boggy, malarial, unbuildable—and it took years to understand their role as the catch basins of floodwater, storing and filtering pollutants before they drain into rivers. The health of such aquifers can be assessed by the health of these birds, which function the way canaries do for miners.

The findings to date have been rather bleak. The king rail may have been driven out of the region; both the American and least bitterns are considered endangered; and the sedge wren is now the rarest of all the state's nesting songbirds. Two recent river spills add to the rising concern. In one, a derailed train car sent six thousand gallons of latex solution pouring into the water. In the other, sulfuric acid was flushed into one of the larger tributaries, killing two tons of fish in the first two miles, the acid so powerful it melted flesh on contact.

No bird calls back to the tape during the time that I wait, and I pack up the gear and drive to my next site, assigned to me because my kayak is light enough to drag through the woods and easy enough to paddle through the shallows of this dark pond. A wood duck explodes from a nearby nesting box; a hooded merganser watches from another. I wish they were proof of a fine water source, but they're more rugged than the birds I'm after and less choosy about where they take up residence. The birds I want to see teeter in a far more narrow zone.

I stow the equipment, lower into the kayak, and paddle to the opposite shore. Once there, I back into the cattails, strap the tape recorder to the deck, and settle in to wait. For the next few minutes my whole focus is on sound. Eventually I begin listing birds on the data mapping form, separating their calls from the lap of waves against the hull, the chuck of a distant chipmunk, a truck laboring up a nearby hill. But when the grebe's eerie call rises from the

tape, suddenly it's twenty years ago and I'm back in northern Vermont, hearing this same cry from a nearby river. I never knew for sure whether it was even a bird I was hearing, and nothing about that habitat—hardscrabble farmland on the edge of boreal forest—was quite right for something that sounded more at home in the company of wild monkeys.

But this was it—a tiny, pied-billed grebe, barely twelve inches long, emitting such a weird cry that it burrowed deep into my brain and stayed there, rooted, for over two decades, until the combination of cold morning wetlands and conifers dislodged it.

A pair of noisy Canada geese (CAGO) brings me back and I list all I hear, using the standard four-letter codes: RWBL (red-winged blackbird). TRSW (tree swallows). GRHE (green-backed heron), its sharp-edged cry like the clacking of swords.

Once again, however, I hear none of the targeted birds.



After spending so much time with these calls, I feel them occupying space inside me, and though this very act of close listening, a kind of cupping of my whole body, has fixed them in my cells. I still don't know what brings them into consciousness, however, or how a sound might trigger awareness before we even know that we've heard it. What I do know is that there have been times over the years when I walked across a field and knew I had to veer left or right, fast, and each time I did, I soon saw what I was avoiding—usually a stream of wasps zipping in and out of an underground nest—probably because my body had picked up some almost inaudible hum.

Sometimes, however, the timing is scrambled, as with my father's recent heart surgery. He had very little warning, maybe a week or so to prepare, and in one of those days he had seen a truck hit a deer. He told me about it the day before he left for the hospital, and that he had seen the deer hobble into the woods near his house but hadn't been able to do anything about it.

I forgot about it, of course. My father's chest was being sawn open, his strongest and most fragile muscle lifted out—the one we all suspected would fail him at this very age—and imagining him healthy again was all I could do. Afterward, I wanted nothing more than to sit by his bedside with my mother and Holly, with my brothers and sisters, and watch him open his eyes, and listen to him breathe, and take pleasure from the warming of his skin. And then he could cough, and then stand, and then eat a small meal on his own.

The fourth morning, the worst clearly over, we were slower to leave the house for the hospital. My mother had made a special breakfast, a way to thank us for staying with her during Dad's absence, and then something insisted I go outside. "I won't be long," I said, taking their dog and heading for the woods. I chose a direction I never take, past the orange apple trees, over a fence, and through a screen of small hemlocks. And then I saw it, though I had been summoned, as though its moan had called me to this site: The injured deer was just ahead, trying to move, its hind legs broken, a sudden jerk carrying it a few yards forward. When it collapsed, it pulled in its forelegs, its eyes never leaving us, its ears in constant motion.

I grabbed the dog. I watched the heave of the deer's sides. I felt its labored breathing against the silence of the woods. And then I knew I should call one of my three brothers, two of whom have guns and could dispatch it fast. But any free time they had would be spent at the hospital. So I called the police instead and left the dog inside. When the officers arrived, I le

them to the deer, turning away as the single shot was fired. Almost immediately a weight lifted from my shoulders. Whatever sounds the deer might have been making—the flutter of its nose and ears, the pumping of its breath—had relaxed their hold on my limbs. Whatever terror we had shared was gone as well.



Two weeks later, as I pole my kayak through a snarl of laurel bushes, an American bittern booms so close the sound seems to come from inside the boat. I feel the vibrations against my back and thighs and wonder if I accidentally hit the recorder's play button when stowing the gear. Then I see the bird ahead of me, about twice the size of a crow, and poised to do battle if I insist on paddling forward.

I do. Carefully. At such close range, the bird's voice is not at all like a mallet against a stake, the usual description given for its call (or, as Thoreau once portrayed it, as if the bird "had taken the job of extending all the fences up the river to keep the cows from straying"). It sounds more like a bang on the skin of a long drum. "*Oong-ka-choonk*," according to the ornithologist Roger Tory Peterson, though I think you have to feel the shift in tongue action to know it, the big *oong* both a gulp and a click, a sound probably only the !Kung or Xhosa people can instinctively make.

Fortunately, it doesn't follow through on its threat, though it flies alongside my boat keeping me warned and cautious. As I back into the cattails, the bittern positions itself in a shrub barely three kayak-lengths away. I spread out my gear. Slowly. Nothing startling, nothing that might be misconstrued. I once heard about a man impaled by a great blue heron; several inches of bill going straight into the man's chest when he ventured too close to the rookery. And though I have never heard anything frightening about bitterns—their best trick after all, is camouflage, a slow lift of bill when they sense danger, their vertical brown stripes a perfect match for the play of light on reeds—I don't want to take any chances.

I turn on the tape recorder and brace myself as the bird hunkers into a posture that lets it tilt forward, white shoulder feathers flaring with each call. This bird has no wish to hide. This is his turf, and I am not welcome. He takes a gulp (*oong*), throws his bill upward (*ka*), then sucks back the sound in a great compression of neck (*choonk*), the noise like someone about to retch. I manage to make the required notes—wind speed of 2 on the Beaufort scale, a compass reading of 200 degrees south, a rose-breasted grosbeak in the tree to my left—while keeping my right shoulder hoisted at an awkward angle above the clipboard, my paddle poised just below my hand. I could raise it in an instant, should the bird come any closer.

It doesn't. It's all bluster and brilliant shapes, "the genius of the bog," according to Thoreau, a loud and angry presence through the whole playing of the tape. I head for the pond's farther end; I repeat the process; a marsh wren delights me and the bittern doesn't quit.

Later in the day, I find myself imitating the sound and absurd neck compression, and wonder how long this bird will dwell within me.



On Father's Day, my dad seems tender with everyone, though particularly so, I think, with Holly. My reserved, cautious father, talking at length with her about her poetry, her mediation work, her grown children in Miami. At various moments, he seems surprised by the fine flavor of the chicken he's just grilled, by a granddaughter's school project, by the fa

that his six kids turned into six adults, who can do everything that he once did and collectively far more. He has to sit, it's all so staggering. And then, when it comes time for Holly and me to leave, he stands and reaches out to us. "Take care of each other," he says, and he hugs each of us against his scarred chest. His look as I close the car door says all I need to hear. *It's a very good thing, the two of you together.*

On the drive home, I have a hard time keeping my eyes dry enough to see the road. I don't know when the transition happened, when he went from cool, distant man to emotional open-armed father. I wasn't around to see how hard he must have struggled, after those awful couple of years when we didn't speak to each other. I don't think I'll ever know how he reconciled the fact that the choices of my life weren't necessarily a rejection of his and that my love of women in no way subtracts from my big love of him.

And because I didn't witness it, I'm free to imagine an osmotic process, ideas emanating from the landscape and the people who inhabit it, new ways of being with one another seeping into my father as he slept and dreamed, as he worked through his days and listened to his heart and watched his kids leave home, one by one. I imagine possibility lodging in inner recesses the way a sound does, and as likely to surface at sudden odd times. The smooch of a neck, the curve of a finger, the spike of a cowlick that won't be denied, and it all comes tumbling back, in no particular sequence—he's a new dad at the hospital, cradling a baby in his arms; he's saying goodbye to his mother, who died when he was much too young; he's loving his wife and he's stunned once again that they created so much together.



I paddle slowly across the pond to do the last survey of the season. Though just cresting the horizon, the sun is already hot on my skin and on the buds of the pond lilies, their petals peeling back in the strong light. The travel is trickier today than on my previous visits—the water level is lower, the floating plants denser—but I feel even more present in the place. Most of the season's recklessness is over, and the rush of birds to mate and nest has calmed. I take my time getting to the first site, as fingers of mist lift from the last of the night shadows.

I miss the bittern, which doesn't respond to the taped *Oong-ka-choonk*. Either it has left the area or it's on a nest and can't risk drawing attention to itself or to its mate. I do hear a marsh wren, however, a bird a mere fraction of the bittern's size yet almost as loud, its reed song like an organ grinder cranking much too fast.

Squinting and a ball cap help with some of the glare, as I paddle the pond's length and stop up again. I will miss this ritual—checking time, temperature, and wind speed; arranging binoculars and pencil, clipboard and code sheet; listening for what's in the area before starting the tape. I will miss having such focus devoted to sound. But I won't mind sleeping another hour or two past dawn. Nor will I be sorry to spend more time with coffee and the telling of our dreams.

RWBL. TRSW.

Then, right next to me, a rail calls, a Virginia rail, talking back to the tape, and suddenly the boat feels too tight to contain all I'm feeling. The tape repeats the call and so does the bird, a few feet away inside a dense stand of cattails. And then it appears, so close I could touch it. It struts like a chicken, in and out of spaces that seem too narrow for its body, and I see how "thin as a rail" comes from the way it compresses itself laterally. All the while

clicks and wheezes, a hammer on an anvil, a bagpipe filling and emptying.

When it reaches the end of the kayak, it flies across the narrow channel and continues calling and watching me. And then two otters pop up ten feet away, all whiskers and dark eyes. They tilt their heads, they whimper their questions, they snort and disappear. Another rail calls; another wren speeds into song. And then it's more din than I have heard all spring—grosbeaks and waxwings in the trees, grackles and blackbirds back and forth between stumps, swallows and more swallows flitting after insects, along with turtle plonks, the croak of frogs, and a crashing on land that sounds clumsy and large.

I don't want the tape or the morning to end. I don't want the sun to rise higher or the mosquitoes to arrive and trap me in the boat. But soon they do; the air starts to hum, and I pack up my gear and return to the car.

A note under the wiper blade explains the last loud noise in the woods, a message written by the woman who gave me permission to cross her land. "Black bear at south end of pond," it says. I wave at the nearby house then slide the kayak onto the roof rack, my shirt sticking to my back in the heat. As I strap it down, stowing the paddle and gear inside, I know I've located all the evidence anyone needs—neighbors and rails and otters and my father—allay whatever concerns might still exist about the health of this small valley.

Water Rhythms

WHEN WATER DOESN'T FLOW from a faucet; when a house isn't connected to city pipes; when every liquid ounce has to be driven in by truck or carried in gallon jugs; when we have to go to the source for every pail and sip—the well, the spring, the reservoir, the river—then we remember how we depend on it, how it fattens our food and veins and humors. We savor it. We dole it out.

We sense again its steady rhythm, which I hear in the voice of a friend when she describes her home by what she no longer has. “We used to live with a cistern,” she says with some sadness. “We had to live our days around it and when there was water.”

She says it as though reciting poetry, as though the experience contained many truths and each could be distilled into an image that succinct. But she and her partner do more than raise sheep and border collies; they also work regular jobs at other places and have to show up on time, whether or not water flows from the small reservoir.

“The catch,” she says, “is that you can only live like that when everyone works on the land the way the earlier farm families did. When you can set up a rhythm of washing—clothes, bodies—that has everything to do with available water and nothing to do with time of day. You make sure there's enough for the animals; you make sure everyone gets some to drink. You learn to shower when you can and save dishwater if you have to, to throw on the garden later in the day.” But after many months of trying to fit their lives into that cycle, they admitted they needed a steadier flow and dug a deep well.

I know what she means, however; I lived the rhythm as a child in those summer weeks that our family spent at my grandfather's cabin in northern Vermont, where all our drinking water came from a spring across the small lake. We took turns paddling over, a chore none of us minded—a quiet approach, a careful entry through tall grass, a way of lowering the pail so that no silt was stirred. And then a bucket of cool water to balance on the way back—in the center of the canoe, up the uneven steps of the bank, and into the kitchen without slopping or dribbling. It was the drinking and teeth-brushing water, the cooking and tea-making water, the coffee and lemonade and thirsty-in-the-night water. For everything else—for everything that didn't come near our mouths—we used what came from the lake. But the water that we dippeded, we loved for its taste and because we knew where it rose up, secretive and splendid.

It was a rhythm I knew as an adult, too, the winters I lived without plumbing and made do with rain buckets, with ice or snow I melted in large trays on the woodstove. And it was a rhythm I felt in every cell in my body for those four days I once fasted without food or water. I had taken part in a demonstration, protesting a nuclear power plant being built on the banks of the Connecticut River, just upstream from where I had grown up. I knew too well what “downriver” and “downwind” meant. I knew too well which railways would carry away radioactive wastes, which roads would turn into evacuation routes for families and school buses and emergency personnel. And I believed then and now that there is no acceptable way of storing toxic materials with century-long half-lives.

I was arrested and chose to fast, my tongue sticking to the roof of my mouth, my body feeling lighter and more brittle by the hour. Then, 2:00 a.m. on the fifth morning, the

released me, a concerned guard offering me a glass of water on my way out. Afterward, almost rehydrated and on the back of a friend's motorcycle, everything in that moist night seemed connected by the sudden kindness of the guard and the water animating all of us—the deer in the headlight, my eyes tearing in the wind, the frogs' great leaps as they sprang across the road.

Tides

I THOUGHT I KNEW much about rivers, having grown up by the Green, which empties into the Deerfield and thence into the Connecticut. The Green was but a short run through the woods from our house, and as a child I found lots of reasons to be there: swimming, fishing, rafting, walking; a place to ice skate or hide out from school or keep clear of the troubles that often brewed at home. There I learned how curves are carved and banks shaped, the river chiseling new shortcuts during wild and littered springs. I watched floods fill the flatlands and ice bar the trees, and I followed fox and deer paths as they paralleled the feeder streams. I figured out how crayfish jerk backwards and raccoons wash and eat them, and I sat for hours in the evenings watching young beaver practice damming. Ducks and herons, minnows and backswimmers, paddling voles that I thought needed rescuing—I believed after all those years that I knew the habits of rivers. But living by the Deerfield makes me realize how much I have yet to learn.



On an early morning in town, I watch the play of light, the lift of mist, the drift of petals as they collect above the hydroelectric dam. Several swallows dart for insects. Someone pushes a stroller. Someone else aims a camera. The Bridge of Flowers in Shelburne Falls looks like a postcard. But I need a wilder and less traveled river, and I drive west and then north, where steep hills force the Deerfield through a narrow, rocky pass.

I park near Zoar Gap and wander the shore, around me a smell like that of clam flats, of things rotting and dead. The travel is tricky, a slick mud between me and the river, the low waters suggesting drier conditions than the last few weeks have been. But I'm too eager to be in the water to waste time contemplating mud. I wade out midstream, watching for the distinctive rise of a fish after an insect. The air is tender, the sun warm. I climb onto a large rock and look around, somewhat surprised that on this soft day I see no other people—no fishermen, no kayakers, no tubers. Mostly, though, the steady flow lulls me, the downward spill a reminder of all the constants in our lives—the pump of heart and lungs, the urge to eat and sleep, the need to love and be loved through the seasons and years.

And then, without realizing I made the decision, I push off from the rock and begin wading toward shore. The river has a new sound to it, something I probably heard but not consciously, something telling me to walk faster, to do so this minute. The ripples lap louder and I pick up my pace; so do the bubbles that stream through the riffles. The current presses hard against my ankles and I have to place my feet with greater care. I aim for the light-colored rocks, which were dry just minutes before, avoiding all that's dark and algae-slick. I don't want to trip and bump downstream, with no way to get a purchase on slippery stone, and I don't know how much stronger this surge is going to run. I stumble; I can't get a foothold; I jar rocks loose in my scramble and have to use my hands to brace myself, until my feet gain a grip and I keep on. But so does the force, the noise, my splashing.

I reach the bank seconds before the water does, then it, too, is at the high tide mark, the line that looks crayon-drawn, inside it all the dirt and leaves and other debris left when the river last receded. I can't believe the change: The river is now twice as wide as when

arrived and flowing perhaps four times as hard. Now I understand what the signs describe: the ones placed at regular intervals wherever people might access the river, or those within earshot of the feeble alarm systems:

WARNING

RISING WATERS

Be constantly alert for a quick rise in the river
Water upstream may be released suddenly
at any time.

DANGER

Water rises after horn sounds
Please leave river

This is how that quick rise looks: Like a tide that just came up, with strength enough to level the thin-boned or unwary. The gates of an upstream dam opened, and the littoral zone was erased. This river—this waterway that looks and smells and sounds like a river—is not the kind I am used to. This is a manipulated energy field, with artificial highs and lows and regulated currents. Needs and tastes far from these steep hills and small communities can, in minutes, change a sleepy flat stream to churning whitewater.

My world just shifted another few degrees, and I realize my earlier sense of rivers was more like time spent with a new lover, on vacation, in a world luscious and separate and untested. I have no idea what will happen after the alarm goes off, the coffee is drunk, and we return to the world of business and hard work.

Ox Blink

THE TRUCK LURCHES FROM side to side when Jack Roberts, a local logger, backs it up on the driveway, and it shudders with each hoof step after he parks and leads out the first ox. When he reenters the truck and brings out the second one, everything around them—the barn, the studio, the big yellow truck—seems to shrink in size, the animals much taller than the six-foot-tall man.

I join them and feel thin, despite the thickness of my down coat, as we look over the remaining tall pines, our deal almost concluded. Our trees will become his lumber, sawn at his mill in town, a trade so close to even that no money will need to change hands. Both the barter and the oxen make the scene feel a century old, only none of these trees would have been part of the view, as all this land was pasture back then, bare hills all the way to the rivers.

It's too cold to stand for long, and Jack yokes the animals together with an ease that reveals his years of doing this. Each ox lost a mate this past year, the only partner either had ever known, and Jack is wary about how they will react to being together. A few weeks ago, he says, after he put them both in the same field, they went at each other so hard that one of their horns broke in the collision and blood spurted everywhere. The wound has healed, but the stunted horn remains, a reminder that they didn't choose to be bound together; this is Jack's idea.

The windchill is minus-twenty-something on this zero-degree day, and we expose little faces and no hands. The oxen, however, seem animated by the cold, and Jack walks them down the hill and hooks their chain to a twenty-foot log from a pine tree he felled the previous day. They heave into the pulling, dragging it about fifty feet over frozen ground before he hollers for them to stop. Then they wait as he and I talk about trees and lumber prices and the animal he recently heard, crying like a baby behind his house in the night, an odd sound that someone told him later was a fisher, an animal we have barely begun to know as a neighbor.

Their big ox eyes close as he starts another story, about a calf killed a few years ago, in the next town to the north, the claw marks exactly like those of a mountain lion, which everyone knows were driven out of the region about a hundred years ago. And they stay closed as he describes a den that loggers have seen a few miles from here, occupied by animals that look more like wolves than coyotes, even though the last wolves were killed in the mid-1800s. But the weirdest change of all, he says, as puffs of steam escape the flutter of patient ox nostrils, has been the arrival of opossums. "I was collecting eggs in the henhouse one evening, and I almost slid my hand under one of them. It was all curled up on a nest, and I wasn't paying much attention in the dark, and I tell you, I came that close." He illustrates without taking off his gloves and shudders again at the proximity. "They sure are ugly fellows, aren't they?"

He gives his team the signal, and they toss their heads and snort and lean hard into the task, but Jack makes them stop again after another thirty feet. "They're too frisky," he says. He has to work them carefully at this point in the season so they don't abuse their legs, which right now support well over a ton of weight. In the summer, he says, they'll be even heavier, maybe three thousand pounds each, and all of it straining at the real test—to move several tons of concrete block at a county fair somewhere in New England, giving him the chance

add more blue ribbons to his collection.

With each hard gust of wind, the pines chatter and creak. An occasional branch breaks free, bouncing off other limbs on its way down, and I know I'll miss their sounds once the trees are gone—the fluttering noise of needles in a summer breeze and the crack and scrape of self-pruning limbs. The nakedness will be startling, but the field will be larger, our house will receive far more light, and the garden will finally get full sun all season.

At the top of the hill, Jack fits a peavey under the log and rolls it into the stack taking shape on the side yard. In the clearing, smells linger—hay and manure and pine and wood smoke—a steady presence against the sense of loss, which occurs each time a tree cracks from its sawn wedge and shudders down. That's when I most want to stand near tall beams that feel like bulwarks against change; that's when I want to watch their sides move in and out with each breath, their eyelids lowering slowly with each blink. Time pauses until those long eyelashes lift, a space between one life and the next.

Jack says they have names—Bob and Mike—but he doesn't use them. He says, "This one almost nine." "This one will be eleven on Father's Day." "This one I know better, the way you always get to know the one on the left side better."

He says, "It's hard to lose one after ten years. You get used to having them around." He turns away to hide his sadness, shouting the oxen back into action, and I head for the warren house, wondering if I'll feel the same way after losing these sturdy dark trees.



Unlike the pines on Holly's and my land—shabby and crowded and mostly double-boled, the result of pine weevils eating their tops years ago—the white pines in the Mohawk State Forest are straight and clean, some as much as 150 feet tall, like cathedral pillars holding high their green tops.

We gather near them to honor a friend who recently died, a forester who advocated for trees just like these, and, to celebrate his life, we're holding a tree-naming ceremony. On the way to the tree, soon to be known as Karl Davies, we pass through a field where the bones of a bear lie scattered by vultures and coyotes, black hairs and a large skull all that's left of its body. As we approach the Algonquin pines, the likes of which are hard to find anywhere else on this side of the continent, Bob Leverett, an expert on finding old growth forests, describes the Native American belief that the white pine is a sacred tree of peace. Out of respect for that association (his wife's lineage), he has given a few of these trees the names of people who worked for greater harmony among all living things.

We circle the tree chosen for Karl, and a few people speak, remembering him as an ally of forests, as an antiwar activist, and as a tall man who assessed woodlots with a tiny dog by his side. I catch sight of a brown creeper, inching up a nearby pine, its thin call like a distant voice in the wind, and I drift between it, the blue sky, and Susan, who stands closest to the tree, wrapped in her own quiet. She and Karl had met the previous year, before his cancer was diagnosed, which gave her little time to love him, but she did so when he was wracked and nauseous and morphine-stupid, and in those moments when he was radiant at being alive in her presence. Had he lived a few more days, they would have been married.

Lines from an E. E. Cummings poem come to me then, about "the leaping, greenly spirit of trees," and I imagine Karl's presence lingering in these woods, his greenly spirit joined with those of the trees. And yet, I also know about the risks involved in giving a human name to

tree. A freak lightning storm could blast the pine's core; a violent microburst could sheer it top tomorrow, and such disaster might affect our memories of all that came before, the way it did for my brother and his first wife, who planted a tree on an anniversary of the marriage. The tree died, they divorced, and Sally cried for a long time afterward. It had been an omen, she was sure.



On the way home, I pause near a favorite stand of hemlock, remembering the different things Karl and I noticed on those days when we wandered along the trails above this valley. It was with Karl that I became aware of how often I look toward the ground, hunting for stories in tracks or scat, fur or feathers; in contrast, Karl looked up, searching for stories far older than passing birds or animals or the evidence of ripe crops. The real histories are recorded high up, he would point out, like global weather patterns, effects of pollution, and markers of lean or good times in crabbed or healthy growth.

I arch back now and look for those signs but see mostly the paradox of hemlocks. The trees thrive in harsh places, often north-facing slopes, where the land is rocky and uneven, the light perpetually muted. Yet there is a tenderness about hemlocks, written all over their rounded, plated length. Thick bark contrasts with delicate limbs, each lined with blunt needles that appear lacy and fine. And in a strong enough breeze, the knobby branches furl back, exposing pale undersides that look inviting and soft.

The trees have always been a part of this landscape, companions on shaded ridges and alongside cool rivers. Such fondness makes it hard to accept that they might one day be gone and I brush one as I pass, for the comfort of its smell. I have no idea how old the tree is, and it's impossible to estimate hemlock age based on height. The species can tolerate shade, which means that for decades they might barely grow, until at last there is light—when a neighboring tree dies or is taken down by a saw or storm—and the hemlock undergoes a growth spurt, pushing high into the upper story. Only a core sample can reveal the actual age, and on some of these hard-to-reach slopes, researchers are discovering trees more than four hundred years old.

Little else in these woods can compare with that life span; few other species contain so many tales. A tree of that age knew the native peoples who once traveled this land, along with the elk and wolves and mile-long flocks of passenger pigeons. A four-hundred-year-old hemlock witnessed the first carts and carriages, the earliest tractors and trolleys and trains. It felt the vibrations of rifles and church bells, chainsaws and waterwheels, and jets traveling so fast they cracked sound waves above it. It experienced years when snow fell every month, when ash from distant volcanoes coated its limbs, and when prolonged droughts made it retreat into stunned and dormant states. It watched as the surrounding hills were stripped of trees and then left to grow into forest again, and it felt the pressure of acid rain, of a thinning ozone layer, of the sheer weight of human life pressing down on the planet.

Yet its rich trove of stories is about to cease gathering. A new and tiny parasite has appeared on the scene, as lethal as the other waves of disease to pass this way, HIV and the various cancers that are felling friends like Karl.

The hemlock's bane—woolly adelgids—recently arrived from Japan, where two insect predators kept them in check. But here, according to Karl, the hemlocks are defenseless, and all of them may be gone within the next ten or so years. We will know the adelgids have

taken hold when bits of white wool appear on the branches, or when nymphs stream from the eggs in April or May, sucking sap as they travel through tender new needles. Once the tree has been infested, vital sap drawn from its core, it dies a slow death, from its limbs to the crown. Four years, Karl said, is the typical life span once adelgids have begun to suck. He had less than a year.

I don't know how we'll mourn the hemlocks' passing, whether we will have organized lamentations on town commons or retreat into private moments. It's not as though we haven't had practice; we know what it's like to have a landscape of skeletons, left after disease decimated both the chestnuts and elms. But it takes time to get used to an emptied space, a chair suddenly vacant at the table, a phone that will no longer be answered. Each loss seems to ratchet up the risk we take when falling in love with someone new.



In the remains of the fire, where all day we tossed branches left each time Jack felled another limbed a tree, the coals can still scorch flesh. I rake partially burned limbs into the orange bed of heat and have to step back to keep my face from blistering. A few feet away, the temperature is about ten degrees below zero, which feels warmer than during the day because the gusts have lessened at last. In their wake, the air is bitter and dry, the stars sharp overhead.

Trees snap in the distance and a dog barks down in the village, yet a deep quiet keeps the sounds from resonating. I can see a few house lights to the south, but otherwise I am alone in a circle of fire-lit snow not far from the edge of the woods.

I remember Jack's earlier talk about fear, which surprised me coming from a man who handles six thousand pounds of oxen, though in this case it was a fear of heights. We had been watching as my nephew, an agile tree climber, strapped a harness around his waist, attached spikes to his boots, and hoisted himself into the trees, a chainsaw dangling from his belt. His pruning helped ensure that the trees fell where we wanted, instead of tangling in the branches of those growing too closely together.

"I can't look any longer," Jack had said, "or for sure I'll get sick." He turned his back and kept talking about other things that unsettled him, such as trees with vertical limbs that make it hard to tell where they will fall or big coyotes appearing in places where they had never lived before. "Damn but change just isn't easy," he said.

My bones ache from dragging and stacking pine branches all day, though since sunset I have simply tended the fire as it died down, taking increasingly long breaks inside our warren house. But on this last trip of the day, I lean on the rake and begin to feel that I am not alone after all. The heat and the glow are too strong, the skitter of sparks too curious to ignore. It is then that I imagine a line of animals on the ridge, hidden just behind the distant line of trees—the fisher, whose tracks I followed a few days ago; the foxes that raised kits in a nearby den last spring; the short-tailed weasel I watched as it bounded across the brook; the coyote who traipsed through last fall.

I imagine the careful distance they keep from each other, wary of me but unafraid of the pop of sparks. I think of their patience, and how long they can sit, and the fact that, though they feel some hunger, it is the heat they are after. Their newness in this place and to each other doesn't matter.

It's too frigid to imagine otherwise; it's increasingly hard to breathe. I sense that as soon as

I scrape the last pine chunks into the hot center and begin the uphill walk to the house, the will inch their way down. They will come closer and closer, gaining access to the coals that will warm them all night, or at least slow the loss of their own store of warmth. In the process, they will also inspect the oxen's trail and sniff out what we have done and discover how exposed they are now that much of the cover is gone.

And though I can't see them, I have a vague sense of why it is I want them here—somehow fixing this moment of flux with other living things, while sharing this last gift of the pines on the coldest night of the year. And then it's too cold to imagine anything at all, and I slog for the last time up the hill to the house.

A WHITE WEASEL SHIMMIES through brown woods, ladybugs stroll on the outside of the window and winter keeps surprising us, this time for its odd warmth. We should have a cover of snow by now; ermine and insects should not be visible. But their very presence suggests that more curiosities await us, so when a friend comes to visit, a newcomer to this area, I'm quick to suggest a walk along the Deerfield River, on the same path once walked by the Mahican and the Mohawk.

A sudden flurry of snow spills over us as we cross rock-strewn slopes of hemlock and laurel through open woods of oak and maple. Though it's Geoff's first time in New England, he knows the landscape by heart, having traveled it again and again through the work of Robert Frost. "Out through the fields and the woods / And over the walls I have wended . . ."

He finishes the stanza as we balance on log bridges and pick up stones to see what might have life underneath. We take turns reciting other Frost favorites and then begin "Birches" together, as though we had planned it, as though we're both there with the boy who became an expert at choosing and climbing a tree, learning to swing out at just the right moment, the birch strong enough to hold him and limber enough to arc over with his weight, before lowering him to earth again.

I tell Geoff that I had done the same as a kid and convinced my youngest sister to try it too, the rushing down far too fast after the buildup of the climb, but not so fast that it deterred me from doing it again and again, and Geoff declares he wants to do it, he always has. He's lean and quite tall, and it'll be a challenge to find a tree that can both hold the grown man and give way. It's a curious tension that he himself couldn't manage—to be firm as well as yield—when a literary award freed him to explore new options, and he left his wife and job and home and took to the road and the poets' retreats. The boy in him still believes all is possible, however, and that same boy emerges now, boisterous and joyful, knocking on hollow logs and flipping over more stones, eager to discover what else might live in these woods.

And then we're stopped by a beaver lodge tucked into the river's bank.

Such a foolish place to build! Beaver can't affect this setting, the way they can with a slower stream. This will never be that marshy place made for ducks and frogs and great blue herons, for dragonflies and sleepy turtles. The valley is too steep and rugged, the river too violent in two of its four seasons. These may be teenaged beaver, kits kicked out by the new brood's arrival, too naïve to know they can't slow a river. Or they wandered these parts too late in the season to find a waterway better suited to their needs. Or perhaps all the good brooks were already taken and this was where winter, not desire, made them stop.

The choicest sites are at a premium—if the number counters are right. According to one report, about seventy thousand beaver now live in Massachusetts, four times what there were just ten years ago, a boom due to the state's new ban on leghold traps. The audible awe heard in the voices of those who watch them shove mud and topple trees, teeth and a tail all the tools that they need, make clear that few humans want to interfere with this feat.

For my part, I would like to think aesthetics detoured them here, where the river stretches broad and wide after the upstream tumble of falls and dams. A powerful quiet surrounds us

this 20 degree air, and I feel muffled and held by the swirl of soft snow, though if Geoff weren't here, on this very gray day, I would probably feel very alone.

That sense of aloneness may be the best reason for this beaver's choice of home. The sulfuric acid spill that happened late last summer took place just six miles north on the North River. The heavier-than-water toxin surged along the river's bottom, dissolving every fish in its way, until a beaver dam stopped it. That gave the Department of Environmental Protection team time to rush in and neutralize the spill with great quantities of baking soda. In the accident's aftermath, however, no one knew the health or whereabouts of the beaver, though we all wanted to assume they had lit out for safer territory.

This may be the home of the very same animals, the ones that inadvertently saved a whole raft of lives.

Geoff calls at the lodge, though they won't show while we're here, and I tell him about another river rescue, one that happened when I was seven or eight years old. My mother had driven us to a local swimming hole, and, too hot and impatient to wait while she unpacked the smaller kids from the car, I raced ahead and leapt into the river, expecting to hit bottom and spring back up again. But the water was deeper than I expected, my feet never touched, and I flailed for the surface and began swallowing river instead of air. I thrashed and couldn't stop myself and went down again and then somehow I was on the shore next to a soaking-wet stranger, my mother was rushing toward us as the woman backed away, and in the confusion no one had time to ask her for her name.

Sometimes, when I'm in a roomful of people, I look around and wonder if she's among them, the person who jumped in to save a drowning child and then had to rush away, embarrassed by her sopping dress and flattened hair. For his part, Geoff grins at all we can know about strangers and beavers and then he's off, leaping from rock to rock, and I ambly follow slowly after, still watching for a birch tree large enough for him to climb and thin enough to sweep him back to earth.

Salamander Crossing

I ONCE PICKED UP a child from the roadside, a boy I had never seen before in a town I rarely passed through. A friend and I were driving toward Camel's Hump in northern Vermont for a day of hiking while the leaves were just ideas and the views big and unimpeded. But first there was the crying child on the grass, his bike on its side, pieces of metal strewn around him. He let us check the knee he held, a nasty scrape already bubbling blood.

We packed him into the car and drove him up a hill far too steep for rickety wheels and a scared seven-year-old in a snowsuit, a bulky knapsack on his back. Once at his house, we knocked until his mother appeared, disheveled and in a bathrobe, holding the screen door closed between us. She looked beaten and suspicious, her hair awry, dark circles under her eyes. I imagine she would have hit him if we hadn't stayed there, waiting. "He's a brave kid," I said. "He almost made it." I looked back at the yard and didn't see any vehicles. "Do you want us to drop him off at school?"

She didn't. "We'll manage," she said.

I took my time retrieving bike parts from the car, arranging them on the lawn, piecing together the story out of the snuffling he had done earlier. He had waited and waited until he was sure he had missed his bus and, knowing better than to wake her, he took off the fastest way possible. It takes a moment to realize that his bus hadn't come when he expected because the clocks had been switched to daylight savings overnight, and, since no one in the house had remembered, the kid was left to do his best on the bike.

We left; we climbed the mountain, and all day I felt oddly off, as though I could float over long stretches of rock, miscalculate distances, or become distracted and forget to get off the summit before dark. As though being an hour out of time meant we could be knocked off the path, if we didn't pay close attention to our feet and our speed.



It happens every spring. We jerk ourselves out of the rhythms that surround us, just when the hours of sunlight seem long enough to approximate our days, just when it's easy to sense the exact moment of sunrise, the exact place on the horizon where it sets. Then daylight savings comes around and we have to learn the patterns all over again.

For the first week or two afterward, I feel tugged two ways at once, though it's more noticeable at night. During the day, there's school and appointments and work around the house, and no choice but to pay attention to clock ticks and digital flashings. But after dark, through windows opened at last, spring comes at us like a train, and it's lusty and oblivious whether or not we're groggy or wholly in our bodies. Its throbbing goes on until dawn, chaotic and barely contained—the spiraling woodcock, the quacking wood frog, the ruffed grouse on his log, slamming wings against air, like a line of cancan dancers, exacting and violent.

Much of the new life is easy to see—fists of skunk cabbage, swollen streams, green spikes shooting up from underground bulbs. It takes a different kind of attention to know that other groundswell, the bodies that slip and blat their way through the woods, across roads, past new construction sites, old stone walls, the driven and unstoppable frogs and toads and

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