9-25-1996

Spirit Resting Places: A Nature Reader

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A Nature Reader

by

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FINAL PROJECT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS IN LIBERAL STUDIES

SKIDMORE COLLEGE
May 1996

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Acknowledgements

I take this opportunity to thank all of those who helped make this manuscript possible: Larry and Laurie and Sandy and Sue of Skidmore's Masters's Program; my advisors, Gary McLouth and Ken Johnson. Without their guidance the way out of the wildness of words would have taken much longer.

A special thanks to Maggie Wohlfarth, whose patience and expertise at the computer proved to be invaluable to me.

Megan and Zachary, my children, deserve a heartfelt thank you for their patience and understanding, and their quiet cooperation for all the long hours when I disappeared into the woods for notes, and into the den for writing.

Finally, and most importantly, thank you, Denise, for standing by me, and for believing in me, and for giving me the time and the energy to finish this project. You were my strongest inspiration; I dedicate this effort to you, my loving wife.

Preface

The pieces collected here are intended to be the foundation of an eclectic collection of a literary view of the natural world from a very personal perspective -- mine. That they share a very basic nature theme is their only reason for being collected in this manner. I suppose that my writing is a journey of self-discovery, and as such I have been motivated to write about the things in nature that I have discovered that have helped me make sense of the goings-on of my life.

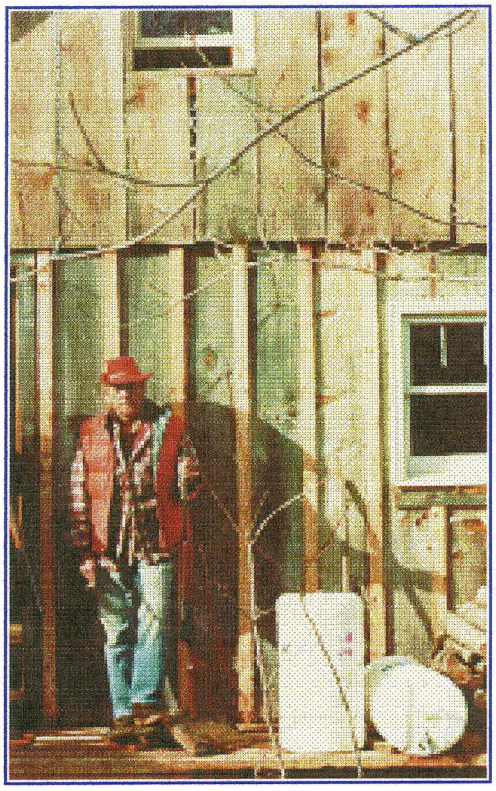
Given the people most important to me, and the things I love and do, and love to do, and the natural environment that unifies all of these, it is only natural I write of nature as the place central to my being. I enjoy the outdoors; my mission here has been an artistic rendering of that joy for the sake of sharing that joy with others.

Martin Thompson
Richmondville 1996

Special Dedication

In Memory:

To C.J., my father, who taught me how to walk softly among special trees. Gone to a far greener woodlot, where all trees are straight and tall and fecund and live forever; gone, but never forgotten. Your spirit swims in my heart forever. You swim in circles, encircling my heart, in cycles. You are my grass leader.



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LAND AND MAN: REFLECTIONS ON NATURE AND THE HUMAN SPIRIT

Introduction

When not involved in the matters of earning a living by teaching, I tramp the woods and fields to hunt or fish, or just to saunter through nature's mysterious beauty, and I read and write. That my writings embody reflections on my observations of the natural world is an extension of the self-discovery quest I have taken up. The pieces in this collection are mottled leafy pattern pieces that attempt to help me make sense of a life that began in rural Upstate New York. I was born and raised in the snow-belt region of Tug Hill, 15 miles east of Lake Ontario, an area laced with low-lying alder, spruce and cedar swamps harboring deer and ruffed grouse; meager dairy farms clinging to an inhospitable landscape and climate. Brook trout called the spring-fed freestone streams home, and woodcock visited those stream banks and alder runs twice yearly on their annual flights. I was tutored in the ways of this natural world by my father, and from him I inherited the stewardship of a chunk of Tug Hill wilderness and a spirit of the place he called home for all his 63 years. I sense the power of the spiritual truth of Nature in her many and varied forms, and I suppose that has instilled in me an attitude toward "place" that comes across as central in many of the pieces collected here. Certainly, one needs to feel one belongs some "place." Nature provides that pastoral haven, a place of refuge in an otherwise inhospitable world.

We must realize that that haven, its land and animals, also has its right to spirit, and to

life. I am a hunter, and a fisherman, pursuits I make no apologies for. I participate in the oldest of bloodsports, pursuing game with the expressed purpose to kill it and render it fit for consumption (remember, venison was King's meat) and at the same time am happy when I've killed nothing, but instead have communed with the land and its denizens and seen it and them vibrantly alive. For hunting truly is the philosophical quest which allows us to understand our stewardship responsibilities - the land does not belong to us; we belong to the land. The land nurtures us, and allows us to find out who we are. "And the child becomes the father of the man;" we owe the land that harmonious interaction that nurturing between parent and child requires. I want my writing to establish some continuity between itself and the things that hold my closest attention: family, hunting, fishing, natural surroundings, that is, the natural integration of man into the world of nature, as observer, predator, and most importantly, as appreciator of the power, beauty, and mystery of nature. We need to recognize that growth, progress is what is destroying nature and her creatures. It is the destruction of habitat - fragile ecosystems that all living creatures need for survival - that threatens the demise of "nature" as we know it. Never will you see outdoorsmen and women, hunters, fisherpersons, or naturalists drain a beaver marsh, dam a river, or clear-cut a forest to have the last trout or deer in their bag or even in front of their camera; rather, this destruction takes place for another shopping mall or interstate to exist. Hunters brought back the wild turkey to our forests and fields, fishers introduced salmon and steelhead to our lakes and rivers, conservationists and bird-watchers and waterfowlers stopped the draining of marshes.

We don't need another interstate to travel so fast to get somewhere, and not profit in the

going. We do need to get to know ourselves, and be pleasantly surprised by this self-discovery. I traveled the Northville - Placid Trail in 1977, backpacking the entire 132 miles in 14 days, my entire worldly needs furnished from 55 pounds carried on my back, and from water in the ponds, streams and springs along the way. I could have driven to Lake Placid in three hours, but never known Duck Hole, the headwaters of Cold River, Rondeau's hermitage, or the exact height of land that marks the division of the Hudson and St. Lawrence River watersheds. To drive to Lake Placid seems a hollow victory at best, but to backpack there (Thoreau would call it Walking) and savor all of that unspoiled natural habitat feeds the spirit for years, decades, a lifetime. Such is nature's ability to allow us to rediscover ourselves as complete beings in nature by exploring and engaging in nature. In nature, one can test one's self and come away having the answers.

I sense that one of the answers we all seek is the cyclic nature of spirit. We inherit the seeds of spirit from those who came before us, we pass them, germinated, to those who follow. I associate my fondness for nature most closely with my love for my father, dead nearly six years now; dead, but not gone. I remember waiting on Sunday nights in November for my father's return from a weekend in the woods. I could barely wait to hear Dad's stories of deer seen or unseen or grouse thundering surprise into every fiber of his being, punctuated with images of beaver ponds, wayward mink and otter, and marauding black bear. The smell of woodsmoke on this green and black plaid mackinaw, dampened by the season's first snow, conjured up pictures of camp in the deep woods, and the rutted trails the surplus jeep, forever four-wheeling, followed to get there. Dad's woodland life was my destiny by spirit. We follow

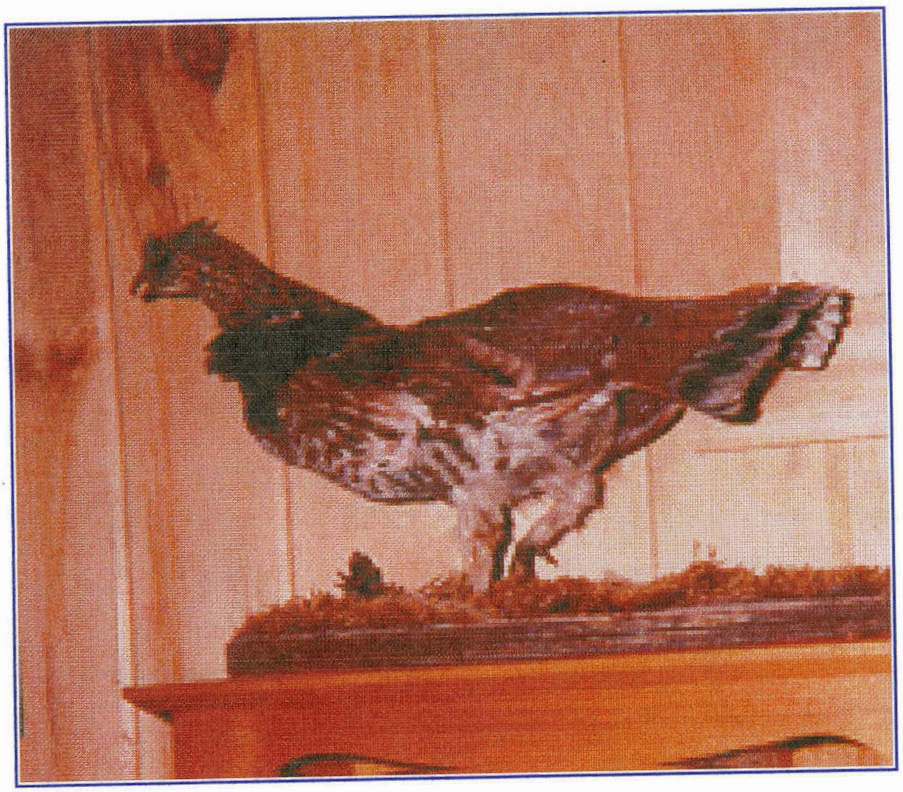
different trails, we arrive at the same water, we cross over together.

Nature provides us with this sense of place, a pastoral haven; this sense of harmonious stewardship; this ability to have surprising self-discoveries, which in turn can give us solace in troubled times. Nature constantly shows us life and death; just today I encountered a dead deer, the victim of an ill-timed meeting with a north-bound car. A wasted life, a natural death, starkly contrasted with the buck I harvested in November, his antlers watching over me as I write, his haunch roasting for tonight's meal. A life fulfilled, a natural death also.

Consolations both, to the deaths I hold so close to my spirit now. A best friend, taken before his time in a tragic accident, and my father, gone before he could see his grandson hold a fishing rod or shoulder a shotgun. In honor to both, I retreat to the Tug Hill Camp for solace, inspiration and answers. The woods and waters make us a compact of two. The votive woodstove, stoked with seasoned maple and cherry I cut and split myself, conjures up spirits of the great-grandfather whose land this originally was, the paternal grandmother who passed it on. I won't let the land, nature, or their spirits die. Such is nature's ability to provide relief from our various forms of grief.

These are the fodder for this collection. How we connect with nature, and thus make nature our own intimate character, is what I observe, and I want to share the observations. Nature is something we can become part of - this makes sense to me. A nature writer ought to get to know his characters, his animals and trees and waters and mountains, and then share them with others. This is mythopoeic; he needs to create this natural spirituality in words. Through this reflection, I'm trying to do just that. Just as the thunderous flush of a grouse surprises me

into realizing I still have everything to learn, I pray that the reader finds in here a brace of grouse he too can flush.



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Grandfather Bert

Albert and Celestia Gardner lived in a small house just back from the road that connected the county highway and the Civilian Conservation Corps camp S-116 at Mannsville. The house was situated under a hill that protected its northeast corner, a hill that nurtured their apple orchard as it nurtured them sleeping in the back bedroom that was under the hill. The C.C.C. road ran in front of the house which faced south, into the winter sun. Turning to the left would take them eventually to Lorraine and Adams and Watertown; to the right was the C.C.C. camp itself and then Mannsville and their daughter Beulah and her husband Andrew and the boys Andrew Jr. and Calvin J.. The house, and the barn, and the farm property, all 167 acres of it, were situated in the most inhospitable and desolate of places, the deep snow region of Tug Hill. At Andrew's urging, Bert had added nearly 11 acres of sugar maples and 12 and a half acres of swampy muck to the farm, the former addition to be tapped for a commercial maple syrup enterprise, the latter to give access to a 30 acre stand of maturing hardwoods that would, one day soon, provide them with merchantable timber sufficient to insure the boys' future. Hardwood fuel from the timbered tops would stoke the Round Oak parlor stove, an added bonus, Andrew argued. This 220 acre farmstead, with its promise of dairy and orchard, syrup and timber, was the legacy Bert and Lettie would leave to their daughter and son-in-law and the two young boys. In the Great Depression, it was indeed a sizeable legacy, if one could exercise prudent stewardship over the land and still pay the taxes.

Bert turned right and headed west toward the C.C.C. camp. It was bitter cold that

December day, three days till Christmas, and the converted bobsled was decked out with harness bells, ribbons, and groundpine greenery for a natural Christmas float. A white spruce, fresh cut, protruded from the bob's back; gaily wrapped presents neatly packed around the feet of Bert and Lettie gave the conveyance the oddly familiar Santa sleigh look. Except for his clean-shaven face, Bert could have passed for Kris Kringle himself. The trees, their sap freezing under their rough bark, snapped and popped in the cold Tug Hill air. Bert steered into the wind, and both pulled their heavy mackinaws tighter around their throats as the wind tried its boreal best to invade their woolens. Word had come that Andrew had returned early from his Great Lakes cruise, wasn't feeling well, but was anxious to spend the holiday with his in-law family. Bert, eyes atwinkle with anticipation of seeing his grandsons, was providing the Christmas Tree.

The black ribbon on the front door wreath was grave indication that the two hour trip was late in its making. Andrew had died near midnight the night before, racked with the fever brought on by a ruptured appendix he suffered while sailing the Harry White down from Oswego. The dream of a working sap bush and high quality timber for Lacona's mills was dead for Bert, as dead as Andrew's prostrate form stretched out in the parlor. This loss sent a chill across the pair that made the normal Tug Hill winter look mild. But Andrew's death was really a harbinger of the months to come. January of 1934 roared down from Canada, across Lake Ontario and squatted with heavy snows and bone-chilling temperatures. Bert and Lettie were confined to the farmhouse and barn for most of the winter, rarely able to enjoy the woods and fields that was their life as well as their livelihood. Beulah and Andrew Jr. and Calvin came to the Lorraine farm as often as cleared and ice-packed roads allowed, Bert making the round trip

to pick them up in the bob drawn by his two trusted Suffolks. The way became routine enough for the draft horses so that, before winter's end, Bert could relax on the back-home run, allowing eight year old Calvin to handle the reins. Andrew Jr. was much reserved on these trips, as if a large part of him was interred along side his father, but Calvin was animated to the point of exultation when in the bob beside his grandfather. By spring, young Andrew had given up on the farm, and signed on as a cabin boy on the Harry White, sailing the Lakes as his father had. By spring too, Calvin had rekindled in Bert, now a tired 63 years old, the dream of one day soon drawing logs to the C.C.C. road.

That spring, Bert began Cal's education in the ways of the woods. First there was a road to cut, corduroy to lay in the wet areas on either side of Skinner Creek, a skid-way to be built, and hauling trails to mark and make clear. The roadway was a forester's dream in its construction. Leaving the road landing, it meandered north past the apples Lettie so painstakingly watched over, skirted the north pasture, and then took a turn to the northwest. Here the tracks dropped into the creek's lowlands, here the locust and ash corduroy was firmly set in the boot-sucking muck of the creek's banks. After crossing Skinner, nearly a mile from the house, the road swung abruptly to the west, climbed a steep bank to gain the high ground of the woodlot, and followed the maple and cherry ridge to the interior landing Bert and C.J. had cleared. Yes, the trail was cleared, and Cal had earned the nickname he so earnestly sought, a man's curt title of just two initials, C.J.. And, on the low ridge just north and west of Skinner Creek the two, grandfather and boy, began to construct a logger's cabin, a haven to escape the sudden thunderstorms Lake Ontario sometimes sent them in the hot, sticky months of July and

August. The two could also bivouac there when chores let them be, and Bert used the time in the woods to fashion proper sway-bars and whiffle-trees from native ash, and to instruct C.J. in the proper hook-up and use of the reins and collar, breastplate and backband and traces that would allow the chestnut Suffolks to skid the logs. The cabin wasn't really a cabin either, just a low shelter built from the straight poles, none larger than five or six inches across, that they had trimmed from the roadway in its mile-long meander from house to woodlot.

And as they sat in the doorway of their stick cabin, before the fire confined by stones, one evening in late August, and watched the orange dance up from the distant waters of Lake Ontario, Bert announced that the next day would see the first tree topple in their woodlot. C.J. saw the dream, and the promise, coming true. And he saw his grandfather, tired and beaten by years of hard work and tragedy, straighten a little and the twinkle come back to his eyes. C.J. knew his grandfather would manage the woodlot like a mother cares for her child, and the legacy promised would be kept.

Bert and C.J. cut logs all fall, and stockpiled them in the woods landing, and waited for the winter snows and freezing to bring them out. When the November snows came, the two spent weekends running the unloaded bobsled back and forth from farm to woodlot, until the runner tracks were clear of snow and frozen solid with the black ice of muck and runner-iron melted snow and the water that oozes back when weight crushes the stalagmatic ice crystals frost sets upon the ground. Finally, in early January, the roadway was ready, and they began to haul the fruits of their first logging season. Stockpiled at the road landing, the massive logs took on an identity of their own, building higher and higher, and threatening to roll into the road without

provocation. But they remained in place, and a buyer from Lacona ventured up to the Hill country and Bert sold the logs for a tidy sum. He gave young C.J. a share, and the rest he rolled in a tight wad and stuffed in the match safe that hung on the kitchen wall.

When school was out for the summer, C.J. moved to the farm full time. Now nine, C.J. considered himself nearly full grown, and when Bert didn't argue the fact, he pressed for long days in the woods, watching the old man fell trees with a cross-cut saw and hardwood wedges. And he noticed, too, that Bert was a broken and tired and sad old man, and that, while he seemed to genuinely relish his days with his grandson, the thought of farm chores drained him considerably. Only the work in the woodlot, hard as it was, seemed to revitalize him. And that was due, surely, to the teaching Bert did as the two, old and young, cruised the woodlot together. C.J. was a bright and attentive pupil, and soon could tell the hard maple from the red, and the cherry and beech and ash by bark or leaf or twig. Spruce, pine, and hemlock were identified as well. Butternut, scarce in the woodlot, were sought out and then jealously guarded, protected from other trees felled around them; their mast crop was far more valuable than the one-time harvest of their timber.

Bert made it a point to explain the management techniques he applied to their woodlot. They needed to "father" the lot, as he put it. Insure its future, and the future of the deer and grouse and rabbits; the squirrels and woodpeckers and tanagers that all called the woodlot home. They cut good straight cherry trees if their butt diameter was at least 12 inches, but left the old monarchs of over two feet on the stump for seed. Maples, hard and soft, the same, except for the wolf trees. Those too twisted and misshapen to produce a good saw log released a multitude

of "spinners," as Bert called the whirling maple seed pods. Dead trees, widow-makers, while dangerous, were left for homes to grub-seeking woodpeckers and wayward raccoons. The smaller conifers gave good shelter for animals, and the hemlock was especially good deer browse; they let them be. And they found two slippery elm trees, and were very careful to leave them alone, except to harvest a few handfuls of twigs for the inner back, saving the sticky, aromatic sap that Lettie had them chew when sore throats flared up. As climbing was required for this, the harvest of inner elm bark fell solely to C.J., and he was proud in the responsibility bestowed. And as Bert's fathering of the woodlot insured its perpetuity, so too did it insure the continuity of the legacy he and his son-in-law had planned.

The summer wore on, and grandfather and grandson harvested timber and stockpiled logs in the woods landing and bucked the topwood into stove-length sticks for the Round Oak and watched the market prices and waited for winter to sell the fruits of their labor. September came, and C.J., just turned ten, went back home to go to school and Bert began to fade again. Now 64, the hard Tug Hill years were showing in his face and shoulders and back. Only when C.J. could get away for a weekend in the woodlot did Bert straighten and strengthen.

Winter set in, and at holiday time came word that the mills were filling up with sawlogs, and that soon no one would want their timber. Bert had to skid the logs soon, or lose a summer's wage to the fickle market. C.J. was down with a touch of the flu, so Bert turned to an obliging neighbor, Donald Robbins, for help. An able woodsman, Robbins was unaccustomed to the two Suffolk draft horse C.J. had handled so well all summer, so the driving of the team fell again to Bert. So it was that shortly after noon of January 28, 1936, Bert watched Robbins

throw a last timber hitch through the chain binder, and cinch the load of cherry and maple and ash logs to the two heavy wooden bunks of the bob, and thought how he might have tied the load off if C.J. were there to handle the team.

Bert clicked the team forward, and horses, Bert, and big and heavy logs inched east and south toward the road landing a mile's distance. Robbins walked behind, carrying the peeve and cant hook and balancing the double-bit ax over his shoulder, and noticed how broken and tired and sad Bert looked. But as they passed the stick cabin, Bert's head came up and looked at the little shelter and then at the January sun, and the sun caught his face. The wrinkles seemed to fade, and a sad smile came to his lips. The team started down the incline to Skinner Creek and Bert had to hold back a little. Robbins noticed as if some power had passed from the frozen earth through the harness traces and into Bert's arms. His stooped shoulders came up and straight back and his back straightened to his full height. And then there was a loud crack, like the pop and crack of maple freezing in the wind.

The power all went out of Bert and his shoulders and back curved down again and bent and old and tired he went to the logs as they went to him and he went down. The horses started to jerk and the load jarred and shifted. Bert was down, and up and sitting on the front bunk, in pain, and said nothing. Robbins took the reins and drove the load to the landing place, Bert, sad and pained, beside him.

Home, Bert entered the house, and the look of death was pale on his face. Doctor Alden was fetched, making the trip from Adams, 12 miles north, by morning. Bert's right side, where abdomen and logs had met, was distended and full of fluid, life's blood slowly leaking out and

into Bert. The doctor give him a shot and pills for pain and the warning to keep quiet, unnecessary. Bert, pale and bent double and small and sad asked for Lettie to have C.J. fetched, and quickly.

Robbins left for Mannsville amid swirling snow sent by Ontario's capricious lake effect. As the snow deepened and Bert watched the C.C.C. road for lantern-light to announce his grandson's arrival the peaceful smile of one who knows his fate played about his lips, and a sad twinkle came to his eyes. The door burst open, a hard-running C.J. having out-distanced the lathered horses by better than a mile. The two, old and young, talked through the night, and Bert reminded C.J. of the trees to cut, and the trees to leave, and why. Of where the log money was and how much to hold out for when the buyer came up from Lacona for this last load of logs. They talked through the night of the stick cabin and the ford across Skinner Creek and the trout they caught in the hole below the slippery elm. They talked through the night and in the soft, weak eastern light of the last morning of January 1936 Doctor Alden came back and pronounced Bert Gardner dead of a ruptured liver, the victim of a broken sway-bar he and C.J. had fashioned at the stick cabin.

Lettie was manless now, Andrew Jr. away and C.J. too young to be a man. In the middle of the Depression, a woman couldn't hold on to land on a whim, and try as she might, the boys in the C.C.C. camp couldn't possible buy enough apple pies to pay the taxes. The farm was sold, all but the 30 acre woodlot. To let that go was to let Bert go, and she couldn't do that. The legacy, buried in a forgotten warranty deed, buried as deep as Bert's remains, as deep as the tap roots of hard maples and cherries, would grow again some day, just as maple and cherry stumps

send out new shoots. In the spring, C.J. returned to the woodlot, and wondered why, at his grandfather's death, had the trees and stream and ferns and wild leeks turned even more beautiful.

C.J., fatherless and now grandfatherless, would have his legacy, and log it, and die, and pass it on. And I would know my great grandfather Bert, and special trees, and C.J. my father, in the 30 acre woodlot.

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The Legacy: Camp C.J.

The beauty of rain is that it is free, a gratuity of sorts, a tip saying thank you for staying around long enough to hear it out. Such is the rain as it strikes the metal roof of Camp C.J., tapping out a symphony of spirit with its immense, insistent, vociferous but controlled rhythms. As the rain increases, penetrating the leafy shroud of maple canopy above the camp's roof, it surrounds the entire cabin with its wet meaning of solitude and reflection. It surrounds me. When it stops, for an encore it drips less rhythmically from maple leaves to metal roofing, from elderberry bush to red fescue, and lets me know that each drop is absolutely alone, as I am, even if others are in camp. The rain surrounds me anew with a strong sense of place, and I am able to reflect on how I come to be here. It is not so much a matter of escaping <u>from</u> the urban world that brings me here, but rather a moving <u>to</u> one of those spirit-resting places we all seek to renew our souls. The sound of rain on metal roof and leafy woods draws me to understanding the legacy of this place.

Camp C.J. sits in the middle of thirty acres of mixed hardwoods, mostly maple, cherry and beech, a few hundred yards north of a piece of ramshackle woodcraft which my father fondly referred to as the stick cabin. That decaying cabin served as a meeting place, and a reference point, for each foray Dad and I made into this section of Tug Hill wilderness, and as the focal point of the stories Dad told of the legacy of the land. Sitting on logs with backs to the stick cabin's south facing wall(the only wall still standing), Dad told me stories of his

grandfather Bert, of how the two of them had built the little log shelter and prepared to harvest logs from the very woodlot behind us, after Dad's father had died unexpectedly when Dad was only five. Of how, a few short years later, Bert was killed while drawing logs out of the very same woodlot. Of how the land was sold by collecting all the deeds (or so they thought) and offering them en masse to a buyer who wanted to cut timber and sell the land to the state when he had denuded it. Of how, thirty years later, the lost deed was recovered, and fate returned the thirty acres to our family. When Dad died, the land became "mine;" more accurately, I became more a part of it. Here is a wild place, a mile from every road. It is darkly beautiful, and intriguing, home to fleet, wild deer, strong native trout, and thunderously flushing grouse; towering hard maples and diminutive wild leeks and princess pine. Each of these has entered my soul from boot bottoms and malone-gray pants bottoms and eyes and ears and nose and throat and hands gloved and ungloved, and now I am married to this place as deeply and lovingly as I am married to Denise, my wife. With this marriage comes a responsibility, and I am steward of this place as strongly and lovingly as I am father to my daughter Megan and my son Zachary, who will someday be as completely a part of this place as I am now.

As part of the legacy, I built Camp C.J. in the middle of this wild place. Sitting alone in this Thoreauvian cabin allows me to listen to the rain tapping out its message that the natural world is the real world, that cities of men are fabricated, made up. But I did not escape to here; I am returning to the place from where I came, for here is the spirit place of my father, and his father and grandfather and great-grandfather. Here is the place of my personal freedom, a place where the real and the unreal merge. It is nature's edge, where the farmer's cultivated field

meets the tangled growth of the woods. Here I come to grips with my own fears and ignorance, and my usefulness and emptiness, especially when I am alone, and wet with rain. Here I listen more attentively to the song the rain sings, and I encounter truth. In this woods place I come to know truth, and the power of the individual. Here I live, sometimes only for a few hours, other times for a week at a time, with the simple and the natural.

I built Camp C.J. in this awesome woodsy atmosphere of secrecy and wildness as a tribute to my father, and as a haven where I can interact with nature in the most harmonious way our hectic time allows us. This place is in me -- it is that private nook surrounded by the yellow line of the state, and transected by the wildness of a deep woods swamp and the cleanness of a free-stone creek that we all have inside of us, if we just take the time to look for it. Nostalgic indeed, it truly is the perfect place of my youth, and now I am part of it.

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I built Camp C.J. because my father had always wanted a deep-woods camp, but he died just months before his dream had any chance of becoming a reality. Dad had selected the site, just north of the stick cabin on a little rise where three old skid roads met. On a crisp, clear, clean October day, when the thick, tangled cover of summer greenbrier was gone, as were the biting black flies and mosquitoes, Dad and I cleared the knoll. Hacking the briers with a mattock and machete, we cleared and leveled a place for a small cabin, and in the waning hours of daylight, set the concrete blocks that would carry the camp above the dampness of woods' leaf-mold floor. We covered each pier with plastic, to keep out frost, and retreated homeward to draw and sketch the plans for the perfect deer-hunting shack. That winter, I bought a one-man

sawmill, and milled studs and rafters and floor joists, roof boards and siding and sub-flooring, and neatly stacked them, cord-wood fashion, under blue tarps, and I waited for spring.

April came, and Dad died while I was flying back from Europe. I went from the funeral to the woods, to the clearing, and I cried. But the tears didn't wash the place, or Dad, out of me, so I knew the camp would be built, and would be Camp C.J., and I would always be a part of that place.

Originally, the camp land consisted of thirty acres of nearly flat hardwood forest. The land is mine by will, and by emotion. The road leading to the cabin, if you are so bold to call it a road once you've traveled it, leaves a county highway and winds its way through a fallow field and across a spring-fed brook, where it rears up slightly, like a young horse just out from the barn, and enters a wet run that traverses a thicket of poplar and thornapples. One must be careful here, lest the apple trees' lancets skewer tires and leave you to walk the remaining half-mile to the cabin. Rising again, the road skirts the northern edge of a swamp drainage, and enters the hardwoods. Here, from the vantage point of an ancient log-landing, you can look west, and catch the glint of Lake Ontario's sunset (for I nearly always arrive there in late afternoon) off the bright stainless steel smokestack. That shiny pipe is the one touch of decadence I've allowed the camp, and it really is more utilitarian than ostentatious once someone occupies the building.

The actual building of the cabin was a spiritual experience bordering on a commingling of the quest for the Holy Grail and an Easter celebration. Following Thoreau's lead, the cabin was constructed of materials that I had sawn myself, or had scrounged and salvaged from

buildings past their prime and ravaged by time and neglect. Even rough carpentry can be a creative experience, however, and working with the rough-sawn fruits of my labor was a truly uplifting experience. So it was that one day in late June, having been released from the teaching duties of my English classroom, I loaded up my pick-up with building materials, pointed the truck north, and headed to the woods to build Dad's cabin. The cabin is actually two small rooms, the kitchen, dining and living spaces occupying the larger, and a bunk room housing a set of single bunks diagonally opposite a set of double bunks. During the hunting season, six spartan woodsman can call the cabin home; my family of four have enough room to nearly enjoy themselves inside; and when alone, the place is a palatial estate in which one can read, write, and listen to the rain with unconfined spirit. Doors open to the north and east, and a picture window to the south lets in light enough for reading in the opposite room. It is cozy, and a welcomed respite from the tempestuous storms for which Tug Hill is so famous. It is large enough to live in, where one wants to do most living out-of-doors anyway, yet small enough to be easily warmed on cold winter days. Burning wood I have cut myself in the little antique oval parlor stove warms me body and soul.

The cabin is buried beneath towering maples and cherries, so to avoid the gloominess of a small, sheltered building, I planned large window spaces, and allowed myself the extravagance of not one but two propane gas lamps. These ingenious devices use pre-formed mantles, and once lighted, allow normal living long after the sun has sunk into Lake Ontario's Canadian edge. My other hedonistic contrivance is an apartment sized gas stove, four burners, oven, and broiler, which I mouse-proofed with hardware cloth. I am now allowed the practice

of preparing a myriad of culinary feasts, popping them in a low temperature oven, and heading out the door to explore nature's offerings du jour. I can then return hours later, with a head full of nature's visions, to a ready-to-eat meal, leaving the evening free for more important pursuits, like reading, writing, and listening to the rain.

The outside of Camp C.J. is rough-sawn boards and battens, stained a traditional red. The battens cover the cracks produced when the sappy boards from my small mill finally shrank in the mottled sunlight of the woods. In addition, they break the monotony of a flat siding, and cover any sins of construction I may have committed. Like the trees that surround the cabin, they run in the vertical, and on the whole make a bold mode of construction, adding strength to a cabin that goes it alone most of the time. The building is capped off with the old-time metal roofing that so many of the country barns sported in years past. Friends warned me that this type of roof covering would be noisy in the rain. I asked why not provide the timpani and snare for nature's own rhythm section, and listen to the songs she beats out? The metal was installed; the band plays on, I listen to the symphony, and that is how I come to know the rhythms and the spirits of my place in the woods.

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Martin Thompson
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RENDEZVOUS
A vision of my father

You stand cradling a rifle,

lever action, and looking west,

clad in green and black jacket

gray pants, colors of hemlock and beech

next to the stick cabin

on the low ridge above Skinner Creek

where we are to meet in the last

dim light of day.

I see you crouch wraith-like

and sight along the barrel

at some distant deer crossing

water -- a rutting buck

and your eye, the sight blade

and his shoulder line up. Your

finger tickles the trigger and

the buck bolts and is gone.

Muddy water eddies in heart shapes
at creek's edge, tendrils of crimson
point through second growth so thick
a man cannot walk there, yet

the deer is in there, and will die
as certainly as you, and as soon.
My eye holds you, deer, stream, greenbrier
in the darkening, and you do not know

I have seen you shoot; you light
a smoke, hands shaking, and sit
back to a tree and me and pray
your aim was true.

The Stick Cabin: OUR RENDEZVOUS

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Tug Hill Trout

Nature in all her beauty is full of symbols, and nothing symbolizes our eastern wilderness better than the brook trout (Salvelinus fontinalis), the fish "of the springs." They thrive in the clear, fresh sparkling waters of wild places; indeed, they can live in no lesser quality waters. I feel a certain exhilaration when I think of brook trout -- they live in that wild and crisp environment that I connect with wilderness itself. For me, brookies (or speckled trout, or square-tails, or natives, for they are all brook trout, which are really a char anyway!) are the personification of the last bastions of natural wilderness and as such they are my "natural spirit." Where I used to catch them and no longer can, I know wilderness in gone forever, and I am saddened. And where I can still catch them, wilderness tenaciously clings on, and I return to it every spring, and I am happy again. I hope there will be brook trout in my world forever, and that hope is what draws me to the streams of my youth on the Tug Hill every spring.

The brookies of the Abijah, Plum Tree, Pigeon, Raystone, Fox, Mad, and Sandy are not big, but the chance of catching their pugnacious beauty is big. Fishing those "up-country" streams may no longer yield a full creel, but I fill myself anew with memories each time I fish those waters. The experience becomes my catch, a creel full of place.

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Camp C.J. is situated a short drive from many of the good Tug Hill Trout streams, but because Ed and I are the only two in camp this May weekend, we choose to fish one of the

smaller creeks, and head for the Abijah. The way out of camp is bouncy and slow, but dry -- we have had no rain for weeks. And so it is no surprise that when we reach the turn-out, and stash our cans of soda under the same moss-covered log we've used for this purpose for nearly 30 years, we notice that the water is lower, and warmer, than it should be, even for May. Today won't be like days in the past, when we used to clean our fish on the bank together, slitting white bellies and, with a deft flick of the wrist, flipping viscera and gills into the alders for a raccoon feast, and then packing them in ferns and late snow to keep fresh on the hike back out. We will need to hike far upstream to the creek's headwaters, where the Abijah is step-across wide, and its ice-cold waters gurgle out from beneath the arch of alders that heavy lake-effect snows have pressed nearly to water-touching level. Fly-fishing is out; there is no casting room here.

We rig our rods with the terminal gear we used as kids, a Wright and McGill spinner - silver blade and red beads on a size 10 snelled hook. We snip the barbs off; we will keep enough fish for dinner, and release most to taunt us another day. The hooks will be draped with the ubiquitous garden hackle of our youth, night crawlers broken in half and threaded on the hooks. Ed steps into the stream at the head of a shallow pool, and faces downstream. He has not forgotten the drill, even if he's rusty from being years removed from this exercise. Here we part company. I know the trail like an old friend, and so I head further upstream, following the faint trace of trail as it winds along the low ridge of alder and hemlock that mimics the meandering south bank of Abijah.

Even the creek's moniker, Abijah, silently screams "wild." As I work my way east, ever

upstream, a flood of fishing days swims into my brain, washing away the static of far too many days in the civilized world. Abijah. Indians and mountainmen. Crow and Hugh Glass. I'm a teenager again, and if luck holds, and I don't run short on patience, I'll have my limit of brookies in a few hours. Only now, my limit is four, and they need to be eight inches or better; because I can eat four trout for dinner, I will only kill four. Others caught will be forever entered into my memory bank under nostalgia, and released back from whence they came. I reach the hand-laid rock escarpment that marks the ancient logroad to Kelly's Camp, which marks my embarkation point and snaps me out of my reverie and back to matters at hand.

Pulling hip boots up and snapping the belt loops, I climb down the fern-covered bank and step into the Abijah. This is trout fishing the old-fashioned way, downstream, drifting the spinner - bait combo with the aid of Abijah's current on the end of a six foot length of spider web thin mono, which is tied to a level floating 5 weight fly line. The idea is to let the offering drift naturally under, over, around and through every conceivable trout hide the creek has to offer, and say a silent prayer that you lip-hook a striking trout before he swallows your offering gill deep.

I'm thigh-deep in Abijah's tannin-stained water; pure, fresh, but the color of very weak tea from the hemlock that graces both banks of the stream this far up. The pressure of water compressing hip boots against legs feels cool, and good, and I reach back to the bank for a generous handful of ferns. I wet them, and fluff them into my wicker creel's bottom. The feel of the water tells me this is to be a good day, and I want to be prepared. A trout has rolled ten feet in front of me, showing the orange and white flash of brookie feeding near the bottom.

I wait another minute, savoring the memory of the very first trout I caught in this exact place nearly 30 years ago -- every thing is the same. Perfect.

I pay out some line -- wishing it under an alder snag, and just as the current catches my flyline and starts to swing it midstream, I see that orange and white flash and he has me in one great swipe. Hooked -- fish on! I steer him around that alder bush, one branch throbbing in the current just as my wispy fly rod laughingly pulsates in my hand. The branch mocks me with its silent, watery laughter, but I successfully navigate my live torpedo around the snag, and swinging the fish out of the water, hug him to my fish-stained vest. Not a very classic landing -- no room for a net here -- but soon he is kicking in a bed of damp ferns at the bottom of my creel, a handsome ten incher.

I relax, and then move forward, downstream, and the water moves down my boots to hug my knees. Shallower. I move again, playing line out through the rod's guides and into the current. My boots are faded green, hemlock color, and smooth-soled, and I slip on the slick rocks of this quick little stream and slide thrashing into the water like so many brookies slipped through my fingers in years past. I come up fast, and wet, and laughing at myself. And I sit on a rock in midstream, and wait for the water, the trout, and me to calm down.

A trout flashes under his guardian alder. I coil up extra line in my left hand, and feed the spinner into the current, shaking the rod sideways to help the line along. Sunlight sneaking its way through the tall hemlocks makes flickering shadows on the water, so it is hard to watch the spot where mono leader and green flyline meet, but now I see it. Suddenly, the knot jerks spasmodically. I haul back, he rushes downstream. Soon, he joins my first fish in the creel, a

perfect pair. I have time to think, and reflect on just how wet I am from my dunking. I'm wet because I was hurrying, rushing to get to the next good pool. I'm supposed to be relaxing, not hurrying and slipping in the process. But how like me that second trout was. Unable to wait for the bright beads and shiny blade to come to him, he darted across the current, eager to get to the next level of predatory fishdom. We are brothers, the trout and I, in our haste. I need to slow down, so I sit and wait again, this time in the only shaft of May sunshine I find in this cathedral of alder and evergreen.

So it goes. However careful, I slip a few more times, drop a few keepers, release a bevy of small fish, and add a third to the creel. I'm thirsty for the soda stashed beneath the mossy log, and I must meet Ed shortly, to see if supper is yet assured. There was a time, not so long ago, when I would have slaked my thirst with creek water, sliding the silvery, moonbeamy water from cupped hands into my parched throat. But no more -- too many beavers about, and beaver fever not a fun trip for me. My thirst, and the high sun, tells me it is time to get at it -- one trout to go. I've saved this hole for last, a lunker-producer from my memory file.

I slide past a current-throbbing alder, and wade thigh deep into the head of a coal-black run of deeper water. A canopy of leafy alders darkens the water, protecting its denizens from solar heat and careless fishermen. I start my drift, working the rod left and right, steering the spinner by current pull and the flash of blade, and deeper it works into the gravel bottomed pool. Just as the line straightens out and the pull starts to lift the lure, a leviathan brookie darts out and smashes the spinner, then turns downstream. He rushes to the foot of the pool, where alders meet water, and plays for keeps among the tangled roots and stems of alder and jettisoned

hemlock boughs. With nothing to lose, I haul him hand over hand, into the open water, sides flashing in the minutiae of sunbeam on water. Crotch deep now, and shipping water over my hip boots, I feel the fish turn, and start toward me. The brook trout swims toward me, and swims into my blood, swimming wildly into my lowered net, and he is mine. And I am his.

Tired-happy, I meet Ed at the log, and drink a soda. We clean the fish, leaving the heads on, like always, and pack them in wet ferns, and turn our lives toward Camp C.J. and a dinner of wild trout.

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The Only Natives

Bottled in gin-clear water, native brook trout
slowly materialize in shallows,
swimming in silent circles
searching for spent mayflies
on the surface;

suspended in deep tannic hemlock dammed pools
stacked like cordwood parallel to the bank
in wolf pack formation
waiting for stone-washed 'hoppers
after the rain.

Tear-shaped living torpedoes, their swim bladders
hold them weightless in water, like gondolas,
motionless except for red
gill flash, feeding over
clean washed gravel.

White-bellied, orange-finned, red, mottled black and olive,

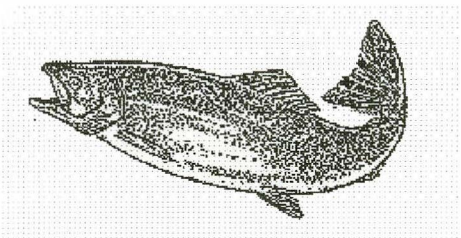
caught in their own amber spell of streambed

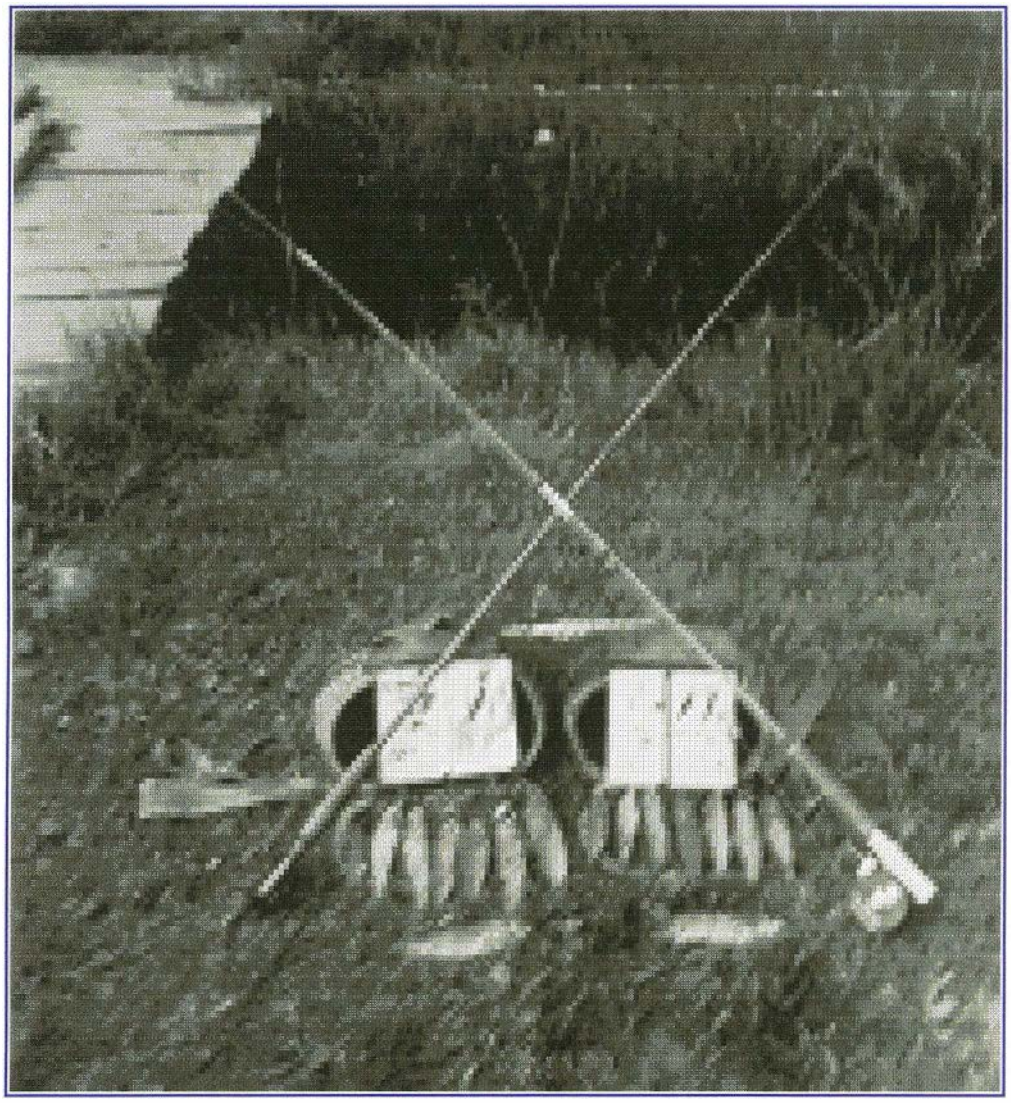
colors of refracted light

dissolved in clean wetness;

so water-colored.

Swimming wild, into me.





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A Tug Hill Woods Walk

Because I was blessed with an inheritance of thirty acres of wild Tug Hill woodland, and had the good fortune to acquire fifteen acres adjoining the original legacy, nature and I have a spiritual relationship spawned by experience. Even though I am no scientist, nature is a patient teacher and I am a quick study; through her I have come to know the trees of my woodlot, the animals, and even some of her most guarded secrets. I listened attentively to my father's lessons, feeling the smoothness of the beech tree's bark and the roughness of the cherry's, and compared each to that of the hard and soft maple, and thus learned my trees by sight and feel. Dillard, Lea and Leopold shared their natural surroundings through their writings, and I strive to acquire their easy familiarity with nature for my own. I walk my woods roads, ridges and deer trails, the better to know the rise and fall of the gentle breathing of the land, to feel the rocks and mud and leaf mold under foot, and to see and hear the fleetness of deer, the booming courtship of drumming grouse, and the shrill whistle of flushing woodcock. Occasionally nature likes to play tricks on me, and throws me a curve in the form of a previously unnoticed sapling on the creekbank, or a sound with no body attached as its maker. Undaunted by these new mysteries, I pursue them until identified, and deposit the newly learned lore in my mythic creel of knowledge. With the spirit of my father to guide me through my woodland walks, I am blessed with the rhythms of nature, and can feel her vibrations and hear her tales, and her gentle tintinnabulation ring in my ears and flow brook-like into my very soul.

On occasion, the woods presents me with a beautifully mysterious vignette, a short

opening scene in her never-ending drama, and urges me to sit and watch the entire act. One April evening, as I made my way from the beaver pond that slows the creek's flow just north of camp, I saw the curtain rise on the courtship rituals of that most diminutive of gamebirds, the woodcock. I had been flycasting for native brook trout, with no success, and left the icy pond waters to climb Mr. Beaver's muddy bank and cross a stump-studded clearing when a gentle whistling sound drew my attention to a bare, sandy patch of ground in the otherwise grassy clearing. Knowing that the wettish grounds of beaverdom and woodcock go together like a moss-covered hollow log and a drumming cock grouse, and this sunset hour being curtain time for woodcock courtship rites, I quietly slipped beneath a thorny wild apple tree to watch the performance. Distinguished by a plumb, mottled body, short neck, overly-large eyes and extra-long, flexible bill, this ostentatious woodcock had chosen this sandy stage to allow maximum exposure of his dance routine to his lady friend.

Strutting on short, spindly legs about the sand, he sings a montage of weird throaty peents, evenly space, to catch the attention of his intended. He has captured me, also. Then, his peenting stops, and he flutters skyward on short, thick wings. His ascent begins with a wide spiral, but as he travels in a true vertical, the spiral tightens, and all the while he emits the characteristic wing twitter of the flushing woodcock of the autumn alder runs. Louder and louder the twitter, smaller and smaller the spiral, until he is just a speck of feather in the April sunset sky, barely visible. A slight, flightless hesitation, and then he tumbles in dive-bomber fashion, a warbling song accompanying his descent. Landing gear down, he levels off and plops to the sand, fans his tail in true peacock fashion, and struts and peents his stuff awhile, and then

rockets skyward again.

Throughout the whole ritual, even when I dare risk a peek about, the female is nowhere to be seen. But I doubt this is a practice dress rehearsal; she is there somewhere, in the grassy box seats, so I do not move, lest I wreck their homemaking, and they move on. The show ends, for me, at dark. Only now do I break my flyrod down, the easier to navigate the abandoned apple orchard and alder thickets that stand between the woodcock's stage and the woodroad that leads to the door of Camp C.J.. I roll down my hipboots, and steal way into the darkening brush, but instinct pushes me to each clear spot in the apples and alders, and I flush several of these nocturnal ground nesters along the way. I pray they think me a deer, albeit a clumsy one, and return to earth soon, no less disturbed by my intrusion.

Come October, I will trade the flyrod for my shotgun, and see if any of the dancers or their hatchlings stayed around for a fall fling. However, their dancing is a memory never forgotten; I will limit myself, and Kelly, my Springer Spaniel, to no more than a brace of birds from this cover, if her nose is operational and my pointing quick enough. Such is nature's lesson in frugality -- I get to see the show, the players should not have to pay the price. Two birds, if I am so lucky, will not hurt a flight of a dozen in their shooting, and the rest will return for next year's performance. An encore is always promised, if the audience approves. I do.

Evenings in the woods are prime time viewing, regardless of the season. An evening last November proved to be no exception, the program's playbill listing a sleek doe deer as actress, a Woolrich clad hunter the audience.

Leaving camp, I follow the woods road east, my back to the wind, to gain the higher ground of the woodlot before I start my afternoon hunt. Once on the ridge, I swing north, and begin a quiet still-hunt, following the line that marks the boundary between the state's reforested pines and my neighbor's slash of apples gone wild and alders intertwined by the weight of heavy Tug Hill snow. White-tailed deer are creatures of the edge. Here is a good half-mile hunt; where the shelter of evergreens meets the open, brushy slash provides all the browse and shelter a deer could ask for. I wear the traditional north country uniform, a red and black plaid jacket, felt hat, dark gray malone pants, all in quiet wool, and rubber-bottomed pacs. I move snail-like, scanning the brush for a feeding deer, but despite my most careful intentions, careless placement of my foot snaps a deadfall, and the white flag of a bounding deer is all I see of the animal I seek. Alone. Could be a buck. I follow the heart-shaped indentations in the pine needles as the deer moves north, to the bank of the creek. There, on the edge of one of the many mid-woods swales that punctuate the forest landscape, the tracks turn west, and head into a spruce swamp. I follow.

The wind, from the lake, is full in my face, a good thing for stalking deer, but it smells a little of snow. A November mist rolls in, little fingers of fog penetrating the spruce boughs. I feel as if I am being covered with a fine, wispy lace. I know where this deer is going, my Dad having shown me the meeting place of several major trails on a knoll in the heart of the swamp. I swing southward, into the swamp, heading for a certain hemlock on the edge of that

higher ground. Here, the thick spruce gives way to striped maple and sweet fiddlehead ferns, and, as the land rises, to sugar maple and mast-producing blue-gray beech. Here, several deer trails, their lines cut deeply in the soft muck of the swamp, converge at the cover's edge, and as a single track make their way to the higher ground. Here, feeding deer emerge from the black spruce to browse on striped maple and paw among fallen beech leaves for the succulent nuts that have fallen, and it is here I will await the buck of my dreams, if indeed it is a buck I have jumped earlier, and if I have managed to arrive at this crossing ahead of him, and unannounced. And it is here that I have erected, at my late father's spirit-sent insistence, a platform of pressure-treated lumber high in the only hemlock in the swamp.

As I climb the limbs of the hemlock, hoist my rifle after me, and settle into my vigil, I notice the wind is stronger, now, pushing the lacy mist out and replacing it with the calm clarity that comes before the storm. Deer will move on this storm front. I won't have long to wait, I can't wait too long. Already, evening shadows are slanting their way into the more open spaces.

The first snow comes as frozen rain, really, in round balls the size of number four shot, just as hard, and just as chilled. The wind picks up a little, coming fully from the west, huge, lake-effect snow clusters filtering through the hemlock's upper branches. I think of Frost, and how I am here to see a deer and "to watch his woods fill up with snow." My great-grandfather's house stood, seventy years ago, a mile from this place -- would he have thought it queer to see me perched in this hemlock, waiting for a show whose performance may be cancelled? The snowflakes are silver-dollar size, and I can pick a single one out and watch it

drift down and come to rest on the ferns at the clearing's edge. The day is darkening, and I am watching the "woods fill up with snow" in the evening, and I am engrossed by nature's work, so I try to recall Frost's poem in its entirety.

At first it is only a moving shadow, dark against an even darker background of spruce swamp, ghosting along the edge of light and dark. Snow is falling thicker and faster now, and I can't be sure of what I see. Although only fifty yards away, I need binoculars to gather enough light to confirm the ghost is a deer, and it is feeding my way. Agonizingly slow, it moves along the edge of cover, in and out of shadows, and still the woods fill up with snow. Already there is an inch on the ground, Tug Hill snow comes fast; but how long have I watched this deer? Another binocular check, and I know it is a doe. Not legal game, although I'm not sure I would have shot had it been a buck either. Kill a deer, feed for a year. Capture this snow, this doe, the swamp shadows, feast for a lifetime.

The doe feeds closer, the woods get darker, the snow comes faster. Soon, I will have to climb down, and clear out. Camp is hard to find in the dark when one must travel a swamp to get there. First snow always changes the look of things. But still I wait. I don't want to spook the doe; deer this close are a rarity around camp. This is the first deer I've seen, discounting flags, in three days of hunting. I don't want to leave before the show is over -- how rude. The doe passes under my hemlock, a sweet fern dangling from her mouth, so close I can see the rise and fall of her ribs as she breathes the snow in. She crosses the standing water exactly where Dad told me she would, years ago, and climbs the low ridge and, tail flicking from side to side, disappears into the gloom of spruce at the swamp's opposite side.

The snow is coming harder now, and I remember a time, long ago, when, to keep a promise of winter venison, we stayed nearly too long at Camp, and nearly were snowed in. Denise has always made me promise, now, that I heed the warnings and head out of the woods before I'm snowed in. Mike waits for me at camp; what fun it would be to be snowed in, but Denise and Megan and Zachary and a job wait for me. The snow is really beating down now, and I hustle to the trail that steers me to camp. The doe provided the main attraction, but Frost has the encore: "The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,/ But I have promises to keep,/ and miles to go before I sleep." Deer hurry for no man, snow stops for no man. The show over for today, I push southeast to Camp C.J..

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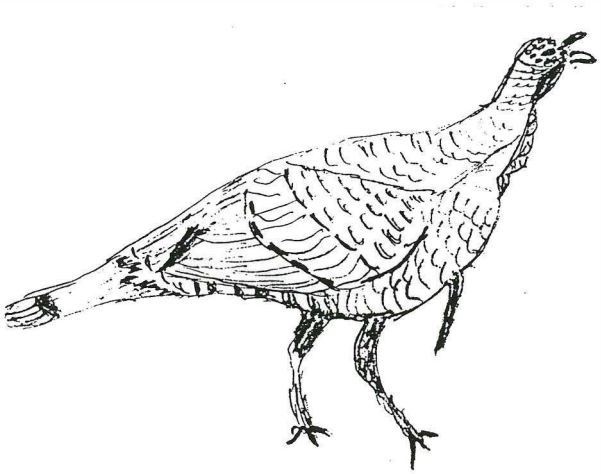
While evening performances are set with nature's full repertoire, morning shows are no less spectacular in their presentations. Happily, far fewer attend these dawn presentations, and solitude is a rare gratuity nature pays those willing to rise as early as she does, and with as much life. Field sparrows are first up, chanting their tenor a full hour before official sunrise. Other birds join the chorus soon after, robins, wrens, grosbeaks, tanagers, cardinals all take their place among the choir. Their song stirs the spirit in me, but I am up early this May morning to hear nature's reverberating percussionist, the wild turkey. Last night I put him to bed in a stand of hemlock on the ridge north of camp; tucking him in with a gentle owl hoot, I then quietly crossed the creek between two beaver dams, and hiked campward sans light, steering by moonbeams. Now I am back, fully camouflaged, with my back against the base of a grandfatherly black cherry, nestled comfortably amid the tree's gnarled, exposed roots. I face the hemlock roost, listen to the morning symphony, and wait for dawn's first gray light.

A beaver emerges from his lodge in mid-pond, and tailsteers his way to the dam for a breakfast of poplar -- rippling tintinnabulation of his wake gently stroke the shore behind me. Peepers in his pond are adequate background singers. Light trickles into my dark, and I sing a few tree clucks with a box call. Without answer, he flies down.

A booming gobble revs the choir, and everyone sings louder. I cluck again, sparingly, because I'm really just learning turkey lingo, and hope he will respond. He does, and his gobbling is louder, and longer, and deeper than the best kettle drumming. I hear his feet scuffing the coniferously carpeted woodland floor, and then I see him strut into view. His elaborate courtship of the unseen hen (me) begins with a fine southern strut, and then he starts his feather-spreading. First the head, then neck, and finally the tail are fluffed into display, and then Mr.

Tom inflates his neck air sacs, and the blue head and red wattles are in full sexy display. Now he struts to the ridge top, and booms a three verse gobble, and fans and struts back and forth across the ridgeline, silhouetted by the rising sun. His wings droop, scraping the leaf-littered ground, and his head pirouettes periscope fashion, looking for his lady. Instead, he finds me, his only audience, and he drops his act quicker than the executioner's axe to the block, and lines it into the hemlocks as quickly as any two-legged runner can, and is gone.

But no matter, I got what I came for, the morning show. The sun is up now, trout are dimpling the pond, cruising the surface for spent mayflies, and the whole day is ahead of me. With a bit of luck, he will entertain me tomorrow, and the camera will be ready. Until then, I'll talk to a few trout, and split some wood in anticipation of the chill of October and November, and long evenings around the Round Oak stove in Camp C.J.



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Zach woke me early this morning to show me his most recent discovery, a black squirrel. We had placed some shelled corn along the fencerow, to help the deer and turkey through the winter, and to allow us a close-up look of them foraging at the same time. So far, however, only the resident gray squirrels had discovered our offering. But nature is secretive and playful, and likes to withhold her gifts until the time is just right for their unveiling. This rainy February morning is one such time. Feeding on our proffered corn are two eastern gray squirrels (Sciurus); one sports the very traditional garb of gray back fur with whitish fur underparts, the other is decked out in the solid black of moonless midnight. Gray squirrels are a dime a dozen around here, but black gray squirrels are a very rare treasure for the eye, and I am happy beyond words that my ten year old son was the first to discover this of nature's little treasures. The binoculars come out, and together Zach and I watch the black beauty feeding in the February drizzle, and I am aware of this little gift nature has bestowed on the two of us, and even though I cannot know all the mysteries of nature's plan to make one squirrel black while all the others are gray, I do know that she has allowed father and son the opportunity to share the beauty of creation in a very special peaceful way.

This reminds me of Annie Dillard's insightful advice she gives in her Pulitzer Prize winning Pilgrim At Tinker Creek. Early in the book she recounts a childhood habit of hers, when she hides a penny, and leaves cryptic messages to lead a stranger to the coin. Who would search for so small a prize, free though it is? Dillard relates this anecdote to show us that the natural world is full of free surprises, gifts to those willing to look for them. "The world is fairly studded and strewn with pennies cast broadside from a generous hand. But, and this is

the point -- who gets excited by a mere penny?" Zachary and I do, for this morning the penny was a black squirrel. Thoreau preached a doctrine of simplicity, and frugality, and reveled in the intimate discovery of the common place in nature. Dillard espouses the same philosophy, urging us to "cultivate a healthy poverty and simplicity, so that finding a penny will literally make your day." The world of nature is "planted in pennies," waiting for us to find them, and bank them in our memories as our most precious retirement annuity, a mutual fund of nature's bounty.

As I walk the woodlot, I am reminded that my father used to refer to certain trees as "special." They were to be looked at, studied, and then left alone, never to be cut. Now, thirty years later, I look for them, to deposit them in my penny bank. There is the gigantic beech, hollow, where squirrels store beechnuts for winter. It has a yellow paint blob on its eastern side, marking the very edge of our woodlot, the line between the state and me. I move down the line, swinging slightly south, and follow the old tote road to a huge black cherry, which still bears the chop marks of great-grandfather Bert's axe. Here he extracted dark, rich wild honey; the bees are long gone, but maybe some day soon others will find the tree attractive and establish a hive there again. Other trees could use these industrious pollinators. I am glad to find this cherry still standing; I remember its location, and move on. I head directly across the woodlot, west, to the creek, cross to the opposite bank, and head downstream. Shortly, after penetrating a copse of maple saplings, I find what I am seeking, the maple tree where Dad smoked out his first 'coon. It is dead and down, but the thicket of wrist-thick maple saplings is testament to its former virility. Requiescat in pace. Reverse direction, walk upstream: Cross on the stones in the

middle of the creek, climb the hill, and there is the small stand of white pines. I know I will not find the monarch white, not as a living tree anyway, because it was disease-ridden, and dying thirty years ago. But its barkless skeleton stands erect still, and I flush a wary pileated woodpecker, a waxy woodborer still in its bill. I have interrupted his loud, slow drumming; I won't hear his soft ending. I could easily push this dead pine over, but it is still special, as a woodpecker dining hall. I leave it, and move north. Here's a tree never noticed before, an ash, like the hundreds of ash throughout the woodlot, except it sports a dark hole, cyclops-like, high up its main trunk. Could the owl I heard last night, hooting his greeting of darkness through the lot, be housed there? Or a family of squirrels, or raccoons? I hope not a porcupine -- he would kill what few white pines and spruce I have left. I mark the ash for saving, a forest housing project approved by the land steward. It starts to rain, so I move towards camp, keeping to the thicker canopy where possible, trying to stay a little dry. I want to be indoors before the downpour hits; that is when the tin-roof symphony at Camp C.J. begins, and I hate to miss any of that performance, the last of nature's free pennies for today.

The musical composition of rain on metal is one of the most pleasurable sounds in the woods, but it is by no means the only one. I need only go back to the white pine knoll south of camp, and listen to the whisper of the wind as she sings in the tops of pine trees. The song is changed ever so slightly when I cross the creek and listen to the breeze in red pine; it changes again in spruce, and the tempo picks up when it moves through the more open hardwoods. Deciduous leaves give it a staccato sound; when the trees are bare, as in winter, the whispering song is punctuated by branch cymbals banging out the rhythm. The wind in the woods, however

subtle, always provides background music in perfect accompaniment to our travels, if we only care to listen. What we take for silence in the woods is a melody of subtle sounds; rustling of leaves, bird-songs, babbling brook, pine needles dropping, and always, the wind.

The wind brings life to the woodlot, it brings rain and snow. In the city, these elements are an inconvenience, in the woods, a god-sent, or a hellish evil. Rain nourishes the plants and refills the streams, washes out the muggy air and raises the watertable. And bangs musically away on my roof. Summer thunderstorms are periodic torrential downpours that wash out my road, and on more than one occasion I have spent hours under my truck in the mud, jacking and packing rocks beneath wheels so that I could drive out. Snow, and Tug Hill is famous for snow, is the bank account for summer wells and hillside springs, and the perfect insulator for seeds awaiting to germinate, and their first year seedling brethren. Plants need this blanket, but if the quilting is too thick, beaver ponds freeze to the bottom, killing trout and beaver, and deer yard up, eating themselves out of house and home quickly, and fall prey to malnourishment and starvation, and occasionally to coyotes. In summer, a thunderstorm shakes Camp C.J. right down to its puny cinder-block foundation, and threatens to isolate me for a few hours until I can make the road passable; any lighter rain lulls me into spirit-land with gentle music. A lake-effect blizzard may collapse my roof, as it did Dad's in 1972, and isolate me for days, until the snow settles enough for snowshoes (and I may not see my truck until spring); a gentler flurry paints the dreary late fall woods a happier white with tracking snow, or makes the sap rise better in March maple syrup time. I welcome all with equal attitude, for how the air smells cleaner when the wind brings rain or snow past the door of Camp C.J.

I began to absorb these natural rhythms in my youth, and I am forever thankful for that. It pays to study books for an understanding of nature (how else would I expect you to be reading this); Camp C.J. has its own meager library of field guides and Dillard, Thoreau, Leopold and others, but one needs to experience what he reads about, to be a part of nature as "in" it, to really savor it. Zachary knew the black squirrel was an eastern gray squirrel, because he has studied the field guide for years, but seeing a black squirrel crystallizes the experience. In The Lost Woods : Adventures of a Naturalist, Edwin Way Teale recounts his grandfather taking him to the woods when he was six years old as "the starting point of my [Teale's] absorption in the world of nature." Just a mile from my parents' house was Lawrence's Grove, a five acre patch of maple sap bush that we called Little Red Bridge, so named because of the color of the iron bridge that spanned the seasonal creek that ran through the middle of the woodlot.

Mr. Lawrence was that grandfatherly farmer type that enjoyed seeing youngsters romping through his woods, and rather than chase us out, he gave us carte blanch to roam its environs. Here I first learned which trees the squirrels nested in, where the pheasants roosted at night, and how to build a lean-to of maple branches and cover it with hemlock boughs to keep most of the rain out. I spent my first night in the out-of-doors camped out in Lawrence's Grove, sleeping in a kapok-filled bag under hemlock and maple, poking arm length sticks of dry wood that I had broken over my knee into a campfire ringed with round stones collected from the dry creekbed. I was enchanted by the crackling of burning wood, the gurgle of the larger Sandy Creek that flowed behind my shelter at the edge of the woods, and the stars that danced overhead in the night sky. It was a lonely spot then, a mile from every where, and my private retreat. Today,

a house stands where my lean-to stood, and posted signs decorate the few maples that remain, and the iron railings of the Little Red Bridge, but thanks to the memories and the urges that they stir, and the things that that private nook taught me, I can go to the woods with the same youthful enchantment of years ago. I hope thirty years hence, Zachary can say the same.

Another creek ran behind my parents' village home, Ike Hunt Brook by name. Its origin was a spring-fed pond two fields behind the house, probably a half-mile in distance as the crow flies. In my innocent youth, I dubbed the pond Frog Pond, and spent many a summer afternoon chasing frogs along its muddy bank. The creek harbored native brook trout, and it was here I learned the gentle art of fishing, and how currents ran in streams. I learned how hard rains could bring the muddy waters roiling over the creek-banks, and how, when the water level washed completely over the large boulder on the bank in our backyard, we were sure to have water in our cellar. When the creek lost its transparency, and its color moved from the pale green of powered jade to the earthy brown of camp coffee, it was officially in flood stage, and off-limits to me. I acquired an almost reverent respect for the awesome beauty that is the mysterious power of nature in this flood-form, and I eagerly awaited the subsiding of the flood waters so that I could once again tramp the creek's banks. And I eagerly watched the flotsam and jetsam of the floodwaters, hoping to find a treasure floating down the creek. I was rewarded once with a wooden johnboat, a prize claimed by salvage rights, and one I promptly lost on the next flood. Such is nature; she gives, and she takes away. These lessons learned in youth are never forgotten. Zach is so much the wiser for his black squirrel, and for the pond, and its frogs and bass, nestled between our house and the wooded hillside beyond. He already knows how to fish,

and when the fish aren't cooperating, he knows how to make the most of frog-chasing and swimming and ice-skating and ... you get the picture. Engage in nature early, and live a life overflowing with gifted pennies.

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Lessons learned in youth hold me in good stead today. Back in the woodlot, I search for more of the special trees my father pointed out to me so many years before, secure in the belief that finding them will give me new insight into the make-up of my woos. I cannot foresee the history lesson about to unfold. My woods is a marriage of two. Thirty acres were my great-grandfather Bert's, who bequeathed them to his wife Celestia, who misplaced the deed when she sold the farm three years after Bert's death. The thirty acres lay in estate for nearly forty years, truly the "lost woods," until my father rediscovered their deed and reclaimed ownership. Bert had purchased the lot in order to harvest its timber; Dad realized that dream with a judicious

logging operation in 1980. Ten years later, Dad died, willing the land to me. When the adjacent fifteen acres became available, and I realized it too had once been a part of the original homestead, I purchased it, combined the two, and began to manage them as my legacy to my two children. A selective timber cut of the smaller lot financed its purchase. Now, I walk out to see if Dad's special trees survive.

I am looking for two trees in particular, slippery elms, and I take my bearings from the stick cabin on the ridge overlooking Skinner Creek, and head due east, past a sunny patch of field grasses and up the slight incline, into the middle of a pungent wild leek patch. So far, in all of the forty-five acres, I have found just two new special trees, butternuts on the down side of prime. They are tall, straight specimens, but apparently don't produce nuts anymore, as evidenced by the lack of butternut seedlings and the nuts' greenish-brown husks on the ground. I decide to leave them anyway, and plan to bring in a few butternut seedlings for their adoption. I am trying to make another addition to the roster of mast producers in the woodlot by planting several Chinese Chestnuts in the lower log clearing. Two seem to be doing particularly well, sending branchlets and leaves well beyond their protective fencing. For now, however, I need to find the elms. Are they down, or hidden by the logging debris left piled for small game hideouts? I sit on a fresh-cut stump, and look down the property line, and try to get back to yesteryear, to remember where these elms were.

I can see the old fence that separated the two plots, and remnants of a stone wall beneath the barbed wire. The wire must be close to one hundred years old -- it is the single ribbon variety of so long ago -- which puts the building of the stone wall in the last quarter of the

1800's. Frost comes to mind again; I begin to wonder what the earlier owners were "walling in or walling out," or were they building the wall only because one of them really believed that '"good fences make good neighbors,"'? Nature has taught me what it is "that doesn't love a wall,/That wants it down." Simply, it is unnatural. Frost, and clumsy deer, and clumsier woodsmen knock stone off stone, and the wall is down; falling trees snap barbed wire, and the fence is down. But why were they up in the first place? I need to know the history of the lot -- how long has it been woods, and what was it before that? And then it comes to me; I need to look no further than the stump I am sitting on, and the others adjacent to it, to read the history of my woodlot. So I look at my sitting stump, and answer two mysteries at once; for here is the slippery elm, down and dead, but not useless, answering the first question, and across its face, the chronology of its lifetime, etched in the annual rings of the stump, the recorded history in answer to the second question.

The stump is easily three feet across, and I eagerly begin to count the rings, some a half inch apart, others, those nearer the center, with only fractions of that separating them. And when I am done counting, I have tallied one hundred seven concentric circles, and now I know this tree back to 1888. A maple stump nearby tallies eighty-two rings, an ash only seventy. All are about the same diameter, and I now know which trees grow fastest, and how thick or thin the woodlot ran in a given year, for these three trees were cut only last spring.

All about the bases of these stumps are dime-sized woodchips from the logger's chainsaw, and I see in them the lives of the trees, and the lives of the people associated with these trees, and the life of the land that supported these trees. Great-grandfather Bert's father

held deed to this land in 1871; that is when my historical chronology begins. Bert was born that year, and apparently his father had cleared the land where my history-stumps now reside. Remnants of a stone wall along the east and south borders of the lot, joined in the southeast corner by a huge cairn of stoves, is testament to the clearing and fencing in, or out, of some domestic animals. Four years later, 1875, Lettie, Bert's future wife, is born, but still the lot is clear, devoid of trees. It is not until 1888 that the slippery elm takes seed in this corner of Albert's lot; Bert is seventeen years old, and helping work the farm. The last decade of the nineteenth century sees mother and father deed some of the land to Bert; he marries Lettie, sells the fifteen acres to neighbor Shelmadine, and fathers Beulah, C.J.'s mother and my grandmother. The little slippery elm sapling watches all these goings-on, and is allowed to thrive, perhaps cultivated a bit for its medicinal inner bark and as a nice shade tree.

Beginning in the center of the stump, the elm's very soul, I count out twenty-three rings. I whittle a dozen rigid splinters I have harvested from the adjacent ash to a sharp point, and jam one into the slit my knife has left in this twenty-third ring, the year 1911. Bert's father died that year, a slippery elm some six inches in diameter the lone sentinel of the field at that time. Count two rings, insert another marker -- by 1913 the elm's shade was protecting another denizen of the field, the maple. Another ring; Bert purchased the majority of the farm just as World War I broke out. A healthy elm and its stripling maple neighbor heard Bert ponder the state of world affairs as he watched over his field-turning-forest acres.

I count six more rings, and cover the history until 1920. Bert's mother has died, he has purchased the state's first hunting license button, or else has become a poacher, hiding in the

shadow of his own trees. No, now I remember the blue and red lettered button proclaiming "Conservation Commission - Hunting and Trapping License - 1917" that heads the collection of hunting license buttons my Dad gave to me, telling me that they came from the farm. Bert did buy a license, perhaps obtaining the $1.10 fee from the sale of slippery elm bark to child-doctoring neighbors. A.B. Clark surveyed the land when the elm was ten inches across, and his blaze marks are still evident on the huge wolf maple in the southeast corner, next to the rock pile and a rusting length of water pipe driven in the ground. Within these circles, we have entered the war, and won, and the elm has celebrated with a three-quarter inch growth spurt.

I count ten more rings and insert another splinter, marking off the decade of the Roaring Twenties, then I count back five, and silently celebrate the birth of my third history tree, the ash. That was the same year, 1925, that Bert purchased another piece of land to add to his holdings -- maybe the alder run just east of the line as a place to water his cows in summer? I take a minute to rest, and carve a special marker. I move just one annular ring, to 1926, and insert the marker to celebrate my Father's birth. I cry a little -- I know the elm, maple, and seedling ash miss seeing Bert this summer, because he is off to Mannsville to witness the birth of his grandson. Moving on, I pass the stock market crash, and my Mother's birth. I wonder, did Bert really start to father these trees in '29 as a real, "hard cash" hedge against the tough times ahead?

Another ten concentric circles, and the 1930's are marked off. The first ring in this band marks the death of his son-in-law, Andrew. Bert vows to take care of his grandsons, and that this woodlot will someday be theirs. The ash is already six, and a strong three inches in

diameter, flourishing in the slightly wetter depression just west of the elm. If the elm knew Andrew's death, it gave no outward signs, for in 1931 alone it grew a respectable two inches in diameter. It could now see the young men building the C.C.C. camp in the clearing some three miles distance to the west, and knew it would soon have many neighbors, most probably red and white pine and black spruce, compliments of the reforestation efforts of the Civilian Conservation Corps. Bert bought more land, perhaps on the promise of maple syrup, for now the maple tree was twenty, and sending out fertile double-bladed samaras fruit to seed the entire west slope. I mark the half-way circle of the '30's with another special sliver of ash. 1935 -- Bert and my Dad built the stick cabin I can see if I swivel just a bit to the west. Funny, my glasses start to fog up, my eyes misty. Must be the glare of the setting sun, always a problem when I try to look for the remains of the little cabin from this vantage point. I take a rest, to think about the journey so far, and the road of history ahead.

I move just one ring, and put another special marker in 1936. The three trees, elm, maple, and ash were witness to the logging operation Bert and C.J. conducted a scant one hundred yards away, so they also saw Bert lose a mammoth load of logs as he drove his team of Suffolks and bobsled down the creekbank. He died three days later. Did these trees weep for him, as I'm sure Lettie did? Just before my last marker, 1940, the trees see Lettie sell the farm, all but their thirty acres and her house and yard and orchard, a victim of the depression and loss of the principle wage-earner. A log baron buys it, strips it of its marketable trees, and resells the land to the state. But these trees, Dad's special trees and their brothers and sisters and their offspring, are spared, by virtue of the deed lost years earlier. The elm had little to fear anyway,

as his timber is worth much more standing tall and producing inner elm bark and shade, but the maple and ash, now twenty-seven and fifteen, are rapidly approaching a harvestable size.

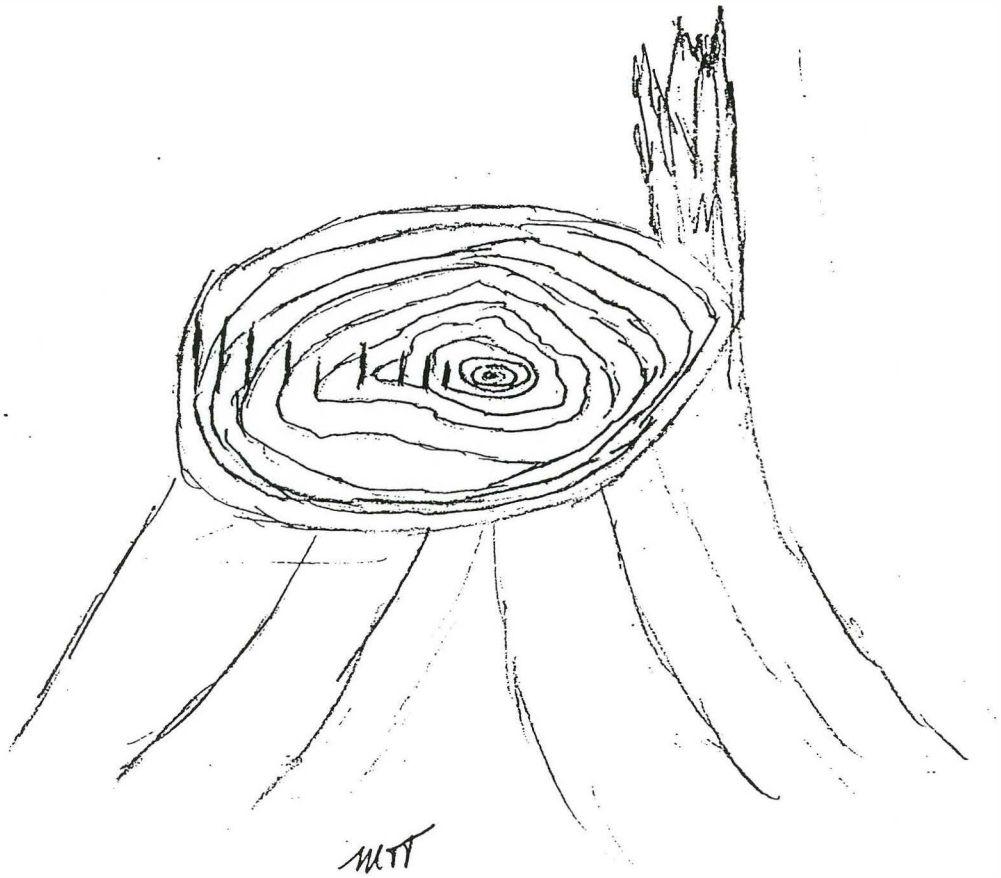
I mark off the 1940's. Pearl Harbor, and the C.C.C. boys are heading for the European and Pacific Theaters of war. Lettie dies, and the family is gone from Tug Hill for awhile, all but the elm and the maple and the ash. C.J. waits until he is seventeen and then he enlists in the Navy. If Bert were alive, C.J. would have spent the summer of 1943 in the woods; instead, he spends it aboard a freighter escort in the North Atlantic. He survives, and while the elm is piling a bark shield around its sixty-first ring, my Mother and Father are celebrating wedding vows fifteen miles to the north. I take another short break, to whittle new markers -- I will need quite a few, because now the history turns even more personal. I'll probably need that red bandanna in my back pocket too, since the sun's glare seems to be more intense now, at least in my eyes.

Refreshed by the small physical task of sharpening slivery splinters of ash, I begin the historical count of rings again. I mark off the 1950's: the first circle of the decade marks my birth, and I recount to get a lucid view of the woodlot. The elm is now sixty-two years of age, and should already be thinking of retirement; the maple is thirty-seven, coming into its prime, and will be ready for tapping soon. The ash, at twenty-five and the fastest-growing of the trio, measures a foot across, and is a straight and true lumber tree already. The lot is a field no more; the stone wall has been dismantled, and the barbed wire is broken in many places, and a fine hardwood forest is replacing field grasses throughout. War with Korea breaks out, but I doubt the woodlot is at all concerned. I count six more rings, and reach the annular announcement of two births. Mel, my sister, and Denise, my bride-to-be, are born and the trees grow on.

The elm's last fifteen rings all grew from light filtered through our woodlot, each circle special in some way. I mark off the '80's, and start the count anew. 1980 - Denise and I marry. Dad's mother dies and my daughter Megan is born just as the last inner bark cells are added in 1981. My uncle, Dad's brother, who has never seen this woodlot, dies during the growth of the next ring; later that year I journey all the way to the north of Newfoundland to chase moose around the tuck bush -- there are no ninety-four year old elms there. Three years pass, Zach is born, the "baby" ash is nearing retirement age. I shoot my biggest buck in this decade, and a bear. I show Eric the stick cabin, and Dad sits him down in a special spot next to it, and he shoots a nice buck. This is Dad's last deer season -- I'm glad he guided Eric's hand like he did mine, and his own, before.

The last six rings are the hardest to count. 1990, the elm is one hundred three years old, and a few inches shy of three feet in diameter. The maple is seventy-eight and nearly the same size, and the ash celebrated its sixty-fourth year sometime during the late spring. Dad, C.J., dies just as the ash samaras are uncurling and the green leaves are about the size of the ear of a chattering red squirrel. He would have equalled the ash's years if he could have made it to August. But it is fitting that I put him in the ground in April, just as the greenery in his woodlot is poking through last year's fallen leaves -- "Remember, man, that thou art dust" -- how many times did my Father hear that in his thirty years as a funeral director; how many times did we talk of life and death in the same breathings in and out in this very woodlot, next to this very elm? In this span of these final rings I built Camp C.J., established a management plan for the woodlot, and acquired the fifteen acres on which the elm, maple and ash grew. I finish counting

the years, and have the answers to so many questions. Where is the elm? Right here, and dead, but not useless, as it holds the history of a piece of nature I deeply cherish. It watched over my great-grandfather in all his years on the farm, watched my Father grow up and grow old, watched me in my youth, and answered my questions in its death. The elm was a special tree and did all it was asked of and more -- it was a generous tree indeed. Its splinter-marked stump makes it a special tree still. Nothing more should be asked of a tree, nothing more could be wanted from one.



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The transformation of an open field into the densely wooded forest that is my woodlot is a prime example of nature's fecundity. A wayward bird drops a beechnut here, an alder strobile there; the capricious wind blows an elm or maple samara on the hillside or in a low depression, leaves mold to earth, the sun warms the spot, and a few trees take hold. Undisturbed, they grow, and spread their seeds, and a forest is born where a pasture was. Nowhere is nature's fertility more evident than in the dense copse of maple seedlings adjacent to the stick cabin. Where once a mighty maple stood is now a rotting hulk upon the ground, and dozens upon dozens of maple saplings, hundreds of offspring from that one parent tree. In death, it has brought forth new life in uncountable numbers. As steward, I will go in and arbitrarily select those straightest to grow on, and will cull the rest for cordwood for Camp C.J..

The low ridge where the stick cabin resides runs alongside Skinner Creek and is sprinkled with beech and cherry of different ages, the offspring of a few particularly fertile parent trees. Many of these striplings are especially fine specimens of their species, large of girth, tall, and straight. Soon they will be of timber quality, and if I select in a judicious manner, and the log market cooperates, they will help finance a college education for my children. I will leave the best, the healthiest, and the wolfish worst ones, for seed, and the woodlot will continue and prosper, and my children will repeat my stewardship. This is how the woodland legacy survives.

Nature's fecundity is the principle player in this grand scheme. She provides me companions whenever I am about in the woodlot. I go for a walk among the trees, and the groundpine and leeks and partridge berries, and I am never really alone. A red squirrel

chatters, and warns a deer that I am coming. The doe lets me get quite close, but never really needed the warning in the first place, her radar ears much more than adequate to hear my human, two-footed approach anyway. Nature plays these surprise tricks all of the time.

Walking toward the stick cabin, I take the squirrel's raucous chattering for an invitation to sit, to rest and listen to the scolding Mr. Pine Squirrel is handing out. He is verbose, loud and long, giving voice to a litany of cheek-puffing chirps and chatters punctuated by his characteristic sentence-ending barks. I sit, not more than twenty yards from the decaying remains of the ancient stick cabin, and watch the squirrel scamper up the trunk of a creek-side hemlock, race to the end of a limber bough, and sit facing me in the characteristic pose this woods sentinel usually strikes -- front paws in prayerful meditation, sitting on his haunches, tail in question mark formation, directly facing the latest intruder of his domain, me. He barks a full five minutes, and I watch, scuffing the leaves in front of my sitting stump, looking for the pungent leek bulbs that frequent this ridge, and listening to the only woods sound available to my ears. I tire of the squirrel song, and stand, brush off my pants, and resume my walk westward on the ridge. A few steps, and nature once again plays her trick on me.

To remind me that after all, I am just a visitor here, and sometimes visitors deserve surprises, the doe erupts from the forest floor like the explosion of a bevy of flushing grouse, and crashes off, white tail waving goodbye as she weaves in and out among the thickest brush she can find. A crashing fall of one of my monarch hardwoods would have been no more surprising, and it is several minutes before my heartbeat returns to normal. This is not the first time a deer has sat tight, waiting for the last second before giving up its concealment, nor will

it be the last, but it does remind me that each time I meet a deer in my woods, whatever the circumstance, is a special time. Such is the power of nature's surprises.

Not long ago, I saw a ermine for the first time. Now mind you, I've seen weasels several times, in their brown coats. But here was a genuine fur-of-the-kings ermine, nearly all white, with a black-tipped tail and a trace of dusty brownish black at the base of his diminutive neck. The early snowfall had apparently just preceded his protective color change by a few days. Nature surprises even her own once in a while. He appeared from under the snow-covered roots of an oak tree, and played sight tag with me for ten fun-filled minutes, darting quickly from roots to snow-covered fern caves and back. Finally, after four false starts, he scampered across the woods road I was watching to reappear on the opposite side, his head visible only because I could pick out those coal-black beady little eyes as he watched me. That stare bore right through me, as if he were trying to see my thoughts, to see if I had designs on his fur coat. I didn't. I was content to watch him stage his little soliloquy in the woodland theater. I came away with a much better understanding of one of nature's most bloodthirsty killers, described by some experts simply as "wanton." This ermine had his gentle, playful side, just as many of us do, and that sight was my reward for patient stalking with my eyes that day. Nature's surprise that day was not my notice of the ermine as much as the ermine playing his part for as long as he did. Why did he entertain me for nearly a quarter of an hour? I might suggest that it was due to that truly animal sense the predator possesses; he sensed that I meant him no harm. I had made no threatening gestures or eye-contact. Had I been bent on clubbing the animal senseless, he would have been long gone; instead, I was receptive to his antics, and he played the role with royal

splendor. I am always truly surprised by nature's surprises -- I am a season ticket holder, and I never get far from nature's playhouse. I am ready to listen and watch always, for nature is truly here and gone, seen and unseen, touch and go.

I live harmoniously with nature, and I am happy to be with her whenever I can. Quite often, she shares her secrets, and I bank them like so many of Dillard's free pennies. With the inflationary help of memory, these secrets make me a wealthy man. An autumn discovery is my woodlot's certificate of deposit that yields me interest that accumulates each time I call it to mind.

I follow a now faint, now distinct deer trail into the heart of the spruce swamp north of Camp C.J., working my way toward the ancient deer stand that was my Father's favorite. In the dim half-light of this November afternoon, I move from high ground mound to high ground hummock hoping to keep my feet dry, and looking for the shafts of light that the raised patches of ground seem to catch. A strange sight catches my eye; I swing left, and there, on a high hummock, is a larger-than-average spruce, holding court over its smaller forest brothers. There, amid the verdant ferns, fallen swamp-maple leaves, and carpet of moss and spruce needles, is a mound of debris the likes of which I had never seen before. A very large heap of cones is piled like cordwood off to one side of the tree, a stockpile of winter food likely the fruits of weeks' or perhaps months' labor of a very industrious red squirrel. At the very base of the spruce, in an area covering a dozen square feet, is a mass of scales two feet deep, and dozens of cores of cones, showing that these had been stripped by one or two squirrels. They had harvested these cones, carried them to this cache, and climbed to one of several dead stubs

a few feet above ground level, to perch and strip the cones of their scales, to have at the seeds along the core. They appeared to have eaten all the fruit of the spruce, and who was I to begrudge them that pitchy prize? Spruce are doing well in that swamp; the squirrel that can open those cones is welcome to them. Never have I seen harvested cones so neatly arranged, never have I seen spruce scales so thick upon the ground. From the size of this secret cache I assume the squirrel has banked some seeds as a hedge against the severity of the forthcoming winter. Perhaps it is the same squirrel that scolded me on the stick cabin ridge; perhaps I will be surprised again by a new plantation of spruce seedlings along that ridge come next May.

Nature is contented to grown from the crumbs which fall from the red squirrel's table, as well as other sources of seeds, and what springs up is what keeps my Tug Hill woods wooded. Nature is generous, from her fertile and dynamic heart, enough to let me in on her secrets from time to time. Ours is a spiritual relationship, growing stronger and more comfortable with each trip through the woods. Thoreau once said, in his essay "Walking," "I believe in the forest, and in the meadow, and in the night in which the corn grows." I believe that nature shares its spirit as I walk though it -- under the influence of forest and streams, mountains and valleys and swampy hummocks and low drainages, sunlight, moonlight and thunderstorm lightning, nature's spirit comes to me in a myriad of free hidden pennies. I believe these are nature's best, they are wild and free, and they give expression to this harmonious interaction I seek with nature. I hope to give expression to these natural images, spirits and forces by transplanting them to this page and yet still leaving them forever wild and free. Grouse thunder into my head, wild leek scent invades my nose, bounding deer give rhythm to my walks,

ermine play mind-tag with me, tree rings tell me stories of circles of life and death, and I hear and smell and see, and understand nature, and I am happy.

These walks through my Tug Hill woods give them a strong grip on my soul, one I hope they never relinquish. My sojourns into the woods are my link with nature and all its mysteriously beautiful secrets -- they hold me up always and lead me to rediscover a spirit as strong as maple, as sweet as cherry, as happy as the chatterings of a red squirrel. They take me to places that are wild and free and full of spirits past and present, and those pointing to the future. They show me alder-banked trout waters, ancient deer runs, woodcock dancehalls. Walking my woodlot gives balance to my existence in an otherwise unbalance world shrinking under blacktop and oil-slicked water. These woodland walks return reason to a world gone insanely awry.

I am at the center of these woods; they are the center of me. I walk around in this center, to make tracks and to get to know the animals and the trees and the people of this place. And I write about them to really know that balance and reason and to share it willingly.

I hope we made some tracks together.

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Camp C.J.: Snowed In

I. Memories: In

I travel north to Tug Hill, deer hunting,
with the constant admonition:
"Don't get snowed in!"
We had prayed for tracking snow, Mike, Dad, and I.
That late November Sunday broke
to six inches of fluffy white groundcovering,
coming down in milk-shake froths.
Couldn't see from camp to pulp clearing --
twenty-five yards --
thought about a second breakfast
as time to let the snow stop.

I fried a dozen eggs, over light, pound of bacon;
Mike stands six-four in stocking feet,
could really pack it away.
Dad didn't eat -- said:
"We might be snowed in, boys."

And me thinking:

"No school tomorrow,"

and Mike saying:

"I'll eat the rest of the pancakes,"

and Dad worrying about the safety of two boys.

I can still see Dad, gone six years now,

rigging chains on the '39 Chevy coupe,

black as coal against the virginal snow,

while we pack away whitened eggs, greasy bacon,

and I think:

"I have too many responsibilities

to get snowed in now,

as much fun as that would be."

II. Promises: Out

We stay at camp two days, to get

venison promised to friends at home --

needed time, but heavy snow came.

The road filled now, all but blocked,
cold and white against green pines.
Third afternoon, tire chains churning snow,
we trucked out past the C.C.C. on
deep brush bordered forest tracks
winding through heavy timber,
crossed upper Skinner on a
shaky log and pole corduroy bridge.

Timber thinned to farmers' fields, where
housetops showed shingled dark,
chimneys belching sooty vapor into
skies still filling with snow.
The state highway sanded, gritty,
we relaxed with the easy going.

Empty-handed, home. Promises kept. Felt good.

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Special Trees

More valuable than saw log timber,

Gorgons of backwoods spewing seeds and shelter,
special trees stand aloof, enchanting wildness.

A great gray bark beech, its hollowed trunk
filled with shelled nuts, a squirrel's winter store.

A hollow wild bee cherry, breached by woodcutter's axe,
yielded pails of sweet dark honey of swarming bees.

Creekside, a titanic sugar maple, smelling smoke blackened,
its acrid autumn odor smoked a 'coon from cavernous

hollow. Hunters filled with deep mud dampness worked
for fur. Winged maple seeds water-carried, heeled
in by hunters.

High ground ash with owlish orifice below its crown, eye-like,
and leafy litter high in bare branches nesting squirrels.

A giant shaky oak, wind twisted and wolfish, dropping sweet
acorns, wasp-stung twigs giving grouse galls to eat.

White pine, reaching for sunlight with whorled crown, amid shadow;
pileated woodpeckers chisel waxy grubs from rotting heartwood.

Barred owls seek the basswood's hollowed heart, a
retreat from noisy crows, raucous bluejays. This

linden, dying from the inner bark stripping for cords,
still flowers to flavor cherry tree bees.

Wizards of woodland's charmed circle, these special trees.

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Spring Sky Dance

April evening, the show set to begin.

Arriving against the orange of sunset,
he flies in low, beneath the alder and apple leaf radar,
lands center stage of bare moss.

Beaver pond peepers his background orchestra,
he begins his throaty peenting overture --
odd, he seems to have no throat, no neck --

he struts, and fans, a soliloquy of peents
like nighthawk's nightly nasal call, until,
earth dancing done, he spirals skyward

in ever-smaller gyres, wing drumming
his own flutter-twitter accompaniment.
Steeply up, smaller, up, louder, smaller, louder

until a speck holding in purple sky.
Then tumbling helicopter fashion, wings wide,
tail fanned, voicing downy-liquid warbles.

Soft peenting applause from amid grassy cover
reminds us he is a good dancer, and
we are not his only audience.

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AQUA VITAE
Environmental Ethics: An Issue Still Alive

"Water, water, everywhere, /Nor any drop to drink." When Coleridge's ancient Mariner spoke these prophetic words, he was looking upon a barren, salty ocean, a real (albeit dead) albatross hanging about his neck. Little did he know that 160 years later this same plight would come to Schoharie County, drought conditions with failing and polluted wells our salty ocean and politics the albatross about our necks. The ancient mariner prays for all living things, even the monstrous water-snakes, and this "spring of love" gushing from his heart cause the albatross to drop off and sink from sight. I suggest that environmental ethics become our prayer; perhaps with the political albatross removed, we can help our neighbors get back Earth's one gift essential to life, potable water.

Water is a universal symbol of life, because it is a universal need. It is perhaps our most basic natural substance, and as such we must realize its origin and presence is Nature's gift to us. Winter snows and summer rains land upon the ground, and begin the cyclic journey of water. Some of this precipitation is quickly converted to run-off; it starts a surfacial journey to the streams, rivers and lakes in the immediate area, where it is born with ever increasing speed seaward, or skyward through evaporation. Some of it begins its journey toward Earth's center. It is filtered through the soils, sands and gravels of the earth, and begins to collect in the subterranean aquifers that are the very water-soul of the Earth's life forms. When full, these subsurface aquifers, and their surfacial cousins, the reservoirs, provide us with all the water we

could possibly need, as long as we exercise stewardship over them in a responsible manner. When we drop our guard, or act in an irresponsible or unethical manner, we risk losing this most precious liquid commodity, and a thirst both physical and spiritual ensues. Thirst is an immediate need. When we are thirsty, or need to bathe, or must cook or satisfy our sanitary needs, water must be present. We cannot wait for some blessed event to furnish us water; Nature's gift has always been immediate, just as our need. But, as we live now, in small communities, in larger cities, in metropolitan sprawl, it is beyond the power of the individual, in most cases, to satisfy this life-giving need completely on one's own. Such is now the case in many areas in our county.

We tend to take water, or the presence of water, for granted. That is modern society's huge mistake. We must begin to face some of the old facts of life, as Coleridge's ancient Mariner did. There may be water everywhere, and nowhere available for our use. Most of us are used to going to the sink or tub, turning the tap, and seeing a tamed, crystal-clear liquid come gushing forth to satisfy our every want. When available, many of us assume a complacent attitude void of the emotions that accompany the procurement of that water. We have little regard for the power that water, or the lack of it, holds over us. Why was the village established along the banks of the creek? What powered our early machinery? Why does New York City maintain ownership of thousands of Upstate acres? The presence of water has held dominion over the sites of habitation, the travel routes of generations, the prosperity (or failure) of countless human endeavors, life and death. It can still create or destroy hopes and dreams, and pit neighbor against neighbor in the quest for its adequate supply. When unavailable to some,

immediate need displaces complacency, and emotions come into play. Unfortunately, some of these emotions come in the form of greedy, uncaring, antagonistic and even amoral displays of human interaction. A while back I was asked to prove that Warnerville had a "water problem" by providing a set number of families who were experiencing difficulties with their water supply. I replied with what I believed to be an ethical answer, saying that just one family without potable water was one family too many, and therefore a societal problem. The answer fell on deaf ears, but, presumably, on a well-quenched thirst.

I live in the country, and obtain my water from a well drilled three hundred twenty feet into the ground. That I am able to have water on demand is the result of a community effort. A well driller set his rig on my property early one July day, and commenced drilling a heavy drillhead into the ground, and pounding a six inch steel casing after it. Several days later, I "had water," and the driller left, after several thousand dollars and I parted company, to his good fortune. Then, three friends and I lowered a submersible pump attached to three hundred feet of pipe, electrical wires and safety rope, into the well, and attached the other ends of these accoutrements to their appropriate receptacles in the house, and crossed our collective fingers. A flip of the proper twenty amp breaker, and water gushed to the surface, filling pressure tank and hot water heater. Now, I really, truly "had water" -- my needs were satisfied. I thought I was self-sufficient, but I was slightly deluded. When, several years later, an opened tap yielded only an airy hiss and then nothing, and the pressure gauge on my tank dropped to zero, the dry tightness in my throat reminded me that thirst and community were mutually inclusive words. Pulling three hundred feet of water-filled piping attached to a hundred pound submersible pump

is not a job for one man, however herculean he may be. The friends came back, the pump was pulled. Parts were needed, so for two days my water needs were satisfied by the generosity of neighbors. Keep track of your actual water usage for forty-eight hours, and you will know how beholden I am to those generous friends. I know I speak the truth when I say anyone without water is one person too many.

Water needs to exist for us in the present, and future, tenses; it flows, and needs to be here now and tomorrow, and for all our children's tomorrows. "I used to have water" is not an acceptable statement in an ethical society. Only people working together can forge water systems that will satisfy our needs into the future in a responsible and ethical manner. We need to heed the Native American's lesson: the Earth does not belong to us, we belong to the Earth. Earth's resources, water included, are limited. We hold stewardship of them, responsible for the wise use and conservation of them. It is time that we cast off the political albatross hanging about our collective neck, and adopt an environmental ethic to responsibly furnish our communities equal access to water.

It has been suggested that the "water issue" in Warnerville is "dead," but that I don't know the meaning of "dead." I know all too well the meaning of the word, be it a dead issue, the death of ethical behavior, or worst of all, the passing of a human life. The later has not occurred in this case(yet), the former I have debated; I hope I have not witnessed the death of ethical behavior in Warnerville. Warnerville's plight can be addressed succinctly: it is time to recognize that no one individual "owns" Earth's water resources, that they are not "free" and "limitless" but instead the we "owe" Earth an ethically responsible husbandry of its water, and a delivery of that water to our neighbors in an equitable, moral fashion.

Coleridge was a Romantic. As such, he believed in a fond remembrance of the past, the vivid use of the imagination, and the beauty, power and mystery of Nature. Many of the residents of Warnerville are Romantic in their thinking too. They fondly remember turning the tap and getting sufficient drinking water. They have used vivid imagination and creativity in installing storage tanks and collecting rain and melting snow to supply water needs. They appreciate the beauty of clean water, the power of those who still have water, and the mystery of where their water came from, and where it has gone. If we embrace the Romanticism of an environmental ethic, if we "... loveth well/Both man and bird and beast/... All things both great and small" we can help alleviate the water problem in Warnerville.

It has been said that if you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem. It is now time to shed the political albatross weighing us down, and embrace an environmental ethic that will restore potable water to all neighbors in the Warnerville community. We are a nation of "community" in every sense of the world. I am responsible for furnishing my own water, via a deep well and pump system, but I cannot be successful at this endeavor without help from my community: no electricity, no water; pump gone bad, pump pulling party; no filter, kids are sick -- the community relationships are endless. In nearly all cases, the ability to supply our needs with good, clean water, and enough of it, is beyond the power of the individual household. Only people working in concert can insure a continually adequate water supply for human consumption. Water has not a shape of its own, but rather adapts to the shape of its container, ever fluid, and releases itself again to give us life. Isn't it time we took a lesson from this life-giver, and thought about adapting to the ever changing needs of our community? We

are part of the cyclic nature of water: from sky to aquifer to human to sky ad infinitum. Water is a universal symbol for life and change, it has universality in its obvious need, it mandates a community effort to insure its procurement and purity.

Water for life? You bet.

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The Deer of Wellesley Island State Park

Wellesley Island State Park (WISP) manager Mike Hoagland was elated to see white-tailed deer browsing in sight of his office window when he first transferred to the park in 1987. By 1990, however, this thrill had turned to one of concern. Hoagland, himself an avid deer hunter, noticed that there were entirely too many deer roaming the park, raiding his bird feeder and the golf course greens. And these deer appeared to be smaller than their mainland counterparts he observed in his daily commute. These observations signaled a problem to Hoagland, so he contacted DEC Senior Wildlife Biologist Jim Farquhar at the Watertown Region 6 office for help in dealing with the problem.

Good things happen when state agencies cooperate and their representatives share compatible goals. Such was the case when New York State Parks, Recreation, and Historical Preservation, the agency which operates WISP, and New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, those in charge of overseeing the state's deer herd teamed up to address Hoagland's concern. Farquhar conducted field studies of the park's deer herd at Hoagland' invitation; his finding confirmed the suspected over-population problem, so he suggested opening a hunting season in the park to help alleviate the problem. Together, Hoagland and Farquhar took their findings and recommendations to Mike Geiss, Regional Director of the 1000 Islands Park Region, who approved the first deer hunt held within WISP in 1992. Because of the stated goals of this hunting opportunity, and the guidelines set up to regulate the hunt, the outdoor sports enthusiasts of New York state end up winners in this joint-agency endeavor.

The WISP hunt, open to archers only, runs the entire Northern Zone archery and regular big game seasons, which begin on September 27 and go through the first Sunday in December each year (1995 dates were September 27 - December 3; 1996 dates will run September 27 - December 1). Hunters are limited to the use of a bow and can take a deer of either sex during the archery portion of the season, but must take only legally antlered deer (3 inch antler) once the regular Northern Zone season begins. At the present time, managers are simply trying to limit the growth of the deer herd in WISP, and not reduce its numbers significantly (although that may become necessary in the future) because the park is particularly noted for the "deer watching" opportunities it provides its visitors. This first goal, keeping deer numbers within the carrying capacity of the habitat to allow visitors to still see plenty of deer, led directly to the accomplishment of the hunt's second goal. By limiting the hunt to some 600 more remote acres of WISP, managers are providing a rewarding recreational experience for archers while at the same time not allowing any conflicting interest to occur. Camper, nature hikers, bird watchers, golfers and archers are all able to co-exist and pursue their interests within the confines of the same state park.

WISP, obtained by the state and opened to the public in 1954, is a 2600 acre state park situated entirely on Wellesley Island in the St. Lawrence River, about a 10 minute drive across the Thousand Island Bridge from Alexandria Bay, New York. The park is home to beaver, muskrat, grouse, turkey, raccoon, red and gray fox, eastern coyote, porcupine, ducks, geese, osprey, eagles, hawks and a host of other birds too numerous to mention, as well as the ubiquitous deer. It also harbors a large population of black squirrels, and pheasants are reappearing as well. Most of these are part of the "Watchable Wildlife" program the park is

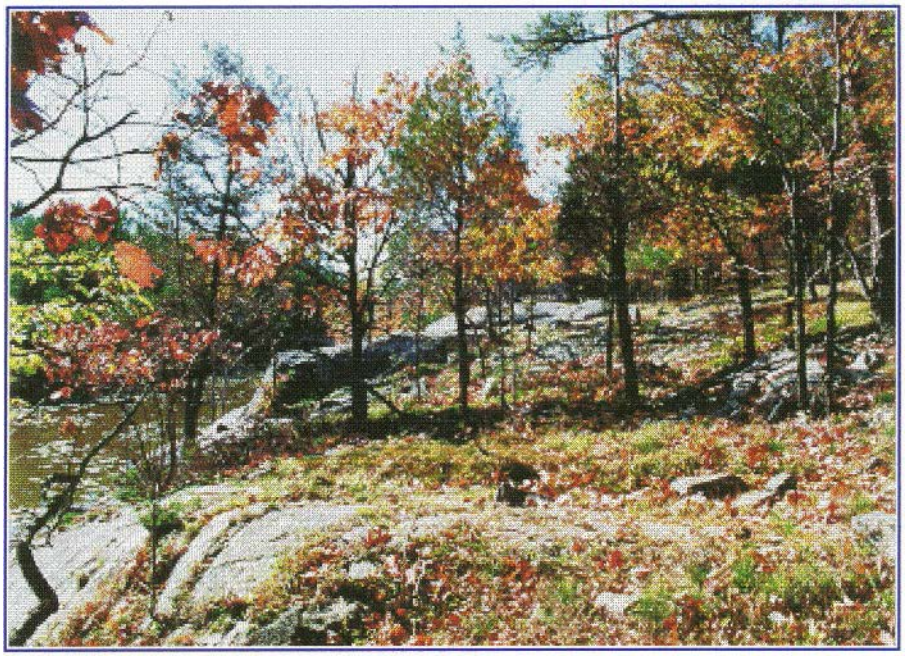
developing in conjunction with its Minna Anthony Common Nature Center, a 600 acre preserve complete with ten miles of trails open year around. The center also hosts annual Autumn, Winter, and Spring Festivals, a Christmas Party, an Art show, and Earthday. Summer programs are featured daily. In addition, the park offers 429 campsites, ten winterized cabins, a nine hole golf course, a marina with boat and motor rentals, picnic areas, a beach, camp store and recreation barn. Bowhunters are encouraged to bring their families along with them, especially in the early part of the season. There is plenty for non-hunting partners to do in the park, and the villages of Alexandria Bay and Gananoque, Canada, with their quaint shops, are only minutes away. Nearby boat tours provide scenic Thousand Island tours, a sight any visitor to the region will surely want to see.

The hunt area sets aside a wooded area of the park where red and white oaks predominate, and in years of good mast crops, deer traffic the area throughout the day. Low granite ridges traverse these oak lots, and the valleys are host to lowlying alder swamps and beaver ponds. Deer trails abound, and many times archers are able to gain an elevated stand simply by setting up on one of the many rocky outcrops that overlook the trail areas that follow the shallow valley floors. These elevated vistas provide ample natural cover for the hunter. The 1995 season saw 294 permit holders harvest 36 deer, 18 of which were bucks. While Hoagland admits this sounds like a rather dismal success ration (in reality, it probably comes close to the statewide average success rate for archers) he hastens to add that not all of the permit holders actually make it to the park to hunt, and also points out that only 25 hunters are allowed in the park per day. The majority of the permit holders come from the greater Watertown area, the closest city to the park, some 30 miles south of Wellesley. But he reports permit holders from

as far away as 200 miles. With camping available right in the park, hunters from a distance can still easily create a quality weekend experience by hunting WISP.

To obtain a permit to hunt Wellesley Island State Park, you must first purchase a valid big game license and a bowhunting stamp. Present these to the Division of Wildlife at Region 6 headquarters on Washington Street, Watertown, New York 13601, and they will issue you a permit, map, and hunt regulations at no charge. This can be done by mail, with a photocopy of valid license and stamp as accepted proof of eligibility. And remember, unsuccessful 1995 hunters may hunt four days in September 1996 on their '95-'96 license. For more information on the hunt, contact Jim Farquhar at DEC's Watertown office (315/785-2261). You can also obtain hunt information, as well as any WISP information you may need from Mike Hoagland, WISP Manager, 44927 Cross Island Road, Fineview, New York 13640 (315/482-2722). The park can direct you in obtaining campsite reservations also.

The WISP archery hunt has been conducted for four years, and so far, the visiting public has accepted it because it remains entirely within its stated scope and purpose. Because archers have cooperated with DEC and park personnel and followed the hunt regulation, they have existed harmoniously with the other outdoor recreationalists visiting the park. Cooperation and shared services between NYS Parks, Recreation, and Historical Preservation and NYS Department of Environmental Conservation has created clear winners all around: the deer herd is healthier, park visitors are satisfied with recreational facilities, and archers have added another well managed area to their bailiwick. Outdoor opportunities abound in Wellesley Island State Park; they exist for the public. Use them wisely, and enjoy a rewarding experience.



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BIRTHDAY BUCKS

Some sports are just naturally lucky--
to be born during deer season.
But, the pressure is still there.

Your birthday--
your celebration of life, your life;
you've made it this far, and you're
vibrantly alive.
But, you're about to kill a buck--
we're talking about death here--
the death of a creature as wild and free
as Nature's wind itself.

Your birth, the bucks's death--
celebrations of that great cycle.
Hunting, and killing, is serious business--
it needs your deepest, broadest perspective;
the future, the sport's future,
depends on that.

Life comes full circle--

predator and prey--

and we are the celebration of it.

Then there's the luck of the draw.

You were born during the season,

and the buck, your celebration

comes your way--

ghost-like, he appears,

black-nosed, brown-eyed, sweet-musk smell--

and the death of the buck

is as much a part of a life

as your birthday.

Sit down with him,

there, in his woods,

listen to the wind whispering,

and know the celebration has come full circle.

It takes a death, appreciated,

to fulfill a life.

And, Sport, nature knows that.

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A Novelty

I.

My fears rest in the comet's tail--

like those before me,

I take Megan, our firstborn, on my shoulders,

(Zach, too young to understand, and Denise, will

come too)

find that celestial blaze

in the night skies over our misty mountains,

and say to her:

"See that, Meg? A comet.

He comes every 76 years.

When you see him again,

you'll be 80. Daddy won't be there then,

but you will."

She cries

(she knows death already,

and asks to see Aunt Jut,

in heaven, again)

because I will be gone--

and I cry, because I am afraid.

Who wants to leave his children?

But that blazing, fuzzy ball brings hope also.

I say:

"Think now, Megan. Of the beauty,

and the power, up there.

Think of me, Meg. Daddy loves you--

I'll always be with you.

When you see him again,

please think of me -- his tail

will point to me. Remember

this walk we had,

what we talked about.

The comet comes -- and goes,

and so do we."

And I talk to her

about cycles, and continuity,

and my hopes and dreams for her

(and Zach, too).

All this to a four year old.

II.

And, yes, Zach, in the carriage,
protected from April night's cold,
his great-grandmother's final afghan
wrapped tightly around him,
a child protected by parents--
he cries because his sister does,
not understanding her tears,
or his.
He is the continuity of my cycle,
the namesake,
heir to the surname my father feared for for so long.
I whisper:

"This doesn't mean much
to you now, Zach. But, someday,
when Daddy, and Mommy, are gone,
you'll be showing your son,
or grandson, this awesome display.
And Megan will be there, my voice,
to tell you of tonight--
this walk, this talk, of this coming and going."

And I ask him to do me proud,
knowing all along that he will.

All this to a boy of eight months.

III.

Denise is beside me,
marveling in the vaporish display of light,
holding tightly to my hand,
crying a little too, because
she knows our circle is mapped.
"We have the best view-
Halley's slides over Casky's Mountain,
there, (she points),
climbs the mountains west,
and lights the hollow below.
We're lucky, the four of us,
to see this together-
marvel, wonder, be blessed
by Nature's other perplexities."

IV.

Turning back to the house,

and our backs to the aerial display,

night's darkness envelopes us again.

Our circle is a little tighter now,

a little rounder, more complete,

our lives a little more mapped out.

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Autumnal Light

Most never understand Autumn; they
take beauty from it -- you and I give
ourselves to it. Beyond wild autumn-

dying grass as wild as our love, a valley
climbs toward itself, climbs quaking yellow
poplar leaves, climbs maples blazing red

orange carotene, climbs a sadly beautiful
incredibly haunting time of year.

The balsam-covered ridge, a feathery
green knifeblade rises from the rainy hollow's
floor, from a hummocky fir forest

thickly to muffle rain. Eerie -- mist a
creeping fog now -- cobalt coolness slides
down ridge from the mountain top, across

our valley a fluttering heartbeat.

A twilight blue spot of silence appears
on the haunting edge of day and night
elevating us to some place beyond
our world to humbleness; We
breathe sorrow and joy in every lung-
full of air, we see fast-falling autumnal

light right before darkness. Our light.
It is a sad time, this death of year,
a beautiful time in spectral lights.
Incredibly, hauntingly beautiful time.

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An Essay on Nature:
Vignettes in Prose and Poetry

To walk through the woods and fields, along stream banks and swamps and other wild places; to walk through nature is quite rewarding because something extraordinarily wonderful happens to those who choose these routes. Sometimes, as I drift along these wild paths, I feel as if the route has actually chosen me, and I'm uplifted by the selection. Out there, I've come to the conclusion that the natural world must live patiently and cooperatively together with our "civilized" world, or both will perish in isolation. As they go, so go we. Man's relation to nature, that is, that which we bring to nature, and that which we learn from nature, is perhaps the single greatest balm for the human spirit. A healthy dose of wilderness, its places, residents, and lessons of the spirit learned is vital to our well-being. We need not control nature; we need let it take our hand and guide us to discovery.

This discovery sometimes comes in the guise of the most familiar of things. I hiked along the base of Cat Mountain, having come from Janeck's Landing and skirting the swamp that guards Dead Creek Flow's inlet, and wondered what the ponds south of the mountain looked like from a mountaintop vantage point. The trail to the top seemed the easy way out, so I convinced my hiking partners that we should climb the granite escarpment that faced southeast as sentinel to the pond. The mountain was a familiar friend, the woods and ponds beyond were equally familiar; the first scrambling ascent, probably a fourth degree climb, was a wondrous lesson in geology, camaraderie, and human spirit:

Cat Mountain Rock Climb

I

From tents
across Cat Mountain pond,
a rock face
four ledges high.

Scree slides yield
a way up
to the peak only
to find another topping another.
Hand-rappelled up micaed granite,
treading lightly over millennial
mosses, careful not to scatter their
meager inch down;
vibrams fight rock
for the last few feet of chimney --
a final hand-hold
to the top.

North to the true summit;
April sun -- pesky black flies --
cherry kool-aid
from the canteen --
        the view:

pond waters spread
at our feet
breezes lap green tents
and grasses
all the way to Cowhorn.

II

Then down.
The slides -- rock hoping, hand -
rappelling, coats thrown down, empty canteen
scattered moss and
rock fragments
        to tents.

We were actually seeing the area as we had never seen it before, and it was beautiful, but I was even more enthralled by the force of the mere presence of that sheer granite face. I needed to see it up close, to grapple with it and come to know it intimately; I needed to "climb" it. I took rock climbing lessons, I purchased ropes and chocks and runners, shoes and 'biners, and I convinced Bill that a first ascent on Cat Mountain would be a feather in our collective climbing cap.

A strenuous two hour hike on a sweltering July day put us at the base of the mountain. We rested briefly, and then worked our way along the boulder-strewn base until we found a vertical route, a fissure in the otherwise flawless granite face that snaked its way skyward some 500 feet into the cloudless blue Adirondack sky. I checked my gear carefully, slinging each chock on a brightly colored piece of nylon webbing. Then I clipped a carabineer onto each sling, and clipped each piece of protection onto my hardware sling, which I carefully draped over my right shoulder and under my left arm. I stepped into my sit harness, and locked a 'biner into the front loops, and tied the rainbow-colored chounard rope to the whole rig with a tight figure-eight knot. Bill tied in to a large granite block at the cliff's base, I attached the other end of the climbing rope to Bill's harness, and chalked up. I was ready to climb, to either caress or conquer the rock.

Eighty feet up, a sinister overhang blocked my progress; I finished the first pitch here, anchored in a belay station and signaled Bill up. We started the second pitch, electing to traverse to the right, looking for another vertical crack system, to avoid the overhang of smooth mica-flecked rock:

The Second Pitch

I stare straight up vertical wilderness --
several fine lines stacked together.
Cold granite, expansive, solid --
Power, and size.

Shivering has ended, but butterflies still churn in my gut.
I will climb clean, free; slotting, sewing up cracks
with chocks slung with webbing.

The belay stance in, I step off the ground.
Rhythmically jamming fists and toes in the rock's cleft,
we become one -- two familiar lovers in union again.
The earth fades beneath my smooth soles --
a few moves of total effort build my confidence --
the automation of jam, pull-up, clip in
carries me to the second pitch.

A freaky traverse that won't go --
with delicate isometric tension,
a combination of opposition of thumbs and toes,
I struggle to stay on thin flakes I am edging on.
Purity and style give way to raw, cold fear.
Six inches more
right foot slips off the flake
my pulsing hand cannot recover its half-inch bed
contact between fingers and rock dissolves into oblivion,
and suddenly, cold, alone, I am arching out
and away from the cliff.

Twisting madly in vain attempts to recapture the rock,
"FALLING !"

The harness tightens my aching loins --
I pendulum, granite searing my flesh, rawed,
and a chock pops.
Another ten feet, falling, in screamer fashion;
the rope tightens, Bill's figure-eight burns from friction,
I am suspended.

The second pitch won't go.

Amazing, how new and beautiful, and a little terrifying the familiar can be. The fall from that rock, harmless as it was, certainly inspired a sense of surprise and no little wonder in me.

This wonder can turn awesome in the flutter of a heartbeat -- just give nature half a chance. Such was the case one winter day when I ventured out alone to run my beaver trapline. Warm weather and increased beaver activity had churned deceptively safe-looking ice into an accident waiting to happen, and I was unwittingly only too happy to oblige. The ensuing few minutes turned a familiar frozen beaver pond into a pleasing terror of unfamiliar falling through ice:

Beaver Pond Ice

I turned from the trail, and, following the thin spoors of touring skies, threaded my way through the crab apple and aspen jungle toward the open expanse that marked the beaver colony. A few more strides took me to the edge of the pond, where drifting snow gave way to half-melted slush, the consistency of maple syrup, and only slightly lighter in color. The pond-ice's rotten color should have warned me, but I sauntered toward the weathered, sun-bleached log sentinel, thrusting its lone arm eastward, as if beckoning me to check its origin beneath the frozen water. It marked my first trap, near the dam which held the water neatly impounded in the tiny valley.

I wondered if the trap, stained black to match the muck on which it rested, had been disturbed; as my mind wandered to ponder this, I strayed from the narrow tracks of my predecessor. With each step half-melt splayed both sides of my track; I thudded closer to the icy shaft leading to my cold steel. I swung right to sidestep a particularly rotten looking spot of ice, and as I lifted my foot, I felt for a fleeting instant the pit of my stomach give way as my

other foot sank, to the ankle, calf, knee, dully thudding through the slush.

I came down hard with my left, hoping to arrest my plunge, but the mush gave way, squishing softly, almost silently, around my waist. I groped wildly, but couldn't stop the slow sinking feeling that enveloped my body. Slowly, as if a straw were being pushed into a triple thick shake, I invaded the privacy of the frigid water beneath the slush. I could find no solid ice to check my fall; in my slow-motion plunge each attempt at grasping the sides of the everwidening crevasse turned the ice to a pulp floating on the blackness. I sank to my armpits, and for the first time felt the iciness invade my marrow and, reacting sluggishly now, crystalize my blood.

In a last ditch attempt at survival, I thought to go with the fall. As I gained speed and plunged finally through the rotten ice, I drew my knees to my chest, as if to ready my extremities for the shock of landing. I felt the bottom muck, thrust my legs in frog-like fashion and, watching bubbles race me up, rocketed toward the syrupy pulp above.

My head shot through the murky slush, a blast of icy arctic-like air seared my aching lungs, and I lunged for the solid safety of my trap stake, my clothing crackling, already an iced piece of armor to shield my frosted body. I lay on the slush, gasping.

The experience certainly terrified me, but I must admit a certain sense of exhilaration as I lay gasping on that ice, my arms tightly wrapped around that life-boat log. I had cheated death, alone, one-on-one. This rediscovery of my resolve to live, and not give in to water, held me in good stead several years later.

Bob and I decided to challenge March's angry creek waters by canoeing a normally

placid eight mile section of Cobleskill Creek. All went well, chilly as it was that day, until we rounded a bend in the creek and saw coffee-colored creek water shooting skyward in ten feet high roostertails. Icy water shipped over the canoe's gunwales, and we were awash and drifting recklessly downstream. Bob's hysterical screams seemed ironically out of place as I coughed and sputtered and shuddered my way to the cobblestone-studded shore. Bob had dragged the canoe to shore; the yellow Old Town and he lay side-by-side on the beach downstream from me, Bob's sides rhythmically rising and falling in tempo with our mighty shivering. These as much from terror as from the cold. He didn't say a word to me -- I didn't know what to say to him. I was just a million times glad that he was alive; as the stern paddler, the canoe, Bob, and our course had been my responsibility.

As the shivers passed, I saw a smirk cross Bob's face. Slowly, the dunking in the cold creek water, nearly liquid ice, had become much more than the eight or ten seconds of our lives the event covered. For me, it was the second time I had survived nature's baptism. I had rediscovered myself, and looked downstream to see a friend as close as one can get. A smile played upon my lips; Bob laughted out loud, and I laughed, and then we laughed together, and our giddy relief was deep and wide and honest. I think the laughter was a prayer of thanks for begin delivered from the creek, for being alive, for being friends, and for being there for each other. Put two men, a canoe, and cold water together, mix with terror, and you get strong friendship, deep, wild, and lasting forever.

Not that remote, wild terrifying water is the only beautiful water. I have a pond in my backyard, one I designed myself, and I watched its construction daily. My family enjoy it, as I do, but I also fear it a bit. I often think about all of the pond's personalities, and I want a clear

understanding with it:

Dear Pond-Out-Back

Dear Pond-Out-Back,

My kids love your pop-sicle water
as they cool-down-summer swim.
Denise loves you, trouble free
you require only air bubbles
springing from bulldozed bottom.
Yet you scare me --
you can take them under
silently, soundlessly, without warning
And give back, belching
only bodies empty of life, like spent cocoons.
And not even care.

I made you, bulldozing gently your muck,
so I must love you too.
A protean god, you swallow large-mouth bass
I feed you. I pray you
don't swallow my son.
I shelter your middle from sun
with a garish gray float, so
my daughter's tired swimming
won't offend you.
Irises and Easter lilies your
north-shore bonnet; my wife
sits just to watch you wear it well.

I trim your bank grass;
thank you for the grace of water.

The pond is beauty close at hand; I see it daily.

Common, tranquil natural beauty sometimes transcends itself, inspiring awe that carries with it a lifetime of revelation. Such was an event a little while back, when I had the opportunity to share an awesome natural event with an entire English class in my charge. Having taught Elizabeth Enright's "Eclipse," a short story that relates the self-discovery of four young women

during a mid-winter viewing of a solar eclipse, for twenty years, I was finally afforded the opportunity, via nature's panoramic stage, to take a class outside to see the real thing. Over four hundred students and teachers were in the parking lot that day at the appointed hour, which allowed me the chance to see the event on a multitude of levels: my personal awe, my class's reaction to the event as fact and surreal fiction, and a society's cosmic view. Tamed silence reigned over the people; untameable power rode the sky. I borrow words from Dillard's article of the same name, and temper them with a generous ration of my own heart:

Eclipse

The sun simply shaved away
less sun, more sky
deepening to blue, no darkness
deepening to indigo, little sun
alpenglow sunless
sun gone, world wrong
an unearthly color, missing
real light of day, mind
going out as the black crescent
disk of sky slides lid-like over sun.

Parking lot macadam liquid black,
grass a metallic silver sheen,
navy blue sky, all a faded
daguerreotype of finespun
copper. And in the sky,
a tiny ring of heliocentric light.

Some power here, in nature's eclipse, and in our reaction to it. We find meaning here; we fear darkness, but we know that light soon follows it. All of my class were silent -- do we each harbor some "eclipse," a time when our darkness overshadows our light, and turns us indigo, or darker yet? Perhaps events such as these point the way to view human existence.

Thoreau intimated that human existence should be some sort of self-justifying esthetic

joy. Our natural world is not always convenient, but it is full of wonderment, not always useful, but beautiful, to be enjoyed and admired. A day with my daughter served up just such an esthetic joy: I took Megan turkey hunting, and I called in several turkeys after we had scattered a flock. They flew silently into a hemlock tree thirty yards away from where we sat, backs to an ancient white oak. Three turkeys, each weighing perhaps fifteen pounds, into the hemlock, and promptly disappeared! We checked all the trees around us one more time, and then started stealthily toward the hemlock. A thunderous flapping caused me to spin around to see two turkeys departing the oak we had been sitting beneath. They had remained, completely unseen, where they had come to roost when we broke the flock up. My calling and the arrival of the other three turkeys had left them completely unflapped; they simply waited until our backs were turned, and made off unscathed. And the other three? They pitched out of the hemlock one at a time, unseen even as Meg and I stared at the needle green that screened them, and we never fired a shot. But Meg's laughter, her genuine joy at the faux pas we had just committed, was our trophy for the day.

By participating in nature, we achieve a oneness, a mystical experience with natural things. To find our way in this world, we need to return to origins. A hunting happening sharply focused this mystic experience for me: several years, I played an integral role in what I now fondly refer to as the miracle of the hunter's moon. I had been called to the hospital, where my father lay in a sterile, white bed, puffing little, shallow puffs of breath into the air. The doctors said he wouldn't last the night. I was convinced that each breath was one less he'd have in this life. Timing was lousy -- not because I might miss the opening day of deer season, but because I was watching the one person I loved so much slip away at the very time of the year that he

cherished so much. I thought I could do nothing.

Dad's eyes fluttered open, and he tried, very hard, to focus on my face. The cloudiness of his look gave way to a clarity that belied the severity of his condition. He tried to speak, but only hoarse whispers, unintelligible, came out. He had given me the will, the spirit, of life. He had taught me the sport of the hunt, and the quest itself. I had to give something back, so I said, "Don't try to talk, Dad. Relax." But he had to try.

This was his hunt, his quest. He needed this. His eyes locked on mine, and he rasped out, "What day is this, Mart?" He only called me "Mart" in the best of times, like the time I shot the fat little six-point buck above the sawmill("Boy, Mart, I don't think I could have made that shot!").

"Tuesday, Dad, but...," I felt the tears welling up -- what difference did the day make this late in the game?

He interrupted, "No, no -- you know what I mean. How many days until Deer Season? I've lost track of time in here."

"Eleven days -- a week from Saturday. But, you can't hunt this year, Dad."

"You don't want to hunt with me?"

"I didn't say that, Dad. It's just that, well, you can't hunt from in here, and it doesn't look like you'll be out of here in eleven days, Dad."

"If I'm out of here, will you hunt with me, Mart?" Him asking me! I had always had to ask him, until I left his Tug Hill home for the Southern Tier. Suddenly, the tears welled up again, and the truth rushed me from all sides. I hadn't had time for a Northern Season opener with Dad in years, and, now, there was the possibility that these openers would be over forever,

soon, much too soon.

"Dad, you get out of here, and I'll hunt with you every weekend. I'll push the Green Swamp for you, and when you clobber old mossy horns, I'll do the drag by myself." I started to believe, and the old sport came dancing into Dad's eyes. He just might make it, I thought.

My father walked out of that hospital room a few days later, and we hunted together that whole season. On the final Sunday of the season, I sent him into the woodlot for a short watch, and when he didn't return at the appointed hour, I began a frantic search for my frail, aging father. Snow was falling heavily, filling his tracks nearly as fast as I could walk, tracking my Dad. Windchill approached forty degrees below zero; I expected to find him dead, the victim of a weak heart, weaker lungs, and exposure. Instead, I found him doggedly dragging a spike buck uphill in thigh-deep snow. He had his winter's meat; he had completed the quest he had begun in the hospital two month earlier. It was his last buck. The next spring, unable to hunt and confined to the house by an oxygen tank and a congestive heart, he died. It was April, and he gave his body back to that last spike buck's fawns:

Deer Poem

Grass leaders,
I have killed the buck
whose fawns will devour me.

For three seasons
I have watched
the six point buck
drink my spring water,
eat my summering grass and fall sweetcorn;
dancing down sunstreaks
he came
in early winter.
I shot him.

He moves,
and is not lost.

I pull the steaming paunch
from his frame,
and know the traditional
first kill meal of liver
and garden onions.

When I die
and move to the earth,
my bones will sprout more summer grass.

I know where Dad's spirit is. Persephone, Demeter and Hades keep no secrets from me. The truth of life and death, and living in between, is noticed by nearly all, but truly understood by those who take the time to understand nature. My father taught me to love nature in all its beauty and mystery and power, and in some small way I try to call attention to nature's awesomeness and beauty in order to preserve them in my writing.

We need to understand that when it comes to our connection with the natural world, we truly own nothing. We are merely stewards of everything nature loans us. We are blessed by sun and rain, day and night, and we feel the pull of the same wind that tugs at the grass and leaves. With a responsible stewardship, we preserve the routes of nature for our heirs to walk through and we insure that the extraordinarily, mysteriously wonderful happenings we experience will be experienced by those who follow us. What more than the newness and beauty of the familiar remain new, beautiful and familiar for all time could we ask for?