



# NATURE WRITING

*Writings from the recovered notebooks of Tabitha H. Eldreth,  
winner of the 1998 Edith Oakley Award for  
Excellence in Ecological Studies*







*August 14th, 1998*

The story of natural history, as with everything else, is riddled with murder. John James Audubon, that great-great-grandfather of conservation, was the biggest monster of them all. His portrait beams down upon the heads of scientists and schoolchildren alike at the Museum of Natural History. Aside from the cocked gun in his hands, he resembles St. Nick. But look beyond this jolly personage to the red-rimmed hills trembling in the background to know something of the man's mind.

And yet, I am empathetic to Audubon. I flip through the pages of *Birds of North America* and am struck with the cruelty of his world. A peregrine falcon pauses in its work of tearing a duck apart to fix the reader with daring eyes, while blue jays nonchalantly decimate a nest of grackle eggs. *The Viviparous Quadrupeds of North America* is even more terrifying, simply because he had more teeth to work with.

One could leave the Audubon canon with the conviction that he hated birds, detested nature altogether. But perhaps he just loved America, a sickly, fragile thing in the face of so much wilderness. And maybe it wasn't that he hated nature, but feared it. The land

was then (as now) riddled with the paths of a million animals and inscrutable men. To take a pebble from the great monolith of Nature and hold it in his hand must have been a great comfort. With every toppled heron's nest, the oppressive weight of the fathomless must have seemed a little lightened.

But for every row stitched into the great tapestry of Knowledge, there are other threads unraveled. Peering into the eyes of a kidnapped mother hawk tethered to his drawing desk, Audubon felt the worth of her wingspan dissolve like morning fog.

So much for regrets! I've given my life to the study of nature in these great American woods and have finally been recognized for it. My prize, of course, is the coveted Edith Oakley Award for Excellence in Ecological Studies. I have been granted eighteen months reprieve from my post at Cobble Brook University and \$10,000 to write the twentieth century's *Walden*.

I have chosen the X-- Preserve as the site of my self-imposed isolation for reasons I will later bring to light. For now, I am freshly installed in one of the few remaining cabins scattered throughout X--'s 200,000 acres of highly protected federal forest.

There is one dirt road that runs north to south, and my cabin is about three miles from it. I have made arrangements to meet Henry Chicanet, a cranberry grower who lives on the outskirts of X--, for propane and food deliveries. We will meet at a pine tree marked with a red flag near the road.

The cabin is located near the eastern border of the woods. It has two rooms, one to sleep in and one for everything else. There is no plumbing, but a stream of spring water trickles nearby. An outhouse winks at me from my bedroom window.

A dingy valance printed with red birds hangs over a window near the gas stove. The cupboards have come stocked with dish service for two and a handful of battered pots and pans. A counter drawer



holds some silverware, an inordinately large knife, and an ancient corkscrew that advertises someplace called Deb's Lobster Corral.

A sooty fireplace in the center of the main room seems to draw what little light the cabin has into itself.

To the right of that is a built-in bookcase. It somehow looks barer with my small collection resting on it. I have brought the complete works of Edith Oakley, *Audubon's Birds of North America*, and a collection of Blake poems. The second shelf holds my work notebooks in case I should need them. They are dated quarterly from 1977 to the present day. I have always written on graph paper made by a now defunct paper company. The emerald lines printed on sea green paper always seemed better suited to nature observations than technical computing to me. I bought reams of the stuff before they went under.

I have also brought a small set of watercolors and brushes for when the light of language shines too dimly. I am not a professional artist, but my illustration of marble snails mating was used in Hong Yeong's dissertation.

Aside from the curtain, the cabin is undecorated. I have pinned a photograph of a young Edith Oakley on a cupboard door. She is wearing a man's shirt and smoking a cigarette.

The wooden table at the heart of the cabin will have to double as eating surface and desk. It is roughly four by six feet and smells like it was hewn from hickory trees. I have set my black typewriter at one end as a kind of dark literary angel. I intend to type up my daily, pencil-scrawled observations into narrative form at set intervals.



*August 21, 1998*

The echo moths are at the tail end of their seven-day life cycle. They have emerged from their cocoons with bellies full of leaves to fly and mate, then die. They're as big as some birds and most commonly blue, but sometimes tinged green or violet. Wide eyes stare blankly from their hind wings, like Greek talismans of protection.

A few nights ago, I was up late studying Edith Oakley's letters to her gay sweetheart, Chet Benson, in search of any mention of the Cora bulb, when I became aware of being watched. An echo moth had alighted on the sill of my open window. I swear its wing eye winked. I had been invited to a moth orgy! I followed it out into the night as quietly as a cat and crept into the crook of a tree to watch their false eyes flash in the moonlight.

The experience recalled to me a scene in Oakley's *Secret Forests* in which she describes visiting a sea cave at dusk. The tide patterns are such that the cave is rarely accessible during the year and then, only briefly. Oakley kneels down on sea moss and lets ocean water soak into her woolen skirt. Pink flowers hang down from the cave's ceiling like dormant marionette puppets. The flowers

are really animals though, waiting for the rush of seawater to envelop and animate them. She is struck with the stillness of the waiting; she realizes that her heart is the empty cave and the sea is her work.

So it was with the dancing echo moths and my little heart. The moths were so transient and beautiful that I threw open my innermost gates and let them march right in. Instead of filling me with contentment though, they filled me with nausea. I startled them in their nighttime antics by clambering out of my tree and finding a bush to wretch behind. When I returned to my roost, they were gone.

I am getting to know my woodland home. My cabin was built from the trees that used to grow where it stands now. Aside from a small clearing in front, it is crowded by plum birches, their hallmark being, of course, the blue-grey sheen of their bark and leaves - and their marked lack of plums. Plum birches are one of countless unfortunate species, inaccurately named by eager male explorers. What he probably mistook for a succulent plum was actually the dung of the now extinct emerald hen.

To the south, there is a stream. To the east, the birch woods open up to a meadow. I have spent the last week monitoring it at different times of day to see what kind of traffic the hulduphinium flowers are getting this year. They are in magnificent bloom right now; big trumpet flowers wobble atop tall, gangling stalks. They are a favorite haunt of many X-- inhabitants, including spotted hummingbirds, cadaver bees, and triad hide deers. Last night I saw an unfortunate velvet mouse attempting to climb its tremendous height before it was devoured by a silver owl.

So much of my life is spent looking and listening that sometimes I feel like an ugly owl. If I could be granted one wish, it would be 360-degrees of looking, or maybe that Lesley Hunter didn't receive the Bramblewood Fellowship.



There is an old story about the secret powers of hulduphinium. A native guide was accompanying a missionary as he bumbled about the woods. The missionary was about to pick a sprig of the hulduphinium's dark-purple blossoms for his buttonhole, when the native stopped him, explaining that if the flower were picked, they must dig up a piece of its root and rebury it some yards away in exchange. The native cut off a small piece of root, but before planting it, rubbed it vigorously between his palms, then on his neck. The missionary picked his flower and asked what primitive ritual the other had performed with the root. The native laughed meanly, and they continued on their way. As they progressed, the missionary was gradually aware of the sound of trailing woodland creatures - rabbits, squirrels, foxes, and deer. That night they shot a buck and ate like kings under the fiery stars of a nascent Virginia. That is why the plant is sometimes called the hunting-root.

Today I spent the morning collecting the colorful corpses of echo moths. I have a dozen bodies to show for it. They are piled in a bowl on my wooden table, like strange *macarons*. I plan to try and find a correlation between their color and scale shape in order to disprove a colleague's flimsy theory.

*August 28, 1998*

This morning I woke up early to try and catch a glimpse of the smoke bird. They are sleet grey and infamously private. One only ever sees them in a drizzle.

In preparation for this stay in the woods, I treated myself to a coat. It is a Burberry men's trench coat from 1967, the same one Edith Oakley wore on her ill-fated expedition to the ludicrously named Gumdrop Mountain in the Northwest Interior. It is made out of gabardine the exact color of black elm bark. It has a matching hat that makes me feel impenetrable.

I spent three hours sitting on a rock, drinking weak instant coffee; I think I saw two of these shadowy birds for my efforts. One of them was stalking a finch. I didn't think they were carnivorous - I will have to investigate this further.

I wish they would eat the monsters ravaging the dawn bell flowers. These lovely plants grow in patchy shade with tall, blue-green stalks. Deep blue flowers grow in threes and hang like bells. I had been looking forward to seeing them but had yet to run into one since arriving. This week I finally found one, alone in a dark

spot with brown-tinged flowers, curling over itself.

I bent down to examine it. At first glance, nothing appeared amiss. It was only after several moments of observation that I became aware of a subtle movement; the plant was covered in worms the exact color of its blue-green stalk. I picked up a stick to throw them off, but when I touched one, I felt its vibrations in the back of my neck. I stood up quickly and became dizzy.

It's odd for a caterpillar to be feeding at the end of the summer. Maybe I will discover a new species while I'm here. It would be typical for me to discover a worm that makes my skin crawl, instead of something commensurate to the years I've poured into this field. It is still incredible that Hilary Woods stumbled upon that new strain of fern during the Amber Cicada Summer of '93. She was hardly on a scientific expedition at all - it was practically a honeymoon. That was a year of incredulities since Dr. Zhang agreed to marry her at all.

The scales of the echo moth are mostly tooth-shaped. The green moths have scales like molars, while the purple scales look more like incisors. I've written a letter to Peter Grant to tell him he'll need to republish his dissertation with this correction. For now, I will have to be satisfied with the image of his future disappointment as I will not send it for some time.

August succumbs to September. The forest floor rustles with activity. Over the years I've come to think of the forest parts as living beings. The litter layer is so noisy that an amateur might think of it as the most industrious animal. But, of course, this is just a distraction, so that the real work of autumn might be carried out underneath without interruption. At night, leaves are pulled under like victims of a capsized boat. The litter layer makes such a ruckus in order that we might be spared the horrid sound of the earth slowly chewing.

The understory is in perpetual stasis, a world of miniatures and

dark-loving things - a kind of living purgatory. To me, the real protagonist of the forest is the canopy. If the dirt is the stomach of the forest, the canopy is its mind. I would trade my left hand for a glimpse into its inner workings. I once spent two nights some years ago, sitting up in the arms of the Giant Woods. I was well-rested and prepared to stay up all night. Both mornings I woke up completely disoriented, alive only because of the harness the forest ranger insisted I take. The occurrences of the night, if there were any, evaporated with the dew. Whatever secrets lurked there were heavily protected.

But I am not afraid of the forest. I have a Burberry trench coat to tuck inside of like a turtle. It wasn't cheap, but I did win the Edith Oakley Award for Excellence in Ecological Studies after all. What I am afraid of is time, time and other people.







Snow Bush  
berries at dusk



*September 4, 1998*

September means that the bog lilies will soon be changing color. They are porcelain pink all summer long, but sometime in September, they begin to turn blood-red at night. It is for this reason that they are also known as the vampire lily.

I staked out a spot among the cattails to watch them. I tried it out last night, even though the flowers aren't changing yet. Sitting on a footstool by the bog's edge, I peered through the reeds and took notes. The pearly berries of the snow bush seemed to glow with an internal light, and the calls of the heather frogs were markedly fewer than a couple nights ago. I will try to find a dead one, so I can see what it's been eating this summer.

Henry Chicanet lives on the outskirts of X-- in a bush long forgotten by the lumber company that once harvested there. He "owns" a cranberry bog and makes a meager living from it. Mostly he just lives off the woods. He can tell the difference between the nearly identical vestal and natus mushrooms, one of which causes internal bleeding, while the other is delicious pan-fried. He hunts all his own meat and is more than proficient in the all but forgotten art of charcoal making. I have not seen Henry's

charcoal pit, but I saw an abandoned one in the Pine Barrens some years back. It looked like a little hill, just taller than me and covered with turf and sand. In a way I couldn't quite define, it reminded me of the candy house in Hansel and Gretel.

I met Henry by the red flag earlier this week. He was terribly chatty, which is why I have so much to report on him. He brought an odd assortment of provisions, probably the best of whatever some Podunk country store had to offer: "luncheon meat" in a tin, a box of instant mashed potatoes, canned pasta shaped like Pac-Man. Thankfully, the delivery included jars and jars of peanut butter. He also brought more gas, though I haven't used much of it yet. The nights are still warm, and I don't cook.

Henry wanted to know if I had come across a large mound of dirt, about three feet wide and six feet long, near the east-running stream by the scorched oak. At this point, I had tired of conversation and asked him to leave. He really shouldn't be hiking around these woods any more than is necessary to reach me. They are highly protected by federal laws.

I've finished sifting through Edith's letters to Chet. There are twenty-six mentions of the Cora bulb. The flower was once a familiar feature of the footpaths and country highways of early America, and it has some silly folklore associated with it. Supposedly, the first Cora bulb planted in American soil was given to a young woman in Maryland by her seafaring lover. He said it came from Samoa, but that was probably a lie, since a tropical flower would never flourish in the mid-Atlantic. He was notoriously duplicitous and ultimately settled in Amsterdam with a rich and ancient duchess. The young woman, I think her name was Emily, was obsessed by the plant. She cultivated it for years in a greenhouse she had built for the purpose, until she had hundreds. On her thirtieth birthday, she set off on her first and last journey, littering the eastern countryside with the darlings of her heartbreak. She never came back. Some idiots claim you can sometimes still see her, traipsing along the disused roads of

another era, wearing the black dress she left in.

Sometimes I wonder whether the flower ever existed. No one even remembers what color it was, but for some reason, Edith was fascinated by it. I believe she spent much of her expedition life in search of the plant, though she never published anything formally on the subject. Her letters to Chet are the only written evidence of her secret pursuit. Chet and Edith were both botany students at the New England Ecology Institute, which may explain why he was trusted with such a confidence. Also, she was in love with him. If she ever saw the flower bloom, I haven't been able to find a record of it yet, but the letters stop abruptly in June of 1963, so perhaps there is another stash somewhere. The batch I've just finished was borrowed somewhat hastily from a colleague's files, so maybe I'm missing the concluding chapters.

The hulduphinium were less busy this week. The hummingbirds and bees dwindle with every dusk, and the echo moths are long gone. I'm glad I caught them. I can't help but smile when I think of Peter someday reading my letter about their scales.

*September 11, 1998*

Last night the bog lilies changed. Nestled amongst the reeds, I listened as a frog's song went unanswered. The metamorphosis of the lily from pink to red takes about two minutes, with the color starting at its base and traveling upward until it reaches the tips. The flowers changed one by one with the random and beautiful timing of a meteor shower, so that I was lulled into a kind of trance. A strange call made by something in the forest close to midnight sounded perfectly natural.

I have spent the week with my ear to the dirt, tracking the mazes of Tiresias moles. I can hear them scurrying around and then suddenly disappearing from earshot. I know they are ducking down into their most secret tunnel, the winter tunnel. I've filled my notebooks with maps of the tunnels I can hear and imaginings of the ones I can't.

The coal snails make patterns in the algae of the stream I visit every day for water. One morning I thought I saw a face in their scribbling, but when I blinked my eyes it was gone. Do the animals know they're drawing? These are the kinds of things I'd like to know, Hilary Woods. This is precisely the reason why I am the

winner of the Edith Oakley Award for Excellence in Ecological Studies, and you are stuck thinking up homework assignments for lazy morons. I cannot communicate the pleasure I feel in having left all that behind for the next eighteen months, possibly forever. These past seven years, I have felt like a grounded crow, hobbling from classroom to classroom with the heavy heart of a winged thing unhinged by gravity. Strange to have felt so trapped when they hadn't even tenured me. I'm not sure what would have happened if I had to spend one more semester in communion with unpromising minds, scowling into my coffee mug. My colleagues hate me because my ideas are unconventional.

My greatest achievements to date are an article on domestic cats turned wild and living on the northwest coast published in *Calico Quarterly*, a 500-page tome on the three-day life cycle of the blue fly (a vanity publication, but with serious interest from Reeds University Press), a watercolor illustration of the types of creatures found in black owl scat that Dr. Dryson printed in his book *What the Woods Eat* and described as "the most compositionally fascinating scientific illustration I've ever seen," and an epic poem entitled, "The Daedalus of the Euselasiinae Family," serialized and published to mixed reviews in the university's undergraduate literary journal, *Tapestries*. I maintain that negative criticism was the result of Sheryl Wong's overzealous editing. Anyway, she scored a less than remarkable grade on her Biology 101 exam, by far the easiest natural science course we teach, so there's that bit of justice.

I admit that my achievements to date are not staggering. I expected more out of these last twenty-five years of professional life. Though I've never been guilty of squandering time in the way most others do, relationships, children, etc., I have felt an increasing sense of urgency these last few years. Sometimes I wonder where my mind was the five summers I spent mired in bog slime, watching blue flies eat and fuck. Time was more viscous back then; now it moves like a hastening spring stream. The upside, however, is that my purpose is clearer than it's ever been.

Earlier this week, I went to find the mound by the scorched oak that Henry told me about, but I couldn't find it. I imagine when one spends his whole life inhaling the enchanting air of these woods, he might occasionally see mirages. I did, however, find some late-blooming fairy eyes. They look like toy flowers with pink and purple strands of string-like petals encircling yellow buttons. Laying myself down among them, I spotted a diamond newt. These newts are cream-colored with three pale green diamonds running down their backs. We lay together among the fairy fronds, letting the late summer sun speckle our respectively magnificent coats. I must have fallen asleep. When I woke up, the newt was looking right at me with his dark eyes. With a fixed and wide grin, he seemed to confirm a mutual knowledge, a mischievous secret. I shook off the feeling and focused my attention on the marvelous fact of being here, of having time only to wait and listen. I've never felt so happy before.

Just before writing this report, I was re-reading Edith's account of her winter spent on Skuyela Mountain in a canvas tent she'd sewn herself. Despite numerous hardships over the course of the expedition, she discovered three new strands of lichen and changed the way scientists understood the striated groundhog's hibernation habits. When a bear ravaged her food supply, she subsisted on elk thistle roots and the fish she caught in ice ponds with a hand-hewn spear. Lying on top of packed snow in her gabardine sleeping bag, she looked up at the stars and watched her powerful breath obliterate them.



Boy Lilies  
changing

*September 19, 1998*

The autumnal equinox is upon us. Silver snails climb wheat stalks toward a waxing harvest moon, and patches of misty lichen have sprung up amidst the rotten, purple leaves of last fall. I have yet to see the most dazzling harbinger of autumn, the lux rains, though I have been out of doors at night with increasing frequency. The gentle love songs of the frogs have been replaced by the dark and moody yearnings of the owls. The crickets underscore the transition. When they accompanied the frogs' songs, they were plaintive and sweet, but under the owls, they sound like horror film strings. The screams of the violet bats don't help to lighten the mood.

In my research cabin I have made a few changes. On the wall across from my typewriter, I have pinned a map of the forest. It is from the 1960s, but aside from two or three roads that have since been paved over with greenery, it's largely accurate. I've always been partial to the cartographer's palette of that decade: mustard yellow, blood orange, deep-sea teal. I acquired the map when my grandparents were clearing out their New England home in preparation for their move to Florida. My grandfather parted with it hesitatingly. He told me he'd bought it from an ancient junk



salesman, who had acquired it from the estate of an eccentric zoologist. The salesman understood that the map had some significance for those who were willing to interpret it, that the woods had secrets to divulge to those that were willing to listen. Before my grandfather could tell me more though, my grandmother dropped a box of Royal Dalton figurines on the porch steps, which preceded much wailing. The map is marked with five faded red x's that I have spent countless hours wondering over.

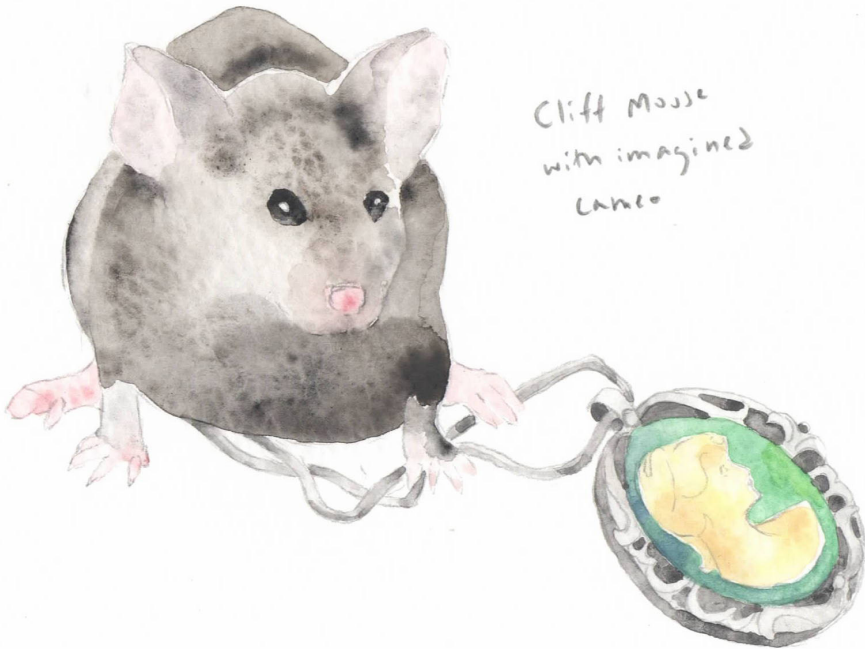
The other big change is that I have found a permanent spot for my gun. Before recently, its position was very unsettled, sometimes leaning on the bookcase or the doorframe, resting on my nightstand or countertop. You may be surprised to find that I keep a gun, but I always have. Of course, I would never use it to hunt - I'd much rather make a weapon out of branches and stone like Edith and test my wits fair and square against the forest dwellers. I keep a gun solely for the emergency of meeting with that creature I have the least sympathy with: the human being. I know how to avert a bear attack with a calm and authoritative voice or by making myself appear bigger than I am, but humans do not respond consistently to these techniques.

I have never felt as safe as I do out here in these woods, with Henry the nearest human, and he thirty miles south of me at most times. But one can never be too cautious, and I discovered that a ledge underneath my day room table created by a missing drawer holds my rifle quite snugly. Since I am often sitting at the table, writing or reading, it is the perfect place to reach it, if ever I should need it.

On my night walks, I have been listening for a repeat of the strange call I heard the night the bog lilies changed, which I believe could have been a mating call. But unlike the love calls of the animals, this one contained very human-like notes of resignation and melancholy, as if it were born out of sorrow rather than instinct. Earlier this week, I tried my best to imitate the call on my personal tape recorder. It is a poor facsimile, but at least I

will have something to reference should I ever hear it again.

The cliff mice are building their nests in the faces of rocks. They are well-known for using unconventional construction materials. In more urbanized areas they are known as thief mice, since their propensity for shiny things has resulted in missing pieces of jewelry and much family feuding. I inspected some of their nests while they were out and discovered the empty, pink cocoons of the echo moths, pieces of a hornet's nest, owl feathers, and one small key, which I imagined the forest ranger might be missing. I thought the owl feathers particularly brazen, since cliff mice are of course a tasty treat for most X-- owls.



*September 25, 1998*

The equinox has come at last. I tried to watch the lux rains that accompanied it, but they made me sick. I know that popular opinion considers the rains to be one of nature's most beautiful spectacles, but to me they have always seemed like hellfire. I lay in my bed with a newspaper spread over the window. (Henry insists on bringing them.) The newspaper crackled from blue to green to pink. Sleep was useless, so I celebrated the equinox as the rodent I am - by stuffing my cheeks with granola and getting crumbs in my nest.

The weather has been on the edge of rain since the advent of fall, like a simmer on a boil. I've been moving through the haze, gathering what I can before winter sets in. I was lucky to find a patch of rubbery elephant ear clinging to a boulder and some spiderwort creeping beneath a downed tree. I have steeped the elephant ears for several nights now, so that the water has thickened and darkened, making an excellent paste for cleaning wounds. Once dried, the lacy roots of the spiderwort will join fria leaves to make a winter sachet to ward off colds. My cabin is beginning to look like a witch's house. In the cabinets, dishes and mugs gleam dim-

ly from dark forests of tangled sprigs and roots. The windowsills are littered with bug corpses, empty cocoons, and snail shells. It's a wonder I don't have jars full of newts' eyes.

Yesterday, in the late afternoon, rain finally broke. It was light and steady. For a while I entertained myself with Edith's account of spring in the Marble Cave. Though I am usually spellbound when the Anisian glow worms finally hatch and the cave walls are lit with their pink light, yesterday I felt restless. Midway through her description, I thought I felt a pair of human eyes. With a furtive check that my gun was where I left it, I glanced at the window to see if any presence still lingered. Whatever I sensed appeared to be gone. I grabbed my gun and coat and tramped off into the woods.

Even if it was nothing, I needed to blow off some energy. The close grayness of the last few days had evidently taken a toll on me. I, too, needed a release, and the light rain was not enough. I tramped fiercely through wet leaves until I could quiet my thoughts.

Last summer I attended a workshop on Ziegler meditation led by Dr. Wilder. The guiding principle of Zieglerism is clarity through obliteration. I have since become so proficient at it that I can manufacture enough silence in my brain that it spills out into the environment. This has proved particularly useful during confrontations with enervating colleagues or failing students.

I let the silence wash over my rustling coat, the dripping in the trees, the songs of wet and happy birds, and my footsteps in the leaves. In the quiet, I was able to hear what was essential. I stopped walking and listened for a moment; as the sound of my own breathing faded, I was just able to make out the purposeful tramp of a biped. It was moving north. With a crash of lightning, the rest of the forest rushed in, and the footsteps were lost. I rushed back to the cabin in the sudden storm. Hyper listening in a Ziegler state is very taxing; I've had a headache ever since.



Colors before  
the rain  
Sept. '98

I suppose the storm raged all night long, though I was largely unaware of it. In my feverish dreams, I could hear a persistent scratching at the bedroom window, which must have been the sound of wild branches, but at the time felt like an urgent invitation. The headache has since settled itself in quite comfortably, nestling in the back of my neck, the arch of my spine, my fingers, and so on. The cold-warding plants were collected too late, and I seem to have contracted an early autumn pestilence. I can deal with the pain, but I hate to be deprived of such valuable observation tools as my nose and ears. My eyes will have to work extra hard. This morning they rested complacently on vanilla ants marching to and from the pantry, sugar granules in tow. How do they always know where to find it? They must have spies everywhere.

*September 26, 1998*

The morning sun after the night's storm was pervasive, far too cheery in the wake of disaster, like certain missionaries. With my useless nose, I imagined a stench of evil accompanying it, something like dead bodies and sulfur. I blundered about for a while in my steaming coat (the storm's rain evaporating leisurely) and took stock of the damage: a fallen branch, a decimated anthill, a downed tree. Ground rodents happily gathered the fallen fruits they'd never been brave enough to go after before, while the invisible agents of death set to work on fallen trees. In a Hans Christian Andersen story, he describes the death of a 400-year-old tree in a storm. Before the tree finally topples over, all of its leaves become eyes, and in one moment it sees the whole of its life simultaneously and finds deep peace there. Frankly, it sounds like a bit of a horror.

For me, the emphasis has never been on the experience of this life, but, rather, the one that I leave behind. If I have to sit through this life again, I'd like a fast forward button. The legacy I'm after is like an everlasting jawbreaker - something mammoth that the world will suck on for ages to come. I intend to illuminate a dark corner of our world, and for the reverberations of

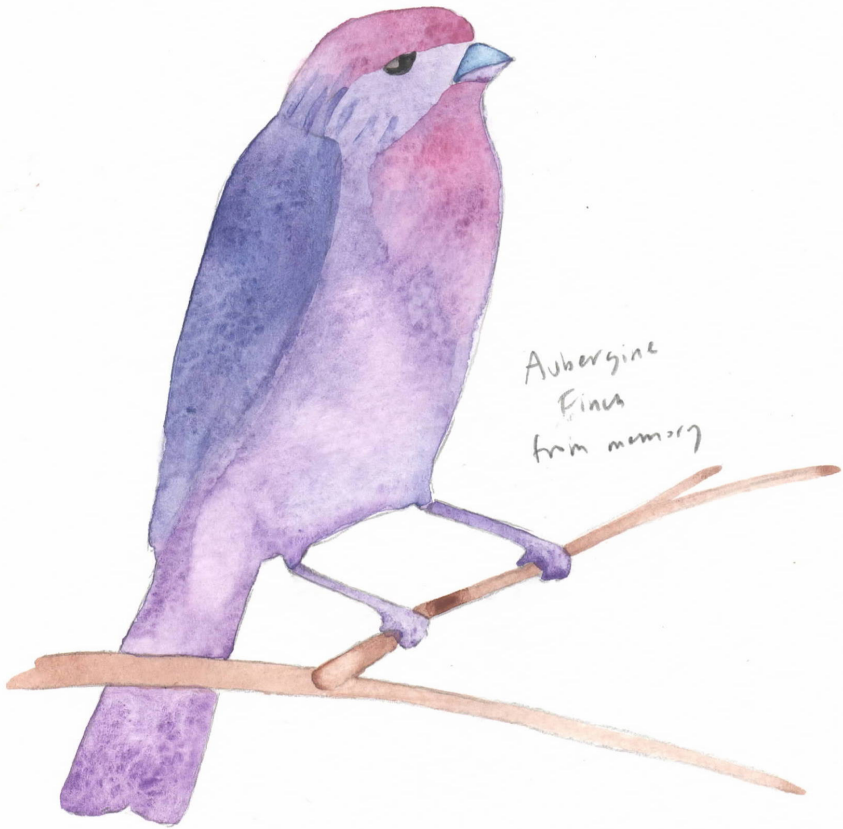
that discovery to ripple both forward and backward. Some people are satisfied with hobbies and relationships, but to me, they have always seemed frighteningly superficial.

The rest of the morning was spent pressing and labeling leaves in a specimen book with shaking hands. I fell asleep and awoke some hours later with a spade leaf stuck to my face.

In the slow dusk of early afternoon, I sat quietly outdoors. I closed my eyes and tried to catch snippets of the forest's whispery inner monologue. The forest is always communicating, though hardly anyone ever bothers to listen. I had little success, and what I did hear was useless out of context, things like "bear coat" and "blue light." A bird pooped on my Burberry coat. I think it was an aubergine finch.

Tonight was the first time I turned on the stove. Food has always been an afterthought to me, a nagging necessity that I've grown to resent as yet another distraction from my work. On this expedition I've mostly subsisted on peanut butter and crackers, sometimes apple juice. The other provisions Henry brings mostly just pile up, but I was happy to have the aid of hot soup in what will most certainly be a speedy recovery.





AuberGINE  
Finch  
from memory

*October 2 (?), 1998*

I believe some days have passed since my last entry, though I am not sure how many. I am in good health but greatly confused about my state of being these last few days. I have been ravenous since I regained consciousness. My peanut butter is nearly gone, but I think Henry will be here soon.

The last thing I remember is watching the moon from my bedroom window. It wriggled its great features several times, as if it wished to speak. I felt as if I were caught in a time loop at the cinema, right before the film begins. Perhaps the moon did finally speak, but before I could hear what he had to say, I slipped irrevocably into the long sleep I have only now just emerged from.

One deeply troubling result of my prolonged bout with inactivity is that my Burberry coat is missing. I remember scrubbing out the finch scat and setting it out to dry. As soon as I regained consciousness, I went to check for it and found it missing. I am somewhat devastated, but strangely confident that it will return.





Fog Tree  
Sprigs in  
mug

*October 9, 1998*

The real spectacle of autumn in X-- has begun. It feels like a vacation in Hell, all the breathtaking trappings of the great Inferno, with none of the consequences. Fog trees are plentiful up here. During the summer they wear round, green leaves and keep to themselves, but in early October their leaves give way to blue plumes of smoke-like growth. Some of these ethereal flowers stay aloft, and some fall to the ground. The forest appears to smolder.

Varieties of oak and maple follow suit, bursting into orange and red flames. The flames travel from limb to limb and crash to the ground during windstorms. I have always enjoyed the feeling of walking unscathed through the devastation of autumn, like a sinless angel taking stock of the underworld.

Henry has come and gone. Having lost track of the date during my illness, I took a lucky guess as to when he would arrive. It took me a while to get to our meeting place by the road. The storm had tangled and broken the red string I'd laid out to guide me to the spot from my cabin. I took a number of short and exasperating detours. When I finally reached the meeting spot, Henry was nearly finished whittling a flute. When he saw me, he

started to play it. Though its range did not exceed three notes, he managed an unsettling little tune. I asked him if it were meant to draw out a specific kind of animal. He said it was meant to draw me out, and laughing, said it seemed to have worked.

Amidst the usual goods, Henry also brought cans of pumpkin puree and maple-shaped cookies. Isolation in the woods is no reason not to enjoy the fruits of the season, he explained. He has a pet fox named Flint who has a restless energy. During the whole of my interview with Henry, he darted here and there after unseen things. Even worse, when he wasn't flashing about, his eyes were fixed intently on the horizon of an eastern hill. I have met the fox before, but he does not seem to care for me. I have never had a great affinity for tamed animals. With wild animals, one knows approximately what to expect. I find the motivations of domestic animals much more obscure.

As a parting remark, Henry mentioned that the dirt mound he had seen back in August seemed to have crept away. He could not fathom what type of creature would make a large pile like that, and then, stranger still, take the trouble to wipe it out. I told him I had gone to find it and hadn't seen it. He winked his collier's eyes and disappeared among the trees. Though he was gone from sight almost instantly, I heard his odd flute for some time afterwards.

On the hike back to the cabin, I heard the ticking of pumpkin-shaped Avonley seeds, a sign that they are almost ready to explode. I sat among the embers of autumn and listened for a while. I have always liked the sound of ticking. My grandmother collected clocks, and her kitchen was filled with them. When my parents were away on academic business, and I was deposited at my grandparents, I used to sit in the kitchen for hours and listen. I could feel their composite rhythm change slowly. It gave me comfort to hear the inconstancy inherent in those foot soldiers of time. When I started listening to the Avonley seeds, their ticks were disparate, but after some minutes of listening, I felt them

pull together briefly, then separate. It was like listening to the ocean.

I felt my mind wander. I wondered what the most essential form of a tree was and decided on its winter self. Psychologically, one could make a reasonable argument in favor of their autumn form. The monotonous regime of food production has finally come to an end, and a tree is free to show its true colors. With the exodus of that tiresome super-ego, chlorophyll, the tree becomes a wild thing, a fearsome embodiment of the id.

The romantic would, of course, make a case for the tree's spring self, but this is only because poets see nature as a box of dress-up clothes for humanity, a chest brimming with trite metaphors.

I'd say a tree's truest form is its winter self. Removed from the banal concerns of eating, dying, and being reborn, a tree finally has time to think and dream. If I could only sneak behind the closed eyes of the winter tree, what wonders I might find. The trunk of a tree is its archivist, recording the passing years with the silence and solemnity of a monk. Because a tree contains all of its past selves, the voice of the tree's thoughts is really hundreds of voices, spoken in a ragged kind of unison.

I was woken from this reverie by the explosion of an Avonley seed. I hit the ground in an instant with my face buried in the leaves. Avonley seed shrapnel is exceedingly hard and has been recorded traveling at velocities up to seventy-five miles per hour. They can fly as far as fifty yards. Sometimes I wish I had been born an Avonley tree, thrust into the world by a grenade and fitted with an impenetrable shell. I would only be responsible for myself, and all I would need to do is strive towards the sun. When it came time to reproduce, I would fling my children over my shoulder like Pyrrha and let them fend for themselves



*October 15, 1998*

At night the forest decorates for Halloween. The spiders are working overtime to fill every negative space with cloying thread, and pearl-eyed bats have taken up residence in the eaves of my outhouse. At dusk they open and blink their glowing eyes, and for a few minutes, they hang like Christmas lights. The owls are especially murderous lately; I hear the kill-scream of the Gorgon owl at least a dozen times a night.



Though the weather was temperate last night, I decided to forgo my usual walk. Instead, I spent the evening with Edith in the Vinelands of Tennessee. The Ohoyo Valley wasn't always known as the Vinelands, of course. It was once a typical example of a Humid Subtropical paradise - before the Kalika vine moved in. In the 1950s, the New Delhi Toy Company manufactured a small line of nature kits for American boys and girls. Included in the kits were projects in egg incubation, feather identification, and vine training. None of the Terra Raptor eggs ever hatched, thank goodness, but the Kalika vine seeds adapted to Southeastern soil quite well. By the early 1960s, the entire Ohoyo Valley was devoured by it, and scientists like Edith were eager to observe the impact on native flora and fauna. Sad as it was to see an entire ecosystem eaten alive, it was a rare chance to see the forces of evolution respond to a crisis.

I could see Edith in my mind: two eyes hidden in a sea of green, barely breathing and watching a mother wren find her nest easily among the Kalika leaves. The bird disappeared, as did Edith moments later. She was on her hands and knees, crawling through the dead world that the vines had entombed. In her book she says she was looking for shrub shrews, but I think she was looking for the Cora bulb. In a letter to Chet, she describes a conversation she had with an old southern tailor who couldn't be sure, but certainly thought he used to see those strange flowers blooming every couple years or so. Underneath the vines, it smelled like slow death, the captured breath of a million plants deprived of sunlight. Breathing it in, smearing it on her expedition clothes, Edith became a part of that underworld, a kind of Keres. She raked her fingers through that enchanted dirt until she fell under its spell. She forgot what she was looking for and imagined she was looking for someone she'd lost, someone who was never coming back.

My coat has returned. I found it wretched and soaking, hung on a tree branch near my cabin a few days ago. I carried it inside with the care a mother might bestow on her dead child's body

and set it by the stove to dry.

A naturalist is not unlike a forensic scientist. Though my toolkit is greatly limited, I resolved to investigate the reappearance as deeply as I could with the means I had at my disposal. I began with a drawing of the crime scene. When one is looking for clues, drawing is an excellent way to slow down the eyes. Once I did a sketch of a small portrait of St. Francis at the Musée des Antiquités in Quebec. Before I drew it, I counted seventeen animals in the picture, but by the time I'd finished rendering it, I'd found forty-eight.

The exercise of drawing the tree allowed me to discover an untenanted bird's nest, some shimmery iris lichen one doesn't usually find this far north, a very still toad hidden in the leaves, and finally, a funny, little mound of dirt, so deliberate and sweet that I can't believe I missed it at first. It was at the base of the tree right beneath the branch where my coat had been hung. It was about three inches wide and six inches long and nearly covered with fresh leaves. I carefully removed the leaves and determined the mound to be recently made, built up from the soil on which it stood, so that a little, empty moat surrounded it. When I finished sketching it, I looked up to discover that dusk had fully descended. Yellow leaves looked sickly against blackening trunks.

*October 23, 1998*

My coat does not dry. Last night I saw lights twinkling in the forest. It could have been luna slugs mating, though I'll never be sure. When they mate, they hang from a branch and entwine their bodies. Their reproductive organs dangle beneath them, which in turn entwine to make a kind of flower that pulsates in the moonlight. I retrieved my binoculars from their hook near the door, but before I could get them focused, the moon disappeared behind a solitary cloud, and the lights went out. I made a cup of tea and dreamed of Heaven as Raskolnikov imagined it: an empty bathhouse in the country with spiders in every corner.

I have spent much of the week looking for signs of my coat's borrower. I had little to show for my efforts (some unusual scat that likely belonged to an oil mink and a solitary partridge feather tinged red), when I felt sure I'd found a biped footprint. Sadly, it was dusk when I made the discovery, so I resolved to return to the spot first thing the next morning.

Fog bloomed with the day. The fiery colors of autumn were deadened in the mist-light. I felt like I was walking around in the dream or memory of the day, rather than the day itself. I

bumbled around for a while, watching my breath become part of the fog. Sounds filtered through the branches as rice in a rain-stick, and I lost my way easily in that evil twin forest. I thought I found the spot where I'd seen the footprint several times, but there was never anything. I did, however, see a smoke bird attack and devour a pepper finch. So they are carnivorous!

The fog disappeared in the night and left in its stead a deep coldness. In the morning, I found that frost had come. American lumberjacks of the mid-19th century believed in a frost animal called the Rimed Badger. This supernatural badger was larger than its commonplace brethren and more cleverly camouflaged. Its fur was subtly reflective, so that when it trundled about at dawn blowing its icy breath on leaves, branches, and the unhappy toad, it blended in seamlessly with the forest. Of course, the lumberjacks wanted to kill it, partly to hold off the inevitability of winter a little longer and partly to collect the sizable fee its stuffed and mounted head would surely fetch from eccentric collectors. They used to designate one member of their party to watch the sunrise for unusual ripples. A century later, the task falls to me, but I find it increasingly hard to discern between the natural and the supernatural.

The clarity of daylight returned the next morning with a vengeance. It was as if the sun were suspicious of what the forest were up to underneath all that fog. The air was cold, and the light was probing. I spent the day observing the effect of frost on the bodies and spirits of the forest's inhabitants. Chipmunks were largely unfazed - if anything they were galvanized. It seemed to me that birds went about their business with heavier hearts. Chipmunks can feel in the air that they must hurry, but they don't know why. Birds fly above the canopies of trees and hold their breath as they watch the lumbering, undefined shape of winter climbing over the horizon.

In the field, the frost separated the weak from the strong. Late season pansy clover perished without so much as a gasp. Wild

sugar snap peas selfishly sacrificed the fruit they'd been tending for the past six weeks in order to save themselves for a few more days. Lucky for me, I found a dead heather frog! Wolfweed and balkwort didn't seem aware that a frost had come at all and waved with complicity in the spying sun. I sat amongst them for a while and sketched the shapes made by bare branches against the blue sky. I saw three cats, a tall house, an animated crow, and a rabbit.



The Rimed Badger,  
after a drawing found in a  
lumberjack's log, c. 1870

*October 30, 1998*

The ghost minnows have just started to change color. In the summer they are deep green, but as soon as temperatures lower they begin to fade, until by mid-December they are the pale peach-green of mermaid skin. As I watched them today, one of them paused to hover beneath me, as if he were trapped in my gaze. The incident recalled me to a time many years ago, when I was hiking across a frozen pond in northern Alaska and came across a conscious indigo fish, trapped in the ice. I sank to my knees and watched his eyes widen as I leaned over him. I felt such empathy for that dumb creature that had swum too close to the surface, that I sat there for a while and tried to melt the ice with my tears.

The trees have nearly shed all of their autumn finery. The grey and dusty marcescent trees look like the ghosts of the barren trees around them. The young pine trees look like fat Buddhas with serene smiles and tightly closed eyes. Free from the cycle that governs the other trees, evergreens are able to focus on just one thought during the whole of their long lives. When they are young, the thought is like a ball of silly putty, but as they age, the putty stretches and stretches until you can see through it in parts.

Even if I were able to hear the pine tree's one thought, it would be so incomprehensible to a linear thinker that I might jeopardize my sanity.

After losing myself several times on the day of the heavy fog, I decided to devote some time to studying my grandfather's map of the woods. Some things have, of course, changed from that time. When the X- Forest became a highly protected federal preserve, the dirt roads to several popular camping sites were paved over with plant life. Forty years hence, only a trained eye could see where they once roved. Only one forest ranger station functions now, where there used to be three. The other two buildings are not maintained but still standing, one of which is rumored to have attracted ivory snakes in droves for some reason. I plan to hike out there mid-winter when the venomous snakes will be well asleep and draw them.

The map came to my grandfather via the estate sale of an eccentric zoologist, purportedly intent on the discovery of animals previously unknown or considered mythological. It is marked with five hand-drawn red x's. Looking at the map late last night, the x's seemed to grow in size. They loomed off the wall and cast dark shadows on the drawings of trees and ponds. When they started to teeter like they were gaining momentum to walk on their rigid legs, I shut my eyes tightly and dispelled the vision. In a few days I will embark on a hike to investigate the two closest x's. The nearest is over seven miles away. I will plan to stay in the field for at least one night.

The days are shorter now. I have lately devoted a certain portion of every evening to capturing the color of the sky right before it turns to night. This evening I sat in front of the cabin like a reinstated king in my dried Burberry coat. I had brought out a chair and my oversized copy of Audubon's Birds of America to function as a drawing board. On scrap paper I made several attempts to capture the sky in watercolors before I was satisfied with the formula. It was blue tinged very slightly green. I

transferred it to my notebook where it could sit amongst other evenings and gossip about time's secrets. I leaned in close to see if I could hear them whispering, but all I heard was the rustle of a nearby partridge, digging for seeds.



Oct. 21



Oct. 22



Oct. 26



Oct. 27





Oct. 23



Oct. 24



Oct. 25



Oct. 28



Oct. 29



Oct. 30

*November 6, 1998*

My hike to the x's was delayed by the discovery of a bustling blue ant colony. The blue ants were, of course, considered nearly extinct in the 1980s after the drought of '76 decimated that year's wild plum crop. In the mid-80s, Dr. Robert Stein wrote a paper hypothesizing that if the ants could have turned their scaling and devouring techniques from plums to sleeping moles, they could have saved themselves. The theory was never observed in practice, so imagine my excitement when I heard the screams of a Medusa shrew and discovered the colony! I have spent the week nestled in the leaves, drawing the ants' paths, recording their habits, and listening for unhappy moles.

Last night I had the privilege of being spat upon by the first fitful snowfall of the season. I stopped to listen to it hiss for a while. I have always preferred the colder seasons to the warmer ones. Certainly, there's a lot of excitement for a naturalist with all the activity of springtime and the profundity of summer. But the forest pretends a graceful kind of surrender in the winter, giving up the hiding places of its summertime residents without so much as a bribe. The naturalist feels like the boy in that story who gets to comb the ocean floor while a fisherman holds the sea aloft in his

mouth. One can finally get at the heart of things in winter.

I imagined I was Edith atop Skuyela Mountain, squinting her eyes at the snowflakes. She would have just finished her survey of the empty earl owls' nests and started pitching her tent for the night. It probably would have been blowing a hard wind, but it wouldn't have made a difference in how efficiently she put her tent up. She could pitch a tent in forty-five seconds in any kind of weather. She used to hold annual workshops at the Mica Gorges Institute in the late 60s, though it was more of a performance than a class, because her deftness was inimitable. I myself have never been especially graceful at anything. I am competent at hiking and crawling, because in my profession you have to be, but I do not perform these tasks with any great beauty. On a research trip to Indiana, Dr. Eigel once mistook me for a badger.

The morning was grey, but warmer. I spent the better part of daylight following the stream to see where it led. I was accompanied by two crows for most of the expedition. They cackled when I slipped on wet leaves or tripped over a hidden root. Audubon considered the crow the nation's most persecuted bird, but I've never felt much empathy for them. They always seem to know more than I do. I once saw a white crow in the Sand Barrens. I was studying the cranberry weevil in a bog, when the crow alighted on a nearby branch and started to eat. Berry juice ran down its throat like blood. I was breathing heavily through my mouth due to a late summer cold, so it wasn't long before the crow noticed my stare. It turned its neck slowly and fixed its pink eyes on mine. The spell was broken when a black crow joined the scene and shook the bush with its landing. I blinked my eyes, and when I opened them the white crow was gone and in its place, an unsettling feeling of lost time.



The three of us followed the stream until we came to a wall of rock, the exposed interior of a hillside. Water seemed to slither out of it. I walked around for a while trying to find the best way to get on top of the wall. The crows took off, rightfully deducing that the investigation was coming to a close. I didn't uncover an easy path to scaling the wall and turned back. A return trip looks vastly different than its earlier counterpart. The shadows are longer, making the trees appear closer together. The birds have quieted down since their morning reveries, and other sounds filter through the silence: the rush of wind, the ticking of a late Avonley seed, a faint jingling. I didn't see the mound on my way out, but I saw it on my return. It was the size of the one Henry described seeing back in September - about the length and width of a body. He really shouldn't be hiking in these protected woods. If he weren't so heavily implicated in my survival, I would absolutely report him to the conservation authorities.

*November 13, 1998*

I neglected to bring a backpack when I was preparing to come out here this past summer, so on Monday, November 11th, I set out with the suitcase I used to carry my books here. I packed it with two jars of peanut butter, four jars of boiled spring water, several tins of anchovies, and a box of Melba toast. Traipsing around in the early morning with my suitcase, I must have looked like a ghost from the lost city of Pendlebury, once a bustling center of the iron industry. In the mid-1800s there was even talk of extending the Silver train line from New York out here, but it fell through for some reason or another. With the discovery of more easily extracted iron in other parts of the country, Pendlebury began to disappear. There is very little trace of it left; one finds the occasional cannonball on hikes.

When European settlers first arrived here, they found it happily devoid of any Native American life. The Chacksaw had a word for it I can't recall now but that roughly translated to "Angry Pit." After Pendlebury dried up, the only action there's been out here was the creation and subsequent demolition of tourist cabins. My own cabin is one of a dozen built in the 1920s to entice rich metropolitans looking to write the next *White Fang*.

The operation tanked after a well-known socialite was eaten by a bear. Historically, it's an area that's particularly adept at keeping people off of it.

To get to the first x, I had to find a road that had been paved over by greenery in the 60s. Satin ash trees were chosen for the task, having once flourished there until the Toyama Virus of 1878 nearly wiped them out (the outbreak of which is supposed to have been caused by a bonsai tree brought over by the famous European actress, Amabel Lemire, who was researching the role of an early American Puritan). It seemed a fitting final act for humans to reinstate the fallen tree when they bowed out of there for good. (Amabel died tragically some years later when her scarf was caught in one of the first elevators to have automatically closing doors.)

Satin ashes are the favorite haunt of salmon lichen, so I was on the hunt for some warmth in a sea of neutrals. This was the cause of the expedition's first disaster, when for no small distance I had been hunting the red flag that marks the spot that Henry and I meet. I sat down on my suitcase and ate my lunch of peanut butter spoonfuls. Shadows flickered through the almond-shaped eyes of a hollow log. I spent the rest of the afternoon tramping through the woods, making such a ruckus in my hiking boots, I was like a dodo bird begging to be shot.

Heading towards the descending sun, I eventually stumbled upon a glimmer of peach. Squinting my eyes revealed that the path ahead was peppered with such growths.

I felt quite at home traveling among the ashes, though they are a vengeful sort of tree. Even in dire times, Irish villagers refused to burn them, knowing full well they would burn with them. Some superstitious historians contend that the elevator that killed Miss Amabel was fitted with ash lumber. To me, they reached out their branches and sang a yearning song, the melody of which is now entirely lost to me. The song was so mesmerizing that it was

dusk before I was woken from its reverie, and only then because I had tramped into the middle of a stream.

After a brief and unsuccessful consultation with the map, I decided it was time to seek out lodgings for the night. I am naturally distrustful of the work that goes on beneath the litter layer, so I hunted around for a suitable tree crook to lay my head. The warm day persisted into the evening, and my farmer's sense assured me that the skies would stay clear throughout the night. An old growth ash winked its lashes alluringly in a slight breeze that had sprung up. I tied a long strip of white linen to its branch and set my suitcase at its base, so that I might do a little exploring before resting. Like a ghost in a lighthouse window, my white linen would wave me back should I stray too far.

The song of yearning had shifted into one of action. The flitting shadows of midday had purpose now. I trusted in the forcefield of my own noise to keep me safe; shadowy creatures avoid tramping like sunshine. Once I thought I saw a buck, but it turned out to be tree branches and a boulder. I sat upon its back and ate a supper of anchovies and phyla-root, which, in addition to be a good source of potassium, is commonly believed to enhance normal powers of perception. In the glow of its nourishment, I felt for a moment that I could understand the words to the song of purpose. I scratched them into the buck's grey back with a flint rock. In a dark stream November stars prattled.

The tree made a satisfactory nest for a big, clumsy bird, and the night passed without incident. I dreamed of Mrs. Mothersole's hairy spiders and awoke with the feeling of their furry feet upon my face. A light rain had begun with the arrival of dawn. I wrapped the linen around my neck, donned my Burberry hat and coat, and slipped into still damp boots. If I was suspicious of the map's inscrutability the evening before, its transparency in the morning justified it. The path going forward was clear, and I expected to reach the closest X before nightfall. I tried to find the rock where I'd scrawled the missive I'd received the night

before but wasn't too heartbroken when I couldn't. Some things are only meant to be read by night eyes.

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The temperature dropped steadily throughout the morning. In the rain, cardinals lit the dreary path like torches. In my used copy of Zimmerman's guide to American birds, the cardinal's page is one of three defaced by a tiny pencil checkmark. A sorry young birder indeed to count cardinals and blue jays among his conquests! When I was a young person, the backyard feeder I designed and built myself was featured as a photographic spread in the 1972 winter edition of *Warblers World*. Dr. Gambel, chair of the ornithology department at Brambleberry University, used to be a frequent visitor. We would sit on the back patio trying not to rustle our winter clothing and hoping for a glimpse of the blue-headed woodpecker. I could feel my mother's eyes from her study window where she'd look up from her translations and sigh. The week after my 14th birthday, the feeder was replaced wordlessly with roller skates. My mother was semi-successful in her plot since I lost interest in birdwatching when I was unable to reproduce the delicate device that protected seeds from anything bigger than a grackle. The roller skates ended up at the bottom of Minnow Lake, and my mother slid irretrievably down the muddy slope of my heart.

The rain lifted into mist, and the hunting of salmon lichen required my full attention. If I were traveling three miles per hour, I would reach a trail post I hoped was still standing around 3 p.m., at which point I would head due south for one hour to reach the first x.

In the grey air, the ash trees almost disappeared, and I held my suitcase-free hand in front of me to avoid collision. My fingers must have been quite numb from the cold, because twice I thought I felt a face. Eventually, my gait became so attuned to the rhythm of the ashes that I was able to put my frozen hand



back in my pocket without bumping into anything. I moved easily through the trees until it was almost time to leave them. The trouble began as soon as I saw the trail post I was seeking. I moved briskly towards it and walked smack into a tree. Upon rising, I stumbled over three roots in the short journey to the post but eventually managed to reach it.

The post was left over from the literary tourists of the '20s and pointed the way to a cabin that no longer existed. According to the greatly faded sign, the cabin was called either "Whispering Walls" or "Whistling Calls" and depicted what I supposed to be a black eagle, a species that would never be found this far east. The site of the phantom cabin was due north if the compass on my grandfather's map were to be believed, so I headed away from it. How sad to bear a message that is rarely read and even then soundly ignored. A dozen steps away from the ash tree road and the pink lichen was completely engulfed by the mist. I gave myself to the wind and continued on.

For the most part, I kept my head down and tried not to be too distracted by the visions of the forest, but a thornberry tree managed to attract my attention. The thornberry is commonly afflicted by the minotaur fungus, with which it lives for many years in a state of slow decline. The fungus causes the spindly branches of the thornberry to grow together in terrible tangles. The tangles create the perfect habitat for spring chickadees, but unlucky birds have been known to ensnare themselves in their own homes and end up dying the slow death of the thornberry itself. The tree that stopped me on my path was in such an advanced state of entanglement that its long, weak branches hung down like the hair of an evil Rapunzel and swayed in the wind. I tried to peer through them to see the trunk underneath, but in the late afternoon half-light, all I could see was blackness. Putting my ear to it instead, I thought I heard the summer song of a chickadee - but as if through water.

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I reached the first x at half past four. It was a small clearing in the woods about twenty yards in diameter. In the blue dusk light I hunted around for clues. A healthy stand of snowberry appeared unchecked by recent frosts, and I startled a very black bird who was grazing among its branches. From what I could make out in the low light, the field was comprised mostly of jackthistle, gracklerod, and Veter's plant. The lavender pods of the jackthistle were nearly empty; only a few seed parachutes were stuck like fur between wolf's teeth.

Before the light was completely gone, I decided to make a fire for the night. If there was something to see at this x, it was probably best seen by firelight. A small distance from the clearing, I found a patch of red-black dirt beneath a leaning boulder and settled

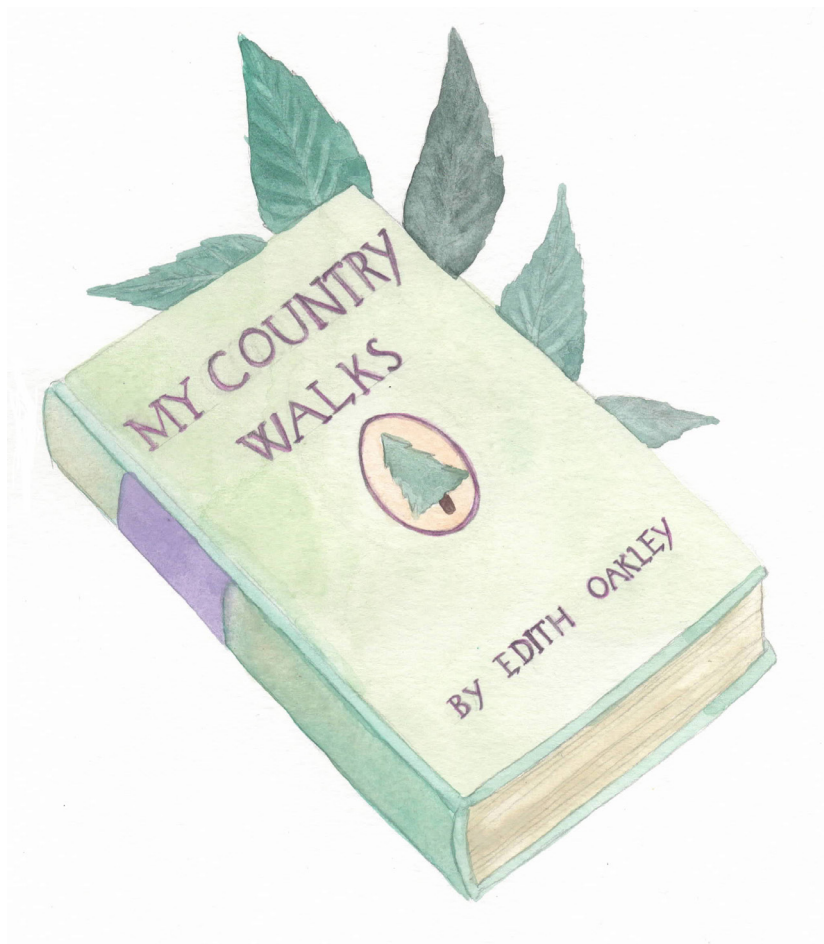
in to make my camp. After several frustrated attempts to kindle crumpled gracklerod with a flint stone, I ripped out the end papers of *My Country Walks* by Edith Oakley and lit them with a match. Some damp white pine eventually grumbled into flame.

I feasted on raw downspur leaves and peanut butter, then turned my attention to the wounded book. Sorry Edith. *My Country Walks* was written towards the end of Edith's illustrious career, about six months before her expedition to Gumdrop Mountain from which she never returned. Frankly, it's not one of my favorite Edith reads. It's far too sentimental, paying homage to the various mentors and collaborators in her life, when really all she ever had to count on was herself. But I'm convinced there may be a thread that winds these dewy reminiscences into a kind of map - and that the map might lead the conscious reader to the Cora bulb.

A lengthy tangent on the pleasant smells of an elderly colleague's country kitchen and the dying flames of my campfire were enough to put me under for the night. Whatever nighttime secrets this funny clearing had to offer, they moved with impunity that night.

I woke up stiff and damp in a white winter light that didn't change as the morning wore on. I discovered more meadow varieties: nightwort, bramblethread, and some extremely ragged drops of innocence. I stuffed my suitcase with the nightwort as it makes a fine winter tea that doubles as a bear repellent. The clearing was exceedingly calm. In what I imagine was the middle of the morning, a solitary hawk's cry hit the field like a pebble in very still water.

I considered passing another night in the hopes that I might discover something more in this marked spot, but rations were running low. With a final survey of the site, in which I discovered a grey fox's burrow and an ivory snake's molted skin, I headed in the direction of Marie's Mountain, roughly northwest.



What is that one really looks for in the woods? Centuries ago, we built houses and lit lamps, not so much to keep the forest out, but so that we could return to it as seekers. In fairytales, the woods are presented as a passage heroes must move through, but they inevitably become the story. Like young lovers, nature writers before me have inscribed all kinds of stories in the bark of wild trees. For Thoreau and Carson, it was a story of justice; for Eiseley, it was humanity; for Edith, it was love. Clutching a map that likely belonged to a madman, I am trying to write my way out.

*November 14, 1998*

Marie's Mountain was named for a Native American woman who served as a guide to a team of French explorers. (Her name, of course, was not Marie.) The story is that she died of heartbreak at leaving her young son behind to go on the expedition, but what she actually died of was a broken neck after she dove into a waterfall. After her death, ten of the thirteen explorers died in mysterious ways while hiking the mountain. The surviving three dubbed it Marie's Mountain and vowed never to return there, even for all the lousies in the world.

The mountain is really more of a king hill, less than 500 yards high with domed peaks. The second x is located near its base on the banks of a small mountain pond.

To get there I hiked all day through a white pine forest. It is unusual to encounter white pines of any significant age, but I noted a number of ancient trees on my route. One even bore the "king's mark," three hatchet blows in the shape of an arrow that doomed trees to the British fleet, which meant it was at least 200 years old.

The hike through the pines was relatively uneventful. The air smelled sweetly of trees and the promise of snow. My thoughts wandered to Edith's Country Walks. The titular walks mostly refer to those she took around her farmhouse in New Hampshire when she was not actively exploring. She was forty-six when she bought her first house. It was a sturdy little colonial set amidst forty acres of disused farmland and patches of woods. It was, as she put it, "as near to Eden as you could get on Earth."

The New Hampshire walks naturally evoked memories of other hikes Edith had taken around the country when she was younger. In my mind I connected these sites in the order she wrote about them and found that they formed a messy spiral. The center of the spiral, however, was markedly missing. Instead, from what I could visualize, the trail stopped short, leaving a radius of about a hundred miles, spanning Vermont and New Hampshire, in which the center might be found.

I was busily ticking through places Edith might have explored within this zone when I looked up to find that the sun had just begun to set behind Marie's Mountain. A heavy blue was creeping in around the trees.

In the fading light, I couldn't tell if I'd reached the pond or not. I moved toward a piece of land I imagined was glowing brighter than the earth around it, but by the time I'd reached it, it had dimmed. I was suddenly aware of feeling dizzy and realized I hadn't eaten anything all day. I sat down against the base of an especially wide pine and began to prepare a Melba toast sandwich, when I thought I heard some distant rustling. I paused in my work and listened but didn't hear anything. I finished making my sandwich and took a bite. With the deafening crunch of toast in my skull, the forest movement resumed in a strange kind of pantomime. Three shadowy figures emerged at once from behind thick trunks and padded slowly toward the mountain.

Because of the distance and low light, it is difficult to describe

the figures definitively. These are the things I can say with certainty: they were bipeds; they were at least seven feet tall; their arms hung low; and in a last splash of daylight, a pair of blue eyes gleamed at me from a black face.

Sitting quietly in the freshly fallen night, I felt a warm glow rise from deep within me. It began in my stomach and lit my heart and lungs. It rose up my throat to blossom in my head, until I would have sworn my face was actually glowing.

*November 28, 1998*

The end of November has been unseasonably warm. In this last gasp of autumn, I have been extremely busy with research and winter preparations. I hung the nightwort I gathered at the first x in the pantry, alongside more recent collections of goldberry and false-toes. They will be ready for tea in early February. In addition to a daily forage for firewood and kindling, I have been monitoring a bocce fungus as it slowly kills a young fir tree and a blind squirrel as he stores for winter. He seems to prefer spots protected by risk rather than camouflage, sometimes tucking acorns away in known owl-hollows after dark or on the banks of a fast-flowing stream where a fellow squirrel drowned recently.

I have seen Henry once since my return. He did not bring Flint this time and was markedly less talkative than his last visit. He neglected to bring more peanut butter, which has been disastrous, and much of what he did bring was useless. A pair of migrating ducks did enjoy the mesquite pork rinds, however.

Winter begins fitfully. Last night it snowed big, wet clusters, and today it's nearly all gone. I encountered one small patch behind an ancient stump I don't think I'd ever seen before. My stack



of found firewood is nearly as tall as the cabin. I am saving the plum birches for last. I have heard they burn quite nicely but exude an odd odor, like some old ladies' face powder.

Somehow the branches feel fuller without their foliage. They tangle to make dark knots against a lowering sky. Every evening I sit outdoors to watch the night fall and listen.

*December 11, 1998*

The cabin felt so dark in the summer that I'm surprised how bright it feels in these cooler months. The days are so short now that I light my first oil lamp around five pm. The cabin came with two but I really only use one at a time; I carry it around with me like a firefly. Animations are supposed to have been invented in the early 1900s, but really they've been around since the dawn of time. Firelight thrown on a cave wall made animals leer and figures with spears bend and lunge. At night when I organize the day's notes and drawings, I am ready to interpret new meanings based on how the markings behave in the oil light.

Because I don't need to worry about any pipes bursting, I keep the cabin relatively cool with just one big evening fire. The stream has not yet frozen over, so for now I gather my drinking water from there. Pretty soon, I'll be able to set my pots and pans of fresh snow by the fire and save myself the extra step of boiling out the impurities of stream water.

Though the cabin gets pretty warm at night with its little fire blazing, I wear my Burberry coat all the time. There's something about it that feels like armor, or a superhero suit. Without it I

turn back into a middle-aged assistant professor at a middling university.

The lack of peanut butter in my last delivery from Henry has forced me to become a little adventurous in the kitchen. This week I've feasted on such delicacies as Melba toasts dipped in refried beans and anchovies in SpaghettiOs. Perhaps not the most enticing of meals, but it must be nice for this little house to smell like any kind of cooking. I had certainly never heard of anyone in my field staying here for extended research like myself. I'm frankly not sure anyone without a vintage map of this place would know it existed. Anyway, an empty house, even a well-kept one, takes on a certain, indescribable quality. Walking around it, engaging in daily activities, you catch yourself waking from that pre-dream state where alien thoughts and memories feel perfectly natural.

*December 18, 1998*

One hears all kinds of noises when one is alone in the woods. The trick is to hear something special alongside a witness. The right kind of witness, maybe especially an enemy, can lend validity to an unusual sound heard in the dark, in the way that a tape recorder simply can't. In 1854 William Frederick Stodge thought he heard a woman crying as he wound his way home from a neighbor's where he had stayed late for dinner and cards. He called out to see what was the matter, but the cry just continued as before. It was coming from a stand of woods not far from the rural path he was following. He turned off the path and headed to the woods, but just as he was about to enter them, he called out once more, thinking that perhaps she did not hear him the first time. In response, the cry turned distinctly animal; it was much stronger and lower. Terrified, William fled back to the path where he nearly knocked over his recent host, who was staring wide-eyed and frozen at the woods. The host, who evidently had been trailing William home for reasons lost to posterity, heard the entire exchange. From then on, the woods were known as Panther Pass, though, of course, there were no panthers there, and afforded a large latitude by all evening pedestrians.

It is with a somewhat troubled heart that I record the sights and sounds of the forest with no one but myself to bear witness. There is certainly no one in particular I feel I must prove myself to; it's more like an annoying electric hum I'd like to permanently shut off. Some early mornings I jolt awake with the fear that my place in the firmament of discovery may be wrongfully blocked by a technicality. In any event, there's not much to hear in this "silent season," as Susan Fenimore Cooper called it. Three days ago, the first heavy snowfall of December dulled the forest to a whisper.

Snow clings to the western sides of birches. The edges of the stream have frozen, and at sunset the ice turns a Miami kind of teal-pink. The birds disappear for whole hours at a time. Blazing a trail of dark blue prints, it's hard not to feel like the last living creature on Earth.



Mistletoe +  
moth wings  
12-25-98

“Like the banquet tables up in heaven  
The tree branches groan in a heaving way.  
Black birds cloaked in mist - the breath of the fen -  
Sit in silence on this holiest day.

“A goose once flew so close to the angels,  
She caught the drops of wine sloshed from goblets,  
Felt the beat of eternity’s singing,  
And saw the cocks of male angels swinging.”

- Tabitha H. Eldreth, c. 1977

*January 1, 1999*

It is New Year's Day in the forest. Last night I made a family of husk dolls as a gift for the badger that lives near the stream. I spent the morning watching to see if he noticed the offering, but he never emerged from his burrow.

Most people regard the holidays as a time to truly enjoy the other people in their lives, but actually, all they're doing is a lot of extra scurrying. At least when the chipmunks scurry before the winter, they are making provisions for the future. For the past twelve years, I've enjoyed my holidays alone, usually deep in some vein of research or another. Though, of course, my colleagues stopped asking me to holiday festivities long ago, I continue to get a little pleasure out of snubbing the tenant party that Mrs. Kram insists on hosting year after year. Though she would never say anything, it's clear that it bothers her.

I've lived at The Royale Apartments for eight years now. There are only nine units, three on each floor. The building is an old brownstone, built about the same time as Cobblebrook University and a short walk from the campus. It has a fireplace and a gas stove that I never use. I spend most of my time in the living

room, which I converted into a study. I have long since filled the built-in bookcases, so that now the floor is covered with stacks of paper and books, most of which have been read and marked. To a non-discerning eye, the room might appear chaotic, but to me, the stacks and paths are exceedingly organized. I imagine if one were able to take an aerial photograph of the room, it would look like a kind of snowflake.

I don't suppose I'll ever return to The Royale for any meaningful length of time. I've already begun the paper I expect will launch me into the class of naturalist that doesn't deign to take university positions. Things will be different when I finish this residency. Perhaps I'll be asked to write a book and the advance will be so generous that I could stay here, or somewhere equally remote, indefinitely. To live in perfect solitude in pursuit of new and ever greater discoveries is the only life that could possibly satisfy me. It is somewhat troubling that I don't already feel some hint of that satisfaction - but I'll consider it the plight of the restless mind in the midst of important work.

The forest is bright and cheerful on this first day of the year. A thin layer of ice has crusted over recently fallen snow, and my reckless crunching frightened a doe. For the first time in many weeks, the dusk was tinged yellow.





There is an old Whin tale about a precious gem made entirely from snow. Though the stone is comprised of many, many layers of delicate snowflakes, it never melts; it sparkles steadfastly like a diamond century after century. It gives off a faint, pink glow that grows until nightfall, when it is bright enough to dimly illuminate a medium-sized room. It fits comfortably in the palm of a child's hand, a little bigger than a robin's egg.

I first came across the story of the Snow Diamond in the notebook of a mid-19th century reporter who was spending several weeks amidst the Whin people, writing a piece aimed at would-be tourists on their fanciful customs and colorful pastries. The reporter learned that the Whin do not write down their most precious stories but instead entrust them to all red-haired Whin girls when they turn twelve. It is unclear how old most of the Whin stories are, whether a new one were written every year or whether they all date back to the very beginning of Whin history. Evidently, the story of the Snow Diamond made a great impression on the young reporter, as it was the only story he bothered to write down. The last furze (Whin for red-haired crone) died in 1984 and with her, all the stories but the Snow Diamond, which you find below.

A young woman and her small son set out one autumn to find the spring. Back then, winter did not exist; the colorful fall leaves simply stayed on their branches until fresh shoots appeared and kicked them off. And just as the world lay in a kind of half-sleep, so did the people in the villages. After the last summer harvest, most people would lay about their fireless houses in a damp cold. Every year, many people starved to death or died of sniffles. The woman was worried that her son would die since he had never been especially robust; you could, in fact, call him sickly. It was commonly believed that spring disappeared into thin air during the autumn. It was her secret hope that instead it simply moved somewhere else for a time, and so she set out to find it.

The woman and her son traveled for many, many days through the tireless landscape of autumn. They slept on beds made from the bent grasses of dying meadows and drank water from streams on the cusp of freezing. After about a month of traveling thus, her son began to show signs of fever. When he awoke from his troubled dreams, he described slick halls of glittering blue and swarms of white bees.

A day came when the boy was too weak to travel, so the woman

set up a home in a shallow rock cave. She laid him down on thistledown and wrapped him in her shawl. She sang him songs about Ulex, the original keeper of secrets. When he complained of his face burning, she went out to gather cool stream water to dab on his forehead. Unfortunately, the Western Wind was feeling mischievous that day, and so he blew her off course until it was many hours later that she reached the stream. By the time she returned to the mouth of the cave, the sun had nearly set, so it was with some trepidation that she observed its glowing entrance.

The cave was very cold and suffused with a thick, white haze that seemed to be a part of the very air. Her son was nowhere to be found. In fact, the cave had become much deeper than when she had left it hours earlier. She clutched the flask of stream water to her chest and followed the light, which she could now see was emanating from deep within the cave. As she travelled, the walls became more and more sparkling, as if covered in fine diamond dust. The white haze thinned, and her breath began to hang in the air, where it would twist in the gathering light. It was desperately beautiful. She was gradually aware of a crackling noise that reminded her of the heat lightning she'd sometimes hear in the summer. And seeming to come from within the crackling itself, the voice of her son singing the answer Ulex told to Rosids when she asked him where roses come from:

“If I told you where the roses come from,  
I'd have to turn you into a shadow,  
And if I turned you into a shadow,  
I'd have to turn your pretty red brows black.”

And with that the crackling ended, and the lights went out. When the woman's eyes adjusted to the darkness, they landed on a glowing, pink rock, which, of course, was the Snow Diamond. She held it in her hand the whole journey back to the village, where she had it fashioned into a pendant she wore around her neck until she died. It was at least a half century later, however,

that winter finally took root between autumn and spring, and there was much debate among Whin scholars as to whether the Snow Diamond even had anything to do with it.

*January 29, 1999*

I've begun gathering provisions for my overnight hike to where the ivory snakes are sleeping. Though they should be in deep hibernation at this point in the winter, I've brewed myself a batch of venom salve, just in case. It's not a full-fledged antidote, but it does slow the fatal swelling of their bites significantly. Ivory snakes are not native to X--; they were brought over in the 18th century by a gang of pirates who called themselves the Silk Corsairs in a deliberate effort to rankle the ineffectual governor of old Pendlebury. Needless to say, the highly venomous snakes, who are iridescent and reflective and who blended in extremely well with the colorful gardens of early settlers, were effective at rankling Governor Merrimack. They terrorized the villagers and all ground rodents smaller than a beaver. The consternation they wrought seems to be at least partly responsible for the governor's death by poisoned Baroness pudding. His body was not buried as was custom but was instead hung from a coastal white pine until it decomposed. A woman's diary from the era draws a connection between the hanging and the sudden exodus of the snakes shortly thereafter deep into the forest.

There are not many ivory snakes left; they were almost hunted

out of existence for their beautiful skins in the late 19th century. There's a pair of ivory snake boots on display at a small historical society in Rhode Island, and they are truly breathtaking. The hike I will embark on soon is to investigate the rumor that contemporary ivory snakes have staked out an abandoned forest ranger station on the western edge of the preserve. I'm interested to know what it is about this particular spot that attracts them and perhaps dissect some of their poop.

This has been a trying month. The forest feels oppressively blue. Though I haven't felt much like hiking, I also haven't felt much like sleeping. I shuffle around the cabin in my Burberry coat in a sleepy daze and don't light too many fires. I've dictated some verse but haven't bothered to record it or write it down. Even Edith hasn't held the same fascination for me. I used to think we were so similar, but I've begun to find her perspective troubling in *My Country Walks*. She became so drippy towards the end of her career. The only significant exercise I've taken of late is the three mile trek to and from the red flag to meet Henry. I must have lost track of the days, however, because evidently Henry had come and gone. He left my provisions next to a tree, and I almost missed them because they were covered with at least three days of snowfall. They made a funny, little mound like a dying snowman.

The days are longer.



*February 4, 1999*

Wildflowers have all kinds of silly names, but the ones I find the silliest are the ones adapted from men's surnames. *Clintonia*, *Smithilis*, *Fredericksdula* are just a handful of hideous names amateur botanists have inflicted on their victims. There is a pettiness in the attempt to claim a small piece of the world for your own that I refuse to participate in. On a brisk walk this morning, I trampled angrily over a patch of frozen *Wilsonica*.

Winter progresses steadily in the forest. The remaining birds huddle together on branches and rouse themselves with a start, imagining they've just remembered a forgotten hiding place of summer stores. After several days of steady, cold sun, a rabbit's footprints left near my cabin have likely outlived the rabbit. Coyotes are especially active this time of year and sing to each other late into the night.

I am out daily with my notebooks. This past week my particular aim was to circumnavigate the bog to the south of the stream in a daily rotation of fifty-degree intervals. Each day I spent approximately thirty minutes out of every two-hour block from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., listening and watching from one specific spot. Sometimes an entire thirty-minute shift would go by without a single thing happening, but other days the bog was alive with secret energy. On Tuesday, for instance, my writing hand could barely keep up with all the activity. Three distinct sets of rustling played a strange game of telephone with each other, while a low, damp wind moved slyly among the bent heads of vampire lilies.

The remaining hour and a half of the two-hour blocks have been spent in a litany of different ways. Let's just say I have reams of very interesting bark rubbings and sketches of bugs trapped in ice puddles to show for my troubles. I think one of these unfortunate creatures might be a yellow-bellied boatman, which I didn't think could survive this far north. Every day, a new thrill.

A decided advantage of spending time at the bog is that it is surrounded mostly by young forest and meadowland. The tall reeds that border it provide the perfect cover, while allowing me to see if anyone might be approaching. I am increasingly concerned of late that I may not be entirely alone out here. The forest ranger is meant to have vacated for the winter in November (he returns in May, well after the tattling snow will have melted), so I don't know who could be responsible for causing the unease I've felt lately. It's not that I've observed anything specific that I could point to as human exactly; it's more a nervousness in some of the animals, a new frequency in the forest, a subtle shift in the way the cabin feels when I reenter it after a day in the field.

In my quest to personally touch every tree within a quarter mile of my cabin, I have discovered what I believe to be a growth of lotus moss, which when roasted and ground into a fine powder can be snuffed as a powerful hallucinogen.

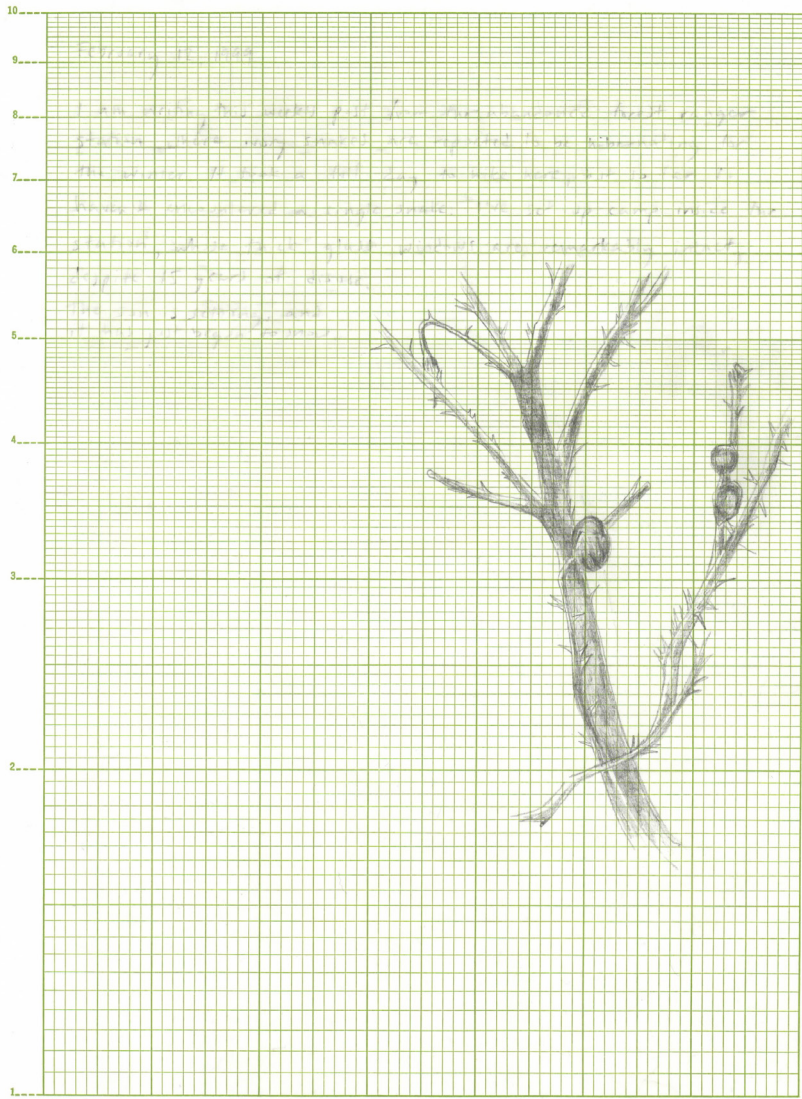


*February 12, 1999*

I am writing this week's post from the abandoned forest ranger station where ivory snakes are reported to be hibernating for the winter. It took a full day to hike here, but so far, I haven't encountered a single snake. I've set up camp inside the station, whose thick, glass windows are remarkably intact, despite forty years of disuse. The sun is setting, and it has just begun to snow.

Despite the lack of snakes, I am deeply relieved to be out of my own cabin. It was beginning to feel intolerably close. A few nights out of last week, I woke up from a dream knowing that someone was watching me through the window in my bedroom. After the last occurrence, I pulled myself out of bed and went to investigate the spot where I imagined someone must have been standing. With the snow and the moonlight, I could only see myself in the glass, shaking and steaming.

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To get to the station, I set out due west at 7 a.m. this morning. Thorny bauble-rods glowed in the rising sun, and I couldn't help picking a few of their dried, heart-shaped berries. In the fashion of early X-- inhabitants, I've been traveling with three in my pocket to ward off evil intentions. At the tree where I usually meet Henry, I began to veer slightly northwest. Bright patches of shining ice along the path made the forest feel especially dark. There were very few calls made during the day, maybe a pink gull at around 4 p.m.

Come to think of it, I'm not even sure where I first heard that ivory snakes were camped out here. It's not likely I would have taken some hearsay from a colleague seriously, and there have been very few papers published about this area. I hope the report, wherever it originated, turns out to be true. The snakes are a fascinating study in the adaptation of intrusive species to their host environments.

The light is nearly gone indoors, though it still lingers between black trees. I will eat half a jar of peanut butter in the dark and listen to the tick of snowflakes against the glass before I descend into deep Zieglerist meditation for the remainder of the evening.

*February 26, 1999*

Whatever dark cloud was hanging over the camp before I left it to search for the ivory snakes appears to have dissipated. When I returned from my hike, the energy in the cabin was clear and cold, despite the fact that my books had definitely been rearranged.

This week the birds and I are experiencing a false thaw. The forest paths are wrecked with black mud, so I've spent much of this last week indoors. After succumbing to the pull of *Castor's Arrow*, Edith and I have made up. *Castor's Arrow* is a thin, blue volume Edith wrote while living in the Southwestern desert in February of 1960. She spent her days sleeping in a cliff cave and her nights roaming the landscape. She discovered a strand of phosphorescent cactus flower and developed a successful antidote (under great urgency) to the sting of the infinity scorpion. In a McCarthy-esque show of literary prowess, she ends the account on a dark plateau where a band of coyotes have encircled a screaming jack rabbit. Since my faith in Edith's essential solitariness has been heartily reinstated, I've returned to my project of tracing the line connecting the places mentioned in *My Country Walks*. The western cabin wall is covered with every possible variation

of the path. My belief is that the center of the spiral created by these sites will lead me to the Cora bulb.

I returned from my hike to the abandoned forest ranger station some time ago. Maybe a week? The time spent in the station was equally slippery. I remember entering a state of Zierglerist meditation as night and snow fell. I think it may have thundered, an unusual but not unheard of winter phenomenon this far north. It also may have been in my mind. The next state of consciousness I remember came with the morning. I'm not sure if I awoke from sleep or meditation. In any event, I found myself sitting bolt upright against the station wall, and my vision was watery. I spent the morning moving slowly about the room as if in a dream. I did not uncover a single trace of snake life.

The station was abandoned almost forty years ago when X-- made the transition from state park to national preserve. It is a one-room log cabin with a tall, peaked roof. In the daylight, I found that it was perversely intact, as if no one had come to clear it out when the decision was made to defund it. In the northeast corner there was a cot made neatly with pale blue sheets and a thick, plaid blanket. Next to that, under a window, a work desk was set with a can of pencils and a stack of yellowed notes. The last ranger was evidently an amateur artist, because mixed in with the notes were line drawings of early spring flowers. An emergency radio had long ago become the nest of cliff mice. Across from the desk, an antique map of the area from the early 1900s hung in a mildewy frame above two grey filing cabinets. By the door, there were shelves set with hiking gear and rescue equipment, first aid tinctures in glass bottles, bandages, and whiskey. A tiny kitchen boasted a cutting board counter, gas stove, and two cupboards. Most of the dishes were blue enamel speckled with white, except for a single novelty mug that advertised some place "where the cars coast uphill".

Afternoon slipped into dusk, and at some point I must have let myself outside, because I felt the darkness fall like a weighted

blanket. It had stopped snowing sometime during the day, but the sky only seemed to pause, rather than clear. After dark, my senses sharpened, so I leaned against an errant ash tree and let my eyes dart around with the night sounds.

At midnight I reentered the cabin and found every possible surface and some of the beams beset with sleeping snakes. Though their strange eyes appeared wide open, they didn't stir when I quickly shut the door and marched back into the night.

There is next to no research on sleeping snakes, let alone dreaming ones. Snakes appear to be sleeping most of the time, though they may actually be in a hyper-alert state of active hunting. I imagine dreaming and hunting slip seamlessly into one another, just as the seeker wakes up suddenly to find herself the sought.

*March 5, 1999*

I met Henry for provisions yesterday. Last week's warm weather had melted most of the snow and roiled the sleeping earth into mud. Now, a plunge in temperature has frozen the mud into jagged crests and valleys, creating temporary memorials to the creatures that walked there just days before. I spent the whole of my hike to the red flag with eyes riveted on the ground, so that I wouldn't be laid out by one of them.

For once, I beat Henry to our meeting place. I decided to climb up a pine tree to watch him as he arrived. Peering out from its thick, blue branches, I considered myself fairly well concealed. After about ten minutes, I saw Henry and Flint emerge from the northern horizon. Henry was wearing a green canvas jacket that looked vaguely military and carrying my groceries in a paper bag by his side. In general, I find it much more difficult to get a sense of a person while talking with them, than when I have the luxury of studying them from a distance. Despite my many months of acquaintanceship with Henry, I would have been hard-pressed to describe him. Now, I could see his craggy face was uncannily smooth, a young man wearing old man's skin. He had a full head of close, curly hair, and in the afternoon sun, the

shadows cast by his sharp features were very dark. I remembered with a shudder an old photograph of an organ grinder on the brink of a mean smile.

I missed the sound of Henry's footsteps before I noticed that he, too, had disappeared. Moments earlier, he and Flint had been moving steadily towards the red flag, but now, the pair was nowhere to be seen. I scanned the forest for a large boulder they might have slipped behind but didn't see anything. In the strange afternoon quiet, I waited for about five minutes before I slid down the tree to investigate.

"I like a good game of hide and seek."

Henry was behind me. I admit I jumped.

"Couldn't very well let you win with that silly hiding place," grinned Henry.

"I was looking for wrens' nests."

"Aye. So was I."

I was trying to figure out where Henry had come from, when I spied a shallow ravine in the earth some yards away. The monotonous colors of winter coupled with the hazy, afternoon light had smoothed it into the surrounding landscape. It would seem the trickster had dove into it at some point in his trek towards me and made the remainder of the walk concealed from view. How he managed such soundless steps, though, I'm still not sure of.

Henry passed me the paper bag.

"I've brought you some extra provisions from the old homestead this time around. Early spring can be the most trying season here in X-- with all its fits and starts. You might find you start to feel a little trapped in time. I've always found lotus moss a



reliable antidote.” Henry winked.

“I don’t intend to compromise my research with any petty diversions, thank you very much.”

“Suit yourself. Spring’s a long way off. For now, whatever secrets the earth has are locked up safe and tight.” And with that, Henry hopped into the ravine and crunched off.

Only one jar of peanut butter, the bastard.



*March 19, 1999*

There are three more x's to investigate on my grandfather's map, the closest of which is nearly twelve miles away. They are clustered together in the northernmost region of the preserve.

My grandfather was a professor of architecture at Mary Elizabeth University for forty years. The dean had to ask him three times to please retire. He loved his work, but more than that, he loved the prim suburbs of the Northeast, and he knew if he retired my grandmother would make good on her promise to relocate them to Florida. He considered the small university town with its pompous municipal buildings and quaint downtown to embody all that a town should be. In the winter, neighbors shoveled the sidewalks in front of their houses before 7 a.m., so schoolchildren wouldn't have to walk in the street. Nearly identical houses made it easy to find the bathroom at dinner parties.

I'm not sure exactly when my grandfather acquired the map of X-- or if he ever explored the woods himself. The document itself is not especially rare; it was one of thousands printed annually for visitors to X-- back when it was still a state park. The map's designer took a whimsical approach to his task, rendering the animals and trees with storybook flair. The Native American ghost that haunts Marie's Mountain is drawn with Anglo features and

glowing blue hair.

I took ownership of the map early in my career as a naturalist. It must have been around 1980, shortly after finishing my graduate studies and well before I had been hired at Cobble Brook University. I was a free agent, full of idealism and energy, looking for a quest. When I found the map amongst my grandfather's papers, I was immediately drawn to it. Even before I knew it was marked by a zoologist, I knew it had something to do with me, and I promised myself I'd find out what it was someday. When my grandfather agreed to give it to me, it was clear he felt its pull, too. He was nearly seventy-five at the time and not likely to leave his wife and cats for an extensive solo hike in protected federal forest, but while the map had been in his stewardship, the door had been at least a little open. With its transfer, whatever adventure the map promised was no longer his to imagine.

Even when I felt myself falling off the path, engaging in collaborative research in the Canadian tundra or allowing a peer to build on my blue fly research, I would remember the map. It is only in recent years that I've come to realize the significance of the x's, but I have always felt they were part of my destiny. When the nights are warm, I will embark on a final expedition to visit the remaining three sites.

For now, the forest is a mass of black tangles. It is hard to imagine how anything would ever grow here again.

*April 2, 1999*

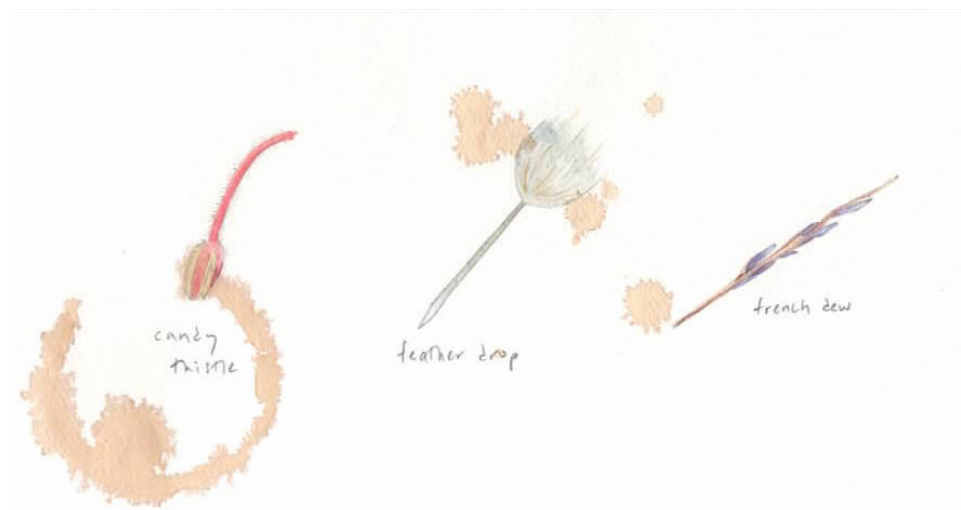
“The whole country is brown again,” wrote Susan Fenimore Cooper of her rural corner at this time of year. Here in the forest, the snow is mostly gone, save for ugly parking lot patches in the darkest shadows. With my watercolors, I’ve been exploring the many colors of thaw, which I find much more expressive than Miss Cooper: tawny meadows cut by the muddy, purple shadows of pines; spindly branches interwoven in a tapestry of blue-grays; running streams that jumble the awakening world into an indefinable color.

Here and there the landscape is dotted with almost grotesque displays of color: the blood-red shoots of the saber bush, the orange breasts of robins. The robins tramp so loudly through the bent meadows that it’s hard to believe they reminded early settlers of the bird they left behind, a small and graceful creature, similar to its American counterpart in color only. The European robin is attended by extensive folklore, considered a kind of household fairy. For a time, every schoolchild and grandmama in England knew that “Him that harries his nest/ Never shall his soul have rest.” Here in America, we have no such rules, and I scowl at the red devil who taps at my window in the mornings asking for

cereal.

When I'm not painting or cataloguing (my current project is collecting a sample of every seed found in the eastern meadow), I am working on *The Paper*. *The Paper* compiles all the evidence I've collected thus far that proves something really quite marvelous. In these last eight months I've gathered physical, visual, and aural evidence for my case that even the most resolute cynic would be hard-pressed to deny. And yet, *The Paper* fails to resolve. It's like a slide that won't focus no matter which way you turn the knob. Though I am at the typewriter half the day, I have little to show for my efforts. A number of false starts have reminded me not to be so cavalier with my limited paper supply. Lately, I've taken to writing in my head but have found just as little success there.

In the meadow, I came across a stand of untouched feather drops. These fluffy spheres appeared to float in the air atop their brown stalks. The spheres are made up of dozens of silken parachutes which are typically disbursed by the wind at the end of the summer. This patch was eerily intact, and I was loath to take just one sample for my collection. Instead, I decimated the whole lot.



*April 16, 1999*

As the earth thaws, the scent of last summer reawakens, and the air is thick with it when I take my evening walks. Profundity through a cloudy mirror. Fern shoots emerge like B-movie invaders. The morning light is staggering as it falls on bare branches. The animals are beginning to return from abroad and underground, and they bring with them a mixed feeling of urgency and boredom. Nesting mother birds sit for hours on end without blinking an eye.

I have been enacting my own version of this game, pouring over Edith's letters once more in search of an answer to a mystery. Though it's possible there are more letters than the ones I've brought with me, I may have to be satisfied with what I've got. This lot was borrowed from a colleague's personal files without his knowing, and it's possible that rooting around for more may bring unwanted attention my way. The owner of the letters was unable to grant me permission at the time, so you could hardly call my use of them a theft. Still, better to steer clear of any drama that might interfere with my work. For now, I must consider Edith's letters and published works a closed circuit, my own personal Orient Express. With the drawings I've created using

the places mentioned in My Country Walks, I'm confident that I will pinpoint the last known location of the Cora bulb before my tenure in the woods is out.

This is a wonderful time of year for the miniature forest. Before the leaves of the deciduous trees come in, the light reaches stands of baby pines without obstacle. In Whin folklore, these tiny worlds are the playgrounds of miscarried children.

After a week of cold, dry weather, the air is lit with the smell of incoming rain. I've spent the morning at the writing table eating peanut butter and watching the clouds darken. I'm not sure why he even had Edith's letters in the first place. Everyone knew she was an especial hero of mine. Frankly, I will put them to better use than he ever could.

*April 30, 1999*

I went for a walk after yesterday's rainstorm and made an interesting discovery. The rain let up sometime in the late afternoon, in the thick of those mystical, pre-dusk spring hours. The forest was tinged yellow. I was following the calls of a distressed catbird and ended up on a path I had incredibly never taken before. I thought the catbird might have been wounded in a fight with a sugar wren, a notoriously territorial and belligerent bird, and was hoping to find its body to take note of its injuries. I followed its increasingly fretful calls until they stopped abruptly, and I found myself in a clearing I had never been before. With my next breath came the sudden realization that I was in a human graveyard.

The cemetery was small, not more than a dozen graves marked with humble stones, low to the ground. I stooped to look at some of the names: Bass Freeman, Kezia Twigg, Nellie Wells, Danior Woods - this was the final resting place of Pendlebury's outcasts. When the production of iron ore became more industrialized in the late 19th century, Pendlebury began to disappear. As each family packed up to leave, they dug their loved ones out of the main churchyard and took their remains with them to be rein-



tered elsewhere. This little clearing just outside of Pendlebury proper likely contained all its original inhabitants. While Pendlebury itself was a well-functioning little iron town with a market and mail service, the undeveloped woods surrounding it had long served as a catch-all for society's pariahs: ex-slaves, single women with a knowledge of medicinal herbs, Roma people passing through - anyone who didn't happen to be descended from the right kind of European. These people lived on the literal fringes of society, eking out an existence from tiny garden plots dug into the roots of ancient trees and ensnaring the occasional partridge in hand-woven nets. God forbid they took something from town for they'd certainly be found out and strung up.

I was considering myself a proud member of this long-gone clan, misunderstood and undervalued by my peers, seeking refuge in this tract of woods, when I noticed a fresh bouquet of early spring houndstooth nestled against one of the graves. It was wrapped neatly with striped kitchen twine. Most of the graves were marked with a deep, imperfect script, etched with care but without training, but the flowers were there to honor a grave without a name. I left quickly, trying to shake off the feeling that perhaps in my attempt to solve one puzzle, I've failed to let the true picture resolve.

*May 7, 1999*

Tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick.  
There must be an avonlea seed buried in the floorboards. Or maybe I did bring a clock after all. Notebooks, Edith's books, my Burberry hat and coat, fingerprints - these are the things I brought with me. Tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick. It's coming from somewhere. Maybe I'm in my grandparents' kitchen, maybe this is what it looks like without ornament, the room swept clean by a tidal wave. Clocks, tchotchkes, papers, magazines, cats - all set rushing and writhing by a powerful wave. Tick, tick, tick, tick, tick. This is my heart, an empty wooden room with a big wooden table with a typewriter on it. Tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, the sound of the keys. This is my secret place protected by layers of muscle and flesh and skin. The sun has shifted, and now it's dark. Edith's letters, graph paper, my gun - one armload of materials for an indefinite stay in the wilderness. What if I never get out of here? What if this purple powder isn't lotus moss after all? What if it's Comet died with beet juice, and this is what it feels like to die? I met Henry on my way into the preserve. I didn't know what I would eat while I was out here. A lean man with a gun by the old state park entrance. It was almost like he was waiting for me. I offered him

\$200 to buy me groceries for the year, and he accepted with a sly smile. He seemed to see through me somehow, to see through the trunk of my beat-up Saturn. Tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, time's up! Where is that ticking coming from? The boundary between inside and outside is stretching like an inflating balloon. The ticking turns to pounding, maybe it will pop. I wonder if he wonders where the car went. The forest offers so many pathways to an altered state. Lotus moss, ivory root, thresher's tea, lacy caps, sitting in a tree for three days without food or water. Then, of course, there is that ultimate altered state, that final resting state. Spotted thistle consumed in mass quantities, the stamen of false lilies, purple crowberries, and the syrup of marsh anemones, delicious to butterflies but completely tasteless and odorless to humans. One dropper full is all it takes. One dropper full swirling like an eel in a cup of coffee. One dropper full disappearing in black water. Henry, a kingly name, Heinrich from the older name Haginrich, hagin meaning enclosure and rich meaning ruler. Ruler of the roost. Put an owl's eye in the left hand of a sleeping Whin woman, and she'll tell you all her secrets. It isn't my heart that's ticking.





May 21, 1999

Spring bristles in the X-- Preserve. This far north it happens quickly, a world suddenly animated like an automaton band. Winter's black branches are lit with the red buds of spring, and soon the canopy will become its own secret world. For now, I peer into last summer's nests to see what the birds have been building with and find haycorn leaves, snowberry twigs, grey grasses, and in a few, some purple feathers I couldn't place. Perhaps the forest had an exotic visitor last summer, a family of birds that somehow flew too far north. I pocketed a few of the feathers for future classification. In the morning, emerald stars shine with dew, and clownjays sing their strange songs.

I'm making preparations for my hike north to investigate the last three x's on my grandfather's map. This excursion will be my longest yet, taking over a week to complete, so I have to be smart

about rations. I've begun collecting berries and seeds to make pemmican, a rustic energy bar invented by Canadian natives that fur trappers depended on. Last time I saw Henry I asked him to bring me some lard, chocolate, and beef jerky to complete the recipe.

My grandfather's map becomes less detailed the further north it depicts, its maker evidently instructed to discourage Sunday hikers from casual excursions. There are no cabins or ranger stations up there. The remaining x's are nestled in the valleys and foothills of three medium mountains in this part of the map. The lack of landmarks would make the trek to the final three sites much harder were it not for a lone set of coordinates written underneath one of the x's. I am using the directions laid out in Edith's account of wintering in the Canadian tundra to build a quadrant. The Spirit of the Snow is an early work of hers. In it, she befriends a deaf Inuit family and becomes one of the only white people to learn Ukturausingit, or Inuit Sign Language, now an endangered language. Over the winter, she begins to feel the line between her body and the world blur. At times she finds it hard to distinguish between herself and the wild rushing of the wind, the tapping of ice augurs, the indistinct shape of animals lumbering along the horizon in a white haze. She describes the experience as a feeling of "ecstatic vanishing," something akin to heaven perhaps.

In the cabin, I am nearly through my supply of firewood. The last few nights have been warmer - almost balmy - but I've been lighting fires just the same. Better to get rid of the stack before I leave the cabin unattended next month.



This week I've been stalking a family of warbling chipmunks as they prepare to emerge from their winter tunnel. These singing rodents breed once a year in early spring; their offspring typically join the above ground world sometime in mid-June. The parents have been quite active gathering food, so the family must be on the larger size. I expect to see their progeny any day now.

The chipmunk is the custodian of the forest. A stray acorn is an accident waiting to happen, so a chipmunk tucks them away safely underground. While it tidies, it becomes the unwitting architect of the future forest, its daily secrets revealed long after it's gone, in the slow and benign fashion of starlight.

Warbling chipmunks have seven brown stripes down their cream-colored backs. Each stripe is dotted with white spots. The effect recalls the pattern once found on the skin of the northern

munksnake, who used to be very fond of warbling chipmunks. Fortunately for the chipmunk, the munksnake was hunted out of existence in the late 1800s for the powerful hallucinogen found in its venom. Why the two creatures should share a pattern is an open mystery, but history, in its droll way, has made the warbling chipmunk the sole and living monument to its old foe.

This is not to say that the contemporary warbler has it easy. Weasels, owls, and foxes make up a handful of the chipmunk's plentiful enemies. But unlike other chipmunks, the warbling variety has a unique last defense.

There is a singular stillness when the hunted finally stops running and faces its hunter. A naturalist buried in the leaves holds her breath so as not to rustle her disguise. She becomes a part of the woods, a piece of the mysterious justice that hangs in the air.

The silence is broken by a series of high-pitched trills, usually three or four half-second notes. Then the song dives into a low drone that lasts for about two seconds before returning to the higher register for a fresh series of three trills, and then back down. The vacillation between high and low gains in speed until it almost sounds as if the chipmunk were singing in two voices simultaneously. The resulting sound is very disorienting, almost hypnotic. Sadly, the chipmunk is not impervious to the mesmerizing effect of his two-tone song and sometimes will remain frozen in his performance until after the hunter is released from it. One out of ten times though, if his listener is inclined at all to poetry, he emerges triumphant.

The chipmunks and I are on the lookout for Sephora spiders, candy-colored creatures that spring up around the same time as the wildflowers. In addition to typical spider fare, they suckle sweet flower juices. X-- natives considered them a seasonal delicacy - roasted, they are crunchy and sweet.

Post 35

June 11, 1999

It is rare that I set to typing in the middle of the night but I've just been awoken by a dream that I'm trying to remember. It is a little after three, the true witching hour, though midnight gets all the glory. In the dream I was exploring a house as if it were a wild place, and indeed parts of it were. I remember approaching a pot on a stove with something very quiet and small moving erratically inside it. Now as I write this I'm left with an unsettling feeling of having left something undone.





*June 18, 1999*

Two weeks of balmy weather have shaken the forest out of its slumber. In the cabin, morning light that used to pour through the window in great, white shafts is now dappled with yellow and green. The meadow is brilliant with color and activity: orange frost with its lacy, bobbing flowers; the striated heads of badger's thistle, deep purple and cream; blue stars atop golden Evelyn weed sparkle like gems in the bright sun. The lovepennies are back this year, copper-colored cousins of the hummingbird, and they flit delightedly amidst summer's bounty.

Tonight, on the eve of my extended hike north, the temperature is dropping steadily. I had planned to bring my Burberry hat and coat in any event, so I'm glad for the colder weather. My suitcase

is packed to the gills, so I will have to wear my coat throughout the journey, regardless of the heat. The case contains fifteen peanut butter jars of boiled spring water, two weeks worth of pemmican (about sixty bars), ten packs of matches, three Edith texts, four boxes of saltines, a sachet of dried nightwort (to repel bears), a knife, and writing materials. I have fashioned an elaborate network of vines to carry my suitcase like a backpack. My loaded gun, too long for the case, is strapped to its side.

I saw Henry last week at the red flag. He complained of a poor mushroom harvest this season, possibly due to an explosion in the zither slug population. I've noticed an inordinate amount of them, too. Because of their light blue color, they glow eerily in last autumn's decomposing leaves. Otherwise, not too much news from beyond the X-- Preserve borders. He brought me Slim Jims and chalky Hershey kisses for my pemmican. No sign of the forest ranger for his annual review of the forest.

I have nearly finished preparing the cabin for my departure, my scant belongings tucked away safely, winter's cords all burned up and the ashes sprinkled in the stream. The Paper is hidden in a very cunning place that I dare not write down. It has been coming together much more easily of late. The last few weeks I've been up well past dark, writing by the fireside; from the window, a black ghost, hunched and flickering. I anticipate that this hike will create the conditions for The Paper, which is flourishing, to fully blossom.

The warbling chipmunks had seven offspring, an unusually large yield. One of them is brown with white spots, set apart from its creamy siblings. I've nicknamed it Tabby, after myself, and hope it doesn't get eaten.

*June 20, 1999*

Two full days of hiking would have given me a healthy sunburn were it not for the superior coverage afforded by my Burberry hat and coat. This morning when I stopped to rinse my face and hands in a stream, I was struck by my sustaining pallor. The last thirty-six hours have been virtually cloudless, and the temperature has risen steadily, even after dark.

I've been following a secret road, this one leading north-northwest towards the mountains. It used to end at a campsite near a meadow famous for its astounding variety of wildflowers, including some truly extraterrestrial orchids. This campsite is long gone, of course, and the road has been grown over for decades. Fortunately for me, I came upon an old pamphlet many years ago describing the effort to sprinkle thousands of ruby garland seeds along the road that once led to the wildflower site. The push was evidently led by an over-eager volunteer named Mildred Farnsworth who knew next to nothing about plant life, let alone ecology. The garland, which wrapped itself indiscriminately around any old tree, is responsible for choking out the extremely rare and beautiful oyster orchid, which once flourished in the craggy bark of the sailor tree, stands of which are only found in this neck of the forest. Anyway, the ruby garland, which continues to thrive,

has just come into bloom, and its bright red blossoms make my navigation much easier for this part of the journey.

I have set up camp among the garlands as the sun begins to set. The air is so heavy with heat, you can almost hear the plants breathing. I've hung my coat as a tent and rubbed myself with the acrid leaves of polychronia weed to keep the mosquitoes at bay. Some pemmican bars and a handful of saltines have helped me recover enough from the journey to write a few words. I'm not sure how many miles I've walked so far, but surely more than ten. Hard to say though; the heat and the lushness of summer have made me feel like I've been pushing through water all day.

I admit that after many months of living alone in the forest, I expected to be hardier. Photographs of Edith after a long excursion into wilderness depict a woman at the height of her health - her skin luminous and taut, her hair somehow darker. Peering into the stream today, I saw a thin, gray woman teetering into old age. Frankly, my physical health has never been of great importance to me. It is my keen observation tools that I hold most dear. For instance, I cannot afford to be uncertain about the unusual noises I've been hearing along my route: a tuneful growl, a clownjay whistle that wasn't made by a clownjay, heavy footsteps.

*June 22, 1999*

I arrived at the site of what I believe to be the first x yesterday in the late afternoon. The site is located in a valley between two mountains, nearly equidistant from both. It is lousy with caves, which I suspected it would be. The heat finally stopped climbing, so that I spent the day hiking in a kind of languid stasis, like swimming in a petri dish.

I set off with the sunrise yesterday morning, which at this time of year, this far north, is incredibly early, certainly before 5 am. I wanted to take an extended break in the fabled wildflower field with the hopes of finding and photographing any orchids in the Lydia family. I've brought with me a disposable camera, the kind you can buy at drugstores nowadays. Henry charged me \$25 for it because he had to "hitch a ride into town special" to find one. Anyway, a colleague has proposed that orchids of this variety are so vulnerable to any change in the atmosphere that they've been dying off in droves every time the earth's rotation slows down even a fraction of a billionth of a second. Needless to say, I was eager to prove him wrong. Unfortunately, the only orchid I could find was a single electra blossom, a fairly common if unusual-looking flower with yellow streaks that cut across navy petals.

From the wildflower field, I hiked due north using the sun and stick method, having neglected to pack a compass when I first came out last summer. It makes travel slow-going, having to stop every half-hour to confirm that I was still pointed in the right direction. I suppose I could have asked Henry to track me down a compass as well, but then I might have had to answer annoying questions like, "How does a research naturalist end up in the woods without a compass?" Bad enough he may have mentioned me in town already in connection to the camera.

Once I arrived in the vicinity of the first x, I spent the afternoon spelunking as best I could with my limited equipment, matches and worn sneakers. The vagaries of the map in this part of the preserve make the exact location of this x difficult to pin down, so I've given myself a wide margin of exploration. I think I probably investigated about ten caves in a quarter-mile radius. Without proper belaying equipment I was loathe to delve very deeply into any of the caves; I've heard rumors about a deep crack in these foothills that appeared about the same time the X-Preserve closed its gates to visitors and as such, is very poorly documented. What wonders the inner sanctums of these caves might possess will have to remain a mystery for now, but perhaps once The Paper has been published and things have settled down, I'll return prepared for deeper excursions. For now, the mouths of the caves will have to suffice, which they certainly have. In the flickering light afforded by my matches, I could discern definite systems of organization: neat rows of sticks, cairns set by shimmering pools, a wall that could only have been blackened by repeated fires. Being careful not to waste my limited supply of exposures, I attempted to document these finds as best I could with the camera.

The night is clear, so I've made my bed under the stars atop a patch of springy moss. It's easy to feel like I'm channeling Edith in her Castor's Arrow days, at one with the universe yet thoroughly alone. In the warmth of slow digestion, I allow myself to be excited about the day's finds. Throughout this expedition,

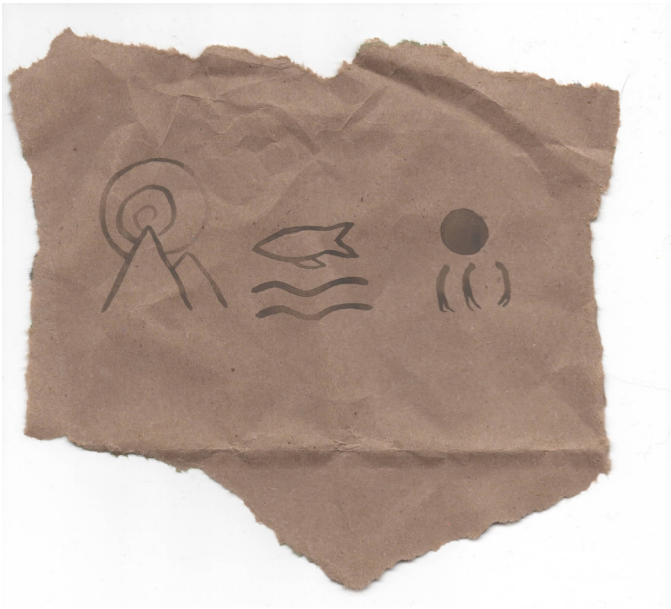
I have had the feeling that I've been accompanied by a guardian angel. Perhaps it is Edith, her spirit raised from whatever wilderness she finally succumbed to thirty years ago. Or perhaps it is something more tangible, though no less incredible.

*June 24th, 1999*

This next x is important because it has a set of coordinates next to it on the map. They are written in crisp, silver graphite. Coordinates mean exactness so something specific must have happened at this site. I made a quadrant to navigate there using the North Star and set out last night as clouds began to thicken. Now, as the sun begins to rise and the clouds have relented into rain, I am hopelessly lost.



*June 26, 1999*



Well, now, these are very exciting. Copied from the wall of a cave directly beneath the x on my map, and I'm the only one who knows what they really mean. I almost couldn't have asked for a tidier prize than if I had come face to face with a sylvissapien itself.

I've only been awake for a few hours, having accidentally collapsed into a death-like slumber for most of the day, but I've been

very busy since my reanimation. After my last entry, I thought I had reached the end of the line. The rain that began the night of ill-begotten navigation persisted into the next day. I was too wet and miserable to sleep, so I waited for the night like a starving bat. The rain let up as the sun began to set, and by midnight the clouds had dissipated enough for me to make out the North Star. Miraculously, I wasn't too far off course. The quadrant worked beautifully; enormous glacial rocks afforded perfect breaks in the forest for me to train my eye on the stars. Kneeling in the damp moss, squinting along the quadrant's sight line, I wish I could have taken a photograph of myself. At dawn, I took a break to eat and listen to the pattering of skeleton beetles as the sun rose red.

In the morning, I checked my longitude against the time and found that I only had a few miles left to reach the coordinates written on my map. I hiked northwest for another couple hours and reached the second x by noon, whereupon I fell into a deep sleep, waking just in time for a preliminary exploration of the site before the sun fully disappeared. I woke up with a kind of premonitory feeling; whatever has been following me along this journey will make itself known at this spot. I lied still for a moment blinking my crusty eyes open and reveling in the cool air. Sitting up, I was immediately immersed in the summer heat. I looked around and discovered a small hole in the earth where I had been lying that was emitting cool, dank air. A cave! Directly beneath my coordinates! If ever I were inclined to religious feeling, this would be the time. It took some searching before I found the entrance, and by then the sun was sinking fast. I lit a match and advanced several feet into the cave before the match went out. I walked a little farther and lit another. The wall was illuminated with scores of white drawings on dark rock. I resisted the urge to photograph them then and there, deciding that the film would be much better spent in the daylight and set about memorizing a few sequences to analyze by the campfire instead.

Almost a year I've lived in these woods and still no one's come around asking questions. Even the forest ranger has no idea I'm

here. It's hard not to feel invincible at this point. Here I am, on the precipice of the greatest natural discovery since Mendel's sweet peas, and no one has any idea what I've done. If I had known it was this easy, there's a dozen other plagiarists and liars I would have poisoned by now.

Perhaps Roger Middleton didn't deserve to die, but his death is certainly no great loss to the scientific community. He was an unoriginal thinker who published often. In the faculty lounge, he was constantly explaining things everyone already knew all about. Though he often spent weekends conducting "field research", he seemed to value the exercise they afforded, rather than the discoveries they yielded. So it was with a great horror that I skulked into the lounge one day during the end of the spring semester and heard him describe an excursion to these very mountains over the past break. He shuddered as he recalled the feeling that despite being the most isolated he'd been in months, he wasn't actually alone. I made my coffee as quickly as possible to hide the hot tears welling in my eyes, but before I could leave the room, Roger made a vow, more to himself than the idiot he was talking to, that he would return to these mountains as soon as possible to uncover their secret.

As soon as possible was two weeks before the fall semester began, when Roger would be finished "mentoring" a group of middle schoolers seeking college application padding. That didn't leave much time to devise my plan. I had finally been awarded the Edith Oakley Award for Excellence in Ecological Studies back in February and had announced that I would take at least a year's sabbatical as a result. I've always known that I would come here if given such an opportunity, but, of course, no one else knew that.

It is not commonly known that salt marsh anemones are highly poisonous to humans. I happened to know that they were thanks to an obscure compendium on "Ritual Plants and Animals Used in Mystical Indian Rites" by the colonial explorer Edward

Gresham, who transcribed Native American stories and songs with cavalier English embellishment, but who seemed to have an unrealized aptitude for naturalist cataloguing.

Salt marsh anemone was not easy to find. I spent three full weekends scouring the coast of Long Island to find some, which I finally did on the boggy edge of a North Fork farm. I made up a story about conducting research on the nesting habits of marsh birds and took copious notes on the subject in case anyone asked where I was going or what I was doing, but nobody did. I loaded a basket with anemone and brought them back to my apartment to determine the best way to extract their deadly syrup. According to Gresham, one dram was all it took to kill a bear, so surely, one dram would be more than enough to fell a middle-aged hiking enthusiast. I wasted a number of the blossoms before I hit upon the idea of stealing a syringe from the teaching hospital associated with the university. The syringe worked perfectly, and I ended up with five drams of the syrup, enough to kill the entire biology department if I got the notion.

Now how to get the poison into Mr. Middleton's system? Its lack of color and strong taste made it easy to camouflage into food or drink, but Roger would raise a serious eyebrow if I offered him something. I've not been known for my generosity around campus. I could try to sneak it into something he was about to consume, but then I'd need to find an opportunity to do so unseen. Best if he could somehow administer the dose himself. A bore through and through, Roger was always keen on the latest health food trends, and lately, he'd been on about stevia in his coffee. I found a time to make a furtive check of the lounge pantry and found that he was keeping a personal supply of it in the cupboard with a piece of masking tape proclaiming his ownership.

I made up a story about needing to use the biology lab to perform dissections on some unlucky brook trout, so I'd have a reason for hanging about the campus during the summer break. Of course, I did gut some fish for real, to make my story more foolproof,

but mostly I observed Roger's movements and habits. He was a regular coffee drinker, sometimes consuming three to four cups a day. Most pertinent to my machinations was the regular late afternoon cup he'd make right after the last middle schooler had been picked up. He almost never missed it. And so, on the last day of the program, I snuck into the lounge to doctor up the stevia. There was about a quarter of a bottle left, so I added three drams of the syrup, just to be sure. Coolly, I made myself a cup of coffee that I didn't want, but nobody was around to see how collected I was.

The biology wing of the campus was virtually deserted except for me and Roger and his acolytes, but an evening cleaning woman would arrive at 4:30 p.m. I had planned to collect his body after dark, but in the meantime I had to stash it somewhere in the building where she definitely wouldn't find it. I had settled on the boiler room.

Just before 3 and the last student was picked up. From the lab where I had just finished cleaning up a trout's entrails, I listened carefully. Squelch, squelch, squelch. Those stupid hiking boots he wore everywhere. He approached the lounge but didn't slow. It sounded like he was almost at the exit at the end of the hall when he turned and opened a door. His office! He closed the door behind him and after several breathless moments, I ventured out into the hall to hear better. He was talking with someone on the phone, his pompousness writ larger stacked against silences. Who was he talking to? Fifteen minutes passed before he emerged. I had returned to the lab at this point and was watching his movements through a slat in the door. The bastard seemed to contemplate an immediate departure, then reconsidered and headed back to the lounge. He made his coffee, fixed it like usual, then settled down to reach the Cobble Brook weekly. With my ear pressed against the wall, I heard him rustle his paper and set the mug on the table every half minute or so. A full ten minutes with no unusual noises. I began to think I should have tested the syrup on one of my landlady's cats, but then I

heard a groan. Unfortunately for Roger, the poison worked more slowly than I thought it would. More groans and gasps and a feeble scraping of his chair. I believe it may have immobilized him before killing him. At length, I heard him slump onto the table.

It was close to 4. I hoisted the body onto a lab cart I had ready and rushed him to the elevators. I didn't encounter anyone. I hit the basement button and rode down. The boiler room was nearby, but when I tried it, it was locked. I frantically looked around for another option before remembering the taxidermy closet on the second floor. There could be no reason for anyone to go in there in the next six hours. By the time I had rushed back to the elevator, landed on the second floor, and somewhat unceremoniously dumped Roger's body in a heap underneath a narrow window, it was 4:20. Back in the lounge, I was a madwoman for five minutes. I washed and dried Roger's mug and threw it back in the cupboard. I moved Roger's masking tape from the poisoned stevia to a fresh bottle I had specially purchased. I even emptied some of the new bottle into the drain to make it look more natural. I returned the newspaper to a short stack of others and did a quick pass of the entire room to make sure I hadn't forgotten any other details. When I was satisfied, I resisted the urge to run. I was nearly across the parking lot under the safety of a small stand of trees that opened to the path to my building, when the cleaning woman arrived. She drove slowly around the empty parking spaces, headed for a spot near the rear entrance of the McKlellan Building, where I had just been. When she passed me, I could feel her eyes.

I spent the next several hours waiting for the night to fall in some anxious discomfort. The sun set so late at that time of year, and I wanted to be sure it was well after dark before collecting Roger. My bags had been packed for several days already, but I hadn't put them in the car yet. I was saving the trunk for Roger, and I was afraid if I put them in the backseat before dark, someone may have noticed them. Between research materials, provisions, navigation tools, and other supplies, I had three trips

to make down to the car. At 9 pm sharp, I carried my first load down to the street - a suitcase packed with books and papers and my Royal Deluxe typewriter. As I reached for the car door handle, I was accosted by the creaking voice of Mrs. Feldman, my landlady.

“Going on a trip, Tabitha?”

She had evidently just returned from the corner store where she had purchased two bulging bags of cat food. This was almost the only reason she ever left her apartment and hardly ever after dark, so I was understandably surprised by her appearance.

“No,” I said quickly, and though I should have said as little as possible, I explained that my work computer had a virus so I needed to write some notes using the old typewriter.

“Awfully late on a Friday night to go back to the office, but to each his -” but by this time I had already loaded the car and begun pulling away from the curb.

After telling a complete imbecile where I was going on the night of Roger Middleton’s disappearance and being forced to leave the bulk of my supplies behind, the evening went relatively smoothly. I drove through the university parking lot with my car lights off and headed to a tiny bit of pavement behind the cafeteria where the garbage truck empties the dumpsters. It was protected from view by three brick walls.

In the specimen closet, dozens of glass eyes gleamed darkly. Roger was a heap of awkward blackness, but eventually I managed to get him back on the cart. I was preternaturally calm throughout the whole maneuver. I even remembered to dig the office key out of his pocket so I could nab his store of Edith’s personal letters I knew he had. I found some in the back of a filing cabinet, though I think there may have been others somewhere else.

Once Roger was safely loaded in the car and the lab cart returned to its post, I began the seven-hour drive north to the X-- Preserve. Last month I cashed my Edith Oakley prize money and had sewn it carefully into the lining of my Burberry coat. Driving in the cool night air, I felt like the powerful angel I always knew I was, my secret feathers bristling with electricity.

I buried Roger by the scorched oak tree and sank my car in a deep pond about a half mile's hike from the cabin. I timed an e-mail away message to explain to my colleagues that I'd chosen the Salamander Cliffs of Utah for my sabbatical.

This one is mine. A brilliant mind trapped in a thwarted career, a lifelong faith in my abilities and vision, a map meant for me. Roger Middleton should have found his own sylvissapien. I always knew I would find something here, but I didn't know just how important it would be. A species many of us knew had to exist but whose existence has never been confirmed. A missing link, a bridge between worlds, the glow of a dead star as it travels through time and space. Vernacularly, Bigfoot.



*June 27, 1999*

Very fruitful day. I had to be smart about what I took photographs of because I know I'll see a sylvissapien before this expedition is over. It was hard to ration myself though with everything I wanted to record. The cave I began to explore last night was full of invaluable evidence: primitive drawings unlike any Native American symbols I'd ever seen; a neat stack of animal carcasses, some recently eaten; piles of wood shavings, as if for kindling; and most telling, a call like the one I heard last summer, neither fully human nor fully animal, but full of mourning.

I believe there may only be one or two sylvissapien left. If my interpretation of the cave drawings is correct, theirs is a sad tale of a species nearly wiped out by a mysterious disease transmitted via birds.

Now, as dusk approaches, I've cleared my camp and hidden my supplies away. I've staked out a spot near the cave's entrance where I can meditate unseen by anyone entering it. I will enter a deep state of Zieglerist meditation which I believe will make me nearly invisible to forest creatures. With camera in hand, I will depend on the hyper-focus yielded by my years of studying Zieglerism to capture an image of the sylvissapien as she returns home from a day of hunting.

*June 30th, 1999*

There is an old tale about a vengeful witch who was bested by a goat herder in an archery contest. After a day of raucous celebration (for the witch had agreed to release the village's crops from years of blight if she could be beaten), the goat herder somehow found himself lost in the woods while making his way back home. Of course, he never made it home; a brave team of villagers found him late the next day, buried under an avalanche of rocks, apparently loosed by the blow of a single, sturdy arrow.

After my last entry, I was settling into a deep state of meditation, slowly shutting myself off from anything but the most essential input from the outside world. The trickling of a nearby stream, a pair of crows chattering, the humming of evening insects - everything growing fainter and fainter - a thick, black paint dripping over the mind. Some unknown amount of time in this darkness before a dim light turned on. In my mind, the forest floor glowed in the low light under silent and very dark trees. Footsteps approaching. My fingers tensed around the camera in my lap. A weary tread, a hunter headed home without a kill. The snap of a twig underfoot. Though she was very close now, something uninvited was clouding the transmission. Something

moving slowly with great concentration, a large and insidious snail. With great psychic effort, I pushed it away, refocused my mind, and the hunter's footsteps came back through with clarity. If I opened my eyes in one second, I would see her. I lifted the camera to my eye and pressed the shutter.

The sounds of the night forest came crashing in. The sylvisapien was bounding towards me, apparently alerted to my presence by the flash of the camera. I leapt to my feet and raced into the woods. Dusk was nearly over, and darkness was falling fast. Blindly, I scabbled up a mossy rock face and tucked myself between a pair of giant glacial boulders. I held my breath while I listened to the hunter tramp and snuff around below. She seemed to consider the climb before turning back the way she'd come. I waited a few minutes before I let myself relax. Ziegler meditation is as taxing as it is effective, so I was deeply exhausted.

When I woke up, my camera was missing. The moonless night was palpably dark, but even still, I knew I wasn't alone.

"I won't tell no one about the body for just a little money."

Henry. This far north. Where no civilian ever ought to be.

"What are you doing here? What are you talking about?" I said.

"I found the body two days after you arrived. You really ought to have brought a shovel at least. That poor fellow was already picked over by crows by the time I found him."

"I didn't have time to pack a shovel."

"Aye, a lot of things you didn't have time to pack, but money isn't one of them."

"I don't have any money," I said.

“A person without much money doesn’t go to great lengths to hide not much money, but I’ve been through that cabin at least a dozen a times by now and haven’t come up with a dime yet.”

“You’ve been in my cabin?”

“I wouldn’t call it your cabin exactly. Sure, you’ve played house in it for almost a year now, but you’ve no more right to be there than a snake in a wren’s nest. I’ve watched you disappear every time the ranger comes around. You’re in hiding, you and a wad of cash. A very vulnerable position if you’d ask me.”

Henry lit a match to light a lantern. The fire gleam in his eyes made his irises very dark.

He continued, “What’s more, I know you’ve got the money with you now. Before you left, I watched you tear that cabin apart. I watched you hide it all away, and when you went to sleep, I dug up all your hidey holes to look for treasure, but I never found none. And I know you haven’t got a wallet in that coat of yours, because that was the first place I looked last fall.

“So, the way I see it, no one would miss you if you never were found, but really, you see, I’m only interested in the money. The money and maybe a little fun. A little fun, all the money, and I really couldn’t care less if you kept playing hide and go seek in my woods.”

He lunged for me where I was sitting between the boulders. I pulled myself deeper into them, praying that they wouldn’t dead end. Henry was pulling at my clothes, tearing at my coat, tugging down my pants. I was crawling on the rock; he was bent over me. The lantern was well behind us, so that the darkness was almost complete. I reached out my hand to pull myself forward, and it plunged into nothingness. The crack in the earth!

“My coat! It’s sewn into my coat! All of it, almost \$10,000 in cash.”

The confession was enough to make him pause before grabbing my arm and yanking me up.

“Off with it.” A pause. “All of it.”

Standing up, I realized that the gap between the boulders had widened. In the darkness, he pushed me up against one of them and faced me from the other. I unclasped the belt of my Burberry coat and unbuttoned it tenderly. Henry whirled me away from him and began to pull the coat off of me. We were very close to the ledge, but Henry didn’t know that. When he had almost gotten the coat off, I twisted my torso violently away from the abyss, so that he and the coat were thrust into it.

I listened for the sound of their landing, but I never heard it. I believe the bastard went down with my camera, because I spent a full day searching for it before making my miserable way back to the cabin. Though I’ve returned with my life, I almost wish I hadn’t. I have no proof, no money, and no goddamn fucking Burberry coat, like the one Edith died in.



*March 28, 1968*

Dear Chet,

This will be my last letter to you. I embark on my journey to Gumdrop Mountain tomorrow at dawn. I won't have a permanent address for close to a year, and I doubt I'll return to the New Hampshire house if I do come back. All these wasted years spent thinking I was waiting for you, that someday you'd wake up and love me. I thought if I could make that damned flower bloom, some kind of curse might be broken.

We started looking for it together after we read about it in an old farmer's almanac. We were botany students at the New England Ecology Institute back then. Emily's story made a deep impression on us, her human longing tied to the timeless yearning of all perennial plants, that was the first time you ever touched my hand. That summer I thought you loved me, and when you were drafted in the fall, I wrote to you almost every day. I scoured the university's historical archives for anything that could be a clue to our mystery flower and planned a trip for us to look for it together. We thought it was probably an imbricate bulb based on the illustration in the almanac, but we had no idea what color

it was. When you wrote to me about your bunkmate, Ted, there was something in your tone that made me leave on the trip I'd planned for us by myself. I started in Maryland, where Emily was reported to have kept her greenhouses where she cultivated Cora bulbs. I took the Appalachian Trail all the way to Connecticut, but I didn't find anything. I stopped writing to you completely and got a spindly kind of pleasure about you wondering over it. Otherwise I was completely and utterly miserable. Back then I didn't even know to boil the water I gathered from streams and got the worst diarrhea I'd ever had in my life.

When the war ended three years later, you found me writing articles for *The Intrepid Naturalist* in New Haven and proposed, but, of course, we were never married. Five years of engagement during which you rogered any would-be Whitman who submitted to the university press you worked for. I went spelunking in the infamously treacherous marble caves and traveled to the arctic with a guide that didn't speak English. I thought when I wrote my first book and achieved almost overnight success, you'd love me like a man, but you didn't.

During my expedition to the Tennessee vinelands, I bought a number of heirloom flower bulbs from the ancient president of the Nashville Day Lily Society. I took the train into New York to surprise you with them and found you naked on a sofa with one of my ecology students, and the sham engagement was finally broken off.

Ten years whizzed by. I went on expeditions, conducted research, trained with a master Native American survivalist. My work was honored in both science and literary circles.

After the publication of *Castor's Arrow* in 1960, you wrote me a letter about the death of your mother, and we began a casual correspondence. You were living with a man for some years who had recently moved to Spain and wanted you to come with him, but you couldn't bear to leave New York. Your letters were so



persnickety for a man in his 40s, that I had to laugh. You complained of the noisy hispanic children that lived next door and the unsalted sidewalks in your neighborhood. One time you fell on the ice and wrote to me about an old woman who laughed at you from her window.

In 1965, you asked if you could come visit me in the New Hampshire house. I had just bought it the year before, though I had been so busy with work since then, I hadn't spent much time in it. My head told me to say no, though I knew I had bought it for you. In all that time, I never stopped thinking of you and I never stopped looking for the Cora bulb. I spent years trying to make the bulbs from Nashville bloom, but the only two that ever flowered were variants of blue dahlias. Beautiful, but nothing like the illustration of Emily's flower. When you came that first time, you stayed for three weeks. It was strangely easy with you in the house. You made breakfast most mornings and tended to the long neglected vegetable gardens I'd inherited. The house was filled with quiet, not the awkward kind, but rather the contented kind you grow into after years of companionship.

When you left, I felt the deepest sadness I'd ever experienced. I threw myself into the house, a sturdy cape from the 1800s that needed plenty of work. I replaced at least a dozen balusters on the exterior porch, patched the leaky roof, rewired the lighting in the kitchen, which used to flicker somewhat disconcertingly during rainstorms, and planted rosebushes everywhere. I thought they might lure you back north like a Flemish butterfly, but it was some time before you came to stay in New Hampshire again. We wrote letters a little. I think you might have met someone. I wrote *My Country Walks* at my publisher's urging, because I didn't have the heart to go on any expeditions during that time, and I didn't know what else to write about. It pretended to outline a hunt for meaning in the explorations I'd been on, the research I'd done, but really it was a special code written for you. Embedded in my quaint reminisces, I wrote a mystery novel about the search for our flower. I even implied that it had

been found, that if only you'd meet me next spring in Edgartown, you'd find a whole field of Emily's flowers, which, of course, was a lie. I have no idea whether you ever read it, though I sent you an autographed copy. Like everything I did, apart from making you love me, the book was very successful.

And then you got sick. Fatally, irrevocably, tragically sick. Your letters revved up, you wrote to me about every mundane detail of your fading life, every person that bowed out of it, some gracefully, some clumsily, until finally, last fall, you arrived. I never was your lover or even your wife, and now I am your nurse. I have tended to you steadfastly these last several months, though never with devotion, not even at first. Now that you're here with me for good, I am finally free from my love for you. It melted when I heard your cab pull up on the gravel outside my kitchen window, but I've tended to you in spite of it, maybe even because of it. I'll own some pleasure in playing nurse, in seeing you so wasted and dependent. But now the ground is beginning to thaw; in the odorless cold, you can just taste it. While you slept in the lengthening afternoons, I was packing my bags, preparing my provisions. I imagine I'll arrive on Gumdrops Mountain just in time to catch the snow lilies bloom. They have an extremely short flowering period, just under three days.

I've cut the phone line.

Regards,

Edith

[as imagined by Tabitha H. Eldreth]





## *Afterword*

The notebooks of Tabitha H. Eldreth were discovered in the spring of 2000 after an exhaustive search for two missing ecologists: Tabitha herself and Roger Middleton. It was the disappearance of a Northfield cranberry grower named Henry Chicanet that finally led authorities to some answers. It would seem Mr. Chicanet, a reclusive and self-sufficient woodsman, had been buying unusual items in the town's country store for close to a year. When his home was searched, police discovered a sizable collection of firearms, a cupboard of natural hallucinogens, and a draft of a paper by Tabitha Eldreth entitled "Sylvissapien: A Bridge Between Worlds." The paper, which builds a tenuous case for the existence of a heretofore undiscovered species, a kind of pre-human primate, was not convincing as a scientific document, but described a number of exact locations in the X- Preserve where "evidence" was discovered. The cabin that Tabitha was using as her home base was found shortly thereafter, which contained these papers and many more. The body of Roger Middleton was soon found nearby, apparently exhumed from the shallow grave under the scorched oak she describes in her notes, and replanted in the bog near her cabin. Neither Tabitha nor Henry have been found, though the X- Preserve and wilderness territory well into Canada have been thoroughly searched.

It was with great deliberation that Cobble Brook University decided to publish these papers. The university in no way wishes to condone the homicidal actions of its former employee, Tabitha Eldreth, but in her quest for personal glory, Tabitha has ended up with a very engaging dialogue between herself and the forest. Tabitha was not a happy person and could be quite mean, but she was not altogether bad. I remember fondly odd conversations she and I had over the years, one about chickadees in an elevator, another about cyclones and bees at a staff BBQ. She always had an unusual stance or observation to share. The real heartache for Tabitha was that she never accepted the image of discovery as a shimmering tapestry of individual minds and contributions, constantly growing and shifting as old patches are illuminated with fresh thinking. She was caught up in the story of herself, a brilliant scientist thwarted by circumstance, her spark kept alight by the illusion of a greater narrative of which she was destined to be the star.

But perhaps it was her status as a lifelong loner that gave her such a privileged ear when it came to the woods. It is this author's opinion that, in addition to being a keen natural observer, Tabitha knew something of the forest's mind. For better or worse, she communicated with mysterious, sometimes dark, forces that most of us cannot hear. She had the generosity, at least, to write some of what she heard down. She offers us a portrait of the civilized mind as it descends into wilderness, a window into our fundamental solitariness. In this way, whether she knows it or not (and very likely not - it would take a seasoned survivalist to make it through a winter without provisions that far north), she participates in the legacy of naturalists she held so dear, and it is this author's opinion that Edith Oakley herself might have found some glowing pinpricks of light in the writings of Tabitha H. Eldreth. Plus, she was one hell of a watercolorist.

- Dr. Hong Yeong, PhD  
Cobble Brook University, 2001

