



THIRTEEN

THE WAY OF
THINGS

EVERY TOKEN OF HOPE THAT I'VE GATHERED in my medicine bundle carries a whiff of the holy. If I trace beauty or wildness or the body's own vigor back to their source, I find myself edging toward the wellspring of the sacred. Even the distinctly human measures of hope, such as family and fidelity and simplicity and skill, draw power from nonhuman depths. To speak honestly of my reasons for living in hope, therefore, I must dive into those depths. I must overcome my reluctance, indeed my fear, and say as clearly as language allows what I have come to believe about the Creator.

"Discussing God is not the best use of our energy," warns the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, a warning that I bear soberly in mind. More than enough talk has already been uttered in the name of God, Yahweh, Allah, Brahma, Tao, and the many other aliases for the creative power at the heart of things. Some of that talk is wise, some is dangerous, and much of it is arrogant babble. I am wary of adding my own voice to the hubbub. What do I know about the underlying mystery that we call by so many hallowed names? I may speak with some authority of my backyard, my town, or the hill country of southern Indiana. But what do I know of the Ground of Being? Precious little, I confess. Yet every path I take in my hunt for hope leads me toward this murky and risky

terrain. In venturing there I may get lost, I may blunder or blaspheme, I may settle for talk about the sacred when only direct experience really counts. What I say about the holy may scare away those readers who are convinced they already possess reliable maps to the realm of spirit, as well as those who are convinced there is no such realm. In spite of the risks, if I am to explain why I live in hope, I must describe my vision of the ultimate reality that sustains and informs everything we do.

From early childhood until I was ten years old, I could have spoken confidently of God as a gentle, giant father in the sky, who looked out for me in the daylight and kept the goblins away in the dark. My days were long and easy; my nights were short and dreamless. At bedtime I prayed with a certainty that God would ease whatever ache I felt, then I closed my eyes, lay still, and a moment later it was morning. Night and day, this reliable God wrapped me in love and filled my body with breath.

Then, during my tenth summer, I went to the hospital for what was supposed to have been routine surgery. My mother assured me that God would go with me into the operating room and hold me in his hand, and when it was over he would carry me back home and mend all that had gone wrong inside of me. Although I trembled, I believed her, right up to the last moment of innocence, when I lay on the table under fierce lights while strangers in blue cloth hats gazed down at me and someone pressed a rubber mask over my nose and mouth, and I breathed in the sweet gas.

What came after was more terrible than anything my fumbling words could grasp. I was floating in a black void, an endless night without moon or stars, when suddenly a huge voice, hate-filled and furious, began roaring in my ears. Out of the darkness loomed the glowing shape of a capital *I*, at first only a bright streak, like a letter fallen from a neon sign, then growing larger and brighter until it filled the world and burned with the menac-

ing red of steel in a blacksmith's forge. Suddenly a great sledgehammer, like the one my father used to drive fenceposts, came banging down on the fiery I, and every clanging blow slammed through me. This went on, it seemed, for longer than I had been alive, the banging and roaring, the fury and fire.

When I swam up out of the anesthesia, knowing nothing of ether nightmares, I could tell from the whispering voices and the drawn faces in the recovery room that I had nearly died. No one confessed this to me until months later, but I gathered from the whispers that I had lost a lot of blood during the operation, nearly too much. Instead of going home in a day or two, I stayed in the hospital more than a week, most of the time flat on my back with my arms strapped down to keep me from tearing at the bandages and tubes. When I was finally permitted to get out of bed, I needed help even to stand up. I shivered in the nurses' arms. Before the operation I had run and jumped and climbed with no thought of my body, but now I had to learn all over again how to walk.

I had also forgotten how to fall asleep. Or rather, in the hospital and then at home, I lay awake brooding for the first time on what sleep might mean. What if the roaring and banging and burning seized me again, and never let go? What if I sank down into the darkness and never found my way back up to the light? What if sleep went on forever?

With its drugged nightmare and its taste of death, the operation was a small agony, as human suffering goes, but it changed me, as if I really had been a slab of red-hot steel reshaped under the blows of a hammer. I lost entirely my childhood confidence in God as a gentle giant who cradled me in the palm of his hand. Had I been older I might have reasoned that a loving power did, after all, reach down and pluck me from the jaws of death. But as a child of ten I could only wonder how I had slipped into those terrible jaws. What had I done to bring on such pain? Bewildered by my brush with death, I could imagine only two explanations: either God was not in charge or God was cruel.

I came to dread the night. I would lie awake for hours, clinging to consciousness. My father and mother took turns singing me songs, telling me stories, soothing me. But after they tiptoed out of my bedroom I opened my eyes and stared at the wedge of light falling through the half-open door. So long as I held onto the light I would be safe. If I let go I might sink into nightmare, for the roaring and pounding awaited me in the darkness. The effort of staring at the light made my eyes burn and my legs twitch. I tried to keep quiet, but my jerking limbs rustled the sheets, and when fear filled me to the brim I sat up in bed and cried out. Soon Mother would come to me, always Mother, for my father soon lost patience with a boy who could not go to sleep without whimpering. She hummed lullabies, or merely sat beside the bed and stroked my hair until weariness finally pulled down the lids of my eyes.

This went on for months, night after night. In rural Ohio, in 1956, in a family without any spare money, nobody thought of taking me to a therapist. Mother did take me to see our minister, a white-haired and quiet-spoken man who left his dairy farm every Sunday to preach at our crossroads Methodist church. We sat in rocking chairs on his front porch. I stared down at my shoes while Mother told him of my troubles, my midnight fears, my doubts. The minister gave me a list of Bible verses that would ease my dread. Before we left he pressed a hand to my forehead, saying, "God loves you, Scott. As sure as you're sitting there." I wanted to believe him, but I no longer could. Whatever power lay behind things, there was more to it than love.

No matter how secure our beginnings, no matter how pampered or lucky we might be, sooner or later all of us go under the hammer of suffering. What pounds us may be humiliation or fever, hunger or cold, a mother's drinking or a father's fist. The shock of the blow forces us to enlarge our view of the world, to make room for the fact of our vulnerability. It may drive us into a shell, make us defensive, even cruel; or it may jolt us into recognizing that

others, too, are vulnerable, and thereby deepen our compassion. I tell about a boy's minor surgery and its aftermath not because they rate high on the scale of suffering, but because, in giving me a foretaste of death, they compelled me to examine the foundations of life.

Eventually I learned how to still my twitching legs, how to stifle my cries, so that my parents thought I had overcome the terror of the operation. But the nightmares went on for half a dozen years, until I was well into high school.

Meanwhile, forlorn and frightened, I set about investigating God. I scoured the woods and fields and roads, studied the faces of friends and strangers, watched the sky, looking for clues. What sort of world was this? How did it all hang together? Where had it come from and where was it going? And who or what was running the show? What was my life, or any life, that could so easily be snatched away? It was as though I had suddenly awakened to the strangeness of things.

Like a good Protestant boy, in my search for God I consulted the family Bible, a heavy, leather-bound volume that lay on a maple desk in the living room. Since the Bible was not to be moved from its place of honor, I would stand there at the desk, open to one of the verses from the minister's list, and read a passage over and over until I had it memorized.

Yea, though I walk through the valley
of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil:
for thou art with me;
thy rod and thy staff
they comfort me.

I was comforted merely to learn that the Psalmist had passed through the shadow of death and lived to sing of it. Recalling the sudden weakness of my legs in the hospital, I was reassured by Isaiah's promise:

They that wait upon the Lord
shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings as eagles;
they shall run and not be weary;
and they shall walk, and not faint.

The words rolled in my mouth like ripe cherries. I read all the soothing words, including John's famous condensation of the gospel into one sentence: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." I worked my way through the minister's list, learning verses by the dozens, all of them antidotes to doubt.

If I had stuck to those comforting passages I might have regained my old confidence in God. But on my twelfth birthday, Mother's stepmother from Chicago swooped down for a visit in her white Cadillac and feathered hat, and presented me with my very own Bible, a zippered copy of the King James version. Not realizing what a dangerous gift this was, I carried it to my room that night, drew back the zipper to reveal the red-edged pages, turned to the opening lines of Genesis, and started reading. Over the following months I plowed straight on through to the Revelation of John. I never understood more than half of what I read, but that did not slow me down, I was so intent on searching out this Yahweh, this God, this Lord whose book had come to me like a challenge.

The God I found in those closely printed pages was a scary mixture of friend and foe, comforter and tyrant. Here was a king that would scorn his subjects, taunt them, hurl them down into Sheol. Here was a creator who would drown all but a handful of his creatures, then promise not to do it again. Here was a ruler of the universe that would kick Adam and Eve out of the garden, turn a woman to salt, trap a man inside a whale, urge one tribe to slaughter another one, kill every newborn son in a whole country,

visit plagues and famine and fire on his enemies. This God of the Bible toyed with people the way our barn cats teased mice. Could the Almighty really be such a bully?

Aside from my sleepless misery following the operation, there was plenty of evidence in my own neighborhood for such a callous God. During the months when I was poring over those red-rimmed pages, a husband in a nearby house often beat his wife and children so hard that I could hear their screams. Another house on our road burned down when the father fell asleep smoking, and afterwards his family shuffled around barefoot in the ashes. Every third or fourth house was poisoned by drink. Driving home with a carload of presents for Christmas, the wife of our grade school janitor was crushed by a gravel truck. In school, a simpleminded boy with flame-red hair was taunted by the other kids until he tumbled to the floor with seizures. Animals died every day on our road, flattened under the tires of cars. More animals died for our food. If our neighborhood was a fair sample of the world, then God seemed not to care how much his creatures suffered.

Having studied that dangerous book from cover to cover, I found I had to choose: either the universe was run by a fickle, fatal, sometimes vicious dictator, or else the Bible did not tell the whole story. I chose the latter. The whole story, I came to believe, was likelier to be told by science.

My infatuation with science had begun much earlier, but it turned into a passion at about the same time I lost my faith in the kindliness of God. The month of my twelfth birthday, which brought me the zippered Bible, was also the October when the Russians launched the first artificial satellite into orbit. I remember hearing over the radio the signals beamed down from Sputnik I, like the chirping of crickets in the autumn fields. However worried the grown-ups might have been by this proof of Soviet wizardry, it lifted my heart, because rockets and satellites prom-

ised to carry our questions out into the heavens. Where did the universe come from? Is anyone or anything in charge? Why are we here, alive and thinking? Are we going anywhere, or are we just wandering around, passing the time until we die? And when we die, is that the end, or does some part of us survive?

For years, right on through high school and college and well into my twenties, I believed that science might answer those questions. I read about fossils and fire, neurons and neutrons, quasars and quarks. I performed earnest, clumsy experiments in our garage, using batteries and beakers and a witch's brew of chemicals, and later, older, I performed more careful experiments in laboratories using subtle instruments. I hung around telescopes and cyclotrons. Hungry for order, I memorized star charts and the periodic table of the elements. Given time enough, I figured, chemistry would puzzle out the secret of thought, biology would uncover the springs of life, physics would probe outward to the circumference and inward to the center of things. Then we would know for sure whether the fact of Creation implies a Creator, whether life has a purpose or the universe has a plan, whether mind is more than a fever in matter, whether we have souls.

The story I learned from all of that study is an enthralling one, as grand as any myth. In bare outline, it goes like this: Our universe began in the void with a burst of energy, between ten and twenty billion years ago, and it has been expanding, proliferating new forms, and cooling down ever since. Among the forms congealing out of energy and dust were galaxies like the Milky Way and stars like our sun and planets like Earth. And on this one planet, at least, and most likely on countless others throughout space, matter coalesced into organisms that could reproduce themselves. These organisms in turn gave rise, through gradual small changes and the rigors of survival, to millions upon millions of new living forms, many of them short-lived, some of them durable, all of them capable of sensing, in however modest

a fashion, some portion of the universe. To varying degrees, the more complex organisms developed an inward space for thinking and feeling. And in at least one species, our own, that space has grown so large that we can entertain the crazy ambition of comprehending the whole universe.

If that is a more convincing tale than any of those offered by scriptures, as I believe it is, what are we to make of it? "Let us interrogate the great apparition, that shines so peacefully around us," Emerson advised. "Let us inquire, to what end is nature?" We have inquired, with breathtaking ingenuity, and all that we can say, in ever finer detail, is how the apparition seems to work. We are no closer to understanding how this apparition came to be, why it obeys such a peculiar set of rules, and where, if anywhere, it may be going. There seems to be an unbridgeable gulf between all that we can measure with our instruments and the fundamental reality that gives rise to the universe.

The limits of what science can tell us might be summed up in a line I have quoted in an earlier book, from a Nobel laureate in physics, Steven Weinberg: "The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless." While many scientists would no doubt take issue with Weinberg, insisting that the universe does indeed have a purpose, they would not be able to justify their beliefs by the methods of science. No one has devised an experiment that would reveal what, if anything, the whole show means, and no one is likely to do so.

Much as I still love science, I no longer expect it to answer my deepest questions. Those questions have stayed with me since childhood, and they have nagged at me throughout my hunt for hope. As I have reckoned up the powers and gifts that might help us to solve the tremendous problems we face, again and again I have found myself driven to think about the cosmic setting in which we act. Are we alone, without guidance, in a mindless whirl of atoms? Or is it possible that behind all we see, behind the

turmoil and cruelty and loss, there is a mind, a being, a way of things, which we might dimly perceive, and with which we might align our lives? And if there is such a cosmic Way, does it merely set the parameters for what is possible, as gravity limits the motions of planets, or does it offer us help? Are we allied to something infinite and immortal, some Ground of Being that might inform and support our best efforts?

Our answers to those questions will have a profound effect on how we lead our lives. "The significance—and ultimately the quality—of the work we do is determined by our understanding of the story in which we are taking part," as Wendell Berry observes. Even if one accepts, as I do, that the scientific account of the universe is the most convincing story we have so far, one still must decide whether the story has any meaning, and whether we have any role to play in it. If cosmic evolution is only a chain of accidents, then we are free to pursue any goal that pleases us; if, on the other hand, cosmic evolution embodies a plot or purpose, then we had better do all we can to decipher it. We should be skeptical of anyone who claims to know for certain what the meaning of the universe is, but we should be equally skeptical of anyone who claims to know for certain that it has no meaning.

So what do we make of the cosmic story? Is it the tale of an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing? Is it the record of a divine plan? Is it a grand experiment whose outcome we might influence? However we answer, whether we deny or affirm that there is a Way of things, we must make a leap of faith. Our faith ought to be informed by the best knowledge we can gather—from the testimony of others who have thought hard about these matters, from science and religion, from history and literature, and from our own deepest intuitions—but finally, in trying to make sense of the cosmic story, we must go beyond what can be known for certain. And so, armed with the little knowledge I have gathered in a brief and hectic life, I make my leap.

I believe that Creation is holy. It is worthy of our wonder, our study, our devotion and love. It is the work of a Creator whom we can apprehend directly, if fleetingly, in the depths of our own being, a Creator who transcends all categories and labels. We perceive the Creator in wildness, in beauty, in art, in the surge of ideas, in communion with our fellow creatures. We meet the Creator as we would meet another person, as a center of consciousness and will and desire, yet one that overflows every limit we can imagine. This divine Being contains all lesser beings, as the ocean contains whales and fish. There is love in this enveloping presence, but also toughness; there is terrifying power as well as serenity; there is tremendous wisdom along with burning curiosity.

I believe that Creation is not finished, but rather is a fabulous experiment whose outcome not even the Creator foresees. Because the outcome is unknown, the Creator is passionately interested in its unfolding. Our universe may be one of many, each one obeying different laws, but it is the only one we humans can witness. However simple the forces that set our universe in motion, and however simple the rules that govern the evolution of those forces, the deepest impulse behind this Creation appears to be a drive toward complexity. Cosmic history reveals a gradual movement, not without occasional reverses, toward higher and higher levels of order, as matter organized itself into atoms, atoms into molecules, molecules into organisms, organisms into societies. The life on our own small planet is most likely only a sample of life in the universe. Every living species manifests the yearning of the Creator to take on form, to explore the possibilities in matter, and every species is therefore precious.

However precious it may be, everything that springs into existence eventually dissolves back to the source, making way for new gestures of being. We humans are not the endpoint of evolution, not the favorite darlings of the Creator, but only clever players in the ongoing drama. Nonetheless, we may be useful, even

crucial, to the work of Creation. We have been given the distinctive and perhaps unique ability to discern the laws that govern the universe, and to express what we discover in words and images and formulas. The search for understanding and the struggle for expression are therefore the most vital of our pursuits; by comparison, the scramble for wealth, power, status, and pleasure is a mere sideshow. We matter as individuals, as societies, and as a species in proportion to what we contribute to the evolving self-awareness of the universe.

Our part in the cosmic story is to gaze back, with comprehension and joy, at the whole of Creation. Our role is to witness and celebrate the beauty of things, the elegance and order in the world, and the Ground of Being that we share with all creatures. We do this through painting and storytelling, through dancing and singing, through science and mathematics, through the raising of buildings and the launching of telescopes into space, through the shaping of poems and pots, through our never-ending talk. In however small a way, each of us helps to push outward the margins of consciousness. If any part of us survives death, it will be the ripples of new perception that we set moving in the ocean of being. All that we perceive, think, and feel is gathered up in the mind of the Creator, and the Creator, in turn, ponders and probes the universe through us. Even these sentences, even your thoughts as you read them, are filaments that flicker in the great Mind.

There, in brief, are the answers I would give now to the questions that have haunted me since my brush with death on the operating table. Of course they are always subject to change in light of new evidence and insight, but for the present they are the ones I try to live by. If elements of my vision seem familiar, it is because I have drawn images and ideas from ancient spiritual teachings, as well as from modern cosmology. In a secular age, I need make no excuse for borrowing from science. I can justify my borrowing

from religion only by appealing, again, to faith: I believe that a holy power calls to us, that it provokes our wonder and reflection, that it responds to our seeking.

While the world's religions differ from one another in details of worship and doctrine, they all point more or less directly toward the same center. This congruence may be explained psychologically as a projection of human need, or biologically as an adaptation to a perilous environment, or metaphysically as a response to a potent reality that commands our attention. Since our plight as fragile creatures on a risky planet influences everything we do, there is clearly some truth in the psychological and biological explanations. But we can approach the whole truth, I am convinced, only by making the metaphysical claim. I believe the source and goal of our longing is really there, at the heart of the world.

Even if there were enough room, this would not be the place for me to explain all my reasons for believing as I do. I have sketched a few of the reasons in earlier chapters, but I would have to multiply these narratives of hope a hundredfold in order to trace the history of my search for the sacred, and I would have to stretch the boundaries of language to even hint at what I have found. I am no mystic, no seer, but an ordinary man seized by awe. I can't prove that anything I say about ultimate reality is true. I can only echo the words of a genuine mystic, Martin Buber, and confess that "nothing remains to me in the end but an appeal to the testimony of your own mysteries, my reader, which may be buried under debris but are presumably still accessible to you." My aim is not to persuade you to accept my vision, but rather to invite you to clarify your own.

At least by now you will understand why my reading of the cosmic story fills me with hope. It is reassuring to feel we are not alone in a hostile universe, but rather we are allied with a creative power which seeks us out, which strengthens and inspires us, which needs our eyes and ears and tongues. We are not puppets

tugged by invisible strings, but free players in the drama of Creation. We learn the script as we go, and we also help to compose it, we and all our fellow beings. In our search for knowledge and our struggle for expression we are carrying on the Creator's work, and in that work we are aided by the Way of things. To recognize the possibility of such aid is to believe in grace. So we are justified in feeling not merely human optimism, based on a confidence in our own intelligence and skills, but cosmic optimism, based on the nature of reality.

I have not suffered from that childhood nightmare of a hammer slamming the incandescent *I* for decades, but plenty of adult nightmares have crowded in to fill the vacuum. Sometimes when I cannot sleep, or when I wake in the morning before dawn, I walk downstairs in the dark. I could turn on a light in the hall, but I don't want to disturb Ruth. So I make my way down the stairs without being able to see where I am setting my feet, yet I never doubt that the steps are there. In mild weather I often continue on outside, and if the night is moonless or overcast, I walk without hesitation over the invisible ground, trusting the earth to bear me up. To live boldly, to work effectively, we need to feel a similar confidence in the Ground of Being. We don't have to feel that it is benevolent, any more than we have to believe that the stairway or dirt is benevolent, only that it is steady, reliable, and, at least in part, knowable.

This argument for trusting in the Way of things may sound cerebral, but in my own experience the trust itself is visceral. Pascal, who knew the downward tug of despair, also knew the upwelling of hope: "In spite of . . . all our miseries, which touch us, which grip us by the throat, we have an instinct which we cannot repress and which lifts us up." If we are going to be lifted up by hope, we must feel it in our guts, through and through, the way we feel the smack of beauty or hunger or love. I cannot look on this magnificent Creation, cannot read the story of the un-

folding universe, without feeling a surge of gratitude and expectation.

"We are surrounded by a rich and fertile mystery," Thoreau reminds us. "May we not probe it, pry into it, employ ourselves about it, a little? To devote your life to the discovery of the divinity in nature or to the eating of oysters, would they not be attended with very different results?" Whatever its source, Creation is a marvelous feat of generosity, an exuberant outpouring. I see that lavish gift in Ruth's face, in the wren pecking for bugs on my windowsill, in the October rain bringing down yellow leaves from the tulip tree in our front yard, in the pumpkin glowing orange on our neighbor's porch. The outpouring never ceases, but only changes form. We honor this continuing gift by our own acts of charity and compassion. We honor the Creator by cherishing every parcel of Creation, especially those living things that share the planet with us, the beetles and bison, the black-footed ferrets and black-eyed Susans.

Because we have achieved an extraordinary power to impose our will upon the earth, we bear a solemn obligation to conserve the earth's bounty, for all life. This means we should defend the air and water and soil from pollution and exploitation. It means that we should protect other species and preserve the habitats on which they rely. For our own species, it means we should bring into the world only those children for whom we can provide adequate care, and then we should provide that care lovingly and generously. Since we carry on the work of Creation through acts of inquiry and imagination, we should safeguard the freedom of thought and expression. Since every single one of us may contribute to the growth of consciousness, we should work to guarantee every human being the chance to develop his or her potential.

The price of hope, in other words, is responsibility. In exchange for the gift of purpose, in exchange for grace, we are called to account for our lives. I am aware that anyone who looks

for divinity in nature may be dismissed as a wishful thinker. I may well be the dupe of my own craving for direction. And yet it seems to me far more wishful to believe that the universe requires nothing of us, that we need be guided only by our appetites, whether for oysters or for some other delicacies, than to believe that there is a sacred authority to which we are answerable. My reading of the cosmic story implies that we *are* answerable, to a high and rigorous standard enforced by an ultimate power, and that in our best moments we may answer well.



FOURTEEN

MOUNTAIN
MUSIC IV

ON A SULTRY AUGUST AFTERNOON in the Smoky Mountains, a year after our quarrel in the Rockies, Jesse and I fell to talking about God. It was Jesse who brought up this grandest of all subjects, and he did most of the talking, because we were climbing a steep trail with loaded packs and he was the only one with a supply of breath.

"I remember when I was little," he said, "and it dawned on me one day that everything alive was filled with God."

"You must have been eight," I said, huffing. "Maybe nine."

"And then I realized that the grass was alive, and the dirt was alive, and suddenly I was afraid of setting my foot down because I'd be walking on God. I remember we were playing baseball in Bryan Park."

"You were chasing a fly ball. Then you just stopped."

"I stood there in the outfield, calling you. I was so scared."

"Sprained ankle, I figured. Or a bee sting."

"You carried me all the way home."

"And you were a load, let me tell you." I grunted, took a few more panting steps, then halted. "You must have weighed as much as this pack."

Jesse turned on me those gleaming brown eyes that have always made me think of Ruth. "Want a break?" he asked.

"Good idea." I wiped a forearm across my slick face. "It's not that I'm tired. I just don't want to wear you out on the first day."

We rested on the trunk of a fallen hemlock, sharing a bottle of water and a handful of raisins. Butterflies lilted past us, heading up the slope, hundreds of them in dozens of colors, feeding on the gangly flowers that grew in the rare openings along the trail. The valley of the Little Tennessee River, where we had parked the car, lay a few miles behind us, and the campsite we were aiming for lay a few miles farther on. Rain had followed us all the way south from Indiana on our drive that morning, and here in the mountains, a ranger told us, it had been raining for most of a week. The gray sky threatened more rain, but so far it was holding back. Creeks rushed down the slope on both sides of the trail, enveloping us in murmurs and mist. I drew in lungfuls of dank air.

"It really freaked me out," Jesse said, "to realize that God was in the grass, in the dirt, in bugs on the sidewalk and in the mashed potatoes on my plate. Either God was everywhere, or he was nowhere. He couldn't just be inside a church or a book. He couldn't be trapped just inside human beings, or even just on earth."

"What do you think about all of that now?" I asked.

"Obviously I got over the fear of walking." Jesse leaned forward on the log and glanced down at his mud-caked boots, which had carried him around Europe earlier in the summer, and on previous treks through mountains, gorges, creeks, and forests in half a dozen states. "And I lost my confidence in talking about God," he added. What he had not lost, he went on to say, was his feeling that a great and mysterious power works through all things; he still wondered how we might contact that power and where it might be leading us.

On this journey, by mutual consent, Jesse was leading us. The trip had been his idea, a last chance to stretch his legs and sleep on dirt before he started college. I'd asked if he wanted to bring along a couple of his hiking buddies, but he insisted that the two of us go alone. "I feel like I haven't really talked with you in

months," he said. He planned the meals, packed the gear, studied the maps. When I offered to help, he shrugged his big shoulders and answered, "No problem. I've got it under control." He was familiar with the Smokies, had even hiked this mountain loop twice before with friends. In every way except age, Jesse was the veteran here and I was the tenderfoot. Sensing his need to play the leader, I honored this reversal of roles.

"You figure we'll reach the campsite before dark?" I asked him.

"For sure. The trail levels out pretty soon, runs through a stretch of pines, crosses the creek three or four times. Then we'll be there. You ready to go for it?"

"Ready as I'll ever be."

At the rapid swinging pace that suited his long legs he set out up the trail, which zigzagged along switchbacks through stands of ash and oak, sassafras and maple, hemlock and tulip poplar. The temperature fell as we climbed. Sure enough, the muddy track soon leveled out, then ran on through a plantation of pines. But I lost my breath anyway, humping along under the weight of my pack. So I mainly listened while Jesse told me that he wondered if humans might be poised to break through into a new level of consciousness. He wondered if maybe that's what lay behind all our troubles. Maybe God was urging us toward a new vision of our place in the world, a vision more tender and peaceful and spiritual.

In his words I could hear echoes of the Buddha and Jesus and mystics the world over. But I didn't say so, not wanting to rub the freshness from his insight.

"We need to be more loving," he said. "It's like our hearts need to catch up with our brains and hands." He trudged on a few paces in silence, then stopped, as abruptly as on that long ago day in the park when he had stood paralyzed in the grass by the fear of treading on God. He swung around to face me. "Do you believe we can change? That we're not stuck in this dead-end way of thinking?"

The intensity in his face and voice demanded the truth. So I considered carefully before answering. "Yes I do."

Jesse gazed at me for a moment, no longer as a boy studying his father but as one man testing another. Then relief spread through him visibly, softening his face, relaxing his body. "That makes two of us."

"Enough to start a movement," I suggested.

"Or join one."

"You mean other people?"

"I mean other people," he said. "And whatever else may be heading in the right direction."

With about an hour of daylight left, we reached our campsite in a cove at the junction of three creeks. As in the Rockies a year before, so here in the Smokies, every stream was swollen, and the purr of tumbling water rubbed over us. We laid out our gear on a poncho and pitched our tent on the damp ground. The rain still held off, yet everything was already soaked, including the dead branches we gathered for a fire. The dampness must have been perennial, because the trees were clad in moss and lichens, not only down among the roots but well above our heads. Ferns curled up everywhere from rotting logs the color of bricks, mushrooms thrust pale thumbs up through matted leaves, and rhododendrons arched over the creeks. In the gathering darkness, tree frogs began to call, soon loudly enough to rival the racket of hustling water.

In spite of the dampness, I managed to get a fire started, and to keep it going with a steady flame. Jesse cooked burritos on our tiny gas stove, frying hamburger and stirring in peppers and onions and seasoning. He insisted on doing all the cooking, not only for this meal but for the whole trip, so I volunteered to wash dishes. This amused him, because he and his buddies never bothered with cleaning up, figuring that grease and grot were essential to the woods experience. After we ate, Jesse was even

more amused that I stripped off all my sweaty clothes and waded into the froth of a creek to bathe. He kidded me about going soft from my indoor life. I kidded him in turn about how black bears are drawn to the stink of unbathed hikers. The truth was that I cared less about getting clean than about lying naked in the rush of water. The creek was cold and I shivered when I stood up dripping in the mountain air.

It felt good to sit beside the fire while the gray sky turned black. Jesse read *The Moor's Last Sigh*, by Salman Rushdie, and I wrote in my notebook, both of us tilting our pages to catch the flickering light. I kept glancing at him, his face so absorbed, the gingery beard glinting on his jaw, the shoulder-length blond hair drawn back in a pony-tail, the fathomless brown eyes. On our drive from Indiana, he had told me that the summer of tramping in Europe had restored his love of reading. He'd lost his way in high school, he said, lost any clear sense of why he was getting those straight A's. During his travels that summer, bumping into other students, sleeping on borrowed floors, riding all-night trains to ancient cities that were brand-new to him, slouching through museums, reading novels in sidewalk cafes, he'd rediscovered the point of learning. And what is that? I asked. "It's fun," he answered. "It enlarges your life, and it prepares you to do some good in the world."

Reading now by firelight, Jesse looked up from his book every once in a while to recall something about those weeks in Europe.

"I'd meet strangers," he said at one point, "maybe in a youth hostel or train station, or crossing a street, and they'd stare at me as though they knew me somehow. We'd find a language we could talk—English, usually, or maybe French, or some fractured Spanish—and I would ask a few questions. And before I knew it, people I'd never seen before were telling me their life stories, and it was like I'd run into lost brothers or sisters." Now he figured that everyone he met had something to teach him, if only about what to avoid on his path through life.

A while later, Jesse asked me what I was scribbling in my notebook.

"What happened today, more or less," I answered.

"For your book on hope?"

"Some of it may wind up there."

"Including what I say?"

"Could be. Do you mind?"

He pondered that a spell, rubbing the bristle on his chin. Sap sizzled in the coals. Finally he said, "It's okay, so long as I don't come off as a fool kid."

"You're the hero," I told him. "One of the heroes, anyway."

He looked at me hard to make sure I wasn't teasing. "Must be a strange book."

Light rain eventually drove us into the tent, where we lay shoulder to shoulder, with our jeans rolled up under our heads for pillows. Within minutes Jesse was asleep. Too tired for sleep, I lay there listening. No wind, no creak of limbs, no grumble of engines, only water song and frog song and our entwined breaths.

Jesse had changed a great deal, and so had I, in the year since we'd quarreled in Big Thompson Canyon and rafted down the river and turned back in the face of lightning over Thunder Lake. I'd spent the year trying to see the world through his eyes, through Eva's eyes, through the eyes of my students, while working on this book. Whatever my words might eventually mean to these young people, the effort to speak of hope had renewed my own courage. Meanwhile Jesse finished high school, decided to stay in our hometown for college, grieved over the death of his best friend's father, saw other friends succumb to dope or drink or depression, and then for six weeks he'd backpacked around Europe, time enough for him to savor his newfound independence, miss his family, and take on responsibility for his life.

I didn't understand all of the changes, in him or in me, but on

the whole they seemed to me blessings. We'd become friends once more. There was an ease in our talk and work together that I had not felt with him for half a dozen years. I could groan over the country music he played on the car radio as we drove south, and instead of taking offense he would laugh. And he could tell me to chill out when I worried aloud about hillsides of pines in the Smokies turning brown, and I felt no urge to lecture him about acid rain. I still could not turn off my fathering mind, but I could turn down the volume, quiet the fretful voice, and enjoy the company of my grown son, without worrying constantly, as I had the year before, that at any moment our voices might begin clashing like swords.

We woke inside a cloud. Trees loomed around us like ghostly columns, their upper branches veiled in white. The creeks purred on, invisible, but the frogs had hushed.

"Where'd everything go?" Jesse muttered, then rolled over in his sleeping bag.

I lay there remembering a park sign we had come across the day before, which explained that three-quarters of the haze in the air that gave these mountains their name now comes from pollution, and only one-quarter from gases released by decaying matter. There was plenty of matter for decay in these old woods, in the leaf duff and downed logs and spongy soil.

I pulled on cold jeans and crawled from the tent and walked on stiff legs to filter drinking water from the nearest creek. Mist rode the current, wafting and spinning under the boughs of rhododendrons, their leaves dangling like green donkey's ears. Hearing a twig crack behind me, I turned, thinking it was Jesse, but it was a deer, coming to drink at the creek maybe ten paces from where I squatted. It looked to be a yearling doe, slender and neat. She stood with her forefeet close together and bent her muzzle to the water and the muscles in her neck rippled as she swallowed. Water had never seemed so good to me as it did while I watched

her drink. Then I did hear Jesse, the tramp of his boots coming my way, and in the same instant the deer jerked her head up, pricked up her ears, spun around in one convulsive motion with white tail raised and bounded off noisily into the fog.

"Did you see the deer?" Jesse asked wonderingly as he drew close to me.

"Wasn't she a beauty?"

"For a second there I thought maybe it was a bear."

Jesse took over from me, pumping water through the filter into our plastic bottles, and as he worked he told about sighting bears on his previous trips into the Smokies. Once he and his two partners had swung around a bend in the trail, and there sat a mother and her cub, feeding on blackberries, sleek fur gleaming in the noonday sun. Jesse knew better than to crowd a cub, so he and his buddies just stood there while the bears ate with long red tongues and much blinking of shiny black eyes. It seemed the bears would never tire of berries, so eventually Jesse and his buddies circled out through the woods and rejoined the trail at a safe distance beyond.

"I'm dressed for them," he said, pointing at his chest.

He wore a clean white T-shirt from a Grateful Dead concert. The words on the front posed a question—WHAT DO YOU DO IF YOU MEET A BEAR IN THE WOOD?—and the back offered an answer: PLAY DEAD. Despite the morning chill, his thick legs jutted out bare from cut-off jeans.

"Aren't you cold?" I asked.

"Not so long as I keep moving."

We tightened the caps on our water bottles. Every time I drank from mine that day I would think of the deer, and of how generous the world is to satisfy our thirst.

After a breakfast of omelets with green peppers, we broke camp and shouldered the packs and made our way uphill through cloud. The trees might have stopped ten feet above our heads, for

all we could see of their branches, and only their bark and the nuts and acorns underfoot identified them as mostly oak and hickory. The trail was littered with broken stone, and the root-balls from fallen trees exposed the shattered bedrock that lay everywhere beneath thin soil, reminders that these were old, snaggle-toothed mountains, far older than the Rockies, and they had been eroding for three hundred million years.

Although it was August, prime vacation season in the Smokies, we had met no one on our hike the day before, and this day we met only a father and his two young daughters clumping downhill looking bedraggled. Jesse and I stepped back to let them pass. The girls' hair frizzed out beneath baseball caps and they peered up at us with glum expressions. The father paused long enough to say they had planned to stay longer, but every stitch of clothing they had with them was soaked through, and no prospect of drying out any time soon, so they were packing it in.

At midmorning we came to a grassy clearing that gave us a view of the sky, what there was of it, and we could see a hint of sun to the east like a single dim headlight on an idle train. By noon, when we stopped for lunch on the open crest of a mountain, the light had chugged on overhead but had grown no brighter, and the sky glowed a pale indigo. We shucked off our packs and hunched down on our spread-out ponchos and ate peanut butter sandwiches, breathing vapor. A few butterflies lolled past, their colors washed out, and they fed on thistles bleached white by cloud. We could see mist easing by on a wind too subtle for hearing. Even these few glimpses of the ghostly world came to us only because this mountain top was bare of trees, one of those openings in the Smokies known as balds. What originally kept the forest back, whether grazing long ago by deer and elk and even bison, or maybe fires lit by lightning or Cherokees, no one knows, but these openings show up on the earliest surveys of the mountains, from the 1820s, and now the Park Service works to keep them clear. Jesse had wanted to show me the panorama visible

from this peak on a clear day, but on this day of swirling whiteness he could only describe for me what I might have seen.

"Sounds beautiful," I said when he had finished.

"It is," he agreed. "Way beyond words."

I washed down the last of my sandwich with some of the creek water I had shared with the deer, and then I left Jesse reading his novel while I went out to hunt for blueberries. After only a dozen paces I looked back and could barely make out his dark silhouette in the cottony air. Not wanting to lose sight of him, I traced out a slow circle with Jesse at the center. Moist grass lapped against my legs, and seedling pines, and cardinal flowers shimmering a dull red, until I came to a patch of low bushes covered with berries that looked in this vaporous air like silver beads. Even blanched of color they were blueberries, all right, as my tongue quickly told me. I picked less by sight than by touch, tilted a handful into my mouth, and savored the burst of tangy sweetness. I ate a second handful and a third, understanding why bears would not quit eating so long as the flavor stayed fresh. Thought of bears made me keep glancing up as I picked, on the lookout for a burly shape heaving toward me through the mist.

The fourth handful I carried back to Jesse, who sat as I had left him, with the book balanced on his lifted knees. He accepted the blueberries with thanks and began popping them into his mouth a few at a time, never taking his eyes from the page. Again I circled away from him, this time with our two drinking cups, and when I returned both cups were heaped with berries.

"You leave any for the poor bears?" Jesse asked.

"A few," I assured him.

We sat there among the drifting clouds munching the tart berries, and I could not tell whether the ones I ate or the ones my son ate gave me more pleasure.

The campsite for our second night was a favorite of Jesse's from previous trips, on a flat ridgetop among old trees growing wide

apart. Before setting up he led me around the place eagerly, as if it were a haunt of his childhood, showing me a huge log the color of bone, where he liked to stretch out, a heap of windblown gray birches where he always gathered firewood, a spring oozing over mossy ledges into a fern-fringed pool where he drew his water, a clearing where he watched the stars.

We would see no stars that night, nor much of anything else during the day, for the dense cloud shut off vision at a distance of fifty feet or so. Jesse and I worked along as though wrapped in fleece. Practiced at making camp, we hardly spoke as we pitched the shivering blue tent upwind from the stone ring of the fire pit, strung a line to hang out our wet socks and shirts in air as damp as they were, then rigged my poncho among four scrawny trees to make an awning against the rain that was sure to come. While Jesse cobbled together a rough bench by lashing dead limbs together, I ranged about gathering firewood. Every snag looming in the mist could have been a crouching animal. Once as I straightened up with a handful of sticks I nearly cried out, certain I had seen a bear. I bit my lip, realizing it was only a stump, but my heart took a long while in settling down.

The rain came on before I had started the fire, at first only a thickening of the mist and then a drizzle, as if the clouds we had been breathing all day had suddenly congealed. Jesse and I sat on his rough bench under the awning while rain pattered down, both of us chilled to the bone. He stared out at the circle of blackened stones. "I sure was looking forward to that fire," he muttered.

"We'll have us a fire," I told him.

"How? In the rain?"

"Let me think here a minute." We had brought no paper along except for the map and Jesse's novel and my notebook, and we would shiver all night before sacrificing any of them. Wondering what else we could use for tinder, I remembered a trick my father had taught me. "You ever see any grapevines around here?"

Jesse shut his eyes, thinking, then pointed along the ridge. "I believe there's a tangle just off the path to the spring."

"Go see if you can find them, and strip off a wad of the loose bark, and zip it in your driest pocket and bring it back here."

He trudged away through the fine rain and the blue of his jacket soon disappeared among the dark pillars of the trees. Under the makeshift awning I took out my knife and began whittling a stick, letting the curls of wood fall into our frying pan. By the time Jesse returned with a double handful of grapevine bark, I had filled the pan with shavings. I took the stringy bark and rubbed it back and forth between my palms to shred it, and then I added the bark to my pile of shavings.

"Now I need you to hold my jacket over me while I lay the fire," I told him, slipping my arms from the sleeves.

"Use mine," he offered.

"I've been wet before."

I handed him the jacket. Bending over to protect the pan full of tinder from the rain, I stepped out beyond the edge of the awning to kneel over the fire pit. Jesse followed and leaned above me, spreading the jacket like a single flimsy wing to shelter me. I laid the shredded bark in the cinders left by other campers and covered it with the shavings and tilted over them a pyramid of twigs and sticks and cut branches as long and thick as my forearm. Then I drew the match case from my shirt pocket, unscrewed the lid, pulled out a wooden match, struck it along the sandpapery side of the case, and held the flame cupped in my hand. Before I could reach the tinder, the match guttered out, and so did a second one and a third.

"This isn't going to work," Jesse predicted.

"Don't give up yet," I answered, striking a fourth match.

A gust of wind blew out this one, and the next. Rain rattled the jacket over my head and mist blew around me.

"We'll get by," Jesse said.

"We'll get by better with a fire."

I struck another match, encircled it with my palm, reached through a gap in the pyramid of glistening wood and pressed the flame into the nest of bark and shavings. The flame wavered, licking up into the cone of twigs, but would spread no farther without more air. I tilted my face and bent down until my cheek nearly grazed the blackened stones and blew gently. A few twigs caught, but they glowed only so long as I kept puffing at them. When I stopped for a breath the flame sank down.

"We need something to fan it with," I said.

"All right," Jesse answered, "but as soon as I move the rain's going to put it out."

"Just be quick. I'll keep it covered."

I stooped over the faltering fire with my eyes closed against the smoke. Steam hissed from the wet wood and rain drummed on my back. After a few moments of rummaging about under the awning, Jesse returned and nudged me aside. I backed out of the smoke and squinted up to see him waving at the fire with his thick novel encased in a plastic bag. Flames quickly ran up the twigs and wound among the sticks. I laid on a few more branches from our pile.

"Don't smother it," he said.

I started to ask him whose fire he thought this was, anyway, but I held back, remembering that we were on his ground, following his trail, and that I had accepted him as the leader on this journey. He'd earned the right, as a veteran in these mountains and as a boy grown up into his man's body.

I stepped back under the awning. "Let me know when you want me to fan for a while."

By the time he offered me a turn the flames were leaping and there was no need for any more fanning. Shivering, we pulled on dry clothes and sat again on the bench with shoulders touching and stared at the flames until our shivers died down. Smoke mixed with steam and rain to cloud the air. The last remnants of light drained from the sky. Soon there was nothing to see but the fire seething and sparks flying up.

"You hungry yet?" Jesse asked.

"I could eat anything that won't eat me," I answered.

He cooked, I fed the fire. We ate slowly, talking of the day, and then I washed up. Rain dripped from the edges of our lean-to, but the heat from the fire enfolded us against the evening chill. I took out the notebook and wrote my own version of the day in a crooked scrawl. Jesse pulled back his lank hair and bound it in place with an elastic band stretched across his forehead. He propped a small flashlight over his right ear and tucked the butt of it up under the elastic band, then he switched on the light and tilted it down so that it shone on the pages of his book.

"You look like a miner," I said.

When he glanced at me, the flashlight dazzled my eyes. "What's that?"

"Never mind. I'm just talking."

"You never run short of words," he observed with a smile, then returned to his reading.

No, I never run short of words, but finding the right ones and yoking them together into sentences that ring true and laying out sentences page after page into a necessary order is always a struggle. To say the simplest thing may baffle me. No piling on of words can ever fully tell how much I love my son, my daughter, my wife, how much I honor my students, how much I exult in this world we briefly share.

"Good fire we built," Jesse said after a while. He switched off the flashlight, pulled it from his headband, and sat staring into the flames. "Even the rain won't put it out."

"Not unless it rains a lot harder," I said.

The two of us watched embers fade and glow as the wind breathed on them. The smell of wet ashes mixed with the smell of burning sap. Rain rattled on the stretched skin of my poncho overhead and hissed as it struck the coals. The sound set me humming.

"You like these mountains?" Jesse asked.

"I do."

"I don't know why, but the mountains make me believe we can change." His dark eyes mirrored the fire. "Maybe not everybody. But at least enough people to start us in a new direction."

"Keep on believing that," I told him, "and you're halfway there."

The fire kept stilling our tongues. Flames whipped from the tops of burning sticks like orange flags. Sparks rose into the dark and dwindled to the size of stars and winked out, and new sparks followed. An old patched-together prayer rose in me:

My God, my God, my holy one, my love,
May I be open and balanced and peaceful.

I breathed in with the first line, breathed out with the second, and that breathing seemed to me the whole of the story we the living have to tell.



FIFTEEN

LIVING IN HOPE

MORE THAN A YEAR HAS GONE BY since Jesse and I built a fire in the rain, but the notebook I carried on that mountain journey still smells of wood smoke. More than two years have passed since we quarreled in the Rockies, but his words about the need for hope still ring in my head as if he had just quit speaking. "You've got me seeing nothing but darkness," he tells me, his voice cracking with pain. "I have to believe there's a way we can get out of this mess. Otherwise what's the point? Why study, why work, why do anything if it's all going to hell?"

I cannot scour from my vision the darkness that troubles my son, because I have witnessed too much suffering and waste, I know too much about what humans are doing to one another and to the planet. I cannot answer Jesse's questions about hope, or Eva's, or those of my students, by pretending that I see no reasons for despair. Anyone who pays attention to the state of the world knows that we are in trouble. Anyone who looks honestly at the human prospect realizes that we face enormous challenges: population growth, environmental degradation, extinction of species, ethnic and racial strife, doomsday weapons, epidemic disease, drugs, poverty, hunger, and crime, to mention only a few. These stark realities press on my mind as I write. What I have been saying in this book is that they are not the only realities, nor

the most powerful or durable ones. I see light shining in the darkness. I live in hope.

“What’s the good of grieving if you can’t change anything?” Jesse demanded of me during our quarrel in the Rocky Mountains. A year later, amidst the rushing of streams in the Smokies, he put the question more calmly but no less intently: “Do you believe we can change? That we’re not stuck in this dead-end way of thinking?”

I answered yes that day; I am answering yes now. My search for hope has convinced me that we *can* change our ways of seeing and thinking and living. We can begin living responsibly and alertly right where we are, right now, no matter how troubled we may be about the human prospect. If we set out to solve the world’s problems, we are likely to feel overwhelmed. On the other hand, if we set out to act on our deepest concerns and convictions we may do some good. We can begin making changes in our own lives without waiting for such changes to become popular, without knowing whether they will have any large-scale effect, but merely because we believe they are right.

For my part, I believe that all but the poorest of us could choose to lead materially simpler lives, and thereby do less harm and reap more joy. We could learn to be guided by what we need rather than by what the hucksters urge us to want. We could ignore fashion and hype, and look for true quality—in products, services, art, and people. We could work toward a more just distribution of wealth, within our own country and among nations. We could re-imagine ourselves as conservers rather than consumers—conservers of land and air and water and all the earth’s bounty, conservers of human achievements from the past and human potential for the future, conservers of beauty and wildness.

If we are determined to live in hope, we could make a more serious commitment to sustaining our families, recognizing that,

in spite all their flaws, they are the best means we have for nurturing children and fostering love. We could re-imagine ourselves as inhabitants rather than tourists, cultivating a stronger sense of place, learning about the land, its natural and human history, and the needs of our communities. We could decide to stay put, in our houses and neighborhoods, unless we have compelling reasons to move. We could think hard before we jump in a car or an airplane and zoom off, making sure each trip is worth what it costs the earth. Instead of rushing about, we could slow down, center down, and open ourselves to the five rivers of the senses.

We could learn to satisfy more of our own needs ourselves, with help from families and neighbors and friends. When we buy goods and services, we could give more of our business to local farmers, artists, craftspeople, skilled workers, merchants and manufacturers, and to locally owned enterprises, since people who share a place with us are more likely to care for it than strangers are. We could accept more graciously our responsibilities as citizens, informing ourselves about public matters, taking our turn at public service, honoring the necessity of government and making sure that our representatives govern well. In the inevitable clash of private interests, we could speak up for the common good.

As we transform our own lives, we join with others who are making a kindred effort, and thus our work will be multiplied a thousandfold across the country and a millionfold around the earth. Whether all such efforts, added together, will be enough to avert disaster and bring about a just and enduring way of life, no one can say. In order to live in hope we needn’t believe that everything will turn out well. We need only believe that we are on the right path.

What endures? What lifts our hearts? What do we possess in abundance? For most of our history, we newcomers to America

have imagined that animals, trees, water, soil, and clean air are inexhaustible, when they are in fact limited and vulnerable. We have considered peace and prosperity and civil order to be our birthright, when they are in fact hard won and easily lost. Our truly abundant resources are mostly intangible, difficult to describe and impossible to measure, and among them are love, beauty, skill, compassion, community, fidelity, simplicity, and wildness. Through cruelty or carelessness we can destroy the conditions that nurture these powers, but the powers themselves are not used up in our experience of them.

To keep up my courage for the journey, I carry tokens of these healing and nourishing powers in my medicine bundle of words: a leaping dog, a necklace of shell and bone, the splash of water over stone, a screech owl calling through storm, a comet returning, a galaxy snared on a computer screen, apple trees bearing fruit near a stream in the desert, a man teaching homeless children how to make music, the image of a woman cupping her breasts, a baby staring, a welder making sure a railing stands plumb and true, my mother laboring up the steps on her reconstructed knee with an armful of flowers, Eva's face shining through her bridal veil, Jesse's dark eyes lit by starlight, the murmur of Ruth's heart.

I write these last paragraphs on the first day of a new year. Thin snow covers our patch of Indiana and the day has dawned clear. With early sunlight streaming in the windows, Ruth and I take down the Christmas decorations, wrap the handmade ornaments in tissue paper, loop the colored lights into bundles, and store everything away in the attic. I carry the tree out the back door and across the yard, leaving a trail of needles the whole way, and lay it behind the wood pile to provide shelter for the birds. Thinking of birds, I refill the feeders. No sooner have I finished pouring seeds and backed away than a nuthatch swoops down, claims a beakful, and flies off. Next come chickadee, blue jay, tit-

mouse, cardinal, each one quick and bright, a spark from the one great fire.

The birds in turn make me think of Eva, who has just begun research for her doctoral dissertation on how birds learn. She wants to know how much of what birds do is passed down through their genes, automatic as the color of feather or eye, and how much is learned from adults of their own kind. She and Matt have been married now for six months, and they're still figuring out what they both like to eat. After lunch she'll be coming over to discuss recipes with Ruth. My mother will also be coming over this afternoon, to go through some old family photographs and help me put names to faces. We hope to see Jesse today as well, but we can never be sure when he'll turn up. He's a sophomore now, studying history and economics, and living this year with four other guys in a house about a mile west of us. He still bristles when I challenge him, but now that he lives on his own I have fewer occasions to challenge him.

Jesse has come to mind this New Year's morning as I split lengths of firewood into kindling, for I keep remembering the day when he and I and Matt and Don Allen, two pairs of fathers and sons, cut up that drift log on the bank of Clear Creek. Today each blow of the axe releases the secret, musty smell of red oak, like the fragrance of an old bouquet. The air is so mild that the snow melts rapidly, and as I tramp between woodpile and back porch with armloads of kindling the ground squishes beneath my boots.

Every half hour or so throughout the morning I interrupt whatever else I'm doing to line up another plastic jug beneath a downspout, where I'm catching snowmelt from the roof to use in watering our house plants. When I've gathered five gallons Ruth signals to me through the front porch window, with a laugh I can see but not hear, that I needn't fill any more jugs.

Still wearing the laugh on her face, she opens the door and hands me a brown envelope. "Here," she says, "if you're looking

for excuses to stay outside, why don't you plant the jack-in-the-pulpits?"

"Isn't it too cold?" I ask.

"The seeds need the cold now so they can recognize spring when it comes."

I put the envelope in my back pocket, and with a hoe I clear a spot in the snow near the base of our tulip tree in the front yard. As I'm scraping aside the mat of leaves, Jesse comes jogging up in shorts and sweatshirt, leading his housemate's new puppy, a golden retriever named Miles. The puppy's tongue is hanging out and in the sunshine his fur gleams with a color close to that of Jesse's wet blond hair. Man and dog are both panting.

"What a day to start the year!" Jesse exclaims.

"Isn't it amazing?" I reply.

Jesse hunkers down to pat the puppy, who laps at his face. "Miles and I ran all over the neighborhood. Didn't we, little guy? We've been out so long it must be getting close to lunchtime."

"Pretty soon," I agree. "You know anybody who might want to stay and eat?"

"Well, I could be persuaded. And Miles could use a drink."

"Go get cleaned up, then, and tell Mom I'll be along in two shakes."

"Are Eva and Matt coming over?"

"Yes. And so is Mimi."

"Cool. A regular family occasion." Jesse bounds onto the porch with the puppy at his heels and the two disappear inside.

I return to my little clearing in the snow, and with the hoe I loosen the black soil and scatter the bright red seeds of jack-in-the-pulpit. As I'm covering the seeds with dirt and leaves and tamping them down with my boots, I do not merely remember, I *feel* the root meaning of hope: to leap up in expectation.

"Memory grips the past," as my friend wrote to me, "and hope grips the future." I think of the scarlet seeds quietly burning against the cold black dirt, waiting for spring. I think of my chil-

dren, and of the children they may have one day, and of those children's children, on and on, like ridge upon ridge of mountains stretching out before me as far as I can see. I think of my students hard at work learning what our clever species has already discovered, and adding their own new knowledge to the store. I imagine the host of ancestors, human and nonhuman, whose lives and labors have made this moment possible for those of us who breathe. I draw a breath, savor it, and bless them all.

Notes

EPIGRAPHS

- vii The first epigraph is a saying attributed to Confucius by Chuang Tzu, as quoted in Thomas Merton's *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (New York: New Directions, 1965), p. 53; the second comes from Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Caufurd (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 128; and the last from Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Richard D. Heffner (New York: New American Library, 1956), p. 38.

WHERE THE SEARCH BEGINS

- 2 Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Ballantine, 1970), p. 197.

LEAPING UP IN EXPECTATION

- 18 Dickinson's lines on hope appear in poem #254 in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, vol. 1, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1955), p. 182.
- 19 Job 7:3-6 (Revised Standard Version).
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- 22 The friend who wrote the postcard about hope is Tony Stoneburner, of Granville, Ohio, retired professor

of English from Denison University and Methodist minister.

- 24 The two passages from Hebrews appear in chapter 11:1-3 and 13-16 (RSV).
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- 25 Amos 5:24 (RSV).
- 26 Isaiah 2:4 (RSV).
- 26 The otherworldly remark of Jesus appears in John 8:23 (RSV).
- 26-27 Vaclav Havel's words come from *Disturbing the Peace: A Conversation with Karel Hvizdala* (New York: Knopf, 1990), p. 181.

WILDNESS

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- 51 Carl Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1933), pp. 215, 217.
- 51 Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, p. 84.
- 52 Norman Cousins, *Head First: The Biology of Hope* (New York: Dutton, 1989), pp. 2-3.
- 53 I quote Blake again from "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," this time from plate 4. See Johnson and Grant, ed., *Blake's Poetry and Designs*, p. 87.
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FIDELITY

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SKILL

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SIMPLICITY

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THE WAY OF THINGS

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