

II



Stalking

I

Summer: I go down to the creek again, and lead a creek life. I watch and stalk.

The Eskimos' life changes in summer, too. The caribou flee from the inland tundra's mosquitoes to the windy shores of the Arctic Ocean, and coastal Eskimos hunt them there. In the old days before they had long-range rifles, the men had to approach the wary animals very closely for a kill. Sometimes, waiting for a favorable change of weather so they could rush in unseen and unscented, the Eskimos would have to follow the fleet herds on foot for days, sleepless.

Also in summer they dredge for herring with nets from shoreline camps. In the open water off the Mackenzie River

delta, they hunt the white whale (the beluga) and bearded seal. They paddle their slender kayaks inland to fresh water and hunt muskrats, too, which they used to snare or beat with sticks.

To travel from camp to camp in summer, coastal Eskimos ply the open seas in big umiaks paddled by women. They eat fish, goose or duck eggs, fresh meat, and anything else they can get, including fresh "salad" of greens still raw in a killed caribou's stomach and dressed with the delicate acids of digestion.

On St. Lawrence Island, women and children are in charge of netting little birds. They have devised a cruel and ingenious method: after they net a few birds with great effort and after much stalking, they thread them alive and squawking through their beaks' nostrils, and fly them like living kites at the end of long lines. The birds fly frantically, trying to escape, but they cannot, and their flapping efforts attract others of their kind, curious—and the Eskimos easily net the others.

They used to make a kind of undershirt out of bird skins, which they wore under fur parkas in cold weather, and left on inside the igloos after they'd taken the parkas off. It was an elaborate undertaking, this making of a bird-skin shirt, requiring thousands of tiny stitches. For thread they had the stringy sinew found along a caribou's backbone. The sinew had to be dried, frayed, and twisted into a clumsy thread. Its only advantages were that it swelled in water, making seams more or less waterproof, and it generally contained a minute smear of fat, so if they were starving they could suck their sewing thread and add maybe five minutes to their lives. For needles they had shards of bone, which got thinner and shorter every time they pushed through tough skins, so that an old needle might be little more than a barely enclosed slit. When the Eskimos first met the advanced culture of the south, men and women alike

admired it first and foremost for its sturdy sewing needles. For it is understood that without good clothing, you perish. A crewman from a whaler with a paper of needles in his pocket could save many lives, and was welcome everywhere as the rich and powerful always are.

I doubt that they make bird-skin shirts anymore, steel needles or no. They do not do many of the old things at all any more, except in my mind, where they hunt and stitch well, with an animal skill, in silhouette always against white oceans of ice.

Down here, the heat is on. Even a bird-skin shirt would be too much. In the cool of the evening I take to the bridges over the creek. I am prying into secrets again, and taking my chances. I might see anything happen; I might see nothing but light on the water. I walk home exhilarated or becalmed, but always changed, alive. "It scatters and gathers," Heraclitus said, "it comes and goes." And I want to be in the way of its passage, and cooled by its invisible breath.

In summer, I stalk. Summer leaves obscure, heat dazzles, and creatures hide from the red-eyed sun, and me. I have to seek things out. The creatures I seek have several senses and free will; it becomes apparent that they do not wish to be seen. I can stalk them in either of two ways. The first is not what you think of as true stalking, but it is the *Via negativa*, and as fruitful as actual pursuit. When I stalk this way I take my stand on a bridge and wait, emptied. I put myself in the way of the creature's passage, like spring Eskimos at a seal's breathing hole. Something might come; something might go. I am Newton under the apple tree, Buddha under the bo. Stalking the other way, I forge my own passage seeking the creature. I wander the banks; what I find, I follow, doggedly, like Eskimos haunting the caribou herds. I am Wilson squinting after the traces of

electrons in a cloud chamber; I am Jacob at Peniel wrestling with the angel.

Fish are hard to see either way. Although I spend most of the summer stalking muskrats, I think it is fish even more than muskrats that by their very mystery and hiddenness crystallize the quality of my summer life at the creek. A thick spawning of fish, a bedful of fish, is too much, horror; but I walk out of my way in hopes of glimpsing three bluegills bewitched in a pool's depth or rising to floating petals or bubbles.

The very act of trying to see fish makes them almost impossible to see. My eyes are awkward instruments whose casing is clumsily oversized. If I face the sun along a bank I cannot see into the water; instead of fish I see water striders, the reflected undersides of leaves, birds' bellies, clouds and blue sky. So I cross to the opposite bank and put the sun at my back. Then I can see into the water perfectly within the blue shadow made by my body; but as soon as that shadow looms across them, the fish vanish in a flurry of flashing tails.

Occasionally by waiting still on a bridge or by sneaking smoothly into the shade of a bankside tree, I see fish slowly materialize in the shallows, one by one, swimming around and around in a silent circle, each one washed in a blue like the sky's and all as tapered as tears. Or I see them suspended in a line in deep pools, parallel to the life-giving current, literally "streamlined." Because fish have swim bladders filled with gas that balances their weight in the water, they are actually hanging from their own bodies, as it were, as gondolas hang from balloons. They wait suspended and seemingly motionless in clear water; they look dead, under a spell, or captured in amber. They look like the expressionless parts hung in a mobile, which has apparently suggested itself to mobile designers. Fish! They manage to be so water-colored.

Theirs is not the color of the bottom but the color of the light itself, the light dissolved like a powder in the water. They disappear and reappear as if by spontaneous generation: sleight of fish.

I am coming around to fish as spirit. The Greek acronym for some of the names of Christ yields *ichthys*, Christ as fish, and fish as Christ. The more I glimpse the fish in Tinker Creek, the more satisfying the coincidence becomes, the richer the symbol, not only for Christ but for the spirit as well. The people must live. Imagine for a Mediterranean people how much easier it is to haul up free, fed fish in nets than to pasture hungry herds on those bony hills and feed them through a winter. To say that holiness is a fish is a statement of the abundance of grace; it is the equivalent of affirming in a purely materialistic culture that money does indeed grow on trees. "Not as the world gives do I give to you"; these fish are spirit food. And revelation is a study in stalking: "Cast the net on the right side of the ship, and ye shall find."

Still—of course—there is a risk. More men in all of time have died at fishing than at any other human activity except perhaps the making of war. You go out so far . . . and you are blown, or stove, or swamped, and never seen again. Where are the fish? Out in the underwater gaps, out where the winds are, wary, adept, invisible. You can lure them, net them, troll for them, club them, clutch them, chase them up an inlet, stun them with plant juice, catch them in a wooden wheel that runs all night—and you still might starve. They are there, they are certainly there, free, food, and wholly fleeting. You can see them if you want to; catch them if you can.

It scatters and gathers; it comes and goes. I might see a monstrous carp heave out of the water and disappear in a smack of foam, I might see a trout emerge in a riffle under my dangling hand, or I might see only a flash of back parts fleeing.

It is the same all summer long, all year long, no matter what I seek. Lately I have given myself over almost entirely to stalking muskrats—eye food. I found out the hard way that waiting is better than pursuing; now I usually sit on a narrow pedestrian bridge at a spot where the creek is shallow and wide. I sit alone and alert, but stilled in a special way, waiting and watching for a change in the water, for the tremulous ripples rising in intensity that signal the appearance of a living muskrat from the underwater entrance to its den. Muskrats are cautious. Many, many evenings I wait without seeing one. But sometimes it turns out that the focus of my waiting is misdirected, as if Buddha had been expecting the fall of an apple. For when the muskrats don't show, something else does.

I positively ruined the dinner of a green heron on the creek last week. It was fairly young and fairly determined not to fly away, but not to be too foolhardy, either. So it had to keep an eye on me. I watched it for half an hour, during which time it stalked about in the creek moodily, expanding and contracting its incredible, brown-streaked neck. It made only three lightning-quick stabs at strands of slime for food, and all three times occurred when my head was turned slightly away.

The heron was in calm shallows; the deepest water it walked in went two inches up its orange legs. It would go and get something from the cattails on the side, and, when it had eaten it—tossing up its beak and contracting its throat in great gulps—it would plod back to a dry sandbar in the center of the creek which seemed to serve as its observation tower. It wagged its stubby tail up and down; its tail was so short it did not extend beyond its folded wings.

Mostly it just watched me warily, as if I might shoot it, or steal its minnows for my own supper, if it did not stare me

down. But my only weapon was stillness, and my only wish its continued presence before my eyes. I knew it would fly away if I made the least false move. In half an hour it got used to me—as though I were a bicycle somebody had abandoned on the bridge, or a branch left by high water. It even suffered me to turn my head slowly, and to stretch my aching legs very slowly. But finally, at the end, some least motion or thought set it off, and it rose, glancing at me with a cry, and winged slowly away upstream, around a bend, and out of sight.

I find it hard to see anything about a bird that it does not want seen. It demands my full attention. Several times waiting for muskrats, however, I have watched insects doing various special things who were, like the mantis laying her eggs, happily oblivious to my presence. Twice I was not certain what I had seen.

Once it was a dragonfly flying low over the creek in an unusual rhythm. I looked closely; it was dipping the tip of its abdomen in the water very quickly, over and over. It was flying in a series of tight circles, just touching the water at the very bottom arc of each circle. The only thing I could imagine it was doing was laying eggs, and this later proved to be the case. I actually saw this, I thought—I actually saw a dragonfly laying her eggs not five feet away.

It is this peculiar stitching motion of the dragonfly's abdomen that earned it the name "darning needle"—parents used to threaten their children by saying that, if the children told lies, dragonflies would hover over their faces as they slept and sew their lips together. Interestingly, I read that only the great speed at which the egg-laying female dragonfly flies over the water prevents her from being "caught by the surface tension and pulled down." And at that same great speed the dragonfly I saw that day whirred away, downstream: a drone, a dot, and then gone.

Another time I saw a water strider behaving oddly. When there is nothing whatsoever to see, I watch the water striders skate over the top of the water, and I watch the six dots of shade—made by their feet dimpling the water's surface—slide dreamily over the bottom silt. Their motion raises tiny ripples or wavelets ahead of them over the water's surface, and I had noticed that when they feel or see these ripples coming towards them, they tend to turn away from the ripples' source. In other words, they avoid each other. I figure this behavior has the effect of distributing them evenly over an area, giving them each a better chance at whatever it is they eat.

But one day I was staring idly at the water when something out of the ordinary triggered my attention. A strider was skating across the creek purposefully instead of randomly. Instead of heading away from ripples made by another insect, it was racing towards them. At the center of the ripples I saw that some sort of small fly had fallen into the water and was struggling to right itself. The strider acted extremely "interested"; it jerked after the fly's frantic efforts, following it across the creek and back again, inching closer and closer like Eskimos stalking caribou. The fly could not escape the surface tension. Its efforts were diminishing to an occasional buzz; it floated against the bank, and the strider pursued it there—but I could not see what happened, because overhanging grasses concealed the spot.

Again, only later did I learn what I had seen. I read that striders are attracted to any light. According to William H. Amos, "Often the attracting light turns out to be the reflections off the ripples set up by an insect trapped on the surface, and it is on such creatures that the striders feed." They suck them dry. Talk about living on jetsam! At any rate, it will be easy enough to watch for this again this summer. I especially want to see if the slow ripples set up by striders themselves reflect less light than than the ripples

set up by trapped insects—but it might be years before I happen to see another insect fall on the water among striders. I was lucky to have seen it once. Next time I will know what is happening, and if they want to play the last bloody act offstage, I will just part the curtain of grasses and hope I sleep through the night.

II

Learning to stalk muskrats took me several years.

I've always known there were muskrats in the creek. Sometimes when I drove late at night my headlights' beam on the water would catch the broad lines of ripples made by a swimming muskrat, a bow wave, converging across the water at the raised dark vee of its head. I would stop the car and get out: nothing. They eat corn and tomatoes from my neighbors' gardens, too, by night, so that my neighbors were always telling me that the creek was full of them. Around here, people call them "mushrats"; Thoreau called them "Musquashes." They are not of course rats at all (let alone squashes). They are more like diminutive beavers, and, like beavers, they exude a scented oil from musk glands under the base of the tail—hence the name. I had read in several respectable sources that muskrats are so wary they are almost impossible to observe. One expert who made a full-time study of large populations, mainly by examining "sign" and performing autopsies on corpses, said he often went for weeks at a time without seeing a single living muskrat.

One hot evening three years ago, I was standing more or less *in* a bush. I was stock-still, looking deep into Tinker Creek from a spot on the bank opposite the house, watching a group of bluegills stare and hang motionless near the bottom of a deep, sunlit pool. I was focused for depth. I had long since lost

myself, lost the creek, the day, lost everything but still amber depth. All at once I couldn't see. And then I could: a young muskrat had appeared on top of the water, floating on its back. Its forelegs were folded languorously across its chest; the sun shone on its upturned belly. Its youthfulness and rodent grin, coupled with its ridiculous method of locomotion, which consisted of a lazy wag of the tail assisted by an occasional dabble of a webbed hind foot, made it an enchanting picture of decadence, dissipation, and summer sloth. I forgot all about the fish.

But in my surprise at having the light come on so suddenly, and at having my consciousness returned to me all at once and bearing an inverted muskrat, I must have moved and betrayed myself. The kit—for I know now it was just a young kit—righted itself so that only its head was visible above water, and swam downstream, away from me. I extricated myself from the bush and foolishly pursued it. It dove sleekly, reemerged, and glided for the opposite bank. I ran along the bankside brush, trying to keep it in sight. It kept casting an alarmed look over its shoulder at me. Once again it dove, under a floating mat of brush lodged in the bank, and disappeared. I never saw it again. (Nor have I ever, despite all the muskrats I have seen, again seen a muskrat floating on its back.) But I did not know muskrats then; I waited panting, and watched the shadowed bank. Now I know that I cannot outwait a muskrat who knows I am there. The most I can do is get "there" quietly, while it is still in its hole, so that it never knows, and wait there until it emerges. But then all I knew was that I wanted to see more muskrats.

I began to look for them day and night. Sometimes I would see ripples suddenly start beating from the creek's side, but as I crouched to watch, the ripples would die. Now I know what this means, and have learned to stand perfectly still to make out the

muskrat's small, pointed face hidden under overhanging bank vegetation, watching me. That summer I haunted the bridges, I walked up creeks and down, but no muskrats ever appeared. You must just have to be there, I thought. You must have to spend the rest of your life standing in bushes. It was a once-in-a-lifetime thing, and you've had your once.

Then one night I saw another, and my life changed. After that I knew where they were in numbers, and I knew when to look. It was late dusk; I was driving home from a visit with friends. Just on the off chance I parked quietly by the creek, walked out on the narrow bridge over the shallows, and looked upstream. Someday, I had been telling myself for weeks, someday a muskrat is going to swim right through that channel in the cattails, and I am going to see it. That is precisely what happened. I looked up into the channel for a muskrat, and there it came, swimming right toward me. Knock; seek; ask. It seemed to swim with a side-to-side, sculling motion of its vertically flattened tail. It looked bigger than the upside-down muskrat, and its face more reddish. In its mouth it clasped a twig of tulip tree. One thing amazed me: it swam right down the middle of the creek. I thought it would hide in the brush along the edge; instead, it plied the waters as obviously as an aquaplane. I could just look and look.

But I was standing on the bridge, not sitting, and it saw me. It changed its course, veered towards the bank, and disappeared behind an indentation in the rushy shoreline. I felt a rush of such pure energy I thought I would not need to breathe for days.

That innocence of mine is mostly gone now, although I felt almost the same pure rush last night. I have seen many muskrats since I learned to look for them in that part of the creek. But still

I seek them out in the cool of the evening, and still I hold my breath when rising ripples surge from under the creek's bank. The great hurrah about wild animals is that they exist at all, and the greater hurrah is the actual moment of seeing them. Because they have a nice dignity, and prefer to have nothing to do with me, not even as the simple objects of my vision. They show me by their very wariness what a prize it is simply to open my eyes and behold.

Muskrats are the bread and butter of the carnivorous food chain. They are like rabbits and mice: if you are big enough to eat mammals, you eat them. Hawks and owls prey on them, and foxes; so do otters. Minks are their special enemies; minks live near large muskrat populations, slinking in and out of their dens and generally hanging around like mantises outside a beehive. Muskrats are also subject to a contagious blood disease that wipes out whole colonies. Sometimes, however, their whole populations explode, just like lemmings', which are their near kin; and they either die by the hundreds or fan out across the land migrating to new creeks and ponds.

Men kill them, too. One Eskimo who hunted muskrats for a few weeks each year strictly as a sideline says that in fourteen years he killed 30,739 muskrats. The pelts sell, and the price is rising. Muskrats are the most important fur animal on the North American continent. I don't know what they bring on the Mackenzie River delta these days, but around here, fur dealers, who paid \$2.90 in 1971, now pay \$5.00 a pelt. They make the pelts into coats, calling the fur anything but muskrat: "Hudson seal" is typical. In the old days, after they had sold the skins, trappers would sell the meat, too, calling it "marsh rabbit." Many people still stew muskrat.

Keeping ahead of all this slaughter, a female might have as many as five litters a year, and each litter contains six or seven

or more muskrats. The nest is high and dry under the bank; only the entrance is under water, usually by several feet, to foil enemies. Here the nests are marked by simple holes in a creek's clay bank; in other parts of the country muskrats build floating, conical winter lodges which are not only watertight, but edible to muskrats.

The very young have a risky life. For one thing, even snakes and raccoons eat them. For another, their mother is easily confused, and may abandon one or two of a big litter here or there, forgetting as it were to count noses. The newborn hanging on their mother's teats may drop off if the mother has to make a sudden dive into the water, and sometimes these drown. The just-weaned young have a rough time, too, because new litters are coming along so hard and fast that they have to be weaned before they really know how to survive. And if the just-weaned young are near starving, they might eat the newborn—if they can get to them. Adult muskrats, including their own mothers, often kill them if they approach too closely. But if they live through all these hazards, they can begin a life of swimming at twilight and munching cattail roots, clover, and an occasional crayfish. Paul Errington, a usually solemn authority, writes, "The muskrat nearing the end of its first month may be thought of as an independent enterprise in a very modest way."

The wonderful thing about muskrats in my book is that they cannot see very well, and are rather dim, to boot. They are extremely wary if they know I am there, and will outwait me every time. But with a modicum of skill and a minimum loss of human dignity, such as it is, I can be right "there," and the breathing fact of my presence will never penetrate their narrow skulls.

What happened last night was not only the ultimate in muskrat dimness, it was also the ultimate in human intrusion, the limit beyond which I am certain I cannot go. I would never have imagined I could go that far, actually to sit beside a feeding muskrat as beside a dinner partner at a crowded table.

What happened was this. Just in the past week I have been frequenting a different place, one of the creek's nameless feeder streams. It is mostly a shallow trickle joining several pools up to three feet deep. Over one of these pools is a tiny pedestrian bridge known locally, if at all, as the troll bridge. I was sitting on the troll bridge about an hour before sunset, looking upstream about eight feet to my right where I know the muskrats have a den. I had just lighted a cigarette when a pulse of ripples appeared at the mouth of the den, and a muskrat emerged. He swam straight toward me and headed under the bridge.

Now the moment a muskrat's eyes disappear from view under a bridge, I go into action. I have about five seconds to switch myself around so that I will be able to see him very well when he emerges on the other side of the bridge. I can easily hang my head over the other side of the bridge, so that when he appears from under me, I will be able to count his eyelashes if I want. The trouble with this maneuver is that, once his beady eyes appear again on the other side, I am stuck. If I move again, the show is over for the evening. I have to remain in whatever insane position I happen to be caught, for as long as I am in his sight, so that I stiffen all my muscles, bruise my ankles on the concrete, and burn my fingers on the cigarette. And if the muskrat goes out on a bank to feed, there I am with my face hanging a foot over the water, unable to see anything but crayfish. So I have learned to take it easy on these five-second flings.

When the muskrat went under the bridge, I moved so I could face downstream comfortably. He reappeared, and I had a good

look at him. He was eight inches long in the body, and another six in the tail. Muskrat tails are black and scaled, flattened not horizontally, like beavers' tails, but vertically, like a belt stood on edge. In the winter, muskrats' tails sometimes freeze solid, and the animals chew off the frozen parts up to about an inch of the body. They must swim entirely with their hind feet, and have a terrible time steering. This one used his tail as a rudder and only occasionally as a propeller; mostly he swam with a pedaling motion of his hind feet, held very straight and moving down and around, "toeing down" like a bicycle racer. The soles of his hind feet were strangely pale; his toenails were pointed in long cones. He kept his forelegs still, tucked up to his chest.

The muskrat clambered out on the bank across the stream from me, and began feeding. He chomped down on a ten-inch weed, pushing it into his mouth steadily with both forepaws as a carpenter feeds a saw. I could hear his chewing; it sounded like somebody eating celery sticks. Then he slid back into the water with the weed still in his mouth, crossed under the bridge, and, instead of returning to his den, rose erect on a submerged rock and calmly polished off the rest of the weed. He was about four feet away from me. Immediately he swam under the bridge again, hauled himself out on the bank, and unerringly found the same spot on the grass, where he devoured the weed's stump.

All this time I was not only doing an elaborate about-face every time his eyes disappeared under the bridge, but I was also smoking a cigarette. He never noticed that the configuration of the bridge metamorphosed utterly every time he went under it. Many animals are the same way: they can't see a thing unless it's moving. Similarly, every time he turned his head away, I was free to smoke the cigarette, although of course I never knew when he would suddenly turn again and leave me caught in some wretched position. The galling thing was, he

was downwind of me and my cigarette: was I really going through all this for a creature without any sense whatsoever?

After the weed stump was gone, the muskrat began ranging over the grass with a nervous motion, chewing off mouthfuls of grass and clover near the base. Soon he had gathered a huge, bushy mouthful; he pushed into the water, crossed under the bridge, swam towards his den, and dove.

When he launched himself again shortly, having apparently cached the grass, he repeated the same routine in a businesslike fashion, and returned with another shock of grass.

Out he came again. I lost him for a minute when he went under the bridge; he did not come out where I expected him. Suddenly to my utter disbelief he appeared on the bank next to me. The troll bridge itself is on a level with the low bank; there I was, and there he was, at my side. I could have touched him with the palm of my hand without straightening my elbow. He was ready to hand.

Foraging beside me he walked very humped up, maybe to save heat loss through evaporation. Generally, whenever he was out of water he assumed the shape of a shmoo; his shoulders were as slender as a kitten's. He used his forepaws to part clumps of grass extremely tidily; I could see the flex in his narrow wrists. He gathered mouthfuls of grass and clover less by actually gnawing than by biting hard near the ground, locking his neck muscles, and pushing up jerkily with his forelegs.

His jaw was underslung, his black eyes close set and glistening, his small ears pointed and furred. I will have to try and see if he can cock them. I could see the water-slicked long hairs of his coat, which gathered in rich brown strands that emphasized the smooth contours of his body, and which parted to reveal the paler, softer hair like rabbit fur underneath. Despite his closeness, I never saw his teeth or belly.

After several minutes of rummaging about in the grass at my side, he eased into the water under the bridge and paddled to his den with the jawful of grass held high, and that was the last I saw of him.

In the forty minutes I watched him, he never saw me, smelled me, or heard me at all. When he was in full view of course I never moved except to breathe. My eyes would move, too, following his, but he never noticed. I even swallowed a couple of times: nothing. The swallowing thing interested me because I had read that, when you are trying to hand-tame wild birds, if you inadvertently swallow, you ruin everything. The bird, according to this theory, thinks you are swallowing in anticipation, and off it goes. The muskrat never twitched. Only once, when he was feeding from the opposite bank about eight feet away from me, did he suddenly rise upright, all alert—and then he immediately resumed foraging. But he never knew I was there.

I never knew I was there, either. For that forty minutes last night I was as purely sensitive and mute as a photographic plate; I received impressions, but I did not print out captions. My own self-awareness had disappeared; it seems now almost as though, had I been wired with electrodes, my EEG would have been flat. I have done this sort of thing so often that I have lost self-consciousness about moving slowly and halting suddenly; it is second nature to me now. And I have often noticed that even a few minutes of this self-forgetfulness is tremendously invigorating. I wonder if we do not waste most of our energy just by spending every waking minute saying hello to ourselves. Martin Buber quotes an old Hasid master who said, "When you walk across the fields with your mind pure and holy, then from all the stones, and all growing things, and all animals, the sparks of their soul come out and cling to

you, and then they are purified and become a holy fire in you." This is one way of describing the energy that comes, using the specialized Kabbalistic vocabulary of Hasidism.

I have tried to show muskrats to other people, but it rarely works. No matter how quiet we are, the muskrats stay hidden. Maybe they sense the tense hum of consciousness, the buzz from two human beings who in the silence cannot help but be aware of each other, and so of themselves. Then too, the other people invariably suffer from a self-consciousness that prevents their stalking well. It used to bother me, too: I just could not bear to lose so much dignity that I would completely alter my whole way of being for a muskrat. So I would move or look around or scratch my nose, and no muskrats would show, leaving me alone with my dignity for days on end, until I decided that it was worth my while to learn—from the muskrats themselves—how to stalk.

The old, classic rule for stalking is, "Stop often 'n' set frequent." The rule cannot be improved upon, but muskrats will permit a little more. If a muskrat's eyes are out of sight, I can practically do a buck-and-wing on his tail, and he'll never notice. A few days ago I approached a muskrat feeding on a bank by the troll bridge simply by taking as many gliding steps towards him as possible while his head was turned. I spread my weight as evenly as I could, so that he wouldn't feel my coming through the ground, and so that no matter when I became visible to him, I could pause motionless until he turned away again without having to balance too awkwardly on one leg.

When I got within ten feet of him, I was sure he would flee, but he continued to browse nearsightedly among the mown clovers and grass. Since I had seen just about everything I was ever going to see, I continued approaching just to see when he

would break. To my utter bafflement, he never broke. I broke first. When one of my feet was six inches from his back, I refused to press on. He could see me perfectly well, of course, but I was stock-still except when he lowered his head. There was nothing left to do but kick him. Finally he returned to the water, dove, and vanished. I do not know to this day if he would have permitted me to keep on walking right up his back.

It is not always so easy. Other times I have learned that the only way to approach a feeding muskrat for a good look is to commit myself to a procedure so ridiculous that only a total unself-consciousness will permit me to live with myself. I have to ditch my hat, line up behind a low boulder, and lay on my belly to inch snake-fashion across twenty feet of bare field until I am behind the boulder itself and able to hazard a slow peek around it. If my head moves from around the boulder when the muskrat's head happens to be turned, then all is well. I can be fixed into position and still by the time he looks around. But if he sees me move my head, then he dives into the water, and the whole belly-crawl routine was in vain. There is no way to tell ahead of time; I just have to chance it and see.

I have read that in the unlikely event that you are caught in a stare-down with a grizzly bear, the best thing to do is talk to him softly and pleasantly. Your voice is supposed to have a soothing effect. I have not yet had occasion to test this out on grizzly bears, but I can attest that it does not work on muskrats. It scares them witless. I have tried time and again. Once I watched a muskrat feeding on a bank ten feet away from me; after I had looked my fill I had nothing to lose, so I offered a convivial greeting. Boom. The terrified muskrat flipped a hundred and eighty degrees in the air, nose-dived into the grass at his feet, and disappeared. The earth swallowed him; his tail shot straight up in the air and then vanished into the ground without a sound. Muskrats

make several emergency escape holes along a bank for just this very purpose, and they don't like to feed too far away from them. The entire event was most impressive, and illustrates the relative power in nature of the word and the sneak.

Stalking is a pure form of skill, like pitching or playing chess. Rarely is luck involved. I do it right or I do it wrong; the muskrat will tell me, and that right early. Even more than baseball, stalking is a game played in the actual present. At every second, the muskrat comes, or stays, or goes, depending on my skill.

Can I stay still? How still? It is astonishing how many people cannot, or will not, hold still. I could not, or would not, hold still for thirty minutes inside, but at the creek I slow down, center down, empty. I am not excited; my breathing is slow and regular. In my brain I am not saying, Muskrat! Muskrat! There! I am saying nothing. If I must hold a position, I do not "freeze." If I freeze, locking my muscles, I will tire and break. Instead of going rigid, I go calm. I center down wherever I am; I find a balance and repose. I retreat—not inside myself, but outside myself, so that I am a tissue of senses. Whatever I see is plenty, abundance. I am the skin of water the wind plays over; I am petal, feather, stone.

III

Living this way by the creek, where the light appears and vanishes on the water, where muskrats surface and dive, and redwings scatter, I have come to know a special side of nature. I look to the mountains, and the mountains still slumber, blue and mute and rapt. I say, it gathers; the world abides. But I look to the creek, and I say: it scatters, it comes and goes. When I leave the house

the sparrows flee and hush; on the banks of the creek jays scream in alarm, squirrels race for cover, tadpoles dive, frogs leap, snakes freeze, warblers vanish. Why do they hide? I will not hurt them. They simply do not want to be seen. "Nature," said Heraclitus, "is wont to hide herself." A fleeing mockingbird unfurls for a second a dazzling array of white fans . . . and disappears in the leaves. Shane! . . . Shane! Nature flashes the old mighty glance—the come-hither look—drops the handkerchief, turns tail, and is gone. The nature I know is old touch-and-go.

I wonder whether what I see and seem to understand about nature is merely one of the accidents of freedom, repeated by chance before my eyes, or whether it has any counterpart in the worlds beyond Tinker Creek. I find in quantum mechanics a world symbolically similar to my world at the creek.

Many of us are still living in the universe of Newtonian physics, and fondly imagine that real, hard scientists have no use for these misty ramblings, dealing as scientists do with the measurable and known. We think that at least the physical causes of physical events are perfectly knowable, and that, as the results of various experiments keep coming in, we gradually roll back the cloud of unknowing. We remove the veils one by one, painstakingly, adding knowledge to knowledge and whisking away veil after veil, until at last we reveal the nub of things, the sparkling equation from whom all blessings flow. Even wildman Emerson accepted the truly pathetic fallacy of the old science when he wrote grudgingly towards the end of his life, "When the microscope is improved, we shall have the cells analyzed, and all will be electricity, or somewhat else." All we need to do is perfect our instruments and our methods, and we can collect enough data like birds on a string to predict physical events from physical causes.

But in 1927 Werner Heisenberg pulled out the rug, and our whole understanding of the universe toppled and collapsed. For some reason it has not yet trickled down to the man on the street that some physicists now are a bunch of wild-eyed, raving mystics. For they have perfected their instruments and methods just enough to whisk away the crucial veil, and what stands revealed is the Cheshire cat's grin.

The Principle of Indeterminacy, which saw the light in the summer of 1927, says in effect that you cannot know both a particle's velocity and position. You can guess statistically what any batch of electrons might do, but you cannot predict the career of any one particle. They seem to be as free as dragonflies. You can perfect your instruments and your methods till the cows come home, and you will never ever be able to measure this one basic thing. It cannot be done. The electron is a muskrat; it cannot be perfectly stalked. And nature is a fan dancer born with a fan; you can wrestle her down, throw her on the stage and grapple with her for the fan with all your might, but it will never quit her grip. She comes that way; the fan is attached.

It is not that we lack sufficient information to know both a particle's velocity and its position; that would have been a perfectly ordinary situation well within the understanding of classical physics. Rather, we know now for sure that there is no knowing. You can determine the position, and your figure for the velocity blurs into vagueness; or, you can determine the velocity, but whoops, there goes the position. The use of instruments and the very fact of an observer seem to bollix the observations; as a consequence, physicists are saying that they cannot study nature *per se*, but only their own investigation of nature. And I can only see bluegills within my own blue shadow, from which they immediately flee.

The Principle of Indeterminacy turned science inside-out. Suddenly determinism goes, causality goes, and we are left with a universe composed of what Eddington calls, "mind-stuff." Listen to these physicists: Sir James Jeans, Eddington's successor, invokes "fate," saying that the future "may rest on the knees of whatever gods there be." Eddington says that "the physical world is entirely abstract and without 'actuality' apart from its linkage to consciousness." Heisenberg himself says, "method and object can no longer be separated. *The scientific world-view has ceased to be a scientific view in the true sense of the word.*" Jeans says that science can no longer remain opposed to the notion of free will. Heisenberg says, "there is a higher power, not influenced by our wishes, which finally decides and judges." Eddington says that our dropping causality as a result of the Principle of Indeterminacy "leaves us with no clear distinction between the Natural and the Supernatural." And so forth.

These physicists are once again mystics, as Kepler was, standing on a rarefied mountain pass, gazing transfixed into an abyss of freedom. And they got there by experimental method and a few wild leaps such as Einstein made. What a pretty pass!

All this means is that the physical world as we understand it now is more like the touch-and-go creek world I see than it is like the abiding world of which the mountains seem to speak. The physicists' particles whiz and shift like rotifers in and out of my microscope's field, and that this valley's ring of granite mountains is an airy haze of those same particles I must believe. The whole universe is a swarm of those wild, wary energies, the sun that glistens from the wet hairs on a muskrat's back and the stars which the mountains obscure on the horizon but which catch from on high in Tinker Creek. It is all touch and go. The heron flaps away; the

dragonfly departs at thirty miles an hour; the water strider vanishes under a screen of grass; the muskrat dives, and the ripples roll from the bank, and flatten, and cease altogether.

Moses said to God, "I beseech thee, shew me thy glory." And God said, "Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live." But he added, "There is a place by me, and thou shalt stand upon a rock: and it shall come to pass, while my glory passeth by, that I will put thee in a cliff of the rock, and will cover thee with my hand while I pass by: And I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts: but my face shall not be seen." So Moses went up on Mount Sinai, waited still in a cliff of the rock, and saw the back parts of God. Forty years later he went up on Mount Pisgah, and saw the promised land across the Jordan, which he was to die without ever being permitted to enter.

Just a glimpse, Moses: a cliff in the rock here, a mountain-top there, and the rest is denial and longing. You have to stalk everything. Everything scatters and gathers; everything comes and goes like fish under a bridge. You have to stalk the spirit, too. You can wait forgetful anywhere, for anywhere is the way of his fleet passage, and hope to catch him by the tail and shout something in his ear before he wrests away. Or you can pursue him wherever you dare, risking the shrunken sinew in the hollow of the thigh; you can bang at the door all night till the innkeeper relents, if he ever relents; and you can wail till you're hoarse or worse the cry for incarnation always in John Knoepfle's poem: "and christ is red rover . . . and the children are calling/come over come over." I sit on a bridge as on Pisgah or Sinai, and I am both waiting becalmed in a cliff of the rock and banging with all my will, calling like a child beating on a door: Come on out! . . . I know you're there.

And then occasionally the mountains part. The tree with the lights in it appears, the mockingbird falls, and time unfurls across space like an oriflamme. Now we rejoice. The news, after all, is not that muskrats are wary, but that they can be seen. The hem of the robe was a Nobel Prize to Heisenberg; he did not go home in disgust. I wait on the bridges and stalk along banks for those moments I cannot predict, when a wave begins to surge under the water, and ripples strengthen and pulse high across the creek and back again in a texture that throbs. It is like the surfacing of an impulse, like the materialization of fish, this rising, this coming to a head, like the ripening of nutmeats still in their husks, ready to split open like buckeyes in a field, shining with newness. "Surely the Lord is in this place; and I knew it not." The fleeing shreds I see, the back parts, are a gift, an abundance. When Moses came down from the cliff in Mount Sinai, the people were afraid of him: the very skin on his face shone.

Do the Eskimos' faces shine, too? I lie in bed alert: I am with the Eskimos on the tundra who are running after the click-footed caribou, running sleepless and dazed for days, running spread out in scraggling lines across the glacier-ground hummocks and reindeer moss, in sight of the ocean, under the long-shadowed pale sun, running silent all night long.

12



Nightwatch

I stood in the Lucas meadow in the middle of a barrage of grasshoppers. There must have been something about the rising heat, the falling night, the ripeness of grasses—something that mustered this army in the meadow where they have never been in such legions before. I must have seen a thousand grasshoppers, alarms and excursions clicking over the clover, knee-high to me.

I had stepped into the meadow to feel the heat and catch a glimpse of the sky, but these grasshoppers demanded my attention, and became an event in themselves. Every step I took detonated the grass. A blast of bodies like shrapnel exploded around me; the air burst and whirred. There were grasshoppers of all sizes, grasshoppers yellow, green and black, short-horned, long-horned, slant-faced, band-winged, spur-throated, cone-headed, pygmy, spotted, striped, and barred. They sprang in salvos, dropped in the air, and clung unevenly to stems and blades with

their legs spread for balance, as redwings ride cattail reeds. They clattered around my ears; they ricocheted off my calves with an instant clutch and release of tiny legs.

I was in shelter, but open to the sky. The meadow was clean, the world new, and I washed by my walk over the waters of the dam. A new, wild feeling descended upon me and caught me up. What if these grasshoppers were locusts, I thought; what if I were the first man in the world, and stood in a swarm?

I had been reading about locusts. Hordes of migrating locusts have always appeared in arid countries, and then disappeared as suddenly as they had come. You could actually watch them lay eggs all over a plain, and the next year there would be no locusts on the plain. Entomologists would label their specimens, study their structure, and never find a single one that was alive—until years later they would be overrun again. No one knew in what caves or clouds the locusts hid between plagues.

In 1921 a Russian naturalist named Uvarov solved the mystery. Locusts are grasshoppers: they are the same animal. Swarms of locusts are ordinary grasshoppers gone berserk.

If you take ordinary grasshoppers of any of several species from any of a number of the world's dry regions—including the Rocky Mountains—and rear them in glass jars under crowded conditions, they go into the migratory phase. That is, they turn into locusts. They literally and physically change from Jekyll to Hyde before your eyes. They will even change, all alone in their jars, if you stimulate them by a rapid succession of artificial touches. Imperceptibly at first, their wings and wing-covers elongate. Their drab color heightens, then saturates more and more, until it locks at the hysterical locust yellows and pinks. Stripes and dots appear on the wing-covers; these deepen to a glittering black. They lay more egg-pods

than grasshoppers. They are restless, excitable, voracious. You now have jars full of plague.

Under ordinary conditions, inside the laboratory and out in the deserts, the eggs laid by these locusts produce ordinary solitary grasshoppers. Only under special conditions—such as droughts that herd them together in crowds near available food—do the grasshoppers change. They shun food and shelter and seek only the jostle and clack of their kind. Their ranks swell; the valleys teem. One fine day they take to the air.

In full flight their millions can blacken the sky for nine hours, and when they land, it's every man to your tents, O Israel. "A fire devoureth before them; and behind them a flame burneth: the land is as the garden of Eden before them, and behind them a desolate wilderness; yea, and nothing shall escape them." One writer says that if you feed one a blade of grass, "the eighteen components of its jaws go immediately into action, lubricated by a brown saliva which looks like motor oil." Multiply this action by millions, and you hear a new sound: "The noise their myriad jaws make when engaged in their work of destruction can be realized by any one who has fought a prairie fire or heard the flames passing along before a brisk wind, the low crackling and rasping." Every contour of the land, every twig, is inches deep in bodies, so the valleys seethe and the hills tremble. Locusts: it is an old story.

A man lay down to sleep in a horde of locusts, Will Barker says. Instantly the suffocating swarm fell on him and knit him in a clicking coat of mail. The metallic mouth parts meshed and pinched. His friends rushed in and woke him at once. But when he stood up, he was bleeding from the throat and wrists.

The world has locusts, and the world has grasshoppers. I was up to my knees in the world.

Not one of these insects in this meadow could change into

a locust under any circumstance. I am King of the Meadow, I thought, and raised my arms. Instantly grasshoppers burst all around me, describing in the air a blur of angular trajectories which ended in front of my path in a wag of grasses. As *if* I were king, dilly-dilly.

A large gray-green grasshopper hit with a clack on my shirt, and stood on my shoulder, panting. "Boo," I said, and it clattered off. It landed on a grass head several yards away. The grass bucked and sprang from the impact like a bronc, and the grasshopper rode it down. When the movement ceased, I couldn't see the grasshopper.

I walked on, one step at a time, both instigating and receiving this spray of small-arms fire. I had to laugh. I'd been had. I wanted to see the creatures, and they were gone. The only way I could see them in their cunning was to frighten them in their innocence. No charm or cleverness of mine could conjure or draw them; I could only flush them, triggering the grossest of their instincts, with the physical bluntness of my passage. To them I was just so much trouble, a horde of commotion, like any rolling stone. Wait! Where did you go? Does not any one of you, with your eighteen mouth-parts, wish to have a word with me here in the Lucas meadow? Again I raised my arms: there you are. And then gone. The grasses slammed. I was exhilarated, flush. I was the serf of the meadow, exalted; I was the bride who waits with her lamp filled. A new wind was stirring; I had received the grasshoppers the way I received this wind. All around the meadow's rim the highest trees heaved soundlessly.

I walked back toward the cottage, maneuvering the whole squadron from one end of the meadow to the other. I'd been had all along by grasshoppers, muskrats, mountains—and like any sucker, I come back for more. They always get you in the end, and when you know it from the beginning, you have to

laugh. You come for the assault, you come for the flight—but really you know you come for the laugh.

This is the fullness of late summer now; the green of what is growing and grown conceals. I can watch a muskrat feed on a bank for ten minutes, harvesting shocks of grass that bristle and droop from his jaws, and when he is gone I cannot see any difference in the grass. If I spread the patch with my hands and peer closely, I am hard put to locate any damage from even the most intense grazing. Nothing even looks trampled. Does everything else but me pass so lightly? When the praying mantis egg cases hatched in June, over a period of several days, I watched the tiny translucent mantises leap about leggily on the egg case, scraggle down the hedge's twigs, and disappear in the grass. In some places I could see them descend in a line like a moving bridge from stem to ground. The instant they crossed the horizon and entered the grass, they vanished as if they had jumped off the edge of the world.

Now it is early September, and the paths are clogged. I look to water to see sky. It is the time of year when a honeybee beats feebly at the inside back window of every parked car. A frog flies up for every foot of bank, bubbles tangle in a snare of blue-green algae, and Japanese beetles hunch doubled on the willow leaves. The sun thickens the air to jelly; it bleaches, flattens, dissolves. The skies are a milky haze—nowhere, do-nothing summer skies. Every kid I see has a circular grid on his forehead, a regular cross-hatching of straight lines, from spending his days leaning into screen doors.

I had come to the Lucas place to spend a night there, to let come what may. The Lucas place is paradise enow. It has everything: old woods, young woods, cliffs, meadows, slow water,

fast water, caves. All it needs is a glacier extending a creaking foot behind the cottage. This magic garden is just on the other side of the oxbow in Tinker Creek; it is secluded because it is hard to approach. I could have followed the rock cliff path through the old woods, but in summer that path is wrapped past finding in saplings, bushes, kudzu, and poison oak. I could have tacked down the shorn grass terraces next to the cliff, but to get there I would have had to pass a vicious dog, who is waiting for the day I forget to carry a stick. So I planned on going the third way, over the dam.

I made a sandwich, filled a canteen, and slipped a palm-sized flashlight into my pocket. Then all I had to do was grab a thin foam pad and my sleeping bag, walk down the road, over the eroded clay hill where the mantis laid her eggs, along the creek downstream to the motorbike woods, and through the woods' bike trail to the dam.

I like crossing the dam. If I fell, I might not get up again. The dam is three or four feet high; a thick green algae, combed by the drag and sudden plunge of the creek's current, clings to its submersed, concrete brim. Below is a jumble of fast water and rocks. But I face this threat every time I cross the dam, and it is always exhilarating. The tightest part is at the very beginning. That day as always I faced the current, planted my feet firmly, stepped sideways instead of striding, and I soon emerged dripping in a new world.

Now, returning from my foray into the grasshopper meadow, I was back where I started, on the bank that separates the cottage from the top of the dam, where my sleeping bag, foam pad, and sandwich lay. The sun was setting invisibly behind the cliffs' rim. I unwrapped the sandwich and looked back over the way I had come, as if I could have seen the grasshoppers spread

themselves again over the wide meadow and hide enfolded in its thickets and plush.

This is what I had come for, just this, and nothing more. A fling of leafy motion on the cliffs, the assault of real things, living and still, with shapes and powers under the sky—this is my city, my culture, and all the world I need. I looked around.

What I call the Lucas place is only a part of the vast Lucas property. It is one of the earliest clearings around here, a garden in the wilderness; every time I cross the dam and dry my feet on the bank, I feel like I've just been born. Now to my right the creek's dammed waters were silent and deep, overhung by and reflecting bankside tulip and pawpaw and ash. The creek angled away out of sight upstream; this was the oxbow, and the dam spanned its sharpest arc. Downstream the creek slid over the dam and slapped along sandstone ledges and bankside boulders, exhaling a cooling breath of mist before disappearing around the bend under the steep wooded cliff.

I stood ringed and rimmed in heights, locked and limned, in a valley within a valley. Next to the cliff fell a grassy series of high terraces, suitable for planting the hanging gardens of Babylon. Beyond the terraces, forest erupted again wherever it could eke a roothold on the sheer vertical rock. In one place, three caves cut into the stone vaults, their entrances hidden by honeysuckle. One of the caves was so small only a child could enter it crawling; one was big enough to explore long after you have taken the initiatory turns that shut out the light; the third was huge and shallow, filled with cut wood and chicken wire, and into its nether wall extended another tiny cave in which a groundhog reared her litter this spring.

Ahead of me in the distance I could see where the forested cliffs mined with caves gave way to overgrown terraces that once must have been cleared. Now they were tangled in

saplings swathed in honeysuckle and wild rose brambles. I always remember trying to fight my way up that steepness one winter when I first understood that even January is not muscle enough to subdue the deciduous South. There were clear trails through the undergrowth—I saw once I was in the thick of it—but they were rabbit paths, unfit for anyone over seven inches tall. I had emerged scratched, pricked, and panting in the Lucas peach orchard, which is considerably more conveniently approached by the steep gravel drive that parallels the creek.

In the flat at the center of all this rimrock was the sunlit grasshopper meadow, and facing the meadow, tucked up between the grass terrace and the creek's dam, was the heart of the city, the Lucas cottage.

I stepped to the porch. My footfall resounded; the cliffs rang back the sound, and the clover and grasses absorbed it. The Lucas cottage was in fact mostly porch, airy and winged. Gray-painted two-by-fours wobbled around three sides of the cottage, split, smashed, and warped long past plumb. Beams at the porch's four corners supported a low, peaked roof that vaulted over both the porch and the cottage impartially, lending so much importance to the already huge porch that it made the cottage proper seem an afterthought, as Adam seems sometimes an afterthought in Eden. For years an old inlaid chess table with a broken carved pedestal leaned against the cottage on one wing of the porch; the contrasting brown patches of weathered inlay curled up in curves like leaves.

The cottage was scarcely longer than the porch was deep. It was a one-room cottage; you could manage (I've thought this through again and again—building more spartan mansions, o my soul) a cot, a plank window-desk, a chair (two for company, as the man says), and some narrow shelves. The cottage is mostly win-

dows—there are five—and the windows are entirely broken, so that my life inside the cottage is mostly Tinker Creek and mud dauber wasps.

It's a great life—luxurious, really. The cottage is wired for electricity; a bare-bulb socket hangs from the unfinished wood ceiling. There is a stovepipe connection in the roof. Beyond the porch on the side away from the creek is a big brick fireplace suitable for grilling whole steers. The steers themselves are fattening just five minutes away, up the hill and down into the pasture. The trees that shade the cottage are walnuts and pecans. In the spring the edge of the upstream creek just outside the cottage porch comes up in yellow daffodils, all the way up to the peach orchard.

That day it was dark inside the cottage, as usual; the five windows framed five films of the light and living world. I crunched to the creekside window, walking on the layer of glass shards on the floor, and stood to watch the creek lurch over the dam and round the shaded bend under the cliff, while bumblebees the size of ponies fumbled in the fragrant flowers that flecked the bank. A young cottontail rabbit bounded into view and froze. It crouched under my window with its ears flattened to its skull and its body motionless, the picture of adaptive invisibility. With one ridiculous exception. It was so very young, and its shoulder itched so maddeningly, that it whapped away at the spot noisily with a violent burst of a hind leg—and then resumed its frozen alert. Over the dam's drop of waters, two dog-faced sulphur butterflies were fighting. They touched and parted, ascending in a vertical climb, as though they were racing up an invisible spiraling vine.

All at once something wonderful happened, although at first it seemed perfectly ordinary. A female goldfinch suddenly hove into view. She lighted weightlessly on the head of a bank-

side purple thistle and began emptying the seedcase, sowing the air with down.

The lighted frame of my window filled. The down rose and spread in all directions, wafting over the dam's waterfall and wavering between the tulip trunks and into the meadow. It vaulted towards the orchard in a puff; it hovered over the ripening pawpaw fruit and staggered up the steep-faced terrace. It jerked, floated, rolled, veered, swayed. The thistle down faltered towards the cottage and gusted clear to the motorbike woods; it rose and entered the shaggy arms of pecans. At last it strayed like snow, blind and sweet, into the pool of the creek upstream, and into the race of the creek over rocks down. It shuddered onto the tips of growing grasses, where it poised, light, still wracked by errant quivers. I was holding my breath. Is this where we live, I thought, in this place at this moment, with the air so light and wild?

The same fixity that collapses stars and drives the mantis to devour her mate eased these creatures together before my eyes: the thick adept bill of the goldfinch, and the feathery, coded down. How could anything be amiss? If I myself were lighter and frayed, I could ride these small winds, too, taking my chances, for the pleasure of being so purely played.

The thistle is part of Adam's curse. "Cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee." A terrible curse: But does the goldfinch eat thorny sorrow with the thistle, or do I? If this furling air is fallen, then the fall was happy indeed. If this creekside garden is sorrow, then I seek martyrdom. This crown of thorns sits light on my skull, like wings. The Venetian Baroque painter Tiepolo painted Christ as a red-lipped infant clutching a goldfinch; the goldfinch seems to be looking around in search of thorns. Creation itself was

the fall, a burst into the thorny beauty of the real.

The goldfinch here on the fringed thistle top was burying her head with each light thrust deeper into the seedcase. Her fragile legs braced to her task on the vertical, thorny stem; the last of the thistle down sprayed and poured. Is there anything I could eat so lightly, or could I die so fair? With a ruffle of feathered wings the goldfinch fluttered away, out of range of the broken window's frame and toward the deep blue shade of the cliffs where late fireflies already were rising alight under trees. I was weightless; my bones were taut skins blown with buoyant gas; it seemed that if I inhaled too deeply, my shoulders and head would waft off. Alleluia.

Later I lay half out of my sleeping bag on a narrow shelf of flat ground between the cottage porch and the bank to the dam. I lay where a flash flood would reach me, but we have had a flood; the time is late. The night was clear; when the fretwork of overhead foliage rustled and parted, I could see the pagan stars.

Sounds fell all about me; I vibrated like still water ruffled by wind. Cicadas—which Donald E. Carr calls "the guns of August"—were out in full force. Their stridulations mounted over the meadow and echoed from the rim of cliffs, filling the air with a plaintive, mysterious urgency. I had heard them begin at twilight, and was struck with the way they actually do "start up," like an out-of-practice orchestra, creaking and grinding and all out of synch. It had sounded like someone playing a cello with a wide-toothed comb. The frogs added their unlocatable notes, which always seem to me to be so arbitrary and anarchistic, and crickets piped in, calling their own tune which they have been calling since the time of Pliny, who noted bluntly of the cricket, it "never ceaseth all night long to creak very shrill."

Earlier a bobwhite had cried from the orchardside cliff, now here, now there, and his round notes swelled sorrowfully over the meadow. A bobwhite who is still calling in summer is lorn; he has never found a mate. When I first read this piece of information, every bobwhite call I heard sounded tinged with desperation, suicidally miserable. But now I am somehow cheered on my way by that solitary signal. The bobwhite's very helplessness, his obstinate Johnny-two-notedness, takes on an aura of dogged pluck. God knows what he is thinking in those pendant silences between calls. God knows what I am. But: bobwhite. (Somebody showed me once how to answer a bobwhite in the warbling, descending notes of the female. It works like a charm. But what can I do with a charmed circle of male bobwhites but weep? Still, I am brutalized enough that I give the answering call occasionally, just to get a rise out of the cliffs, and a bitter laugh.) Yes, it's tough, it's tough, that goes without saying. But isn't waiting itself and longing a wonder, being played on by wind, sun, and shade?

In his famous *Camping and Woodcraft*, Horace Kephart sounds a single ominous note. He writes in parentheses: "Some cannot sleep well in a white tent under a full moon." Every time I think of it, I laugh. I like the way that handy woodsy tip threatens us with the thrashings of the spirit.

I was in no tent under leaves, sleepless and glad. There was no moon at all; along the world's coasts the sea tides would be springing strong. The air itself also has lunar tides: I lay still. Could I feel in the air an invisible sweep and surge, and an answering knock in my lungs? Or could I feel the starlight? Every minute on a square mile of this land—on the steers and the orchard, on the quarry, the meadow, and creek—one ten thousandth of an ounce of starlight spatters to earth. What

percentage of an ounce did that make on my eyes and cheeks and arms, tapping and nudging as particles, pulsing and stroking as waves? Straining after these tiny sensations, I nearly rolled off the world when I heard, and at the same time felt through my hips' and legs' bones on the ground, the bang and shudder of distant freight trains coupling.

Night risings and fallings filled my mind, free excursions carried out invisibly while the air swung up and back and the starlight rained. By day I had watched water striders dimple and jerk over the deep bankside water slowed by the dam. But I knew that sometimes a breath or call stirs the colony, and new forms emerge with wings. They cluster at night on the surface of their home waters and then take to the air in a rush. Migrating, they sail over meadows, under trees, cruising, veering towards a steady gleam in a flurry of glistening wings: "phantom ships in the air."

Now also in the valley night a skunk emerged from his underground burrow to hunt pale beetle grubs in the dark. A great horned owl folded his wings and dropped from the sky, and the two met on the bloodied surface of earth. Spreading over a distance, the air from that spot thinned to a frail sweetness, a tintured wind that bespoke real creatures and real encounters at the edge . . . events, events. Over my head black hunting beetles crawled up into the high limbs of trees, killing more caterpillars and pupae than they would eat.

I had read once about a mysterious event of the night that is never far from my mind. Edwin Way Teale described an occurrence so absurd that it vaults out of the world of strange facts and into that startling realm where power and beauty hold sovereign sway.

The sentence in Teale is simple: "On cool autumn nights, eels hurrying to the sea sometimes crawl for a mile or more

across dewy meadows to reach streams that will carry them to salt water." These are adult eels, silver eels, and this descent that slid down my mind is the fall from a long spring ascent the eels made years ago. As one-inch elvers they wriggled and heaved their way from the salt sea up the coastal rivers of America and Europe, upstream always into "the quiet upper reaches of rivers and brooks, in lakes and ponds—sometimes as high as 8,000 feet above sea level." There they had lived without breeding "for at least eight years." In the late summer of the year they reached maturity, they stopped eating, and their dark color vanished. They turned silver; now they are heading to the sea. Down streams to rivers, down rivers to the sea, south in the North Atlantic where they meet and pass billions of northbound elvers, they are returning to the Sargasso Sea, where, in floating sargassum weed in the deepest waters of the Atlantic, they will mate, release their eggs, and die. This, the whole story of eels at which I have only just hinted, is extravagant in the extreme, and food for another kind of thought, a thought about the meaning of such wild, incomprehensible gestures. But it was feeling with which I was concerned under the walnut tree by the side of the Lucas cottage and dam. My mind was on that meadow.

Imagine a chilly night and a meadow; balls of dew droop from the curved blades of grass. All right: the grass at the edge of the meadow begins to tremble and sway. Here come the eels. The largest are five feet long. All are silver. They stream into the meadow, sift between grasses and clover, veer from your path. There are too many to count. All you see is a silver slither, like twisted ropes of water falling roughly, a one-way milling and mingling over the meadow and slide to the creek. Silver eels in the night: a barely-made-out seething as far as you

can squint, a squirming, jostling torrent of silver eels in the grass. If I saw that sight, would I live? If I stumbled across it, would I ever set foot from my door again? Or would I be seized to join that compelling rush, would I cease eating, and pale, and abandon all to start walking?

Had this place always been so, and had I not known it? There were blowings and flights, tossings and heaves up the air and down to grass. Why didn't God let the animals in Eden name the man; why didn't I wrestle the grasshopper on my shoulder and pin him down till he called my name? I was thistledown, and now I seemed to be grass, the receiver of grasshoppers and eels and mantises, grass the windblown and final receiver.

For the grasshoppers and thistledown and eels went up and came down. If you watch carefully the hands of a juggler, you see they are almost motionless, held at precise angles, so that the balls seem to be of their own volition describing a perfect circle in the air. The ascending arc is the hard part, but our eyes are on the smooth and curving fall. Each falling ball seems to trail beauty as its afterimage, receding faintly down the air, almost disappearing, when lo, another real ball falls, shedding its transparent beauty, and another. . . .

And it all happens so dizzyingly fast. The goldfinch I had seen was asleep in a thicket; when she settled to sleep, the weight of her breast locked her toes around her perch. Wasps were asleep with their legs hanging loose, their jaws jammed into the soft stems of plants. Everybody grab a handle: we're spinning headlong down.

I am puffed clay, blown up and set down. That I fall like Adam is not surprising: I plunge, waft, arc, pour, and dive. The surprise is how good the wind feels on my face as I fall. And the other surprise is that I ever rise at all. I rise when I receive, like grass.

I didn't know, I never have known, what spirit it is that descends into my lungs and flaps near my heart like an eagle rising. I named it full-of-wonder, highest good, voices. I shut my eyes and saw a tree stump hurled by wind, an enormous tree stump sailing sideways across my vision, with a wide circular brim of roots and soil like a tossed top hat.

And what if those grasshoppers had been locusts descending, I thought, and what if I stood awake in a swarm? I cannot ask for more than to be so wholly acted upon, flown at, and lighted on in throngs, probed, knocked, even bitten. A little blood from the wrists and throat is the price I would willingly pay for that pressure of clacking weights on my shoulders, for the scent of deserts, groundfire in my ears—for being so in the clustering thick of things, rapt and enwrapped in the rising and falling real world.

13



The Horns of the Altar

I

There was a snake at the quarry with me tonight. It lay shaded by cliffs on a flat sandstone ledge above the quarry's dark waters. I was thirty feet away, sitting on the forest path overlook, when my eye caught the dark scrawl on the rocks, the lazy sinuosity that can only mean snake. I approached for a better look, edging my way down the steep rock cutting, and saw that the snake was only twelve or thirteen inches long. Its body was thick for its length. I came closer still, and saw the unmistakable undulating bands of brown, the hourglasses: copperhead.

I never step a foot out of the house, even in winter, without a snakebite kit in my pocket. Mine is a small kit in rubber casing about the size of a shotgun shell; I slapped my pants instinctively to fix in my mind its location. Then I stomped hard on the ground a few times and sat down beside the snake.

The young copperhead was motionless on its rock. Although it lay in a loose sprawl, all I saw at first was a camouflage pattern of particolored splotches confused by the rushing speckles of light in the weeds between us, and by the deep twilight dark of the quarry pond beyond the rock. Then suddenly the form of its head emerged from the confusion: burnished brown, triangular, blunt as a stone ax. Its head and the first four inches of its body rested on airy nothing an inch above the rock. I admired the snake. Its scales shone with newness, bright and buffed. Its body was perfect, whole and unblemished. I found it hard to believe it had not just been created on the spot, or hatched fresh from its mother, so unscathed and clean was its body, so unmarked by any passage.

Did it see me? I was only four feet away, seated on the weedy cliff behind the sandstone ledge; the snake was between me and the quarry pond. I waved an arm in its direction: nothing moved. Its low-forehead glare and lipless reptile smirk revealed nothing. How could I tell where it was looking, what it was seeing? I squinted at its head, staring at those eyes like the glass eyes of a stuffed warbler, at those scales like shields canted and lapped just so, to frame an improbable, unfathomable face.

Yes, it knew I was there. There was something about its eyes, some alien alertness . . . what on earth must it be like to have scales on your face? All right then, copperhead. I know you're here, you know I'm here. This is a big night. I dug my elbows into rough rock and dry soil and settled back on the hillside to begin the long business of waiting out a snake.

The only other poisonous snake around here is the timber rattler, *Crotalus horridus horridus*. These grow up to six feet long in the mountains, and as big as your thigh. I've never seen one in the wild; I don't know how many have seen me. I see copperheads,

though, sunning in the dust, disappearing into rock cliff chinks, crossing dirt roads at twilight. Copperheads have no rattle, of course, and, at least in my experience, they do not give way. You walk around a copperhead—if you see it. Copperheads are not big enough or venomous enough to kill adult humans readily, but they do account for far and away the greatest number of poisonous snakebites in North America: there are so many of them, and people, in the Eastern woodlands. It always interests me when I read about new studies being done on pit vipers; the team of herpetologists always seems to pick my neck of the woods for its fieldwork. I infer that we have got poisonous snakes as East Africa has zebras or the tropics have orchids—they are our specialty, our stock-in-trade. So I try to keep my eyes open. But I don't worry: you have to live pretty far out to be more than a day from a hospital. And worrying about getting it in the face from a timber rattler is like worrying about being struck by a meteorite: life's too short. Anyway, perhaps the actual bite is painless.

One day I was talking about snakes to Mrs. Mildred Sink, who operates a switchboard. A large pane separated us, and we were talking through a circular hole in the glass. She was seated in a dark room little bigger than a booth. As we talked, red lights on her desk would flash. She would glance at them, then back at me, and, finishing her point with careful calmness, she would fix on me a long, significant look to hold my attention while her hand expertly sought the button and pushed it. In this way she handled incoming calls and told me her snake story.

When she was a girl, she lived in the country just north of here. She had a brother four years old. One bright summer day her brother and her mother were sitting quietly in the big room of the log cabin. Her mother had her sewing in her lap

and was bent over it in concentration. The little boy was playing with wooden blocks on the floor. "Ma," he said, "I saw a snake." "Where?" "Down by the spring." The woman stitched the hem of a cotton dress, gathering the material with her needle and drawing it smooth with her hand. The little boy piled his blocks carefully, this way and that. After a while he said, "Ma, it's too dark in here, I can't see." She looked up and the boy's leg was swollen up as big around as his body.

Mrs. Sink nodded at me emphatically and then heeded the flashing light on the panel before her. She turned away; this caller was taking time. I waved and caught her eye; she waved, and I left.

The copperhead in front of me was motionless; its head still hung in the air above the sandstone rock. I thought of poking at it with a weed, but rejected the notion. Still, I wished it would do something. Marston Bates tells about an English ecologist, Charles Elton, who said, with his Britishness fully unfurled, "All cold-blooded animals . . . spend an unexpectedly large proportion of their time doing nothing at all, or at any rate nothing in particular." That is precisely what this one was doing.

I noticed its tail. It tapered to nothingness. I started back at the head and slid my eye down its body slowly: taper, taper, taper, scales, tiny scales, air. Suddenly the copperhead's tail seemed to be the most remarkable thing I had ever seen. I wished I tapered like that somewhere. What if I were a shaped balloon blown up through the tip of a finger?

Here was this blood-filled, alert creature, this nerved rope of matter, really here instead of not here, splayed soft and solid on a rock by the slimmest of chances. It was a thickening of the air spread from a tip, a rush into being, eyeball and blood,

through a pin-hole rent. Every other time I had ever seen this rock it had been a flat sandstone rock over the quarry pond; now it hosted and bore this chunk of fullness that parted the air around it like a driven wedge. I looked at it from the other direction. From tail to head it spread like the lines of a crescendo, widening from stillness to a turgid blast; then at the bulging jaws it began contracting again, diminuendo, till at the tip of its snout the lines met back at the infinite point that corners every angle, and that space once more ceased being a snake.

While this wonder engaged me, something happened that was so unusual and unexpected that I can scarcely believe I saw it. It was ridiculous.

Night had been rising like a ground vapor from the blackened quarry pool. I heard a mosquito sing in my ear; I waved it away. I was looking at the copperhead. The mosquito landed on my ankle; again, I idly brushed it off. To my utter disbelief, it lighted on the copperhead. It squatted on the copperhead's back near its "neck," and bent its head to its task. I was riveted. I couldn't see the mosquito in great detail, but I could make out its lowered head that seemed to bore like a well drill through surface rock to fluid. Quickly I looked around to see if I could find anyone—any hunter going to practice shooting beer cans, any boy on a motorbike—to whom I could show this remarkable sight while it lasted.

To the best of my knowledge, it lasted two or three full minutes; it seemed like an hour. I could imagine the snake, like the frog sucked dry by the giant water bug, collapsing to an empty bag of skin. But the snake never moved, never indicated any awareness. At last the mosquito straightened itself, fumbled with its forelegs about its head like a fly, and sluggishly took to the air,

where I lost it at once. I looked at the snake; I looked beyond the snake to the ragged chomp in the hillside where years before men had quarried stone; I rose, brushed myself off, and walked home.

Is this what it's like, I thought then, and think now: a little blood here, a chomp there, and still we live, trampling the grass? Must everything whole be nibbled? Here was a new light on the intricate texture of things in the world, the actual plot of the present moment in time after the fall: the way we the living are nibbled and nibbling—not held aloft on a cloud in the air but stumbling pitted and scarred and broken through a frayed and beautiful land.

II

When I reached home, I turned first to the bookshelf, to see if I could possibly have seen what I thought I had. All I could find was this sentence in Will Barker's book, *Familiar Insects of North America*: "The bite of the female [Mosquito, *Culex pipiens*] is effected with a little drill that can puncture many types of body covering—even the leathery skin of a frog or the overlapping scales on a snake." All right then; maybe I *had* seen it. Anything can happen in any direction; the world is more chomped than I'd dreamed.

It is mid-September now; I can see in the fading light the jagged holes in the leaves of the mock-orange hedge outside my study window. The more closely I look, the more I doubt that there is a single whole, unblemished leaf left on the bush. I go out again and examine the leaves one by one, first of the mock orange outside my study, then of the cherry tree in the yard. In the blue light I see scratched and peeled stems, leaves that are half-eaten, rusted, blighted, blistered, mined, snipped,

smutted, pitted, puffed, sawed, bored, and rucked. Where have I been all summer while the world has been eaten?

I remember something else I saw this week. I passed on the road by the creek a small boy bearing aloft an enormous foot-long snapping turtle. The boy was carrying the turtle—which was stretching and snapping wildly in the air—at arm's length, and his arms must have been tired, for he asked me plaintively, "Do you have a box?" when I was on foot myself and quite clearly did not have a box. I admired the turtle, but the boy was worried. "He's got leeches," he said. "Leeches?" "You know, they suck your blood." Oh, I had noticed the black leech drooping like a tar tear down the turtle's thick shell. The boy showed me another one, almost two inches long, fixed to the granular skin under the turtle's foreleg. "Will they kill him?" the boy asked. "Will he live?" Many, if not most, of the wild turtles I see harbor leeches. I assured him that the turtle would live. For most creatures, being parasitized is a way of life—if you call that living.

I think of the fox that Park Service Ranger Gene Parker told me about. The fox sprawled naked and pink-skinned in a mountain field, unable to rise, dying of mange. I think of the swimming bluegill I saw at the Lawsons', upstream in Tinker Creek on the other side of Tinker Mountain. One of its eyes was blinded by an overgrowth of white water mold, a white that spread halfway down its back in filmy lumps like soaked cotton batting. It had been injured, perhaps when a fisherman had hooked it and tossed it back, perhaps when a flood dashed it on rocks, and the fungus had spread from the injured site. I think of Loren Eiseley's description of a scientist he met in the field, who was gleefully bearing a bloody jar squirming with yard after yard of some unthinkable parasite he had just found in the belly of a rabbit. Suddenly the lives of the parasites—some sort of hellish hagiography—come to mind. I remember

the bloodworms and flukes, whose parasitic life cycles require the living bodies of as many as four hosts. How many of the grasshoppers that hurtled around me in the Lucas meadow bore inside their guts the immense coiled larvae of horsehair worms?

I received once as a gift a small, illustrated layman's guide to insect pests. These are insects that for one reason or another are in the way of human culture—or economics. By no means all are parasites. Nevertheless, the book reads like the devil's *summa theologica*. The various insects themselves include cotton-cushion scales, bean beetles, borers, weevils, bulb flies, thrips, cutworms, stink bugs, screw-worms, sawflies, poultry lice, cheese skippers, cheese mites, cluster flies, puss caterpillars, itch mites, and long-tailed mealy bugs. Of cockroaches the book says, "When very abundant, they may also eat human hair, skin, and nails." (The key word, *skin*, is buried.) The full-color pictures show warbled beef and fly-blown gashes, blighted trees and blasted corn, engorged ticks and seething ham, pus-eyed hogs and the wormy nostrils of sheep.

In another book I learn that ten percent of all the world's species are parasitic insects. It is hard to believe. What if you were an inventor, and you made ten percent of your inventions in such a way that they could only work by harassing, disfiguring, or totally destroying the other ninety percent? These things are not well enough known.

There is, for instance, a species of louse for almost every species of everything else. In addition to sucking blood, lice may also eat hair, feathers, the dry scales of moths, and other lice. Birdbanders report that wild birds are universally infested with lice, to each its own. Songbirds often squat in the dust near ant hills and spray themselves with a shower of living ants;

it is thought that the formic acid in the ants discourages the presence of lice. "Each species of auk has its own species of louse, found on all individuals examined." The European cuckoo is the sole host to three species of lice, and the glossy ibis to five, each specializing in eating a different part of the host's body. Lice live in the hollow quills of birds' feathers, in warhog bristles, in Antarctic seals' flippers and pelican pouches.

Fleas are almost as widely distributed as lice, but much more catholic in their choice of hosts. Immature fleas, interestingly, feed almost entirely on the feces of their parents and other adults, while mature fleas live on sucked blood.

Parasitic two-winged insects, such as flies and mosquitoes, abound. It is these that cause hippos to live in the mud and frenzied caribou to trample their young. Twenty thousand head of domestic livestock died in Europe from a host of black flies that swarmed from the banks of the Danube in 1923. Some parasitic flies live in the stomachs of horses, zebras, and elephants; others live in the nostrils and eyes of frogs. Some feed on earthworms, snails, and slugs; others attack and successfully pierce mosquitoes already engorged on stolen blood. Still others live on such delicate fare as the brains of ants, the blood of nestling songbirds, or the fluid in the wings of lacewings and butterflies.

The lives of insects and their parasites are horribly entwined. The usual story is that the larva of the parasite eats the other insect alive in any of several stages and degrees of consciousness. It is above all parasitic *Hymenoptera*—which for the sake of simplicity I shall call wasps—that specialize in this behavior. Some species of wasps are so "practiced" as parasites that the female will etch a figure-eight design on the egg of another insect in which she has just laid her egg, and other wasps will avoid ovipositing on those marked, already parasitized eggs. There are over one

hundred thousand species of parasitic wasps, so that, although many life histories are known, many others are still mysterious. British entomologist R. R. Askew says, "The field is wide open, the prospect inviting." The field may be wide open, but—although most of my favorite entomologists seem to revel in these creatures—the prospect is, to me at least, scarcely inviting.

Consider this story of Edwin Way Teale's. He brought a monarch butterfly caterpillar inside to photograph just as it was about to pupate. The pale green caterpillar had hung itself upside-down from a leaf, as monarch caterpillars have done from time immemorial, in the form of a letter J.

"All that night it remained as it was. The next morning, at eight o'clock, I noticed that the curve in the 'J' had become shallower. Then, suddenly, as though a cord within had been severed, the larva straightened out and hung limp. Its skin was baggy and lumpy. It began to heave as the lumps within pushed and moved. At 9:30 A.M., the first of the six white, fat-bodied grubs appeared through the skin of the caterpillar. Each was about three eighths of an inch in length." This was the work of a parasitic wasp.

There is a parasitic wasp that travels on any adult female praying mantis, feeding on her body wherever she goes. When the mantis lays her eggs, the wasp lays hers, inside the frothy mass of bubbles before it hardens, so that the early-hatching wasp larvae emerge inside the case to eat the developing mantis eggs. Others eat cockroach eggs, ticks, mites, and houseflies. Many seek out and lay eggs on the caterpillars of butterflies and moths; sometimes they store paralyzed, living caterpillars, on which eggs have been laid, in underground burrows where they stay "fresh" for as long as nine months. Askew, who is apparently very alert, says, "The mass of yellowish cocoons of the braconid *Apanteles glomeratus* beneath the shrivelled remains of a large white butterfly caterpillar are a familiar sight."

There are so many parasitic wasps that some parasitic wasps have parasitic wasps. One startled entomologist, examining the gall made by a vegetarian oak gall wasp, found parasitism of the fifth order. This means that he found the remains of an oak gall wasp which had a parasitic wasp which had another which had another which had another which had another, if I count it aright.

Other insect orders also include fascinating parasites. Among true bugs are bed-bugs, insects that parasitize dozens of species of bats, and those that parasitize bed-bugs. Parasitic beetles as larvae prey on other insects, and as adults on bees and kangaroos. There is a blind beetle that lives on beavers. The cone-nose bug, or kissing bug, bites the lips of sleeping people, sucking blood and injecting an excruciating toxin.

There is an insect order that consists entirely of parasitic insects called, singly and collectively, stylops, which is interesting because of the grotesquerie of its form and its effects. Stylops parasitize divers other insects such as leaf hoppers, ants, bees, and wasps. The female spends her entire life inside the body of her host, with only the tip of her bean-shaped body protruding. She is a formless lump, having no wings, legs, eyes, or antennae; her vestigial mouth and anus are tiny, degenerate, and nonfunctional. She absorbs food—her host—through the skin of her abdomen, which is "inflated, white, and soft."

The sex life of a stylops is equally degenerate. The female has a wide, primitive orifice called a "brood canal" near her vestigial mouth-parts, out in the open air. The male inserts his sperm into the brood canal, from whence it flows into her disorganized body and fertilizes the eggs that are floating freely there. The hatched larvae find their way to the brood canal and emerge into the "outside world."

The unfortunate insects on which the stylops feed, although they live normal life spans, frequently undergo inexplicable changes. Their colors brighten. The gonads of males and females are "destroyed," and they not only lose their secondary sexual characteristics, they actually acquire those of the opposite sex. This happens especially to bees, in which the differences between the sexes are pronounced. "A stylopsised insect," says Askew, "may sometimes be described as an intersex."

Finally, completing this whirlwind survey of parasitic insects, there are, I was surprised to learn, certain parasitic moths. One moth caterpillar occurs regularly in the *horns* of African ungulates. One adult winged moth lives on the skin secretions between the hairs of the fur of the three-fingered sloth. Another adult moth sucks mammal blood in southeast Asia. Last of all, there are the many eye-moths, which feed as winged adults about the open eyes of domestic cattle, sucking blood, pus, and tears.

Let me repeat that these parasitic insects comprise ten percent of all known animal species. How can this be understood? Certainly we give our infants the wrong idea about their fellow creatures in the world. Teddy bears should come with tiny stuffed bear-lice; ten percent of all baby bibs and rattles sold should be adorned with colorful blowflies, maggots, and screw-worms. What kind of devil's tithe do we pay? What percentage of the world's species that are *not* insects are parasitic? Could it be, counting bacteria and viruses, that we live in a world in which half the creatures are running from—or limping from—the other half?

The creator is no puritan. A creature need not work for a living; creatures may simply steal and suck and be blessed for all that with a share—an enormous share—of the sunlight and air. There is something that profoundly fails to be exuberant about

these crawling, translucent lice and white, fat-bodied grubs, but there is an almost manic exuberance about a creator who turns them out, creature after creature after creature, and sets them buzzing and lurking and flying and swimming about. These parasites are our companions at life, wending their dim, unfathomable ways into the tender tissues of their living hosts, searching as we are simply for food, for energy to grow and breed, to fly or creep on the planet, adding more shapes to the texture of intricacy and more life to the universal dance.

Parasitism: this itch, this gasp in the lung, this coiled worm in the gut, hatching egg in the sinew, warble-hole in the hide—is a sort of rent, paid by all creatures who live in the real world with us now. It is not an extortionary rent: Wouldn't you pay it, don't you, a little blood from the throat and wrists for the taste of the air? Ask the turtle. True, for some creatures it is a slow death; for others, like the stylopsised bee, it is a strange, transfigured life. For most of us Western humans directly it is a pinprick or scabrous itch here and there from a world we learned early could pinch, and no surprise. Or it is the black burgeoning of disease, the dank baptismal lagoon into which we are dipped by blind chance many times over against our wishes, until one way or another we die. Chomp. It is the thorn in the flesh of the world, another sign, if any be needed, that the world is actual and fringed, pierced here and there, and through and through, with the toothed conditions of time and the mysterious, coiled spring of death.

Outright predators, of course, I understand. I am among them. There is no denying that the feats of predators can be just as gruesome as those of the unlovely parasites: the swathing and sipping of trapped hummingbirds by barn spiders, the occasional killing and eating of monkeys by chimpanzees. If I were to eat as the del-

icate ladybug eats, I would go through in just nine days the entire population of Boys Town. Nevertheless, the most rapacious lurk and charge of any predator is not nearly so sinister as the silent hatching of barely visible, implanted eggs. With predators, at least you have a chance.

One night this summer I had gone looking for muskrats, and was waiting on the long pedestrian bridge over the widest part of the creek. No muskrat came, but a small event occurred in a spider's web strung from the lower rung of the bridge's handrail. As I watched, a tiny pale green insect flew directly into the spider's web. It jerked violently, bringing the spider charging. But the fragile insect, which was no larger than a fifth of the spider's abdomen, extricated itself from the gluey strands in a flurry, dropped in a dead fall to the hard bridge surface a foot below, stood, shook itself, and flew away. I felt as I felt on the way back from lobar pneumonia, stuffed with penicillin and taking a few steps outside: *vive la chance*.

Recently I have been keeping an informal list of the ones that got away, of living creatures I have seen in various states of disarray. It started with spiders. I used to see a number of dad-dylonglegs, or harvestmen, in the summer, and I got in the idle habit of counting their legs. It didn't take me long to notice that hardly ever did an adult of any size cross my path which was still hitting on all eight cylinders. Most had seven legs, some had six. Even in the house I noticed that the larger spiders tended to be missing a leg or two.

Then last September I was walking across a gravel path in full sunlight, when I nearly stepped on a grasshopper. I poked its leg with a twig to see it hop, but no hop came. So I crouched down low on my hands and knees, and sure enough, her swollen ovipositor was sunk into the gravel. She was puls-

ing faintly—with a movement not nearly so strained as the egg-laying mantis's was—and her right antenna was broken off near the base. She'd been around. I thought of her in the Lucas meadow, too, where so many grasshoppers leaped about me. One of those was very conspicuously lacking one of its big, springlike hind legs—a grass-lunger. It seemed to move fairly well from here to there, but then of course I didn't know where it had been aiming.

Nature seems to catch you by the tail. I think of all the butterflies I have seen whose torn hind wings bore the jagged marks of birds' bills. There were four or five tiger swallowtails missing one of their tails, and a fritillary missing two thirds of a hind wing. The birds, too, who make up the bulk of my list, always seem to have been snatched at from behind, except for the killdeer I saw just yesterday, who was missing all of its toes; its slender shank ended in a smooth, gray knob. Once I saw a swallowtailed sparrow, who on second look proved to be a sparrow from whose tail the central wedge of feathers had been torn. I've seen a completely tailless sparrow, a tailless robin, and a tailless grackle. Then my private list ends with one bob-tailed and one tailless squirrel, and a muskrat kit whose tail bore a sizable nick near the spine.

The testimony of experts bears out the same point: it's rough out there. Gerald Durrell, defending the caging of animals in well-kept zoos, says that the animals he collects from the wild are all either ridden with parasites, recovering from various wounds, or both. Howard Ensign Evans finds the butterflies in his neck of the woods as tattered as I do. A southwest Virginia naturalist noted in his journal for April, 1896, "Mourning-cloaks are plentiful but broken, having lived through the winter." Trappers have a hard time finding unblemished skins. Cetologists photograph the scarred hides of living whales, straited with gashes as long as

my body, and hilly with vast colonies of crustaceans called whale lice.

Finally, Paul Siple, the Antarctic explorer and scientist, writes of the Antarctic crab-eater seal, which lives in the pack ice off the continent: "One seldom finds a sleek silvery adult crab-eater that does not bear ugly scars—or two-foot long parallel slashes—on each side of its body, received when it managed somehow to wriggle out of the jaws of a killer whale that had seized it."

I think of those crab-eater seals, and the jaws of the killer whales lined with teeth that are, according to Siple, "as large as bananas." How did they get away? How did not one or two, but most of them get away? Of course any predator that decimates its prey will go hungry, as will any parasite that kills its host species. Predator and prey offenses and defenses (and fecundity is a defense) usually operate in such a way that both populations are fairly balanced, stable in the middle as it were, and frayed and nibbled at the edges, like a bitten apple that still bears its seeds. Healthy caribou can outrun a pack of wolves; the wolves cull the diseased, old, and injured, who stray behind the herd. All this goes without saying. But it is truly startling to realize how on the very slender bridge of chance some of the most "efficient" predators operate. Wolves literally starve to death in valleys teeming with game. How many crab-eater seals can one killer whale *miss* in a lifetime?

Still, it is to the picture of the "sleek silvery" crab-eater seals that I return, seals drawn up by scientists from the Antarctic ice pack, seals bearing again and again the long gash marks of unthinkable teeth. Any way you look at it, from the point of view of the whale or the seal or the crab, from the point of view of the mosquito or copperhead or frog or dragonfly or minnow or rotifer, it is chomp or fast.

III

It is chomp or fast. Earlier this evening I brought in a handful of the gnawed mock-orange hedge and cherry tree leaves; they are uncurling now, limp and bluish, on the top of this desk. They didn't escape, but their time was almost up anyway. Already outside a corky ring of tissue is thickening around the base of each leaf stem, strangling each leaf one by one. The summer is old. A gritty, colorless dust cakes the melons and squashes, and worms fatten within on the bright, sweet flesh. The world is festering with suppurating sores. Where is the good, whole fruit? The world "Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light, / Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain." I've been there, seen it, done it, I suddenly think, and the world is old, a hungry old man, fatigued and broken past mending. Have I walked too much, aged beyond my years? I see the copperhead shining new on a rock altar over a fetid pool where a forest should grow. I see the knob-footed killdeer, the tattered butterflies and birds, the snapping turtle festooned with black leeches. There are the flies that make a wound, the flies that find a wound, and a hungry world that won't wait till I'm decently dead.

"In nature," wrote Huston Smith, "the emphasis is in what is rather than what ought to be." I learn this lesson in a new way every day. It must be, I think tonight, that in a certain sense only the newborn in this world are whole, that as adults we are expected to be, and necessarily, somewhat nibbled. It's par for the course. Physical wholeness is not something we have barring accident; it is itself accidental, an accident of infancy, like a baby's fontanel or the egg-tooth on a hatchling. Are the five-foot silver eels that migrate as adults across meadows by night actually scarred with the bill marks of herons, flayed by the sharp teeth of bass? I think of the beautiful sharks I saw from a shore, hefted and

held aloft in a light-shot wave. Were those sharks sliced with scars, were there mites in their hides and worms in their hearts? Did the mockingbird that plunged from the rooftop, folding its wings, bear in its buoyant quills a host of sucking lice? Is our birthright and heritage to be, like Jacob's cattle on which the life of a nation was founded, "ring-streaked, speckled, and spotted" not with the spangling marks of a grace like beauty rained down from eternity, but with the blotched assaults and quarryings of time? "We are all of us clocks," says Eddington, "whose faces tell the passing years." The young man proudly names his scars for his lover; the old man alone before a mirror erases his scars with his eyes and sees himself whole.

Through the window over my desk comes a drone, drone, drone, the weary winding of cicadas' horns. If I were blasted by a meteorite, I think, I could call it blind chance and die cursing. But we live creatures are eating each other, who have done us no harm. We're all in this Mason jar together, snapping at anything that moves. If the pneumococcus bacteria had flourished more vitally, if it had colonized my other lung successfully, living and being fruitful after its created kind, then I would have died my death, and my last ludicrous work would have been an Easter egg, an Easter egg painted with beaver and deer, an Easter egg that was actually in fact, even as I painted it and the creatures burgeoned in my lung, fertilized. It is ridiculous. What happened to manna? Why doesn't everything eat manna, into what rare air did the manna dissolve that we harry the free live things, each other?

An Eskimo shaman said, "Life's greatest danger lies in the fact that men's food consists entirely of souls." Did he say it to the harmless man who gave him tuberculosis, or to the one who gave him tar paper and sugar for wolfskin and seal? I wonder how many bites I have taken, parasite and predator, from family and

friends; I wonder how long I will be permitted the luxury of this relative solitude. Out here on the rocks the people don't mean to grapple, to crush and starve and betray, but with all the goodwill in the world, we do, there's no other way. We want it; we take it out of each other's hides; we chew the bitter skins the rest of our lives.

But the sight of the leeches and the frayed flighted things means something else. I think of the green insect shaking the web from its wings, and of the whale-scarred crab-eater seals. They demand a certain respect. The only way I can reasonably talk about all this is to address you directly and frankly as a fellow survivor. Here we so incontrovertibly are. *Sub specie aeternitatis* this may all look different, from inside the blackened gut beyond the narrow craw, but now, although we hear the buzz in our ears and the crashing of jaws at our heels, we can look around as those who are nibbled but unbroken, from the shimmering vantage of the living. Here may not be the cleanest, newest place, but that clean timeless place that vaults on either side of this one is no place at all. "Your fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead." There are no more chilling, invigorating words than these of Christ's, "Your fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead."

Alaskan Eskimos believe in many souls. An individual soul has a series of afterlives, returning again and again to earth, but only rarely as a human. "Since its appearances as a human being are rare, it is thought a great privilege to be here as we are, with human companions who also, in this reincarnation, are privileged and therefore greatly to be respected." To be here as we are. I love the little facts, the ten percents, the fact of the real and legged borers, the cuticle-covered, secretive grubs, the blister beetles, blood flukes, and mites. But there

are plenty of ways to pile the facts, and it is easy to overlook some things. "The fact is," said Van Gogh, "the fact is that we are painters in real life, and the important thing is to breathe as hard as ever we can breathe."

So I breathe. I breathe at the open window above my desk, and a moist fragrance assails me from the gnawed leaves of the growing mock orange. This air is as intricate as the light that filters through forested mountain ridges and into my kitchen window; this sweet air is the breath of leafy lungs more rotted than mine; it has sifted through the serrations of many teeth. I have to love these tatters. And I must confess that the thought of this old yard breathing alone in the dark turns my mind to something else.

I cannot in all honesty call the world old when I've seen it new. On the other hand, neither will honesty permit me suddenly to invoke certain experiences of newness and beauty as binding, sweeping away all knowledge. But I am thinking now of the tree with the lights in it, the cedar in the yard by the creek I saw transfigured.

That the world is old and frayed is no surprise; that the world could ever become new and whole beyond uncertainty was, and is, such a surprise that I find myself referring all subsequent kinds of knowledge to it. And it suddenly occurs to me to wonder: were the twigs of the cedar I saw really bloated with galls? They probably were; they almost surely were. I have seen those "cedar apples" swell from that cedar's green before and since: reddish-gray, rank, malignant. All right then. But knowledge does not vanquish mystery, or obscure its distant lights. I still now and will tomorrow steer by what happened that day, when some undeniably new spirit roared down the air, bowled me over, and turned on the lights. I stood on grass

like air, air like lightning coursed in my blood, floated my bones, swam in my teeth. I've been there, seen it, been done by it. I know what happened to the cedar tree, I saw the cells in the cedar tree pulse charged like wings beating praise. Now, it would be too facile to pull everything out of the hat and say that mystery vanquishes knowledge. Although my vision of the world of the spirit would not be altered a jot if the cedar had been purulent with galls, those galls actually do matter to my understanding of this world. Can I say then that corruption is one of beauty's deep-blue speckles, that the frayed and nibbled fringe of the world is a tallith, a prayer shawl, the intricate garment of beauty? It is very tempting, but I honestly cannot. But I can, however, affirm that corruption is not beauty's very heart. And I can I think call the vision of the cedar and the knowledge of these wormy quarryings twin fiords cutting into the granite cliffs of mystery, and say that the new is always present simultaneously with the old, however hidden. The tree with the lights in it does not go out; that light still shines on an old world, now feebly, now bright.

I am a frayed and nibbled survivor in a fallen world, and I am getting along. I am aging and eaten and have done my share of eating too. I am not washed and beautiful, in control of a shining world in which everything fits, but instead am wandering awed about on a splintered wreck I've come to care for, whose gnawed trees breathe a delicate air, whose bloodied and scarred creatures are my dearest companions, and whose beauty beats and shines not *in* its imperfections but overwhelmingly in spite of them, under the wind-rent clouds, upstream and down. Simone Weil says simply, "Let us love the country of here below. It is real; it offers resistance to love."

* * *

I am a sacrifice bound with cords to the horns of the world's rock altar, waiting for worms. I take a deep breath, I open my eyes. Looking, I see there are worms in the horns of the altar like live maggots in amber, there are shells of worms in the rock and moths flapping at my eyes. A wind from no place rises. A sense of the real exults me; the cords loose; I walk on my way.

14



Northing

I

In September the birds were quiet. They were molting in the valley, the mockingbird in the spruce, the sparrow in the mock orange, the doves in the cedar by the creek. Everywhere I walked the ground was littered with shed feathers, long, colorful primaries and shaftless white down. I garnered this weightless crop in pockets all month long, and inserted the feathers one by one into the frame of a wall mirror. They're still there; I look in the mirror as though I'm wearing a ceremonial head-dress, inside-out.

In October the great restlessness came, the *Zugunruhe*, the restlessness of birds before migration. After a long, unseasonable hot spell, one morning dawned suddenly cold. The birds were excited, stammering new songs all day long. Titmice, which had hidden in the leafy shade of mountains all summer,

perched on the gutter; chickadees staged a conventicle in the locusts, and a sparrow, acting very strange, hovered like a hummingbird inches above a roadside goldenrod.

I watched at the window; I watched at the creek. A new wind lifted the hair on my arms. The cold light was coming and going between oversized, careening clouds; patches of blue, like a ragged flock of protean birds, shifted and stretched, flapping and racing from one end of the sky to the other. Despite the wind, the air was moist; I smelled the rich vapor of loam around my face and wondered again why all that death—all those rotten leaves that one layer down are black sops roped in white webs of mold, all those millions of dead summer insects—didn't smell worse. When the wind quickened, a stranger, more subtle scent leaked from beyond the mountains, a disquieting fragrance of wet bark, salt marsh, and mud flat.

The creek's water was still warm from the hot spell. It bore floating tulip leaves as big as plates, and sinking tulip leaves, downstream, and out of sight. I watched the leaves fall on water, first on running water, and then on still. It was as different as visiting Cornwall, and visiting Corfu. But those winds and flickering lights and the mad cries of jays stirred me. I was wishing: colder, colder than this, colder than anything, and let the year hurry down!

The day before, in a dry calm, swarming ants took part in nuptial flights, shining at the front door, at the back door, all up and down the road. I tried in vain to induce them to light on my upraised arm. Now at the slow part of the creek I suddenly saw migrating goldfinches in flocks hurling themselves from willow to willow over the reeds. They ascended in a sudden puff and settled, spreading slowly, like a blanket shaken over a bed, till some impulse tossed them up again, twenty and thirty together in sprays, and they tilted their wings, veered, folded, and spattered down.

I followed the goldfinches downstream until the bank beside me rose to a cliff and blocked the light on the willows and water. Above the cliff rose the Adams' woods, and in the cliff nested—according not only to local observation but also to the testimony of the county agricultural agent—hundreds of the area's copperheads. This October restlessness was worse than any April's or May's. In the spring the wish to wander is partly composed of an unnamable irritation, born of long inactivity; in the fall the impulse is more pure, more inexplicable, and more urgent. I could use some danger, I suddenly thought, so I abruptly abandoned the creek to its banks and climbed the cliff. I wanted some height, and I wanted to see the woods.

The woods were as restless as birds.

I stood under tulips and ashes, maples, sour wood, sassafras, locusts, catalpas, and oaks. I let my eyes spread and unfix, screening out all that was not vertical motion, and I saw only leaves in the air—or rather, since my mind was also unfixed, vertical trails of yellow color-patches falling from nowhere to nowhere. Mysterious streamers of color unrolled silently all about me, distant and near. Some color chips made the descent violently; they wrenched from side to side in a series of diminishing swings, as if willfully fighting the fall with all the tricks of keel and glide they could muster. Others spun straight down in tight, suicidal circles.

Tulips had cast their leaves on my path, flat and bright as doubloons. I passed under a sugar maple that stunned me by its elegant unself-consciousness: it was as if a man on fire were to continue calmly sipping tea.

In the deepest part of the woods was a stand of ferns. I had just been reading in Donald Culross Peattie that the so-called "seed" of ferns was formerly thought to bestow the gift of invisibility on its bearer, and that Genghis Khan wore such a

seed in his ring, "and by it understood the speech of birds." If I were invisible, might I also be small, so that I could be borne by winds, spreading my body like a sail, like a vaulted leaf, to anyplace at all? Mushrooms erupted through the forest mold, the fly amanita in various stages of thrust and spread, some big brown mushrooms rounded and smooth as loaves, and some eerie purple ones I'd never noticed before, the color of Portuguese men-of-war, murex, a deep-sea, pressurized color, as if the earth heavy with trees and rocks had pressed and leached all other hues away.

A squirrel suddenly appeared, and, eyeing me over his shoulder, began eating a mushroom. Squirrels and box turtles are immune to the poison in mushrooms, so it is not safe to eat a mushroom on the grounds that squirrels eat it. This squirrel plucked the nibbled mushroom cap from its base and, holding it Ubangi-like in his mouth, raced up the trunk of an oak. Then I moved, and he went into his tail-furling threat. I can't imagine what predator this routine would frighten, or even slow. Or did he take me for another male squirrel? It was clear that, like a cat, he seemed always to present a large front. But he might have fooled me better by holding still and not letting me see what insubstantial stuff his tail was. He flattened his body against the tree trunk and stretched himself into the shape of a giant rectangle. By some trick his legs barely protruded at the corners, like a flying squirrel's. Then he made a wave run down his tail held low against the trunk, the same flicking wave, over and over, and he never took his eyes from mine. Next, frightened more—or emboldened?—he ran up to a limb, still mouthing his mushroom cap, and, crouching close to the trunk, presented a solid target, coiled. He bent his tail high and whipped it furiously, with repeated snaps, as if a piece of gluey tape were stuck to the tip.

When I left the squirrel to cache his mushroom in peace, I almost stepped on another squirrel, who was biting the base of his tail, his flank, and scratching his shoulder with a hind paw. A chipmunk was streaking around with the usual calamitous air. When he saw me he stood to investigate, tucking his front legs tightly against his breast, so that only his paws were visible, and he looked like a suppliant modestly holding his hat.

The woods were a rustle of affairs. Woolly bears, those orange-and-black-banded furry caterpillars of the Isabella moth, were on the move. They crossed my path in every direction; they would climb over my foot, my finger, urgently seeking shelter. If a skunk finds one, he rolls it over and over on the ground, very delicately, brushing off the long hairs before he eats it. There seemed to be a parade of walking sticks that day, too; I must have seen five or six of them, or the same one five or six times, which kept hitching a ride on my pants leg. One entomologist says that walking sticks, along with monarch butterflies, are able to feign death—although I don't know how you could determine if a walking stick was feigning death or twigginess. At any rate, the female walking stick is absolutely casual about her egg-laying, dribbling out her eggs "from wherever she happens to be, and they drop willy-nilly"—which I suppose might mean that my pants and I were suddenly in the walking-stick business.

I heard a clamor in the underbrush beside me, a rustle of an animal's approach. It sounded as though the animal was about the size of a bobcat, a small bear, or a large snake. The commotion stopped and started, coming ever nearer. The agent of all this ruckus proved to be, of course, a towhee.

The more I see of these bright birds—with black backs, white tail bars, and rufous patches on either side of their white breasts—the more I like them. They are not even faintly shy. They are everywhere, in treetops and on the ground. Their

song reminds me of a child's neighborhood rallying cry—*ee-ock-ee*—with a heartfelt warble at the end. But it is their call that is especially endearing. The towhee has the brass and grace to call, simply and clearly, "tweet." I know of no other bird that stoops to literal tweeting.

The towhee never saw me. It crossed the path and kicked its way back into the woods, cutting a wide swath in the leaf litter like a bulldozer, and splashing the air with clods.

The bark of trees was cool to my palm. I saw a hairy woodpecker beating his skull on a pine, and a katydid dying on a stone.

I could go. I could simply angle off the path, take one step after another, and be on my way. I could walk to Point Barrow, Mount McKinley, Hudson's Bay. My summer jacket is put away; my winter jacket is warm.

In autumn the winding passage of ravens from the north heralds the great fall migration of caribou. The shaggy-necked birds spread their wing tips to the skin of convection currents rising, and hie them south. The great deer meet herd on herd in arctic and subarctic valleys, milling and massing and gathering force like a waterfall, till they pour across the barren grounds wide as a tidal wave. Their coats are new and fine. Their thin spring coats—which had been scraped off in great hunks by the southern forests and were riddled with blackfly and gadfly stings, warble and botfly maggots—are gone, and a lustrous new pelage has appeared, a luxurious brown fur backed by a plush layer of hollow hairs that insulate and waterproof. Four inches of creamy fat cover even their backs. A loose cartilage in their fetlocks makes their huge strides click, mile upon mile over the tundra south to the shelter of trees, and you can hear them before they've come and after they've gone, rumbling like rivers, ticking like clocks.

The Eskimos' major caribou hunt is in the fall, when the deer are fat and their hides thick. If some whim or weather shifts the northern caribou into another valley, some hidden, unexpected valley, then even to this day some inland Eskimo tribes may altogether starve.

Up on the Arctic Ocean coasts, Eskimos dry the late summer's fish on drying racks, to use throughout the winter as feed for dogs. The newly forming sea ice is elastic and flexible. It undulates without cracking as the roiling sea swells and subsides, and it bends and sags under the Eskimos' weight as they walk, spreading leviathan ripples out towards the horizon, so that they seem to be walking and bouncing on the fragile sheath of the world's balloon. During these autumn days Eskimo adults and children alike play at cat's cradle, a game they have always known. The intricate string patterns looped from their fingers were thought to "tangle the sun" and so "delay its disappearance." Later when the sun sets for the winter, children will sled down any snowy slope, using as sleds frozen seal embryos pulled with thongs through the nose.

These northings drew me, present northings, past northings, the thought of northings. In the literature of arctic exploration, the talk is of northing. An explorer might scrawl in his tattered journal, "Latitude 82° 15' N. We accomplished 20 miles of northing today, in spite of the shifting pack." Shall I go northing? My legs are long.

A skin-colored sandstone ledge beside me was stained with pokeberry juice, like an altar bloodied. The edges of the scarlet were dissolved, faded to lymph like small blood from a wound. As I looked, a maple leaf suddenly screeched across the rock, arched crabwise on its points, and a yellow-spotted dog appeared from noplacé, bearing in its jaws the leg of a deer. The hooves of the

deer leg were pointed like a dancer's toes. I have felt dead deer legs before; some local butchers keep them as weapons. They are greaseless and dry; I can feel the little bones. The dog was coming towards me on the path. I spoke to him and stepped aside; he loped past, looking neither to the right or the left.

In a final, higher part of the woods, some of the trees were black and gray, leafless, but wrapped in fresh green vines. The path was a fairway of new gold leaves strewn at the edges with bright vines and dotted with dark green seedlings pushing up through the leaf cover. One seedling spruce grew from a horse's hoofmark deep in dried mud.

There was a little hollow in the woods, broad, like a flat soup-bowl, with grass on the ground. This was the forest pasture of the white mare Itch. Water had collected in a small pool five feet across, in which gold leaves floated, and the water reflected the half-forgotten, cloud-whipped sky. To the right was a stand of slender silver-barked tulip saplings with tall limbless trunks leaning together, leafless. In the general litter and scramble of these woods, the small grazed hollow looked very old, like the site of druidical rites, or like a theatrical set, with the pool at center stage, and the stand of silver saplings the audience in thrall. There at the pool lovers would meet in various guises, and there Bottom in his ass's head would bleat at the reflection of the moon.

I started home. And one more event occurred that day, one more confrontation with restless life bearing past me.

I approached a long, slanting mown field near the house. A flock of forty robins had commandeered the area, and I watched them from a fringe of trees. I see robins in flocks only in the fall. They were spaced evenly on the grass, ten yards apart. They looked like a marching band with each member in place, but facing in every direction. Distributed among them

were the fledglings from summer's last brood, young robins still mottled on the breast, embarking on their first trip to unknown southern fields. At any given moment as I watched, half of the robins were on the move, sloping forward in a streamlined series of hops.

I stepped into the field, and they all halted. They stopped short, drew up, and looked at me, every one. I stopped too, suddenly as self-conscious as if I were before a firing squad. What are you going to do? I looked over the field, at all those cocked heads and black eyes. I'm staying here. You all go on. I'm staying here.

A kind of northing is what I wish to accomplish, a single-minded trek towards that place where any shutter left open to the zenith at night will record the wheeling of all the sky's stars as a pattern of perfect, concentric circles. I seek a reduction, a shedding, a sloughing off.

At the seashore you often see a shell, or fragment of a shell, that sharp sands and surf have thinned to a wisp. There is no way you can tell what kind of shell it had been, what creature it had housed; it could have been a whelk or a scallop, a cowrie, limpet, or conch. The animal is long since dissolved, and its blood spread and thinned in the general sea. All you hold in your hand is a cool shred of shell, an inch long, pared so thin it passes a faint pink light, and almost as flexible as a straight razor. It is an essence, a smooth condensation of the air, a curve. I long for the North where unimpeded winds would hone me to such a pure slip of bone. But I'll not go northing this year. I'll stalk that floating pole and frigid air by waiting here. I wait on bridges; I wait, struck, on forest paths and meadow's fringes, hilltops and bank-sides, day in and day out, and I receive a southing as a gift. The North washes down the mountains like a waterfall, like a tidal

wave, and pours across the valley; it comes to me. It sweetens the persimmons and numbs the last of the crickets and hornets; it fans the flames of the forest maples, bows the meadow's seeded grasses, and pokes its chilling fingers under the leaf litter, thrusting the springtails and earthworms, the sowbugs and beetle grubs deeper into the earth. The sun heaves to the south by day, and at night wild Orion emerges looming like the Specter of the Brocken over Dead Man Mountain. Something is already here, and more is coming.

II

A few days later the monarchs hit. I saw one, and then another, and then others all day long, before I consciously understood that I was witnessing a migration, and it wasn't until another two weeks had passed that I realized the enormity of what I had seen.

Each of these butterflies, the fruit of two or three broods of this summer, had hatched successfully from one of those emerald cases that Teale's caterpillar had been about to form when the parasitic larvae snapped it limp, eating their way out of its side. They had hatched, many of them, just before a thunderstorm, when winds lifted the silver leaves of trees and birds sought the shelter of shrubbery, uttering cries. They were butterflies, going south to the Gulf states or farther, and some of them had come from Hudson's Bay.

Monarchs were everywhere. They skittered and bobbed, rested in the air, lolled on the dust—but with none of their usual insouciance. They had but one unwearying thought: South. I watched from my study window: three, four . . . eighteen, nineteen, one every few seconds, and some in tandem. They came fanning straight towards my window from the northwest, and from the northeast, materializing from behind the tips of high

hemlocks, where Polaris hangs by night. They appeared as Indian horsemen appear in movies: first dotted, then massed, silent, at the rim of a hill.

Each monarch butterfly had a brittle black body and deep orange wings limned and looped in black bands. A monarch at rest looks like a fleck of tiger, stilled and wide-eyed. A monarch in flight looks like an autumn leaf with a will, vitalized and cast upon the air from which it seems to suck some thin sugar of energy, some leaf-life or sap. As each one climbed up the air outside my window, I could see the more delicate, ventral surfaces of its wings, and I had a sense of bunched legs and straining thorax, but I could never focus well into the flapping and jerking before it vaulted up past the window and out of sight over my head.

I walked out and saw a monarch do a wonderful thing: it climbed a hill without twitching a muscle. I was standing at the bridge over Tinker Creek, at the southern foot of a very steep hill. The monarch beat its way beside me over the bridge at eye level, and then, flailing its wings exhaustedly, ascended straight up in the air. It rose vertically to the enormous height of a bankside sycamore's crown. Then, fixing its wings at a precise angle, it glided *up* the steep road, losing altitude extremely slowly, climbing by checking its fall, until it came to rest at a puddle in front of the house at the top of the hill.

I followed. It panted, skirmished briefly westward, and then, returning to the puddle, began its assault on the house. It struggled almost straight up the air next to the two-story brick wall, and then scaled the roof. Wasting no effort, it followed the roof's own slope, from a distance of two inches. Puff, and it was out of sight. I wondered how many more hills and houses it would have to climb before it could rest. From the force of its will it would seem it could flutter through walls.

* * *

Monarchs are "tough and powerful, as butterflies go." They fly over Lake Superior without resting; in fact, observers there have discovered a curious thing. Instead of flying directly south, the monarchs crossing high over the water take an inexplicable turn towards the east. Then when they reach an invisible point, they all veer south again. Each successive swarm repeats this mysterious dogleg movement, year after year. Entomologists actually think that the butterflies might be "remembering" the position of a long-gone, looming glacier. In another book I read that geologists think that Lake Superior marks the site of the highest mountain that ever existed on this continent. I don't know. I'd like to see it. Or I'd like to be it, to feel when to turn. At night on land migrating monarchs slumber on certain trees, hung in festoons with wings folded together, thick on the trees and shaggy as bearskin.

Monarchs have always been assumed to taste terribly bitter, because of the acrid milkweed on which the caterpillars feed. You always run into monarchs and viceroys when you read about mimicry: viceroys look enough like monarchs that keen-eyed birds who have tasted monarchs once will avoid the viceroys as well. New studies indicate that milkweed-fed monarchs are not so much evil-tasting as literally nauseating, since milkweed contains "heart poisons similar to digitalis" that make the bird ill. Personally, I like an experiment performed by an entomologist with real spirit. He had heard all his life, as I have, that monarchs taste unforgettably bitter, so he tried some. "To conduct what was in fact a field experiment the doctor first went South, and he ate a number of monarchs in the field. . . . The monarch butterfly, Dr. Urquhart learned, has no more flavor than dried toast." Dried toast? It was hard for me, throughout the monarch migration, in the middle of all that

beauty and real splendor, to fight down the thought that what I was really seeing in the air was a vast and fluttering tea tray for shut-ins.

It is easy to coax a dying or exhausted butterfly onto your finger. I saw a monarch walking across a gas station lot; it was walking south. I placed my index finger in its path, and it clambered aboard and let me lift it to my face. Its wings were faded but unmarked by hazard; a veneer of velvet caught the light and hinted at the frailest depth of lapped scales. It was a male; his legs clutching my finger were short and atrophied; they clasped my finger with a spread fragility, a fineness as of some low note of emotion or pure strain of spirit, scarcely perceived. And I knew that those feet were actually tasting me, sipping with sensitive organs the vapor of my finger's skin: butterflies taste with their feet. All the time he held me, he opened and closed his glorious wings, senselessly, as if sighing.

The closing of his wings fanned an almost imperceptible redolence at my face, and I leaned closer. I could barely scent a sweetness, I could almost name it . . . fireflies, sparklers—honeysuckle. He smelled like honeysuckle; I couldn't believe it. I knew that many male butterflies exuded distinctive odors from special scent glands, but I thought that only laboratory instruments could detect those odors compounded of many, many butterflies. I had read a list of the improbable scents of butterflies: sandalwood, chocolate, heliotrope, sweet pea. Now this live creature here on my finger had an odor that even I could sense—this flap actually smelled, this chip that took its temperature from the air like any envelope or hammer, this programmed wisp of spread horn. And he smelled of honeysuckle. Why not caribou hoof or Labrador tea, tundra lichen or dwarf willow, the brine of Hudson's Bay or the vapor of rivers milky with fine-ground glacial silt? This honeysuckle was an odor already only half-remembered, a

breath of the summer past, the Lucas cliffs and overgrown fence by Tinker Creek, a drugged sweetness that had almost cloyed on those moisture-laden nights, now refined to a wary trickle in the air, a distillation pure and rare, scarcely known and mostly lost, and heading south.

I walked him across the gas station lot and lowered him into a field. He took to the air, pulsing and gliding; he lighted on sassafras, and I lost him.

For weeks I found paired monarch wings, bodiless, on the grass or on the road. I collected one such wing and freed it of its scales; first I rubbed it between my fingers, and then I stroked it gently with the tip of an infant's silver spoon. What I had at the end of this delicate labor is lying here on this study desk: a kind of resilient scaffolding, like the webbing over a hot-air balloon, black veins stretching the merest something across the nothingness it plies. The integument itself is perfectly transparent; through it I can read the smallest print. It is as thin as the skin peeled from sunburn, and as tough as a parchment of flensed buffalo hide. The butterflies that were eaten here in the valley, leaving us their wings, were, however, few: most lived to follow the valley south.

The migration lasted in full force for five days. For those five days I was inundated, drained. The air was alive and unwinding. Time itself was a scroll unraveled, curved and still quivering on a table or altar stone. The monarchs clattered in the air, burnished like throngs of pennies, here's one, and here's one, and more, and more. They flapped and floundered; they thrust, splitting the air like the keels of canoes, quickened and fleet. It looked as though the leaves of the autumn forest had taken flight, and were pouring down the valley like a waterfall, like a tidal wave, all the leaves of hardwoods from here to Hudson's Bay. It was as if the season's color were

draining away like lifeblood, as if the year were molting and shedding. The year was rolling down, and a vital curve had been reached, the tilt that gives way to headlong rush. And when the monarchs had passed and were gone, the skies were vacant, the air poised. The dark night into which the year was plunging was not a sleep but an awakening, a new and necessary austerity, the sparer climate for which I longed. The shed trees were brittle and still, the creek light and cold, and my spirit holding its breath.

III

Before the aurora borealis appears, the sensitive needles of compasses all over the world are restless for hours, agitating on their pins in airplanes and ships, trembling in desk drawers, in attics, in boxes on shelves.

I had a curious dream last night that stirred me. I visited the house of my childhood, and the basement there was covered with a fine sifting of snow. I lifted a snow-covered rug and found underneath it a bound sheaf of ink drawings I had made when I was six. Next to the basement, but unattached to it, extended a prayer tunnel.

The prayer tunnel was a tunnel fully enclosed by solid snow. It was cylindrical, and its diameter was the height of a man. Only an Eskimo, and then only very rarely, could survive in the prayer tunnel. There was, however, no exit or entrance; but I nevertheless understood that if I—if almost anyone—volunteered to enter it, death would follow after a long and bitter struggle. Inside the tunnel it was killingly cold, and a hollow wind like broadswords never ceased to blow. But there was little breathable air, and that soon gone. It was utterly without light, and from all eternity it snowed the same fine, unmelting, wind-hurled snow.

I have been reading the apophthegmata, the sayings of fourth- and fifth-century Egyptian desert hermits. Abba Moses said to a disciple, "Go and sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything."

A few weeks before the monarch migration I visited Carvin's Cove, a reservoir in a gap between Tinker and Brushy mountains, and there beside the forest path I saw, it occurs to me now, Abba Moses, in the form of an acorn. The acorn was screwing itself into the soil. From a raw split in its husk burst a long white root that plunged like an arrow into the earth. The acorn itself was loose, but the root was fixed: I thought if I could lift the acorn and stand, I would heave the world. Beside the root erupted a greening shoot, and from the shoot spread two furred, serrated leaves, tiny leaves of chestnut oak, the size of two intricate grains of rice. That acorn was pressured, blown, driven down with force and up with furl, making at once a power dive to grit and *grand jeté en l'air*.

Since then the killing frost has struck. If I got lost now on the mountains or in the valley, and acted foolishly, I would be dead of hypothermia and my brain wiped smooth as a plate long before the water in my flesh elongated to crystal slivers that would pierce and shatter the walls of my cells. The harvest is in, the granaries full. The broadleaf trees of the world's forests have cast their various fruits: "Oak, a nut; Sycamore, achenes; California Laurel, a drupe; Maple, a samara; Locust, a legume; Pomegranate, a berry; Buckeye, a capsule; Apple, a pome." Now the twin leaves of the seedling chestnut oak on the Carvin's Cove path have dried, dropped, and blown; the acorn itself is shrunk and sere. But the sheath of the stem holds water and the white root still delicately sucks, porous and permeable, mute. The death of the self of which the great writers speak is no violent act. It is merely the joining of the great rock

heart of the earth in its roll. It is merely the slow cessation of the will's sprints and the intellect's chatter: it is waiting like a hollow bell with stilled tongue. *Fuge, tace, quiesce*. The waiting itself is the thing.

Last year I saw three migrating Canada geese flying low over the frozen duck pond where I stood. I heard a heart-stopping blast of speed before I saw them; I felt the flayed air slap at my face. They thundered across the pond, and back, and back again: I swear I have never seen such speed, such single-mindedness, such flailing of wings. They froze the duck pond as they flew; they rang the air; they disappeared. I think of this now, and my brain vibrates to the blurred bastinado of feathered bone. "Our God shall come," it says in a psalm for Advent, "and shall not keep silence; there shall go before him a consuming fire, and a mighty tempest shall be stirred up round about him." It is the shock I remember. Not only does something come if you wait, but it pours over you like a waterfall, like a tidal wave. You wait in all naturalness without expectation or hope, emptied, translucent, and that which comes rocks and topples you; it will shear, loose, launch, winnow, grind.

I have gluttoned on richness and welcome hyssop. This distant silver November sky, these sere branches of trees, shed and bearing their pure and secret colors—this is the real world, not the world gilded and pearled. I stand under wiped skies directly, naked, without intercessors. Frost winds have lofted my body's bones with all their restless sprints to an airborne raven's glide. I am buoyed by a calm and effortless longing, an angled pitch of the will, like the set of the wings of the monarch which climbed a hill by falling still.

There is the wave breast of thanksgiving—a catching God's eye with the easy motions of praise—and a time for it. In ancient

Israel's rites for a voluntary offering of thanksgiving, the priest comes before the altar in clean linen, empty-handed. Into his hands is placed the breast of the slain unblemished ram of consecration: and he waves it as a wave offering before the Lord. The wind's knife has done its work. Thanks be to God.

15



The Waters of Separation

They will question thee concerning what they should expend. Say: "The abundance."

The Koran

"Fair weather cometh out of the north: with God is terrible majesty."

Today is the winter solstice. The planet tilts just so to its star, lists and holds circling in a fixed tension between veering and longing, and spins helpless, exalted, in and out of that fleet blazing touch. Last night Orion vaulted and spread all over the sky, pagan and lunatic, his shoulder and knee on fire, his sword three suns at the ready—for what?

And today was fair, hot, even; I woke and my fingers were hot and dry to their own touch, like the skin of a stranger. I stood at the window, the bay window on which one summer a waxen-looking grasshopper had breathed puff puff, and

thought, I won't see this year again, not again so innocent; and longing wrapped round my throat like a scarf. "For the Heavenly Father desires that we should see," said Ruysbroeck, "and that is why He is ever saying to our inmost spirit one deep unfathomable word and nothing else." But what is that word? Is this mystery or coyness? A cast-iron bell hung from the arch of my rib cage; when I stirred it rang, or it tolled, a long syllable pulsing ripples up my lungs and down the gritty sap inside my bones, and I couldn't make it out; I felt the voiced vowel like a sigh or a note but I couldn't catch the consonant that shaped it into sense. I wrenched myself from the window. I stepped outside.

Here by the mock-orange hedge was a bee, a honeybee, sprung from its hive by the heat. Instantly I had a wonderful idea. I had recently read that ancient Romans thought that bees were killed by echoes. It seemed a far-fetched and pleasing notion, that a spoken word or falling rock given back by cliffs—that airy nothing which nevertheless bore and spread the uncomprehended impact of something—should stun these sturdy creatures right out of the air. I could put it to the test. It was as good an excuse for a walk as any; it might still the bell, even, or temper it true.

I knew where I could find an echo; I'd have to take my chances on finding another December bee. I tied a sweater around my waist and headed for the quarry. The experiment didn't pan out, exactly, but the trip led on to other excursions and vigils up and down the landscape of this brief year's end day.

It was hot; I never needed the sweater. A great tall cloud moved elegantly across an invisible walkway in the upper air, sliding on its flat foot like an enormous proud snail. I smelled silt on the

wind, turkey, laundry, leaves . . . my God what a world. There is no accounting for one second of it. On the quarry path through the woods I saw again the discarded aquarium; now, almost a year later, still only one side of the aquarium's glass was shattered. I could plant a terrarium here, I thought; I could transfer the two square feet of forest floor *under* the glass to *above* the glass, framing it, hiding a penny, and saying to passers-by look! look! here is two square feet of the world.

I waited for an hour at the quarry, roving, my eyes filtering the air for flecks, until at last I discovered a bee. It was wandering listlessly among dried weeds on the stony bank where I had sat months ago and watched a mosquito pierce and suck a copperhead on a rock; beyond the bank, fingers of ice touched the green quarry pond in the shade of the sheared bare cliffs beyond. The setup was perfect. Hello! I tried tentatively: Hello! faltered the cliffs under the forest; and did the root tips quiver in the rock? But that is no way to kill a creature, saying hello. Goodbye! I shouted; Goodbye! came back, and the bee drifted unconcerned among the weeds.

It could be, I reasoned, that ancient Roman naturalists knew this fact that has escaped us because it works only in Latin. My Latin is sketchy. *Habeas corpus!* I cried; *Deus absconditus! Veni!* And the rock cliff batted it back: *Veni!* and the bee droned on.

That was that. It was almost noon; the tall cloud was gone. To West Virginia, where it snubbed on a high ridge, snared by trees, and sifted in shards over the side? I watched the bee as long as I could, catching it with my eyes and losing it, until it rose suddenly in the air like a lost balloon and vanished into the forest. I stood alone. I still seemed to hear the unaccustomed sound of my own voice honed to a quaver by rock, thrown back down my

throat and cast dying around me, lorn: could that have been heard at Hollins Pond, or behind me, across the creek, up the hill the starlings fly over? Was anybody there to hear? I felt again the bell resounding faint under my ribs. I'm coming, when I can. I quit the quarry, my spurt of exuberance drained, my spirit edgy and taut.

The quarry path parallels Tinker Creek far upstream from my house, and when the woods broke into clearing and pasture, I followed the creek banks down. When I drew near the tear-shaped island, which I had never before approached from this side of the creek, a fence barred my way, a feeble wire horse fence that wobbled across the creek and served me as a sagging bridge to the island. I stood, panting, breathing the frail scent of fresh water and feeling the sun heat my hair.

The December grass on the island was blanched and sere, pale against the dusty boles of sycamores, noisy underfoot. Behind me, the way I had come, rose the pasture belonging to Twilight, a horse of a perpetually different color whose name was originally Midnight, and who one spring startled the neighborhood by becoming brown. Far before me Tinker Mountain glinted and pitched in the sunlight. The Lucas orchard spanned the middle distance, its wan peach limbs swept and poised just so, row upon row, like a stageful of thin innocent dancers who will never be asked to perform; below the orchard rolled the steers' pasture yielding to floodplain fields and finally the sycamore log bridge to the island where in horror I had watched a green frog sucked to a skin and sunk. A fugitive, empty sky vaulted overhead, apparently receding from me the harder I searched its dome for a measure of distance.

Downstream at the island's tip where the giant water bug clasped and ate the living frog, I sat and sucked at my own dry

knuckles. It was the way that frog's eyes crumpled. His mouth was a gash of terror; the shining skin of his breast and shoulder shivered once and sagged, reduced to an empty purse; but oh those two snuffed eyes! They crinkled, the comprehension poured out of them as if sense and life had been a mere incidental addition to the idea of eyes, a filling like any jam in a jar that is soon and easily emptied; they flattened, lightless, opaque, and sank. Did the giant water bug have the frog by the back parts, or by the hollow of the thigh? Would I eat a frog's leg if offered? Yes.

In addition to the wave breast of thanksgiving, in which the wave breast is waved before the Lord, there is another voluntary offering performed at the same time. In addition to the wave breast of thanksgiving, there is the heave shoulder. The wave breast is waved before the altar of the Lord; the heave shoulder is heaved. What I want to know is this: Does the priest heave it *at* the Lord? Does he *throw* the shoulder of the ram of consecration—a ram that, before the priest slayed and chunked it, had been perfect and whole, not “Blind, or broken, or maimed, or having a wen, or scurvy, or scabbed . . . bruised, or crushed, or broken, or cut”—does he hurl it across the tabernacle, between the bloodied horns of the altar, at God? Now look what you made me do. And then he eats it. This heave is a violent, desperate way of catching God's eye. It is not inappropriate. We are people; we are permitted to have dealings with the creator and we must speak up for the creation. God *look* at what you've done to this creature, look at the sorrow, the cruelty, the long damned waste! Can it possibly, ludicrously be for *this* that on this unconscious planet with my innocent kind I play softball all spring, to develop my throwing arm? How high, how far, could I heave a little shred of frog shoulder at the Lord? How high, how far, how long until I die?

I fingered the winter killed grass, looping it round the tip of my finger like hair, ruffling its tips with my palms. Another year has twined away, unrolled and dropped across nowhere like a flung banner painted in gibberish. "The last act is bloody, however brave be all the rest of the play; at the end they throw a little earth upon your head, and it's all over forever." Somewhere, everywhere, there is a gap, like the shuddering chasm of Shadow Creek which gapes open at my feet, like a sudden split in the window or hull of a high-altitude jet, into which things slip, or are blown, out of sight, vanished in a rush, blasted, gone, and can no more be found. For the living there is rending loss at each opening of the eye, each *augenblick*, as a muskrat dives, a heron takes alarm, a leaf floats spinning away. There is death in the pot for the living's food, fly-blown meat, muddy salt, and plucked herbs bitter as squill. If you can get it. How many people have prayed for their daily bread and famished? They die their daily death as utterly as did the frog, *people*, played with, dabbled upon, when God knows they loved their life. In a winter famine, desperate Algonquian Indians "ate broth made of smoke, snow, and buckskin, and the rash of pellagra appeared like tattooed flowers on their emaciated bodies—the roses of starvation, in a French physician's description; and those who starved died covered with roses." Is this beauty, these gratuitous roses, or a mere display of force?

Or is beauty itself an intricately fashioned lure, the cruelest hoax of all? There is a certain fragment of an ancient and involved Eskimo tale I read in Farley Mowat that for years has risen, unbidden, in my mind. The fragment is a short scenario, observing all the classical unities, simple and cruel, and performed by the light of a soapstone seal-oil lamp.

A young man in a strange land falls in love with a young

woman and takes her to wife in her mother's tent. By day the women chew skins and boil meat while the young man hunts. But the old crone is jealous; she wants the boy. Calling her daughter to her one day, she offers to braid her hair; the girl sits pleased, proud, and soon strangled by her own hair. One thing Eskimos know is skinning. The mother takes her curved hand knife shaped like a dancing skirt, skins her daughter's beautiful face, and presses that empty flap smooth on her own skull. When the boy returns that night he lies with her, in the tent on top of the world. But he is wet from hunting; the skin mask shrinks and slides, uncovering the shriveled face of the old mother, and the boy flees in horror, forever.

Could it be that if I climbed the dome of heaven and scabbled and clutched at the beautiful cloth till I loaded my fists with a wrinkle to pull, that the mask would rip away to reveal a toothless old ugly, eyes glazed with delight?

A wind rose, quickening; it seemed at the same instant to invade my nostrils and vibrate my gut. I stirred and lifted my head. No, I've gone through this a million times, beauty is not a hoax—how many days have I learned not to stare at the back of my hand when I could look out at the creek? Come on, I say to the creek, surprise me; and it does, with each new drop. Beauty is real. I would never deny it; the appalling thing is that I forget it. Waste and extravagance go together up and down the banks, all along the intricate fringe of spirit's free incursions into time. On either side of me the creek snared and kept the sky's distant lights, shaped them into shifting substance and bore them speckled down.

This Tinker Creek! It was low today, and clear. On the still side of the island the water held pellucid as a pane, a gloss on runes of sandstone, shale, and snail-inscribed clay silt; on the

faster side it hosted a blinding profusion of curved and pitched surfaces, flecks of shadow and tatters of sky. These are the waters of beauty and mystery, issuing from a gap in the granite world; they fill the lodes in my cells with a light like petaled water, and they churn in my lungs mighty and frigid, like a big ship's screw. And these are also the waters of separation: they purify, acrid and laving, and they cut me off. I am spattered with a sop of ashes, burnt bone knobs, and blood; I range wild-eyed, flying over fields and plundering the woods, no longer quite fit for company.

Bear with me one last time. In the old Hebrew ordinance for the waters of separation, the priest must find a red heifer, a red heifer unblemished, which has never known the yoke, and lead her outside the people's camp, and sacrifice her, burn her wholly, without looking away: "burn the heifer in his sight; her skin, and her flesh, and her blood, with her dung, shall he burn." Into the stinking flame the priest casts the wood of a cedar tree for longevity, hyssop for purgation, and a scarlet thread for a vein of living blood. It is from these innocent ashes that the waters of separation are made, anew each time, by steeping them in a vessel with fresh running water. This special water purifies. A man—any man—dips a sprig of hyssop into the vessel and sprinkles—merely sprinkles!—the water upon the unclean, "upon him that touched a bone, or one slain, or one dead." So. But I never signed up for this role. The bone touched me.

I stood, alone, and the world swayed. I am a fugitive and a vagabond, a sojourner seeking signs. Isak Dinesen in Kenya, her heart utterly broken by loss, stepped out of the house at sunrise, seeking a sign. She saw a rooster lunge and rip a chameleon's tongue from its root in the throat and gobble it down. And then Isak Dinesen had to pick up a stone and smash the chameleon.

But I had seen that sign, more times than I had ever sought it; today I saw an inspiring thing, a pretty thing, really, and small.

I was standing lost, sunk, my hands in my pockets, gazing towards Tinker Mountain and feeling the earth reel down. All at once I saw what looked like a Martian spaceship whirling towards me in the air. It flashed borrowed light like a propeller. Its forward motion greatly outran its fall. As I watched, transfixed, it rose, just before it would have touched a thistle, and hovered pirouetting in one spot, then twirled on and finally came to rest. I found it in the grass; it was a maple key, a single winged seed from a pair. Hullo. I threw it into the wind and it flew off again, bristling with animate purpose, not like a thing dropped or windblown, pushed by the witless winds of convection currents hauling round the world's rondure where they must, but like a creature muscled and vigorous, or a creature spread thin to that other wind, the wind of the spirit which bloweth where it listeth, lighting, and raising up, and easing down. O maple key, I thought, I must confess I thought, o welcome, cheers.

And the bell under my ribs rang a true note, a flourish as of blended horns, clarion, sweet, and making a long dim sense I will try at length to explain. Flung is too harsh a word for the rush of the world. Blown is more like it, but blown by a generous, unending breath. That breath never ceases to kindle, exuberant, abandoned; frayed splinters spatter in every direction and burgeon into flame. And now when I sway to a fitful wind, alone and listing, I will think, maple key. When I see a photograph of earth from space, the planet so startlingly painterly and hung, I will think, maple key. When I shake your hand or meet your eyes I will think, two maple keys. If I am a maple key falling, at least I can twirl.

Thomas Merton wrote, "There is always a temptation to diddle around in the contemplative life, making itsy-bitsy statues." There is always an enormous temptation in all of life to diddle around making itsy-bitsy friends and meals and journeys for itsy-bitsy years on end. It is so self-conscious, so apparently moral, simply to step aside from the gaps where the creeks and winds pour down, saying, I never merited this grace, quite rightly, and then to sulk along the rest of your days on the edge of rage. I won't have it. The world is wilder than that in all directions, more dangerous and bitter, more extravagant and bright. We are making hay when we should be making whoopee; we are raising tomatoes when we should be raising Cain, or Lazarus.

Ezekiel excoriates false prophets as those who have "not gone up into the gaps." The gaps are the thing. The gaps are the spirit's one home, the altitudes and latitudes so dazzlingly spare and clean that the spirit can discover itself for the first time like a once-blind man unbound. The gaps are the cliffs in the rock where you cower to see the back parts of God; they are the fissures between mountains and cells the wind lances through, the icy narrowing fiords splitting the cliffs of mystery. Go up into the gaps. If you can find them; they shift and vanish too. Stalk the gaps. Squeak into a gap in the soil, turn, and unlock—more than a maple—a universe. This is how you spend this afternoon, and tomorrow morning, and tomorrow afternoon. *Spend* the afternoon. You can't take it with you.

I live in tranquillity and trembling. Sometimes I dream. I am interested in Alice mainly when she eats the cookie that makes her smaller. I would pare myself or be pared that I too might pass through the merest crack, a gap I know is there in the sky. I am looking just now for the cookie. Sometimes I open, pried

like a fruit. Or I am porous as old bone, or translucent, a tinted condensation of the air like a watercolor wash, and I gaze around me in bewilderment, fancying I cast no shadow. Sometimes I ride a bucking faith while one hand grips and the other flails the air, and like any daredevil I gouge with my heels for blood, for a wilder ride, for more.

There is not a guarantee in the world. Oh your *needs* are guaranteed, your needs are absolutely guaranteed by the most stringent of warranties, in the plainest, truest words: knock; seek; ask. But you must read the fine print. "Not as the world giveth, give I unto you." That's the catch. If you can catch it will catch you up, aloft, up to any gap at all, and you'll come back, for you will come back, transformed in a way you may not have bargained for—dribbling and crazed. The waters of separation, however lightly sprinkled, leave indelible stains. Did you think, before you were caught, that you needed, say, life? Do you think you will keep your life, or anything else you love? But no. Your needs are all met. But not as the world giveth. You see the needs of your own spirit met whenever you have asked, and you have learned that the outrageous guarantee holds. You see the creatures die, and you know you will die. And one day it occurs to you that you must not need life. Obviously. And then you're gone. You have finally understood that you're dealing with a maniac.

I think that the dying pray at the last not "please," but "thank you," as a guest thanks his host at the door. Falling from airplanes the people are crying thank you, thank you, all down the air; and the cold carriages draw up for them on the rocks. Divinity is not playful. The universe was not made in jest but in solemn incomprehensible earnest. By a power that is unfathomably secret, and holy, and fleet. There is nothing to be done about it, but ignore it, or see. And then you walk fearlessly, eat-

ing what you must, growing wherever you can, like the monk on the road who knows precisely how vulnerable he is, who takes no comfort among death-forgetting men, and who carries his vision of vastness and might around in his tunic like a live coal which neither burns nor warms him, but with which he will not part.

I used to have a cat, an old fighting tom, who sprang through the open window by my bed and pummeled my chest, barely sheathing his claws. I've been bloodied and mauled, wrung, dazzled, drawn. I taste salt on my lips in the early morning; I surprise my eyes in the mirror and they are ashes, or fiery sprouts, and I gape appalled, or full of breath. The planet whirls alone and dreaming. Power broods, spins, and lurches down. The planet and the power meet with a shock. They fuse and tumble, lightning, ground fire; they part, mute, submitting, and touch again with hiss and cry. The tree with the lights in it buzzes into flame and the cast-rock mountains ring.

Emerson saw it. "I dreamed that I floated at will in the great Ether, and I saw this world floating also not far off, but diminished to the size of an apple. Then an angel took it in his hand and brought it to me and said, 'This must thou eat.' And I ate the world." All of it. All of it intricate, speckled, gnawed, fringed, and free. Israel's priests offered the wave breast and the heave shoulder together, freely, in full knowledge, for thanksgiving. They waved, they heaved, and neither gesture was whole without the other, and both meant a wide-eyed and keen-eyed thanks. Go your way, eat the fat, and drink the sweet, said the bell. A sixteenth-century alchemist wrote of the philosopher's stone, "One finds it in the open country, in the village and in the town. It is in everything which God created. Maids throw it on the street.

Children play with it." The giant water bug ate the world. And like Billy Bray I go my way, and my left foot says "Glory," and my right foot says "Amen": in and out of Shadow Creek, upstream and down, exultant, in a daze, dancing, to the twin silver trumpets of praise.

Afterword to the Twenty-fifth Anniversary Edition



In October, 1972, camping in Acadia National Park on the Maine coast, I read a nature book. I had very much admired this writer's previous book. The new book was tired. Everything in it was the dear old familiar this and the dear old familiar that. God save us from meditations. What on earth had happened to this man? Decades had happened, that was all. Exhaustedly, he wondered how fireflies made their light. I knew—at least I happened to know—that two enzymes called luciferin and luciferase combined to make the light. It seemed that if the writer did not know, he should have learned. Perhaps, I thought that night reading in the tent, I might write about the world before I got tired of it.

I had recently read Colette's *Break of Day*, a book about her daily life that shocked young metaphysical me by its frivol-

ity: lots of pretty meals and roguish conversations. Still, I read it all; its vivid foreignness intrigued me. Maybe my daily life would interest people by its foreignness, too. And was it at that time that I read Edwin Muir's wonderful *Autobiography* and noticed how much stronger was the half he wrote when he was young?

A *New Yorker* essay that fall noted that mathematicians do good work while they are young because as they age they suffer "the failure of the nerve for excellence." The phrase struck me, and I wrote it down. Nerve had never been a problem; excellence sounded novel.

How boldly committed to ideas we are in our twenties! Why not write some sort of nature book—say, a theodicy? In November, back in Virginia, I fooled around with the idea and started filling out five-by-seven index cards with notes from years of reading.

Running the story through a year's seasons was conventional, so I resisted it, but since each of the dozen alternative structures I proposed injured, usually fatally, the already frail narrative, I was stuck with it. The book's other, two-part structure interested me more. Neoplatonic Christianity described two routes to God: the *via positiva* and the *via negativa*. Philosophers on the *via positiva* assert that God is omnipotent, omniscient, etc; that God possesses all positive attributes. I found the *via negativa* more congenial. Its seasoned travelers (Gregory of Nyssa in the fourth century and Pseudo-Dionysius in the sixth) stressed God's unknowability. Anything we may say of God is untrue, as we can know only creaturely attributes, which do not apply to God. Thinkers on the *via negativa* jettisoned everything that was not God; they hoped that what was left would be only the divine dark.

The book's first half, the *via positiva*, accumulates the

world's goodness and God's. After an introductory chapter, the book begins with "Seeing," a chapter whose parts gave me so much trouble to put together I nearly abandoned the book and its attendant piles of outlines and cards. The *via positiva* culminates in "Intricacy." A shamefully feeble "Flood" chapter washes all that away, and the second half of the book starts down the *via negativa* with "Fecundity," the dark side of intricacy. This half culminates in "Northing" (it is, with the last, my favorite chapter), in which the visible world empties, leaf by leaf. "Northing" is the counterpart to "Seeing." A concluding chapter keeps the bilateral symmetry.

As I finished each chapter, I collected those index cards with bits I liked but had not been able to use and filed them under later chapters. The more I wrote, the thicker the later files grew. When I reached "Northing" I thought, It's now or never for these best bits, so—exultant, starved, delirious on caffeine—I threw them all in.

Later I regretted naming the chapters, nineteenth-century-style, because somebody called the book a collection of essays—which it is not. The misnomer stuck, and adhered to later books, too, only one of which, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, was in fact a collection of (narrative) essays. Consequently I have the undeserved title of essayist.

Because a great many otherwise admirable men do not read books American women write, I wanted to use a decidedly male pseudonym. When *Harper's* magazine took a chapter, and then *Atlantic Monthly*, I was so tickled I used my real name, and the jig was pretty much up. Still I intended to publish the book as A. Dillard, hoping—as we all hope, and hope in vain—someone might notice only the text, not considering its jacket, its picture, or the advertising; and not remembering someone else's impression of the book, or its writer, or its other readers; and not know-

ing the writer's gender, or age, or nationality—just read the book, starting cold with the first sentence. Editors and agents talked me out of using "A. Dillard," and talked me into allowing a dust-jacket picture. I regret both decisions. I acknowledge, however, that living in hiding would be cumbersome, and itself ostentatious.

It never entered my mind that publishing a book could be confusing. The publisher's publicity director and I wrangled daily on the telephone, at full strength, in mutual mystification, her to urge, me to refuse, an unceasing cannonade of offers. Some were hilarious: Would I model clothes for *Vogue*? Would I write for Hollywood? The decision to avoid publicity, to duck a promotional tour, and especially not to appear on television—not on the *Today* show, not on any of innumerable network specials, not on my own (believe it or not) weekly show—saved my neck.

Later a reporter interviewed me over the phone. "You write so much about Eskimos in this book," she said. "How come there are so many Eskimos?" I said that the spare arctic landscape suggested the soul's emptying itself in readiness for the incursions of the divine. There was a pause. At last she said, "I don't think my editor will go for that."

How does *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* seem after twenty-five years? Above all, and salvifically, I hope, it seems bold. That it is overbold, and bold in metaphor, seems a merit. I dashed in without any fear of God; at twenty-seven I had all the license I thought I needed to engage the greatest subjects on earth. I dashed in without any fear of man. I thought that nine or ten monks might read it.

I'm afraid I suffered youth's drawback, too: a love of grand sentences, and fancied a grand sentence was not quite done until

it was overdone. Some parts seem frivolous. Its willingness to say “I” and “me” embarrasses—but at least it used the first person as a point of view only, a hand-held camera directed outwards.

Inexplicably, this difficult book has often strayed into boarding-school and high-school curricula as well as required college courses, and so have some of its successors. Consequently, I suspect, many educated adults who would have enjoyed it, or at least understood it, never opened it—why read a book your kid is toting? And consequently a generation of youth has grown up cursing my name—which, you recall, I didn’t want to use in the first place.

About Annie Dillard



*Annie Dillard has carved a unique niche for herself in the world of American letters. Over the course of her career, Dillard has written essays, poetry, memoirs, literary criticism—even a western novel. In whatever genre she works, Dillard distinguishes herself with her carefully wrought language, keen observations, and original metaphysical insights. Her first significant publication, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, drew numerous comparisons to Thoreau’s *Walden*; in the years since *Pilgrim* appeared, Dillard’s name has come to stand for excellence in writing.*

Tickets for a Prayer Wheel was Dillard’s first publication. This slim volume of poetry—which expressed the author’s yearning to sense a hidden God—was praised by reviewers. Within months of

Tickets's appearance, however, the book was completely overshadowed by the release of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. Dillard lived quietly on Tinker Creek in Virginia's Roanoke Valley, observing the natural world, taking notes, and reading voluminously in a wide variety of disciplines, including theology, philosophy, natural science, and physics. Following the progression of seasons, *Pilgrim* probes the cosmic significance of the beauty and violence coexisting in the natural world.

The book met with immediate popular and critical success. "One of the most pleasing traits of the book is the graceful harmony between scrutiny of real phenomena and the reflections to which that gives rise," noted a *Commentary* reviewer. "Anecdotes of animal behavior become so effortlessly enlarged into symbols by the deepened insight of meditation. Like a true transcendentalist, Miss Dillard understands her task to be that of full alertness." Other critics found fault with Dillard's work, however, calling it self-absorbed or overwritten. Charles Deemer of the *New Leader*, for example, claimed that "if Annie Dillard had not spelled out what she was up to in this book, I don't think I would have guessed. . . . Her observations are typically described in overstatement reaching toward hysteria." A more charitable assessment came from Muriel Haynes of *Ms*. While finding Dillard to be "susceptible to fits of rapture," Haynes asserted that the author's "imaginative flights have the special beauty of surprise."

The author's next book delved into the metaphysical aspects of pain. *Holy the Firm* was inspired by the plight of one of Dillard's neighbors, a seven-year-old child badly burned in a plane crash. As Dillard reflects on the maimed child and on a moth consumed by flame, she struggles with the problem of reconciling faith in a loving god with the reality of a violent world. Only seventy-six pages long, the book overflows with "great richness,

beauty and power," according to Frederick Buechner in the *New York Times Book Review*. *Atlantic* reviewer C. Michael Curtis concurred, adding that "Dillard writes about the ferocity and beauty of natural order with . . . grace."

Elegant writing also distinguishes *Living by Fiction*, Dillard's fourth book, in which the author analyzes the differences between modernist and traditional fiction. "Everyone who timidly, bombastically, reverently, scholastically—even fraudulently—essays to live 'the life of the mind' should read this book," advised Carolyn See in the *Los Angeles Times*. See went on to describe *Living by Fiction* as "somewhere between scholarship, metaphysics, an acid trip and a wonderful conversation with a most smart person." "Whether the field of investigation is nature or fiction, Annie Dillard digs for ultimate meanings as instinctively and as determinedly as hogs for truffles," remarked *Washington Post Book World* contributor John Breslin. "The resulting upheaval can be disconcerting . . . still, uncovered morsels are rich and tasty."

Dillard returned to reflections on nature and religion in a book of essays entitled *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters*. In minutely detailed descriptions of a solar eclipse, visits to South America and the Galapagos Islands, and other, more commonplace events and locations, Dillard continues "the pilgrimage begun at Tinker Creek with an acuity of eye and ear that is matched by an ability to communicate a sense of wonder," stated Beaufort Cranford in the *Detroit News*. *Washington Post Book World* contributor Douglas Bauer was similarly pleased with the collection, judging the essays to be "almost uniformly splendid." In his estimation, Dillard's "art as an essayist is to move with the scrutinous eye through events and receptions that are random on their surfaces and to find, with grace and always-redeeming wit, the connections."

Dillard later chronicled her experiences as a member of a Chinese-American cultural exchange in a short, straightforward volume entitled *Encounters with Chinese Writers*; she then looked deeply into her past to produce another best-seller, *An American Childhood*. On one level, *An American Childhood* details Dillard's upbringing in an idiosyncratic, wealthy family; in another sense, the memoir tells the story of a young person's awakening to the world. In the words of *Washington Post* writer Charles Trueheart, Dillard's "memories of childhood are like her observations of nature: they feed her acrobatic thinking, and drive the free verse of her prose." Critics also applauded Dillard's keen insight into the unique perceptions of youth, as well as her exuberant spirit. "Loving and lyrical, nostalgic without being wistful, this is a book about the capacity for joy," said *Los Angeles Times Book Review* contributor Cyra McFadden, while Noel Perrin of the *New York Times Book Review* observed that "Ms. Dillard has written an autobiography in semimystical prose about the growth of her own mind, and it's an exceptionally interesting account."

The activity that had occupied most of Dillard's adulthood was the subject of her next book, *The Writing Life*. With regard to content, *The Writing Life* is not a manual on craft nor a guide to getting published; rather, it is a study of a writer at work and the processes involved in that work. Among critics, the book drew mixed reaction. "Annie Dillard is one of my favorite contemporary authors," Sara Maitland acknowledged in the *New York Times Book Review*. "Dillard is a wonderful writer and *The Writing Life* is full of joys. These are clearest to me when she comes at her subject tangentially, talking not of herself at her desk but of other parallel cases—the last chapter, a story about a stunt pilot who was an artist of air, is, quite simply, breathtaking. There are so many bits like this. . . . Unfortunately, the bits do not add

up to a book." *Washington Post Book World* contributor Wendy Law-Yone voiced similar sentiments, finding the book "intriguing but not entirely satisfying" and "a sketch rather than a finished portrait." Nevertheless, she wondered, "Can anyone who has ever read Annie Dillard resist hearing what she has to say about writing? Her authority has been clear since *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*—a mystic's wonder at the physical world expressed in beautiful, near-biblical prose."

Dillard ventured into new territory with her 1992 publication, *The Living*, a sprawling historical novel set in the Pacific Northwest. Reviewers hailed the author's first novel as masterful. "Her triumph is that this panoramic evocation of a very specific landscape and people might as well have been settled upon any other time and place—for this is, above all, a novel about the reiterant, precarious, wondrous, solitary, terrifying, utterly common condition of human life," wrote Molly Gloss in the *Washington Post Book World*. Dillard's celebrated skill with words was also much in evidence here, according to Gloss, who noted that Dillard "uses language gracefully, releasing at times a vivid, startling imagery." Carol Anshaw concurred in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*: "The many readers who have been drawn in the past to Dillard's work for its elegant and muscular language won't be disappointed in these pages."

Following the 1994 publication of *The Annie Dillard Reader*, a collection of poems, stories, and essays that prompted a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer to term Dillard "a writer of acute and singular observation," Dillard produced two works that were published in 1995. *Modern American Memoirs*, which Dillard edited with Cort Conley, is a collection of thirty-five pieces excerpted from various writers' memoirs. Authors whose work appears here include Ralph Ellison, Margaret Mead, Reynolds Price, Kate Simon, and Russell Baker. "Many of these memoirs

are striking and memorable despite their brevity," commented Madeline Marget in a *Commonweal* review of the collection.

Mornings Like This: Found Poems, Dillard's other 1995 publication, is an experimental volume of poetry. To create these poems, Dillard culled lines from other writers' prose works—Vincent Van Gogh's letters and a Boy Scout Handbook, for example—and "arranged [the lines] in such a way as to simulate a poem originating with a single author," noted John Haines in *The Hudson Review*. While commenting that Dillard's technique in this book works better with humorous and joyful pieces than with serious ones, a *Publishers Weekly* critic remarked that "these co-op verses are never less than intriguing." Haines expressed serious concern with the implications of Dillard's experiment: "What does work like this say about the legitimacy of authorship?" He concluded, however, that "on the whole the collection has in places considerable interest."