December

Go to the winter woods: listen there, look, watch,
and the 'dead months' will give you a subtler secret
than any you have yet found in the forest.

Fiona Macleod, *Where the Forest Murmurs*

DECEMBER 1. He must have tiptoed across our back porch because I never heard him, but as I rehung the bird feeders before dawn, I saw his tracks in the dusting of snow. The night had been bitterly cold and windy, and I had almost told my husband Bruce not to bring in the feeders. What self-respecting bear would be out on such a night? Yet on this first day of December I saw the unmistakable evidence.

When Bruce went for a walk after breakfast, he discovered bear tracks on Greenbrier Trail that headed through Margaret's Woods and across First Field to our driveway.

First the bear had poked around the outside of our guesthouse, and then he had followed our son Dave's well-worn track from the guesthouse to the main house.

At 9 A.M. I took up the bear's trail and tracked it across the backyard and into the open doors of our garage. That's when I decided it had to be a male because he had been checking out Bruce's machinery as any male would. Besides, male bears usually go into hibernation later than females.

After leaving the garage, he circled behind it, crossed our old garden and went into a small patch of woods between the

open land and the small powerline right-of-way that bisects our property. From there he had proceeded to the powerline pole, a "mark tree" in biologist lingo. Using a combination of "arched-back rubbing" and tree biting, bears re-mark these places several times a year. Once I even caught a bear in the act.

From the power pole, he more or less followed an old deer trail that winds between the woods and First Field. Because the snow was patchy and thin, I often had a difficult time finding his tracks and frequently had to backtrack. After several hundred feet he reached the Short Circuit Trail, which swings out into First Field to a summer trail Bruce cuts in our old field every year. The bear followed it up into the Norway spruce grove. Perhaps he was resting there.

Because his tracks were larger than my open, gloved hand, I hesitated a few seconds before plunging into the dark, quiet grove. But the grove was bearless and snowless, and I had to skirt the far edge of the spruces until I located his trail emerging from the conifers and heading for the Far Field Road. Anticipating easy tracking on the old woods road, I was dismayed to see that he had climbed down into the sheltered, warm, and fast-melting Roseberry Hollow instead. Even though he paralleled the Far Field Road, the going was difficult as I climbed down and up the steep slope many times, and under, around, and over fallen trees in pursuit of his melting tracks.

In several places I found the melted brown ovals where deer had lain and then leaped to their feet and run off, presumably frightened by the approaching bear. My walking stick helped me move over the landscape, and I used it to dig into the hillside one last time when the bear tracks returned to the Far Field Road near Coyote Bench. From there he stayed on the road, pausing once to dig in the snow beneath a tangle of grapevines in search of fallen fruit.

By then the sun was high and warm, and when I reached

the Far Field most of the snow had melted. Still, I was able to find his fading tracks and follow them as they crossed the field to the old red fox den. For a moment I thought he had wriggled through the small entrance, but the tracks continued to the upper edge of the Far Field and on to Pennyroyal Trail, where they went into the woods beyond the Far Field.

On the melted slope of Second Thicket the tracks disappeared in a brown blanket of dead, hay-scented ferns. After cautiously probing under an uprooted tree with a hole beneath that looked like a perfect place for a bear to hibernate, I gave up the chase. I had been pursuing him vigorously for more than two hours without a rest. Even though I hadn't seen my quarry, tracking the bear had given me a good workout and a little insight into how a bear moves over the landscape.

I rested on Coyote Bench and I watched a red-bellied woodpecker and a northern flicker foraging near the same woodpecker hole in a chestnut oak tree. A winter wren, a high-energy bird in a low-energy season, skipped across the road and into the underbrush where it called as it bounced up and down like a manic jack-in-the-box.

Then two northern flickers—a male and a female—landed on another tree down the slope from where I was sitting. They called to each other and performed a short "wick-a, wick-a" display, spreading their tail feathers and swaying back and forth. Next they flew to a broken-off chestnut oak snag and foraged, she above, he below. When he flew to another tree, he still called and their "wick-a, wick-a's" continued as they foraged on the snag and nearby trees.

According to ornithologists, flickers only give that call when they are defending territory or cementing pair bonds in the spring. At this season, they are supposed to be far south of here, although we often have a flicker or two overwintering if there are enough wild fruits to eat. The literature also says that they probably do not mate for life, but no one is sure.

The pair I watched seemed proof that at least one pair does, and that the "wick-a, wick-a" calls and displays are important for keeping in touch. The fluid natural world and its occupants rarely stay in the little boxes that scientists construct for them, and I frequently observe behavior that either hasn't been recorded by scientists or that contradicts it. Wildlife behavior, like human behavior, varies considerably within the same species.

Once the flickers moved on, so did I. By the time I reached Alan's Bench, in front of the spruce grove, the view was as clear as it ever gets against a cloud-studded, pearl-white and blue-streaked sky. The changing winter sky is one of the season's highlights. Even as I watched, the sun shone on first one blue mountain, then another, and each, in turn, glowed. Although I have admired this view for thirty-two years, I never tire of it.

Scott Russell Sanders, in his book *Hunting for Hope,* says, "Our part in the cosmic story is to gaze back, with comprehension and joy, at the whole of Creation. Our role is to witness and celebrate the beauty of things, the elegance and order in the world, and the Ground of Being that we share with all creatures."

Sanders also talks about simplicity, fidelity, beauty, and other aspects of leading a spiritually rich life. Sequestered up here on our mountain, we interact with hunters, walk the same trails day after day, drive as little as possible, and are without many of the necessities of today's frenzied society—a television, VCR, microwave, and dishwasher, for instance. We try to cooperate as little as possible with a system that tells us to spend more money so that our economy grows. Instead, we try to practice nonconsumptive activities such as reading, writing, walking, and simply being.

My companions are my husband Bruce and our middle son Dave. Both Bruce and Dave are as wedded to this place as I am. Bruce is the problem-solver; the person who runs the ma-

chinery and protects our property from the indignities of loggers and developers. As a poet and environmental activist, Dave has chosen to live and work in our guesthouse.

Our lifestyle leaves us plenty of time for family, friends, writing Christmas letters and notes, baking cookies and bread, eating meals made mostly of vegetables and, in season, the fresh food purchased from local farmers in nearby valleys. We try to participate actively in a few local nature and environmental groups and are especially interested in both private and public forest issues. But we also write letters and e-mails and make phone calls about state, national, and even international conservation issues. Most of all, we try to stay informed about what is going on in the wider world. It is enough to keep us busy for a lifetime.

Reading Sanders's book, in which he advocates such a life, I realize that Bruce and I have been doing this for four decades and mostly against the general tide. We raised our three sons here and the other two—Mark and Steve—have retained a love of the natural world and this place even though their career choices have led them far afield. As Sanders advocates, Bruce, Dave, and I have "re-imagine[d] ourselves as inhabitants rather than tourists, cultivating a stronger sense of place, learning about the land, its natural and human history, and the needs of our communities. . . . We [have] . . . learn[ed] to satisfy more of our own needs ourselves . . ."

Recently, Dave has reached out even farther by forming the Friends of Rothrock to defend and monitor nearby Rothrock State Forest. The group actively encourages road closures and the expansion of a state wild area within the forest and counters other threats to this beautiful place from highway projects and gas and oil exploration. Surely a rich country like ours can afford to leave wild places wild. Or must every nickel be wrung from an already impoverished natural world to create the still-elusive goal of more jobs?

DECEMBER 2. Nineteen degrees at dawn and frost blanketed the landscape as the sun rose over Laurel Ridge and shone through heavily frosted windows that sparkled in the light.

I stepped outside in the cold to listen to winter's silence, broken only by the quiet chitter of birds at our feeders. Even the Carolina wren and song sparrow, winter's persistent singers, were struck dumb by the cold. Usually we don't see frosted windows until January and suddenly we wonder not if we will have winter, after the Indian summer days of November, but how bad it will be.

The ground no longer had the springy feel of warmer days. Instead, it was hard beneath my feet as I took a short walk in the mid-afternoon sunshine. I had so many clothes on I could barely walk—long underwear, sweat pants, two pairs of wool socks, lined boots, lined knit mittens, flannel shirt, dark green hooded sweatshirt, heavy gray winter jacket, and orange hunting vest and hat, the latter because on this Saturday the mountain bristled with eager hunters. Sitting in a sunny, sheltered area on Sapsucker Ridge, bathed in winter sunlight, I didn't feel the cold breeze.

Then I walked on to the Far Field, seeing only deer and crows until I heard birds calling on the hillside. I sat down at the edge of the field and waited for them to come. And come they did—tufted titmice, black-capped chickadees, a brown creeper, hairy and red-bellied woodpeckers, American goldfinches, and white-breasted nuthatches—and for a few minutes I felt as if I had entered the oft-reproduced painting of St. Francis of Assisi.

Leaves skipped along the ground like hopping birds and trees groaned as they swayed in the wind. I wandered home over the sun-washed field as the sun sank below the ridge, grateful, as always, for the hushed silence of a winter sunset.

Much of our winter entertainment is at our bird feeders, both during the day and at night. Every fall, in early Novem-

ber, I hang two bird feeders from our back porch latticework. One is an open, wooden platform feeder that has been batted apart at least three times by black bears and patiently repaired by Bruce. That feeder is almost thirty-seven years old and has great sentimental value to us. The birds also prefer it to our other feeder, which is a sturdy tube reinforced by steel mesh and is, so far, bear- and squirrel-proof. Both feeders are filled with black-oil sunflower seeds.

On the back steps and ground below, I scatter mixed seeds of millet, cracked corn, and sunflower. That setup attracts diverse bird species and some mammals too, especially at night. On a mid-November evening three young raccoons first appeared on the back steps to eat birdseed. Turning on the porch light didn't deter them. Neither did opening the squeaky, inside door, sitting on a chair, and watching them through the screened storm door. When the telephone rang, they looked up briefly. When I talked to them, they also glanced up and sometimes retreated back down a step or two, but they soon returned and looked in at me. Finally, an hour and twenty minutes later, after occasionally staring intently into the darkness, they left.

Young raccoons usually spend the winter in a communal nest with their mother and sometimes other raccoons, as many as twenty-three, in a state of semihibernation, once they have built up a layer of fat to sustain themselves during winter food shortages. Those dens are most often in hollow trees but can also be under tree roots, in rocky crevices, or in remodeled woodchuck, opossum, fox, or skunk dens.

According to Dave, however, those raccoons probably live under the guesthouse, along with a skunk, an opossum, a porcupine, and a groundhog or two. Living above this mammal condominium, he expects to spend the winter listening to the assorted bumps, snarls, screams, and hisses below his bedroom as he has every winter he's been here.

Throughout November the triplets, as we called the young

raccoons, visited most evenings, but we never saw an adult. Often, though, they seemed to be disturbed by something in the forest and would leave. Sometimes I thought I heard a faint sound. Was their mother warning them off?

Then, tonight, a young opossum came to the back porch to eat seed. Unlike the triplets, it barely tolerated the porch light. Any sight or sound of us sent it back down the steps with many backward, hesitant looks. Because young opossums stay with their mothers for only three months, this one was on its own. Although opossums don't hibernate, they are relatively inactive in late autumn and winter, resting in nests of grass and leaves, or so the experts say. They are southern animals and have a difficult time if the temperature dips below nineteen degrees Fahrenheit. Opossums that live through a northern winter usually have deformed ears and have lost the tip of their tails because of frostbite.

This opossum arrived before the triplets' visit at 8:15. After the opossum left, Bruce took me outside to see an unusual alignment of the planets in the southwestern sky, one that won't occur for another hundred years. Unfortunately, Mercury was hidden below the ridge, but a perfect crescent moon shone at the end of a lineup of Mars, Venus, Jupiter, and Saturn. Had we a powerful telescope, we would have also seen Neptune, Uranus, and Pluto. The night was clear, beautiful, and still, and the stars glittered in a black velvet sky.

DECEMBER 3. Today it was even colder—thirteen degrees at dawn and clear. The frost-covered First Field sparkled, each grass blade encased in needled crystals.

Across the field, two large does looked nervously at me, but it is Sunday, day of peace, and they were safe. Still they leaped away instead of remaining boldly in sight as they usually do.

I headed over to the old clear-cut on property we bought after it was logged in 1991 and climbed above Greenbrier

Trail to walk Bird Count Trail. That trail is impassable in summer but remains a refuge for birds and animals in all seasons, especially during winter, when it is warmly lit by the rising sun. I too use it as a refuge and laid down against the old road bank to soak up the silence and sunlight.

Such a place inspires me to contemplate the miraculous creation of this earth and its evolution and to wonder why humans have not honored it more, especially now when we know its story and should be even more humble about altering its intricate complexities. Despite the abuse this mountain has taken over the last couple hundred years, I am immensely grateful that I have been able to live much of my life here among the abundant remnants of a mostly human-altered natural world.

Finally, the cold seeped through my jacket and sweatshirt, and I moved on. Ruffed grouse flushed, deer fled, and the clear, whistled song of a white-throated sparrow broke the silence. Ever since they lost their winter refuge in one of the south-facing hollow streamlets that was shorn of all its trees by the previous landowner, wintering white-throats have been rare here. Recently, though, they have been making a comeback and I am happy to be startled out of my winter reverie by their "poor Sam Peabody, Peabody, Peabody" song.

Frost crystals still sparkled on the bench blind and one crow sat above me, croaking its monotonous warning to wildlife of my presence. Another crow landed below the first one and they cawed back and forth for many minutes. Finally both flew off to Laurel Ridge, still noisily communicating. It sounded as if their cawing had more to do with each other than with my presence since it continued long after they left. Crows, after all, are monogamous and often live in family groups that include offspring as old as five years. Perhaps those crows were mates or siblings or parent and offspring.

In the warmth of midafternoon, a black, fuzzy caterpillar moved slowly across First Field Trail, fully protected by its fur

coat. It was the larva of the great or giant leopard moth *(Zeuzera pyrina)*, a species introduced from Europe before 1879. Overwintering in larval form by hiding in plant material, the caterpillar stirs on warm days to nibble a few leaves of plantain, dandelion, violets, honeysuckle, maples, or willows, its preferred foods. Although the caterpillar appears to be totally black when ambulatory, when threatened, it rolls into a ball, as it did today, and displays vivid red bands between its body segments. Eventually the caterpillar will metamorphose into a striking white and black moth with a three-inch wingspan and an orange-marked, blue abdomen.

At bedtime a great horned owl hooted, reminding me that soon they will be courting in the depths of midwinter.

DECEMBER 4. White-breasted nuthatches vocalized in the sunny woods beside the powerline right-of-way, heralding a couple of golden-crowned kinglets who flew in low to forage. A pair of downy woodpeckers tapped away too.

On the other side of the right-of-way, a male hairy woodpecker hitched his way up a red maple tree trunk and flaked bark off a horizontal limb, followed by a nuthatch doing the same thing.

A rooster crowed from Sinking Valley, which was peacefully swathed in misty clouds while Logan Valley seethed with sounds from the railroad, the interstate, and other commercial activity. Sinking Valley, lacking even a state highway, remains a bucolic anomaly. The advent of several Amish families a decade ago has helped the peaceful process as they pulled the farms they purchased off the electric and motorized grid. They also practice diversified farming and so we have a gratifying choice of vegetables and fruits throughout the growing season as well as honey, fresh chickens, and eggs. To see a farming community gain, rather than lose, diversity in these days of corporate and macrofarming is encouraging.

Lying still on the bank beside the Far Field Road, I heard a

winter wren, crows, pileated woodpeckers, cedar waxwings, and quiet drumming from a downy. This seemed to be a "woodpecker day," as they called loudly in addition to foraging during most of my walk.

Unfortunately, our hunters had a drive on and I was in the midst of it, wondering which direction to go to avoid them. Since this is Monday of the second week of buck season and at least nine have gotten their bucks, I had assumed the mountain would be relatively clear of hunters. Instead, I saw one stationed in his tree stand along Laurel Ridge Trail and another standing in front of the spruce grove, gun poised and ready, as I walked along the Far Field Road.

For years, before we posted our land for hunting by written permission only, hordes of mostly unknown folks dressed in orange ranged over our property, running herds of deer this way and that but not killing many. As a result, our forest suffered from overbrowsing and a loss of biodiversity.

A biologist friend, an authority on deer management, told us that our overpopulation of deer was slowly destroying our forest. Tree seedlings, wildflowers, and shrubs were nipped off as soon as they germinated. The understory was badly degraded, impacting other wildlife, such as ruffed grouse, many songbirds, and wild turkeys, that need such habitat for food and cover.

Our friend recommended having thirty to forty deer taken off our land each year. But according to him, that meant hosting 90 to 120 hunters on our land during hunting season. Already I spent most of the two weeks of buck season, except for Sundays, inside. That many hunters, most of them strangers, would turn our property into a battle zone.

Instead, we decided that we needed a few good hunters who would be safe, careful, and effective. First we included the four hunters who years before had helped us with a vandalism problem. Then we talked to people in the area for suggestions and comments about hunters we were considering.

Our eldest son Steve urged us to accept the local Scott brothers he remembered from high school and whose father, Cloyd, had hunted on our neighbor's property for many years. Our brother-in-law, Bob, a lifelong resident of the area, vouched for a few others. To that core list we added neighbors who had been friendly and helpful over the years. Altogether, we have about twenty hunters, depending on how many of their children join them from year to year. By getting to know the people who hunted on our land, we quickly overcame the safety issue and I've been able to go out every day of hunting season.

They also help us with new trail building and road maintenance, post and patrol our property, and share their bounty with us. Best of all, due in part to their in-depth knowledge of the property, they kill far more deer with far less shooting than when we had our land opened to everyone.

Since we initiated our deer management plan, we have watched our forest develop a thicker understory. For the first time in nearly thirty years, some tree seedlings are not only surviving but thriving. So too are many more species and numbers of wildflowers and shrubs.

DECEMBER 5. Fifty degrees by midmorning, clear and warm. It looks like winter, it sounds like winter, but it doesn't feel like winter.

Insects floated past in the sunlight. A gray moth flew up from the dried grasses at the Far Field and a spring peeper called from the Sapsucker Ridge woods. As I walked down First Field, an orange sulphur butterfly fluttered ahead of me.

Butterflies in December? Then another orange sulphur spiraled up from the grass below the back porch. This late-flying butterfly *(Colias eurytheme)*, also known as the alfalfa, comes from our own Southwest. When alfalfa cultivation became common after the 1870s, this western species spread rapidly eastward, reaching the Northeast in the 1930s. A yellow and

orange butterfly that has multiple broods sometimes as late as November, it has been recorded on December 16 near Philadelphia. Warm spells often encourage its overwintering pupa to emerge prematurely, so it is technically possible to see an orange sulphur long after its caterpillar food plants—alfalfa, vetches, and clovers—are finished.

The day remained a miracle of warmth and slanted light—seventy degrees in the sun—as we sat on the veranda in early afternoon. Winter, in a very short time, can have spring, autumn, and even summer weather. It is the most extreme of seasons at our latitude.

DECEMBER 6. Fierce winds last evening brought the temperature back down to eighteen degrees by dawn. A few chickadees and nuthatches called along Laurel Ridge Trail and, as I sat on Coyote Bench, a hairy woodpecker "peent-peented" loudly. I heard a quiet drumming that I thought was probably a downy woodpecker along with a scolding tufted titmouse. This sheltered, sunny place along the Far Field Road, like Bird Count Trail, is a winter refuge for the birds.

I circled a silent Far Field on Pennyroyal Trail and caught a flash of something that seemed too insubstantial to be a bird. It disappeared into the weeds beside the massive remains of a fallen pasture oak. Still, I pursed my lips and pished and a silent winter wren appeared like a brown spirit, popping in and out of its cover. Then I heard a calling eastern bluebird in the distance. This is a warm but noisy corner of the Far Field where I used to bask in the winter sun before the bypass became an interstate highway and destroyed my peaceful retreat.

So many places have been lost to me because of habitat degradation. Neighbors all around us have cut their land until there is nothing left but the twisted trees and scrubby brush that have no value on the market. Every decade has been worse than the one before it as landowners milk their