

Introduction

WHENEVER HE COULD, my father headed us “up home” for weekends and vacations. Home was Pennsylvania where he had been raised, a poor boy of working-class parents, bright and determined to get a college education and make something of himself. He graduated from Penn State in 1936 with a degree in chemical engineering. It was not his true calling—landscape architecture was his true calling—but it was a way to earn a living in the depression years. Chemical engineers were being hired, although not in Pennsylvania. Only the string of oil refineries along the Delaware River on the New Jersey side needed engineers. And so my father crossed the river, and my mother followed. For forty years they were exiled from “home” to make a living and raise a family. But all the while they were exiled, my father told tales of his life as a boy in the woods of eastern Pennsylvania. I was the child who listened the hardest and who longed for the kind of free-ranging childhood my father had lived, roaming the hills and valleys near his hometown.

Even as a small child, the only time that counted for me was the time spent outdoors. We lived at what was then the edge of town near a chain of small lakes set amid a substantial woodlands laced with narrow trails. Being a girl, I was not allowed to go by myself into the wild area, but I usually managed to round up enough siblings and neighbors’ children to accompany me. I was, in fact, a kind of female Pied Piper of the neighborhood who led the willing youngsters deeper and deeper into a maze of wooded wetlands and impenetrable thickets, cajoling the more timid ones through areas that might have appalled their parents had they known. Despite

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the sameness of the flat, southern New Jersey countryside, I had an unerring sense of direction in the woods that never failed me no matter how unfamiliar the terrain was.

Those explorations, though, were second-rate in comparison to our time in Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania had hills and even mountains, and I am a mountain person, preferring vertical rather than horizontal terrain. I also favor rushing streams over placid lakes and upland forests rather than lowland swamps. The southern New Jersey landscape has its own special beauty, but to me it remained an alien landscape. I passed my first eighteen years in suspended animation, waiting expectantly for my life to really begin. It would begin, I resolved, with college when I would leave New Jersey forever.

My first thought had been to attend Penn State, which is encircled by the ancient ridges of central Pennsylvania. Instead, I chose Bucknell University near the island-studded Susquehanna River because the campus looks westward over a verdant valley to a series of softly mounded green mountains to the west. I had no idea, nor did I particularly care, what courses the university offered. The view of the mountains was my sole criterion for choosing that university over the half-dozen other places I visited in Pennsylvania.

It turned out to be an excellent school for a budding naturalist, nurturing not only my Pennsylvania passion but my passion for learning as well. Time spent in stimulating classrooms was treasured almost as much as time spent roaming the nearby mountains and valleys. Again, because of my gender, I looked for suitable woodland companions. During my first two years, they were female friends. Then in my junior year I found my life partner, also the child of exiled Pennsylvanians, with the same feeling of “home” as I had.

First Bruce and I explored on foot—sometimes twenty miles at a time—and then on his motor scooter. Every suitable weekend we were out traveling the network of gravel roads built throughout Pennsylvania’s forested lands. Return-

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ing late one evening, we saw our first aurora borealis display flickering across the splendid silence of the night sky. On another trip we stopped to walk in the woods and were caught between a pair of screaming bobcats. For an hour we sat in the underbrush and listened, hopeful, yet half-afraid that we might see them. Gradually the sounds faded away, and we were left alone, our minds firmly imprinted with an image of wildness in the midst of a peopled land.

During a hike in the Seven Mountains area, we encountered another symbol of wildness—a black bear—who turned tail and ran when we saw it, much to our relief. In those days we were uncertain about the intentions of what most people considered fierce and dangerous wild animals, novices, as we were, in the ways of nature. We had not yet seen many of the commonest birds, which is why I almost fell off the mountaintop at R. B. Winter State Park when I spotted my first scarlet tanager perched on a tree below the lookout. As I explained to Bruce, I had never quite believed that such a vibrantly hued bird lived part-time in temperate Pennsylvania, despite the assurances of my field guide. To this day no other birds, even those I have seen in the tropics, seem quite so beautiful as the scarlet-bodied, black-winged male scarlet tanagers.

By the time we graduated from college, we had covered a significant portion of central Pennsylvania on foot and on motor scooter, convinced of its inherent beauty and “homeness” to us. Someday, we dreamed, we would own a country place there. Sooner than most people, after our own few years of exile in Washington, D.C., we bought our first country home—in central Maine, however, not in Pennsylvania. And we had two sons with a third on the way.

Our five years in Maine were wonderful, but Maine remained alien to me. It was not “home.” There were too many conifers and not enough hardwood trees. I noticed the lack particularly in the winter. The Maine woods are deep and silent, muffled in white snow and overhung by evergreen

boughs, picture-postcard beautiful to be sure, but not home. Home woods are on-and-off white, continually freezing and thawing, brilliant with winter sunlight that pours down over the woods' floor, unimpeded by the naked silver and black limbs of hardwood trees. Such light and openness liberates my spirit. The Maine woods stifled me.

Only when we crossed into Connecticut, heading south at last into Pennsylvania, did the woods begin to resemble "home." Our Volkswagen van and U-haul truck were jammed with the accumulation of nearly eight years of marriage, along with our three sons, two of whom mourned the loss of the only home they knew. But we *were* going home, I told them, home to the mountains of central Pennsylvania and to Penn State where Bruce had a new job.

As we drove along, I sang out the names of the places we passed, weaving in tales of my childhood, my youth, our courtship, our collective memories of Pennsylvania. There, in northeastern Luzerne County, was where Daddy's people came from. The coal regions of Carbon County had nurtured my grandparents and my favorite great-aunt. That road led to Bucknell University where Daddy and Mommy had met. Just off Interstate 80, which had not existed during our college years, were the remains of the green wilderness we had explored as students. Our favorite place was Ricketts Glen State Park, with its twenty-eight waterfalls along an eight-mile trail and its tract of virgin hemlock forest, embodying the best of wild Pennsylvania. During our college days and our years of exile, we had returned to hike the trails in every season of the year, renewing, with each visit, our vow to return "home" as quickly as possible.

Deeper and deeper into the mountains we drove, sweeping past the largest road cut in the eastern United States. Except for one trip with the Bucknell University Choir, I was farther west in Pennsylvania than I had ever been before. So I had the sense of coming home and yet of entering new territory. That

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dual sense of familiarity and discovery has remained the dynamic that has nurtured me and will continue to nurture me for the rest of my life. Despite a fascination with the wider world beyond these ancient hills and valleys of an old, old land, a fascination we occasionally feed by traveling, no matter how far I go and how wonderful the places I visit, I soon find myself realizing, like Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz*, that there's no place like home.

Having come home finally, at the age of twenty-nine, I was free to become what I had been working toward, through all my years of exile—a writer of place, eager to sing the praises of my own special niche on earth.

I had kept a nature journal spasmodically during our years in the city, recording only those parks and green spaces we fled to on the weekends. When we moved to Maine, my journal-keeping became more rigorous and was filled with the wonder and discovery of a novice to country living, parenthood, and the world of nature. I also read the old and new masters of nature writing—John Burroughs, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Hal Borland, Sally Carrighar, Ann Zwinger, and Rachel Carson, to name only a few—but I never considered entering the ranks of nature writers myself. Not, that is, until I came home. The incredible place we found for ourselves in Pennsylvania so overwhelmed me that I had to share my discoveries with others, just as Burroughs and Borland and Thoreau—all naturalists of place—had shared theirs.

We found our home on the Fourth of July. Following the vague directions of a local real estate dealer, we edged our bus along a narrow, gravel road that led up a wooded mountainside. Ferns and wildflowers covered the bank to our right while a small, rock-strewn stream tumbled below the road to our left. At last we emerged from the cool, summer-woods darkness into the sun-filled grounds and surrounding fields of what could only be described as a small estate with its two houses, a large barn, shed, springhouse, and garage, all pos-

sessing elegant lines and an air of faded grandeur. Well-loved in the past as the summer home of a wealthy family, its owners had sold it to less provident people, and already the decay had begun. But the price was right along with the mountain land accompanying it.

Perched near the top of the northwesternmost ridge in Pennsylvania's ridge-and-valley province, our home is accessible only by the gated, mile-and-a-half private dirt road we had followed. By western United States standards, the road is not particularly steep, nor is the mountain high (1,600 feet), but to most easterners, raised on roads paved to everywhere and used to convenience at all costs, our home is daunting to reach by vehicle and impossible on foot. We might as well live on an island in the middle of the sea.

Such a place has allowed me, as a woman, the kind of freedom from fear that remains an impossible dream for most women. In the early years, little boys clung to my hands or dogged my steps during most of my walks, but once the last son was off to school, I roamed alone and unafraid, an experience I had never had before. I was finally able to live, in my adult years, the kind of life my father had lived as a child. Our own land holdings now amount to 648 acres of mountain land, a veritable kingdom here in the crowded East, and our land is surrounded by other privately owned mountain land, most of which is posted against trespassers by its hunting landowners living in the farm valley below. Since they see me as unthreatening because my use of the land is nonconsumptive, the landowners have told me to ignore their signs. So, in essence, I have thousands of mountain acres to wander over and every season of the year in which to observe the life cycles of my fellow wild creatures.

This freedom to roam unafraid, gathering vignettes of natural happenings, harkens back to the sense of home our primitive forebears were thought to have had and makes me and my lifestyle a kind of throwback to a less complicated age.

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Whether such a halcyon period ever existed is still debated by those who believe that humanity is naturally aggressive. Many feminist writers, however, postulate a time when females were dominant in communities as gatherers and nurturers, before the rise of male-dominated, violent societies. Whatever the truth may be about the ancient socializing tendencies of humanity, the sense of peace and fulfillment I feel, living here, is the kind of “home” spirit many females yearn for in these latter days of violence and hatred toward women.

Home should be a place of comfort, a womb in which we can float safely and warmly, buoyed by people we love and a landscape that nurtures our spirit. My childhood dreams of coming home to Pennsylvania have been fulfilled beyond my wildest expectations. As a female child I was infused with a love of the outdoors I could not fully indulge in because of both gender and place. As an adult I am home at last on land that will nourish me the rest of my life. And when my life is over, in final payment for the peace and beauty I have found here in harmony with nature and with humanity, my bones will in turn nourish the land so that my covenant with the natural world will not be broken.

I flip back through twenty-five years of nature journals and think of how much has changed and yet has remained the same, both in our lives and in the life of our Pennsylvania Appalachian mountain. Our three boys are grown now; Steve and Mark are married and only occasional visitors to the mountain. David has chosen to live and work in our guest house. This year our first grandchild, Eva Luz, born in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, on March 16, has come for her first visit. Now the pattern, begun so many years ago with our sons, of introducing them to the natural world as infants and carrying through, year after year, will continue into the next generation.

What Eva sees here is not quite the same mountain her fa-

ther, Mark, saw when he arrived as an almost two-year-old. Then we owned 140 acres on top of the mountain; now we own 648 acres, including the entire watershed of the small stream that winds down through the hollow. Then, only the occasional bear wandered through every few years. Now bears are common here. Wild turkeys were rarely seen. So were porcupines. Both have increased tremendously. Cottontail rabbits and whippoorwills, the former ubiquitous, the latter breeding on the mountain, are now scarce. White-tailed deer and woodchucks have an overpopulation problem, and red and gray foxes are abundant. Eastern coyotes, not yet permanently in residence, have put in sporadic, fleeting appearances.

Bird numbers and species have also increased and diversified. Most neotropical migrants breed in our mature forest and over the last several years we have added yellow-breasted chats, Kentucky, cerulean, black-throated blue, and black-throated green warblers as breeding species, bringing our total breeding species to 71 and our number of species sighted to 163. Eastern bluebirds, once a rare treat to see, now not only breed here in both our nesting box and in hollow trees but frequently winter on the mountain as well. Red-bellied woodpeckers, infrequent visitors throughout the 1970s, are now permanent, year-round residents. House finches arrived here in the early eighties. They breed on the mountain and invade our feeders by the hundreds in early winter. Common ravens, once residents in this area, reappeared in the late seventies and are now seen and heard regularly all year long.

More and more wildflower species germinate every year. Two new orchid species—round-leaved orchid and nodding ladies' tresses—appeared in the early nineties at the Far Field. Wood betony sprouted on the road bank below our deceased neighbor, Margaret's, derelict house just two years ago. In the last two years fifteen new wildflower species have bloomed, and altogether we have found 192 species, 138 of which are na-

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tives to our area. The others are alien species, most of which were intentionally brought from Europe by early settlers as useful herbs or favorite garden flowers.

We have more trails, courtesy of the logger who clear-cut Margaret's land before we could buy it, and of David, who has built several foot trails through the mature forest on the Laurel Ridge side of the hollow. Once we owned the clear-cut land we renamed the upper road "Greenbrier Trail" and the lower road "Ten Springs Trail." On Laurel Ridge the Black Gum Trail, following old deer trails, bisects the mountain-side. Rhododendron Trail winds down into the lower end of the hollow and Pit Mound Trail stretches from the stream up to Lady Slipper Trail near the ridge top. Today we have over ten miles of trails leading through a diversity of habitats—meadows, mature oak/mountain laurel and wild black cherry forests, a recent clear-cut, and a hollow with a mixed mesophytic forest (a diverse eastern forest type that develops on moist but well-drained sites).

Despite what seems to be an increase in species diversity and numbers, we worry about the long-term viability of both natural and human life here. When we moved to the mountain, the four-lane bypass below Sapsucker Ridge had just been built. Now it is connected to other highways and has been upgraded to an interstate, so traffic streams past night and day, traffic that we occasionally hear clearly if the air currents are right. We also suffer from noise pollution when the air currents sweep up the hollow, bringing us the din from what was once a small, family-owned limestone quarry in the valley and is now owned by a huge corporation. The Sinking Valley side remains peaceful, a farm valley with not even a state highway running through it, now being farmed, in part, by the Amish. So usually I can find silent places on the mountain where I can imagine that the late twentieth century's technological excesses are a bad dream.

Eva, born into a noisy world, probably will not even notice

the occasional lapses. She will know only the world she is part of, a world with billions more people than the world I was born into, a world of vanishing forests and increasing desertification, a warmer world with more violent weather patterns, a world of diminishing fresh water and clean air, of species' extinction and chemical pollution, even in the far reaches of the Arctic and sub-Arctic wildernesses.

We have tried so hard to save a portion of the natural world for future generations, for our grandchildren. But for every step forward, it seems, we have fallen back even farther, beaten down by the rhetoric of politicians and talk-show hosts who refer to us as environmental extremists, responsible for all the economic woes of an overpopulated, overconsuming humanity.

Now that our grandchild is here, we can only say to her, "We have tried. Here, at least, is a piece of land still wild, still cherished, diminished by noise and air pollution and poor forestry practices, but not gone, a place where you, even as a female, can run safely and freely, as your father did, and experience what was once every human's heritage—a close connection to the natural world."

Eva came to us in mid-May and will stay through most of the summer, season of warmth and fruition, when the woods and fields are green and lush and overflow with singing birds, blossoming wildflowers, buzzing insects, and fluttering butterflies. In summer there are babies everywhere, wailing, peeping, crying for their parents, for food, for comfort, for the reassurance that their world will remain stable and safe and that they will mature in the goodness of time, each according to his or her own calendar. For the birds and deer, porcupines and woodchucks, it will happen in weeks or months; for Eva, the time line is more than two decades. All youngsters are part of the natural world, and their summers are halcyon days when life is young and stretches on forever.