

BLOODROOT



GEORGANNE HARMON

BLOODROOT

An Abstract
Presented to the
Graduate and Research Council of
Austin Peay State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Georganne Harmon
August 1991

ABSTRACT

The bloodroot grows on the mountainsides of East Tennessee, blooming for a brief season around the second week in April. It comes and goes quickly, so I have to make a special effort to be there for its blooming, or I will miss it. I must commit to it as to a pilgrimage and an act of faith; I must keep the date. This collection of essays and poems is an exploration into what I keep--days that have passed, people and objects which have shifted me around somehow, the house I live in, and a caring eye on the world around me. It is a search into the personal act of conservation. Part I is an exploration into the private spirit of conserving. Part II turns outward to the wider environment, where keeping things is a matter of survival.

BLOODROOT

A Creative Writing Thesis
Presented to the
Graduate and Research Council of
Austin Peay State University

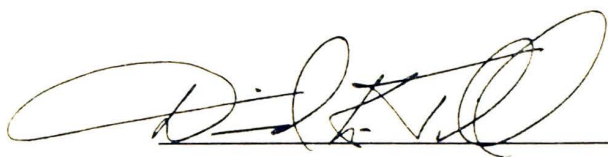
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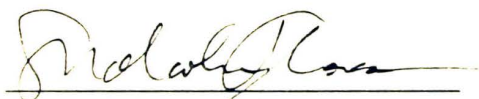
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August 1991

To the Graduate and Research Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Georganne Harmon entitled *Bloodroot*. I have examined the final copy of this paper for form and content, and I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts, with a major in English.

A large, stylized handwritten signature in dark ink, written over a horizontal line.

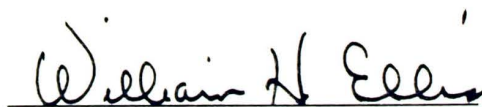
Major Professor

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Second Committee Member

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Third Committee Member

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Dean of the Graduate School

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Additionally, I wish to acknowledge *The Tennessee Conservationist Magazine*, in whose May/June, 1991 issue, the essay "Joining the Eco-System at Otter Creek" first appeared.

My thanks, as well, extend wholeheartedly to my husband for inspiration and understanding and to my children and my parents for their encouragement.

DEDICATED

TO

Norma York Hammond

(Weedy)

Weedy Jumps
April 16, 1907

The late afternoon sun
tilts long shadows across the gray barn
and just catches the light strands
in her brown hair.
She swings her legs out of the hayloft,
knock-knocking them
against the boards below her,
and studies the ground.
Sissy! taunts her brother Ralph.
Her arms grow tense, and instinct
pushes her away and down
through colors of spring
to the unresilient pale dust ground
in triumph!
And she will not tell that her feet stung
or about the burning scrape
on the back of her bare legs;
she has done what she must;
she has gone to war, like the rest.

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I

Silk in the Wind

Lately,

I have lost papers that were, moments before,
in my hand, keys that should be
in the left pocket, pens whose ink
is still fresh on a page--

I am like an unrolled bolt of white silk
billowing on a meadow in a willful breeze
that will not let it take form or rest, but
sends it tilting, furling on itself,
ballooning inside and out before
I can take hold of it with the four corners
of my mind and gather it in.

It's the winds that steal the form I thought I had:
they sail in from the west to turn my head,
and then from east and south;
in furious battle, they uplift, then
suck out a vacuum, so I fall.

I cannot remember my name today,
how many yards I am, what I must
make of myself; but listen:

If the winds will just abate a little,
I will lie down, still, on the dewy grass

and cut a pattern for papers, pens,
and a simple dress.

Letter to Maria

"*calma, calma*," she used to say, standing planted on the porch of her house like a pleasant picture, all wispy white hair on rosy face and plump frame with the village and the blue Italian pre-Alps for background. I would be struggling with an armload of books and groceries, toddlers at my heels, promises and projects, and she would be smiling, one hand aloft, waving as if to brush my cares away as mere chaff I had mistaken for grain. "*Perchè?*" she would ask. "Why rush? Everything will wait." She seemed to live in a timelessness that allowed her luxuries I could not allow myself: she kept rooted in one place; and she tended the garden within her reach.

I remember Maria most of all when I get a tightness in my chest that tells of overreaching. I think often of writing to her. Phoning is out of the question now. I used to phone on March 6, her birthday and mine, but the conversations were too brief and full of garbled exclamations, and she seemed confused once, so I didn't have the heart to call the next spring. Now the years have passed, and I write to her in my daydreams where my memory of her writes back to me.

I tend to use time as a commodity and transplant myself continually in order to save it, to get the most out of it, or to outsmart it. During the two years that I rented the villa above Maria's and Augusto's house at Ronco Alto, though, I did adjust to a slower pace in, some ways, of necessity. I remember, at the beginning, that I would plan to go into Bergamo on Saturday afternoon to buy groceries, go to the stationery store, pick up the cleaning, and perhaps buy new shoes for one of the children. It would take thirty minutes to find a

parking place within the creative chaos of the crowded streets and sidewalks. Drivers screeched cars onto sidewalks at angles and parked there in mock ignorance, placing old traffic tickets on the windshields. Other drivers shouted oaths with angry voices and shook fists at pedestrians, violence that dissipated into thin air, that meant nothing beyond the ritual. I learned at last a way to take part in the competition, how to floor my Renault into a just-vacated parking space in front of the white Fiat that, despite the homey look of yellow-flowered crocheted pillows in the back window, hovered like a vulture. Then, the car situated, I went into the *carteria*, tagging along three tots, to buy airmail stationery.

I stood on one foot, then another, while the trim proprietress waited on the woman who had arrived ahead of us. She pulled out note paper with ink drawings of Italian monuments, Bergamasque festivals, mountain scenes and the four seasons, and Signore, her husband, displayed them artfully on the counter for the customer ahead of me. He demonstrated the quality of the paper as if it were destined for an invitation to the Medicis, showed both the white and the cream, and, finally, stroked respectfully the border of the one closest to him while the customer decided. Signora looked on, at the ready. At last, he passed the rejected cards carefully back to his wife, who redeposited them in a glass cabinet, and he stacked the chosen ones neatly between his hands. He spread the blue wrapping paper across the counter, smoothed it with both hands, and placed the treasure in the middle to wrap it with reverence, at last asking about the client's husband and children. While he tied the pink ribbon around the package and curled the ends with the back of a pair of scissors, she recounted the family's episode with influenza; both shook their heads, "*Potà*," that Bergamasque expression of helplessness, and in a flurried exchange of good-byes, she left.

Meanwhile, in order to avoid an ulcer from impatience, I found some item of interest in the tiny store (I have to wonder how a married couple can bear working together in a space no more than six feet by three behind a counter cramped by the merchandise of their trade, day after day). I examined wrapping paper, notebooks, and art pencils; and while the children blew their breath on the glass case and drew pictures in the fog, the solicitous couple insisted on showing me the entire stock of each category of item I had been looking at. "Such lovely blond children," commented Signora with a warm smile. "How old are you, little man?"

"Six years old," my son answered, eagerly. I thought it was kind that she spoke to him instead of immediately giving attention to the baby.

"Do you like caramelle?" Signore asked all of them, winking. "I might have some in my pockets. *Eccole!*" He sprinkled a handful of hard candy across the counter for the children.

Eventually, I left with my airmail paper and envelopes tied up in blue paper and a sense that life was orderly after all and had the possibility of a certain fineness that comes from attention to the small things, that the paper goods I had bought were of the highest quality, and that the merchants would be glad to see me next time I came. Soon, I gave up trying to do more than one errand in an afternoon. This resignation felt good.

Of course, now that I am back in Tennessee, U.S.A., I have come to expect fast service again. We are a nation of hurried people, anxious to get things moving. With a full calendar, I, like my colleagues, resent inefficiency. As I defend my life's pace, though, I like to imagine Maria in her kitchen, stirring the hot chocolate while it heats. (I am an impatient stirrer of sauces and custards, puddings, and hot chocolate; I turn them on high and count myself lucky if I avoid scalding them.) I remember the calendar on her wall by the

table and my asking if she had forgotten to tear off March to reveal April. She turned to me with a slow smile and a wry recognition of her sentimental nature, and said, "Oh, March was such a happy month! I'm not quite ready to throw it away." She allowed herself to keep March, to hold onto it as long as she liked. "People are in too much of a hurry, I think," said Maria. "You have to hold onto your days." I'm afraid I've always been glad to get things behind me, out of the way, so that I can clean my slate and start all over, as though each new start had the possibility of perfection. Maybe I don't have enough respect for what I am doing, then. Maybe I believe that the flaws in each day gone by reflect on me in some basic, judgmental way. So, do I want to throw it all away each time and say, "That was then, before, and this is the new me, clean and perfect?"

My husband is a bit like Maria; she would like him: he is a keeper; he has all the photographs, letters and greeting cards from past chapters in his life. It would leave holes in him to throw any of these things away, and so to deny pieces of his existence. I am the one who held a great purging of old photos so that we would never happen across those ironically happy poses from the past, frozen as if forever. Once Maria didn't clear a table for an entire day after friends had dined with her and Augusto, because she wanted to look at the empty wine bottles and the bread crumbs on the cloth and the chairs all at angles and remember the pleasure of the evening. I often ramble through these good memories of Maria and the days in Italy like a table that I, too, don't want to clear. I keep replaying her sense of time as her own malleable gift, to work as she wills, and dream that I might, somehow, learn it.

When I went to pay the rent, I didn't write a check and slip it into an envelope and put it in her mailbox as I might do today. I went for coffee. Maria opened her door to me as she would have for a happily anticipated guest.

She made chocolate for my littlest child, who went with me, saying, "Would you like some real caffè? You can drink caffè just like the ladies!" We sat at the kitchen table at the window that showed the late afternoon sun pink and gold on Mount Roncola, just beyond the village, and, eventually, she gave me the bill for the wine, cheese and butter, the bread that the boy on his Vespa delivered to my kitchen window at dawn each day, and the rent. The wine was a young red one, bitter to me at first, but I came to like it. It came from our hill and was made in the cellar under the villa. I paid 1,500 lire for a three-liter bottle. Augusto went to the mountains just above us to get the butter and cheese. Maria always told me what good, pure butter it was: "From the mountains," she would tell me with a reverence that carried over to mealtimes. I always had visions of glacier-fed meadows and erratically clanging bells while I was spreading it. It was the same with the cheese, which we kept wrapped in white paper, the way she showed us, admired with each unveiling, and grated sparingly. Maria showed a respect for what the earth yielded that was strange to this suburban American, used to being casual with food, another commodity, like time. Maria tried to teach me to look closely at these little things it had been so easy for me to take for granted once, to take time to tend properly to them.

Time and its treasures were for Maria the way seeds are for my grandmother. They were collected and kept over winter for the promise of life they carried (the months on the calendar, the past, the care of things in her present), carefully harvested from old blooms to sow again, always replenishing themselves with careful nurturing, establishing a cycle without beginning or end. Being rushed becomes irrelevant in this light; being casual, irreverent.

Maria seemed to live in a rhythm with this cycle, as satisfied to be still with her vineyards and gardens and eight grandchildren around her as I was hungry for movement and change. She was rooted. I was a transplant, sure to move again. I remember her telling me about her dream of living on this little vineyard-covered hill, of having her garden, of hearing the village bells that soothed me and my babies in our sleep. I had just paid for the rent, the butter, the wine, and the cheese, and she was walking with us, up the driveway where it turned and wound past the wooden shrine with its crucifix, to the villa; the mountains rose in the distance beyond. She told me that she and Augusto had lived in Tunis, then in Bilboa, all the time they were raising their children. When Augusto retired from his work as a civil engineer, he would have stayed gladly in Bilboa. He loved city life and his city friends, and he hated farming. "I was not made to work in a garden!" he told me one day, punctuating the statement with a thrust of the hoe in the spring soil. But Maria held staunchly onto her dream to return to the land just as she held onto days and uncleared tables. Behind that soft, round face, rosy-cheeked like the dawn on a cream sky, was something firmer. I believe it was basic honesty, like the garden that never, in its beautiful giving, denies its need for nourishment and care. Sometimes I have confused giving with self-denial (I think I would have made my life in Bilboa, because Augusto wanted to); but Maria recognized her need for rootedness, for a kind of giving that was within her own reach, her own capacities, and within a circle of her own contentedness. Maybe if I could define my own circle of satisfaction, I would free myself of the conflicts of time and place I continually confront. Failure to define what is important, regardless of time and place, condemns one to being always a borrower, rarely a giver. Definition is what made Maria whole and content and able to give from the stored-up richness of contentment.

Augusto might have wanted Maria to be a girl with flashing eyes, a woman who made him laugh (he told me of such a woman he knew during the war), but he accepted the shelters of an earthier woman to whom life rhythms were clear and constant and whose place was with the children and the land. Perhaps I, instead, have been too busy flashing my eyes and laughing for someone else's ears to hear my own voice.

So, I think of Maria and write her imaginary letters when I seek quiet and a certain delicacy of living, a certain tending of the small corners that in my flurry of activity I often neglect. I remember, when I was sick with bronchial infection, wheezing like the north wind, I lay feeling lonely and pathetic in the enormous old bed with the straw mattress on the first floor, while the children played in the kitchen. Maria called, "*Permesso?*" at the door and came in with Leia, the German shepherd, the dog shaking off the wet and cold on the tile floor, she bringing in the steam and warmth of hot lemon tea. More than that, she brought a mother's remedy, attention, to my childlike state. My friend Alice brought me a small, very appropriate book on a similar occasion just a year ago, and I recognized the Maria in the act--thoughtful, delicious indulgence! Once, on my balcony at Ronco, I looked down and watched Maria fluff and position her pillows to dry on her porch down the driveway below me. She caressed them as though they mattered, as though they had been ill, and she had given them lemon tea, and now what they needed was good, fresh mountain air; and I thought, "I've never washed my pillows. How can you have time to wash pillows, to fluff and attend to and preserve everything that serves you?" And indeed, I rarely seem to find time to attend to anything but the essentials for decent living; or I choose to fill up spare time as quickly as it appears. Still, there is a voice that begs me stand still--to love whatever exists in a random moment with me.

That last winter at Ronco Alto was in 1972. When I visited, one winter evening during a Christmas vacation in Italy eight years ago, we stood in Maria's kitchen in a happy clamor of exclamations, talking about the Ronco children and my children, all nearly grown. *"Impossibile! Pensa!"* Chica and Gianni, Ita and Ferruccio, and Rosi and Raul, the daughters and son and spouses, all came down. Maria had had a little stroke. She looked older; she was slower. So I haven't had the courage to call again, or haven't wanted to confuse her. I would say much in a letter, though. I would have to confess some things about this American woman she nourished in her ways: I have used paper napkins; I have not wrapped the cheese tightly; it has dried up like a cement block, and I have torn a plastic garbage sack with its weight; I sometimes did not get up in the night to make lemon tea for a coughing child; I treat my plants with the drought-and-drown method and many die of this care. "But, Maria," I could say, "I have held onto the sparkling April sun on the apricot tree below my bathroom window, to the voices of the men checking wine at two a.m. in my dusty cellar, to the rooster's crow as the fog lifts off the bare valleys in winter, to warm morning bread in my kitchen window, to the little wood-roofed crucifix on a backdrop of blue foothills; and, Maria, I've held on to you, haven't I?"

*Lemon Tea**--Villa d'Almè 1973*

The straw-filled mattress rasped as I shifted, and I wheezed like the North wind in dead oak branches. The light danced, arhythmic, beyond my dark room where children's voices squealed and shushed in the kitchen. I would have to get up soon, see to their baths in the great chamber at the top of the stone steps, the most foreign room of all, red tiled and grand, its graceful bidet, the water heater that accused from where it hung in the corner, its watchful eye, its secret ticking on a hidden meter. Tears crept down my hot face.

"*Permesso?*" The iron door clanged open.

First Leia, the German Shepherd, invaded the light, shaking off the wet and cold on the tile floor, and behind her, Maria, her round face smiling in my doorway, wisps of white hair damp on her brow.

"*Veri limoni,*" she was saying,

"*Buono, molto buono per lei,*"

and made me take the hot drink, made from fresh lemons, so good for me: the steam travelled through my head, the hot liquid hushing my throat, taking me home, taking me home.

Azimuth

On Grassy Ridge above the balds
I watch sun set from a hard outcrop
and run my hand over granite spiked
with quartz, sharp against my skin.
Navy blue clouds billow around sky-fire,
and I think of sea god and earth god meeting. . . .

I

One day I floated on the broad back of summer ocean--
I drifted and dreamed no dreams, but emptied into air
with the cycle of mists. I never turned
to see how far I'd floated out on soft waves,
and shut my eyes against the sting of sun.

I dragged my raft onto the dry, resistant sand.
The sun burned.

II

In April I sat on a jagged cliff, waiting
outside a cave. Below, the spring breeze was sweet:
it carried perfumes of new grass, pear trees in white bloom.
The song of a river turning rocks from its channel
was muted in the quiet film of pollen, bearing drowsiness.

Pale leaves still clung curled to poplar trees and willows
and I dreamed I sailed into their arms
until I disappeared into easy long sleep.

The cave spewed back children and guide; together
we scrambled across rocks, skidded
down the dirt trail to the asphalt road.

Tonight I watch the gods in counsel over tomorrow.
I will sleep on earth's rough spine and dream
of a mountain trail to plant my feet on and become
an exploring vine that grips deep within the stubborn rock.
I think I will climb beyond this ridge to the windy mountain,
the one where hail and gale and height push me
to the edge of what I think I can do.
The soothing wave can't have me
and I will not fall, numb, too deep forever from this rock.
I touch the prickly leaf,
I hear the raven's cry
announce the lifting of the dark veil.

View from the Gran Paradiso

"*Cosa scrivi?* What are you writing?" asked the little boy, Beppe, looking over my shoulder as I finished my postcard. He stood on the bottom rung of the log fence in front of the shelter. Before us rolled an Alpine meadow dotted with anemone and edelweiss, and then the forested mountains that held the wild preserve called the Gran Paradiso in the Italian Alps. Mont Blanc was a jewel's glint in the sun.

"A postcard to my friend in the United States," I answered. "I'm writing him a message."

"*Bellissimo viaggio,*" he prompted.

"Sì, it's been a beautiful trip," I agreed.

"*Scrivi, scrivi,*" he insisted. "I want to see the English words."

"Dear Tony," I wrote. "Okay?"

"*Va bene,*" Beppe replied. As though I had performed to his satisfaction, he climbed down, then looked at me with new attention. Would you send me some stamps from the U.S.A.?" he asked. "*Per favore?*"

I handed him my journal and turned it to one of the last pages. "Write your address in my book, and I'll send you stamps," I promised.

I turned and leaned on the fence and breathed deeply. The air swept in cool and clean. I felt that I could reach just a little ways and hold Tony's hand. Or that I was already holding it, and there was no need even to send the card. He already knew. He had known all the time. The card would just tell him that I knew, too, now.

His eyes were the color of the sky that stretched away over the mountains, a startling blue. He had offered to feed the cats while I was

gone and to send the checks I left on the dining room table to the electric and water and telephone companies when the bills came. My instinctive reply was a grateful acceptance. Then I wondered if that wasn't letting him in pretty close, like a point from which return might be difficult. The cows in the meadow below moved, slow and serene, to a new spot. The grass sparkled, looking delicious, tender.

I thought again about what had worried me about this man. We both had disastrous marital pasts. Yet he was confident, rock-solid-sure about us. I was the one who had been off-balance all the time--liking his directness, trusting his wisdom, excited by his inquiring approach to the world. He taught me in what week of the year, and on what hillsides, to find the bloodroot and the Dutchman's britches, the showy trillium and the tiger lily. He introduced me, in knee-deep snow, to the ravens that play among the balds of Roan Mountain, taught me to recognize the red-tailed hawk and the Cooper's where they sit waiting in snags along country roads or spiraling on wind currents among the ridges. He'd been almost as excited as I was about my winning the grant that gave me this adventure--a five-week backpacking trek in the Alps with three high school students.

A small hand nudged at me, bringing me back to the mountaintop in Italy. "*Suo libro*, your book, *signora*. *Grazie*." He went to where his father, Elio, was focusing binoculars on the snowy mountain that rose behind the shelter in the distance so that Tam, one of my students, could spot the climbers. They were three Italians who had left the shelter at 2:00 a.m. Elio was explaining that they had had to get to the snow before the morning sun made it too soft to climb on. I

turned back to the meadow to follow the cows with my eyes, to wander in quiet a moment longer in my thoughts.

What I hadn't liked were the things he kept: a picture of his former wife between the cards in his billfold, anniversary cards and birthday cards in his table drawers, books with endearing inscriptions, a slide among his wilderness pictures showing her beside the flame azalea he'd been so excited about showing me. I felt petty and disturbed all at the same time. I am a purger: a clean-out-and-begin-again type. He is a keeper. "That's part of my history," he said. "If I throw it all away, then I'll throw away big chunks of my life. I'd leave holes where good things were going on, too. The good and the bad, that's what makes me who I am today."

"I see them! There they are, those little colored dots," Tam announced. "Boy, that mountain must be farther away than it seems." I turned in time to see Elio grin. He took the binoculars and handed them to my daughter Emilie, who was shading her eyes against the sun as she searched. Elio Gontier had built this refuge, the Bivacco Gontier Mario, and appointed himself caretaker. He hiked up here from his village of Aymavilles every two or three weeks to check on it. Often Beppe and Signora Gontier came, too.

My third student, Matt, asked if the climbers would come back this evening. He wanted to hear the story of their climb. Elio told us that they would descend by the Val Savarenche to Cogne, instead. "It's July," he said. "The rocks will be moving." He leaned on his walking stick and looked past the glacier to places we could not see, but which he held wedged in his mind. "The crossing will be technical now."

I was sorry to hear this, since we were planning to go that way, too. "*Tecnico?*" I asked.

"It's dangerous, *pericoloso*," he said, "unless you are experienced. A boy fell last week and got a bad concussion. An accident like that can endanger the whole group. Rock falls are common in summer, as well as avalanches," he explained, shaking his head and squinting his eyes again toward the peak and the climbers.

"We'll go out the way we came up, then," I asserted. "Back to Vièyes. I'm sorry, though. I have heard that we could see a lot of wildlife in the Val Savarenche, and that it is one of the most beautiful parts of the Gran Paradiso."

"*Si, è bello*. But you'll find the animals here, if you go out at dawn or at dusk -- Ibex, chamois, marmots. Go *adagio*, *adagio* and wait."

The grant I'd received was one that offered enrichment experience for teachers. The committee had liked my wild proposal and had sent me on this mountain trek. The students paid their own way, but they were an integral part of the proposal I had written. They looked to me for leadership. I looked to them for the support I needed to lead. The looking was pretty equal.

Vièyes is a forty minute bus ride out of Aosta in the heart of the Gran Paradiso, a national wildlife refuge that King Vittorio Emanuele gave to the government in 1922. What village there is lies below the road on a steep mountainside. We found a huddle of little vacation houses and some ancient stone buildings with boards over their

windows and doors. "It's a good thing we bought food and supplies in Aosta," I said to Emilie. She was heaving her thirty-five-pound pack onto her back. Matt was looking around the high side of the road for a trail.

"There's a man down there on a porch, see him?" Tam said. I went down and asked if the man knew the trail *Bivacco Gontier Mario*. He pointed down the road a ways, and we set out, loaded down with hiking gear. *Bivacco Gontier Mario* was carved into a sign that marked a cut in the foliage. We pulled back branches and looked. The path led straight up.

"Do you suppose it's all this steep?" asked Emilie, scrambling. We were having to stop every few minutes to rest, and I was uneasily wondering the same thing, thinking of the distance to travel and the loads we all carried. I can walk forever on even terrain, but am easily winded when climbing. The kids were definitely stronger.

"Look around us," I finally answered. All the mountains in our view were like ours; there was a solid hugeness to the land, all bent at steep angles.

"A nice, easy walk, he said. *Sure*," said Tam. "That old man at the Alpine Club in Aosta must be Heidi's granddad!"

"It's okay," said Matt. "We'll be real yuppies: upwardly mobile all the way!"

There was nothing to do but climb. Matt went on quickly, climbing with his long boy's legs and boy's will onward and out of sight. The girls and I climbed steadily, stopping to turn and rest our calves and lungs and look at the dizzying view toward the west where the green mountains repeated themselves above dark valleys on and on

to the snow-capped Mont Blanc range. They would lean their packs against big rocks while they rested; they sat often. This I didn't dare do, considering the energy and will power it would take to get up each time.

"Come on," I encouraged Emilie, the youngest at fifteen.

Remember what Eric told us last week on the snow climb? Sixty steps at a time; you can always hold out for the sixty." She swatted at the pesky black flies that chewed on us when we were still, nodded a little grimly, and turned upward. Now and then the trail leveled and switched back and forth, traversing the mountain.

We crossed a rushing torrent, again and again, and wobbled across on rocking stones. At one crossing a heifer stopped us with her brown eyes, pleading, I thought, as she looked up from drinking. She tried to move away from us, and I saw that she was lame. "Look at her foot," I said. "I wonder if she'll just die here." I patted her on her rump and she swished her tail at me. "Come on, come with us," I urged. She looked away. I trudged on.

Crossing the stream again, we met a young Englishman hiking down, wood staff balancing him as he tested the rocks. "What's the trail like up ahead?" I asked.

He eyed my big pack. "Rough," he answered, "really steep and quite difficult, I'd say, with the load you're carrying. Good luck to you."

By 7:30 I was alone in deep forest between ridges, the girls having outpaced me. We all found we hiked better alone when the going was rough, anyway. No one to complain to; or measure against. It was also good to have solitude, for a change, to contemplate the open

places that offered vistas beyond imagining, soft green giants row on row.

Some hikers on their way down told me cheerfully that I was about halfway there. "*Corraggio!*" they called to me as they passed. I was feeling the weight of my pack by now, and their cheer made my chin tremble. It took all the courage they offered me to lift my feet over the roots and boulders in my path, to step up to new levels on juts of rock.

Besides my pack, I'd been carrying other baggage with me since that morning, when I'd placed a call to the States, 4:00 a.m. there, and gotten no answer. "He's probably giving his mother a hand on the farm," I thought. But a familiar sick feeling had gripped my stomach and stayed with me. "Here I've let myself almost make a commitment at last, and maybe I'm wrong. Maybe he can't leave the stuff of his past life alone; maybe I can't. Yeah, and what about my own ghosts? I've made the stupidest decisions any fool could make about men. I just don't think I'm meant to be in a relationship anyway. Look what I've put my kids through. . . ." Sixty steps, turn, look, rest, sixty steps.

The air grew cool and the light paled. My mouth felt dry, yet getting at the water was time-consuming and an effort I couldn't easily face. I thought I heard the wind sigh in the branches of larch and fir, and for a moment felt comfort in the movement and life of the mountain; then, looking up, I saw that the trees were still and heard only my own hard, dry breathing. The mountain was motionless, hard now under my feet, cold to sit down on, too steep to throw down my sleeping bag as I longed to do and spend the night. I kicked at the

ground, muttering at the silent earth that offered no help for my churning mind and my aching body.

Soon I was lifting my legs with my hands over fallen logs, up root-steps, breathing down to the deep center of my chest, shedding whatever was ambitious or competitive or jealous or worried in my body and my mind until I felt all stripped except for the will to arrive. I took sixty steps, then allowed myself to stop, then sixty steps, looking only at the ground ahead of me now, then sixty steps again and again and again. I left the trees behind. At altitude 2,310 meters I saw a tall thin cross against a navy blue sky streaked with light wisps of clouds. Big anemones and hundreds of tiny buttercups appeared underfoot. The path faded away and opened to a meadow of clumped long grasses, uneven to walk on.

"Mom! Finally! I was worried about you. We're talking to some boys from The Netherlands. They speak great English. The refuge is big enough for all of us." Emilie took my pack. I began to shiver from a cold that took the feeling from my face and hands. It was hard to walk.

The Bivacco Gontier Mario is a cabin made of pine and stone. On the lower level triple-decker bunk beds are built into the walls with ladders running up beside them. A long pine table dominates the room, and cabinets along the walls hold emergency canned goods. A little gas stove is in the corner by the door. "*Si scaldi subito, signora*," said Elio Gontier. His eyes were kind and grave. "I'll bring you some hot tea."

"He tells me I need to get warm clothes on," I explained sleepily, "but I don't think my fingers can undo the pack." I was unsteady on my feet, but we made it around to the back of the cabin and up the steps

to the second level, where fourteen wool-blanketed mattresses lined the walls under a low ceiling. The girls pulled out thermal underwear, a sweater and wool jacket and a knit hat and helped me get into them. Elio brought the tea and held my hands steady while I drank it. His rough hands on mine warmed me past the overwhelming desire to sleep, and he told me about the refuge. "It's for my son Mario, you see. He died a year ago. He was electrocuted, working for me."

"How old was he?" I asked.

"He was twenty. We used to spend all our free time in the mountains. He loved to hike, to climb, to ski and hunt. So his friends and I, we spent several weekends building this cabin for him. We made the cross, and last April we had a mass said up here to dedicate the refuge to Mario. Forty people came!" He smiled, thinking of it. "We come now and then to check on it, to be sure people are treating it well. *Vede*, you see, it's a kind of experiment for me, a measure of man's civilization. So far, it goes well. You must eat now, *signora*. You know, you can die in the mountains. Eat, *mangia*."

By now it was dark. Elio's wife and Beppe, my little stamp-collector friend, were getting ready to climb into their bunks, and three young men were already asleep. "They're going out early to climb to the top of the mountain," Elio whispered. Four blond boys were huddled, reading the hikers' log, commenting and laughing softly at what they read. Emilie lighted the little camp stove outside next to where Matt and Tam were cooking and heated water for instant soup for herself and me. We all took our soup and cheese and settled around the table with the boys inside where the candle flickered silhouettes on the walls around us.

Much later, I slipped out from under the heavy wool blanket that had held me warm at last in safe sleep and pulled on the wool sweater I had left by the mattress. My watch showed 3:20 a.m. The others breathed in slow, thick measure along the length of floor under the roof of the refuge. I carried my boots in my hand, slid the bar that held the low door shut, rough pine rubbing against rough pine, and ducked outside onto the steps. While I tied my boots, I took my first real look at where I'd arrived, trembling with cold and fatigue, the night before. Bivacco Gontier Mario. Gran Paradiso. To bivouac in Paradise, I thought, and grinned to myself. Is that it?

The swat of cold air brought a wash of tears to my eyes and woke me to a clearheadedness I'd thought my flirtation with hypothermia, just hours before, had irreparably dulled. I moved away from the cabin toward the dark rocks and the rush of water. The sky was all around me, more the element one lives in than the earth at this hour, at this altitude. The stars were fat and blue, the moon a bath of cool light that splashed over the rough meadow leaving rocks, the inner banks of the stream, and distant secrets in silhouette and outline. Cows, bunched into an amorphous ink blot, stood immobile before the thin cross that reached and disappeared into the black. Their eyes glowed gold. Mountain peaks like a child's cutouts repeated themselves on and on toward Mt. Blanc to the west. I stood and listened.

A stream of ice-born water rolled down from the dark in thin chatter. A glacier, like a sleeping dragon at the end of its high valley,

cracked and groaned, shifting in the night. Rocks shook loose and fell, echoing with hollow voices. A bell clanked.

I approached the stream that took its life from the glacier and watched awhile the moonlight hopping, silver, among its ripples; I inhaled, conscious of the thinness and stark cold of the air in my lungs. I threw silver water on my face. First my cheeks and fingers numbed, then stung.

I was awake now I remembered the climb to this spot. I thought back to how the mountain had demanded all my strength, and how I had finally put down the baggage I had been carrying in my head and left it on the unconcerned rocks somewhere along the way, dropping everything extra, anything that would take energy from what I had to do, where I had to arrive. I became like the trees in winter, I thought, when they are not adorned, and have left behind both sweet greens and flaming reds. I know them in their skeletal form, then, stripped down to essential bark and shape. I stripped down to what was essential to keep the promise I'd made in setting out, the promise every hiker makes to get there. As soon as I had left enough self-stuff there on the trail to turn to dust with the leaves, the load had been light enough to carry.

In Chamonix the week before, the four of us had climbed the sheer face of the mountain called Le Moine with our guide Eric after crossing the Mer de Glace glacier. Maybe I've been heading up to the Bivacco Gontier Mario for several weeks, I thought. All day, with ice-gripping crampons attached to our boots, we'd been making our way between crevasses that could become ice tombs, had been poking with ice axes to be sure the footings were solid, and had been always inches

from possible death. Then: Le Moine. Steel ladders were bolted into the rock face, and hundreds of feet above the glacier, only the will to hang on, to grip the hard bars, could save me from a fatal fall.

After a dizzying glance down, and forever up still to go, I'd asked myself, in a loud voice, what the hell the women I went to school with, all now in their forties like me, were doing at this very moment.

"They're playing bridge!" I shouted desperately. "Me? I'm hanging off the side of a mountain!" The kids got a good laugh, and so did I, and the thought gave me a perverse kind of courage to "keep on trekking," the motto of this expedition.

Into the clarity of the night, with its white stars and glittering stream, I repeated the idea: Keep on trekking. What else is there, anyway? The Mer de Glace, the face of Le Moine, the Gran Paradiso's Bivacco Gontier Mario trail--they are challenges I embraced precisely because the risk was great. For me, these are the things that define what is real.

"That's it!" I shouted. No one heard. The cows shifted a little in the dark. I took a deep breath.

That's it -- a whisper this time. I've been a risk-taker all my life. I've slipped a time or two, but I can trust a man who's taught me to know the trees in winter. *Tecnico*, technical. No doubt about that. But it is a risk I can calculate. I know something about the terrain. I know to take it only sixty steps at a time, and I know to keep in mind the promise of refuge at the top. The *yes* was a soundless voice that played among the rocks in the moonlight as I went back to my bed and slept, dreamless, until I heard the boys leave the loft in the early morning.

This morning I felt at home on the mountain. The Italian hikers disappeared from our face of La Savarenche, and we trusted that they were safely on their way to the forested valley. We waved good-bye to the boys from Holland as they picked up the last of their gear and set out to skirt the peak and make their way to Cogne. Signora Gontier was ready to go, too. "*Grazie*, thank you for everything," I said, sensing the weakness of the words against the feelings. I wanted to thank them for the welcome, for the warm hands, for the refuge and the wool blankets, for kind eyes, for the friendship of their child. I waved. "*Arrivederci!*" I called after them.

We would rest today, and tomorrow we would leave the refuge, too. It was a shelter for hikers, not for sojourners, and we had had our privileged shelter and our privileged view. We would creep out at dusk this evening to sit among the rocks in hopes of seeing the chamois for even a fleeting moment. In the morning, leading, stepping lightly down the trail, I would keep on trekking. I began in the left hand corner of the postcard I still held and, balancing it on the rail in front of me, I wrote *yes, yes, yes yes, yes...* covering all the spaces with the *yes* that welled into my chest. I reached into my pocket for a stamp.

Inadvertent Casualty

Winters I awoke to a dense Po Valley fog. It lifted around eight-thirty in the morning and revealed the Lombardy countryside that sparkled with hoarfrost in fields on either side of the road I took. In the distance blue mountains shed their veils and became sapphire-peaked. I slowed through the bent streets of villages dotted along the way to town, where women in black scarves stepped in and out of shops, and boys with blue smocks and neat book satchels walked to school beside little girls with oversized white bows in their hair. Men in shirtsleeves worked on repairs along the frosty road; impatient drivers took my caution personally, and, muttering, zipped around me. At last, I reached the ancient walls of Bergamo, gleaming gold tones above the valley.

The road up to the Porta San Lorenzo, one of the Venetian gates of the city, was steep, so it was treacherous when there was ice. I checked for oncoming cars in the mirror mounted at the arched gatehouse and wondered idly who might be peering from behind those lace curtains above the keystone. Then I turned and made my way steadily, holding my breath, to the top, fearful that my Fiat's tires would lose their grip on the slick cobblestones.

Balconies held people out to the crisp air over the valley across the winding road and then, over the streets in the town. Bedclothes aired on the railings; priests hurried across piazzas; businessmen and lawyers met and entered steamy warm *caffès*. Everywhere, the smell of good bread.

The memories are old ones, but each so alive that it gives birth to a dozen more, and I keep them all at my side. I left Italy over sixteen years ago to return home to Tennessee, yet the stones of Bergamo and my village, Villa d'Almè, have left their grit in my fingertips. I claim a part of its life for my own, and can return at will to my relationship with it. I know it with my eyes,

with my ears, by aromas--of diesel or espresso or new leather--that float images through my memory, and with the language that still lives on my tongue. When I reach out to touch it, it touches me back. With people, it depends. We sometimes squeeze them in and out of our lives like changing liquid in a sponge.

People used to ask me if I still felt the same about Italy after I divorced Carlo a few years ago. It didn't take much consideration. The break with Carlo was a thorough cleaning out, a throwing away of an unfortunate mistake, like burning off brush to permit new growth in a field. Afterwards, I discovered with delight that my relationship with the land and the stones of Italy was distinct, and that I had kept custody of this private property. I found I had to give up, however, some other important things that Carlo was link to. For one, I had to give up Riccardo.

I've heard that Riccardo is getting married this month in Naples. He must be around twenty-eight now. I wonder if his fossil collection will find a place on the new bookshelf, or if he'll leave all that behind.

Riccardo is Carlo's nephew who spent a summer with us in Nashville. He was eighteen, a tall, broad-shouldered, square-jawed boy, built like his father, and he arrived in a fine tailored shirt and tie, slacks with pleats. He spoke a little English, but was uneasy about using it, as my son Byron, several years younger, was with his Italian. Late at night, though, I'd hear them talking and laughing, so somehow they managed to talk about sports and girls and parents and to tell jokes that probably weren't translatable.

When we asked Riccardo what he most wanted to do during his stay, he said he'd read that Tennessee was rich in fossils, and he really wanted to find a trilobite. Byron had a job and Carlo worked all day, so, accoutred with hammers, screwdrivers and plastic bags, Riccardo and I set out for the

creekbeds and roadsides of middle Tennessee. He knew what we needed for the task. He knew what to look for. I was the driver and native guide.

We found nothing in the dry creekbeds I drove to; I should have known better, even armed only with Geology 101. Along the road cuts we found brachiopods, crinoids and bivalve creatures, all very common. I love to climb. Riccardo thought I was funny, scrambling willingly along cliffsides. We would come home with sacks full of rocks, and he would sit in the garden all afternoon, chipping them to release his finds. I still find fossil-rich limestone in amongst my sage and basil.

"Riccardo," I said one morning, "we have a university here that has a geology department. I know they can help us find a trilobite." His eyes darted at me with excitement. "*Andiamo*. Let's go early," he said. I called Vanderbilt's Department of Geology first to ask if they would see us, so a graduate student was waiting when we arrived and led us down dark halls lined with glass cases to a large, bright room in which there were enormous tables with pathways mazed between them. On the tables hundreds of specimens enticed my companion. To Riccardo, this was the ultimate candyshop. We looked at rock-embedded creatures and talked with the young man about where to look for trilobites. He showed us several huge ones on the tables.

"I don't think you'll find one like this, now," he said, holding up a large black specimen, "but there's some Walden Shale along the Ashland City Highway just this side of Bull Run Road."

"I know exactly where that is," I said. "There's a nursery about a mile farther in, on the left."

"The shale is dark, almost blue. You can't miss it; but you'll probably have to climb up pretty high to find anything. It's already been worked quite

a bit," he said. I was excited. Riccardo sensed that I was his teammate now, too, and we set off on our search, optimistic about our success.

We drove the twenty miles or so to the spot. The shale was clearly recognizable just opposite the river. We pulled off the busy two-lane highway onto a narrow shoulder. Trucks whizzed by us alarmingly fast and close. There were broken bottles, cans and dirty diapers on the ground. But there was also, above all this, the shale and its ancient mysteries, so it was worth braving the danger and the trash, and we started to look, first down low. The shale was fragile. It peeled away in sheets. We didn't find anything but fern prints down low, but climbing was tricky. "I'll go along the harder rock and reach from there," called Riccardo, already above me, working his way to a likely spot. I looked on, sack at the ready and prepared to hand up tools if needed. He groped, pulled, scrambled. The shale cut his fingers. I wondered what I'd do if he fell.

"*Stai attento!*" I called. "Be careful!" He winked at me. It is something mothers feel guilty not saying. So, the duty was discharged. We both knew that taking a risk is almost always more worthwhile, and he knew I knew.

"*Eccolo! Eccolo!* I've found it!" Stretched like a cat at prey, he worked around the specimen until he got it free, then put it in his shirt pocket and scrambled down to where I was waiting, dying to see it. He held it to the light, turned it a little, and there it was: not perfect, not free of the rock like the best specimens at Vanderbilt, but the obvious imprint of the trilobite. He was ecstatic--and healthfully dirty, I thought, for a city boy, with Tennessee sweat and rocks and soil. It was a moment of triumph. "*Zia! Grazie!* (Aunt! Thank you!)"

Later that summer we drove to Mammoth Cave in Kentucky; another time, we went to Huntsville to see the Space Center; and we went to Opryland, a

real foray into the culture of Music City. He got soaking wet on one of the rides, the flume-zoom. I took my first roller-coaster ride, with him insisting and pushing me all the way; I was as wary as he had been in the huge, dark cave. "*Attaccati!*" he shouted as the world dropped out from under me. *Hold on, my foot!* I closed my eyes and screamed. He laughed at me all the way home. That was okay. He was wet from the flume zoom, and he was singing, with a terrible twang, a country song about, in his words, *four hundred children and the crap in the field*. I think that was supposed to be four hungry children and the crop. . . . It was a searching, exploring summer, a time for learning much about both ourselves and each other--about southern expressions like y'all and southern traditions like biscuits with sawmill gravy; about how to curse in Neapolitan, good language learning--and I grew to think of Riccardo as son, friend, at least a real nephew. We had a language of joking and understanding and discovery that fastened a bond between us, like magic.

I can still see him standing in the hallway ready to go back home, Tennessee emblazoned across a new tee shirt. "Just stay on for the school year," I begged, knowing he wouldn't. "You can go to Vanderbilt!"

"*Ciao, Zia. Ci vediamo presto, sai.*" (You know, we'll see each other soon.) When we went to Italy a year and a half later for Christmas, I waited at the window of my mother-in-law's apartment for an hour to see him arrive with his parents and sister, and my heart was in my throat with excitement. When I looked at his smiling eyes, I knew it was the same. We still had a secret path to each other's affection and understanding.

Riccardo lives in my memory alongside the rich images that the city I lived in returns to me, and I find him with fond recognition in the stones I turn over while I weed my garden and, smiling secretly, discern the ribbing of a brachiopod's shell. But I can return to Bergamo and confirm with comfort

the damp winter air that carries on it the aromas from Nessi's Bakery and the efficient bustle of a *caffè* on a work morning, the vineyards interplaying with the old city walls, the violin's strains under the windows of the conservatory.

I cannot in the same way return to Riccardo and embrace him like a son.

There are too many clouds to fly through between where I am and where he is.

So, like his mother and father, who were warm and kind and funny, like my mother-in-law, his grandmother, to whom I once wrote dutiful letters, I have lost him, a sad casualty for me on the periphery of the burned-off field.

Early October

The cat has made a gray circle of himself,
his tail wound into the ring of his curled body,
and sleeps secure: no loose ends.

Dry leaves rattle in early October wind that
speaks loud in still-dressed trees
above cricket murmur, telling time.

Change tells in the tone of yellow-dappled
sun on green grass and shadows;
black silhouette of hackberry looms
cold beside a bright spot that
teases on the driveway, where colorless leaves
brush across the pavement with voices I recognize:
raspy they whisper and wear worn shades
like tired clothes and call me to rest.

Yet hackberries are the ones
that give up early. A flaming day
is coming--maple tree and hickory!--And
I'm afraid I will miss it from inattention,
because I'm trying to catch up the tattered
ends into a hem, or will close myself too tight
in my own circle of sleep.

Once a year, in August, I become brutal in my attic. No one with any sense enters an attic during the hottest month of the year for any reason, but for me, August carries on its still breath the musky scent of change. A teacher, my beginnings are in the fall, and beginnings mean new chances, a time to bury the past and begin again as a new person with new possibilities. My eyes begin to wander to the attic steps, my fingertips begin to itch. Then arrives the day that I surge out from under my piled-up complacency, and, armed with large shopping bags left over from Christmas, I mount the steps and attack.

Away go the boxes, coat hangers, shiny sacks from stores, misshapen sweaters, shrunken tee shirts, glass jars, milk jugs, shells from the beach, popsickle sticks, things I thought, in the careful moods of winter, I might someday use. At the height of summer's plenty, I discard with abandon. I carry bag after bag of secret clutter, stuffed into sacks and hidden from reconsideration, to the garbage cans and the Goodwill bag. I hardly pause for a breath, so hungry am I for virtue--to see the baseball glove hanging from its designated nail, the clothes in zippered plastic shrouds, the Christmas decorations in labeled boxes that sit squarely one on top of the other, and to be able to walk from one end to the other unobstructed.

On such a day, I lost the christening dress my mother's hands had stitched in faith of continuity. She didn't know, then, that once a year some cleanup disease would strike my premises like the Creation in reverse, cut a wide neat path, and leave in its wake a kind of destruction, not unlike the whimsical and erratic touchdown of a tornado. The dress was of French batiste and family lace. Sometime between the first two wearings and the third, its

lighter-than-air box, tissue-lined like the empty ones that made a wobbly tower to the ceiling, found itself on the trash pile. Emilie got her name in a simple dress from the store.

My gardening habits are not unlike my housekeeping. I fall in love every spring with impatiens and geraniums and begonias and salvia, with spinach, tomatoes for gazpacho, Cayenne peppers to string, and baby's breath for wreaths. I till and hoe with an energy that feels like courtship, when I was never too tired for a ten o'clock movie or too serious for sledding after the first snow.

Then growth begins. Roots grow firm. Other concerns beg a share of my energy. Weeds sprout. Black mold creeps. Dogs nap in the parsley. Caterpillars chew. Even though my back is turned, I know it is going on. I see it from the corner of my eye. What day can I give to dirt and sweat? What week to aching muscles? Out of hand like the rainstorm that grows to a hurricane, I resort to crisis measures: with angry hoe and spade I make the earth neat again, give it a human order. I take a begonia's leg off by error, eradicate a precious baby's breath along with the insidious nutgrass, snap a tomato stalk as, too late, I force it into a frame. I ask myself, at last, "At what price cleanliness? Of what worth seasonal integrity?"

I remind myself of my grandmother, who weeds fast, saying, "It's the effect I'm after. I can't worry about the occasional lily I pull up." The thought of her beautiful garden consoles me for a while. Then I think of mother, Grandmother's first child of three, a member of a crowded garden, who still cries sometimes for words she wanted to hear, and never did, hugs she wanted to feel, and went without, during some busy season sixty-five years ago. And she, the maker of a christening dress that was to span generations, is sandwiched between two weeders.

I grieve for what I might have done to prevent the gall, the aphid, the spread of weeds that made me clear away in heady passion, throwing away some good with the choking and diseased. I think of friends whose faces have faded in my memory, whose names have disappeared in the new address book.

They come back anyway, though, no matter how efficiently I clear away for new beginnings--just as the weeds will. I think how much past I have buried that has risen to make each mythical new beginning a continuity, in spite of myself. The old photographs I threw away have turned up in dreams and poems, and in my children's faces. *Bucatoni alla carbonara* still turns up on my table years after I mailed five boxes full of the Italian husband's possessions away, *away* from this address, and the clutter of his language still lingers around on my tongue, *pazzesco* and *tesoro* and *non puoi star' zita un pò* mixed insidiously in with my clean English, *crazy* and *darling* and *can't you hush*.

Emilie, so different from the ones who wore the family dress, carries her grandmother's face and her methodical ways in her own strain of continuity, sandwiching me between two keepers. But she humors me. "It's okay," she tells me. "I'm the only one who cried loud enough at my christening to drive the devil from the church. And, you know, I always did look silly in a fussy dress."

What I Keep

"Love is best!" --Robert Browning

The smooth grooves were cold under my fingers
when they searched this arrow-shaped stone
for fleck-fleck sounds of chips that flew
beneath the red-brown fingers of the craftsman,
as if by pressing, I could feel his warm breath,
I could hear his sounds, and be his sister
watching him as the sun heated
the dry dirt beneath the rocky bluff.
The tiny concave scrapes, bowl-like, reflected
his dream, like a chant, fleck-fleck,
of the racing deer, the wide-eyed rabbit,
and then the meaty smoke of gleaming dark roast,
his squaw's long hands,
and her smile, yes, her smile.
I heard like the ticking, fleck-fleck,
of a clock I did not carry;
except this, the woods were quiet enough
to reach through and find, under an overhang
where I had wandered and touched the rainbow
where the water falls, an arrowhead in the dust.

There is, in the Cluny Museum,
a warrior chief's crown of thin, hammered gold.
Seeing it, I gasped as if it had been my own,
lost inexplicably, spirited away,
now discovered in this quiet place.
He was a Visigoth, fourth century,
and wore a crown set with glassy jewels,
red, watery yellow, green, infinite purple.
I could feel its fit and a rough pride,
the brief speeches that vibrated under it,
the broad sword that caught its light;
I heard the ragged shouts that gathered
into battle cry; trembled with the heart
beating in the shadows beneath the crown
that I had somehow found again.
And yet--absurd!--the museum guard moved towards me
when my fingers touched the glass case
as if I had no right.

My mother never located the tablespoons
that disappeared one year. In a dim picture
I see myself digging holes in Tennessee dirt,
to China, perhaps. Now I imagine someone
whose warm hands will someday touch where
my short fingers pressed.

Last June I placed a strand of my hair
on a barbed-wire fence along a wooded ridge--
a light brown thread flecked with gold,
no stronger than a spider's link between slim twigs--
to catch in the fingers of a later hiker, and
to keep the woods familiar for when I came again.

There is still dust of Alps in my tent, and each time I prepare to fold it, I am careful not to shake it out too well. When I sleep in its closeness, I can dream that I hear the light clank of a goat's bell in the meadows above Val Orsine, the crack of larch as it bends in the wind before a rain. Once I ran my fingers over the stones of the ancient building that houses the music conservatory in Bergamo, Italy. Strains of viola ran along the window sills above me. I wanted an exchange of substance, to feel its stony crumbs on my flesh, and to imagine that I left a microparticle of myself in this city that had been my home for two years.

We can know a place, according to essayist John Daniel, only through our direct contact with the stones, the snakes that slither among them, and the reactions, even fear, that make us reconsider ourselves in relation to where we have dared to wander. The window of a bus, he says, will bring us a sight to admire; but it cannot bring us the textures that will change us, textures like the feel of the stones under our feet, the smell of the air through the trees of a particular place, and the sounds of its life. I travel to know what is in the world and to offer myself to the possibility of change. Not that I will change; I might not, in any way that my husband or my children will notice. I will know more. My cells will shift around a little, to make room, and something new might happen. This is why I want to get close.

The first time I met Pierre Maréchal, I had no idea that my husband and I would someday sit at his table in Thonon Les Bains, France. I had taken a group of sophomore English students to Legislative Plaza in Nashville, three blocks from the high school, to write about the city. We had spread out on steps and fountain edges to ponder the enterprises of the pigeons, the April

sun on water jets, the buildings like rockets and lipstick tubes and Egyptian temples. Breaking the near silence of the square, the rhythms and syllables of French conversation surprised me. Looking up, I saw three men and a woman. One was Pierre, a white-haired man of fifty-five or so in blue sweatpants and a tee shirt that had HAUTE SAVOIE printed across it. I had been in Haute Savoie, one of the Alpine provinces of France, just the summer before. I went over to meet them and discovered that they were chaperones for a boys' soccer team that was touring the southern half of the United States. Pierre, the only one of the four who spoke no English, said that if I ever went back to France, I must not miss his town, Thonon-Les-Bains, on the French side of Lake Geneva, which he called Lac Léman. "It is the most beautiful town in France," he said. "The lake is on one side, the Alps on the other!" He suggested that we exchange addresses, and later he sent a postcard.

A year after this meeting, my husband and I decided to go to France for a couple of weeks to visit my brother in Paris and to explore together the mountains I'd described to him again and again. I wrote to Pierre to tell him that we were planning to visit France's most beautiful town, as well. I asked for advice about hiking trails in the region and said we hoped to see him and his wife while we were there. He immediately sent us brochures and offered to find us accommodations, so I wrote back that we were traveling modestly and were staying in *Chambre d'Hôtes*, bed and breakfast inns. We telephoned from Paris, said we were going through Burgundy and would leave Beaune early Sunday and arrive there by noon. "*En face du Commissariat de Police*," he directed, "*Rue Sergent Morel*." In front of the police station. What could be easier in a resort town? He invited us for dinner at noon.

At one o'clock, we pulled up to the large apartment building with the Pierre Maréchal carpet store downstairs. Pierre, in red, white, and blue

sweats, was pacing out front. His face opened into a grin when he saw us. "Unload the suitcases here. I'll show *Monsieur* where to park." Unload? But we were just invited for lunch. I suffered a moment of uncertainty. Pierre looked at me and laughed. "You said *Chambre d'Hôte, n'est-ce pas?* We have *chambres*. We have breakfast. This time, you are our guests! Come on. *Allons!*"

His wife Delores was distressed; the *rosbif* was dry. Her Spanish-accented French echoed around us in the marble hall as Pierre led us in, introducing us, reassuring her, welcoming us. She smiled and showed us where to put our bags, where to wash our hands, and she worried aloud and apologized about the dinner, wondered why we were late. "*A midi, vous avez dit. Il est une heure.*" A whole hour late. But all the time she was smiling, seating us at the heavy table in the little dining room, fussing in the kitchen, listening to me pick through my French to tell about the traffic along the outskirts of Geneva and the confusion of directions in Thonon-Les-Bains.

Their daughter Sylvie, a willowy girl of about twenty-two, kissed us like old family friends, regretted not staying to lunch with us. "My boyfriend is arriving at the airport. He's been gone for two weeks. I'd hoped to eat with you, but now it's late. *Au revoir! Bon voyage!*"

Delores pursed her lips and Pierre frowned. "She has just moved to her own apartment," he said. "If she wants to stay out all night with that young man, it's her business, but she may not live here with us and behave that way. That's final."

"The boyfriend is not welcome here at all," added Delores, bringing in a plate of pâtés and gesturing for us to serve ourselves. "Not that he isn't nice, *très agréable.*"

"Ah, *oui*, we like the young man. Intelligent. A lawyer," Pierre said.

"If they get married, and they should, then he'll be welcome at this table. But not the way things stand. *Vous comprenez*. You have children. What are they thinking of?"

"She's a lovely girl," I answered. "It's difficult to know how to handle these situations."

"*Ah, oui. Bon*. I'll bet you've never had real kir. I make the liqueur myself." Delores was drying her hands on her apron, her animated face dancing between worry and happy enthusiasm as it had since our arrival. She twisted the top off the clear bottle that held the blackberry syrup. Pierre poured the white wine and Delores added the dark liquid.

"*Goûtez! C'est bon*. This wine is from the region," beamed Pierre. "A toast to the travelers!"

It was delicious. No, I'd never had kir before. It was rich and earthy, a good complement to the roast which had indeed dried out somewhat. I rolled the wine on my tongue and thought about the gift these new friends were giving us.

The rumor about the closed, difficult-to-know French has circulated ever since I can remember. We were sitting now at Sunday dinner with people whom we hadn't known an hour ago. Our suitcases cluttered their extra room, and we were sharing their anxieties about their daughter's choices. Perhaps these were unusual French people. Yet, when I think of the other tables we occupied in those weeks, I remember again and again a sense of being gathered in, a sense of generosity in personal exchange, a real sense of contact. My brother used tabletops as focal points and backgrounds for many of his paintings over a period of several years. When pressed for explanation, he said that at a kitchen table, people read the wedding invitations, the birth announcements, the obituaries; they solve family crises, their elbows planted

firmly; they laugh there, at each other and at themselves, fight there, and cry out their disappointments there. Our stay with Pierre and Delores was a gift of contact across the family table where they shared with us the stones under their feet and some of the dark and light that dart among them.

Along the lake, Thonon-les-Bains is a garden. A wide promenade led us, that afternoon, from the noisy center of activity where an International Triathlon was in progress to the far western end where sailboats and yachts clustered in the harbor. The flowerbeds were lavish arrangements of Bicentennial blue, white, and red that circled and cascaded around monuments and fountains. Delores knew everyone and seemed to have ongoing business with most of the women with whom she stopped to talk. "Ah, Cécile!" she cried. Cécile, arm in arm with her elderly mother, both of them bright-eyed, smiling, approached us. "These are our American friends."

"*Bonjour, bonjour. . . un plaisir. . .*" And they talked of Thursday's luncheon *chez Madame* . . . while Pierre and my husband and I walked over to the edge of the lake and watched the white ducks chase each other in the shallows.

On a tree-shaded sandy court couples played at boules. I pulled out my camera. "Attendez!" Delores called out, holding up her hand for me to wait a minute. She introduced us to the whole group this time, though I don't think she knew any of them before this moment, loosely explained the object of the game to my husband, and invited him to take a shot that I could photograph. The heavy ball rolled close to the others already thrown, a good shot for a beginner. He got a round of applause and I got my picture.

They took us down the road where it followed the lake to Evian, where the famous water is bottled. The casino there is a popular place for the Swiss who cross the lake by yacht to gamble Swiss francs for French ones. The

casino was noisy and busy, a dark world with artificial lights flashing red and green from the machines and glittering white from the chandeliers, a rattling contrast to the outdoors, which was geranium-colored, sky-colored, lake-colored, the air thin and clean. Delores popped her francs into slot machines and pulled the levers, one after the other along the wall. She would have stayed longer, laughing at herself and enjoying the lights and noise, the acquaintances she met, but Pierre didn't meet the dress standards, since he was in a sweatsuit (I have never seen him in any other clothing), so we went back into the bright afternoon, got into the car, and drove on to Marin.

Pierre had done his homework for us. I had asked about hiking trails when I had first written, and he had found Marie-France and Jacques Hénin. Jacques is an accountant who does all the bookwork for the local Alpine Club in his spare time, and he, Marie-France and their two boys are avid hikers and skiers, as well. Marie-France is an English teacher at the lycée in Marin. She had told Pierre that she would gladly take us hiking in exchange for the opportunity to speak English with a couple of Tennesseans.

We reached Marin by driving up switchbacks through residential neighborhoods that overlooked the dazzling red tile roofs and flowers of Thonon and the expanse of misty-blue Lake Geneva, the view becoming even more breathtaking with each turn back to it. The Hénin house seemed to grow gracefully out of the subtropical foliage that surrounded it; crotons, moist ferns, geraniums and lilies bordered the walkway to the deck and then opened up to the spectacular view from this hillside.

Marie-France welcomed us at the gate. "Hello," she said. "Come in. Would you like a cup of tea?" We shared two tables with Marie-France: the table in her living room on which we spread tea, coffee, cookies, and

topographical maps of the Dent d'Oche (a giant's tooth), and, the following day, a picnic table on that mountain at an altitude of 2,222 meters.

Marie-France is a small woman, stocky, with a square, direct-looking face. She didn't seem very athletic, not very much like a skier or even a hiker. "That's quite a garden," I said. I could see from the front windows the large plot filled with rows of lush vegetables. It was twice as big as the one we had trouble keeping up with at home. "Who does the gardening?"

"Oh, I do that," she answered. "Sometimes Jacques will work a little, to pull out some weeds, but it's really up to me, you know," she said. I noticed her sunburned arms and figured they must hide a strength that belied her small stature.

She chose her words carefully, yet she seemed comfortable with English--far more than I was with French. We switched languages back and forth, though, since my husband spoke no French, and Delores and Pierre spoke no English, and traced the trail she proposed we take the next day.

I was thankful that Pierre and Delores were with us. They kept a buzz of conversation going in their sociable way. Marie-France was quiet. Getting to know her was slow. Her son Philippe whipped into the room, the front door slamming behind him, and announced that his younger brother had beaten him in tennis--again. She flashed him an amused smile that helped me know her a little better. "Say *how do you do*," she told him, and then introduced him to us. "This is my older son."

He blushed. "How do you do, hello," he said and retreated into the kitchen.

"Bring a warm sweater," she advised us. "Maybe it will be cold on the mountain. I hope it isn't cloudy. If not, you can see the whole lake from the top."

I followed her to the kitchen with cups and plates while the others went out to look at the garden. "What time would you like to leave for the mountain?" I asked.

"The hike will take three hours there and three back. We should leave by seven, I think." That suited me, since we had to travel to Bellevaux afterwards. I noticed that her shelves were arranged in haphazard fashion, rather like those in my own kitchen--as though it wasn't very important where things ended up, as long as they were out of the way. I liked her priorities.

"Should we pack a lunch?" I asked her.

"Packalunch?" she puzzled. "Oh, *lunch*. No. I have some things to bring. And there's a restaurant on the road just where the trail starts." With all the arrangements made, we left, promising to be at her door early the next morning.

Pierre and Delores took us to the village of Yvoire after we left the Hénins. We walked under the centuries-old town gate and wandered the twisted streets where flowers were spilling over every doorstep and window sill and gushing from the ancient wells in every square. The Maréchals told us that Yvoire had won the annual prize for *La Ville la Plus Fleurie*, or the "bloomingest city," as I translated loosely for my husband.

We ate in a restaurant which was cluttered with shiny copper and geraniums and served lake trout that were tiny delicacies. We drank the local kir, perhaps a great amount of it, and then had a brandy. We laughed a great deal. Delores began to tease me about writing to her husband, saying, "You're the talk of Thonon, you know. Everyone is gossiping about the American woman who writes to poor, defenseless carpet merchants in search of bed and

breakfast!" Pierre reddened slightly and said that he had enjoyed the attention, for a change.

On the way home, Delores began to warn us about Pierre's snoring. "We should have lived next to a railroad track," she said, "to muffle the noise he makes nightly." We laughed indulgently, but later we discovered that she wasn't exaggerating. I have never heard such house-shattering snoring as I did that night. At last, its rhythm captured me, much like the clickity-clack of a train from a berth or a torrential rain on a tin roof, and I slept in its comfort. As for Pierre, he was fresh from his bear's sleep and eager to get us to Marie-France's house by seven a.m.

I was surprised how quickly the little road she chose took us into rugged high country; the trail head was only a fifteen-minute drive away. We parked by a sprawling wood-frame restaurant/lodge and were out of sight and sound of human traffic almost immediately.

We climbed slowly through the spruce forest, picking our way up a seasonal stream bed. At first I tried to make conversation, as I had, with difficulty, in the car on the way. "I see you have wild geraniums here, too." I pointed to the little purple flower.

"Yes. I didn't know its name," Marie-France replied.

"Do you ski on this mountain?"

"Oh, yes."

"Are your boys skiers, too?"

"Yes. We come almost every Sunday all winter. They would rather ski than eat. My husband, too."

After a while, I asked if she had learned to speak English in Great Britain, and she told me that she had lived in London for a year on two

different occasions. "Is our southern American accent difficult for you to understand?" I wondered.

"Sometimes, a little," she admitted. "But I have been to the United States, too. Not in the South, of course. The children and I stayed with a friend in Chicago."

I asked her where else she had gone while in the U.S., and she told me, and then I quit trying to make such an effort to be polite in conversation, thinking maybe that the greatest politeness with this taciturn guide might be silence.

We reached rock-strewn meadows that curved and rolled up to sheer rock, their sweet greenness barely covering something hard and indifferent and unconquered. We arrived at a cowherd's hut, where we stopped to drink water at a spring-fed trough and made friends with the ragged dogs that greeted us. For a second, the weathered face of an old woman appeared at a window, both woman and hut ancient like the mountain and textured like its roughest terrain. She was a face from an old tale, a face, perhaps, that I didn't believe existed anymore; but I felt here a suspension of time, the dogs joining me and the woman as a common link across centuries. The shutter banged shut.

I noticed that the water also ran along a trough into the stone barn, which was half underground, built partially into the mountain. Both the barn and the hut would be indistinguishable from the rest of the rock formations in winter, I figured, buried under meters of snow. I heard the clanging of bells from invisible meadows and wondered how difficult it was to drive the cows up the steep, rocky trail to these high pastures for summer grazing and then back down.

Past the hut, the trail grew steeper, and we zigzagged up the tilted green meadows, past the tree line, past the grass line, and then to the rocks. Still, we couldn't see the top, or even where it was. The mist was heavy. My progress was slow, and the rocks slipped easily away underfoot. The last hundred yards or so were nearly straight up. I thought back to the slow, puffing (though steady) pace that Marie-France had pulled along the early part of the trail and was amazed at her sure-footedness and self-assurance on these rocks which took all our concentration and athletic ability to negotiate.

"Put your hand there," she'd point out, ahead of us now. "Now, your foot there. Be careful." A rock nudged loose under my feet and sailed down toward my husband. Finally, we pulled up over the last ledge and found ourselves on the top of the mountain.

"We can get some tea here," she said. "There's a refuge up ahead." It was a rough-wood hut maintained by the Alpine Club of Thonon. A student posted there for the summer was on a ladder painting the inside, but he climbed down long enough to serve us our drinks. We had begun in early sunshine, climbed up to mist, and now sat at a picnic table in a fog that soaked our hair and clothes and would have chilled us thoroughly if it had not been for the wool sweaters Marie-France had urged us to wear and the hot tea we sipped with deep pleasure.

"It's too bad you can't see the lake. It is a beautiful sight on a clear day," she said in even syllables. In fact, we could see not quite twenty feet ahead. "Here, have some chocolate," she said. She pulled out three Lindt candy bars. The student's German shepherd begged us to play ball with him, and when my husband threw it, the dog would leap precariously close to the edge of the summit, or scramble, slipping on his toenails, down the rocks for it, wagging his tail enthusiastically.

"Do you think he will survive the summer?" I wondered aloud to Marie-France. We talked about teaching. I begged vocabulary of her for various social situations (What is the polite way to excuse oneself to go to the toilet? *Excusez-moi. Je vais au petit coin.*) and current teenage slang to take back to my French students. "Does a teacher in France call her student *tu* or *vous*?" I asked.

She explained: "I used to say *vous* when I was younger. Now, I have sons their age, and I call them all *tu*."

When we had rested long enough, she took us to the actual summit, where a marker said 2222 *metres*. "You will want to take a photograph here," she stated. I was beginning to understand Marie-France, slowly. She reminded me of my husband's mountain relatives, whose cores run deep and do not reveal themselves in conversation. I have come to know them through their gestures, in sharing the generosity of their kitchens and their needlework and their gardens and their terse stories. Marie-France grew up in a small village in the Vosges Mountains. Knowing her had to be founded on the concrete, the observable.

"Do you want to go back the way we came, or the other way, which is more difficult?"

"Let's go the other way," I suggested immediately. My husband agreed. We descended by a trail that led over sharp boulders and flat rock faces. To traverse them, we held onto chains bolted into the rock and searched for places to wedge a foot, to find a balance. There was nothing below to break a fall. I loved it; and I was as frightened as I have ever been, my face against cold stone, feeling the texture of the mountain, and in this union, feeling its enduring solidness and how soft and brief I was, a gnat on a Giant's Tooth. With the mist swirling about us in that eerie other-world where the black

chouca's scream broke the quiet of the fog much like a raven's, we were bound up in our efforts not to fall, and we did not immediately notice two observers. Standing on a thin outcropping of rock were two young *bouquetins*, little mountain goats. They were far more inquisitive about us than afraid, on this terrain. My husband crawled over to them to take a picture, and when he reached out his hand, one of them sniffed at it with a little annoyance, then scampered lightly over the rocks to rest all four feet on an eight-inch-wide pinnacle at a safe distance.

Marie-France, like these four-footed tight-rope walkers, picked her way along the descent with relative ease and had to talk me past more than one tricky place. At last we eased down into the pastures where the cows were grazing noisily, through the spruce forest once again, and out to the mountain road.

Our guide had given us invaluable gifts. I looked at her stolid face as we drove back to Marin, and I thought about her. She was not a gushy, proud enthusiast of adventure like me, I noted. She was, rather, a steady light: a pleasant, generous, and at last, warm person, a person who would climb a mountain with two presumptuous strangers, who would give them the surprise of *bouquetins* and the thrill of a precarious climb, knowing matter-of-factly that these were the reasons one seeks mountain trails. She made me feel the textures of the Giant's Tooth, the texture of my fears about where I dared to place my feet, and the texture of an ancient cowherd's life, defying time and the world beyond the mountain. She brought Swiss chocolate to share across a picnic table in the fog.

Pierre and Delores met us with our car, a bottle of homemade kir syrup and a poster for my classroom, and they led us out to the road to Bellevaux. We left them with tee shirts and tapes of music from Tennessee. I later sent a book

with pictures of Nashville and Jackson, Kingsport, Knoxville, Chattanooga, Memphis, Bucksport, and Soddy Daisy. But we can't return the riches they gave us without sharing the things and people we know by living here. When they come to Tennessee, we will take them to eat catfish at Uncle Bud's, to ride a river boat on the Cumberland, to hear Nashville music at the Bluegrass Inn, and to have dinner at our table. They will hear the neighborhood children playing kick-the-can in the summer twilight and perhaps smell the lilac's perfume from the side yard while we wonder aloud if our son will starve to death in the music career he has chosen. They will meet our friends Sally and Bill, and then they will rest in our guest room, down the hall far enough to block the rumble of a night train.

II

I begin to know the locust tree
in winter, its bark thick,
pattern interlaced like arms
crossed in folk-dance chains.
The maple trunk is smooth,
hackberry bubbled (maligned
scrub tree), the sycamore
mottled white against the bank.
The gum has bark arranged
in squares. All leafless,
I begin to know them,
as I also recognize the ducks,
now, beyond their colors, and
the bars and rings around their eyes.
In silhouette their forms--
large, squat, pintail,
divers, surface feeders,
curve of bill--give me
golden-eye and bufflehead,
scalp and teal, and I enter
into secret conversation with what
I know, not by dress, but
by geometry and act.

I

At Cades Cove, the bear
came out of the woods and galloped,
black fur rippling, catching autumn sun
like dew on tilted grass and silver mountainside.
He turned and stood, solid, graceful,
proof of what we think
lives in those leafy shadows.
He lingered at the edge of woods
and my belief--long enough for me
to tell the story of a wild thing glimpsed,
and hold it as truth until human memory
dims again.

II

At Radnor Lake I know
the stands of raspberry bramble, pawpaw,
persimmon and cane, and where sparrows
fuss among low brush. But the doe--
I could have touched her: *touched!*
She surprised me, in dusk-light,
and I, her, so I bounded back, and she
flashed her white flag--then
stopped, turned brown eyes to me and
began to browse, still watching, until
from the thicket there in shadow,

the young one came on spindles,
fairy-like--and at last I was the first
to leave, as night fell.
The knowing, flesh again,
taste of bread.

III

At sunset the Canadians come honking
when the water is streaked with red sky
and white hands of sycamore wave;
ducks in darkening coves grack-quack
like society dames, and they skid-skid-
splash in to rest, chattering, settling,
letting the water grow still again.
The dark fills in the spaces in the air
with the gathering of species,
rough voices mingling,
sky and water merging.

IV

Out of a Vermont summer sky pale with heat
against the hum of road and narrow valley
between wooded mountains banked
above trout stream and beaver dam,
a cedar waxwing thumped against the window
and fell at my feet on the floorboard of the pickup,
dead and perfect. He was earth-yellow and green.

and wore a regal tuft, an envoy from his race,
come, perhaps, so I would know him
when he passes through, squealing and
feasting on the hackberry in my yard.
Dead and perfect. Cedar waxwing.

V

Whistle of marmot mocks from the alpine rock;
the barred owl stares unafraid of our delight in him;
rue anemone dances like girls in batiste dresses;
and a poem slips onto a page out of the mysteries
I only half-believe in; and then believe again
when I find witnesses in the shadows
waiting for communion.

A high-pitched laugh rolled along the uneven ground, skipped against rock and tree, and ricocheted out into the night. Under my sleeping bag, I giggled. Stars dotted the sky like random pinpricks lighted from behind a velvet curtain. I recognized the unreined hilarity of David Heiser, age sixteen. Bill Brown, one of the other teachers, hurled a clump of moss at the boys' tent. "I don't have to choke you, Heiser, 'cause a bear's gonna do it for me when he comes to get the sardines I baited your tent with!" The laugh pealed out again, irresistible. Not much chance. We were at the Big Creek campsite in the Savage Gulf Wilderness, a huge stretch of virgin forest on the Cumberland Plateau in Southeast Tennessee. No bears here. More likely a raccoon or a possum or a skunk.

Three of us, Brown, Tony Beasley, and I, were with eighteen high school students, spending two days deep in the woods. Brown is an English teacher, and Beasley, a biology and ecology teacher. Both have been spending weekends with high school students in the wild areas of Tennessee for many years. I came along to discover what made this program so successful, why students not only signed up to go on backpacking trips, but also made wilderness outings a prominent part of their lives and service to the environment a priority.

We hiked eight miles in, beginning on the rim at the Great Stone Door at 1,600 feet and following the rocky Indian trail down into the gulf (a Tennessee word for gorge) along Big Creek. The students found out that descent is sometimes tougher on the body, at least the knees and toes, than ascent. Twice we stopped along the creek and stretched out on the huge boulders like turtles in the February sun. Some pulled out ragged journals and wrote. Some

munched gorp and stared. At the first stop, Katie asked for moleskin, cradling a pale foot next to an empty boot, and Barry got a head start on a flattened peanut butter sandwich. Once Gina asked how much farther, and Beasley said, "Four hundred miles."

"Really!"

"No, just right around the next bend."

She got out her own map and consulted it. "You're full of it!" she railed. She perched on a log, following the trail map with her finger. "We're about half-way there, but it looks like we've got a big pull ahead of us up to the top. I think it'll be hard to get there before dark!"

"That's up to you, I guess," Beasley answered.

We had lunch near a waterfall that we discovered streaming down the far wall of the gulf, seeping out from high crevices and dropping down the broken rock face. Just the barest disparity of rhythm above the mad rushing of the creek led us in a vague direction--and then the waterfall, through brittle trees. Already, fiddleheads appeared, sticking up through the leafy floor. Beasley showed the students a walking fern on an outcrop of rock along the bank. "Look," he said, "wherever the tips touch the ground, new plants sprout. That's how they spread, by walking."

"It's smoother than other ferns, and tougher-feeling, isn't it?" Josh observed. He rubbed his fingers along the length of leathery leaf. "What are these zits along the underside?"

"Those are the fruitdots," Beasley answered. He turned over the leaf to examine the bumpy growths. "The spores form inside them, allowing the fern to reproduce asexually."

Brown pointed suddenly to a red-tailed hawk, playing on the shifting air currents. "Look at him rise, and he still hasn't flapped his wings," he said.

He laughed. We squinted into the sun and watched as the hawk spiraled, slowly up, then down.

Tony Beasley began taking inner-city students to the wilderness twenty-two years ago, and Brown joined him four years later. The outings evolved into a program they called Camp, Hike, Explore, Write--CHEW. They and the students chewed a great deal of fat, they chewed on discoveries, and they chewed quite a bit on their relationship to the natural world. Students from Beasley's biology and ecology classes signed up, some because they were intrigued by the dynamics of the natural world they were studying, others for the adventure, and still others because their friends were going. Brown's students were writers and saw the adventure and the opportunity for meditative retreat as good reasons to go. Of course, there was a great deal of overlap of budding ecologists and writers. They met in the high school parking lot at 5:30 a.m. one or two Saturdays a month, while their other friends cruised on in sleep until noon. They gave up two days in front of the tube or revving their cars or trying new hairdos, choosing instead to struggle with a twenty-five pound pack up a mountain trail, dirtying and endangering their rears on slippery and jagged descents, fording creeks in thirty-degree temperatures, and thawing out ice over campstoves at sunrise.

The program grew every year. The Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools began to sponsor it as a part of its Extended Learning Program under a federal grant for gifted students.

I got involved because seventh- and eighth-graders across the system wanted to join, too, and Beasley and Brown were trying to run two programs at once, hiking nearly every weekend. The program looked like something that I, a teacher as well, wanted to do. "Help me help you," I said. "Teach me."

My wilderness experience was sufficient, but not recent. I had spent nine summers hiking and canoeing and studying the woods as a child at a rustic mountain camp and continued as a counselor through my college years. But after an outing with Brown and Beasley, the aura surrounding the program was what I wanted to recreate for my group, not just the technique. The kids obviously had a good time. They took care of the novices; no one, I noticed (not even I), was new for long. An easy acceptance swept them in, with people helping with a tent, sharing water purification tablets and ramen noodles when there was need, perhaps because they remembered learning, too. I didn't hear anybody complain, not *really* complain.

Teasing was rampant between teachers and students, but so was serious learning. "Here, taste this," I heard Beasley say. "The Indians loved it. It's called pipsissewa." One taste of the small, white-veined leaf, and three students attacked him like scruffy hounds on a big bear and finally pulled him to the ground, he laughing, they, shouting in indignation. "I didn't tell you why they loved it, did I? It cured their diarrhea!" he announced. I tried the pipsissewa, too, suckered in like the rest. It was bitter and lasting. But I know pipsissewa, now, every time I see it creeping along the ground, green even in winter--and so do five or six students. They know ginger and pick it to crush and spread in their sleeping bags to keep them fresh-smelling. Brown says they should use it on their armpits, instead. Distance and reserve break down on a backpacking trip with leaders like this. What happens, I think, as a result of serious purpose combined with riotous interplay among participants and leaders is an *esprit de corps*, a mutual trust.

Behind the ability to be relaxed and playful in the wilderness, I learned, is a thorough attention to preparation. Leaders prepare the students for a common purpose in setting out, and students learn to equip themselves to be

self-sufficient. For the city-wide program sponsored by the school system, Beasley and Brown set up weekly afternoon meetings at a central location. At these meetings, students help choose which trails they will take, determine probable hiking time, and talk about what natural features, flora, and fauna they are likely to find. Furthermore, the teachers involve students in discussions about the necessity for self-sufficiency. Students share ideas about nutritious, light-weight foods and how to pack for warmth and comfort. Each student comes to understand that personal preparedness is his or her responsibility, and that it is critical to the safety, as well as enjoyment, of the whole group.

For some meetings, Beasley procures films from the State Department of Wildlife Resources and the Department of Conservation on subjects such as hypothermia and on ecological issues that range from low-impact camping practices to endangered species and lands. Finally, every meeting includes a writing session that encourages thoughtfulness about self in the natural world. Therefore, the students come to face each trip as an exploration of the land with a spirit of inquiry born of some foreknowledge and contemplation.

At the 5:30 a.m. departures, Brown and Beasley check packs for rain gear and wool or thermal shirts. Brown always packs a few extra sweaters. Beasley calls him Mother Brown and refuses such concessions. No one takes a radio or Walkman. At trailhead, the teachers talk about their status as guests, about respecting the silence of the forest, and about leaving no signs of our visit besides our footprints. Other than that, the teaching is informal and spontaneous, a matter of sharing. Naming the wildflowers, like spotting the hawk, becomes a joy in recognition, something picked up from others who are thrilled to find a pink lady's slipper in a clump of grass or a turkey-tail bracket fungus on a rotted log.

Besides the self-sufficiency and responsibility that characterized the seasoned hikers, the most important quality I began to understand in the days of my initiation was a sense of shared pride that seemed to be part of the group spirit. This pride arose from a specific philosophy that it took me a long time to come to terms with, a philosophy held by both men. I knew how important pride in accomplishment was from the beginning, but back then, I wanted everyone to have it, despite their individual inclination. And I wanted to control its achievement.

"Yeah, we may have walked nine miles, straight down, then straight up today," I heard Tam say, "but this is nothing compared to Mount Rogers!" Groans underlined her statement.

"Oh, God, don't remind me," Katherine sighed. "Beasley and Brown nearly killed us. It wasn't enough to walk twenty miles in one day. We had to climb up the sixth highest mountain in the whole Appalachian chain."

"And that was just day one of three, don't forget," added Amy.

"Hey, Mr. Beasley, when are we going to get to climb it in the snow?" Chris interjected. "You promised!" The others listened eagerly for an answer. They wanted to go again. They wanted to relive the challenge, only tougher, I realized.

I had thought that easy, short outings would be good at the beginning for seventh- and eighth-grade students, maybe even "car camping." Brown and Beasley suggested I go the whole way: "Give them something they can be proud of."

One of first trips I helped lead was just such a challenge to a new group of thirteen-year-old hikers. We embarked on a newly-opened section of the Cumberland Trail which follows a ridge along the eastern wall of the Cumberland Plateau and ends in Cove Lake State Park. The trail offers vistas

across a whole stretch of the Tennessee River Valley, at one point all the way to the river itself. It is a rocky spine that winds up and down through oak and hickory forest and falls off on either side to deep ravines.

The first two hundred yards are a tough climb up to the ridge. Along the way the new hikers complained of unpadded straps on packs, too much weight, too little wind, need for rest, blisters. Our goal, Eagle's Nest Bluff, was twelve miles away, and I kept pushing them. We crossed rock bridges that were like tight-ropes; we had to squeeze pack and body between upright boulders to climb to new levels; at one point, we had to pass packs down the rocks and help each other find safe hand- and foot-holds.

We walked and walked through November woods, stopping several times to snack, to drink, even to write a little, but mainly pushing on and on. At dark, some flashlights went on. Beasley told the kids to turn them off and use their eyes. "There's a moon," he said, "and it isn't so dark that you can't see, unless you depend on those lights." We reached camp around 7:00, and neophytes pitched tents in the dark, the cords awkward in their numbed fingers. They huddled around each other and rubbed each other's cold hands, then got out their stoves, lighted them by trial and error, and got warm food into their bodies. They had survived the ordeal of the long, hard hike. They had survived to sing and share poems around the fire we built out on the bluff, where valley lights and starlights merged to make one gigantic sky. They endured, and it was no set-up situation. It was real.

Of course, several on that trip never signed up to go again, and I hated to lose them. I thought that if I had just eased them into the outdoor experience, they might have built up a toughness and then gone on to enjoy it. One was Sabrina, who cried the last two hours from fear and sore shoulders. I

carried her pack, and when we arrived, others helped her with her tent and her supper. She went to bed immediately and missed the stars and the singing.

"You have to make the decision either to entertain kids or to help them grow," Beasley told me. I believe now that he is right. The students who remain active in the program must have somewhere deep in them a will to endure, and they must have connected endurance to self-worth. Opportunity to exercise what is already within them is what we can help to provide. If students have this desire to stretch themselves to meet challenges, they come back for the opportunity to continue proving themselves in real terms. For that nucleus of proven youngsters, the program becomes very important, and peer teaching becomes a prominent force in bringing others to tap their resources. Teenagers encourage their new friends to go along, and they help these new ones get started. They maintain group behavior that is gentle on the woods and bearable for their adult leaders; most of all, they encourage openness to personal challenge. These students may be the ones we would lose if the initial challenges weren't satisfying; and these are the ones who will make a difference, in their immediate worlds and in the world at large, because they push themselves to discover what they can do.

After leading many trips and watching the young people grow through their wilderness experiences, I have decided that the challenge of wilderness is one of the most valuable gifts we can offer those who are willing to try. Most young people today have little opportunity to test their worth. Much of the time, they are insulated from real experience. They participate only vicariously through television and movies, screens that separate them from the realities that feed their lives. Bread is in the refrigerator, water in the tap, the bath in the tub, the clothes in the closet. No fetching, hoeing, or weaving. No wood to chop or fire to build to keep them warm. Few have any idea

whether or not they have what it takes to handle hardship, discomfort, or crisis. In the woods we feel real stone underfoot; climbing we find the hand holds and control our shaky legs or risk a stomach-sinking sail out on the rope; in a canoe we learn that studying the river is the difference between a good run and an icy bath.

Time and again, hiking with young students, I have learned the lesson of what hardship can do for a growing human being. On a five-day trip along the Roan Mountain section of the Appalachian Trail, we saw four afternoons of rain. Two fourteen-year-old girls with me were just second-timers. The first was astounded to find herself unprotected, other than by a rain poncho, in a downpour on Low-Gap ridge. She wanted shelter, now! "Rachel, it's just rain," I said. "Yellow Mountain Barn is not too far away."

"I want to go home," she wailed, incredulous that life could deal her such a situation. I realized with astonishment that she had never had to endure a rainstorm without promise of shelter.

"Home? That's where we're headed," I said. "We'll get to the highway in exactly four days. Want a piece of chocolate?" Rachel survived getting wet. I saw her hanging up drippy clothes to dry on the rafters of the barn loft. She was combing her hair when I sat down nearby. "How're you doing?" I asked.

"Fine," she said matter-of-factly and turned to continue her conversation with Lily. I left, clearly unneeded.

Claire, the second girl, rather resented walking. She said she liked the camping, if we could just stay in one spot. I noticed her grim, set face the first two days of the trip. On the third, we crossed Big Hump Mountain in a raging storm. Wind-driven rain stung against faces and bare arms, and it was cold. The climb up Big Hump is gradual and teasing, the top always apparently close, but always another hundred yards beyond. The trail is deep-rutted and

difficult to place one's feet on, with clumped long grasses at the edges. With a burst of gathered effort, I came up behind Claire, whose plastic raincoat was in shreds, and I sang, off-key and as loud as I could, my wet-weather disaster song, "Jeremiah was a Bullfrog!" I even added a dance step as I passed her, just to spit in the rainstorm's eye. "How can you sing when it's so *awful*?" Claire demanded.

"Because," I answered, "I don't like the alternative." Not only did Claire pick up her feet and get the heck over that peak and into the protection of the woods on the ridge, but also she went on to become one of the new leading voices of the ecology club in her high school. And she tells the Hump Mountain story on herself. She advises new hikers to break in their boots before a trip and to purchase reliable raingear and to pack light.

Both Rachel and Claire, as well as thirteen others, had survival stories to tell at the end of the trip. Meeting the challenge of Hump Mountain in a gale and the other ordeals they told of bonded them, moreover, to the more experienced campers on that hike; and I noticed that, during the final days of the trek, they entered more freely into conversations and confidences with the older ones. They walked straighter; they wore independence like a fine garment as they marched ahead of me past the Apple House Shelter days later toward Highway 19E that marked the end of our trail.

Commitment to wilderness seeps into the blood along with self-reliance and respect for others' efforts. Mollie and John are both involved in environmental studies at Warren Wilson College, where they are close to mountains and mountain lore. Jason wants to study forestry. Melissa's project on "yellow boy," a substance that gets into the rivers from strip mining, was a product both of ecology class and wilderness excursions that taught her to love the land. Her work got attention in Washington that halted the practice in at

least one area. She is now a biology teacher and a seasonal naturalist in a state park. Gavin is studying philosophy, and Barry is a poet. The land needs them, too, and will profit from their thoughts and words.

I can sail on the memory of David Heiser's distinctive laugh back to Big Creek campsite or Twin Arches or Frozen Head or Virgin Falls anytime I want and recreate a present tense of the voices that speak out of those countless outings. These are young people whose feet have known blisters caused by rock floors, whose hands have slipped in wonder along fluted cave walls, and who have crawled with their bellies in the dirt and recognized their kinships and their origins. Then they have stood up to point at the stars above the pines, and their maturing through these encounters is perhaps one of the candles that flickers through the pinpricks in the night sky. They carry a light of their own that might just nourish the planet.

The wind stands us all at angles
to each other, a cubist's composition
against gray hazed mountains and sky
that we sent our features into, disjointed
like *Nude Descending a Staircase*.
Last night our tents billowed up like clouds
when we tried to set them
in resistance to a wild call;
we had to reach up and pull them down to us,
and we slept buffeted in the dark winds
that rearranged us, shook away our mirror images,
made face fly from limb, from song,
from heartbeat, and could grasp only
the simple abstraction of ourselves
that nurtures wholeness finally
in this liberation from form.

What were seven boys and girls, aged twelve to fourteen, doing knee-deep in murky water on a sultry June morning when they could have been still in bed . . . or listening to the headphones they had reluctantly left in the cars . . . or swimming at the neighborhood pool . . . or talking on the phone? At the beginning, they were undoubtedly wondering the same thing. Warren is confident, curious, cool; Sean is a musician, a dreamer; Aisha has a bright smile in front of her serious intellect; Marissa shaves one side of her innocent blond head, and her little girl eyes meet you directly; Elizabeth and Shannon are the twelve-year-olds, going on thirteen, dressed on other days in the ideas of their older selves, in the long flowered skirts their mothers might have worn in the sixties; Corrie is a loner, creative in her angry-faced way. What brought them together was a summer enrichment course they chose from its title in the brochure put out by the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools: "Exploring and Communicating about Environment." Last week, when they took a hike at Nashville's Radnor Lake with naturalist Randy Vincent, they got a taste of observation. Today, there would be exploration, the kind that would end up producing the real framework for communication, and far more.

Area Director Mike Carleton and Randy Vincent are teachers in the best sense of the word. When I asked Mike if he could set up a work project for my students, he and Randy researched and planned an activity that had the potential to be motivating, educational, and, best of all, student-centered, or self-directing. They were the facilitators of what evolved into one of the most dynamic student activities I have observed.

"Our goals," said Randy to the ragged group slouching half-awake in the parking area, "are two-fold. We need to save some of our larger fish that have

been trapped in the stream down here." Eyes opened wider. The students began to pay attention. They were being called upon to *save* something. "An ephemeral stream," he continued, "flows with pretty good volume after a rain, then falls off to a trickle, might even dry up, during a time of little rainfall or drought. Some of the big guys get trapped in the pools that are left when the flow has slowed down. It's your job to find these guys and take them up to the lake."

Immediate reaction erupted. "Oh, wow! That sounds neat! How are we going to catch them?"

"With your hands, Dumbo!"

"Not me! They might bite!"

"Don't worry," said Randy. "You'll use seines and hand nets. But slow down. You haven't heard about the second goal yet."

The students nudged each other to quiet attentiveness while he waited to continue. "We need to prepare an aquarium where people who come to our Visitors' Center can see a stream eco-system. The thirty-gallon tank we have up there will accomodate about twenty-five inches of fish."

"What kind of fish will we find?" asked Sean.

"Bream, mostly. Maybe some little cats, bass, little johnny darters,"

Randy answered. "But what else do you think we need? I said we wanted to create an eco-system. Now, what do you think we'll need to include?"

Brows furrowed. Feet shuffled in the gravel. "Um . . . an eco-system, " tried Warren, "would have to include food . . . and shelter. . . ."

"That's right," urged Randy. "Have you thought about food for the food?"

"Okay," began Aisha, sparked by an idea, "a fish would eat . . ."

". . . smaller fish," added Elizabeth.

". . . and insects!" Shannon mused.

"So what would the smaller fish and insects eat?" continued Aisha.
"Algae? Leeches?"

"Now you're thinking," Randy said. "So what needs to go into the aquarium?"

"Well," said Corrie, "we'll have to get some of everything, won't we? Even rocks and gravel?"

"Right!" he exclaimed. "You'll even be collecting critters and plants you can't see. Look, I've brought some hand lenses so you can see some pretty tiny things on the rocks you turn over. Those are important in the food chain, too."

"What about the water itself? Shouldn't they have have their own stream water that they're used to?"

"The water temperature is important," Randy replied. "We'll try to maintain that temperature in the tank, and, of course, we're interested in what is *in* the water, important microscopic things, so we'll definitely want some of the actual stream water in there. I think you've got the idea, now. Let's go get started. Here, who wants to carry the seines? Here are the hand nets, one for each of you. Put a lens in your pocket. You, grab that bucket. And you, get that tray!"

We left the parking lot in a line behind our leader, following him through the thick brush of bush honeysuckle, sumac, and poison ivy that grew along the edge, and then down into a dark green woods where the mist was rising from a little stream. When we reached its banks, the students stood around and waited for Randy to tell them what to do. Big surprise!

"Now, I'm not going to tell you what to do," he announced. "Let's review our goals." He ran back through the dual missions of saving trapped fish and setting up the aquarium with stream life, and then he asked if everyone was

sure they understood what had to be done. "Get organized," he told them. "You're going to have to work together and figure out for yourselves who's going to do what." The two boys stepped into the water with one of the seines and started to unroll it. One of the girls leaned over and swept her hand net through the water. No one said much that was audible. "Hey, folks, get close together where you can talk about this. It's *your* project. Now, you've got to talk to each other."

They finally gathered into a group, and we stood back and watched leadership emerge. "Okay, we need four of us to work the seins," said Warren. "Sean and I will work this pool, and Aisha and Marissa can start in that pool up there. Shannon, Elizabeth, Corrie--why don't you work the edges and around the rocks in the shallow places with the hand nets?" They began to work in earnest.

With a word or two from Randy, these young explorers got the hang of working the seines, and nearly every sweep yielded surprises: little long-eared sunfish, bluegill, sucker-mouth minnows, banded darters, crayfish, several little catfish, an eight-inch smallmouth bass which Shannon, Elizabeth, and I delivered to the lake, and a snapping turtle! Corrie was fascinated with what could be found on and under rocks, and the younger girls were excited about water striders, backswimmers, and orb snails. There was active traffic to the aquarium and back to the stream and the hum of business and discovery. Aisha became a water-stirrer in front of the seiners, which was what brought up the larger fish and the snapper. They were a community at work, using a set of terms and nomenclatures that three hours earlier would have been textbook vocabulary. Now they had taken possession of words like johnny darter and orb snail; they used with familiarity such ideas as abiotic

and biotic factors; and the food chain, once a classroom lesson, entered a personal context.

Knowing names, I have always felt, is as much a part of being in a comfortable relationship with the out-of-doors as it is in companionship among people. I feel responsible for those whose names I know, and I observed that this theory held true for the students at Radnor this June day. The aquarium became "our" aquarium. They measured the fish, and Mike helped them move a few to another tank to prevent overcrowding of our stream tank.

"There's my silver darter."

"Look at my backswimmer!"

"Why are our catfish standing on their heads behind that rock?" These were typical exclamations. Giving them ownership in an important project built a sense of pride in the power these young students had exercised to make a difference in what happens in the natural environment. Yet, it was not the kind of power that comes from dominion of a superior species over inferior ones. Rather, what emerged was a sense of place in the community of living things. It was the power of knowing things--facts, needs, names--and then working with the knowing.

Rangers have busy lives, working long hours daily to maintain the delicate balances within the wild areas in their care. At Radnor Lake, education of the humans who come into contact with these areas is clearly a priority. The managers and rangers have seen that informed people and committed people often become advocates of the wild lands on our earth and their inhabitants, and they have taken every opportunity to teach school children about living in community with nature. This rare and magical June morning, Randy Vincent and the staff and leadership of Radnor Lake gave my

students membership in this community by showing them that they are empowered to be rescuers and competent workers for the environment. And the word will spread like ripples in the stream they came to know.

Land between The Lakes is a wild tongue of preserve that lies in Northwest Tennessee and Southwest Kentucky between the part of the Tennessee River called Kentucky Lake and a bulge of the Cumberland River known as Lake Barkley. When visitors to this wild area ask the naturalist why the Tennessee Valley Authority allows timber cutting there, they will likely receive a surprising answer. "The logging is selective . . ." he will begin. He may soon be able to reply that the careful cutting of trees has little or no negative effect on the wildlife. "In fact," he may add, "there is evidence of an overall 25% increase in breeding bird populations where selective timber cutting has occurred." And the visitors, because they are concerned about the careless devastation of wild habitats, will want to know more.

Always a lover of nature, I am a beginner in active conservation efforts. I am learning how to change my living patterns, and I am trying to learn about the issues concerning intelligent conservation. When I was on Mount Mitchell two summers ago and aghast at the desolate remains of evergreens on that summit, the ranger told me and the others there that no conclusive evidence had pointed to acid rain as the culprit. "That's just politics," I sneered, feeling powerless and bereaved. But there were questions to explore in what he said.

In responsibility to the integrity of scientific process, scientists must march to a slow, methodical drummer that leads to more blind alleys than open avenues of celebration. How do scientists do it? What makes them plug along at it? When will it pay off for the planet?

When I enrolled in a graduate program in English at Austin Peay State University, I slipped over to the science building and asked Dr. David Snyder, a principal investigator in the Center of Excellence for the Study of Field

Biology, if I could tag along on some of his research outings. I wanted to work on a creative writing project that centered on conservation, and I needed some information about what was actually being done by the people who know most about habitats, their inhabitants, and what happens when humans encroach.

"We've just finished the field work for the bird study," he said. "We're compiling data on it now to see what effect the selective timbering at Land Between The Lakes is having on the bird populations. We're looking at small amphibians and reptiles now."

I was immediately curious about methods of counting birds in the field. Experts, he explained, are assigned stations--circular areas called fixed radius points--from which they observe and note the species present, and to which they return for recounts on up to thirty different occasions. The statistician must take into account the weather, the wind, the precipitation, the season, and the individual capacities of human observers, since some hear better than others and some see better than others. There are other problems, of course. I asked if they didn't do a lot of repeat counting of the same bird. As he explained it, multiple observation outings and a standardization of such factors as weather, time of day, and expertise of observers tend to reduce the biases.

Dr. Snyder's response to my request was affirmative. "Sure, you're welcome to go along if you'd like to. This week, read Loren Eiseley's *The Immense Journey* and Aldo Leopold's *Sand County Almanac*. Later, I hope you'll take a look at *The Natural History of Selbourne*," he added. "That'll give us some things to talk about one of these days. In the meantime, meet Barry Hart here Tuesday. He's a senior biology student who checks the herp traps twice a week at Land Between the Lakes. *Herp*," he explained, "is a shorthand version of *herptile*, our jargon for *amphibians and reptiles*. On Tuesdays, a freshman, David Fuller, helps him. You can go with them."

I was encouraged: Dr. Snyder is a scientist who thinks both practically and philosophically, and he was urging me to deepen my view. I imagined observing groups of busy students catching, banding, and recording in the bright sunshine at lakeside. The reality was quieter, more routine than I had envisioned.

Waiting in the vertebrate lab for Barry and David on the appointed Tuesday, I studied the snakes through their glass containers. I had told Dr. Snyder that I was trying to get over my fear of snakes, and he had suggested that I come to the lab and handle the non-poisonous ones there. As I watched an orange corn snake attack and devour a white mouse with fearful red eyes, I shivered down to the center of my body and decided to put the lessons off for at least a few more weeks.

Barry came in and introduced himself. At twenty-six or so, he would graduate in the spring with his second degree, in biology. His first one was in music. He plays the piano. He likes Celtic music, as I do. He has a short brown beard, longish hair and eyes that revealed an interest in my goals and a willingness to be engaged in my endeavor to learn. He is a natural teacher-- he has a certain stillness about him, an intense focus, and above all, patience. He and his wife, a teacher, want to live in the Rocky Mountains. His eyes shine, dreaming a scene, when he speaks about it. He wants to study alpine tundra, but he isn't sure what he wants to do to make a living.

David was late. He'd been up all night fighting a fire in his uncle's tobacco barn that had also destroyed his car. He was feeling ragged. His hair falls around his shoulders, and he wore a broad-brimmed camouflage hat with a turkey feather in it. He chews. He has a wife who works at Fort Campbell and a little baby. I discovered later in the day that his mother is my friend's first cousin, and that he wants to be a park ranger because he loves the woods.

These were my companions for my introduction to field biology, the young guides for this forty-odd-year-old beginner.

The drive from Clarksville to Dover and on into LBL takes about an hour and a quarter. It was to be an all-day outing, just like every Tuesday and Thursday until cold weather. Since I had to be back early for a class, I followed in my own car. They drove the black Austin Peay jeep along Route 79 past small communities, farms, red barns and giant rolls of hay, past fields of goldenrod and ragweed and purple asters, past the Queen Anne's lace and wild ageratum that decorated the roadside, tobacco fields, bait and tackle shops, a tannery and taxidermy shop, and into the park where Smokey the Bear announced that there was MODERATE fire danger that day. We turned left at the Piney Campground and drove into the deep woods. It was only early September, but the poplars were already yellow, the sumac, red.

"It's a good day for herptiles, especially the amphibians," Barry said.

"Yeah, bet we'll see 'em all over the place," David agreed.

"Why, because of the rain we've been having?" I asked, high school biology in the dim mists of my past.

"Right," Barry answered. "You see, reptiles don't need so much water, but the amphibians have to absorb moisture through their skin." We were walking through a sparse oak wood, the floor a thick, moist maze of vines and saplings. "Look!" Barry pointed to a few gray shell fragments in an exposed patch of dirt. "Red-eared slider shells," he said. "The turtles come out of the lake to lay their clutches on the ridges," he explained to me. "Then some lucky mammal comes along and gets a good meal."

The trap sites are conspicuous on the forest floor because of the long aluminum "drift fences" which intercept wandering herps and divert them into buckets set into the ground at regular intervals on each side of these

barriers. When we got to DF1, or Dry Fork, trap one, Barry took a clipboard from his pack and started filling out a chart. David set a thermometer into the ground and hung a hygrometer on the low branch of a sapling. He twisted another gauge, this one to measure pH and soil moisture, into the ground. Time: 12:05. Air temperature 6" above ground, 71° F; 6" into the ground, 69° F. Soil moisture, 40%. Air temperature, 85° F. Wind, negligible. These measurements are the abiotic conditions, I learned. Then we looked to the pit traps. It is important to know which animals are in which traps, for analytical purposes, so each trap is numbered, and Barry entered this number on his chart.

Now I was excited, wondering what we would find in the traps, alert for the appearance of a big snake. Soon it became obvious that a big snake wouldn't be trapped in a ten-inch deep bucket; all the catches were small, and the men pulled them out with a dipper.

D.I.P.: the first catch was dead in the pit. It was a ground skink. In the next one we found two live worm snakes, good beginner-snakes for me to handle. David tried to hold one of them straight for Barry to measure, but the worm snake was uncooperative. At last they got it measured: snout to cloacal vent, 199 mm with a tl, or total length, of 236 mm. "Try to put a tooth on me, will 'ya?" David protested gently.

"Do they have teeth?" I asked.

"Just barely," he replied. "It's a very reduced kind of teeth. We're just getting some jaw action here!"

We continued to other traps and found a couple of D.I.P. mice, recorded them, and put them in plastic bags to take back to the lab. At pit 3 we found a pretty ring-necked snake which I played with proudly, now and then stifling

a wave of unreasonable panic as it explored my ten fingers. My hands reeked with the noxious odor this snake emits for its defense.

We drove to a new area. Here Barry and David captured, measured, and marked a fat fence lizard, snipped off a toe with nail clippers for identification, and released him. They found a D.I.P. newt, several live Fowler's toads, and a young black racer, which I held, almost confident now, and admired his pretty blue belly. Its sv length was 330 mm, tl, 445 mm. We found a white-footed mouse, half-drowned in the collected water, and I helped dip the buckets here. Each time, Barry and David carefully noted all the abiotic variables and all the biotic measures. It is a slow, repetitive process with only the occasional thrill. I thought that this job, all day, twice a week, must become tiresome. I asked Barry if he liked doing it. "Definitely," he said. "Usually I'm alone," he explained, "and I enjoy being out in the woods by myself. Some days, I guess I hate to think about driving all the way up here, but once I'm here, I'm really glad."

Talking with him later, I pursued this line of thought. We were having coffee on the terrace at the student center, and I was curious about how he wanted to use his education once he's graduated. "Do you ever feel frustrated," I asked, "because you can't draw conclusions sooner, because you see such a small piece of the puzzle at a time?"

"Oh, yes," he responded quickly. "I am putting lots of energy and time into the first step, the collecting. I'd like to be there at every stage. I'd like to be the statistician, too, and be able to compile the data. And then I'd like to study the evidence and draw the conclusions. Of course, I'll need to go on to graduate school somewhere. Field biology and statistics and ecology are all so distinct; I am frustrated by their separateness, because for me, all these disciplines need to come together to make the steps necessary to be an

effective preservationist. Right now, what I am collecting contributes a very small part, and the answers we get from my notations are a long way away."

"Not that what you're doing isn't vital to the process," I interjected.

"Absolutely," Barry agreed, sitting up and looking at me with refreshed intensity. "If we can just make people aware of the great diversity and fragility of an area, that's a beginning."

"What differences do you *think* you've observed between the logged and unlogged areas so far?"

"The logging probably doesn't make much difference for the reptiles," he answered thoughtfully. "In the logged areas, there are more fence lizards, because there is more sunlight, and they like that. Now the long-tailed salamander, like other amphibians, are more numerous in unlogged areas that stay more moist. Remember, though, that with selective timber cutting, you're not going to disturb habitat to nearly the same degree as with something like clear-cutting."

"Barry, what interests you most about field biology as a career?" I pressed. "It still seems to entail a great deal of thankless monotony."

"The diversity of wildlife is always exciting," he smiled. "And the woods. I like to be in the woods."

"How will you act on what you find? That has to be part of your motivation, doesn't it?"

"Not for everyone," he explained. "But for me, yes, it's important. I'll probably write articles. And I'll try to speak to clubs and societies which are focused on environmental problems." He looked as if he were trying to picture himself a long way away. I could picture him. He had on khaki hiking shorts and a windbreaker and was on the side of a western mountain that broke off to

others again and again, as far as I could see. He was studying a tiny succulent plant that clung to bare rock and making notes.

"Go for it," I said. "You're young. Go where you want to be. You would really make a good teacher, you know."

I went back two more times to Land Between The Lakes before I went to East Tennessee in search of the green salamander, *Aneides*, with Dr. Snyder and his wife Cathy, Dr. Paul Hamel of the Department of Conservation, and a collection of various-sized little boys belonging to the two biologists. We searched in two sites, at Savage Gulf along the banks of the Collins River and at Ozone Falls.

Little boys are specialists at finding the nooks and crannies the green salamander prefers, those with a little moisture, but at a dry level above the stream. They climbed nimbly over boulders to examine the big rock faces for crevices. For all of us, crevices became exciting areas of attention; lines separating rock sections that before had been only hand holds for me were suddenly full of potential, alive with hidden communities. The ones that are ideal for *Aneides*, our green salamander, do not contain much dirt and are not too mossy. Following the model of the experienced searchers, I shined my flashlight into the cracks and looked and hoped. Soon I saw a point of something that looked decidedly herptilian, though not green. It was confirmed as a rock. Hope alone cannot generate a salamander, I found, so I continued to climb and peer into small dark places. The youngsters finally put their flashlights down and answered the call of the river rocks and waterfalls while the rest of us continued climbing and looking, and the sun dropped behind the ridge. Dr. Snyder told me that there was more chance to find

Aneides after dark because they are nocturnal animals. But we found none, even after the moon had settled itself small and still in the dark sky, large and dancing in the pool under Laurel Falls.

"Fifteen years ago, Aneides was here," Dr. Snyder told me. "In North Carolina, they have become nearly extinct since I studied them there in 1970. Today's field outing is to substantiate a speculative paper about what its absence could indicate."

"You mean environmental problems?" I asked. "What do you think is causing its disappearance?"

He reminded me of the canary that miners used as a tester for noxious gases deep in the earth. If the canary died, the miners knew that the air wasn't safe for them. "The green salamander, *Aneides aeneus*, might be seen as an environmental tester for acid rain," he explained. "It could make a good tester for several reasons. First, it lives on the rocks, so moisture from rains goes directly onto its skin. Ground salamanders may benefit from carbonates in the soil which act as acid buffers, so they may not be as affected by substances in the water as Aneides is. If Aneides is disappearing, it may be that acid rain is involved in some way."

"How do you know for sure that acid rain is the cause?" I wondered.

"We don't. It may well be that natural causes were responsible for the population crash that the species experienced in the Carolinas in the late 1970's. Perhaps drought or cold or disease was the culprit. What I want to do is establish base line data which will stimulate interest in further study of Aneides as a tester for the harmful effects of acid rain."

I asked about the procedure of collecting data on this kind of animal and learned that the researcher checks a population in a given area, marks individuals, and returns to check again and again. He or she records how

many are found in one spot at each visit. The more times an area is checked, the more dependable are the assumptions which the researcher then makes.

The following day, we went to Ozone Falls on the top of the Cumberland Plateau and looked around in the little gorge where some of the waters that flow into Daddy's Creek rush away. Here the white snakeroot and alum were still blooming, though it was the last day of September, and hearts-a-bustin'-with-love still clung bright red and shiny to their stems. The area was rich in moist rock faces. I thought of Aeneas the wanderer, Aeneas the founder of a race, but was enlightened out of my romance by the information that *Aneides aeneus*, Greek for bronze, refers to the color of spots, not the character of our salamander. I was left thinking of bronze-like attributes of the Trojan emigrant, then, rather than mythological notions about this bronze-spotted crevice-critter.

Dr. Snyder's son, Jared, found a cave salamander, and I took a look. He was back there in the dark--a long, thin, still thing in the wet crevice. My light picked up an un-rock-like curve of leg, and then the beautiful orange skin with random spots on it. It was exciting to me to see at last a crevice-dweller, there at the edge of its dark world.

We found a nest built by a visionary wren in a vertical crevice that was about seven inches wide, wedged on the sides so that it seemed suspended, air above and below, a safe penthouse for last summer's young.¹

Eureka! Cathy found the green salamander, the Appalachian *Aneides aeneus*, the climbing bronze-spotted fellow! It was in a crevice in a damp boulder by the pool at the base of the falls. Everyone else came down from the bluffs and converged on the spot with flashlights, eager to see what we'd been looking for for two days. From practice during my short stint at Land Between The Lakes, I thought to note some specifics: 11:10 a.m.; cloudy; around 75° F;

very humid; sharing crevice with a green tree frog. Scientific recording I may have made, but the feeling was definitely emotional, like triumph. And I guess that's one thing that keeps the researcher going about his often fruitless inquiry.

I asked Dr. Snyder the question I'd posed to Barry: if it isn't frustrating to be only a tiny part of compiling information that will go to construct the picture that might tell an important truth some day. He said that he does it because it's always interesting; it's fun; and he just has to hope that some day it will mean something. "But don't you have an urge to get the word out that Aeneides is vanishing, and soon it will be too late, and that it's probably due to acid rain? I'm impatient," I said. "I want change to occur rapidly, and people won't change unless science shows them evidence that animals are dying, and that the implications for them, the humans, aren't pleasant."

Dr. Snyder leaned forward and looked at me steadily. "Science has to work according to good scientific practice," he said. "The superficial scientist/prognosticator gets heard by mixing a little information with news-getting philosophy and often weakens the cause with hasty and unproven assertions. People want conclusions so that they can lobby for solutions, and that's natural; but the fact is that what science has to offer now on many issues is inconclusive; and sometimes, as we have found at Land Between The Lakes with the selective timber harvest, conclusions are not what observers might initially think. Initial studies certainly point to dire prospects for the future of the planet." He paused and sipped his coffee. "There is not enough knowledge available to us at present to allow us to predict confidently the effects of the depletion of the ozone layer," he said; "yet the effects may be calamitous."

"So what is the answer?" I asked.

"To just keep doing our work the scientific way," he answered; "and train young scientists to be more than technicians. To take their thinking beyond the technical aspects. To be philosophers, but responsible ones. To care about where their work is leading; to care about finding the answers that will enhance the health of the planet."

"To interest more people like Barry Hart in science?" I asked. "People who love the woods and who want to make a difference, but are willing and able to do the meticulous, patience-demanding work of collecting and analyzing data? And people like you, of course."

"Yes, I think that's an important part of it," Dr. Snyder smiled.

At home that night, I washed the tin cans the corn and the mushrooms came in and put them next to the glass containers and the plastic milk jugs and the newspapers in the recycling bin. I turned out all the unnecessary lights, and then I thought how small my part is in resolving the global dilemma that human habitation has brought to the planet, and about how small is the role of one lonely researcher collecting and recording in the forest and in the laboratory. Yet, in small, careful ways, we may be able to accomplish something fine--like a clean, well-managed planet where man and beast and plant can live healthfully. This is the hope we act on when we work on one small part of the puzzle.

"...by losing his life for my sake, he will gain it."
 -Matthew 10:39

Little death so sweet I cry
 for you again and again
 for the new floods of life
 like bloodroot seed that
 expose themselves under white, white
 bloom--virgin's kiss, sun on morning's breeze--
 then dry and blow in late spring wind
 across woodland floor, forgotten
 bloodroot, gone underground, until it
 sprouts, folds, blinks into flower
 ten more times, a hundred more
 and the hillside white with exhilaration
 and Eastersong.

If I keep myself, keep
 hard shell over tender seed
 that might die at your touch--
 you friend, you mother, you
 lover, old man, sick child, mountain,
 sea, woman with pleading eyes--
 I will die sterile, undiseased, I
 will not know the winds that whip
 indifferent to my call,

will not know falling

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or rising up again.