

Why

The morning sun warmed my back as the cool, sweet exhalations of balsam fir trees bathed my face. Moose Mountain, an Adirondack peak deep in remote woods and rarely climbed, loomed over my right shoulder, several miles away but seeming much closer. I felt my life affirmed on all sides. Was this bliss? Maybe.

I didn't stay there long. Sitting on cold, waterlogged ground in our new front yard, I had a practical task to complete. A few inches at a time, I lowered a string into a rusty iron pipe sticking out of the ground. It was a well casing. We were preparing to do away with an old jet pump that broke down every day or two, which, in its little house of concrete blocks, would not stand up to Adirondack winters. Ours had been a summer place only. In order to make it habitable year-round, we needed to install a submersible pump. It would operate deep down in the water column, well beyond the reach of frost. My job was to determine how deep the well was, which in turn would tell me how much water pipe and electrical cable we'd need to buy.

I had tied a heavy iron washer to the string's lower end. The cord looked like it had been made by Dr. Frankenstein. Just for fun, as part of an exercise in Thoreauvian economy, I had saved tea bag strings, a few inches here, a few inches there. Tying each to the next, I created enough line to fill a spool. It had taken several hundred cups of tea to show me the well's depth was 117 feet.

Practicalities aside, I gave thought for a golden moment to the balsam firs that sent joyous news across a meadow and into my nostrils. They told me I was home, home in the North Woods, home in the woods my grandfather had known so well, home in one of those rare places on earth where humans are dwarfed by a large and thinly populated landscape. A

black bear might saunter by at any moment. So might a moose. I might look up to see a bald eagle soaring. The thoughts filled me with a kind of idiotic rapture.

It all meant so much because place has always been vital to me. As a child, I came to realize that certain landscapes cheered or excited me while others made me sad or anxious. My spirits soared while I walked in woods, for example, yet plummeted during a run by bike or automobile through a gantlet of suburban sprawl. I seemed to be more sensitive to place than anyone I knew, or at least more than anyone talked about. Was something wrong with me? I loved woods and lakes, meadows and thickets. I grieved over neighborhoods filled with identical houses and felt threatened by roads crowded with automobiles, parking lots, and retail stores. I found it alarming that wild places were disappearing and sprawl was on the march.

Growing up in a suburb north of New York City, I saw a great many high school classmates gravitate to Manhattan for entertainment and illumination. Not me. I sought novelty and knowledge beyond the “No Trespassing” signs of a nearby watershed. There, as far from the synthetic world as I could get, I immersed myself in flora and fauna. Among the trees and wild animals, I felt a sense, rare at home and almost nonexistent at school, of belonging.

Looking back, I realize something I couldn't see at the time. I was lucky. I had the watershed and the good sense to seek solace in it. I grew up and kept on going. But a shocking number of the boys I knew in high school never reached middle age. Their stories are too important to be treated here in passing, but it's instructive to contemplate the causes of death: self-inflicted gunshot wound, self-inflicted hanging, death by falling, alcoholism, heart attack related to injuries sustained during a suicide attempt, automobile accident as a result of extreme speed, death by choking, and murder by gunshot wound. At times I fear I'm overly critical of the suburban culture in which I grew up. Then I remind myself of the bright young nonconformists who have fallen. Admittedly, they died directly or indirectly as a result of choices they made. Still, the control-obsessed culture that tormented and alienated them deserves some of the blame.

My boyhood cohorts were strong of will and difficult to tame. Of course! They were the descendants of explorers and pioneers. Yet society locked them up in classrooms on gorgeous sunny days when anyone in his right mind would have been better off playing hooky, which some of us did. In school and at home, boys such as these (and girls, too) were

punished for perfectly sane acts of rebellion. Defiance of the established order often expressed greater reason than the order itself, while the alternative, conforming to the order, required a certain madness. What's more, as if five days of school each week weren't strict adult control enough, most of these young men were coerced, as I was, to attend church on Sundays. Yet their souls were not so easily bound to dogma. Each in his own way chose rebellion over surrender to higher powers of all sorts, and it cost him.

Somehow, I muddled through. After high school, I carried on my education at Middlebury College, in bovine Vermont. Amid pastures scented with manure, flanked by the Green Mountains to the East and the Adirondack Mountains to the West, life took a happier, more constructive turn. I majored in geography, the study of place, but only after a year of floundering.

First, as a freshman, I tried biology and English on for size and found each, as taught in that place at that time, narrow and cramped. I hungered to swallow the world whole, not nibble at the narrowly defined parts of it. The biologists I studied under, and all but one of the scholars of literature, suffered from myopia. They functioned efficiently and often brilliantly within narrow specialties, yet their work seemed scarcely related, or not related at all, to the vibrant rural landscape amid which we lived and learned. Beyond classroom walls, real life surged, brimming over with blood and chlorophyll. It was almost entirely ignored.

English professors, for example, talked about Wordsworth's Lake District, but not much about Lake Champlain, just down the road. We picked apart Frost while failing to witness the frost browning leaves just beyond the windowpanes. Botany started off right, commencing with a field trip up Snake Mountain. For a day, we looked at actual plants. But that was it. The professor locked us indoors for the rest of the semester. In a poetry course, verse was cut open and autopsied, also indoors, in bloodless discussions during which the teacher and half the class chain-smoked. I gagged, desperate for fresh air. Oh, the faculty did its best. There were bright spots and big hearts. Still, the landscape of learning had all the texture and appeal for me of a concrete wall.

Except in geography. Here professors regaled students with tales of adventures around the globe and showed slides that opened windows into the world. When we weren't camped in chairs contemplating Bavaria and Botswana, we were out in the Vermont countryside, expelling vapor from our nostrils on chilly mornings just like the cows. Thanks to the department's trusty workhorse, a warm and brilliant Harvard PhD named

J. Rowland Illick, we were beguiled by old fields, abandoned cellar holes, and Pleistocene glacial shorelines. It was good while it lasted.

Then came graduation and uncertainty. What to do next? Where to go? Back to the suburbs? No, thanks. Still, between bouts of despair that I might never find a place for myself, I was optimistic, somehow convinced that the world was my oyster, as the saying goes, even though I hadn't a clue how to eat it.

Like many a bewildered youth, I looked outside official channels for inspiration. I found it not in drugs, alcohol, or destructive rebellion but in Henry David Thoreau. I first read "Walden" in high school. Thoreau's manifesto of independent thinking and self-reliance helped me find the courage to be different, and it set me dreaming about living a life in the woods. I also took heart from the example of my mother's father, Burdett Emlin Brownell. I knew him as "Grampy." He was my hero and I loved him, although I never dared to tell him.

As heroes go, Grampy didn't look the part. He ate to excess, tended to look eight months pregnant, chain-smoked, snored mightily, and was prone after bedtime to extravagant displays of flatulence. Perhaps the tall glasses of milk he drank, along with an undiagnosed case of lactose intolerance, explained the exhaust. Grampy spoke his own language. He had odd pronunciations, such as "ignition" with a long first *i*, arguing that if you ignite something, then "ignition" should be pronounced accordingly. If he disliked someone, and he didn't dislike many, he called that person a "touch-hole." It's a suggestive epithet from an earlier time that literally refers to the firing orifices of muzzle-loading cannons and muskets.

Grampy had other, greater failings. A prodigious drinker in his youth, alcohol was a factor in the collapse, when my mother was five, of his marriage to my grandmother. The precipitating event seems to have been a house fire. According to a newspaper clipping that has survived, my mother-to-be was the hero. "Five Year Old Child Saves Lives of Family as Home Is Fire-Swept," the story begins. Joyce woke up to the smell of smoke and roused the household. All escaped alive, including upstairs tenants. The newspaper story did not make clear in those judicious days that my grandfather, full of beer or booze, had conked out in a chair, a cigarette dangling from his fingers. It's likely he had caused the blaze.

Later, too late to save his marriage but in time to save himself, Grampy found the courage to metamorphose. In middle age he shed his old bad-boy skin and crawled out a devoted public servant, an unabashed do-gooder, mostly sober at first and then, after diabetes presented him with the stark choice to either keep drinking or keep living, dry as the

proverbial bone. He was a shy man who hated public speaking, yet he made friends easily and launched a modest political career. It began with him winning election, shortly after the Second World War, to Northville's village board.

Grampy was a strong, quiet man, more likely to act than to analyze, although he excelled at the kind of analysis that leads swiftly to thoughtful action. Although he lacked Thoreau's gift for words, by the time I knew him he possessed a superior talent for living. I know of no other man or woman who was as rooted in landscape (in his case, the Adirondack landscape), involved with its geography, and enmeshed, willingly and happily, in the lives of his neighbors, and with the flora and fauna, as he was.

His family tree (and mine by extension) was rooted on his mother's and father's sides in the southern Adirondack village of Northville. There his Brownell and Lawton ancestors had lived for generations, and there today they crowd the cemeteries. Forebears stayed put after the creation of the Adirondack Park in 1892 because, as we've discussed, this was Burroughs country. What they thought of the new arrangement—living in a park with rules rather than living on a frontier with few of them—I don't know. The important upshot was that my grandfather grew up in a homestead along the cold, wild, boulder-strewn Sacandaga River, in the southern Adirondacks. It's hard to imagine him taking shape anywhere else.

Most of the adults I knew groused about where they lived, finding it too hot, too cold, too something. Grampy spoke of home with pleasure, and he worked hard to keep it a good place to live. After cutting his political teeth on the village board, Grampy served as Northville's mayor and chief law enforcement officer. He was a man of principle. Open to multiple and inconvenient truths, he was a Rockefeller Republican who in the 1972 presidential race voted for George McGovern over Richard Nixon. He spoke with distaste of Nixon's unprincipled witch-hunting for communists during the McCarthy era. Once he fired a policeman who harassed a pair of men on motorcycles who looked like hippies, even though no one disliked long hair and outrageous clothes on men more than my grandfather.

Grampy's career, so much as he had one, involved cutting leather in small glove factories—factories that made Gloversville, New York, my mother's birthplace, the world's foremost producer of leather gloves from the late nineteenth century until sometime after World War II. As long as glove making persisted in upstate New York, which it did, barely, until the end of his life, Grampy possessed a skill that was always in demand, and the demand gave him freedom. He worked intermittently and only

as much as he wanted to. More important were fishing, hunting, tinkering with mechanical things, helping friends and family, and poking around the forests and lakes of his native mountains. Outdoors, he often clenched a pipe in his teeth. He wore a weather-beaten felt hat and tended to dress in green. Today, the hat hangs on a peg in my writing studio. Sometimes I take it down and feel the sunbaked felt and gaze wistfully at strands of hair that linger inside. Those hairs hold the amino acid sequences of Grampy's DNA. One of his pipes sits nearby on a shelf. Ashes linger in the bowl. Thirty-two years after Grampy's flame burned out, their appealing smell summons delicious memories.

After my graduation from college, Thoreau and Grampy (I had not yet found Burroughs) remained, albeit posthumously, my close philosophical companions. I drifted into jobs as an interpretive naturalist, serving with the National Park Service, a county park system, and various conservation organizations. The work suited me, or at least it did for a decade. I got to be outdoors, mostly, and it was a thrill to teach people about birds, bees, trees, and other things that I loved. Astonishingly, I got paid for it.

Slowly, though, my hunger for congenial geography began to demand satisfaction. Everywhere I lived, from a barrier island off the coast of Pensacola, Florida, to a charming old farmhouse I shared with rats and flying squirrels in a 4,700-acre park in suburban Cross River, New York, I watched bulldozers chew up my nearby surroundings. I loved my home places yet hated them, not for what they were or had been, but for what they were becoming. I craved a refuge, not just for wildlife but for myself.

Eventually I gave up naturalist work for writing. Around the same time, during a walk in the woods on my thirty-fourth birthday, I met an irresistible woman, fell in love, and, straying from Thoreau's celibate path, married. Like me, Debbie loved wild places, loved sleeping on the ground deep in the woods, lamented landscapes purged of every species but our own, and hungered for adventure.

Hard, romantic years followed. For eight of them, we inhabited an identical number of spots on the map. We traveled for nearly a year in Australia and New Zealand, and, counting four moves to the same congenial town on the Mississippi Gulf coast near New Orleans, we uprooted a dozen times. We lived strenuously and joyously, except when we were miserable and broke. We explored the Downunderworld, hobnobbed with extraordinary wildlife and remarkable people, and served as migrant workers ("seasonals," we were called) for the National Park Service.

Friends and relatives fretted. Weren't we moving too often? Would we ever settle down? Truth is, we wanted a home. Yet to find one, we

were compelled by our natures to wander. As the Tao Te Ching puts it, we sailed East to go West. To achieve a more stable geography in the long run, we had to go walkabout in the short.

What sort of paradise did we seek? Not the plain, upholstered, all-white, wall-to-wall-carpeted facsimile of God's heaven I once saw pictured on a backlit panel in a Mormon temple visitor center. Our notion of Nirvana was earthy. It included bugs and birds, flowers and trees, snakes and skunks, beavers and chipmunks, dirt and the occasional snowstorm, lightning bolt, and downpour.

We wanted to alight in such a place—to stop drifting like seeds on the gusts of chance. As nature lovers, we hoped to take root not just anywhere, but in, or along the edge of, a wild place. We insisted that the spot be governed by restrictions certain to prevent abuse. We had seen the landscapes of our youth despoiled by “development”—a curious word often meaning the reduction of a landscape from a habitat shared democratically by thousands of species to a place dominated ruthlessly by one. As newlyweds, we had moved south to work at Gulf Islands National Seashore, along Mississippi's Gulf Coast. Voters had just passed a referendum legalizing casino gambling. Month by month, we watched greed turn a vibrant world of bayous, pine savannah, estuary, and artsy seaside villages into a place of traffic; of overcrowded homeless shelters; of drugs, robberies, and pawn shops.

Our favorite place to spend rainy spring evenings in Mississippi had been a wetland next to the post office. There we took in the throbbing, symphonic orgies of narrow-mouthed toads and squirrel tree frogs. Today the place and its helpless inhabitants are no more. In their stead rises a housing development, giving shelter to cockroaches, ants, spiders, and blackjack dealers. Debbie and I grew despondent. Progress was plundering one treasured place after another. We found ourselves craving not just a home but a refuge.

We weren't antisocial types who longed to live in the middle of nowhere. The opposite was true. While wanting to live in, or on the frontier of, a wilderness, we also aimed to join a small but flourishing human community, one that would offer prospects for friendship, intellectual stimulation, art, music, employment, food, drink, outerwear, underwear, books, and barter.

We wanted to live in a part of the country or the world where the human population was stable or declining. In the United States, workers and retirees drift southward into the warmer latitudes like monarch butterflies Mexico bound in autumn. We loved the South but eventually

ruled it out. Too many others were heading in that direction. We aimed our rusty station wagon northward.

We were in our early forties. Parents, siblings, and old friends were showing signs of age. The mirror didn't lie to us, either. Perhaps it was time to move closer to our points of origin: not to go home again, but to settle within a day's drive of the four sources of our chromosomes. We missed seeing our parents and siblings. We'd lost touch with irreplaceable friends who had watched us metamorphose from egg to crawling thing to pupil to adult. All but a few remained in the New York City suburbs where we had grown up.

Why not simply rent a moving van and go back where we came from? We could not. We would not. Real estate prices in our old haunts had climbed above reach. Familiar places had been "developed." Green spaces we had loved as children were buried beneath cavernous houses, shopping malls, tanning parlors, fast food joints, medical complexes, giant supermarkets, "superstores" of various sorts, and multilane highways. Facing the changes would bring heartbreak we could not bear.

We wanted to live within a half-day's drive of a major metropolitan area. That way, if we desired an escape from the woods or needed a toner cartridge for our laser printer, we could find it without fuss. The trick would be to keep a sensible distance. If we encamped too near a city, taxes and traffic would drive us away.

We wanted to live on water: on the shore of a lake or river or at the seashore. There we might swim in season; watch wildlife; cast for fish; and row, paddle, or sail.

We wanted to own a view no excavating machine could mar. To do so would require purchasing an extensive tract of land with a house in the middle of it or finding a place surrounded by land managed in a wild state. The government or the Nature Conservancy would make a better neighbor, we reckoned, than a speculator bent on churning acreage into profit.

Finally, we wanted a place where we could be happy. There was no way to delineate such a spot in advance. We'd have to blunder upon it, cry, "Aha!," and still be saying "aha" ten years later.

Were we searching for the unattainable, for the Shangri-la every latter-day homesteader yearns to find but rarely does? In dark hours we feared as much. We might search until decay and death caught up with us at some lonely bend of the road.

Only after we had shifted our search from Ithaca to Bar Harbor and from Maine to the Adirondack Mountains, identified paradise, purchased it

(with considerable help from a bank), and commenced the Herculean labor of renovating the tumbledown structure standing on it, did we realize an item that should have been on our wish list but wasn't. We had neglected, in groping for a base, to focus our longings on a particular kind of house.

As a result, when luck came our way, we received what we asked for: not much of anything at all, a real estate agent's "fixer-upper." It was a drafty summer cottage, built without insulation or an effective heating system in one of America's coldest places. Only mice had ever inhabited it in winter. Verging on collapse, the house represented as much a liability as a prospective place in which to eat and sleep.

This was just the beginning. For the naturalist seeking shelter from the sleets and sorrows of outrageous weather, times have changed. In 1845, Thoreau's ten-by-fifteen foot cabin cost him, he boasted, twenty-eight dollars twelve-and-a-half cents exactly, including nails. Land came *gratis*. Thoreau squatted. He lived with no mortgage and suffered no taxes, not even, famously, the poll tax whose nonpayment earned him a historic night in jail.

Our place, by contrast, cost ninety thousand dollars. We laid out thirty thousand up front and borrowed the rest. The down payment came largely from money willed to us by Debbie's maternal grandparents. Producing the rest was trickier. Debbie had just started a new job, directing the activities program at a bustling "senior independent living facility," as they're known in the trade. Only one bank would consider a mortgage. As far as the institution was concerned, I, a writer and freelance naturalist, didn't have a job. My parents saved the day by cosigning.

One cold, gray March day, we walked out of a lawyer's office with a piece of paper granting title to the house and eighteen and a half acres. We tumbled into a Grand Canyon of expenses. More than \$28.12 was needed to get this shack into shape. Beneath the peeling paint and sagging floors lurked hollow walls bereft of insulation, rotted floor joists, and supporting beams that had collapsed and decomposed. We'd known all this in advance. Yet romantics at heart, we'd gone ahead like Don Quixotes. When I wriggled under the house for the first time, I looked around and felt sick. Mushrooms sprouted from beams and joists. Wet soil mashed into my clothes. Moss grew in places where sunlight shot through cracks in the foundation. One patch of moss actually glowed.

Several months after the luminous moss was obliterated during a carpentry project, Ed Ketchledge, the grand old man of Adirondack botany, since deceased, told us the plant was almost certainly *Schistostega penatta*, or Goblin's gold. This remarkable moss reflects light through its chloroplasts,

greening any glow that falls on it. The result is an impression, convincing but false, of bioluminescence, the name for the eerie glow given off by certain zooplankton, glow-in-the-dark fungi, and fireflies.

Up top, things were little better. Holes riddled the roof. Water dripped into buckets. The chimney leaked. In the attic sprawled a Sahara of black sand dunes—the droppings of hundreds of generations of mice. Among them I found a cylindrical twist of hair and bone. It had likely been deposited there by an oversized weasel known as the American marten. The shaggy predator might have crept into the attic through one of several promising holes. Who could blame it? Until we arrived, the house had been inhabited by humans for only a few weeks every summer. The rest of the year, rodents ruled. Judging by the volume of their feces, enough to fill several large trash cans, the mice had made the most of things.

With the structure in such a shambles, why buy it? The question deserved attention. To see beyond our idealistic notions of living in the woods to the practical challenges we would face, we had done the sensible thing. We hired an engineer to give us his informed opinion.

The man appeared in the driveway one day, shook our hands, and tore off into the crawl space, his face etched with concern. He poked screwdrivers into rotting wood, examined breaks in the foundation, burrowed through tight places, and stalked gingerly across the roof. After an hour, the expert was ready to talk.

“Don’t buy it,” he said.

“Why not?”

“It’s a money pit.” One had to respect the man’s frankness.

Debbie and I had heard the expression “money pit” before, but never in relation to a house we proposed to buy. Usually a mechanic applied the phrase to our car.

The man continued. “Really,” he said. “Don’t buy it. Get yourself a nice piece of land. Build something new.”

I ruminated for a minute, then demanded explication. Where in the vicinity could we find a property half as appealing—one with a deep, dark river pouring over it, with a house close by but perched safely above the flood zone, with woods and a meadow, on a dead-end road, with state land behind it and two villages nearby, villages large and vital enough to provide jobs when we needed them, art, music, restaurants, consumer goods, cucumbers, and car parts? My mind raced, reviewing all the real estate we had examined from Maine to Mississippi. Yes, this house was

nearly hopeless. Yet no piece of geography in our price bracket could rival this one.

To the engineer's credit, and despite his opinions, he listened. "You're right," he said. "This is a very unusual property, a desirable one. With a solid house here, you'd have a valuable asset. Knock this one down. Start from scratch."

The guy roared away in his pickup truck, leaving us a quandary and a bill. We struggled for weeks. Emotions soared and nose-dived. Finally we reached a decision. We'd go forward. We'd keep the house, decrepit as it might be. No matter what the engineer said, the old "camp" (as Adirondack summer places are called) had character. It wasn't feasible to knock the house down and live elsewhere while a new structure went up. For one thing, the bank wouldn't let us destroy a building they'd loaned us money to buy. For another, a tent and sleeping bags wouldn't do. We'd spent nearly a year roughing it around Australia and New Zealand, but the Adirondacks were not the South Pacific. Frosts come even in summer. The region is notorious as the coldest in the Northeast, and within the region, this is often the coldest spot of all.

The house would stay. Nevertheless, the engineer's report unsettled us. What to do? We did what most people do when faced with expert advice they don't like the sound of. We found another expert.

This one's name was Tom. A carpenter and jack-of-all-trades, he came out after we had signed the purchase contract. A delay in the owner's ability to produce a marketable title had voided the fine print, and this opened a legal escape hatch. For weeks Debbie and I agonized. One hour we saw great adventures ahead and felt happy we'd signed the papers. The next, imagining ruin, we thought of backing out.

Tom burrowed through the crawl space, padded over the sagging floors, and braved the seventy-eight year accumulation of mouse effluent in the attic. "Gotta do it," he concluded. "This place is a find. If you don't buy it, I will." Tom went on to explain how new beams and floor joists would fix the floors, and how new wiring and plumbing would turn the place from a nightmare into a dream. "You guys can do it," he said.

Which expert to listen to? Were Debbie and I charging like Tennyson's Light Brigade "Into the jaws of Death/ Into the mouth of Hell"? Or were we sailing on a fair wind toward Yeats's "Land of Heart's Desire," a golden realm "Where beauty has no ebb, decay no flood/ But joy is wisdom, [and] Time an endless song?" Seeing parallels between the decision facing us and the one we'd made years earlier to marry, we decided

to step toward Yeats rather than Tennyson. We'd roll the dice and see how things turned out.

Each of us, Debbie and I, had a checkered past, one that might have driven a human structural engineer to declare us suited for demolition. I'd been "acquainted with the night," as Robert Frost put it, facing depression in my early thirties. Debbie had plunged into black depths in her twenties while suffering through a disastrous first marriage. Still, we'd chosen to turn away from the past and believe in the world and each other. After seven years of marriage, we were, it seemed, happier than the average couple. Life together continued to be exciting. So we took deep breaths and jumped into the money pit.

In the last nights before packing up our village apartment and moving eight miles to the house, we marveled over the piece of paper that would be a source of joy and a millstone around our necks for years to come. It granted dominion over eighteen and a half acres, "more or less." The acres teemed with living things whose forebears in the great majority of cases had inhabited the place for millennia. They had been given no say in the sale. We and our silent partners at the bank owned the land; so our lawyer assured us. But what rights, legal or otherwise, had the plants, the animals, the fungi, the microorganisms?

A branch of New York State government known as the Adirondack Park Agency (APA) oversees human activities in the 6 million acre Adirondack Park, which is a park like no other. The land is split nearly evenly between state-owned "forever wild" holdings and private parcels that consist mostly of big timber company properties but also villages and inholdings such as our own. Rules imposed by the APA specified the numbers of trees we could cut and setbacks if we wanted to erect new structures along the river. Still, to us the restrictions seemed modest. Our deed, filed in the Essex County courthouse, granted license to wreak all sorts of havoc. We could kill the majority of animals on the property—the majority consisting of invertebrates few other than highly specialized zoologists pay attention to. We could fell trees. We could turn most of the place into an ecologically impoverished putting green if we wanted to, as long as we did it in increments.

We had no intention of doing any of these things. Yet the power—a legal, if not a moral, one—unsettled us. As wildlife-loving naturalists, we had often criticized the way others used land. Now the time had come to be landowners ourselves, to see how well we could live up to our own philosophies. The years ahead would represent a trial and an experiment.

How would we treat our domain? After all, we'd already obliterated an interesting moss. Would we mow the lawn, or would we let the grass grow and watch as forest slowly reclaimed it? Would we cut trails or leave the woods as we found them? Would we practice live and let live outside the house but exterminate mice and spiders indoors? Would the birdsong of a spring day be interrupted from time to time by the roar of a chainsaw? These questions and hundreds more demanded answers.

In order to begin sorting them out, we hatched a plan. To the best of our abilities, we would inventory the property's wildlife. Using our know-how, and by consulting books, experts in various fields, and Internet resources, we would attempt to identify every last plant and animal, as well as every bacterium, every alga, every protozoan, every fungus, every slime mold.

Naming all the wildlife on eighteen acres anywhere is an impossible dream. The diversity is like the diversity of stars in the universe. Yet the more we pondered the effort, the more we became convinced it would lead in the direction of enlightenment, if not actually carry us the full distance. We believed we had no business managing our land, or entertaining ideas of being its stewards, if management or stewardship made sense, without deep immersion in the life already flourishing on it. We were biologists of the Burroughs school, after all. Our biological survey would help us overcome at least a little of the chauvinism toward other species we *Homo sapiens* tend to practice.

And there was another aim. By having a never-ending science project to work on, we would enjoy a running excuse to steal away from the roofing and the structural repairs, the plumbing and electrical work, to slip off into the creeping, crawling, flapping, blooming world that drew us to the property in the first place. Call it preventative psychiatry. For our very survival, and to maximize our chances of staying, it would be vital to maintain a strict regimen of fun amid the clambering over hurdles.

So began our involvement with the land and life we call "Moose Hill Farm" (moose for the biggest mammal we might hope to spy waltzing past the mailbox; hill for the knoll the house sits on; farm for the fruits and vegetables we would grow, climate willing). I bought a stack of index cards, and Debbie and I began making records. "*Abies balsamea*, Balsam fir, 2/26/00, abundant in woods behind house" and "*Poecile atricapillus*, Black-capped chickadee, 2/26/00, calling in woods" were early entries, scribbled a few weeks before the place was legally ours.

BIOLOGICAL SURVEY RECORDS:

Peromyscus maniculatus Deer Mouse

3/5/00: Two found dead in a wastebasket in the house; clearly bi-colored tails and pronounced long, stiff bristles extending beyond cartilage of tail.

Castor canadensis American beaver

3/6/00: Fresh evidence of wood gnawed and trees felled by beavers along both sides of river.