



## *Walking in Place*

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*HENRY DAVID THOREAU'S QUOTATIONS  
ARE FROM HIS ESSAY "WALKING."*

### THE EASTERN RIVER

A hot Sunday afternoon in mid-August, my husband and three children out of the house. Giddy at being home alone, I can't settle down to any of the things I'd like to do in the rare quiet left behind in their absence. So I go for a walk.

I step out the door and into the woods, following a long hump of glacier-deposited gravel on whose toe-like southern terminus we built our house thirteen years ago. Over the

years, we've cut back the more aggressive brush and sawed away—or worked around—downed trees, but otherwise our trail is little more than a wildlife path through the woods, and we can tell by the tracks they leave behind that the wild creatures still travel this route we adopted from them.

I pause, hearing only the distant crow of a rooster. Not an insect, a bird, a breath of wind in the trees, not a car on the road breaks the stillness. The trail ambles to the

northern boundary of our property, makes a sharp left U-turn, and travels downhill through a grove of young balsam fir from which we cull our Christmas trees. At the bottom of the hill, I walk along ruts left behind by a skidder that cleared the land years before it became ours, cross a seep of deep glistening mud on a wobbly log, and continue to the river.

Our river isn't much of a river, by Maine standards. Barely wider than my kitchen, it diminishes to a shallow trickle this time of year. But it is an official river: the West Branch of the Eastern River. A few miles downstream from us it joins the East Branch and from there it broadens and becomes tidal as it flows south and joins the much more mighty Kennebec and Androscoggin Rivers in Merrymeeting Bay. It's been a dry summer, and the water in our stretch is even lower than normal. Grass grows in the streambed and rocky bars stretch in from both sides. Where the steep bank dips down to meet the river, I step in.

The water is the color of an old penny, the bottom a jumble of blocky stones. Blobs of gelatinous green algae cling to underwater grass. A pair of blue damselflies settles on the water, the male clutching the female's neck with the tip of his abdomen. She sinks below the surface to lay her eggs on a blade of grass. Thumb-sized fish occupy every pool deeper

than a few inches. Frogs leap or swim away at my every step. Crimson cardinal flowers line the far bank. If I were with my family, we would wade upstream to where the river crosses under the road through a large culvert, but today I take a few pictures of the flowers, study the damselflies, then return to the trail. When I reach the fork I hesitate. If I were to go back the way I came, I'd avoid the field overgrown with vegetation that will tear at my bare legs, but something pulls me in the other direction, through waist-high goldenrod and meadowsweet and clouds of deer flies—a sense of ritual, the full-circle satisfaction of walking a loop.

#### WALDEN

Last summer I visited Walden Pond on my way to see a friend in Massachusetts. I had driven by the sign on the highway that points to the road that leads to the cabin in the woods many times, but I had never before made the detour.

After a drive through Concord that befuddled my GPS, I found Thoreau's Eden right on the side of the road—pond to the left, parking area and reconstructed cabin to the right. I had no plan for what to do when I got there, so I walked, away from the bath house and beach where swimmers shrieked in the May-cold water and around Walden Pond, an

orb of clear blue water circled by a narrow band of sand and steep slopes forested with tall, straight white pines. A side trail led me to the heap of stones that marked the spot where Thoreau's cabin had stood. From there, I climbed Emerson's Cliff, a ridge of gray granite encrusted with rock tripe lichens the size of elephants'

long essay "Walking" makes me want to throw my copy, bound in a tiny book, across the room: "I think that I cannot preserve my heart and spirits, unless I spend four hours a day at least—and it is commonly more than that—sauntering through the woods and over the hills and fields, absolutely free from all

*"I think that I cannot preserve my health and spirits, unless I spend four hours a day at least—and it is commonly more than that—sauntering through the woods and over the hills and fields, absolutely free from all worldly engagements."*

—Henry David Thoreau

ears. There, far from the noise and bustle of swimmers and joggers, I felt a moment of the peace Thoreau might have experienced on his daily saunters. Back at the pond, I put my feet in the clear water, completed the loop, and crossed the road to peer into the replica of Thoreau's hut, a just-right-sized cabin furnished with a bed, a chair, and a desk.

*Walden*, the book, has sat on the lower shelf of my night stand for more than a decade. I pull it out once in a while, but after a few pages of the old hermit's wordy ramblings, I toss it aside in favor of writing more relevant to my life. *Walden* is tiresome, but this line in Thoreau's

worldly engagements." By "worldly engagements," Thoreau means, I assume, responsibilities, of which he had few as a bachelor whose friends helped take care of his material needs. He expresses amazement, almost confusion, possibly sympathy, at the lot of shopkeepers and "womankind" who spend their days sitting indoors, but he fails to note that not everyone has an Emerson on whose land they might squat, nor a Mrs. Emerson to cook them Sunday dinner.

I try to forgive Thoreau his near-sightedness—he was, after all, a product of his time—and read on. After several pages that explore the difference between nature and cul-

*“I have met with but one or two persons in the course of my life who understood the art of Walking, that is, of taking walks—who had a genius, so to speak, for sauntering . . . If you are ready to leave father and mother, and brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, and never see them again,—if you have paid your debts, and made your will, and settled all your affairs, and are a free man; then you are ready for a walk.”*

—Henry David Thoreau

ture, some mental wandering, descriptions of his own walks, and a longish poem or song, Thoreau explains that when he walks he usually heads in a southwesterly direction: “Eastward I go only by force; but westward I go free.” While Thoreau may be speaking literally—east of Concord is Boston, west the wilds of the Berkshires—he is also speaking metaphorically, situated temporally in the midst of the Westward Expansion. I, too, head southwest; although our trail starts out heading north, its ultimate destination, the low spot on the riverbank, is south and west of our house. My heart, too, strains to the southwest, for the mountains and deserts of Colorado, the place where I was born and grew up, a home I have been in exile from for nearly twenty years.

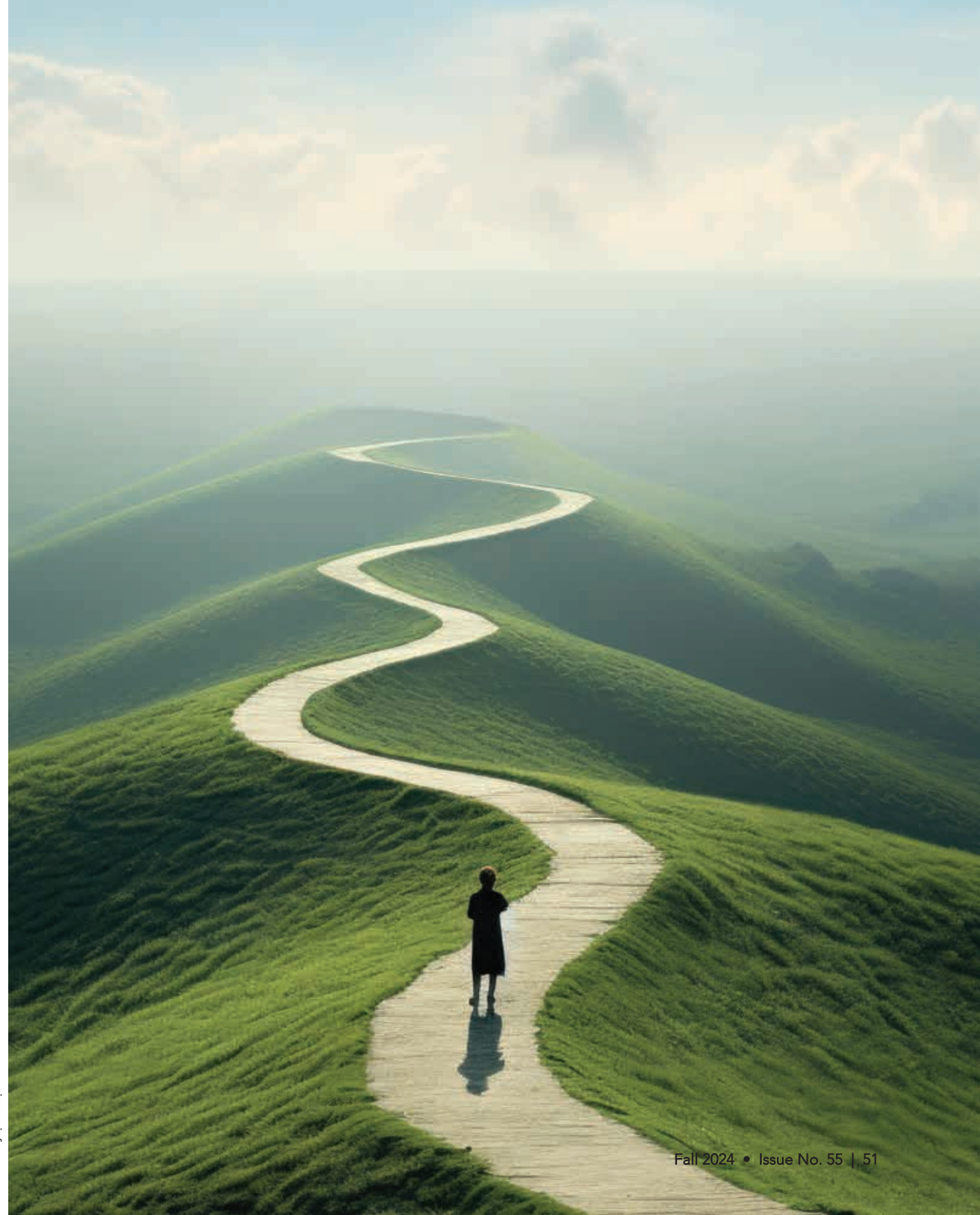
Thoreau goes on to philosophize for several pages about west versus east, waxing romantic about the

West before coming to one the most oft-quoted Thoreauisms: “The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild; and what I have been preparing to say is, that in Wildness is the preservation of the World.” While I have seen the final seven words of this quote emblazoned on countless posters, tote bags, and coffee mugs, I was not familiar with the first part until I read “Walking.” The West is another name for Wild. I gnaw on this idea. In coming east, Thoreau seems to tell me, I became tame, domesticated. In moving to Maine, I gave up that wild, essential part of myself.

#### EASTWARD

I did not come east by force, not even in the metaphorical sense in which Thoreau uses the term. Rather, the east coast, Maine specifically, was a kind of West—an unknown, a frontier—

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for me. My operating principle at the age of twenty was travel, adventure, escape from the humdrum of the suburban world of my childhood. I picked the tiny college on the coast of Maine in part because of the images of windswept coastline, bare granite hills, and endless blue sea depicted in the admissions catalog.

When I got here, I found I liked Maine. I liked sea kayaking and poking in tide pools. I liked hiking little mountains and climbing granite cliffs. I liked the colors of the autumn leaves and living on the doorstep of a national park. I liked Maine. But I didn't fall in love with Maine the way people who come here from Worcester or Hartford or Baltimore do—city-born people who want nothing more than to grow tomatoes, fix up an old farmhouse, raise chickens, pick apples, simmer maple syrup, watch the seasons change in their back field. Maine feels like coming home to them, but for me it only made me miss the West—wide open expanses of sky, searingly dry air, stark peaks of bare stone, riotous profusions of wildflowers.

I went to Idaho for the summer between my two years of college in Maine, then returned to Colorado as an AmeriCorps volunteer after graduation, followed by a 470-mile hike through the Rockies, a short stint back in my suburban hometown outside Denver, then travel through the western states.

Each new place, each mountain and canyon, desert and meadow, instilled in me a deeper sense of connection, of rapture, of feeling I'd come home to this place called West.

But I had met a boy in college, a boy who grew up in a small town in Maine, a boy who, despite his declarations of a desire to travel, was at heart a homebody. Each time we went west, we would be lured back to Maine by promises from his family of a place to live and a job, by his homesickness for leafy trees, damp air, deep winter. My family could offer us nothing more than a patch of living room floor on which to roll out our sleeping bags. We lived a tug-of-war between the two places for years until we had a baby, built a house, found full-time, permanent work, had two more babies, and realized we were here for good.

At Thoreau's cabin site, a large sign bears this well-known quote from *Walden*: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived." The decisions that led me to Maine were made more haphazardly than deliberately, yet they have etched a very deep groove that I don't see a way out of. Will I discover, when I come to die, that I have not lived? Or will I find that my life had carried on despite my dissatisfaction?

## A ME-SHAPED HOLE

Five years ago, I attended a writing conference in Denver. On my way there, I lost my driver's license when I changed planes in Boston. I was too frantic trying to figure out how I would board my return flight to recognize the metaphor of dropping my Maine ID at the border of New England, arriving in Colorado stateless.

The theme of the conference was "Place," with a western flavor. For three days I listened to writers who had moved from New Jersey to Colorado or Texas to Montana talk about how long one must live in the

I had lived in Maine continuously for more than a decade and for large chunks of the decade before that. I had been gone from Colorado for as long as I had lived there. But I hadn't set down roots in my new home. Rather, having landed there through a series of small, inconsequential decisions, I fully expected to pick up and reunite my body with my soul at any moment. But Colorado didn't fit either. Suburban Denver had metastasized into an unrecognizable sprawl of strip malls and car lots and rows upon rows of identical dust-colored houses with huge garages and minuscule green lawns. And, as the implanted writers implied, I had

*"No wealth can buy the requisite leisure, freedom, and independence which are the capital in this profession [walking]. It comes only by the grace of God. It requires a direct dispensation from Heaven to become a walker. You must be born into the family of the Walkers."*

—Henry David Thoreau

West to be a true "western" writer, how deeply steeped in the landscape you have to be to be owned by it. Over the next three days, as I took notes and wandered the streets of downtown, met family and friends for dinner, listened to poetry readings and keynote speeches, I began to feel increasingly placeless.

been gone too long to truly know the place. The West no longer belonged to me, nor I to it.

In her memoir, *Horizontal World*, about growing up in North Dakota, Debra Marquart writes, "Another reason you can't go home again is that the shape you made upon leaving does not match your shape

upon return. Not even for a weekend is it comfortable to step through the ill-fitting hole that your exit created and take up residence in your old life.” I was finding this discomfort in streets whose names I no longer remembered, the gleaming gold capitol dome whose executive I had never voted for, the seas of people attending the conference, none of whom I knew.

At one panel, the editor of a journal devoted to the idea of place spoke about having recently moved from one region of the country to another and how this change gave him perspective to write about his previous, beloved home. During the question and answer portion of the session, I tried to ask

where we live more than anyplace on earth. I’ve walked it in flip-flops, rain boots, and snow shoes. I’ve walked it with babies in slings, backpacks, strollers, and sleds. I’ve walked with friends and family, with my husband and children, and by myself. I’ve eaten its wild blackberries and strawberries, picked its apples and blueberries, dug its wild sarsaparilla and wild cucumber root. I’ve seen bobcats, white-tailed deer, a moose, two otters, a snapping turtle the size of a trashcan lid, raccoons, porcupines, skunks, mink, weasels, a swarm of honeybees. I’ve lain in bed at night listening to coyotes yip and howl in the river valley. I’ve learned my warblers and thrushes

*“I have met with but one or two persons in the course of my life who understood the art of taking walks daily,—not [to] exercise the legs or body merely, nor barely to recruit the spirits, but positively to exercise both body and spirit, and to succeed to the highest and worthiest ends by the abandonment of all specific ends,—who had a genius, so to speak, for sauntering.”*

*—Henry David Thoreau*

him how to cope with physically living in one place when your soul resides in another. Thinking I wanted advice on becoming more closely wedded to the new place, he recommended walking and keeping journals.

I have walked the piece of land

and woodpeckers from these trees and made a list of more than sixty wildflowers growing in its earth. I’ve seen barred and great horned owls, turkey vultures, bald eagles, osprey, Cooper’s hawks, and a goshawk. I’ve watched a family of newly fledged

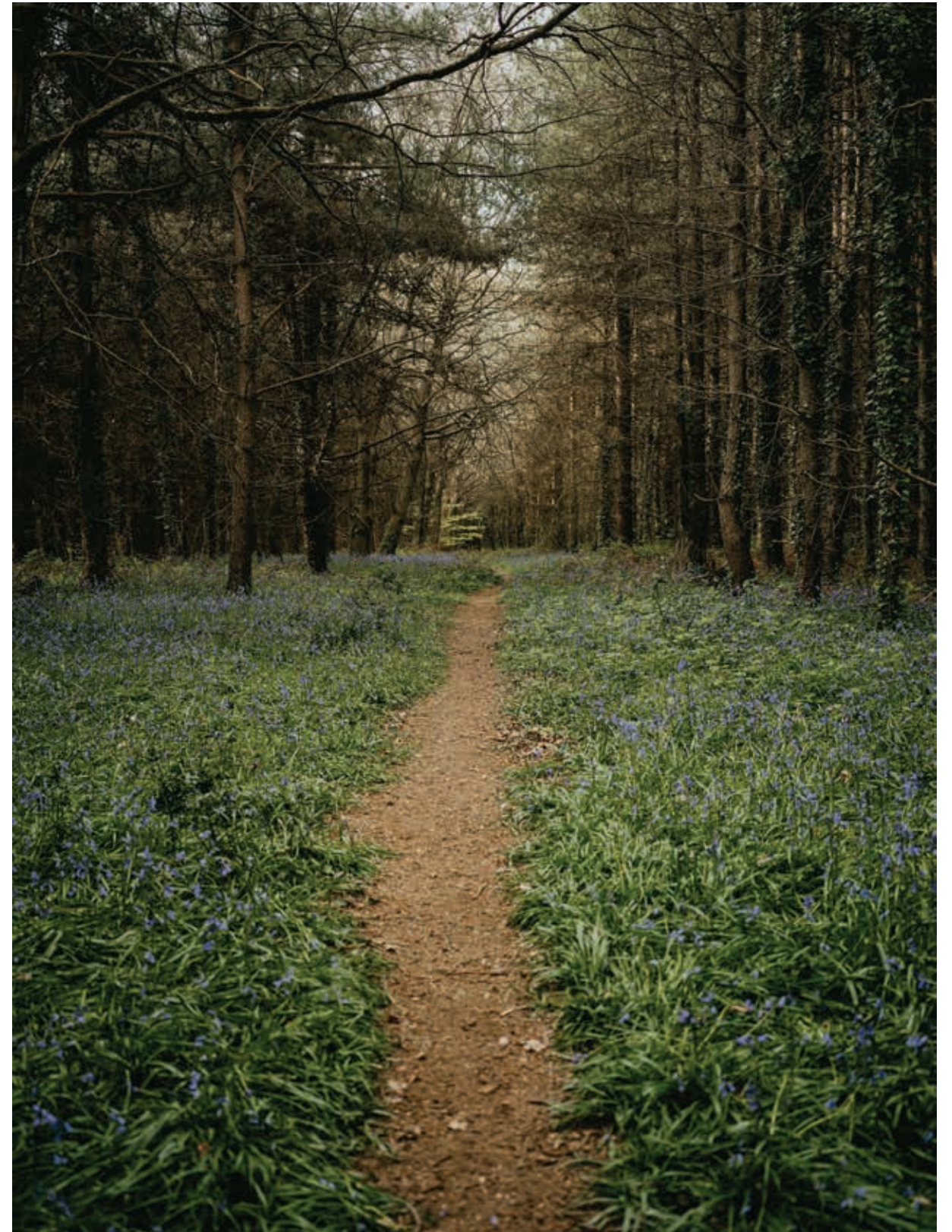


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broad-winged hawks ready for migration every fall but have never found their nest.

My fitness device tells me that our trail is 1,500 steps and our driveway, from the house to the road and back, is 1,000 steps. Sometimes I go weeks not walking the trail, other times I walk it weekly or daily. If, on average, I've walked the trail once a month and the driveway daily for the last thirteen years, I have walked 910,000 steps on this land, more than 400 miles.

I have walked and I have kept journals, a stack ten high in which I've sketched mushrooms, pine trees, glacier-tumbled metamorphic rocks. I've drawn the golden-crowned kinglet that hit the basement window, a garter snake with a leopard frog halfway down its throat, the flowers that brighten our fields, the murky water of the gravel pit pond. I've written lists of trees and flowers and birds, poems about weather, observations of dragonflies and hummingbirds, notes about walks taken with my children. In the pages of those journals, I've noted the change of seasons, year after year, and expressed appreciation for the small and beautiful things of our land.

Yet, despite all those hundreds of miles of walking and the dozens of pages of journals, I have not assimilated to this place. My body lives here, but my soul hovers 1,800 miles away.

## WANDERING

Last fall, inspired by Colorado writer Ann Haymond Zwinger's essay "[The Art of Wandering](#)," I started walking off the beaten path. Where our trail bent south, I turned north, following a ridge above the river, discovering an isolated section of stone wall, a big nest high in a pine tree, a hollow stump I speculated belonged to an American chestnut. I bushwhacked through fir trees to the neighbor's pond, where we skate in winter, and coaxed my family to follow the pathways of all the stone walls on our property. We found an ancient roasting pan and our neighbor's remote-control plane, but the walls didn't lead anywhere, each one petering out in a pile of rocks.

When spring came, I wandered into the woods behind our gravel pit in search of fringed polygala. I didn't find the tiny magenta flower, but I discovered a pink lady's slipper—the first I'd seen on our land. I hunted for more and found a total of seven. One of my sons and I wandered out one evening, hoping to see what occupied that nest on the ridge. We didn't find any hawks, but discovered that beavers had gnawed through three thick ash trees growing along the stone wall high above the river, and we watched a porcupine emerge from its den beneath the roots of a fallen fir tree.

Zwinger defines wandering as "not going anywhere in particular except just to whatever next catches your eye." I was a born wanderer. My mom used to call me Poke-Along Cassidy because of my tendency to dilly-dally whenever we walked to the library, store, or school. I wandered around my backyard, the streets of our neighborhood, behind the ditch that bordered a nearby park. On camping trips, I would wander into

answered, wandering is a lilies-of-the-field pursuit." (Jitney, I learned, is a kind of Uber, a vehicle that transports passengers for a fare. Zwinger's verbified jitney is an accurate description for how parents spend much of their time, although I've never received a fare for my efforts.)

Zwinger found that the practice of wandering does not even require movement. One spring the

*"I am alarmed when it happens that I have walked a mile into the woods bodily, without getting there in spirit."*

—Henry David Thoreau, "Walking"

the forest, aimless but for the glint of sun on a creek, the arc of a tree that resembled a cabin, or a meadow of wildflowers. I didn't go for an actual hike with a destination until I was a teenager. To this day I bring up the rear on a trail, peering into flowers, gazing at treetops, daydreaming my way up mountains.

To learn the art of wandering, Zwinger turns to Thoreau, whose journals document his development as a wanderer. But unlike Thoreau, Zwinger understands what it means to have worldly responsibilities. "Wandering is, on the surface, frittering away one's time," she writes. "When there are children to be jitneyed, laundry to be folded, meals to be planned, dogs to be walked, and letters to be

appearance of a pair of mallards returning to the pond below her house recast what had been a "dour" frame of mind: "With this stationary wandering, I knew, for a moment, the buoyancy of water. Wind flowed under my wing feathers, and the treetops spun away beneath me even as my feet remained on the wooden-plank deck. I came back to this chill world refreshed and cheerful. The ducks were here where they belonged. I was here where I belonged."

It is no coincidence that the place Zwinger belonged to is Colorado. I first discovered her book on alpine tundra the summer after I graduated college, during that AmeriCorps term when I worked on a trail crew on one of the state's 14,000-foot mountains. To this

day, when I read her words about the mountains of Colorado or the deserts of Utah, I sigh. That feeling of belonging is what I am missing, its absence is what squeezes so tight in my chest. I listen for the first squeak of a spring peeper every April, watch (with some dread) for the turning of the maple leaves to crimson every fall. I hear acorns fall on our metal roof, run out to play in the first snow with my children. I scan the edges of the field for emerging wildflowers, search the trees for migrating birds. Each marker of seasonal transition I greet with familiarity, a small measure of joy. But that feeling of rightness, of belonging, eludes me.

#### HOME

Since my day home alone when I waded into its shallows, I walk to the river one evening a week. All along the trail I greet landmarks—the big white pine where my oldest son and I saw a barred owl on New Year’s Day when he was one, the patch of hay-scented fern that sends up its warm fragrance as I wade through, the place where I discovered the lady’s slippers. It has rained all week and the vegetation along the trail soaks my pants. The Eastern is a river again—dark water flows through the grass and submerges most of the rocks that had been laid bare last week. I pause and listen. My ears take in the gurgle of the water as it flows toward the

sea, a faint wind moving the leaves in the highest branches of the trees, an insect that emits a rough buzz and one that makes a high trill, and a bird that gives off a coarse scraw.

It occurs to me that the editor at that conference so long ago did not misunderstand my question, that what he was saying when he told me to walk and keep journals was *let go. Call your soul home to your body.* To, as countless posters proclaim, *grow where you are planted.* It is, no doubt, sound advice. There is little to guarantee dissatisfaction as much as being unwilling to come to terms with the place where you find yourself on this earth. But as much as the me-shaped hole back home no longer fits, this place doesn’t fit either. It’s like a sweater my mother-in-law, who shops at thrift stores and yard sales, might give me for Christmas—serviceable, but too tight across the shoulders, too long in the sleeves, the fabric scratchy, the color wrong.

When I returned from the writing conference all those years ago, I arrived home in the dark and stood in my yard with stars shining overhead, peepers chorusing in the pond, and tears streaming down my face. I knew that my heart’s home was no longer my home and hadn’t been since I first rode away from it in a Greyhound bus pointed east more than twenty years before. I knew I had to let it go, but I knew that I could not. ✱

