

WHEN THE *wild*
COMES *leaping* UP

Personal Encounters with Nature

EDITED BY *David Suzuki*



David Suzuki Foundation


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Introduction

HARVARD ECOLOGIST EDWARD O. WILSON coined the word *biophilia* to describe our “need to affiliate with other species,” a need he believes is encoded in our genetic makeup. As one example of biophilia, he cites the fact that every year more people in North America visit zoos than attend all professional sports events. Biophilia can also be seen in an infant’s instant fascination with a flower, spider, seed, or butterfly (often accompanied by a desire to stuff the object into her mouth). Yet a child of six or seven who encounters a beetle, slug, or nettle is likely to respond with fear, revulsion, disgust—biophilia transformed into biophobia.

Throughout history, every society has known that we are deeply embedded in and dependent on nature. People have understood that everything is connected to everything else and that therefore every action or inaction has consequences. Many of our songs, prayers, and rituals affirm that embeddedness and dependence and offer a commitment to act properly to preserve nature’s abundance and generosity.

In the past century, humanity has undergone a stunning shift in the way we live that has profoundly altered our relationship with the natural world. At the turn of the twentieth century, most people on Earth lived in rural villages. We were an agrarian species. In a mere one hundred years, cities have exploded in number and size, and we

have been transformed into a species of big-city dwellers. In such a human-created environment, we are surrounded primarily by other people, selected domesticated plants and animals, and a few pests that refuse to yield to our all-out war against them. A city is radically diminished in biodiversity.

I have been asked in all seriousness, “Who needs nature?” As we have shifted our domiciles to large cities and come to live with a vast array of technological wonders, it’s not surprising that we would begin to regard the natural world as a frill, something removed from us to enjoy on a hike or camping trip. I discovered the consequences of this attitude a few years ago when I was host of a children’s television series called *The Nature Connection*. We took two ten-year-old children, a boy and a girl, from upper-middle-class Toronto homes to a farm north of the city and for two days filmed them playing with the animals, milking cows, gathering chicken eggs, feeding the pigs, and riding horses. On the third day, we took the children to a slaughterhouse, where the boy burst into tears when he learned for the first time that hot dogs and hamburgers are the muscles of animals.

We have become further disconnected from nature by the constant recession of wilderness as our cities expand into farmland, forests, and wetlands. Highways and roads serving our love of the car crisscross the countryside and reduce the number of places that remain wild. As well, our knowledge of the world comes primarily from the electronic media, which replace the illusion of connectedness with fragments of information devoid of context or history that indicates how it all hangs together. The immense advances of science and technology reinforce the sense that our enormous intelligence and technological dexterity enable us to escape the boundaries of nature and manage our own destiny.

As we enter the twenty-first century, beset by tremendous disparities of wealth both within and between nations, terror and violence, and a single global notion of economics and progress, the natural world is disappearing at a frightening rate. I have attended a number of international meetings on biodiversity where scientists documented a terrifying rate of extinction and loss of habitat around the world, thereby upsetting the ecological diversity and balance that have enabled life to be so resilient for millions of years. But in our infatuation with our technological and economic “progress,” we seem blinded to the implications.

There are those who argue for the protection of wilderness primarily because it may contain medicines, new foods, resources, and so on. Some say it is simply a matter of setting proper economic values for parts of nature—that is, getting the pricing right. But I believe in the end that preservation of the wild is not about accommodating economics but about our need for spirit, a sense of belonging to and being embedded in something bigger than ourselves or our creations. We need to know that we emerged from nature and will return to it upon death. We need to have sacred places that are not just opportunities to harvest resources but are worthy of respect and veneration.

For many of us, a personal experience with the wild informs us of the existence of things that are priceless beyond economic worth. We have asked established writers with an interest in nature and social or ecological issues to share an experience that moved them or changed them in some way and that occurred in the natural world. The enthusiastic response of the outstanding writers in this collection attests to their sense that such experiences are important. These essays confirm that we are profoundly influenced and moulded by our surroundings.

The contributors to this book live in Australia, Great Britain,

Canada, and the United States, thereby providing an inadvertent comparison of perspectives from different parts of the globe. Both Australians describe dramatic, life-changing occurrences at sea. The British authors relate experiences in tamer versions of the natural world—a park, a country lane, a common. Many of the Canadian authors express explicit concern for the fate of wilderness, and several of their stories take place in the vast expanses of the Canadian landscape—the prairies, the vistas of the North—or describe the harshness and danger of northern winters. The American essays revolve around interactions with creatures of the wild—a run-in with yellow jackets, watching or following deer, fly-fishing in a spring creek. All the authors write with passion and eloquence.

I cannot omit commenting on the contribution of one author. Timothy (Tiff) Findley was one of Canada's most talented and celebrated writers. Tragically, Tiff died just as the proofs of the book came in. His partner, Bill Whitehead, informed us that this was Tiff's last piece of writing and that the subject was especially dear to his heart. It is an honour and a privilege to have his final original work to grace this book.

BETH POWNING

The Way Back Home



BETH POWNING's writing and photography have been published in magazines and literary journals. Her first book was *Seeds of Another Summer*. Her second book, the memoir *Shadow Child*, was shortlisted for the 2000 Edna Staebler Award. She lives on a 300-acre farm near Sussex, New Brunswick, with her husband, Peter.

I

THE WOODS OF MY CHILDHOOD were not far from the house. I could see the trees from my bed; on summer mornings the cold, exuberant tumble of birdsong broke my sleep, voices coming as if from far away and then growing steadily louder until I opened my eyes to see leaves lifting in the first breath of sunrise, passing the light back and forth like good news. I could hear the deep-bellied bawling of the neighbour's cows and a clatter of pans downstairs in the kitchen. My eyes shut and I gazed with interest at the insides of my eyelids. Red and golden speckles spun in a golden-black sea. My window was wide open and a leaf-smelling breeze stroked my cheek.

I sat up in bed. Light shone through my cotton nightgown as it had shone through my eyelids. I yawned, watching a wasp wakening on the windowsill. As the sun rayed through the treetops, the wasp raised its wings; they quivered, translucent as age-ambered parchment. I set my bare feet on the wooden floorboards, noticing that the birds had quieted, had begun, perhaps, to preen their breast feathers or drop suddenly from the branches where they had proclaimed themselves throughout the coming of the fierce light.

THERE WERE FIVE DAIRY FARMS within a half-mile radius of our house. Their lives pulsed around us, as much a part of sky and wind as peepers or summer rain. Because of them, pastures sprouted thistles; down at the pond iridescent water pooled in cow-prints; the air smelled of silage and manure and hay. Most people lived and worked at home. Women inhabited linoleum-floored kitchens or strode in fields wielding sticks. They were more sound than sight, like the hidden frogs or birds whom I knew only by their voices. The women had sour Yankee voices, German voices, one shrieking Bronx voice. They had bent fingers with dirt-encrusted nails, toad-soft floury skin, bib-aprons, and laced black shoes. Their husbands had bodies like tree trunks, spare and leaning; they smelled of grease, oil, tobacco, and their eyes glinted like breaking clouds. Tractors and manure spreaders passed below our house, which was red and stood on a bank overhung by the swaying branches of a weeping willow. Our woods were like an island, floating in a sea of stone-walled pastures and fields.

SO WHEN I WENT UP over our own horse pasture to play in the woods on this summer morning of birdsong, I was at home, like everyone else. My mother did not worry about me, since the woods had known borders that emerged in neighbours' fields; I was immune to poison ivy; the snakes were benign; and there were neither humans nor bears.

When I climbed through the broken place in the stone wall, our red house lay beneath me, cupped in the valley fields. I was up higher, in a place like the starry sky. Even though it was close and part of home, it seemed like a hidden kingdom where spirits ensured that everything was connected: clouds bent to rocks; shadows cooled lichen. Ferns shaded the tiny leaves of wild blueberries, a white

cloud slid forward, and a bird made a searing cry, as if in warning. Like an unquestioned king, the sun had a path to travel and moved higher as the morning passed until, at noon, grass blades, rocky ledges, and grape leaves were shadow-doubled; and the woods lay motionless beneath its dominion.

The wind too was another being; it grew from somewhere over the western hills, came scything through the hayfields making black swaths, seized the treetops, and tousled their dignity. Or it took small breaths and then sighed through the clearing at the trees' edge, which was neither pasture nor field, where a small wind could wend its way between rock piles and red hawkweed, could release the hot spice of juniper and the resin of rotting pine needles. And stretching away around me was a community of trees whose neighbourhoods I knew: a grove of stern young maples; fey paper birches that either loved the wind or were dead, ice-bent; wicked apple trees clawed with black twigs; and by a tiny shallow pond, the benignant oak whose crown could be seen from every farmhouse in the valley, like a grandfather whose absence is unimaginable.

Here, when I was very small, I played away the summer mornings. I slid into the light and shade of the grey-skinned maples and waded waist-deep through the shadow-flecked glade, brushing my hands over feathery ferns whose tips licked the air like green tongues. One day I saw a rock covered with a shawl of green moss and squatted to stroke it—it was dense and soft, unspringy, like the matted hair of an ancient pony. Now I was in the ferns' world; I looked up and saw that the undersides of their fronds were golden and spotted with brown spores. Sturdy stems lifted a ceiling of leaves, which rocked on the air like lily pads. The light was aqueous, lilting, and I imagined myself to be four inches tall.

Or in the little clearing I sprawled on my belly in the cricketing warmth and watched the life of ants. I built houses with pebbles, roofed them with oak leaves. I scratched roads in the dirt with sticks, pretended that juniper berries were grey horses, and made their feed troughs from acorns. Mica glittered on the rock pile where water snakes sunned themselves. I squirmed closer and lay on my belly watching them. They too were intimates of this world. Glaucous hoods slid over berry-black eyes. Red tongues flickered like heat-lightning from their eternal smiles. The sun sank into the crevasses between their glossy scales, and squiggly squares patterned their coils, like turtle shells, or designs in dried mud.

And I thought that the snakes listened to a bird cry that sheered over the chirr of insects; I thought that the oak tree heard it, and the green frogs in the pond beneath its limbs. I thought that the ferns took the cry into their grass-floored halls and that it rode the lovely, rippling beds of wild violets up by the spring. The wind snatched and twisted the cry; sun glittered on the granite boulders as it died away, falling down the air. I did not understand what the bird said, but I perceived that everything else in the woods listened attentively. Thus in the knowledge that this was a community and that here was a language did I feel the first glimmer, and glamour, of life's mystery.

Because I did not understand this language and because nothing in the woods cared for me or acknowledged my presence, I was myself to myself, whole unto every moment. I loved the woods but did not call it love. I lay pressed against the earth solid as stone, shelled in drowsy heat like a pea in a pod. It was deep summer, the time of humidity and thunderstorms, of daisies and snapping turtles: the day passed into me even as I drifted unaware through time, thinking neither of the day's ending nor of its beginning.

II

VALENTINE'S DAY, 1998. My husband and I, on that day, had been married nearly thirty years. I gave him a card that said, "Just the two of us . . ." We brought our outdoor clothes from the unheated hall and lay them on the kitchen floor to warm: felt-lined boots, double mitts, neck warmers. Our farmhouse lies at the end of a valley in the Caledonian Highlands of New Brunswick. The fields glittered in the early-afternoon sunlight; it had snowed and then rained; now, on this bitterly cold day, there was a crust so thick that we could walk anywhere without breaking through.

We set out on snowshoes. They were small "cats' paws" made of aluminum with crampons that bit at every step. We crossed the lower fields, heading up to the woods, the points of our ski poles rhythmically puncturing the crust. We left behind our white farmhouse with its grey-shingled outbuildings; every field rose up the bowled hills, so no matter which direction we took, it was not long before the place we live seemed insignificant, its steel roofs a cluster of angled slants, like the bony shells of barnacles.

I was thinking of neither love nor time as we left the fields behind, following the brook whose voice we could not hear, so deeply was it buried. A wind rose; we heard a high roaring sigh that faded and then started up again, far off, and rushed towards us. The uppermost branches of the trees—ice-crowned, graced by prismatic lace—danced stiffly, creaking; shattered light spun round every twig, dazzling against the dark blue sky, and then our snowshoes crunched over tubes of ice that clattered down. I was feeling only the peaceful warmth of exertion rising from the elastic spring of toned muscles, and the pleasure of shared delight. Peter pointed with a ski pole. I looked up as a raven flew low, seemingly incurious but opening its

beak just as it passed over us, making one plaintive croak; we could hear its wings spading the air like a fan with a missing blade.

The brook leads up to a ravine where cliffs rise like a ship's prow. From May until November the brook emerges from their base after a long descent between rocky walls; it tumbles down mossy chutes, splashes into pools where it spreads, black as a horse's eye; and then bends again over the lip of the next fall. There it breaks, is revealed in its separateness: flying droplets, white spume, rainbow mist. We reached the cliff and stood in the shadows, breathing the bitter air. Forty-foot spears of blue ice hung from the cliff's edge. The waterfall was frozen, although at its top we could see an opening like a window onto another world where water still sheered down, disappearing far beneath the crystal-flecked, massed meringues of ice. We could not stay here long—it was too cold—but we couldn't resist creeping into a shallow cave behind the ice columns. The ice cave forms every winter and yet we were still amazed by its presence, as fascinated by its dank snugness as we were the first time we stood at the foot of the ice-gripped ravine. We crawled in behind the hanging ice and crouched, pressed together, holding a thermos lid in mittened hands. The place felt both safe and treacherous, a hiding place without comfort, a deadly refuge. We shared a Valentine's Day cup of tea, and each other's blessed warmth.

Up on the hillsides the winter sun lay in golden trapezoids intersected by tree shadows. I led the way, shouting for Peter to follow. I loved how my crampons took me to places we did not ordinarily go, for these hills were too steep for skiing or walking. He demurred, but I persisted and so he followed. We walked straight up between the motionless trees, stamping our crampons into the ice, reaching out with our poles and stabbing the crust, stopping to pant. I had almost

reached the top and could smell the spruce trees that curved down over a rockier soil. I stepped sideways. Suddenly my crampons had no purchase and I felt myself begin to slip. I lunged forward, reached for a tree. I fell, twirled on the ice. I sensed a great motion from Peter, saw him begin to fall even as he reached for me, felt myself begin to slide on my back, thought I would catch a tree, reached, and felt bark tear past my mittens.

He called my name and I heard fear. My body gathered speed; I fell too fast to reach or react; I felt helplessness like something being torn from my hands. I crashed into a tree with one shoulder, was thrown sideways, plummeted headfirst backwards at accelerating speed, unable to turn, to catch anything, to dig in my heels. I thought with amazed clarity that the next thing to hit would be the back of my neck and that I would be paralyzed or killed. My mind, like my body, had no volition, had time only to register the sense of being in the grip of a great force, a wonder that I could do nothing to help myself, and an awareness of the implacable, steel-hard resistance of this multitude of peaceful, shadow-casting trees.

Then my leg caught, my body swung hard against it, and I came to a stop and rolled forward, hanging like a taloned mouse. I heard Peter shouting. He plunged downward by lunging from tree to tree.

Something had given way in my knee. I was entangled in the branches of a bush, my leg hooked around the trunk of a young maple. Peter was beside me.

“Something’s wrong with my leg.”

He glanced down, his arm around a birch. We were only halfway down the hill. Not a single step could be taken without falling. The sun had reached the western hills. Cold air streamed up from the darkening valley, carrying the smell of ice.

We spoke with focused intensity, planning how we would get down. He would wedge himself against a tree, I would take his hands, I would swing loose, and he would haul me across the gap. This we accomplished, and he heaved me like a bag of grain against the tree. Thus, in slow stages, we reached the trail at the bottom. There I looped my arms over his neck and stood on the backs of his snowshoes.

When we reached the fields, the crust was flushed with the rays of the setting sun, glittering as the sun shifted, and in the hollow the apple trees of the little orchard were already crouched in blue shadow. He left me wedged in the rocks of a cairn and ran down to the house to get a toboggan. He loped awkwardly, running on snowshoes. I watched his red coat going across the field and then leaned forward with my face in my hands and felt sobs rise in me so heavy that my chest could barely lift them. This was not ordinary weeping. This grief came from the heart of February, had been quivering in the ice cave and the tea we shared there, had stretched within the golden light and the blue shadows. It rose from my soul and I could not check it. For an instant I had been like a wind-tossed bird in whose heartbeat lives the owl's talons. For an instant I had known both love and its ending.

III

MY HUSBAND, WHO IS AN artist, has his studio just across the barnyard, so for the rest of the winter, at least, I was not alone. I sat on the edge of the dining-room table with my legs dangling and tried to lift my leg backwards but couldn't. I dragged it behind me as I took the stairs one step at a time: *step-step, step-step*, tipping from my hip, clutching the bannister for balance. I dreamed that I carried a cow stanchion around my neck. I studied *Gray's Anatomy*, packed bags of

frozen peas around my knee. Eventually I acquired a leg brace and a surgery date: June.

Meanwhile, Peter skiied, as we would have done together, but only shrugged when I asked him (jealously, wistfully) what was happening in the woods. He would only answer, "The skiing's terrible," and tell me how he had used the wrong wax or worn too many clothes as he shrugged from his coat which, as winter waned, brought the earth-sharp smell of wet ferns, granular snow, and river water into the dusty kitchen. The house had not changed. It was as it had been in the fall when we readied it for winter, with pleasure, like provisioning a boat for a long journey. Then we had been contained within the dark nights, the kitchen stove dropping coals from its grate, onion braids reflected in the glossy window, and snowdrifts like great mufflers winding round the house. Our skis leaned against the cracked plaster, Peter read out loud about Arabian deserts while I sat cross-legged, snow-tanned, knitting wool socks. The house, then, was alive and appropriate, and we loved the storms, which began with the portentous spit of ice on our windows and rose, overnight, to shrieking gales.

But in late March the light changed and revealed the passing of an epoch. Another winter's journey had been navigated. So the light announced, falling on the empty onion braid, which shed papery skin, and on a bouquet of dried hydrangeas whose petals would turn to powder if crushed. From the windows I could see the pewter rooster tail of the brook as it leaped down from the ravine, twisting through the pasture. I could see how the snow lay like diminishing islands, drifting on the brown hills. I stood on the wooden sill of the shed door watching spring shadows stretch from the eaves of the barns, listening to the voices of robins and freshets.

The accident had put an end to a time that I now remembered with yearning. I looked back at the winter when we skied every day, understanding why Inuit have dozens of words for snow, when we had seen two weasels looping through the deep drifts of the lower field, or found an entire grouse fresh-killed and surrounded by marten prints, or stood on the treeless expanse of the blueberry barrens and watched the veiled twist of crystals as snow wind-spiralled like tumbleweed over a prismatic desert, and had returned home to the cavelike kitchen, our mitten liners sweat-soaked, our cheeks cold-parched. I couldn't accept that they had not continued, those balanced days. I stood in the back door listening to the spring evening, whose elements I had not witnessed as they grew, vanished, arrived: the free-running brooks whose ice had broken, turned to slush, capsized as it rolled downstream; the shrill mating calls of tree frogs, pulsing from the swamp; wind softened by the red tasselled fringes of budding trees; the hollow thunder of snipes' wings. I felt excluded, not having participated in the continuum of change. And my mind swung, as it had for months, from past to future, from the time when I could walk to the time when I would walk again; and I turned from the evening birdcall, from the damp air sharp with the scent of mud and alder buds, and went to the living room, where I kept exercise pads, rolled towels, rubber stretching bands.

Every night, Peter helped me. I lay on my belly as he lifted my leg, observing minute improvements with elaborate praise. Friends telephoned. I was between drafts of a book, waiting for my editor to send comments. In this limbo, I waited for my knee surgery, and although I was surrounded with people who loved me, I felt a vague, disturbing sense that I was in the process of displacement, of