

On Gardens, Beartown Lakes, and Being Human

I've slipped outside in my robe to survey the garden at sunrise. The air smells sweetly fresh; the grass is dewy-wet under my bare feet. Baby green foliage peeks up from the loam – feathery cosmos, tendrilled sweet peas, glossy snaps – all birthed from seed. I pry out some small weeds, then go in to dress and head to Beartown for a morning walk.

For thirty years now I've followed these trails, in the pleasant company of beech and hemlock, and often friends, and sometimes, I think, angels. I've walked under sullen sodden skies and beneath clear canopies of brilliant blue, when sunlight dissipates over the water in little pools of flashing liquid light.

I've walked early on a hot summer day before the dew dries, in time to see the dawning light throw shadows across still water.... stillness broken only by a trio of mallards gliding in silence, leaving V-shaped wakes.

Fall mornings are crisp and fragrant. I've walked through ghostly mists that rise from the waters, veiling the reflected masses of scarlet and gold.

On enchanted winter days when Heaven is icy blue, snow squeaks beneath my steps and a blinding, shimmering whiteness blankets the land and arrests my breath with the cold and the splendor.

Sometimes my husband joins me. He has an eye for vignettes of curious beauty and points them out : the bold contrast of a yellow finch perched on violet thistle, or dappled light dancing on a pendulum of dark purple berries.

In the company of a friend, words flow freely like the water along the creek. Whispering leaves provide a foil for our voices while we lose track of how many loops we made.

Most often, though, I've walked alone - yet rarely felt less alone.

I pass an old man, a veteran fisherman with smile lines etched deeply into his tanned face. Our eyes meet. We smile and nod, silent so as not to disturb the fish.

Runners pass me, smiling "good morning" – others panting hard, focused.

I meet young mothers with happily-disheveled children, on foot, or on bikes - mothers like myself long ago. At the time my little girl had just learned to ride her two-wheeler, and once, near the end of our hike, the trail suddenly descended and she began careening downhill. Lunging to protect her, it was I who fell – and fell hard – while she coasted on with gleeful confidence. We still laugh about that.

It was on the same trail, years later, that our future son-in-law walked with my husband and asked his blessing on proposing marriage to our daughter.

These days we might walk with our grandchildren - slowly, to allow for short legs and long questions. Hollow trunks of trees are doorways into fairyland. Closer to the ground than we, they readily notice the beechnuts or winged maple seeds. These, we explain, are how these trees began.

Words are seeds. Life begets life. We sow; we reap.

I turned seventy the same week I lost my mother. The lakes drew me, offering freedom to cry where only God could see. A flush of daisies on the bank, dazzling white in the sun, reflected glory into my soul. Eternal perspective quieted any sense of urgency at this threshold of my new decade of life.

It's hard to grasp that these trees are thirty years older as well as I. Their trails seem always the same, while the children who once walked them with me now have babies of their own. And I'm reminded of my Place, my Purpose.

How, for all of our apparent progress, have we lost what it means to be Human? What are we, really? Complex machines, replaceable by more efficient, soulless upgrades? Mere organic elements of an evolving ecosystem?

*Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?**

The towering beeches, the gliding mallards, the snowy daisies – they don't ask such questions; they implicitly follow a mysterious ancient bidding. It's the Human asking the questions. It is we wanting to see the bigger picture, to know our place on the map. It is we who are stirred by beauty, who find fulfillment in building and sowing, in generating that which is Good. Unless, that is, we stop our ears to the questions and distract ourselves with noise and amusements.

In these woods I learn humility and perspective - I am a learner, an observer of a magnificent choreography largely oblivious to my presence. But on the piece of land on which our home and garden rest, I am a master and steward, a sub-creator, striving to produce fruitful beauty from earth and seed and the labor of my hands.

It is so in my garden; it is so in my world.

*T.S. Eliot, *The Rock*