Finding the Springs

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In the winter of 2014, I was coming undone. Call it a midlife crisis; call it one too many transatlantic relocations; call it incipient empty-nest syndrome. In clinical terms, I was suffering a major depressive episode. *Depression* is a word that is bandied about casually; a depression in the ground is just a low spot, but this felt more like I'd fallen into an abandoned mine shaft. I could barely see daylight above, let alone climb out. I couldn't shake the sense that the person I'd been before had shattered like a broken pot. Pleasure and purpose had been replaced by a fog of anguish and dread. I spent much of the time crying, and shrank from social interaction, fatigued by the enormous effort of pretending that nothing was wrong. I was sleeping half as much as usual, tormented by endless visions of my own worthlessness. A longing for death and thoughts of ways to procure it kept recurring. The antidepressant I had been taking for years to ward off just such a state of affairs was clearly no longer enough, so I made an appointment to see a therapist.

On the first of what would prove to be many visits, I stumbled through an explanation of what had triggered this flare-up—the profound grief I'd felt at returning to the U.S. a few months earlier, after a fifth golden year in Spain, and the deeper question it had uncovered: where did I belong? Where was home? I'd

lived in eight places in England, Ireland, and Nigeria by the time I was eight, followed by France, Spain, and the U.S. as an adult. Missing one or other of my homes had been a constant since childhood: so why had this last uprooting caused so much pain and psychic tumult? The therapist, who had pixie-cut white hair and a thousand-watt smile, listened gravely, taking notes on the pad in her lap. At the end of the hour, as I wiped my eyes, she said, quietly, "I'd encourage you to spend an hour outdoors every day this week. And there's a task I invite you to take on, if you're willing. There are nine springs in this city. See if you can find them."

I was taken aback, but nodded, trying not to let my bafflement and skepticism show. Privately, I wondered how this could possibly help. Standard, HMO-approved therapy for clinical depression usually focuses on evidence-based methods like cognitive behavioral therapy—retraining one's assumptions and thought processes. This was clearly another tack altogether. Nevertheless, the conscientious side of me resolved to give this wacky assignment a try.

It rapidly became clear that locating springs wasn't going to prove an easy task. Google yielded nothing useful. Clearly, I wasn't going to be able to find the addresses of local springs online and then go visit them, like a tourist with a bucket list. None of the area maps showed water sources, only creeks, rivers, and lakes. Springs, it seemed, were tantalizingly everywhere and nowhere. There was a Nine Springs Golf Course, Park, and Expressway. There was a Capital Springs State Recreation Area and a Spring Harbor neighborhood. There were springs in some of the street names around town. But no maps showed where the springs were.

Madison, Wisconsin, the city where I live, is built on a swampy isthmus between various bodies of water. The Hoocąk (Ho-Chunk), whose ancestral land it is, call it *Teejop*, or Four Lakes, for the four big lakes of Mendota, Monona, Waubesa, and Kegonsa strung along the Yahara River waterway. But the one I'm most intimately acquainted with is the smaller fifth lake, Wingra, a five-minute walk from my home. The Hoocąk knew it as *Kecąk hoxepra*, "Where the Turtle Rises Up." White settlers, who began occupying the Four Lakes district in the late 1830s, took to calling it "Dead Lake," mistakenly thinking it had no outlet. Judge Levi B. Vilas wrote indignantly that "Dead Lake" was an outrageous misnomer, in a vehement letter to the *Madison Democrat* in 1869.

He protested that "on the contrary, [Lake Wingra] is full of living fishes and surrounded and covered with winged fowls and singing birds from which it obtains its true and appropriate name." (The word *Wingra* comes from a Hoocąk term for duck).

Vilas also praised the innumerable "bubbling springs around its shores." An early Madison historian, Charles E. Brown, wrote in 1927 that Wingra "had a greater number of fine large springs than any other of the Madison lakes. . . . [T]he number and size of them were largely responsible for the location of six different early Indian village sites and the large number of Indian mounds on its shores." The springs sustained a thriving community of human, plant, bird, and animal life in and around the lake.

Of the nine springs in Madison, I knew the location of only one, the Ho-Nee-Um spring by Lake Wingra. The following day, I turned away from the traffic on busy Monroe Street and walked down there. It was December and winter had locked down in Wisconsin; leafless trees, a bitter wind harrying the lake, ice shards jingling in the shallows. I followed a trail through a marshy, wooded area that leads to a creek with mossy stepping-stones. Just beyond the crossing point, clear water was bubbling up out of sandy soil. It was nothing spectacular—not a fountain or a geyser, just a shallow pool overgrown with watercress and the frozen remains of forget-me-not. If you weren't paying attention, you might not even notice it was there. Even in this depth of winter, the water was open and the cress was alive, vivid green, though everything around it was brown or gray. A few birds flew off as I approached. There were deer tracks in the frozen ground around the springs, a trail of cloven hearts. I stood there watching the water quietly bubbling up, making the grains of sand jiggle and dance in small clouds and columns, as if boiling. How unimpressive, and yet momentous, it was that fresh water came out of the earth right there. It was obvious what the therapist was getting at: you might think you're dead, but have faith—life will well up in you again. If only. I stood there, hoping for some kind of New Age healing to be transmitted. None was.

The next time I saw the therapist, I mentioned that I'd found it, but I hadn't felt any kind of healing—if anything, just the opposite. There was a wellspring of sadness overflowing in me that would never be quenched. I began predictably leaking tears as I struggled to express this. She looked at me searchingly, passed me a box of tissues, and nodded silently. I sat in her warm, cushioned office and tried to breathe.

The dead and the living: springs are connected to both. They are revered by ancient people around the world as sources of life. They provide clean water for drinking, bathing, cleaning, and cooking and are the focus of many cultures' sacred ceremonies. In English, the season of rebirth is named after them. But as places where an aquifer meets the earth's surface, they are also thresholds, doors to the underworld, like Celtic Christianity's notion of "thin places." For the Hoocąk, springs are portals where animals enter the spirit world. They made offerings of tobacco, food, and stone or bone implements at them to obtain the animals' blessings.

Because water is essential to life, travelers and migrants of all sorts—human, avian, and animal—have historically followed water sources. In the days before piped water, overland trails frequently ran between springs. Native American villages and seasonal campsites were located near them. European settler-colonists favored plats containing springs for their burgeoning homesteads and towns. The ancient Native names for the springs were often lost in the process, replaced by the names of the landowners—names which changed over time as the property changed hands. This made it difficult for me to trace the location of springs in Madison, because each has a variety of names, and historic descriptions of their location referenced owners and buildings long gone.

A couple of weeks later, I came upon the second spring almost by accident. I had dragged myself out on one of the daily walks I was forcing myself to take. My body felt like a sack of dry sand and I never felt better after these excursions, but at least I didn't feel worse. They kept the agony more or less level. By now, like a person in danger of freezing to death, I knew I needed to keep moving. A few feet from the intersection of two busy thoroughfares in Madison, Monroe Street and Nakoma Road, is an old limestone wall above what I'd always assumed was merely a duck pond. There were always birds there, because—I'd never thought about this before—the water never froze. One day, I noticed a plaque nearby. It explained that this was Gorham Springs, a major five-spring complex known by the Hoocąk as *Ñįįpįį Nąągu* or Good-Water Trail, since it lay on the route of one of their trails. The elegant stone house opposite also had a plaque, announcing it as the Old Spring Trail Tavern, built in 1854 to cater to thirsty stagecoach travelers and their horses and oxen. Local farmers from far around who had no wells would haul barrels of water away on their wagons. A

wall was built over the springs in 1927, rendering their source invisible, but the water continues to issue from deep underground, emerging at the base of the wall to create the pond, and from there feeding into Lake Wingra. I was sad not to be able to witness it bubbling out of the ground. Also bemused that I'd passed it unwittingly thousands of times over the years, though pleased to have notched up another spring for my list.

Christmas came and went. I saw the therapist every week. I mentioned that I'd only found two of the springs and hadn't had any insights from them, although I was still looking. She smiled and nodded. At one point, I talked about feeling as though dark waters were closing over my head; I was going under, foundering. "You're going through a transition," she said. "Remember what transition was like in labor? It's when the shit hits the fan."

As the months passed, we delved into my life story, marked by the loneliness of being a resident alien in the U.S. and Spain—never entirely belonging, no matter how hard I tried—while becoming an alien in my supposed homeland, Great Britain, where I had not lived for twenty-six years. I tried to explain my conflicted relationship to place, simultaneously yearning to belong and to be somewhere else. I described how, every time my plane landed in Madrid, I was pierced with joy and relief at the golden sunlight flooding the cabin. Madrid is at the same altitude as the part of Nigeria where I lived as a very young child. That upland light, landscape, and air are imprinted on me, as is the sensation of loss. My earliest memory, from when I was aged around four, is of waiting forlornly in a dark, dingy room in England, feeling bereft, aching for somewhere that had been luminous, and warm, and beautiful.

I described falling passionately in love with the mountains in Spain—the Sierra de Guadarrama, the Picos, the Pyrenees. Hiking them, I never wanted to come back down to real life, wishing I could climb forever. Drinking from *fuentes* of cold, sweet water that made my teeth ache and shocked me alive, quenching my deep thirst. The smell of resiny *jara*, wild thyme, and rosemary in the mountain scrub. And the other part of my heart forever reserved for the soft greens of Britain, the mountains and coastlines I'd walked since I was five. When I leave there, I'm deprived of so many things—bluebell woods; the smell of Shropshire fields; the grass on Welsh hillsides. Every time I came back to the U.S. from Spain or Britain, part of me went into mourning at being uprooted,

and took weeks, or sometimes months, to recover. I would have dreams that I was flying over the place I'd left, looking down from above, but whenever I tried to land there, I would lose control and find myself heading toward a terrifying crash landing on barbed wire or some other danger. I would wake screaming hoarsely.

I found Madison delightful when I first arrived in 1986, but I never fell in love with America as I had with Britain and Spain. I had no deep connection to Wisconsin's landscape, since that kind of attachment—for me—is based on physical intimacy. I get to know a place from the ground up, by traversing it on foot—what the English call "rambling." The human heart beats at a walker's pace. I never had time to get to know my new surroundings that way; my job was way too demanding. After moving here permanently to be with my husband, I spent eight years commuting to a job one hundred miles away, in Illinois, in a town so devoid of access to the land that I felt empty and disoriented. I hated every minute I spent on the interstate, driving from one home to another, neither of them truly mine. I used to play tapes of Spanish music—Serrat, Belén, Mecano—and of British novels, all of which conjured up such vivid memories that I sobbed on my drive to work, teaching Spanish language and literature to American undergraduates whose utter uninterest broke my heart. I spent all my time longing to be elsewhere, and escaping abroad whenever I could. I saw myself, bitterly, as someone who would never really belong in Wisconsin, someone for whom there was no longer any "home." Depression surfaced then, and returned again and again over the decades, a kind of deep, dark wintering that periodically threatened my life.

Looking for information about springs in Madison, I came across something else I should have known: before colonial settlement, they would have been clearly identified by groups of vast, ancient earthworks called effigy mounds, which were constructed around and oriented toward them. Southern Wisconsin has the highest concentration of these in the U.S. From about 700 to 1100 CE, the Hoocąk's Late Woodland ancestors built over twelve hundred striking mounds in the Four Lakes district, shaped to represent sacred figures, including birds, bears, and long-tailed water spirits. Their sculptures dominated the local landscape, and early white settlers found them extraordinary and mysterious. The birds represented the upper-world sky realm, and the water spirits guarded

the underworld. Because Lake Wingra had such an abundance of springs, it clearly had great spiritual significance to the Late Woodland people: they built at least 233 mounds around it, especially bird mounds. As I read more, I realized that our house in Madison was still ringed by these huge birds built into the terrain. Next to the Edgewood College library where I write, there is a bird mound with a 260-foot wingspan. There is a large goose mound in nearby Lake Forest Cemetery, swooping downhill toward Lake Wingra. Above Vilas Zoo, there is a small hawk-like bird effigy flying across the drumlin overlooking the lake shore. White historians do not know what happened at these mounds or why they were built, but they seem to have functioned as three-dimensional cosmological maps, representations of a worldview. Mounds and springs, archaeologists Robert Birmingham and Amy Rosebrough surmise in their book *Indian Mounds of Wisconsin*, were "places to which people returned again and again for renewal," to restore the balance between air, earth, and water spirits, and to maintain harmony in the natural world.

In January, my teenage son started training sessions with a swim coach at a health club on the north side of the city. I drove him out there every week but then had the familiar parental quandary of what to do—there wasn't time to drive home and back at rush hour (plus I hated being in the car), and no cafés nearby, so I sat in the waiting area and tried to read. It was a grim, cramped space in the middle of the building, with no windows, fluorescent lighting, and a large TV screen emitting a continuous stream of jabber at full volume.

After several weeks of this purgatory, I came prepared with hiking boots. At least I could use the time to get my prescribed walk. I had looked online and realized there was a large green space nearby, Pheasant Branch Conservancy, but Google Maps didn't show any trails. Still, I was determined to escape, so, after dropping off my son, I drove around the corner to Century Avenue. As soon as I saw woodland on my right, I parked in a rundown subdivision opposite, jaywalked with some difficulty across four lanes of fast traffic, and found myself in another world. The din of the highway started to recede as I made my way down a small, winding path through heavy snow. The trees stood silent, muffled. I walked fast, to keep warm, until I ran out of time and had to turn back.

I continued this routine weekly, taking a different route when the path

forked, trying to make a mental map of the woods. One day, I came across a park information board that showed you could walk all the way around Pheasant Branch Conservancy—a seven-mile loop—but there was a confusing mass of trails and no signposts. It also mentioned that "branch" is a southern dialect word meaning "creek." The place had been named by the first white settler to own it, who was from Virginia. The creek in the Conservancy was fed, the sign said, by springs. It did not say where they were, indicating only that they were "on the north side."

A faint thrill ran through me. Maybe I could even find my third spring today! I wasn't sure which way was north, but I figured if I walked around the perimeter of the Conservancy for long enough, I'd see something. That day it was below zero and the wind was pitiless. I walked fast, farther than I'd ever been before, but saw no springs and ran out of time again.

I trudged around those trails in Pheasant Branch once a week, through February. Eventually, March arrived and the grimy snow that had piled up on the sidewalks began to shrink. The icy tracks I'd left in the woods off Century Avenue gradually melted, revealing leaf litter. There was mud and deadness for a while. Then I began to notice, week by week, a faint greening, the wild honeysuckle and dogwood beginning to put out buds, which then split into tiny leaves.

I also began to notice birdsong on these walks. I could identify chickadees, cardinals, robins, crows, white-breasted nuthatches, and the drumming of woodpeckers, but I started registering another two-note call that was loud and insistent: *Peter! Peter! Peter!*, like a doorbell being rung hard. It bothered me that I could never see the bird and didn't know what it was. When I got home, I tried to identify the call online, with no success. I did, however, discover a blog by someone who was clearly an expert on Pheasant Branch, with many professional-quality nature photos, so after some hesitation I posted a query to him. The blogger replied in great detail, but when I listened to the recordings he sent, I couldn't decide which one matched what I'd heard. We continued the exchange by email, and eventually the blogger wrote: "I go birding at Pheasant Branch along the creek corridor every morning before work. You're welcome to join me if you'd like." I agreed, intrigued. I hadn't known there *was* a "creek corridor." Maybe this person could help me find the Pheasant Branch springs.

And so began a new morning ritual. On weekdays, I hauled myself out

of bed two hours earlier than usual and drove across town to go birding. I found the blogger, Mike, stunningly knowledgeable and—luckily for me—very patient. He was tall, with the long, loose-limbed stride of a person who walks a lot. He dressed in dark clothes with lots of pockets. His face was surprisingly young and round under his signature black beanie. He had the kind of supreme confidence about bird identification acquired only by putting in hours a day in the area for half a lifetime. I followed him timidly on his rounds up and down the creek every day, awed by his expertise. He could identify a single whistle or cluck, the quietest squeak or "chip," the tiniest, most distant flicker of movement. He knew what to look for and where: on the bank, at the water's edge, scratching the ground by the side of the trail, in certain trees. And he was not alone: he was joined along the way by his birding friends: Dottie, a soft-spoken wildlife ecologist with stunningly acute hearing, and Sylvia, a gentle silver-haired naturalist who seemed like a small, shy bird herself. I had always been guarded with strangers, bracing for the inevitable question about where I was "from," my accent always provoking comment, underlining my otherness, my nonbelonging. These three—I named them "The Three Ornitheers"—just accepted me for who I was: a would-be learner. My being of a different linguistic feather didn't matter to them. I was deeply grateful for that, and for the way they didn't engage in too much social chatter, which meant we could all tune in and listen. We walked along in companionable silence, punctuated by restrained sotto voce exchanges about nearby birds.

Every day, I watched, listened, and wrote down in my notebook the names of the birds I was learning to see. At home, I studied field guides. I bought a pair of binoculars that were better than the thirty-year-old miniatures I'd been using. Slowly, I began to climb the huge mountain of my own ignorance. Birding doesn't require very much of a person, especially a person who is suffering; it's a forgiving and gentle pursuit, with no hard-and-fast rules except patience. It's okay to slow down; in fact, it's a good thing. You just have to show up, be quiet, and pay attention. You turn your focus outward, to what is around you: watch for flickers of movement, note the plants and trees, the berries or insects present, the direction and strength of the wind, the angle of the sun, the temperature. You have to practice what naturalist Kathy Miner calls "deep listening," and retune your ears to register whatever is there. In these moments I experienced what author Rob Nixon has described as a "quality of presence" that slowed

time, a kind of internal stillness that felt something like peace.

In April, I solved the puzzle of the third and fourth springs fortuitously. Driving out to the creek corridor in the mornings, I passed a turnoff for Spring Harbor Road. One night, on impulse, I googled "Spring Harbor neighborhood" and found mention of two springs. The next day, I biked there and wandered around the small square of mowed grass in Spring Harbor Park, which had a playground, basketball court, and benches but, needless to say, no helpful sign saying "To the Springs." I asked a woman with a toddler if she knew where the spring was. She gave a slight start of surprise and looked at me blankly. "You could take a look in there, there's a path," she ventured, pointing to an area of woodland next to University Avenue and its roaring four-lane traffic. I walked into the woods and spotted a faint trail, all overgrown. Birds kept flying up and away. I had no binoculars to observe them. But one landed close, giving the *Peter Peter* call. I realized it had a crest in silhouette—which meant Mike's first guess, all those weeks ago, had been right; it was a tufted titmouse. I was surprised how diminutive it was, in contrast to its loud, ringing voice. The path—just a faint track—wound around through the undergrowth in a lackadaisical way. Finally, it curved left to a couple of wooden boards propped over the remains of a stream. To the right were two large pools, choked with leaves, algae, and watercress, but with patches of clear water and a sandy bottom just visible. In here, the water was hidden, overlooked, neglected. I thought about all the thousands of cars that thundered by this spot each day, mine one of them. How oblivious we'd become to where water comes from. How we take it for granted.

The other spring proved surprisingly easy to locate. I biked along Lake Mendota Drive, wondering where it could be, when I was startled to spot what had been missing everywhere else—a sign saying "Path to Merrill Spring." I locked my bike to a tree and followed the narrow footpath down a steep slope blanketed in oak leaves, skirting expensive houses that overlooked the shore. At the bottom was a small cul-de-sac ending in Merrill Springs Park. This time, the springs were impossible to miss: clear water shimmering in a massive, circular stone cistern built in 1934, with a boulder next to it bearing the name *Mąąkąʼ Mąąʼíí* (Medicine Spring). There was a fast-running rivulet leading from the springs to the mossy banks of the lake, with two ancient weeping willows at its mouth, much hacked but still surviving. The park was flanked by craggy old oaks

and cottonwoods. There were three Depression-era stone tables and benches, and the concrete remains of an old jetty. The place had an air of tranquility, and beautiful views of the lake; but the spring was evidently much lower than it used to be, and virtually still—there were no visible "boils." Both Merrill Springs and the ones up the road all but dried up after a deep well was dug in 1960 to provide drinking water for the city's rapidly expanding population. A noticeboard in the park says that there was an Indian village nearby until the nineteenth century; the Hoocąk believed this spring had healing properties, and that wishes made when drinking its waters would be fulfilled. In 1888 it became a resort area. There were some fifty ancient effigy mounds nearby, but when they were first surveyed by Increase Lapham in the 1850s—a mere twenty years after white settlers first started pouring into the area—half had already been damaged by farming and development.

Given patience and a lifetime, you can learn about birds totally unaided; but it's more rewarding—and faster—if you seek out people who can show you what to look and listen for, where, and when. Birding creates communities of people who often have little else in common, and between them, they develop a deep knowledge of place. Birders, I discovered, knew where springs were—because that's where birds go. Birds, especially tired, thirsty migrants, need fresh water.

It was thanks to the birding community that I came upon—or rather, was led to—the fifth and sixth springs in late April. An Audubon tour at 6:00 a.m. introduced me to two important springs in the woods on the south side of "my" lake, Wingra. The first was *Mąą'i Wooga Pįį* (Good Gift Spring), now known as Big Spring. On the ridge above it are effigy mounds: a bird and a long-tailed water spirit. I remembered having canoed into Big Spring from the lake on a hot summer day years before, not realizing what it was, but marveling at the clear, cold water and the sudden hush as the inlet wound its way past cottonwoods, basswoods, maples, and tamaracks, eventually culminating at the foot of a tall pin oak with a forked trunk. Big Spring is a favorite of migrating birds, and so is a magnet for bird watchers in spring and fall. In winter, it provides welcome drinking and bathing water for the year-round avian residents. The birders' route along Lake Wingra involved walking as quietly as possible to these two springs, standing still for long periods and watching everything winged that came and went—kingfishers, great blue herons, phoebes, flycatchers, brown creepers,

wood ducks, and hermit thrushes, and a host of different wood warblers—yellow-rumps, palms, black-throated greens, chestnut-sided, bay-breasted, magnolias, Wilson's, and flame-throated Blackburnians.

Even though it's much more noticeable, the Hoocąk avoided drinking from Big Spring—they preferred nearby White Clay Spring, which they believed had healing powers. Although they are just two hundred yards apart, they are quite different. White Clay is quieter and smaller than Big Spring, more hidden. The Hoocąk called it *Reexoro Sga Nįįšąnąkra*, White Clay Creek, indicating that it used to have a much bigger flow. Visiting it alone one evening in May, I was thrilled to find myself surrounded by golden-crowned kinglets, tiny migrants flitting around right at my eye level, hawking for insects, their dandelion-colored crowns glowing in the waning rays of the sun as they sang their tiny songs to one another.

I discovered the seventh spring, the one I had been looking for in Pheasant Branch Conservancy for so long, thanks to Mike, who told me which road to take, where to park, and what trails to look for to get there. With these instructions, I hiked out one summer evening, leaving the graveled trail at a certain spot and heading downhill into the prairie grasses. There, surrounded by ancient, gnarly bur oaks, was the biggest spring I'd ever seen: a wide, shallow, sandy pool filled with dozens of "boils," which issued into a meandering creek. The place was a hidden bowl in the shadow of a big hill, completely unseen from the hiking trail. You'd have to know someone to know where it was. I sat there, drinking in the quiet, listening to the burry *conklaREE* of red-winged blackbirds and the bugling of sandhill cranes in the marsh. This spring was called *Mąą'ų ee pįįra* by the Hoocąk, in an expression that denotes its beauty and its spiritual significance, but it is now known as Frederick Spring, after the farming family who owned the land most recently. In 1915, there was still an Indian trail, sometimes known as the Blackhawk Trail, leading from Frederick Spring to Gorham Spring, on the edge of Lake Wingra. On modern maps they aren't even in the same city (one is in Middleton, the other in Madison). But they were and are linked—by birds, by water, by the people who know about them.

The eighth spring came not long afterward. I'd been emailing with a friend whose husband worked at the DNR. He reported that there were springs not far from the Capital City bike trail, but I had no idea how to find them in the

dense thickets and marshes. However, they were close to Eagle School, to the south of Madison, off Fish Hatchery Road. Someone put me in touch with the science teacher there, who said she did indeed know of a big spring and would be happy to show me the way. On the day we had agreed to meet, it was raining, but we decided to go anyway. The teacher, Maggie, who also runs a small organic farm, was weather beaten, with shoulder-length dark hair and a down-to-earth attitude that made me feel instantly at home. With her dog bounding enthusiastically ahead, we hiked down the bike path, exiting into the undergrowth at an unmarked spot. "Look for the forked cherry tree," Maggie said. "That's where you go in." After picking our way through waterlogged ground and waist-high brush, we came to a spring where a young man, a golden lab, and a toddler were playing. Black mud, boggy tufts, clear deep water. I emerged from the bush-whacking soaked and covered in burrs, but feeling an emotion I'd almost forgotten: happy.

By the end of that summer, after nine months of therapy and outdoor walks, and several months of birding, I noticed two things. First, my capacity for pleasure, wonder, and absorption was coming back. My world was imperceptibly but unquestionably transitioning from black and white into color again. And second, my way of seeing and hearing was starting to shift, to sharpen. I was amazed at the intricacy and complexity of the life that had been going on all around me, to which I had been largely insensible. Stephen Rutt has written in *The Seafarers* that birding helps humans because "birds give structure to the world outside; they mark the seasons and explain the landscape. Because nature is a language . . . and . . . birds are the verbs of that language." I started to appreciate bird sounds as *language*, not just noise: communication with meaning. For starters, there was the obvious *I'm here!* or *Watch out!* or *This is my spot!* or *I'd make a fine mate!* And then there was the fact that birds made all kinds of different vocalizations—not just songs, but also alarm and contact calls and other sounds—for different reasons and at different times of the year. Now I was starting to pay attention to every sound, knowing it meant someone was near, someone was saying something.

Mike, my birding guru, sometimes grilled me as we walked along. *What are you hearing right now?* With difficulty, I'd identify two or three species. He would then rattle off ten more, which seemed obvious once pointed out, but that

I'd been unable to hear. Birding by ear involves retraining your brain to register individual sounds instead of an undifferentiated mass of background "birdsong." This transformed even a walk around the block for me. I started to really hear my neighbors, to recognize them, to pick out their voices. Crows were not just making a random cawing; they were acting as police sirens. The sentinels of the bird world, the mob predators, shouting *owl owl owl!!!* for example. Gradually, I started to locate birds by hearing them first, pinpointing where the sound was coming from, and then finding them in my binoculars. I was struck by how often people—joggers, walkers, bikers—rush past wearing headphones, absorbed, oblivious, when there was so much to listen to. Listening like that meant slowing down, something I'd been too impatient to do until that point, always preferring to hike fast rather than stop and listen. This way of hearing and seeing was the exact opposite of where I had started—in the lounge at the health club, with its blaring television and gray walls.

Birding means being out-of-doors in the green world, which is good for sadness because, if done often enough, it builds attachment to a place and its inhabitants. My depression both springs from and provokes a sense of alienation, of not belonging. "Alien" and "alienation" derive from the Latin *alienus*, "belonging to another." Rootlessness is bad for human beings; in my lifetime, it has caused me a great deal of grief. We need a sense of connection to survive, both psychically and practically.

The most striking thing about birds is how intensely *alive* they are. Learning to love and appreciate them helped counter my death instinct. As I got absorbed in bird lore, the darkness that had taken hold of me started to recede. Pleasure reentered my life in single flashes: the thrill of catching a black-throated blue warbler in the binocular sights; recognizing the tiny, sweet, bubbling call of the winter wren; holding my breath to hear the haunting, fluty notes of a wood thrush; or the warmth of being welcomed by my new birding companions.

Birding helped me reframe the question I'd been struggling with throughout my life about where I belong. As a migrant, a person whose loyalties are divided between three countries, I couldn't decide which was truly "home," where to "settle." But birds made me realize, deep down, that "settling" in one place wasn't the only pattern for a life, or even the most natural one. Helen Macdonald writes in *Vesper Flights* that she found birding helped her rethink her

assumptions about belonging: "I thought of homes as fixed, eternal, dependable refuges. Nests were not like that: they were seasonal secrets to be used and abandoned. But then birds challenged my understanding of the nature of home in so many ways. Some spent the year at sea, or entirely in the air, and felt earth or rock beneath their feet only to make nests and lay eggs that tied them to land." As I started to appreciate the great tides of migration that traverse Wisconsin (over three hundred bird species travel north via the Mississippi Flyway from March through May, and then south from July through October) and as I began to discern the birds' different plumage and vocalizations in the different seasons, I came to feel more at peace about my own travels, and more rooted in this terrain in the Yahara River watershed where I've happened to wash up.

Except maybe it didn't just happen. Maybe, for all my struggle against living in the Midwest, I was meant to be here, and this Four Lakes landscape I live in was waiting for me to become part of it. At least, that's what the therapist seemed to suggest, once. "And you thought you just *happened* to end up here in Madison," she said, stressing the word with an ironic smile. "Next to Lake Wingra. Pure coincidence, that."

It's a curious paradox that searching for springs and birds healed me. It should have made me much sadder, and in a nonpersonal sense, it has. The great Wisconsin naturalist Aldo Leopold writes in *A Sand County Almanac* that "one of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives in a world of wounds." We think of springs as symbols of eternal life, but that is an illusion. They can be exhausted, dry up. Just as species can die out. Springs, and birds, are imperiled by relentless human expansion. By the 1950s, after a century of white settlement, more than twenty springs in and around Lake Wingra had ceased to flow. Homo sapiens has precipitated a new geologic age, the Anthropocene, and the Sixth Extinction is well underway. A study in *Science* in October 2019 reported a "staggering decline of bird populations" of over three billion birds in the last fifty years, estimating that there are 29 percent fewer birds in North America than in 1970. The National Audubon Society noted this means that "within one human lifetime, North America lost more than one quarter of its avifauna" due to habitat destruction, collisions with buildings and windows, widespread pesticide use (which kills the insects birds eat), and predation by household cats. There have been steep losses even among birds once considered

common and widespread, such as meadowlarks and thrushes. The prognosis is grim: in October 2019, National Audubon reported that two-thirds of America's birds are threatened with extinction from climate change.

When I contrast this with what used to be, even a mere hundred years ago, I'm stunned at the magnitude of what's already been lost. In 1915, Charles E. Brown, a Wisconsin historian, wrote that Lake Wingra had an abundance of fish, ducks, geese, quails, partridges, and prairie chickens "by the thousands"; deer, black bears, wolves, foxes, lynx, wild cats, raccoons, skunks, woodchucks, minks, muskrats, and otters. Two brothers who grew up on Lake Wingra (and owned a spring) in the second half of the nineteenth century, Walter and Samuel Chase, mention Wingra's bountiful wildlife: redhead and canvasback ducks, gar and northern pike, otters and bobcats. At night, wolves howled from the south shore. Passenger pigeons, Samuel Chase wrote, "were so thick as to weigh down the oak trees from which they were gathering mast."

In the face of these losses, searching for springs, and the birds that visit them, is a tiny act of resistance, a bulwark against the oncoming annihilation. We can't protect what we don't know. Environmental stewardship stems from love and attention. *Somebody* has to notice and care about a given species or place for there to be any hope of us getting together to save it. Becoming aware of the birds all around me and their incredible daily feats of survival ultimately helped me emerge from my own struggle for survival, even as it alerted me to the devastating threats they face.

I found nine springs in total that year. Were they *the* nine springs the therapist was thinking of? I don't know, and it doesn't matter. There is an abundance of them in Madison, even accounting for the many that have disappeared since settlement. Over the years, I've continued to find them across the city and beyond—springs that were there all along, unbeknownst to me. The discovery has kept on widening, like ripples from a stone thrown in a pond. There are fourteen springs on a single stretch of DNR land at Nevin Springs. Eleven that I'm now familiar with on the shores of Lake Wingra alone.

This year, under quasi-quarantine, I've spent much more time walking in Madison than usual. Threatened by a return of my depression as we move into a winter reigned by the coronavirus, I recently embarked on more spring-finding. The latest one came this October, when I chanced upon a kayaking website that

described a trip down Nine Springs Creek, showing photos of a particularly beautiful spring that could only be reached by water. I sent the link to my friend Judy, who owns two inflatable kayaks, and asked if she was interested in helping me find it. She responded enthusiastically. The following week, we met at a small nature preserve on Post Road, laboriously inflated the kayaks at the prescribed social distance, and lugged them 850 feet down a grassy track to the creek snaking through the marsh. The put-in point was precarious because the bank was so steep and muddy, but I managed it despite my lack of kayaking experience. The creek carried us swiftly downstream, and we had to negotiate our way past fallen tree snags with some care. I felt instant serenity in this new vantage point, at eye level with the horizon, passing the secret grass tunnels and coves where muskrats hid.

Our enthusiasm was quenched when we reached South Syene Road; we were supposed to portage across the road levee but found it impassable. So much filthy debris had collected by the bridge that we couldn't reach it, and we were surrounded by thigh-deep swamp that precluded landing. So we turned around and paddled back; painstakingly reloaded the kayaks, and drove to the bridge to put in on the other side. The traffic was relentless, and the narrow shoulder was strewn with garbage.

Once back in the water, however, our luck changed. We paddled downstream until the creek branched, then took the left fork, following instructions. The inlet wound around, becoming shallower, until it ended at a large pool ringed with stones: the springs. It was sheltered from the wind in a hollow in the long marsh grasses. To our left, the drone of cars, trucks, and sirens on Syene Road, just a few hundred yards away—but where we were, a hush. We beached our kayaks in the shallows and clambered out. The water was searingly cold, and the creek bed sharp and slippery. We picked our way over to the springs and perched barefoot on the large rocks surrounding them, crying out with relief. There were thick patches of watercress growing at the edges, and some large cottonwood trees. We spent a long time just gazing and listening, in silence, both of us smiling. We picked a few leaves of watercress, washed them in the springs, and ate them: I've never tasted anything so sharp and alive, its peppery greenness still vivid in my mouth as I write this.

On the way back, we battled the current and a twenty-mile-an-hour headwind. Climbing out of my kayak onto the bank by the road, I almost fell in;

I clung to the long, dry grasses, convulsed in helpless giggles, the kayak slipping perilously out behind me. It had been months since I'd been overtaken, body and soul, by laughter. Somehow, I managed to claw my way up onto the shore without losing the kayak or getting submerged in the creek. The joy of discovery has stayed with me since then, and something about the light, the stillness, and the taste of that invasive European weed, watercress, continues to illuminate my memories of that day. I hope it will light me through the coming winter dark.