A Sacred Place

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late 1960s and early growing on the steep forests on field trips of Vertebrates, and by Ken Thomasma of Vertebrates, and who were not taking trips. Another person on was going into K-12 these forested ravines. laid out the trail, and trail into the hillside, on the trail and even ben worked to semesters in 1980, groups, scouts, senior these no longer occur, then leave, just about ask. Wood rots rapidly that struggle to replace it as well. Toward the end, we have the responsibility of the next four Nature Trail. This display anywhere in the lower flowers, and for most hillsides. The Biology plants found along it.

A SACRED PLACE

Christine Stephens

“When I would recreate myself, I seek the darkest wood, the thickest and most interminable and to the citizen, most dismal, swamp. I enter as a sacred place, the marrow of nature. In short, all good things are wild and free.”

—Henry David Thoreau, “Walking”

I’ll never forget it. I was running the obstacle course of Grand Valley’s nature trail, traversing rough-hewn log steps, roots, puddles and rocks, and had yet to reach the difficult makeshift bridge which elevates the walkway above swampy earth. I’d run the path so often that I knew each missing slat and handrail, memorized where to place each foot, my path deepening with each pass. My roommate asked why I would choose this chaos rather than the uniform safety of the indoor track. The question seemed ridiculous. In autumn, goldenrod dotted the path, as buttery sunlight cut through the leaves, the sweet smell of decay permeating my clothes. Exercise may have been my motivation, but what I found was a sacred place, a silence punctuated only by bird calls.

I turned a corner into a small clearing. Before me grazed five deer, unterrified beside the wooden walkway, their presence lending a stillness to the air, rendering it other-worldly, as if I had stepped into a photograph. Then one turned to a fresh patch of grass; another twitched a velvet ear. I don’t know why they didn’t run, but for a full minute we inhabited the same space, as if I belonged in their wilderness, close enough to see their jaws work the grass side to side, their wet eyes dart behind long lashes.

I’m not sure what broke the silence, but when one raised her head, the rest scattered in impossible long-legged leaps. Had they been there at all? I walked the rest of the way, conjuring their image.

A month later, a sign in the dorm warned students to wear bright orange on the nature trail because it was hunting season. This puzzled and frightened me. Stomping in my cut-off sweats and Grand Valley sweatshirt, how could anyone mistake my clumsiness for a deer’s grace? Besides, how could a poacher trespass on University grounds? Why was the nature trail not protected?

I’d come to accept my vision of the deer as a gift, but I suddenly recognized their ignorance in trusting me. Where I had felt a serene bond—each of us vulnerable, linked to the earth and thus to each other—I felt a new separation. I was dangerous to them; I could have been someone with a gun. But I was also like the deer, hunted, though I could wear bright orange. Hunted and hunter, I was neither and both, caught in the weighted balance of nature.
I may have ignored the posted warnings and jogged unhindered, but I didn't run the trail the rest of that season and quit each hunting season, choosing safety to a deer's danger in nature. By running the indoor track, I'm not sure what I lost—perhaps, as Thoreau said, the chance to recreate myself. Hunting may be part of life, but poaching and carelessness are unforgivable. If we seek the "wild and free," must we count ourselves among the hunted?

I know a brook,
Where oxlips and anemones grow,
Quite overhung with flowers,
With sweetest balm, and leaves of myrtle.

I love this place, this little room, where people together—staff, students, community—can come together to wander, to read or talk, to eat or drink, to be together with place, with nature. Ophelia wanders through, Perdita hands flower favors to Titania, Oberon where Titania and Oberon are shears of the wild and free.

The Shakespeare Garden, weeding and mowing, watering, were mostly donated by friends. From Ursula Franklin, a rose, in mid-September. A daylily from the homestead. Another climber, strawberry from Ostroot Snyder, strawberries, mallow from Carol Winters and English ivy, Don and Arlene; primrose from Loretta Winters; mallow from Bill Baum, honesty and hemp, road at six one foggy Saturday morning, garden in upstate New York, from their gardens. Ceramics to name the plants and evoke the poetry the images and memory of Barb Roos; of Barb Roos, Lockerd planting pear tree at our knees pulling out weeds and roots. Garden's official photographer once, often stop and ask to help. Shakespeare class occasionally...