

A Matter of Scale

by John Tallmadge

It was not a happy day when I learned that my family and I would be moving to Cincinnati, Ohio. What wilderness lover would ever dream of living deep in the Rust Belt, downstream from places with names like Ironton, Oil City, and Nitro? It was a long drive from our home in Minnesota, every mile falling farther away from the Boundary Waters, where big pines still towered over pristine forests and lakes. At the time, it felt like hurtling into exile. But now, after 10 years in the heart of it, I find the city as rich with lessons as any wilderness. Reaching this point has been a long, fantastic voyage, and the best guides have been my children.

Early on, it was hard not to dream of remoteness. Our plain brick house in an aging suburb bore the usual wreath of lawn, shrubbery, and petunias, with only a thin belt of trees to screen us from the neighbors. More enticing were the hundred-meter woods that separated our yard from the city park, with its soccer field. I used to walk there dreaming of mountain heather and Parry primrose, while stumbling amid the jewelweed and mayapples. Out in the park, a west wind teasing the grass always made me think of snowy cirques high in the Rockies or yellow prairies along the hundredth meridian.

And why not? The very idea of wilderness presumes the viewpoint of someone immersed in civilization, gazing far off. We may encounter wilderness "out there," but we normally think about it "right here"—that is, in the city, where most of us live and work. We habitually think of

wilderness as something with big trees, big animals, and big scenery, a place of "mountains and rivers without end." This classic view of wilderness seems to pose only hopeless choices: nature or culture, adventure or home, wildness or civilization.

My children solved this conundrum by proving, inadvertently, how much our sense of wildness is really a matter of scale. From our earliest walks they brought attentiveness and wonder to even the most common things. Rosalind discovered feathers—blue jay, cardinal, mourning dove. In her tiny hands they looked as big as fans, beautiful talismans of airy life. Elizabeth loved "treasure walks," where we gathered acorns, sweet-gum balls, and dried grass stems as stiff and precise as architecture. Each discarded husk was as precious to her as a golden apple dropped by some passing goddess.

As the girls grew, so did the grass in the park beyond our woods. One year the city failed to mow, and the grass grew heedlessly into a tossing prairie. On a June day when Rosalind was eight and Elizabeth almost six, we went out there to escape the house, threading our way through poison ivy and amur honeysuckle until we were able to stand up straight at the meadow's edge. The sight of all that glowing, rippling grass washed over us like pure delight. Did our ancestors feel like this when they first stepped out of the forest onto African savannas more than a million years ago? The soccer field was calf-deep in blooming timothy, English plantain, and oxeye daisies, and on the far side unmowed grass rose up in a green wave, shoulder high. With a shout the girls plunged in like swimmers breasting the surf, then reappeared leaping and burrowing as I thrashed along behind.

When I caught up with Rosalind she was down on her hands and knees. "Look!" she cried, "a slug!" Then, nose to the ground, "Daddy! Look!" I dropped beside her, staring into a patch of moss that grew on the damp, shaded floor of the meadow. Tiny mushrooms had sprouted there, stems thin as horsehair, ribbed caps delicate as Chinese parasols. Over them towered smooth,

straight stalks of grass, their ink-black shadows slanting across the moss. A beetle lumbered into view, as big and shiny as a pickup truck. What lives, what emotions, what battles or discoveries were being played out here while I sat indoors dreaming of distant, glamorous wilds? "It's a grass forest!" I murmured. But Rosalind had already bounded off toward Elizabeth, who was chasing white and orange butterflies. "Let's be naturalists!" she cried.

It occurred to me then how grown-ups, who have become adept at living, often miss the wildness at the heart of life itself. That's why we hanker after the strong drink of wilderness; we need such tonics to take us out of ourselves. To find the wildness near at hand we need to regain that beginner's mind before which the world still appears fresh and luminous and unbounded. But how? On those early walks, my children taught me that wildness is not just a state of nature but a state of mind. Where do you suppose the horizon lies for the small denizens of the grass forest, which grows up today and tomorrow is mowed down? We humans bring all things to the text of ourselves. But the world is larger than our conceptions of it.

Gauged by average human dimensions—say, a body five and a half feet tall, weighing 130 pounds and lasting 70 years—the Cincinnati landscape manifests little wildness. Few trees in my neighborhood are more than 50 years old, and the only animal approaching human size might be a stray deer or coyote wandering through. Move down the scale, however, and the living world becomes more prolific and diverse. Although our woods no longer hold black bears, elk, wolves, or buffalo, we do have opossums and raccoons, plus smaller mammals such as squirrels, chipmunks, rabbits, moles, and mice. More than two dozen species of birds have passed within a block of the house, from great blue herons and pileated woodpeckers to juncos, warblers, and house sparrows. Insects abound, especially in summer, when hundreds of fireflies rise into the trees on hot June nights, and crickets rasp outside the windows all through July.

At smaller scales, it becomes even harder to distinguish our woods from wilderness, particularly when you reach the teeming metropolis of the soil. Turn over any rotting log or clump of decaying leaves, and you'll expose a host of wriggling invertebrates, some barely visible without a lens: thrips, centipedes, grubs, springtails, roundworms, annelid worms, nematodes. A microscope would reveal even more: tiny crustaceans, mites and spiders, transparent rotifers bulging frantically into view, plus all kinds of protozoans—ciliates bumping along like barrels, flagellates whipping around—and clots of blue-green algae, delicate meshworks of mycelia destined to fruit eventually as yellow honey mushrooms or red-capped boletes, perhaps even the gloppy plasmodium of a slime mold programmed—who knows how?—to gather one day into a bright, chrome-yellow dollop, soft as mayonnaise, on the surface of some damp, unassuming log. Not to mention, of course, the myriad bacteria, many unknown to science, whose job it is to perforate, ferment, digest, and otherwise transform all the vast residuum and waste of "higher" life into the nutrients those very forms can use. Without them, the planet would be no more than a gigantic landfill, clogged with junk.

Time offers a similar venue for thought experiments with the sense of scale. The Cincinnati landscape bears dramatic testimony to the Ice Age: moraines, changed drainages, valleys cut by meltwater, even the present course of the Ohio River itself. The ice stopped here before retreating north, and a glance at the weather map shows that Cincinnati still rests on the isotherm between two climate zones: Our winters seesaw between ice and thaw, wreaking havoc on city streets and concrete bridge abutments. Walk outside a few days after a snow, and you'll find water running in the gutters, cutting small canyons in slabs of remnant ice. Up close, the ice resembles that found at the snout of a glacier, congealed to a waxen uniformity by freeze-thaw cycles and studded with relics of the surrounding landscape—in this case, bits of sand and concrete lifted from the

pavement, wood chips, bark, seed husks, broken glass, perhaps a bottle cap or twist tie, or even a feather dropped by some passing bird.

All these are first embedded, frozen in, and then released by scouring water, washed downstream, and eventually deposited in the elbow of a curve against the ice, or else in a small delta at the lip of a storm-sewer grate. One can see the same processes at work that created the vaster landscape over tens of thousands of years. All at once, time begins to lengthen out. It becomes harder to distinguish the present and future from the past. The landscape begins to shimmer, seem less permanent; its current "damaged" and domesticated state appears as little more than an eddy in the larger flow of climate, ecosystems, and advancing or declining species.

But one does not need geological epochs to appreciate how wildness depends on the sense of time. Imagine a smooth granite surface in Yosemite's High Sierra—specifically, the top of Sentinel Dome. A crack has formed, and over the years, it begins to fill with sand weathered out of the bedrock. Soil forms, and one day a blown seed catches in the crack and sprouts. A tree begins to grow—specifically, a Jeffrey pine. It hangs on for 100 years, buffeted by prevailing winds, until its trunk extends like a twisted arm far out above the bare rock surface, while its twigs and needles bristle upward, stiff as a comb. One day a photographer—Ansel Adams—frames it at high noon against a dark horizon. In the remorseless light the tree looks totally exposed, no cover anywhere between it and the churning clouds. The awed viewer sees it as an icon of rugged individualism and endurance, like a climber achieving some first ascent by "fair means" alone. Its splendid isolation and tortured form seem an expression of character, as if its entire history were bodied forth. We think, This is what it means to be wild, to be in the wilderness and survive.

Now imagine another smooth rock surface—specifically, a concrete sidewalk in downtown Cincinnati. Soil has accumulated along a joint, and one day a ragweed seed lodges and sprouts. It

grows for 100 days, buffeted by wind and sun, gnawed by insects, beaten and bruised by passers-by. It is small, dusty-looking, of no more account to the casual eye than any of hundreds of other vigorous, opportunistic, and street-tough weeds that flourish like some green stain at the edge of the human world. By summer's end it, too, has attained an eloquence of form that testifies to a lifelong spirit of survival. Both plants are dead now, yet who can say that one was more wild than the other? Both lived out their allotted time, accumulating a history expressed in their very shape and so achieving character. The only difference is that the pine lived longer than a human life and grew in a place removed from human work. It therefore acquired an air of sublimity that Adams, with his art, converted into the radiance of an icon.

It is easier, I admit, to dream of remote and glorious places than to exercise the imagination upon the humble and near at hand. An icy gutter or a spoonful of garden soil cannot match the glamour of an Alaskan fjord or a tropical rainforest—unless you are willing to shift your perspective dramatically. For children, this comes naturally. For adults, it takes commitment and concentration, especially in middle age, when there's so much else to attend to. I still need the wild, with its tonics and challenges, as much as I ever did when young; it still refreshes my spirit, startles me, helps me learn and grow. But now, my children teach me how to perceive it close to home. They show me how the wildness of modest, unassuming landscapes, even in the midst of cities, connects with that of remote, untrammelled places. Deliberate imagination can expand the eye to see them all as part of a larger landscape in which people might learn to live sustainably, even for centuries. To connect the places we inhabit with those we admire, the lands of heart's rest with the lands of heart's desire—such is the challenge and hope of an urban practice of the wild.

Now, in midlife, I seek a beginner's mind that floats on history like the water lilies of Quetico. I find its traces in the footsteps of my children, even after they have run far ahead,

disappearing into the grass forest. Out there, beyond the trees, it's quiet now. I emerge gingerly, stand for a moment, and bend down. There is a certain slant of light at the base of smooth, translucent stems that stirs both memory and desire. I think of Minnesota prairies tossed by a wind out of the Rockies. I think of the sandy-colored grass that grows in western Kansas and high on the tableland of Mount Katahdin. I wonder what adventures lie in wait for my daughters as they leap toward adolescence. Standing, awash in light, I watch them bound away, cavorting like young lions.