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A SALT-MARSH MORNING

The following is a journal entry recorded on July 16, 2018 near Bald Eagle Bridge on the Salt Marsh Trail in Cole Harbour, Halifax County. It is one of 43 entries drafted outdoors between April 2018 and November 2019. This project was a follow-up to my previous *plein air* work, *Branches Over Ripples: A Waterside Journal* (2017). The manuscript's settings include Maine, Newfoundland, Quebec, British Columbia, California, Sweden, and, by far most frequently, Nova Scotia. While much of the seeing, hearing, questioning, learning, and writing is unpredictable and spontaneous, one guideline I followed faithfully was to be outdoors before sunrise.

THE QUIET.

The quiet . . .

The quiet—

In a common etymological pattern, did the adjective *quiet* historically precede the noun, or did the absoluteness of *the quiet* come first? In Genesis chapter 1, the line "darkness was upon the face of the deep" could make you think that the noun was first. If *darkness* and *the deep* existed before there was a need to call anything *dark* or *deep*, would the same case apply to *the quiet* and, subsequently, *quiet*? I'm speaking of the quiet rather than the silence because just after sunrise on the long causeway that was once a railway route and now serves as a popular hiking and cycling trail, silence was only intermittent, but because the quiet was deep, sounds had an unusual, undistracted clarity. Though the Mourning Doves' wing-whistles were familiar—the birds could easily be named Wing-whistlers, foregrounding their flight rather than their hollow cooing—the wingbeats of two crows approaching from behind my back and continuing into the distance—the beats slower, dryer, stiffer than the doves'—were surprisingly loud. Likewise with a heron's croak and a landing cormorant's light splash: each sound had

its own time and space, without competition from other sounds. The glass-still water and the cordgrass in the mud flats were undisturbed by breeze or wind.

Today I again experienced sunrise only through the knowledge that it had occurred. In Cole Harbour Heritage Park, the surrounding trees made barriers against views of the returned sun. The forest was a rich habitat for small birds, their voices often overlapping—Black-throated Green Warbler with White-throated Sparrow, then Evening Grosbeak with Northern Parula. Whenever a distant Hermit Thrush sang, no other bird was calling, which seemed appropriate for the ascending, solitude-suggestive song. At times the ethereal qualities of its voice have made me associate the thrush with evening or dusk, its voice an accompaniment to retreating light and growing dimness—but the Hermit Thrush must sing as often around sunrise as around moonrise, and my thinking of it as a late-in-the-day bird is due in part to my scant experience until recently of rambles and sounds during the first hour of sunlight.

Before other walkers appeared, the tide was low. The brown mud—with none of the sandstone-tinted reds of Minas Basin—glittered whenever the sun strayed away from the clouds. Not long after I began the four-kilometre walk along the trail with the ocean on both sides, heading eastward into the rising sun, to the south the mud's smaller creatures were being eaten by a scattering of 7 Great Blue Herons and 16 Common Willets. The herons had chosen a wide berth from their fellows and didn't interact as they stalked, poked at the mud, or stood stock-still. One of them seemed fixed in unflinching stillness, but not "frozen," since its living muscles and blood contributed to maintaining its stance, which didn't seem focused on prey or danger. I stared at it through my binoculars for a couple of minutes without seeing it move; no breeze even stirred the dark plumes on its head. I was tempted to think of its long-legged, long-necked stance as meditative or contemplative; it seemed to embody a sense of prolonged, unflustered patience, not so much a trance as an all-senses-alive alertness. I tried to imagine being a bird with eyes on both sides of my head. What an enlarged encompassing that might provide! What panoramas, what an advancement for surveyors! The fantasy, however, threatened to bring on a headache; the desire to *become* what I see is bound to break down, returning me to the role of witness.

Consulting *The Sibley Guide to Birds* (2000) on shaded grass overlooking an influx of seawater covering the previously bared flats, I learned about

the Great Blue's first-year juvenile stage: no plume, a mottled neck, a grey darker than the adult's. Yes, it might be hard to argue that anything of much solid value is gained by training eyes and mind to quickly tell an adult heron from a young one, yet such distinctions and observations, especially when dozens or hundreds of them are added up, feed more than a hobbyist's hunger for detail. Looking, seeing, distinguishing, and remembering—whether we're talking about flowers, moths, piano sonatas, jazz trios, novels, or haiku—make us more awake and honour what we want and care to witness. It's a small but not trivial thing to tell a young Great Blue Heron from a juvenile, a greyish female Evening Grosbeak from a yellow-splashed male, or the song of a Swainson's Thrush from that of a Hermit Thrush. Still, a storehouse of such knowledge needs more if it leaves out a growing awareness of connectedness and if seeing one Barn Swallow—as I did an hour ago halfway across the causeway—doesn't raise questions like *Where have all the Barn Swallows gone?* and *What can we do to make things better for insects in decline?* Arguably, in today's climate it's less pressing to tell apart adult and young herons than to take note, as reported in the most recent posting on the valuable blog *Nova Scotia Forest Notes*, that this month's provincial cabinet shuffle was accompanied by the splitting of the Department of Natural Resources (known from 1928 to 1991 as the Department of Lands and Forests) into two departments: the Department of Energy and Mines and the Department of Lands and Forestry. If the shift from "Forests" to "Forestry" is significant, then that's a reason to fear that the industry's short-term economic wants will be favoured over long-term forest protection.

Many floral yellows, purples, pinks, and whites are gathered on the thickly vegetated sides of the trail. On a field trip two days ago into the Bedford area of the proposed Sandy Lake Nature Park, retired-from-teaching but still very active biologist David Patriquin (the *Nova Scotia Forest Notes* blogger) showed the group two examples of what he called "intimacy" between an old Eastern Hemlock and an old Yellow Birch: the trees' trunks touched in parts, an example of how species coexist and share nutrients, contrary to exaggerated views of rampant competitiveness. This morning it's been reassuring to see Purple Vetch intertangled with Beach Peas, Sow Thistles shoulder-to-shoulder with Birdsfoot Trefoil, and Evening Primroses mixing their yellow blossoms with the pink blossoms of Wild Roses. Some other yellow flowers—Black-eyed Susans, Rough-fruited Cinquefoil, Yellow

Hawkweed, Yellow Clover, Mustard, a St. John's Wort species—grow independently in patches. After Saturday's field trip my eyes are more drawn to the species literally crisscrossing and supporting each other, neither species seeming to dominate the other (though an emphasis on live-and-let-live cohabitation might be quickly qualified by those with botanical expertise). Insects were also attuned to the flowers. Cabbage Butterflies didn't settle down and rest, though they weren't anywhere without flowers; a European Skipper rested on leaves; a bee nuzzled the yellow centre of a Wild Rose and vibrated, as if revelling in the satisfactions of eating.

A sign along the trail gives information on Wild Roses, touching on their value to insects and on human use of them during pioneering times and World War II as a source of Vitamin C, their fruit (rose hips) incorporated into jams, jellies, syrups, and juices. While I starting to daydream about fall and winter experiments with rose hip jam (*you're retired now, man—time to make jam*), I soon found another sign and learned that Italian workers built the causeway between 1914 and 1916 as part of the bedrock for a railway line connecting Musquodoboit Harbour with Dartmouth. Over the years, the mighty tides ate away at the causeway, despite four small bridges built along it to allow in some saltwater. By 1960, passenger trains along the line were terminated, and in 1982 freight trains stopped coming this way, so the railway tracks were taken away; then, in 2000, the construction of the Salt Marsh Trail began. Though always uneasy with excessive signage along trails, I've appreciated today's few postings of information; it seems unjust to condemn the signs as unnatural, since the causeway itself is a product of human settlement and subsequent renovations.

Mosquito report. Today subject BB protected his legs with long pants and figured the mosquitoes wouldn't be much of a problem since he'd be by the sea more than in a forest, but his forehead, upper arm, and back itch (mosquitoes must've crept under his T-shirt). During the past few summers his body's reactions to insect bites have increased in intensity, maybe a result of both aging and a mild allergic factor. Fate's or Nature's joke: he spends decades without a thought of ever writing *en plein air*, then picks up the practice only at a stage of life when his body has begun to rebel against the slightest mosquito piercing.

A cormorant standing on a rock near shore fans out its wings to dry out in the sunlight. The wings' undersides are made pale by the light, almost as if translucent. With binoculars it's easy to admire the crescents of red feath-

ers around the birds' eyes. More than once I've grumbled to friends about Milton's prejudice in his prospectus to Book IV of *Paradise Lost* when Lucifer sits in Eden "in the shape of a Cormorant on the Tree of Life." More appealing is the Norwegian association of cormorants with good luck, and the story of Ulysses, threatened by his raft losing its mast, being saved by a sea nymph turned into a cormorant bringing him a flotation device. Those dark birds, less conventionally elegant than herons or egrets, needn't be associated with anything Satanic and are better imagined as reliable guardians of transitional worlds where land and sea meet. The flaming-red feathers around the cormorant's eye might've been painted by the sunrise.