LANDSCAPE AND IMAGINATION

TO BE INTIMATE WITH A LANDSCAPE IS TO KNOW ITS moods and contours as you would know a lover's. The shape of breasts and hills, the sound of a laugh or the song of bullfrogs, the smell of hair and honeysuckle—such knowledge becomes part of who you are. As in marriage, however, what is utterly familiar may lose its charm, may in fact become invisible, until you are deprived of it. Absent yourself a while from lover or landscape, and upon returning you will recognize with fresh acuity what you had known but forgotten.

I experienced such a freshening of awareness not long ago, when I returned with my family to Indiana after a year's sojourn in Boston. We drove into the state one afternoon toward the end of July, the air rushing in

our car windows like the breath from a furnace, a haze of muggy heat blurring the flat horizon. Thunderheads were massing in the west, grave clouds that cast their dark temper onto the whole countryside. A rising wind made silver maples show the pale undersides of their leaves and set cattails stirring in stock ponds and bent the trajectories of birds. After a year in the bunched-up terrain of New England, I was amazed by the extent of sky, the openness of the land, the vigor of the head-high corn, the loneliness of the farmsteads, the authority of those clouds.

We pulled over and shut off the engine for a change of drivers. I could smell hot tar bubbling in the joints of the road, creosote in telephone poles, windblown dust from cultivated fields, the mustiness of new-mown hay, the green pungency of Queen Anne's lace and chicory and black-eyed Susans. In the stillness I could hear the distant grumble of thunder like a clearing of throats, and the nearby ratcheting of crickets and cicadas. Only when I caught those smells, heard those sounds, did I realize how much I had missed them in the East, just as I had missed the sight of a level horizon broken by power lines, grain elevators, water towers, silos, and the shade trees around farmhouses. During our absence, the Midwest had suffered through a plague of cicadas. When we had called Indiana from Boston, the ruckus of insects over the telephone had all but drowned out the voices of our friends. Now, as I walked around to the passenger side of the car, cast-off cicada shells crunched under my feet. That sensation also was a rediscovery.

We angled south from Indianapolis toward home in Bloomington, coasting from the glacial plain into wooded hills, a landscape not so markedly different from that of New England. And yet even here my heightened senses picked up a flurry of details that characterize this place: limestone roadcuts, the white blaze of sycamores in creekbeds, pastures growing up in cedar and sumac, bottomlands planted in soybeans, sway-backed barns tattooed with ads for chewing tobacco, sinuous gravel driveways leading to basketball hoops, trailers and shacks interspersed with tidy ranch houses, the occasional white clapboard mansion encrusted with fretwork, the blither of billboards (outlawed in most of New England), the low-slung evangelical churches, and over it all that sovereign sky. The light was the silken yellow peculiar to a region of tornadoes. The fields recently harrowed were the color of buckskin. Unchecked by ocean or mountains, the storm that came roaring through the hills was another local species, its thunder jolting us inside the car with sudden changes in air pressure. In the twilight before the deluge, fireflies along the roadside blinked their semaphore of desire. Even in the dark that overtook us before we reached our front door, there was an unmistakable familiarity in the roasted-earth smell of rain and in the leap of lightning, which lit up the swirling treetops and shaggy hills.

The effects of my year away have not yet worn off. The landscape of the Midwest, familiar to me since childhood, still wears an air of novelty. T. S. Eliot spoke

of such a renewal of vision in those magisterial lines from *The Four Quartets*:

> *We shall not cease from exploration*
> *And the end of all our exploring*
> *Will be to arrive where we started*
> *And know the place for the first time.*

It is increasingly rare for any of us to know with passion and subtlety a particular place, whether a town or a state or a region. We have itchy feet. Once every five years, on average, we pull up stakes and move. No sooner do we arrive somewhere than we begin hankering for a new spot that's richer, more lively, more celebrated. Most of the time we huddle indoors, gazing at magazine pages and television screens that benumb us, no matter where we live, with the same uprooted images. When we do venture outside, we barrel along superhighways that have been designed to ignore the terrain, past a blur of franchise joints, or we glide through corridors above the clouds.

Bothered by this, wishing to know the place where I have been set down, I drive the back roads of Indiana, tramp across country, wade the streams, look about. It is never a simple matter actually to see what is before your eyes. You notice what memory and knowledge and imagination have prepared you to see. I take pleasure in silos, for example—the antique masonry ones covered by domed roofs, the squat silver ones wearing conical caps, the giant blue steel ones bristling with chutes—partly because their vertical strokes are a dramatic calligraphy above the horizon, partly because, as a boy, I spent many

hours loading chopped cornstalks into the silo of a dairy farm and many hours more, half dizzy from the yeasty smell, pitching fermented silage to cows. As a teenager I also helped make hay and build houses, so there is beauty for me in a meadow of alfalfa freshly cut and raked into windrows, or a field humped with great round bales, or a pile of lumber beside a raw foundation, or the flash of a hammer in sunlight. My muscles know the ache and grace in such things. Likewise, for reasons of memory, I pay attention to all manner of barns, the venerable ones with boards missing as well as the brand spanking new ones. Admiring lone maples and oaks in pastures, their winter branches a net of nerves against the sky, their summer shade a haven for horses, I remember climbing such trees. Memory compels me to stop in the middle of railroad tracks and gaze down their latticed miles, to survey the junked cars and tractors and combines rusting in weed-grown ditches, to linger on the main streets of drowsy towns where clocks run slowly, to follow the inky flight of crows against a snow-covered hillside or the lope of a stray dog along a ridge. What I see is stitched through and through with my own past.

What I see when I look at the land is also informed by the company I have kept, beginning with that of my parents. Reared on a Mississippi farm, my father loved to poke about the countryside, studying crops and fences, eyeing the livestock. He would speculate on the quality of soil, squeezing a handful to judge the amount of clay, sniffing it, tasting a pinch. He wondered aloud about the facts of ownership and debt, since land took on meaning for him as property. A connoisseur of carpentry, he remarked with equal pleasure on weather-gray

outhouses and gingerbread mansions. He counted the crossbars on telephone poles, by way of estimating the density of rural conversations. He would stop to shoot the breeze with idlers at gas stations and feed stores and doughnut cafes, wherever men with time on their hands gossiped about planting and harvest. He avoided cities, because little grew there aside from people, so much of the dirt had been payed, and because in cities he could not see, as he could on farms, the fruits of a family's or an individual's labor and skill. My father had little use for scenery. The land he cared for had been lived in, worked on, made over to fit human designs.

My mother, by contrast, is a city person with an artist's eye for texture and composition, and she goes to the country as to a feast for the senses. She notices every flower in bloom, the silhouettes of trees, the delicate tracery of hills, the architecture of clouds, the effects of light. What people have done to the land interests her less than what nature has done and is doing. My father's nose was ruined by smoking and boxing, but my mother more than makes up for it with a sense of smell that can detect lilacs or pigs from implausible distances. She can distinguish and name a hundred colors, many of them derived from oil paints, such as burnt sienna and raw umber. She can discern the slightest change in texture, as though the earth were a bolt of cloth over which she glides a subtle hand.

I learned what to notice and value in the landscape from both my parents, at first unconsciously and then deliberately. Like my mother, I exult in the nonstop show that nature puts on, the play of light and shade, the chorus of bird song and running water and wind-

shaken trees, the seasons, the planet's voluptuous curves, and the infinite palette of paints. Like my father, I also relish the long-running human show, the fields cleared of stones, farmhouses built to capture sunlight and breezes, groves of walnuts planted as a legacy for grandchildren, high-tension lines, corncribs, orchards, bridges, anything that testifies to sweat and ingenuity and care. Between them, my parents taught me to honor whatever has been handsomely accomplished on the surface of the earth, whether by nature or by nature's offspring, us.

LIKE ALL LANDSCAPES, that of Indiana is a palimpsest, written over for centuries by humans and for millennia by the rest of nature. Every fence, highway, billboard, and clearing is an utterance, more or less eloquent, more or less durable. You can see, for example, in the checkerboard layout of crops and the right-angle turns of local roads the marks of a surveying grid that was imposed on all the country north and west of the Ohio River by the Land Ordinance of 1785. It was an unprecedented gesture, a Newtonian abstraction, reflecting the Enlightenment belief in reason, to ignore nature's own contours and inscribe on the land a uniform pattern of mile-square boxes. The map of the Midwest came to resemble graph paper, each block of which, in keeping with Jeffersonian ideals, was to support a citizen-farmer. The grid encouraged the establishment of isolated, self-sufficient homesteads, in contrast to the village culture of New England or the plantation culture of the South. During the period of settlement, what one did on his or her

property was private business, and it remains largely private to this day, which is why zoning boards and planning commissions have such a hard time here, and why in many places the Indiana countryside is a hodgepodge of contradictory visions: grain fields alternating with strip mines, stretches of woods interrupted by used-car lots, dumps in ferny ravines, trailer courts in the middle of meadows, gas stations and motels plopped down wherever the traffic flows thickly enough. In much of Indiana, the isolated freeholdings have gradually been combined into larger and larger parcels, the remnants of forest have been cut down, the hedgerows cleared, the meandering creeks straightened, the swampy lowlands drained, thus further rationalizing the landscape, pushing it toward an industrial ideal of profitable uniformity.

Native creatures inscribe their own messages on the landscape, messages that one can learn, however imperfectly, to read. Deer trails mark out subtle changes in slope. The population of butterflies and owls and hawks is a measure of how much poison we have been using; the abundance of algae in ponds is a measure of our fertilizer use. The condition of trees is a gauge of the acidity in rain. Merely finding out the name and history of a plant may deepen one's awareness of a place. For years I had admired the coppery grass that grows in knee-high tufts along Indiana's roadsides before I discovered that it is called little bluestem, a survivor from the prairies. Now I admire those luminous grasses with new pleasure, for I see them as visitors from a wild past.

I also know from books that, except for dunes and prairies and swamps near Lake Michigan, all of what would become Indiana was dense with forest when the

first white settlers arrived. This means that almost every acre of soybeans and corn represents an acre of trees cut down, stumps pulled out or left to rot: oak and beech, hickory and maple, dogwood, sassafras, buckeye, elm, tulip poplar, ash. In two centuries, a mere eyeblink in the long saga of the planet, Indiana has been transformed from a wilderness dotted by human clearings to a human landscape dotted by scraps of wilderness. Today, only the southern third of Indiana is heavily wooded, but the speed with which redbud and locust and cedars march into abandoned pastures convinces me that the entire state, left to itself, would slip back into forest again within a few decades. The highways, untraveled, would succumb to grass. The barns and houses, unroofed, would succumb to rain. It does not trouble me to see our clearings as ephemeral, our constructions as perishable, for that is the fate of all human writing, whether on paper or on earth.

Despite our centuries of scrawling on the landscape, we can still read the deeper marks left by nature—especially, in Indiana, the work of water and ice. For millions of years, while the Appalachians were being uplifted to the east and the Rockies to the west, the land that would become Indiana was forming grain by grain in the bed of an ancient ocean, as limestone, siltstone, sandstone, dolomite, shale, slate. It was and remains a placid region, at the core of the continental plate. These sedimentary rocks have never been folded, never heaved up into mountains nor deeply buried and cooked into granite or marble, never burst open by volcanoes. When the waters receded, the bedrock, exposed to wind and rain, was carved into low hills. Beginning roughly a mil-

lion years ago and ending some ten thousand years ago, glaciers bulldozed down from the north, flattening the hills and filling the valleys and burying much of the Midwest beneath a fertile layer of dust and pulverized rock. In their retreat, the glaciers gouged out the stony bed of the Great Lakes and filled them with water, altered the flow of rivers, and left behind a trail of gravel and sand. In Indiana, only a thumb-shaped area stretching about a hundred miles north from the Ohio River escaped the glaciers. The limestone exposed there is laced with caves and underground rivers, pockmarked by sinkholes. Knowing even this much geological history, I look at the flat expanses of black loam, or the polished quartz in a creekbed, or the strata of shale in a bluff with a chastening sense of nature's slow rhythms and our hasty ones.

Without these lessons in seeing, from people and memories and books, I might view the landscape before me as little more than a straggle of postcards. In fact, without benefit of instruction, in a territory as unglamorous as the Midwest I might fail to appreciate even the two-dimensional postcard views. Of all the regions in America, this one has inspired, I would guess, the least smugness from local people and the least rapture from travelers. People do not move here for the scenery. They do not commonly even visit here for the scenery. I have no way of checking, but I would venture that fewer landscape snapshots are taken per square mile in the Midwest than in any other part of the country, including the deserts. Millions of people drive through Indiana every year

without lifting their gaze from the highway. Those who do glance aside from the line of motion tend to see only indistinguishable fields and humble hills.

I have spent enough time in the mountains of Oregon and Tennessee, the redwood forests of California, the mesa country of New Mexico, the moss-festooned bayous of Louisiana, and along the stony coast of Maine to know the pleasures of spectacular landscapes. How could anyone equipped with nerves fail to rejoice in such places? On the other hand, to know the pleasures of an unspectacular landscape, such as that of Indiana, requires an uncommon degree of attentiveness and insight. It requires one to open wide all the doors of perception. It demands an effort of imagination, by which I mean not what the Romantics meant, a projection of the self onto the world, but rather a seeing of what is already there, in the actual world. I don't claim to possess the necessary wisdom or subtlety, but I aspire to, and I work at it.

Wherever we live in America, many of those who preceded us were so bent on changing the land to suit their needs that they scarcely looked at what was native. We have only recently begun to realize how much was lost in that refusal to look. Those who preceded us here found an astonishing wealth, not only in lumber and loam and oil, but in the intricacy and beauty of life. Yet they valued almost exclusively what could be used or sold. Generations of settlers treated the land as a storehouse, to be ransacked before moving on. The fact that we dislodged Indians from their home grounds and herded them onto reservations a thousand miles away

reveals how little our ancestors valued the sacred connection between a people and a landscape. We are still suffering from the Puritan habit of regarding wild nature as demonic, a realm to be conquered and saved from the Devil. The secular version of this view treats land as raw material for profit; whatever does not yield a return in dollars stands in need of "development," which is an economic form of salvation. Thus a chorus of angry voices cries down every proposal for the creation of wilderness areas or the preservation of wetlands or even for restrictions on the clear-cutting of trees.

Insofar as we are nomads, adrift over the earth and oblivious to its rhythms, we cease to acknowledge the fecund mystery that sustains our existence. We take inordinate pride in our own doings. Acting without regard for the effects our lives will have upon a place, we become dangerous, to ourselves and our descendants. If our own senses fail to teach us, then disasters will, that the land is not merely a backdrop for the human play, not merely a source of raw materials, but is the living skin of the earth. Through this skin we apprehend a being that is alien, a life unfathomable and uncontrollable, and at the same time a being that is kindred, flesh of our flesh.

It is a spiritual discipline to root the mind in a particular landscape, to know it not as a visitor with a camera but as a resident, as one more local creature alongside the red-tailed hawks and sycamores and raccoons. The explorations from which we return to see our home ground afresh may be physical ones, such as my family's sojourn in New England, or they may be journeys of the

mind, such as those we take through stories and photographs and paintings. By renewing our vision of the land, we rediscover where it is we truly dwell. Whatever the place we inhabit, we must invest ourselves there with our full powers of awareness if we are to live responsibly, alertly, wisely.