

LOOKING WITH MEMORY

Edward Byrne

Looking with Memory

Earlier during an instant of my inattention, a pair of white-tailed deer abruptly rumbled past me perhaps less than ten feet away—each rushing among stark features of a marsh and leaping a large log of tumbled tree trunk nearby—and then hurried into the darker shadows at the shallow edge of a swamp forest. Darting sharply, weaving through the intricate maze of trees, and briefly rustling among a tangle of thick underbrush deep in nearby woods, the two created a momentary commotion as they clamored amid this serene setting before quickly disappearing, running beyond the slight slope of a small mound rising beside the trail. Suddenly out of sight, their invisible presence, crashing and splashing, continued to smash the silence that had been all around me. Unfortunately, I was unable to capture any of this action with my camera.

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I had been hiking a winding trail toward a narrow river reaching between small hills. However, when I approached the slowly flowing water of this nearly still tributary, I stopped a while to watch a lone hawk quietly glide on by, gracefully riding high streams of imperceptible air drafts at that altitude. As the hawk slid against the bright sky, a ragged green tree line stretched beside the far bank, an illuminated row at the edge of a forest resembling David Hockney's famous paintings at Woldgate Woods. Among his musings about the process of artistic imagination and invention, Hockney has sagely remarked that "one looks with memory even when intent on documenting the moment" in a natural landscape. In this way any image presented represents a reconstructed reality, as much a product of the creator's contemporary or previous observations, experiences, and reflections as it is a physical depiction of the immediate setting. At this start of summer and some months after the seasonal runoff of snowmelt, the patiently advancing river—frequently a metaphor for the passage of time, as I would teach English majors in my literature classes—leads me forward today. However, the water seems to curb its current

purposely, as if it, too, wishes to linger in spring or relish the present and exist outside the steady progress of chronology, even as its presence represents the past.

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Passing by a relatively new kayak and canoe launch, I note the sheen of plastic planks that suggests having been waxed and rinsed clean by recent rains. Shiny metal poles rising along its sides also glimmer with a distinct silvery steel glint, dazzling and perfectly straight, reminiscent of sentries on guard and self-consciously standing at attention around the structure's border—as if hoping not to bring notice to themselves by being so still. An extended access ramp descends more than forty feet toward the water, a wooden walkway lowering from the roadway at an angled plane, sloping almost like the incline of a child's slide. The dock's sleek and overly contemporary appearance makes it seem out of place, located here by mistake, only a few hundred yards from that first white settler's home built of stone and wood in the 1830s and still visible in the distance,

looming on a rise beside the river. Although I understand the boat platform's practicality and usefulness, this fabricated object distracts from the natural imagery and manipulates my emotional reaction, its artificiality distorting my ability to appreciate fully the setting, and it unintentionally insults the surrounding elements.

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Nevertheless, in the past I've seen this small dock is a convenient spot for a skillful fisherman with rod in hand to rest his tackle setup, tin lunch box, bait container, catch bucket, or even an old folding chair. Once, I noticed an angler I'd watched during the late morning sunshine, and to whom I offered a friendly wave, wait patiently on the kayak launch much of the day, still remaining when I returned from a long hike in the afternoon and approached him. Sporting a brown painter's brush moustache under a tan wide-brimmed bucket hat hiding his hair, he also wore a green tee shirt beneath denim bib overalls extending over a pair of brown waterproof boots. Although his height was hard to measure since he was leisurely

sitting in a camping chair, he seemed tall with a lean frame. While he munched his late lunch, a thick sandwich held in his left hand, the fingers of his right hand were loosely wrapped around a thin fishing rod, tilted with its base wedged in a space between planks beside him and the upper part of the pole balanced against the top of a supporting backpack. The surrounding canopy's shadows had shifted and now offered a cool pool of shade over him. The chair's backrest of blue lightweight cloth seemed to sag comfortably under the man's weight, as a can of Bud Lite beer rested in the mesh cup holder. While he relaxed and relished his time beside the river, I envied the seeming ease with which he fished the river.

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When we spoke, I learned his name was Nate, and he appeared to be in his late thirties. For decades, this river had been too polluted for fishing, but the recent restoration efforts have resulted in renewed opportunities for activity. I wondered if he'd had any luck, and he told me it had been slow going so far. "No fish yet today; thought I had one, but he got away.

I seem to keep missing them. However, I've had plenty of time to think," he replied with a wink. He satisfied my curiosity about the species of fish available by listing a few he'd gotten in the past—"mostly bass, the largemouth is supposed to be 14 inches, plus sometimes a catfish and a carp." He told me he worked in the nearby steel mill, "already been there more than ten years." When I inquired how often he fished the river, he responded, "Depending on the weather and my work schedule, I try to get out about once every two weeks in spring—even more in summer—here and elsewhere." Pointing at my camera with his sandwich-filled hand, Nate asked, "How much time do you spend walking the woods and taking pictures?" "Maybe the same amount of time," I answered, and added with a smile, "I've missed a few shots today as well, but the hiking gives *me* plenty of time to think."

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Soon, late-June's true fuse will lead to July's sweltering temperatures. Usually, photographers lament the hard and harsh illumination of severe

midday light under a wide-open sky, maybe the way artists find difficulty painting outdoors under direct sunlight. The radiance overwhelms and shrouds with glare, obscures key aspects of the landscape, which itself appears to be donning a disguise. Photographers prefer the more interesting sense of depth and texture partial cloud cover or even a total overcast contributes by protecting details potentially lost to black shadows. But sometimes such clear and searing conditions seem so much more accurate in depicting summer's control over everything. Though most likely entirely an invention of my imagination, I admit that I sense a welcome lethargy or sluggishness in summer, lending to more patience and compelling greater contemplation. Indeed, I embrace the daily spirit I discover in this season's lazy days with extreme temperatures when the sun sometimes seems to sizzle, even amid a scattering of surrounding clouds. Its repeated heat, though sometimes stifling and inescapable, usually feels like a healing force to me.

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When the river flow slows in summer and becomes more saturated by recent seasonal erosion from its banks, sediment runoff mixed with algae acts as ink pigmenting the water to cause a coffee-and-cream-colored appearance in mid-river. Tainted by this influence of silt staining the surface, a rich mocha brown at its edges complements the coarse and thick trunks or bigger bottom branches of bordering trees, their garments of bark darkened like wet leather by dampness and shade. Awnings of overhanging foliage now extend from each side and meet over the middle of the river, creating an arched entryway. These green leaves exist in an ever-changing variety of hues dependent upon the presence and positioning of sunlight shifting during the day. A scribble of those thinner upper sprigs sometimes sags under the cumulative weight of so much foliage, while below the sluggish current frequently finds itself redirected by fallen trees or broken branches. Months ago, ice schisms might have split limbs, divided as if sliced, and dropped them during gusts in a winter-kill, depositing these remnants littering the river.

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The season's trees and slumping twigs of underbrush, heavy with their wet leaves along the Little Calumet River, remain lush—some in full bloom, others still budding—creating a green leaf-shade beneath them. Thorny trailside shrubs strung among the riverbank haul their shorter shadows behind them. Along with an abundance of weeds, encouraging signs of a ripening environment line the trail. As I hike farther, I notice how many wildflowers, June's blooms, seem now to float in the air beside me amid those stunted shapes of plush shrubbery, as if floral ornaments sprawled across nature's altar. A protective canopy of upper branches crosses above me, gentling that harsh glare of nearly noonday sun easily meandering through the intricate crisscross of foliage, its thickness cooling this route moving inside the riverside woods. Though some wooded clumps of trunks huddle together like conferring teammates plotting a play, the untroubled brightness opening above me in that isolated gap between treetops now appears merely to be a natural skylight. Backlit by a highly illuminated sky, the network of veins in each leaf within reach becomes visible, attracts my attention, and I make a mental

note to return with my macro lens to capture an optically magnified image with optimal clarity.

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Now I listen to the loud and determined chirping of unseen smaller birds—lurking among the dense layer of leaves and circulating easily between these trees beside me. Next, I notice the knot of an empty nest above a warty and blackened burl at a juncture of two warped lower limbs just over my head. Ever since spring migration began, I've appreciated the increased intensity of birdsong. The shrill, squeaky sounds seem active, as if the birds are chatting back and forth, conversing in their high-pitched voices. Sometimes the twittering even appears to be evidence of a constant bickering or gossiping with one another, maybe sharing rumors. However, I imagine the jabbering might be a mentioning of my presence as well as anxious alerts—or worse, spooked by my intrusion, communicating a tuneful curse—as the sounds now somehow seem articulate and synchronized. Perhaps this patterned blend of song is

merely a simple style of comforting music like those few soothing chords heard repeatedly in a short but sweet melody when lyrics are unnecessary and rarely ever remembered.

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Farther on, I hear the loud knocking of a red-headed woodpecker high overhead, perhaps offering a coded message atop a slender tree taller than the others, its green shape tapered like a steeple. His exact tapping sounds patient, like the steady cadence heard from a ticking second hand of an old analog watch, and as persistent as a trickle of drops from spilled liquid dripping off a tabletop rim. For a few minutes I scan the upper reaches in that spine of a pine tree too far for my wide-angle lens to capture clearly, and I watch the woodpecker go about his work for a while until he finally flies away. Everything remains still except for the scarlet splendor of a solitary male northern cardinal testing the stub end of a dead branch hovering over the water's edge and lit for a minute by dazzling light seeping through the trees. He temporarily spreads his red flag of feathers

as he repositions himself to settle among a cluster of twisted boughs on the opposite side of the river. I stare until he takes to the air again, smoothly spins in a different direction, and flits off into the distance. The bird disappears somewhere beyond my vision, gathered downstream by a gnarled hitch of limbs cast away from their trunks during the winter and caught in the current on the slope of a riverbend.

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Suddenly, a pair of swamp sparrows also activate overhead. They arrow the air above me, each eventually situating itself among the arboreal clutter of summer driftwood on the other bank of the river. Near where they momentarily perch, I recognize a circular blue mylar balloon that I have seen during previous trips, an unwanted buoy bobbing amid a sea of green leaves. About two feet in diameter and almost wholly deflated yet stuck among the wavering upper branches of a large pine tree across the water, this annoyance has been present at least since last November when I first noticed it. Hanging high overhead in an awkward and almost

irretrievable position, the nuisance debris has not survived due to neglect by park staff, and I expect it will soon be removed. Its intended celebratory message written in pink script is illegible from this distance. Like the glass canning jar in a well-known Wallace Stevens poem, “Anecdote of the Jar,” that by its artificial presence stole an innate character from the “wilderness” and made it “no longer wild,” this object takes “dominion everywhere.” Similar to that shiny new boat launch farther upriver, it negatively influences one’s impressions of the natural vicinity, diverting from the pure environment. More importantly, the party balloon’s nonbiodegradable material leaves long-lasting litter in the environment and can be deadly to wildlife if they consume the balloons or become entangled in the strings.

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Approaching an arched wooden footbridge that spans a seasonal creek veering to the east, surprisingly still more shallow than I’d expect after days of rain, I spot one of the many gray squirrels scurrying around the

area and scampering across the trail, apparently oblivious to my presence. He rummages through the underbrush ahead of me, stopping to scratch at something found on the damp sandy path, and then hurries across one of the span's worn handrails, the brown tone bleached by weather and use, its grain now showing a fine intricacy in the wood's pattern. The route muddies even more on either side of the bridge. So many little holes alongside the walkway are still filled with rainwater naturally stored after the recent days' downpours, as if every cleft is another opening among a multitude of tiny wells. This section of the path's course, progressing toward the southwest and proceeding adjacent to the river, was unrecognizable a couple months ago during the overflow of flooding when water welling up during early spring storms thoroughly soaked the land for a long time. Indeed, the way ahead sometimes becomes impassable in spring, especially following snowmelt after those winters with heavy accumulation.

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When the swollen tributary had spilled beyond its banks—spreading waters at least a few feet deep far and wide into bordering woods, inundating forested land, and swallowing other features of the surrounding landscape—the spring flooding completely erased any trace of this trail, submerging its path parallel to the river under waist-high water. Many trees suddenly found themselves surrounded, thin pillars extending from the expanded floodwaters and reflected in the mud-stained surface, their thick trunks and lower limbs mirrored amid still pools visible between porous screens of new seasonal growth, the beginnings of today’s rich green leaves.

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Following eventual drainage of flooding, the worn portion of this trail frequently seems to shift a bit. Realigned a little, it will twist and turn beside the river in a different position each season, perhaps passing closer to the eroded bank than in the past. Reflections settle on the surface of slow-moving water, gridded patterns of thin limbs looking like a page

with faded ink prints preserved in an elegant gallery, the drawn lines in the design perhaps highlighted by return of a brightening blue sky following the leaden clouds of a passing storm. The casting back effect appears as if intended to multiply the experience. The reverse images evident on the river's skin seem aesthetically meant to double the impact of such wonderful scenery. In photographs, especially those captured in black-and-white on a calm day, the distinction between reality and reflection becomes vague. Specifically, its duality resembles the symmetry in an M.C. Escher drawing as the two seem to merge in details located along the bank and then linked to their duplicates on the water mirror of the stilled current.

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My brown boots are blackened in spots by the muddy ground. A gritty slop adhering to my feet slows the regular pace of my walk and makes a squish with every step I take past the glare of river surface, its little ripples now glistening like lighted cracks in a pane of glass. I follow those

footprints—pockmarked impressions like little partially-filled cups with about a quarter-inch of water—that others have left in sludge now carrying the dark caramel color found in a stiff drink of Kentucky bourbon whiskey where this dirt route skirts the river and then shifts uphill. The trail tilts up a slope slanting toward a forested hill and beyond a twist toward an unseen destination. There, I will move through thicker woods yet sticky with muck from overnight moisture. Only once do I hear the voice of another hiker—emphatic calls of encouragement and guidance, commands to a companion—loudly coming from somewhere beyond that blind bend a hundred yards ahead of me. Holding back so as to not overtake him, I pause to record the words shouted out with excitement, scribbling on a flipped page in my small notebook as if written in a film script: “*Look!*” ... “*Over there!*” ... “*See?*”

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Another deer appears far downstream in the distance, tilting its brown body and dipping its head among river reflections for a drink, but too far

and indistinct from brown surroundings, weathered trunks of dead trees beside the waterway, to permit a pin-sharp picture with my wide-angle lens. Over the years I have learned to accept that often the best images are those unavoidably omitted from my photographs, but I hope they might be better remembered and captured by the words I write. I watch the animal running from the riverside toward a nearby forest line, the leaves of lower limbs rustling in the temporary little wind gust brought as it passes underneath. Halting a while nearly a hundred yards away, the animal stands still, facing my direction. Though I really can't quite see which way its vision is concentrated, the deer seems to be gazing back, as if looking at me through that deep screen of trees, its figure faintly visible between the heavy branches sagging at head height and the chaotic undergrowth thickening beneath.

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Again, I hear a staccato tapping somewhere above; so, I look for a few moments at upper reaches of a nearby tree and finally see a common

downy woodpecker, though too far away for my lens to capture. By the time I turn back to the area where the deer had been, it is gone, too, disappearing into the distant camouflage of forest, yet another photo opportunity lost. Therefore, I move on again with merely a memory. Continuing downriver accompanied only by the subdued murmur of water, I seek to photograph a section that stretches east where the ribbon of river passes through a corridor of dune woods before bending north. There, I observe a track of deer prints marking the muddy border of the water like letters of a scrawled signature in the corner of a canvas. The almost calm current once more mirrors those leaves filling overhanging limbs—their small green shapes appearing on the river's surface like smudged brushstrokes in an impressionist painting—and the water reflects a random ragged pattern of scattered clouds now slowly shifting into the region from the south to signal a forthcoming change in weather. Thankfully, none of these features will escape the focus of my camera.

