Making Love With Light

Contemplating Nature with Words and Photographs

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Dedicated to Minor White
(1908-1976)

Preface

I delight in photographs
I delight in words
I delight in mixing both
To see what happens if they blend...
—Minor White

The sacred arts of Zen are not found in Zen iconography and liturgy but rather in what has become known as the "artless arts." Principle among these artless arts are *zenga,* or Zen paintings, brush and ink images created by ancient masters who employed them as a vehicle for communicating the ineffable to their students.

Most zenga incorporate within the painting a short text in prose or verse called *san.* San are composed either by the artist or another person as a way of deepening and clarifying the religious content of the image. Many of the classical zenga are Zen koans expressed visually and poetically. Nature has been the traditional subject matter for this kind of expression. It is said that a single zenga of nature, combined with san, can be the embodiment of our true nature. At their best, the words and pictures say something together that neither of them can say alone.

My photography teacher Minor White experimented with combining images and words, in one case going so far as to inscribe the poem directly on the emulsion surface. For the past thirty years I have also added words to images. I have found that this format provides a dimension that is not available when either the photograph or poem appear alone, a dimension that takes the aesthetic and spiritual content a little deeper. In the creation of this book I have given each poem and photograph their own pages so that they may function together or as independent entities. It is my hope that these words and images be as nourishing to the reader as they have been to me in creating them.

This book would not have been possible without the help of many people. I am grateful to Konrad Marchaj and Vanessa Goddard for their invaluable assistance from editing through production, to Jody Kimmel for her archival work and cataloging of my photography, and to Kay Larson, David Noble, Sybil Rosen, Jack Maguire and Amy Brown for their feedback. I am most deeply indebted to Bonnie Treace for sharing her insight and enthusiastic encouragement throughout the formative stages of this project, as well as her editorial assistance. To the many others who have provided assistance and guidance but are not listed above, my sincere thanks.

An ancient sage has said,

"Mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers."
The meaning of these words is not
that mountains are mountains,
but that mountains are mountains.
Therefore,
we should thoroughly contemplate these mountains.
When we thoroughly contemplate the mountains,
this is the mountain training.
Such mountains and rivers themselves
spontaneously become wise ones and sages.

Eihei Dogen
13th Century Zen Master

Sacred Space

It's early morning. I've been out for an hour already sitting on a small rise surrounded by tall grasses and budding swamp willow saplings, waiting for the first light and first songs—the early stirrings of the day. Hearing splashing in the water nearby, on hands and knees I slowly weave my way through the weeds to get a better view. Below me, on a lazy stretch of a meandering stream a female wood duck and her gaggle of hatchlings are feeding. I inch forward, trying not to be abrupt in my movements. Light readings out of the way, the camera is ready. The birds are not aware of my presence.

As I point my camera, prepared to make an exposure, there is a sudden burst of activity, lots of scurrying. I look up from the viewfinder; the ducklings are gone. Their mother seems to be alone in the water, quacking loudly and wildly flopping around, acting wounded. From the corner of my eye I notice a flash of black fur sliding swiftly across the water, and the wood duck deftly moves out of the reach of a hungry mink. Another quicksilver lunge from the mink and the duck flies a few feet farther away, then falls into the water again, continuing to draw the mink towards her. The mink's blood must be boiling. It strikes again; the duck escapes just in the nick of time.

This macabre dance unfolds down a quarter mile of the winding stream that curves towards the river. Finally both duck and mink disappear from my sight and I realize that I have been holding my breath. As I exhale the mother duck arrives from the opposite direction and alights on the still water where the whole episode began. She makes a few quiet sounds and in an instant the ducklings materialize from among the weeds. With the mother leading, the ragged column waddles away and dissolves into the deep cover of the wetlands. Somewhere along the riverbank a confused mink is sniffing and searching for the easy prey that got away.

For over twenty years I have lived amidst the Catskill Mountains, streams and wetlands. I have witnessed the life and death struggles that are a daily occurrence here, and photographed the creatures that are born and die in this wilderness. Contemplating their changes and cycles; seeing, hearing, tasting, touching and smelling the wonder of this place with these creatures, I receive the gift of sharing this space with them.

Hundreds of years ago, these wetlands were part of what is now the opposite shore of this river. During a raging spring flood the current cut away a fifty-acre portion of the mainland, creating an island. With the incessant sculpting of wind, water, and ice, along with the build up of silt runoff from the mountain slopes, the island shifted across, getting close enough to the near river bank to create an adjoining expanse of wetlands. The other shore had arrived.

In the center of the wetlands sits Long Pond, a stretch of water almost a half-mile long, two hundred feet wide, and twelve feet at its deepest. The pond is both spring-fed and filled by water that finds its way through the riprap of the upstream dam that conservation department engineers designed as part of their attempt to manicure the flow of the river. The beaver population builds its own dams downstream and maintains the pond at a healthy level even during severe droughts. The shallow end of the pond empties into a winding stream that eventually finds its way back to the river.

Long Pond has a robust variety of fish—pickerel, sunfish, bass, catfish, minnows, and an occasional trout after the swollen river runs over the dam. Overflow from the pond crisscrosses the wetlands and the island, filling innumerable depressions, ruts and channels, keeping the ground juicy. An assortment of frogs, water snakes, turtles, and aquatic insects resides in this matrix of bogs, swamps, and puddles. Attracted by all this life, ducks, geese, great blue heron, green heron, and eastern bittern wade and fish the area daily. Fox, coyote, black bear, mink, weasel, bobcat are in turn attracted by the presence of these

birds. Osprey, bald eagle, and owls prowl the skies overhead. The river, wetlands and the pond are at the edge of the western slope of a mountain that has a circumference of over eleven miles at its base. Since this site is one of the few places in the area that provides an easy access to flowing water with the protective dense forest cover, virtually every creature living on the mountain sooner or later finds its way into this sacred space.

There are times when this landscape brimming with life turns into a wasteland. Rampaging spring floods tear down trees along the river banks, churn the channel all the way to its muddy bottom, scouring out the pond until all vegetation and living creatures have been swept away. All of life appears to be sucked out of the wetlands, now a scene of desolation. But in a very short time life returns. Animals carry seeds in their fur and scat. Fish eggs, clinging to the feet of wading water birds, are deposited in the pond. The wind sweeps in clouds of insects. By midsummer the environment has rebounded and the wilderness is pulsating with life again.

When we stop cultivating a piece of land for even a very short period of time, wildness returns. That wildness is as much a part of each of us as it is a part of nature. Indeed, wildness is akin to our true and deepest nature. Civilization has a way of making wildness seem very negative. Yet, all things return to the wild: people, mountains, rivers, gardens, apples, the family cat. And it doesn't take that long. To be truly free, to be truly liberated and wild, is to be prepared to accept things as they are, abiding in their own natural state. Sometimes it's painful, sometimes open and joyful. Always impermanent, never fixed. Unbounded, yet infinitely bountiful. After all, in a fixed universe, there would be little freedom.

Back in the woods at twilight, as I am walking from my cabin, my steps are careful, with short checking pauses so as not to startle the wildlife. A beaver splashes in the pond. Despite my best efforts to remain unnoticed, my movements have telegraphed my presence. A deer snorts in the encroaching darkness. I can hear it crashing through the thicket as it moves deeper into the woods, away from me.

I am in awe of the incredible communication system of the wilderness, the inherent intelligence of wildness. Although I am being very quiet, in a short time virtually every creature that is afoot within a mile radius of where I stand, knows of my presence. Every movement is felt and relayed by the birds and beasts. The crow tells it to the jay, and the jay tells it to the kingfisher, the duck and the deer. Sitting by the pond, when someone enters the woods, I am aware of their whereabouts by listening to the forest. Within seconds the message that they are on their way is passed through the little patch of trees. All of the animals understand this wild language, even my very domesticated dog. Immediately he perks up and looks in the direction of the sounds. He waits for confirmation through visual sighting or a scent before starting his racket of barking and carrying on. Isn't this communication? Isn't this intelligence?

The intelligence of nature allows life to sustain and cyclically recreate itself. It provides a language that all can appreciate. And it teaches. It is teaching incessantly. The sounds of the wind in the pines, the forms of the smooth river rocks, the bursting colors of spring and fall, all reveal the truth of our own true nature as well as the nature of the universe itself. Range upon range of endless mountains and bluestone cliffs deliver their profound sermon. Murmuring streams and roaring rivers expound the teachings of formless form day and night. The insentient all hear it. The question is: Do we hear it? When we stop to think about it, we miss it. How then can these teachings be heard? We must "hear with the eye and see with the ear."

When we listen with the ear we hear the insentient beings speaking in our language. In so doing we usurp the real voice of the insentient. When, however, we listen with the eye we hear the insentient beings speaking insentient, teaching endlessly. How can we hear with the eye and see with the ear? We must first set down "the pack"—the ideas, notions and positions that separate us from reality. We must

take off the blinders that limit our vision, and see for ourselves that originally there are no seams, flaws, or gaps between us and the whole phenomenal universe.

The ten thousand things are in reality neither sentient nor insentient; the self is neither sentient nor insentient. Because of this fact, the teachings of the insentient cannot be perceived by the senses. Our minds are conditioned to divide and compartmentalize reality. We have come to know and define the universe dualistically. As a result, everything we have created with our minds is dualistic. Our philosophy, psychology, medicine, politics, sociology and education are based on a dualistic understanding of the nature of the universe. What kind of world would this be if our appreciation and activity were based on non-duality? Could we function out of such realization? Of course we could. Thousands of people have navigated the world of distinctions from the perspective of the unity of all things, a perspective that presents all things as interdependent entities, mutually arising, and with mutual causality. This kind of vision requires us to see the aspect of existence that is neither being nor non-being, neither self nor other.

Many people think that the teachings of the insentient are similar if not equivalent to the teaching we receive from sentient beings. But hearing the teachings of the insentient is not a matter of ordinary consciousness. How then can they be heard? When body and mind have fallen away, in the stillness that follows, the teachings are intimately manifested in great profusion. Whether we are aware of it or not, they are always taking place. The teachings of the insentient are about intimacy, not words.

Mountains are the entire natural realm. Rivers are the entire natural realm. They permeate the ten directions. The self is the entire natural realm. The mountains and rivers I'm talking about are not the mountains and rivers of the poet, naturalist or biologist. They are not the mountains and rivers of geography, geology or geomancy. They are the mountains and rivers of true nature, wild and unbounded. They are sacred space itself.

As I make my way back to the far end of the pond to await the moonrise, only a blue glow remains in the evening sky. Once each year the moon rises at precisely the right place to send a silvery sheen down the very center of the pond. Tonight is the night.

Ahead, I hear commotion in the undergrowth, then wild splashing. Whatever is moving there is noisier and bigger than a beaver or a deer. Peering into the darkness, I see the form of a large black bear directly across from me, shaking off the pond water. He rears up on his hind legs to get a better look at me. He is about as tall as I am, with twice the bulk. We stand there poised, staring at each other and trying to understand this meeting, he with his wild brain and me with a cultivated one. After a few moments he gives a little huff, turns tail and goes crashing into the woods. I continue to the pond's end.

Settling myself at the western edge of the water, I can already see the full hunter's moon rising to the top of the tree line. Magically, a long streak of silver light suddenly flows down the length of the pond, almost reaching my feet. Although the air is still and the water's surface like glass, in the moonlight I can see the pond quivering with the life it contains. It breathes in the cool night air, like a giant reclining figure with a luminous spine and a shadowy head of pine and willows. The coyotes begin singing their night song, the song of the hunter. This moon belongs to them.

Light

Pearly, shadowless images are becoming warmer as they begin to fill with color. Reds and oranges are seeping into the day, transforming this land and my feelings. Though still below the horizon, the sun has begun to illuminate the morning sky. The light filters through the forest of white pine and sycamore, and the surface of the pond glows, sepia tones shifting beneath my canoe. The water is still, broken only by the occasional movement of a fish or an insect touching the surface. Within minutes, the hot orange glow of the sunrise softens to a yellow hue. Shadows dance; images metamorphose. As the day unfolds, every object begins a journey of endless change, a sifting of form and appearance, revealing millions of faces, speaking in innumerable voices. At every moment, the trees, the pond, the reeds along the bank are alive, new, and fresh, image after image after image.

Suddenly, a blue heron glides into the picture. Her giant pterodactyl shape appears over the soft border of pond grasses. A six-foot wing span suspends her in space and time. With no apparent movement of her wings, she skims to the water's edge and gently touches down with a slight bounce, barely creating a ripple. Without hesitation, she begins her hunting ritual, gracefully moving upstream toward my blind, an elegant and deadly ballerina. She is completely focused on the hunt, tuned into every whisper of wind on Long Pond, every stirring in the surrounding undergrowth. She senses a fish swimming around her legs, spears and kills it, then hoists it from the water and swallows it down, her slim neck stretching and undulating in the process. She is a shimmer of calm light, a hush of blue-gray and slate black-tipped feathers.

I lean closer to my camera, focus, take a light reading. Her movements stop. Have I been detected? As she freezes, I freeze. Her golden eyes are like both a telephoto lens and a magnifying glass. She's able to read the entire landscape more thoroughly than I can imagine. But she returns to her hunger, and the pickerel, sunfish, and catfish that swirl in the warming water. Behind the butternut tree branch that reaches out over the water like a resting arm, I sit in my canoe and silently ask for permission to photograph. Just as she is poised to strike again I release the shutter. Click! She follows through with her lunge, spearing the fish, but then pauses, the wet fish dripping iridescent jewels of light. Satisfied that all is well, she swallows again, then resumes her hunt. I cock the shutter slowly. She spears another fish, and again I release the shutter. Click! This time the small sound shatters her confidence and startled, she catapults out of the water into the clearing blue haze of this June morning. I follow her flight with my camera, clicking the shutter as rapidly as possible as she passes right by me and, to my surprise, lands on a nearby tree.

I sheepishly move the canoe out from behind the natural blind. I scull closer to her perch high above the pond, amazed and cut through with gratitude that this beautiful being, known as extraordinarily cautious and difficult to photograph, is letting me into her morning so generously. After a few more exposures, I turn the canoe and head back to the landing on the far bank of the pond. Stroking the water as easily as I can, I hope not to disturb her any further. As I reach the canoe launch, the sun is just breaking over the jagged treeline beyond Tremper Mountain.

Minor White, my photography teacher, once said to a group of us at a workshop, "Try to photograph using light in such a way that it expresses a warm emotional feeling for some thing, some person, some place that is not necessarily the subject being photographed." He said, "I can photograph a plow, and if the light is right I'm making love—but not to the plow. If I give the photograph to someone I'm giving them a gift of love. Try to be aware of the light," he said. "Try to bring it into the photograph in some way. If you make a portrait, let the light show that the person is not only lovable, but edible. Or make a photograph that has a sense of love in it which you can give to someone as a gift."

That assignment was the beginning of a very powerful three-decade long romance with light that has immeasurably enriched my art and my life. I am certain that I will never exhaust the possibilities of "making love with light."

We are all constantly in the midst of light. We are surrounded, bathed, and nourished by it. This miracle we call light can transform. It can teach, reveal, evoke, and heal. It speaks in many voices. We tend to see light as something that makes form visible, but light reveals much more. It reveals us. In the subtle, soft undulations of a snowscape illuminated by an overcast sky, in the raw presence of a backlighted, towering, ancient oak, both subject and photographer are revealed. Light makes visible the invisible. It can show us love where there seems to be only a rotting log or a solitary rock perched on a ledge. Sometimes the subject is illuminated by light, sometimes the subject is illumination itself. Then the subject itself glows; there are no shadows.

Light has the ability to reveal the many layers, the myriad faces contained in each form. Most often, we tend to see just the surface of a subject. We name it, identify it, and forget about it. And we stop seeing. Yet when the light changes, the subject changes, and what the subject has to show us changes. Unless we are ready to be patient and sit with our subjects, allowing the light to transform them, we see little more than their superficial aspects, and our art and our lives reflect that shallowness. If we are patient, letting go of thoughts and letting the mind settle down, then the hidden faces rise to the surface, and subtlety and richness return. A shift takes place, resonance appears. This allows for real intimacy with the subject.

Sometimes light is diffuse; the day is overcast and there is no localized light source. Everything is illuminated by the huge hemisphere of the sky and takes on a subdued, luminescent, and sensual character. Even craggy rocks become soft and delicate. When light becomes directional and there is a single, strong source of illumination texture appears. Different aspects of the same subject come into view. The boulder that was once very soft under diffuse lighting now becomes hard and heavier looking. When the subject reflects the light, the reflections add another dimension; patterns begin to appear. Before sunrise the world is essentially black and white. You can still see things and they can be photographed, but essentially there is no color. The light is cool, shadows not apparent. Things are almost translucent. Unless we are really "seeing" and not just looking, it is easy to miss the richness of these subtleties.

Both what and how we see are intricately interwoven with our conditioning. We see what we have learned to see. If we come out of our house in midday and see a yellow barn surrounded by a forest, that image becomes a part of our memory. Later, at the end of the day, when the evening sun is sinking over the horizon and the once yellow barn and green trees have been transformed by the fiery orange hue, we may miss that change. Our tendency will be to remember the yellow and green unless a deliberate effort is made to see things as they are. In the glow of twilight the house may have a pinkish tone. Trees will turn purple. Yet our mind, if we let it be controlled and fixed by our memory, will only see the afterimages of the past.

Cameras and film add other challenges and provide other possibilities to our seeing. They are not burdened by the bias of memory. They always "see" the image from a camera's perspective. Lenses and film types change the way color is recorded. Kodachrome "sees" differently than Ektachrome, which "sees" differently than Fujichrome. To see what the camera sees it is necessary to develop that camera's vision. To "make love with light," to consciously create the moods and feelings a photograph can emanate means first giving our attention to all these technical factors. Then, we must see the subject fresh, new, in the moment of the shutter's release. If we are awake to all of that, then we experience a sense of completion. The circle closes.

Towards evening, I am back in my canoe floating silently on the pond. The light is beginning to warm up again, the reds returning, the shadows lengthening. An ethereal glow descends on the pond and the forest, and a slight mist settles in the valley, drifting onto the surface of the water. It suffuses the landscape with a mysterious air, quieting thoughts, softening muscles. The clouds have pinkish hues, with subtle green and delicate violet shadows beneath. I sit here each evening and look at the same things and each evening find that I see different things. The renowned Japanese Zen teacher and mystic, Eihei Dogen once asked, "Is it that there are various ways of seeing one object? Or is it that we have mistaken various images for one object?" His words come back to me again and again; ripples on the water expanding in widening circles, reaching out endlessly.

A large downed branch floats by, draped with veils of mist-speckled spider webs reflecting the waning purple skylight. I'm in love with all of it—from the damp pungent smell of the swamps to the delicate fragrance of the spring breeze, the shimmering summer rains and the winter blizzards that cover the scars of the landscape. I love each and every moment. I feel this love as a vibrant intimacy, involving my whole body and mind with the whole world itself. The illusory boundaries that separate animate from inanimate, cultivated from wild, self from other can't confine this love; it propels itself with a natural power. I can feel it coursing through my veins tonight.

Intimacy is an environmental preservation force that runs deeper and truer than any belief system, and is far more powerful than any legislative or scientific solution to our problems. Deeply attuned to this intimacy, Master Dogen asked us, "How can we return to, rather than possess, mountains and rivers and the great earth? How can we hear the 84,000 hymns of the valley stream? How can we find the real meaning, the true form of the spring pine and the autumn chrysanthemum?" In response, he pointed to the revealed truth, the experience of intimate days and nights, "These mountains and rivers of the present are themselves wise ones and sages." What would happen if we all realized that intimacy directly and saw for ourselves that originally, and continually, there are no gaps between our life and the life of the natural world? Obviously there would be no need for an Environmental Protection Agency nor environmental legislation. There would be no hole in the ozone layer, nor oil polluting the harbors. There would be no endangered species, pollution in the air and water, no greenhouse effect, no depletion of natural resources. These problems are the self-inflicted wounds of a human race that sees itself as separate from the rest of the world. Human causes harbor human effects. This truth can only be realized by humans, and it can only be healed by humans.

For many of us, wild nature is an abstraction rather than a reality. The closest we may come to it is while visiting a zoo or a museum of natural history, or during an occasional trip into a manicured wilderness area. It is difficult to conjure up any passion or concern for something we barely know. We have to truly love to really care. We have to make the lives we care for palpable by letting them "enter" our life.

But how can we realize this intimacy when we constantly reinforce the apparent discontinuity between ourselves and the natural environment? The words of Jack Turner in his *The Abstract Wild* open up an important possibility for addressing this: "Most of us, when we think about it, realize that after our own direct experience of nature, what has contributed most to our love of wild places, animals, plants—and even, perhaps, to our love of wild nature, our sense of citizenship—is the art, literature, myth, and lore of nature. For here is the language we so desperately lack, the medium necessary for true vision [intimacy]. Mere concepts and abstractions will not do." Intimacy, love, compassion arise out of the realization of a sense of identity. When we enter nature intimately, nature becomes compellingly and absolutely personal. The body and mind involved is realized as the body and mind of the great earth

itself. And we offer our words, images, and poems—indeed our life—to all life. We invoke the reality of "no gap," the sheer and free wildness of things as they are.

My heron friend is back, making her perch on a cross branch of a looming sycamore tree. I paddle my way through the phantom dancers that the evening light has created from wisps of rising mist, searching for an optimal position to make an exposure. Twilight plays on the heron's plumage: shocks of white, fine streaks of ebony and deep rusty umber. Perhaps tiring of my maneuvering to find a more advantageous position, she is suddenly airborne. The strong, deft beats of her ponderous wings palpable on my skin, she glides the length of the pond. The last photograph of the day: her fifty million-year-old form—a small mark on an infinite mountain sky—disappearing into the blackening greens of night above the river's far shore.

River Valley

River Valley

The river never speaks yet it knows how to find its way to the great ocean; it does not know the ten thousand things are born from it. The way the river finds its way contains a universal truth; the way it gives birth to the ten thousand things reveals a teaching that is unspeakable.

When we let go even river rocks are radiant; when we hold on even a jewel's brilliance is clouded. If we are to enter the sacred place we must first set down the pack and remove the blinders. Only then can the voice of the river muse be heard.

The sound of heavy rain in the blackness of the night. A few more hours until dawn. It has been pouring for days. With the warm rain, the dissolving of accumulated snow has turned into a threatening spring meltdown. The river is at the edge of flood stage. From my bed I can hear its roar as it surges in tumbling torrents past the cabin, a sound that easily cuts through the rhythmic pelting of raindrops on the roof and windows.

After daybreak, on the riverbank, I watch in awe the incredible force of the flood surge. Blood red with mountain silt and mud, the river leaps in the air over submerged boulders, its unstoppable imperative to reach the sea magnified and inspiring. Later in the afternoon, the water rises over the dam at Long Pond, transforming it into a branch of the swelling river. Rapids at my doorstep heave ten feet into the air, huge trunks of trees topple, boulders roll like pool balls in the swift current. The river gets up on its hind legs and walks over the land.

The downpour continues and the water rises past flood stage and then some more. The beaver hutch and dam are now under seven feet of churning chaos, the occupants probably somewhere in the next county. The wetlands are transformed into a lake; only the tips of the tallest brush are visible. The deer that normally spend the nights browsing this territory are all yarded up in a meadow on the mountain. I am startled to see the reflection of so many pairs of eyes clustered together, hunkering down under the beam of my flashlight sweeping across the field as I check the extent of the growing damage.

Hours later, there is still no sign of the rain letting up. The roads are flooded; birds, beasts, bugs and people have for the most part moved to higher ground. The raging river treats equally everything that is foolish enough to get into its path. Whatever is in its way—houses, cars, trees, animals, people—is snatched up and carried downstream, eventually to reach the sea.

At midnight the rain stops; the river crests. By daybreak it is below flood stage, though still running at a formidable speed. The swirling clouds part and the river valley begins the timeless process of re-establishing its life within the newly acquired configuration. New ponds have appeared in the wetlands, while the old ones, filled with shifting sands and silt, are now mounds. Feeder streams have changed their course. With the beaver dams ripped open, bogs have disappeared. Many of the landmarks—the boulders and trees that I have come to use as markers of this landscape—have been dislodged, repositioned, or have simply vanished.

By the time spring passes into summer, the wetlands are brimming with life. The water is filled with tadpoles, catfish, crayfish, and aquatic snakes. Ducks are flocking to the pond and the heron is paying her regular visits. Everything seems normal, just as before. Yet, under closer scrutiny, there are some significant changes among the inhabitants of this fragile niche. Oriental bittersweet has appeared, with its woody vines and flowers in whitish clusters which in the fall reveal yellow to crimson arils enclosing the seeds. It is striking in appearance but damaging to other plants. A vigorous climber, reaching up to forty feet, bittersweet twines around the trunks of neighboring trees, making them top heavy and vulnerable while also choking out their normal canopy growth.

Another new resident is the Japanese knotweed, a member of the buckwheat family. Both bittersweet and knotweed are oriental plants, common to northeast Asia. They have been imported to the United States as ornamentals. The spring torrents have carried their seeds from the flooded streamside gardens north of here. In a few seasons they will likely begin to dominate these surroundings, making it difficult, if not impossible, for many of the native species to survive. I notice the firmly established Chinese rose and the catalpa tree, plants that were completely foreign to this river valley a mere hundred years ago. These wetlands are a dance of impermanence; like everything else, in a state of constant becoming.

What is native anyway? Many plants that are now foreign to North America have been found in the local fossil records. As the continental land masses shifted and separated, new equilibria were established. Can a species that has appeared in the region ten years ago be considered native? How about a hundred years ago? Ten thousand years? What period of this planet's history shall we take as a standard to conclude what is native and normal? This great earth has been evolving for over five hundred million years. That is what it does.

Twenty years ago the forests on these mountains were completely devastated by the gypsy moth caterpillars. In just several weeks these voracious feeders completely stripped the deciduous trees of their leaves and were beginning to feed on the conifers. Walking through the woods, I could hear the caterpillars eating, their droppings raining on my head. The mountains and the river valley looked like a desolate December landscape. Greasy strips of mashed caterpillars spread across highways, creating slick surfaces and posing serious road hazards. People began to ring their favorite trees with tar belts to keep the invasion from getting to the leaves. But as the caterpillar vanguards reached the tar and became stuck, others climbed over them, using their dead companions as bridges, and continued to the upper branches. All-out aerial spraying assaults and importing praying mantis into the area to check the spread did not stop the onslaught. It simply stopped by itself when the cycle was completed.

In early June, with the foliage of the large trees absent, the unshaded mountain laurel and dogwoods came into full bloom, the likes of which were never seen here before. Later that month leaves appeared on all but the weakest trees. By midsummer there were no traces of the devastation. Knowing how to survive is part of the wild intelligence.

The gypsy moths haven't been back since. The predicted and dreaded seven-year cycle never materialized. Supposedly, they didn't return because a fungus that is a natural predator of the moths' egg clusters entered and settled in the area. Foreign species released into virgin, enemy-free environments expand tremendously at first, but are ultimately held in check by the arrival of new species that turn out to be their natural predators and parasites.

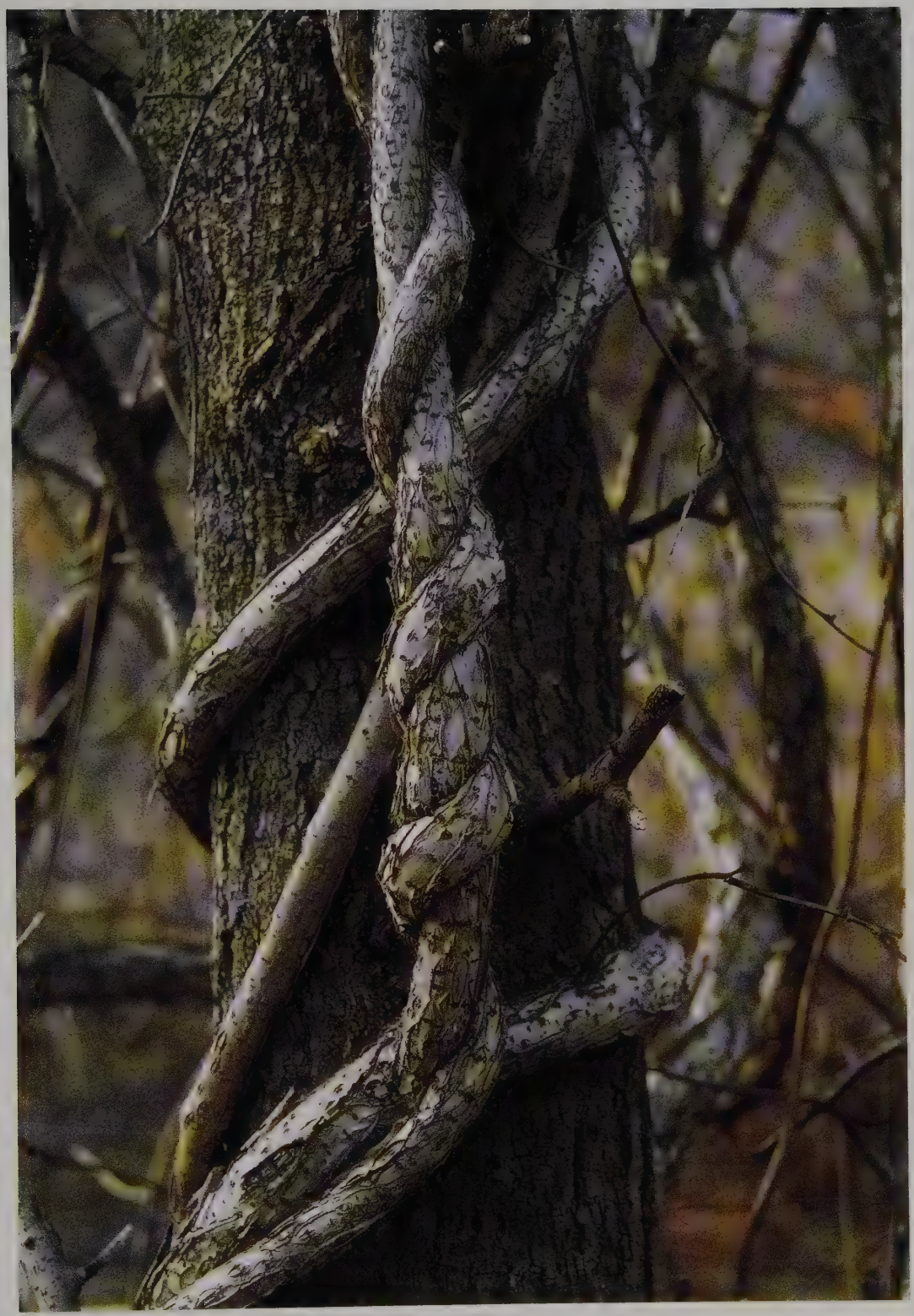
There is an inherent wisdom in beings large and small that has developed over the billions of years of earth's history. Many species have lost their struggle for survival. Others survived and evolved into new forms. Over time this dance plays itself out as an intelligence that continuously adjusts to circumstances. We should learn to trust this inherent wisdom and quit trying to manipulate and control. Given space and time, wildness, in and of itself, will know how to take care of itself. These mountains and rivers have been plundered by a formidable list of invaders, and have survived. They saw the passage of trappers, tanners, charcoal makers, quarrymen, loggers, land developers, speculators, tourists. Each group stripped the land of its wildness and vitality and each time wildness found the wherewithal to recover and rebound.

The mountain will give birth to the myriad things; the river will find its way to the sea.

How many sounds
when a thousand murmuring brooks
are the silken whisper
of these woodland falls?

The raging river doesn't understand;
still, it finds its way
to the great ocean.

Living together
dying together,
black locust and bittersweet.



Sky and water merging
at my feet
leave me no place
to abide.

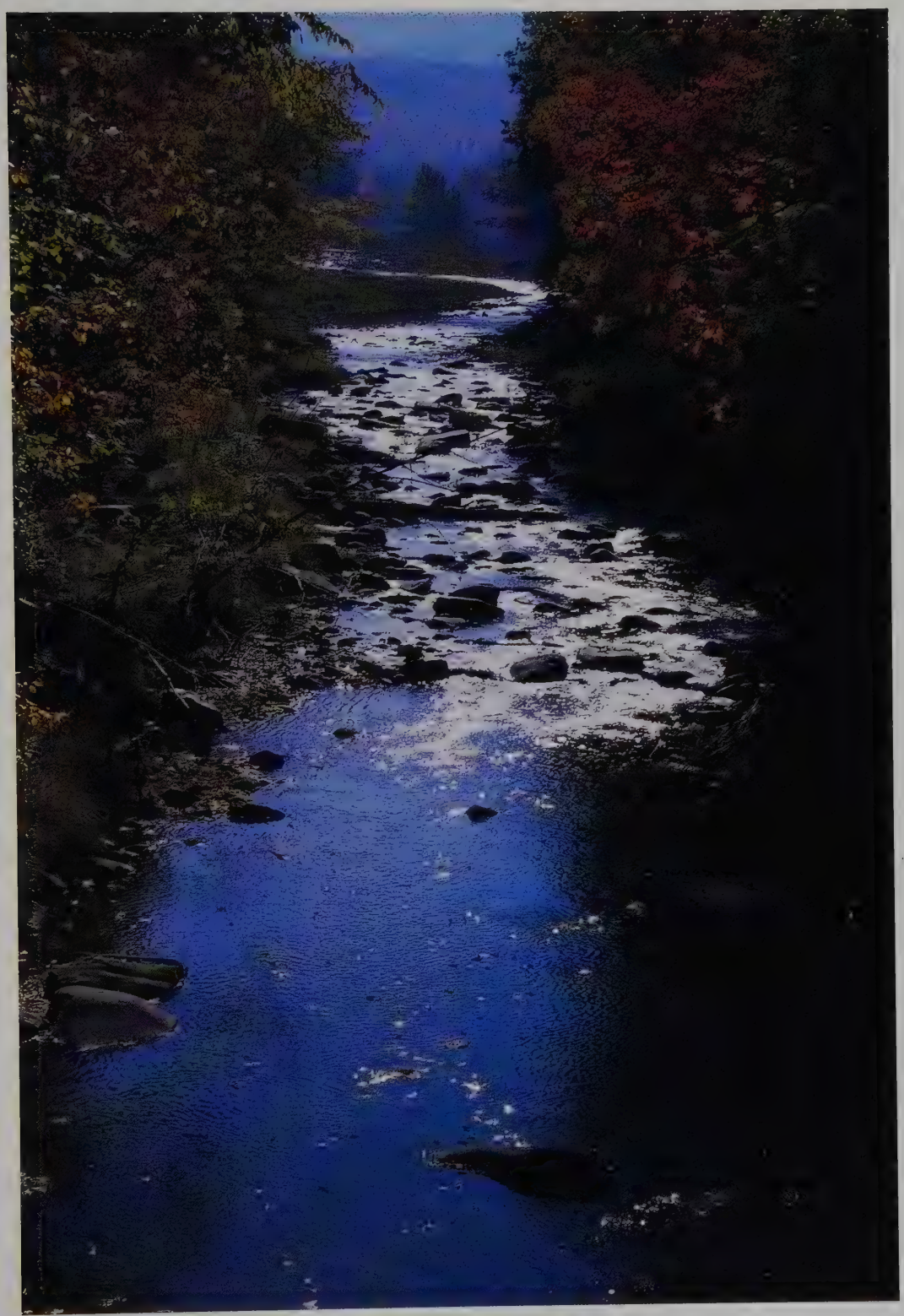
Hidden in the forest.
Singing the song
only a mountain stream can sing.

Swamp grasses
greet me in dawn's first light—
an aura of angels.

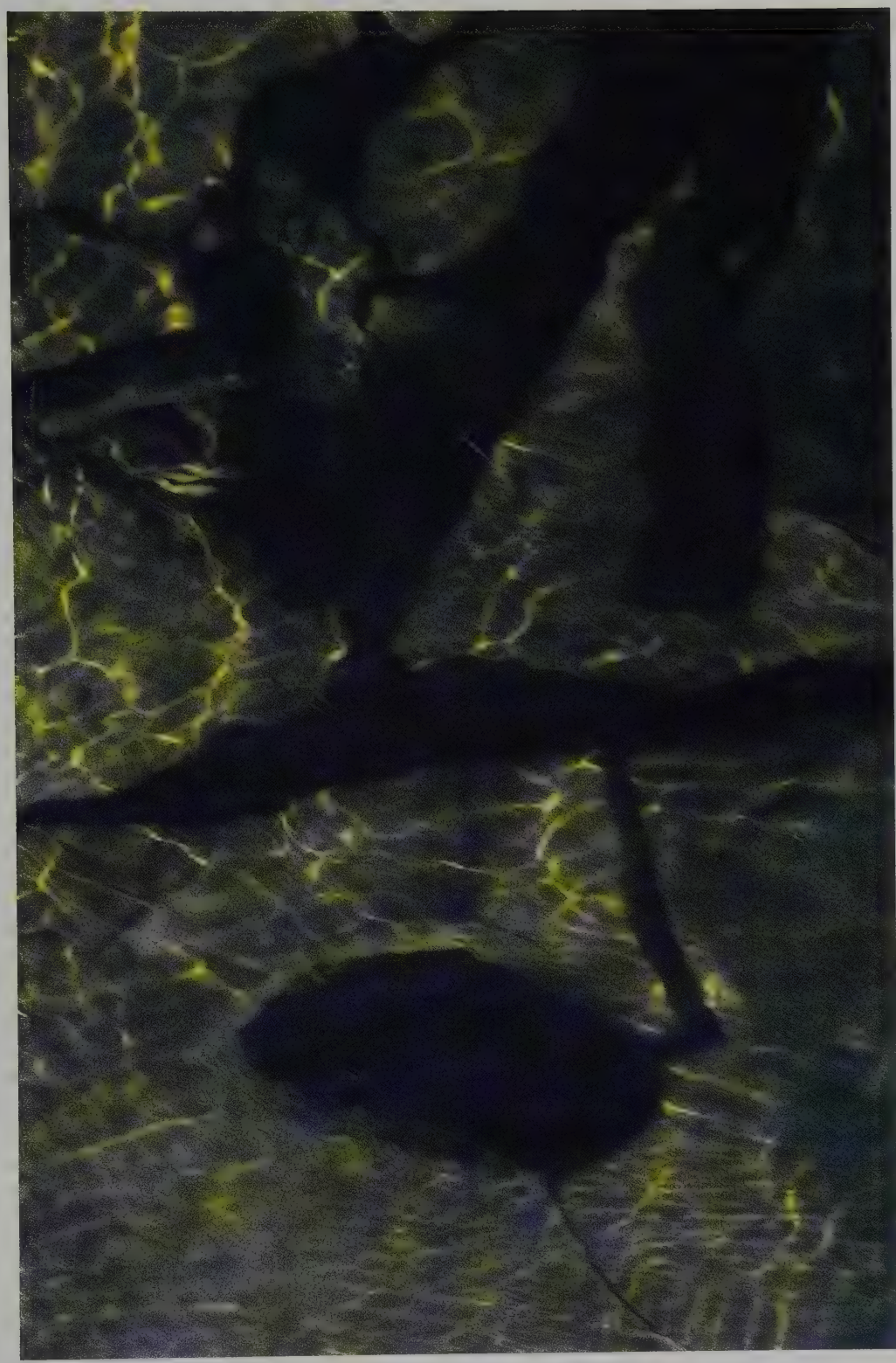
Tiny flower faces
warmed by the morning sun
cannot feel the swamp's icy chill.

Always able to find its way,
the great blue heron
is never apart from its true home.

Unstoppable!
Time makes no sense
to the meandering stream.



The river shallows hidden
all winter long
now shimmer in spring's
warm light.



A single autumn leaf
announces
the arrival of the golden wind.

Quivering tadpole jelly
becomes
the question of life and death.

Spiderweb sails
like a high-masted schooner—
a branch on an aimless pilgrimage.

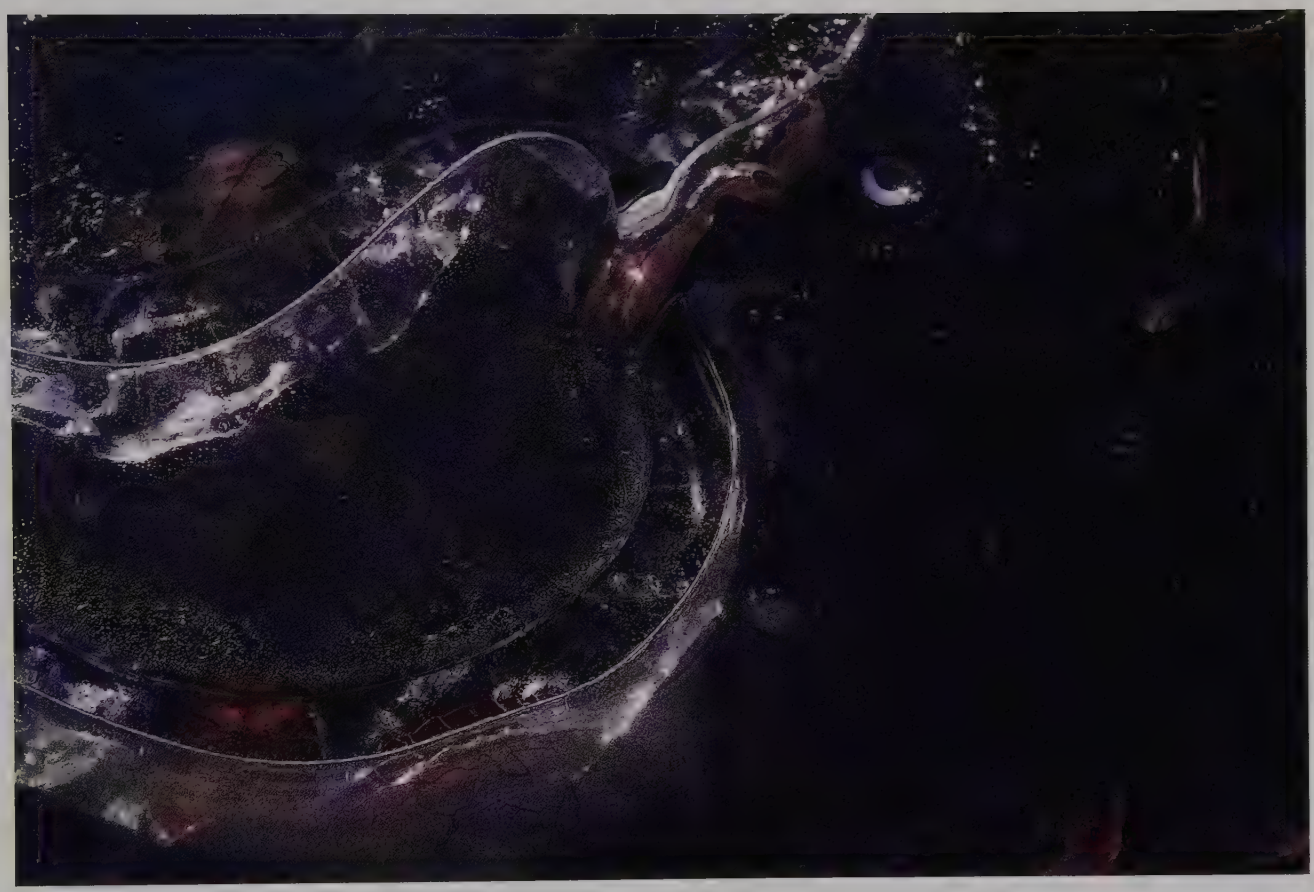
On the still pond
a leaf drops
without making
a ripple.

No longer ominous—
the river bottom
exposed by a shaft of sunlight.

The branch trusts freely
the alien vine's
search for the light.

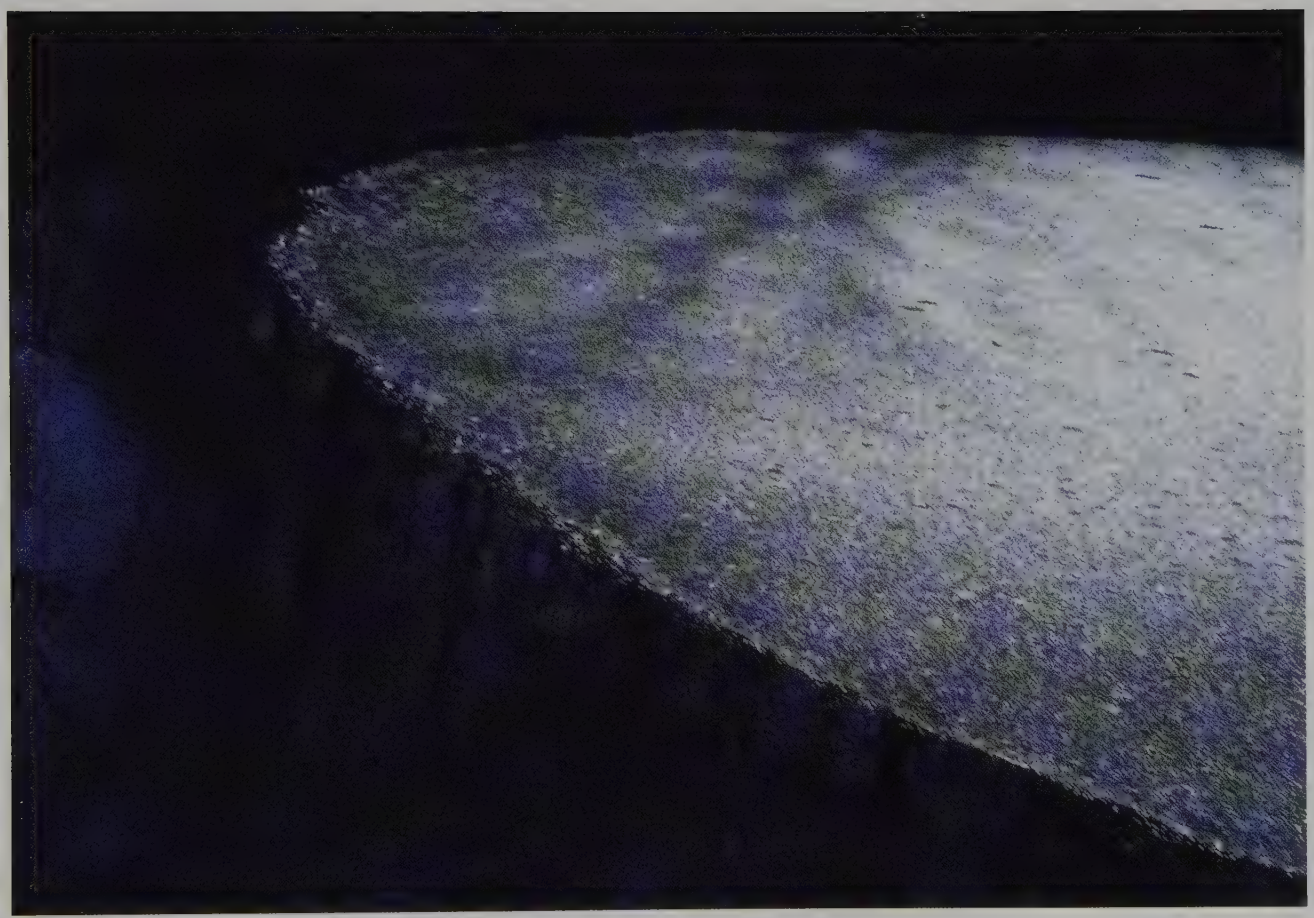
Even in its waning,
the decaying cypress tree
enchants the eye.

A shimmering ice bird
floats downriver—
winter's unexpected gift.



The frozen saplings
cradled from the wind
by light, shadow and snow.

All that remains
of last winter's freeze—
an icy disc being swallowed
by the warm spring breeze.



Only spring
can turn this hushed silver stroke
into a murmuring stream.

The ancient pond ripples
with jeweled light—
a mirror of the wind's wintry face.

Wind-dancing autumn leaf
snatched up
by a frozen puddle.

Her graceful lines
undiminished by seasons—
timeless and at ease.

Rocks

Rocks

There are mountain rocks, river rocks, heavenly rocks, earthly rocks, male rocks, female rocks, rocks neither male nor female, hard rocks, soft rocks, stationary rocks, flowing rocks, killing rocks, life-giving rocks, rolling rocks, flying rocks, sailing rocks, walking rocks, talking rocks, dancing rocks, rocky rocks, and non-rocks.

Our canoe rides a gentle current. Green rolling farmlands, craggy mountains, low lying wetlands glide by. Except for a few gentle strokes of the paddle to keep us heading in the right direction, we exert little effort, abandoning ourselves to the river. The afternoon is perfect. With the sun shining and clear water, I see sunken rocks rush past beneath us in the riffles and pools. The canoe's shadow races over submerged boulders, stone clusters, and washes of pebbles. The history of these mountains and rivers is written in these rocks. All of them predate most plant or animal life. How many millions of years of sculpting by water and weather has it taken to create these incredible forms?

The canoe slides towards a rock outcrop. We land. The place boasts a fine spring and a pleasant vista. I cook dinner while my partner unloads. We have been training together on weekends, and by now feel confident as a team. Tomorrow, we will be encountering Class Four rapids. The locals call it "the falls" because of the river's steep drop-off. The turbulent eddies below the rapids are a treasurehouse of outdoor equipment, deposited there from capsized canoes.

Next morning, before the sun lights up the predawn sky we have our breakfast and break camp. By the time the mountain tops are aglow we are underway. Within two hours we enter the two-mile stretch of rapids that precede "the falls." The river narrows and the canoe picks up speed. We drop to our knees, lowering the boat's center of gravity and adding some stability. Shimmering wet boulders scattered throughout this watercourse seem to bob up and down as we plummet towards them. Spray hits our faces, blinding us for a moment. An occasional wave sweeps aboard. Our training and teamwork are paying off.

In the distance we can hear the deep rumble and roar of "the falls," our real challenge. I see mist from the churning waters hanging in the trees ahead of us. A swift current passing over submerged boulders creates huge standing waves with wild, white manes. The foaming turmoil is upon us before we know it. There is no turning back now, no time for fear. Paddles dig deeply as we parry and dodge rock after rock. Some are clearly visible, others hidden deep enough to remain invisible yet ground or flip a loaded canoe.

Reading the water and responding appropriately occur all in one instant. There is no room for reflection or discussion. The river has no mercy for the unwary or unskilled. Our bow smashes through an unavoidable standing wave and we take on about a foot of ice cold water. As it sloshes around the bottom, the canoe's balance gets precarious. No time for bailing. Boulders streak by as we slither and slide in and out of souse holes, past rocks that flash towards us with foaming speedboat wakes. Swaying and pitching we work our way through the boiling turbulence into the smooth water. The river widens and slows down. The canoe, half full of water, drifts sluggishly. Soaked to the skin, we realize that we are shivering uncontrollably, half with excitement, half from the cold.

We beach the canoe and start a roaring fire. Dried out and fed, we return to the river and continue our journey downstream. Thousands of egg-laden shad pass us on their journey upstream to their spawning sites. The beauty of the day silences us. The river is smooth and lazy now. Leaning back, we let the current and the day carry us. We drift as if in a dream—an unfolding dream of wild nature, overhanging cliffs, towering pines and oaks, breathing bogs. The river nourishes our souls, while no more than two miles in any direction we are surrounded by manicured lawns, blacktop roads, MacDonald's golden arches and all the endless conveniences of our civilization.

I have watched the creeping advance of civilization descend on the wild like a great dark cloud blocking out the warmth and light, enshrouding all that is free, untamed, and vibrant. Can I ignore my responsibilities and my passive compliance in the rape, squandering and destruction of our wild heritage? The dawn of each day witnesses the disappearance of countless acres of wilderness, hundreds of species. Acidic lakes are unable to support aquatic life. Before they reach the sea, some of our great rivers are sucked dry by overuse. Politicians debate, activists demonstrate, prophets of doom proclaim the end, while the jackals of commerce and special interest gorge themselves on what little remains of what this planet needs to support all of its life. What has been lost cannot be reclaimed. What would it take for all of us to realize that wilderness, indeed wildness, is critically necessary for the survival of this civilization? If either is to continue both must prosper; the wilderness unmanaged, raw and free, the civilization cultivated, controlled and developed. Wildness and civilization are interdependent, have a mutual causality, and share the same path.

As the journey continues, days slip by like cattails and cypress along the shore, glittering pebbles and mossy rocks beneath us. Conversation and commentary fade away and we settle into an unspeakable awareness and silent awe. We are ahead of schedule by a day and only about a half-day's paddle from the end of our trip. We decide to stop and spend the last day celebrating this river. As soon as we share this thought the perfect cove manifests right around the next bend.

The campsite is next to the shallows of the river, bordering one of the most striking and beautiful community of rocks and boulders I have ever encountered. For the next thirty-six hours we disappear into the landscape, I with my camera, my partner with his journal. The river muse is unreserved and generous, unlocking sights, sounds and smells. The flow of water sings a sweet, lonely, and primeval tune. Changing light transforms the rocks into an endless stream of shifting forms, images, and feelings. As the day slides toward sunset each hour reveals more stunning faces concealed in this place. Then, the light is gone. I set the camera aside and let the night sounds in: spring peepers, the whisper of water, the sigh of the land.

The morning arrives wrapped in fog. Everything is illuminated with the eerie bluish glow of filtered sunlight. Yesterday's forms have vanished, fresh images appearing in their place: shifting contours, hallows and protrusions, a stream of images—dancing, somber, comic, profound, unreasonable, sensuous, voluptuous, ascetic. Some are as gentle as a spring zephyr, others as stunning as a blow between the eyes.

The mix of river and earth, wet and dry, the different densities of mist absorbing the morning sun, reflections from the flowing water—all collaborate to create an ever-changing and astonishing drama. As the mist rises, direct sunlight floods the valley, and with it, more transmutations arrive. The range of perceptions and feelings is staggering. Universes and aeons pass through this cove no bigger than a tennis court. By midday I am completely exhausted. Propped up against a boulder, half in and half out of the river, I watch a water snake slither among the rocks. I drift off to sleep and dream of singing, dancing rocks.

Departing, a short stretch of paddling brings with it the first smells of civilization. Fast food grease, engine exhaust, factory smokestack effluent. Then the sounds: revved-up car and truck motors, insistent beeping horns, screeching brakes, the faint pounding of a bass speaker. And the images: even rows of houses, geometric parking lots, black telephone and electric lines intermingling with the green of maple and pine and the blue of the sky. Bridges and walkways crisscross the river; shad traps fill the shallows; people frolic along the river banks.

The spider web and the Brooklyn Bridge are both the work of nature. We must learn how the delicate dynamics of this unlikely relationship work. The earth's heart is big enough to hold both. The question is, how big is the heart that we manifest?

The cool, blue shadow
protects the thin ice
that wraps moss and stone.

A gaping mouth
reveals the earth's
hidden mystery.

Yesterday,
dancing in the swift current;
this morning,
resting in the eddy.

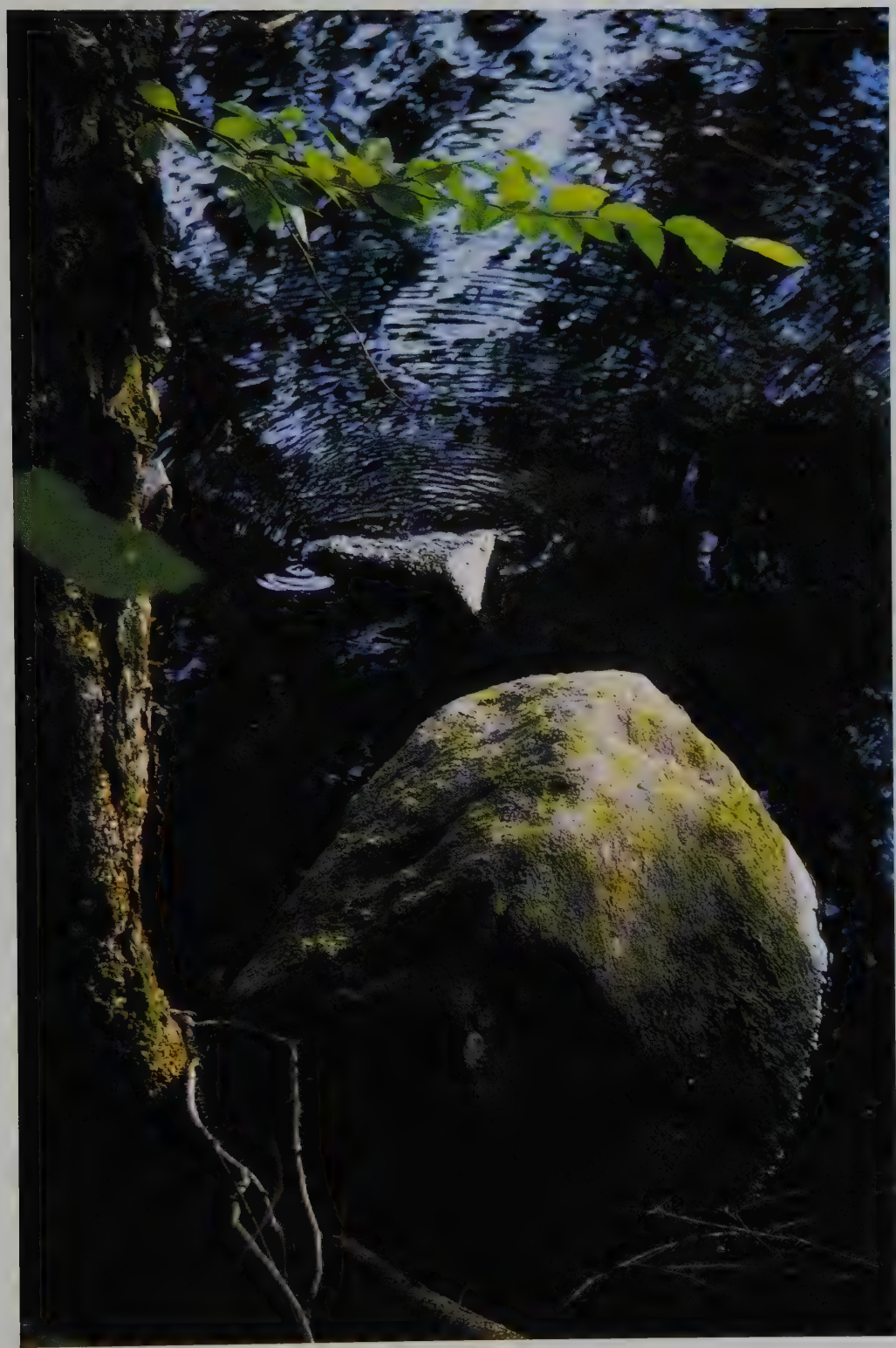
There are heavenly rocks
and earthly rocks.
Then there are rocks
that belong to neither heaven nor earth.

From shadows
forms more real than life
are created.

The dawn of a new day
on the tip
of a stone tongue.

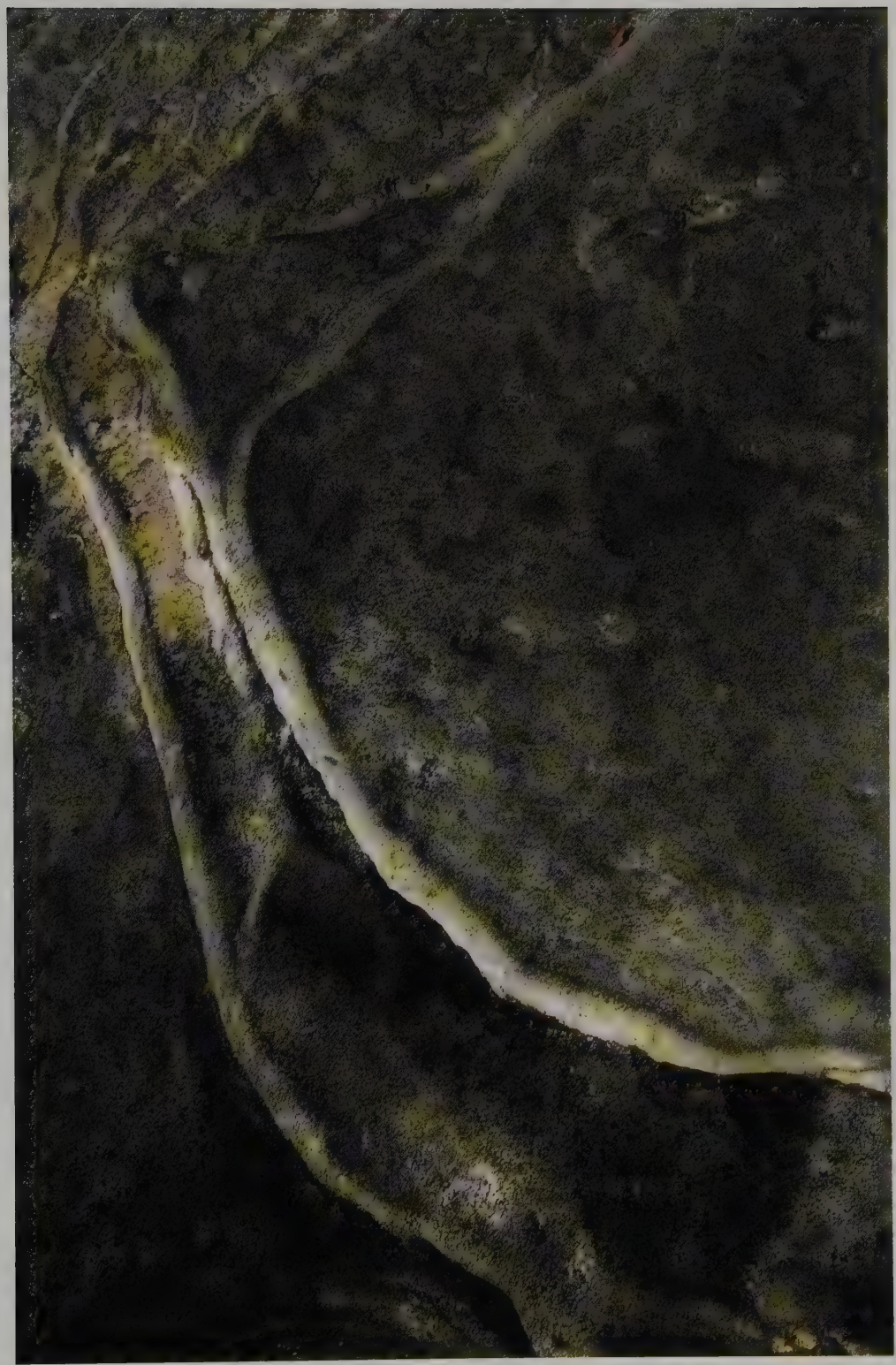
Every image presents
a multitude of perspectives
if there is an eye that sees.

Boulder and tree—
familiar sentinels
at Hidden Cove.



Winter's footprints
remain
along the river's run.

Cold remains
in the folded skin
of river rock.



Light as spring blossoms,
boulders float
suspended in space.

Under the cold winter sky
the river wind
sharpens the stone.

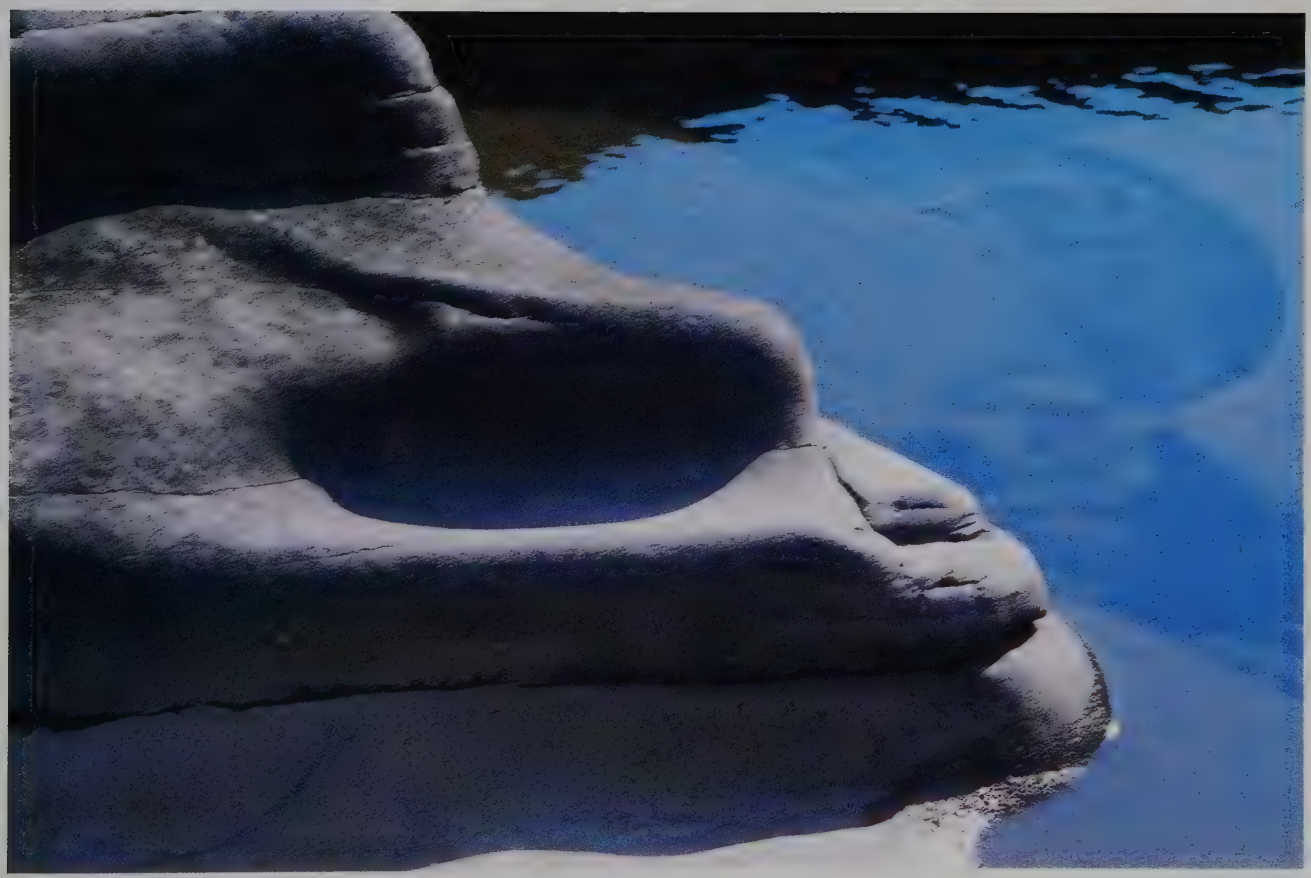
A piece of heaven
suddenly seen—
a touchstone of light.

Rock and water
ceaselessly
practicing together.

The mind—
what can we say of it?
Forms, created by rock shadows.

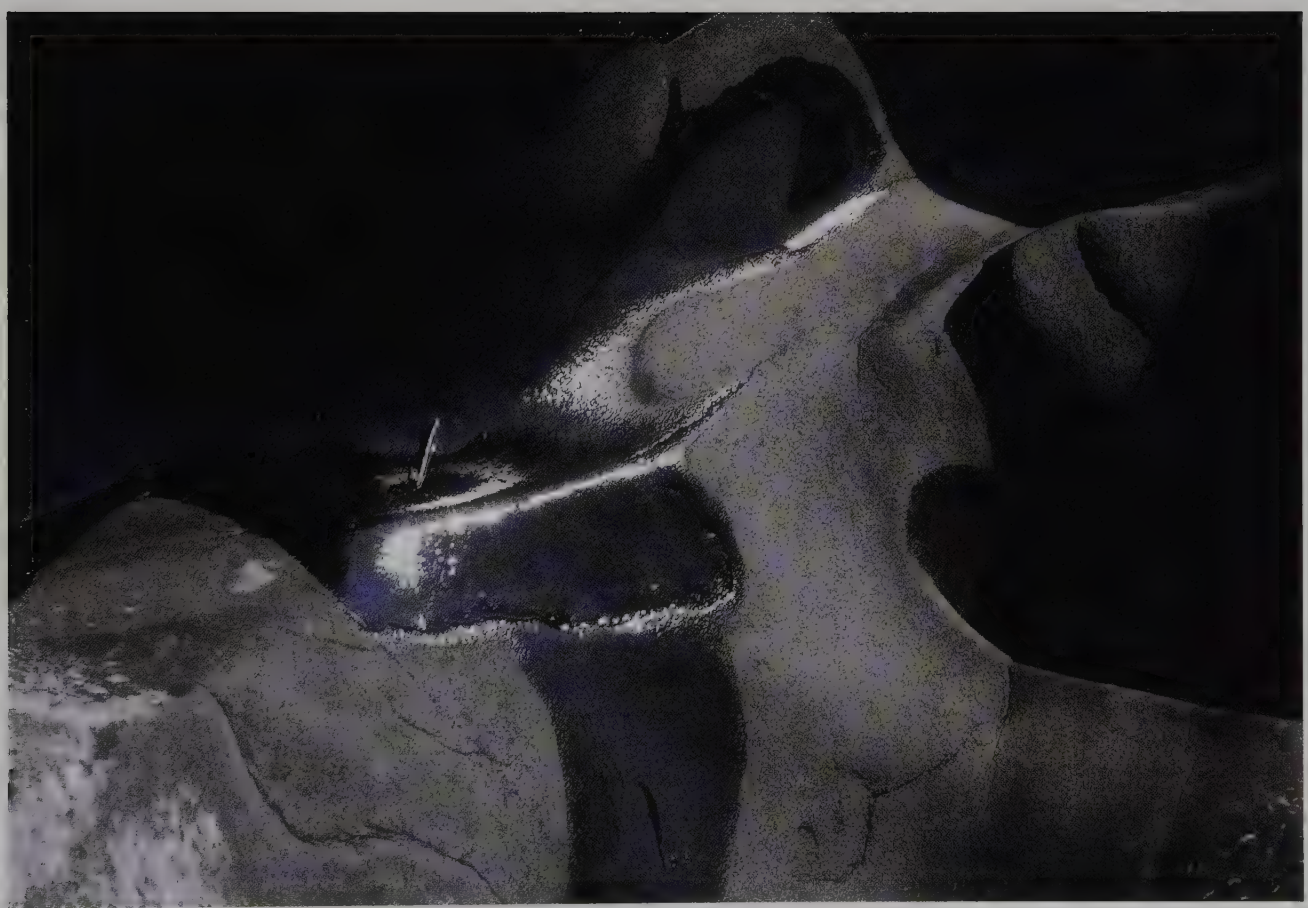
Autumn's passing
shows itself
in the long, sad shadows.

The receding river
has revealed
the work of rock and water.



Made for each other—
flowing water
and the narrow rock channel.

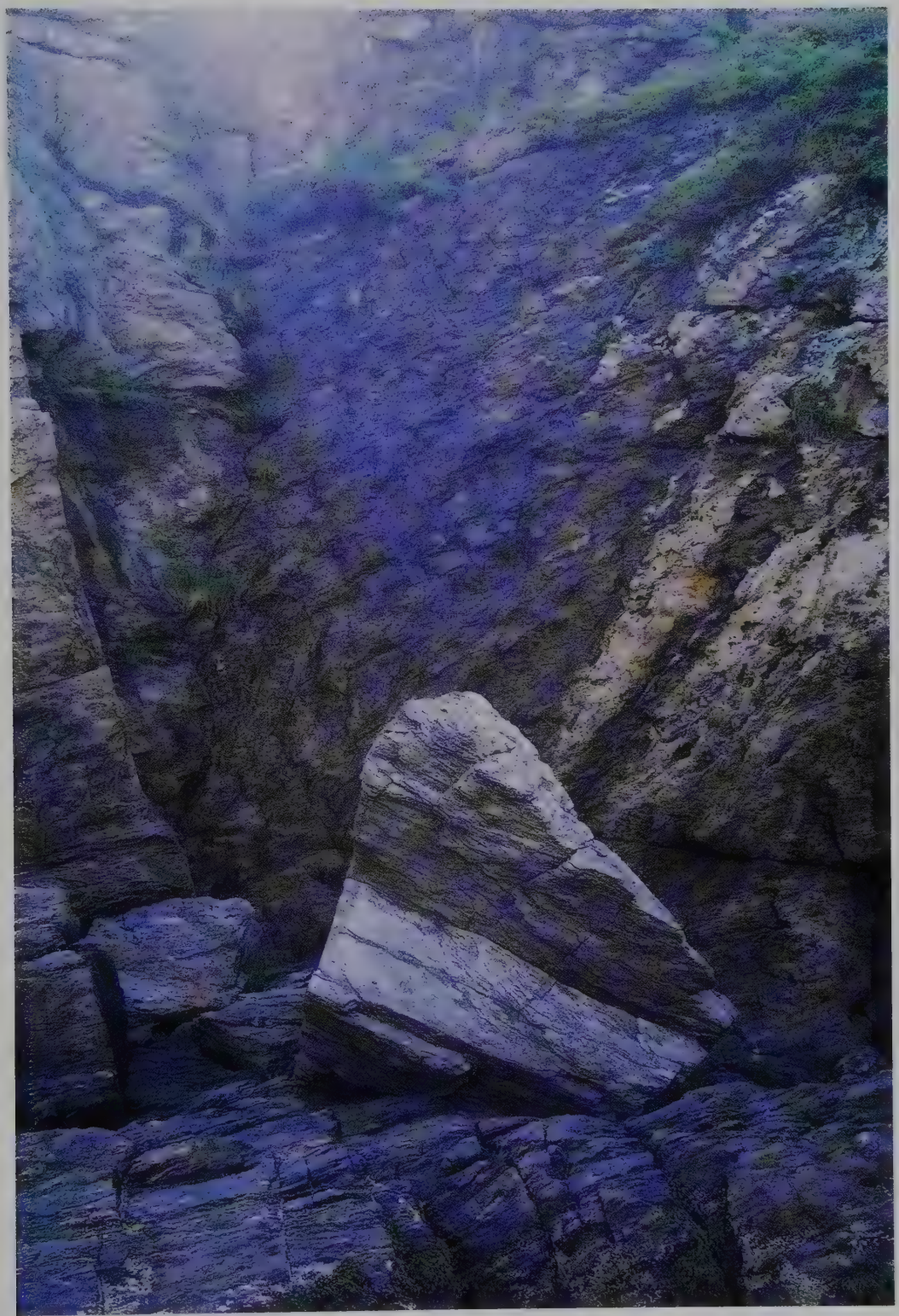
Along the darkening river
a presence appears and commands.
Attention!



Things are not
what they seem.
Neither are they
otherwise.

Graffiti sculpted
by the hand of wind
stands witness to time.

As if meticulously placed there—
the solitary rock
on the cliff's edge.



Body and mind
taken
by the teachings
of rock and water.

Blue Mountain

Blue Mountain

Although it is said that the mountains belong to the country, actually they belong to those who love them. When the mountains love their master, the wise and the virtuous inevitably enter the mountains. And when sages and wise ones live in the mountains, because the mountains belong to them, trees and rocks flourish and abound, and the birds and beasts take on a supernatural excellence. We should realize that the mountains actually take delight in wise ones and sages. —*Zen Master Dogen*

I bring in my sleeping bag, a small rucksack of food and camera equipment, then get a fire going in the small potbellied stove to quell the fall chill hanging in the air. I am in the new hermitage, ready to spend a few days in solitude, breaking it in. The cabin, a tiny eight by ten space high on the mountain side sits near the edge of thousands of acres of state forest preserve, well out of sight of civilization. The only sounds I hear are the trickling of water, the wind in the pines, and the occasional scolding of a jay or a red squirrel. The cabin reflects bare bones simplicity: the stove, a large window, a few hinged planks that serve as a table beneath the window, the sleeping bag on the wooden floor.

This site is one of several magical places on the mountain. I can't articulate the reason why it is sacred but birds, animals and people all seem to recognize it. The south-facing window overlooks a downhill slope, providing a magnificent view of endless mountains, "blue heaped upon blue."

Aside from heating morning coffee on the stove, I do my cooking outdoors over an open fire in an attempt to keep scavengers from intruding into the cabin. After dinner I hike down to a nearby spring to fill the canteens and wash the dishes with a moss pad, a handful of sand and some water. Dusk is a transition time for the mountain creatures. The diurnal critters—chipmunk, squirrel, grouse, turkey are getting ready to bed down for the night, while the nocturnal wanderers—fox, coyote, bear, porcupine, raccoon, and owl are preparing for their night shift. The air is quite still but I can feel the activity around me. Many animals are moving down the mountain to the river, feeding along the way. Some will spend the night near the river banks, in the wetlands or in the valley forest. As I return to the hermitage, a great horned owl hoots, bats whiz by my face catching night insects. It's almost impossible not to duck when I see them coming. Nearing the cabin, I hear a porcupine at work chewing on the sideboards, trying to get at the taste of salt in the glue of the plywood that skirts the cabin. I shoo him off with the broom and reposition the wire mesh cover so that he doesn't keep me up all night. The space inside is toasty warm and cozy. Sleep comes before I am ready.

I am up before dawn, startled by the racket of a squirrel rolling hickory nuts down the roof. I stoke the fire, put the coffee on, get dressed. Outside the fog is so thick I can barely find the traces of the campfire. I feed the glowing coals, build a small fire and begin cooking a breakfast of oatmeal, peanut butter, sliced raw pears, and maple syrup. Waiting for the water to boil, I lean back against a boulder and relax.

As I sip the morning coffee I feel that I am being watched. The fog is so dense though, that whatever or whoever it might be, would have to be standing no more than a few feet away for me to see them. I study the indistinct features of the shrouded forest, examining the undergrowth and the branches overhead. Nothing. Then, sensing a slight movement, I peer into the fog and see a huge eight-point buck staring at me. He is taking small deliberate steps directly toward me with a slightly lowered head. I stand up so he can see me clearly. He hesitates for a moment, then continues his slow advance. He is now about 50 feet away. Is it my oatmeal he wants? I have heard of hunters attacked by bucks but that happens only when the animals feel threatened. Could this guy be rabid? A strange thought enters my mind and passes unprocessed, "Solitary camper killed by Bambi."

There are not many eight-point bucks on any mountain. Territorial competition sees to that. Could this be my old friend of a few seasons ago? One day several years earlier, I had come nose-to-nose with a majestic deer like this one. He came crashing through the forest spooked by something while I was leaning against a huge oak photographing a beaver. He stopped to rest on the other side of that tree, still snorting and huffing. I turned and our eyes met. He got frightened and was off in a flash.

The buck stops and stands motionless for a few moments, then turns and slowly walks uphill, circling the cabin, the campfire and me. Completing a full round, he returns to his starting place. With the fog thinning and sun streaming through the branches, his striking form is streaked with light and shadows. He has to be over three hundred pounds, carrying his elegant rack with great dignity. Composed, we study and enjoy each other. Since the oatmeal is getting cold and pasty, I start to eat. He turns and begins to climb further up the mountain. I watch his movements until he disappears into the rising mist. I feel that I failed him somehow. What did he want that I could not understand?

Later in the day when the fog completely clears I pick up his tracks and follow his trail around the hermitage and then up the mountain. What was inside that circle that he wanted so badly, aside from me, the hermitage and the oatmeal? Then I see it: a salt lick next to a mossy boulder. It had been placed there, near the hermitage, to entice the porcupines and keep them from chewing on the cabin planks. It must have been a daily stop for this buck on his morning return to the mountain. This morning I was the obstacle, a bit too close to the lick. In spite of these logical explanations for the buck's behavior, his visit remains as enchanting as ever.

Another day, on my way to the spring, I pass within twenty feet of several doe bedded down in a small cluster of brush. They pick up their heads and placidly watch me go by without any indication of alarm. Further downhill, in a stand of stately deciduous and evergreen trees, a flock of some sixty wild turkeys is feeding. I photograph them for ten minutes with the birds showing no signs of concern for my presence. I decide to walk directly into the flock to see how they react. In seconds they are airborne, heading straight up and into the trees. Try as I might, for the next fifteen minutes I can't spot a single one of them. Not a sound nor movement reveals their location. They have vanished miraculously, yet I know they are no more than fifty feet away.

My first trips into these mountains began over forty-five years ago. I would drive up from the Jersey shore several times a year and spend weeks hiking these trails, climbing the mountains, canoeing the rivers. My sons, before they were two years old, had their first experience of the wilderness here. By the time they were five they were backpacking along with me. I am delighted to see that my children have transmitted the love of the wilderness to their children. What greater legacy do we have to give to the next generation than the love for a mountain, a river, a sparrow, or a blade of grass? It is in our love of nature, of things wild and free, that we make nature real and palpable. And when nature is a tangible reality, not an abstraction, a story, a picture or a map, we take care of it. Indeed, as Master Dogen says, "these mountains belong to those who love them."

Standing on a ridge that rises above the hermitage, the mountains unfold to cover the whole horizon. Forty years ago I stood in almost the same exact place looking down into the valley. I remember turning to my climbing partner and saying, "Wouldn't this be an incredible place to live?" For the past twenty blessed years, this place has been my home. Incredible indeed.

Mouth of the river valley
in morning mist—
nothing is revealed.

Endless years
beneath sun and moon—
the ancient cypress reclines.

A single splash
of morning light
illuminates the entire forest.

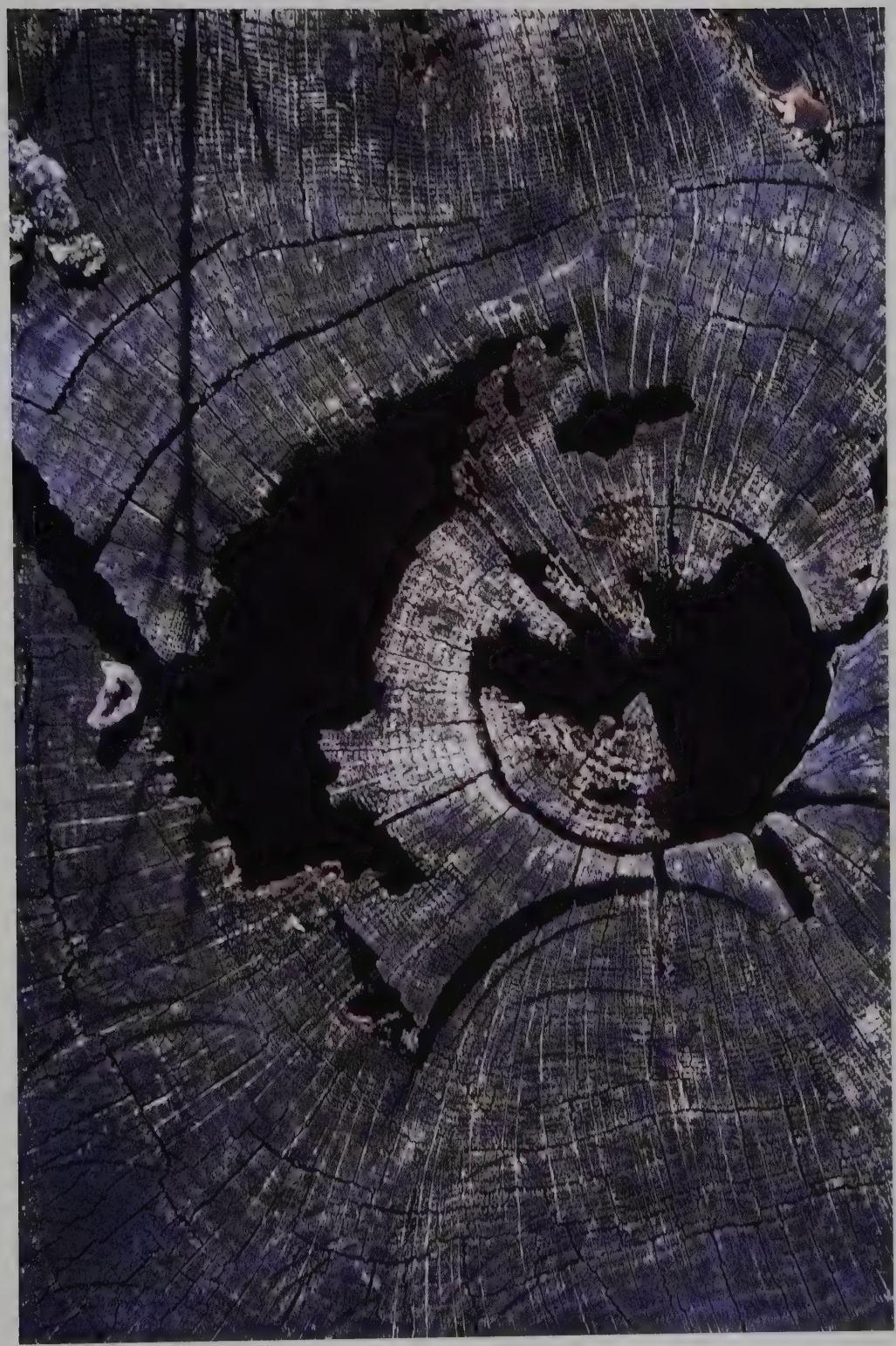
The contentment
of the fully awake—
unruffled by nearness.

Green threads
of river grasses
slip into the sliding waters.

I can still hear its song,
still feel its flight
in these quiet bones.

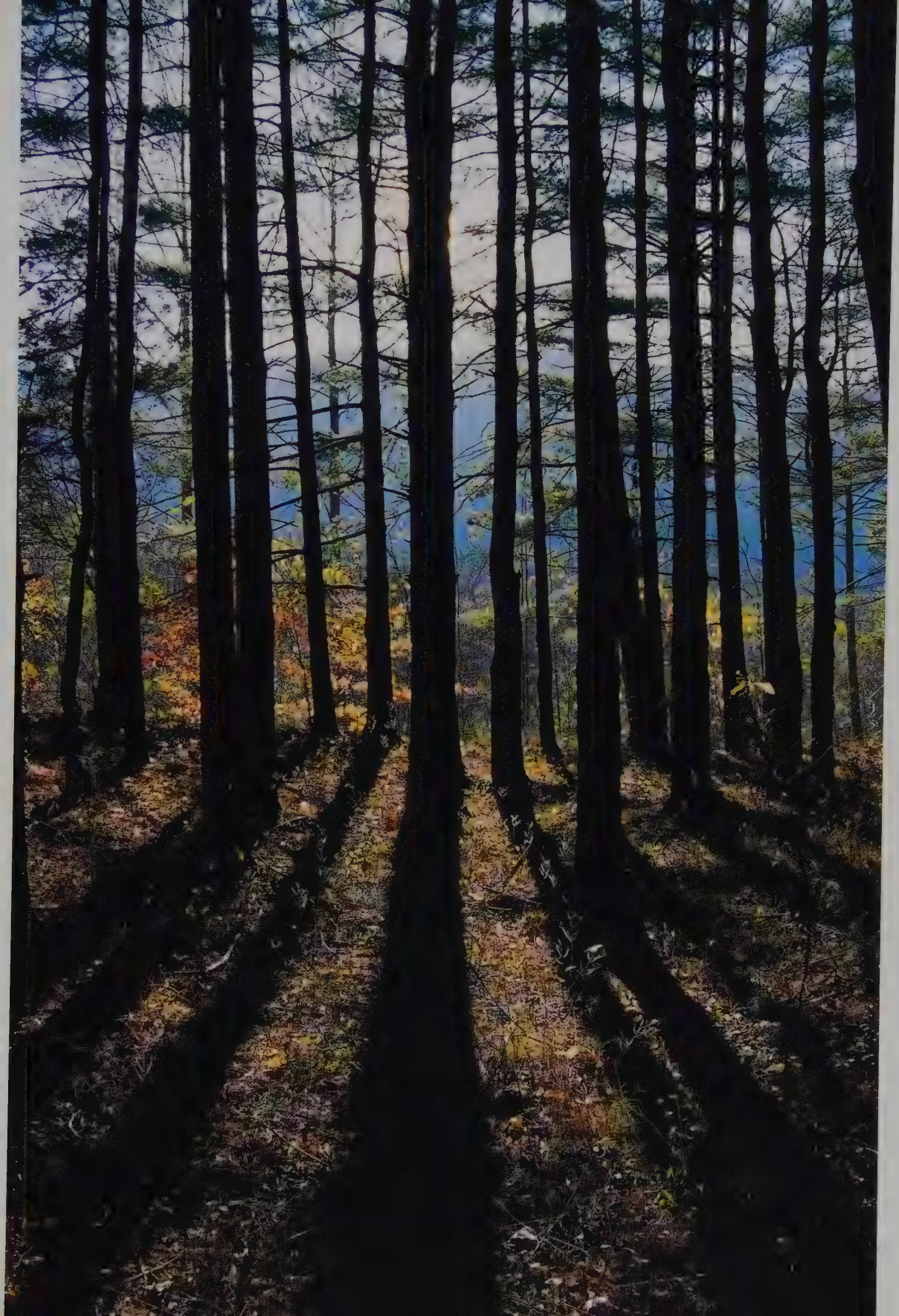
Wind chimes
soundlessly dance—
catalpa seed pods.

The closer you stand,
the sweeter the fragrance,
the richer the shadow.



The tree's dark skeleton
surrounded by new spring buds
can only point.

At day's end
long pine shadows
cover me.



Clustered to keep warm—
mushrooms
in morning's cool shadows.

A pair of fawns
hide their heads
but reveal their bodies.

Bathed in the last light of evening
the river willow
is the only tree in the forest.

Once hidden in the damp earth,
toppled pine roots
dance in the sunlight.

Even in the dim
morning light,
the sycamore trees glow.

If you still don't believe,
then look at September,
look at October—
leaves of green and gold.

Clumps of red berries
just as the sun comes up—
I cannot say a word.

In the woods' quiet,
in places wet and juicy,
mystic forms and colors
spontaneously appear.

It contains the best
of all we are—
truth that can be seen
but cannot be told.

Lost in play
they forget to fly away—
adolescent woodpeckers.

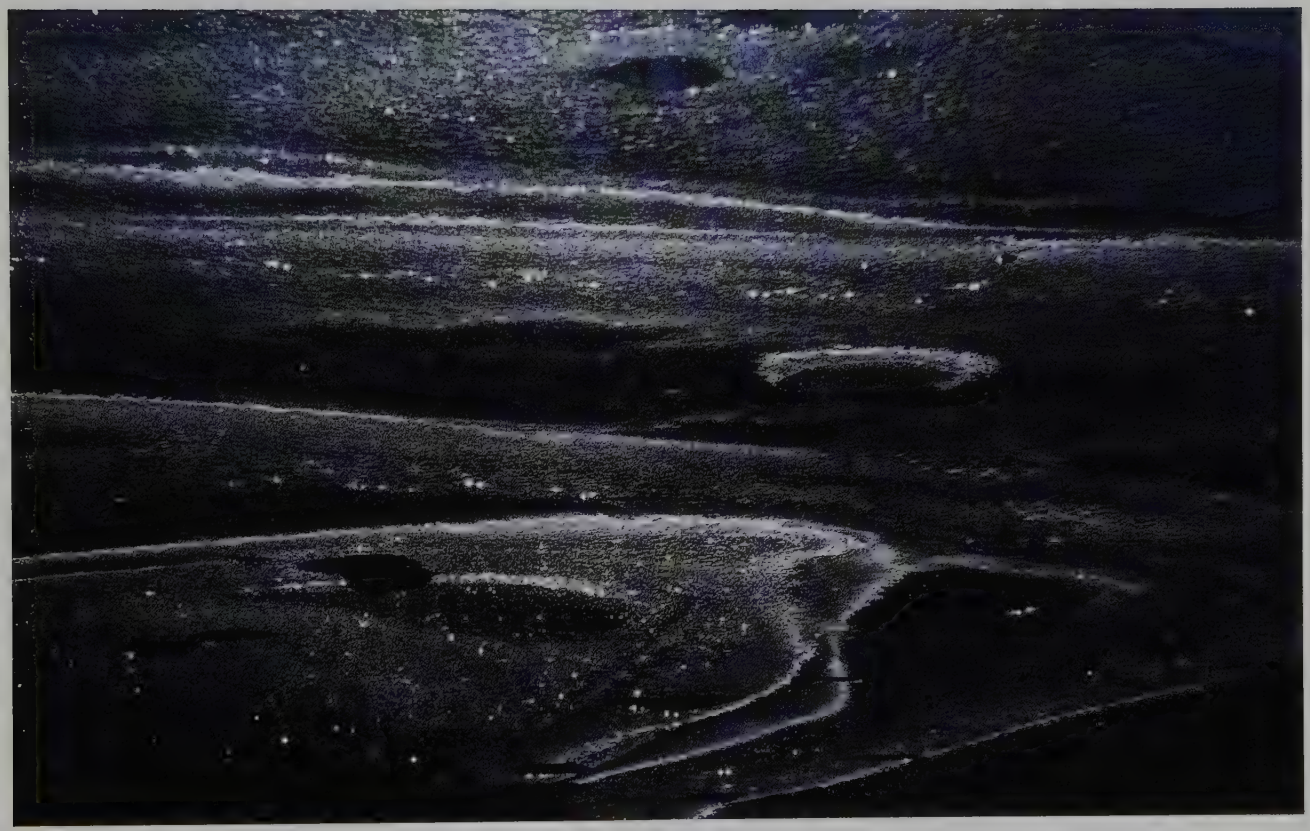
Ice-ladened pine needles
tinkle
in the frosty air.

Spring is in the branches
buried
beneath three feet of snow.

Frozen snow
adorns the naked tree—
flowers bloom in winter.

Fields and mountains
all taken by the snow—
nothing remains.

The shape of the wind
is etched
on the surface of the frozen pond.



Deep woods, midwinter—
nature's silent heart
soothes my mind.

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Cave of Tigers, Weatherhill, 2000
Teachings of the Insentient, Dharma Communications Press, 1999
Path of Enlightenment, Dharma Communications Press, 1999
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Invoking Reality, Dharma Communications Press, 1998
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Two Arrows Meeting in Mid-Air, Tuttle, 1994
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Mountain Record of Zen Talks, Shambhala Publications, 1988
The Way of Everyday Life, Center Publications, 1978

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This book arises from the premise that unless we love nature, we will not work to save it from exploitation and eventual destruction. The rich mixture of photographs, Zen poems and essays presented on these pages is intended to open our hearts to the wild and the wilderness, and to direct us to the ways in which we can heal this earth.

Just as ancient Zen painters expressed the truth of reality with sparse strokes of the brush, Zen Master Loori captures the unfathomable mystery of our mind and love of the wilderness in extraordinary photographs of ordinary nature. Making Love with Light *pioneers the new genre of Zen photography with profound and touching images and penetrating words.*

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Author of Brush Mind

These photographs and poems speak powerfully to our "wild intelligence." John Daido Loori has created a feast for the senses and an invitation into the depth of mystery embracing all life forms. This is a book to treasure, to savor, and to transform our lives.

Mary Evelyn Tucker
co-editor of Buddhism and Ecology *and*
Worldviews and Ecology

John Daido Loori is one of the West's leading Zen masters. He is the founder and spiritual leader of the Mountains and Rivers Order and abbot of Zen Mountain Monastery.
His work has been most noted for its unique adaptation of traditional Asian Buddhism into an American context, particularly with regard to the arts, the environment, social action, and the use of modern media as a vehicle of spiritual training and social change.
Loori is an award-winning photographer and videographer, and his art and wildlife photography form the core of a unique teaching program that integrates art and wilderness training, and cultivates an experiential appreciation of the relationship of Zen spirituality to our natural environment.
He is the author of *Heart of Being: The Moral and Ethical Teachings of Zen; Teachings of the Insentient; Cave of Tigers: Modern Zen Encounters,* as well as nine other books.

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