

Elemental Things

How easy it is to stay indoors on cold autumn nights; a sirens' song floats from the sofa after a long day. On a recent late October night, I defied their seduction and headed outside.

All ambivalence melted away as I started into the night forest. Soon I saw a dark shape hustling across the trail. In the beam of my headlamp, I recognized a porcupine of my acquaintance, Quirinus (named for a Roman god, the wielder of the spear). I was especially happy to see him because sickness has been afflicting porcupines this summer. I have had a number of patients, a few I was able to treat successfully, a few I was not. Quirinus appeared to be in robust health. I don't know what he has named me, but I assume it translates to "wielder of the apple." He waddled over as I shrugged off my pack. Because he is a porcupine, and therefore curious, he gave my leg an olfactory inspection before settling down to the pleasant task of eating the apple. I hiked on.

I arrived at the site of the beavers' new works and heard the amateurish warning tail-slap of the kit. This shy fellow remains elusive. The grassy place where I used to sit was now underwater. What had been meadow a few weeks ago was now a pond, with water right up to the forest edge. I waded to a little island with a view of the sky, pulled on my fattest coat and warmest hat and settled in to enjoy the show. I could see my breath in the headlamp beam, and also the wake of an arriving beaver. Henry is a handsome beaver, in his prime. He approached me cautiously, took an apple, and retreated to the pond. The moonless sky, framed by spires of fir and spruce, featured the myriad small stars of the southern heavens in autumn. The creatures of the night forest were quiet and no wind rustled the trees. The only sound came from the contented munching of the beaver.

In the nearby woods, I found duff-filled depression just the right size and unrolled the two warm sleeping bags and pads that would ensure a toasty night. I then gathered a bundle of sticks and lit a small fire near the beavers' dam. There, in the night forest, with the fire casting a warm glow on the trees, the sound of gurgling water, and the celestial dome visible between the branches, I defied any architect to create a more spectacular room. At that moment there was no place I would rather be.

To care deeply about nature is an affliction these days. The worst news this week was the election of

Jair Bolsanaro as president of Brazil. He promises to accelerate the conversion of the Amazon rainforest to industrial farmland. Such an act would not only destroy an irreplaceable global treasure but would guarantee catastrophic levels of climate change. May legions rise to stop him.

Sitting by my little fire that night, I recalled one of my favorite sentences from Henry Beston's classic book, *The Outermost House*, "The world today is sick to its thin blood from a lack of elemental things, for fire before the hands, for water welling from the earth, for the air, for the dear earth, itself, underfoot."

I know of few things that recalibrate values better than Beston's elemental things. If you find yourself unmoored, I recommend that you defy the sofa sirens tonight and head out into your own favorite woods. You are also invited to join me by a fire at the beaver pond on November 23, the night of the full Beaver Moon (see below). Whether at my pond, or on your own I hope you find your hands before a fire, and feel the dear earth, itself, beneath your feet. Maybe invite Jair Bolsanaro to join you? —Patti Smith

