



The View From Heifer Hill—April 2023



Death and Life in a Winter Forest

"...[M]ICE AND men, soils and songs, might be merely ways to retard the march of atoms to the sea," wrote Aldo Leopold in *A Sand County Almanac*. The essay, "Odyssey," tracks the eons-long travels of imaginary atom X from the time it was wrested from rock to its return to the "prison of the sea." Throughout its time in grasses and trees, foxes and birds, X is a building block of life in the prairie. During footloose time in the soil, X is carried ever downhill by moving water. The amount of time this atom spends in the world of living things rests in part upon whether the organisms in which X is bound release it at a higher or lower elevation than where it was absorbed. Leopold's words remind us that, from the perspective of an atom, living things are bit players in the saga of life on Earth, and may be as important in death as in life.

This essay came to mind when I set out for a ski about a week after the March heavens delivered nearly four feet of snow. On that day, I skied up the brook to see how the wildlife was faring. The snow banks along the streams were vertical towers, keeping the beavers largely confined to the water. I saw no signs of animal movement until I was a mile upstream. There I encountered the tracks of a deer and coyotes; the tracks of the deer were the last it would make.

I veered away from the scene, feeling anguish for the deer. The tracks of other deer revealed that the survivors weren't having an easy time of it, either. Even with the snowpack firming up, their

small hooves and slender legs punched deep with every step. I was surprised to see that they had been scrambling up ledges to browse on exposed vegetation on the rock faces. It was while I was surveying these tracks that I remembered the trail camera in my backpack. I knew that if I set it up at the kill site, I would see the other side of the story of winter hardship and death.

Although the deer had been killed within the week, all that remained were the spine and ribcage, a bit of hide, and parts of a foreleg. Oh yes, and the deer's intestines, stuffed full of mostly-digested plant matter.

Two days later I took the camera home and viewed the videos. The first beneficiary arrived that night—a red fox who spent twenty minutes chewing on the deer's hide before shearing off a chunk and trotting off to stash it. This pattern continued for an hour—feeding and caching. She returned several hours later for another session. At dawn, the camera captured a beautiful gray fox who trotted through, sniffing for scraps. He posed for a portrait in the monochrome world of early morning.

When daylight arrived, a pair of crows triggered the camera. I could see that the hide and leg were gone. The crows were undaunted by the remaining poop sausages. They shook them free of their contents and consumed the flesh. Next came a turkey vulture. How do these high-soaring, wide-ranging birds find death beneath a canopy of conifers? Recent research has shown that they have an extraor-



dinary sense of smell. They can follow faint plumes of air-borne compounds from great distances. The long wings that allow vultures to soar so effortlessly made the bird appear ungainly on the ground. While the sleek crows swaggered on their wide-set legs, the vulture teetered along the snow using its wings and tail as props.

The red fox made a couple of daylight appearances, showing off her beautiful colors against the sun-dappled snow. The last animal to be captured before the camera batteries died was a beautiful coyote, making sure the clean-up work was finished. The deer's atoms dispersed, uphill and down, in red fox, coyote, crows, turkey vulture, gray fox, and the other celebrants who arrived before I did.

IN ODESSY, once X returned to the sea, Leopold introduces a second atom; Y emerged into a world transformed by a single species. The former prairie had been plowed and planted. Soil no longer grew richer and deeper with each life and death. Atoms returned to the sea faster than they were extracted from rock. Y's journey through the biosphere was much shorter and less noble than the journey of X.

In Vermont, the forest that welcomed the return of the deer's atoms has been altered by the activities of the same domineering species. In the forest during the time of X, wolves or cougars would have redeemed the atoms of the deer. Still, it is a forest, and made wilder by coyotes.

The perspective of an atom is unsentimental and eternal. I adopt it to escape from the emotional turmoil that is the blessing and curse of sentience. If I had to choose, though, I would choose to be among the brief sparks to feel the pain of the deer, the satisfaction of the fox, and the awe that arises from the capacity to appreciate just how wondrous life is. May we harness this reverence to redeem ourselves.

If it has been a while since you pawed through *A Sand County Almanac*, I encourage you to dust off your copy and take a stroll with Aldo Leopold. Make sure you read the story "Sky Dance" in which he describes the mating flight of the woodcock. Enjoy this spring rite on EarthDay evening, April 22, at BEEC. Visit www.beec.org.

