

AMY WELDON

Gaze Upon This World

Nature, sight, and time

I'M BIKING through the dark in the smoky chill of October. Overhead, a great-horned owl gathers itself and lands on a snag, its swiveling, feather-crowned head wider than my palm. I stop the bike and stand still. For a while, the owl and I watch each other. Then, hearing some creaturely snap in the brush, it ungrips its branch and springs into the dark.

Wonder stirs in me and sharpens to delight. *When I get home, I'll call Daddy and tell him I saw . . .*

Oh.

Three weeks ago today and it still isn't real.

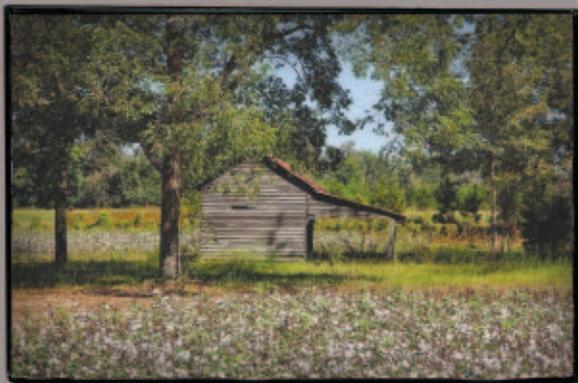
The fierce knuckly hands almost gentle in their letting go, the big thing taking to the night as quiet as a sigh—

One breath. And then he's gone.

I SEE THE WILD WORLD because my father taught me all my life to look at it. The wrinkle of snake-back where I'm just about to

put my foot. Turkeys stalking in a cutover cornfield. The young bobcat dashing across the road. Bald eagles wheeling over the Upper Iowa River and the college where I teach. Spotting wildlife became a game: "Buzzard or hawk?" he'd ask, pointing at the sky. Driving the two-lane roads near our farm at dusk, I'd test him back: "Might be a deer up there," I'd say, "you better slow down." When, a hundred yards later, the deer flashed through the headlights, he'd sigh. "You have the best wildlife eyes on Earth," he marveled. "If you don't see it, it isn't there."

My wildlife-spotting habit follows me everywhere I go, and by now, *everywhere I go* could mean Alabama, Rome, Florence, or London. One January, three students and I were trudging up Fleet Street at dusk, the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral glowing in the sky. In the alley to Samuel Johnson's house, up a ramp of rain-shined cobblestones, a dark shape flickered. "I'll be damned!" I exclaimed. It was a fox, white-tipped brush aloft,



trotting away on his narrow paws. He glanced back, looked me in the eye, then vanished. Where'd he gone to earth? Marvelously, nowhere I could see.

Even when I can't see animals, I need to know they're there. Animals are the bright throughline of my life in the world; they have a way of being that I worry less about romanticizing than I used to, despite well-founded questions of animal consciousness and selfhood. Our world doesn't need more theories. Our world needs love, and the clear sight and conviction of which love makes us capable. The grief-lit questions of the Anthropocene are loose among us right now—who'll carry on what we love? Who'll protect the dying, speak up for the vanishing, bear witness and struggle and mourn?

My father's dead. And now these questions slice into me, and twist. Who will know the stories he knows, stop to marvel at a tree full of winter birds, speak with dignity in a world that shouts? What will I keep doing with the gift he gave me: a writer's first necessity, a keen and rapturous attention to the living world? To whom will I tell what I see?

ON A THOUSAND ACRES in east Alabama, my father made a world for himself, and us, centered on the bird-hunting tradition in which he'd been raised. Like his father, he was a doctor who kept cattle and horses and planted longleaf pines. ("When William Bartram came here," he'd marvel, "the whole Southeast was full of them, a pine savanna the Indians would burn every so often, because longleafs love fire.") He labored over habitat for bobwhite quail, bewildered by the decline in the modest little creatures that had once been known as the *poor man's bird*, rocketing out of every fencerow to feed any sharecropper with a rickety gun. Too many subdivisions mushrooming up, now, where pastures had been. Too many coyotes,

those opportunists of over-peopled land. Too many chemicals in air and water and, thus, in eggshells. Who knew all the reasons behind their decline? But nevertheless bird hunting—the ritual, if not the killing—was a big part of the place; there were always the kennels full of pointers and setters, leaping against their chain-link walls and shivering with delight. ("A righteous man," read the verse from Proverbs taped to our kitchen cabinet, "cares for the need of his animal.") There were the horses, Chester and Pal and little Charlie, who'd lie down and roll in water even on a cold day. And there was the "Stal," or "White Stallion," a 1995 white two-door Tahoe with Quail Unlimited plates and 300,000 miles on the odometer and a bumper hitch to pull the dog trailer. "Let's see," he'd sigh, "how long we can keep this thing going."

I spent more bright winter days than I'd ever count there in the field with him, learning by sight, like a young monk with master, what became a ritual preserved for its own sake. Let the dogs fan back and forth in front of you. Walk easy, don't crowd. And say *good dog* early and often. Bird dogs like a woman's voice, although I was less dog-handler than preteen horse-holder while the men got off and waded into the brush to shoot. I'd gather the long reins into my hands, soothing the horses as the men withdrew the shotguns from the padded scabbards under their stirrups ("thank you, honey") and crunched away into a stand of partridge pea and thorn behind an excited dog freezing on point before the whirl of wings exploded into the sky. The older we got, the less shooting we did. But we never gave it up entirely. Some rituals are worth preserving simply for the way they direct you to an ethic of humility, for the way they train your eyes toward that which is just beyond your sight.

I've never killed a living thing with a gun and expect I never will. But I love bird hunting. Like any walk, it tunes up my sight.



I crave its meditative pace, that stroll through a landscape of sedge grass and pine, the constant visual scan for what's ahead of you and what's right at your feet: abandoned halves of turkey eggshells, a black ribbon of snake curled at the mouth of its den. Learning to submit your attention to the world makes you love

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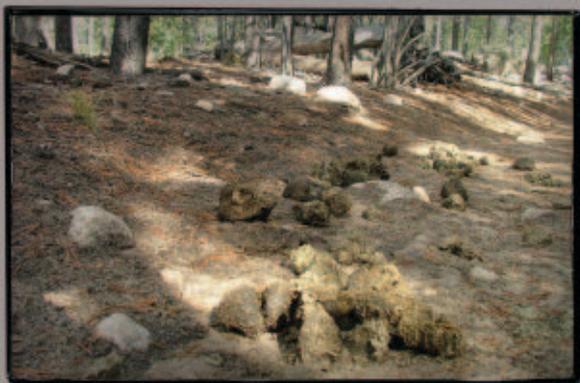
the world and makes you feel responsible to it by drawing you into the network of relationships and realities bigger and more wondrous than yourself: seasons of leaf and bud and fruit, tides and the motions of stars, Leviathan moving, even now, in the acidic and sonar-riddled deep.

Years later I'd recognize this same responsibility and rapture in Galileo's patient observations of the moon. His treatise, *Siderius Nuncius* (*The Starry Messenger*), published in 1610, alternates sketches of the moon's phases—shadow creeping across in thicker and thicker crescent shapes—and lists of data with prose explanations of what he's seen. Like his fellow Florentine Dante Alighieri, Galileo is always analogizing, explaining the heavens to us in terms our earthbound eyes can understand. If the moon looks so smooth from afar, how can he claim that it's actually so rough? "So [also] in a billowy sea," he writes, "the high tips of the waves appear stretched out in the same plane, even though between the waves there are very many troughs and gulfs." Elsewhere he describes "this lunar surface, which is decorated

with spots like the dark blue eyes in the tail of a peacock." The national science academy of Italy, the *Accademia dei Lincei*—literally, "academy of the lynx-eyed"—rewarded Galileo by inducting him in 1611 as its sixth member, publishing his work, and even backing him in his famous conflicts with the Church.

In naming itself after a famously sharp-sighted animal, the *Accademia* placed observation at the center of the scientific process, and even of human life. Its founder, a young nobleman named Federico Cesi, had been inspired by a line from *Magia Naturalis* (*Natural Magic*, 1558) by the Renaissance polymath Giambattista della Porta: "with lynx-like eyes, examining those things which manifest themselves, so that having observed them, he may zealously use them." Cesi chose the academy's motto accordingly: *Minima cura si maxima vis*, or "Take care of small things if you want to obtain the greatest results." In a way, every great scientist or writer or surgeon or ecologist who's ever lived is connected by this love of the living world. By seeing it clearly, we can join hands with them. My father held one end of that chain, extending his other hand to me. And I reach out, now, to my students: Go walk around campus, notice one thing in the natural world, and put it in your story, no matter what it is. Name the sound new snow makes when you step on it. Turn off your phones. Be like Galileo. Look closer. Wake up.

IN THE WINTER before my father's death, I started taking his dogs out myself. (That was the month he'd shattered his tibial plateau by stepping on a slippery metal trailer hitch, "like an idiot," he griped. Was that when his illness started, the run-down-ness so easy to dismiss as *just gettin' old*, *just this leg that's got me down*, those signs we didn't see and didn't know how to read?) Each run began with investiture: the tan-and-orange Dunn's jacket, the electric training collar in its black case, and



last—and most importantly—the whistle on its braided leather cord. Normally that whistle swung from the knob on the back of the door against the starched white coat with *Dr. Weldon* stitched on the right chest in black thread and its pocket full of index cards for him to fill with his dark spiky script: patient's name, observations, signs pointing to a diagnosis. He'd been a surgeon for thirty-eight years but a bird hunter all his life. And like every bird hunter he had his preferred whistle: the Acme Thunderer of Bristol, England. He loved to hear me talk about England; a reluctant flyer, he'd never been overseas. "You know so much," he marveled. "My lord, the things you know."

But you know more, I wanted to say but couldn't, struck dumb by the flood of it into my mind, so effortless to him: the names of every tree on our place, the intricacies of heart-vein and cell, the deep-past family histories, the boyhood in a segregated South, the river of association and knowledge flowing through the particular filters of his history and brain and speech, his sudden utterances a kind of grace. "It was a good thing the South lost the war." "If there is a cougar out there, I'll never allow it to be shot on my place." "Out on the tractor, bush hogging—that's where I do my best prayer." Sometimes I'd ask him to say more. Sometimes I'd retreat bashfully, according to some idea of tact that now seems criminally naïve. We think there's so much time, so many words, until there aren't.

With the Acme Thunderer around my neck, I'd back the Stal up to the dog trailer and pull it around by the kennels. The dogs were ecstatic, scurrying across the concrete floors, sniffing and wagging and leaping up to paw my chest. Taking them out was a big responsibility. In the back of my head lay the potential calamity of any activity involving animals: the half-buried wire that snatches a horse and rider to the ground, the neighbor bringing back a runaway dog after dark, the shame of incompetence. But

they'd leap into the trailer, and we'd trundle out to see what we could find.

IN LATE JULY OF 2015 my father found a mass in his belly. *Poorly differentiated sarcoma with involvement of kidney and nodes. Treatment: Surgery with Whipple procedure and nephrectomy. Prognosis —*

Twelve hours of surgery later, we believed we had it all. But sarcoma doesn't work that way. It's more like the brush fire we set each spring to scald away the sweetgums and anneal our young longleaf pines. There's a center, and there are offspring fires, blazes where blowing sparks land and take root. Neck, nodes, lungs.

By late September, it was everywhere.

"He wants to do this with some grace," my mother wept.

So he came home. From truck to porch to chair to hospital bed in the living room, under a painting of the brilliant trees around our lake in fall. Heavy-bellied, ankles blurred white in stretchy support hose, he was a man underwater, fluid rising in his legs, his lungs. In his favorite blaze-orange sweatshirt, blue scrub suit, and moccasins, he sat in his chair, reading aloud, with his brother, a book I'd sent them on British Civil War spies in Charleston. I flew down to Alabama every weekend, then back to Iowa to teach. I tried not to let him see me cry. My sweet students, awkward and sincere, watched me carefully, sat up and spoke eagerly, pressed close as puppies near the end of class, their presence beseeching: *please know we wish we knew what to say to you*.

When Daddy could sit out on the porch, or come to the back door, we brought his bird dogs to him. They rolled belly-up at his feet, refusing to be drawn away. I'd rinse their buckets and hose their kennel floor. "Thank you for doing that, honey," he'd smile. "My lord, got a PhD and you still come down here and shovel dog shit." "Hey," I'd respond, "no worse than the average faculty



meeting.” The ancient Labrador—her body lumpy with benign lipomas, stiff with arthritis—would press close and shove her nose underneath his hand. “Funny,” he mused, “I never thought this old dog would outlive me.” He’d drink a milkshake. He’d sit with us. He’d take his pills.

On October 1, 2015, before dawn, in the hospital bed in his own living room, he died. It was just after 4 a.m. in Iowa when my mother called me. “He’s gone,” she said.

The memorial service in my childhood church—standing-room only—was a stiff-backed, burning-eyed blur: his nurses, loyally dressed in scrub suits; the shine of the plastic communion cups; my small niece and nephew snuffling into Mama’s neck. On a table in front of the altar: framed pictures of Daddy in his hunting clothes. The surprisingly small mahogany box of his ashes, draped with a white handkerchief. And flowers from our yard: early-blooming camellias, one mysterious late gardenia, and three so-called Confederate roses, *Hibiscus mutabilis*, the tall scraggly bush you’ll see in every country yard and abandoned-homestead clearing in Alabama, with thick-petaled, ruffly flowers that open white and slowly blush pink until they’re fuchsia by dark. They bloom in October, right at the dimming of the year. The first one opened, white, on the morning of his death.

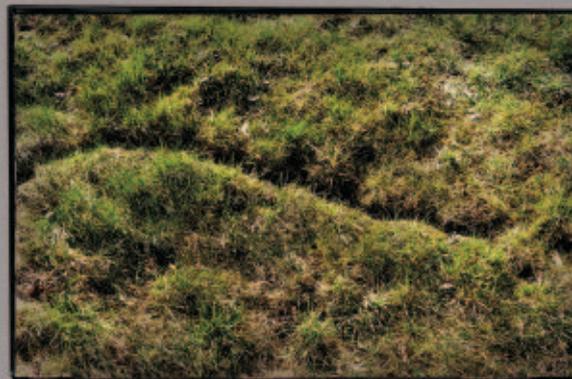
Back home, I set the box of my father on his old rolltop desk. Flinched at the naked white label with its number and name. Fetched an orange hunting cap and set it on top. Every night I put my hand on that box. It thrummed with some energy, with a faint hum I heard below my actual sense. *Good night, Daddy, I prayed. You’re not alone. You’re not here by yourself.*

BEING OUTDOORS teaches you to see what’s there in front of you, but, through imagination and story, it can also turn you toward

the mythic. Monsters and beasts come alive through detail, in *The Odyssey* or in a hunting camp: *You should have seen that snake that sprang out of that haybale when they cut it open. I looked up and there he was, a big ol’ buck with the smoke coming out of his nose and a rack just like a rocking chair. Finally we saw him—a nine-foot gator, been in that pond the whole time and we didn’t even know.* To walk in the natural world is to walk in particularity and mystery, both of which are sharpened by the attention that can keep you alive.

A good way to understand this is to look at rattlesnakes, which occupy the same place in the rural Alabama imagination that Scylla and Charybdis must have occupied in the minds of Odysseus’s sailors—dreaded and feared, right enough, but what a thing to see, what a welcome sign that the world’s not yet tame. Every farm truck had a stash of rattles in the propped-open ashtray, with shreds of skin clinging to the pocketknife-chopped roots of the tail. Once, frozen to the spot, I watched my mama chop a three-foot rattler to pieces as it streaked for its den under the porch. Another time, my father uncovered a nest of young snakes inside the wooden pallet that held up our diesel-fuel tank: “people think rattlesnakes hiss *soft*, like steam,” he said, “but it’s not, it’s a *hard* sound, like a *spit*.” He knew different sounds could be important; like eighteenth-century surgeons, he’d put his ear to patients’ chests for the evocatively named *seagull murmur*. Physicians, like writers, are connoisseurs of the sensory and the specific.

And then there was the rattlesnake ghost: a skin nearly a foot wide, edge to edge, draped over a rafter in my grandmother’s attic. I never knew who’d killed it, or where. On Sunday afternoons, if I could cajole an adult to tug the trapdoor cord in the hallway ceiling, I’d clamber up the wooden ladder that uncurled at me and sagged beneath my weight, each step a narrow knob of spine. As my head rose into the dark, I was already turning to look for the rattlesnake skin in the far back corner, its scales



sequin-rough, its pale belly luminous. I touched one shaggy black stripe, already knowing how it would feel. I feel it now. Yet when we cleaned out the attic after my grandmother died, the snakeskin was gone. “I never saw anything like that,” my mother said. “Are you sure it was there?”

Years later, teaching my students to write similes, I thought of it: *like an evening shawl, flung over the back of a chair*. This line was in my head even as a child, helping me reconcile that dark attic with the bright rooms underneath; a good simile can show you we’re all in the same house. “Let the snake wait under / his weed,” wrote William Carlos Williams,

*and the writing
be of words, slow and quick, sharp
to strike, quiet to wait,
sleepless.
—through metaphor to reconcile
the people and the stones.*

A simile rides on an essential likeness of sensory texture and a responsibility to physical realities of a particular place in which two unlike things may be found. And on a leap—a reaching into a space where anything might meet your hand.

IN MY FATHER’S HOUSE, after his death, coyotes were a torment. Every morning at 2 a.m., yips and yowls at the window woke me up, then—infuriatingly—fell silent. There was no getting back to sleep. I wanted to snatch up a gun and blast into the dark. Nobody’d miss a goddamn coyote.

This was a persistent note of the fall: *who’s alive while he’s dead? Who’s still breathing the air when he’s not?* After his memorial, we got a grateful letter from my father’s last patient, whom

he’d gone to see back in July although he was *not feeling good*. My father was loved. He was needed. For years it’s been our rueful axiom that the best animals will die if you look at them sideways, but you can’t kill the worthless ones with a stick. I suppose it’s wrong to apply this reasoning to people.

Days kept coming. I moved through them, voice shriveled dry by anger and grief and the fallenness of whatever this new world was. I fought toward an elusive Jesus (*I have to believe you are there*) and bit down on the snarl at sweet Baptist ladies to get out of my face. I graded papers and counseled students and chaired the faculty. I taught *Frankenstein*, in which a fatherless creature shambles, bellowing, through the world, bereft as Faulkner’s Benjy Compson, who can only holler and grieve, clutching the treasure that gets dirtier the longer he clings to it. I drank wine and binge-watched *The Knick*, about a New York hospital in 1900. Brooding surgeon Clive Owen slashed open a girl’s chest to massage her heart. Three minutes earlier, she’d been alive. *Gotta call him, he’d really love this . . . Oh.*

Like a boat against a dock I bumped against the fact that tethered me.

In his memorial-service bulletin, we printed a poem called “Death Comes to the Physician.” “Enter, Death, my old acquaintance!” it begins. “I know thee too well to fear thee.”

Throughout my childhood, his successes flowed around us like the tide. In every restaurant, in church, in gas stations, patient after patient would approach, shaking his hands, hugging him, smiling, often crying: “I’m alive because of you. I’ll never forget what you did for my mama.” Yet, never quite consoled, the doctor walks the border between life and something else. And he goes there alone. In his memoir *Do No Harm*, neurosurgeon Henry Marsh quotes the French physician René Leriche: “Every surgeon carries within himself a small cemetery, where from



time to time he goes to pray.” I don’t know all the names on the stones in my father’s plot of memories and regrets. I’ll never know all he’d seen inside the bodies and hearts opened to him, all he’d forgotten or decided to forget. But I imagine they are there, clustering around him still—for one spirit never leaves another—in a chorus of anger and grief and grace. *Don’t worry, Doc. We know you did your best.*

Making dinner on an ordinary night, I was listening to Classical Minnesota Public Radio when the men’s vocal group Cantus began to sing.

*I am sitting here wanting memories to teach me.
To see the beauty in the world through my own eyes.*

*You used to rock me in the cradle of your arms.
You said you’d hold me till the pains of life were gone.
You said you’d comfort me in times like these and now I need you.
Now I need you, and you are gone.*

In my kitchen I stood frozen and weeping, gripping the edge of my counter as if it were an altar because to let go was to let go of that ringing note of beauty that was cutting some ragged edge clean.

TWO WEEKS after the memorial service, I climbed into the Stal before dawn, heading back to the airport. A pale shape loped through my headlights. Coyote. I hit the gas. The old engine roared. I almost had him, the son of a bitch who kept me awake all week when I wanted sleep more than oxygen but had to keep pushing my sandy eyes open and my cheeks into a smile. But suddenly the coyote ducked right and disappeared.

Coyotes are common all over Iowa too. On freezing nights

their songs needle down off the river bluffs and into my warm living room, where my cats shiver and flatten their ears.

The world goes on. No matter what I’d rather do about it.

“MAYBE YOU COULD USE his phone,” my mother offers, six months later. “It’s just sitting here.” I’m the family technophobe and cheapskate intellectual, with a million theories about how screens fuck us up. I do need a phone. But speaking through the device that held my father’s voice creeps me out and saddens me. Maybe I can download the messages, though, to save them. Maybe I can download the pictures.

It’s a jolt to unwrap the familiar black iPhone in its battered blaze-orange-and-Realtree-camo case. When I scroll through the pictures, I see through his eyes. Instruction manuals and my niece on her pony and tractors for sale and my own flowering garden in Iowa and small things he considered beautiful: Wild Cahaba lilies in the swamp. Spring crabapple blossoms. Galaxies of tiny white flowers in the grass. The sign my mama propped in the driveway when the killdeer chicks took over the front yard: *Caution! Baby Birds in Road!* And over and over, my mama herself.

Mythic wildlife, too, were here. There was the nine-foot alligator baited with raw chickens until it bit down on a four-pronged hook. There was a red-eyed snapping turtle thrashing in the back of a truck. And at the sandy edge of pine woods stood a man hoisting, on a chest-high stick, a rattlesnake so big each end almost touched the ground, its thick body shaggy with scales, its head fist-sized. It is a sleepy, murderous beast. It is a blast of Old-Testament desert-hearted myth. And it is something my father would have taken great pleasure in thumbing back to, savoring it as a sign that the world had not yet been thoroughly explained. He looked to see those signs. So do I. That’s how I’ll remember



him, because memories are pinned in images to our minds, and to our hearts. Galileo knew this too. “For such is the condition of the human mind,” he wrote, “that unless continuously struck by images of things rushing into it from outside, all memories easily escape from it.”

When I stand on the Ponte Vecchio in Florence, I think of Dante, child of that river city, comparing sinners hunkered in pitch to frogs cowering up to their eyes in mud, fleeing the Heavenly Messenger as if fleeing a heron’s jab. I can picture that panicked sideways spurt of motion, raising a curl of river-mud through the water, because I saw it in Alabama first, alongside the siren drone of peepers and the soft plunk of turtles in our own lake, on some evening that my father and I were—are always—standing on the bank, enjoying, together.

The lovely thing, truly seen, can bend time back into itself until all moments are the same.

Danger. Beauty. These things remind us: *dust thou art, and to dust thou shalt return*. But first: open your mortal eyes and gaze upon this world.

WITH THE ACME THUNDERER around my neck, I parked the Stal and unlatched the dog trailer and released Brownie, the female pointer who’s the hardest-running, most self-forgetful dog in the kennel. Brownie will leap into a patch of thorns and nose around until she’s cut to ribbons. She’ll bite her own tongue in excitement and gallop on, bleeding. She won’t come in until she’s good and ready.

Running along the creek bank, she caught something in the air and swung around so hard she almost backflipped. Then she was on it, digging with both paws so fast her head soon disappeared. Every so often she’d thrust her nose against the dirt and snort, pause, then dig faster. I hunkered close and poked

with a stick but couldn’t see anything. Not a quail, for sure. Maybe it was an armadillo—they were all over that field. She dug so hard I was worried she’d soon break through the burrow ceiling and fall in.

“Brownie, come on.” I touched her wiry back, ribs and muscles jerking under the brown-flecked white fur. She ignored me. “Come on.” I grabbed her collar and yanked her away, and she strained back to the hole. All the way back to the dog trailer I dragged her and she fought until she slipped loose and galloped back to dig in again.

Then I remembered: Brownie loves rats, which, like deer or house cats, are forbidden. But look how badly she wanted it: tail whipping, mud-caked ribs heaving. Isn’t that why we take animals out into the world with us—to enter reality as they experience it, even for a little while? To feel the world flow into our bodies as it flows into theirs—one continuous river of taste, smell, sight, desire?

A month before my father’s death, Brownie would be the first to run to him where he stood shakily in the door, and the last to be shooed away.

It is something to want, to reach with everything you have for something no one else can see, because it is so clear to you. To look at the world, and keep looking. This is how a spirit moves forward through time. This is how it goes on.

I left Brownie at the rat hole and fetched Stal and the dog trailer. By the time I got back, the rat was gone, and she was ready to come in, trotting close and low, looking up at me and wagging her tail, leaning against my legs, ready to be lifted into the trailer to go home.

In the Stal, whistle jingling around my neck, I cruised past the house and waved at my father. Distantly I could see him in the door, waving back. *Good work.* ○

