

The Tangled Bank

Robert Michael Pyle

LOSERS KEEPERS

Things that go missing, or what we gain from the ever-present ebb and flow of stuff

IF MY TESTICLES were not firmly tied on with gooseflesh, I would have lost my deep male voice long before it ever cracked. I am a loser of the first degree.

It's always been this way. When my grandmother Grace took my older brother Tom and me to early Disney films at the Denver Theater—*Snow White*, *Cinderella*, *Peter Pan*—we walked from her house near City Park to the #12 bus stop and waited beside a big mulberry with whose sticky little fruits Tom and I filled our faces. After the “streetcar” brought us

Deer Creek Canyon, a true Valhalla cut off from my home by many miles of the still-small Mile High City, I went wild over amethyst Colorado hairstreaks on Gambel’s oaks, bright silverspots and skippers thronging September-yellow rabbitbrush. But when we transferred buses in front of the state capitol’s golden dome, my box of specimens—my best trove yet as a young lepidopterist—did not. The Denver Tramway dispatcher got used to us.

You could cover the heads of a small nation with the hats I’ve scattered about

through the end of the ’60s, that era of enhanced appreciation for outrageous headdress, then abandoned me at a roadhouse in Toad River, Yukon Territory, along the Alaska Highway. In the years that followed, I refined losership into an art. The summer of ’76, visiting Estes Park, I managed to misplace my glasses, my camera, and ultimately the driver’s door of my Volkswagen bus all in the same week.

But not all of my losses have been for keeps. I have been lucky beyond any sensible expectation in the return of my offerings, and not just the thirty pounds along the waistline that I’ve lost and found time after time. The Black Watch flannel shirt deserted on a Delta airplane in Arkansas and recovered through the zeal of a humane ticket agent who made it her mission to restore the stray garment. The wallet I’ve carried for twenty-five years, a patchwork of thin leather and duct tape, that liberated itself from the top of our car on a California freeway only to reach me a month later, cards truck-busted but contents otherwise intact. The object that I’ve lost and found the most, and most fear losing for good, is the set of fine, small Leitz binoculars given me by my former wife Sally Hughes when we were living in graduate school penury. They came with us from New Haven to

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back—a bus by then, but to Grammy it was always the streetcar—we walked home in the shady alley behind Detroit Street, tired and way too hot to wear the jackets we were obliged to take on every outing in case one of the famous Denver thunderstorms came up. Good thing skin is waterproof, because invariably Gram had to call the Denver Tramway Company to retrieve the jacket I left behind.

Not long later, my car-less mother and I managed through her tactical skills to reach a close-in Front Range canyon via varied public transportation. Once inside

the globe. The pebble-gray cap left in a hot college classroom. The purple-heather deerstalker ditched during a summer deluge on a London double-decker near Big Ben on the way to see snakeshead fritillary flowers in a Wiltshire wood. Any number of straw and Panama chapeaus and one ridiculous Hoss Cartwright ten-gallon cowboy hat that badly needed losing. And one I truly hated to forfeit: my XXX Beaver Stetson Smokey hat, acquired for and well broken in during a summer as a ranger-naturalist in Sequoia National Park. It lived an unofficial life

New Guinea, and accompanied me everywhere I've been ever since. They are as much a part of my body as the units with which I began this column, but they are not attached. I have left them on trains, planes, and boats, at security in JFK, and atop a mountain in the Sangre de Cristo Wilderness Area in Colorado just before a storm. And once in Costa Rica, would-be thieves, seeing me near tears over my missing binoculars, returned them to me, pretending they had found them.

The first of many cases that carried these field glasses was a neat leather bag with Indian-head nickels for clasps. I once recovered that bag through a want ad in a local paper, but finally parted ways with it at a rest stop on the Oregon coast. The binocs were around my neck that day, praise be! These beloved optics—which once got me into a Van Morrison concert, inspired an impromptu haiku by Gary Snyder in Okinawa, and granted me intimate visions of an infinitude of lives and landforms—have (knock, knock, knocking on wood) always come back to me. And so, I dearly hope, it ever shall be. Amen.

Even the gray, marbled Pelikan fountain pen with which I am writing these words has taken its leave and returned over and over, like the cat that came back, or a slow paddle ball. Once it disappeared into a recess of Thea's truck for six months. Another time I lost it on the *Coast Starlight* approaching Redding at three a.m., the Amtrak conductor and I on our hands and knees among the legs of slumbering passengers, looking all around with a flashlight. He found it just before I had to detrain. And again just last week: somehow misplaced at a conference in Eugene, almost given up for gone, it arrived in the post yesterday from a friend who had used it to sign a book and later found it in her purse.

Every time such beloved items find their way back home, I feel a disproportionate thrill of joy and redemption, like the



simple glee expressed in the words of that old pop song: "Reunited, and it feels so good." But don't misread me. I am not a very materialistic person; my only car just passed a third of a million miles, my only boat has buoyed my bulk in its eighteen feet of wood and fiberglass for decades. Except for the beckon of books, I'm a rotten consumer. Yet I am a materialist, insofar as modest physical objects matter to me. As a biologist, I try to imagine the adaptive value for such behavior—why do we feel such affection for old belongings? Is it merely sentiment, or resistance to change, or is it something atavistic? After all, our pets and their wild ancestors have their favored lairs and playthings. The violet-green swallows return to the same nest-hole in our porch year after year. Captive chimps, like children, give up their accustomed blankets only under violent protest. Possession seems to have deep evolutionary roots. Artifacts have always mattered to people. Sure, they are only things, and when lost, they reassimilate into the world. But they are the things that recall our histories and root us to our material existence.

The fact of the matter is we are all losers, even if not as practiced as I. We lose

our special childhood places to subdivisions and shopping centers. Our hard-won freedoms, along with the most basic expectations of a civilized society—education, healthcare, and security in old age—are slipping away from us, filched by officials and legislators in service to wealth and power. In large ways and small, we share the certainty of loss, every day and all through our lives—our elders, hair, keys, all gone. Yet the losses we suffer deepen our gratitude for the good things still in our keeping, and make us cherish those that come back from the brink: recovered binocs, the ivory-billed woodpecker, a lover rescued from the grip of mortal illness.

We keep nothing, of course, beyond our temporary tenure. And if possession is only a short-term loan, then what we call loss might be seen as an act of early return, like taking a library book back before the due date. I'll remind myself of that the next time I have to buy new specs, having taken to leaving a trail of trifocals across the land. *yo*

Robert Michael Pyle, who lives with wife Thea and a cat named Firkin on a Lower Columbia backwater, counts his blessings every day and wears his mittens on a string.