

Life in Flyover Country

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I pick up chicken feathers and tie them together. Stick them in pots. Wrap them in grapevine. I watch the down move with the breeze. The robin with the window-damaged eye sings from the garden fence while the oriole harmonizes in the black walnut. The hummingbird drinks from the feeder and the raccoon hides under the chicken coop. I sit vigilant—watching, listening, absorbing—the stones cool beneath my feet. A coyote skirts the back of the soybean field and ducks into the woodland. The trees around her dance. They whisper their memories, their needs, their knowledge.

Something rises in me sitting amongst these magnificent trees and the vestiges of the Ohio Eastern Deciduous Forest. A Carolina chickadee lives here amongst these trees and sits near me—another witness to the incessant song of a red-eyed vireo. The air is electric with sound and warm breezes. A rescued bloodroot and mayapple bloom beneath the decaying yet life-giving sugar maple. What preceded these plants was a lawn covered in a large, sad pile of trash—the tatters of a marriage and lives withered and broken. The sugar maples in the fence row sheltered the same. Their companion shrubs and forbs long gone to clearing, then farming and topsoil loss, then successful and aggressive invasive plants and mowing and more trash. The trees are growing back on their own, and with our help rescued woodland wildflowers come home—back to the



Stones

forest, back to the place where fungal mycelia weave reunion amongst the woodland family and support the life it previously grew for thousands of years.

How do you describe air that hums with life? Life that radiates from the Earth through soles directly to heart. Rooted. Connected. Revered. I think of salamanders and frogs that slumber in a bed of leaves and live in a castle of rotting wood



Trout Lily nestled into American Beech

and loose soil; who feed on small organisms and answer to the pull of the warm spring rains and lengthening days in a primal and ephemeral pool amongst the recovering forest, never drained by dredging, channeling, or the dreaded tile. Swimming and diving and mating; wet, yellow polka dots, yellow thighs, silence and song and finally emergence—a return to the woodlands. Forest and wetlands, a recipe for magic. Life on land, life in water; to need both is a challenge in our developed Midwest.

I think of snapping turtles and their similar but opposite sequence required for lineage perpetuation—water, then land, then water. These ancient beings live as long as humans do and come of age the same time we do. I ponder how united I am in their ritual of procreation—not in the watery conception, but amongst the leaves: the same cushion for my then new, young desire as for the snapping turtle’s precious eggs. If she is lucky, no roads cross her path. An arduous climb up the bank, away

from the water, and into the fallen leaves are all that precede her sacred ritual, then urgently—a return to the safety of her watery home.

We walked this evening and reveled in the enveloping warmth, the fading sunshine, and felt our hearts lighten only to be cracked open again by a raccoon hit and killed moments before we passed by. Life is so abrupt. Here. Gone. The glimmer of life still reflected in her eyes, so fresh was her passing. I wanted to hold her, to move her onto the soil that would take her back and make her anew, but I felt instinctively her spirit needed time to leave without my interference.

Migrating turkey vultures and red-tailed hawks found her the next day and reminded me to put her and her decomposers somewhere safe, away from cars. I hurried down the road, fearing what might come quickly over the rise. I startled the vultures into the trees, disappointed in their luck, but I assured them I would be quick. She was gone, no spirit lingering, her abdomen open and her intestines spilled onto the road. I picked her up gently and carried her to the adjacent farm ground far from the road, so her body would feed those hungry, return to the accepting soil and grow into new plants and new animals. A magnificent cycle, though I mourned the loss of this raccoon. I thanked her for sharing space with us and for living according to planetary rules. Perhaps she is the raccoon that feasted on our two chickens, so desperate was she to feed herself and her babies, and so thoughtless were we in our protection of our feathered hens. Her fur is etched in my memory—the perfectly lined-up hairs to keep her cool, warm, protected. Her eyes glittering green and her hand reaching to the moon.



Gray Treefrog singing in gutter

The drive ahead of me is a dreaded one—not for the destination, a coffee date with my sister, which is warmly anticipated—but because of the traverse across the farmed Till Plain of northwestern Ohio. An hour and a half east for my sister; the same northwest for me. Fog-shrouded soybean fields whispered memories of fog-shrouded prairie. If I looked just right, I could see what was before. As I drove north, I fell under the fog trance and saw what was no more than a remaining vestige: Indian Grass along the roadsides, tucked in amongst the railroad tracks. Freight cars lined up. Idle. Years idle. Tagged by many an artist speaking their truths. What were they for? Why weren't they used anymore? Who lived in them? What did the tagging say? Did the drivers around me notice the cars? Did they feel the whispers of the long-gone prairie, too?



Eastern Prairie

During our rare but essential sisterly catch up, a very kind staff person came up to us and noted our “earthy natures” and our “good energy” and how we “look and feel like we should live in Colorado.” This is not the first time someone has sought me out and joined my name and being with the state of Colorado. Are people that love the Earth and spend their work time serving humanity and the planet only to live in Colorado? I knew what he meant and thanked him for his kindness, but inside the sentiment confused me and made me sad for the land I knew as home. Why are we as a people so defined by stereotypical geography? Why can't good-hearted Earth lovers live in the Midwest? Many of us, of course, do, but why must we so often be mentally linked with Boulder or Crested Butte or Durango? I, too, love the craggy, young mountains, clear running streams, pikas, marmots, and magical aspens, but I also love the great Eastern Deciduous Forest and recognize that the large difference between the two lies not only in the geology, but also in

the destruction or seeming lack thereof. Land that is big and relatively intact and free feels different. I know. I love and need that feeling so very much, too; but if we only love that, then this part of the country—in its current state—becomes known as, and is, “flyover country.”

The millions of monarchs, green darner dragonflies, songbirds, shorebirds, cranes, and myriad other species journeying north in the spring and south in the fall across the Midwest tells me it is—most certainly! Not only is this land flyover country, but it is very important flyover country, fueling the migration of arguably one of the most spectacular butterfly phenomena from the Great Lakes region all the way to Mexico. When looked at from this perspective, that phrase takes on serious new meaning. There is work to do here: land that must be restored to offer sanctuary to us and all the rest of life that shares this patch of ground. There is so much work to do, what is really needed is a revolution—a complete and total renovation and restoration of this clear-cut, farmed, and drained Eastern Deciduous Forest, Wetland, and Prairie complex. Let's restore millions of acres to wild land while also reuniting this land with small-scale agriculture, small farmers, fencerows, and all the wildness that easily coexists in just such a scenario. There is opportunity here for innovation and creative thinking and for heart and soul enrichment.



Hope in a Wild Iris seed

We've experienced the wonder firsthand as we've taken this 3.5 acres of mowed lawn and started to stitch ancient threads of life back together. We provided an open canvas for Mother Nature to work her magic, with just a bit of assistance from us. This reunion we began weaving here—native plants with origins thousands of years ago in this particular place with



First wildflower planting

these particular insects, birds, mammals, amphibians, reptiles—surpasses, daily, both our expectations. A life-devoid lawn transformed into a nature preserve in just a few years. Really? A deep satisfaction settled into our spirits so immediately, it became apparent we lacked something our minds and hearts and undefined parts of ourselves required. What's happening here feels mystical; the peace is all-encompassing as our spirits settle into our ancestral roots and our hearts open to all the other life around us. This satisfaction makes sense because, contrary to many beliefs and spoken and written words, we are part of nature. Not separate. The plants and animals returning feel like old friends. Needed friends. Best friends. This 3.5 acres of unlikely land we call home in north central Ohio is reminding us who we are, where we came from, and where we want to go.

What do we do now as monarchs dwindle in number? As trees reach further and further to communicate? As vernal pools continue to fall prey to bulldozers and dreams of big ponds or the perceived necessity of more parking lots? Where is our love and respect? Good people, let us unite and give voice to the silent cries of salamanders and trees. Let us put aside our distractions and pause. Place our hands in the furrowed bark of a beloved tree or any tree—any at all—settle our fingers into the crevices, feel the braiding, the heartbeat of this living being. Rest our heads on the trunk in peace. Hear the rustle of leaves. Feel time pass. Remember. Offer a prayer of thanks for this moment, in this place, with kindred glad to know us and to be heard. And then, let us act bravely and without fear.

I love being a member of this planetary community just as much as I love the plants that are starting to recognize me as

kin, as someone who wants to learn the rules of living sustainably and gratefully. I love saying goodbye to the voices that scolded me for anthropomorphizing, realizing we as people forgot how to listen to life other than human life. My heart and my mind and the return of life around me tells this is the right path and always was. I am grateful for the tiny seed deep inside me that remained viable for forty years knowing there is infinite complexity and depth to life, and I am grateful to all these plants and animals that gave shelter and water and fertile soil for my seed to grow. This seed is not unique to me. If you are an observer or listener or doer or seeker like me, I invite you to join me in the planting revolution, the restoration revolution... the remembrance revolution. Try it and see if that dried, desiccated part of your soul waiting for reunion doesn't just start swelling as soon as you see the first monarch reunited with the milkweed plant, or the first leafcutter bee cutting crescent moons from plants that once called this land home, too.



Leafcutter Bee sign on newly planted Eastern Red bud.

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Jennifer Kleinrichert is co-owner of The Common Milkweed plant nursery where she and her husband are restoring nature to their property and helping others do the same. She's worked as a naturalist and educator for the National Park Service, the National Audubon Society, Columbus, OH Metro Parks and other non-profits sharing her love of the planet with anyone and everyone. She was first published in *Taproot Magazine's* SEED Issue 10.