The Toad Not Taken

— Jeffrey S. Cramer

Two toads submerged in a yellow mud

And sorry I could not capture both

And be one capturer, long I stood

And looked at one as long as I could

Where it sat in the undergrowth. . .

We are collectors, touchers, takers. We are fascinated by things and so we touch, taste, feel, look and smell, but most of all, we take—to look at later, to experience again and again, to share with a select few, to hoard, to make our own. It is part of who we are that, as we do not like to be left behind, we do not like to leave things behind us. It defines who we are. Perhaps it is part of our heritage as hunters and gatherers that we cannot help but collect as we walk.

Our memories are scanty at best, often failing us. We rely on outside stimuli to help us remember. Taking photographs is one way to take something with us at the same time that we leave it behind. We sketch. We write in journals. We write insipid, flowery verse. These are ways to preserve without affecting the subject. When we leave, nothing external has altered but our vision.

Thoreau knew when someone had called at his Walden cabin while he was out. When he returned home from whatever errand had called him away, he would find broken twigs or forgotten flowers, sometimes elaborately twined or wreathed, left on his desk. "They who come rarely to the woods," he wrote, "take some little piece of the forest into their hands to play with by the way, which they leave, either intentionally or accidentally. One has peeled a willow wand, woven it into a ring, and dropped it on my table."

The landscape should be entered responsibly, respectfully, so that when we leave it is as if we had not been there. It should not be so obvious that we have passed by. I do not want to make my way so unconsciously through the world, leaving little crumbs along the trail, nor marking, like a dog, every tree. This is not an easy thing to achieve. It is more than just

taking our trash with us, scattering our ashes or covering our tracks. It is being awake to our surroundings. As we walk, we often do not know where we are. We are absent-minded, unaware. We break twigs and pick flowers. We crush something underfoot: an insect, a wildflower, a nest. We expose something which needs to remain unobserved to survive. We make our way clumsily through the world without purpose or definition.

Sometimes it is difficult to see the harm of our actions, they seem so minor as we look at the abundance around us. We live in a country celebrated for its abundance and this land overflowing with bounty has been exuberantly described and honored, and perhaps because of this, we also live in a country that has not taken its role of stewardship seriously. Ever since the rediscovery of North America by the white man, the resources of this land have been considered unlimited, and through this myth a consciousness of waste has been ingrained in us that is difficult to adjust.

Coronado described "such large numbers of cattle that it now seems incredible. . . Traveling over the plains, there was not a single day until my return, that I lost sight of them." Pattie, an American trapper, saw an endless plain of plenty: "As far as the plain was visible in all directions,

innumerable herds of wild horses, buffaloes, antelopes, deer, elk, and wolves fed in their wild fierce freedom." Arthur Barlowe wrote "that I think in all the world the like abundance is not to be found. . . This island had many good woods full of deer, conies, hares and fowl, even in the middest of summer in incredible abundance." John Smith found a land in which, compared to England, a small amount of labor is rewarded with results heretofore unimaginable:

> Heer nature and liberty affords us that freely, which in England we want, or it costeth us dearly. . . He is a very bad fisher cannot kill in one day with his hooke and line, one, two, or three hundred Cods. . . Thus, though all men be not fishers: yet all men, whatsoever, may in other matters doe as well. . . For hunting also: the woods, lakes, and rivers affoord not onely chase sufficient, for any that delights in that kinde of toyle, or pleasure; but such beasts to hunt, that besides the delicacy of their bodies for food, their skins are so rich, as may well recompense thy dayly labour, with a Captains pay.

Facing such abundant resources it is hard to imagine a need for a conservation ethic. Given resources of an unlimited nature there can be no conception of anything but illimitable waste. If waste, by its very meaning, as Webster defines it, is "to cause to shrink in physical bulk or strength: cause to become consumed or weakened. . . to wear away or impair," then it becomes the simplest of logical conclusions that you cannot diminish what is unending, lessen what is greater than we can imagine. It is like removing a grain of sand from a shore, a drop of water from the ocean, a star from the heavens.

At one time flocks of passenger pigeons could literally blot out the sky creating an ornithological eclipse. Alexander Wilson observed a flock in 1810 which he calculated to be a mile wide and over 200 miles long containing more than two billion birds in flight. Audubon saw dung falling "in spots not unlike melting flakes of snow, and the continued buzz of wings had the tendency to lull my senses into repose." The seemingly unlimited supply and ease of capture made them a common and cheap market staple. In Ohio in 1857 a law was proposed which would protect the passenger pigeon but the Ohio state senate decided the bird needed no protection. They called it "wonderfully prolific" and mistakenly concluded

that "no ordinary destruction can lessen them or [cause them to] be missed from the myriads that are yearly produced." Just over forty years later the last known wild passenger pigeon was shot.

Once Julia and I took our two daughters to a nature sanctuary north of Boston to see the tide-pools. After we had stayed awhile, we started gathering together shells and rocks and bits of sea-weed. Then we saw the sign. "Please do not remove any objects." Unable to understand the harm in taking a few shells from this infinite shore, I asked one of the guides there. She explained about the number of visitors they welcomed every day, the number of schoolchildren bussed in, and how if each child took only one or two mementos, the beach would soon be stripped clean.

It was a simple concept. I was one, we were four, but we must look at the possibility that every person has the potential and the right to do the same thing we do and that, not only are we not exempt because we are only one—every person is only one; every action is only once—but that consenting to one is consenting to all. What is here for one is here for all to share. Infinitude is merely a mathematical concept. In reality everything is ultimately finite.

It *is* a wonderful life and the wonder is how far-reaching every action and thought may be, which isn't to say we should never pick a wildflower or pocket a shell, but we must do so responsibly and consciously. As stewards we must make sure there are always enough buds to flower and go to seed and not pick a field clean. When collecting shells or rocks we must take only what we truly need or desire and not leave a barren shore. We must not take just for the taking, pick for the picking. When it comes to wildlife, whether it is an insect, a snake, a toad or a bear, look at it, observe it, hold it gently in your hand (not the bear!) if you must, and then put it back. One snake seen slithering through the underbrush is worth a hundred held in a terrarium.

One man brought 100 starlings to New York and changed the face of North America forever. A small group of men stocked the Colorado River with trout and the fate of the humpback chub was irrevocably altered. Many men but one conscience almost completely wiped out the plains bison from our continent and did succeed in removing the eastern bison, the passenger pigeon, the Carolina parakeet, the auk and other unique forms of wildlife from our lives forever. Forever. When it is love we are

talking about forever may be a heavenly eternity but when it is referring to an unredeemable loss it simply becomes hell.

One summer's day, softly paddling down the Concord River, I could see a school of sunnies swimming under my canoe. I took a cracker from my backpack and held it under the water. The fish began nibbling at the cracker, with an occasional gentle tug on a finger. I was in awe as these fish fed from my hand. It was a gentle introduction to the power of nature to hold us enthralled as I interacted in this simple way with the wild, however mild and innocuous that wild happened to be. Floating flakes of fish-food on the water in an aquarium is not, cannot be, equivalent.

I have been lucky enough to hold a starling in my hand; to steady a raccoon with my gaze as we sat and watched each other at five in the morning in my backyard; to see a fox run unharmed across a busy suburban road during a rush-hour sunset; to give a soon-to-be-run-over turtle a life-saving ride to a river in my car; to observe two spiders share one large juicy fly for a noon-time repast; to have a gentle garter snake sun on a board behind my house; to have a luna moth balance on my finger. I want my children to be able to say the same thing, and their children after them.

The thing we take with us today is gone for everyone else tomorrow. If it lives, the toad not taken is there for others to observe, for it to mate and give rise to more of its kind, or to be eaten by a bird or animal, or to return to the earth, in an endless cycle. It is a cycle with which we should not interfere. Responsibility begins when we can observe and then walk away, resisting the all-too-human impulse to take and make our own.

I may be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence: *(but I do not think so. . .)*
Two toads submerged in mud, and I—
I left them both behind,
And that has made all the difference.

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