

Water Striders

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The future is an open question, but when we hop the wire fence behind the barn, we know this narrow deer path will lead downhill to the east-facing riverbank. The trail follows a rocky ravine once used for dumping all manner of household refuse: pill bottles, soup cans, milk crates, even the rusted-out washing machine I remember from childhood. A few sharp edges poke up through the tangled weeds, but most of the debris is long buried now after decades of washout and slow decay.

There's more than one way to the river, but we're fond of this steep, craggy gulch with its sandstone staircase and mossy boulders. The rocks can be treacherous when wet, but no rain for a week and not a cloud in the sky, just a light breeze from the south taking the edge off this warm August day. Two months from now the leaves on the young maple trees will turn a shocking blood-orange. We pause for a moment in the spot we love for its burst of color and filtered sunlight, then we turn and take another careful step, anxious to find out what's happening down below.

The occasion is our twentieth anniversary—a milestone to celebrate as we navigate the tricky contours of a world falling apart before our eyes. Every day

there's another reason to curl up and surrender, but we must honor this time together because our lives—past, present, and future—depend on it. When we first set the template for this stretch of days, I felt a base note of apprehension. To fail or falter along the way would be to face the possibility of not making it to twenty-one. As the week drew near, I had to curb the negativity bias while guarding against old habits and inhibitions. Heeding this revisionist impulse was lesson number one in learning, once again, how to love.

I've tried a few different versions of that sentence (how to listen, how to care, how to open up), but the part about learning has never changed. The course gets both easier and more difficult with each passing day, but every day, no matter what, it feels like perpetual churning, like compressed, concentrated healing, and maybe, just maybe, like a new kind of thriving and a new way of being. I have to ease my way into this material because those were my instructions: to get a grip, then relax it; to breathe new life into languishing commitments; to drop the idea that mind alone will show the way. The forces at work here are flow and eddy, not groove and hardware.

A "course," it turns out, can be many things: the route followed by a road or river, or the manner in which time progresses. In medicine, a series of treatments; in education, the mystifying pathway to certification. As a verb, to course is to move without obstruction—tears down cheeks, blood through bodies. What the word fails to capture is the motivation, the reason why. For me it was always about changing direction and being changed, but I had no clear view of the path before us, no sense of where to go or how to get there. Steps had to be taken, but which way? I knew the going would be tough, but nothing had prepared me for such perilous winding.

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The sounds bouncing off the bluffs today are nothing like what we've heard before. Weekend canoers are one thing with their drunken sing-alongs and boisterous laughter. Train clatter across the river, once so disturbing, barely registers anymore. Even the target shooting (neighbors on three sides) is jarring but predictable.

Whatever courses from down below, however, quickens the blood and rallies attention because we've learned to recognize patterns that don't feel quite right. So when the noise doesn't stop and the trees we love tremble, we drop everything

and change into our walking clothes: jeans, long sleeves, rubber boots. There will be burrs and stinging nettle on the old ravine trail, but that's the least of our concerns. More important is our shared objective as fretful deliberation gives way to synchronized action.

Relationship experts have a term for this—system co-regulation—but for us the point is to face the unknown together knowing full well that you and I, as independently bundled neurons designed to fire first and ask questions later, are the biggest and scariest unknowns of all. As trusting companions, we must protect each other from the unfamiliar and frightening. But in love's sprawling ecosystem there's the added challenge of fending off the frightening-because-familiar.

My job, in other words, is to protect you from me, so when I offer up an educated guess, when I think I know what's happening down below and venture to say so, odds are pretty good I'm both wrong and don't know so. Another key lesson in learning how to love: There may be two different and equally valid points of view, but there's no such thing as right and wrong, not in our thriving survival unit at least. Staunch certainty from any corner (*I think, I know, I say*) is nothing but aggrieved performance wrapped around faulty human wiring.

In late summer, when the river runs low, we get beaches: narrow bands of pebbly sand and gravel, great stepping-off points for canoers looking to stretch legs, relieve bladders, rest a spell. Heavy rain washes most evidence away, but today we find footprints and the vestiges of a small campfire. We're never surprised to learn someone's been here, because here is not for us to co-regulate. Where land touches running water there's no such thing as yours and mine. This magical spot where river meets ravine "belongs" to our closest neighbors, but years ago the kids dubbed it "Narnia" and so claimed it as theirs as well.

And so on, through the course of time, and well beyond our own boot prints and bodily functions, our ash remains. In the end there's no owning anything except the frazzled nerves that brought us here. Now even the frazzle disappears because all that rumble and grumble we heard up above has washed away.

"It's that mischievous ricochet," I say, referring to the way sound bends funny around here, deceiving the listener.

But you're not having it. Or maybe I'm not saying it but rather thinking it, choosing silence as a check on certainty, unwilling to risk our shared tranquility. Meanwhile the fallen walnut tree we're sitting on is the perfect canoe for two people in love with love's ambiguity, for its occasional treachery. On the river's surface, under our dangling boots, hundreds of water striders dart this way and

that, easy prey for passing bluegill and smallmouth bass. The smaller ones—newly hatched, we assume—keep to the relative safety of shallow micro-eddies while the larger ones risk deeper waters. From our twentieth anniversary we’ve fashioned a week of life-and-death meditations, but I’m afraid most of those baby water striders won’t make it to day seven.

My fear—feeling it, knowing I feel it—is a promising sign, at least. Until recently, such opportunities would have slipped by unnoticed. The explanation I come across, alexithymia—a term to describe problems with feeling emotions; in Greek, it loosely translates to “no words for emotion”—is a bit of a stretch but sounds right from a distance. All those men out there paddling, for example. How many would find it difficult to identify feelings coursing through their bodies right now? How many could describe those feelings to themselves or the ones they paddle with? What a big relief, in fact, to see the outlines of a subclinical condition in the broad sweep of my early conditioning. If there are symptoms, there must be treatments, a reliable course of action. Experts recommend journaling, more expressive language.

But it’s a false diagnosis, wishful thinking in the guise of therapeutic lifeline. Why muddy the waters with an official disorder when all the evidence I need is right here coiled up in my aging nerve bundle? Every emotion I felt growing up—sorrow, aversion, boredom, bewilderment, remorse, envy, yearning—found its low point in blasts of anger and aggression, an attempt to make the disagreeable (unseen enemies, real or imagined threats, the future) go away. Naturally I felt a whole bunch of subtle emotions all the time, but I had no words at the ready to express them, no one nearby to help me learn how to name and process them.

Now we keep a shared list of feeling words on our phones, but we’re never quite sure how to make best use of them. This new lesson in learning how to love defaults to basic vocabulary. Talk with you, when we get it right, is a kind of matching game, an exercise in linking raw feeling to the most suitable denotation.

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My plan is to change and be changed, to be “acted upon by the beloved,” as bell hooks writes in *All About Love*. But out of embarrassment—maybe aversion?—I opt out of taking my shoes and socks off to wade through the shallows with you. The water’s cold, you say, but the silt feels good between your toes. We agree there’d be no crossing today even if we wanted to, but we’ve done it before, once

during a drought so bad the river peeled back, leaving a land bridge ten feet wide. One winter we trekked across the bumpy ice to the small island we've always loved, a ten-acre stretch of dense woods and honeysuckle where deer get stuck sometimes if the temperature climbs too fast. Walking back, we felt the ice shudder and pop beneath our heavy boots, but we both understood—even then, didn't we?—that the practice of love “offers no place of safety.” To live and love fully, on thin ice especially, we would need “to let go of our fear of dying.”

In its place, a love of living. Meaning we can't stay here forever parked on a dead tree stirring up mud in a water bug hatchery. The unknown called out to us, airborne fragments of noisy uncertainty, but everything we know is up there on the other side of that barbed wire fence. When we fell in love, you insisted on a shared strategy, a contingency plan to help stave off the possibility of falling out. We call it “valve work,” subtle compression and flow adjustments to help navigate crisis moments. But after twenty years, a quick fix may not suffice. The valve itself may need replacing.

Which makes sense given the literal plumbing problem we're faced with back home: a pinhole leak requiring invasive, through-the-wall intervention. When it happened I felt compelled to apologize, like it was my fault for setting the pressure too high, all those years ago. “It's okay,” you said when I shut off the main line. “I like living without water with you.”

Before turning back we can rest for a spell, safe and dry on the bank of a river that never stops flowing. We try five minutes of meditation, but two minutes in, we're back to chatting about stream entry as metaphor, then casual chitchat as metaphor for mental distraction. Our conversation is both the vehicle and the tenor, the canoer and the canoe. To be alive in the midst of contingency is to be always practicing, putting in upriver at sunrise, taking out many miles downstream. The point is we can't go back to the beginning and re-enter a stream we've already entered. Our feet are already soaking wet.

Heading home, it's a different story, or maybe a new version of the same story. My plan going in was to offer this up as a kind of open letter or statement of purpose. What better way to celebrate our twenty years together than to make a solid case for twenty more? It's always been a love plot, in other words, but each unit of interaction must be healed if I have any chance of making it back up that hill. Every word, thought, decision, insight, effort. Each and every action, gesture, fidget, expression, offering. I have so much to say and write about what it means to be coursing along with you, two nerve endings climbing a narrow trail

on the outskirts of a bright, roiling universe. But the best course of action might be to stop the chatter altogether, to forfeit all plans, attachments, expectations. Love by abandonment and relinquishment. Love by surrendering to the twists and turns up ahead.

And far removed from the mystery sound we've all but forgotten as we scramble back over the fence. It's possible our calmer moods have prevailed, laying a blanket of quiet to overwrite our earlier live-wire reaction. We can't hear the rumble anymore, so why fear it? Why question or even think about it? What captures our attention now is the brief interlude between thought and reflex. That and the bittersweet feeling of letting go, of leaving this moment on the trail behind us. Neither one of us bothered to check the forecast, but we both know what's coming. Clouds form on the horizon as years of opportunity missed and mangled gather on the rocky hillside. What a relief when the sky opens up, washing them underground.

