# Among Other Bodies

The Ogeechee River & Beyond

*A river begins as a trickle, as a stream. It becomes a trail, it becomes a rabbit hole. Where are we going, what are we becoming? The river is a vein in my arm, a root winding down, a vast ecosystem of beings; a small, yet important part of The Whole Story. What is the story? It is happening right now. I am a character, and so are you. The veins — they branch out;  they widen with this body, they bend and they pulse — loudly. O my heart. What else can I do but softly break you, again and again? I stretch my arms wide and step into the mouth, and into the open ocean.*

*The Ogeechee River at Scarboro Landing*

# I. Headwaters

A beginning is a small thing — unnoticeable, underground, unconscious. So it often goes with headwaters, with the source of a stream (or idea). And so it was when a bug containing curiosity and happenstance fell into my ear. I was told about the tannic waters of the Ogeechee River: *dark waters there, like black tea*. Because I make ink out of walnuts and oak galls (their pigmentation due to their tannic properties), I kept thinking about this mysterious blackwater river; the curious bug remained, occasionally tickling, humming, and calling me forth. So now I am driving from my home outside of Athens, Georgia, down to the headwaters of the Ogeechee River and then onwards to where the Ogeechee runs into the Atlantic Ocean, 25 miles south of Savannah. I've been driving for maybe 45 minutes, it's just past sunrise. Everything is still blanketed in a thick fog with the sun streaking through so sleepily. The trees are that perfect hazy gray that keeps us suspended in thoughts of what could be. Sorrow and hope. So many layers. The fog presents a theatre, a game of visible vs. invisible. Now the sun rays are intensifying. They shoot spotlights down on me, on the road, on the passing fields. I recall how when I was young, I thought these bursts of sunlight might be the end-of-times Evangelical event known as the Rapture. I was constantly afraid of who would be taken, when, and who would remain.

These days it is not God that I fear and on this day, the fears that I do have are feeling pleasantly faint. Right now, in this fog-drenched mystery, I am reminded that the Sun is a giant star in the solar system; a perfect ball of light, of energy, a life force. And I am a very small creature wandering about on Planet Earth. The best thing I can do is to notice, to pay attention, to keep searching through the density and to find meaning in the mundane. I keep thinking about disappearance (as I do), and I keep taking backroads (as I do). Avoid the highways, avoid the speed and noise and absence of lollygagging. *Bless you, you old dirty, country road.*

I am under the spell of driving through places I have never seen. My senses are heightened and I'm aware of my body — eager to be here, to come into contact with each emerging moment. I see a large, black vulture sitting on a wood fence post, just visible through the fog and just before a large swath of recently clearcut land. Stumps, mud, abandoned tree carcasses strewn about. The glow of the fog and the sun make it beautiful, but it feels like I've walked in on a tragic crime scene. There's no one to call, nowhere to report the transgression. I think about the vulture's bald head and its featherless neck, how it has evolved this way to make the reaching in and hollowing out of carcasses more sanitary, less disease-ridden. I'm aware now of another body: this land, this earth. How is it evolving?

I drive through the forest that is no longer here and see the semi trucks sitting, like the vulture, waiting to pick up the remains. Not to vilify the vultures. Or the truckers, for that matter. They are just doing what they've been told, I suppose. And it's not as if there's an abundance of job options around here. It's the system that I hate — that old fruitless and soulless system of profit over people, over life, over a future. I drive past a graveyard of cars rusting, inoperable skeletons blanketing the yards, the trailer homes barely visible. Out here is where poverty is kept and hidden, along with the clearcut forests. Witnessing these places of suffering, exploitation, and neglect makes us feel uncomfortable, guilty. What have we done? Who do we call?

My mind wanders back to the Ogeechee, and then to the Atlantic Ocean into which the river flows. I recall my first experience with this very large and salty body, and how I fell in love with it. It was February of 1987 and I was two years old. My family had driven from Little Rock, Arkansas to Orlando, Florida in our clunky diesel Suburban "Stripe", creatively named for its white stripe down the middle of its otherwise red body. Pops had a work conference to attend so we made a rare vacation out of it. My memory is feeble and misshapen, but I do remember the Dumbo ride that no one but Mom would go on with me (bless you, Momma), the slightly painful, but pleasurable feeling of a Roseate Spoonbill eating bird seed from my small, tender palm, and the smell of stale popcorn that filled the car all 15 hours there and back. And I remember how forlorn I was when we left that vast body of water that I wanted to somehow hold and keep and knew I never really could. I stared out the car window on that very long drive home and repeated, again and again, "where water go?"

I feel a weight on my chest. My mind clouds and my brow furrows. Like many of us human animals, I often struggle with feelings of uncertainty and anxiety. I flail about, looking for a solid answer to grasp onto — to *know*. I do not have a full understanding of what I'm doing, or what I'm looking for along the Ogeechee. I don't even have a plan. But it doesn't feel impulsive, this journey — it feels instinctive. This is a hunch that feels right; it's some sort of intuition, an act of faith. I feel the weight of my uncertainties, and I remind myself that it's all a collection of oddly-shaped puzzle pieces that arrange this strange nonlinear existence. This road insists on the ongoing practice of some sort of somatic attunement, of letting go of the mind's desire to move in straight, predetermined lines. My friend Nik once shared with me that in the language of Pali, there is a word *saddha,* which is often translated as "faith" or "confidence", but what it literally means is "to place the heart upon". Praise be, it is a verb! Not just something that we do or do not have; it is an ongoing practice, something that we willfully choose. That is what this Ogeechee research trip is for me — and I suppose this much, much larger trip: this big/small thing that is my life, my meanderings. I reckon what we must do is stay with the uncertainties, with the curiosities.

*Insect inscribing on dead wood*

Near Crawfordville, Georgia, I'm fumbling about for the headwaters of the river. I've turned down a dirt road that I'm hoping will take me to the water. Nina Simone's voice is in my mind now, singing that old hymn that contains as much complexity as this tangle I am driving into. *Take me to the water, take me to the water, take me to the water to be baptized*. The road begins as a jungle — above me and beside me it is dense and overgrown. I am a snake winding through the trees, hungry and thirsty, sensing for what will bring me nourishment. The jungle suddenly opens up into a wide space, red with dirt and bright with sunlight. I stop and blink. I feel exposed. The color and texture of the earth has dramatically shifted into something barren. Although there's vegetation that has grown back, the forest is gone, clearcut. Blooming thistles are here, along with honeysuckle, blackberries (too green to eat), and the tall blonde grasses of broomsedge bluestem. Everything is dancing with the wind today. Windows down, the air smells of ligustrum; so sweet, so nostalgic. Ligustrum, or privet, is known around here as a highly-invasive, non-native shrub, with fragrant little white blossoms in the spring. But please note the troublesome language here: "invasive" and "non-native" carry the baggage of xenophobia and puritanical hierarchy — "good" and "bad". While these types of plants can be damaging to an ecosystem by taking resources, they are not inherently "bad". Artist May Babcock has been trying out other titles that I've been leaning into: "troublesome" plants; "displaced" plants. I breathe in deeply; all the troublesome, sweet scents.

Our blessed little dirt road is true: she leads me back into a dense thicket and straight to the water. At a bridge there's a sign that reads 'weight limit 5 tons' but that seems overly optimistic for these weathered planks. I say a silent prayer as I drive over the bridge and alongside the metal rails that

have been severely bent and distorted by what, I do not know — a tornado? A tragic car accident? Bigfoot? The bridge holds, I pull off to the side and step into the thickness. In the distance, I hear the sounds of chainsaws and machinery that are conflicting with the sensitive trilling of the insects and birds. Logging, I reckon. I say some sort of sorrowful prayer and move on.

Among the ferns and poison ivy, lie human remains — garbage, I mean. Candy wrappers, part of a hot pink inflatable tube, PVC pipes, and a crumpled receipt that I'm afraid to pick up lest it was used as toilet paper. A towel faded to be a barely-green; it's rather pretty. The birds are still a continual chirping chorus, along with the chainsaws. I suddenly feel unsettled in my body, unsure if I should be here. A tricky thing to discern: general anxiety vs. legitimate gut feeling. Because I reside in a female body and because I do most things alone, I have learned to listen to those quiet *maybe-it's-time-to-go* feelings. While my anatomy often makes me more vulnerable to harm, I also know the privilege that my white skin holds. It gives me a free pass again and again, to wander and loiter, without suspicion, without fear for my life, without the weight of a history that's so shameful schools are being banned from teaching it. I don't think it's so much the horror that makes people want to hide America's history of racism and its devastating effects, I think it's more so the shame; the messiness, the difficult work of being with and reckoning with troubled truths — the discomfort that us white folks are so keen on avoiding. The garbage remains to be dealt with.

A breeze comes through; it has picked up the smells of a farm somewhere nearby. It feels familiar and familial (my family lineage of farmers runs deep). A BFG of a pine tree stands just to the side of Old Dear Dirt Road. Near the top, it is beginning to get choked out by vines. A pileated woodpecker flies over me, laughing loudly as they do. It's the second pileated I've seen today, the first one being this morning, as I was leaving home. It was an amusing send-off for my anxious heart, a hopeful omen. It's been a couple years since I've seen a pileated. Is today their day? Maybe it's our day too. A box turtle comes shuffling through the leaves and twigs, his fleshy neck strained forward, focused. He's a curious one, folding up into a neatly-boxed present for only a moment when I pick him up, and then his legs and neck are back out, swimming mightily in the air. I confess and repent to this small, Strong King of All Box Turtles that I used to decorate his kin's shells with a horrifically garish purple nail polish. So much for camouflage. My desire was to be able to know them if our paths crossed again. And it did happen once, circa 1992: out near my old crafted fortress of tangled vines, I discovered a faded purple shell — only to realize that there was no flesh, no Tina Turtle. Convinced it was the fault of my decorations (which, perhaps it was), I was so overcome with shame that I didn't know how to apologize.

The water is calm here and small; just the humble beginning of a river. Tiny bugs are flying frenzied about my face, while the sunlight reflects frenzied off the water and onto the trunk of a river birch. The birch's bark is a delicate shedding paper. When I was very young I would make drawings on birch bark; mostly very important maps that led to very important buried treasure. I

suppose that's a bit of what I'm doing here now: shedding, making/remaking maps. I'm attempting to turn away from the doubtful demons that tell me I've missed the turn, from the puritanical preachers that tell me I'm wrong. I waver and wobble, continue to fret, convinced at points that I do not belong, that I am not capable of having the life I am seeking. *You are not enough*, hiss the demons. *You are broken,* shriek the preachers. That old story again, where I am small, where I weep. So yes, Madam Birch. Let us shed, let us make maps that hold this small body with care and trust. The sunlight's reflection is a sequined gown on Birch's body, on my body. *We are the very important unburied treasure*.

*The bridge near the headwaters*

*I use this verb ["I feel"] not only to describe my body's sensations when it encounters a blueberry, but also to express trust in my cognitive and embodied knowledge. I conjure affect and sensitivity because I believe that they are legitimate sources from which to think and do in the world, even if they still don't get taken entirely seriously as epistemological tools in the "West." Yet in our time of environmental disaster and urgent demands for social justice, we need to acknowledge our senses and talk about our feelings…Carving out space for affect and care is nothing short of a political act.*

-Stefanie Hessler, *Sensing Nature*

*Snail with unknown fungus*

## II. The Body

Leaving the headwaters on Highway 22, I spy my third pileated woodpecker. What luck! I pass Heavy's BBQ; it looks legit, I'm hungry, but it's only open Friday-Sunday and today's Wednesday. No luck. Past the fish, wings, ribs & more, past more clear cutting, past more poverty, past the south fork of the Ogeechee River, past the north fork, past lots and lots of logging trucks. I eventually stop at Diana's Cafe. Wood-paneled walls, flowered curtains. Only four other customers are here at 11:37 am, and I'm definitely the only one under the age of 70. I'm tempted to get fried okra or fried green tomatoes or fried livers, but I hear my Great Depression-surviving farmer grandpa in my blood and I settle for the extremely mediocre sandwich I've packed in the cooler. I sit at the counter and ask for a cup of coffee. It's the bottom of the pot, the last cup; the woman at the counter doesn't charge me. It's strong and muddy, but I don't mind. Goes along with the charm of the day. Lots of cream and a packet of sugar make it drinkable. 90's R&B is playing, a pleasant

surprise. I have just enough bars of service to look at the map on my phone for a bit; I sway along to Sade, finish my cup of joe, and head out. Next stop Antioch Baptist Church. I'm unsure why, it's just a place I saw on the map that lies near the river that is beckoning to me.

It feels like another era, driving down this road. Shotgun houses that have been here 100 years before my time, covered with more moss than paint. Old wooden churches — beautiful, neglected structures that are falling apart. Naturally, I can imagine myself living here with the spiders and mice that are probably its primary occupants. Antioch Baptist Church is like many of the buildings around here — abandoned long ago. The door is open, I walk inside. I think about how I renounced my belief in God and religion many years ago, but lately I have felt a shift. Something about a new understanding of spirits slipping back into my being. My past and present reconfiguring, the possibility of imagination resurfacing. In Sheila Heti's book *Pure Colour*, the character's spirit resides in a leaf for a time. I dwell on this possibility, of sitting still in a treetop, surrounded by other leaves (are they full of spirits too?), and then eventually being carried off by the wind to an unknown destination.

In 2017, I had a strange encounter not far from here in Statesboro, Georgia. I was on a solo road trip from California to Savannah and ended up staying a night in a large historical home that had once been what I would call 'real fancy'. Here, in that strange house that had been mostly-abandoned and was now only sometimes-occupied on the top floor by a friend of a friend and his son, I found myself sleeping alone in a bedroom downstairs, in a very empty house. The sheets seemed clean, the spiders seemed friendly, and it didn't cost a penny. But then the spirit of a small, angry boy came to me from behind those floor-length curtains, and my legs, unfeeling and paralyzed, elevated — pulling me towards the window and the boy. I spoke softly, saying I was not a threat, that I would be leaving in the morning, and that I was so sorry for the harm that was done to him. He let me go and disappeared. Perhaps it was just a dream. Perhaps it wasn't.

It's not just these types of ghostly spirits I've been considering — it's also my soul-spirit that is inhabiting my still-living body; and yours, and my dog Dorothy's, and the river's and the pileated woodpecker's and the once-alive oak's that is being drilled into and filled with the spirits of acorns. What is it that we contain besides our blood and our bones? What is it that fills us with fear and longing and love and brokenness? And what spaces will we inhabit when our bones collapse and our blood ceases to flow?

This past July I started looking for spirits in the clouds. I was flying in them, flying over the Rocky Mountains, heading to Missouri to be with my Grandma Lindy as she was dying. One of the most precious beings in my life, Lyndall Arleene Cornelius. I lived with her for almost 9 months during Covid and we formed the "Tender Hearts Club" which was not actually anything except the two of

us and my mom and all of our big feelings. We would draw together; she felt self-conscious about her artistic abilities, so she would copy whatever I drew. Her drawings were always so much better. They had that distinct, heartfelt quality of the untrained hand: so earnest and true. She and I — we had such different lives. She raised children and cows in rural Missouri and went to a baptist church. But she confided in me at 98 years old, that she sometimes wished she had lived a life more like mine — with independence and greater adventure. She held a soft resentment for my grandpa who had her leave her job in order to be his farm wife. So now I wonder and hope that she has found more fluidity and freedom since she has left her body. Perhaps we all will.

Just before she fully left, her breathing was rattled and heavy. Her cheeks were sunken in, her mouth open, her lips chapped and dry. Her skin felt like the softest petal of a poppy flower: so smooth, thin, fragile, and precious. She couldn't open her eyes but she did squeeze my hand before she left. Her cat Kittle had been lying with her on the bed all the days, but as soon as Grandma stopped breathing, Kittle jumped off the bed and ran over to the window. She sat there at the window, her gaze going from the bed and the body and then back to the window. She never returned to the bed. I've been resistant to any beliefs that are not based in science, but I am also keenly aware (and pleasantly humbled) by the knowledge that we do not know, that we do not understand. I want, as Sarah Shin and Ben Vickers express in their book *Altered States,* "to allow for myth to fall among the mundane and to find some medicine in the madness."

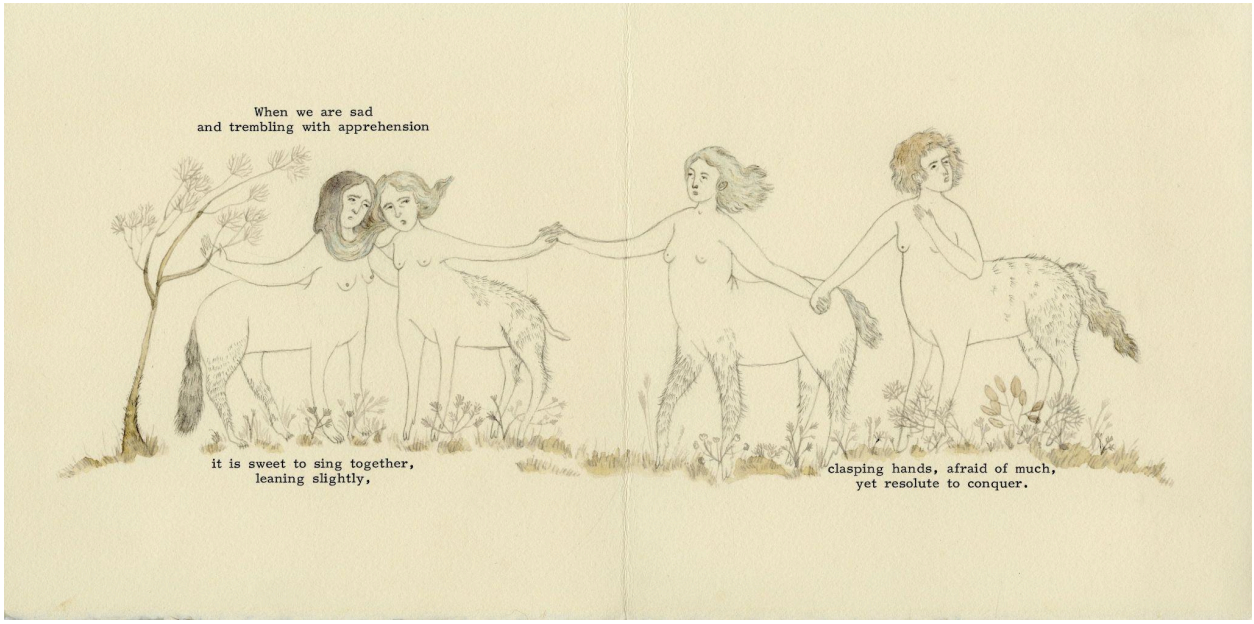
*Grandma's cloud drawing*

It has been a long time since I let go of the end-of-times Rapture story — of Jesus saving his followers and leaving the rest of us to destruction. But what of our story of the apocalypse? The story of the end of the world? And the feeling that it is approaching us rapidly? The word 'apocalypse' originates from the Greek word *apokaluptein,* which means to 'uncover, reveal'. What if we start telling a story that is less about destruction and more about truth and reckoning? The weight of our current crises and unknown futures bears down on us. Can we reframe it? Lighten it without denying it? I want to respond to this weight with tenderness, curiosity, healing, and agency. In Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, she writes, "It is the story that makes the difference. It is the story that hid my humanity from me…the killer story. Lest there be no more telling of stories at all, some of us out here in the wild oats think we'd better start telling another one."

I recall how deeply affected I was as a child by the various fairy tales that all told the same, but slightly different story, of a human (usually young, naive, and poor) who took the time to rescue something small (a grasshopper, an ant, or a fly) and then was later saved and rewarded by that same small creature. The humans who refused to help the small struggling beings would instead meet some sort of failure. I really believed this story to be true. And I suppose I still do, albeit in a less dramatic sense. I witness the truth of reciprocity daily — the knowledge that we thrive when we recognize (and extend) our responsibility to one another. My efforts to build interconnected worlds and complex stories through the work I make is perhaps a small gesture, but maybe it could be an opening to something larger. I've been considering Alice of *Alice in Wonderland* and her pool of tears: how her series of mistakes led her to so much sorrow. It wasn't until she cried a body of water that she was able to move into the next realm. She had to be with the uncertainty and then to reckon with it. By processing and transforming my own narratives in my work, I ask others to inhabit this place with me: an imaginative space that holds an abundance of complexities — uncertain shadows, tender expressions, fearsome beings, murky waters, and hopeful growth.

This place of imaginative narrative that addresses complexities in an engaging and accessible manner is where my interest in illustration, installation, and teaching lies. It is with earnest resoluteness that I strive to make work that facilitates creativity, curiosity, and growth; to create thresholds — other worlds where our perspectives and narratives can be shifted, and our curiosities heightened. Within the entanglements of a vast ecology of shapes and beings, a web of physical and emotional complexities form a beautiful, yet vulnerable and difficult existence. Our perspectives compose our realities — can we shift it a bit? What if we step into a sphere that allows us to transform our configuration, to bend with the wind, to extend our roots beyond ourselves, beyond our own kin? It feels full-circle in a way: those illustrated fairy tales that were my first encounter with "art" — how they captured me at the public library those many years ago and have continued to hold me. I recognize (as one who grew up amongst a long lineage of farm

folks) that art is often out of reach or unavailable for many. Children's books can be a bridge of sorts, an opening into other worlds and other ways of seeing and thinking. As Maria Popova says, "Great children's books are works of philosophy in disguise. In the language of children — the language of curiosity and unselfconscious sincerity — they speak the most timeless truths to the truest parts of us by asking the simplest, deepest questions." This exploratory nature of children's books is also how I strive to navigate installation and teaching; simply opening doors into a curious world that already exists.




*Pages 5 & 6 from my book "It is Here, It is Past"; words mined from Virginia Woolf's "The Waves"*

It is with matters of care that I continuously step into this very uncertain and unconventional life of being an artist; to have consideration not only for what I put into the world, but also for *how* I put it there. I often think about being in relationship to the spirit, or the pulse of place — which includes humans and other-than humans. Enrique Salmón refers to this relationship as 'kincentric ecology'. Fostering this kinship with the natural world, I transform plant materials and soils into inks and paper — a sensual, slow, and messy process. Many of these materials will fade and distort with time; like us, like the landscape, like everything. I investigate this impermanence and transformation with curiosity: how does this alter the way we perceive relationships, humanity, death, and art?  As climate change becomes increasingly threatening, what are we going to be letting go of? Who and what is going to disappear? These questions are not to bring about a

morose or existential crisis, but to urge us to inhabit these places with greater responsibility, presence, and appreciation.

As I carry heavy buckets of malodorous paper pulp and water to my porch that has become an extension of my studio, I can't help but smile and think that I have been training for this sort of work all my life. I'm reminded of being young and carrying buckets of water out to the goats during winter; the smell of mucking their pens, the warm slick stickiness of a newborn lying in the dirt and straw, still struggling to take in its first breath. It's a sensual experience being in this world, and paying attention to these senses has been of great importance to my various processes. It's a practice to stay in my body, to be somatically attuned, to not drift elsewhere. I realize, as I move carefully across this fragile wooden framework that I make my paper on, that my internal and my external processing are almost identical. There's a great deal of slowness and intuition, deep listening and wondering. Observing my feelings and how I embody them lets me know when to stop and when to press forward. Or when to be still and wait; to let the piece become what it will without having a forced, linear plan of what I think it should be. I open the door for transformation.

*Processing corn husks for papermaking and pokeberries for ink*

I think of slowness as resistance to the capitalist framework of neverending striving and producing. We've been so conditioned to this ongoing effort of visible and profitable progress. I

see the harm that it has done to our bodies — and not just our human bodies — the non-human and non-animal bodies as well. Can you see it too? In his book *Sacred Economics*, Charles Eisenstein states: "In nature, headlong growth and all-out competition are features of immature ecosystems, followed by complex interdependency, symbiosis, cooperation, and the cycling of resources. The next stage of human economy will parallel what we are beginning to understand about nature. It will call forth the gifts of each of us; it will emphasize cooperation over competition; it will encourage circulation over hoarding; and it will be cyclical, not linear." My practice of listening, wondering, and slow meandering cultivates an ongoing curiosity that enables me to survive the deep sorrows that life sometimes brings — because curiosity brings possibility and possibility brings hope.

Back in Georgia, while setting up camp at Magnolia Springs State Park, I spy my fourth pileated woodpecker of the day — laughing between the hammering. I ride my bike down to the springs where a bale of turtles are swimming. The water is so blue and so clear, it feels a bit surreal. The turtle's shells are all covered in thick algae, each carrying another world on their backs. *Is it heavy?* I wonder. A red-shouldered hawk flies overhead, countering the weight. On my return to camp through the woods, I find a cocoon hanging low. It feels as if it is made of paper, and I wonder how. I want to take it home, but then I discover that a wasp has made a nest inside of it. I wonder again. I am often under the illusion that I'm a good observer, but then three startled deer jump straight out from in front of me. They were camouflaged so perfectly, I had no idea they were there, just feet away. I love thinking about everything I am not seeing. Who is there? Who is watching me? I recently watched the French film *The Velvet Queen*, where two photographers search the mountains of Tibet for the elusive snow leopard. At one point, there was excitement for a beautiful photograph capturing a hawk, but disappointment with the lack of the leopard. It wasn't until much later upon closer examination of the hawk photo that they noticed the camouflaged face of the snow leopard directly behind the hawk, silently watching.

That night in my tent, it's a strange avant garde symphony of sounds: a cow bellows, an owl shrieks, the nearby highway is a constant hum and chug. There's a donkey somewhere and then some crying/yelping from a dog. The cow is groaning now — in agony? A whip-poor-will chimes in, the crickets and frogs have no beginning or end. I've left my tent sans rainfly, and find myself dusted ever so lightly with dew.


*Have You Forgotten How to Feel?*

On my way home I stop at the Ogeechee River Mill. It's closed to the public now, but I've just spoken on the phone to Missy, the current owner, who has generously invited me to wander about as I please. In her gruff voice, she cautions me multiple times about snakes. I appreciate the care. It is stunning here. The breeze running off the water smells like earth and fish and worms in the most delightful way. The sun is beating down on me and this giant rock I am standing on just beneath the falls. Clumps of sunburned, sand-encrusted moss extend in piles on this rock. It all feels ancient and otherworldly. But the moss is also soft. I am petting it and it feels like an animal — a pig maybe. Looking at the landscape within this rock, it feels like I have seen it before but thousands and thousands of feet above — viewed from an airplane. But here I am — standing right over it, as if I am a giant. Did I eat the cookie? Drink the potion as Alice did, and grow to tower above the white rabbit and the world beneath me? Yellow tulip poplar blossoms are scattered all about the ground. I see something soft and furry embedded into the gravel driveway. I can't tell if it's an animal or a towel. Either way, it has decayed and taken on a new spirit.

Observing the natural world brings me hope. I think it has something to do with witnessing the resilience around me. Sometimes it makes me want to cry, and often times I do. It's a hard knock life and that won't stop until our hearts do. I don't necessarily believe in a utopic future, and I don't think that it has ever existed. But what I have witnessed, again and again, is that despite the difficulties — the fires, the floods, the deforestation, the oppression, exploitation and colonization

— there is resistance. There is a continual search and insistence for joy that doesn't deny the weight of the world, but responds to it. I'm staring at this little tree in front of me: tiny, skinny and short. It's poor top has been taken, by what, we do not know. But here it is, living, with what would be its head completely gone. And look — something has nearly chewed through the bottom half also, leaving a gaping hole that bits of grass are growing out of, and oh look here's another hole in the very middle. It is open so wide, like a cartoon choir child's mouth. What does this tree's voice sound like singing? So we have this tiny headless tree full of gaping holes, singing, and shooting little green grasses and leaves all about, still persisting, still providing, still connecting to this thing we call living. And we cannot even begin to see what is happening with the giant caring web of mycelium — the mycorrhizal network — that is lying beneath our feet. This is what our heroes of hope can look like.

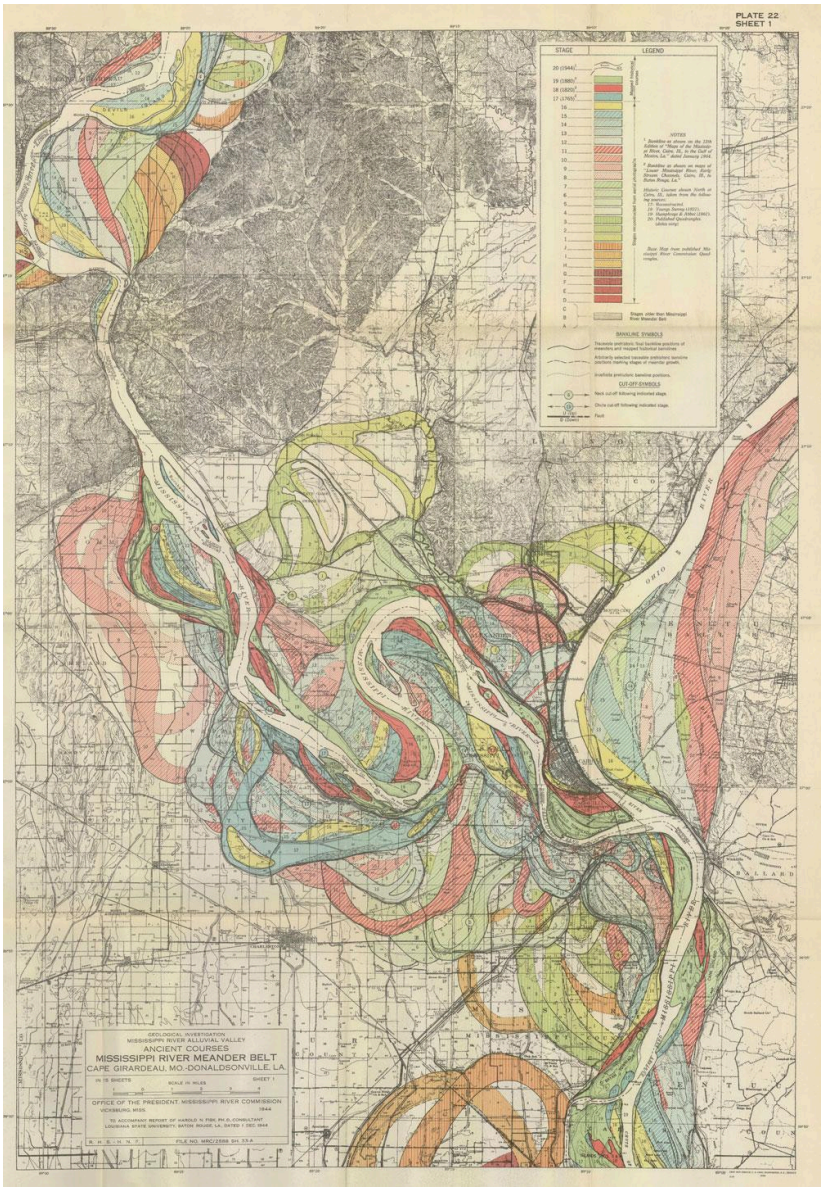
I return home to where I live in the thickness of woods, above the rushing waters of Rose Creek, in an old grist mill. It's a place that is quiet, deeply healing, and often challenging. Sometimes it feels lonely, and sometimes the solitude feels like too much weight. But what I've also been able to feel is my own very tender body, mind, and heart. *Mimosa pudica*, I've been called. A sensitive plant, a sensitive pea. We fold our leaves inward when we are touched. I grew up in a large, mostly loving, but complicated family. I was touched too much; my leaves curled inward; and did not uncurl for quite some time. Shortly after moving to the mill, I discovered a *mimosa pudica* growing at the gate to my driveway. She was thriving, beckoning me to cross the gravel threshold into this *sanctum sanctorum*, into this place where I could allow myself to be held and nourished.

Out here at my mill home, I watch great blue herons stalk their prey slowly and carefully; kingfishers with their loud, rattled cry, dive full speed into the waters; and just the other morning, I saw a beaver shuffle up the slippery shoals. All of this from my kitchen window. How did I get so lucky? When I first moved into the mill, I had so much love for it that I became overwhelmed by that love — and by the fear that perhaps it would not be with me forever. I felt this intense sorrow with the thought that I might lose this place. How could I ever leave? I've been resistant to being still my whole life. I've moved almost every year (& sometimes more) since I left home at the age of 17. Twenty-two homes (which includes a geodesic dome and a FEMA shelter shack from the 1906 San Francisco earthquake), twelve cities, and six states. That this old mill, out in this tangle of Georgia woods is the only place that has ever fully felt like home, feels powerful. I don't want to let it go. I want to be still at last and let my roots grow; to go down deep into this earth. Integrate my pulse with the pulse of this place. But — it might happen — the loss. Softening the edges of this fear is an ongoing process. While my love has deepened, I know that the fear of losing my home will only cause harm, preventing me from receiving the fulfillment and preciousness of this time. How strange it is, that our fears often keep us from receiving what it is that we truly want.

In psychology it is known that we will repeat harmful relationship patterns again and again because we look for (and accept) what is familiar. What was learned. What we believe we deserve. *Maybe this time I can fix it. Maybe this time I'll be enough.* After too much repeating, I'm seeking new patterns, new feelings. This aloneness, that is sometimes not my choice, and that is often potently uncomfortable, is one of my many teachers. "To be alone", says David Whyte, "for any length of time is to shed an outer skin. The permeability of being alone asks us to reimagine ourselves, to become impatient with ourselves, to tire of the same old story and then slowly, hour by hour, to start to tell the story in a different way, as other parallel ears, ones we were previously unaware of, begin to listen to us more carefully in the silence." And so with this impatience of the old story, I practice the patience of creating a new story. I step into my body, into my senses. I unfurl my leaves.

*Mimosa pudica at my gate*

In 1944, the geologist and cartographer Harold Fisk created an image to illustrate the ever-shifting shape of the Mississippi River. The white trail shows the river's course as it was in 1944, the green trail as it was in 1880, the pink of 1820, and the sky blue of 1765. While there are many conditions (human and nonhuman) that cause these changes of a river's course, this map reveals the dynamic nature of all rivers. The curves of a river are known as meanders. Due to factors including waterflow, sediment, and erosion, a river will adjust its course, cutting off meanders from the rest of the river. This separated meander is known as an oxbow wetland; they become vital to our ecosystems as they filter water and provide essential wildlife habitat.



It's a comfort to me to think about how the shape of a river changes so drastically over time. I'm also thinking about the places where our lives shift: we leave a home, a job, a partner, a life. Sometimes it may not be our choice, but our ship is steered onto a different course. Those old places remain. Sometimes it feels like a wound, these past lives. Sometimes we wonder how we could have gone that route to begin with. We mourn what we lost, what could have been. We might think we wasted time. If only we had known that it was the wrong direction, we never would have gone that way. But what if we looked at these spaces as a vibrant wetland, teeming with life? I'm thinking about when I have literally stepped into a wetland — how the mud sinks and gurgles under my feet. The ground is fermenting, transforming — right here, right now — beneath my feet! I try to think about my past lives in relation to this, how I have inhabited courses that could not last, could not support my evolving form. But the lessons, the nutrients of the soil that was made there, is still being made there — that's the stuff! That is where the riches lie, where transformation happens. Sitting (and moving) with the liminal stickiness seems to be how we become the shape we long to be.

The day of the fall equinox, I'm walking through the woods where I live. I'm walking with my stick high in the air just in front of me, leading the way. I'm not being dramatic or performative, it's just that it's spider season. In recent years, this region has become thick with Joro spiders. They are brilliant, yellow, and massive. Their webs are also yellow — and extremely sticky and strong. Thus my outstretched stick. I have mostly evolved to avoid the webs on my own; my eyes have sharpened, and I have learned to duck quickly. I have also become accustomed to the occasional "spiderweb facial". But today I have a nice stick and I feel like a water dowser. I am seeking always — with no certainty that I will ever find what I am looking for. Now I am like the Statue of Liberty — my torch is held high. I am so strong! Look, Dorothy dog has a stick now too. It's a parade! All of us are holding our torches. Our banners are sparklers in the night. Celebrating and searching — for answers, for the path, for the joy, for the solace and delight of it all.

*“Now if Not Before” – thesis drawing detail*

*Thirst will cease to be thirst and wounds will cease to be wounds, though not in the way that's expected.*

Patti Smith

*Where the Ogeechee River funnels into the Atlantic Ocean*

III. The Mouth/The Ocean

It's February 2024 now; a full year has passed since my first visit to the Ogeechee. I'm driving back down, seeking its mouth this time — where the river flows into the Atlantic Ocean and becomes another entity. The day is clear and bright: the golden broomsedge grasses glow, punctuating the brilliance of the blue skies. So blue, so radiant. How could this be real? I think of Maggie Nelson's book *Bluets*, a love letter of sorts to the color of blue. "That this blue exists," she says, "makes my life a remarkable one, just to have seen it. To have seen such beautiful things. To find oneself placed in their midst. Choiceless."

On Highway 16, I bump over a bridge and feel my heart flutter when I unexpectedly see the sign read “Ogeechee River”. I feel like my biggest crush just walked into the room — and this time they return my affections. I’ve never felt this way about a river, and I understand now it’s because I have let myself be tamed. Just as in Antoine de Saint-Exupery’s timeless story *The Little Prince: “What does that mean — ’tame’?” asked the little prince to the fox. “It means to establish ties.” said the fox. “To me, you are still nothing more than a little boy who is just like a hundred thousand other little boys. And I have no need of you. And you, on your part, have no need of me. But if you tame me, then we shall need each other. To me, you will be unique in all the world…”* What a thing — to need each other. And how we resist it! I resist it. Our rugged individualism trumps our tender vulnerabilities (or so we imagine). What is actually occurring though, is a continued malnourishment of our beings. So much so that the U.S. Surgeon General, Vivek Murthy, describes our lack of connection as a public health crisis. In 2023 he issued an advisory on the “epidemic of loneliness and isolation”, where he states that “the mortality impact of being socially disconnected is similar to that caused by smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.” How do we come to understand that we need each other? How do we let ourselves be tamed by the world? *A river is only as healthy as the forest that surrounds it*, say the ecologists. *The quality of our lives is determined by the quality of our relationships*, say the psychologists. If we believe this, this whole science and cause & effect thing, how could it not bring a certain *gravitas, or* sense of responsibility as to how we inhabit the world?

I can see the open mouth now. The dark body of the Ogeechee River is dispersing into the brackish waters I am traveling through. I’m with a small group of folks; we are boating out to Ossabaw Island, a remote barrier island that has been protected from development. It’s cold and windy today, but the silver lining is that the mosquitos are hiding. We are traveling through multiple rivers — Skidaway River, Vernon River, Moon River. I’ve always loved that song, and here we are, in its waters. *Oh, dream maker, you heart breaker. Wherever you’re goin’, I’m goin’ your way.* We make it to the banks of this ancient, wild island and I wander off on my own. I’ve got a date with the Ogeechee. I walk to the northwest part of the island where the tannic waters of the river are contrasting with the saltwater of the ocean. The wind is not gentle out here. I feel a bit like a blade of grass and I’m grateful that I too am flexible. I am reminded of the story of the wise spider who builds their web not between two strong rocks, but between two blades of grasses so that when the wind comes, their web will bend and not be torn apart.

I am alone, but the presence out here is of many. The long arms of the live oaks are extending far, the ghostly green curtains of spanish moss are swaying overhead. All I can hear is the wind moving through the forest. Where the thickness of the trees end, the open marsh begins. It’s golden grasses and blue skies, palmettos, a palm, a snag. And of course the pluff mud that is

unique to the salt marshes of this Lowcountry region. Pluff mud is intensely thick — like an oozy clay. If you attempt to walk into it with shoes, you will not see your shoes again; the mud will suction them right off of your feet. It might keep you also. And then there's the smell of the pluff. Most visitors to this region are usually repulsed by the potency. I get it. I mean, it's mostly dead stuff. Really. It's decomposing grass, fish, crabs and shrimp and god knows what else. But it's also full of life — the pluff mud is a nutrient-rich protector of this land; it is one of the four components that the salt marsh depends on to thrive. It is life and death in the same body, at the same time. Perhaps it's because I grew up on a farm, or perhaps it's because the marsh tamed me — but I love the smell. It's not my home, but it feels like it.

*The salt marsh on Ossabaw Island, next to the Ogeechee*

Ossabaw's salt marshes are protected. But many other wetlands are not. Historically, wetlands have been seen by humans as wastelands, unable to make a profit. So they have been burned and destroyed; filled with dirt and built upon. When I walk through these vulnerable places, I am sometimes overcome with sorrow. In the marsh, I see the roseate spoonbills chattering together with their cheery pink feathers and I weep. I see the very tiny crabs scuttling sideways over the pluff mud, their little fists raised to the sky — are they praising or cursing? I think it can be both at once. I have come to understand that anger is what we feel when the things we love are being threatened. I am angry and I am fearful of what we will lose due to ignorance and greed. Sometimes I feel helpless. What do I have to contribute? I don't have the brain of an engineer or scientist; I have no money. My skill set often feels limited. I'm decent at observing and listening and drawing. I can make good sauerkraut. But you know, I'm also good at loving; loving this soft bed of pine needles beneath my feet, this incredibly thick humidity, these mushrooms that I do not

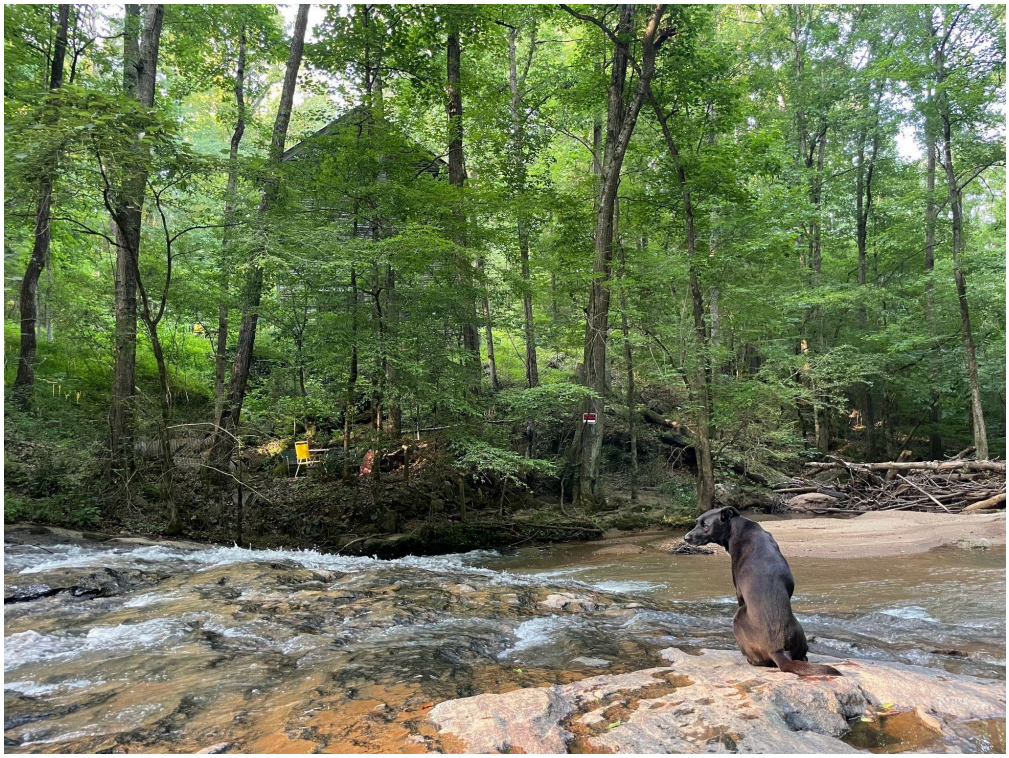
know,  but oh! how I love their softness and smell and delicate underside that is slightly cool to the touch. The cypress trees and their knees, the pileated woodpeckers, box turtles, whip-poor-wills, sea beans and pluff mud. My love overflows into the human world too. In the grocery store, I can't help but adoringly observe the large gruff gentleman carefully trying to select the perfect peach. He touches and smells at least five before selecting one. Just one. Is it for him or for someone else?

It's that feeling at the end of the day when the sun is still there, but you know it's about to disappear behind the trees. The air is cool, your hands are cold. You put your face in the sun, open your mouth — try to bite into it, try to eat it, try to let it fill your body. You put out your hands, your cold hands, in an attempt to grasp it. There is nothing to grasp. There is nothing to hold except for this moment, this little moment of warmth. I've pinned all these swamp daisies to my sweater, to my jacket, to my shoes and my hat. Am I trying to decorate or camouflage myself? Can it be both at the same time? I want to be beautiful like a spring meadow, but once picked, the daisies curl and wilt and dry, and soon I feel a bit like an aged doily — as Grey Gardens as grey can be. I remember how when I was young, everything – *every thing* – was a treasure: all the dead insects and shiny stones and shells and sticks and flowers and the poor dead bunnies' tails that I kept in a shoe box. And now I remember how I buried my rock collection because I was ashamed of how strange I must seem to the others. I imagine the rocks are still buried somewhere out in Ferndale, Arkansas, but thirty-some years later I've got a new collection outside my door and a pile of snail shells sitting on the counter that I feel nothing but pride and admiration for. The sun behind me, I wave to my shadow. *Hello! I see you,* I say.

Do you ever have the urge to extend your fingers beyond themselves? To grow them long long long long — longer still — till they have passed your feet, into the ground, touching the roots of the grasses and flowers and the trees — oh hello earthworm — and then your long, extended fingers connect to that complex fungal root system called the mycorrhizal network that trees use to share water, nutrients, and communication. They share their resources; they don't compete. Suzanne Simard, the scientist who discovered this symbiotic relationship, originally published her findings in 1997 in her article "The Wood Wide Web". It wasn't until after nearly a decade of continued dedication that her research finally started to become more widely accepted and understood. She says, "The underlying message is that we are all in this together. We are all one. We depend on one another and have to love our plants." I realize that I cannot actually extend my fingers to join this underground network. But my hope is that this message continues to spread. And that we listen.

*Is Anyone Home?*
*Can You Feel Me?*
*Can You Feel You?*

If *Bluets* was Maggie Nelson's love letter to a color, is this my love letter to a river? It seems that like the river, my love has become larger, branching out to encompass much more than what is contained within these riverbanks. It has become a love letter to this nonlinear life: to the choicelessness and the choices, the meanders and oxbows, the heartbreaking and heart-opening, the reckoning, the bearing, the ever-shifting nature of rivers and of becoming and un-becoming. The neverending uncertainty, fear, and curiosity. A love letter can be a reminder of sorts, of what one may already know; it's a tender, generous expression — the acts of writing and receiving. An essential exchange. We need to pull our letters out of our pockets every so often to reassure and remind ourselves that love does indeed exist. And to remember that love — like faith — is an action. It is an ecosystem of its own, one that needs to be tended to and advocated for. We must create within ourselves a willingness to be tamed, despite the pain that this sort of soft vulnerability often brings. Becoming a river, I watch and feel as I rise and fall.



*Dorothy on the shoals at the mill*

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