

At Home in the Wild

Beyond the concrete sidewalks and mowed lawns of my childhood, I was free to explore the fields and woods that bordered our neighborhood. I was especially drawn to copses of maple and birch trees that for me became airy multi-room dwellings. A wide circle of trunks would be the living room. Rocks with flat tops were tables, round ones were chairs, and little ones were arranged in a circle for an imaginary hearth. A tight cluster of trees would be a bedroom, bathroom or closet. I could spend hours inhabiting my arboreal home, mothering an imaginary forest family or just lolling on the grass letting the dappled light of the leafy canopy play on my eyelids, awash in solitary contentment.

When we moved to San Francisco, there was no wilderness in which to wander, just wide concrete treeless sidewalks, good for hoola hoops, hopscotch, jacks and roller skates.

The Presidio was nearby, but it was then very much a military base and I didn't feel at liberty to roam there. The Marina Green at the base of the hill was just a patch of lawn to lie on when the fog rolled back. The little beach on the edge of the harbor was awash in motor oil that would stain my shorts. The pond at the Palace of Fine Arts had its charms, but all these places were full of people, and none felt remotely wild.

Longing for at least a little taste of wilderness to call my own, I began to explore our small back garden. Unlike any yard I had ever known, it was set into the hillside: a brick patio with high walls inset with steps that led up to a small sloping lawn. The east facing wall of the patio was filled with ecstatically abundant fuschia, a flower so exotic to my Midwestern eyes, I thought my Cleveland grandmother with whom I shared a love of sweet-faced pansies, would be quite scandalized by the sight of them. She may have believed in heaven, but she was uncomfortable with paradise.

We were renting this faux-Tudor Union Street house and my mother was taking a break from gardening, exhilarated by all the cultural offerings in her newfound city. We had no outdoor furniture, so the empty courtyard became my playground where I practiced the game of four square, a West Coast invention I had to learn PDQ or be laughed off the schoolyard.

I produced a play on the patio, corralling neighborhood children for various parts in "The Blue Willow." I must have chosen a Japanese play so that I could wear the red silk kimono given to me by Great Aunt Eliza and Uncle Bob when they stopped off to visit us on their way back from Japan. I was not any better at acting than playing four square, and the production was poorly attended. It did not help that our patio was overrun with two-inch long black beetles, so that attendees kept finding excuses to go back indoors.

I had no previous experience with beetles, and wasn't thrilled that my only outdoor space was full of big bugs. But I decided to befriend them rather than abandon the garden all together. They were large enough to impress me with a sense of personality and slow enough that they never startled me. They were amenable to whatever I wanted to do, so I

created beetle circuses, beetle houses and beetle amusement parks. I could never get any friends to take an interest in this pursuit. Once introduced to my beetle buddies, they preferred to play inside.

50 years later I still have a fondness for those beetles, though I rarely see any. Our yard here in San Rafael is full of lizards who zip around on the rocks and across the deck, do pushups in the sunshine, and are generally likeable companions, as amusing as squirrels but quiet; not as glamorous as the birds that visit our waterfall, but more permanent residents of the garden, so that I can distinguish one from another and name them. There's always a Lizzy, of course. And then there's Zippy, Speedy, Slim, Chunky, or whatever name suits the moment. They don't take offense if I forget.

Through my windows I can rest my gaze many times during the day upon Mt. Tamalpais, such a constant presence in my life that I consider her a friend and a gifted teacher of how to be calm and grounded amidst the ever changing weather of life.

I am free to roam the hills and find peace in the accessible unpeopled wilderness that abounds in Marin County. And there is a little copse of oak trees, a perfect little summer house, up on a hill where someday, I trust, my earthly remains can take their rest.

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