

JAMES L. MCELHINNEY

Kaaterskill Falls, Lower Cataract
watercolor and pencil on paper, 5 x 14 in.



COURTESY THE ARTIST

CHRISTIAN SCHWARZ

Repetition, Variation, and Abundance

**A Naturalist and Mushroom
Forager Reflects on Seasons**

Descending from the bright heat, wilted wildflowers, and sunburned meadows of Ben Lomond Mountain, I head for the coast. Here, on a small prominence of tide-darkened rocks, I ply the shore for dinner. My hands turn clammy. Pelicans glide by. I pull a cazon in by its cavernous blue mouth from between swaying frills of maroon kelp. The wall of fog before me does a steady dance, now receding, now billowing in around me. It's midsummer, and this is the flavor of my days for now. But the water in front of me is a blankness that my mind wanders to fill, drifting back and forth through time . . .

Have you ever felt distilled nostalgia for a season?

It is not ordinary nostalgia: most longing for times past is a losing game, an unadmirable form of sentimentality. But nostalgia for a season is something different. This is the main magic of seasons: the days you long for are on their way again. The past is returning.

Soon enough I'll be shivering my way through midwinter, looking forward to returning to just these kinds of long days, with abundant fruit at the farmers' market, hot afternoons in the hills, and dinner taken from the sea. Even knowing this, I feel a sudden longing for the wet weather and waning days of fall, when the forest soil begins to churn with the underground workings of mushrooms, their hunger stoked by the rain.

I spend thousands of hours outdoors every year, immersing myself in the worlds of birds, of fish, of plants, of moths, and especially of mushrooms. Many thousands more hours are spent learning and teaching the names of these organisms, documenting them on maps and with photographs. I write and I read about them. I consult experts. Learning to recognize Earth's life-forms with the same familiarity that I recognize my human friends—that's the syrup of my desire.

What lies in those thousands of hours that attracts me and keeps me in their light? What in my mind is so sensitive to the natural world's power to fascinate?

Glimmers of an answer began to take shape when I went to hear a friend give a speech to her college's graduating class. She spoke about her art (a kind of pointillism using hundreds of bits of candy—imagine gummy bear mosaics) and drew parallels from it to the twenty-eight thousand-odd days that make up a typical human life and the progress of humankind (a panoply of seven billion souls,