

ROD CLARK

North Country Reflections

Musings from
the Birthplace
of Conservationist
Aldo Leopold

1 The Ten-Minute Brook

Have I ever told you about the ten-minute brook? I myself have seen it only once in its glory, sparkling and cold as it carved its way through snow and reluctant ice. My dog Morley discovered it, abandoning our path through the woods in pursuit of the unknown. I called for him several times, listening for the jingle of his tags in the crisp air. At first there was only the cawing of some refrigerated crow, and then I heard it. Nothing sings like a brook, in that crystal braid of voices, saying: *Listen to me I am water, clear and crystal, trickling down over moss and stone.* So I was thrilled—but also astonished. To the best of my knowledge, there was no brook on my land! But I found Morley lapping at an icy rivulet that had magically appeared on the hillside—and the mystery was solved. Heavy snows in the upper field had melted, and finally the weight of the water had pierced the dam of snow at the

edge of the rows and poured into woods below, creating a tiny brook where none had been before. And standing there, I listened carefully, because I knew that in a few minutes, the field above would be drained, and the song of the brook would be brief. And it was important to listen to this music of March, because the brook was singing of warmer days to come, and all the songs that would follow, like the one I was hearing just then, above the rush of water, as a young cardinal, perched high in the pines, began to sing his ruby song of love for any lady cardinal perching in the woods, and all the world to hear.

2 The Quarry

Children are playing hide-and-seek in the old limestone quarry at the edge of the village where I grew up. I hear them as I walk, their voices ringing high and clear, echoing off the high stone walls among the mysterious trees. Crows complain, squirrels scold the invaders from the safety of green branches—and suddenly I am carried back to summer days in the fifties when my brothers and I played “Scatter” and “Capture the Flag” on the two wooded levels of the quarry. Remembering how we crept among the sumac and the shadows of boulders. How honeysuckle perfumed the air. How I once saw a possum, hanging by its tail in the cool shade of a catalpa. And I remember how we named the secret places of our playground: “Pirate’s Path,” “Lover’s Leap,” “Dead Man’s Cave,” and most marvelous of all, “Cool Cave,” which possessed in its depths a limestone nook where you could keep a bottle of Coke cold even in the heat of summer.

And as I ascend the path to the uppermost ridge to look down on a world mapped by children, some of whom are no longer alive, a small boy pops out of the brush in front of me—his eyes wide, burrs tangled in his hair. “Are there any pirates down there?” he demands breathlessly. But I am no longer of his world—and cannot answer him. Without waiting for a reply, he plunges into green spaces below. I hear the rapid patter of his feet descending to the second level—punctuated with improbable leaps and bounds—and suddenly I realize what it is I have been seeking here as I make this pilgrimage: it is my childhood that is racing away from me, down the steep pathway, among the mysterious trees.

photo: Rod Clark

3 Of Frost and Flame

This black winter night I try to write. The TV aerial rattles spookily against the wall outside, but no raven comes tapping, rapping on my window. The room grows cold. When I descend the narrow staircase to discover the cause, I see the fire in the stove is almost out—again! As each dying ember writes its ghost upon the floor, thoughts of Robert Frost pursue Poe’s shadow: Unless I fetch more wood, my world may end in ice! And if I freeze tonight, who will read what I might have written?

Outside, the suddenly distant woodshed beckons me into frozen darkness. With a burst of foolhardy courage, I throw on a poncho, grab a flashlight, and plunge out into the cold. Ayy! A vise of icy air clutches at my throat! Idiot! Idiot! I mutter to myself. An owl hoots derisively overhead as I stumble across the crunching snow.

Breathless, I arrive in the shed. I run my light along the stacks. Moonlight trickles through the slats. My breath fogs in its beam. Before me lies the harvest of summer: a small forest of windfalls dismembered and stacked: fragrant black cherry, beech, and box elder; blight-killed oak and shagbark hickory—all stacked crotch to elbow, knotty knee to moldy hollow—high as my head with spaces “big enough for a mouse to crawl through, but not for a cat to follow.” I think suddenly of trunks in the attic stuffed with plays never finished, branches of thought never followed to their leafy ends, stories still greening in the forest of the imagination, and—

Whoosh! Suddenly I am startled by an explosion of scarlet from the top of the stacks. A rush of wings whirs past my ear. A cardinal! Seeking refuge from the owl perhaps, or searching for insects frozen in the bark. Hastily, I fill my sling, and dash back to the house, closing the door to winter behind me. I feed the embers with cold fingers, and soon, through the window of the iron stove, I can see the fire spreading over oxidizing bark, telling better stories than any to be found on late-night cable.

No need to go back upstairs to my manuscript quite yet, I tell myself, nestling in the fire-facing chair. Still no raven comes tapping, rapping at the window, but the room is warm. *This* is creative work. Really. Just sitting here on the couch, sipping the last few drops of whisky from the cabinet and watching the blaze of this small sun, borrowed from the bounty of October.

Rod Clark is a lifelong Wisconsin-based writer who lives with his wife Melanie Werth and cat Leslie Underfoot in a 140-year-old farmhouse on twenty rural acres in southeast Wisconsin. He is perhaps best known as the editor and publisher of the literary magazine *Rosebud*, now in its twentieth year of publication. “The Quarry” and “The Ten-Minute Brook” were aired earlier this year on International Public Radio’s “Living on Earth.”