



SPLENDID VISIONS

A meditation on the childhood sublime

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AT SOME POINT between my sixth and seventh birthdays, the Greek god Pan started haunting our backyard. He dwelled behind the pear tree next to the garage and left his hoof prints in the dirt, his half-eaten pears in a shrub. I once spotted his horned silhouette near the ivy-strangled fence. With a fashioned spear I hunted him up and down the block, through neighbors' yards, and into the woods by the river, my imagination animated, stirred by sylvan possibility. I've never forgotten that feeling, never been *able* to forget.

An ecstatic and engaged individuality defined my childhood in suburban New Jersey. While my single father labored ten-hour days, my pals and I biked all across town, cussing and spitting, each of us a veritable Tom Sawyer or Huck Finn. We concocted waterproof forts by the river and then prayed for rain, raked mountainous piles of leaves to grapple in, buried *Star Wars* figures in narrow graves in a field, donned camouflage and faded into the woods with BB guns and bows and arrows. (My father's handing over of a Crosman BB gun and compound hunting bow to an eight-year-old boy remains a curiosity I can't fully explain. That nobody ended up disabled or deceased is a mystery fit for Newton. Even after my little brother shot our babysitter in the face—the BB got lodged in the bone of her chin and had to be surgically excised—I was still allowed to make merry with the gun.) For most of the day, my father and grandmother didn't know my whereabouts, and nobody between the ages of six and thirteen ever lingered indoors longer than necessary. My grandmother's voice—the Italian Catholic shrill of it—knifed the neighborhood every evening at five when dinner was slid onto the table. Meals were wolfed down, barely tasted, and I was gone again.

Greg Borthwick lived on Bosel Avenue, the tree-lined street behind ours. His face mottled with acne, body scarred everywhere from recklessness and riot, he was the wildest son of a bitch on wheels—skateboard, scooter, BMX, ten-speed. He'd ride that BMX off the diving board into my godmother's pool, or jump from my grandmother's high brick porch on a pogo stick. He picked apples from the tree in the field across the street from my house and chucked them at aluminum-sided garages and parked automobiles. We played basketball incessantly in our driveway, even in winter, even at night—my grandfather attached a floodlight to the porch for us. Because he was a maniacal fan of professional wrestling, Greg Borthwick organized matches in our front yard, a melee of Levi's jeans and t-shirts, twenty-five kids in a multihued pile. Cavorting with Greg Borthwick was better sensory stimulation than anything electronic could have afforded me—this was a time before the ubiquity of soul-killing electronic distraction—and he looms large in the dome of my memory. Last I heard, he'd moved to Virginia to preside over an amusement park: the perfect attempt to prolong the childhood sublime.

Our small suburban town flanked by countryside made that kind of childhood possible, made Greg Borthwick and Pan possible, and I can't help but doubt that my son—Ethan Jacob, age three—will have the equivalent of a Greg Borthwick or Pan obsession in his Boston boyhood. If I send a ten-year-old Ethan into the Boston streets on a BMX bike it will be perhaps only a matter of hours before he's pancaked by a car in Copley Square or else bullied off the curb by a sidewalk crowd on Boylston. All of civilization might be a danger zone—if metropolitan madness does not maim you then a raging river or stray tractor in a wheat field

might—but I cannot shake the idealistic, naïve suspicion that Ethan would be safer, freer, *better* in the wilderness, with a more complete affection for beauty, a *want* of the sublime.

Cities are not entirely devoid of nature, I know, but their parks and reserves make it difficult to achieve what Thoreau named “a constant intercourse with nature,” one that leads to “the contemplation of natural phenomenon” and thus to “the preservation of moral & intellectual health.” For Thoreau, that constancy was not negotiable. If he thought he could have achieved the sublime in the Boston Common—the oldest park in the nation—he might have tried, but he didn’t believe it was possible. Consummate immersion in the deep green of Concord was the only method of obtaining the particular brand of clarity that had become so necessary for his sustained contentment.

WHAT WILL BECOME of Ethan, of his “moral & intellectual health,” in the city of Boston without Thoreau’s constancy, without the mountains and meadows, the rivers and forests so integral to his development into a fully feeling adult? Since his birth I have returned again and again to Wordsworth and Thoreau with a kind of hallowed intensity, convinced that their nature-wisdom has something to teach me about raising and loving my son. I’ve been conflicted since day one over the prospect of raising Ethan in the city, because my beloved Wordsworth recommends a life in nature—because Wordsworth wouldn’t have been Wordsworth without it—and because I myself grew up within frolicking distance of forests and streams that taught me about bliss and its first ingredient, beauty. Too much concrete, macadam, and steel—like too much electronic illumination,



God help us—must be detrimental to a child’s development. Someone asked me recently, “What do you want Ethan to be? A poet?” And I thought: *Indeed*. The poets, those unacknowledged legislators, have always been wiser than the philosophers, the politicians, the pundits.

If it’s true that children raised in cities often grow into shrewd, incisive adults wise to the crooked ways of the world, that being exposed daily to a wealth of cultures, languages, libraries, bookstores, theaters, and museums can make impressive people, Wordsworth might argue that those individuals lack a “sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused”—that is, a sense of the unity, harmony, freedom, and “unwearied Joy” exemplified by nature. Who doesn’t want “unwearied Joy” for his child? Emerson might go a bit further and say that those divorced from nature have a thinking deficiency, because “Nature is the vehicle of thought.” For Emerson, as for Wordsworth, Nature is synonymous with Life—our lives simply refuse to cohere outside the context of the natural world. Will Ethan the city boy forever lack something sacred in his mind and spirit? Will he lack a certain *useful* knowledge? When my paternal grandfather was in Korea during the war, his platoon mates from Manhattan thought the crickets were North Korean soldiers sending evil signals to one another in the nighttime. They never got a good night’s sleep.

In the opening pages of his book-length poem *The Prelude*, Wordsworth knows the value of the child’s communion with nature:

*'twas my joy
To wander half the night among the Cliffs
And the smooth Hollows, where the woodcocks ran
Along the open turf.*

This boyhood dedication to nature—this *joy*—will evolve by the end of the poem into the grandest moment of humanism in all of English-language literature: the poet’s encounter on Mount Snowdon, where human imagination is deified. In the childhood scenes of *The Prelude*, the boy’s mind and spirit are fostered by nature, but by the time the poet has reached the peak of Snowdon, a reversal has occurred—the mind is now molding nature, and has indeed become more eminent than any aspect of the natural world: “a thousand times more beautiful than the earth” and “of substance and of fabric more divine.” Sublime reciprocity: nature enhances the mind so that the mind can enhance nature, endowing it with an influence to enhance the mind even further. Decades later and an ocean away, Thoreau would come to a similar conclusion in the woods of Walden, writing *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*: “This world is but canvas to our imaginations.” In other words: I’m worried about Ethan’s

mind, about the canvas he will or will not be capable of creating from that mind. What will be his Snowdon? A taxi cab? A traffic circle? The subway system?

Wordsworth’s experiences in nature, from his earliest verse to the 1850 version of *The Prelude*, are never marred by hippie simplicity or the kind of Noble Savage naïveté that infected the hapless hero of Jon Krakauer’s bestseller *Into the Wild*. Rather, Wordsworth felt in nature what Gerard Manley Hopkins later felt: the sublime, a “divine vitality” and spiritual prevalence that revealed not only the divinity’s creative power but our own power of imagination and transcendence. Wordsworth’s “spirit in the woods” is for Hopkins “God’s grandeur”: “nature is never spent; / There lives the dearest freshness deep down things.” That exuberant caravan of words, “dearest freshness deep down things,” never made sense to me until Ethan was born and I began envisioning his future, his development.

Emerson believed that nature was a better teacher than history or manmade authority. Wordsworth saw “mind” at work in daffodils and ferns, artwork underway in every forest. And this is what Thoreau means by “Nature is a greater and more perfect art.” More perfect than what? Than anything *we* are capable of crafting from plastic, from iron, from words. I’ve felt the truth of those eternal sentiments since I was a boy, years before being blessed by Wordsworth and Thoreau. At the age of ten, I needed to leave home in order to punish my father for some perceived injustice or other. I crept down the block and disappeared into the pine forest, barefoot and wearing a backpack stuffed with survival gear and crackers. That pine forest spoke to me of simplicity and purity—of *haven*—long before I had an accurate notion of complexity and contamination. And what worries me now about Ethan is that when it comes time for him to run away in order to make me ache, he will not have a pine forest whispering to him about sanctuary and salvation. If I’m lucky he’ll flee to the Museum of Fine Arts and lose himself in quite a different, albeit lesser, breed of sanctuary. If I’m unlucky he’ll walk into Harvard Square to befriend the pierced vagabonds huddled in a reek at the entrance of the T. What I want for him, really, is *religion*, and not that species of belief available cheaply in every one of Boston’s churches, but the religion that is already a part of him, pulsing within him—if only he is allowed to experience it as such.

ONCE A MONTH, usually after a dose of Wordsworth’s “Intimations of Immortality” or “Tintern Abbey,” my wife and I have a conversation that runs something like this:

“We need to get out of this city,” I’ll say. “These goddamn car alarms. When did the world acquire so many *cars*? Everyone is texting and driving. The traffic is unholy.” (Furthermore, twice a month between April and December the city cleans the streets in

our sector. The obscene orange vehicles alert us to this cleaning at seven a.m. by way of loudspeaker. It sounds like the Battle of Britain and yanks my whole household from sleep.)

“We can move to western Mass,” she’ll say, “and get some land. Away from cars and street cleaning.”

“But then I’d have to drive into Boston for work. And you *don’t* drive, so you’d be stuck in the sticks.”

“We want to move to the country to get away from the cars, but we can’t move to the country because I don’t drive a car.”

“And the people here are generally so angry. So *impatient*. Some are evil. A woman, the other day, tried to run me down on my bicycle.”

“Will there be libraries and museums in walking distance in the country?”

“It’d be nice if Ethan could have a little dirt bike,” I’ll say. “Or a horse. He needs a forest to wander in. I had a stream in my backyard when I was growing up. We caught frogs.”

“He’ll break his neck on a dirt bike. And he’s afraid of actual horses. He likes them in books only.”

“He’s gonna get hit by a car in this city. So many *cars*. We need *mountains*. Not people, *mountains*.”

Katie and I attempted an experiment for Ethan’s second birthday: We took a trip to Boulder, Colorado. The only other time Ethan had been in nature happened at the start of that summer when we spent two days at a friend’s cottage in the New Hampshire wild. The mosquitoes and flies were kamikazes, but Ethan enjoyed netting snakes and toads in a pond and then canoeing across an unspoiled lake, and mostly because there were other children there to share the experience with. We trekked through the forest—swatting vampiric flies—to a meadow resplendent with sunlight, and we picked marble-sized wild strawberries, though the tall grass made our ankles itch. We were mere weekend tourists incapable of real immersion, of anything even approaching spiritual pleasure. I was a curmudgeon overly concerned with getting mud on my shoes. Halfway back I had to carry Ethan because the mists of pollen made him sleepy.

On the summit of Flagstaff Mountain in Boulder, with only a few other people in view, we gawked clear across Colorado and into Kansas, that untampered-with air like the air in Eden, pines and boulders everywhere the sanctified art of earth. I remembered Thoreau’s sublime, transformative experience atop Mount Greylock—the highest peak in Massachusetts—when, also on a July morning, he beheld beneath him “a country as we might see in dreams, with all the delights of paradise. . . . It was a favor for which to be forever silent to be shown this vision.” Thoreau’s vision, like Wordsworth’s on Snowdon, involved clouds, mist, and the imaginative might of the mind, whereas ours on Flagstaff was less, well, *visiony*. Crystalline and reaching forever,

yes, but brief and . . . ordinary. And we had *driven* to the summit in a rental car, for God’s sake, since hiking such terrain with a toddler would have been an invitation to injury. Ethan was thrilled to crawl over boulders and crap on pine needles, and Katie and I felt exhilarated up there—but this wasn’t the sublime for me. It was simply a reaction to novelty. In just another day our trip would be finished, and my phone insisted on vibrating with work-related questions. Vacation for me always feels like a vacuum. We airplaned back to our Boston lives and haven’t mentioned Boulder since.

Maybe some of us are not fit for visions, for Wordsworth’s “visionary hours,” the sacred wisdom that nature has to offer. Perhaps we’ve become too infected with the opposite of idealism: cynicism, and its quickness to say *bullshit*. For me “the world is too much with us,” and part of that world is the exhaustion of skepticism, of waiting to be swindled by the truth, disappointed by outsized expectations. For every scientist who claims that the human being’s default mode is gullibility and the willingness to subscribe to nonsense and idealism of every stripe, there’s another who claims that cynicism and doubt are precisely what allowed early humans to flourish. Two hundred thousand years ago you’d better have been rather skeptical of that lurking lion’s intentions and as equally cynical about that other clan’s ostensible motives. Think about how difficult it would be now to sell someone a magic potion, or a 1990 Oldsmobile. Unless you have the constitution of a thirteenth-century monk, it’s just as difficult now to believe in lasting transcendence by hiking to the peaks of Snowdon or Greylock. Modernity’s mess is in our pores, and belief in anything but the immediacy of our tactile lives grows more difficult by the generation.

But I want to believe. And I want my boy to believe with me. We shake off our idealism—our dreams of mountains—at our own peril. And this seems to me one of the essential values of Wordsworth and Thoreau today (even if you aren’t contemplating a return to nature): their secular insistence that our lives have meaning beneath the immediacy of the quotidian.

MY MISANTHROPIC STREAK enjoys this logic: the planet is an overpopulated insane asylum; humans are heinous and cruel. Glance around at what we’ve done to the animals, the oceans, the air. (Thoreau on the human being: “What he touches he taints.”) Remember what we did to one another at Antietam and the Somme. That’s what kind of clan we are. Selfish, crazed, cannibalistic. I’d like to get away from them, from *us*, live in a place where my nearest neighbor is an owl.

My pastoral idealism and viridity have convinced me that humans are happier, less aggrieved creatures among bucolic splendor, awash in Wordsworth’s “vital feelings of delight” inspired by



the interconnectedness of nature. Or, as Thoreau has it in *Walden*, “There can be no very black melancholy to him who lives in the midst of Nature and has his senses still.” For anyone who has anguished beneath the black dog of melancholy, that seems an irresistible promise. Concrete, steel, car alarms, and computers are not soothing, not even a smidgen religious. The human spectacle lacks tranquility. We are so ensconced in artificiality, is it any wonder many of us are miserable and almost mad? In Thoreau’s celebrated *Journal* (for a personal record of the nineteenth-century American mind at work it is second only to Emerson’s magisterial *Journals*), he argues that you can’t have it both ways, that you must decide between nature and society: “You cannot have a deep sympathy with both man & nature. Those qualities which bring you near to the one estrange you from the other.”

That’s the rub: *You can’t have it both ways*. Certainly not if you earn an average income and don’t own a weekend and summer house in Vermont or New Hampshire. Even so, do you honestly want to spend half of the weekend in your earth-killing car, stymied on a highway with a million other Bostonians trying to give their children a weekend’s worth of rustic bliss? There’s no constancy in that, and aggravation enough to age you. And so once you accept Thoreau’s formulation, the line is drawn: on this side is city life, on that side nature. *You must choose*. But our lives, our circumstances, choose for us, do they not? Who is really master of his own fate? It was easy for Thoreau; he was a bachelor without a job or children to feed. He could sit in the Concord woods and whistle with the wind (he also accidentally burned down more than three hundred acres of those woods in 1844). I have to go to work every morning, and I’m not about to switch professions and become a lumberjack so my boy can daily chase after chipmunks and maybe become a bard. In a certain mood you could very quickly come to the conclusion that Thoreau is full of shit.

HERE IS WHAT I REMEMBER with something close to euphoria: I spent every summer of my boyhood in the wilderness of Bridgton, Maine. When I was a small child, my maternal grandparents moved to a cottage on a lake in the woods so my grandfather could fish full time (only a middling human being, he was an expert fisherman with more trophies than could fit in the cottage). They owned a motel/restaurant on a hill, and out back was a long, wide, grassy slope that stopped at the sandy edge of Beaver Pond. Larger than two football fields, Beaver Pond was where I swam, boated, fished for bass, and conquered the island in the center. Even after my parents divorced when I was ten years old, I continued going to Maine each summer. I could always tell when we were getting close because the air changed, turned piney and new as soon as we hit New Hampshire. Jersey didn’t have air like that. And when I say I would lose myself in

those ancient woods, I mean I would enter in the late morning and not emerge again till almost nightfall, moose and deer near enough to smell. The world was not too much with me then.

Wordsworth’s idealizing of childhood is not Lewis Carroll’s retreat into innocence and wonder but rather an integral component of his nature worship. There’s always a sense in Wordsworth—especially in “Intimations of Immortality,” “The World Is Too Much With Us,” and the later books of *The Prelude*—that adulthood is a disappointment after the “delight and liberty” of childhood. The girl or boy receives nature by mainline, by intuition alone, whereas the man or woman communes with nature only by reflection, by cognitive processes that can cause static in reception. The child has no word for the sublime; he simply experiences it. The adult, on the other hand: his word gets in the way of his experience. Ethan’s time atop Flagstaff Mountain in Boulder was purer and more joyous than his mother’s or mine not only because his phone wasn’t buzzing—although that certainly helped—but because the child “still is Nature’s priest” capable of “the vision splendid.” A newborn arrives hardwired for communion:

*Along his infant veins are interfus’d
The gravitation and the filial bond
Of nature, that connect him with the world.*

We sorry adults have lost that gravitation; we’re far too busy, too wrapped up in society’s strings:

*Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!*

Here’s the good news for us adults who frolicked in the forest as children but are now too besieged by civilization to give a damn: We can recollect those “beauteous forms” of nature when locked in the offices we work in, and feel once more “sensations sweet.” Wordsworth can will himself into a “serene and blessed mood” because he has nature pulsing at his hub, informing his thoughts and emotions. That childhood engagement with nature becomes ever after “a master-light of all our seeing,” and it’s precisely the master light I want for Ethan. In his essay “The Method of Nature,” Emerson believes that the natural world has the potential to inspire “ecstasy.” That’s a lofty goal for my boy; I’ll settle for contentment, for well-roundedness and appreciation of the wooded playground that made us.

Rachel Carson maintained: “Only as a child’s awareness and reverence for the wholeness of life are developed can his humanity to his own kind reach its full development.” No American of the last century did more than Carson to emphasize the

importance of a child's immersion in nature, of how love for nature equals love for humankind. Our want of *full development* for our children is our own reminder, our own summons to restore the primordial nexus we have to the natural world, regardless of whether or not that nexus has been weakened by society's sharp sting. Establishing that vital connection to nature for our kids is one way we redeem ourselves after forgetting ourselves—it's one way we become children again.

HEMINGWAY'S BOY-HERO Nick Adams spends his childhood and adolescence praying to the forests of Michigan—the wilderness his sanctuary, his temple—and yet, for all of his communion with nature, Nick doesn't turn out that well (nor did Hemingway himself). I have a family member who was reared in the woods of Maine, in the sanctified wild where I found the sublime. The last I saw her, she was two hundred pounds overweight, tattooed from neck to feet, and had a slightly off child from a nowhere-to-be-found father and not even the dimmest possibility of employment. Many of the Mainers I've met have become immune to the grandeur just outside their doors. They don't even look. As I continue to contemplate a monumental uprooting from Boston into a backwoods, that cousin of mine towers like a reprimand or warning. You can't just drop a child into the woods, clap your hands, and expect him or her to turn into Wordsworth or Carson.

And if Ethan is never allowed Thoreau's all-important constancy in nature? I'll chastise myself for choosing one place over another. But that's the paradox of place: We want to be somewhere, and then we want to be somewhere else. There's always somewhere better, even if the place we are is best. This dilemma of the city versus the woods has become for me a question of proper parenting, of how to inspire awe in Ethan, and how to invoke Wordsworth and Thoreau anywhere we are—at the apex of the Prudential Tower in downtown Boston or on a mountain in Colorado. The question has become not *Will we move to the country?* but rather *What kind of father do I want to be?*

In the first half of his supremely dull autobiography, *The Words*, Sartre writes, "There is no good father, that's the rule." The poet Robert Bly, channeling Freud, writes, "Millions of parents now realize that to raise children without damaging them is impossible." But how can we damage them *least*? At the Boston MFA or at Walden Pond in Concord, we must cultivate our children's sense of the sublime, must nudge them always toward what is beautiful, toward bliss, toward a deeper-seeing into the things of earth, wherever on earth we might be. 🐾

How do you nudge children toward the sublime? Share your thoughts on childhood and parenthood, wild and tame, at www.orionmagazine.org.

Hungry

Bears cougars rattlesnakes man alive
people keep saying aren't you
afraid living way out there no
close neighbors real friends
where do you shop on the spur
just go for a cuppa coffee look
what if you suffer an attack of
anything can happen my god
at your age it's crazy—

Well

the other day I said *whoa*
stepping back to gaze in wonder
at how this sow pushed over
my compost box oh I understood
of course spring and all the surge
still I'd built that box myself
scraps of ancient planks squared off
clean and straight at the corners
nailed tight with spikes a big old
boy I was sorry to see lying there
behind the barn all messed apart
a long scar clawed across the black
sheet of plastic covering the top
or not covering anything now
except a patch of gray snow
bristling with pine and fir needles
how many moldy cheeses and pea
pods skins seeds and pots of coffee
grounds I'd given that box to mix
and cook and sweeten over the years!

Oh

she was hungry all right bear-
hungry after a good long sleep
and quite likely eating for three
those two babies back in the den
blind whining and wanting
their milk yes sir friends
sour is sweet things break
the yearning returns home
and abroad hungry is hungry.

—Gary Gildner