To Love a Place

Cross Mountain

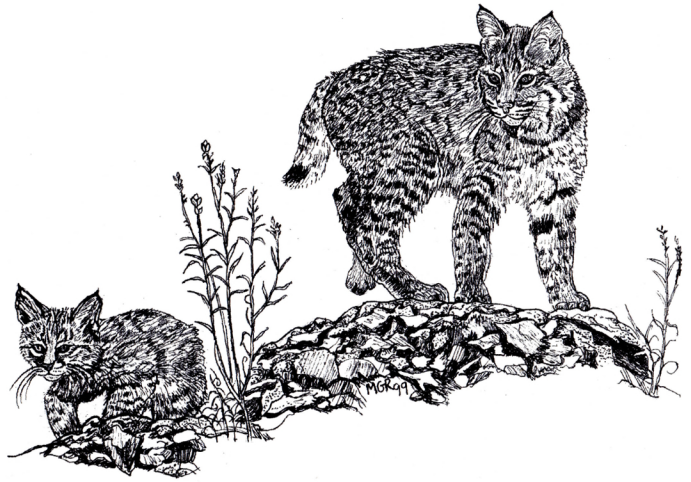
Chris Bolgiano

I have learned to watch for the occasional day on Cross Mountain when nature shows her most murderous face. It happens only every few years. The last flare of autumn in fallen leaves is first extinguished by sodden winter. Then temperature and moisture may conspire with evil intent. The dark hump of mountain through my western window turns deathly pale in a fine mist. Raindrops gather at the ends of bare twigs, to freeze into blades of ice. Ice dulls the green of the cedars to the color of doom. Sometimes the air is still and suffocating. Sometimes there are gusts of wind like tracer bullets across the forest floor, tossing up helpless leaves. If I ventured out unprepared, Cross Mountain would kill me with hypothermia in a few hours. On such days, I feel most deeply my love for this place.

Although I lack personal experience with motherhood, I suspect this feeling is akin to the love of a mother for her serial-killer child. It is an unconditional, unreasoning, undeniable love. Its power takes me by surprise. I am disarmed, but I am not, after all, rendered so witless that I want to go outside today. Instead, with the requisite cup of home-grown herb tea, I sit at the window, savoring the ironies of emotion and environment by watching to the west.

For the last fifteen years, since my husband and I moved here, Cross Mountain has filled my western horizon. It rises at the edge of

the Shoemaker River Valley, west of the much wider Shenandoah Valley. In the pattern that defines land ownership throughout much of the southern Appalachians, the rich valley bottomlands are held in private ownership, and national forest starts about halfway up the thin-soiled slopes. My hundred-acre tract on the flank of Cross Mountain is on the ragged private fringe, and our back border adjoins the George Washington National Forest. That puts us on the threshold of more than a million acres of undeveloped, forest-covered public land, which is itself more or less connected to another six million acres of national forests and parks along the spine of the mountains.



bobcats

I sit with arms hooked over the back of a chair at the window, alert for any activity in the gloomy light outside. Small creatures have fled, seeking cover in cedar trees and under brush piles, but two deer come to lap up spilled corn from the squirrel feeder. They stand quietly with heads down. It's snowing now, and the white flakes on their dusky backs turn them once again into spotted fawns. They roam my land and the government's, not recognizing the difference. For the last fifteen years, I've followed their example, trying to understand Cross Mountain as a whole.

There was little in my early years to lead me toward a life immersed in nature; I was a child of cities and suburbs. But as it happened, I came of age during the Back to the Land Movement in the counterculture 1960s. It was a blessed time. I'm proud to be an aging hippie, weaned on the slogan of Peace and Love, man. I took seriously the idea that serenity and wisdom could most surely be found in an earthbound life. For a double dose of nature appreciation, I married a biologist. We moved to a small farm, but soon realized that what we were looking for lived not in the fields, but in the fencerows. Those weedy, overgrown borders between pastures were home to wild things. It was wild nature we craved. So we sold the farm and moved to the woods, into that mysterious forest world at which the fencerows could only hint. Going back to the land came to mean, for me, going back to the forest.

The deer have disappeared. In the gashes made by old logging roads across the slopes of Cross Mountain, snow is collecting white and soft, like the buzzard down that Indians used to stuff into wounds. Like the pioneers that replaced the Indians, I am not native here. Like them, I left family history behind. Genealogy has always seemed to me to be a pointless pursuit. My ancestors were either handsome or plain, smart or stupid, kind or cruel. Or, if they were like most people who ever lived, they were all of these at various stages of their lives.

I have no ancestors buried on Cross Mountain, their bones to become part of the trees and the deer. Instead of human stories, I look for tales the land has to tell. Cross Mountain is my textbook. Some of its oldest pages are the creek rocks, and if I scan carefully I can pick out those that are scored in small circles by shells of lives lived three hundred million years ago. The evolutionary heritage of life in the Appalachians is profoundly ancient, yet most of the signs I see are fleeting. A cluster of wind-thrown trees in Mushroom Flat records a storm a decade ago, if my measure of moss on the root mass is accurate. Half a millennium and the pits will be mostly filled in, the roots well rotted. Charred logs in Finite Hollow are pages of

billowing smoke, blistering fire. Inscribed maybe eighty years ago, in a few hundred they'll be illegible. A muddy streamside is a blackboard, scribbled by passing feet and erased by every rain. When snow falls, the forest is a white sheet embossed with animal tracks. I follow them, burying my mind in a vision of their creator, remembering myself only when I turn and face my own footprints.

Today is not a good tracking day because the snow is too blotchy for my eye to decipher any imprints. Even with binoculars here at the window, I can't detect the tracks of the two deer that just left. Maybe they've gone up to the little plateau where a cluster of tall pitch and Virginia pines might give them some protection against the snow. Unless the snow is very deep, branches catch most of it, leaving bare earth remaining in dark circles beneath pines, especially white pines. The little plateau seems an odd place for pines, because hardwoods generally outcompete them where slopes are moderate enough to hold soil and moisture.

The pines whisper a different kind of story, in which humans figure as the agent of change that has altered the original scheme of things. The moldering split-rail fence snaking straight up a steep slope, with locust trees (a sure sign of an old opening) growing only on one side of it, tells of hard human use. So do four acres of dense grapevine draped over scrubby trees high on the east face of the mountain. All over the mountain, young chestnut trees struggle valiantly but vainly to beat an imported blight. Almost every single chestnut oak tree, a dominant species here, is actually one of four or five or even six stems all sprouted from a single cut stump. If you trace a circle by connecting the centers of each of these trunks, you get a close approximation of how large the original tree was. The sizes amaze me, and I look around trying to imagine how the forest once was.

There are a few scattered places on Cross Mountain where it's possible to find some echo of what used to be. Most trees are between seventy and ninety years old, an age we document by counting rings in the firewood we cut. Most trees fit easily within the embrace

of my arms. The occasional individual or couple of trees that are bigger generally mark the corner of a land boundary, or the line of a former fence. On a ridge to the north, a rusted logging crane with iron wheels confirms the industrial nature of the lumbering that swept through all the mountains in the early twentieth century. So widespread and thorough was the destruction that the federal government bought up the land to stop the erosion and the wildfires. That's why we have those millions of acres of public land in the southern Appalachians.

Just south of my house, where a creek flows through an unusually wide bottomland, a decent depth of soil along the slender braided flow of the stream has created a tiny cove of a few acres. The trees here are no older than the surrounding trees, but they're larger because of the better soil and the protected site, down between two steep slopes. I can't quite reach around most of the trees. They're big enough to attract serious attention from pileated woodpeckers, as many oval holes attest. The undergrowth is subtly different from other areas, more layered. There's a lot of standing and down deadwood, including a lightning-split tree trunk I use for a bench. This structural complexity, apparently fostered by the better conditions in the cove, makes it the closest thing to an old-growth stand on this side of Cross Mountain. Along the top and down the steepest, rockiest draws, there are individual oaks that are not very large but are gnarled and twisted by age. These are the survivors, trees too poor or difficult of access to have been worth taking.

The mountain is shaped like a U, its ridgeline hovering around a modest elevation of about twenty-two hundred feet. Inside the U, in the heart of the drainage, I once found what appeared to me as the most beautiful creek in the world, bedrock stepping down in gray slate ledges, each filled with limpid pools in which many large fish swam. I've never found it since. Sometimes I wonder if it was magic, but Cross Mountain is not known for magic of any sort. Aside from the obvious fact that it does have a name, one that appears on

U.S. Forest Service maps at least by 1927, Cross Mountain is quite anonymous. It has no areas designated as special. Whatever ecological uniqueness it might once have harbored was presumably lost during the last, most devastating cycle of cutting. All the reports I read when we first bought land here—soil productivity assessments, wildlife habitat ratings, dependability of stream flows—ranked it fair to poor. The foresters we consulted all agreed that the trees were typical mixed Appalachian hardwoods. We should not expect anything beyond the ordinary on Cross Mountain.

But even after centuries of abuse, the forests of the southern Appalachians still rank as the most biologically diverse temperate woodlands in the world. There are mosses, fungi, salamanders, insects, mussels, fish and flowers like none other on earth. This abundance of living forms, and the unique communities they create, invest Appalachian forests with mysterious grandeur. Though they are only a green shadow of what they used to be, the woods of Cross Mountain are still so lovely they lull me into believing that anything is possible.

And it is: on Cross Mountain I have found such uncommon plants as fringe trees, round-leaved orchis, lily-leaved twayblade, red mulberry trees and one of the few cucumber magnolias I know of in this area. A blinking saw-whet owl one autumn afternoon earned me a county bird club first sighting record. Warblers rare for this area, like Wilson's and the orange-crowned, flit through. Ravens nest somewhere along the top of the mountain, and woodcocks have danced near its foot. Wood turtles appear occasionally, apparently expanding the southernmost extremity of their range. In addition to all the predictable varieties of small wildlife, I have found salamanders and snakes of mysterious species (at least to me). I have seen mink, bear and bobcat. Cross Mountain is a classic example of revelation, through time and conscious attendance, of hidden depths below the surface of understanding.

The surface of the ground outside is becoming glazed now, as the snow turns to sleet. If this keeps up all night, even the lowliest ground

dwellers will have trouble finding their next meal. On such days as these, when Cross Mountain unleashes its deadliest powers, I recall to mind as an invocation its opposite mood, the glorious days of spring, when blue skies are mild and dogwood blossoms spangle white across the unfurling green of the forest. On those days I sit out on my deck to soak in the blessings of air and light, and to mind the mountain. I listen for the songs of migrating birds and watch the slopes and hollows that course down Cross Mountain to see what's going on, which is usually nothing obvious. It was on one of those days in our early years here that I first heard someone hot-rodding out on the dirt road, undoubtedly throwing beer cans as he went. The roar broke the forest stillness and voiced everything I feared in life, defiled everything I held sacred. My anger leapt until I cursed the driver with a vehemence that, afterward, astonished me. I found myself flushed with hatred. I understood then where all the anger in the world comes from, the intensity that lights wars. It comes from me.

There are other lessons I am learning from Cross Mountain. The cedar in front of the deck obstructs the panoramic view from my window, but once, after a deep snow had buried the forest floor for weeks, I saw bluebirds, robins and cedar waxwings, famished, search out the tree's blue-black berries. Having glimpsed the role of that single tree, I begin to sense the whole in the part, the universe in the atom. I see that the forest is like human society. Each tree is an individual, wounded by life in idiosyncratic ways, yet inextricably part of something larger than itself. When a tree dies it molders calmly to show how easy it is to return to earth, in the process that nurtures us all. With the forest as example I can fit myself into the inexorable cycle of life and death. It's the only way I *can* fit in. Without ancestry or progeny, I have no past in this land, and no future. I have only the present moment, the eternal present of forest life. Just at this moment a branch in the cedar tree is shedding its icy load in a cascade of razor-edged shards. I'm glad to be sitting here with steaming mug in hand, safe inside, where there is mint instead of murder in the air.

Chris Bolgiano writes on nature and travel for the *New York Times, Washington Post, Audubon, Wilderness,* and other publications. Her books include *Mountain Lion: An Unnatural History of Pumas and People* (1995) and *The Appalachian Forest, A Search for Roots and Renewal* (1998).