

## THE TASTE OF WILD WATER

I was eight the first time I tasted wild water.

I lay with my great-grandfather along the bank of a pond deep in rural Indiana. I was close enough that his smell came strongly to me, subtly shading and comforting the wild smells surrounding me. It was a smell that I have known since I have known smell, deeply encoded in my body-memory, stored away with other body-memories that are bound together with the origins of my life: the feel of his starched shirts against my newborn skin, the smell of his soap and cigarettes, and his voice a deep rumble into which was interwoven the communications of ancient generations and nineteenth-century life.

My great-grandmother is there in body-memory, too. Her voice throaty. She overweight and chain-smoking, hard-drinking and peering nearsighted, heavy-bosomed, strongly perfumed. And always with her memory are smells of gravy and fried chicken, green beans boiled to non-existence, the taste of too-sweet iced tea in great, sweating glass jugs. And the feeling of being loved deep into the soul till it matters not the shape of a person's body or the irregularities of their personality.

I remember journeys to their formal stately home in Columbus: dark and dangerous basements, attics filled with memories and old smells, mirrors that distorted new generations peering half-frightened into them, and overstuffed horsehair chairs that could not be sat upon without sliding off. And out back of the house, my great-grandfather's office where patients from the nineteenth century came to see their doctor.

Those patients had little trust in the new generation of physicians that peered condescendingly down at them, talking as if to children, certain of their educational pedigree, all

in clean-white-shining-characterless faces. They came instead to be with a fellow traveler through time, who had been filled with stories of Civil War, begun life on horses and in buggies, had seen them die in one world war and then another. One who used the old medicines and still looked at the tongue, who palpated the organs, and who said, "Say 'ahhh.'"

I sometimes went in the back door of that office - drawn always against my will. It stood darkly in the back of the garden, pulling on me, until I could resist no longer. Then uncertain, trembling, I would walk past the goldfish pond filled with ancient flashing carp, along the overgrown walkway, to the blond brick building with the dark brown door. Even touching the handle brought its smell to the nostrils: old metal and years of human touch. The knob rattled slightly, but it took a pressure to turn it, for the door fit tightly. All of my strength was necessary and my hand would just start to slip when the door would let go with a sudden "thunk" and pop open a little. More smells would come, smells held at bay behind blond brick, peeling brown door, metal latch and knob. Strange smells: of herbal medicines and chemicals and leather, of oak and old paper, of old sickness and pain, and of the years of human lives, which has a smell all its own.

The door creaked when I pulled it open, hinges protesting, and it scraped along the concrete walk. When it was finally open there was always that terrible moment when I had to decide whether or not to step inside. In the dim light lay old boxes and metal things, wornout brooms, and scrapes on the walls, and that slightly damp concrete with its own wetly penetrating smell. As I breathed it in I was caught up and carried away to some kind of life that I did not understand. It seemed so old and somehow so sad that I could hardly take breath. But none of these things came to me in words. They expressed themselves in the instinctive motions of flight, half turning to the door again to go, to get away, to feel once again the sunlight play over my

body and fill up my lungs. And sometimes I gave it rein and left not-running, remembering to close the door, to push on it until it snicked into place. And somehow in the back of my mind I could hear a sad thing crying out to me - a thing that I could not hold, could not understand, could not bear.

But other times I would not turn and go, not give that silent fear expression or control over my body. I would reach out and turn on the light and sometimes I would even close the door behind me and place myself firmly in that world. Then, trembling, I would step out into it and it would close about me firmly, insistently, irrevocably.

Along the right side of the room were counters and above them shelves. In the middle of the counter was a large sink, stained by fearful liquids over unimaginable years. On the shelves above were brown bottles leaning, filled, leaking, mysterious, and strange. The smell was strong - of herbal medicines, and chemicals, and water, and plants, and age. Along the left side of the room were shelves filled with boxes and bottles and metal devices and things that my memory provides no shapes for.

Once I had made it this far, it was seldom that I did not go on. There was a door ahead of me and through it the room where my great-grandfather saw his patients. It was a room that felt safe, touched by human life. There was a high leather table with shiny metal things at one end that looked like stirrups or the spurs used by cowboys. There was a desk with a chair and papers and the walls were clean and it smelled like hospitals and fear and hope all at the same time.

At the far wall there was another door, always closed. It carried on its surface a shiny patina of age, the knob turned silently and easily and on the other side was the waiting room. There was a couch, its leather dark with years, its oak body rubbed black and smooth. There were oak chairs and end tables with magazines and table lamps and along the front length of the couch

there was a low table and on it a large glass jar, perhaps a foot across. It was filled with shark teeth and I knew I could take off the top and reach inside and take some if I wanted. Sometimes I did and wondered about a fish that could have these kind of teeth and sometimes I would think about falling in the ocean - but not often.

Eventually I would turn and retrace my steps and always that back room would challenge me. I would snake through it quickly, hearing soft footfalls behind me that I could not turn and face and it always seemed that I got the door closed just in time. I would shake then and not understand why I had ventured in and it might be a month or a year before I did it again.

They had another house - in the country.

It was in Columbus that I was introduced to the mysteries of my great-grandfather's profession but in the Indiana forests of his country home that I was introduced to the mysteries of the human and the Earth and of the interior world that all human beings possess.

His country house was a hand-hewn, oak barn built a century before. My great-grandfather had bought it, numbered the pieces, disassembled it, moved it to the farm and rebuilt it. I remember visits there, lying next to him in bed and hearing his stories. It did not matter what he said but only the sound and rhythms of his voice, his arm about me, and his smell sinking deep within me. I remember one night lying with him when the story was done and looking up from slitted eyelids to his face and knowing that the only thing I wanted in life was to be a man like this man. Only years later did I realize the Universe hears such requests and shapes irrevocable destiny from child thought. Even more years passed before I realized that there is a price to granted wishes.

Sometimes he would take me out into the woods on that farm and we would walk. There is a special kind of shadow that happens in deep woods that are old and have been left

undisturbed. Underneath the canopy of ancient hardwood trees the greens are deeper, the soil blacker, the smells richer. And there is a shadow that is over everything, calling out that there is a deeper world than the human of which we are a part. Something came out of that place and entered my body. I felt more whole, more human, more loved, more a part of the world. And in some indefinable way I *knew* who I was.

I remember the particular way my great-grandfather walked through those woods - few walk that way now. I see it mostly in old pictures, in the stance of ancient ancestors, of Civil War veterans, of people long gone. That way of walking has a particular smell, a particular gait, a particular rhythm, a particular integration with Earth and plant and water. As we walked through those woods he would push aside a plant in his path, but it was not brusquely done. Rather he moved them from his path as if they were relatives he was setting aside. The soil was black with a bit of clay and it could be easily formed with the hands. A shovel would go in deeply and there were few stones. The roots of the plants entwined in that deep dark soil and our feet sank down a little as we walked - as if we were moving on the living tension of the soil, like the water spiders that skated on the pond where we fished. My great-grandfather's feet knew the tension of that soil - they expected it and the soles of his feet spoke to it, conversed with Earth, each step of the way.

When we reached the pond, we would lie for hours on its banks, the silence a blanket over us. Sometimes we would drop a word into the silence like a stone into the water and the word's meaning would send ripples through us until they ebbed, slowed, and stopped. Still, even then I knew those words were unnecessary. For in our time together we were doing something without words that humans have done for millennia. As we lay with the smells and the sounds and the feels of that place deep inside something would leave his body and enter mine. I would breathe it into me as slowly as I breathed in his smell; something in my soul found purchase in it.

It was a food without which I could not become human. It is always passed in silence between the man and the boy, between the woman and the girl. It is handed down from one interior world to the next. Its essence penetrates the muscles of the body, the oxygen of the blood, the substance of the spirit. And this was the time in which I first tasted wild water.

A man's hand possesses touch and touching, softness and hardness, those deep veins on its back that capture the eyes and will not let them go, and all his life written in the lines of his palm. I remember lying back upon my elbows with a piece of grass between my teeth and my great-grandfather leaning forward and cupping his hand, sliding it under the surface of that glassy pond. He lifted the shining surface to my lips and said "Here, have you ever tasted this water?" I looked at him askance and caught the gleam in his eye, then bent my head and pursed my lips. I remember the translucency of that water, the tiny particles of dirt floating in its depths, and below it all his life written in the palm of his hand. The water was sweet and cooling; my body liked it. As I lifted my head, I caught the glint in his eye and he made that particular gritty sound with his teeth as he smiled that I loved so much. "Good isn't it?" he asked. And I remember nodding. And then we lay back down and that thing continued to come out of his body into mine.

Later, my mother caught me drinking wild water and told me it would kill me and began to instill in me a fear of the wildness of nature. And later still, my great-grandfather died and my days began to be filled with TV dinners and the flickering, half-intimacy of television. The years passed and the voices of my ancestors began to fade from memory; I became used to the taste of domesticated water.

It was long and long again before I tasted wild water once more, before the seeds that the land and my great-grandfather had planted within me began their slow growth. And even more years passed before I was no longer afraid wild water would kill me. The journey back to wild

water is a long one.

And now, in my turn I have walked with my son in the deep forest. I have lain next to him and felt something leave my body and enter his. He needs it less often the older he becomes. Still, sometimes he is unsettled and paces the floor and a peculiar look comes over his face. Agitated, he will ask if he can lie next to me and in silence I hold him. Something in him opens up and a food flows out of me into him. The color and tone of his skin changes and his breathing slows and deepens and eventually he sighs and is filled once more.

I know that in his time he will pass this on as it was in turn passed into me. And perhaps also, one day, he will bend over and cup his hands, and ask his child or grandchild or some child:

*"Here, have you ever tasted this water?"*

(This first appeared in an early version of *The Taste of Wild Water: Poems and Stories Found While Walking in Woods*, later in *The Lost Language of Plants*.)