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WINTERING

Diana Kappel-Smith

"A gifted naturalist's chronicle of the season . . . powerful and intriguing" —*The New York Times*

Wintering

Diana Kappel-Smith

Illustrations by the author

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for my father
Albert David Kappel

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Foreword

When I spent my first winter in Vermont, twelve years ago, I bought a pair of snowshoes. They were the only way to get back into the woods. I thought it would be a good idea to learn to tell the trees apart in the wintertime, by their twigs and whatnot, but I made slow progress. After a while I left my field guide and hand lens at home, and went farther into the hills. With three feet of snow on the ground the world was clean, stripped. The snow settled in branches, sifted through the air, or blew into drifts, in ways that I thought were very beautiful. Walking through the countryside in January was like exploring a foreign planet. Aside from a light network of gravel roads, with a few farms and summer cabins here and there, there were not many signs of people. It was easy to pretend that I had the planet to myself.

My sister and I had bought an old falling-apart farmhouse on the ridge of the hill the summer before. We bought it with some money that we had inherited from an uncle. There was enough for a house and six acres, with something left over to live on for a while. We had romantic visions of a simple life. I wanted to keep ani-

mals, a garden, cut my own wood, and learn to be a better naturalist. None of these things are simple; I'm not sure why we thought that they would be. The woods in winter, on the other hand, were peaceful and undemanding. Pushing along through the undergrowth, tracing a river to its source, was easier in many ways than staying home, burning green wood, and expecting to be warm.

One day I floundered down a ravine into a deer yard. The dense little evergreens had been pruned by nibbling deer into tunnels, hedges, and walls. There were deep pathways tramped in the snow, and oval hollows where the animals had slept, and droppings everywhere. I was beginning to notice that the winter planet wasn't empty at all, or uneventful.

After four years on the hill I married a neighbor and we began to farm full-time. Neither farm nor marriage was built to last, but I still live here—writing some, farming some—with my son, Coulter. The woods in winter continue to be a source of wonders.

In the winter everything out-of-doors seems to be gone. But ever since Louis Pasteur exploded the myth of spontaneous generation—which held that frogs could be born out of a spring rain and mice from ears of ungleaned corn—we know that nothing is gone, and that all the rich life of a June morning must be out there on a January morning. These stories are the results of many and varied attempts to find out where it is, and what it is up to.

I have been struggling to define my terms, even to myself; and winter is not an easy thing to define. Most plants are not growing then, it is cold, there is less sunlight, so the season itself translates as a time of energy

deficit. The deficiencies are of immediate and tangible things: calories of food, BTU's of heat, quanta of light. The gnawing lack of these basic necessities of life makes itself felt gradually through the autumn months, and spring comes slowly also, so that winter is a turning rather than a coherent event. *Wintering* tries to compass this turning, and so it has come to include a good deal of the year.

This is also a personal journey filled with strayings from the narrow path and burrowings after obscure subjects and wonders; I hope that others will enjoy this convoluted path as much as I have.

I have inevitably made use of the work of a lot of other people, for which it has not always been possible to give due credit. I trust that I will be forgiven for these oversights, and that the people whose work I have used will be pleased with my use of it.

Finally, every observation and event and understanding in here have been powerfully affected by the seasons of my own heart; I believe that this is unavoidable, even good.

When we observe something, what we take in is less that thing itself than its effect on us—the clangor of nerve ends processing chemistry, temperature, reflected radiation, old terror, and private hope. I have come to the conclusion along the way that there is such a thing as the wintering of the human spirit; by spirit I mean the force which we hold, hidden, chrysalised, as it were, under a layered shell of physical necessity and present time. The spirit seems to inhabit no time and no space at all, but it thrashes and resounds when it meets the world, like a tuning fork which has been struck against the edge of a table. By its sudden music we know it is there.

Tuning forks have a strange and almost magical qual-

ity; if you hold ten of them up in a room, and strike only one so that it sounds its particular tone, a few other forks will begin to sing quietly as well, in harmony, each absorbing sympathetic vibrations through the fabric of the air. When I have been struck, then, I have tried hard to listen, and to communicate the clear sound.

I have used science as my chief tool here, because I have some experience and training in it, and I like it, and it's handy. The art of science seems to be to look, ask, observe, and ask again. This process gains momentum, though, until it has the intensity of battle. It is the nature of this odd quest that facts dispatch questions as if they were a head of the Hydra; each time an answer is found a dozen fresh questions squirm into grinning life. I dimly remember that I began this journey into wintry things feeling brave and shining, inviting anyone that would to come along, on what seemed to me would be a kind of rout, a morning's joyride into spring. I laugh now because I hardly recognize myself: my armor has a patina of pitch and rust, sticks and burs are tangled in my sleeves; but I can lift my face in the April sunlight and suck air. We have won this. It is no mean prize. That anything lives at all now seems a victory beyond measure.

Twelve years ago I used to follow Dr. Steven Young into the woods whenever I could. He was encyclopedic; he knew the names and habits of everything that lived in the hills, and would crash off cross-country, uphill and down, in wholly inappropriate shoes, and arrive twenty minutes later at the bush or the rare four-inch-high fern that he wanted to check up on. Besides, he was and is a great botanist. Once I asked him how he knew the names of the trees so well. He said that it was like

recognizing a friend on the street; you just knew. At the time this seemed a miraculous knowledge. I am indebted to Steve for many things, but most of all for the habits of not carrying field guides or sticking to paths but of keeping one's eyes open; and of knowing that you can never keep them open enough.

To Dr. Peter Marchand I owe a different debt of gratitude: that of introducing me to winter ecology as a hard science. To the other professors who taught with him, both in 1973 and in 1983, I owe a similar debt. My fellow students, especially in the early years, practiced their science in a serendipitous fashion, building snow houses and sleeping in them, soberly taking the temperature of their own toes, and discovering firsthand what it might mean to be a bear. These were exercises in joy. I try not to forget them.

The libraries of Yale University and of the University of Vermont have been constant sources of nourishment. The excitement and frustration of tracking down a paper on "Compensation for Temperature in the Metabolism of Poikilotherms" are not unlike the sensations produced by following an otter trail over the ridge. The Center for Northern Studies has allowed me to use their library as well, and their lab, and the staff there has always been helpful. I hope that they don't take it amiss that I still have one of their microscopes. It was lent me long ago by a staff member whom I dare not name. It has been very useful.

My cousin G. Stuart Keith was responsible for bringing birds into my life very early on. I was not very receptive. I used to trudge along in his wake, binoculars a-dangle, only because I liked being with him. After a while, something rubbed off. His help, both tangible and intangible, has been a simple gift of himself.

I am very grateful to all the people at Cape May who let me follow them and watch them work during the great hawk migration. Some of these are people whom you will read about presently: Pete Dunne, Bill Clark, Dr. Sidney Gauthreaux, Katy Duffy, and many other banders and watchers. Their enthusiasm was inexhaustible. I know I got in their way more than once. And if it hadn't been for Larry Metcalf, my old partner in naturalists' mischief of many kinds, I would never have gotten there in the first place.

In 1979 and 1980, Blair and Ketchum's *Country Journal* published a series of three articles I had written about wintering, which later became the inspiration for this book. I am very much indebted to them, especially to Tom Rawls, for his faith and his criticism. In the winter of 1983 *Vermont Life* published a portion of *Wintering*, which was very exciting, especially because it gave some of my friends and neighbors a chance to see what I had been up to all this time. As a result, my friends and neighbors gave me a boost when I needed it most.

Making a pile of stories and notes and articles into a book has involved a lot of what I believe is called technical support. Technical support is like that crisscross of girders under the railroad trestles in those old Westerns; without them, tracks and train collapse into the Rio Grande. Julia Fallowfield and Ray Roberts have been like literary parents; my sharpest critics and most reliable enthusiasts. Shapleigh Smith, Jennifer Martin, Annette and Christine Whipple and their family, Christine and Rick Bolin and theirs, and my mother and father, Victoria and Albert Kappel, have all taken care of me and of Coulter while I was working. Tom Burke rescued a chapter from electronic oblivion. Fritze Till gave me two birds

to draw. Jane and Homer Porter gave me a snowshoe hare to draw, and eat. Lois Budbill taught me about drawing pencils. Carol Clarkson got me into the Bronx Zoo after hours. Suse Lyon did a typing blitz that set a record for such things, I think. Phillip Isom gave me sleigh-rides and snowball fights. These were all, at the time, necessary things. All real gifts are. I hope that I can give them back.

D. Kappel-Smith
Vermont, February 1984

Contents

I  *A Way Away*

. . . their chearfulness seems to intimate that they have some Noble Design in Hand, and some great Attempt to set presently upon, namely, to get above the Atmosphere, high, and flie away to the other World.

—CHARLES MORTON,
London, England, 1703

Just give me the miracles!

—PETER DUNNE,
Cape May, New Jersey, 1982

News

In August I went to Dead Creek to see what birds were there. While I was easing down close to the water, trying to get a better look at a stump that seemed to be a rare species of heron, I dropped suddenly to my ankles in slick, stinking mud. I slid steadily down and as the mud gathered me in its cool grip I collapsed backward, scrabbling, in the cattails. It took all my strength to haul myself out, and the mud chuckled at me, closing over one lost-forever sneaker like gray, greasy pudding. I was annoyed at losing my sneaker and at having to spend the rest of the day in boots; this isn't my kind of place anyhow, I thought to myself while I scraped the worst of the ooze off my pant legs with a stick; in more ways than one I am out of my depth here—a foreigner, sightseer, tourist. It is small comfort that the birds I have come here to see are foreigners and tourists, too; or that the mud is part of what they come for. The mudflats of Dead Creek are an oasis for shorebirds in the long flight from breeding grounds to wintering grounds; a lucky swatch of fertile muck in a howling wilderness of granite hills.

Actually the wilderness is not as howling as all that.

Dick Smythe, my good friend and neighbor, says that sometimes, spring and fall, a pair of spotted sandpipers will visit his homemade pond up on our hill. They stop by there for a rest and a dab of food on their way from Mexico to Labrador, or Labrador to Mexico. Dick's pond has been in existence for only four years, so some birds anyway must fly all that way with their eyes peeled.

With the gray mud drying on my jeans and ankles I went on from one bridge to another, scouting the marsh with my binoculars; the reedy greenery hid much, nearly everything, in fact. I caught the loom of muskrat houses here and there and I saw a muskrat nosing along in the green water. The muskrats make trails up onto the land just like beavers do, hollow muskrat-sized pipes in the reeds and mud and cattails, and autumn wildflowers and grass.

Great blue herons were around every bend of marsh, yard-high graceful birds like something come alive from an Oriental screen. From the side they were dusty blue with white cheeks and black cockades, but their breasts and throats were streaked, so that when they turned toward me they disappeared against the cattails. This was an optical illusion of the first water; I couldn't see them at all and they could see me just fine.

The great blues had bred there along the creek and along the lakeshore, and they wouldn't go far to winter—to Delaware, the Carolinas, maybe on to Florida. I wasn't looking for great blues particularly, but all day long I couldn't take my eyes off them; patient, gangling, serene, with their dark-browed warrior's eyes and beaks like swords.

Between stops I drove off on straight roads through fields of alfalfa and corn. This was farm country, old Pleistocene lakebed, the rectangular level fields bearing

crop after crop between straight hedgerows of elms and oaks. This was all only an hour and a half by car from my hardscrabble farm in the hills. There are few elms on my land and no oaks, and we have no rich muddy marshes anywhere nearby. All of our hill water drains downhill fast, the streams running cold and fresh even in August, in falls and curves and rushes like the hills themselves. There in the lake valley where the countryside was going nowhere in particular, the water wasn't in a hurry either. Dead Creek meanders; even that is a mild word for what it does or doesn't do. It is made of loops of old river in the terminal stages of their riverness before becoming land. It is a thread of marsh more than a creek, a rich soup of water life.

Under the suddenly expanded valley sky I looked and looked into the marsh, and the more I looked the less there was to see, and, oddly, spookily, the more fascinated I became. In one place I spent an hour and a half sitting on a stone, watching a great blue up to his ankles in water (his ankles are where our knees are, in the middle of his legs, only they bend ankle-wise instead of knee-wise), and he was doing what passes for hunting: standing still with his eyes open and beak poised, his legs as inanimate as sticks. I watched the heron who watched the water. When he stretched his long neck it seemed to spread out from him smoothly, like a cat on the prowl. When he walked it was with a jerk-and-stop . . . jerk-and-stop motion that was tricky to watch. The eye catches the jerk and looks, and by the time one looks the bird is stopped and one sees nothing; and just as the attention falters and the eye wanders there is another jerk. They are big birds, after all, and may be hunted from behind while they are hunting below, so it makes perfect sense that their arts of invisibility have been honed, and honed.

When I looked up from my binoculars, the trees beyond the marsh and the mountains beyond them oozed and shrank, as if my eyes were zooming backward at the speed of sound. Vertigo—I held on to my stone and fastened my eyes to my binoculars again, and seemed to hang weightless over the water, scouting the horizon of the marsh world. After another hour of this I knew a few more things. I knew that in back of that gray stub there was a green heron padding around in the cattails. To the left of him was a muskrat tenement, to his right was a fat muskrat. Three species of dragonflies were mating and laying eggs on the cattail and rush stems within a yard of me. Goldfinches and field sparrows were foraging deep in the brush along the shore—and there were noises. There were clicks, coos, splashings, and fidgets in the rushes and the cattails, news of a vast invisible crowd: frogs, insects, fish, more birds—rails or bitterns—all only visible as shadows, ripples, whisks, jerks. I couldn't tear myself away. All these mysteries seemed about-to-be-revealed. It was like waiting in a theater in which the curtain was always just about to rise.

I have never acquired the good hard-nosed objectivity to media messages of all kinds that most people seem to have, or to drama, however gentle. I take what I see and hear almost too much to heart. For instance, after an hour of TV network news I am left with some unhappy, uncomfortable suspicions: that world leaders are vain and venal, that nothing is safe or sacred, that no one is to be trusted, and experts least of all; et cetera. All this exposure to the greatest of human dramas—international hanky-panky, love, murder, sex, violent death—the news, in short, delivered in a matter-of-fact monotone by a bland man in a TV studio—makes me uncomfortable. At least a wide-eyed street-corner gossip endows her