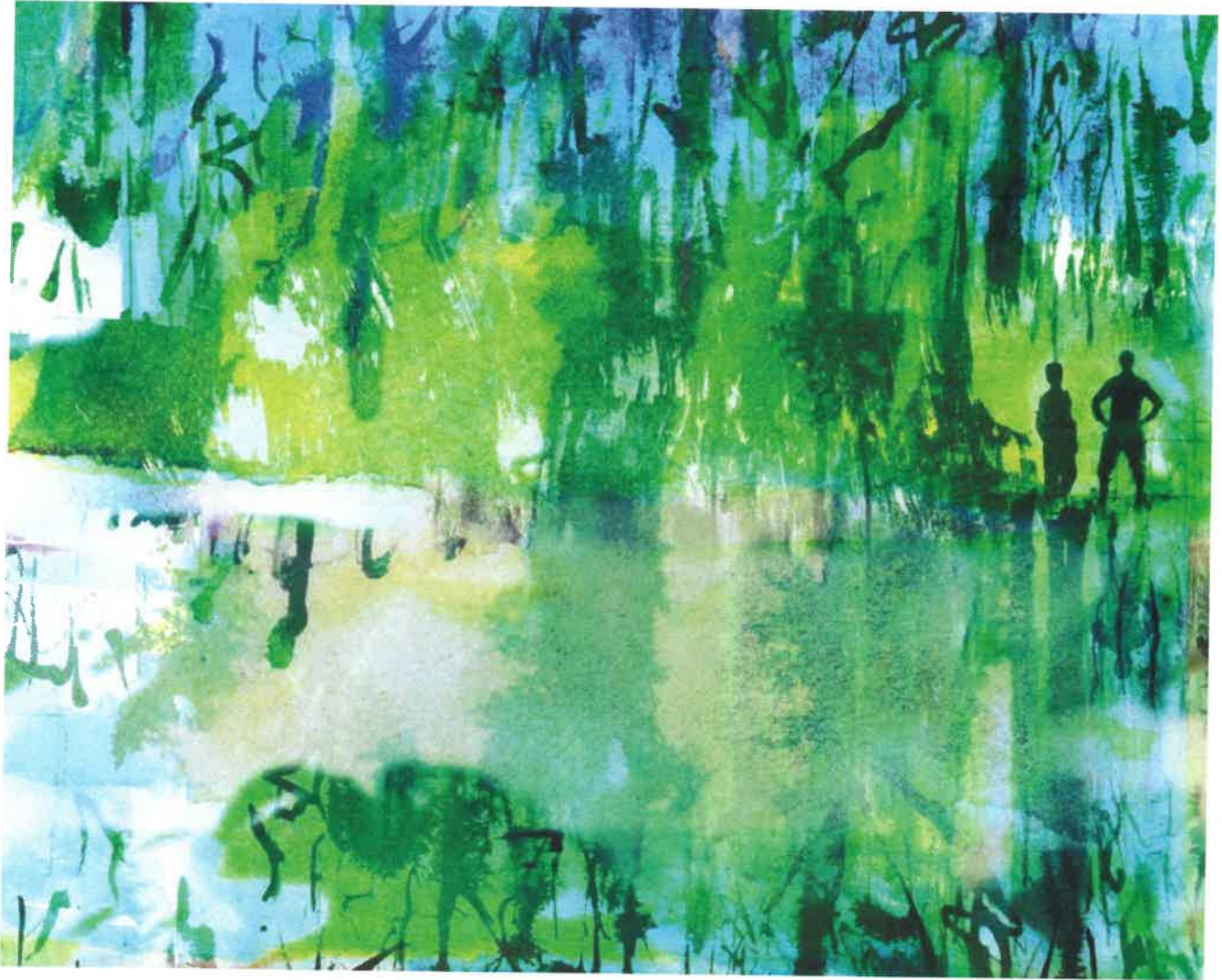


OPINION | LEILA PHILIP

Tagging along with a beaver trapper



SIMON PEMBERTON FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

By Leila Philip | MAY 05, 2017

IN THE YARD today, the daffodils blaze yellow and it's spring, but strangely, I am thinking of a different morning, in winter still.

“Want to see a beaver lodge up close?” Herb Sobanski Jr. is grinning like a boy scout, knee deep in the freezing swamp water. “Sure,” I say and move toward him eagerly, too eagerly in fact, and I almost lose my balance. Each step in my rubber hip waders feels like I am walking on balloons. The cold water surrounds my legs, then my thighs. I walk forward slowly.

“Hey, would you look at that!” Herb says suddenly, and points delightedly to where an intricate birds nest filled with red berries hangs from a nearby branch. “This is why I love this, I always see somethin.’ ” He forges ahead. Soon we are about 10 feet from a beaver lodge, a huge mound of sticks and mud that juts up from the surface of the water. I have never been so close to a beaver lodge before and I stand in awe of its size and complexity. But where I see the mystery of raw nature, even here, 30 minutes from downtown Hartford, Herb sees the problem that the state called him in to resolve. The beavers that built this lodge have flooded the woods so badly that their extensive pond threatens to pollute the local water supply with giardia, what has historically been called “beaver fever.”

“There’s fresh mud on top, so you know its active,” says Herb, studying the lodge intently, “and look, there’s the feed pile.” He points to a stretch of water to the right of the lodge where branches and even large limbs rise up through the surface. Sun glints through the trees. Herb nods appreciatively and we admire the feed pile in silence. “They’ll eat that all winter. Swim over and take a branch back to the lodge,” says Herb, “Open up a beaver’s stomach, nothing inside but sawdust.” He points again, “Look, there’s an osprey nest! Isn’t this beautiful. I love it back here.”

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Soon we are traversing the narrow dams that the beavers have built through the swamp. All along the banks we see trees half gnawed, or gnawed down completely. It's incredible the amount of beaver construction here, the swamp now spreading out in a series of ponds that look like woodland rice paddies. Beavers need open water to thrive. Fat and cumbersome on land, they are magnificent swimmers.



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“There you go,” says Herb pointing to a pine tree half gnawed through, but still standing. “Beaver sign. Interesting, they usually don’t like pine, too sticky. Careful here, it gets deep.” Before I know it, Herb has waded forward and is up to his chest in the half-frozen water and then checks a half-submerged

island of swamp grasses. "I think a muskrat might have set off my trap," he explains as he examines the water and pokes at it with his trapper pole.

"Nope, its OK." He wades back.

"Unless my eyes aren't good," Herb says and points to where I can just make his next set and, indeed, one of the guide poles leans over at an angle, "I think there's something in that set. "

"A yearling," he says quietly, his tone serious now as he works to free the animal. "Pelt won't be worth much, but it's good eating. This would be a good one for you to try." He throws the beaver onto the bank where it lands with a thump, then he resets this trap, submerging it back down in the water with his bare hands. "We got a guy who is going to make us beaver sausage," he explains. Herb swears beaver tastes good, especially as beaver chili.

I'm not listening. I'm looking at the beaver. I can't imagine eating beaver chili. For Herb, the beaver is an animal to be harvested. He'll even use the tail to make coyote bait. To me, the beaver is a wild animal, and it makes me uncomfortable to think of it having to be managed or, in wildlife management lingo, "harvested."

"Can you grab that for me?" Herb says casually. I know he is pressing me into this moment. I've asked to come along to learn, after all. I nod and grab the beaver's front leg. It is surprisingly heavy. I carry it back to the stand of pine where he had left his wicker trapper's pack and, as carefully as I can, place it in, headfirst. I am implicated now. No longer an observer.

TWO DAYS LATER I'm in Herb's fur shack watching him skin the beaver. He expertly slices the meat from the hide. I find it hard not to flinch. To me a beaver is a token of the wild, like those animal tracks I'll find by the creek. A

wildness I want to think is still out there. But being with Herb has blurred the lines. One can make the case that trappers like Herb, who utilize every part of the animal they catch, are the ultimate locavores.

Herb throws the pelt over his shoulder to take it upstairs to stretch, and as he walks away I ask him the big question — why trap? He answers easily, “Not everyone can kill; it’s not for everyone, but I respect the animal. If we didn’t manage the populations, there would be so much disease and starvation, people don’t realize.”

“Why do I trap? Not for the money. I have lots of other ways to lose money,” he laughs, then grows serious. “Even if fur prices are down. I’ll still trap. I love it out there. Its spiritual. . . . It’s my church.”

I think of Herb’s respect for the animals he is trapping and how he’ll use every part of the beaver he has killed. I think of the bullet hole decals on his truck, his motorcycle, the many signs promoting guns in his fur shack, and how this trapper, demonized by animal rights groups, is a keen naturalist.

We are living in a moment when what divides us seems greater than our common good. Out on the trap line, I’ve been following another set of tracks, relearning that elusive truth: Appearances can fool you, things are rarely as simple as they seem. Paradox: the way spring daffodils, those yellow emblems of summer, are just as surely tokens of the winter from which we’ve come.

Leila Philip is a professor in the English department at the College of the Holy Cross. Her latest book is “Water Rising,” a collaboration with artist Garth Evans.

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