On Being Lost

By Blair Braverman

Colby College, in Maine, sits atop a broad hill that slopes down into woods on all sides, like a castle moated by a tangled knot of trees. In my four years at this school, I've spent a great deal of time getting lost in these woods, whose size – only a few square miles, really – suggests that for most of us, getting lost would be difficult if not impossible. Luckily, I'm willing to put in the effort. There's a magic in being lost, and when I set off for an hour's or an afternoon's expedition, I try to cross the boundary into the unfamiliar. I try to find an instability of place.

I leave my dormitory and enter the woods along a broad, rutted-dirt trail. My favorite time to do this is early morning, when the sky is blue and the branches are dark veins against the white light of the rising sun on the horizon – or else on overcast mornings, when the whole gray sky seems to glow above me, smooth with fog or mottled with clouds, and the sun could be nowhere or everywhere at once. In fact, any time of day will do. I walk down the trail, feeling the solidity of the earth beneath my sneakers, the small variations of pebbles or roots. Within a few minutes I begin to pass animal trails, threads of open space, marked only by a slight parting of bushes, a crack of greenery less dense than that around it. It is these that I most like to follow.

Sometimes there are footprints between the ferns, footprints cloven and confident, no longer than my thumb. They are even, immaculate, each pressed into the soil with equal force; my own footprints, on the other hand, vary from the deep gouge of a landed leap to a gentle disturbance of twigs, left while I hesitate to look over my shoulder. If I were to walk with certainty, then my prints would be as the deer's; as it is, I've got no chance in the world.

Lately I've been wondering how animals navigate – if they even realize they are navigating. When a deer passed along this trail, parting these same bushes, was she following a scent, a feeling, a certain unknowable pull toward food or water or home?

I've never seen an animal lost, not outdoors at least. I've seen animals lost indoors, and I know that even to witness such a thing is alarming, disconcerting. Last year, while waiting for a flight at JFK airport in New York, I saw no fewer than four plump sparrows swooping under the domed ceiling. They rode the air in high arcs, passing over the bowed heads of men and women holding suitcases and cell phones. One of the sparrows kept fluttering against a tall window, sliding back and forth against the glass, over and around. It would stop, rest its small feet on the sill and shiver itself into a perfect light ball; then, after its feathers had smoothed, it would rise again to fly endlessly against the

glass. Two of the other birds were hopping beneath a row of benches, pecking the ground. One held a worm in its beak, and I stared at it, stunned, wondering how this perfect anomaly had occurred, how a bird and worm had both happened into the same cement-walled room and found each other in time to enact this modest replica of wildness; then, at the same moment, I understood that the worm was a French fry.

I thought, then, that the birds could spend their whole lives in the airport, could find food and water and simply live there, for years, maybe even die of old age in that one room.

In any case, though the deer who made these trails may well have known its destination, I don't know mine, and that's how I want it. I don't try to lose my way; instead, I simply let myself follow, follow whims or desires or some vestigial instinct left long undeveloped and unheeded. I walk. I walk over roots and down into gullies, walk through the creases of earth worn away by last year's snowmelt, walk into and out of clearings. I pluck ticks from my ankles. I loiter, wallow, rub leaves between my fingers.

In the spring, I count fiddleheads as they sprout, admire their elegance as they push through humus in delicate curls; later, as I pass through a carpet of ferns, I remember how they started out. I lie on my back and look at the sky, then I lie on my stomach and look at the soil. I have seen squirrels, deer, skunks, groundhogs, and on one occasion, a red fox, who trotted parallel to my path for several minutes; we stared at each other the whole time, neither of us changing direction. Then, abruptly, the fox was gone, ducked and vanished into some unseen cavern, and I understood that it had come home.

Usually, after an hour or two of wandering, I too begin heading for home. Unlike the fox, I never beeline; I couldn't if I tried. I know that if I make my way uphill, I usually emerge at some point into a field, or near a road I recognize. But I have, at other times, surprised myself, coming out in a location totally, miraculously unknown. Once, blinking, I stepped out of the woods and into a groomed backyard, where I was met with three charging poodles. After a moment's consideration, I sprinted around the side of the house – which was generously pillared, with three cars in the driveway – and came panting into a cul-de-sac, which I traced back to a main road several miles from campus. Later, when I looked at a map, I discovered that the section of woods I had emerged from was not, in fact, attached to the section of woods I had entered several hours before; they were separated by a four-lane highway, which I had never actually crossed.

Do you understand? I am addicted to such mysteries.

Last summer I worked as a mapmaker for Colby's Environmental Studies program. I sat for eight hours a day in a computer lab, staring at a screen, trying to diagram Maine's woods and mountains – trying to demystify them. It was technical work. I spent a lot of

time typing numbers into spreadsheets, column after column; it was hard to imagine that data like this could somehow represent wilderness. But there was, I found, a precise beauty in the maps' layers, the speckled lakes and jagged mountains, the lacy coastline, the spider web of roads and rivers. I liked to know where everything was, to see the relationships between places, the way creeks converged into streams, and streams into rivers, and the thick mass of forest spread across the northern half of the state like jam on toast. And to be able to put these maps together myself, to construct a model representing hundreds of miles – I felt like I was cupping the whole state between my hands.

One morning, as I settled into the lab, my professor came to me in a rush. That very afternoon, he said, he would be bringing several researchers up into the mountains to show them a conservation project he was working on, and that they had helped to fund. He needed a map. Not just any map, but one made by his own student, in his own lab. He wanted to show them what I could do. Normally, it took me days, if not weeks, to make a map – he needed this one in three hours. Could I do it?

Of course, I told him, already starting to sweat. A map. I could do it. In three hours? No problem. Relax, I said. I have it under control.

For the rest of the morning, I typed and squinted and cursed, tracked down data and tried to make sense of it. I painted rivers. I colored the forest. I shaded the dark sides of mountains. I added a legend, a compass, and a scale bar, and I signed my name at the bottom: by Blair Braverman, June 2010. The map, when I finished, was lovely – bright and intricate, detailed enough to be useful in navigation without sacrificing artistry. I printed five copies – one for my professor and each of the researchers – then slid them into plastic covers, knocked on my professor's door, and handed him the neat stack. He smiled. My job was done.

That evening I went for a walk in the woods, and I felt a certain confidence I had never before experienced, an unfamiliar sense of authority. I know you, I thought to the trees. I had mapped the wilderness. I was on top of it.

The feeling lasted until the next day, when I met my professor with his head in his hands. How had the trip with the researchers gone? A disaster, he said – well no, not quite a disaster, but an embarrassment. He had spoken so highly of his students, and so proudly of the map I'd made, and yet when he and the researchers began to search for a certain river that was an integral part of the conservation effort, they drove in circles for over an hour; they simply could not make a connection between the map in their hands and the landscape around them. It wasn't until late in the afternoon that my professor realized, in horror, that the river wasn't on the map. I had simply – forgotten it. Left it out. How was that possible? My professor didn't know; I had used official government data. I looked at

the map – but it was so pretty! – and then out the window, feeling helpless. It was windy outside, and trees waved their branches, the forest shrinking away toward the horizon.

I sat down that evening with my map and an atlas, creased flat on the table, and began to compare the two, segment by segment. Sure enough, there was the river in the atlas, and when I looked at my own map, I couldn't even find the place where it was supposed to be. The only thing there was a lake – a really big lake. The lake wasn't named, and – now, this was strange – I couldn't find it in the atlas. In fact, it seemed to be directly covering the missing river – and not just that but the whole area around it, a dozen or so small towns, two mountains.

I stared at the map and atlas with a feeling of dawning horror. It was possible, I realized, that I had drowned half of northern Maine.

Later, I would think that the amazing thing wasn't the lake itself, but the fact that none of us had noticed it. Not me, not my professor, not even the researchers – we had all failed to question a lake the size of a Rhode Island puddled in the middle of the state, a lake none of us had ever heard of. That even as the researchers searched the map for a certain river, it was easier to acknowledge it as missing than to point out that Hey, so's the rest of the county! After all, the data should have been reliable. The computer shouldn't have lied.

This was the first time that being lost frightened me.

I thought of the sparrows in the airport, nesting in the branches of potted trees, swallowing French fries. I thought about how they could live their whole lives in that terminal, cocooned in glass and cement, soaring under metal beams. Did they even realize something was missing? Did I?

A sparrow, I have learned, navigates with the direction of the setting sun, the angle of the horizon in the distance. A beaver builds its home based on the flow of water, and measures the seasons not by weeks or months but by the chill of the air, by the crust of ice that starts at the edges of the pond and spreads inwards, a silver ceiling. A bat echolocates, a grasshopper follows the prevailing winds, a bear lets its nose find the way.

And I pass through a doorway into the bright outside, down a path to the mouth of the woods. I step off-trail, walk through a crease in the bushes, follow the shadows of mountains cast by a sun 93 million miles away. There's a chipmunk on a stump, ignoring me, and a line of ants by my feet. The wind is still. I take a few turns; I've never been here before. At the top of a hill, I stop to catch my breath and look out at the horizon,

over fields and the dark roofs of a few loose cabins. Far beyond them, in the distance, is the flash of sunlight on a lake.

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