

The Blue House in the Hemlocks

by Katherine Casey

It was July seventh and I was visiting my mother's home deep in the trees of northeastern Pennsylvania, the house where I had spent the summers of my childhood, a blue home surrounded by hemlocks, draped in the smell of moss and mildew. It was damp, always. Towels never dried and swimsuits draped over racks dripped lake water into small pools on linoleum floors. You had to watch your feet; one wrong step could send you flying.

That weekend my husband Jon and I spent mornings on the uncovered porch where potted basil and geraniums bent their faces towards the sun. I ran on red dirt roads until my ankles were caked with mud that also streaked my calves. In the evenings mosquitoes and moths, attracted by the light, battled the mesh of our screened porch. My family ate late dinners: plates of grilled corn, peach salad, and ribs that my brother had smoked all day. As a vegetarian I didn't eat the ribs but I loved the magic of my brother's presentation: a labor of love drawn hopefully from the fire and presented to faces that smiled at the miracle of patience, sustenance, and woodsmoke. I have always loved small miracles.

The days with family were lovely, but not idyllic. There were dirty dishes and too many shoes. There was drama to unpack: which member of the family wasn't speaking to another and why; whose husband was an unbearable asshole; who had finally lost the weight. I arrived exhausted, burnt out from six impossible months at work. I had been sick three times in the past four months and there was no amount of sleep that could bring me back to myself. Still, if there were ever a place to be tired with my entire being, the blue house in the hemlocks is the place I would have chosen. It was where I had been free as a child, the place I still held in my mind's eye when I needed to steady my nerves, and the place I had most wanted to show Jon when we first started dating. It was the place where I slept the deepest.

The morning before Jon and I were to go home to Colorado I made cobbler for breakfast. The peaches from the farmstand were just days from turning. They were too good to waste, and cobbler cooked in cast iron sounded delicious. We ate it from chipped bowls and mismatched mugs, bent over the kitchen island, wiping sugar off our lips with the backs of our hands and remaining quiet in the way of people who are rapt with deliciousness. With my stomach swimming in the delight of fruit warmed by butter, I walked to our bedroom to pack my suitcase.

Suddenly a roil of nausea rose up in me like a fever dream of bathroom tile and clammy hands. The sensation was strangely familiar, a feeling in my bones, and I had a keen sense that I had been there before, inside this feeling in this body in this place.

Blackness closed in from the periphery. And then I went away. And then I came back.

This was my first seizure. Soon there would be more: on a treadmill, at my desk, in my favorite chair, at a marathon finish line, in a sauna, in a car, hiking with my dogs, staring at the morning sun rising over the Indian Peaks, hitting “print” on a finished manuscript. Each felt like a cruel joke. Rather than weep at their unkindnesses, I wondered if they might be messages from the wisdom of the body and the earth.

Having epilepsy would mean seeing doctors. It would mean inconclusive tests, a peculiar dance of finding the right pharmaceutical concoctions, many shrugged shoulders which seemed to say, “sometimes we just don’t know,” and my life turned upside down. It would mean a search for a silver bullet, faith paced in supplements and tinctures. It would mean hopes of remission. It would mean inevitable heartbreaks at my seizures’ inevitable returns.

Being a person who experienced seizures would come to mean many things and would come to raise many questions. For some reason, the question that sat most deeply in my bones was this: Why had my first seizure happened in the blue house in the hemlocks? What was I meant to know, to recall, to understand? Was there an answer in a place?

The blue house in the hemlocks sits in a place that is not a town, but a gathering. It is most alive in summer but also beautiful in the snow. It is called Pocono Lake Preserve.

You make your way there on a red dirt road hidden within the sharp turns of Route 940. If a guest visits, you have to drive out to the intersection of clay and pavement to meet them; that's how hard it is to find.

The Pocono woods are dense and smell of ferns, fecund and damp. Everything that grows there is shallowly rooted in silty soil, the remnants of glaciers that melted long ago. When storms roar through, the trees are easily uprooted. Though they sway in the wind and fall to lightning, the trees are holy stewards. All of Pocono smells of water and wet earth, of the moss and ferns which grow at this union. The air is heavy and humid. Someone once told me that humid air holds ghosts. I thought about this a lot as a child. When I had to walk a dark road on my own, I was sure I could feel spirits.

The center of Pocono's life, perhaps its very heart—is the lake. It is shallow with water that is more brown than blue. Deep brown like tilled earth, murky and alive just beneath the surface. If you dive in and open your eyes there will be no light, and you will not be able to see. The lake asks you to trust. When we were girls my friends and I would bike to the water, throwing our rusted chariots to the ground when we arrived, knowing they would not be stolen. When we dove in we could feel our bodies move through a surface warmed by sun into icy cold beneath. We could not see our toes. This exhilarated and terrified us. We came back to the air giddy with our imagination.

In the afternoons we would roam the mossy woods pulling up mushrooms and collecting red efts, tiny newts seeking sustenance from insects and beetles that consumed the fungi of the forest floor. We passed whole days hunting small white buttons and smaller orange tails that peeked out from fallen leaves so thick with moisture they were quickly becoming soil. My skin burned in the summer sun that heated the water and fields where my friends and I raced, lanky and proud of our speed. My hot thighs stuck to the backs of chairs. My freckles came with the season. They were a tapestry across my nose, and I imagined them as code, a handshake to the secret society of the wild girls.

The lake empties itself into a slow stream—the Tobyhanna—that bubbles and hums. There are stepping stones that cross the Tobyhanna. The stones seem to rise and fall throughout the summer, though really it is the water that changes. Dry weeks will elevate the stones from their algae bottoms making them easy to navigate. You can hop

along them. Leap. Wave your arms with the mirth of an easy crossing. Heavy rains bury them. Then only the very brave will cross, and even they usually end up in the water.

There is a picture of me on these rocks as a girl. The largest and flattest of the stones is high above the surface and bone dry. I sit on the stone, my feet in the water. My eyes squint looking into the sun. I pucker and pinch my whole face into a smile; when you are a girl, you smile with your whole being. The water around me refracts the sunshine, lighting my gold hair like a halo. I look somehow holy, water washing my feet like a prayer, body safe and full face towards the light.

Since seizing I have wanted little more than to be that holy girl.

The day before my first seizure was sunny. My mother, Colin, his girlfriend, Jon, and I borrowed a pontoon boat. We puttered out to the very end of the lake, past the small island where my friends and I had camped without our parents when we were girls. We called it “Snake Island” (though there were no snakes, to my knowledge, and it was barely an island). The twenty yards of water separating it from the shore were so shallow that we waded across and our knees would stay dry. At night when the water was glass still, we could easily hear voices from land.

The five of us arrived at a public dock extending out from a small spit of earth. The sun was just barely beginning its descent, and the winds had picked up, not enough to churn the waters but sufficient that when sunlight hit the water’s surface it seemed we were on a sea of stars. We had our paddleboard with us, a bright orange thing my mother had purchased a few summers back. There was always at least one spider lurking under its plastic handle or around its tapered edges, but it was light and quiet and moved easily on the lake.

Wanting a moment of solitude, I set out on the paddleboard. I intended to go only across the small cove to the little red boathouse, maybe towards the causeway to see where the lake began. I was soon taken by the sun and the breeze. Taken in both senses: moved by the majesty and quite literally moved by the wind. I rounded the bend out of sight from the dock and hugged the shore, pushing forward, feeling strong and capable there on my own, board beneath me, feet planted and firm and lapped by sun-warmed water, moving ahead, always ahead, never deterred. Eventually I turned around, fighting

mightily against the wind to get back to the dock to my waiting family. I arrived exhausted and lay back on the splintered wood. The sun was warm on my face, my feet soon dried, and the moment was good.

Weeks later my mother would remind me that had the seizure come one day sooner—had it happened when I was on that board and out of sight—I would certainly have died.

In the year that followed my first seizure I did everything like every doctor said: I took the supplements and the pills; I left my job so I could rest; I stopped running because it exhausted my tired body; I surrendered my beloved glasses of red wine; I began following a keto diet, long known to support brain health, which meant eating poultry again for the first time in ten years. None of it worked. My seizures did not stop. No matter what effort I invested in healing there were only short remissions and certainly no cure.

There seemed to be no hope of arriving somewhere better, shiny and healed, newly wisened from all my diligence, with a story of triumph to tell. Forward seemed uncertain. And so I went back. Not to pharmacology. Not the doctor. Not to my lists of new rules. I went back to the blue house in the hemlocks, to the stepping stones, to the lake.

Had Pocono hurt me or saved me? Did it have the power to do either?

A human is mostly water. Cells contain fluid. Also blood, plasma, the digestive fluids that turn appetite to energy. The brain is the most water-dependent organ. Water maintains the elements—sodium, potassium, chloride—which compel neurons to fire. Lose the balance of water, lose the balance of fire, lose the balance of mind.

Water returns to itself, again and again. Waves to a shore, rain to mist. Water also explodes. It branches outward, forever seeking, ever smaller and ever finer. Tributary to river, river to creek, creek to stream, stream to groundwater, water that we can see and then no longer see, water that stays underground until it becomes, somehow, the rivers and lakes where we swim, headwaters yet again. Water holds and water buries. Water carries salt and water carries soil. Water moves, dutifully, with the natural order of

nourishment. Water returns, but not before it divides itself, maybe infinitely. Water wanders, faithfully, back to itself where it finds again the gift of its offering.

A tree's roots are ever-repeating tendrils searching through earth toward the promise of water. The roots of a forest are connected by mycelial networks, which are threaded, interwoven fungi wrapping themselves around roots, helping trees find nutrients. They stretch and meander, extending expansive networks of life and language which sustain a forest. Mycelium breaks down dead material, keeping soil and earth healthy, making nutrients available for the living. Mycelium directs food from older trees to the saplings that have not yet found the sun so that they may grow. Mycelium allows sick trees that are infected or diseased to talk to the healthy, to warn them of a pestilence, to urge them towards protection. Mycelium binds one tree to another through nutrient, care, and knowledge.

Trees, rivers, roots, and groundwater form patterns belonging to a natural order of repetition, return, self-similarity, and seeking. Since falling ill, I have searched for such order, both inside my body and in the natural world where my seizure first found me. But I have come to see that none of the natural patterns of which I am a part offer the precise code of a cure. Take the hemlock's neighbor, the red oak. Its boughs and branches bear a fractal pattern, but the red oak must improvise. Throughout the day and over the course of its life, as the sun shifts across the canopy and the sky, the oak's leaves abandon any scientific law, any calculus of self-similarity, so they might follow the light. They always turn to the sun. We, too, are the leaves of the red oak.

This is what Pocono has taught me: Our divine nature is aligned with all that nurtures. We are not governed by any law, neither the law of the forest nor the stream, neither the law of affliction nor repair. We do not control ourselves or our natural world, nor are we trapped within an order we cannot affect. We turn to the light.

Back in Pocono, one July after that first July, I walked the trails alone. This time when I found a red eft, I left it where it lay. I trusted this place to be what it was before me and what it will be after, shaped by soil and water that have never been mine.

The morning before Jon and I left to return home to Colorado I went with my mother to Pocono's Quaker meeting. Forty people sat in the church grove, a clearing surrounded

with trees still wet from the night before. As the sun came through, I watched wisps of evaporation, quiet waters making their way toward the light. Everyone was silent. Quakers believe there is that of God in each of us, and that no one has any more right than another to speak the Word. When someone is moved, they simply stand and share their testimony and the rest listen.

In the middle of the meeting, as shoes gently scuffed small red rocks beneath prayerful feet and wooden benches, speckled with lichen, creaked with memory, we heard a crackling of the stipes of summer ferns. We all turned our gaze and then held still in nervous reverence as a bear lumbered past, unbothered by our presence, unmoved by the earnest hopes of faithful humans. We worshippers were not sure who belonged there more, whose space this was, if we were meant to clap our hands and shout “hooah, git, go on now” to scare the animal away, watch it pass indifferently, or marvel at its presence, eager to tell our families how beautiful the bear had been and the meanings we make of her presence.

My mother asked me what I thought of the bear. Why had it come just one year after my first seizure? Was it a message? Some sort of divine direction? I told her: Bears live in the Pocono woods but the blue house in the hemlocks is still where I sleep the deepest and a body needs to rest, no matter what’s outside.

Just as I returned to this childhood place, we return to ourselves, back and back again, the same but not, sadder sometimes, sometimes more peaceful, maybe knowing something we did not before, maybe having done a thing that we were meant to do. Maybe better able to love others, ourselves, our bodies, fragile as they are. And my God, aren’t we beautiful?

Katherine Casey is a writer, educator, and advocate living in the mountain state of Colorado by way of the waters and woods of North Carolina, Maryland, Pennsylvania, California, and Massachusetts. Her writing focuses on human bodies and the natural world, invisible disability, somatic memory, and the peculiar politics of living in a woman’s body. Katherine is a member of the Lighthouse Writers Workshop Book Project where she has worked with remarkable artists: Ingrid Rojas Contreras, Anna Qu, Sarah Elizabeth Schantz, Alexander Lumans, Natlie Hodges, Andrea Dupree, and others. She is working on her memoir titled *Lunacy and the Wilderness*.