Springs are places where water flows to the surface of the land. The most celebrated springs occur where water tumbles down hillsides, swirls up on the surfaces of pools, or issues like serpents uncoiling from dark cavities beneath roots and stones to become black cold-running brooks.

Some springs, remembered by generations as the last water during summers of drought, are embellished at wayside and village fountains with granite troughs, with plantings, or with chrome faucets protruding from rocks, handy to picnic tables. Other springs are enshrined; a sheltering roof covers a large, stone-sided pool that boasts of a flow strong and cold enough to supply a community of summer bungalows and support a handsome, sixteen-inch mascot trout with shining eyes.

For every one of these mythic springs, there are ten thousand seeps: small springs with weak, meager flows. Water normally moves slowly, secretly, as it circulates in the ground through layers of sand and gravel in soil, through fissures, faults, dissolved channels, and porous strata in bedrock. Except at the rare and celebrated springs of spas and dreams, which pour and never go dry, water emerges at the surface of the land in small flows, seasonal rills, still pools at seeps.

For millennia, humans have hunted and gathered water from seeps, learning the signs of small flows and searching for the confluences of rock and soil that urge water toward the sky. On the sides of Cliffs, plants mark trickles that can be coaxed into hollow plant stems or kissed from the sunwarmed face of rock. In forests and on savannas, animal trails converge at wet spots and silent stillwater pools that will flow when poked and punctured. Where water is plentiful, it is located by listening for its sound a muffled resonance of xylophones beneath rainsoaked earth.

Spleenwort.

Hunting water is a physiological capacity for animal survival inherited with body and senses. Gathering water is a cultural transaction with the land. When human communities open springs, they alter the course of natural changes in the land. Unlike stone implements and petroglyphs, which passively resist the changes of time, a society’s manipulations of the land, its hunting, agriculture, and water gathering, become agents of the evolutionary process. When people abandon land, the evidence of these transactions is absorbed into the wildness of a land.

The forested land on either side of Interstates 75, 81, 87, and 91 on the outskirts of the East Coast megalopolis is the upper reaches of the foothills of the Appalachian range. In the two decades following the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1763, waves of settlers swept up from the coastal plains along eastern rivers, branching into their tributaries, and branching again and again up into the highest valleys, which rise against the barrier slopes of the Allegheny Front and the Smokey, Green, Adirondack, and White mountains. As the settlers ascended the watershed, the geography of the rivers and streams became the architecture of their culture. Towns, markets, and mills were built where larger rivers flowed together. Further upstream, villages served the hamlets of the higher valleys. The highest ground was settled by people who followed the flow of streams beyond the headwaters to the steep, narrow margins at the rims of the watersheds, and opened springs.

Springhouses mark this country as a land that has been hunted for water. Shaped like kestrels when they come to ground with wings spread to consolidate their grip on prey, springhouses are small, isolated structures, perched in swales or depressions on hillsides beyond and above farmhouses and barns. They are constructed to protect spring water gathered in a cistern before it is piped down to houses and barns. The traces of pipelines down pasture slopes tie springs to
Though it were alive.

Required a culture. And the people to make ten thousand springs required intimacy with the land. To make a seep into a spring required a culture. And the people of this culture watched the land as though it were alive.

Tracking water is like following the seasonal movements of a partridge or a deer. On hillsides, beneath the ground’s surface, hidden courses move water along unpredictable patterns, like a partridge underground. The water settles in, then disappears, or veers in a different direction as the seasons change. A swale that is the first to show through the snow and the last to brown in September may be a watercourse. A depression may indicate erosion from below. Sensitive fern in August marks a spot to check for water in October and again in early May.

Seep water has to be “figured out” and sometimes hunted for two years before it can be gathered. The settlers studied the flow while cutting and hauling wood, plowing and planting, and quarrying stone for roofs, hearths, doorsteps, whetstones, and chimney mantles. Knowing the watershed was integral to making a farm. In this country, where gardens, farm fields, cattle, domestic fowl, sheep dips, and mills demanded and consumed more water than was readily offered, the land was combed for water by generations of serious and thorough people. There is no seep that has not been studied, poked, and probed, no spring nor stillwater pool left undiscovered.

When the westward tide washed the frontier over the mountains and spilled America into the Ohio and Mississippi valleys, it carried people away from this marginal land. As the abandoned landscapes blurred, the springhouses and cisterns disappeared first. Constructed where ground is damp and wood rots quickly, the infrastructure of springs is obscured more quickly than a field becomes a sapling forest.

Once a seep has been prodded and opened, a crevice chiseled out, a hillside scooped away, the water’s strengthened force can maintain a spring’s flow, becoming a force that changes the shape of the land. Untended cisterns and pipes become clogged or wash away, and formerly dry hillsides turn into

A seep from an outcrop on a high, dry pasture supports an elm of the wet bottomland.
soggy, pungent, bareground wetlands in the periodic overflows below abandoned springs. On more gentle slopes, spring water settles into the earth; a pool, reflecting sunlight, clouds, and leaves, framed by rocks and ferns, is probably nested in the silted, slumped basin of a farm’s stillwater spring.

The water-gathering imprinted the land with human intelligence. The imprint permeates the life of the forest and is revealed in a wildness nourished by water that once made the land home for people. Birds and wildflowers make the imprint visible. Woodcock find abandoned springs. They probe the bottoms of silted cisterns and hunt the overflows.

Chestnut-sided warblers sing from the brush that grows thickly above silted pools on old pasture land. Swamp candles glow in vernal dusk, tiny yellow lights marking the edges of disappeared ponds. Spruce, hemlock, pink lady slippers, and winter wrens return to rocky bowls.

Its low escape flight carries it over a haze that hangs in the air just inches above the ground, where the blue tint in the leaves of maidenhair fern glows through the dull gold they turn after frost. The fern patch spreads as it descends the forest slope in the shape of an apron fringed by silver freshets that run from a concealed seep in a vein of limestone. The water nourishes the fern with minerals from the stone before it emerges as the sparkling fringe, then flows into the wet bank the woodcock was probing. Scattered with a tatter of oak leaves and fern stalks muddled and crushed into the hoof prints of deer, the bank is an unstable wedge of slumped soil. Its shape bears witness to a human past.

A century ago, this place was an open pasture. The limestone and the water were treasures hunted by generations of the land’s dwellers. Below this slope, half way down toward the river, there is a limekiln, or what is left of one after its cut stones were harvested for building material. Limestone from the vein may have been sledged to the kiln across the frozen winter pasture. Here high upon the ridge, a half a mile from the rim of the watershed, a farm pond would have made this a good upper pasture. Grazing sheep, or perhaps a flock of domestic geese, would have been visible for miles. The pasture pond or whatever it was that was built here a century ago has disappeared into a muddy embankment, carried by the same freshet ribbons that once tied a farm to this hillside.

The oaks, maidenhair fern, the woodcock, the freshets, and this slope share a human and a natural history. The view through the oaks of the blue-gold haze from the frosted fern is not across a chasm that separates us from Nature. It is a bridge that connects us to ancestral, animal capacities of the hunter for intimacy with land, and to the capacity of a culture to imbue land with a legacy of place a haunting in the wildness of the watershed.

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