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Sitting in the Bush, or Deliberate Idleness

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SYLVIA BOWERBANK

Sitting in the Bush, or Deliberate Idleness

If I was leery about being an owner, a
possessor of land, now I have to understand
the ways in which the place possesses me.

Gretel Ehrlich
The Solace of Open Spaces (1985)

It's New Year's Eve, 1997. The night is crisp and cold. My flesh resists going outside, and I delay until well after dark. The dogs run in front of me and hesitate at the edge of the hill, expecting only our customary before-bed look at the stars. When I head off down the hill, they are ecstatic. I trudge slowly across the bottomland below my house. Snow still clings to the ground. The weather is unstable, and I feel vulnerable and fearful, expecting another New Year's Eve of fitful sleep.

I am wearing my best woollen hat and my usual layers of long johns and wind pants, turtleneck, down vest, and a soft polyester pink jacket with dog treats in the pocket. I carry minimal camping gear in a large basket packet: a big blue pad, an all-season down sleeping bag, and the luxury of a pillow from my bed. There is little wind and no precipitation, so I don't need a tarp. I walk out with a cane that lets me climb slippery slopes in rubber boots, leap swollen creeks, and play the master if I should meet one of the half-wild dogs around here. On such a cold night, I am also wearing my high-cuffed black snowmobile mitts and a long loose-woven Angora scarf wrapped around my head and neck. The scarf is a gift from my sister, the most amazing piece of winter gear I own, an old technology that lets me keep my face both warm and dry. If need be, I can cover my whole face and still breathe freely, as I sleep.

I have come to think that these winter nights outside are good for my soul, but tonight as I head into the darkness, I wonder why I am doing this. Still I know enough to keep going. Despite a cloud cover, the landscape is well lit, a strange version of its familiar daytime self. I have no trouble getting across the ice-lined stream. I can see my own tracks where I have crossed earlier today. As usual, I have not planned in advance where we will sleep because so much depends on the whims of the weather. I have learned to pack lightly so that, if need be, I can move

around during the night, looking for a hospitable place. Tonight, there is no wind and the cold is dry, so we can pretty much settle down where we want. I take the first good place, at the wild edge of my land, in the place where we camped out for two months in the fall of 1990 when Sammie was a puppy.

I remember that time in my life so well because it was the only occasion in which I tried to live outside while carrying on my university job. We set up a huge canvas tent to live in. The plan was to go out before dark, cook a meal, then sleep, rising with the light. Sammie slept at the door of the tent. Even then, he was a silent, vigilant dog, the son of a husky and a German shepherd. In late September, this double way of life seemed possible, but as the days shortened and the demands of the job became more pressing, our bodies began to hibernate and to rebel against the routine. The transition from one mode of life to the other became difficult. I would get home from the university late in the evening and drag myself outside. I would either fall asleep immediately or lie there, thinking about various undone assignments. In the morning, we would not hear the alarm. Finally, I had to either give up my job or retreat to the house.

Still, I see myself as a kind of amphibian being: I may make my living in a society still addicted to notions of empire over nature, but I seek to cultivate Green habits and attitudes in my daily life (and not just on wilderness vacations). I make the assumption that, in a disintegrating society—in a society that calls its citizens “consumers” and “human resources”—people themselves are broken, alienated from nature, and in need of rehabilitation. As I live and work in Southern Ontario—in the very belly of the beast, as it were—I am especially aware of the irony that my “self” is part of the problem. I am a university professor, tenured to a system that manages

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knowledge; my job is to teach my students strategies for getting ahead in the world. My research and theirs will be judged in competitive terms: Are we on the cutting edge? In resistance to this professional “self,” I live on ten acres out in the country. At home, I attempt to put into practice a way of life I call “sitting in the bush.” I associate “sitting in the bush” with my

grandfather and the makeshift existence of my childhood when we lived in a log cabin, built by my great uncle and grandfather, in the forest by Lake Baptiste (near Algonquin Park). My grandfather would say “I’m sitting in the bush” to indicate his way of being—whether he was fishing, playing cards, or having a conversation. “Sitting in the bush” is hard to define and even harder to live. It refers to a deliberate form of idleness, a way of being present-minded and easygoing in the wild.

Nowadays, I live on the edge of the remnants of Beverly Swamp, approximately half an hour’s drive from Hamilton to the east, Brantford to the west, and Guelph to the north. In the valley behind my house, Spring Creek runs west to merge with Fairchild Creek, which runs into the Grand River, and eventually into Lake Erie. Luckily for me, the land on which I live is neglected

land. It is zoned as agricultural, but the soil is clay and the ground water has a tinge of sulphur, so farming in my neighbourhood is marginal, and bungalow development is, as yet, kept to a scattering of communities.

The only spiritual rule I follow is to live some part of the day, however briefly, outside in the open air, even if the "outside" of Southern Ontario is itself compromised and degraded. I go outside every day in the belief that there are intricate, if invisible, connections between the good care of myself and the good care of this place. Given the stereotype of my profession, I am afraid of becoming absentminded and abstracted, of dwelling in the realm of ideas. Last week I almost tripped over a large rabbit, hiding among the teasle. I was composing a letter of reference as I walked, and didn't even know where I was. This happens a lot. I could be anywhere and wouldn't notice. Not so with Sammie. He can be a real hang-dog around the house, but the moment he hits the free air, he is electric with joy. Everything is new and fresh for him. He pays homage to every new scent that comes his way. When I am attentive, Sammie is as much my spiritual teacher as Thich Nhat Hanh is. He is absolutely in the present moment. He is my eyes, ears, and nose to the wild. The important stories of my life happen during my daily wanderings on the land with Sammie. We scavenge for wood; we trespass; we enjoy winter picnics; we hide in the bush and watch the wondrous customs of possum, coyotes, and men; we take snoozes on the matted grass where deer have slept the night before; and on New Year's Eve, we celebrate our sacred annual ritual of sleeping under the stars.

The December of 1997 has been confusingly mild. Some days have been crisp and bright. Moles have darted from snow mound to mound; rabbits have been plentiful and bold; deer are eating well. The pussy willows look as if they might bud too soon. One rainy day, the bottomland flooded quickly, as if it were a day in March, and I saw the body of a fat mole floating on the surface of the marsh. On Christmas day, I finally got around to planting the daffodil bulbs I had dug up last spring. Knowing how busy I've been, the soil was forgiving and gave me an extension.

The Sunday after Christmas, I was once more sick at heart at the mindless way our culture celebrates its feast days. I wanted to hide out in bed with a good book, but my canine counsellors, Sammie and Thunder, nagged me until I went for a walk. We headed over the hill towards the once-a-maple forest, until the sound of a rifle off to the west led me to cut our route short. It was Sunday morning but still some animal or tree was being shot at. I was wearing black, as is my custom, and the dogs had long since lost the red kerchiefs they wear during hunting season. I was worried that some jerk might shoot Sammie for his doe-like face or Thunder for his white-tailed exuberance. I am used to hearing shots in the woods during the holiday season. One of the mysteries of modern Christianity is that a country boy should be given his first rifle for Christmas.

Now it is New Year's Eve. And I am alone and looking for a good place to sleep. In the place where Sammie lived as a puppy, I spread out my pad, take off my boots, and crawl immediately into my sleeping bag, not wanting to lose any of the residual warmth carried from the house. Though I know from experience that I should walk around for a while to get good and warm, I

am lazy and stretch out to test the terrain. Underneath a scant layer of snow, the ground is flat and grassy. Nothing is sticking in my back. The site is protected from the north wind by a slight incline and by a tangle of raspberry bushes. The maple and oak trees above us are now bare and I can see a star or two behind the clouds. In those first few moments, I am irritated by the excitement of the dogs, who are sniffing and snuffling around a fallen tree trunk they pass every day. I am not sure how the puppy Thunder will behave tonight, but after jostling for the best position, the dogs are obedient and lie down beside me on the mat. This is Thunder's first winter night outside and he is shivering a little, whether in cold or fear, I can't tell. Sammie nestles too close to my face and I give him a rude shove. I feel the hard ground and my bones are already complaining. I should have brought another pad. My body is swaddled with too much clothing, but even so, my neck is already constricting with cold. I'm too old for this.

I have slept out like this for eight New Year's Eves now. Looking back, the first two, which were with my ex-husband, were luxurious. We had an open fire and cooked lamb chops, licking our greasy fingers and laughing as the darkness fell. Now that I am alone, there is no tent, no fire, no meaty smell, and minimal bedding; I do nothing to call attention to us. Like Superbowl Sunday, New Year's Eve is one of those rare moments when men with their snowmobiles, ATVs, dogs, and rifles can normally be counted on to stay indoors to party while the creatures celebrate a short jubilee. On such a night, with any luck, I can sleep peacefully under the stars.

One New Year's Eve—was it four years ago?—was fiercely cold; the wind was so quirky and cruel that even Sam the Stoic was whimpering as he huddled in the lee of my body under the tarp. Sometime after midnight, I asked him if he wanted to go inside, but he just gave me his best wolf grin and raised his nose to the wind. Even so, we were forced to wander most of that night, taking naps here and there on the landscape, mostly in the shelter of pine trees. I had little bits of ham in a jar, which I gave Sam to cheer him up. My chocolate was cold in my thermos. To keep my spirits up, I told myself stories about the homeless surviving the winter in the streets of New York City. I read these stories in the obituaries of *The Catholic Worker*, a little paper that continues to come twenty years after my brother Jeff sent away for a five-dollar subscription for me. One story was of a woman living on a hot air vent, which was at some distance from the *Catholic Worker* office. Because the weather was so bitter, a kind woman who worked at the office began to walk out each day to bring a bowl of soup to the street woman. This went on for many days without the street woman acknowledging the soup or the other woman's invitation to move into a shelter. It may be that the woman had not spoken to anyone for years. Neither her name nor history were known. She never did move into a shelter. But what did happen was that, each day, the street woman moved vent by vent closer to the *Catholic Worker* office so that the other woman would not have to walk so far in such freezing weather.

On this New Year's Eve in 1997, as it turns out, the weather is benignly cold. There is no wind. Within five minutes of settling into my sleeping bag, my body is suffused with warmth and a sense of well-being. I have to take off my coat lest I start to sweat. I am smiling up at the clouds and humming softly to soothe Thunder. The air is so fresh and my breathing so pleasurable that I begin to think I am the most blessed person alive. Then the unexpected happens. I fall into a

deep sleep and miss midnight. I don't stare for hours at the sky with the intense and dark thoughts I have come to associate with surviving this first night of the new year. I don't wake up again until a slight breeze stirs—at about three in the morning according to my body clock. It is 1998. The puppy is still curled into a warm ball at my feet, but Sam is sitting upright, looking across me into the night, guarding the site. I touch his paw lightly and he lies down. We fall back asleep until the beginnings of dawn, when we leave our campsite to take a walk. I put on my coat and rubber boots, and then I am ready to pay tribute to the coming year, while my mind is clear and everything is new again.

We head uphill towards the oldest pine tree, the tallest tree around here. Sammie and I slept under it last year. When I walk out each day, this pine is visible from all directions; it is my private Inukshuk, should I lose my bearings. It stands alone and jagged to the north of my house, the world-weary, weather-beaten mother of all the younger pines nearby. I once heard a researcher say that it takes a long time for a single tree to reforest an area. As we head north, we meet a few pine saplings; the progeny of the old pine are working their way downwind towards my house.

I am following a path that I broke in October. Usually, I wait until a good freezing rain knocks down most of the vegetation before I venture onto this terrain. This past October, however, my farmer neighbour plowed up the vetch field on which I love to wander in the fall. He left large clumps of hard soil exposed, thus making the walking difficult until next spring. He does this every few years without consulting me. The first time I made this path in October, I was weaving and bobbing among the hawthorn, stomping down the grass and the raspberry, when I spotted something white and unnaturally round. I picked it up and sniffed, and, indeed, it was a mothball. Then, I could see several more, marking out a short strip of ground from which the sod had been removed. A row of fourteen cut-off stalks—concealed by leaf debris—were all that remained of the crop. Low on one stalk, there were the beginnings of a leaf, which I pinched off and rubbed between my fingers, releasing a faint, sweet—was it an illicit?—scent. The site was cleverly chosen, slightly sloping to the south, but just out of sight of houses and barns. There was no tell-tale trail to the spot, save the indeterminate deer paths that mark all the land hereabouts. I speculated on how a secret garden gets planted without leaving any trace of the gardener. Perhaps, the bicycle tracks I saw in early summer give a clue. Today, with the vegetation defeated by winter, I can easily spot a blue milk carton and sod clumps, hidden under a nearby pine tree; I guess the gardener got lazy and careless. The mothballs are still here, keeping pests away long after the crop is picked. When the dogs and I reach the mother pine, I squat under its branches, using my cane to keep me steady while I look about. I raise my nose to the air and breath in deeply—a meditation I learned from Sammie. Life is good

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and I don't even bother to snap at Thunder, who is sneaking a bite of something suspect. It seems he has not taken any New Year's resolution to give up the habit of eating deer shit.

We now walk in a valley populated on both sides by hawthorn trees and bushes. When I first moved here, I didn't find this place at all attractive. I measured it against the wild landscape of my childhood, with its deep evergreen forests and pure lakes. Trees around here are not allowed to multiply into powerful forests under their own governance. When Anna Jameson passed this way in the 1830s, the trees were already girdled to make way for the farms. Even so, though the trees were dying, their trunks were still standing as white and ghostly monuments to their former greatness. Nowadays, the "forests" here are monocultural plantations of spruce, or Christmas tree farms, or lots of assorted trees made up of the leftovers after all the best trees have been cut down for profit.

It was late fall the very first time I walked on this land. It seemed to be covered with dull brown grasses, nettle, thistle, brambles, burdock, and low scrub. My rambling got me a bout of poison ivy once. It took me a few years to realize that the scrub consists mostly of self-generating apple trees, survivors from long-forgotten orchards. They thrive in the summer, only to feed rabbits in the winter. My farmer friend Edith Smith took one look at my land and saw the future makings of a heritage orchard. Back then, I used to call this place "hawthorn haven" to register my ambivalence about my new home. Hawthorns of every variety and size grow on all the hills, making walking and skiing rough and unpleasant. A haw-thorn is a dangerous barb. Sam has had his paw pierced several times over the years. The first time it happened, Sam ran wild with pain and rage and got the thorn more deeply embedded. I had to get him home and use the tweezers to pull it out. Now, he trusts me enough to limp over for help as soon as he gets pierced. I sit on the wet ground and he lets me feel his paw until I find the thorn. All the while, he mock bites my hand to let me know that he is hurting. As I got to know the land around here, I began to recognize that hawthorn groves—with their gnarled branches and stabbing needles—harbour the possum, the rabbit, the partridge, and a multitude of other little creatures. Only the most determined farmer would venture to plough them down. The hawthorn keeps the wild alive, even here in Southern Ontario. Last year, in this very valley, I accidentally flushed a bush wolf from the cover of hawthorn deadfall.

Now we head up an old farm road that another neighbour has taken to mowing for the past two years. No doubt he does it for his own reasons, but I thank him every day when I use it to reach the height of land. This first morning, on the trail ahead, I see a fresh pink object. Thunder and Sam are off to the side in the bushes, so I rush to get to it first. It is the tiny severed head of a piglet. I can't make up a story sufficient to frame this creature's short life. Pigs around here live in factory barns, so this is not the old story of a little piglet being snatched from its pen by a predator. My black Labrador—the dog I had before Sammie—used to run away, and, on occasion, would return home with the gift of a pig embryo, scavenged from a farmer's field. Was this piglet born dead and cast out into some rubbish heap or plowed into some field? Who ate its body and dropped its head here, far from any pig barn? Was it a crow or hawk? Just before the dogs arrive, bristling with interest, I pick up the head with my cane tip, spearing it through the neck. I raise the impaled head and place it among the branches of a hawthorn tree.

Whatever its unknown and short life, its head ended up high in the air, a macabre object, embraced by hawthorn branches.

Now we are coming down the hill in the next valley, the one I call Andy's valley, in memory of the winter picnics we once had. Those were the days when Andy, my stepson, was around thirteen and becoming aloof. Though he didn't like to be seen with adults in town, he enjoyed gathering wood with us and making a small fire on this hillside, overlooking the trickle of a stream below. In those days, we had a wonderful samovar that was designed to make great tea outdoors. We would sit around, talking and throwing bits of cheese and kielbasa to Danny, the black lab. Then, when we got chilled, we would move along. It was a good Sunday habit. A form of family worship. There is still a black patch here on the ground, hidden now by the grass, where we used to light the little cooking fire. Our lives are written on this ground.

Our lives are written on this ground.

Around here, there are lots of old apple trees, which were abandoned long ago and left to grow every-which-way, as they will. On such apple trees, odd assortments of new, middle-aged, old, and dead branches co-exist together. The year my mother lived with me, we used to come over here to gather kindling from these apple trees. We would break off some dry deadwood and carry it home in our basket packs, two squirrels preparing for winter.

I rarely plan my walking route ahead of time, so it is only now that realize, on this first morning in 1998, I am heading for Beverly Pond. To get there, I have to walk in a valley that is wet and lumpy with hummocks of grass. There are plenty of fresh deer tracks here. I have not yet had any close encounters with deer this year, but I have seen their white tails as they flee over the hills in front of me. Their traces are everywhere: they have been resting among the sumac, chewing up the alders, breaking down briars, jumping fences. One left an antler for me to find. In the fall of 1996, Sam discovered a newly shot deer just down the hill from the vetch field to the northeast of our house. Somebody had wounded it on the back haunch and it had escaped to die under the cover of the tamaracks. When we first saw it, except for the wound, the carcass was intact. I didn't walk in that direction for the next two weeks in case Sam should revert to the ways of his ancestors.

The only time I really love living in Southern Ontario is when fresh snow covers everything and I can go snowshoeing, which is my greatest pleasure. I go out early and stand alone on top of a crystalline landscape. I am walking on water. By the grace of deep snow, I wander on top of raspberry and hawthorn tangle, I climb straight up steep hillsides, I hide out in the spruce plantation, improvising labyrinthine paths that no snowmobile can follow. On one occasion, the day after I had made one such elaborate path, I went out to discover that, in order to negotiate the deep snow, several deer had been following my snowshoe track. For some years, I had been using their paths, and it seemed wonderful to me that they were now letting me return the favour. It was a conversation of sorts.

I am approaching the pond I call "Beverly." After such a mild, dry December, it doesn't look like much. But I know better. This pond and I have a past, a present, and, with luck, a future

together. I place my mitts on a layer of pine needles and sit down in a spot overlooking the pond. On the ground, there is a small blue and brown feather—blue jay? I pick the feather up and stick it my hat band. About once a month, I walk over to this pond to pay my respects. When it's been raining enough to fill the pond and cold enough to freeze it hard, I bring my skates, a cassette player, and, if it's been snowing, a shovel or a broom. Those are the best days. I listen to UB40 or to *Great Waltzes* as I skate, pushing the shovel in front of me to clear the ice. The sounds of the music get lost in the wind and there are bulrushes growing through the ice to trip me up. And Sam—whose dignity rarely lets him play—slips and slides with me in foolish rhapsody. Even when there is no ice, I make my way over here, bringing an austere picnic of apple, cheese, and a thermos of tea. This morning, I have only brought some jerky for the dogs. They are pleased, and Thunder gives my hand one of his little deer-shit kisses.

Beverly Pond isn't on any map. Yet, the mallards still find it in the spring. So do frogs, muskrat, turtles, and rabbits. For that matter, Beverly Township itself is no longer on the map. It appears as “West Flamborough,” and sometimes, in deference to local feeling, the words “formerly Beverly” are added in parentheses. The ponds of Beverly are not of much interest any more to the makers of road maps or even to the locals who can now skate at the Rockton arena with a Zamboni to clear the ice. There are probably hundreds of swampy ponds, lying low and forgotten around here; they are the secret remnants of the Great Cedar Swamp that existed in this area before 1800. Before the Europeans settled here, the Swamp was a rich and varied place where the now-extinct Neutral nation cohabited with the snake and wolf, the fox and turtle, beaver, frog, muskrat, duck, pine, birch, and cedar. Now, the Cedars of Beverly have all but disappeared. The Great Swamp is mostly drained and cleared, but for those who care to look, it still has its niches.

As I sit here, I can already feel the January snows coming and new winds picking up. I don't make any resolutions for the new year, or compose narratives for the future. Even the piglet's story will end more miraculously than I expected. Some leaves—perhaps sumac and black willow—will stir and rise up from the ground, and then cling and freeze to the piglet's head. By the time I will think to look, two weeks later, the head will be encased in a decent shroud of leaf and ice.

Someone once said I have the colouring of a deer. I could be a mouse or a muskrat, blending in. When I am out on the land, I think of myself as a timid kind of animal that moves silently, never drawing attention to itself, keeping to cover. Escaping surveillance. Keeping the secret of where the fox sleeps. On this first morning of 1998, as I pause under a white pine by Beverly Pond, I am listening in a strange state of vigilant inertia. Letting be. Sitting in the bush. Aware of the fragility of such freedom.

* * *

This essay is dedicated to my young friend Justine Laforme, who sometimes sits with me under the tamaracks and tells me stories about her generation.

SYLVIA BOWERBANK (1947-2005) was one of Canada's first ecocritics and influenced and mentored many others. A tenured, full professor at McMaster University, Sylvia Bowerbank was cross-appointed to the Department of English and the interdisciplinary, problem-based Arts and Science Program and was one of the founders of the Women's Studies Program. Her scholarship focused on early modern cultural studies, especially women's texts and history; ecocriticism; literature and science studies; and Indigenous knowledges and cultures. Her landmark book *Speaking for Nature: Women and Ecologies of Early Modern England* was published by John Hopkins University Press in 2004. In 2000, with Sara Mendelson, she co-edited *Paper Bodies: A Margaret Cavendish Reader*, published by Broadview Press. Other influential publications in ecocriticism include her essay on the Creature—not monster—in *Frankenstein*, "The Social Order vs. The Wretch" (*English Literary History*, 1979); "Towards the Greening of Literary Studies" (*Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, 1995); and "Telling Stories about Places" (*Alternatives Journal*, 1997). The Margaret Cavendish Society awards a biennial Sylvia Bowerbank Award in her honour to recognize the best paper presented at the biennial meeting of the society, with preference given to junior scholars.

Editor's Note

"Sitting in the Bush, or Deliberate Idleness" was not published during Sylvia's lifetime, though it was written for publication. She had received and circulated among her current and former students, myself included, a call for submissions of personal essays about relationships to place. I wrote an essay, so did she, and she mailed me a copy of hers with a small feather enclosed. The feather is brown, but when I hold it up to the light in a certain way I see bright blue streaks, suggesting, as Sylvia does in the essay, that it is a blue jay's. I have had Sylvia's essay in its envelope with the feather in a box under my office desk all these years. I was reminded of it when I read Daniel Coleman's personal essay "Deer in Their Own Coats," published in *The Goose* in Fall 2015 (14:1). Coleman's lyrical, reflective essay is about observing and getting to know the urban deer that have become his neighbours. It roams around Hamilton, Ontario, near the countryside where Sylvia walked and wandered in deliberate idleness. But it was the phrase "deer in their own coats," which Coleman credits to Onondaga Chief and university professor Oren Lyons, that prompted my memory, recalling for me how Sylvia writes, "we take snoozes on the matted grass where deer have slept the night before." I had retained this image of Sylvia and her dogs curled up in the space formed by the warm body of a deer, perhaps because I have so often come across such body imprints in my own wanders in the woods, these intimate signs of deer presence. I spoke about Sylvia's essay first to Daniel Coleman, who enthusiastically supported its publication and connected me with Mary O'Connor, who, in turn, contacted Sylvia's family, who have graciously given permission for this posthumous publication.

I wanted Sylvia's essay to be published in the winter issue of *The Goose* because it celebrates winter. Yet as Sylvia describes walking out into the winter night when the year turns from 1997 to 1998, she comments on the mildness of that winter. Now, almost twenty years later, we

know that 1998 was one of the warmest on record, in terms of global temperatures. It was the warmest year of the twentieth century and stands now as the sixth warmest ever, with the five above and ten below it on that list all in the twenty-first century.

—Cheryl Lousley

