

Where I Grew Up

By Kelsey Rowe

I – Harleysville

when I was growing up
we heard so many stories

my mom grew up on a farm

her childhood narrated our bedtime

we heard about the time
 when she went to get the mail
as a two-year-old
and got lost in the grass

we heard about the time
 her dad slapped his pants
and a mouse fell out

the time my mother and a friend wandered off
 and were found at the top of the hay mow
which I've seen in farm stories so much
that it seems like a normal kid thing

the time the swinging stall door froze
 because the bull liked to stand under it
 and scratch his back
and it was so cold
the poop he left when he went outside
 was frozen by the time he came back in
my grandfather had to jump in the stall
 and chip away at the poop
jumping back out every time the bull charged the door

my childhood was full of stories of that farm
the pond
the trees
the cows and horses
the dogs
the gardens
the work

I never saw it, even though it's in this county.

it's a neighborhood now.

they cut down all the trees
tore down the barns
and put up a hundred copies of the same house

sometimes I wonder how that changed the water table
those acres went from supporting from one large family,
 their veggies and cows and horses
to a hundred small-ish families with pets and swimming pools

these 'modern' developments weigh so heavily on the land.

I grew up in a house
that was never a farm house

where I played with my brother in the woods
 and in the creek
we built forts and watched tadpoles
we sat
walked
looked at six-inch waterfalls
fought with pricker bushes
and wondered if what we'd just picked was aloe

now I'm living at home again and I realize
 that's not actually woods
it's a strip
a creek with a couple trees on either side
 running from our mailbox to our neighbor's barn
 to the bigger creek down the hill

but it's not woods

it hasn't been woods for centuries.

when German settlers took this land they also took out the woods
cut down trees like they wanted to get rid of the sylvania

the Pennsylvania Dutch lived here for a few centuries
farmed this entire corner of Pennsylvania
turned this area into tracts of land

that got divided up
and turned into housing plots
when farming wasn't profitable anymore

there are trees
but I don't think they can talk to each other
I don't think they can work together
to prevent insect attacks
to fight off spotted lantern flies

and anyway, they don't have parent trees
making sure they don't grow too quickly
and sometimes branches break
trunks split
or the deer rub their antlers too hard
on the young trees
stripping the bark off

but we have yards
yards are important
you have to have one
and so we do

II – Dams

I've been thinking a lot about dams in the last year

dams were built for so many reasons

to generate electricity

to store water
and make it available to farmers
and people in cities

to prevent and control flooding

to make big, flowing rivers
places for picnics and kayaking
and motorboats with outboard engines
because going fast is fun

some dams were even built
so that people could harvest ice
in the winter
when the river froze
like the small dam near my house

the river hasn't frozen
at least since I've been alive
but the dam's still there

waiting

helping my neighbor's house flood
every time there's a decent storm

when I was little we had picnics there, above the dam
we would swim and jump off fallen trees
skip rocks
watch crayfish and tadpoles swim around
throw sticks for our dog

most dams are tiny
the small dams built many years ago
don't do what they were supposed to do

not because they broke
but because the world is different now

but we leave them there

to crumble into the water

to spread concrete downstream

to block the sediment that's badly needed by river mouths
to replace the river bed that's lost to the ocean
and restore habitat for creatures that live in estuaries

some places have started taking them down
The Nature Conservancy in New Jersey built a list
to help local organizations decide which dams to remove

the list thinks about things like engineering
how hard it would be to physically remove the dam
regulations
how hard it would be to get the government to agree
existing use
whether the dam still serves some purpose
community support
whether people live or play near the dam
and would want to keep it
and owner support
whether the owner would agree to take it down

five big categories that can help decide
whether or not that particular human impact
will be removed
not to say reversed

removing dams is good for the fish
they can get where they want to go before they spawn

even the fish that haven't been able to go home for decades
when you remove a dam
the new generations know their ancestors came from up that river
and they go past the removed dam
until they hit the next one

because some rivers, like the Elwha
if they have one dam
they have many

and even though dams should have fish ladders
most of them don't

even though fish ladders
which are supposed to help fish be fish
 in a world that sees their thwarted migration
 as fallout¹
 an unintended side effect
are tiny and hard to find
and harder to navigate

¹ Elizabeth Loughrey, Jill Didur, and Anthony Carrigan, eds., "Terraforming Planet Earth," in *Global Ecologies and the Environmental Humanities: A Post-Colonial Approach* (Routledge, 2016).

III – Green Lane

one of my favorite hiking spots here is the Green Lane Reservoir
a 103-foot dam built in 1954
it flooded 800 acres of countryside and holds 4.4 billion gallons of water

the reservoir is beautiful
surrounded by open space
miles of trails
so many trees

it was built to provide water to downstream communities
towns and cities closer to Philadelphia
which had previously relied on the Schuylkill River

the Schuylkill was undrinkable by 1865

when I briefly rowed on the Drexel crew team
we practiced on the Schuylkill
we joked about what it would do to you to touch the water

the city of Philadelphia poured raw sewage into the Schuylkill
from the 1850's to the 1950's
when people realized they couldn't drink from it anymore
they looked North
to the Perkiomen Creek

the clean, free-flowing, Perkiomen Creek

at Green Lane you can walk all the way around the reservoir
12 miles of trails that take you through the forest
then along a road
I hiked the whole last fall

I wanted to know what it looked like in all the different spots
and imagine what that area would be without the dam

I think we'd still have trails along the river
spectacular views of Pennsylvania hills along a flowing stream
raspberry bushes ready for anyone to pick in late summer

or would we?
is the river clean today because the reservoir was built?

IV – The Quarry

there's a quarry northeast of my house
 it's a two minute drive
 maybe a 15 minute walk

it's been running my whole life
 at least 29 years of rock
 that took millennia to form
 have been dug, jackhammered, and blasted
 out of the ground

taken away
 in trucks that leave rock dust in their wake
 so much that the quarry washes the road it's on
 to make its existence less visible
 less rude
 to hide some of its side effects

they do a decent job overall
 the entrance to the quarry doesn't show much
 just check-in points for construction vehicles

from my house, you can see the upper edges of the quarry
 where they first started digging
 decades ago
 but it's only visible in the winter
 when the trees lose their leaves
 and if you didn't already know what was there
 it would just look like a ridgeline
 something we don't have much of
 here at sea level in PA

most of the time, the quarry is invisible
 it's part of the landscape
 the cost of building highways and bridges

you don't think about it
 because you don't see it anymore
 you remember once or twice a week
 when they blast more rock into pieces
 manageable pieces
 salable pieces
 and the windows rattle

the house shakes
the birds flutter up off the feeders

but they flutter back almost as quickly
just like we do

the quarry wraps their company trucks
in eagles and American flags
nationalism and patriarchy couched in patriotism
as is so common around here

when the quarry was for sale, years back
a company put in a bid to make it a dump
a group of locals opposed the sale, saying
 “we don’t want a giant stinking trash heap polluting our homes”

the locals didn’t win, exactly
another materials company bought the quarry
it’s more active now
but it’s not a dump

ten minutes away, Salford Quarry has been declared a superfund site
three companies dumped industrial waste there over thirty years
most of the water runoff from that site goes into Skippack Creek
 the Skippack Creek flows into the Perkiomen Creek
 the Perkiomen Creek feeds the Green Lane Reservoir
feeds it cadmium, lead, and boron

don’t worry though, it’s not a lot of lead or cadmium
 and they’ll give you bottled water if your well has boron in it

they’re taking care of it

V – Home

I came back to PA over a year ago
 it made sense
 two parents instead of five roommates
 a yard for my puppy
 homecooked meals
 no rent

I moved away in 2009
 went to college
 worked in New York
 moved to Armenia
 moved to Boston

most of the last ten years, I've been in cities
 appreciating single trees breaking down the sidewalks
 patches of grass
 small urban parks
 residents who keep their assumptions to themselves

for the most part

being here, I reflect more often on certain topics
 like what a friend calls 'femininity'
 how its performance changes so much
 and yet so little
 depending on where you are
 and yet my own performance, which has changed so little
 over the last five years
 holds such different weight in Pennsylvania
 where I'm local and supposed to conform
 than it did in Boston
 supposedly the most liberal city in the US
 or in Armenia
 where I was allowed to be an outlier

it's something that confronts me when I walk outside
 we have new neighbors I hadn't met before
 they have opinions

I think about it in the grocery store sometimes
 as I pick up a block of cheese
 and someone behind me says

“Excuse me sir, where do they keep the eggs?”
 I don’t have long conversations with those people

but mainly it’s something I think about on trails
 when I’m out with my dog
 not alone, but alone enough

in this space, this open space, there is so much that can go wrong

the last time I went to walk around that reservoir,
 the one I talked about earlier
 I was 3 miles in
 on my way back to the car
 when I saw a man
 in a hunting cap and a Carhart jacket
 standing
 slouching
 skulking, to my eyes
 off the trail, in front of very tall grass

why was he there?
 why did he stare at me without acknowledging my existence?
 why did it make me so uncomfortable?
 why did he feel so different
 from the group of men I ran into five minutes later
 who all said “Hey!”
 who wanted to pet my dog

I don’t think I’ve ever walked that last mile more quickly

I told my mom about this and she shivered
 told me not to go back by myself
 I told my dad
 he didn’t understand why I was scared

it feels good to be outside, walking, hiking, cycling
 I expect there to be some risk
 snakes
 roots in unexpected places
 loose dogs
 it’s the humans I can’t account for

the ones who build the dams and quarries
 even though there are other ways

ways that are better for the earth and all its creatures

who knowingly poison those around them
or far from them
for the sake of profit
or national security

who hunt other beings out of existence
secure in the knowledge
that nothing could do that to *them*

but there are other humans, too, who try to move the needle
just a little
slightly closer to a world where we respect agency
and recognize it even if it doesn't look like human agency

who are thinking about what decolonization *really* means in every conceivable situation
and how to incorporate anti-racist practices into life and business

others who run companies and publicize their supply chains
who don't pack pairs of socks in plastic anymore

even though I can't account for humans
sometimes
they give me hope

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