

# 5 miles with my eyes and ears wide open

*by Elisabeth Robson*

Have you gone for a  
walk recently?  
One where you paid  
attention?

I mean really paid  
attention.

Come with me.



Out the doorway, down the driveway, across the road.  
Do you remember what used to be here?

Last April, during nesting season,  
a brush hog worked in these woods.  
All day. For days. Weeks.

From my chair in the backyard I could hear the engine  
rise and fall,  
rise and fall.

Everything shorter than a young tree disappeared.

Where there had been thicket and tangle, there was  
suddenly visibility.  
The ground lay open.

In spring the woods used to move.

Frogs and newts would come  
out of the damp places and head  
toward the road.  
Garter snakes threaded through  
last year's ferns.  
Birdsong came from everywhere  
at once.

Sometimes I would carry the smaller  
ones across the asphalt, cupping  
them in both hands.  
Many didn't make it.  
Each migration left its quiet marks  
on the road.



Now, ten months later, the ground is still exposed.  
Branches lie twisted where they were torn.  
Young trees that had been reaching upward are  
flattened into the soil.  
The older trees stand alone, their trunks suddenly  
visible from far away.

A few ferns have returned, bright and tentative.  
They feel like questions.

It is very easy to see through the woods now.

It is much harder to find anything living there.



I wonder if there will be any birdsong this year?

We begin to notice the fences.

At first they look old, almost softened by time.  
Some are swallowed by thickets.  
Nootka rose, snowberry, blackberry.  
In summer the roses bloom through the wire.  
In fall the berries hold on.

Towhees move in the tangle.  
Sparrows drop down and disappear.  
Someone small rustles and goes still.

Even the wire seems less certain here.

In some places there are three generations of fence.

Wooden posts, gray and fallen, nearly soil again.  
Beside them, rusted t-posts leaning at angles.  
And just inside, a newer line. Straight, tight, deliberate.

Barbed wire catches light differently.  
It does not soften.



I have seen hair caught in the barbs.  
Once, the deep marks in the dirt where someone struggled.  
The fence remained standing.

Along the roadside, hedges used to thicken each year.  
Some are cut back and return, patient as ever.

Others disappear all at once.

Roots lifted.  
Stumps gone.  
No shadow where there had been one.

A new fence arrives in their place,  
clean and geometric.  
The field becomes easier to measure.  
Easier to monetize.

It is harder to cross.



After a while, we begin to see lines everywhere.

Fence lines.

Road edges.

Property corners marked with bright tape or metal stakes.

The map in our heads is tidy.

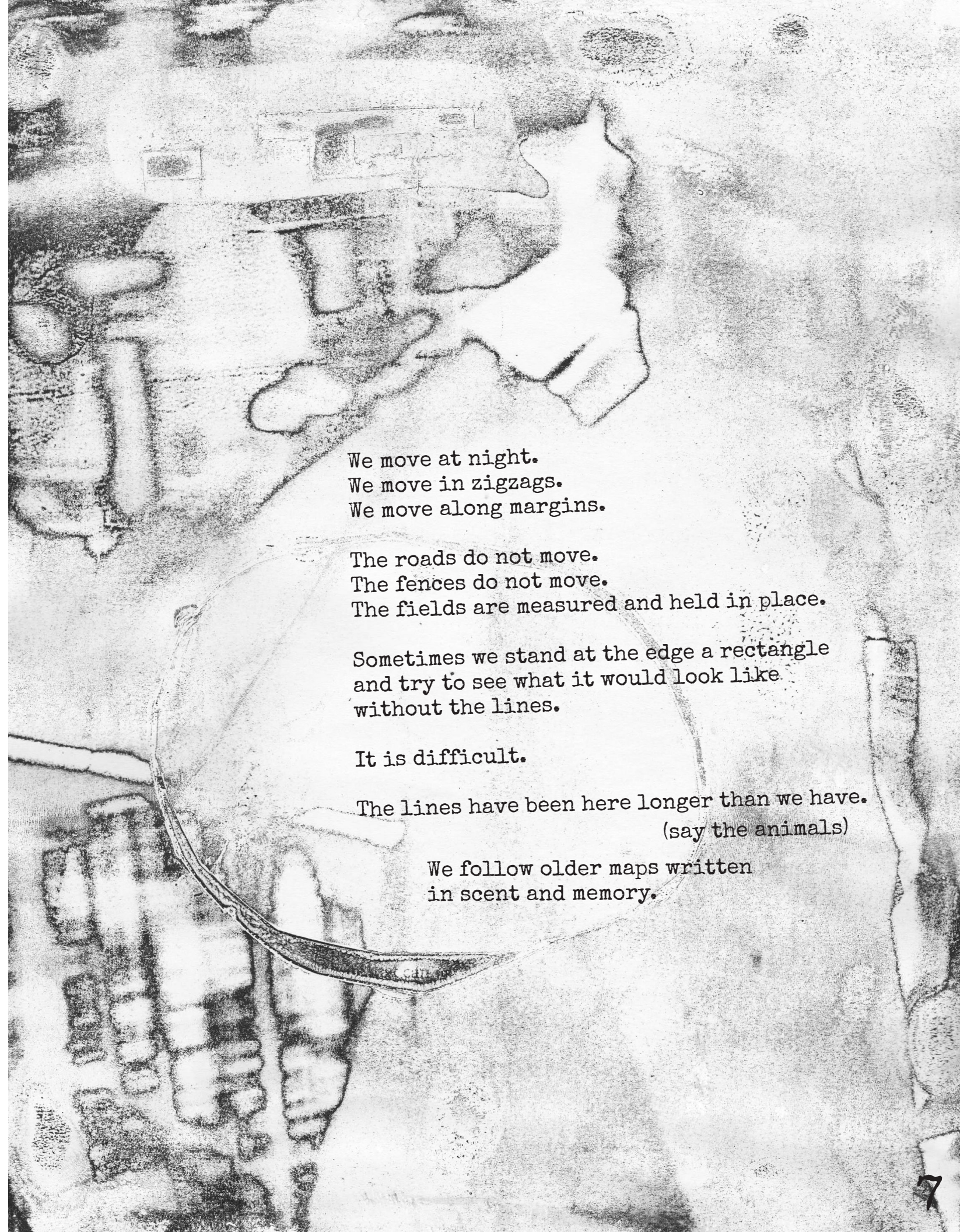
Rectangles.

Boundaries.

Names.



The map under our feet is not.



We move at night.  
We move in zigzags.  
We move along margins.

The roads do not move.  
The fences do not move.  
The fields are measured and held in place.

Sometimes we stand at the edge a rectangle  
and try to see what it would look like  
without the lines.

It is difficult.

The lines have been here longer than we have.  
(say the animals)

We follow older maps written  
in scent and memory.

I heard a story once from the local baker.

He found a killdeer nest while plowing a stubbled field.  
The eggs were almost invisible against the soil.

When he stepped down from the tractor,  
the parent bird began to limp away,  
wing dragging, voice sharp with alarm.

alarm

alarm

alarm

Killdeer do this when something comes too close.  
They offer their bodies as distraction.

The engine idled behind him.  
The field stretched out in straight lines.

He stood there for a long moment.

Then he climbed back up and steered around the nest.



In the middle of  
those furrows  
a small circle  
remained untouched.

For a few weeks,  
the field bent  
around them.

Some trees feel urgency.

They rise straight and narrow in the open light,  
their trunks smooth,  
their branches reaching upward all at once.  
People call them weed trees,  
as if being young were a flaw.



forgetting of  
course that old  
trees grow from  
young trees; they  
just need to be  
given enough time.



Somewhere still stand the old ones.  
A few.

They no longer aim only upward.  
Wind has turned them,  
taken their tops.  
They bend and continue.

Look up.

There are lines overhead.

Not the white streaks in the blue sky.  
The darker ones, strung from pole to pole.  
They follow the road the way the road follows itself:  
straight, deliberate.

Beside the road, the ditches run just as straight.

At first they are only cuts in the soil.  
Then, over the years, they soften.

Grasses lean in.  
Water collects and darkens.  
Seeds settle.  
Something green threads its way along the edges.



A ditch becomes a  
narrow strip of shelter.

Until one morning the  
machines return  
and scoop it open again.

The muck lifts out in  
heavy curls.  
Roots come with it.  
The channel is made  
clean and angular.

It looks new.

Below the power lines the ground is open in the same way.

Two years ago trees stood here.  
Now the earth is exposed to the sun.  
The surface is rough where the treads passed.

What grows first is quick and certain.  
Tall grasses rise in a single season.  
Thistles claim the bare patches.  
They move in without hesitation,  
holding the soil where it would  
otherwise drift.

The ferns that used to unfurl here  
are harder to find.  
So are the low, glossy leaves of  
salal.

Along the roadside the green begins  
to look the same.  
Lawn grass, pasture grass, orchard  
grass.  
A continuous margin of familiar  
blades.

It is efficient.  
It is easy to read from a distance.

Standing here, it takes a moment to  
remember how many kinds of green  
once shared this strip of ground.

The lines remain overhead.  
The ditches hold their shape.  
The field keeps its edges.

**cold rationality**

Life returns, but it returns  
differently.

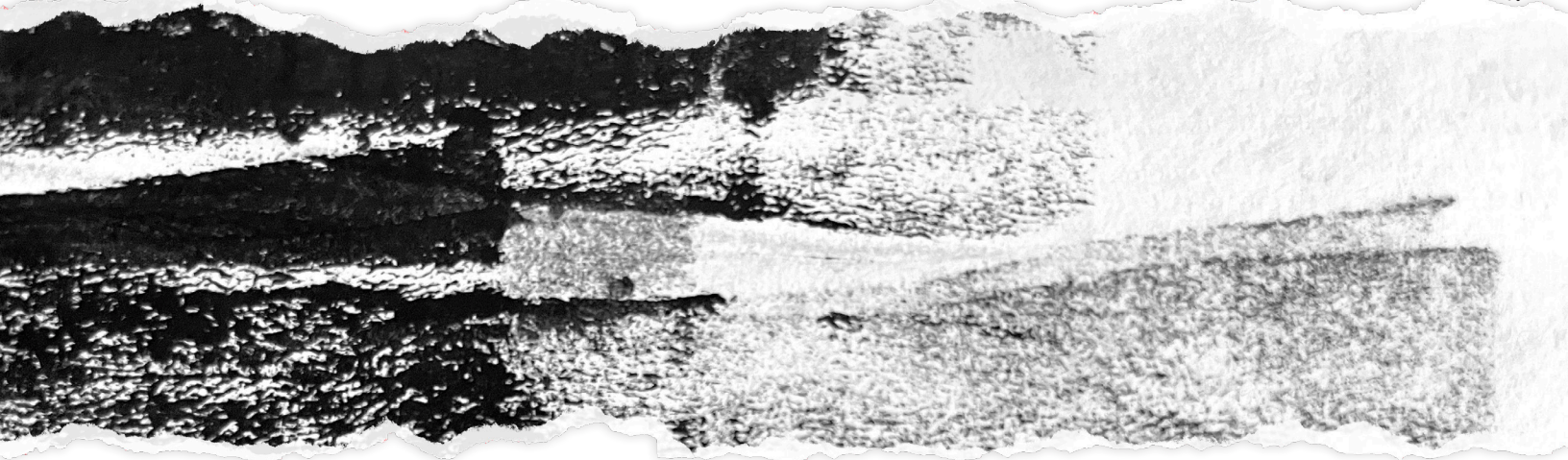
We begin to wonder  
who learns these new patterns,  
and who does not.



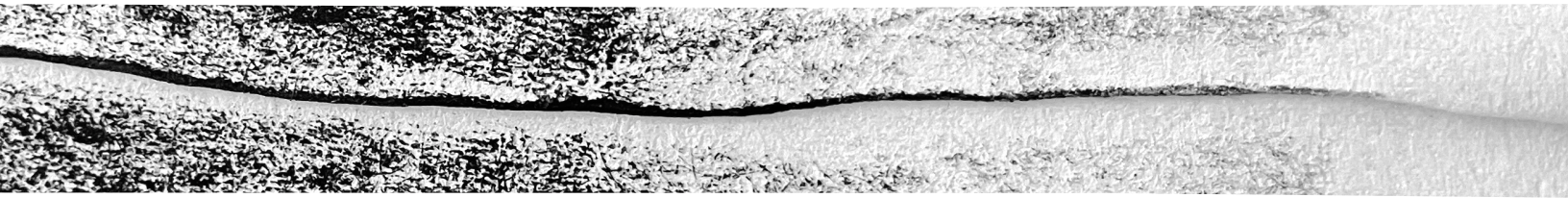
INTERLUDE

we look away from the lines

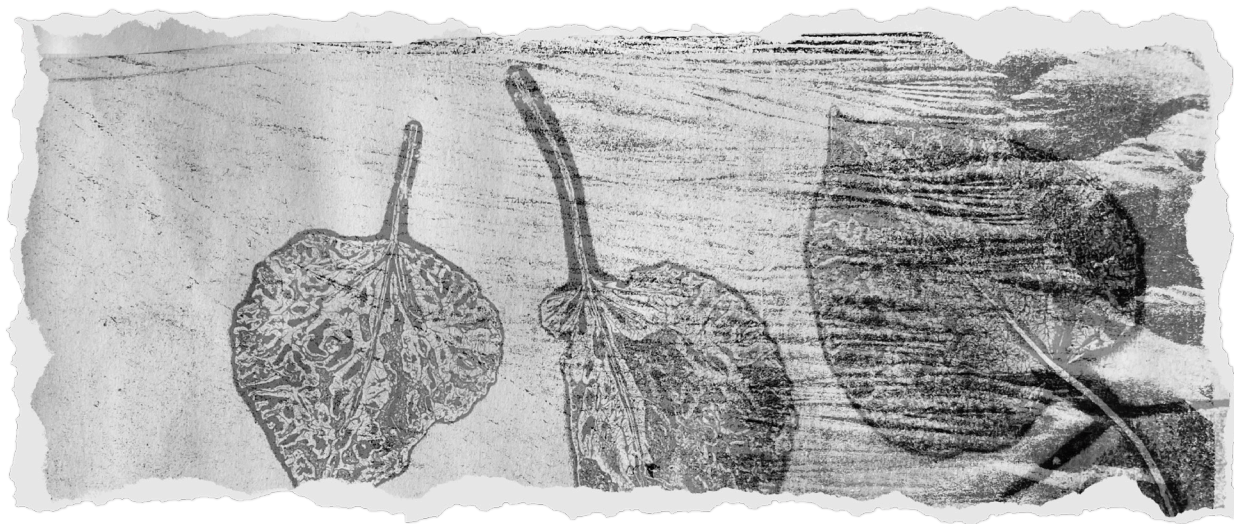
we begin to see the curves again slipping around stones braiding into shallow



threads. Each turn remembers the last rain gathers leaves. A narrow trail



appears and disappears through the grass bending around roots following the

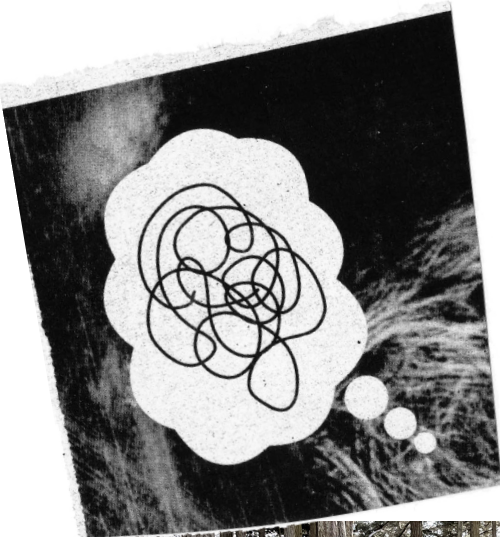


shape of the ground.



Can you see it? Right there!

Who goes there?



A little farther on, the ground opens.

Several trees lie tipped on their sides,  
their roots lifted into the air.  
Soil hangs from the tangled mass,  
rocks caught in the weave,  
fine roots exposed to the light.

The trunks lie at angles now,  
needles browning,  
branches settling into the ditch.



The trees had grown used to one another,  
shoulder to shoulder.

A few years ago, the trees beneath the  
power lines were cut back.  
More sky appeared between the poles.

The wind found its way in.

Trees who had leaned against their neighbors  
were left to stand alone.

Some of them did not.



Photograph courtesy Saltwater People Historical Society.

Down the road from the fallen trees  
a narrow lane runs to a rocky  
headland.

An old pier still stands... barely,  
as it's unmade piece by piece.  
A shuttered store behind chain link.  
A concrete wall, ghost of fuel tanks,  
pollution folded into thin soil and  
rock.

The bay is serene now.  
Fields. Houses. Trees.  
Blackberry and rose along the road.  
Quiet.

In old photographs  
the bay is crowded with boats,  
the store alive, the tanks full.  
Few trees.  
Wolves newly gone.  
The land worked hard, stripped  
close.

Now the value is the view.  
We take it in another form  
and call it "property."

Still—  
wildflowers push through lawn grass.  
Birds gather insects from foreign leaves.  
Deer slip between fences.  
Raccoons comb the dark.

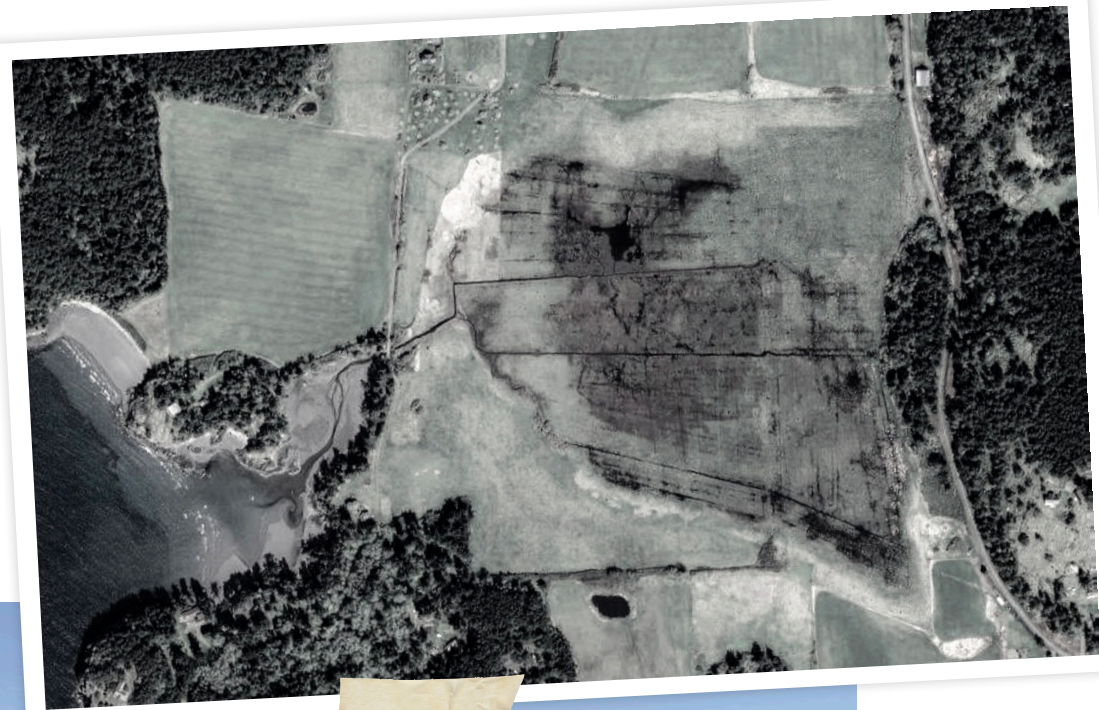
Life remains.  
Changed.  
Insistent.



Here we reach the wetlands.  
We can see well from a rise along the road.

The ground lies flat and grassy,  
a gate near the shore holds back the tide.  
Years ago it was cut through  
with straight ditches.  
The water that arrives now comes from rain.

This place was once a salt marsh.



Has the soil forgotten  
what it was like to grow  
pickleweed, arrowgrass, saltgrass,  
ghosts of an older rhythm?

Most of the marsh was turned to summer pasture.  
Field grasses rise thick:  
reed canary grass and pasture grasses proliferate.

In winter the land softens again.  
Water spreads across it,  
as a seasonal stream flows its way in.  
Marsh wrens stitch their calls into the reeds.  
Mallards settle in the open ponds.  
Eagles wait in the taller trees.

Beneath the surface, other lives are missing.  
No shells gather at the margins.  
No waves ripple the shallows.  
Spring is serenaded by Pacific tree frogs,  
rather than the rise and fall of the tide.

A new fence runs along the edge of the field,  
holding the summer cattle in place.

Standing at the boundary,  
it is possible to imagine the tide returning,  
water lifting and sinking with the moon,  
channels opening and closing on their own time  
instead of ours.

The gate remains shut.



We near the end of our walk,  
our bags full of color.

Not the blue-purple of camas,  
nor the cream and cocoa flecks of chocolate lily.  
Not spring gold's yellow  
or the sudden pink of sea blush.

Our bags hold another palette:  
the bright scatter left by indifference  
Caught in grass and gravel.

We gather what does not belong,  
knowing we will return and gather again.

For a moment  
the verges breathe,  
given back to growing things.



Everywhere is speaking all the time.  
We can choose to see.  
We can choose to listen.

Who lives where you live,  
someone you may not have noticed before?



Pay attention,  
Be astonished,  
Tell about it.  
- Mary Oliver

February, 2025

All photos and art by the author  
unless otherwise noted.

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