

where I liked it better than I do here. I like to walk where you can walk on level ground. Outside here, if I stand still, fifteen or twenty quail, couple of coveys, will come and go around. The gray fox don't come nearer than the swamp there, but I've had coons come in here; the deer will come up. Muskrats breed right here, and otters sometimes. I was to Tennessee once. They're greedy, hungry, there, to Tennessee. They'll pretty near take the back off your hand when you lay down money. I never been nowhere I liked better than here."

There is no place I would rather be than with a new McPhee book in hand. I treasure the hope that there may be more to come, just as I look forward to that day each semester when I am trying to explain narrative description to reporting students, and Fred Brown floats back to me.

The Slovenly Wilderness

David George Haskell's stunning meditation on a patch of Tennessee forest gives insight to all of nature.

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The Forest Unseen: A Year's Watch in Nature
By David George Haskell
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Not quite a century ago, Wallace Stevens published a much discussed little poem, "Anecdote of the Jar:"

*I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.*

*The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.
The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.*

*It took dominion every where.
The jar was gray and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee.*

Interpretations differ by literary school and the number of beers graduate students of English can consume in one sitting, but the general consensus of the New Critics was that Stevens was talking about the artist imposing order on nature. The gist was that the artist creates an imagined thing which defines the natural world, simply by standing in contrast to nature.

David George Haskell, a professor of biology at the University of the South, has placed his own jar of sorts, round upon the ground and wholly artistic, upon a hill in Tennessee. Specifically he chose a small patch of old-growth forest, preserved from the ax by the steepness of its slope, near the edge of the Cumberland Plateau. Haskell's "jar" was an imagined circle just over a meter in diameter, modeled after a Tibetan mandala—a sand painting that recreates the path of life while serving as a focal point for meditation. The selection process for the placement of the mandala included an adjacent, comfortable sandstone boulder on which Haskell could sit and observe. He spent one year visiting this mandala, closely watching the nature within: insects, grubs, salamanders, parasitic worms, birds, squirrels, deer, coyotes, mosses, fungi, herbs, flowers, trees and many other things. From these observations, and from the latest research on each living thing he observed, Haskell drew conclusions not only about the health of Tennessee forests, but about the slow march of evolution, the interconnectedness of all things, evolutionary impulses toward art and the human role within the dance of life on Earth.

Haskell recounts these conclusions, one mandala visit at a time, in *The Forest Unseen: A Year's Watch in Nature*—a seminal work on nature. Rising to the philosophical heights of Annie's Dillard's *A Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and Thoreau's *Walden* (both of which were also structured around a one-year meditative sojourn within a specific wilderness), Haskell's book is far more than the sum of its parts. It is *The Voyage of the Beagle* rendered small-scale, but with no less significant observations than those made by Darwin in the Galapagos. Its sentences are beautifully crafted. It is tall and of a port in air.

From the first chapter, which describes fungi, lichen and bacteria in the mandala, Haskell begins to develop his theme on the interconnectedness of life, on the foolishness of considering single species or single habitats when trying to make sense of it. "Taoist union," he writes. "Farmer's dependence. Alexandrian pillage. Relationships in the mandala come in multifarious, blended hues. The line between bandit and honest citizen is not as easily drawn as it first seems. Indeed, evolution has drawn no life. All life melds plunder and solidarity."

In exploring the relationships seen through the lens of a bit of Cumberland Plateau, Haskell often refers to history, both human and geologic. In discussing the way in which North America's large herbivores—the mastodon, the giant musk-ox and so on—vanished during the same time as humans arrived, he quotes first Darwin and then Jefferson: "Formerly [the American Continent] must have swarmed with great monsters; now we find mere pygmies

compared to the antecedent, allied races,' [Darwin wrote]. Thomas Jefferson disagreed, believing that giant sloths and other creatures must still be alive. After all, why would God create them, then kill them off? Creation reflected God's perfect handiwork, therefore nature would unravel if pieces were to fall away. Jefferson instructed the explorers Lewis and Clark to bring back reports of these creatures from their trek to the Pacific Coast. The expedition found no evidence of living mastodons, sloths, or any other extinct creatures. Darwin was right; pieces of creation can be destroyed."

Haskell quotes no external source, whether Darwin, Jefferson, or a recent gene study, without tying that source to the mandala as he observes it in any given chapter. In the next paragraph after this statement, he describes plants of the mandala that evolved seed dispersal schemes dependent on giant herbivores; these plants have not yet had enough time to evolve new schemes since the herbivores vanished. The honey locust, for example, is "doubly lost," first, because its two-foot-long seedpods grow at a height too great for any living animal to reach, but one that is perfect for browsing mastodons, and second, because they are too large for any living species to swallow, although they are the perfect size large extinct mammals. And then he gives several other examples. He does not interrupt his well-crafted prose with footnotes or other citations, but includes as an appendix a detailed scientific bibliography for each dated chapter. If there is anything to fault in his writing, is the fact that, by the act of tying each chapter's theme to the mandala, he makes the reader grow somewhat tired of seeing that word, "mandala." It appears at least once on most of the book's pages. But the writing surrounding the word is so wonderful he can be forgiven the conceit of his central metaphor. Over and over again in this book, the reader will find sentences worthy of being inscribed as plaques over the entrance to the biology buildings of the nation's universities.

Taken as a whole, each chapter of *The Forest Unseen* offers a calm, clear, intelligent confirmation that every cell of every living thing testifies to the theory of evolution as well-established fact, no less mysterious and wonderful in its complexity than any of man's old creation myths. Each chapter also reinforces man's inescapable role in the ongoing evolution of life, for better or worse; this book allows the wilderness to sprawl around us, no longer wild. We are not outsiders looking in, but insiders looking out.

Biographical Sketch

Michael Ray Taylor is a frequent reviewer and literary writer for Chapter16.org, the website of Humanities Tennessee, a nonprofit agency sponsoring literary events and providing free reviews to Tennessee newspapers. He is author of *The Cat Manual*, a humor E-book available for Kindle and is currently working on a novel.