

REMNANTS

Reveries of a Mountain Dweller

by

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I respectfully acknowledge that I wrote this book on the unceded Traditional Territories of the Semá:th People of the Sumas First Nation, the Matsqui First Nation and the Stó:lō Nation. Stó:lō peoples have lived in this area for over ten thousand years; they are the original caretakers and custodians of this Land. I am grateful for their knowledge and wisdom through which I have come to learn so much.

The mountain sat upon the plain
In his eternal chair,
His observation omnifold,
His inquest everywhere.

The seasons played around his knees,
Like children round a sire:
Grandfather of the days is he,
Of dawn the ancestor.

“The Mountain,” Emily Dickinson (1896)

It's peaceful beneath the canopy; tranquil and unassuming. A deep belly breath brings the dewy morning air that follows a rainy night into my system; I am drunk on the freshness. It permeates my bloodstream, running up and down the meridians of my body, forcing sensory reflexes to awaken. I am attentive to a complete body and mind shift that only this place provides me. I feel taller yet less imposing. I feel wider yet nimble and light. I am utterly expansive as I tune into the rhythm of the forest. My skin tingles with goosebumps, tiny hairs stand up at the back of my neck, my head grows slightly fuzzy and my limbs move into a realm of weightlessness. I am carried along by some unseen army of forest elves beckoning me to experience spring on Sumas Mountain...

DEAR READER

What have I created for you in these pages? What words, what thoughts, what images will capture and hold you?

Sitting down to write in the space of stolen hours, I did not at first know what it was that I was writing. It began with an observation, in a very Rousseauian or Montaignian way: I captured shifting perspectives of a tree near my house. Then, I wrote about the swallows who chirp and glide in spring, and then it was a consideration of the rain and heat and the names we give. I thought at one time that I was writing what was known of my family history. At another time, it was of the heartbreak that comes with change. Finally, I found I was documenting the emotional state of a single year. A year that brought—alongside extraordinary joy and beauty—sensations of confusion, frustration, disillusionment and sadness.

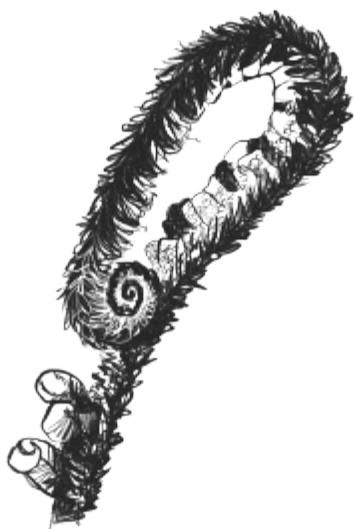
I wrote and continued to write until it was time to stop. I wrote what I saw and what I felt. I wrote the experience of my life in the glisten of a singular place, in a singular time so saturated with progress and growth and greed and questions about sustainability and the protection of those places—with no acceptable answer.

What you will find here is a series of observations culminating mostly within the year 2021. The myriad of calamitous events throughout the Fraser Valley, BC, and around the world during that time have drawn great attention to the problem of climate change and our influence upon it. My response, my way of working to understand and talk about these issues, arose as a collection of questions and a commentary of hope for humanity—situated in present and historical place, dedicated to the intrinsic sparkle of ecology set against those inherent contradictions of what it means to be human. What it means to both contribute to a problem and work to solve it.

This contradiction is showcased through four seasons organized into four sections. I begin with spring—lightness, revitalization and change—and end with winter—the reflective quiet among the harsh realities of colder months, made even harsher by extreme weather. My aim is to showcase the wonder existing within these seasons as well as the broken-hearted realities of human growth and development.

It is with deepest gratitude that I thank you for picking up this book; I hope there is something here that may capture and hold you.

SPRING



SWALLOWS

Barn swallows—the acrobats of the sky, who soar and tumble and dodge to impressively catch flies—migrate to and from Sumas Mountain every spring and fall. Every April, I anxiously await their arrival. They make their way up from Mexico and Central America using the Pacific Flyway; one or two will arrive on our property first, and then larger groups follow. They return to nests in the rafters of our barn—nests left behind by their ancestors, year after year, which each new arrival revitalizes with fresh horsehair and moss to signify that it's occupied.

Their day begins, bright and early, loud and boisterous, each morning. Sleeping above them in a renovated loft, I hear them twitter and chirp, warble and cry, from when the sky starts to lighten until the sun peeks through the trees—which is when the show of acrobatic flight commences. Sometimes, they will quiet down momentarily, but they will start up again as soon as a single bird chirps. Soon, everyone has an opinion—on what exactly I am unsure. The floorboards of my loft ignite with dynamic swallow gossip, marking the beginning of mating season. I look forward to feeling their energy all year, and I like to anticipate what I might learn from their

interactions with each other and with the space they occupy in the sky.

While I know the abundant noise is part of their mating ritual, I like to imagine that they might be communicating about their long trip up the Pacific Flyway. I wonder, too, how that migratory route may have been negatively impacted by human intervention. Was a crucial resting ground along the way newly developed? Did they eat insects tarnished by pesticides?

Not long after their flurry of arrival, I begin to spot anywhere between three and eight small white eggs with reddish brown spots and flecks in most nests. At this point, the early morning gab sessions grow quieter and less frequent. The days grow longer; at dusk they dance triumphantly, tumbling to snatch up mosquitoes and flies while nearly colliding with one another, playing a talented game of chicken yet knowing precisely where and how fast their wingspan can take them.

When the nestlings hatch, the chattering starts up again at dawn, loud and clear. I lay in bed and note the difference: now, the mature call of the parent is punctuated by the desperation of their hungry young. I love to go into the barn and spy on the tiny heads peeking out of fluffy nests. The parents, already up and searching for food, come and go. Those resting near the ceiling turn their heads in my direction when I walk in. They *cheep, cheep, cheep* with excitement or alarm, then cast off and out into the open air. They know every inch of the barn—where the openings are, where their nest is, which wire or post or stall edge they can land on.

Some days, when it's been too cold or too hot or the population of bugs is unseasonably low, the swallows are very

quiet when I enter the barn. I know what this means. I walk through and check the floors of each stall. In one of them I will find an emaciated chick alone and lifeless. Opening the stall door, I bend down to scoop up the body. The bird's head may wobble to one side, but the body is already stiff. It feels weightless in my hands, no bigger than the head of a tulip, as I take it out to the trees and say goodbye.

Those at the South Coast Conservation Program and Fraser Valley Conservancy don't always know for certain what causes a bird's death. A myriad of reasons could be the answer and a combination is likely. Some claim heavy pesticide use can wipe out the insect population or poison the birds who eat the infected bugs, which can be lethal or impact successful reproduction and healthy nestlings. The way this pollution is passed through species is aptly named secondary poisoning, and it highlights how vulnerable ecosystems can be when even a single element is tampered with.

Others suggest that the decreasing number of barn swallows is also due to the demolition of barns and other man-made structures or habitats. When these structures are torn down, the migratory birds must nest elsewhere quickly, often building them in dangerous or unstable areas. When the bird population grows smaller, the insect population grows larger. The greater the swarms of insects, the more difficult it is to manage bug populations; this is hard on the farmers who grow our local produce, which can often lead to the use of pesticides. The more we spray, the more birds eat infected bugs and the more we will find the scattered bodies of lifeless birds.



On a spring night one June, I hosted an outdoor dinner party for friends and family. We were sitting out on the grass in the backyard; we sipped on glasses of Riesling underneath strings of warm lights. We sat around the candlelit table in wide-seated, reclaimed teak chairs, dishes at each place setting scraped clean, as we chatted about our lives and memories and the dreams we had yet to realize. The evening air was warm and the stars began to glow when one among us remarked at how few bugs were flitting about. We nostalgically discussed dragonflies, once a staple in the skies as the air warmed each year; their transparent, rainbow-tinted wings seemed to catch and refract each ray of sunshine and their otherworldly, mermaid-like bodies were beautiful in their alterity. They were expert dancers, and I would watch as one rested on a blade of grass, tilting it over ever so slightly, before taking off once again to continue its choreography elsewhere as the last golden rays of the day retreated.

I told my friends about moths the size of small maple leaves that used to come out after dusk throughout my childhood. When the back porch light went on, they would collect there, glued to the glow of the glass encasing the light fixture, sharing the space with other moths of many sizes, shapes and colours. I remember watching them flutter and rest, flutter and rest, in one moment completely manic and in the next part of a well-painted tapestry. There were also ladybugs, the nine-spot and two spot-breeds, whose ability to expansively populate our south-facing kitchen window became an

elaborate game between six-year-old me and them, where I tried to anticipate where they were going with such a dedicated march. In the grass, too, those red and black ladies seemed to be everywhere. They crawled on my hands and arms and along my toes and in the curves of my feet. Once they were on me, I laid still so as not to disturb their determination. They certainly had somewhere to go—or perhaps it really was nowhere, for they seemed to me to wander here and there endlessly. These days, as foreign breeds take over, I am lucky to spot a handful of the native ladybug all season.

As we discussed our bug tales that June evening, we noticed a mosquito buzzing among us from one person to the next, hovering before each of our faces. We watched but we did not move; nobody raised a hand to swat her away.

I once heard a radio interview with neuroscientist Vivek Jayaraman who was talking about the wonder of fruit flies. As we watched the mosquito glide among us, I retold the story to my friends. Since 2014, Jayaraman's Virginia-based team and researchers at Google have been mapping the brain of the fruit fly. They discovered that there was more going on in these small brains than most of us realize: in one section, there is a complex circuitry that informs the fly whether it has eaten enough, where its next meal might be located in the vicinity and where it's located in space at all times—which could explain, I suppose, why the fly always makes a B-line for my expensive red wine over a browning banana on the counter. Apparently, the fly never forgets where it is, how it got there and what it's intended purpose was in entering my home.

As I finished the story, we watched as the mosquito hovered among us, lingering for several minutes, and then floated upwards, to where I knew swallows would soon be ending their daily flight and vacating the area to make way for a collection of little brown bats. Whatever her fate that evening, my friends and I decided to let this mosquito go. She was free from our quick hands and irritation. At that moment, we saw the mosquito differently. We decided to appreciate the complex systems that make up even the most seemingly inconsequential and irritating creatures.