

Night Life

 Almost every day for more than twenty years now I have been going down to a bank above a slow stream where the bittern and the heron stalk the marshy reeds and otters slip through shadowy waters. I go in spring, when the stream is in full flood and the cries of red-winged blackbirds fill the air. I'm there in summer, when the forget-me-nots bloom and turtles bask along the banks. I come in autumn, when the marshes turn lion brown and flights of ducks crisscross the open sky. But, ironically, the best season to know the life along the stream is winter.

A few years ago on Christmas morning, long before anyone was up at home, I went down to my place beside the brook just before dawn. It was a day not unlike any of the 364 other days that I visit the place, except that this was the official beginning of winter and it had snowed the night before, leaving a light dusting that covered the ground and a clean blank slate whereon was written the stories of the night.

All the way down to the brook along an old cart road that leads from my house, I followed the tracks of a red fox that had apparently set out for its appointments of the night from the brushy field to the north. I noticed at one point that it stopped to investigate the signs (some of them invisible to me) left by other sojourners out on their various forays. At one point I noted that the fox halted to consider the footprints of another mammal before moving on—the round tracks of my own cat, who slept all day by the woodstove and then by night reverted to his primordial state and set out on night work of his own.

About halfway down to the brook, two coyotes came out of the swamps to the south, and nosed the tracks of the fox, and then moved on. (I noticed that they later circled around and ended up at the same place both the fox and I were headed—the stream bank.)

Three deer crossed the cartway about a hundred yards back from the banks, and everywhere in the surrounding woods I could see the little bastings of white-footed mouse tracks, stitching the trees together. At a gap in one of the old stone



walls that line the road a fisher had crossed and headed up the hill; next squirrels, more mice, the double print of a grouse wing (I think), a raccoon, and always along the whole route the fox, trotting at a determined pace and threading the whole tapestry of tracks together.

At various times during the night, most of these creatures—presumably the same ones I had seen in the upland—converged on the stream bank. Here there was a great *mélange* of comings and goings, snufflings in the snow, scratched stumps, droppings, the scent mound of a beaver, a scattering of seeds from foraging birds, the nipped twigs where rabbits and deer had fed, and a muddy slide where otters had slipped repeatedly into the dark waters. And all the while below the bank, I could see the as-yet-unfrozen black stream running down to its appointment with the sea.

Traditionally, the night that had just passed—the longest night of the year—was considered a dangerous time in the human community. Without the eternal intervention of priests and shamans, one could not be sure the sun would ever cease in its decline and rise again. But out in the wilder, perhaps more sensible, world, it was business as usual, a night like any other, filled with hunting and gathering and testing the territories for enemies, allies, or mates.

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