

The Breakup

The second winter that I lived in the stone cottage above the brook the snows began in mid-November. There was a blizzard on December 8 and, following that, week after week of periodic snowfall, some of it heavy, some simply a steady dusting that drifted down between the surrounding pines. Streams in the valleys iced up early that year; the lake froze solid by mid-December, and there were a few snowy nights there when we might have believed that the world beyond that little valley had come to an end and we were alone with the dog and a good supply of firewood.

January passed. February became old; some days we skied down to the hollow where Hurricane Brook cut through the ravine and cleared the snow from the deeper pools and lay facedown on the ice. Beneath, we could hear the growl and rumble of running water, and one day there, later in the month, I spotted an oblong open hole in the ice. I sank to my knees and stared. There below, I could see a swirling rush of black water.

Finally, imperceptibly at first, the snows began to melt. There was a smell of something in the air, something moist. The little icicles appeared at the ends of the twigs of the sugar maples that lined the road to the cottage. The days slowly warmed, the spring songs of the titmice and the chickadees filled the woods, and one afternoon, down by the swamp below the cottage, I saw the little green noses of skunk cabbage and the curled cigars of false hellebore poking up through the sphagnum and the mud.

In early March there was a hard rain that turned to ice as the evening wore on, and late that night there was a precipitous drop in the temperature and a hard freeze. Early in the morning, I dreamed of a burnished crystal palace. The dream, in fact, was real. The surrounding forest was gleaming in celestial light, every twig, every branch and bud, was glistening in the sun. Then the day warmed, and all morning we could hear the clatter of falling ice.

In effect this event marked the end.

One night about this time I was awakened by a profound, incessant roaring. At first, in the confusion of half-drugged winter sleep, I thought some vast

freight train was passing in the valley below. But this little cottage was set in the middle of 40,000 acres of wildland, and there were no rail lines within fifty miles. There were hardly any roads, in fact; but the roaring sounded like some distant, heavily traveled superhighway cutting through the wilderness. I thought perhaps a high wind had come up and was raging through the bare limbs; I had heard such sounds at the beginning of winter, with the onset of storms. But I looked out the window and the entire world was still. I got dressed and went outside.



It was a peaceful, warm night with a quarter-moon descending beyond the basketwork of the winter woods. Outside the noise was even louder; it thundered above the trees like a squadron of propeller-driven warplanes, a disembodied sound that rode through the upper air. I couldn't place the origin. I heard the sound to the north, where Hurricane Brook cut throughout the ravine. I could hear it coming up from the south, above the swamp and the lake and the valleys west of the lake. I heard it in the sky; it seemed to emerge from the very earth. It permeated even the granite walls of the cottage. And then finally I figured out what it was.

This region was characterized by high hills and deep valleys, a large lake, and many running streams. On this singular night, after weeks of slow warming and periodic rains, all the streams of all the valleys had, as a body, freed themselves from the chain of ice that had bound them winter long. Free at last, they came charging through their streambeds, crashing ever downward to larger streams and thence to small rivers, and then onto the mother of all rivers in these parts, the Connecticut, and then, finally, to the sea.

And after that night, it was spring. The wood frogs began croaking in the hollows. The spring peepers called, the salamanders emerged from their deep burrows and marched through the woods, arbutus bloomed, the red-wings came back, and for the first time since early November you could smell earth, and the forest and redolent odor of that quintessential elixir of all life—water.

Spring 2003