

## Runways

by Moira Linehan

*They dined on mince and slices of quince,  
which they ate with a runcible spoon.*  
—Edward Lear, “The Owl and the Pussycat”

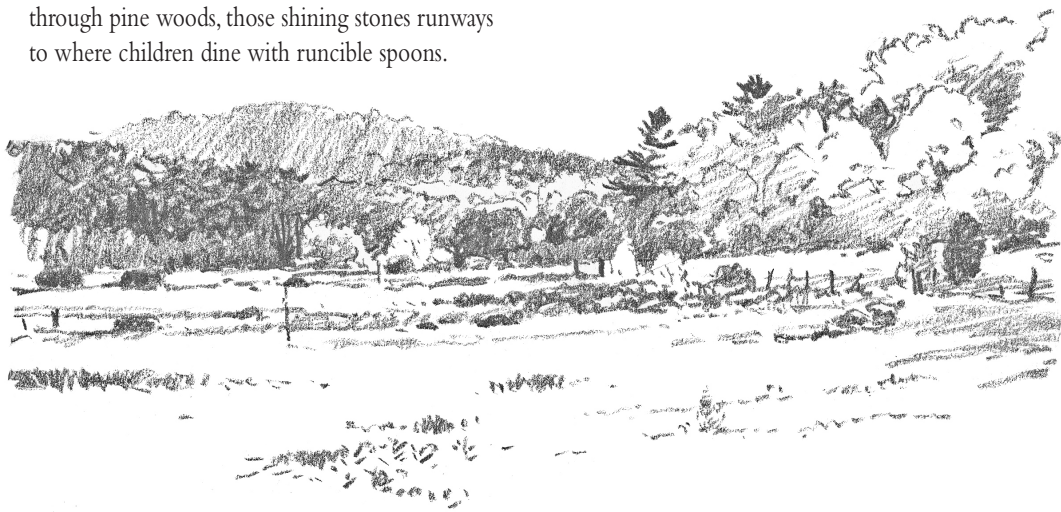
A child’s running commentary, a runnel’s  
nonsense mouthings strung out in tongue-long lines  
of bubbles around every tree trunk, log jam,  
boulder in the way, then brung back into pools  
and eddies, drunken delight at whatever’s there,  
each ounce wrung out, wrung out. Then abandoned  
as children do. Now runic, the allure  
of white rocks flattened by the brunt force  
of glaciers as they trundled through. In shallows,  
in runny mud along banks, along paths  
through pine woods, those shining stones runways  
to where children dine with runcible spoons.

## Two Haiku

by Brad Bennett

half a moon  
high above  
a quiet cove

swamp morning glory . . .  
since the beginning  
of time



## The Heart of the Matter

by Thomas Conuel

In first grade, I attended a parochial school run by an order of fierce nuns. Sister Agnes Marie, the first-grade teacher, was not one to coddle students. Perhaps a month into the semester, she was delivering a lecture to the boys in the class—the girls had gone to another classroom for their own admonishments—and a dozen bigger boys from higher grades had been brought into our classroom to hear Sister’s talk. Sister Agnes Marie would not tolerate impure thoughts and desires in any boy. These were the work of the devil, and boys were particularly prone to his horrid enticements. I had not the faintest idea what she was talking about, but managed to maintain a frozen look of concentration while not fidgeting and sitting ramrod straight in my chair. She was reminding us of her determination to stamp out these vile manifestations of Satan’s handiwork when she spied the large muscular boy next to me smirking.

“Wipe that smile off your face, Mr. Dermody,” she intoned, “or I shall wipe it off for you.”

Dermody was slow to comply so Sister Agnes Marie strode purposefully to her desk where she kept a wicker basket full of tennis balls. I had noticed the basket from the first day of class and wondered why a nun kept tennis balls on her desk. Seizing a ball, she pivoted and fired it across the room with a powerful, accurate throw that a major league baseball player would be proud of, winging it off Dermody’s right ear. The tennis ball caromed around the room, and Dermody stopped smiling, looked befuddled and then baffled, and then bit his lip to stop from crying. I had been afraid of Sister Agnes Marie before; now I was terrified.

I had started the school year badly anyhow. Every morning on the school bus I would ask my older brother, Bruce, who was in charge of shepherding me to and from school, the same question several times on the ride.

“How long is the school day?” I would ask him

“Six hours,” he would reply.

I would wait several minutes, and then again.

“Bruce, how long is the school day?”

“Six hours.”

And again. And yet again.

At the age of six, I was due for open-heart surgery and had missed many days of school because of appointments with heart doctors. As a result, I was afraid of doctors, hospitals, teachers, and school. Doctors probed and scrutinized me. Adults looked at me as if I were about to come apart before their eyes. School made me nervous. I was afraid of the ride on the school bus; I was afraid of Sister Agnes Marie; I was afraid of not completing my homework correctly; I was afraid of entering the confessional booth and reciting my sins to the priest. I was afraid of everything, except the woods.

I spent most of my free time outdoors, alone, wandering a woodlot behind my house in a newly constructed suburb in the Berkshires. It was the only way I had to escape the turmoil of my life before and after the surgery. Outside of school, in the woods, I was not afraid.

My woods was a mix of pine and hardwoods on perhaps 35 acres that had probably been clear-cut once in the late nineteenth-century and was now growing back as a typical New England forested landscape—white pine and hemlock giving way to oak, maple, ash, and birch. There were a good-size vernal pool and two impressive rock formations—the Boulders, and Boulders Two. The woods were bounded on all sides by roads and houses, but inside they were quiet and deep.

I started wandering the woods to get away from adults, and because on those days after a visit to the hospital I had nothing else to do. I was forbidden to play sports. Doctor’s orders. We had no television, and my brothers and sister were in school. And visits to the hospital left me in an agony of both fear and

embarrassment. To start with, there was the problem of getting to the hospital in broad daylight on a day when everybody else was in school.

Even when escorted by my mother and walking at her side, I worried and magnified the incongruity and unnaturalness of my being out and about on a school day. Adults moved about their business, but there were no other kids on the streets. That policeman in his patrol car—he was looking over at us with what seemed casual interest as we waited for the light to change, but I could see otherwise. The policeman was thinking, “Why is that kid not in school?”

A car mechanic stood to wipe his hands on a towel and looked over our way as we entered the hospital grounds. Perhaps an adult would think that was just an appreciative look at my mother and a small smile from the mechanic, but I knew otherwise. You could easily see what he was thinking: “Boy that kid must be in real tough shape. ‘Cardiac Clinics.’ Only old people go there. A sad case.”

Or later, after my surgery, Miss Z, my second-grade teacher (I had changed schools by then), calling me over during recess along with a bunch of boys that I had been galloping about with. “You are running too much. You’re out of breath. I want you to stay here with me by the swings and not run for the rest of recess.”

Later, incredulous questions from my friend Gary Yates and others. “Why did she make you stop running? What’s the matter with you?”

I lied: “I hurt my ankle.”

The truth was I had been born with a serious heart condition, a constricted pulmonary heart valve that left me short of breath, wheezing, and with intermittent chest pains. It had been that way since the day, sometime in my first year, when my mother took me to our family doctor for my first checkup.

Dr. Desautell, who had also delivered me, smiled and chatted with my mother while he placed his stethoscope on my chest. And then he stopped smiling, fell silent, and lifted his head from my chest. He frowned, shook his head slightly, and bent down to listen again. The second time he kept the stethoscope on my chest for a long time, moving it up and down and even around to my back.

My mother, a pretty woman of 28 with a husband just back from World War II and a growing family, held me and tried to remember if Dr. Desautell had been this thorough with her older boys. Dr. Desautell finished, looked over at my mother, started to say something, and then stopped. Abruptly, he put his stethoscope back to my chest. He listened for a third time, but quickly now. Then he removed his stethoscope, placed it carefully on the table, drew a deep breath, glanced at me, and then looked my mother in the eye. “Celia,” he said, “Celia, there is something wrong with his ticker.”

My mother didn’t believe him. She dressed me quickly and rushed from the office in tears, sure that Dr. Desautell had made a mistake. She carried me around to other doctors for nearly a year, seeking a medical opinion that would contradict Dr. Desautell. She never found it.

The doctors in the local hospital in the Berkshires pondered over me for a long time after that, and for many visits, “This is a young man’s future,” they kept saying to my mother. “We need to do something.” My parents finally agreed. I was removed from my classroom with Sister Agnes Marie, and one morning found myself riding to Boston in a big white station wagon of the American Heart Association.

We were poor, a family with six kids by then. We had no car. Mrs. Smith of the American Heart Association, Berkshire Chapter, concocted some business that needed doing in Boston and then offered to drive my mother and me to Children’s Hospital. I had no idea why I was entering this big hospital in Boston.

There was a quiet nun in blue who talked to my mother and me in a small chapel. Later, there was an operating room, bright with large white lights overhead, and a nurse standing over me as I lay on my back, first offering a lollipop that I never got to unwrap and then pressing a gray rubbery mask over my face while telling me to count to ten, and still later I woke up groggy, my chest hurting and swathed in bandages, my mother bending over me.

There were lots of cards and gifts. That was good. There was a kaleidoscope that I shook and viewed a dozen times a minute, a book about Davy Crockett, a

small green plastic travel toothbrush kit (a real prize since it showed that I was a sophisticated boy who had been places), and, best of all, a get-well card somebody had given me with a brand-new one dollar bill in it—more money than I had ever seen in my life. All these gifts and attention would make my brothers and sister jealous. But there was a downside.

First, there was the long wait to return home. My mother remembers the event one way: My father was in the sanatorium, recovering from tuberculosis. She was at home with six kids, no car, no money, and no babysitter when the time came to retrieve me from the hospital, 140 miles away. Unable to get anybody to watch her children, she couldn't get to Boston on the appointed day and came for me the next day.

I remember the story this way: I was standing by an elevator in Children's Hospital in Boston waiting for my mother. I was six years old. Each time the elevator stopped, I stepped forward to look for her among the crowd of nurses, doctors, and brightly dressed visitors who emerged. When the elevator departed, I watched the red indicator arrows in the wall panel and tracked its descent until it reached the ground floor, where a new batch of people would be getting on. In a short time, the elevator would be returning to my floor, and my mother would be on it, and I would be going home.

I watched and waited like this for most of the morning, my suitcase at my feet. Finally, a nurse came for me and took me by the hand and with her free hand picked up my suitcase. Together we went back to my hospital room. "One more night," the nurse told me. "Just one more night, and you'll be going home. Now how about an ice cream soda?" Where I came from that was an offer one never refuses.

I slurped my ice cream soda and wandered from my room, bored and restless. I tried the reception room where there are copies of *Look* and *Life* and other magazines scattered about on the gray plastic chairs. I glanced at the pictures in both magazines, but after a while I was bored and restless again. And I was

worried. Why did my mother not come for me? I tried to remember, did she kiss me goodbye days ago after my surgery? Perhaps not. And what did that mean if she didn't? The nurse looked in on me, offered me another ice cream soda, which I accepted, and I asked the nurse for a pencil and paper.

And then I spent the rest of that long day drawing a map of my woods. They were large dark woods with hidden ponds, great pine trees, mossy swamps, shady lanes, and a sprawling sun-drenched field. I mapped it all out from memory and felt better.

At some point after the surgery, I began asking my mother and father about jobs for a boy with a heart condition. No, my father told me not unkindly, the FBI was out. Same with being a policeman or fireman. He said that you had to be a perfect specimen for those jobs. I pondered that as I walked my woods. By now there was a family dog that joined me. Skip, a large dark collie and shepherd mix, loved to charge through the woods, ranging in front and to the sides of me as I followed favorite trails to the Boulders, to Shady Lane, to Boulders Two, to the Old Pine Woods, and to Crane's Field (named for a prominent local family, not a bird).

Once, on a sun-streaked spring afternoon, several older boys found me in the woods. I had been poking about on the edge of Crane's Field when I saw them coming. They loomed over me, ominous and tough—not boys really—mostly teenagers, big guys with black engineer's boots, mounds of hair sculpted into place with Vaseline, cigarette packs tucked into rolled-up sleeves.

"What are you doing here?" somebody demanded.

Foolishly, I admitted the truth. "I'm counting rabbit holes in this field," I said, holding up my notebook as validation. "This is kind of my woods, and I thought I'd make a map of where the rabbits live."

"Counting rabbit holes," somebody sneered.

"What's that book?" somebody else asked, pointing at my *Golden Guide to Birds*.

“Well there are also these birds with a white chest and two big black bands on the chest. A whole flock of them; they come here every year. I’m counting them too.”

Several of the older boys scowled menacingly. One reached down to grab my notebook. “What a creep,” he said, and threw my notebook into a patch of tangled highbush blueberries. Another stepped up close, jabbed his finger an inch from my face, and then pointed up to the sky. “Look,” he commanded. I looked up and the bad boy kicked my ankles with a swift scything stroke that sent me sprawling. Things were looking grim. But then one of the bad boys paused and looked down at me.

“Hey,” he said to his companions, pointing a grease-stained index finger at me. “This looks like Denny Conuel’s little brother.”

His companions paused. One said, “Denny Conuel is the starting center on the football team.”

“The football team sticks together,” another bad boy said with the tone of one who has studied a complex subject deeply and come to some inalterable conclusions.

Clearly, the possibility that Denny would come looking for these young miscreants with half the Pittsfield High football team backing him up gave pause. Wisely, for once in my life, I kept my mouth shut.

Denny had quit the football team four days ago, but I wasn’t telling.

The bad boys, however, were unaware of this. I said nothing to enlighten them. Finally one of them said. “Let him be. Who needs all the hassles?”

I have been back to those woods several times as an adult. The distance between the Boulders and Crane’s Field has shrunk dramatically. The hike to Boulders Two, once a daunting trek not lightly undertaken, is now a twelve-minute walk along a well-tended path. The big deep pond that appeared every spring near Crane’s Field has molded itself into damp wooded hollows and a shallow vernal pool with a few tadpoles. Crane’s Field is still there, but I haven’t seen the flocks



of birds with white chests and dark breast bands (probably killdeer) that I used to spot—though I did see an indigo bunting on my last visit several years ago.

Eventually, the visits to the heart doctors ceased when I came home around age 12 from my first visit on my own and told my mother, “They just want to operate on me again, and I just want to be left alone.”

Eventually, my rambles in the woods ceased too, replaced by a deep fondness for a 1957 Ford, two-tone blue, four-on-the-floor, wide whitewall tires, and a really decent radio that could pick up Joey Reynolds, the Emperor of the Nighttime, from faraway Buffalo.

But then many years later, in springtime, as a freshman at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, I stood for the first time on the banks of the Connecticut River, New England’s Great River, and it all came tumbling back.

I was on a field trip with a class of geology students inspecting the Triassic redbeds, one of the Connecticut River’s distinctive rock formations. The geology teacher called out dates and rocks to the class, but his words were lost in the high wind that was whipping off the river. I stood there on the riverbank looking out across the blue-gray waters thinking what a small piece of time and landscape were captured here in this moment, and how this somehow brought me back to the woods where I had wandered as a boy.

I walked away from the group and stood on a ledge overlooking the water. It was just me and the river and nobody else, as it had been in the woods when I was a boy. I can capture this if I try hard enough, I thought. I’ll write this all down. Standing there on the banks of the Connecticut, watching the river roll on to the sea, I flipped open my geology notebook, intended for scholarly observations, and started writing, hampered greatly by the high wind that tore at my pages.

I've been writing ever since. I write about the natural world because it is my excuse to go poking about in places and landscapes that have meant a lot to me—especially when I was a lost boy many years ago wandering on the frontiers of open-heart surgery. 🌿



Cottontail in  
the grass in  
front of the  
studio