



READING NATURE

Tapping the Past

Tom Murphy

During World War II, a white peach orchard grew across the road from our house. Today, no sign of it remains. A neighbor told us that when the hundred-year-old sugar maples were planted in front of the house, the farmer's horses ate the tops off, perhaps explaining the variety of their shapes. Below the barn, cattle were penned, awaiting milking. We planted our asparagus there. Though the gardening books all say asparagus requires extensive fertilizing, we do very little. The manure of those long-gone cows still bears fruit.

I started noticing such hints of the past hidden in the landscape while I was reading the three interconnected essays of John Elder's *The Frog Run: Words and Wildness in the Vermont Woods* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2001). Frog Run is a local phrase associated with maple sugaring: the swelling of the sugar maple buds (when the sap becomes no longer good for syrup) and the spring chorus of frogs begin at about the same time. The last boiling of the sap gathered before both those events takes place, as the peepers sing their mating songs, is called the frog run. Elder uses the seasonal transition embodied in the frog run to describe the transition in his life as his last child goes off to college, as he reflects on his teaching career, and as he begins to work the sugarbush he and his family acquired. Raised in California, he also comes to accept that his life is now inextricably bound up in Vermont.

The book evokes the way the past interweaves with the present. In the first essay, Elder describes that interweaving by referring to another of his interests—the game Go, which he played while he and his family lived in Japan. He uses the term *aji*. In Go players alternately play black or white stones on a large grid, trying to surround and capture each other's pieces. Play happens in many places on the board. Sometimes groups of stones will be so surrounded that, while they have not yet been eliminated, they are so isolated that they are essentially dead. But as the game progresses, the situation can change and the

surrounders may become the surrounded. “This surprising potential for apparently dead stones to spring back to life and influence is referred to by Go players as *aji*, a Japanese word meaning ‘a lingering taste,’” says Elder. He uses the term to describe the relationship between nature and civilization, as in “the surprising reemergence of wilderness from the cutover landscape of Vermont,” or Pennsylvania and New York for that matter. The *aji* of the wild.

Literature and the natural world are connected in Elder's life, and in the second essay, he traces his love of both back to Psalm 23: “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.” He tells how the balance exhibited in the psalm inspired his love for poetry even as a boy: the walk through the Valley of Death is offset by the presence of the shepherd's protecting presence; even while the Lord is feasting him, his enemies are present like a lingering taste. He learned from the psalm the beauty of nature, the value of reflection, and the inevitable connection between something and its opposite. The same is true, he says, of another piece of literature he grew to love—Milton's *Paradise Lost*: “No Satan, no Christ; no danger, no transfiguration.”

In the third essay we get the story of the building of the sugarhouse, and how, with his two sons, he connects with a now less prevalent tradition of family maple sugaring operations. Elder describes how they bought their 142 acres to practice sustainable forestry and to harvest and boil the maple sap. He discovers, not much to his surprise, that he is building something more as he sees his sons' commitment to the land and the sugaring grow, as if the *aji* of that Vermont tradition is binding his

own family together.

I was reminded by this book of the many ancestors to whom we are related not just by blood, but also by land. But this is a book rich in connections, and you will surely find your own. 🌲

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