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SLIP AWAY, TIME

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Vermont is a landscape of patience. Driving along Route 30 on the edge of the Champlain Valley, I am acutely aware of the scenery around me. Though I've not been up this highway in months, it feels as if it might have been just yesterday. Time is indeed passing - the calendar tells me this is true - yet I feel remarkably unencumbered by its passage. That's the magic of this place. The sense of time here, detected through subtle changes in landscape and light, frees one from the inhibitions of minutes and seconds, opening a world of possibility governed by patterns: seasons and weather, sunlight and snow.

In this part of the country, each day begins with the pale pastels of dawn edging over the smooth Green Mountains, as if infinity itself were seeping forth from behind the old, glaciated hills. Each day concludes with a brilliant display of windswept clouds hovering tenuously above New York's jagged Adirondack horizon, ushering in nightfall as Vermont turns away from the sun.

Between the hours of dawn and dusk, betwixt these two mountain ranges, I have often found myself traveling through this rhythmic, perpetual topography. Through four years of college I watched the cultivated fields outside my car window alternate between green and brown, like a patchwork quilt covering the cool bedrock that a glacier left undulating millions of years ago. And then were the winter months, when the quilt transformed into a solid white blanket, peppered with dark rocks and structures poking out from beneath the snow. Now, when I return to these parts as a visitor, I still feel a strong affiliation with the landscape. Rather than merely traveling through it, I venture into it, embracing it like a dear old friend.

Today I am traveling north on this narrow, windy road that wraps around lakes, rises steeply over outcrops, plunges dramatically down their backsides, and even makes an occasional sharp turn to avoid the thick trunk of a gallant old tree. It is a blustery autumn afternoon. Sporadic gusts of wind sweep crumpled, fallen leaves across the road in front of my car. I slow my speed to watch as they are drawn up into a whirling vortex that spirals turbulently, slows, then dissipates in all directions. I am in no hurry.

Any seasoned traveler will surely tell you that back roads, while generally slower and a little less direct than interstate highways, are infinitely more interesting. A small highway such as this offers the keen wayfarer a book of stories, bound together by the perennial double yellow line, pausing occasionally in the inevitable confusion of traffic flow around the rotaries on Main Street in small-town America.

Some prefer the fast routes - trading the intimate for the institutional. Others, like myself, find time to get lost among combination shoe repair, bait & tackle

shops, railroad-car diners with bad coffee and greasy eggs, and big open fields where cattle line the fence, stretching to snatch the luscious grass in the ditch just beyond reach.

I know that somewhere along this road, nestled among the folds and ripples in the land, is an old building by the edge of a lake. Though it's hardly a complete structure anymore, I still consider it to be among the most intriguing I have viewed in my lifetime. These deteriorating structures abound in life, from a crumbling curb on a metropolitan street corner to the deep russet line of humus on the forest floor where a tree once fell. Entropy is, after all, a law of nature. And the image of this collapsing cabin still lingers in my mind while most street corners and fell trees have managed to slip away.

This illustrious remainder of a renaissance long ago has been left to shed piece by plank its wood panel exterior; advancing, with each long Vermont winter, the angle at which its structural beams and buttresses lean in juxtaposition to the surface of the lake. I am imagining it now just a few miles up the road - one fifth submerged in the steel-blue waters, four-fifths leaning gently down the bank.

I've never spent an extended period of time there. On the contrary; I only see it when I drive up this particular highway. As I reflect further, I come to realize that I've never even seen it completely in focus. Rather, its blurry image has slid across my front windshield - then accelerated down the long windows on the driver's side of my Chevy Blazer. Still, the fleeting image resides in a Hobbit-hole in the back of my mind, emerging periodically to remind me of otherworldly comforts and time-scales that extend beyond my ability to comprehend.

As I pass through a small lake-town put to rest by summer inhabitants long since returned to their urban lives, I wonder what activities have ensued since I last came this way. Docks have been pulled in; porch furniture stacked neatly in piles. A chill lingers over the water that will, over the course of the next month, render the choppy lake surface a crystalline bed of thick ice. Smoke billows from chimney pipes of houses and camps that are occupied by non-migratory lakefront dwellers.

My memory suggests that it should be coming up soon on the left. I turn my head quickly, lift my foot off the gas pedal, and try desperately to keep one eye on the curvy road while the other takes inventory of the scene. From this ridiculous and reckless maneuver, a barely two-dimensional vision is posited in some corner of my mind. These snapshot visions have collected over time there, enhancing each other, blending to render a mental portrait that flashes periodically, inviting heady thoughts about time, aging, and change.

The hasty nature of drive-by observations has heretofore prevented me from discerning whether the structure is actually proceeding in its slow slide down. Yes I'm sure its stature is changing - boards are shifting, foundation advancing.

It is highly probable that, in the six years I've been periodically taking note of this relic, it has crept forward, waded a little further into the lapping waters of the lake. I need not seek evidence of this gravitational migration; the thought alone is sufficient to enhance my appreciation of slow processes. Ever-present, yet ever-changing, this vision encapsulates both time and timelessness.

I trust that one day it will vanish from the shore of the crescent-shaped cove. In fact, each time I round the lakeshore I feel a sense of foreboding. If it were to disappear from this landscape anytime soon, I fear that it would not have been allowed to slowly sink below the waterline of the lake. Seeing this spot in the recent future without the building or record of its presence will be the tell-tale sign of a thwarted conception of utility. This hauntingly beautiful building with its dangling rotted wood boards and awkwardly angled posture champions something latent in our sensibilities: an affection for the effects of time on our world.

Next time I pass this way, I am confident that the hands of time will have gently nudged the modest structure a bit further down. Two, five, eleven miles up the road now, I am contemplating the natural deterioration of wood; how things, when left to themselves, move and change at their own pace. The structure is a testament to how we move through experience on a fundamental level - we undergo metamorphoses undetectably with each passing moment. Yet from day to day, we seem unchanged, and that sense of immutability is what sustains us.

A board creaks, some soft wood splinters, a rusted nail weakens its hold. Time and seasons craft irregular cracks and fissures: tectonic, structural, metaphorical. This is how things are in Vermont. Just as the cracks in the sidewalk are reminders of harsh winters gone by, so too are the deep grooves etched in the faces of dedicated dwellers.

Take, for instance, the weather-worn farmer who has just pulled his rusty red tractor, speed hovering around twenty miles per hour, out onto the road directly in front of my car. He would surely attest that, while earning his livelihood ostensibly by shaping the land, the reciprocal is also the case. And the land does not only affect the farmer; this entire community is drawn together by the place, this mutual locality, communal climate, seasons and stories that the wind blows through here.

The soft rolling countryside and the slowly turning tractor wheels, the double yellow line charting a wavering path between two mountain ranges, over hills and through valleys, past lazy old structures and newly plowed fields - they are the harbingers of a sense of vitality. They remind me that time is ensconced in the rising and setting of the sun and moon, the freezing and thawing of lakes and ponds, the geologic uplift, glaciation, and erosion of mountain ranges.

So I continue my journey north through the hills, slowly, patiently, riding the wake of scattered straw sown across the road behind the tractor. Shadows of

wood fences and pole-strung telephone wires migrate further out into the road as the sun sinks below the Adirondacks, bathing the golden fields in the radiance of what I suspect will be another revitalizing October sunset in Vermont.

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