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“Baldwin Woods, Mid-Afternoon, Mid-Winter”

By Elizabeth Schultz

Hardly a winter day. The temperature is in the sixties when we set out through fields of switch grass to walk into the dense woodlands created by several preserves outside of Baldwin. The pale light is weightless around us. It is dry. There has been little precipitation for months. Each of our steps produces its own puff of dust.

Entering the woods, the light darkens, and we feel we've moved to fall, for along the paths the leaves of oak, hickory, sycamore, and hackberry are thick and slick. With the drought, the mulching process hasn't started, and the leaves remain unrumpled. Where water might run in spring--down crevices between slopes, in creekbeds, brown leaves flow.

This is not flat land. We follow paths up and around small hills, limestone bones protruding along the way to remind us of the geological skeleton beneath the ground's body. Trees cloister us. With their leaves down, we can be attentive to the variations of their bark and can approach them easily as tribes and individuals--the shagbark hickory's flying flanges, the hackberry's dark ridges, the sycamore's scales which give way to its smooth white skin in the upper stories. A burl, an efflorescent goiter, distinguishes a black oak, and at the base of their trunks, several sycamores have open cavities big and dry enough for raccoon families to crouch inside. While each tree may appear to stand independent among its peers, their branches connect them in a complex network overhead, and grape and poison ivy vines, swooping and twisting among them, connect them below.

The curves of a dry creekbed reflect the looping vines above them. It bends around the base of these small hills, its waters long ago having formed this lumpy and diverse topography. We follow the creekbed's course. Here a tree-studded slope moves gradually back from the bank, with tree roots exposed like nests of jungle snakes. Here the cut is severe; the earth seems sliced. Above us a ribbon of sky unwinds blue. Sudden light. An oak balances on the edge, its branches grasping for the sky above and its roots spread out desperate against the earth below. A limestone bluff throws the light back to us with the linearity of its striated ledges contradicting the trees' verticality and the intricacy of their roots and branches. Lichens, dusky blue and emerald green, wander over the surfaces of these ledges in a cartography of their own.

We cross the creekbed. In places it is clogged with anonymous branches revealing the creek's former life as a rushing torrent. Rocks are a-jumble. Moss spreads out like handkerchiefs across several of them and, then, runs up the hillside quilting it. Its bright greens seem the apparition of early spring. As if to tease us further, a monarch flickers silently out into the sun.

We climb again, back among the trees and their shadows. Along a sandy stretch in the creekbed, we'd seen the firm three-toed imprint of wild turkeys, and in the woods patches where they'd scratched about in search of grubs beneath the leaves. Deer hooves, too, had punctuated the paths. Although surely creatures have all along been listening to us covertly, the woods today are as still as the pale light filling them. Seemingly between seasons, perhaps we all have been in a state of suspense.

Elizabeth Schultz, author and KLT member, explores her own response to the natural world in "Senses of Place," a *Stewardship Notes* feature.