

## **On Ceding Control**

*Motherhood in a pathless landscape*

**Emily Mitchell Heidenreich**

There is pleasure in the pathless woods.

—Lord Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*

At home, alone with this writhing pink bundle of skin and bones and new life and *need*, I step outside and wander. I wander to keep the silence at bay, for the company of the squirrels, the birds, the wind in the trees.

I wander to remain on this side of sanity.

The baby fusses. I loosen the baby carrier, unzip my hoodie, and guide her to my chest.

My body is no longer my own.

I've cut holes in my old t-shirts, the ones with the fading Appalachian Mountain Club logos, the ones I used to wear when welcoming students to the base of Mount Washington, before leading them to some pre-selected point on the mountain, sometimes all the way to its crowded alpine summit. The ones I used to wear when I was in full control of my body and what it could do in the wilderness. Now, the holes accommodate nursing on-the-go. The hooded sweatshirt is for modesty, for easy access.

I am a new mother. This is my uniform.

I have learned to wander and offer sustenance in tandem. The alternative? Rocking in a chair, with this tiny mouth and these hungry eyes, nursing up to 18 hours a day. I wander these pathless woods, my baby strapped to my chest, as an attempt to reassert control over my body after the violence of pregnancy, of motherhood. This wandering is *body work*. It is a rebellion, a refusing to succumb to the recent assaults on my body: chafed and bleeding nipples, slacked belly, the torn and ravaged nether regions of childbirth, the stupid exhaustion. And my right thumb, which has painfully swelled and weakened from the repetitive motion of scooping up a newborn.

And the need, the need, the *need*. Her body, needing mine.

My body is no longer my own.

She latches. Silence. She's content, for now, but I know this walk—this stolen escape—could fall apart at any moment. I recklessly extend my wandering, and instead of turning east on an old logging road, I continue north, farther from home. I pass abandoned sap lines in a wide-open sugar bush, I climb over blowdowns on a path lined with young hemlock and fir, finally emerging into an overgrown field. An old barn foundation is sunk into the hillside, hidden in the tall grass. Mouth agape, my babe's fallen asleep. I linger at the field's highest point, where I take in the view of the brown fields and barren forests of the Tabor Valley, a no-man's land nestled between eastern Vermont's Upper Valley and its Northeast Kingdom.

At my new home with my husband's family in Vermont, I'm an exile, on house arrest with a newborn, less than 100 miles from my former home in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. The helpless nursling attached to my once mountain-hardened body has reshaped and softened it. I used to measure my life by bodily rhythms: of boots on steep and hard-packed treadways, of the belabored breath of ascent. Now the rhythms have changed: bouncing, rocking,

the ditties I sing in soothing rhyme, the hushed and staccatoed exhales I now offer my newborn, as she stirs:

*Shh shh shh.*

*Shh shh shh.*

We keep walking. Then more fussing, urgent now. My time has expired; I won't make it to my planned destination, the maintained dirt road on the other side of Currier Hill. So I turn east through the field, to the forest's edge, and I begin bushwhacking uphill, slowly picking the path of least resistance through the young beeches and maples, gently moving branches away from my baby's face. The fussing escalates; soon it's all-out crying. We are completely and totally alone, two bodies in the middle of the forest, moving toward home.

*Shh shh shh.*

*Shh shh shh.*

Here in eastern Vermont, no one calls this scrappy patch of fields and forests wilderness. It's flanked by farms, carefully maintained sugar bushes, old stone walls, freshly cut logging roads. Yet, in the woods and fields, there are no trailheads, no maintained paths, no signs that signal which way to turn. Where if you want to remove a fallen tree from a road or a path, you do it yourself. Where if you find yourself disoriented in an unknown patch of woods, you've nothing to do but backtrack or follow your nose.

Yet I find myself keeping an arm's length from this unruly piece of family land and the hills that surround it. I long for adventure, for the White Mountains' rugged but carefully maintained spaces. My body is here, certainly. But some essential and unreachable part of me is back in the Whites, a ghost on a mountain, carrying her rations for a week in the wild.

[line break]

Fall turns to winter, and my nursling grows, unstopably, inexorably. As winter turns to spring, she learns to feed herself and self-soothe. By summer, she's wiggling and slithering across our hardwood floor, intent on reaching some shiny toy that has lodged itself under our stove. She doesn't know it, but in so doing, she concedes territory; my body begins to restake a small claim on itself. With these small freedoms, I decide it's time to return to my former home, the White Mountains, this time a visitor—alone.

I instinctively point my car straight for an accessible mountain range: the Franconia Ridge, only an hour drive from my home. I feel like a caged animal unexpectedly sprung from her trap, and I am hungry for these mountains, these mountains where I experienced a wilderness of full control, where I used to reign over my own body, protecting it from an onslaught of savage aggressors: wind, rain, sun, ice, uneven terrain, hunger, thirst, fatigue.

When I arrive in the parking lot, I struggle to find a parking space, typical for a weekend in Franconia Notch. Puffs of cumulus clouds move overhead at a reasonable clip; I can tell it will be breezy on the summit. I throw on my daypack—unusually light without the weight of a 9-month-old—grab my poles, and start ascending. My legs and feet soon find their rhythm, and I balance my desire to move quickly with navigating the typical snarl of White Mountain rocks, roots, and other hikers. The vegetation feels familiar here: the sturdy-leafed hobblebush that doesn't grow at the lower elevations where I live; the hardwoods slowly giving way to the spruce, fir, and white birch higher up in the boreal. I sit on a boulder to breathe it all in; I know I won't be back for a while.

A photograph from this same day—taken on the bald and rocky summit of Mount Lafayette, the pinnacle of Franconia Ridge—shows me bundled in all of my layers, the wind blowing my long hair out from under the cinched hood of my turquoise raincoat. Behind me is blue sky and the seemingly endless peaks of the Pemigewasset Wilderness and the Presidential Range beyond. In the photograph, I look fierce and wild and my surroundings do, too. But my memories of that day tell a different story: the overcrowded parking lot, the heavily-impacted Falling Waters Trail, the hordes of tourists—myself included—wandering the fragile alpine summits of Little Haystack, Lincoln, and Lafayette.

On my way down the Old Bridle Path, I stand in line to descend the steep, orange basalt dike of Agony Ridge, a punishing bit of trail on the edge of precipitous Walker Ravine. I pass around assurances to first-time visitors that this is the most difficult part. In another lifetime, I extended these same assurances to groups of middle school students, as we slowly picked our way down the mountain after a night on the side of Mount Lafayette. I am deeply familiar with this terrain, but waiting in this line of bodies—including my own—stands in deep contrast to my solitary, pathless meanderings in the woods outside of my new Vermont home.

This I know: I have been homesick for the White Mountains' steep granite faces, their rocky paths, for moving my body—uninhibited— through what I believed was their inherent wildness. Yet, driving home in the fading daylight, my legs shaky and sore from the descent, something in me stirs: a disappointment I can't quite locate.

[line break]

It is summer again. My daughter no longer wiggles and crawls; she now toddles through the yard. A year and a half after becoming a mother, I am pregnant again. Whatever small advance I

had made on the terrain of my body has been willingly ceded once again, to the nausea and the violent fatigue, to the new life growing in my womb.

I do battle with the weeds in the garden, my swollen belly making contact with the ground as I pull pigweed from the vegetable beds. I attempt in vain to harvest every last green bean, every last broccoli floret. My suburban upbringing betrays me when I try to tame our forest clearing into straight lines with the electric mower, when, scythe in hand, I try to keep the grass at bay in the orchard. I notice my sister-in-law watching me attempt to press order on chaos, on the encroaching wilds.

*Can't we just let plants be plants, she says. Sometimes we need to let them grow undisturbed.*

My father-in-law says: *We have to beat back the wilderness around here.*

My mother-in-law gives him a look that says: *It's a losing battle.*

Then she takes up her own body work, digging up a nook in the yard for a new flower garden, though the others are overgrown and wild.

[line break]

A few months later, as Vermont's October foliage gives way to the barren landscape of late autumn, the nausea subsides. For a brief span of months, my body feels almost familiar, before it will grow and transform beyond recognition. My daughter and I resume our wanderings. I drop her into a backpack, swing it over my shoulders, and fasten the hip belt below my growing womb. Frost hangs in the air. I duck under a blowdown, then a sap line. We stop at the edge of a field, maples lining the frontier. *Which way toward home, pumpkin?* I croon. Over my left shoulder, I can just see her mittened hand, pointing to the east end of the field, where a faint path

through the low-land has been replaced by an obvious trail, packed down by two years of our ritual wanderings.

This landscape, I have come to realize, is slippery and amorphous. Logging paths are cut, then grow up. Open fields grow in with briars. Blow downs punctuate once well-trodden paths. Views open up and then fill in. It's rare that I meet someone else on foot in these woods. When I do, we exchange greetings in hushed tones and briefly. To do otherwise would be irreverent.

Still, I look east, to the mountains. I am blind to the sanctuary outside my door.

[line break]

I am kneeling on all fours on a hospital bed, screaming into my exhalations. The midwife whispers, *Save your strength for when the baby comes. She's almost here.* There are four other bodies in the birthing room—including my husband's—but I can't see them, can't feel their presence. Pain is all I know, and it comes unstoppably, violently.

My body is no longer my own.

Then: *It's time to push. Let us help you to the birthing stool.*

Sweat drips off my nose. I shake my head. *How?* My arms and legs are quivering, weak.

*Your body remembers.*

But I can't remember, or don't want to. All I know is pain, right now, in this moment, and it's routed me to the bed, a thousand stones pressing on my back, on my womb. The birthing stool might as well be on top of Mount Katahdin, and I in Georgia, 2,200 miles away.

Suddenly, I'm on the stool. I don't know how I got there, or how long it might have taken. And then, somehow, my body takes control of the pain, riding the waves of contractions,

instead of getting crushed underneath them. I am pushing, pushing. Yes, there is pain. But there is something else.

This is body work.

And then my second daughter: wet, pink, perfect.

[line break]

I continue to look east, to the mountains, seeking to put a mountain range between my body and the relentless physical demands of caring for a helpless newborn and a willful, difficult toddler. I return to Franconia Notch, and this time, hike west, toward the broad views of the Kinsman peaks. The solitude I find on the south end of Kinsman Pond is a tease; as I approach the junction with the Appalachian Trail, I'm suddenly in a throng of hikers on a trail-turned-highway.

I keep walking south, ascending an ethereal otherworld of stunted trees. All of a sudden, I'm above the trees, on the summit of South Kinsman, where the unfiltered strength of the sun catches me off guard. I follow the carefully maintained treadway. Delicate alpine plants and lichen are surrounded by a phalanx of a thousand stones, standing dutiful guard like soldiers going into battle. I look around, marveling at this wild and bald summit, in some ways so manicured, in all ways so different from the irrepressible and—as I'm slowly learning—the irresistible disorder of our family land.

*But this is progress*, I assure myself. Hikers and dogs lounge in all directions; not one of them has ventured out-of-bounds. The alpine vegetation quietly continues its hardscabble existence.



Further on, I make small talk with three southbound thru-hikers lazing on rocks in the sun. I ask them what's changed on the trail, since I myself stood here, 14 years ago, on my own thru-hike. I notice the official-looking yellow Appalachian Trail placards on their backpacks.

*What are the tags for?*

*The ATC wants us to register.*

*Mmm, I say.*

Conversation trails off.

We gaze in silence at the 360-degree views.

I pull out my map, but I don't need it to tell me I am looking out at imposing and isolated Mount Carrigan to the east, the Sandwich Range to its south, Mount Moosilauke behind me. I lived among these mountains for nearly a decade—as a thru-traveler, as a teacher, a trip leader, a caretaker—and they are written into my blood, the shapes of their peaks imprinted on my brain. Yet today, the distant views are eclipsed by my view of *this* summit, littered with bodies. Each body a pinpoint on our phones' GPS apps, some of us tagged with yellow placards, all of us staying between the lines.

And then it hits me, a sudden and nascent craving: I want to go home. I want the solitude and unrestricted freedom of the hills on my family's land. I want to meander up our sugarbush, topping out on a geological feature we call the Highest Point, with its sweeping views of Orange Heights to the northwest. There, I can walk in any direction my legs carry me. There, I can exit the summit any damn way I choose.

The unruliness of this family land begets its inaccessibility; its ordinariness precipitates its solitude. It's a wilderness where, babies in tow, I'm learning to cede control: not only to the

pathless landscape, but to the unceasing demands of motherhood. For me, the two are inextricably bound.

I leave the summit of South Kinsman and make my way back down to Kinsman Pond, threading my way through these mountains where I thought I had first experienced real wilderness. Where, I now realize, the paths stay mostly clear, the blowdowns get removed, the trailheads remain open, the National Forest roads clear. What then felt wild now feels curated.

[line break]

My two baby girls have grown; they're far from nurslings. I can no longer carry them on my back. My body used to be their universe; now they are more interested in their friends, or in each other. They are in school, and I'm back at work. Time for far-flung roaming is at a premium. When we wander, we don't wander far.

But when we wander, I engage my daughters in their own body work. Not the body work of their mother, the work of grasping for control in an unpredictable world. Nor the body work of their grandmother, with her instinct to make things grow. But the body work of children, the work of exploration and curiosity. Through exploration, I try to plant the connections between their bodies and this land we live on.

When we wander, we talk about our sturdy legs, our bodies growing strong, being brave, risk, and fear. We whisper the place names of our family's land, the land passed down from their great-grandparents:

**[ROBIN: note the special indents in the next list.]**

The Cellar Hole

The Old Barn foundation

Slide-a-phoria

Sherwood Lane

The Witch's House

The Magic Field

The Straightaway

The Highest Point.

My daughters and I wander, and we gather these names, turning them over in our mouths like our hands on the stones in our pockets. We make them ours, though the three of us are the newest residents here, on this scrappy piece of land.

We are wild. We don't wander far. We don't have to.

We've planted our bodies in this forgotten corner of eastern Vermont, where I'll grow into middle age, where my daughters' bodies will grow strong. They're already strong. No, it is not Mount Washington's alpine garden, with the *Diapensia* in full bloom. I cannot hike straight up a mountainside for miles and miles, sweat beading and running down my chest. But this is home.

Home. A quiet cathedral of maples and oaks and hemlock and pine nestled in the subtle rolling hills. Where my body can lose itself amongst the raw, the untamed.

Home. Where, together, we cultivate our own wild.

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writing, rock climbing, and connecting with people who value pushing their limits in the outdoors, especially her husband and two daughters.