

POTOMAC review

\$10

Issue 45

A Journal of Arts & Humanities



Urban Refuge

Sue Eisenfeld

New York City's Roosevelt Island (population 9,500), a 147-acre island of metamorphic bedrock scoured and shaped by glaciers as they retreated from the last Ice Age, is home to dozens of high-rise apartment buildings, two hospitals, churches, art galleries, a library, and a handful of historic asylums, in the middle of the East River. While there are some parks and other green open areas, the trees on Roosevelt Island are like a garnish of parsley; there are no real woods.

Washington, D.C.'s Roosevelt Island (population 0), on the other hand, is an 88-acre island of upland forest, swamp forest, floodplain, and tidal marsh in the middle of the Potomac River, home to tulip poplar, American beech, hickory, spicebush, beaver, fox, chipmunk, painted turtles, Fowler's toads, spring peepers, black rat snakes, mallards, great-horned owls, bald eagles, and ruby-throated hummingbirds. This similarly metamorphosed bedrock island—located where the Potomac bursts from its constriction with ancient, erosion-resistant rock and widens and flattens across younger (as in 10,000 to 100 million years ago), sandy, clayey, and gravelly soil—could have easily ended up with the same fate as its New York counterpart if the U.S. House Resources Committee had had its way. In 2005, the committee suggested selling the island to residential or commercial developers (read: luxury townhouses, strip malls) to bring in additional federal revenue.

But Roosevelt Island kept its status as one of fourteen preserved historic sites, which together comprise a 7,600-acre national park, linked by the George Washington Memorial Parkway. More than 144,000 people visit the place each year, to hike, jog, ride bikes, walk dogs, birdwatch, fish, or otherwise escape their Beltway and Blackberry lives.

Transitioning from the teeth-clenching drive on the sign-impaired parkway to the footbridge passage onto the island does indeed transport the visitor from one world to the next. The deep blue-greens of the river, the lapping of water against shore, conjure

an islandy feel, all wind-swept and remote. But instead of vistas of open ocean and palm trees, this island, in winter, is a grove of trunks, vines, and cattails, browns of all shades, like a Wyeth painting. Branches strum against branches in the breeze like tuning violins.

Most of the trees on the island are second- or third-growth, no more than a telephone pole's diameter, but there are also several hundred-year old trees stretching their arms above all the others. Some lie horizontally across a wetland, like fallen dinosaurs, slain by time. Fifty feet above, the white sky silhouettes barky fingers, and bright buds of red maples beckon like red candies. Dozens of trees crawl with fuzzy poison ivy vines, while others are costumed in a full suit of English ivy, like topiary monsters gone wild, as no tree can escape the scourge of this invasive alien. In the 1930s, in an attempt to "re-wild" the island after centuries of human use, the Civilian Conservation Corps, under the direction of Frederick Law Olmstead, Jr. (whose father designed New York's Central Park), cleared the land of most nonnative vegetation, but left the English ivy unchecked since its planting in the late 1700s.

This is an island of infinitely changing forms: the slow march of erosion, the river's mood dictating the daily silting up and flowing away of acreage, new sprouts from Georgetown seed escapees. Once a seasonal fishing village for Native Americans, later a slab on which to build a brick mansion; later yet, a farm, and a site for boxing matches, jousting tournaments, and balloon launches; a training area for the First U.S. Colored Troops of the Union Army; and finally, a memorial to our first conservation president, the man who burst in late for an important White House meeting exclaiming, "Gentlemen, you'll never believe what just happened. I just saw a chestnut-sided warbler, and it is only February!"

Pausing for a moment in the woods along one of the island's paths yields the bouncy whistle of white-throated sparrows, the wind-through-savannah whispering of grackle flocks. But try as I might to imagine a distance from the city, we are very much entombed by the hum of the parkway, the buzz of the Roosevelt

Come In, La Bamba

Anne Wilson Gregory

Bridge, and the booms of National Airport jets passing overhead. Stopping for closer inspection similarly focuses the whites and blues of Potomac River boathouse graffiti through naked trees, the geometry of the Georgetown waterfront, and the mirrored face of Rosslyn's Northrop Grumman fortress.

At the same time, every moment on the island yields a great void of perception. For within this cocoon of protected wilderness and history, one cannot see out to the White House, to the Capitol, to the long, white halls where men in suits not only give birth to these such lands across the nation, but with the swift swipe of pens—easing, exempting, decentralizing, deregulating—write death sentences of wilderness and wild things and their ecosystem services everywhere.

Gone are millions of acres of wetlands and mangroves that filter toxins and prevent floods, chipped away by loose definitions, unscientific principles, and easy development. Vanishing are the insects and microorganisms—the fungi, the honeybees—that nourish and pollinate our apples, almonds, apricots, and asparagus, due to pollution, pesticides, and politics. The vernal pools of the South, where spotted salamanders breed just once a year, on the night of the first warm spring rain, are dry. But still the pens soar across paper, somewhere across town on the mainland, through these swaying trees.

But right now, right here, before me, there's a downy woodpecker with its delicate tap, shimmery specks of mica schist in a glimpse of bedrock, fox scat on a log, a mossy old brick buried beneath leaves, and a time-smoothed shard of a Mason jar. It's late afternoon, an hour before closing, and I head back to my car, boots caked with mud, mind cleared. Driving back into my life in the rat race, Roosevelt Island fades in the distance until gone, not unlike so many beautiful wild things.

Early one August, my husband, Jimmy, mandated that our entire family would sail overnight from Little Creek in Norfolk to Onancock on Virginia's Eastern Shore. An avid sailor, he had recently purchased a gently aged C & C 27, a not-quite tub of a cruising sailboat. She had graceful lines, but needed cosmetics; a previous owner had removed the head to create extra storage ("replaceable"), the orange cushions on the bunks were musty and dated ("washable"). He named her "La Bamba."

"That's not fair. You can't make me leave on a weekend," said Anne Cole, our high school sophomore.

"I told you I don't like boats," said thirteen-year-old Helen.

But adolescent tears did not move him, weather reports did not concern him, and a cast on his broken right arm (another story did not deter his exuberance. "You'll see. It'll be great, our first of many family voyages," Jimmy assured us that muggy Saturday morning as we boarded sheets and pillows, ice chests and soda, sandwiches and sullen teenagers, and set sail.

Once we were out of the channel we were suspended in time for a few perfect hours. It was as Jimmy had promised. The harsh sun beat down but we were shaded by the jib; the breeze was steady enough to keep the sails full and La Bamba lightly heeled to starboard. Helen relaxed and Anne Cole, resigned, even helped with winch handles between stints as rail meat until, around noon the wind fell off, the sails died, and everyone began to sweat and quarrel. The boat bounced erratically for awhile, rising jerkily and plopping back down, until it was so evident we weren't making progress (actually, I think we were drifting backwards) that Jimmy admitted defeat and started the motor.

Anne Cole, irritable again, was desperate to use the head. Only there wasn't a head, just a bucket. "Disgusting," she said. "I wait."

"I'll stop the motor and you can go down the swim ladder," Jimmy offered.