

JONATHAN SKINNER / Kalendar, Spring 2011 (Selections)

"Most of us," Thoreau writes in the introduction to his final manuscript, the phenological "Kalendar," *Wild Fruits*, "are still related to our native fields as the navigator to undiscovered islands in the sea." "I fear bodies," he also wrote, on his trip to Mount Ktaadn, "I tremble to meet them." In my forty-fourth year—Thoreau's when he died—I finally made time to keep a phenological journal, i.e. a study of weather patterns and the appearances of plants, trees, flowers, animal species and their interactions. With a bit of release from teaching, and nowhere to be but home, for the month of April, I decided to "notice what I notice," and to note it down in daily entries. To practice awareness of the changes in bodies in the spaces around my home.

The eye and ear are honed to what's new—"first appearances"—but also to the changes for any given species, as the springtime blooms. I live in South Central Maine on a ridge above the Abagadasset River, which flows into Merrymeeting Bay, the confluence of two major watersheds, the Kennebec and the Androscoggin Rivers, just before they empty to the ocean. The landscape is secondary forest on the silty clay of an ancient sea, evergreen and hardwood, on the banks of a river with strong tidal effects, even twenty miles inland. Our house sits on bedrock, overlooking a two-acre meadow surrounded by thin woods. Across the road from us more secondary woods grow out of what must have been a very wet pasture. Stone walls run beneath these trees, relics of old clearings.

As editor of the journal *ecopoetics*, I experience the special treatment "nature" gets (in positive as well as negative terms), when I am turned to for "expert" advice. Every time this happens, my heart sinks a bit: I figure *ecopoetics* hasn't yet done its work, so long as it is perceived as entertaining a special relationship with some "nature" over there. As if "nature" weren't a matter of everyday relationships, alliances, divisions, agreements, crossings, sympathies, antipathies, understandings and misprisions, common to us all, rather than a collection of "facts," sheltered from society on the altar of science and experience. Bruno Latour, amongst others, has argued persuasively that the unassailable separateness of "nature" undermines alliances made in the name of "the social," that political ecology needs to think past this "bicameral" constitution.

At the same time, the evolutionary sublime, with its “world of gliding monsters”—of blue whales singing just a few miles off the Verrazano Narrows—is compelling for the transcendent ethics it implies, for the meaning of “care” in mutually constituted circumferences of indifference. (As Derek Jensen puts it, the Coho salmon don’t give a damn about our ecopoetry; they just want the pumps removed from their rivers.) It is as much for the “blind spots” in my relations as for the points of contact, then, that I pay attention. I am with Lorine Niedecker when she affirms that “when it comes to birds, animals and plants, I’d like the facts because the facts are wonderful in themselves.” Because our attention so insistently inheres in the world we have constructed, we do need a name for what is “out there”—if only as a holding tactic while the new alliances of bodies and things take shape beyond inside/outside. People are moved to great acts of political courage, to heights of joy and depths of despair, by their conviction regarding the “state of nature.” And yet, when one pays attention—with even just a loose approximation of the sustained, daily attention given one’s job, one’s beloved, one’s children—how few “facts,” in the end, appear certain.

In typing up these notes logged by hand in a pocket-sized notebook, I am not impressed with any mastery of the emergent life of the springtime, with any clear-eyed sense of my proximate relations. (If anything, these journals prove how little I know about my surroundings.) There are far more clouds and birds than leafing and flowering trees, and far more trees than grasses and shrubs—is my head so up in the air? The experiment lasted just over a month, beginning just after the first snow melt and falling off when the amount and intensity of events exceeded my ability to keep track (there was also a kitchen garden to get started). My reliance on an online “almanac” of temperature, barometric pressure, wind speed and direction, with its neat daily graphs, lends a false baseline of objectivity to my observations. And yet, if there is poetry in these notes (big if), its prosody lies, I feel, in such interlocking, overlapping patterns. Stripped of the complexity of microclimactic and local variations, the brute pressure of weather asserts itself, an indifferent music.

Minimalism, conceptualism, (n)oulipean procedures . . . so many prosodies for excavating and/or amplifying the various consistencies of our sound systems. Our modernist epics are made up of historical documents, but their methodology is not that of history. “By which art, Ion, do you know that horses are well

managed,” Socrates wonders. “Is it because you are a horseman, or because you play the lyre?” Similar questions might be asked of the “thinkership” of today’s conceptual poetries: if they are not about the contents of their reframings, what is it such poetries help us think about?

The weather offers an endlessly renewable occasion for poetic discovery, invention, documentation, detournement, and a site for critique—witness Lisa Robertson’s and Kenneth Goldsmith’s eponymous volumes, or poet Brendan Lorber’s Acculorber video pieces. When I began this experiment, I had just come off an intensive, month-long editing job, compiling an assemblage of poets’ responses to Gulf of Mexico BP oil drilling catastrophe—responses that were either staged civic interventions in political space or reflections on such engagement. Turning to the weather, to chart the annual explosion of spring in the temperate climes, seemed like a deepening and extension of that work, not a flight pattern. Many of the migrating species whose appearances I might log would be dealing with a crucial staging habitat, the Gulf Coast wetlands whose parameters the catastrophe has altered in ways we do not understand. In the aftermath of the Macondo well blowout, I recall scientists lamenting how little baseline data we have of the Gulf of Mexico ecosystems, from which to measure damage. How, in the catastrophe that awaits, can we know what is lost, without knowing what we had?

4.3.11

Sunny. Mid 40s, reaching to 50° F in the late afternoon. Westerly wind 10 MPH with gusts to 25 in the afternoon. In the mouth of the Abbagadasset: common merganser, ring-necked duck, teal, lots of geese. Sheltering in the lea of Center Point: ring-necked ducks, hooded merganser, immature bald eagle. Peepers not peeping yet. Pressure steadily rising.

4.4.11

Uniform gray. Mid 30s, reaching to 43° F at noon, then cooling—freezing rain. Pressure dropping. Wind shifting S to E, gusting to 10 MPH.

4.5.11

Temps rose and fell symmetrically, 37–47–37° F, pressure dropped and rose. Gray—in the clouds warmer, rain. “Stay inside and don’t look at it” weather. Faint wind shifting E to N. Woodpecker—pileated?—drumming in the woods by the barn. To bed 3 AM—stars out.

4.7.11

Sunny, impeccably clear. Rising from 23° near dawn to 48° F early afternoon. Pressure rising, falling, then rising. Fifteen robins on worm patrol on the morning lawn. Nearly windless, with 10 MPH gusts in early afternoon W to S. Snow melting off—though not in shade or woods. Branch ends turning maroon. Woodcocks peenting (same two). I approached near enough to hear a kind of gulping (like grouse drumming sound) the bird makes, before issuing a “peent.” Sunrise 6:10 AM, sunset 7:12 PM.

American woodcock folk names: timberdoodle, bog sucker, night partridge, brush snipe, hokumpoke, becasse.

Cryptic plumage.

4.11.11

Rain, creeping mists, stratus and nimbostratus. Late morning thunderstorms. Chipping sparrow sheltering at feeder. 45° at dawn to 55° at 5 PM, then dipping and leveling 51–53° F. Rain ends late afternoon. Spring peepers started. And wood frogs: an amphibian ruckus, at the corner of Dinsmore Cross and Carding Machine Road. Pressure dropping steadily, light S wind, some gusts at dawn and at midday.

4.12.11

Hazy sunny. Not quite warm enough to eat outside. Ground showing some green. 55° at noon, rising to 60° F late afternoon. Pressure rising steeply, a cool NW breeze (10 MPH) in the morning till about 3 PM. Stepped outside this morning

to cowbird calls, juncos & sparrow at the feeder, phoebe calling. Jonquils bloom. Isabelle: "look at the crimson branch tips!" After sunset woodcock flight (but no peenting?) in backyard. Pileated flaps through, tailed by crows. Porcupine making noise. Moon waxing gibbous (63%). Woodcock on the ground by the barn peenting in the moonlight (around 10 PM).

4.18.11

"Partly cloudy." 48° at midnight dipping to 43° at dawn rising again to 48° F by 1 PM. Pressure rising steadily from 29.7 to 29.9 inHg (inches of Mercury) starting at 4 AM. SW wind steadily decreasing. More stratocumulus. Cooler feeling than expected. Sparrows singing in the early morning. Green buds at the ends of the lilac branches. 53° by late afternoon, dropping to 45° F after sunset. Pressure leveling at 30 inHg. Porcupine in the headlights.

4.24.11

Easter Sunday. Sunny. Temps 42° F all night, steadily climbing after 8 AM. 53.2° F at 9:30 AM. American tree sparrow at feeder. A walk to the Brown Creeper Trail (our name for old logging path through woods down to river). That song—purple finch?—that is so common yet the singer hard to spot. Chipping sparrows, tufted titmice "tear tear tear tear." Yellow-rumped warblers singing (not seen). Two molting bald eagles—one sitting on a sandbar in the river. A northern raven sails over fast and high. Much more bird activity near the paved road, in yards. White-throated sparrows singing for the first time this year. Red-winged blackbird "tears" and "cheers." Cries of children hunting for Easter eggs. Peepers and frogs. A father named Steve and his boy Jordan. Jordan, peering through my binos: "I'm looking for a prayer from God." A red-spotted salamander in the road: tensed up muscle under its sheaf of skin—I move it out of the way of an oncoming Jeep. Jordan thanks me for noticing it. Hairy woodpeckers. A black-capped chickadee filching something from the top of a snapped-off birch, climbing down inside it. Lightest haze of green showing at bare branch ends. Sky hazing over with white cirrostratus, with silver-topped, blue-bellied stratocumulus developing. Pressure level, calm, 66° F at 12:45. A warm spring day.

4.25.11

Half-moon rising at 2 AM. American toads trilling (night), owls hunting in woods (barred—single-note hunting call I'm not familiar with). Temps rising after 4 AM. 50° F by 8:15, 57° by 10:45 AM, dropping sharply toward 4 PM, back to 47° F by 5:45. S wind to 5 MPH in the early to mid afternoon. Pressure even. Warm, bright under altostratus. Some undulatus verging on "mamma" (a hurled underbelly in the late morning). Yellow-rumps and northern parula in the neighbor's (Mike's) trees. Skies darkening toward late afternoon. Light, "female" rain. Warm. 45° F all night. Trilling toads. First night of spring (it feels).

4.26.11

Thunderstorms toward dawn (sharp pressure drop at 6 AM). Crackling rolling thunder & lightning alternating dry & light, steady rain all day. Window strike from brown-headed cowbird—stunned, hung out on lilac branch bush for a couple of hours. Sparrows at feeder, etc. Seemed like good bird fall-out but I wasn't able to investigate. A stray dog—white, wolfish-looking creature—with a trailing harness, in the middle of the White Road. Ran off, tail between legs, when I tried to approach. Robins caroling in woods. Temps even most the day, mid to high 'forties—rising to 54° F in early afternoon, then dropping again by 4. Pressure low, steady after 7 AM. Fitful E/SE winds, 2–7 MPH. American toads trilling strong after midnight, dominating peepers.

4.27.11

Gray, altostratus. Temps rising steadily after dawn: 60° F by 2 PM, then falling. Pressure steady. SE wind increasing. Finches & sparrows at feeder (including white-throated). Broadwing hawks circling & calling high over our lunch. Sun almost breaking through. Almost feels hot. Big trees by the driveway leafing out—everything else still in bud phase. Black ants infesting the house.

4.28.11

Awoken by a bird song I had never heard. A lazy, rising and falling song—five notes? Came near the house as I was still dreaming. I went out in my slippers but it was beyond the apple tree. Light flat and gray—always about to clear, about to rain weather. Light fog, in a cloud weather. Stratus, nimbostratus. Warm, 60° F at 7 AM rising to 64 around noon then dipping only slightly, 64 again at 5 PM, dropping to about 59° by 10 PM. Humidity 87–95%. Pressure dropping steadily until about 5 PM. S gusts to 28 MPH starting at midday. Tornado destruction in South yesterday: Georgia Tennessee Alabama. Mile wide F5 tornado crossed Alabama—300+ dead. Tornado watch up the coast, but not here.

Generally intense spring weather. Tornado last week in St. Louis, flood warnings in NY, torrential rains, wind—the wind certainly whipping the trees around here, this afternoon. But no tornado watch.

Morning calm: unidentified rising and falling song, chipping sparrows, some high pitched wiry song (not b & w), turkey hen walks right up to the feeder. Squirrels and chipmunks very alert, engaged. Black-throated green warbler. A wren-like sound, reminding me of deserts.

Thunderstorm in the afternoon. Evening: toads trilling to peepers. Porcupine quills in Isabelle's tire. Frogs crossing the road in headlights.

5.1.11

Cooler: 38° F toward dawn. Sunny—white cloud bank gone. Small, puffy alto cumuli. Cool N breeze to 6–7 MPH. Pressure rising, falling after 10 AM, steady. Temp rising to 57° F by 1 PM. Hummingbird at feeder. Lilac bush leafing. Meadow coming up in tufts of green. Lawn getting long. Dug garden bed.

5.2.11

Sunny, not a cloud in sky. A cool foundation to the air, but warming quickly in sun. Swallow burble, swallow shadows. Doves cooing. Brown squirrel on tree. Now it's the catbirds' chorus. Phases. Why do the plain & chipping songs come

first? 2 roosters calling, to N & S. Dandelions up. Rhododendron beginning to bud. Trees all leafed this time last year, but also a late frost?

Cooling, light flattens, some cirrus 11 AM. 11:30 AM two eagles creaking and gyring high over the neighborhood—joined by what look like two hawks & another, female or immature eagle. The latter engages one of the eagles in a long, straight synchronized double flight. 12:12: broadwing peeps and flies by low barely above the rooftop. Sound of bees buzzing in the maple buds. “Mare’s tail clouds.” Sky gradually whitens toward evening. Temp rises sharply 33° to 60° F by noon. Drops from 62° to 49° F by 9 PM, pressure steady. S wind 5–10 MPH mid-morning to late afternoon.

5.3.11

Graying. Temps rise 50° to 60° F by late morning then drop again—back to 50° by 4 PM, to 45° F by midnight. Pressure steady, dropping toward midnight. E/S wind 5–10 MPH. Sun almost emerges mid-afternoon but not quite. Not tempted to walk outside.

5.6.11

Sunny, “springy” day. Steady wind from SW 6–14 MPH, gusts to 24 in the afternoon. Strangely hot-cool. Ovenbirds singing. Sparrows hitting their syncopated stridency—the song you’ll hear all summer. Finches jolly too. Localized cirrostratus, some cirrus, possibly some cirrocumulus. Almost lenticular, Isabelle says. A bunch of ducks at Green Point I didn’t i.d. (we were walking too fast), maybe a thrasher. Streaked sparrows at feeder, hummingbird on branch by nectar (in the shadows their face is black). N. harrier flies over (uncharacteristically) with something in its talons (small bird?) Doves below feeder. Hummingbird wars.

Black flies out. Less dandelions this year, it seems. Grass ready for cutting and just a few dandelions. Chickadees counter singing. Hummingbird checks gorget in feeder reflection. Temps rising from 41° to 63° F mid afternoon, but never really felt that warm. Titmice at tube feeder, hammering open sunflower

seeds. Pressure steady after 9. Wind shifting south. A pale custard light toward sunset.

5.10.11

Light rain, cottony white no-sky. Temps 48° F near dawn rising only to 52° or 53° by 10 AM, dipping again after 11 AM, steadying at 50° F. Oceanic weather? N wind 8–12 MPH, w/ gusts 24 MPH, dying down after 1 PM. Dandelions closed up. Rain does die off at times, even gets warmish when the cloud cover brightens. Very close look at a black-throated green warbler in the front-yard maple, moving slowly but steadily through the three dimensions of the tree, sallying, snapping up a large winged insect in its short bill. The different calls of the near & far black-throated greens. Pressure steadily rising, peepers still going, even in wind & rain. They seem especially sensitive to my presence—clamming up when I walk onto the back deck (yet they are not close to the house).

5.11.11

Robins going like mad toward dawn. Partly sunny, windy. Dandelions out in force. Lawn definitely needs mowing. Cool, though warm in sun, when it's out. Temps steady around 46° F all night, rising to 63° by 1 PM, dipping, rising again to 64° then dropping off after 4 PM (60–7° F at 5:30 PM). Pressure uneven but steady overall. N wind gusting 18–30 MPH mid to late afternoon. Clouds: gauzy bits of torn strato and alto cumuli moving in different directions. The main strata northeasterly but the very thin (gauzy) lower levels seeming to move in the opposite direction—SW to NE cloud layer starts to build again, humid & blue-looking, toward evening. Wanted to sit outside to write this but the bugs drove me in. Generally a stormy, blustery-feeling day, with no precipitation. Birch looks almost fully leafed out. Average temps for this date (since 1995): 38–60° F