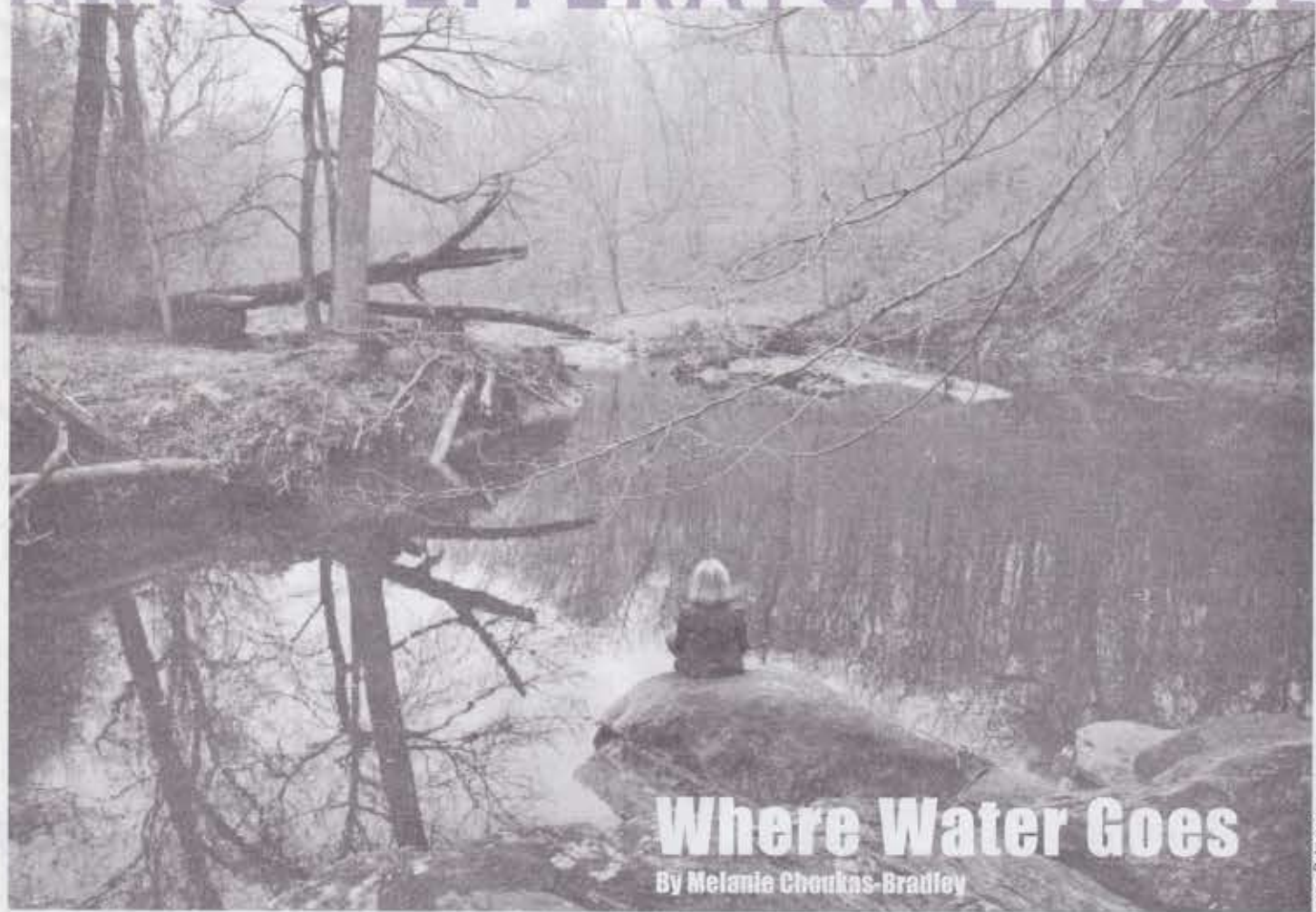


ARTS & LITERATURE ISSUE



Where Water Goes

By Melanie Choukas-Bradley

Lorne Peterson

One day last June, the Washington area got nearly 10 inches of rain. The following day, despite ongoing showers and a soaked basement, I had to see what had become of my beloved stretch of Rock Creek. It wasn't a rational thing to do, but necessary for me.

My usual routes into Rock Creek Park were barricaded so I parked by the Meadowbrook stables and tried to walk the mile or so to the loop trail at Boundary Bridge on the Maryland-District line. My first glimpses of the devastation were shocking. A ball field fence, lined with heavy debris, had a rescue boat tied to it. Nearby, several dislocated cars and their disgruntled drivers awaited tow trucks. A rippled coating of mud covered the road.

"What do you want to see?" a park service employee yelled at me. "It's a mess! Do you want to end up stranded like all of these people?" "I just want to cross the bridge and get into the park."

"You can't cross it and you can't go into the park," she said. "That's why all these barricades are up."

Well, that was a clear signal...to find another way into the park.

I parked on Woodbine Street and walked down flooded, abandoned Beach Drive toward the District line. I found a large dead bullfrog in the middle of the road. Nothing living stirred.

When I got to Boundary Bridge, several wild looking dogs and an even wilder looking man with waist-length hair stood on the bridge looking into the rushing coffee-colored water. "Looks like Katrina came through here," he said.

I headed for the trail that winds along the creek. But there was no trail. Instead, there were flattened spicebush, pawpaw, and bladdernut trees as far as the eye could see, which wasn't far in the wet green jumble. River birches, box-elder, and ironwoods leaned far into the creek, at life-

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Letters

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To the Editor,
Your feature front-page article regarding the charming English sparrow, including recommended Nazi decapitation, is despicable. When will do-gooders learn to let evolution that brought us the marvels of nature, including the wondrous world of birds, alone?

Gene A. Bechtel
Washington, D.C.

We are not surprised that we received some negative (and positive) letters about the controversial issue addressed in Kathleen Franklin's "The House Sparrow..." We wish to make it clear, however, that ANS does not endorse any position on this issue. Franklin's article was a result of careful research, and it reports on the pros and cons of dealing with the house sparrow problem by a number of different methods. The careful reader would note that the house sparrow population is currently in decline, thanks perhaps to increased education about appropriate nest boxes, feeder use, and reduced use of millet and other grain-based seed. But the bad news is that overall bird diversity is declining, likely as a result of introduced species that compete for the same niches, as well as pollution, careless use of pesticides, and habitat lost to development.

Regarding Juan's concern of ANS bird seed, shop manager Matt Mathias writes, "We find the white millet in the ANS custom mix attracts a variety of species, including northern cardinals and finches. However, you raise a good question. In the last year we have added several new blends or mixes to our birdseed selection. And this year we will carefully consider changing the ingredients in our custom mix to make it less attractive to house sparrows."

~ Editors

Where Water Goes

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threatening angles. The place was unrecognizable as I started to bushwhack downstream.

This park that usually hummed with hikers and wagging wet dogs was an alien new landscape. Fresh wet alluvial soil covered the matted acres. Small fish swam in places that were dry land just the day before. The horizontal shrubs and small trees went on and on, acre upon acre. I touched the trunks of the tall tuliptrees, ashes, maples and sycamores that still stood. What were their chances if this sort of flood became a regular occurrence, as many of the global climate change models predict?

I began the switchback up the steep eastern slope of Rock Creek. Here everything seemed normal. Wild hydrangea bloomed along the rocky ledges. Christmas ferns looked perky, the way ferns look after rain. All the upland plants were vertical: witch-hazel, beech, oak, mountain laurel. But the grimmest surprise was still in store for me.

I climbed down to "my" meditation rock. On sunny mornings for two years (since my family dragged me from our home at Sugarloaf Mountain to live in Chevy Chase), I sat on this rock and marveled at the way the light played on the undersides of the leaves of two beech trees. The trees reached out from each side of the creek and touched in the middle. The light reflecting from the water on the underside of the leaves never failed to bring me back from any distraction or problem of the day. Often, a great blue heron landed on the nearby shore, or wood ducks silently paddled downstream.

But there would be no more limb-touching light shows, because the beech on the opposite shore was gone, or rather, uprooted and lying in the creek. I could just make out my meditation rock under the swirling muddy water, and the beech on my side of the creek

still stood. But its companion along with several other huge trees had not made it through the flood.

I began the two-mile slog back to the car. The rain picked up, and as I drove home to begin another round of bailing, I was filled with conflicting emotions. I had seen how Mother Nature can take a small creek and toss some cars around. Storms have always fascinated me, and who could be numb to their power? I knew that I would get to witness the healing process along Rock Creek, and I harbored a small, possibly futile, hope that fresh alluvial soil might help the spring ephemerals that are so challenged by invasive species and unpredictable weather patterns. But the knowledge that our climate-altering way of life may be stealing our children's future is now inescapable for me.

That morning I got an email from my friend Jeri Metz, aka "Mother Herb."

"If you have been having a huge amount of rainfall in your area," she wrote, "...this is the future, folks—drought and deluge. Instead of swimming against the tide here, use this time to observe. Watch where

the water goes."

Later, I heard a slight pickup in the intensity of the rain falling on our skylight. I opened the front door and stood next to the downspout that had flooded the basement the previous night. I waited, and within minutes the downspout burst the seam and started to gush. This time, I was ready. I yelled to my husband, and the two of us frantically bailed our outdoor window well, avoiding any new flood.

By observing, it's easy to adapt and learn how to keep your basement dry. But how will we adapt to the larger challenges brought on by the unpredictability of global climate change? And even more important, what can we do to lessen those changes and pass on to our children a recognizable map of the world?

Melanie Choukas-Bradley is the author of three natural history books, including City of Trees: The Complete Field Guide to the Trees of Washington, D.C., which will be updated and published by the University of Virginia Press in 2008. This year, Melanie will lead ANS hikes along the Boundary Bridge trail described here.

WATER WANTS By J.B. Smith
What we want water to do is stay right where we want it to, then come on sharp command like an overtrained dog at our lips' beck, our plumbing's call. Hence Hoover Dam. Even if we want wisely, water has other things to do, water things, like keeping salt dissolved and Atlantis lost, water things like steaming uselessly off Sonoran rocks, cutting canyons through the eons' earth, washing away the unjust with the just. If water didn't do them, they wouldn't get done.

This poem is from Smith's second poetry collection, Settling for Beauty (Wordsch Communications, 2005). A recent recipient of a Fellowship in Poetry from the NEA, Smith lives with his wife and rescue dog in Washington, DC. Find out more at www.jbsmithwriter.com.