

Excerpt, title essay from *Finding a Clear Path* by Jim Minick

“Finding a Clear Path”

Walks frame my day. Early every morning, the dogs and I head east where I greet the sun and say a prayer. Lost Bent Creek fills the small valley with the sound of water slipping over rocks. Wrens and cardinals shake their feathers and wake their voices, a cacophony of joy. The birds love the morning, even in the rain. Sometimes I'll catch the screech owl's last wavering call descending from the ridge, his “good night” song to the rousing day.

In the evening, after a day away at a desk and chalkboard, I journey out again, this time on one of the many trails we've cleared on this farm. I might hike the newest trail through hundred-year-old oaks to the remains of Ms. Lefew's chimney, the land of her cornfield now towering in pines. Our two dogs, Grover and Grace, often scare up turkeys here, their wings thumping through the pines, their scratching feet having fluffed the forest floor like a cushion. Usually on these evening jaunts, I walk our lane to check the pond, to look for the pair of wood ducks who raised seven yellow balls of feathers last summer. When I see the male and female flying in through the budding trees, I know spring is near. From the pond, if I'm ambitious, I'll hike the back loop, or if I'm too tired, the shorter loop, complete with hammock and daffodils. Both trails come out at the blueberry field, the rows of bushes turning color, the bark changing from red to yellow, the buds swelling. It won't be long.

In all this walking, I try to be quiet, attentive to this place. Usually, though, I have to first turn off the voices in my head, especially after a long day at work. Sometimes I'll walk the half mile to the pond before I realize I'm still living in my head and not here where I am. Then I'll sit at the pond a while, trying to mirror its smooth surface.

Today in a foggy mist, the dogs and I wander up the bee hill road. We all three start at the flight of a grouse, the explosion of whirring wings carrying it over the ridge. In the old orchard, Grover and Grace take off after two deer. I only see the white flags of their tails arcing over a split rail fence.

Whistling for the dogs to start for home, I notice that I am surrounded by mist gathering into drops. On the pines, the wild roses, the golden broomsage, the spider webs, on all of it, the water hangs like a giant, dancing necklace of clear jewels. I hold a bending branch close to my face and peer through each drop, discover the pointy pines on the other side, curved and upside down. Microscopic life swims in the sea of this drop, having traveled thousands of miles from river to sky to fall as mist here on this hilltop. The shimmering radiance stops me, opens me to the world as it is, in this moment of beauty.

On my tongue, I gather one of these globes of water and taste its cool sweetness. Then I turn and head home, the dogs leading the way, the path through the world, for this moment, clear.