Annabel Howard

My husband and I moved our family to Tiohtià:ke/Montreal from the British countryside three years ago. Since then I've discovered how easy it is to overlook nature in the city. Not that I don't see it. I have the opposite problem: I seek it out and am ambivalent. Or more than ambivalent. Disengaged. Laced with shame, perhaps.

I've always found solace outdoors, but in the city I have to force myself to notice much besides the concrete and the broken bottles and the discarded plastic and the tall glass windows that everywhere reflect back images, if not of me, then of the dense layers of human silhouettes that might as well be.

In the 1950s, Rachel Carson, reflecting on the joy she experienced introducing her three year old nephew to the natural world, exhorted caregivers to instill in their children a sense of wonder. All a child needs, she writes, is a single adult who can open the gate to wonder simply by sharing their enthusiasm. I try to be that adult. I try to be all the different adults—the aunts and uncles and grandparents—my children don't have in their geographically dissociated lives. I try to be like author Margaret Renkl, who sits (for what must be long periods of time) in her urban yard somewhere in Nashville, deriving much admirable joy from the critters that come and go there. But I don't have time, and I don't see critters. My yard is the size of a single parking space and it faces onto a concrete alley where nothing—not even grass—survives, and where the only visitors are the occasional, tailless squirrel and the mangy cats that incite my own (deaf) cat to yowl like a creature bewitched.

When I’m with the children, I try to sheathe my longing to be elsewhere. I’m forever pointing to sparrows, goldenrod, poplar trees. We keep our eyes peeled for snails, bugs, and unusual stones. Sometimes we walk to the river and offer gifts of twigs and candy. We climb trees. We scout for fish. We note the moon. For all this, something lacks.

Lately, I’ve begun to wonder if this is the symptom of a larger grief: the knowledge that my children and I are rowing up from under the weight of this city and all it’s taken from the land. The enormity of what’s been lost: old growth forests filled with ancient chestnuts, oaks, maples and hickories, rivers dense with salmon, eel, and sturgeon, meadows replete with trilliums and orchids, skies dark with passenger pigeons and bobwhites. All gone. And their shades abutted so precipitously to the present that you can taste the bright, woody slivers of the smashed tree boles, you can feel the wounds still raw in the soft ground, and you can hear, in the cries of the seagulls, lamentations for the richer symphonies that populated this place a few brief lifespans ago. Here, unlike in Britain, there is nothing mellow or nostalgic about history because, even on a gentle walk down to the river, the past here *hurts.* And what I read in this landscape is not only an impoverished emptiness, but the sense that if we want to build anything, we have to start by making relations with what remains—which is the detritus; the bones.