Ecotone

The landscape in the Alaskan interior doesn’t put on airs. Spruce stands ragged, and scrubby. Their muddy green branches stick out like an uneven haircut. They stand packed together, with no room to stretch and luxuriate in the sun. The underbrush is thorny. Grasses are dry and starchy. They prickle the skin instead of cooling it. All life seemed this way when I came to the interior. Everything and everyone was unashamed to be purely functional. Nothing had the luxury to behave otherwise. My sensibilities were temperate. The ideal ecology was one of abundance. A coastal forest where water and light were so plentiful that trees towered, and could afford to share it all with moss draping from their limbs.

In the interior, there was only one place where the landscape seemed to fit my ideal. It was a nature trail that struck out into the boreal wetlands at the top Tanana valley, cradled between the northern hills and the rocky islands where downtown Fairbanks perched above the water table. The trail snaked through a birch forest bordering ponds and fields. In the spring, the area flooded. The raised log bridges snaked over a landscape where the forest floor had been replaced by a smooth mirror. It reflected the pale, bowing trees back perfectly in a icy blue hue.

That trail became a meeting place for the first companions I found in the city. We would walk there, smoking weed, passing the bowl up and down the line as we admired the light filtering through the birches. It was still illegal then, so in the heat of summer, when the trails were busy, we would trek a ways out into the brush. Crouching in a dry riverbed, every move would send dust puffing out from the straw yellow grass carpet, setting off a sneezing hay fever fit.

A short walk from the trail, the ecology comes to a sudden change. Walking beneath the tall birches, the light is hidden. The earth is free of lower story plants, covered instead by a carpet of dead leaves and dry branches. It smells like a mellow must, like old blankets. The change comes all at once. Footfalls turn from a crunching shuffle to big steps that sink into mossy hummocks that coat the ground. Light breaks in, as the birches give way to dwarf spruce. The small trees make me feel like I am a giant, that I have stumbled across a miniature landscape. As I come to terms with the disorientation, the smell hits. It’s an herbal, floral, resinous scent that flies off of the springy undergrowth.

In those woods, I asked a girl to date me, and she agreed. That night, we walked under the birches, glowing softly from distant city lights. The sound of ducks splashing in the dark water. We sat together near the ecotone, hidden from view, wafting its resinous scent over us.

In winter time, all of that disappeared. It became so cold that the life in the forest didn’t just go to sleep, it appeared to vanish. The now covering turned the trees to sculptures, and the waterways into flat marble floors. The forest was still a meeting place. It was somewhere to escape from suffocating interior places, where work and school was always too close at hand. It was a bitter, escape, though, too cold to tolerate for long. My relationship wouldn’t survive that winter, and I entered spring, like the trees, a little worse for wear, but surviving.

After witnessing a few springs in the area, the wood began to look different. The forest with it’s mirror waters and arching birch wasn’t just a romantic landscape of curves and pastel colors. I discovered that the wetland was formed from melting permafrost. The disappearing ice caused the earth to sink and flood, never to refreeze. Each year the wetland was expanding, undermining the forest. Those elegant, curving birches were drowning. One caught by the expanding water would begin to list. Year by year, the tree would lean closer to the water, until finally, it bowed it’s head beneath the surface. The roots release, and spring free from the earth, tendrils stretching towards the sky.

That trail became a darker place to me. On top of the water, I began to notice an iridescent film of decay. The smells of life were mixed with rot. Winter was still bitter, and white and smooth. The spring no longer signaled the time for new growth, it was just the resumption of the march towards death.

One year, part of the trail sank below the waterline. In order to reach the deep woods, I had to trip off my shoes and socks, roll up my pants, and wade through the icy water to higher ground. Standing barefoot in the moss, breathing the cool air, my body felt refreshed. I noticed the water-loving plants blooming in the pools. Insects, and the birds that ate them were more prolific.

Later in the year, the raised pathway was moved to adapt to the sinking land. It followed the edge of the water, forming a longer, more circuitous route. If I were to return to this trail year after year, I would have the privilege of watching it shift as it adjusted to the melting forest. That path moved through a vista changing at a pace that could be marked by human eyes, something that few forest trails could claim.

The modest trees of the interior no longer seemed scrubby, stunted, pathetic. When I look at the black spruce, I think of those modest little trees standing on the cushioned hummocks, balanced above the water, absorbing it and drawing it up towards the dry interior sky.