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Backwaters: A Writing Mentor Surfaces

Jeff DeBellis

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Backwaters

A writing mentor surfaces

Jeff DeBellis



BEAR CREEK ORIGINATES HIGH IN THE ROCKIES, SPILLS OVER THE Front Range, and ends unceremoniously in a lake between two highways in suburban Denver. One late-spring day, I packed a rod, a few boxes of flies, and some old sneakers and followed the creek toward its source. The water was high, fast, and turbid. I made two casts and called it quits. There was no way I could fish it. Disappointed, I pointed my car back toward my apartment and began the drive home. The disappointment gave way to introspection, and I thought about the outsized role that fishing played in my life. How, no matter what was going on, I could always find solace in an isolated stretch of water. I put my thoughts into an essay, titled it "Rise," and sold it to a magazine. A couple of weeks after it came out, I got an email.

"Man, I really hope this is still your email address," it began. "I just came across this amazing essay called 'Rise.' It was written by a Jeff DeBellis, and based on context and description of author, I think it's you. If it isn't, well then the rest of this email is going to be weird." The irony is that the friend who sent me the note is probably the person most responsible for me being a writer in the first place. We hadn't talked in a decade.

In summer 2005, I was working on a trail crew in the North Woods of Maine with about a dozen other people. Mike, who ten years later would send me that note, was one of them. Trail work is bone-crushing, the hardest physical labor I've ever done. We would load metal pack frames with 50 pounds of tools, food, and gear and hike miles over wet, rocky trails to get to a worksite. Once there we would fell trees, de-bark them, buck them into stringers, skid them through the mud, and build bridges across roaring brooks. With pry bars, we would roll boulders the size of small cars to build erosion-control structures. For one of our projects, we set up a highline with steel cable that lifted rocks out of a ravine and hauled them onto a ridgeline trail. We were typically covered in a putrid cocktail of mud, sweat, gasoline, and blood from scratching open black fly bites. We would dig, drag, and heave until we were all but too exhausted to hike back out to the van at the end of the day.

All summer, Mike kept a small notebook in the pocket of his work shirt. Every once in a while, he would step back from whatever we were doing to scribble a quick haiku. I was struck by his rare ability to keep his feet so solidly planted on the ground while keeping his mind so unencumbered. Here

Bear Creek in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado flows so fast that the author couldn't fish it. But he could write about that. ANDREW DIMLER/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

was someone willing to run a chain saw while standing knee-deep in mud but who could also remain coolly detached enough to rend the experience into poetry. I wanted to cultivate that same duality.

Since we had to hike in and out of the backcountry to reach most of our worksites, we worked four ten-hour days in a row and got the next three off. We would usually spend these hiking or fishing. Northern Maine is a patchwork of tarns, kettle lakes, and small streams that feed into the Penobscot River. Many of these ponds were once part of private camps owned by the wealthy industrialists of the Gilded Age. Now many of them are on land accessible to the public. Most times, we'd have a whole pond to ourselves. Every now and then, we would have to share it with a loon, a moose, or the occasional tourist from suburban Boston.

On Sundays, a few of us would make the long drive into Millinocket, the closest town, to pick up supplies for the coming week. One Sunday evening, I was sitting on the cabin porch swatting mosquitoes and reading a borrowed copy of Jack Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums*. Mike walked up with an armload of groceries, saw what I was reading, and told me that the novel's main character is based on Gary Snyder, a poet who also spent a number of summers working on trail crews.

A FEW MONTHS LATER, IT WAS FALL, AND I WAS BACK AT SCHOOL, BACK IN the city. I was scrounging around a used bookstore on a rainy afternoon and found a beat-up copy of Gary Snyder's *The Back Country*. I bought it and took the bus back home. Like Mike, Snyder could find the poetry in hard, monotonous labor. He took apart cars, hitchhiked through deserts, and drank in shift bars. He wrote about trail work, fishing, mountains, and other things I knew and loved. Instead of reducing life to poetry, he raised poetry up to life. His writing was simple and free from gimmicks. One of my favorites of his poems is—on the surface—essentially a recipe for beef stew.

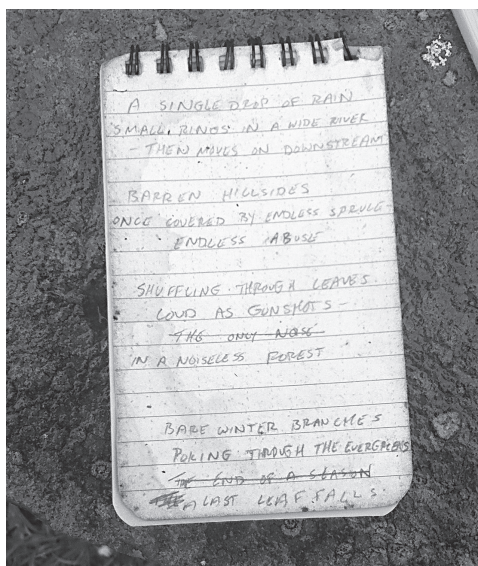
The next summer I signed on for another trail crew, this time in the Green Mountains of Vermont. Before driving up to the mountains, I stopped at the stationery store near my school and bought a small notebook, the kind with waterproof pages, so I could carry it around in my pocket and jot down haikus while I worked in the woods. For the next few years, I would continue to move back and forth between the two worlds—sometimes in the woods and sometimes in the city. Wherever I was, I kept a small notebook to scratch down thoughts. Eventually I began to write longer poems, then essays. At some point, I started sending them off to magazines and journals, and occasionally they would be published.

Writing, like fishing, also began to take on an outsized role in my life. They aren't so different. They are both crafts that require an intense attention to detail. We do them in the hopes that publishers will accept our stories and fish will accept our flies. If they don't, we convince ourselves it doesn't matter, that we do them because we love the process and not just the end result. Maybe this is true, and maybe it's a lie. In the end, it doesn't matter, as long as we continue to do the things that make us feel most alive.

Mike and I met up to go fishing about six months after he sent me the note. Rods in hand, we scrambled through deep limestone canyons and thick forests, dropping nymphs into plunge pools. I learned more from him in two days than I would have in a year of fishing alone. The same way I learn more from helping a friend with one of his or her poems than I do from writing a dozen of my own.

EVERYTHING CAME FULL CIRCLE THAT SPRING AS WE HIKED IN THE grit-gray woods surrounding the Savage River. From mouth to source. One day I set out to go fishing and wrote an essay instead. It led me to another trip, a new river, and an old friend. I had finally found that duality I had always admired—that ability to be fully engaged but still just a bit detached. I wrote most of this in my mind as I cast flies into the tumbling river that afternoon. As I put it on paper, I think back on every cast, every plunge pool—every backwater.

JEFF DEBELLIS is a geographer with the Prevention Research Center at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. His poem, "Settling Down," appeared in *Appalachia's* Winter/Spring 2012 issue.



Poems, notes, book titles, lesson plans, and directions to trails fill the stained pages of this battered notebook, which has ridden in Jeff DeBellis's pack for a decade. JEFF DEBELLIS