

that deer will not flee unless two of their senses are alerted; they have to hear *and* see, see *and* smell.

I let the dog out and stand at the door, waiting for him. His grey back vanishes in blowing snow, and reappears. It could be any time of day. The light has no warmth, as if it is coming out of the ground, from the trunks of the bare trees.

By the calendar, we have passed the year's longest night. The Earth, in its elliptical orbit, has begun its tilt back toward the sun and will go on doing so, spinning out and back in space, whether I am around to think about it or not. Picking the newspaper up off the porch I turn my face to the sun and—nothing. The landscape changes hourly—hills where there were no hills before, all the boundaries softened, gradually erased.

LARRY SILL
 Winter

For two months I have hardly seen one bird. In past years we would have flocks at the feeders in the back yard. Finches, nuthatches, at least five varieties of woodpeckers, mourning doves, sparrows, bluejays, cardinals, the occasional hawk hunting the birds at the feeders, and once a great horned owl. I will admit their numbers took quite a drop when Walmart bulldozed a couple of hundred acres of woods behind my house for one of their fine stores, but this year they have almost vanished. Once in a while a sparrow will chirp from the top of the crabapple tree next to the garage when I leave for work. I usually throw some seed in the driveway next to the bush though it seems never to be touched.

It has been a cold winter. Sixty days now without the thermometer going above freezing once. One day with the high temperature below zero. I find myself looking at the bare trees and wondering if the birds have somehow found shelter in crevices and overhangs, or are mostly frozen or starved to death.

This winter a ninety-year-old woman froze to death filling her birdfeeder. The police think she must have accidentally locked

the door behind her when she went out. They found her on the steps outside her back door. Last week, when it was twelve below zero, I stood at the glass door in the back of my house, looking out through the back yard. On my side, I was fairly comfortable in shorts. On the other side, I would probably not have survived an hour. The snow washed towards me in waves driven by the wind over smooth drifts. Swirling in eddies around the tree trunks, it hollowed out circles at each tree then blew in little whirlwinds and long arching lines scurrying over the snow. When I touched my fingers to the glass, I could feel it push in from the pressure of the wind. When I pushed back, it seemed almost like something alive on the other side.

I am constantly amazed at how casually we take the thin veneer of our civilization which protects us from the forces of nature. How confident we are in the transparent technology—an eighth of an inch of melted sand—that separates us from the winter outside. How smugly we drive through the blizzard in our cars.

That is, until the earth moves. Or the lights go out. Or the water rises. Or the wind blows the walls of our house out from under the roof. Then we stand looking dumbly into the TV cameras asking “Why did this have to happen to us?” as if we were somehow a factor in the movement of tectonic plates or the direction a low pressure system takes out of the south Atlantic.

I think perhaps I will stop feeling sorry for the birds. They are, after all, probably snug in some place I know nothing of, quietly waiting out the storm.

J O H N L A N E
Natural Edges

Once I lived on Cumberland Island, on the eastern margin of the continent, at a place of merging forms. It was a water land. The sea and marsh drew in around me with each tide, fell away as the tide receded. Live there long enough, Nate, one of the island people, would say, and I'd feel my own being—mostly water anyway—slosh from ear to ear at the pull of a full moon.

I felt the moon pull me often, late at night, away from a book or a letter I was writing and up the trail to leave me sitting for hours watching the water slip up and back. I learned much on these nights, mostly the math of connection: the common denominators among us all. To live on an island is to walk daily on that common ground, to walk the edges of many things.

A dead deer was my first denominator. Curled under live oaks, feet crossed under its body, it was 10 feet from the barn where I wrote and slept. It was a big buck, but each day a little more disappeared as the island recovered its own. I watched it decay for a month in the island heat. The body collapsed inward. The carcass supported a congress of insects. Red ants, beetles, flies, wasps and mosquitoes came and went, working day and night to