

“Metamorphoses”

It takes a leap of faith to celebrate Easter in Vermont, particularly in the month of March. The calendar may say spring, but the ice is still solid on Mallet's Bay, where the water's shallow. Still, the signs were there as recently as a week ago, along the Colchester Causeway, where birders spotted Wood Ducks, along with Redheads and Tufted Ducks and Northern Pintails. The birds were on their way North, and the water birds came first.

Because life is wet. It flows, it ebbs and oozes, it squishes like mud, like the trickles dripping from the eaves and the slush that seeps over the tops of your shoes when you step across a half-frozen puddle. Spring is the soggy season, and March is the month of mush, a moist reminder that life began in water, and that the flood in your basement and the leak in your roof are really both reasons to give thanks. A dry world is a dead world. And if sap rises and buds burst, it's because the same liquid tonic is pouring through the veins of maple and cherry that stirs our own juices and make us sing.

In the Northern Hemisphere, where we live, the flood moves in one direction only, from the equator to the Arctic. It never meanders. Spring doesn't dwaddle. Life wastes no time. Instead the tide of green runs steadily, spring advancing northward about seventeen miles each day, roughly the same distance a hiker in good condition might march in twenty-four hours over varied terrain. So that theoretically, you could exactly keep pace with the spring, make it your constant traveling companion... watch the season unfold in slow motion, or freeze frame it, the flowers perpetually on the verge of unfolding. If you walked fast enough, you could even make the film run backward. Meaning that if you started out on the Appalachian Trail in southern Georgia and hoofed it at high speed, you might very well find snow at the top of Mt. Katahdin by the time you came to the end of the line in Maine, having journeyed in reverse, so to speak, from warmth to chill, early spring to early fall, skipping summer altogether.

Or you could accomplish the same feat just by climbing Mt. Mansfield or Camel's Hump, starting out in your Bermuda shorts at the bottom and photographing yourself on the summit wrapped in a down parka. Spring ascends the mountain slopes at about a hundred feet a day--the temperature drops with elevation--which is perhaps why Henry David Thoreau said that "hope begins in the swamps," not only because they're warmer and wetter, but because that's where the show starts, typically with the skunk cabbage, which in Vermont is usually the first plant to emerge from the bogs in late February or early March, growing in pools of melted snow and actually able to generate its own heat through a unique process of internal vegetable combustion that can reach 60 degrees Fahrenheit.

But of course, no matter how fast you traveled, or how high you climbed, you'd only be pretending to change the tempo. Spring has its own rhythm. Life has its own beat. And the music plays faster the farther north you go. Right now the season seems slow in arriving. Cabin fever is epidemic as we ask, "Will spring ever come?" But by the end of March, at least in Vermont, there's a full hour's more sunshine between dawn and

dusk than there was at the beginning of the month. By the end of April, we'll be enjoying fourteen hour days, with sunlight to spare, warming the soil and rousing the worms, who need a ground temperature of three degrees above freezing to come out of hiding and bring the robins along. Sunrise comes earlier, night falls later with each degree of latitude. Which for those of us in New England means that the darkness of December will eventually get repaid with interest ... not because the world's in perfect balance, but because it's not.

The reason we have seasons, and perhaps the reason we have life at all, is because the planet's tilted on its axis, at 23 ½ degrees. Fortunately for us, we inhabit a world that's cock-eyed, off-center, more than slightly askew. Half of each year, we're tilted toward the sun, and the other half we're tipped away. Twice a year, at the moment of the vernal and autumnal equinox, we're precisely at the tipping point, a point that actually arrived last Thursday morning at 1:48 a.m. At that brief instant, the days weren't getting any longer; they weren't getting any shorter, either. Daylight and dark stood in absolute equilibrium. But the rest of the time, change happens. Instability reigns. Nothing's on the square. If the planet were vertically centered, straight up and down, there would be no change, no seasonal variation, no recurring dance between the blossom and the bee. We'd be like Venus, which leans at an angle of just two degrees, not nearly as tipsy as planet Earth. If life existed at all, it would be much simpler, more linear and predictable than it is now, but not nearly as interesting. There might be less pain, fewer tears. But not so much love or joy, either.

Grief and celebration are interwoven in this world, like birth and death, light and dark. That's a lesson curiously captured by the first harbinger of this season, the little frog called *Hyla Crucifer* or the spring peeper. The word "crucifer" in Latin means the one who bears the cross. In the Easter service in many Christian churches, *crucifer* is the name given to the young girl or boy who carries the crucifix in the ritual procession, while the frog is so-called that because of the crossed marking on its back. The markings are a coincidence, surely, but still symbolic. For a hundred million years, the peepers have chorused in the arrival of spring, and for all those eons, they have mimicked the ancient story of resurrection. Like all amphibians, they undergo a metamorphosis, beginning their journey in water as tadpoles, gradually losing their gills and leaving the ponds where they were born to move ashore, where they become tree climbers. On land, they mate, lay their eggs, and as the weather cools burrow into the mud to hibernate until the cycle begins anew. It's a hundred thousand millennia, encapsulated and re-enacted on the briefest, tiniest of evolutionary scales. The frogs are small, about an inch long. But their voices together create a sound that's not only loud but also haunting—eerie and at the same time familiar, old and at the same time always new. Their song is both mournful and cheerful, reminding us that we are all crucifers, each one bearing the marks of struggle and loss, each participating in the promise of hope and rebirth, our lives transient, but part of a larger, more lasting epic. Through life's transformations, may we always hear the music.

[Sound recording of peepers plays]

God of Hope and New Beginnings
Thaw our wintry souls
Unlock the life that's frozen
And enable us to rejoice again in the flow
Of creativity
Of love
Of wild, emergent, untamed and vitalizing energy
That choruses around us.
Make our spirits sing,
For birth and death, for day and night.
And for all for that lies beyond our reckoning,
Grant us the gift of faith.
Roll away the heavy stone of anger.
Deliver us from the swamps and bogs of negativity.
Metamorphose grief into healing,
Sadness into joy,
As we peep our way toward spring.