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Résumé de l'article

What does the War on Terror have to teach us about the ongoing War on Invasive Species? Rooted in the author's personal experiences as an immigrant on a family farm in Virginia, this essay explores themes of language, mental frames, and violent conflict in novel ways that shed insight into the morality of the struggle to manage unwanted species.

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Life on the Move

Ranjit Singh

No one starts a war – or rather, no one in his senses ought to do so – without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it.

- Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*[1]

When the situation is hopeless, there's nothing to worry about.

- Edward Abbey, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*[2]

***

A plant can be as difficult as any living thing. I became interested in *microstegium vimineum*, commonly known as Japanese stiltgrass, while researching stories of life on Potomac Creek. The Creek runs through a rural part of Stafford County, Virginia. Fifty years ago, our immigrant family started a small goats-and-vegetables farm here.

One question I've pursued is how this unwelcome Asian native – stiltgrass, not me – got here. Stiltgrass usually appears in the forest where paths are worn or the ground has been disturbed. It may be the most damaging invasive plant species in the United States. Pretty with silver-striped lanceolate leaves, it easily outcompetes forest floor rivals in shady, humid places, spreading to create thickly matted, pasture-like areas that block the natural growth of an understory. Plant diversity and wildlife habitat suffer. For all these reasons, the Forest Service lists stiltgrass as a Category 1 invasive plant – the worst in terms of displacing natives.[3]

Given these facts, if your state of mind propels you towards QAnon and fear of a Great Replacement, then stiltgrass is your botanical foe. Except it's not a conspiracy. Stiltgrass is blowback, the unintended, harmful result of our own actions. And this modest and ironic plant is bedeviling land managers around the country.

Well into my research, I can now tell you that conflict and opportunism brought Japanese stiltgrass to Potomac Creek, as they do most migrants. I can also speak to how stiltgrasses' quiet appearance reveals the Creek's intimacy with the rest of the world. These two ineluctable truths,

[1] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 579.

[2] Edward Abbey, *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (New York: Harpers Collins Perennial, 2000), 294.

[3] European and Mediterranean Plant Protection Organization, "Microstegium vimineum (Trin.) A. camus," *EPPO Bulletin* 46, no.1: 14-19, https://doi.org/10.1111/epp.12276.

in turn, elicit expanding circles of thought about life on the move, and natives and newcomers in all places.

This is to be expected, of course. On the topic of origins, Anjali Vaidya, another migrant writer, wryly observes: "Dip your head into the scientific literature on invasive species from recent years, and you will find a discipline in the midst of an identity crisis."[4] Invasives raise questions of language and who-we-are, where-we-are. With the right state of mind, the stories of these unwanted plants and animals become remarkably human.

Maybe as a "come here" myself I empathize with stiltgrass. But every researcher brings a singular perspective. As a professor of international politics, for instance, I also tend to look for the things I teach: the legacies of history, actors' goals and strategies, the morality of violence, etc.

And that's why life on Potomac Creek troubles me so.

***

It's mid-winter on Potomac Creek now. Silent, the Creek seems utterly inhospitable. I take a morning walk and my crunching footfalls obscure the twittering of cold birds. Dormant woods. The drone of a nearby road. Leaves and grass are dead, monochromatic, pressed to the forest floor by weeks of rain and ice, the raw material of future soil.

***

The first time anyone noticed Japanese stiltgrass growing in the United States was in 1919. George G. Ainslie, an entomologist studying borers (insects that bore into plants) found the grass growing on a creek bank in Knoxville, Tennessee. Unable to identify it, he sent a sample to the Smithsonian in Washington DC.

Ainslie had come across a minute botanical story lost within the belligerent theater of geopolitics. It begins with America's rising interest in the Pacific following the annexation of California in 1848. The official history of the State Department relates how belief in Manifest Destiny continued to drive US interests westward.[5] Now, inspirited Americans sought trade and influence with China and Japan; we wanted to send missionaries and secure ports and coaling stations for our whalers, merchants, and naval vessels. The isolationist Tokugawa shogunate in Japan resisted American designs. But President Millard Fillmore knew that strategically Japan was the right place to be. To stiffen US diplomacy, he sent across the ocean a naval squadron led by Commodore Matthew Perry, whose armed ships sailed into forbidden Tokyo Bay in 1853. Contemporary Japanese portraits assigned Perry hairy, wolf-like features. Even so, America and Japan were now

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[4] Anjali Vaidya, "Native or Invasive," *Orion* March/April 2017, https://orionmagazine.org/article/native-or-invasive.

[5] Department of State Office of the Historian, "The United States and the Opening to Japan, 1853," accessed May 26, 2023, https://history.state.gov/milestones/1830-1860/opening-to-japan.

literally in business.

This is one of many historical moments where global politics and biogeography – the branch of biology that studies the geographic distribution of life – come together. A Japanese poem documenting Perry's arrival portends,

> *Distant moon that appears*
>
> *over the Sea of Musashi,*
>
> *your beams also shine on California.*[6]

Still, it's unlikely that anyone planned for stiltgrass to take root across the world's largest ocean. But stiltgrass needs no plan. It has us.

***

As biologist Bernd Heinrich observes, "We gauge what we think is possible by what we know from experience."[7] Fair enough, but that doesn't mean we have the faintest idea what Potomac Creek will be like in a hundred years. Choose your power, God or Nature, if the distinction matters to you, because the only true answer is "God/Nature knows." The story writes itself.

The Perry mission, followed by Japan's stunning display in the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia, induced a "Japan Craze" in the United States. Americans of the industrializing late nineteenth century loved the pastoral motifs of delicate Japanese porcelain. They thought the ceramics represented a less harried life, where artisanship and harmony with nature still mattered. (What explains our current fascination with *manga* and *anime*?) The export market for Japanese art boomed. To maximize profits, merchants needed a cheap and plentiful filler to package their goods for safe transport across the Pacific. And so stiltgrass came to America – the packing peanut of its day.

Such are the traps laid by history. First recorded in Virginia in 1931, stiltgrass was confirmed in Rhode Island in 2005, and Wisconsin in 2020. On American soil, the difficulty with stiltgrass isn't just its effects on native ecology, but its remarkable fecundity. Each green stalk produces as many as a thousand seeds which can remain viable for several years. The seeds disseminate in nearly infinite ways: wildlife, floods, people. The shady area where I rinse off my hiking boots is now a tiny stiltgrass colony.

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[6] John W. Dower, "Black Ships and Samurai: Commodore Perry and the Opening of Japan (1853-1854)," *MIT Visualizing Cultures series*, accessed May 25, 2023, https://visualizingcultures.mit.edu/black_ships_and_samurai/bss_essay02.html.

[7] Bernd Heinrich, *Winter World: The Ingenuity of Animal Survival* (New York: Ecco, 2003), 133.

One springtime long ago, my friend and I netted spawning herring by the bucket. We pulled them up from Potomac Creek with neither limit nor license. Boastfully, we showed our bounty to Mr. Young, the cornfield farmer, who offered five cents per fish in future catches. We returned to the Creek the next day. Chicken-wire nets in hand, we filled plastic trash cans with silver fish. Hours later Mr. Young looked over the hundreds of herring, to which he said "I'll pay two cents each." We were angry and refused to sell. My mother made us clean them all. Boys like us are one reason herring are now all but gone from the Creek, and illegal to possess.

Who knows which days in the woods will be written about forty years later?

***

An important bit of local history: I'm no Marxist, but on Potomac Creek for the last four centuries until recently, it's fair to say nothing influenced people's status and equanimity more than their relationship to the means of production – land. If you knew someone's property in this traditionally rural society, you would know, with only the mildest hyperbole, who they are. Local historian Jerrilyn Eby surmises the importance of owning property in *They Called Stafford Home*. Every southerner, she writes, had to learn that "Land could make him rich or it could make him poor, but without land he was nothing."[8]

And here, following the English tradition, land without people is nearly as worthless as people without land. John Locke wrote that human labor "puts the difference of value in everything." This is especially so with land:

> *[L]et anyone consider what the difference is between an acre of land planted with tobacco or sugar, sown with wheat or barley; and an acre of the same land lying in common, without any husbandry upon it, and he will find that the improvement of labor makes the far greater part of the value.*[9]

Of course, Virginians have long tied the accessibility of good land to a taxonomy of race, too. The County dump that overlooks Potomac Creek today is bounded by Black families and a jail. The state song until 1997 (and still its official "song emeritus," whatever that means) begins:

> *Carry me back to old Virginny,*
>
> *There's where the cotton and the corn and tatoes grow,*
>
> *There's where the birds warble sweet in the spring-time,*

[8] Jerrilyn Eby, *They Called Stafford Home: The Development of Stafford County, Virginia, from 1600 until 1865* (Bowie, MD: Heritage Books, 1997), xi.

[9] David Wooton, ed., *John Locke: Political Writings* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 281.

There's where the old darkey's heart am long'd to go.[10]

The song's blithe racism overwhelms the senses. Regrettably, it also buries a more universal message of the sweetness of fecund land. Such land is the most coveted resource in human history.

The question is therefore unavoidable: What's being done to stop bad species like stiltgrass from taking over good land like Potomac Creek?

***

You pick up a stone in the path, find it smooth, and toss it back. You pick up another and see moss or lichens growing on it, and that is something entirely different. What makes a "place" is not the human connection to it, but life.

***

Listing all the imperfect and often risky ways people try to manage stiltgrass would be simply punishing. The use of competing species and herbicides is common. But the mechanical method – mowing or physically pulling plants from the ground – is probably the most familiar.

People love arranging "invasive pulls." Pulls are kid-friendly events, and teach volunteers how plants like stiltgrass and tree of heaven affect local landscapes. But do such management methods work? I have no idea. The more impertinent question is *how* we might know when these methods succeed or fail. That is, what defines "success"?

Here is where the story of stiltgrass shifts from the historical and botanical towards something else.

Scientists fiercely debate the effects of invasive species. Some champion the notion that certain invasives may be beneficial. For example, citing the merits of autumn olive, Japanese honeysuckle, and others, nature writer Marlene Condon argues that science shows some alien plants are better than native species at restoring environments damaged by humans. She cautions: "If you care about wildlife, ignore the siren call of voices who frame the invasive plant 'problem' in terms of morality, suggesting it is your 'duty' to destroy these plants."[11] A bit of a gadfly, Condon's views appear in *The Washington Post* and elsewhere, and can provoke angry replies.

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[10] *Encyclopedia Virginia*, "Carry Me Back to Old Virginny (1878)," March 16, 2021, https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/carry-me-back-to-old-virginny-1878.

[11] Marlene A. Condon, "Let 'Invasive' Plants Do Their Job So the 'Natives' Can Take Over," *Bay Journal*, April 9, 2021, https://www.bayjournal.com/opinion/forum/let-invasive-plants-do-their-job-so-the-natives-can-take-over/article_7387fc70-93c6-11eb-a929-03fb0e9b107b.html.

But controversy isn't what caught my eye about Condon's work. Whatever the ecological merits of her argument, her recognition that an act as seemingly innocuous as pulling a plant from the ground may be seen to have moral significance is striking. Because it does: Doing the right thing matters greatly in the war on invasive species. Defining success, in particular, is a moral imperative. And this means that such matters shouldn't be left wholly to the scientists.

***

Once, fishing off a sunny river dock, I spoke with two pole-carrying young men who were moving deliberately along the riverbank, searching for catfish. The bank was muddy and very slick. To my mind it was unpassable, completely overgrown with late summer vines and the types of tangled bushes and unpromising saplings arborists call "trash trees." Yet the men's pursuit was loud and perfectly joyous. One wore a t-shirt and jeans, the other jeans with no shirt. Both had dark lines of wet mud up to their chests. They showed no fatigue, no concern for the heat, humidity, biting insects, abundant poison ivy; they passed the dock speaking only of "getting on" good fish. To me, the men were a revelation: Here, embodied, was the mania behind so many fishing memes and thumb-worn collections of short stories. Surely all peoples who have lived on Potomac Creek have witnessed its power.

***

At risk of appearing oblique, for six years I've taught a graduate seminar called "Strategy and War" for the US Naval War College. This adjunct position grants me use of the grandiose title "Fleet Professor" even though the last time I slept on a ship was as an infant on my way to the United States. Meeting weekly in the Washington DC Navy Yard, my students are mostly junior military officers, with some Capitol Hill staffers mixed in. It's the only course I teach where I'm regularly called "Sir."

For nine months, we study core texts of strategic theory, as well as historical case studies ranging from Greek wars of antiquity to modern times. The goal is to instill awareness of war's enduring problems. Have you objectively weighed the enemy's strengths and your own? Do you know what type of war you are getting into? Can you adapt to changing realities, to "fog," "friction," and uncertainty? And of course: When should leaders end a war? I'm not someone given to reflexive admiration for the military; to my mind, the best response to "Do you support the troops?" is to ask: "Well, what are they up to?" But these officers are smart, a tad idealistic, and committed to finding the right course of action.

The seminar's toughest case study comes late in the year, in the analysis of what many call the War on Terror. Contrary to belief, that global conflict continues. One year after the chaotic pullout from Afghanistan, author Salman Rushdie was brutally attacked in New York, and an American drone killed the leader of Al-Qaeda on a Kabul rooftop. US counterterror forces and

advisers remain active in dozens of countries in Africa, the Middle East, and elsewhere. (What foreign seeds are riding on their bootlaces?) As I write, troops are again in motion, returning to Somalia.

Some seminar students have already experienced this roaming, protracted war. A few years ago, I became worried about a particularly edgy Army chaplain who joined us midway through the course. I later learned it had been his repeated duty to accompany the war dead home. He delivered their bodies to grieving widows and families and stayed for every funeral. He carried ghosts into our classroom.

Discussing the conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, etc. thus differs from debating the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05. These students know that strategy – the art and science of applying force to achieve a desired end – is always an exercise in ethics and morality, as well as kinetic violence.

One reading in this case study is Audrey Kurth Cronin's article "The War on Terrorism: What Does It Mean to Win?" from the *Journal for Strategic Studies*. Written in 2014, Cronin's analysis is wonderfully direct:

> *[W]hile terrorism itself never ends, wars by their nature demand a distinction between "war" and "peace." So far, the United States government has no idea how to characterize "peace." This is a great oversight. All the great strategists agree that war cannot be fought successfully without clear notions of an end state to guide, modulate, and focus operations.*[12]

Cronin censures the idea – upheld by key figures during the War on Terror – that the US should fight a global campaign against violent extremism *everywhere.* She blames such thinking for the war's expansion and seeming endlessness. Writing thirteen years and thousands of deaths into the conflict, Cronin observes that the United States suffers symptoms common to all prolonged wars: means become ends, tactics replace strategy, important boundaries are blurred, and the search for a perfect peace replaces the reality that there will never be a full victory. Critically, Cronin notes that there isn't even any clear definition of what "victory" will look like – i.e., what's the *point* of the War on Terror? Without this clarification, she asks, how could the war ever end well?

***

Why summarize a critique of the War on Terror in an essay on wandering grass? Clearly, a military

[12] Audrey Kurth Cronin, "The 'War on Terrorism': What Does It Mean to Win?," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37, no. 2, (2014):174-197, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2013.850423.

conflict with a well-armed enemy differs from a "war" on plants and animals. Yet war is a popular, mind-organizing metaphor (just google "War on Invasives" and see). Cronin's questions should be asked of *any* strategy or campaign. And what in her depiction of the fight against terror doesn't rhyme with the long and ever-expanding war on the non-natives of Potomac Creek and elsewhere? Not much:

> Have we defined "victory?"
>
> Do we have an exit strategy?
>
> If not, is this a forever war, to be fought everywhere?
>
> Can we imagine making "peace" with the enemy?

In life-threatening situations such questions are senseless. But invasives rarely pose a direct threat to human life. In this conflict, the failure to provide answers risks making our violence pointless. And then – well, what are we up to?

***

My teenage son sits quietly at dusk on the overturned red bucket. Alone, he's positioned along the line of field and trees, waiting for an animal to appear, hoping for life to aim at. It is possible life will come as the light fades. His brown hair is grown out long under his cap. His toes are sunk deep in pasture boots; a watchful archer, fingering the bowstring. His grandmother will let him shoot the groundhog that eats from the garden. He will finger the brittle bark of the loblolly. He can carve an atlatl from pinewood with his too-large knife.

We are temporally distinct, yet father and son share this shifting Creek. The air of every summer itches the neck. Uncounted children of all the Creek's generations, always in many states of being. Black ducks. Silted up pond; on the bottom rusts the tossed can of filched beer. Would he do that, too? Last summer he shot a squirrel just to do it but not another. Up the tree it ran before falling cartoonishly, bloodlessly, its heart stopped by a pellet from an air rifle. Matter rearranges endlessly. Mind and body; earth beneath fingernails. Age doesn't teach us what matters so much as when things matter. Now, this solitary moment on a red bucket matters all.

***

An odd tic in the War of Terror has been the revival of the eighteenth-century idiom "blood and treasure." Are senators now reading Swift, or merely nostalgic for swashbuckling 1930s movies like "Captain Blood," "The Sea Hawk," etc.? One imagines them scribbling "B&T" in the margins of speeches for a touch of color and gravitas.

In any case, "blood" is certainly no metaphor in the war on invasives, either. We slay uncountable quantities of life in hopes of halting its movement. In fact, if life itself has value, the War on Terror

pales against this level of biological slaughter.

Take the eastern coyote. Coyotes are sleek canines able to interbreed with dogs. Never native to Potomac Creek, they moved here after bigger predators were killed off (for this reason, some call them a "responsive" rather than "invasive" species, a nuance lost on both the public and coyotes). As a "nuisance species," coyotes are subject to a continuous, open hunting season. The National Park Service reports 400,000 or more are killed annually by rifles, traps, M44 "cyanide bombs," and so on. Conservatively, that's about twelve million pounds of dead coyotes each year, the weight of 480 school buses. Some portion of these were newcomers to Virginia.

There's also the invasive mute swan, the icon of Russian ballet. Wildlife managers addle their eggs to limit their birth rate. For adult birds living on the Potomac River, they have an instrument called the *emasculatome*, which was invented to castrate ruminants. This steel pincer manually snaps necks at the rate of thirty-two per hour. After twenty-four field operations, a local agency calculated the mean cost – including disposal of the bodies – at $28.84 per swan.

No ballerina dreams of dancing the title role of the northern snakehead fish. Biologists electroshocked the Maryland pond where this Asian native first appeared in 2002. Ninety-nine stunned juvenile snakeheads floated to the surface. Within weeks, investigators announced they'd found the hobbyist who dumped the fish. Captain Sanders of the Natural Resources Police clarified that two snakeheads – originally from New York – had outgrown their aquarium. He explained to the press that the man who freed this piscine Adam and Eve "had no idea it would create the situation we have today." No charges were filed. And then, like medieval clergy trusting God would provide a just outcome, the authorities punished the pond. They surrounded it with guards and poisoned it with rotenone, killing every guilty life within.

Yet each of these species proliferates today. In fact, the world record snakehead was caught on Potomac Creek four years ago. Every, every fish tale is a parable.

***

> *"If we don't selectively kill animals by making wise decisions, then we are not being good stewards like God commanded us to, and the pendulum will go farther out of balance. Animals are not made in the image of God like we are.* They do not have a soul. *In the Bible, God tells us to care for our animals. He tells us not to abuse them. He also tells us to kill them when needed. That is our job - to manage this planet and make those types of decisions. Sometimes those decisions can be hard."*
>
> From a 2021 Facebook chat about wildlife on Potomac Creek (emphasis added).

***

What is life to an animal? All this blood flows as numerous studies confirm how richly many species encounter the world. In *What a Fish Knows*, ethologist Jonathan Balcombe shows how fish solve problems and experience emotions. Ed Yong's bestseller, *An Immense World*, illuminates how animals perceive landscapes and worlds to which we aren't privy. Dogs separate identical twins by smell. An echo-locating dolphin sees the fetus within a pregnant woman. It senses if a buried object is made of brass or steel. Plants, too, we're discovering, possess previously unknown abilities. Forest scientist Peter Wohlleben's *The Hidden Life of Trees* shows how these organisms seek and provide help, cooperating and communicating – through the air and underground – in ways absent from forestry manuals, yet much alive in Tolkien's imagination.

Given this information, reasonable people should find the violence directed towards invasives troubling, if they know anything about it. As David Foster Wallace proposed, even a touch of cross-species empathy for as evolutionarily distant a creature as a lobster scrambles the wires of conventional ethics.

And "treasure?" In the US, economic damage from invasive species is estimated at $120 billion per year. That's about $370 per person – a staggering, even war-worthy sum. In response, the federal government spends about $3 billion annually, or $9 per person. While that number doesn't include money spent by the states, the problem clearly dwarfs the response. Someone might use this imbalance to argue that more should be done. Or, generations into the struggle, does it mean – with due respect to the earnest scientists and managers working in the field – that we aren't so serious about this protracted war?

Then what are we up to?

***

Cemeteries of all kinds abound along Potomac Creek. Despite the prolonged presence of Indigenous people, no people have proven to be reliable inhabitants. Like many other species, we appear and are apt to vanish.

My son recently found in a bulldozer's scrape a projectile of a type called a "notched Kirk." It dates back seven to nine thousand years – at least two millennia before the Great Pyramid and Stonehenge. The person who knapped it lived here many ages before it became possible to meet a Patawomeck Indian, the tribe after whom the English named the river and its tributary creek. The Creek might sensibly be named for a more durable native like the paw paw tree. The ubiquitous paw paw originally adapted to a now-extinct world of megafauna.

Upon all these stories, the Creek is transforming once again. Thousands of newcomers arrive to occupy its thinning forests and rising marshes. Some are speaking Spanish or Pashtun. The Creek is always a place of been heres and come heres.

***

The list of breakdowns is growing.

Recalling Cronin, boundaries are blurring. As lines between the Defense and State departments, the CIA, DHS, FBI, et al. muddied in the War on Terror, so ambiguity marks the fight against invasives. Such species, flora and fauna, terrestrial and aquatic, care nothing for our "org charts." Nor will action to mitigate their impacts ever fall within the scope of a single agency, or even a few. Add to this the vagaries of electoral, institutional, and budgetary politics, and the efficacy of *any* long-term action is questionable.

Consider Virginia. Every few years, the state issues an "Invasive Species Management Plan" or something with a similar title. The most recent, from 2018, lists seven goals "to minimize" harm inflicted by invasive species (even this imprecision evokes the War on Terror).[13] The plan itself was developed by the Virginia Invasive Species Advisory Committee (VISAC) in cooperation with the Virginia Invasive Species Working Group (VISWG). The state agencies involved in the plan's execution are VDACS, VDOF, VDH, VDGIF, VMRC, VIMS, and VDCR – if you guessed the "V" stands for Virginia, you're right – which, in turn, coordinate with federal agencies NISC, UDA-APHIS, USFWS, NPS, USFS, and various nongovernmental organizations.

Let us know how it goes. But still there remains the matter of simply living in the world.

***

This sounds corny, even a bit woo-woo, but after decades of teaching topics as varied as environmental politics and war and peace, I've found that by semester's end I can usually sort my students into two groups: those who see themselves as a part of the natural world, and those who don't. It is a matter of mindedness, of empathy. Only once we consciously embed ourselves into the world "taken on its own terms," as philosopher John Gray puts it,[14] can we speak meaningfully of the rights of people, other living things, and even places. A living world has no center.

***

Nearing its end, Potomac Creek flows with the tide past Crow's Nest Natural Area Preserve. In 1971 a developer proposed rezoning the Crow's Nest peninsula for 1,000 single-family residences and 7,000 apartments and townhouses, as well as two golf courses, four marinas, a heliport, and other commercial development. This never happened because people opposed this hellish plan and subsequent ones. Now considered a "biological gem" of Virginia's nature preserve system,

[13] "Virginia Invasive Species Management Plan 2018," Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation Virginia Invasive Species Advisory Committee, accessed May 25, 2023, https://www.invasivespeciesva.org/document/virginia-invasive-species-mananagement-plan-2018-final.pdf.

[14] John Gray, *The Silence of Animals: On Progress and Other Modern Myths* (London: Penguin, 2013), 77.

the 3,000-acre Crow's Nest holds two globally rare forest types, habitat for migratory songbirds of declining populations, and rare, intact soil profiles.

That said, flora and fauna aren't necessarily safe here. Up to eighty Crow's Nest beavers were killed in 2021 alone to ease flooding on roads beyond the preserve's boundaries. Under a lottery system waterfowl hunting (ducks, geese, teal) is seasonally permitted one day per week from September to January. Deer hunting is allowed, too. And here, as virtually everywhere, life is managed through the killing of invasives and other unwelcome species. To combat kudzu, for example, preserve managers spray the vines repeatedly with glyphosate (aka, the "Roundup" herbicide). Doing so frees the trees from a smothering invasive. But the long-term effects on the food chain of this chemical, banned in several countries, are at best unknown and highly controversial. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently reported that eighty percent of us have glyphosate in our urine.[15] Is this victory?

The "why" is never clear here, always just out of focus. If the *purpose* of Crow's Nest is to leave space for both people and nature, the *strategy* should be to build a "nature preserve" where non-human life is protected. To allow for the restart of something wild.

But true wildness is anathema to human planners. Instead, at Crow's Nest we search for a perfect peace at odds with reality; we seek, unsuccessfully, to kill off unwanted species that arrived after an unspecified date to create an impossibly static museum of life.

Let us know how it goes.

***

Winter becomes spring. Ancient cycles recur, and the Creek churns with millions of biota. Tree frogs ring. Eagles and herons nest again in the white bones of sycamores, above the tail-slaps of dying shad haplessly caught in a sun-warmed pond, while luckier companions move on through the cooler channels of the Creek. Quietly, green stiltgrass pushes upward through the litter of the forest floor.

***

In *Winter World*, the biologist Heinrich, himself a migrant, writes,

> *Each species experiences the world differently, and many species have capacities that are far different from ours. They can show us the* unimaginable*. Thus, the*

[15] "National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey: 2013-2014 Data Documentation, Codebook, and Frequencies," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, June 2022, https://wwwn.cdc.gov/Nchs/Nhanes/2013-2014/SSGLYP_H.htm.

> *greater our empathy with a variety of animals, the more we can learn.*[16]

The remarkable Heinrich stumbles only in his imaginative powers: humans can empathize with and learn from plants, too.

Plants like stiltgrass are on the move. We respond, thinking that just wars will repair the harms done us and restore the *status quo ante bellum*, the way things were before. We act to arrest such life and turn it back. To seal the borders from fecund nature in motion. From plants, from animals, from people.

Only if we see how our language and taxonomies of hierarchy are tricking us into resistance will we stop identifying as nature's victims. As science writer Fred Pearce observes, "Nature never goes back; it always moves on."[17] Life on Potomac Creek is showing us that we really aren't managing much at all. A purposeless war is literally unwinnable; it can only be endless or lost.

Another trap of our making. The story writes itself.

[16] Heinrich, "Winter World", 3.

[17] Fred Pearce, *The New Wild: Why Invasive Species Will Be Nature's Salvation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015), 193.