

IMPULSE

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Along with steep hills and rocky outcroppings and springs and clear creeks, it is the omnipresent Christmas fern, *Polystichum acrostichoides*, that distinguishes our highland landscape from the delta country where I grew up, where the land is flat and the soil deep, where there are no springs, where dirt-bottom streams run slow and muddy, and where ferns are comparatively few in both species and number.

In our hilly woods the dark, evergreen fronds of the Christmas fern are an environmental feature as representative of our region as are the saguaro cacti of the Arizona desert and the Spanish moss and live oaks of the Deep South. On some of our wooded slopes it forms dense evergreen mats, but even where it's sparser it is never altogether absent.

There are about twenty-five species of ferns here in this region, and although the Christmas fern is not my favourite of them I have considerable affection for it nonetheless. Because it is everywhere at hand, like a beloved commonplace, the Christmas fern insinuates itself disarmingly into the consciousness and becomes a reliable and familiar companion to the observant and respectful walker in the woods.

The Christmas fern is the only widespread evergreen fern here. Its leathery, dark green fronds remain visible, though perhaps supine and bedraggled by late winter, until replaced by new fronds in the spring. It does well under varying conditions of light and moisture, and it is easy to transplant.

I would never never tread heedlessly on a Christmas fern. Even while struggling for footing on the steepest and loosest slopes in our hills, I am at pains to avoid damaging them. It is a concern that has become

so customary on my walks that I would find another's less considerate attitude troubling.

Because I lived my childhood in another kind of terrain, these rocky little mountains and clear, rock-bottom creeks still feel exotic to me. And I'm glad this place seems always new, because the feeling of newness hones the senses and the imagination. No matter how well acquainted I become with these hills and hollows and tributaries, I never perceive them as ordinary. I realize that many here never notice Christmas ferns, but I always do and am ever-conscious of how integral they are to my love of these acres of wooded land.

Even though Christmas ferns are abundant in our woods, numerous even on the hill rising up abruptly from the back door of our cabin, I have wanted to see yet more of them in places even closer by. I have therefore taken some Christmas ferns from elsewhere and have moved them nearer to me so that I can see luxuriant masses of them from where I sit on our little back porch.

I did not take them from our own hills. Stingily, I did not want to move our own Christmas ferns from their places in our woods. Instead I stole some from an adjacent woods owned by a timber company that is in turn owned by people who have never even been near this land but who are nonetheless pleased to take its trees, frequently by methods that are ruinous to our hills and creeks and that make them ugly. I am entirely confident that these people who from afar care so little about the environmental health and beauty of this region care nothing at all about their Christmas ferns. I have presumed therefore to take them for myself, and my conscience is unbothered by my thievery.

But something else does disturb me about my shifting of ferns from one place to another, from where they grew from spores that landed in those places to other places where I've preferred them to be.

And I've moved not only ferns but tree seedlings and other plants and rocks, and even logs that I've wanted closer to our cabin so I can watch as they accumulate lichens and fungi and gradually decompose to become earth again.

What bothers me about all of my seemingly innocent relocating of all

of these materials, living and not, is the suspicion—no, the near certainty—that it manifests one of my species' most dangerous inclinations.

It seems clear to me that my impulse to carry Christmas ferns from afar and bring them nearer, to move rocks some yards through the woods, to transfer beech tree seedlings from nearby hollows to places near our cabin, or to roll old stumps down the hill, all because I like the way they look and want them in view ... it seems to me that this is the same impulse that drains swamps and destroys wetlands; that makes seaside golf courses of sand-dune shores; that channels rivers and streams, ruining natural habitat for the sake of human convenience; that depletes ground water to grow palm trees and lush lawns in deserts; and that obliterates meadows and woods to build gas stations and malls and expressways.

The impulse that leads me to make little changes in the environment around our cabin is different only in degree, not in kind, from the impulse to make the massive destructive environmental transformations that human beings have become capable of imposing on this planet.

But we are stuck with this impulse, as well as with others, equally dangerous. Nothing can be done to remove them from us. Nor can we reasonably blame (or congratulate) ourselves for having them. It was not after all by our own decision that we harbour them. These impulses to manipulate our environment to suit ourselves developed in us, along with every other human characteristic, as our species itself developed over millions of years of evolution.

But the danger now is that the characteristics that have enabled our species to overpower all others, to overpower even the world that made us, could soon, from deep and ineradicably within, unless we find a new and overriding wisdom, overpower and destroy us ourselves, as in a kind of berserk suicide.

ROBERT MCGOWAN'S fiction, personal essay, and art criticism are published in a variety of prominent literary, nature, and art journals, including *American Craft*, *American Forests*, *Art Papers*, *Blue Mesa Review*, *Connecticut Review*, *Dos Passos Review*, *The Fourth River*, and *South Dakota Review*. He lives in Memphis, Tennessee, USA.