

under the skin

by David Ackley

Every few days, on one of our walks, the dog and I go down to a shallow, quick river where I used to fish for brook trout and which still looks like trout water, though it no longer holds many.

A dirt path, double-tracked by the pickups of fishermen, runs along the right bank for a few hundred yards, bending left with the river, between it and a pond where beaver build their lodges and snip off alder and birch for nourishment, and where we see the occasional carousing otter, and in migrating season, merganser and buffle-head ducks, and sometimes as many as forty Canada geese. It's a pretty spot, with intermittent looks at the mountains, and the way the light fractures across the little peaks and valleys of the stream's riffles, shifting constantly from dark to bright and back again.

Occasionally, a pair of ducks or geese take up residence on the pond and raise a clutch, but it must be too small to support more than those few, a harder life than you might suppose from the idyllic appearance of the place.

The path comes to a dead end, closed off by forest growth, and, as usual, we climb down the river bank so the dog can sniff along the edge or drink and wet his feet in the cool shallows on this hot day. Here the river drops down a long bouncy riffle, then smooths out and narrows in perspective between looming grey boulders before it swings to the right into a cave of overhanging pines and disappears. Perhaps because it opens a space in the greenery like a long straight hallway that penetrates deep into a dwelling, you can sometimes glimpse the unexpected. I keep an eye out for deer or maybe a young black bear splashing across the shallows.

That's how, while the dog laps up his drink, his leash slack between us, I catch sight of the mother duck, a merganser by her red head, paddling quickly from the shore to the middle of the stream, followed close by a single puff of yellow down, tiny, bobbing

along in her wake. It seems odd that she'd risk her offspring to the current, though it rides over the little waves of the riffle buoyant as a ping-pong ball, keeping nicely close to her tail feathers.

And that there's only the one seems odd, too. By the time I think this, they've turned downstream and move rapidly away, a little faster than the current, which luckily is not especially heavy. She's paddling, making it harder than need be for the duckling to keep up.

And then it's gone. I haven't taken my eye away, haven't even blinked. There's been no disturbance at the surface, no sign of pursuit, not even a suspect ripple. Yet the small yellow puff is gone, and fails to reappear, though I watch and wait.

The mother paddles on without a glance back to betray that it ever existed.

I watch her all the way out of sight around the bend, realizing only then that she'd not taken flight, as you'd think she might have once the duckling was gone, if there'd been any threat.

I watch her all the way out of sight, unsure what it is I've just witnessed, save perhaps a small intimation of what lies under the surface, under the skin of the world, waiting.

