

## About Pedestrian Thoughts

Pedestrian Thoughts is a free semimonthly column by Lorianne Schaub. A longtime journal-keeper and essayist, Lorianne believes in the art of non-fiction prose, citing writers such as Annie Dillard, Virginia Woolf, and Willa Cather as her literary influences. Lorianne's essays are "pedestrian" in all senses of the word: ordinary and common, her prose rambles at a walker's leisurely gait.

If you'd like to subscribe to Pedestrian Thoughts, visit Lorianne's website at <http://www.lorianneschaub.com> or send email to [info@lorianneschaub.com](mailto:info@lorianneschaub.com).

## About Dr. Lorianne Schaub



A professor of writing and literature at Keene State College, Lorianne earned her BA from the University of Toledo, her MA from Boston College, and her PhD from Northeastern University, where she wrote a dissertation on 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century American nature writing. She also publishes a daily weblog, "Hoarded Ordinaries," which is available at

<http://www.lorianneschaub.com/blog>

In addition to her literary pursuits, Lorianne also teaches Zen meditation and is the co-founder of the Southern New Hampshire Zen Group. An avid birder and field botanist, Lorianne enjoys hiking, canoeing, and snow-shoeing with her husband, Chris, and her dog, Reggie. Following in Thoreau's footsteps, Lorianne makes it a habit to walk and write everyday, striving (as she strides) to "travel a great deal" in her adopted environs of Keene, NH.

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# Pedestrian Thoughts

## *A Natural History of the Ordinary*



by Lorianne Schaub

<http://www.lorianneschaub.com>

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Outside a chickadee is singing: already it is July, and the staghorn sumacs are starting to blossom into summer color. Yesterday I saw a lone catbird perched in the dead mountain ash outside our bedroom window; this morning I heard but did not see a catbird from the same spot. Although it's early in the day, it's late in the year, and already I lament time's passage: I've spent too much time indoors, too much time not writing, too much time not noticing, alone.

As I sit here writing, the usual worries take up their morning litany. Every morning I write, and every morning I worry: always I fret that the next word or sentence will not come. And yet something always does arise: in the silence after that chickadee, a robin starts his burbling chant, and in his eventual absence, some other bird will speak. Even the utter silence of no birdsong has a distinctive voice all its own: the sound of cars zooming down nearby Marlboro Street, someone's neglected alarm sounding across the street, the hidden incessant hum of the computer plugged in and charging. And even devoid of these external sounds, my body itself is not silent: my skull sings with rushing blood and pumping heart, the music of my own individual sphere.

At quiet moments like these, the internal and external blur. At each moment as I inhale and exhale, these two realms mingle and mix without my notice; even the echo of birdsong or passing traffic on my eardrum represents the interpenetration of two worlds. The infinitesimal avalanche of sound undulating across time and space triggers a neurological quiver in my ear, bones, then brain, hastened along by electrical sparks strung along countless neurons. So where does that instigating chickadee end, and where does my receptive ear begin? Does

that chickadee sense even subconsciously that I am here listening, that his song has fallen on a receptive vessel, that the wavelengths of his making have stubbed against the obstacle of my ear? Does the nature of his voiced vibration alter and transform after landing lightly on the membrane of my mind?

One would like to think that one's life has meaning; one would like to think that one's presence would be missed if one simply vanished, inexplicably, from existence. I know I'd miss today's chickadee if suddenly he and his kin vanished; would that chickadee return the compliment? Are individual lives mere trees in an infinitely isolated forest, falling without nary a sound? Surely trees themselves notice when one of their brethren falls: surely trees feel the vibration of earth and air initiated by such a cataclysmic crash. So what is the worth of mere human life: what difference does it make that I sit here writing as that catbird again sets up his wheezy, whining chant? Surely catbirds sing for a purpose: surely they sing to be noticed, to attract a mate and fend off rivals. Surely catbirds sing for an audience, for appreciation and notice: are we any different?

On Monday, after walking with the dog to campus to deliver this past semester's grades, I sat for a moment on a bench on the banks of the Ashuelot River and did nothing. As soon as I unleashed the dog, he disappeared, finding his inevitable way into the river where he swam oblivious to care. In the meantime, I sat motionless on that bench, watching the water flow, enjoying the simple pause I'd dreamt about for days: a chance to begin anew, the world and my work-weary eyes feeling refreshed. Even then and there, a half mile from this house with its dead mountain ash, a catbird called as traffic roared and the dog, damply emergent from the river, snapped at an invisible gnat. That place—both the green-shaded site beneath maples and my own inner sanctum that found purity in a pregnant pause—had been there all along, uninvestigated and forgotten.

Peace is imminently at hand, yet we either forget or refuse to touch it, to stop, to reconnect. Taking a cue from the dog with his leap-before-you-look approach, on Tuesday I drove to Goose Pond, swimsuit under my shorts and shirt, to ignore posted prohibitions and take a surreptitious swim. The place where I swam was on the shady backside of a piney peninsula; only a narrow dirt path led down to a silt-bottomed shore. Steeped in the silence and solitude of morning, I slowly floated in the shallows of what Thoreau termed earth's eye then returned to the dirt path where I stretched onto the earth, my shirt spread on the ground like a blanket. Stretched to my length between earth and sky, I let the sun dry my skin as red-eyed vireos, black-throated green warblers, and eastern wood pewees sang from the trees overhead, the air zipping with dragonflies.

Religions around the world see water as a symbol of renewal: water, an agent of either life or death. Floating in a pond, you are totally receptive and passive, entirely at the whim of whatever force keeps you buoyant, unseen. Water is the ultimate emblem of interpenetration: as I floated in the shallows at Goose Pond, my toes skimmed a muddy, leaf-littered bottom while brown, tannin-steeped water completely filled my ears, the very hollows of my skull. The waters that make up my body—blood and sweat and snot—swelled to meet the waters that supported it, my skin the only thrilling, nerve-netted screen between that cosmic mingling. Is it any accident that both the ancients and Thoreau himself saw time as a river—the stream we all go a-fishing in—and that mortality is perpetually figured as an enormous gaping ocean, the waters from which life emerges and to which it ultimately returns? This pond, any pond, is the earth's own baptismal font, the site of an immersion embodying both death and new life.



We're all in the swim of it, this great cosmic ocean, whether we feel the chill of water on our skin or not. The air like water undulates with vibrations coursed across space, a great mythic tsunami linking your life with mine, with all. The silent splashes of even my slow swimming spread slyly from this center, rippling into a universe well versed in tremor and wave. Light is wave and so is wind; wind, in turn, is a tactile sign of spirit itself. And so even our smallest movements—even our secret, silent thoughts, swimming slowly—reverberate into the liquid ether of our lives: your vibrations meshing into mine, and ours mingling with those of the Infinite.

It might have been a crime, that brief dip in Goose Pond, but it felt divine. There were several chickadees and at least one catbird calling from the pines and maples that fringe the pond: my soul hearkened at the thought that they alone had witnessed my surreptitious swimming, the warblers and vireos and pewees being too intent on their own songs to pay heed to mine. But the chickadees and that sole calling catbird felt the tremor of my secret splash, their calls quickening, electric, at the reverberation of that wave.

