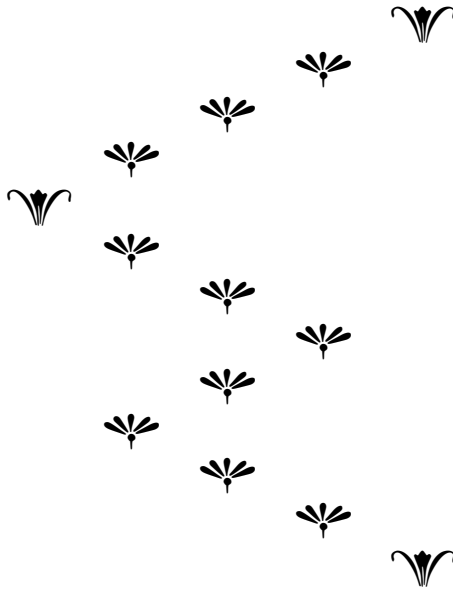


TRAIL MAGIC



Felicia Mitchell

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DOWN BY THE RIVERSIDE

I laid down my burden down by the riverside
just as a black bear appeared in the pasture
where I had been counting sheep,
sheep that safely grazed while the bear stood,
tall, staring, listening to me singing a hymn
as if I were waiting to watch a preacher emerge
to dip me in the Holston like a penitent
instead of waiting to see what the bear would do—
and then it did what bears do, ambled on,
up the hill and through the brush away, away—
by then, I had stopped singing, the only holy need
I had gone with the bear across the hill,
the sheep dog silent in the field white as a holy ghost.

AFTERNOON AT ALVARADO

Sometimes a walk
is both a vigil
and a requiem,
a white bloodroot
emerging from its leaf
as much a reminder
of how life cycles
as a sign of spring—
bloodroot petals are
as precious as tears.
Hepatica blooms in rocks
living colonies, roots enmeshed
the way friends
end up friends for life,
their stories intermingling.
Hiking with a group of friends
on a Tuesday afternoon
can feel like church
when one who is missing this hike
out of so many hikes together
feels as present as a phoebe calling
from a tree in the woods.
"For where two or three
are gathered together,"
Jesus said, "there am I too
in the midst of them."
Today we gathered like that,
my friends and I, needing
to be in the midst of the divine
and each other too,
when communion was as natural
as the air we breathed.

TEXTING WHILE HIKING

It does happen, sometimes,
the click of my fingers
alongside the clack of my feet
on a rocky trail,
just as it did the other day
crossing Buzzard Rock.
I am not ashamed to admit it.
Silurian, that rock—
so old, millions of years old,
it can ground me
and put everything
(or almost everything)
into perspective,
and not just the panoramic vista
with big, big sky.
Even texting while hiking across it
can feel like something ordained.
Keeping spirit in sync
with a friend far removed
in our life's journeys—
my feet taking up where his left off—
there is no judgment from sun
or sandstone or afternoon sky
when there is a way to seek each other's company
across the ages, across some rocks,
across the miles between us.

BY THE CLINCH RIVER, ST. PAUL

I was looking for pawpaws
and found the pawpaws
but there were no pawpaws

so I listened to the birds,
some birds I did not know
and some birds I recognized
the way I would recognize
myself even before I was born.

By the river, an osprey called,
and then it flew and called again.
I watched it and listened again.
A coal train came down the tracks

so I paused in my own tracks
and watched it through the leaves.
There were so many pawpaws
and no pawpaws at all

so I kept walking down to the falls,
where I turned to pick up a walnut,
and there it was, the one pawpaw
I had been looking for but not finding,
blinded as I was by the trees.

Carrying my pawpaw back,
I knew sometimes one is enough.
One pawpaw, one morel,
one monarch sighting in a season.
One love as biodiverse as a river
where everything you need is there,
even one pawpaw, ripe as time.

FLATIRONS

Each time I hike the Flatirons,
I meet a new challenge—
sometimes one my son assigns,
sometimes one that arrives
like an epiphany as I meander up
and decide to try something new,
something like scrambling across rocks
as far as I can scramble, safely,
such a meager achievement
in the big picture of Boulder's scene
(and yet a huge success for me).
Last time, on a new trail, I got lost,
the rocks I rested on another planet.
Every direction I looked?
It all looked like the same gray matter.
I could have used my phone.
I could have panicked and called my son.
But one thing I learned early on
is to leave early enough on a hike
to have time to find yourself before dark.
I also depend on voices I hear,
this time the voice of a young mother
carrying her toddler who paused with me
when I called out to her on her ascent
(opposite to my stalled descent).
She mothered me with a bandaid for my ankle
(scraped while walking in circles)
and pointed me in the right direction
before I ambled on down my rocky way,
waving farewell to her and her little boy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Felicia Mitchell was born in South Carolina and spent her childhood there and on the coast of North Carolina with her parents John A. and Audrey Mitchell and three brothers (John Henry, Charles, Graeme). Following graduation from Booker T. Washington High School in Columbia, she received BA and MA from the University of South Carolina. After completing a PhD at The University of Texas at Austin in 1987, she moved to southwestern Virginia, where she currently resides. Felicia taught English, including creative writing, at Emory & Henry College for many years before retiring with emeritus status. Her scholarly work includes *Her Words: Diverse Voices in Contemporary Women's Poetry*. Poetry collections include *A Mother Speaks*, *A Daughter Listens: Journeying Together with Dementia* and *Waltzing with Horses*. In recent years, she has blogged about cancer survivorship for *Cure Today*. She volunteers with the Mt. Rogers Appalachian Trail Club and hikes often solo or with friends, including Second Sunday Ramblers and a lifelong friend referenced in "Blue-eyed Mary, My Old Friend."

Reading this stunning book of poems by Felicia Mitchell, I feel like a child released from the confines of a well-manicured lawn. Mitchell's *Trail Magic* allows me to wander freely (in my mind's eye) through the wild places that many of our fellow creatures call home. Even the titles of these gorgeous poems are enticing: "A Love Poem for My Son at Wilburn Ridge" (so poignant and one of my favorites) and "Birding at the Salt Wells, Saltville," to name a few. And while the poems in this exquisite collection are, in part, odes to the natural world, they are also the multi-layered, nuanced, and superbly crafted work of a skilled writer. Spending time with Mitchell's magical and deeply moving poetry is like walking wilderness trails with a naturalist—one who knows not only the names of every bird and flower but also the innermost workings of the human heart—her own as well as the hearts of others.

—Terri Kirby Erickson, *Night Talks: New & Selected Poems*

The magic of Felicia Mitchell's *Trail Magic* lies in the healing enchantment she finds on southwestern Virginia pathways and occasionally trails farther afield. In "Landscape with Shoes, Stewarts Creek," she writes: "Not much lasts, not the sound of water rushing/or a vireo singing in a tree whose name I'll forget/before I forget why I wanted to remember it all." Transience, uncertainty, self-awareness—all stated humbly yet wisely amid the bolstering presence of the natural world. Again, at this creek: ". . . the leaves, the twigs, the mud, the grass,/ skin and bones inside a simple pair of shoes." Mitchell's poems pulse with empathy for the vulnerable. After rescuing a creature from bike tires on the Creeper Trail, she reflects: "The millipede may not know to be grateful,/ the course of its life its own mystery." But we can be grateful for the fertile habitat of this poet's mind as she traverses a particular place.

—Suzanne Stryk, *The Middle of Somewhere: An Artist Explores the Nature of Virginia*

The poems in Felicia Mitchell's *Trail Magic* are decidedly more existential than in previous collections. As is consistent in her writing, though, these are poems of a hiker, someone who has spent a life connected to the natural landscape. As a reader, I am suspended within this vital landscape as the narrator of the poems ponders the complicated vicissitudes of growing older. As many writers turn to nature to reminisce or find symbolic meaning, Mitchell's poems demonstrate a life lived within the landscape among the community of birds, etc. Existentially, the life of a hiker usurps the dilemma or search for meaning. Within the landscape is a brightness of being—a profundity of now. I am so moved by this work of poems. As a hiker myself, I feel so connected through them.

—Jim Harrison, Director of Outdoor Programs and Semester-a-Trail, Emory & Henry University