

Maple River Syrup



Drawing by Jim Duby

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We pull out from the launching site at Blackwater bridge at 9:30 am in the middle of February, excited to go upstream for the first time in perhaps a year. Last month Bill lost his father and has been doing his grieving largely without the river. My mind is seriously overloaded on too many levels, but to get me through I have been singing a song to myself, all day long at work, that goes to the tune of the Happy Wanderer (warning: this song is seriously addictive for the weary mind):

I am the Multi Processor
 I do five things at once;
 I welcome interruptions,
 But I focus for the nonce.

Falderee, falderahh, falderee, falderahahaha
Falderee, falderahh, I focus for the nonce.

These are difficult times for the nation and I am acutely aware of being in a kind of civil war quandary, not unlike the years that followed Whitman's publication of *Leaves of Grass*. As we saw earlier, he had a reasonable position: avoid bloodshed in the present, try simply to contain the problem by insisting that new states be free, and then await the coming of conscience to the south.

Today, I suspect, we would call his a preference for cold war rather than violent regime change. The determination of both sides to have their way at the expense of peace and the union was extraordinary. How can any human make decisions of this kind? I have been opposed to

every war America has fought since I was old enough to be taught the five reasons for a just war according to St. Thomas Aquinas. I was fifteen.

But these past couple of months as I have stood on the local busy corner where peace Orlando has been holding up its signs to eight lanes of intersecting traffic, I have struggled to know what to write on a sign that would make sense of the complex issues. It isn't easy to define a free soil democrat's position in one paragraph. It must have been clear in the Civil War, as it is not here now, that both sides had God on their side, the one in whom we trust. The proposed war on Iraq unfortunately looks too much like a renewal of the Crusades after nearly a thousand year's pause.

Blackwater Creek knows none of this, doesn't ask us to honk for peace or hold up a flag. That's what I did the first time I went out to Colonial and Orange Avenues. I wanted to show my country men, women, and children that I felt patriotic in doing so, to be supporting an idea of my own about how to handle these extraordinary moments. In hindsight, I regret the echo of religion in the "Honk for Jesus" mode since America is about the end to religious persecution and wars.

Many honk, most are non-responsive, and a few give me the finger. Given no other way to respond, not even one word, unless they roll the window down and holler, they choose the obscene. Others do the imperial thumbs down or shake their heads or frown their opposition. I try to read every fellow citizen as the cars cruise by. Most are surprised to see the small demonstration in the midst of their busy Saturday noons.

The Blackwater seems to have no human traffic but us. She carries, however, a billion flags along the banks on both sides. The trees are almost all bare, with a few beginning the spring green, but the red maples have put out such an incredible amount of seedpods that they look at first like a magnificent new growth of full red leaves. Except for these solid red masses, you can see through the swamp on both sides all the way to daylight on the horizon. When our kayaks pass under them, we see there's a bright sinewy and muscular form to each cluster of samaras.

When you were a child, did you tear one apart at the seed and use the two gooey sides to stick one on your nose? You can see the delicate ridging of the wing on this seed by holding it up to the light. It has all the form of a great raptor's wing with a widening and lengthening of primary feathers, with a decrescendo at the end. Maple seeds come in twos and you can make the pair twirl downward like a red-shouldered hawk descending a thermal. Each pair droops from a single thin thread in bunches that make me hungry. Today they seem to have clusters of these arching up over themselves in gestures of excess befitting the courts of Europe's baroque "maniarchs."

The sky is bright above and the air quite cool. The current is swift and the river fat and dark. Wherever there are any snags jutting out from her black smoking body, a wedge of maple seedlings gather among the other floating debris and spread a light red and butterscotch blanket on the water's surface while the river rolls underneath. For a time they are the only fixture in the flow, around and about.

Back deep in the woods I scan for deer or bear, but today the truth is about the love-birds chasing and chipping after each other for reproduction time. The strangest story emerges as some warblers along the left side (without binoculars I can't be sure what kind) are making their way upstream with us. It is impossible to tell whether a little grey squirt dodging this way and that is

the same bird each time, but my mind creates perhaps one bird out of many who is following or accompanying us.

When I call this possibility to Bill's attention, he is skeptical with me as he must always be, so I tell him about how frequently a yellow-throated warbler will "hike" Fall Creek with me, in upstate NY, for several miles. It has something to do, I think, with keeping a pace on the path. One will choose a side and follow along, usually chirping all the way. After a while, you keep looking to see that black forehead and the brighter than canary throat.

Our aim today is to make our way up to the confluence of the Blackwater with Seminole Creek, but I am not sure we have enough time for that against today's heavy flow. Most of the congestion of hyacinths and other water-floaters has been swept clear in the November flooding, it seems, and we move without delay around familiar bends. Now a kingfisher is dislodged by our appearance and launches the first of many flights ahead, shooting out directly like a skeet, then arching to a new perch. The wings seem like tumbling thin triangles, rapidly flashing across that white neck band. He lets out a raspy glawgling that signals a certain indignity, I always assume, at being disturbed, and perhaps a warning to a mate that he is heading out.

At some point after Moccasin Spring, where we see a pair of young men camping and later fishing, we start to look at double channels and eventually take a move deeper into the swamp on the right. Leaving the main channel, we start to get into river-in-the-round where the density of trees is uniform and one can no longer define the creek by a tree line with occasional snags. The water here is shallower and no cutting of the channel has ever been done. But we are still going upstream.

The clearest sign of this is the thin and narrow descending navy of maple-seed samaras. They move ever so lightly over the surface back in here, a very slow motion of the kind a batter needs to meet a Nolan Ryan fastball. Bill is up ahead threading us through the debris and the trees, knee deep in Wekiva. You have to be gauging the distance between each pair of trunks up against the thirty-two inch width of the kayak. Soon we are bellying over logs and sandbars, the flotilla of leaves and seedlings is harder and harder to locate, and we are enjoying the possibility of being boxed in.

No warbler leads the way now and no kingfisher would be caught dead in here. This would be a good place to find fifty white ibis getting ready to rook, their long orange beaks twitching through the mud and mussels for their brunch of larvae and such. My mind begins to wonder about the millions of maple seeds. What a cache of food this would be for some hungry critter. Are there seed-eating fish or turtles that awaken to this early springtime feast? What does it take for one of these pods to win the lottery and be the next generation of river maple?

Just about the time the current disappears, Bill spots up ahead an opening to the creek's main channel and after some struggling and humping—whatever word can describe the sudden throwing forward of your shoulders with the quick hurry-up force of your butt to catch up—we gradually move the kayaks over bars of sand and log into a free-floating status. It ain't pretty, but it works.

Back on the open trail again, we make our way past some old pilings that mark the place where the old railroad grade was constructed for the extraction of the old growth cypress trees. Here the channel divides into three, each with its own large rusted culvert which the rangers are planning to remove soon. They too have to wait for permits to do this un-construction work.

Why should something built without a permit seventy years ago await the approval of another state agency? Ironies abound back here, but the system for protecting our watershed is so far working and eventually we can all cheer when the Blackwater flows naturally in this lumber-forgotten-spot which only a few have ever even seen.

Bill recalls the day when the water was so much lower in the culvert that he kayaked through the thing for its twenty-five foot length. Now if you tried it, you'd be scraping all the way through, since the water is filling two-thirds of the six-foot diameter. Bill is considering doing it anyway. The river has carved out channels on all sides of these construction items and forgotten altogether why they were ever here.

We stop for lunch and discuss much of our river business and the course we are working on together called The River Community. I wish that Freud had studied the river rather the dream-recollections of his patients. Psychiatry would now make more sense I think if sublimation of this kayak kind were at the foundation of the soul's understanding. Emerson said, "Wisdom consists in keeping the soul liquid." He was trying to explain how to remain creative in a chaotic world of chores and wars. We resist channel and we resist being stranded without it. We fight for peace, or for war. But keeping the spirit or soul liquid is indeed the solution to most problems.

Deep in the Blackwater I can hear Bill up ahead now, probably a football field away, whistling like a boy. It makes me want to cry for joy that his grief is here, now, for the nonce lifted. It took me four years with my own dad's passing, to get back to level. I take this agony of seed as a sign of the very complicated postures of patriarchy that culture has cooked up, whereas the river can carry all that away in a simple spring flowing.

Reluctantly we turn about, with yet an hour left on our schedule. What took nearly three hours upstream will rewind in one. Suddenly, however, a transformation occurs that cannot be described. Was it the wind? Did the rising heat of the early afternoon cause it? We descend in a steady stream of rosy maple seeds and are surrounded, indeed conducted along a pink and red carpet. A feeling of exhilaration, of parade begins to rise in us. You can't really get white water thrills in Florida, but this is like that, only silky smooth and placid, like Saranac Lake in early loon-day.

Archie Carr has a beautiful description of jubilee in the St. Johns when he comments on Bartram's sighting of the same. That's a frenzy of fish that no science seems to be able fully to explain, but this is a gigantic winding procession of maple genes, covering now most of the center of the creek on both sides of the kayak and when a narrow turn arrives, the full stream is red and pink. Nothing could be finer. A feast and a procession fit for kings.