



Turn, look down: there is no city; this is the center of a forest

Margaret Atwood, 1970

Vale of Evoca, 2015



Going There to Be There

by Robert Burley

I look through my camera down into the Don River Valley. I'm standing on the north sidewalk of the Prince Edward Viaduct – more popularly known as the Bloor Viaduct – a bridge built between 1915 and 1918 to span the valley and connect Toronto's east neighborhoods to its downtown core. The traffic on the bridge is urban and frenetic; the valley floor, caught on my viewfinder 50metres below, is natural and idyllic. I'm physically fixed in the city proper, but my mind is lost in the primal ravine, a lush green expanse with its own complex system of creeks and rivers extending for miles into the city in all directions. I'm standing in a spot I ought to know well: it's less than a ten-minute walk from my home and on a thoroughfare I cross and re-cross at least twice a day. Travelling "up here" my movement is constrained, like a chess piece, by the urban grid. "Down there" the travel restrictions are fewer, and more mysterious: I can wander, amble, meander, and explore.

I discovered the world below when I first moved to Toronto, in the 1970s. Since then, for most of my adult life, I've lived within a mile or two of it. From my present position I can see the spot where I began photographing for this project some four years ago. I'd parked my car on a service road just off the expressway entrance ramp to the northwest, and I'd headed with my camera into an open meadow dissected by footpaths leading toward the river. It was a warm day in August 2012, and I was wearing shorts and sneakers, which initially meant I was more than comfortable. Until, that is, I decided to step off the path and bushwhack my way through an area overgrown with Manitoba maples, dog-strangling vine and, of course,

stinging nettles, another ubiquitous gift of the valley. In five minutes my calves were on fire with inflammatory histamines, but I didn't stop – I was too busy making photographs. After about 20 minutes I decided to take a break. I looked around me, and even up above me, but for the life of me I couldn't figure out where I'd come from. I tried walking 20 metres in one direction, but didn't recognize anything; I took a similar walk in the opposite direction – still nothing looked familiar.

I had no idea where I was. Or, rather, I knew exactly where I was: I was lost.

Not just lost, but lost in a place less than two miles from City Hall, and about a mile from my home of 25 years. The succession of responses I had to this fact were as interesting as they were disturbing: panic (I'm lost!), then disbelief (how the hell can I be lost?), and, finally, delight (I'm *lost*). And then, truly finally: I have been here before. As a child growing up in small town eastern Ontario, I'd experienced this kind of short-term displacement on a hundred hikes through the woods – this uncanny knowledge that the wilderness was perpetually on my doorstep. To rediscover this as an adult was somehow even more uncanny. When I was "lost" in the woods as a child, the magnitude of my secret was modest: I was surrounded by a population of 4,000 people – at most – who were unaware of the adventure they were missing. Now, "lost" in the Don Valley four decades later, there were three million captive people who had no idea of the magical freedom a stone's throw away from them.

It was the perfect disconnect.



Don Valley Brickworks, 1983
Over the last twenty-five years numerous areas in the parkland system have been re-naturalized. The image above shows the Brickworks as an active industrial site in the early 1980's and the image below shows the recently opened park on the same site.



Don Valley Brick Works Park, 2016

During the intervening four years, my dozens of photographic rambles have been defined by two perspectives: the view looking down into the vast tracts of Toronto's green space, and the view from an explorer's eyes. It has been a study in surprise. Though a long-time resident of Toronto, I was progressively more astonished by the extent to which the city I live in was shaped by nature.

The surprise started at my first meeting with the project team from the City of Toronto Planning and Parks, Forestry, & Recreation departments. I was presented with a list of 86 sites, which were "limited" to just the wild or re-wilded parts of the parklands. After a quick scan of the list, I realized I hadn't visited over two-thirds of them. No great worry, I thought, I had all kinds of written information, along with traditional maps, not to mention satellite imagery and wayfinding apps. I was certain my photographic task would be a straightforward one that could be completed with time and effort. However, I'd neglected to account for the overwhelming scale and complexity of the parklands. Making landscape photographs requires an awareness that's only acquired by walking and exploring, a process that in turn demands time and attention, two of the scarcer commodities in today's world. Google Earth views don't really help when your subjects, like the rivers of Heraclitus, are never the same twice. There is a reason Ansel Adams once described landscape photography as "the supreme test... leading to the supreme disappointment." And I was about to explore and document the equivalent of approximately 30 Central Parks, many of which had been fragmented

and interwoven into residential, industrial and high-density developments over an area of 630 square kilometres. The ravines, Robert Fulford writes in his book *Accidental City*, "are to Toronto what canals are to Venice and hills are to San Francisco. They are the heart of the city's emotional geography." But Fulford also writes, "Torontonians have difficulty seeing their environment. We look at it in pieces and fail, through inattention, to see it whole."

Connecting this disconnection, seeing the city environment "whole," is what the book is, hopefully, about. It comes at a time, when, as landscape historian John Stilgoe puts it, our technology-driven propensity for "tuning out" the natural and even physical world is spiking. Mind you, it could be argued that Torontonians have been tuning out the natural world for close to half a century. In the 1970s and the early '80s parkland areas were still being described by city politicians and planners as "space left over after planning." They were seen as inconveniences: Their natural forms stubbornly refused to conform to the urban grid. "Nature" at the time was supposed to be accessed either through the city's smaller formally designed parks – or via a two-hour drive north to cottage country.

While the digital age has seduced some into tuning out the landscape, others, especially urbanites, have found refuge in nature. Over the last 25 years, as more of Toronto's parklands have become enclosed by dense urban development, they have simultaneously become active Arcadian retreats for those residents living close, and not so close, to them. In response, city planners have started to connect the parkland areas with new multi-use trails and

bridges, and to provide new street access points to areas previously described as impenetrable. Paradoxically, neglect might have forced Toronto's ravines to adapt and even thrive. Toronto today enjoys the largest urban tree canopy in North America and has possibly the greatest access to inner-city landscape experiences of any city on the continent. Contrary to my wishful daydream on that warm August day four years ago, I was not really the only person enjoying the ravine magic. Nudge a native Torontonian, and you will find stories of childhood play involving woods, creeks, and rivers in the ravines – secret places that were as exclusively all their own, as mine were.

One such Torontonian was conservationist Charles Sauriol, who formed a deep bond with the parklands long before they were known as such. Sauriol's lifelong relationship with the ravines began when he was an east-end kid exploring Taylor Creek in the early 20th century. He wrote extensively about his experiences with the 45th troop of the Boy Scouts who took him camping in the upper Don Valley, visiting boy-mythic places like the Big Hill, the Pine Wood, and the Swimming Hole. (We had a Big Hill and a Pine Woods in our town too.) As an adult, he purchased a small cabin at the fork of the Don River and became Toronto's weekend Thoreau. Except Sauriol found his Walden Pond *inside* the city. Over a period of some 40 years, Sauriol not only wrote about the ravines, but became a major advocate for their importance to the fabric of Toronto. He researched their history and meticulously identified myriad species of plant life and birds; he even undertook

tree-planting programs to re-forest parts of the hillsides close to his cabin.

Landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, the designer of Central Park in New York, once called urban forests "the lungs of a city." Charles Sauriol would have gone further. He would have described Toronto's ravines not only as lungs, but also as the city's heart and lifeblood. For Sauriol the parklands weren't ancillary to the city, they *were* the city. He wrote, "As the years go on and the population increases, there will be need of these lands and more; and in life where so much appears futile, this one thing will remain."

Having spent four years witnessing the therapeutic magic of the ravines he treasured, I can better appreciate his statement "I would just go there to be there." I hope that this book does its small part in encouraging people to venture out on a warm summer afternoon or a bracing winter morning, to descend a few hundred metres from home, step off the grid, and do the rarest, most valuable thing any urban dweller can do in the course of his or her distracting life: Get lost.