Visions of Kaczynski

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About the time I signed my rental lease for a log cabin in the Catskills, three FBI agents posing as land surveyors lured Theodore Kaczynski from his grim shed in Montana and arrested him as the Unabomber. "Hey, Ted, can you help me find on this map where a line is?" said an agent, holding up topographic bait. In 25 years the reclusive Kaczynski had invited only two people into his messy home, a census taker and a local hunting partner. He had prepared for the police. A loaded rifle always stood by his door. A hanging cord could trigger an incendiary bomb that would destroy the detailed record of his life, some 22,000 note pages on everything from mixing explosive powders to cross-pollinating wild and domestic carrot plants. But for some reason the land surveyors didn't scare him. He leaned out far enough for an agent to grab his skinny arm and twist him into handcuffs. His hands and hair were caked with dirt, perhaps from spending time in his root cellar, and he wore a dark shirt and trousers with torn knees. The agents led him to a nearby chalet for a conversation. "Don't talk to me about the UNABOM case," Kaczynski insisted. "For the next five hours he talked about little things, fishing, and his beloved garden," reported Robert Graysmith in his book *Unabomber: A Desire to Kill.* "Finally, the agents just told him, 'You're under arrest.'"

Within hours, the media transformed this nondescript cabin with weathered wooden siding, old tarpaper roofing, two small windows, and a sooty stove pipe into the most notorious piece of real estate in the country. It was a hermit's nut house, a psychopath's tool shed, a Walden gone mad. And it made me wonder, for the first time, if I was subconsciously following a darkness of my own. After 16 years of apartment living in New York City, I was moving into a cabin with a broken TV roof antenna, a wood stove, leftover mouse traps, and no neighbors in sight except on summer weekends. In Manhattan, my therapist wore a grave look on her face when she asked, "You mean, you may go several days at a time without seeing anyone?"

My own journey into the woods began at my mid-town apartment where pigeons occasionally cooed on the fire escape as my only wild visitors. Living by Grand Central Station, I commuted to the Connecticut suburbs where my office at a small environmental magazine on an industrial back street overlooked an automobile repair garage. With my windows opened for fresh air, I listened all day to a discordant symphony of riveting, welding, spraying, and manly barking as the mechanics shouted above the noise. Perhaps it was an odd soundtrack for writing articles about forests and oceans, but many things about the magazine weren't what they seemed. The publisher often refused to pay bills until threatened with lawsuits. The advertising department called people interviewed for articles and asked them to buy ads as well. The managing editor rewrote quotations into her preferred style of English. For my own unhappy reasons, I kept the job and quietly seethed. But I finally slammed my windows shut when workmen poured fresh tar on the roof of the garage. I refused to breathe their carcinogens.

My solace came from walking each morning and evening between the train station and office. A shortcut led me along an industrial frontage road beside a small tidal

river that emptied into Long Island Sound. An oil barge sometimes floated at the dock pilings for an aging oil tanker with rusty seams. Being an environmentalist, I noticed with reassurance the precautionary yellow oil boom loosely lassoing the barge in the water. Farther down the road stood a three-story asphalt mixer aimed like a cannon across town. Some mornings, the burner inside the mixing barrel flamed like a rocket engine, while dump trucks waited in line to fill up with steaming loads of road dough. The suburbs had a bottomless appetite for fresh asphalt.

Amid the ugliness nature flourished. The town had even designated a park at the grassy end of the road where a split-rail fence protected a bench and a tree. As small as an office, the park seemed like a joke. Yet I discovered abundant bird life inhabiting the nearby marsh and mud flats. New at birding, I was excited to identify anything, such as the cormorants that stood on old pier pilings with their black wings held open like vampire capes to dry in the sun. Along the marsh edge, a great blue heron often waited motionless with its dagger beak ready to spike minnows from the shallows. At low tide, sandpipers sprinted across the mud flats, inspecting snails and other tiny debris. In late summer, ospreys arrived, following fish upriver. Early one morning, I was lucky enough to watch an osprey swoop down, unzip a glassy length of water, and then rise with a silver fish in its talons like a torpedo keel.

All of this activity delighted me. It made the world bigger than my office malaise. A shopping cart sunk to its basket in the mud flats became my Statue of Liberty.

In time I was fired, a harsh but healthy remedy for my hatred of the job. After carrying home my Rolodex and files, I began writing as a freelancer, determined to pursue my own ambitions after wallowing in the amateurish atmosphere of the magazine. All I missed from commuting was the river. In Manhattan, my sidewalk offered three anorexic trees and a fire hydrant. For nature, I had to wait until the weekends when by bus or train I rode out into the Highlands, an ancient mountain range worn down to stony hills that stretched from northern New Jersey across the Hudson River at Bear Mountain. All day, I hiked on the Appalachian Trail through surprisingly wild forests only forty miles from Manhattan. Coyotes dropped furry scat on the paths. Turkey vultures soared over the ridges. Indian pipes sprouted in the deep forest shade. From several summits, called *tornes* after the Dutch settlers, I could see Manhattan in a gap between the green hills like a ship with silvery art deco masts docked against the wilderness.

I cherished this illusion. Seated on a sunny rock, serenaded by crickets and sipping from my canteen, I enjoyed the best of a summer day. Yet I wondered why at dusk I returned to the steel-and-glass canyon lands of Manhattan. The landscape of my life seemed as disjointed as Jekyll-and-Hyde.

Months after launching my freelance career, I landed a magazine assignment that sent me to Ecuador on the sort of adventure that had been my fantasy in Connecticut. I investigated shrimp farming, a lucrative business that devastated coastal mangrove forests by clearing the trees for large shrimp-breeding ponds. For several days, I interviewed environmentalists and government officials in the city of Quito in the Andes.

Then I rode buses down to the coastal provinces and traveled by boat to remote villages to observe the standoff between subsistence fishermen who trolled and clammed in the mangrove channels, and armed guards who patrolled the earthen walls of the shrimp ponds. Sitting in the middle was the best form of reporting.

After a week of gathering more than enough information, I caught the night bus back to Quito. Tired, satisfied, and eager to return home, I shoved my bags under the seat and soon relaxed. Unlike the daytime bus driver, who had played salsa and rap as loud as factory machinery on the tinny speakers, this driver turned the music low enough for people to sleep. And at night I only caught headlight glimpses of the steep canyon walls of tropical vegetation as we followed the winding valleys up into the Andes. Careening down the road in daylight, I recalled stories of South American bus disasters, but in darkness I hardly noticed our ascent. Instead, I lost myself in a book by Rick Bass, a prolific nature writer who had chosen to settle in an isolated Montana valley inhabited by elk, grizzlies, and Paul Bunyan-sized characters.

By mid-book, I decided to live in my own mountain valley. After all, I could just as easily sit at my computer in a cabin in the Catskills as in my Manhattan apartment. It would be cheaper, quieter, and prettier. Rather than sipping my morning coffee and gazing across the street at the YMCA's shower room window cracked open to reveal a young man soaping his groin, I could wake up to the flute music of wood thrushes. No longer would I spend my lunch hour fretting over bad news in *The New York Times;* instead, I could draw and write in my nature journal. At night, I wouldn't envy other writers invited to book parties and VIP lounges. I could stand under the stars listening to coyotes howl. By the time the bus reached Quito, I had fantasized a wild and exciting future for myself.

After looking at Catskill rentals from A-frames to ski chalets, I found the perfect place: a dark brown log cabin with a forest green roof practically camouflaged among hemlocks on a hillside overlooking a stream. Standing on the porch above the stream bank, I felt like a ship's captain taking charge of the surrounding woods from my railing.

Inside, the cabin had a stone fireplace, wood stove, and picture windows. The rear had been divided into a small bedroom, bathroom, utility room, and kitchen alcove. A cozy loft upstairs under the cathedral ceiling promised an ideal writing space. And I knew there was a creative legacy here. The previous tenant had written a children's book. The landlord had composed blues songs. He already expected me to write a novel. The rent was a mere $415 a month. In Manhattan, people paid that much on dry cleaning and parking.

To learn the lay of the land, I scrambled up the hillside on switchbacking deer paths until reaching an old woods road on a flatter slope of beech trees. It beckoned for the future. Turning back, I bounded down through the hemlock needle duff and spotted the big green cabin roof at the bottom of the trees. I felt like a kid again. Then to my side, partly hidden behind a natural stone bench, three wild turkeys marched smartly

uphill. On strong neck stalks their purplish heads punched forward with confidence and determination. Watching them clinched the deal.

Then the FBI caught Kaczynski. Until this media frenzy, I had assumed that most Americans shared my dream of living in a cabin. After all, we learned in elementary school that Abraham Lincoln grew up in a log cabin, a symbol of the frontier spirit, democracy, and the triumph of the common man who carves a good life out of the wilderness. In fact, the presidential campaigns of 1840 and 1860 promoted the log cabin as the proper birthplace for all great Americans. This homely structure became our civic manger.

In high school, many of us fell under the spell of *Walden.* This cabin offered a nourishing retreat for our spirit and mind. "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived," wrote Thoreau. Although few people rigorously followed his example by living for two full years in the woods, many Americans shared his sentiments, at least judging by their vacation homes. In these prosperous times, of course, the "log cabin" has grown into a "log home" that may reach palatial proportions. My cabin was still a cabin. But as a freelance writer, I enjoyed the freedom to live in it year round. If not tied to cities and suburbs by their marriages, mortgages, careers, and children, millions of people would have joined me on permanent vacation. Or so I figured.

The Kaczynski story didn't break that way. "The headlong pursuit of 'Nature' is what happens when prosperous societies grow indolent and parochial, and begin to indulge themselves. It is the politics of nostalgia and fetishism," wrote *Newsweek's* chief fulminator, Joe Klein, who later gained fortune and fame as Anonymous. In his Unabomber book, Robert Graysmith drew many parallels between Kaczynski and Thoreau and envied neither of them his solitude. "The rasp in Thoreau's social relations may have been a defect of personality, rather than a truth of his character," he wrote. "The silence, shyness, and alienation of the Hermit [Kaczynski] may have been his only personality." Even Thoreau, according to a professor quoted in *The New York Times,* was seen as an "eccentric" in his day.

The media drew little distinction between Kaczynski's murderous pathology and his life in a cabin. Neither did his lawyers. A year after the arrest, they had the building wrapped in tarps and trucked to a courthouse in Sacramento as evidence of their client's insanity. "This is not an idyllic, rustic cabin with a refrigerator and a wet bar," a defense attorney told the Associated Press. "It barely had a window. It was very dark, very cramped and crammed with stuff. And he lived there for almost 25 years."

What haunted me in the news photos of the cabin lashed down on the flat bed truck were the tarps. Years earlier, I had once seen a suburban house wrapped entirely in yellow plastic by an exterminator in order to trap the poisonous gases. The tarps in the news photos suggested that Kaczynski's cabin was contaminated, perhaps even contagious. Maybe I, too, was susceptible to loneliness, isolation, and fear. My family certainly had a strain of crippling shyness.

In the suburban house of my teenage years, my father and brother still lived together in genteel poverty. Although both had earned master's degrees, neither earned much money or showed much ambition, nor did they seem very lively or happy. After working as a bank economist for 25 years, my father received early retirement when his department was closed and now taught economics as an adjunct at local colleges. Stingy with his pension and meager salary, he kept driving the family's old Volvo station wagon with its wheezing engine, faded bumper stickers, dead odometer, and smell of countless dump loads of yard waste lingering in the rear bay like cloistered basement air. Although he could be talkative and even loud, he felt uneasy around people, rarely looking them in the eye. If I happened to be in the conversation, he stared at me instead, almost as if I was his translator for social behavior.

In his early 40s, my brother still lived in his boyhood room and slept in his single bed, although *Penthouses* now lay spilled under his clock radio table. Like me, he wrote freelance journalism, but he earned $50 an article at an alternative weekly newspaper, entry level work he continued for years. His old car was a dirty bronze hatchback with rust stripes and dusty black bumpers. Like my father, he drove very slowly, as if afraid his car would fall apart with too much speed and excitement. He even walked at my father's pace, as if practicing for a future of bad knees. But unlike my father he mumbled. He acted afraid of being heard. Only in print did he emerge as an articulate person.

Together they repaired or replaced almost nothing in the house, not the side table with books stacked under a broken leg, nor the television room carpet with a hole worn through to the floor, nor the couch cushions flattened like greasy rugs. For years, they kept using a carving knife with a blade that had broken in half. With few visitors, they had little reason to keep up appearances. Lost in their thoughts, they accepted this interior decoration of emotional depression.

At the same time, they piled newspapers and magazines on almost every flat surface, including the former family dinner table and chairs and the living room footstool and rocking chair. The house appeared sand-bagged with reading material. In truth, reading was their defense against loneliness, the outer world, and perhaps each other. During phone conversations, I was often surprised by how little they knew of each other's activities and whereabouts. On my rare visits home, I too found our conversations awkward and retired to my boyhood bedroom to pull an old book from the shelves. One Christmas Eve I read *Naked Lunch* for the first time since the age of fourteen.

The older son, I had grown up the prince of the family, earning good grades, playing on sports teams, and making friends through pickup basketball games, Scout camping trips, and summer jobs painting houses. Meanwhile, my sullen brother spent countless sick days in his bathrobe seated Buddha-style before the television, close enough to reach up and turn the dial. I teased him mercilessly, treating him like an exploding marshmallow to be poked and prodded until he blew up with rage. By adulthood, we hardly spoke, yet I felt shadowed by him. At Christmas, he asked for books that also appeared on my wish list. His political views, his tastes in movies and music, and his

journalistic interests often mirrored my own. After my divorce, he called my former wife in Manhattan several times a year to go to a museum or a movie. If nothing else, he had learned how to fight back. Long after I left the environmental magazine in Connecticut, he subscribed and layered copies in his magazine piles that I couldn't help but notice on my visits home.

Moving into the cabin, I worried about succumbing to this family temptation to retreat from society and ambition. Theodore Kaczynski intrigued me like the Devil.

At his peak, the anonymous Unabomber had tickled my fancy as a terrorist driven by radical ideas. Although hardly a Luddite, I dismissed the cybertopian view of *Wired* magazine that the silicon chip would succeed where LSD had failed in leading us to new levels of evolutionary consciousness. In the cabin, I didn't want a television or need a microwave or call out for pizza deliveries. But the Unabomber had murdered for his principles and made the cover of *Newsweek.* He seemed like a character from the paranoid fiction of Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and Paul Auster that had been shaped by the Sixties. Born in the late Fifties, I was of an age to envy all things Sixties.

After his arrest, however, we learned that Kaczynski preferred an older European pessimism. He admired Joseph Conrad's 1907 novel *The Secret Agent* about an anarchist shopkeeper in London who hopes to dynamite the Greenwich Observatory. Although written as satire, the book may have struck Kaczynski as perfectly sane when a character says, "Science is the sacrosanct fetish." In an article for *The Atlantic Monthly*, Alston Chase suggested that young Kaczynski took his Harvard reading assignments in Sigmund Freud, Thorstein Veblen, and Friedrich Nietzsche all too seriously.

For intellectual support, Kaczynski drew upon *The Technological Society* published in 1954 by Jacques Ellul, a sociologist and former leader of the French resistance in World War II. Ellul feared that technology, or the way of thinking created and promoted by technology, was becoming the next totalitarianism, one that would eradicate our most cherished human qualities. This same dystopian vision appeared in George Orwell's novel *1984* written three years after the war. Oddly enough, *The Technological Society* concluded with predictions for the year 2000. By now, Ellul believed, people would routinely travel to the moon, our food would be synthetic, all diseases would be cured, we would reproduce by artificial insemination to favor the best genes. But the price for this utopia, he warned, would be "a world-wide totalitarian dictatorship ... In comparison, Hitler's was a trifling affair. That it is to be a dictatorship of test tubes rather than of hobnailed boots will not make it any less a dictatorship."

In hindsight, we know that Ellul inflated many legitimate fears and criticisms of technology to absurd proportions. Perhaps his book provided a valuable warning of where an unchecked enthusiasm for technology could lead. But Kaczynski was seduced by the dystopian fantasy more than by the intellectual rigor. Despite his early brilliance at mathematics and his literate reading, Kaczynski's treatise, "Industrial Society and Its Future," read at best like a clunky *Dummies* guide to the technological critique.

He claimed that humans found true fulfillment and freedom in primitive societies by meeting the worthy challenges of providing life's basics: food, clothing, shelter, and

safety for their families. By supplying the basics so easily, modern society has removed these crucial opportunities for fulfillment, leaving us depressed, bored, anxious, and unsatisfied by such artificial challenges as professional careers, social activism, sports, and hobbies. For true fulfillment, we must topple Industrial Society and return to our nature as "peasants or herdsmen or fishermen or hunters, etc." For inspiration, Kaczynski recalled the collapse of the Roman Empire. And he urged anti-technologists to breed like crazy to increase their numbers.

Kaczynski raised a fascinating subject: the psychological dislocations caused by humanity's rapid march out of the natural landscape of our evolutionary origins into modern society. But he proved incapable of understanding these issues except in the most simplified, polarized, and extreme terms. For such a serious reader, he completely missed the nuances of history, anthropology, psychology, technology, and nature. While others have written masterpieces of technological discontent, Kaczynski clung to a cartoonish Armageddon that pitted the Noble Savage of primitive man against the Alien Invader of industrial technology. If he had written with any flair, he might have produced a bad science fiction novel.

Yet the oddest part of the treatise was that Kaczynski never quoted from *Walden,* John Muir, Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac,* or any other classic of American nature writing. Although our literature has revealed its own despair over vanishing wilderness, our writers have continually turned to nature as a source of spiritual and ethical renewal. And for 25 years, Kaczynski led the idyllic life promoted by his manifesto of subsistence hunting and gardening, walking and bicycling rather than driving, avoiding taxes and voting, and answering to no one. Yet nature didn't heal him. It fermented his rage.

"Ha! Revenge is sweet!" he wrote in his journal after shooting a rat that had nibbled on his blanket. "According to Kephart, it is the testimony of gourmets who survived the siege of Paris that cats, rats, and mice are the most misprized of all animals from a culinary point of view. If domestic rats are up to woodrat standards, I quite agree. That rat was [expletive] good eating." In the book *Unabomber: The Secret Life of Ted Kaczynski,* his neighbor Chris Waits reported that this bitter man tortured and poisoned dogs, vandalized vacation homes, strung wire between trees in hopes of beheading a motorcyclist, and lamented the difficulties of shooting at helicopters through the forest canopy. Although Kaczynski wrote voluminously in small pocket notebooks, he never followed Thoreau's example of examining his life through the wonderful metaphorical possibilities of the woods. Instead, he obsessively inventoried his meager possessions and jotted crude outbursts of emotion. After missing a rifle shot at a coyote, an animal whose brains he boiled and ate like pudding, he wrote, "I got all depressed again, over wasting a 30 cent cartridge like that."

At times in the cabin, I suffered from my own punishing loneliness. Working at home, I found it harder to make new friends in the country than I had expected. I went to Saturday night movies alone, read newspapers at restaurant counters when tired of my own cooking, and surfed the Web for outdoor pornography. Yet loneliness

in Manhattan had been just as bad. Especially towards the end of my marriage I felt surrounded by thousands of strangers with nobody to talk to. At least in the woods, I heard solace whispering from the breeze in the hemlocks or the stream splashing over the rocks.

More often, my cabin succeeded as a creative retreat. Many writers have had private studios in the trees where they ruminated, played darts, chopped wood, reviewed the outer world through their memories and imaginations, and caught the flow of words that carried them for hours. "The creative person is constantly seeking to discover himself, to remodel his own identity, and to find meaning in the universe through what he creates. He finds this a valuable integrating process, which, like meditation or prayer, has little to do with other people," wrote Anthony Storr in *Solitude: A Return to the Self.* In a classic example, Arthur Miller left Brooklyn and built his own cabin on a Connecticut hillside. Before painting the walls, he sat down at a desk made from an old door and in six weeks wrote *Death of a Salesman.*

Seated in my cozy loft under the split log roof beams, I worked for hours at the computer. My essays considered new ideas and encounters: the seductive burbling of my brook, the totemic weight of bears that sometimes wandered down from the woods, and the remarkable song of the winter wren that flew between the ragged root hollows in the rocky hillside behind my window. Hardly bigger than a muddy golf ball with a stubby tail that looked plucked, the wren wailed like an avant-garde jazz soloist with bottomless lungs. His musical blast never failed to amaze me. In Manhattan, every story described human interactions, but in the woods, I found mysteries bigger than ourselves and older than contemporary fads. The seasons passed, from summer June bugs bouncing off the windows at night like rubber bullets to winter snowstorms clinging to tree twigs like white caterpillars. I kept watching and writing. In time I learned the cabin didn't turn me into Kaczynski or Thoreau. It reintroduced me to myself. It was the gift box. I was the gift.

Will Nixon has published two poetry chapbooks. *When I Had It Made* (Pudding House Publications) and *The Fish Are Laughing* (Pavement Saw Press). His personal essays from magazines and journals have been collected at www.mycabinfever.com.

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