

## **Where the Trees Remember Me**

*A Love Letter to Cape Ann's Woods*

*By Harrison Schoenfarber*

*I'm not a scientist or a policy expert – I'm just someone who's found healing in these woods. Over the past five years, the woods and waters of Cape Ann have been more than just a backdrop to my life – they've been part of the healing. In some of the hardest and most transformative seasons, the trails of Gloucester and Rockport have offered me space to breathe, to feel, to reconnect. This piece is both a personal reflection and a quiet call – a way to honor what these wild places have meant to me and to speak to why protecting them matters, now more than ever.*

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There are places that hold us before we even know we need holding. For me, Cape Ann has been that place. Not just for the salt air or the crashing tides, but for the stillness in the middle. The woods. The trails. The moss-covered stones that seem to whisper something true when the rest of the world feels too loud. Over these past five years – through heartbreak, grief, growth, and recovery – I've kept coming back to the forest. Not to run away from life, but to move more honestly through it.

It started with Ravenswood. I wandered there often, tracing the curves of tree roots like they might lead me somewhere – and they did. I'd go with friends, laughing while getting lost on purpose, stopping to admire clusters of mushrooms like tiny worlds popping up overnight. I've taken hundreds of photos – deer tracks in the snow, foxes slipping through the brush, coyotes leaving prints in the mud – each one a reminder that life continues, whether or not we feel ready for it.

Some days, it was just me and whatever I was carrying. I'd pass through a green gate – no signs, no rules – just a low-hanging branch that felt like an invitation. And miles later, I'd realize the ache I came in with had softened, or shifted, or spoken in some way. The woods have a way of slowing you down, asking nothing but presence. A stone etched with *WORK* once stopped me mid-step. Years ago, I might've brushed it off. But that day, it hit differently. This wasn't about productivity, it was about presence. The work is listening. The work is not running anymore.

Cape Ann is surrounded by water, but it's the center that holds me – dense with trees, looping trails, the smell of pine and wet leaves. I've walked those paths with people I've loved, and in those moments, we grew closer. Not just to each other – but to something older, quieter,

and deeper than us both. These woods hold stories. They've held my silence. My joy. My sorrow. My returning. One morning, I passed a stone carved with *BE TRUE*. It stopped me cold. And in that quiet, it echoed louder than anything: Be true to who you are. To your voice. Your weirdness. Your softness. Your strength. In a world that constantly asks us to shrink, these woods reminded me to expand.

Another time, after spiraling in thought for hours, I finally hit a quiet stretch around mile five. Out of nowhere, a melody from a kids' song I wrote years ago popped into my head, and I laughed. Right then, I turned a corner and saw the word IDEAS glowing on a sunlit stone. A message, maybe. A reminder that joy, creativity, and connection aren't extras, they're the whole point.

And sometimes, it's just this:

***The world whispers before it roars.***

***Birds trading stories of yesterday's wind,***

***deer slipping like ghosts through the trees,***

***leaves trembling with dew, waiting on the sun.***

***Just me and the earth – before the humans take over.***

Nature has never asked me to be perfect, just present.

I'm still learning how to offer myself the same compassion I've spent years offering to others. Still learning how to slow down. But I'm not hiding anymore. And that's something.

These woods – these trails with their roots and stones and sacred detours – they've helped me come back to myself. Again and again. And I'm endlessly grateful.

But gratitude alone isn't enough.

These places – these sacred spaces that have held me and so many others – aren't guaranteed. They're not permanent. They need care, protection, and respect. Every time something wild gets developed or paved over, we lose more than land. We lose access to something vital. And it's easy to forget, in the rush of life, just how much we need these places, not just for play, but for perspective. For reconnection.

I often wonder – if these trees helped hold me through some of my darkest years, what might they hold for my kids? Will these paths still be here when they need them?

Preserving the wild isn't just about the environment – it's about preserving who we are. Because when we lose the woods, we lose a

part of ourselves – the part that listens. That feels. That remembers what matters.

So yeah – this is a love letter. But it's also a reminder. A small record.

A quiet ask:

***Let's protect what protects us.***