



## **Our Train.**

by Conrad Vispo.

The gulch's water had cut its way through the silt and clay like hot wax through cold. At the bottom, it joined a companion stream, but the little valley then opened, the crevices dissolving into a flat, wooded wetland. The trees here are neither particularly old nor young. This is neither uncleared old growth nor 50-year-old former farm field. Between the wetland and the River is the rail line, and, as birds flit and trees grow, a passenger train out of Hudson rattles quickly through, rather as one might expect an urgent deer to dart by with straight-line determination.

What of this is the work of humans and what of remaining nature? How much of that flat plateau of wetland was actually the result of historic topsoil erosion from higher farms? Was it even a wetland before the railroad-bed dyke blocked the free flow of water and sediments to the Hudson? Indeed, what of this does not wear a tint of our hand? No doubt the plants contributed some self-selected repertoire of species to this landscape, yet even here we have honed, adding and subtracting botanical components; seeking White Oak for its timber, Hickory for its firewood, Sugar Maple for its sap; accidentally importing diseases which decimated some species; and effectively seeding exotic plants across the land. Where, even, was the River's shoreline before dredging and the relocation of bottom muck became common practice?

It is easy to say, as some do, that we are in the Anthropocene, the geological Age of Man. However, I think there is a risk in such pronouncements – while labeling our truly profound effects upon the World, it may also stroke our vanity; while naming our responsibility, it can also seem to say, 'the rest of nature has had its day, today is ours'. Not only would such a stance ignore the smell of wildness that hangs in the air before and after the train's passage and which, often unnamed, is a backbone of our own

existence, but it also suggests a possessiveness which implies we now have the knowledge, right and power to shape brethren nature to our ideals.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Hudson River School of painting stood on the firm ground of nearly two centuries of European settlement in the Valley and looked out on a Romantic wilderness. In many of their tableaux, the forms of wild nature tower over any representatives of humankind. The Romantic period helped people recognize and value wildness. In addition, by glorifying wildness on the one hand and, on the other, by setting it within a distinct, often literal, frame, it may have helped to perpetuate the concept of a human/nature, evil/good dichotomy, which continues to this day.

From my low hilltop, I might wonder about another perspective, essentially the reverse, wherein the observer stands in the midst of wild nature – not a nature untouched by humans, but one that, nonetheless, has its own ample vitality – and looks out onto the works of humanity, looks down onto the 9:30AM train north out of Hudson, which clatters briefly through the forest, bearing, encapsulated, so many egos like my own, and then dashes onward, leaving birds to flit and trees to grow. No matter our power to lay and clean the track, to alter wild nature through intention or accident, we are but one player in the cast of such a canvas. There would be a conscious humility in such a painting; a humility encompassing both the mature self-consciousness that accepts responsibility for ourselves and also the reverent, child-like wonder that recognizes the unfathomable immenseness of the nature which holds us.