

SUSPENSION

By Renée Flory

At Capilano Suspension Bridge Park, I was forced to reckon my fear of heights with a desire to explore the natural world. While I didn't realize this at the time, the small personal conquest was merely a precursor to a later adventure much closer to home.

The year was 2017, and my parents, sister, and I were visiting my aunt and uncle in Vancouver, Canada. The whole of the trip was lovely, but more than any particular activity, event, or gourmet meal, I recall with vivid detail the experience of nature on another coast. Born and raised in Virginia, I grew up surrounded by East Coast flora and fauna—butterfly weed and purple loosestrife, garden phlox and burdock, shagbark hickory and sumac. Yet as we drove to Vancouver by way of Seattle, I looked out the window and realized, with surprise and even discomfort, that I was seeing trees I had never seen before: pointy trees, spiky trees, trees taller and stranger than I could've guessed from the Pacific Northwest as represented by photographs and television. I was reminded that nature as an experience is impossible from a distance—that standing in foreign trees is entirely unlike seeing those trees in an episode of *Twin Peaks*.

Before we reached the border between the United States and Canada, my family stopped at a pharmacy to buy granola bars. Memories link in fascinating ways—I will always remember the CVS in that tiny town outside of Seattle, because it was in that CVS parking lot where I looked out at the horizon and saw the Cascade Range for the first time. It was nothing like the Blue Ridge Mountains I grew up nestled between—no better and no worse, of course, but wildly and incomparably different. Later, back home in the Shenandoah Valley, I found myself slightly defamiliarized. The trees I had taken for universal were in fact inherently local.

After arriving in Vancouver, exploring Capilano was an exercise in equanimity from start to finish. At multiple locations the pathway along the side of the mountain was made of glass. “Not loving this,” I said to my sister several times. “Are you really enjoying this?” Then I would stumble across some peculiar leaf, a weed or plant I had never seen before, and my desire to continue exploring superseded my desire to be somewhere slightly less high. The suspension bridge itself, around 460 feet long, was crowded with tourists and swayed in the wind. Watching the breeze batter the Canadian flag hung in the middle of the bridge, it was not difficult to imagine myself and my family thrown 230 feet down to the river below.

In the end, I followed my family to the swinging center. We elbowed the other tourists to earn a good angle for our selfie, and with my knuckles white against the railing, I tried desperately to keep my eyes open so as not to miss the view. Later that day, I continued opening my eyes: on the Cliffwalk, on the Treetop Platforms, and on the beautiful drive back into the city. Miraculously, my knuckles sustained no permanent damage, and my eyes are even open in the photo. In retrospect, the 230 feet doesn't seem so high.

The swinging bridge over Maury River in Rockbridge Baths, Virginia, is not even one tenth the height of the Capilano Suspension Bridge. On a drive with my grandfather in the spring of 2022, my family stopped just ahead of the tiny red Rockbridge Baths Post Office on Maury River Road. The bridge there is sturdy, but it certainly lives up to its name: as my sister and my mother, a Rockbridge Baths native, trudged forward along the narrow bridge, we swayed with the breeze and the weight of our footsteps.

I held back. Four years after crossing the Capilano Suspension Bridge, I was once again unprepared to stand on unsteady ground.

Yet when I looked down over that bridge, I could name the river beneath me. I could name the road that took us to the bridge; I could name the neighbors, tell stories about the sawmill and farms and local restaurants. In May of 2021, my grandmother called us down to Goshen Pass—just three minutes from the bridge by the Post Office—to see a wildfire burning itself out along the road. Adjacent to the Maury, we gathered with hundreds of locals to experience something also quite different between coasts. There was no threat to us at Goshen Pass as the wildfire swept through; there was only smoke and crackling and a golden glow, entropy without the destruction that might do harm. My grandparents, Burnett Jr. and Nancy, have lived in Rockbridge Baths since long before I was born. That moment with the wildfires, alongside hundreds of others from my childhood, make the rural area another home for me.

Standing on that Rockbridge Baths suspension bridge, I was not destabilized nor defamiliarized. Although I may have been holding tightly to the railing, I was home.