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Along the Path

I can't say how often I have walked this path over the last ten years. It runs for three kilometers, past our house, through an agricultural landscape typical of eastern Mecklenburg, to the village lake. Most of the time it was simply *the path to the lake*, taken alone, as a couple or with friends, to relax, contemplate, or get some exercise. Or to observe the very different light moods over the course of the seasons: an endless white extending, almost without transition, from the sky to the snow-covered ground, in wintery mists, dramatic cloud formations before a thunderstorm, or a nearly unreal twilight blue.

In the past, I perceived the vegetation and wildlife along the path without looking more closely or otherwise investigating what was there. But at some point, I began to wonder what I was actually seeing. Why do I know so many of the animal species that I encounter along the way, but only just a few of the plants growing there? This gave me the idea to create a photographic catalogue of this familiar area over an extended period. At the same time, I began to use classical nature guides, apps, and other digital tools to establish exactly which animals and plants I was looking at. By changing from incidental perception to targeted observation, new, possible aspects of my project emerged again and again. Each walk resulted in new discoveries and, startled by the unexpectedly high number of species I found there, the realization that a great deal would remain hidden from me. All the same, I thought I understood the inspiration that might have driven the pioneers of natural taxonomy in the eighteenth century. The notion that it might be possible to develop a system that could encompass all of nature was based, however, on the religious assumption that God, in his act of creation, had created a clearly defined, fixed number of species. But even then it soon became clear that the idea of a definitive scientific order was an illusion. It was obvious from the very start that any encyclopedic claim would be equally illusory in the case of my own project as well. Everything that I was able to depict and name would point to

the unavoidable incompleteness of such an undertaking. Even though I extended work on the project from the originally planned one year to four years, this book can only serve as a sample of the inexhaustible whole.

At the beginning, I had already decided not to include any agricultural or garden plants or domesticated animals in my lists of species, but list archaeophytes and neophytes like the snowdrop or the winter aconite, and invasive animals such as the fallow deer or the raccoon. My focus was thus placed on what could be considered natural in the original sense of the term: anything that tries to resist human dominance, the remains of the wild, the feral, the endangered, whatever is seemingly superfluous, because it's regarded as useless according to economic criteria. As it is everywhere, it's fought, repressed, and yet it is the reason why walking along this path is often a delightful experience.

I am constantly aware that the diversity of species I found so surprising is already decimated and continuously decreasing, and that conflicts often invisible to non-locals even impinge upon these modest, almost idyllic spots. The ongoing devastation caused by industrialized agriculture and its impacts, such as the massive reduction of soil diversity and the eutrophication of bodies of water, can hardly be recognized at first glance. Even more striking is the large-scale conversion of cultural landscapes into industrial zones for energy production. Areas that were once legally protected and zoning regulations have been radically cut back. The increasing use of technology and raw materials is supposed to ameliorate the negative effects of the principle of constant growth. Applying this logic of less through more, the use of resources is merely shifted around, and the destruction of ecologically important habitats continues. The political decisions behind all of this are ultimately prompted by economic interests, for there is, above all, one engine driving the supposedly unavoidable necessities executed in the name of what is considered progress, and that is greed.