

Gentian

By Mary Buchinger

Once I was the caretaker of a species of gentian—an ugly plant, hairy leaves, stumpy blossoms, mentioned in books from the nineteenth century, not seen for many years, believed extinct in this part of the country—found one day by an old woman, and passed on to me. It lives in an urban wetland that houses tents and encampments, trash piles, scared dogs tied up for hours to a tree. There was no trail, nor could there be, to the gentian I was protecting; keeping it hidden yet findable was key in this inhabited wilderness filled with sticker bushes, beer cans, and ticks, so I tied a rag to the limb that hangs over it, and made my annual pilgrimage, full of dread, uncertainty, hope. Each year, I'd document my success with a photo. As margins of this wetland were eyed by development, I believed my gentian was a kind of owl, maybe a northern spotted owl, who could ensure acres of protection. But, it turns out to be not so rare after all, and bears watching no longer, nothing more asked of me on its behalf, and I feel the lesser for this loss of duty in this burning world.

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