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In colonial Virginia, it wasn’t uncommon for someone like X to believe that W’s life was not quite as rich, or, all things considered, that Z’s was a total loss. The Blue Ridge Mountains west of town echoed his gossip till everyone knew better than to try to befriend such a man. X even noticed that Y’s life was led by social forces beyond Y’s control, that Y was therefore not worth talking about. But V had a talent for going unnoticed. X’s unlucky neighbor, he lived in a cellar with fellow hermits Q, R, S and T. And they made damn sure that X didn’t hear whatever it was they were doing down there.

So centuries went by without much change, except, perhaps, that the mountains lost hair. X’s beliefs remained much the same, held the same water for crazy men later, handed down from year to year. As long as they were at all reinforced, by a weakness shown in this face or by a problem shown in that, the Xes were eager to wave their gavels. By then, there was power in numbers. It wasn’t likely that they’d disappear.

But lately I have attended a church near there, a white frame church at the foot of the Ridge. The preacher goes by the name of U and carries on about the sins of the Xes. From what I gather, the preacher believes that all of our neighbors’ lives are lived, after all, without our permission.
Deeper, he says, than little ditches,
we are each of us wells connected
by an elaborate system of underground streams.
All one has to do to realize this
is to lower a bucket into one’s neighbor
and pulley up from the well-bottom there
a water that tastes much like one’s own.
And next year the national forestry service
plans to plant seedlings at 4000 feet.