

Land Association

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— Kevin Finn

I've walked several miles to get here, following the narrow dirt road that winds up and through a forest of maple and hemlock, to this spot where an elderly oak dazzles with a bit of woodland sleight of hand: at chest height the tree sprouts not a branch, but a thin, metal cable. As if spun by some humbled Rumpelstiltskin trapped in its trunk with only the tiniest of portals through which to pass his handiwork, the braided wire erupts directly from the barky surface, extends out through the air, is eventually joined by hook to a second tree. The twelve feet of its exposed length droops in the middle, forms a smile between the two trees, a jump rope.

“Double Dutch?” the trees seem to ask me.

I know the first tree's secret, know that when I was a boy, twenty seven years ago now, my grandfather wound this cable round its trunk, then strung it to the second to form a makeshift gate. Tracing a finger along the tree's rough hide, I can feel the faintest swell where it engulfed the cable, slower by magnitudes than the most patient of constrictors. Within another decade even the swelling will be imperceptible, lost beneath hard rings laid on during the year's warm months.

Leaving the dirt road, I duck under the cable, start down the primitive driveway that had been bulldozed a football field's length into the forest. Cut the same year as the cable was wound, the path remains now only in faint outline. The trees have crowded back in, cathedraling above and littering the ground below with limbs and occasionally their own fallen bodies. Hidden beneath the knee deep green of grasses and scrub, the pale rose of shale blasted from a quarry two mountain tops away and dump-trucked onto the path. Desperate for light, aided by the nudge and scour of years of spring runoff, the

sprouts pushed their way past the stones, populated gaps and spread, blurring the once neat boundaries of road ending and forest floor beginning.

I stop at a downed tree three times as big around as my body: a barrier even to four-wheel drive, but not my two feet. I scan for the gap in the sky that it occupied for more years than I've been alive, but find only the full, bright leaf scrim, the basecoat of blue sky splash-painted a green like unripe citrus, hinting already at the oranges and yellows to come.

Though there's no detectable breeze, the tree tops nod gently and the canopy hums with the white noise of leaves shuffled. I close my eyes to listen, to hear. I inhale deeply and my shoulders drop, my chest expands with the tang of loamy earth and damp ferns fed by underground springs, the sweet of sun-baked pine from the copse of spruce a stone's throw from here. Expands with this scented air, and in exultation.

I'm smiling, can't help myself. Broad. Toothy. Foolish. Big as the cable looped between the two trees.

I am in the land.

A quarter century earlier I frown my way across the blacktop and concrete of my grade school playground, the fenced in twos and threes of the hopscotch court fluorescent yellow beneath my feet, my best friend racing away to join the scramble of other boys.

Come over my house on Saturday, play Transformers, he'd said, talking as we ran, out of the lunchroom, into the light. But I had to shake my head no, say that I couldn't. That we go up the land on weekends. Because this is what my family does, how my family says it. And though I hoped that he would pause, at least, to ask me what I mean, be impressed by what I tell him, in the uncurious way of fourth grade boys he was already on his way.

That Friday I mope, imagining robot cars locked in combat on my friend's patio as my family loads coolers, sleeping bags and dogs into the back of my father's truck, prepares to make the weekly half hour trek past the glittering black culm banks that mark Wilkes-Barre's city limits, over the Susquehanna river and into the low mountains that frame the Wyoming Valley. Up the land, as someone in the family had once said — was it my grandfather? — and though there was something peculiar about using the word land in this way, instead of the more descriptive, more precise *woods*, or perhaps even the more colloquial *country*, the phrase took, rooted itself in our family lexicon with hardly another thought.

Up the land camping as we did on holidays and summer vacations, whenever we had a free couple of days. Where my grandfather and grandmother would drive to join us during the day, though head back to the city at night. My grandfather, who had purchased the land a couple of years earlier when it was called Lots 2 and 3 of the Moon Lake Forest Land Association, twenty of more than five hundred acres of woodland divvied up by a developer and sold to those looking to get away, looking for what the Association contract called "primitive recreation": hiking and hunting, no houses or utilities, please.

Up the land we went and down again to the city we came for ten years, until we went and stayed for good. All of us. Left downtown Wilkes-Barre and the aging apartment building we all shared for up the country: my grandparents a mile down the road from my parents, and all of us not much more than three miles from the land as the crows flew — and they did.

At that point, as we'd moved up, it became necessary only to go in. Out the front door of our modular ranch and across laneless Mizdale Road, named for the area's first — and for a long time, only — residents, onto the gated dirt road that marked the entrance to the Association property and back into the woods.

In the land.

In the garden out front my parents are digging holes, limp pussywillows lined up in rows, ready for planting among the other homegrown natives and seed catalog exotics. Hummingbirds scrum noisily at a trio of glass feeders, take shifts alighting on the power line that carves our road-front trees into topiaries, perch there like periods above long underscores.

My father sees me coming diagonally across the yard, and though he's the one who asks where I'm off to, both he and my mother are waiting for my response.

"Heading in the land. Be back tonight."

I am sixteen and without a car, my friends all at least twenty minutes away at 55 MPH. They know already my answer, but ask, I believe, because they like what they hear, because they so rarely have the opportunity to go in themselves anymore, busy as they are with the burdens of the new house, with this place located somewhere in-between.

"Watch for snakes" my father says, which is both a warning and an appeal. He hopes as much as I do that I'll have some to report on upon my return. "They're on the move with the cutting that's going on in the state forest."

I nod and am off.

The cutting is no longer confined to the state forest. Tempted by the current prices for timber, other owners in the Association have begun to log their property. The commercial forester making the rounds of the members approached both my parents and grandparents. When they declined his services, he left with them a brochure that implores them to "Remember, a healthy forest is no accident!" I picture him smiling reassuringly when he says this aloud to potential clients, because he believes what is written, knows that some need

convincing. Smiling like Robert O'Brien, chief forester for Cotton Hanlon Timberland Management and speaker at a seminar on "Forest Income Opportunities" that I attended recently. He, too, believed, knew that some of us in the room needed convincing and so he stressed, for the large camouflage jacketed man and the graying wolf sweatshirted woman, that wildlife are not frightened away from logged areas, even during the cutting.

"You may hear otherwise, but trust me" he said, chuckling just a bit before moving on with his presentation.

Regardless of Mr. O'Brien's words, I'm looking for snakes in the land today, just as I had seventeen years earlier at my father's behest. Preparing again a report on healthy forests and happy accidents for my family who see as little of the land or less as they had then. A report I only file now the half-dozen times a year I'm in the area, visiting them, visiting the land.

Having moved beyond the wire and over the fallen tree, into the slender valley where the former driveway dips down before ascending sharply, I'm standing atop a man-made mound. Long ago adopted by nature and dressed up as one of her own, the mound might now pass as an ordinary hill if its back did not arch out of a flowing creek's bed. In the ground beneath my feet, under grass covered shale, a metal pipe forms the mound's foundation, big around as I am tall and twice as long. And within that pipe the creek's water, and the sound of the creek's water.

My grandfather wanted to be able to drive deep enough into the land so that his car couldn't be seen from the access road, so that no one would know he was there — never mind that the road was gated and locked, traveled only by other association members, and only those few who owned lots past ours. It's what he wanted of the space and it was his to say. And so he paid to have the pipe laid, paid for the backhoe, puffing diesel clouds, that dangled and swooped it above the water on chains like some giant fishing fly, waiting for a strike,

hoping for the big, big fish story. When nothing took the bait, the chains were unhooked and the pipe was covered with stone, a better bridge by far than lure. Thereafter, the waters passed underneath, and we — and any other animal who wished to cross with dry feet — passed above.

My grandfather didn't mind wet feet, at least not when he was working, and after his car was parked safely on the other side he'd head straight again for the creek. He'd begun digging out its bed, first on the entry side of the pipe, and then the exit, and eventually over the length of the water's run across the twenty acres he owned. Rocks exposed by the cut of the water over the long span of geologic time he rearranged according to his own scenic vision of creekness: wet with lake runoff for centuries, they now dried lining the banks. Entombed somewhere among them was the turtle he mistook for a stone, tossed onto the pile with the rest, crushed because he did not notice, did not see what he was doing. The shallows he cleared and dammed and deepened, because deeper, he thought, was better. The tiny cascades he broke down and reengineered into larger, grander falls, trading the simple elegance of chance for design. Around the pipe he gathered the biggest stones, big as his own massive torso. Wheelbarrowed, then stacked, and finally cemented into place. Like a bunker. Like a monument.

As a child wandering on the steep embankment that rose above the creek, flipping logs and rocks to reveal the tiny, scurrying worlds underneath, I would sometimes stop to watch him if disappointed by my find — pillbugs, say, but no newts. Clouds of gnats graying the air around his head, the bleed of disturbed silt browning the water around his feet, all around him was movement, flux. And he, at its center, bending, lifting, dropping, tugging, pushing, pausing only to wipe his brow with, of all things, a white silk handkerchief, and then dipping back into the waters again. Even when I'd crested the hill, left the valley behind for happier creature hunting grounds later in the day, the sounds of his labors,

the sharp clack of rock on rock, were lifted to me, reminders that he was still working.

Though thoroughly camouflaged by the speckling of mosses and lichens, his cement-work continues to hold to this day. Little else has. The creek, late summer low now and only a finger's deep in some spots, passes invisibly but audibly elsewhere, singing beneath rocks that have during years of spring swells washed from the banks, cluttering again the pools he'd cleared.

Those same swells stuffed the pipe's maw with branches, saplings, silt. And because water stays to those courses we dictate only so long as they can accommodate it in full, it eventually ran over and around the pipe, pathfinding a new way, its own way once again. The wash of these waters along the pipe's top thinned and rutted the shale, swept swaths of it away completely, exposing the steel underneath like the fossil bones of some metal dinosaur.

I kneel down, dip my head over the pipe's lip, hair hanging free, to see this world turned upside down. My brother and I would use the pipe as a last refuge in our games of chase: would the other follow, risk wet sneakers for the rest of the day with a slip of widely spread feet on its curved bottom, a face full of the mosquitoes who hovered near its curved top? A dare, too: who would be brave enough to stay in the pipe, risk being crushed in a collapse as my father's truck, my grandfather's station wagon rumbled above? A refuge and a dare then. A telescope now, through whose aperture I see the water and rocks, the trees and the land on the pipe's other side. I train it beyond these for now, and by straining my eyes, look back into the past in search of my grandfather. In search of myself.

When I see him he is kneeling, too, in a space as claustrophobic as the confines of the pipe, but he is much bigger than my brother at thirteen, me at ten. Around him thick wooden beams hewn from whole trees pretend to prop a stone

ceiling several hundred feet thick. His helmet lamp reflects off the glossy black mirror of the stone face in front of him. He packs into a hand-drilled hole an explosive charge that will shatter his stony reflection, the shards of which he and his crew will then shovel into rail cars for transport to the world above where they will heat homes, light the lamps and television sets within them.

In the land meant something far different to my grandfather as a young man. His father had come to this country from Bulgaria to work the silver mines of Missouri and he would follow in his footsteps down into the earth, but back east in the rolling hills of Northern Pennsylvania. No precious metal here, but precious rock: anthracite coal, the country's richest vein. And though the industry that had driven the area's economy for more than a century had seen better days, it would still offer for a short time a good job for those unafraid of hard work, of cave-ins and tunnel floods, of the seep of toxic gasses.

My grandfather was not afraid. Found a satisfaction in those mines, in fact, that he would not find in his later work as a corrections officer, locked behind thick cinderblock walls and metal bars. Though he would spend his days in tight, lightless spaces in the mines, they were no prison for him. There he could lay his hands on the cool, hard rock, feel it yield beneath his hammer blows, watch it offer up its humble wealth in piles at his feet. He would gladly have finished out his career as a miner if the mines had not drowned in 1959, the local anthracite industry drawn into a vortex that formed in the Susquehanna river.

For years the area's mining companies had cheated in their bargain with the land, just as those still operating elsewhere continue to cheat today. The land offered the vast supplies of the sun's energy banked several hundred million years ago. Stored first in some of the earliest trees — tall, tufted poles like unlimbed artificial Christmas trees — it was then compacted under layers of earth, and compressed by the cranky clashes of tectonic plates and continental

landmasses into burnable rock that could be held in one's hand, could fuel the growth of entire nations. It required, along with the human sacrifices the companies were more than willing to offer, a certain responsibility, a certain reasonableness of management: do not go too deep or too far, leave in place enough that the land might literally support itself. But supporting columns, still rich with coal and sought by the even richer, were robbed, and whole networks of the mines collapsed. Above ground, homes were swallowed, streets sagged, entire city blocks were displaced. Then, on Jan. 22, 1959, the land abrogated its bargain completely and spectacularly when a drip became a trickle, a trickle became a gush and the entire Susquehanna river burst through a tunnel wall too thin, too near its bed. Forty-four million gallons of its rushing waters drained dramatically into the valley's interconnected mines, washed away jobs and lives and more than a hundred years of work in seconds.

Further back in time, before the waters and before my grandfather, I see my great grandfather, also crouched, but in the flash of his head lamp, quicksilver. He had found the small window between the two Balkan wars and the First World War they led up to to come west to the U.S., and then to the gateway to the West, Missouri. For a hundred years prior, the state had been the starting point for those settlers fanning out into, claiming for themselves the vast lands that lay between it and the Pacific. For him it would provide the means to return to his homeland, one-and-a-half times smaller than this single state of the massive United States, and purchase thirty acres of land, to live the dream of true private property ownership — fee simple, as it was called — that saw its first widespread practice by commoners like himself in the U.S.

But the political unrest that continued in Bulgaria throughout the 1920s would lead him to abandon his land, return again to the United States and for good, this time with his wife and sixteen month old son, my grandfather, in tow.

And though my grandfather had no actual recollection of the land left behind, his father spoke of it often, made legend of his legacy:

Thirty acres of rich land.

Soil black as coal.

Across the sea, waiting for your return.

My grandfather never acknowledged that this land, his land, was likely seized and collectivized during the communist takeover of the country when he was twenty. He continued to speak of visiting it someday, less frequently as he grew older, but even after he'd replaced what he'd lost, what he'd never had, with the purchase of his own land in 1980.

Men such as my grandfather strive to match, at the very least, the accomplishments of their fathers, measure their own success in life by their ability to do so. My grandfather was fifty-six when he finally achieved this goal, paid \$18,000 in cash that he'd earned and saved digging coal and blackening his lungs, patrolling the concrete corridors of a prison.

He brings his entire family along, his wife and their daughter, her husband and their two children, his grandchildren, when he first looks at the land, considers buying it. I see myself then, at six, in the foreground and on the dirt Association road, bored and kicking rocks around my father's truck. In the background, in the woods, my grandfather and father and another man named Scotty who is bearded and flannel shirted like my father, but who wears pants instead of jeans, shoes instead of sneakers. We'd all bumped in over rough roads, stopped and walked through wet leaves and tangled underbrush, only to load back into vehicles, move on to another section of woods and then repeat. I wonder why we can't simply walk or drive, why we must stop and start.

The three men are far enough away that I can not hear what they are saying, though I can hear my grandfather's voice, loud always, loud enough to

fill this vast, quiet space. I imagine, because his repertoire of stories for strangers is small, that he is telling the bearded man about his work in the mines and the prison, about the vandals who threw a bottle at his house in the city, the house he has worked so hard on, about how he confronted them in the street, him nearly three times their age, five of them, about how he needs to get out of the city, into the country for fresh air, peace and quiet.

The man, Scotty Thomas, smiles his handsome smile, teeth white and straight beneath a neatly trimmed beard that I now know is a business accessory, like a gold pen or leather attaché, listens and latches onto the idea of fresh air and peace and quiet and the benefits of a country get away. Because he is a developer and a salesman, because his own father, John B. Thomas, has built a small real estate empire in Pennsylvania, because Scotty, too, wishes to match his father's accomplishments one day, he knows what to say to sell this property, this land to a man like my grandfather. Just as Scotty had known there was money to be made in the land, in this land, and so had bought all five hundred acres from Eileen Welsh, called a Land Association what she had called her backyard.

And though in the foreground I still cannot hear any of this, I do hear when my father shouts my name, calls me, calls the rest of us over. A snake, he says. A slender garter flowing under the ferns, and though all the others see it — my grandmother blanching, terrified of snakes — I do not, can not, am disappointed because I have never seen a snake in person before. We only learn months later how bad my vision is, how badly I need glasses.

Through those glasses, on the land that has now become ours, all of ours, my grandfather adding even me at six years old to the deed, I learn to see the other creatures who call this space home. My father helps, shows us the spectrum of some of the more common animals as we sit in the bug-loud

darkness one night. Runs a spotlight from the cigarette lighter of his truck, pulls from the long shadows with this 400,000 candlepower wand the brown profiles of deer who turn and vanish in white, the black masks of waddling raccoons, the white quill tips of shuffling porcupines.

But it is the little living things, those that I find each day, on my own, that I spend most of my time looking at, looking for. Compensating, perhaps, for the snake that I missed. A prospector panning, I cover small areas at a time, spend half a day huddled over one overturned stump, over one rock-framed pool. I see parade marching daddy long-legs and bullet train millipedes; inquisitive snails who stretch necks and eye stalks the better to see, who, in turn, reveal their own furiously beating hearts through translucent shells, and bashful crayfish who disappear before my eyes in a cloud of creek-bottom stage smoke; glossy black salamanders who swagger like gunfighters, bow-legged and spread armed, and matte orange newts, who sport different duds, but walk the same cowboy walk; lumpy toads who lurch over mossy stones and the sleek frogs who pop through the brush like sprung snares.

But, become prospector, I am not satisfied only to see, have to claim as my own each eureka find, tote it to my parents, exchange its discovery for adulation. Sometimes I offer up pyrite.

“Mom, Mom! Look, look!”

She is walking along the creek, red sweatshirted because it is hunting season, two dogs on a leash, a third loose but trailing close. Walking and looking. Inhabiting the space.

Breathless, I open the muddy clamshell of my clamped hands to reveal a salamander’s detached tail, a squirming decoy for the Houdini who somewhere along the way slipped my grasp.

“Honey, you didn’t hurt him did you?”

“No, no. they do that sometimes. To get loose.”

She is still smiling patiently. "Okay. Be careful with them, though."

And though I try and am, I am not yet ready to simply be, to be without taking.

My grandfather who gave me this land, gave me also this acquisitiveness, this overweening desire for recognition that I will not grow out of, that he has not yet. Look at us. Look what we've done, we chorus together.

I ride with him one summer Saturday morning when I am nine, on our way to the land. I had come home with him the night before to watch morning cartoons, sleep on a mattress flopped on his living room floor while my parents and brother stayed on, camped over with campfire and cricket song. In the car's back seat I am eating the onion rings he stopped special for, us halfway to our destination, when he snaps on his blinker, pulls from the smooth of the pavement onto the rough of the shoulder, stops and looks into the rearview.

"Hold on a minute, kid. I gotta get something. Keep an eye out for cars."

With a conspiratorial wink he's outside, swinging open the station wagon's backgate. I turn my body around to watch for cars, as I've been asked, to watch as he lifts and loads rocks from the roadside into the trunk, the car's springs pony-rocking with each deposit. The stones have sheared from the steep mountain side here which rises straight up just a few feet from where cars pass. In the winter, the stone face sprouts a thick icicle beard, but shorn now, it shows the wrinkles left by the roadmakers' drills and dynamite.

On the other side of the road runs a stone wall, a guardrail to prevent drivers from shortcutting the curves, plunging into the creek — broader several times than ours — that feeds the Susquehanna a few miles downstream. When the wall was built with rocks kin to those my grandfather loads, he was a boy younger than I am at the time. The men who constructed it worked for the WPA program during the Great Depression, left their names on a brass plaque planted

in the cemented stone, signed and dated 1931. Their colleagues, half way across the country in Missouri, in the millions of acres surrounding the mine where my great grandfather had worked, were busy at other projects, with replanting the massive forest that had been clear cut during a half-century's logging, replanting forests that would one day become the Mark Twain National Forest. I doubt that my grandfather knows this or cares, then or now, knows only that this sturdy wall has lasted, a tribute to the thirteen builders, a worthwhile solid something of them left behind. Knows, too, that he wants the land to be his wall.

And so he stops wherever he sees the rocks that will allow him to make that wall, whether along Interstate 81 or the dirt road to the land. And while my father asks him to stop, explaining that these rocks either belong to someone, if private property, or to everyone, if public property, and that either way they are not simply his for the taking, my grandfather does not listen. Just as he does not listen when my father suggests that he stop breaking off all the low branches of the land's trees.

Winter browse for deer, my father explains. A more natural setting.

Easier to walk around now, my grandfather replies.

Nicer.

Mine.

Says that he pays his taxes for the public land. Paid for the land. Reminds us all of this again and again. And so he takes the rocks, and takes the trees' limbs and takes whatever else he wishes because he believes he'd been handed the receipt at some point, a receipt that is also a blank check.

The car jostles a final time as he loads himself back into the driver's seat, just a minute or two after we'd first stopped. He checks the mirror again, scans the road behind us. I see that he is smiling, that a light sweat has broken on his high forehead. The coast clear, he looks down at me.

"Ready?" he asks.

I uh-huh and we're off, though I continue to check out the back window until we've turned finally onto the tree lined dirt road, and the plume of dust from its summer-dry surface swirls so thick behind us that I can barely see the trees or the forest or anything else anymore. And so I face forward.

Pushing forward through the tangle of brambles, feet sucking mud with each step, I radiate ripples of silence, form a hushed sphere in the racket surrounding me: the sound of a crowd in fierce conversation, talking all at once, but without words, no crowd visible. In the shallow waters at my feet, my effect echoes: waves pulse outward in interlocking rings, expanding circles developing from the hundreds of singularities that appear here, there, random as raindrops, but triggered by my movement. Each singularity is a frog body breaking the surface. Going under like the last skip of a flat stone. Or coming up, grander then, like a volcanic island forming. If I pause long enough, the waters still and glass over, the sound pushes back in close around me. Some intrepid frog talker only a few feet away can no longer bear the silence, declaims insistently; others near rush to rebut him and I am engulfed again.

The sound of these small brown frogs does not register as amphibian when I first hear it. After four springs and summers spent in the land at this point, I've learned the toads' trill and the peepers' chirp, but this seems something completely other. Like badgers, I think, though I've no idea what they sound like. Dozens of them, tossed in sacks, squabbling. And so I am wary of coming closer, the sound so desperate, so frantic that it raises the vestigial fur of my arms and neck. But siren compels me, too. Come. Find the source.

I am less familiar with this area of the land, the broad flat top of a stubby mountain that climbs up a thousand or so feet from the creek valley where my family spends most of their time, where they are now. They will not hear me should I call for them. I wander up here only occasionally, when I've exhausted

the playground of rocks and logs and the tiny, not always willing playmates below. I have to stop and listen to orient myself, pick my way among bare blueberry bushes and gnarled mountain laurels, green still, though the rest of the forest remains late March grey. I know there is a swamp here, just above a rocky ridge, have walked by it on the beginnings of long hikes with my parents, but have never gone too near. Because the thick thorny brush threatens torn clothes and views obstructed beyond more than a few feet. Because my father jokes that a hunting partner of his decided to take a short cut through and did not come out. Because he does not joke that the bear would find it a fine foraging spot.

The swamp, though, is where the sound intensifies, shout-loud now, clearly where it originates. The briar thicket in front of me conjures up fairy tales, beauty sleeping on the other side. I, because I can do nothing else, play the prince and enter.

And should not be surprised to find amorous frogs waiting. But am. And relieved. Dizzied, though, by the wash of sensory information — the unsettled water and leaping, swimming, throat-swelling bodies all around me, the chaotic laughing-talking-barking that erases thought, allows only the experience of the sound that is everywhere, even inside me. I feel time without me, before me and all else that is upright, warm-blooded, live born. And I know in this moment, though I don't yet know it, that what I've been seeking in the squirm and struggle of the tiny beings I capture is not to be found there, cannot be held within my hands.

The duration between my steps lengthens, as does that of each step — foot dangling in mid-air, cartoon stealthy, buoyed on the anticipation of frogsong — until finally I stop altogether, a machine wound down. I settle into my spot, into the sound, realizing there is nothing to be gained from getting closer, moving deeper, only precious seconds of this miracle lost. When finally I move again, what feels like days, years later, it is to remove myself from the swamp as

quickly as I can, the sooner might my quiet wake disperse. I come down the mountain, glad now to keep my silence to myself.

Reading by myself in silence I find echoes of my experience, intimations of the larger significance that I do not, cannot yet fully appreciate at ten when I first hear the frogs. Or at twelve when I check out the tattered library copy of *Where the Red Fern Grows*. Or at fifteen when I flip open my school text to Sarah Orne Jewett's "The White Heron". Something, though, is at subtle work in my mind, and at nineteen I've read just enough, am just old enough to begin to understand. To begin to wonder why I have not found the time in nine years to return to the swamp during the single week the wood frogs congregate. To realize that profound experiences are not wasted on the very young, only delayed in the processing, obscured by the temporarily important.

I am wrestling my notebook and British Romantics anthology into my backpack after a session on Wordsworth when a classmate leans over to ask, with a playful smirk, what I could possibly find so interesting in the long verse bore that is *The Prelude*. I look down at the slush puddles that have formed on the linoleum beneath my hiking boots, the boots I have, as of late, only laced up when it snows. I consider showing her the margins of the First Book which I've filled with exclamation points and yeses, my dumb response to what seems the full articulation of my own formative experiences. There where the adult Wordsworth recollects his childhood on the moors and in the mountains, when he first recognizes the dread-wonder of nature, beautiful and awful. There where "The leafless trees and every icy crag / Tinkled like iron" but also where the "grim shape" of a mountain peak "black and huge...Upreared its head" appearing to follow him, across the lake on which he rows, and then into his dreams. There where the now older author writes in a rare moment of understatement "the earth / And common face of Nature spake to me /

Rememberable things”, things that he has realized have made him who he is. Or, because showing her the margins will tell her nothing, telling her instead about my own rememberable things, the land and the creek and the swamp and the frogs. But I do none of these things, because they seem like English major clichés, English major pick-up lines, and I want her to know that even if they’re both, they’re also true. Since I don’t know how to fully communicate the truth, I offer up instead a vague platitude:

“I guess I just know where he’s coming from.”

She smiles then, and goes. And I know, too, where I am going.

Spring break that year, while some of my friends set off for Cancun and Key West, I make my way back to the land, take daily treks into the woods that seem spare and graphite drawn against the grey of the late March sky. Fairy tale prince last time I’d come frog-finding, king in waiting now. Waiting each day atop a white pine throne, bent ninety degrees to horizontal at knee height, then ninety degrees vertical again a few feet along, over and around the boulders it had somehow sprung from, seed taken root on stony ground. Waiting for frogs that do not show, but also do not disappoint. Because I know that somewhere near, in the land beneath my feet, sometime soon, the unmined nuggets of gold-flecked eyes will open, bodies frozen solid during January nights will circulate again the cold blood that allows this sci-fi feat, and then, tiny Persephones, the woodfrogs will claw their way out of the underworld. I do not need to see or hear them. Knowing this is enough to tide me over for twelve months. After all, I’d waited already nearly ten years.

The following year I return with Franklin’s *Autobiography* in my bag — I’ve an exam when I return to read for — but Faulkner in my head. *Go Down, Moses*’s Ike McCaslin, in the swamp and in my memory, spotting for the first time on his own the spoor of the mythic bear that *is* the forest, its track traced out in the

marshy ground, beginning already “to dissolve away”. Ike who is only able to see the bear once he’s completely stripped himself of civilization’s trappings — gun and compass and watch — find it only after losing himself in the woods. After three days of silence, I experiment, leave book and bag behind, wander more and sit less. Still, the frogs, who have not read Faulkner, do not show.

During the next twelve years that I patiently, hopefully make my pilgrimage, I find the wood frogs only a handful of times. The first, I am still breathless from the steep climb when the susurrus that will become a roar as I near reaches me; it is sound enough to carry me through the drought of the two following years. Another time I am sick enough to sweat through the layers that the freezing rain doesn’t soak on my first day, and lose my voice for the remainder of the week; on my final day, the frogs reward my sacrifice and silence, lend me the sound of their own voices.

Most recently, this past spring, I follow a different trail to the swamp, not straight up and past the several stony outcroppings that are the mountain’s flesh bared, but along a gentler, more rolling course, the border between our property and another’s, another who plans to log. An assessor has been through recently, has left his twine strung between the trees, the line between mine and his, ours and theirs, clearest usually on the two dimensional space of paper, but reified here, now in the three dimensions I occupy. The fourth dimension of time will soon make the division all the more apparent. I straddle the divide between two worlds for a moment, of soon-to-be managed and still to be un-, eye the fluorescent paint marks on the doomed trees, splashes like bloody bullet wounds, then snap the twine, ball it up and pocket it as I go, Theseus on his way out of the maze, the monster confounded for now, though still alive. And hungry. I’m walking fast, worried, but the paint marks stop, the twine veers out and away from me and my trajectory the closer I get to the swamp. As if to

assure me that they're undeterred for now, I can hear the frogs. All not quiet on this front, they say.

But already I am thinking of the silence rippling outward. Of the rings that form around bodies breaking the surface, crossing the surface. Of the rings that form inside trees, that keep the secret of how long they've been alive, a secret they, in their modesty, only reveal after they die. Of whether we need to know such specifics, whether we need to hold a log in our hands and count each grainy circle, by twos and threes, to quantify the tree's accomplishments. Of what we know and what we need to know. Of what we need.

Back on the other side of the pipe, back again in the now, five months later, I complete my own survey of the past, turn my head back upright, cross back over log and under wire, back onto the dirt Association road.

I am coming out of the land.

I do not ascend the hill past the creek to check the swamp and the line of cutting that is now likely complete. For that, I'll wait until spring, in the hopes of seeing the frogs, of hearing that the loggers and the logging have had little effect on them, a momentary silence in a small sphere. And besides, there will be enough logged areas to see on my walk out.

As a boy in the land I had assumed the combined space of all the Association's properties to be vastly greater than I now know it to be, because the world is always larger when we are smaller, when we've had nothing against which to gauge and measure it. Now that I have studied maps, and flown over continents, backpacked for weeks at a time through a six million acre park without seeing even another person, I have come to see how relatively small the five hundred acres that surrounded me as a child truly were. Reduced in size, I should clarify, but not diminished by the perspective I'd gained. It would take the loggers to do that.

A starry night is the privilege of finitude. Our universe began in time, ends in space, we know, because starlight pinholes the dark sheet of the evening sky, provides beacons for navigating, dots for connecting, elsewhere for naming. A universe endless and eternal would wash away our night in the uniform glow of a star at the end of every sightline, in light that has had sufficient time to travel the vast vacuum to our eyes. And so the cost of our constellations is the knowledge of our universe's mortality, far more humbling than the knowledge of our own. A fair trade, I'd wager anyway, since by the same effect we can take solace in at least the illusion of boundlessness here on Earth. We need only give ourselves enough forest, of sufficient thickness that each vanishing point is a tree, the horizon a seamless grey-brown palisade of trunks. Surprisingly little space is necessary, a few uninterrupted acres, to imagine a forest without end.

This I could do at any number of places in the land until only recently. Even from the Association road you could peer back into others' properties, have no sense of how deep the woods there was. But now I am a mile or so from the wire-smiling trees of our land when I round the bend of the dirt road, see the forest wall on my left broken by the explosion of light. Our daytime star. Not the backlit scrim here, but sun's full spotlight, harsh and bright and direct, white on the trunks that border the cut and white on the chaos of the cut. Log skidders and flatbeds have rubbed the ground raw and muddy. Broken limbs and sheered trunks jut sharp and mangled. Worst of all is the loss of the illusion. Apparent now is just how shallow these woods are, how soon the hill sweeps over into someone else's property, and then to road, and highway and city. I pass by two more such cuts before I reach the gate that marks the end of Association property, the line between in and out. In that time, I try to decide on the game metaphor most suitable for the situation. The forest logged in this way forms a checkerboard, panels of light and dark, of trees and not. The decision to

make it such plays out like dominoes. One starts, others follow, and everything falls down. Ashes, ashes.

In my grandfather's house, the shades are drawn down as always. The TV mute, though just moments ago blaring, the remote still in his hand, still small seeming in comparison. Behind his chair, on the mantle, a row of clocks: a cheerful ceramic lab counting seconds with the wag of its tail, the dog he never had; a big-belled old fashioned alarm-clock; a cheap plastic wind-up, glowing-armed, the twin of which he gave to me. His favorite gifts of late. His current buying compulsion. A sea of numbers that tics in soft syncopation as we talk.

"Is it still nice in there?" he asks. "In the land? Is the water still running nice like I made it?"

I assure him that it is, as I always do, as I have for at least ten years, since the last time he'd gone in on his own. Since he'd raked the last of that season's pine needles and leaves, gathered them, along with the branches that had fallen, those that he had broken off, all into big piles like dry-docked beaver lodges, here and there throughout the areas he tended. And then, his regular maintenance chores done, his creek project complete, he simply stopped coming. Of course he was past seventy then, owned a house with a small wooded yard which required its own tidying. But still he asks me each time I am in to visit the land and my parents and him this same question. Is it still nice in there? Is it still nice like I made it? And each time I wonder which of these questions is the more important, which the more important to answer truthfully.

I choose always the first, because then I am not really lying to him, because I do believe it is still nice in there, for now at least, though he would disagree with me, seeing the land reverting back to its former state, pre-him. Fortunately a word like nice is broad enough, vague enough, that it lends itself to interpretation.

Like the word land itself.

I wonder what those other Association members who have logged their land, who intend to log their land, call it. Do they refer to these forest spaces as *lots*? Caches of goods to be bought and sold? Something that is plentiful? Or do they simply call the property an *investment*? An *opportunity*?

My grandfather nods his head and smiles at my assurances, looks at but not out his window. As I study his profile I think, not for the first time, how much his head looks like that of a bird of prey's, the bald pate, the long, hooked nose.

He begins to talk about figures. Loads of shale and bags of cements. Surveyors. Trips in the car, to and from. Costs. The price of the land, the price of the pipe, the price of it all. He asks me, as he always does, if I know how much it's worth these days, the land.

And, as always, I assure him that I do, a brief assent, the formulaic response to his call. I wish we could change the tune, though. Me lead for once: do you, grandfather, know how much the land is worth? Beyond the \$18,000 spent all those years ago, the thousands of dollars of taxes paid since. Beyond the \$900 a forester tells my father he'd give for just three of the land's hard maples, the \$8,000 another landowner says he received for a more expansive cut. Do you know the worth of what you have given me?

He thinks of his legacy as what he made of the land and I lie because I cannot bear for him to know that all of his physical labor there has been undone, will be undone, because I cannot tell him that I am his legacy and that I will pass on not what he has taught me, but what I have learned because of him, could not have without him.

"It's yours you know," he says. "To do with what you will when I'm dead and gone."

I nod because I cannot say out loud that I don't believe that it is mine. That the land is not a mine. Because thinking like that leads to checkerboards and dominos. And I'd rather think about jump ropes. About a wire that links two trees in time and space. That shows how a tree heals, from the inside out, a ring at a time. And how a forest might, too. Spread outward from a single point. As beliefs and ideas and love do as well.

They can cut every last acre around our twenty, I want to tell him. I won't sell. Won't give them logging rights. Because that would be sacrificing all that you had sacrificed for. Even if I move far away, never see it again, have to mail checks across country to keep up its taxes. Knowing it is there will be enough. I know that now.

I wish, grandfather, that you could know this.