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Wilderness

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Wilderness

Kendra Smalley

The Blue Heron

Standing beside each other, we stare at the sluggish water of the creek as it creeps south. Dad snaps off the tops of some tall, scraggly underbrush: buckthorns, probably, which still infest our yard despite years of cutting them down to burn. He tosses the twigs into the creek to be dragged away by the brown water. Movement to the north catches my eye, and I turn to see a large, blue-tinted bird silently rise from near our side of the bank and fly across the water. I gasp and nudge Dad, trying to whisper, “look,” but my voice snags in my throat. Feeling the nudge, he looks up in time to watch it vanish among the naked branches on the other side.

“Blue heron.” His brow furrows, and my grin slips away.

“Is that bad?” I suspect it has something to do with the warm winter we’ve had so far.

He nods. “Yeah. It’s weird to see one here so late in the season. Not usual for it to still be around in December.”

“Oh.”

I think of the four chickadees chirping as they hopped from branch to branch when we arrived at the creek, their black-capped heads twitching as they surveyed the wood. We watched them for a few minutes, until Dad said he hoped they weren’t already marking out territory.

“They only do that in the spring.”

Hoping for another glimpse of the heron, our eyes still study the patch of forest where it disappeared, swallowed by the scraping and clicking branches. After a few minutes, Dad breaks off one final buckthorn crown and tosses it into the water. We watch until the growth lining the banks obscures it, then we turn to trudge back to the house.

Our dog, Jetta, races ahead of us, then circles back, careening behind us to run ahead again. We watch her, sometimes giving chase for a few steps, sometimes growling back at her. As she circles around, I rub her black, curly fur, and she gives the air in my direction a playful

nip. She bolts forward, leaping through the wind-flattened grass, until the dry meadow veils her from our view.

We pause in the orchard, where for the past few years the small trees have yielded fruit: hard pears and bitter apples, stunted and misshapen and nothing like the massive, sweet perfection found in a grocery store. On our way to the creek, I noticed a brown pear, rotten in color but still holding its shape, had fallen upside-down into a crevice in the branches of its tree, right where the arms divided away from the trunk. It looked like it was lodged in too high for deer to nibble at, or perhaps they had been so focused on foraging the ground that they hadn't glanced up.

“Hey, Dad, look at this.”

He turns away from the cracked concrete slab where he keeps his leaf bag attachment and other tractor accoutrements under a blue tarp. He dreams of building a shed there so he can properly house the items, and every summer begins with his resolution to start construction. In the end, however, some other emergency (most recently regarding the septic tank) whisks the funds from that project to the one more pressing. I wonder if this summer, still months away, will materialize his hopes.

Catching sight of the pear, he chuckles as he walks over. “Do you want to—?” He gestures toward the fruit, and I shake my head. Even though it's cold enough that the top layer of ground is frozen so it slides over the deeper mud when you step on it, I doubt the pear is completely solid. I imagine its innards reduced to grotesque mush from the sunlight, the memory of its shape the only thing maintaining its resemblance to a pear. One nudge, and the whole thing will liquidize, either oozing down the trunk or popping like a water balloon and spraying putrid juice everywhere.

Dad shrugs and pulls the pear from its lodging before dropping it at the base of the tree. It doesn't even roll, just hits the half-frozen ground and rests there, rotten skin unbroken by sickly explosions or slow oozes.

"Deer'll love this," Dad says before returning to his tractor equipment to adjust the tarp. Eyeing the fruit, I wonder if the hidden flesh will become a meal for the deer, or if the inside will reveal itself to be discolored and, ultimately, inedible.

I glance around. To the south, where the wood thickens, an invisible line divides our property from our neighbors'. The people who first owned their land had hoped to cultivate a Christmas tree farm, so they planted young pines in strict rows at what was then the edge of the forest. Decades later, the trees are much too bent and wild for a festive living room, and anemic saplings disrupt the uniform rows. There is no longer a divide between the tree farm and the rest of the forest; it always looks dark and slightly haunted among the pines, the shadows thick with needles hiding scrawny underbrush from the sun. I wonder if a coyote is peering at us from the gloom, waiting for us to move on before it creeps out into the light. With a forest this thick, it's hard to know what creatures (if any) are lurking in the overgrowth a few steps away.

Charles Williams, in reference to the opening of *The Inferno*—when Dante, as narrator, realizes he has lost his path in a dark forest—writes that "[t]he image of a wood has appeared often enough in English verse. It has indeed appeared so often that it has gathered a good deal of verse into itself . . . indeed the whole earth seems to become this one enormous forest, and our longest and most stable civilizations are only clearings in the midst of it." I look at the arbitrary place that was marked by someone's orange flag, at some point, to signify the end of our patch of wood and the beginning of our neighbors'. The coyotes and deer that glide between these trees don't care about the placement of the flag; this, all of it, is their land.

Rising right through the center of the invisible property line stands a wide-trunked pine, its distant tip shrouded by the other trees nearby. Its lower branches are barren and dangling, or else snapped off a foot or two from the trunk. Above the shrubs and tree-line, the rest of it is green and full, but everything growing near its base has blocked the sunlight to its lowest branches. When we first moved in and I still loved climbing, I had found this old pine to be the only satisfactory tree to clamber into. The other ones in the yard were either too small to hold my weight (or to offer a challenge) or else their lowest branches were beyond my reach. The tall pine, however, was perfect—that was, until I climbed it the first time and covered my hands in sap that clung to my skin no matter how hard I scrubbed with a bar of coarse, pale green bar of Lava soap.

Dad and I trudge on, passing through the line of trees that marks the end of the forest and orchard and the beginning of the narrow lawn that slopes up to the house. Circling around to the front, we enter into the mudroom, and I shiver at the warmth as I slip off my boots and set them beside the larger, grimier pairs of my family. With a paint-stained towel, Dad cleans the mud and leaf fragments from Jetta's paws, then she bolts ahead of me into the kitchen. At the stove, Mum cooks pasta and tomato sauce for dinner.

"We saw a blue heron," I tell her, perching on one of the stools at the island. "It was back by the creek."

"We must have startled it," Dad adds.

I nod, though I think it was specifically because he kept ripping off the tops of buckthorns and tossing them into the water. "It was beautiful," I say, even though all I have left of it is the impression of a bundle of grey feathers smudged with blue, lifting away into the air and vanishing on the other side of the creek.

The Climbing Tree

I pull myself up
Through gaps in branches
Extending from narrowing trunk.
I perch high enough to
Peer through gaps in
Linden leaves and look over the
Roof of our two-story house
Into the neighbors' backyard.

"I can see the Kunises' patio!"
My parents, milling on the lawn,
Chatting with friends,
Whip their heads around at the
Distant sound of my voice,
Finally look up.
I wave. They shout for me to
Come down, that's too high—
Don't go any higher!

Even if I want to, I already
Climbed so high I can't continue.
I am a queen in my tree,
Swaying along with the branches,
Grinning at a world
I have conquered,
Ignorant of the
Fear ringing in their voices.

Oakhurst Gardens, Minnetrista

Into their backyard the Balls welcomed
Wilderness: underbrush snarling up trees,
Flowers and weeds tangled and spilling onto
Paths cobbled by bricks stamped with
“Brazil Indiana” in all capitals.
My mother and I capitalize on the
Fog-burned-away day.
Sweat prickles our backs when we
Pause in the sun, but
We mostly shelter,
Walking and whispering,
In foliage-shade. This garden is not
A manicured lawn lined with roses, but a
Wood: beautiful, untamed. Wild verdure
Creeps between clay,
Crawls along benches, sweeps into
Courtyards of lantana, Russian sage,
Wisteria winding up columns—wisteria
Salvaged from a 1960s fire, never choked by
Smoke then, car exhaust now.
We get lost on the
Russet path, wonder where we are
In the backyard jungle,
Holding our breath with each bend
In hope that the foundations laid at our feet
Won’t narrow, narrow and
End at the base of a tree.

Sisyphean Gardening

No matter how many times I scrape away dandelions,
They still sprout back in the cracking pavement,
Waving jagged fronds and nodding
Green-turned-yellow-turned-white heads
At my inadequate attacks.

Mounds State Park

160 BC

Dug by hand, piled fist by fist
Into horseshoe-shaped mounds
Sealed by sweat glazing over palms,
Beading across foreheads, trickling down backs—
Perhaps, say modern anthropologists,
These shapes were raised for
Astronomical celebrations, or
Ceremonies, burials, sacred rites
Performed in night's silence.

1929 AD

Amusement park, 40 acres,
Sprawling across open field beside
Gentle, unmistakable rise of
Great Mound. Cars whizz and
Clack over wooden tracks until
Financial depression constricts visitors;
Desperation, and then land bought, transferred,
Paper and ink fating rides to be
Razed, replaced by seeds
Trembling in earth that once shook
From the force of
Feet pounding, machines grinding.

2018 AD

Oaks stretch arms of foliage over
Great Mound's sacred inner lawn,
Shielding grass from sun, rain, silver
Glint of stars. Guardians' cracked bark

Appears old as the mounds they protect,
Yet the acorns they were born of
Scattered and burrowed only after
Dust crusted over carnival dreams.

How quickly open spaces crack apart
And fill with creeping things once again.

February Respite

Whiff of earth thawing,
Dirt upturned,
Soil exposed to sun and seed:
Promise of emerging things
Arising after sleep,
Peeping and creeping and crawling,
Bleary-eyed, well-rested, from
Burrows, holes, snug homes—

Chill wind snaps and lashes,
Hints of snow dust its shrieking lips,
And I know that
Spring is not yet come,
Aslan is not yet moving,
We still have time to bide,
Hats to pull low over chapped ears
Like reminders to bind to our heads
As we bundle up, trundle out
Into winter once again.

Falling Forest

Wood squeaks as branches and trunks
Rub against one another, tossed into gossip—or
Cries for help—in a biting wind, merciless in its
Vivacity, caught up in the
Energy of itself. We emerge, ahead of the group,
From gold-leaf tunnel turned pale after
Grey clouds usurped sun. Milling in the field,
Hair tossing and hands clutching hats,
We wait. A crack-thump
Resounds behind us, and we
Race back into the wood, gape at a
Massive limb, foliage full, lying across the path
We had just walked.
It nearly hit Esther on its way down,
A straight fall after snapping from trunk.
We grasp its thickness and shift it
Into undergrowth, pretending
It fell there, not in the midst of a trail
Shaped for safety of hikers.

Notos (or, the Way of Creation)

South Wind kicks up,
Strength mounting until it
Whistles, careens, rushes across
Ripe fields growing into
Sun's glowing arms.
Parching, searing gusts
Rage, clamber, lay low life
We toiled to cultivate.

Our work vanishes,
Chapped skin flakes away,
Muscles deteriorate,
Bones disintegrate,
Marrow crumbles to dust,
Spilled blood seeps into cracks
Etched in rigid earth.

On wind's tail will come
Clouds—thick, heavy—
Pelting rains,
Harassing storms.

What wind does not wither,
Tempest will tear.

Yet we spend our days
Tilling mud, tucking
Seed into soil,
Tending and nursing
Delicate shoots—
Is it all destined to only
Topple, wither, shrivel to chaff

Wind-whisked into oblivion?

Marsh Fire in Walkup Woods Park

We march between tall reeds,
Walk in paths beaten by
Teens who probably did bad things here.
Grade school, and we are explorers,
Kings creeping to secret meetings,
And no one in the world can see us
Among the tall, dry reeds:
Moisture in the marsh
Sucked out by unclouded sun.
Tomorrow night,
Driving home from soccer practice,
Black smoke will slink into sky,
Taint the blue, and
My upper lip will sweat
Knowing I stood where fire now
Eats, consumes, shines.
But today, we lose ourselves in
Adventure made from
Imagination and plants
Too dry to survive.

Coyotes

———— grow bold:

Brown coats slink through grass,
Slide between emerald shrubs.

———— creep anywhere:

Across lawns and gardens,
Edging around ponds scum-slick.

———— howl at night:

Crying strength, victory,
Mocking the black shotgun in Dad's hands

As he stands on the back step and stares,
Ears open, into pitch black yard
Minutes after midnight.

As always, by the time he
Grabbed his gun, slid the door open, they
Vanished from the twilit yard,

Transformed into flitting shadows
That still cackle in our memory.

Touching Poison Ivy

Pink vine, thin as string,
Slinks up a tree, and

As we follow trails
Carved through forest,

My eyes latch onto its
Bright, unexpected elegance.

I reach out, fingers tracing
Patterns popping from the bark.

Oblivious, I give myself a rash.

Foggy Day

White fog enfolds branches and buildings,
Turns the world into a landscape of
Vague silhouettes and forms.

Cold, damp silence: tranquility
Unachievable when the wind
(Which also I love) whips across bare fields and
Ravages trees, tears leaves from limbs.

Not counting a black crow this morning,
The only thing hanging in the air
Is haze: no birds
Wing through the sky, no shouts
Resound across campus, no
Car engines, fire alarms.

I smell damp, rust, moisture—and
Mold, is it? Something dissolves,
Quiet and isolated,
Back into the mist.

Restless Midnight

I wish it were raining —
 or the wind howling —
 to drown out the silence of the night
and remind me that
there are Things bigger than I,
 that continue even when
 I don't think I can,
 that roar and rage despite
what I can feel or say or do.
 It is a comfort
 to know I cannot stop
the rain from falling,
 cannot steal
the voice of the Wind.

Turkey Run State Park

I forgot how tall trees stretch,

How wide trunks grow,

How distant branches spread

 In a forest:

Undergrowth thick around my feet,

 Brushing my legs,

 Caressing me as I walk by;

Empty air between brush and bough

Filling with unseen birds

 Winging above my head,

 Rejoicing in the midst of limbs

 Arching high, distant, regal.

Before Dad Rototilled the Strawberry Patch

I spent hours folded toward earth—
Knees of jeans soaked in black mud,
Faded yellow work gloves caked—

Digging at weeds, yanking
Pale roots, maneuvering
Parasitic grips away from

Three-leaf clusters shading
Crimson flashes of fingernail-sized fruit and
Baby shoots arcing away,
Nestling in soil. I sometimes even

Shed my gloves to feel
Gnarled roots, soft triplet leaves,
Moist soil housing
Wriggling worms, roly-polies,
Spiders dragging fat white egg sacks.

But dandelions, nettles, clovers, grass
Fought harder than my hands, crowded out
Plants intending—unable—to grow.

When I returned after my freshman year of college,
My strawberry patch was a plot of flat, empty dirt.

White River Forest

How many times has Tree Trail
Wound a new way, barred by fallen tree,
Emerging sapling?

Mushrooms sprout on trunks,
Signal the end, the looming
Fall. Bark spreads with moss,

Leaves fade to brown and crumble.
But seeds have still fallen from
Trunks decayed back into soil, and

Seeds grow and stretch, live and
Shelter—only to die and fade.
Only to die and fade? Toppled trees

Nourish new sprigs of green,
Alter the path, preserve the name
Of a place ever sprouting, growing, dying.

Zephyrism (or, Of Wind and Home and Something Else)

Anemoi frolic together,
Fling limbs and laughter into
Air swirling from swift steps.

Leaves caught in the romp rattle, hiss,
Whisk psithurism to my ears as I
Curl up inside holding a battered book

Of yellow pages fragrant with
Almond, or maybe vanilla,
Decomposing wood, and

Things faintly warm and familiar:
Cedar chests of afghans,
Photo albums lining a shelf,

An out-of-tune piano plunked by
Passionate but unpracticed fingers.
I burrow under a quilt—home-made,

Hand-stitched—as a mug of
Spiced tea sits on the side table,
Paints white strokes in the air.

I Don't Know Your Name

I don't know your name,
Mushrooms clambering up tree trunk,
Dark red and black with frills—
Coral of earth, not ocean.

I don't know your name,
Delicate blooms growing in clusters
At the end of a long stem,
Red flowers on the rim, then
Orange next, and
Yellow at the top, in the center.

I don't know your name,
Tree with shaggy bark
Peeling and curling on a trunk
Lurching toward a blue sky.

You thin leaves dusted white,
You with pink petals swirling together
Like a dancing woman's skirt,
You bright orange fungus growing
At the base of the oak—

I don't know your name, or
Yours, or yours, or yours, but

I know the whiff of nature,
Sweetness and mold tingling my nose;
I know the sight of you.

The Night Girl

If I could, my life would be
Framed by a flaming sky,
Awakening on time to see the sun
Suspended in its vanishing,
Caught in a glory of gold, pink, blue,
Hues too elegant to name with
Single words, short and deficient—
 Ents are right: as with “hill,”
 So with this.
My mornings would be
Roams across the land in the
Fading grey light of gloaming,
Sipping tea as the stars wink awake—
Steam rising into galaxy dust as
I, too, blink bleary eyes open, wide.
I would lie outside on grass
 —Emerald in daylight, then rendered dewy—
Stare up, down, sideways perhaps into that
Spreadingness of outer space, the heavens,
A universe glinting back at me, so distant yet
Every night I would try
To reach out, brush my hands across the sky,
Riffle the silver freckles, gather up
Dust and diamonds in my hands, let the
Ink of night seep and dribble
Between my fingers.
I would hear owls cooing in trees,
Nighthawks SHVOOMing out of dives,
 Foxes rustling bushes,
 Crickets and frogs and fauns—
And I would not tremble at the

Glint of eyes in the darkness.
I would read books, write tomes,
Dance with bare feet and sing at the moon
Until shy grey light
Peers over the horizon, asks the
Beads of water sprouting on grass, asks the
Spiders spinning silver webs, if it is yet
Time for the sun to rise.
I would nod my head, whisper back a blessing
(Along with the rest of the night) and
Slip back inside, into the
Warmth of my bed,
Until my patch of earth again revolves away
From our exploding star.

Afterword

When I was little, I was given a beautiful copy of *Sleeping Beauty* illustrated by K.Y. Craft. Each page features the delicate strokes of a pastel paintbrush in a style similar to rococo. I would pour over those glossy pages and trace the stories of the paintings, though I'm not sure if I ever read the actual words on my own. Instead, I would stare at and study the pictures, captivated by the detail and care, the elegant devotion of an artist, a creator. The pictures contained a gentle extravagance, one that drew me in and made my own world appear infused with magic when I looked away. With each new glance at the paintings, I saw another layer of details like a small gift tucked away within the larger story.

I grew up in a house filled with fantastical stories. From my parents reading *Narnia* aloud at bedtime to the illustrated collections of Italian folktales and the Brothers Grimm faery tales, the stories woven by other people surrounded me. Trips to the library led to armfuls of books; reading consumed my time, and I consumed the pages, immersing myself in the experiences of wandering through new lands or allowing goblins and faeries to invade my world.

The more I read, the more I wanted to create my own worlds for other people to explore. I began to dream up adventures and sketch characters who would inhabit my worlds. Books were about experience, escape, enjoyment; they offered realms tinged and tingling with magic, where the impossible could happen, where I could be anyone.

It wasn't until high school when I began to realize that stories provide more than vicarious living: they also offer a glimpse of the human experience, asking questions and posing possibilities for what it means to be human. It was *Frankenstein* that set up the trajectory for my love of classic literature and enjoyment of pondering some of the big questions about life and humanity. My teacher assigned us to write essays analyzing the characters and determining who

was the true monster of the story. I had never had to think of books in that way before, to judge them beyond a gut reaction of “I liked it” or “I disliked it” based on my enjoyment of the adventure. We questioned why we enjoyed—or despised—the book, and I began to realize that one can value a story even if the main characters are flawed or hateful.

Then, over spring break of my sophomore year, I ran out of books to read. Perusing my parents’ bookshelves, my eye caught an old, beat-up copy of the Folger Shakespeare Library edition of *Hamlet* that my mum read in high school (and which has mysteriously relocated itself to my bookshelves). We had read *Romeo and Juliet* in my freshman English class—and I had hated it—yet I was drawn in by the cover image of a young man brooding over a knife in his hands. I struggled through the play, but thoroughly enjoyed it; I was amazed at the intricate plot and the careful use of language, but I didn’t know at the time that I still had so much more to learn about the prince of Denmark and the king of English literature.

Following that, I have no way of cataloguing in detail the influential books and tales that shaped my view of what a story can do. Art is in and of itself enough: to create something of beauty, to craft an object and, hopefully, share it with the world, can be rewarding enough. But art, aside from—or perhaps because of—its beauty is able to open us up to discussions of the world we are in: Who are we? What does it mean to be human? Why do we suffer? Why is it important to pay attention to things, to love beauty and foster what pleases and delights?

During my sophomore year of college, I took a Romantic literature course that introduced me to such beloved poets as John Clare, John Keats, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Percy Bysshe Shelley (the latter being someone whose choices in life distress me but whose work I must admit captures my imagination and sends me running to a secluded place to write). These writers, along with others like them, were not afraid to engage with how people interact with nature and

how the natural world can lead us to better understand ourselves and our place in our communities and cultures. They taught me that nature has a duality about itself, often captured by the concept of the sublime: something can be both beautiful and dangerous, tantalizing and traumatizing. In my writing, I wanted to explore this threat of nature, a wildness that is at times masked by its beauty and mundanity. In considering nature, neither beauty nor danger is privileged; rather, they are entwined together as qualities to celebrate, respect, and wonder at.

Our society has of late—and by this I mean since about the Industrial Revolution, which is relatively recent in the grand scheme of time—attempted to tame nature, to box it away in quaint city parks or make it a form of entertainment through zoos and petting farms. But the wildness keeps creeping back, in the forms of parking lot weeds or massive tree roots that buckle concrete sidewalks. I have heard that there is no longer uncharted territory, that we have found and explored and put our imprint on all that there is in the world. Perhaps, collectively, this is true. But I have not seen those places, climbed many of the so-called “conquered” mountains, splashed through the “tamed” rivers that still have sucking and thrashing undercurrents; even though, since 160 BC, thousands of people have tramped across the land of Mounds State Park, it is no less uncharted and new, wild and exciting to me.

I want to pay attention, and I refuse to let go of the wilderness because to me, it is infused with the magical lands I loved when I was younger. The wood is wild, but it is also beautiful. In ages past, this wildness was captured by folktales, which were darker and more terrifying than our technicolor Disney remakes now portray them. Folktales and uncultivated growing things are inextricably linked, and as we domesticate nature, so, too, do we domesticate folktales. But in the days of the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen—of whispering stories by the flickering light of a fire, of raising and nurturing our own gardens of produce—the stories that

were told offered not only warnings of the wild (yes, it is beautiful, yet take care), but also to give life lessons and morsels of what it means to be a human: one ought to foster virtue and good character, to help one's neighbors and pay attention to them. And are our forests and mountains, our muddy creeks and wind-hissing plains, not also our neighbors? Jack Zipes, in his biographical study of the Brothers Grimm, notes that

. . . the forest is rarely enchanted, though enchantment takes place there. The forest allows for enchantment and disenchantment, for it is where society's conventions no longer hold true. It is the source of natural right, thus the starting place where social wrongs can be righted . . . The forest [i]s unconventional, free, alluring, but dangerous. (67-68)

Lately, however, as our efforts become concentrated on taming our natural spaces, we also strip down the depth of our stories. We begin to lose the ability to pay close attention because we do not expect to see anything enchanted around us. We stop seeing our world. The pale, dry marsh grasses and reeds that have been flattened by snow fallen and melted are reduced to an ugly reminder of the chills of winter. We cannot fathom the dead brush being used as a shelter for slumbering geese, that the grasses were flattened by a bedding deer.

Our stories used to be wild, and our images of nature used to be wild. People before us, who spun these tales and repeated them to one another, were also much better at recognizing how their homes and settlements' physical locations in the landscape shaped them as individuals and communities. Through the writings of Scott Russel Sanders, I was reminded that remembering place—where we have spent our life, where we devote our time—influences who we become. Many of his essays in *Writing From the Center* reflect on where he grew up and lived: the Midwest, a region known not for its dark woodlands or tall mountains or lashing seas,

but for its lack of topography and abundance of corn. Yet, the land of the Midwest and its pockets of wilderness still leave their marks upon those who live here. In his essay “Buckeye,” Sanders calls his readers to pay attention to the place they are in, rather than attempting to mentally dwell elsewhere:

How could our hearts be large enough for heaven if they are not large enough for earth?

The only country I am certain of is the one here below. The only paradise I know is the one lit by our everyday sun, this land of difficult love, shot through with shadow. The place where we learn this love, if we learn it at all, shimmers behind every new place we inhabit. (6)

After considering how we are shaped by the land—how *I* am shaped by the land—I altered some of the titles and content of my poems to better reflect on and celebrate the region that has shaped me, and to offer to the reader a better sense of my place. And how surprisingly lovely have I found this place to be! I have fallen in love with the dramatic rock formations of Turkey Run, with the slopes and valleys of Mounds State Park, and even with the miles of corn and beans adorning the shallow hills that line crumbling roads.

It is good to be grounded and to lay roots, and I am finding that the places we live ground in us and lay their roots in us, too. Nature offers us comfort and affirmation—and healthy doses of awe, wonder, and even terror. As Sanders says at the end of “Buckeye”: “We need to know where we are, so that we may dwell in our place with a full heart” (8). I have tried to do just that in these pieces, to study and learn about and celebrate where I have been and how those places have influenced who I am and taught me to listen and wonder.

There is a reward in going back to the wilderness and listening to the secrets it has to tell, paying attention to the places it has hidden among its folds. We stand before a massive tangle of

snarled branches and thorns which some call tame but I still believe is wild, and we are given a choice: we can ignore it and go on with our lives, safe and cozy in our electric houses in front of our flashing screens; we can attack it and try to burn it and cut it away so it is shrunken, misshapen, beaten into a rare attraction to gawk at for five minutes before growing bored and leaving; or we can step in, with eyes and ears wide, and seek the treasures it conceals at its heart. I for one choose to join Mary Oliver and enter the long black branches beside her:

Only last week I went out among the thorns and said
to the wild roses:
deny me not,
but suffer my devotion.

Then, all afternoon, I sat among them. Maybe

I even heard a curl or two of music, damp and rouge red,
hurrying from their stubby buds, from their delicate watery bodies.

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