SOMETHING IN THE WOODS:
ON DISTANCE, KNOWLEDGE, AND ENCHANTMENT

ALYSSA PELISH

1. Enchantment

At the entrance of temples, in tombs, and possibly above their beds, the Sumerians and Akkadians placed carved amulets and terra cotta plaques of the fearsome head of Humbaba, long-ago guardian of the legendary Cedar Forest. In Pliny the Elder's encyclopedic *Natural History*, six books of which are devoted specifically to trees, one in particular to forest trees (which itself contains ninety-five chapters), he includes himself among those Romans who believe that the tutelary spirits of the silvani, the fauns, and numerous nymphs preside over the woods. For centuries in Devon and Cornwall, according to stray accounts here and there, wayfarers would turn their cloaks inside out as a kind of protection when passing through oak groves thought to be haunted by elves. People of these regions would also set apart a certain share of their fruit crops for the fairies of the woods bordering their fields, just in case. And while, over the whole wide higgledy-piggledy assemblage of European states—which were once upon a time chockablock with forests—there are no reliable written records of people's actual beliefs about what lay in the woods, what remains instead is the great mass of woodland spirits, fairies, elves, wild men, and witches that populated their folklore. The people who told these tales seem to have felt *something* was in the woods.

The landscape of my Wisconsin childhood was mostly that of the cornfield and the soybean field. In my memory, the bland uniformity of those rows and rows of identical crops is contiguous with the boredom of childhood: The endless, shadeless, monotonous view from the back seat of the family car. The immense dullness of the rural school system. The plain tedium of an empty summer day that ran in one straight line like a county road through a repetition of fields. The town was once, in fact, a place that drew loggers, was once upon a time the center of a massive lumber industry—"until," as the Chamber of Commerce nutshells about six decades of history, "the large stands of white pines in the area were exhausted." Then it was the farmers who settled in. At first, potatoes and oats and corn. Now, like the rest of the Midwest, mostly corn and soybeans.

Of much more interest to me were the areas of our neighborhood a real estate agent might describe as "wooded": the sprawl of trees I couldn't identify by name that lined about a hundred meters of the road into the cul-de-sacked sub-development where we lived, that fringed our unkempt backyard, that clustered at the edges of the man-made lake that gave the town its name. These spaces didn't quite qualify as *woods*, like those that haunted our illustrated book of fairytales or my copy of Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House in the Big Woods* (set over a hundred years before and ninety miles south of our circa 1970s house). But these spaces seemed, even so, to hold much more promise of enchantment than the surrounding fields. Their relative darkness and thickets of depth hid things, suggested secret dimensions that the flat plains of neighborhood lawns and fields could not.

That I should want enchantment, that any child should be looking for it, doesn't seem surprising. Why wouldn't you look for a glimmer beyond the rote repetition of the everyday? Why wouldn't you want to believe it was a real fairy who had replaced the tooth under your pillow with a silver dollar, try to convince yourself the abandoned cabins by the lake were haunted, scan your dolls for evidence that they'd twitched or talked while you were out of the room, inspect tree hollows for signs of wood elves, make sincere wishes on dandelion fluff? Why wouldn't you, whatever the cornfields of your boredom?

That I would search for such enchantment in those woodsy spaces is also not hard to fathom. My imagination was a living residue of all the fairy-tale woods I'd absorbed and then encountered, refracted, in countless borrowed library books centered, usually, on bullied or orphaned children carving out a forest realm for themselves—not to mention the cover of one hardback book, filled with a tangle of foliage from which peered

Duane Slick

a set of red-veined eyes, that I could never bring myself to actually pick up. There was the deep, deep darkness of the Big Woods surrounding the Little House. There were also all those Bigfoot documentaries that seemed always to be on TV in the eighties. And there were the shadows of the woodsy areas themselves. And the intricacy, in contradistinction to the cornfields: the almost humanoid curve of certain tree trunks, the ogreish burls in their bark, the silvered glow of their lichen-splotched limbs, the suggestive hollows in sweetly rotting stumps, the eerily bright caps of toadstools in their hidden colonies, the fur of moss that could itself contain a miniature forest of trees.

Why wouldn't you look for a glimmer beyond the rote repetition of the everyday?

When I go into the woods today, it's usually a more bona fide woods, not just a wooded area: a forest preserve or reserve or a heavily treed park. But still, it's domesticated. Its trails are already forged, usually marked and mapped. There's usually some kind of ranger station around. And yet, when I go there—when I double-knot my sneakers and eventually figure out where the trailhead is and walk into the shade of whatever forest preserve or reserve or heavily treed park it is—I go there, still, because there does seem to be *something* in the woods. Not fairies or elves or fauns or silvani necessarily. But something.

Enchantment is a word that—especially since the Grimm brothers published their collection of folk tales, heavy on both *Zauber* and *Wald*—is regularly entwined with woods. *Enchanted woods. Enchanted wood. Enchanted forest.* No other ecosystem has been so consistently entwined with the word that it's entered the realm of cliché, become the answer to crossword puzzle clues and *Wheel of Fortune* spins. So that something in the woods—let's just call it enchantment. What I'm wondering, though—given the terra cotta Humbaba plaques and the belief in tutelary sylvan spirits and people's habit of turning their cloaks apotropaically inside out, and all the stories, and the small shiver down my own spine—is how exactly it works. How is it, I guess I'm asking, that the forest enchants us?

2. The Non-I

"In the vast world of the non-I," the fairly gnomic philosopher Gaston Bachelard writes, in his *Poetics of Space*, "the non-I of fields is not the same as the non-I of forests." Of course this is true. The fields of my childhood, while no more mine than the wooded areas, were the work of other people. They were tilled and fertilized and sprayed and combined by men in gargantuan metal machines. They might as well have been the products of a factory. The woodsy bramble, though, seemed beyond human intention. And while it probably wasn't, forests, if you go far enough back in history, are. Forests first appeared in the Devonian period, about 385 million years ago. There weren't even any animals around. Humans didn't emerge from the frames of their long-armed, low-browed, heavily occipital-bunned ancestors until maybe 384.5 million years later. If you read enough about the earlyish natural history of forests, it begins to seem not just as if they were completely beyond human control, but that they had a will of their own. For one thing, even after something like a Permian extinction event or an ice age, they kept coming back. For another thing, they were incredibly expansive. They seemed to set down roots wherever they could. The Permian extinction, about 250 million years ago, wiped out something like 70 percent of terrestrial animal species and nearly all marine animals, and significantly cut back the extent of the forests. But forests—evolving into flowering seed plants and doubling down on phyla like the conifers and ginkgos—soon set about populating the earth from pole to pole. When a succession of ice ages hit, between 2.5 million and 15,000 years ago, forests were KO'ed again. But when the glaciers finally began to retreat, like some embattled, melting ice monster, the forests rose again.

As I read in a book called *Forests: A Very Short Introduction*, forests "pushed north… right up to the edges of the ice sheets." Like dogged landowners reclaiming their forty acres and then some, the forests "pursued the retreating glaciers" even up mountains, in East Africa, New Guinea, and the Andes. This way of describing the forests as sentient beings, pushing and pursuing—like some early instantiation of Birnam Wood—is something I encounter often, once I start reading. Another book I read, one that entwines the history of northern European forests with fairy tales, tells of how, "about 10,000 years ago, when trees began to crawl north following the retreating ice cap, the first pioneers were birch and then pine." It's as if the forest were the great undead of terrestrial ecosystems. And it's not just that they always rose again; it's that they did so with such vigor—they gave chase, their branches outstretched. Pursuing, pushing, crawling. *A Very Short Introduction* caps its discussion of forestial repo with a story of Hernán Cortés "hacking his way through tropical forests in Mayan territory." What he stumbled

across were "the ruins of long-abandoned ancient Mayan cities that had been completely overwhelmed by centuries-old forests."

This, for me, has always been the shiver-inducing part of "Sleeping Beauty": not the evil fairy's curse, not the part where the princess pricks her finger on a spindle, but the moment when, all the cooks and courtiers and scullery maids and porters and pages and footmen of the castle having been magicked into a deep slumber, a thick forest springs up around it all, so deep and brambled and thorny that, for a hundred years, not even the most determined prince can swashbuckle his way through. (Not for nothing is the full title often translated "The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood.") I would feel the same shiver in the Brooklyn neighborhood where I lived for a time, walking by a long-vacant brownstone, ivy overrunning its peeling facade and punched-in windows, tall grasses and wildflowers and saplings growing up around the heavy, ornate balusters and the high stone steps fuzzed with moss and lichen. This is the natural order of things, these creeping, crawling, pushing, sprouting plants and the forests they grow into seem to say. We go on without you. We are what will remain when you are no longer here.

3. Lost

In the accounts of early European colonists in North America, the woods aren't Birnam Wood-level aggressive, but they're daunting. When Captain John Smith wrote in 1606 of the land that became Jamestown Colony, he remarked, more than once, that "all the Countrey is overgrowne with trees." "The whole country is simply an interminable forest," was French Jesuit Missionary Pierre Biard's 1616 assessment of the still new French colony of Acadia, in southeastern Canada. He blamed the extreme cold of the region on "the wild and primitive condition of the land," on "its boundless forest." "Ye whole countrie, full of woods and thickets, represented a wild & savage heiw," William Bradford recalled, in his journal of the Pilgrims' arrival on the tip of Cape Cod. "What could they see," he wrote, sympathetically, of his fellow Pilgrims, "but a hidious & desolate wildernes, full of wild beasts & willd men?"

This vision of the woods as wild and endless seems, reliably, to have been the general reaction of European colonists who themselves hailed from relatively cozy farmland. (By the end of the sixteenth century, most of the forests in Europe had been cleared.) But it also just seems to be the attitude of anyone who doesn't know the forest well. (There are not, for instance, in the tales of the Ojibwe people native to my hometown, any mentions of Bigfoot-like creatures or of losing one's way in the woods.) It's the unknown, the non-I-ness, of the forest that gives us the wolf who leads Little Red Riding Hood astray, that makes any mother who would strand her children there particularly evil. "Once upon a time," *Little House in the Big Woods* begins, "a little girl lived in the Big Woods of Wisconsin, in a little gray house made of logs." The book begins like a fairy tale, and it is the woods that make it so: "The great, dark trees of the Big Woods stood all around the house, and beyond them were other trees and beyond them were more trees. As far as a man could go to the north in a day, or a week, or a whole month, there was nothing but woods."

In *From the Forest: A Search for the Hidden Roots of our Fairy Tales*, Sara Maitland goes so far as to say that in the folklore of geographies without forests, people simply do not get lost. No lost heroes in *The Arabian Nights*, Maitland points out. And while this claim doesn't seem entirely credible to me (couldn't one become disoriented, lose one's way, in the vastness of a desert or in a storm at sea?), it does hint at the way the forest is something different. Practically speaking, there is no view of the horizon in a forest. The open sky and its constellations are concealed. Your line of sight is restricted: on every side of you, immediately in front of you, there are only trees. "I ended up in a dark wood," go those famous lines from Dante, "for the straight way was lost." The woods (to the non-forest-dwelling European) are the very state of being lost. It makes sense, then, that in Grimms' fairy tales, stories rooted in towns and farmsteads where the forest marked the boundary of what was known and settled land, boys and girls and fair maidens and the thumb-sized son of a woodcutter, and even princes and kings, lose their way again and again, always deep in the woods.

And something happens, in fairy tales, when you lose your way in those woods. The woods expand. Like a black hole, or a TARDIS, or the nutshell in which the girl in a Grimms' fairy tale keeps her three dresses from the sun, moon, and stars, the woods—once you are in them—seem deeper and wider than they appeared from just the edge of them. When Hansel and Gretel, abandoned in the woods, try to find their way out, they are so lost that they can conceive of the space of the woods only in terms of time: "They walked the whole night and all the next day too from morning till evening, but they did not get out of the forest.…They began to walk again, but they always came deeper into the forest." When the huntsman charged with killing Snow White at last lets her go, in the midst of the woods, she runs "as long as her feet would go until it was

almost evening." The forest has become so vast, it seems, that she can run for an entire day and still not reach the end of it. Of course the forest seems to expand, to deepen and darken, precisely because we are lost, because we can't find a path out.

About a year ago, on the pine duff and leaf litter of a northern Wisconsin trail chiaroscuroed by the afternoon sunlight through trees, looping around sunken ponds fringed by late-summer lily pads, I, in fact, realized that I was lost. It was maybe forty-five minutes into what was meant to be a tidy 4.5-mile jog around what the people at the Chippewa Moraine Recreation Area call the Circle Loop Trail. Seizing upon landmarks that proved to be illusory (a slightly more sunken pond, an incline like a stairwell, the twinned trunk of a tree), pressing first in one direction, then in another, mapless, compassless, and wholly unable to determine the position of the sun in the sky, I began to understand that I had no useful sense of where in the woods I was. The woods were still, in the heat, save for the crepitations of small, unseen creatures, the sporadic call of distant birds I couldn't name, the buzz of deer flies. The varnish of DEET on my bare skin had already dissolved in my own sweat. The canopy of pale green leaves and dark needles almost hid the hot blue sky. After a while, I gathered that I had somehow veered from that tidy loop I'd intended to run and onto some stretch of the Ice Age Trail, a path following the terminal moraine of the last glacier—the furthest, debris-dumping point—curving itself, snake-wise, around the entire state, southeast to northwest. But I didn't know anything else. There was nothing to guide me, no signposts I could recognize. Sometimes I would spot what seemed to be the white blaze of a trail marker on a trunk, but it would always resolve itself into a patch of lichen. I knew that I wasn't lost in any significant way. The Chippewa Moraine Recreation Area is not the Amazon rainforest or the Russian taiga. At some point I might come across a dirt road, where at some point a truck might rattle toward me. (This, in fact, is what finally happened.) I was not a beleaguered colonist facing the desolate wilderness of uncharted territory. I was not a child abandoned deep in a dark woods, far from her village. Their fears were not mine. But to truly not know where I was, to look around myself and see nothing but the thickness of trees and the bramble, to feel their utter indifference to me, was sobering.

Thoreau, as it happens, that American icon of life in the woods, wrote about being lost in the woods. "Not till we are completely lost, or turned around," he decided, "do we appreciate the vastness and strangeness of Nature." It's one of his more needlepoint-sampler-ready thoughts, but as I reread *Walden*, I find myself returning to it. While the thought appears apropos of all the visitors to his cabin who get lost in the four acres of pitch pine surrounding Walden, it bears the mark of a significant foray he made at the time into the much vaster woods of Maine. (His reasons for that foray, in fact, have more in common with my reasons than with that of the colonists or the early tellers of those tales who would end up in the Grimms' collections.) In his account, *The Maine Woods*—which, as a narrative, has no particular course other than the one Thoreau takes through the woods—he is all the time remarking on the vastness and denseness of the woods. "The trees are a standing night." They are a "tangled labyrinth of living, fallen, and decaying trees only the deer and moose, the bear and wolf can easily penetrate." Thoreau had to, in fact, rely on a Native Penobscot guide for all of his travels through those woods. And even this precaution didn't preclude his own frequent disorientation. "At a hundred rods you might be lost past recovery," he writes, only half-speculatively, of straying from a camp in the woods. A rod is about five meters. In *Walden*, he thinks about how we carry the map of our everyday, our habitual course, always within us, "constantly, though unconsciously steering like pilots by certain well-known beacons and headlands." The Habitrail of our daily life. To be truly lost, then, he feels, is to have lost this world, to suddenly have no use for its map. And this, I think, is what the woods allow. The woods, even if only for part of an afternoon, veil the horizon and blot out the sky. They leave you surrounded by only them.

4. No Young Forests

When Hesiod, back in something like 700 BC, tells of the five ages of man, he describes the warlike race of the Bronze Age, born of ash trees. Homer, in his *Odyssey*, alludes to ancient stories of men sprung from oak. Lycophron, a third-century BC poet, describes the Arcadians as "sons of the oak," a people so ancient they existed "before the moon." Vergil's *Aeneid*, somewhere in the last few decades BC, describes the forested site of what will someday be Rome as having once been home to "a race of men sprung from trunks of trees and hardy oak." These allusions to humans born of trees are scattered throughout Greco-Roman stories, and then beyond. In Norse mythology, the first man and woman, Askr and Embla, were formed from an ash and an oak. Zoroastrian mythology imagines a tree that was transformed into the first man and

woman, Mashya and Mashyana. Trees, all these old stories insist—long before carbon-dating, long before any understanding of how photosynthesis first suffused the earth with the oxygen we aerobic creatures need to live—were here before us.

A book I find, published by an obscure press in 1922 and called *History of Barron County*, the northwestern square of Wisconsin where I grew up, offers a version of this kind of origin story. "The greater part of the surface of Barron County was originally covered with a forest growth," the author tells us, proceeding to describe the "dense growth of mixed pine and hardwood, comprising almost every variety of tree growing in this latitude," after which follows a litany of sorts: "A lusty growth of red and white oak, rock and water elm, yellow birch, sugar maple, ash, butternut, basswood…." And more, the author says, as if a complete roll call is beyond the space of the page. "Upon these pine forests," the author then concludes, "the early history of Barron County is based. Logging the forests brought here the lumbermen, who later stayed and established farms, and upon the ruins of the early lumber camps, the cities and villages of the county are founded."

It is a simplistic little story, leaving out the Ojibwe people and the animals whose homes were destroyed by the logging industry. But it does convey how the forests preceded all of us. I knew none of this, of course, when I was growing up. The street names of our town bore traces of the men who'd founded the massive lumber company that had planted one of its mills right in the middle of what would become the town. Knapp, Stout, Tainter. There was a tiny park called "Knapp-Stout." But I had no idea that the wooded areas I was drawn to were tokens of an actual forest that had once, in fact, covered the entire county. Not direct descendents, but tokens. Like what a goldfish bowl is to Lake Superior. And still, those woodsy grounds where I tried to climb the curved trunks and crouched in the bramble *seemed* old. It wasn't something I thought about, specifically. It was just the way it felt.

"In the reign of the imagination," Bachelard writes, "there are no young forests." As it happens, of the Wisconsin forest land that existed before the nineteenth-century logging companies struck, only about 0.3 percent remains. Certainly, none of the wooded area I played in as a kid is part of the 0.3 percent. None of it is even within a reasonable drive (the closest is about four hours by car, on a forty-acre parcel of land that exists today only on account of the whim of a lumber company president, whose wife—the story goes—likening her favorite stand of white pines and red pines and hemlocks to a

cathedral, persuaded her husband to spare it). But it's true, as Bachelard suggests, that when I go out into the woods, whatever woods I'm in, regardless of the diameter of the tree trunks, I always kind of imagine that's it been there for ages.

Recently, I visited Athens for the first time. The Acropolis, the Agora. The adjacent piles of unclaimed plinths and capitals, just crumbling with ancientness. A friend of mine asked me, upon my return, if I'd felt any sense of awe at the sight of those ruins. In truth, I hadn't. What I'd felt, mostly, were the layers of tourists and ongoing efforts at preservation—the ubiquitous ticket booths, the clusters of people with camera phones in front of the scuffed didactic signage, the criss-cross of metal scaffolding that surrounds so many of the ruins. But I'm often left cold when presented with famous locations like this, never mind if it's the villa where a laudanum-imbued John Keats hit upon the meter and rhyme scheme of his famous odes, or the site of the first major battle of the Civil War, where Union soldiers had to resort to using their commanding major's woolen socks as cartridge bags and eventually borrowed a Texas senator's white handkerchief to hoist in surrender. The halo of human-made aura, somehow, doesn't quite reach me. When I thought about it, it occured to me that the only time I feel something like awe is in nature. And mostly, it's when I'm alone in the woods. Part of this, I think, is the woods' complete indifference to me—to anyone. It seems as if the trees have always stood there: silent, breathing, sentinels of slow time. But they haven't necessarily. There are, indeed, some fantastically old Sequoioideae and pedunculate oaks, and even a bunch of many-hundred-year-old stretches of forest. But most of the woods in Wisconsin only began to be coaxed back into existence in the 1930s—when legislators and weary homesteaders, and some particularly zealous local newspaper editors, finally accepted that the land in these far northern counties could never be farmed on. What is it about the woods, then, regardless of their actual history, that affects me in this way? I wonder if it has something to do with how, unlike the ancient Greek columns that echo the broad trunks of the woods, no human design went into their making. If architecture—arches and entablatures and Ionic columns—is a way of marking human time, human space, trees stand outside of that.

"In the reign of the imagination," Bachelard writes, "there are no young forests."

In those Maine woods where Thoreau seems to vacillate between enchantment and enervation, he marvels that "you are never reminded that the wilderness which you are threading is, after all, some villager's familiar wood-lot, some widow's thirds, from which her ancestors have sledded fuel for generations, minutely described in some old deed which is recorded, of which the owner has got a plan, too, and old bound-marks may be found every forty rods, if you will search." He seems, here, to have forgotten about the number of times the members of his party have come across a small settlement of log huts or a heap of felled timber, each log carved with the telltale device of a logger (e.g., "Y—girdle—crowfoot"). But this is how the woods work on the imagination. His larger impression is not unlike that of early colonists, whose initial, overwhelmed descriptions don't quite take into account the native people's small clearings and route ways and cultivations of crops. What Thoreau sees is a "grim, untrodden wilderness," a forest "primeval" and "virgin." A forest, in other words, that has long preceded him.

This is how we envision our gods—preceding us, enduring us, outlasting us. Except it was the trees, groves of them, Pliny explains in his *Natural History*, circa AD 79, that drew the gods to make their temples there. The trees were there first. To try to imagine time in this way is at least a little bit dizzying. It's something along the lines of a glimpse of the world without us.

5. Through a Forest, Darkly

Late last October, when a friend and I passed an afternoon traipsing through a forest preserve north of the big city where we live, we oohed not only over the ghostly yellow traces of autumn color but the massive, shaggy root system of a felled tree that created a kind of alcove there in the woods, with crevices we could curl ourselves into. We marveled at the knobby stairsteps formed by thick tree roots half-emerged from the earth. We exclaimed at and crawled into the cage-like structure formed by a hydra's head of tree trunks all improbably bending down to the leaf-littered ground. We saw verdigris in the lichen-splotched rocks and tree trunks. In other words, we found human-made forms in a natural landscape.

It was not, really, so different from an art installation I remember walking through many years ago in a forest of northern England. There, every so often, among the beeches and maples and ramrod-straight rank and file of spruces, you'd come to a clearing and find some kind of sculpture

fashioned only of forest materials. A tastefully naked man in stone, kneeling athletically, with a dead animal slung over his shoulders. A tree-tall Ent-like creature, all in wood, leaning on an ax. An elevated bridge thing, in heavy stone and sticks. Giacometti-style caryatids, one sluicing water over the other, in a creek bed. There was something a little bit magical about it, as if the spirit of my childhood play (which so often involved seeing miniature alcoves and antechambers in rotting stumps and tree hollows, and situating my Playmobil people therein) had been given monumental form. The sculpture, strangely, that I remember the best, was in a distant part of the forest: there, an armchair resembling a La-Z-Boy, carved of wood, faced the broad screen of an antennaed TV, also of wood. There might have been a lamp, too, and a footrest. The particularly bathetic contrast between the furniture of a living room and the wilderness of the setting just underscores, I think, how we're all the time projecting the fixtures of our own world onto the leafy scrim of the woods.

Emerson, Thoreau's mentor in things Transcendental, captures this tendency in a fairly happy way, in his Transcendentalist treatise, *Nature*. "Man is an analogist and studies relations in all objects," Emerson declares, in his aphoristic mode. "He is placed in the centre of beings, and a ray of relation passes from every other being to him. And neither can man be understood without these objects, nor these objects without man." Emerson's belief in this ray of analogy that humans beam between ourselves and the natural world feels very familiar to me. An ex of mine once forbade me, midway through a walk in the woods, to make any more likenings. A hollowed trunk like a witch's hearth, burls like the embellishments on a Gaudi facade, a mushroom cap like a tarnished goblet, another like a lace parasol. I was out of control, he said. Couldn't I just enjoy the forest on its own terms? But this way of thinking about the natural world is knit into our language: we're as likely to find limbs and trunks and stumps in the woods as we are on our own bodies. And then there are all of the belongings we've placed in the woods, so familiar as to be cliché: carpets of pine needles, columns and pillars of tree trunks, stairsteps formed of thick tree roots, high canopies of foliage, a whole cathedral in a pine forest. It is, in fact, very like when you leave the outside light on at night, and suddenly, through the broad panes of a sliding glass door, all the furniture of your living room appears in your backyard.

This echo of us, this reflection that's not quite us, is pleasingly eerie. It's as if the forest has been populated with enchanted beings, equivalent to the uncanny trees and frogs and birds in the woods of any number of fairy tales. In the Grimms' tales, just for instance, a tree turns out to be a prince, a frog from deep in the forest is revealed to be another prince, and a sylvan fox is at last restored to, yes, the prince he really is. In one of the more troubling, rapey tales of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the nymph Daphne is transformed into a laurel tree. Pursued, doggedly, by a Cupid's-arrow-struck Apollo, she calls on her river-god father to somehow transfigure her—and soon bark is hardening her limbs, leaves sprouting where her hair once flowed, her feet taking root in the ground. But Apollo, unfortunately, recognizes her even in this arboreal form. He places his hand on her trunk, embraces her branches as if they were human limbs, presses his lips to the bark. Daphne has become a laurel tree, but she is still discernibly feminine. In another, much happier tale, Jove promises an exceptionally hospitable peasant couple, Baucis and Philemon, that not even age will part them. And, in their final moments of senescence, they watch each other sprout leaves and branches. Bark closes over their mouths, until they can say nothing else to each other. What they become is two trees growing from one trunk, two forms grown into one, which the people of their hilly region of Phrygia still point out to anyone passing by. The trees in these tales are us, but not-us.

"There must always be an underlying something, namely that which becomes," Aristotle ventured in his *Physics*, some three hundred years before Ovid's tales of transformation, ratiocinating his way toward the principles of change, of one thing becoming another. To talk about this underlying something, Aristotle used the word ὕλη, or *hyle*. This word (which, in ancient Greek, sounds something like *hoo-luh*, like the hoot of a strange owl), for a long time, just meant *woods*. Homer used it that way. Herodotus did. So did a lot of other Greeks. It was also used to mean firewood, or timber, or even the twigs that birds use to build their nests. Regardless, its sense was unmistakably woodsy. Eventually, most likely because wood was such ubiquitous material, *hyle* became another word for *matter*: the stuff things are made of. Most notably, Aristotle used this word, this forest-derived, timber-derived word, to refer to his very particular concept of matter: the something that remains even when a body changes, when it takes on or loses traits, or when it passes in or out of being. Every physical object, he contended, is a compound of matter and form. The form of any living being—say, a human or a tree—is its soul. The matter of a human is flesh and bone. The matter of a tree is

bark and leaves. All such matter, bark and bone alike, can be broken down into further matter—some combination of earth, air, water, and fire (or the divine substance of aether, if you're a star or a planet). But ultimately, even these seemingly most elemental of elements can be broken down into something else—what Aristotle calls prime matter, *prôtê hulê*. It is *prôtê hulê* that underlies all beings. It can take on any form whatsoever.

Reading Ovid (in whose language the concepts of wood and matter also converge in one word: *materia*), the possibility of this matter that underlies all beings, that can take on any shape, seems alive, as beings shift from flesh and blood to bark and leaves, or to the cold light of astral bodies, or to the horns and fur or beaks and feathers of forest creatures. If there is pluripotency in this underlying matter, this material rooted in the woods, there is precarity in every being.

It's a sense of precarity that, it seems, took on a darker resonance for the Europeans colonizing North America. A prevailing theory of natural philosophy at the time held that humans degenerated, physically and mentally, the farther they drifted from their origins in Paradise. (The English, of course, had not drifted at all.) This explained the most visible differences between Europeans and the darker-skinned natives they encountered elsewhere, but it also menaced those colonists facing the wilderness of this New World. They feared a similar transformation in themselves.

This fear was especially intense among Puritans, whose Calvinist foundation taught that evil lurked in the heart of every person. It seemed highly possible, then, that the innate depravity of humans would unfurl in the moral vacuum of the wilderness they faced. In the dark forest, men might degenerate into heathen creatures—or worse, as the later accusations of witchcraft would attest. (See Nathanael Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," in which a man who walks deep into the emphatically dark woods is horrified to discover exactly that innate depravity in his fellow Puritan villagers.) In his 1630 farewell sermon to a fleet of ships sailing for the Massachusetts Bay Colony, the minister John Cotton (future father-in-law and grandfather of the equally fire-and-brimstone ministers Increase Mather and Cotton Mather) issued a warning: "Have a tender care that you looke well to the plants that spring from you, that is, to your children, that they doe not degenerate as the Israelites did." This biblical figure of the degenerate plant haunts the sermons, histories, tracts, diaries, and jeremiads in verse of the Puritan leaders, some of whom, decades later, would effectively weep and

gnash their teeth at what they saw as the ungodly transformation of their people in the New World wilderness. "It is affirmed," intoned Cotton Mather, in his 1696 "Things for a Distress'd People to Think Upon," "That many sorts of Inferiour Creatures, when transplanted from Europe to America, do Degenerate by the Transplantation." Mather the Younger then quotes Jeremiah 2.21, adding his own exclamation point: "I planted thee a Noble Vine; How then art thou Turned into the Degenerate Plant of a strange vine unto me!" More eerily, his father, Increase, reflecting on the bloodshed of King Philip's War, in 1676 describes how "the English Soldiers" faced off against their enemy in "a dismal Swamp." "The Swamp," he wrote, "was so Boggy and thick of Bushes" that "It could not there be descerned who were *English* and who were *Indians*." Accordingly, the Englishmen (as the Mathers insisted on calling themselves, resisting the New World moniker "American") ended up shooting their own. "What could have beene done more to my Vineyard, that I have not done in it?" goes the verse from Isaiah that the self-loathing Malden, Mass. minister Michael Wigglesworth chose to preface his 1662 jeremiad in verse, "God's Controversy with New-England." "Wherefore when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wilde grapes?"

This precarity in the woods is something more than just the fear of losing your way or encountering a bear or a Bigfoot. It has to do with the matter of one's very being. It blurs the line between the *I* who enters the woods and the *non-I* of the woods and all its forms. Daphne the laurel tree. The fairytale frog prince. All those knights of medieval romance, turned madmen. The Puritan soldiers rendered indistinguishable from the Indians. It makes a certain sense that we see human shapes in the woods, shapes that are like us but not us. As if we might lose not only our way, but ourselves.

6. The End of Enchantment?

In 1616, Captaine John Smith, erstwhile of Jamestown, began his campaign to fund a settlement in the lands north of Virginia. Part of his ploy was to persuade potential investors that the land and its climate were akin to a second England, a region that could be readily settled and cultivated to resemble their homeland. The centerpiece of this campaign was a map Smith had specially printed. *New England,* he titled the map, and thus the still unclaimed territory. It presents a kind of visual English pastoral, a landscape dotted with the familiar names of English towns: Sandwich, Greenwich, Norwich, Oxford. They appear just as English villages were depicted in the most widely known atlases of English cartographers of the time. A decorative tree appears here and there, as if to suggest the possibility of a pleasant shade, or perhaps a woodlot for firewood or fence posts. What has been cleared, though, are the forests.

If you wanted to establish any any kind of permanent settlement, the forest is what had to go. Or it's at least what had to be encroached upon. The history of human settlement is also the history of forest clearing. In the four-thousand-year-old *Epic of Gilgamesh,* wherein Gilgamesh, he who is renowned for building the wall of Uruk-Haven and the wall of the sacred Eanna Temple, presses deep into the faraway Cedar Forest. There, he and his platoon of men without households or mothers to hold them back, armed with axes and other weapons, fell not only the guardian of the forest but also an enormous tonnage of timber (six times, it is repeated, "the sons of his city who had come with him lopped off its branches, lashed them together, and laid it down at the foot of the mountain"). This is how, Gilgamesh keeps saying, he will establish his renown. While reading about the history of forests, I come across an article titled "How the Ancients Viewed Deforestation." (Largely, they seemed conflicted. They cut down forests for fuel and shipbuilding and farm land, but they worried about the subsequent soil erosion and flooding and rising temperatures, and they still worshiped in sacred groves.) A book I read on the history of lumbering in Wisconsin ventures so far as to say that "the nation has been carved from wood." Another book, subtitled *The Story of Wood and Civilization,* declares that, "Without vast supplies of wood felled from forests, the great civilizations of Sumer, Assyria, Egypt, China, Knossos, Mycenae, Classical Greece and Rome, Western Europe, and North America would never have emerged."

When the first colonists sailed for the territory John Smith had christened *New England,* they left behind European land that had been cleared of its significant stretches of forest generations before they were born. When they landed on the western shores of the Atlantic Ocean, 820 million acres of forest covered the territory that would become the contiguous United States. (On a reconstructed map, now famous among geographers, a deep blackness pervades the land east of the Mississippi, the dark ramifications of its branches extended even further west.) Accordingly, Smith's 1631 *Advertisements for the unexperienced planters of New-England,* a sort of handbook,

included a chapter on "how to spoil the woods for pasture and corn" ("spoil" meaning basically what it sounds like: to lay waste to the woods). This how-to on quickly clearing the woods was important, given that the average English colonist had never before faced land so "overgrowne with trees." They learned, though. By the mid-nineteenth century, loggers were migrating west, to the pine woods of new states, like Wisconsin.

The pioneer settlements that Laura Ingalls Wilder recalls in *Little House in the Big Woods* show these Wisconsin settlers' relationship to the woods on a more granular level. Instead of a sweeping history of deforestation, it is a little-girl's-eye view of her most immediate surroundings. And what's present—almost uncannily—in every description of settled land… is tree stumps. It's kind of incredible, like when you start noticing, I dunno, the severed heads in every room of the killer's house. "In the clearing he had made last year," Laura recalls, "Pa was plowing around the stumps and putting in his crops." A while later, Pa remarks of his clearing: "Those sprouts are getting waist-high around the stumps in the wheat-field. A man just has to keep everlasting at it, or the woods'll take back the place." The stumps everywhere allude to the faster way to clear a forest, a method that John Smith had in fact learned from the Virginia Powhatan and recommended to *unexperienced planters* over two hundred years before. Instead of the slow, laborious process of cutting down each tree and then uprooting the stump, settlers learned how to "girdle" a tree, stripping a ring of bark from its trunk so that the leaves soon dropped from the branches and the trunk eventually fell on its own. Settlers spaded and hoed and planted around the stumps. There were so many, they didn't have time to dig them up.

And truly, the stumps are omnipresent in *Little House*. When Laura, for the first time ever, travels with her family through the woods to the small town of Pepin, she is astounded by all the houses in one place: "Standing among the stumps, there were more houses than Laura could count." The houses are all made of wood, as is the general store, built on "a clearing, larger than Pa's clearing in the woods at home." When she spies children playing in that clearing, what they're doing is "jumping from one stump to the next stump and shouting." Stumps are ever-present in the little girl's own play. In the winter, she and her cousins leap from them to leave the impress of their own bodies on the snowy ground. In the summer and fall, Laura finds her Aunt Polly's yard to be a terrific place to play, "because the stumps were so thick." She and her cousins can play at jumping from stump to stump, "without ever touching the ground." And when Laura's prim older sister Mary decides she wants to play at something quieter, the girls play house in Aunt Polly's stump-filled yard: "The stumps were chairs and tables and stoves," Laura recalls, in what strikes me as a perfect, if unwitting, image of humans' domestication of the forest. Today, when I travel the ninety minutes from my hometown to visit the former site of the Little House, a replica of the incredibly tiny cabin stands there, alone, on a small grass lot. All around, on every side, are cornfields.

In 1897, as *History of Barron County* tells it, "the forests were practically gone." In 1903, Knapp, Stout, & Co., the mammoth lumber company, divested itself of all its interests in Barron County. By 1905, already a quarter of the land was set down in the county records as "improved" farm land. And by 1917, eighty percent of the county was farms. "Since Barron

County has very little territory not suitable for some sort of agriculture," the author notes, in 1922, "it will never have extensive tracts of forests."

To say that the history of civilizations is the history of forest-clearing suggests that the beginning of that history is the end of enchantment, the end of finding enchantment in forests. There is little mystery, after all, little that isn't already self-evident, and little way to get lost, in wide-open pasture land and neat rows of crops and the square lots of houses. And yet. On a topographic map of my hometown I look at today, the predominant color scheme is pink and grey, the shades of settlement. It is particularly pink in the old downtown—where banners of mallard ducks are flown from the lamp posts and the Kiwanis club members have hung planters of petunias—and the south side, where all the big box stores are. What roils, though, on the edges, are pale green masses, almost like a weather system that could spread. *Vegetation, typically trees or dense foliage*, the map's legend indicates. There, too, are blotches of green on the fringes of the cul-de-sacked sub-development where I grew up.

Even after the legendary Gilgamesh, in a mythical time before 2100 BC, felled the Cedar Forest and its guardian, the myth of the forest remained—of Humbaba the forest guardian's "pugnacious mouth," his "dragon's maw," his "lion's grimace," his "chest…like a raging flood," of the Cedar Mountain, "dwelling of the gods, throne of the goddesses," of the great height of the cedars themselves. *Little House in the Big Woods*, which is, not least, a story about making a clearing in the woods, ends with a yarn about Pa venturing into the woods with his gun. He sits in the branches of a big oak tree, waiting. A deer, with "great, branching horns" comes along and is still, for a long moment, in the moonlight. Pa doesn't shoot. A bear, "fat from feasting on berries and roots and grubs all summer," stands on his hind legs before the moon, "perfectly still." Pa still doesn't shoot. A doe and her yearling fawn step "daintily out of the shadows." Pa can't shoot them. Pa is so enchanted by the forest creatures he encounters by moonlight that he can kill none of them, and returns without any meat for his wife and children. "These were the temples of the gods," Pliny begins his chapter on the early history of trees. *Haec fuere.* These were. As if that age has passed. But then he reminds the reader how, even today, it's not just the simple rustic folk who consecrate their trees to the gods: "we ourselves worship the groves and their very silence." It's that mention of silence that gets me—that dense stillness of the trees, absent any human sound, that inspires worship.

The otherness of the woods—and thus its possibility for enchantment—has never gone away entirely. Part of this may have to do with the plain fact that, in establishing homesteads and villages and cities, the forest gets pushed farther and farther away. It grows more mysterious than it was to begin with. Kant, writing in a city—which is where he lived most of his life—offered up a vision of "lofty oaks and lonely shadows in sacred groves" as an example of the sublime, the kind of awe that can be experienced only from a safe distance. When Thoreau made his immersive trips into the vast Maine woods, he was coming from Concord, where less than a tenth of the landscape was still wooded. His language, when he really gets to rhapsodizing about what he consistently calls the "wilderness," verges on mystical, and what he argues for is in contradistinction to any utilitarian

relation to the woods: "It is the living spirit of the tree, not its spirit of turpentine, with which I sympathize, and which heals my cuts," he writes in a particularly reverent passage. "It is as immortal as I am, and perchance will go to as high a heaven, there to tower above me still." It would be a similar workaday distance from the woods, and a similarly reverent inclination—European Romanticism channeled into the more activist Transcendentalism of America—that propelled the US wilderness preservationist movement toward the end of that century. "Leaving the workaday lowlands… we find a new world," Sierra Club co-founder John Muir wrote, in his 1900 "The Forests of the Yosemite Park." A world where we "stand beside the majestic pines and firs and sequoias silent and awestricken, as if in the presence of superior beings new arrived from some other star, so calm and bright and godlike they are." As impressions go, this is somewhat different from the "hidious & desolate wildernes" the Pilgrims saw upon landing in the New World. In these romantic visions, the forest, vanished from everyday life, becomes a site of veneration, a temple.

Even so, ages from the era when Cotton Mather shook his finger at the "devil's territories" his people had colonized, pinpointing that original wilderness as the source of the witchcraft plaguing his people, there is something in our hindbrains (maybe) that doesn't entirely want to let go of the darker shades of enchantment, of the possibility of the woods as a "hidious & desolate wildernes." When, for instance, I google "horror movies set in…" my second option is "the woods," search terms that yield not only a slew of titles (including, point blank, *The Woods*, *The Forest*, and *The Cabin in the Woods*—as if to suggest the dark side of Thoreau's project) but a lengthy sub-Reddit titled "Best horror films set in the woods?" "I always found the woods to be creepy but endearing at the same time," says the OP. "Like the thought of being trapped in some creepy woods is exciting I guess." The thought is, at least. Here again are the "lofty oaks and lonely shadows in sacred groves" of the Romantic sublime—a scene which, when viewed from a safe position, can arouse in us "a sort of delightful horror, a sort of tranquility tinged with terror" (as Edmund Burke puts it, in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*). Streaming *The Woods* from your living room is probably safer than backpacking through the forests of Yosemite Park, but what the two experiences allow strikes me as gradations of the same thing. "Astonishment that borders upon terror, the dread and the holy awe which seizes the observer…this, in the safety in which we know ourselves to be, is not actual fear," Kant points out, "but only an attempt to feel fear by the aid of the Imagination." Both of these experiences of the woods hinge on our modern-day distance from them, a distance that sets us up not for the *actual fear* of the Puritans, arriving from pastoral Europe and suddenly staring up at an interminable wall of dark woods, with no homestead to return to. Our distance, rather, means that whatever we might fear in the woods is more like a memory of someone else's fear, lurking so far in the back of our brains that we forget it when we return, as we so easily can, to the workaday lowlands. Which is why we have to go to the woods, by one means or another, to find it.

I'm hesitant, though, to say that distance is wholly necessary to find enchantment in the woods. Before the reservations, before the clearcutting, the woods were the place where the Ojibwe of what would become Barron County lived at least half the year. They camped there, in the maple woods, in early spring. They sheltered there in winter—the pine boughs held off the worst of the snow. Suffice it to say, they didn't hold the woods at a distance. And yet there is undeniable enchantment in the forests of Ojibwe lore. No demons lurk therein, and hardly anyone gets lost, but people, as in Ovid's stories and all those European fairy tales, do undergo transformation. They morph into trees, bears, squirrels, birds, and then again into people. Reading these stories, even fixed on the printed page as they now are, it seems to me that these transformations mirror the fluidity not just of the self but of the woods, a place that changes from season to season, now green-canopied, now particolored, now bare-limbed, now pulsing with sap, now tender-budded. Significantly, it's a tall pine tree that rescues the people's founding hero from the great flood of their origin myth—a pine that, when commanded, stretches many times its own height. This woodland people's origins seem to hinge, then, on a kind of everyday magic of the woods.

Something like this, I think, is what Thoreau ultimately found in the woods. He went there to "live deliberately," and what that meant, or what it ended up meaning, is that he noticed, acutely, the wildlife around him. Describing, at length, the growth of a sumac near his cabin, he recalls how its "large buds, suddenly pushing out late in the spring from dry sticks which had seemed to be dead, developed themselves as by magic into graceful green and tender boughs." Magic. His everyday rambling leads him to scenes of enchantment, in "pine groves, standing like temples… so soft

and green and shady that the Druids would have forsaken their oaks to worship in them," in a cedar wood "where the trees, covered with hoary blue berries, spiring higher and higher, are fit to stand before Valhalla, and the creeping juniper covers the ground with wreaths full of fruit," and to "swamps where the usnea lichen hangs in festoons from the white-spruce trees, and toad-stools, round tables of the swamp gods, cover the ground, and more beautiful fungi adorn the stumps, like butterflies or shells, vegetable winkles; where the swamp-pink and dogwood grow, the red alder-berry glows like eyes of imps, the waxwork grooves and crushes the hardest woods in its folds, and the wild-holly berries make the beholder forget his home with their beauty, and he is dazzled and tempted by nameless other wild forbidden fruits, too fair for mortal taste." It's just as magical as anything in *Lord of the Rings*.

But it's not that Thoreau let his own fantastic projections obscure his view of the rooting, budding, grubbing life there before him. His observation of things like pine seeds blowing into oak forests, of squirrels burying nuts, and of feasting at cherry trees, followed by pine trees springing up in oak forests and cherry trees growing in isolation, helped convince people that plants don't ever just arise spontaneously—an ancient belief that lingered in the mid-19th century. He noticed that more redpolls and goldfinches in the woods meant the white pines, hemlocks, and larch were bearing seeds in abundance that year. He saw how the wind and the squirrels and the birds made for a natural succession of pines in oak groves, and, conversely, of oaks in pine woods, how tall pines could nurse oak saplings, and he encouraged the members of the local agricultural society to heed this cycle so as to better manage their wood lots. He noticed, in other words, the workings of this world.

In Barron County, long before it was Barron County, the Ojibwe told stories about reeds in the wind that masqueraded as a host of dancers, and of maples and cedars that could talk. They also knew when the sap would be rising in the maples, and how to tap them with a stone axe and a hollowed-out sumac branch, and when and where to gather wild rice, how to knock the ripe grains with their long poles into their canoes. They knew that it was better to clear and farm a patch of land for just a few years, and then move on and let the forest grow back. It was a world they understood, intimately.

In either case, Thoreau or the Ojibwe, I don't think the more fantastical conjuring can be disentangled from the deep knowledge of the woods. It's all one.

Back in Barron County for a spell this June, I drove about ninety minutes north to the site of a former logging camp and mill. Black Lake. In 1921, an early spring thaw sank tons of decked logs to the bottom of the lake. "Some people believe," the trail pamphlet informs me, "that the dark color of the lake is due to the large amount of rotted bark and logs in the lake." As if the spirit of the old forest haunts the lake. The land surrounding the black lake is unarable, unable to support rows of corn or soybeans or anything else, and so it was at last replanted with trees, starting in the 1930s. It's still a young forest, all of its trees less than a century old, most of them what you'd call slender. But it is, unmistakably, a forest. In mid-June, there was the canopy of leaves above, the green-leafing and flowering profusion of its understory, the slowly rotting logs furred with mosses, the lichen-splotched trunks and limbs—and the green glow of the whole of it, which lingered, I later saw, in the photos I snapped of it. I had been, for a while, reading a book that purports to reveal *The Hidden Life of Trees,* that lays bare the biological reality of the terrestrial ecosystem that is the forest. And, having learned about the underground network of roots threaded with hyphae that relay chemical and electrical signals from tree to tree and deliver sugar to saplings and weakened trees, of the micro-ecosystem of bacteria and fungi and insects and moss and lichen that inhabit each tree right down to the very cells of its bark and leaves and roots, the forest felt far from demystified. It seemed deeper now, in a way, now that I was aware of the trees' teeming internal lives, of the intricate web of their underground, of the microcosms they sustain.

The forest doesn't need humans. It will outlast us. Or, if we destroy it, it will return after we are long gone. Humans, though, need the forest: we need its fairly fantastical tricks of turning carbon dioxide to oxygen and transforming ground water into cooling vapor and sheltering the soil that rains and winds would otherwise wash away, and, yes, we need its wood. I also think we needs its enchantment. "At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things," Thoreau writes toward the end of *Walden,* in an era when the flattening effects of industrialization were encroaching on even his woods, "we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be infinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable." This is no doubt the appeal of the woods today: that as a space, as a living, breathing body, it is never entirely knowable. Or, better still, that our knowledge of it doesn't diminish its enchantment. Because we do need knowledge of it. We need to know how to live *with* the forest instead of entirely outside it or against it. Know it well enough to want to protect it, know it well enough to know how. And this is the thing about the forest: it can be charted in terms of acres or hectares or square miles, its component parts scientifically described and dissected, its rate of carbon sequestration calculated and contrasted with the rate of anthropogenic CO2 emissions, the direct and indirect effects of its biogenic volatile organic compounds measured, every element of its intricacy entered into the nomenclature—but none of this changes what it feels like to just go to the woods and stand in the middle of it, surrounded on every side. ●