

Beyond the Wild Wood

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Adult category

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There is no backcountry in Iowa. When I first started dating my husband, an inveterate backpacker, we were both living in Seattle, a Mecca of all things Gortex, fleece and outdoorsy. He'd speak wistfully of the backcountry, the way an immigrant might talk of her homeland. But the term meant nothing to me. If anything, it conjured pigs and the tiniest, off-the-map hamlet precariously existing on a gravel road. What I'd seen of Washington State's non-urban areas—the rainforest on the Olympic Peninsula, the glacial lakes and old growth forest of the Cascade Range, and, most famously, the omnipresent active volcano, Mt. Rainier, encased in more than 35 square miles of snow and ice—all seemed to qualify as backcountry.

But the term, I came to know from experience, has an aura of Valhalla to backpackers. It carries with it the possibility of bivouacking, of seeing no one for days, and the threat of getting lost. Backcountry evokes not only the sublime but danger. When my husband and a friend went on annual weeklong hiking trips, they would leave a topo map with me highlighting their probable route and the areas I should alert Search and Rescue to if they didn't return: "Tell them to look for the bodies here."

After a decade in the Northwest, I returned home to Iowa with my husband, a neophyte to the middle of the country. Several times during our first year back, we

scouted state parks, taking our tent along for weekends in the wild. Time and again we were disappointed; we'd run into views of cornfields after achieving any elevation or while skirting the edge of the postage-stamp sized park. We took a liking, instead, to driving country roads without a map, taking every unexpected turn, venturing down any dirt road that would have us, trying to get lost. This was our new backcountry and, ironically, it fit the American Heritage Dictionary's definition: "Backcountry: A sparsely inhabited rural region."

The notion of a wild place has a different meaning to me than it did as a child. You can't spend a day semi-lost in an old growth forest and not reconnoiter your definition. And yet, the places that were wild to me as a child—fields and backyard woodlands—still loom large, discovered, as they were, with the eyes of a child who once was able to believe she'd found a wild Brazilian bird of paradise when a domesticated parakeet flew onto the branch of a small, freshly planted tree in her suburban yard.

That suburban yard into which such fancy flew was a freshly laid sod expanse surrounding the last house on a street that dead-ended into a pasture. We moved there in 1969 when I was two and my parents, closer to their teens than their thirties, had just sunk every nickel they had into a dusty-blue split level that was on a fly-over zone for the Des Moines airport. The yard was a blank slate. We planted its first trees, rototilled a small garden and dug flowerbeds. We were pioneers.

What really interested me, though, was what lay on the other side of the fence at the far border, just beyond the tulips. Shimmy over or crawl under that barrier and you were in a ramshackle field, a narrow strip that served as a buffer between the new houses and the farm just beyond, the one that had been carved up to make room for our plaid sofa, my Easy Bake oven, and the beige Chevy in the garage. The field had a small, faded

barn filled with hay; sometimes a pony spent time there. There was a tire swing that hung from a leaning box elder tree, and a cement mound that served as a swinging jump-off point. The field extended to a gully and halted abruptly when it collided with a major road. A band of kids could traverse it in a single afternoon, mason jars in hand for collecting frogs and butterflies.

Children are as good at discovering wild zones as cats are at finding sunny patches. My neighborhood playmates and I intuited that these unkempt spaces—the long field and the overgrown territories that separated some of our backyards from farmland and vacant lots of crabgrass—were more interesting and safer than the life existing in our houses and beyond in the adult world. We echoed the sentiments of the animals in *The Wind and the Willows* who understood the right order of things: “Beyond the Wild Wood,” explained Rat to Mole, “comes the Wide World, and that’s something that doesn’t matter, either to you or me.”

The sixties were messily tumbling into the seventies and fear lurked up and down our street, subtle but palpable. One adolescent who lived in a grey Tudor was a budding juvenile delinquent. She smoked and once used a pocketknife to corral us younger kids into the small barn, threatening us with the blade until we all agreed to pull down our pants. At another house, the father came home sporadically, heaving a tan duffle bag out of the trunk when he arrived. He had a crew cut and wore the same camouflage I saw on the men on the evening news. I vaguely understood he’d come from this place, the place with the helicopters, the place that made my mother sour. And when a Black family moved in and caused a flurry of neighborhood meetings and fresh “For Sale” signs up

and down the street, I could not understand what all the fuss was about; their young daughters seemed perfectly nice, the parents always smiled.

If that was civilization, if that was the grown-up world, then give me the wild grasses and gnarled trees that stood sentry between swing sets and barbecue-bijoued lawns and the wide open beyond. Along this DMZ we picked clover, sucking on the pleated violet petals to extract the sweet taste. We climbed mulberry trees and plopped the sunny, seed-filled berries into our mouths, juice running onto shirt fronts and leaving bruise-colored stains for our mothers to hiss at later. Sometimes we sang as we went, whatever we'd heard on the car radio as we were transported to the grocery store, the dentist, pre-school and home again, our worlds rarely moving more than a few miles from this tiny universe: "I've got a brand new pair of roller skates, you've got a brand new key..."

The day Nixon resigned, when I was eight, my family moved eastward on I-80 to Iowa City. Arriving at our new house, I discovered a different kind of wilderness. The woods in our backyard were deep, running on and on until they ended at the large playfield of my new elementary school. A dense, green, brown, and gray cross hatching of trees and under brush with a creek and steep hillsides dotted with animal burrows, these woods were immediately mythical to me. They held the possibility of Narnia. They were as menacing as the place that swallowed up Hansel and Gretel. They were, I thought, what Everyplace had looked like before there were people, roads, houses and shops.

The woods were accessible via a path that a neighboring professor had created. A tributary of it ran right up to our backyard, and I regularly took the path to and from

school. I loved the quiet of the woods, which ended abruptly when I'd emerge onto the playground with its calliope of jump ropes and four square. In March, on the first balmy days of spring, the little creek would jump over its banks turning everything, including the cuffs of my jeans, muddy. A month later, May apples began to appear, delicate green umbrellas. I'd finger them lightly, the jacket my mother had made me wear tied around my waist. On the blistering, humid days of late summer when school seemed to start much too early, the woods were an overgrown hothouse of poison ivy and vines.

Much of what I'd learned about woodland plants had come from my grandmother who lived on several acres of oak savannah in central Iowa. She and my grandfather had left the small, straight and narrow farmhouse where they'd lived since first marrying for a sumptuous, modern marvel. The house was nestled into its environs and made to look like it was meant to be there. Though I loved its fairy tale location, I was already aware of the irony of house's excesses. It had an open-design entryway that flew up two and a half stories to a row of high-placed windows; an electric switch would sweep a set of drapes open or closed over them. Intercoms connected people between floors. A faucet in the kitchen provided instantly boiling water. Electric blankets warmed every bed. The three-car garage was home to two Mercedes and a Cadillac, while a large R.V. and a motorboat were parked outside.

Among the dress-up clothes, antique dolls, and vintage marbles that I loved to rifle through in the basement were some of the books that had belonged to my father when he was my age. A particular favorite was *The New House in the Forest*, published in 1946. It followed the building of the Jenks' new home, as witnessed by a bear, squirrels, owls and other creatures. The animals fret that the house will affect their own

dwellings but are reassured again and again that everyone will be able to cohabit happily: “The silvery fish saw the plumbers put the end of the pipe into their river. When the plumbers turned on the water in the kitchen, the fish heard the water in the river gurgle as it ran into the pipe.

“Don’t take the water from our river’ said the fish, sending up many bubbles.

“Little fish,’ said Judy, ‘we need water in our new house to wash in and to cook with. But there will be plenty of water left in the river for you.’”

Despite the lack of mountains, of oceans, even of sizable lakes, my husband and I love the ease of life in Iowa. We have wonderful friends. Our children can walk to school. The older, tree-lined neighborhood in which we live has the markings of an idyllic American place. We make good use of the natural areas near us—a sizable city park that is collection of wooded paths and several state-run nature areas outside town. And yet, lurking around the borders are disquieting reminders of what it means to live in a state that is nearly entirely cultivated. Hog confinements, insecticides, and the marching multiplicity of housing developments and strip malls endanger the open spaces of my childhood imagination.

With my children strapped into their car seats, I drive past yet another upturned field or knocked down wooded area and harrumph. “What, Mama?” they plead, disturbed to hear me unhappy. I try to describe what I’m seeing, the loss I feel, but how can they mourn what they haven’t known? There are no woods around our present house for them to lose themselves in—or find themselves in, for that matter. No place they can go on their own to dream and feel the church that is a wild space.

In the summers, my husband and I take them as many times as we can without becoming pests to a friend's "farmlet." We climb up and fall down undulating hills, counting cows and horses as we pass Half Moon Road and Old Woman Creek. At the top of one precipice, we turn onto Greencastle Avenue, pass several newer homes and then turn into the gravel drive of our friends' refurbished farmhouse. Once a derelict school marm of a house, it's been brought back to life with recycled material: the floor of a since demolished junior high gym provides coffee-brown comfort for bare feet, the cupola of a grander home, also long gone, serves as a beacon to all visitors. Solar panels and water barrels allow my friends to live nearly off the grid. There is cultivation here but of a different sort. A tall grass prairie and swaths of Black-eyed Susan and Echinacea grow so tall in summer that my five-year old can disappear into them. There's a pond with tadpoles, fish, and a heron that spent much of last summer perching to one side watching the children belly flop themselves into the muddy waters. A few chickens, whose fate my kids don't fully appreciate, cackle alongside the sun shower, and a tent of green beans becomes a shaded temple by August.

Bella and Tobey, never dull or meek, are different in this place. They laugh at a new pitch. For an hour at a time, they disappear into an exploration of mud, experiments of grass and petals. Last summer, Bella built a living room of sand for a toad she and a friend unearthed in the pond sludge, while Tobey carefully cupped the perfect shell of a Monarch in his small hands, whispering with wonder. Here, they learn about themselves and the world things I can never teach them through stories, books, crafts, or museum visits. Every bit of good education cannot provide what they take in by osmosis at this reclaimed wild place. They roam here, unfettered by whatever worry is consuming the

grown-ups: wars, politicians, and the state of earth. In the days and weeks that follow our visits, they talk of this place and I know that for its relative smallness, just a few acres, its wildness is more than enough for them to find mythical, mystifying, and miraculous. I hope they can connect throughout their lives with the particular liveliness they have here, that it will live inside of them the same way my old woodland rests deep in me.

When we returned to Iowa, it took only weeks before I was drawn back to the woods behind my parents' now former house. In a prescient decision, the neighbors had long ago bought the land and given it to a land trust, so I was assured it would be there, waiting for me. The path, though overgrown, could still be found. I pushed away some low branches obscuring its entrance and took but a few steps into the canopy of leaves when the quiet foliage engulfed me. Already out of sight of any house, the sky blocked by branches, I stopped and gasped. I could not see her exactly but I knew she was there: the ghost of my nine-year old self. With her long blonde braids and crooked smile, a grey dog running ahead of her, I could feel the air she stirred and hear her laughter. Never before had I experienced such communion with the girl I had been. But she was alive in these woods, a free spirit on this protected land.

Bio:

The author has written two books, *Drawing from Life: The Journal as Art* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2005) and *Dan Eldon: The Art of Life* (Chronicle Books, 2001). She lives in Iowa City with her husband Andrew and their two children, Isabella and Tobias.

