

## SAVING TREES

### JACQUELINE DOYLE

*When I am among the trees,...they give off such hints of gladness.  
I would almost say that they save me, and daily.*

—Mary Oliver, “When I Am Among the Trees,” *Thirst*

#### 1

My younger brother and I tuned out our parents’ continuous bickering every night at dinner and escaped the kitchen table as soon as we could. “May I be excused?” we asked the minute we’d cleared our plates. Permission granted, we bolted out the back door, screen door banging, clattered down the rickety wooden stairs, ducked under the low hanging branches of the maple trees by the back porch, and swung around the corner to race across the back yard to our tree-house in the large apple tree.

#### 2

I grew up in New Jersey, where Joyce Kilmer wrote his poem “Trees.” We had to memorize it in school. “I think that I shall never see / a poem as lovely as a tree.”

#### 3

The tree house in our back yard was just a small platform nailed into the boughs of the apple, and some scraps of wood nailed into the trunk that served as a makeshift ladder. My brother and I liked to sit there, cross-legged, hatching our plots for forays into the woods. In spring, fragrant white blossoms surrounded us like clumps of snow.

4

Kilmer wrote his poem in Mahwah, New Jersey, now designated an EPA Superfund site because of millions of gallons of paint sludge and other industrial waste dumped in the abandoned Ringwood Mines by the Ford Motor Company.

5

In the front yard, an oak tree surrounded by damp green moss towered over the road and rained acorns on the ground every fall. I could see it from my bedroom window, a stalwart sentinel. Lilac trees lined the yard, their blooms lavender, their trunks ancient and gnarled, propped up with two-by-fours. I inhaled their heady scent in spring, when I escaped the house to sit and daydream and read in a sheltered corner of the side yard, leaning against the slender trunk of a dogwood tree.

6

In the 1950s, no one was talking about pollution or global warming or toxic waste, at least not in New Jersey. We studied photosynthesis in school, but we didn't learn why we needed trees to absorb carbon dioxide and store carbon, or that deforestation contributed to greenhouse gas emissions. We didn't learn that carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere had risen over 40 percent in the past century. We were studying the *Weekly Reader* and learning about the perils of Communism.

7

My brother and I endlessly explored a large wooded lot

behind the neighbor's house. Three older boys from the street behind ours liked to climb trees in the lot and throw rocks at us, so crossing the woods was a hazardous adventure. Farther down the block we caught crayfish and tadpoles in a tiny stream, dipping our hands in the cold water. Sometimes we lugged large rocks home for the metal tub in my brother's room, where we kept turtles and frogs.

8

When I recently zoomed in on my old neighborhood on my computer, I was surprised to see that the wooded lot is still undeveloped, though some of the surrounding houses are worth over a million dollars. As children we didn't think the woods belonged to anybody. It's hard to tell from the aerial view on the screen, but it looks like the gigantic oak tree by the road out front and the hemlock tree outside my bedroom are gone. My brother and I used to shimmy down the hemlock at night to prowl the neighborhood, so changed in the moonlight. The trees cast long shadows over the neighbors' yards.

9

In the summer we got up early and rode our bikes to the dense woods surrounding Birchwood Lake, where we roamed all day, unsupervised. The ground at Birchwood Lake was damp and covered with a thick cushion of brown pine needles. Tall trees filtered the sunlight, and we clambered over fallen, rotten birch trunks on the narrow paths. Brushing away clouds of gnats, we squatted to peer at green-striped jack-in-the-pulpits and yellow lady slippers, poked at bulbous mushrooms amidst feathery green ferns, stepping carefully to avoid red-tinged poison ivy. We

climbed trees and we swam in the lake and we caught frogs and turtles and fish. Sometimes we roasted the fish on campfires, each small sunfish about a mouthful after it was deboned. We never seemed to get tired. Or sated.

10

By high school my brother and I had lost the intimacy of the woods. He hung out with the popular kids in the cafeteria and drank every weekend. I hung out with the outsiders in the art classroom and read all the time. He moved to the Midwest, became a beer-drinking good ol' boy. I moved to Ireland, then Germany, the East Coast, the West Coast, became a professor. We didn't have much in common any more, including geography.

11

Lady slippers and jack-in-the-pulpits are on the endangered species list. Birchwood Lake is still there, but the small town we grew up in has changed into an enclave for the very rich, who have felled the large oak and maple trees and demolished the old three-story stucco houses to build new mansions over the old foundations.

12

Now, I live with my husband and son in northern California. Developers keep felling trees in our neighborhood. An unincorporated area of former chicken ranches, Castro Valley has long narrow lots with room to build houses behind houses. One developer built two oversized houses with no yards behind a modest house on our block. We could hear the chainsaws after dark one night, as workers cut down the protected trees without permits from the

county. The light felt too bright the next day, the sky empty until we got used to the missing canopies.

13

Where I live now, the pomegranate tree behind our 1930s house flourishes, and the orange and lemon trees alternate between abundance and a meager output. When they bloom in the spring, the fragrance of the citrus trees is overwhelmingly sweet. The white blossoms on the apple tree in our side yard remind me of my childhood tree house. The tree overproduces tart green apples, only good for cooking. They attract animals, and one night my son woke to a deer peering into the window at the foot of his bed. The two towering blue pines in the front yard are home to squirrels and mourning doves and robins and finches and humming birds. Red-tailed hawks soar in the sky and perch on the highest branches. At night we sometimes hear the soft hoots of an owl. The two trees are gigantic, as if they predate human beings on the planet.

14

The oldest redwood on the Pacific coast is an estimated 2,520 years old, the oldest giant sequoia 3,200 years old. A bristlecone pine in the White Mountains of eastern California, over 5,000 years old, is believed to be the world's oldest living tree. The trees dwarf man's written histories and puny achievements. "It took more than three thousand years to make some of the trees in these Western woods," John Muir wrote in *Our National Parks*, "trees that are still standing in perfect strength and beauty, waving and singing in the mighty forests of the Sierra. Through all the wonderful, eventful centuries ... God has cared for these

trees, saved them from drought, disease, avalanches, and a thousand straining, leveling tempests and floods; but he cannot save them from fools.”

15

Recently, scientists at Yale University estimated that there are more than 3 trillion trees on Earth. At the present rate of attrition, however, they may all be gone within 300 years.

16

Now, I lie on the couch on our porch, looking up into the two giant pines in the front yard. Boughs sway and rustle in the breeze. Squirrels chitter as they chase each other up and down the trunks, leaping from branch to branch, their tails twitching. Hummingbirds dart in and out of view. I can hear the whine of a buzz saw down the street, someone’s lawn mower in the distance, our neighbor’s leaf blower closer by, the twittering conversation of birds and the jeers of a blue jay between pauses in the combustion. The smell of new cut grass reminds me of my brother, summer days running through the sprinkler, tree sap sticky on our palms.

17

Now, my brother is dying of cancer, two thousand miles away. He tells me the experimental chemo has poisoned his body and killed his teeth. “They’re going to start breaking off,” he says. “That’s what the dentist just told me.” There are no treatments that will save him, no more treatments to extend his life. He doesn’t know how long he has. I remember meeting under the stars on the sleeping porch that connected our second-story rooms to escape the

house together at night. How we leapt onto the hemlock tree, arms outstretched, ready to grab the rough trunk. Pine needles and twigs scratched our arms and faces as we carefully shimmied down, testing branches under our feet, one by one, hugging the tree as we made our thirty-foot descent. Usually I went first and helped my little brother as he lowered himself to the ground. This time he's gone before me.

