

## THE WOODS

The August night tells me that I'm home once again, down from New York City, where I've lived since 1987, a long barreling Interstate drive away. In the garage, the Subaru's cooling engine ticks and clatters. All around me as I stretch and unbend, the darkness of a Chapel Hill neighborhood resounds, a vast, pulsing rave of cicadas, crickets, and frogs, with the occasional hoot of an owl thrown in to terrify the small mammals. If you saw me then, you'd witness a man on the far end of middle age, standing in his mother's driveway, listening intently for something he can't quite hear, despite the loudness of the insect clamor. I'm in no hurry to go inside, though my mother, half-asleep on the couch, waits up for me just as she did when I was out late in high school. Within two or three months she will be driven to the hospital and never come home again. "Mommy," she will call out as she leaves.

I stand there, listening, soaking in the reverberant waves of noise, as if this time, after all these years, I might decipher the night's impenetrable code, as if a meaning lurks just beyond my ken, as if there is a key there to the strangeness of being alive.

The feeling is similar to when I was a boy and I lay in the grass of my grandparents' lawn in Huntersville, North Carolina, eavesdropping on the mysterious ways of adults who sat on the patio, speaking in low, comfortable voices interrupted by the occasional shrieking laugh (like those owls), ice chiming in their glasses of tea. Maybe my father and my uncle were drinking something a little stronger. Probably they were.

The sound of those voices worked the way music does, the words did not much matter.

Judge Phillips, a friend of ours, says he knew he was home from the Second World War, where he saw terrible things, when the train taking him south chugged into little hamlets and stopped and he heard at long last the drone of the cicadas. Let's admit that this sound has been a longtime staple of Southern comfort and not just for the judge.

And yet sometimes when I wake up in the middle of the night, the roaring in the vegetation is not so much soothing as it is an abomination, a manic, electrified buzzing, an unstinting cacophony that won't shut the hell up. That drone reminds me of how inhuman nature can be, how little it cares for us despite our toasty maternal fantasies of it,

a conclusion that even the great nature lover Henry David Thoreau came to when he ascended the barren alpine heights of Maine's Mount Katahdin and nearly went mad from the terror of implacable ice and rock. The gentle shore of Walden Pond was galaxies away. Here was infinity, here was man. The two did not belong together.

A fellow in such a state comes to realize that his own mind is at once a part of this clamorous, dissolving madness and yet distinct from it. There is no comfort in either position. If God is present in the bug roar and the icy altitudes, it is an infernal God, the God of absence and accident, the God of hurricanes and whirlwinds, of asteroids and black holes and dwarf stars, of plane crashes and birth defects and random acts of violence, of crocodiles and snakes, the God of being picked randomly out of a line for execution.

I have always wished for an exception, a loophole out of which one might climb above mortal fear. The summer I was fourteen, I dreamed that a majestic joyous presence was awaiting me outside on the front porch of my parents' house. In an ecstasy of anticipation, I wrapped the bedclothes around me, thinking they were a royal robe, and for the first and only time of which I am aware, sleepwalked up the stairs and opened the front door to meet the majestic joyous presence. The street lamp buzzed. The insects roared. No one was there. Still asleep, I wept on the front porch.

Then I went back downstairs, the bedclothes dragging behind me, a solitary, jilted king returning to bed.

Yet I keep listening for something. Sometimes at noon down South on the hottest of days, when everyone is shivering inside their arctic offices, I go outside just to hear the metallic whirring of the cicadas start up in the trees on the edge of a parking lot. Their tymbals pulsate against their abdomens and the thick air reverberates with the loneliest sound in the universe.

For some reason, I am drawn to that sound the way some men are drawn to fuck up their happy lives. There's no good reason for this. It's simply the way things are.

The South in general and North Carolina in particular offer up at least a dozen standard-issue muses, a dozen rationales for writers to exercise their tymbals against their abdomens and generate an unholy racket in the weeds. The list is as familiar and belated as a great aunt's recipe for ambrosia. There is the instigating subject of Family, though there





have been known to be families elsewhere. Somewhat linked together, there is the War Between the States, the Original Sin of Slavery, and the Land—"the land, Beaugard, the land!" There is also the Christ-Haunted Landscape, lest we forget dear sweet Jesus.

And yet my muse is none of these things exactly, substantial though

they all may be. Mine is the insect pointillism of an August night, mine is the South as the place that refuses to tell all that it knows. Mine is the transit point between the awesomely inhuman and the familiarly local, between the dead and the living. Mine is the silence that wishes to be said. Mine is nothing at all.

## A BOXWOOD

One summer many years ago, M. and I took mushrooms at the family farm. "Are you sure this isn't going to make them less potent?" M. asked as I brewed up a psilocybin tea. We had come south from New York City for a "working vacation." M. liked his drugs. He'd done ayahuasca the previous year even though it left him shaking in the felicitously named Cosmic Coffee Shop at Broadway and 58th when I met him the next day.

"No worries," I said. "This is a tried and true technique." In truth, I was secretly hoping the tea might not be all that potent, having myself not long before endured a twenty-four-hour nightmare produced by doctored hashish that in its evil thrall had me repeating to anyone who would listen (including my boss), "I just want to wake up into the dream that is my life."

In the recent context, potent was worrisome. Potent had a way of turning New York City into an alien spacecraft. Potent had me start drinking a glass of water and become terrified that the water in the glass was endless. Potent had me hiding behind the door from the managing editor, who would not have understood the trouble that bored young men can get into on a Wednesday afternoon. Potent had me asking my wife to say something that I didn't expect her to say so that I would know she was not a figment of my imagination. I didn't know what potent would do down South.

When the tea took effect, quite kindly as it turned out, M. and I lay together with our heads under the sofa so that the darkness of that location might accentuate the patterns appearing in the exact same order (paisleys, spirals, lightning bolts) on the inside of our eyelids. We giggled at the possibility that we might be discovered with our heads under a couch while engaged in this investigation.

After a while, I left M. to the multiplex of his eyelids and wandered outside into an afternoon saturated with greenery and was led for reasons unknown to sit in the presence of a lovely boxwood that sparkled

before me like a voluptuous, unkempt green brain that had the power of telepathy. Bees were zigging and zagging into and out of the bush, as if bringing communiqués to the central nervous system. All the yard was wired together with light. And there before me was the boxwood, which seemed to be saying in its vegetative language that *everything is*

*as it is*. Which is another way of saying: *This is it*. Meaning (in the Carolinian vernacular): *This right here is all there is*.

Mind you, Moses himself listened to a bush.

For Southern Christians, raised as we have been to see the world in front of us as mere staging for the next life, the boxwood's sentiments came as a necessary correction. Like something William Blake would have said had William Blake been a telepathic bush. This world is all there is and yet it is enough. More than enough. The afternoon vibrated to an unheard, joyous music.

For a while longer, I sat there at peace. The mushrooms were polite, as befits proper Southern shrooms. I had a sense of an ample life force pulsing through this old beaten yard where normally I might have parked the car and gone onto the porch without a second thought.

When I finally started coming down, I went back inside the house, where M. was watching the Olympics on a tiny TV. We talked a little bit about

how God is felt to be everywhere in the South, how in that sense you don't have a lot of privacy. But then you're never really alone, either. There's always Someone with Whom to Have a Conversation, even if it's a little one-sided, which most people don't really mind, as long as it's their side that gets the airing. Then M. said, "Man, this TV is really tiny." Which was not a drug perception. It was a really tiny TV. And so we welcomed back the mundane.

In the years since, the boxwood seems to have disappeared during a bout of landscaping. The grass stretches lushly toward the field where not long ago we ran cattle.





## POTATOES

She liked to laugh at me in a way that drove me insane. I didn't know what thread count was, for instance. And apparently I had mistaken sheets with artificial fibers for pure cotton sheets. This proved I was a rube. She told me about New York, design, Knoll Associates, where she worked, a Japanese boyfriend who tried hard to please her. She told me that if I came to New York, not to live in the East Village like everyone else who came to New York in those days.

I bridled against such glamorous injunctions.

On the advice of our mutual friend, she had sent me her poetry months before when I was living down in Alabama. I had long admired her from a distance. I wrote her that her poems lacked nouns. I was wrong, but I didn't know that then. She herself was a succession of lovely nouns, some proper, some not. She had been a dancer and she was proud of her body.

Despite my authoritative lessons on poetry, the poems kept coming. And in between my decrees about nouns, we began to make little confessions about ourselves. What we liked. What we did that day. Did I mention that I had a girlfriend? I probably surrounded the notion with inviting ambiguity.

She said if I came to New York on a visit, to call her. I called her from an icy street in early January. She seemed not to be in. I left a message and went home, more than a thousand miles to Alabama. She wrote me a letter in return, telling me she was disappointed I didn't have more of a Southern accent. I could have exaggerated mine as naturally happened around family but I balked. She was maddening. That wicked laugh of hers. As if she knew something about me that I did not know about myself. A year or so later, I threw her out of my room one night. The memory still makes me happy and shames me, all at once.

More nouns, I told her as the poems continued to arrive. Every romance needs resistance—obstacles that you can look back on knowingly, wondrously, as you lie next to each other at the time of your

first mutual confession. *When did you know . . .* Her mockery. My rules. A plot.

We met the next summer at her friend's apartment in Chapel Hill. I had moved back to North Carolina for a spell between jobs. Her friend's black lace panties were pinned to the clothesline on the balcony. I proposed a swim in the complex's pool. We swam in our underwear

during a violent, early-evening thunderstorm, lightning illuminating our faces as if we were suspects being photographed. I remember laughing exultantly, like a drunk. What kind of death would this be, a fool splashing through a field of lightning? Clearly, I was willing to die an idiot's death in pursuit of her.

I invited her to come visit me later that summer in the country. On her first night there she told me about New York and design and how mine weren't real cotton sheets. I had given her a room of her own,

which is somehow where I ended up under some ridiculous guise having to do with ghosts in the house.

We stayed up all night. She asked me if I loved her. She was such a cosmopolitan person, I was surprised at the question. I probably hedged in an unconscionable way. Though if I didn't exactly love her like that, I did love that moment and she was in it, in the near-dawn in the second floor bedroom on polyester-cotton blend sheets. Pursuit has something amoral in it, the thrum of possibility, the hunger for trying on a new life, if only for a day.

In the field outside, just below the bedroom window, the neighbors were digging potatoes that morning. They called me to join them. With my bare feet sinking into the dirt, I thought of her back in the bedroom waiting for me and wondered: What will she look like? What will she say? How will it be different this time?

That was in the days when I thought I knew what the muse demanded.

Nouns, more nouns.





## MAGNOLIAS, GRASS

It was my mother who told me that I, too, would have to die one day. I was four or five, standing beside her as she put out the trash in the backyard of the house we rented on McCauley Street. This was probably no more than half a mile from the room in which she would die decades later at the UNC Medical Center.

There is a place as real as this moment where we will one day die, you who read this now, and me. I think about this every day though I cannot for the life of me understand what it means. Contemplating death is guaranteed to melt the mind into a puddle of wax.

I once visited Susan Son-tag at her apartment in the London Terrace complex in New York. The cancer that would one day kill her had not yet recurred. Books were everywhere, even on top of the kitchen stove. For hours we sat at her kitchen table and talked about our favorite novels and writers. Her gusto was palpable. I think that she believed that she would live forever as long as there were more books to read. I cannot help but feel the same.

"Do I *have* to die?" I asked my mother in exactly the same way I might have asked "Do I *have* to go to bed?" I don't know why the subject of death had come up, some kid had probably told me about it, but already I was looking for the loophole. I should have become a lawyer. Many people have told me that over the years, including my ex-wife.

"Yes," my mother said. "We all have to die. But you don't have to worry about that for a long time."

She was being tender, I suppose, trying in the way of most mothers to allay my fears by putting off the moment of reckoning far into the distance. She was good at that. She herself would die not having visited a doctor for at least thirty or so years. Living with one for a good part of that time doesn't count. He didn't like to visit doctors, either.

"I don't want to have to worry about it," I said.

Prior to the age of five or so, I worried about things. At one point, I thought I was having a heart attack in the bathtub. I had seen a public service announcement from the American Heart Association on TV. I had all the advertised symptoms: pain in my chest, shortness of breath, profuse sweating. "I'm having a heart attack," I said, summoning my parents to say goodbye.

"What makes you say that, Willie?" my father asked. My parents stood over the tub as I forlornly let the washcloth sink to the bottom. There was

no need to scrub any longer. I was going to die. I recounted the symptoms. "I think it's gas, son," he said quite tenderly, grinning at my mother.

"I am not going to die," I told her that day in the backyard. I was angry. I felt as if my mother had the power to prevent my death. That all she had to do was say that I wouldn't die and then I wouldn't.

"Everybody dies," she said, the way mothers now say "everybody poops." Death, it appears, is the greatest democracy of them all. "But I'm telling you, you don't need to worry about it, not for a long, long time."

The rhythms of her sentence turned it into a little lullaby, the "long, long time" part especially. But that was as much soothing as she was going to do that day.

As it turned out, she didn't like the fact that she was going to die, either. And as she was already in her thirties, she had a big head start on me in dying. So her "long, long time" was not quite as "long, long" as mine—in an instant, I was calculating the odds, an amateur at mortality tables and yet I knew I was likely in a better place than her. And I am ashamed to say (though nothing could be truer) that I exulted even

then at my presumed distance from the end. I would live alone on the earth if I had to—this I understood. The rest of humanity might have to go charging off a cliff into oblivion. I would stay back and watch everybody disappear, even my loved ones.

"It's not true," I said. "I'm not going to die. I don't want to!"

My mother simply said "that's enough!" to all my whining and went inside to fix supper. I wandered off into the green, blooming backyards of McCauley and Ransom Streets and proceeded to forget about death for a while. I knew every tree, every shrub, every dog bone, every bird's nest, every board of every fence. I knew what the yards smelled like when a thunderstorm approached and the air crackled with ozone and the ladies raced into the yards to take down the laundry off the lines. I knew what the dirt smelled like after the rain. I knew how many years could pass on a single desultory morning where I would walk around prodding things with a stick until my father yelled, "Willie, stop messing with that dadgum stick!"

I had been banned from bringing sticks into the house. I did love them, sticks. They became what I wished in my hands—snakes, rifles, shovels, wands. That a stick in a Carolinian yard can become what you wish it—that's the first miracle, isn't it? That's making poetry before you





even know what poetry is. A single stick in the right hands is a muse.

It was lovely, my life as a young mammal in those days. Getting up before the rest of the household, eating the dog's food (the Purina as crunchy and delicious as any breakfast cereal), stalking through the yard in the dewy mornings, hunting for fairies. They were there, I was sure, most likely in the flowers. I had read about them. Now I wanted to see one.

Trees, birds, insects. An eternity existed in every day. Even boredom was delirious. Largely unsupervised, my sister Annie and I climbed repeatedly the magnolia that stood outside the kitchen window, often plummeting to the ground when the branches snapped. The wind knocked out of us, we lay there breathless on the hardpacked dirt at the base of the tree until we could rise and climb again.

At night we caught lightning bugs in our hands and jailed them in Hellmann's mayonnaise jars with holes punched in the lids. We stationed

the jars between our beds and fell asleep to starry skies trapped inside glass, blinking constellations of insect light that serenaded us into the temporary beyond. In the morning, the lightning bugs were almost always gone, having escaped through the air holes.

I found dog skulls in the corners of the yards, where old mutts had crept to die in private. I held them up and listened to the wind hollow out the spaces in the bone. The light arrowed through and hurt my eyes. The grass grew thick where dogs died.

"Don't be messing with those bones," Louise Hackney, our housekeeper and my other mother, said. "They're dirty."

I poured the dirt out of the skull. "Not anymore," I told her.

Louise lives to this day, out in the country, where she repeats herself at regular intervals, telling me every time I visit: "Child, you were a mess!"

## A PINE AND AN OAK

**D**ecades later, we buried my mother at the end of October in the old Chapel Hill cemetery in the same grave in which my father already lay, under a pine and an oak, where the headstone still had a blank space on its granite face awaiting her name and dates.

*Mama*: the word springs forth at the end of things, just as at the beginning.

Her four children wrote the obituary together, all of us older than my mother was that distant day beside the trash cans when I discovered death. What I learned makes no more sense now than it did then.

"Nothing can happen nowhere," declared the Anglo-Irish writer Elizabeth Bowen as a justification for why setting in fiction matters. Hers is an attitude long considered sympathetic toward the Southern enshrinement of place. I hear her words differently (and so might Samuel Beckett), so that two seemingly incompatible things are true at once: Nothing, whatever nothing might be, comes into the world, and where that nothing happens is a place known as nowhere.

For me, that's where the cicadas sing from on a summer night—an emptiness that feels immense. Death, too, is nothing and that's the good and the bad of it.

At the end of the graveside service, we touched the coffin and spoke our quiet farewells. Without conferring, each of us reached down and picked up pinecones and placed them on the headstone in my

mother's honor. She and I had become great friends in her last years. I told her nearly everything about my life. That was true for my siblings as well.

The months pass, and from time to time the wind blows them off and we put them back. And then the wind blows them off again. And the next time we visit we put the pinecones back again.

I want to inscribe the blankness. Instead of the word made flesh, I'll settle for the flesh made word.

How hard it is to say goodbye. I know that nothing eventually gets the last word. I know that one day even the last word will disappear. But as I said, and will say again, we put the pinecones back. 🌲



Gloria Blythe  
March 27, 1928 – October 27, 2013