

NONFICTION PRIZE WINNER

Judge: Jason Howard,
coauthor of *Something's Rising: Appalachians Fighting Mountaintop
Removal* and editor of *We All Live Downstream:
Writings About Mountaintop Removal*

“The slow walk of three generations—grandfather, father, daughter — through their family’s woods is detailed in this remarkable essay. ‘He is thin, lined like one of his trees,’ the author writes, and we, too, are present in that moment, pulled in by her evocative imagery and fully realized scenes. But what is most extraordinary is how the unhurried pace of their trek mirrors the author’s own realization.”

The Heart of the Woods

Eva Sage Gordon

My father, grandfather and I park. This is where the winding rock road crosses the railroad tracks. We pull up under a huge spreading tree with three dark trunks and wildly reaching branches. It is a Bois d’Arc, locally bodock or mock orange, daddy is quick to say. This stuff lines the ditches and hedgerows of north Mississippi country, he tells me. I wouldn’t know; we live up north and are just visiting. I am nothing but a little girl with my daddy and granddaddy and the great big woods.

We make our way slowly onto the tracks, which shoot north along an earth berm raised high above the swamp floor. We can see for two miles, to the place where the rails bend west and disappear. Down each side of the steep banks the grass flows evenly, cropped by deer. This park-like expanse, the railroad’s right-of-way, is a hundred yards wide. Where it ends on each side, the woods begin, with magnificent sentry white and red oaks standing in silence and grace. My daddy says this land was claimed by hunters many years ago.

I lead the way but I move carefully, in a rhythm I believe to be my father’s. He is copying the rhythm of his own dad, ahead of us, aged 78. My dad is hoping to hear some of his stories about our land, especially the ones he has half forgotten. I’m just here because somebody needed to

bring me along, to watch me until my mom comes tonight. Plus, I was told there might be turtles on the railroad tracks needing saving, and that's my specialty. My dad grabs my hand and laughs. He says, "Tom said to me, whatever you do, don't take your father into those woods. Don't let him see those woods. We laughed nervously about this, because for years whenever my father saw his trees, he wanted to cut them."

Tom is my daddy's best friend, and they hunt together every year. Granddaddy grew up in the sawmilling business, the third generation of his Arkansas family to do so, and for many years he operated a mill of his own. My daddy left the family business, but the sight of tall, straight tree trunks still affects my daddy and granddaddy the same way. They are in awe. Now they are talking to each other in low voices like whispers, saying they can envision boards hiding inside the trunks of oaks. This is smooth, perfect lumber, they are saying, the best from near the log's edge, with the softer centers winding up as boxed hearts, eight-inch-square crossties for railroads.

As we walk the sharp granite chips that line the bed, Granddaddy speaks of his craving to cut timber. The last time we made this trip he was upset. There had been a storm, maybe a tornado, and trees lay uprooted, thrown down into the mud. "I should have cut the timber," he kept saying. That was my first trip to the woods, or at least the first I remember.

We reach the first of the bridges, and a black turkey leaps into flight down below us. I squeal into the woods, "Ee! Turkey!" and he flies left, under the trestle beneath our feet, and sets his wings to sail out among flooded trees. It is the second week of March, the very beginning of spring, and the trees are almost bare. Granddaddy smiles. He is thin, lined like one of his trees, and he carries a walking stick turned from good oak. His blue eyes take in the timber and railroad grass, and they smile.

This land seems to me a great wilderness, a place of shaggy long-tusked boars and bobcats and wild black turkeys, even panthers. It seems my daddy must see it this way too, but later he tells me the woods is more a garden than a wilderness, wild-looking and feeling, but actually revealing years of careful choices. "Like the yard?" I ask. "Like the blueberry bushes and the pear tree?" "Kind of," he says. I wait for a longer explanation, but he is quiet. Only many years later will I come to understand that the abundance of deer and turkeys, the very creatures my family likes to hunt, aren't primordial wilderness so much as expressions of my grandfather's silent will. What I feel in these woods as a little girl—the richness, the mystery—is informed by my limited knowledge of how it all works. However, when I look at my daddy, at my granddaddy's blue-eyed gaze, it is clear they feel the power of this place even more than I do. I have a feeling that great black turkey was just the beginning of the secrets to come.

Beyond this square mile of hardwood bottomland lies the greater landscape of the Tombigbee River—the site of so many of my bedtime stories—the place of the annual sweeping floods, the rushing brown

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We reach the second bridge, and a big silver bird flies up and catches the spring wind. Birds are everywhere now, claiming their season for all to see, motionless on fence posts and tree limbs, silently spying for mice and cottontails. They seem to fit right in here, as part of the everyday landscape, so it's hard to believe what I'm told, that they're in the middle of their great migratory journey.

We stop to admire the silver bird, then resume our slow walking, and soon we come to a corner, which granddaddy declares is the beginning of our land. We cross over another bridge and one of the grown-ups starts moving toward the woods. Here the ground is higher, not so swampy, and we find sound footing and thin brush. We walk beneath the oak canopy, beside green grass and moss on a stream bank, between honeysuckle bushes with fresh leaves. A sapling extends a red flower at the level of our hands.

I am feeling comfortable here, knowing this is our family woods and I am protected. It turns out the grown-ups aren't doing quite so well. In a few moments my father announces he is turned around, and I sit on a fallen log while he and granddaddy figure out where we are, where to go. They argue over the name of the stream up ahead, and point out distances to other landmarks. I spot a family of bunnies with grey backs and white underbellies,

and I am overjoyed, but I stay still. Nobody else notices. Soon the mama bunny spooks, and all three creatures disappear.

“Look at this persimmon tree,” Granddaddy says, and we all look over to a tall, winding black trunk with a bark of hard, squarish knobs. “We never cut a persimmon in here,” he says. “So this one has to be over forty years old.” He casts his eyes up the high, limbless trunk. It is like a treasure to him. “The wood is so hard they make the heads of golf clubs from it.”

We pass on into an area of different trees. Daddy says they are white oaks and sycamores and hickories. I notice their buds. Daddy can’t keep his eyes off the tracks beside the stream. He picks me up on his shoulders and tells me that right here in this spot an animal story is being told. It’s been years since so many raccoon prints have overlaid each other, he says, and this is supposed to be a record season for them, as for coyotes, bobcats and all other “predators.” Granddaddy can’t keep his eyes off the trees, and Daddy can’t stop looking for creatures. I admire these men, with their different obsessions, and as long as the mosquitoes don’t bite, I will look at whatever anyone wants me to.

“These old hickories,” Granddaddy says, “the Scaly Barks make the worst lumber. When we cut last, I told them to get rid of these. But they didn’t do it.”

We reach a hidden pond in the center of the woods. Daddy calls it the Seven Point Slough for something that happened with a deer thirty years ago. Beside a beaver dam, Granddaddy selects a reasonably dry log, and we sit down to eat our lunch. Mom has packed us small cheese sandwiches, a pair of apples, and a thermos of spring water. As we eat in silence I see my first butterfly of the spring, orange with black markings. I rise to move closer, but it is wary and flits on through the brush. I return to the log, and Daddy tells me how many turkeys he’s seen at this spot.

“Is that right,” Granddaddy says. But I notice his clear blue eyes drifting across the trees, a lifetime of concern for trees. He finishes his sandwich. “I remember going to look at some timber in Arkansas with Papa,” he says. “It was virgin timber, and you know this would have been in the 1930s. The cypress trees were so big you couldn’t begin to put your arms around them.”

He holds out his arms, reaching for a circle.

“The woods floor was absolutely clean. No brush at all. Just the great big huge cypress trees. And as far as you could see, there were purple violets blooming all around them. It was the most beautiful thing you ever saw.”

Turns out this is one of the old stories daddy was waiting for. He perks up and says, “I thought that was your dad. You were there too?”

I don’t know what difference this makes, but it seems like a big deal.

“Did he buy the woods?” Daddy asks, wide-eyed.

“No,” granddaddy says, “somebody else outbid him that time. A big mill in Memphis, I think.”

I wonder what a forest full of violets would look like, and I wonder if they

would die if I stepped on them on my way to wrap my arms around a tree.

Granddaddy talks on. He talks about other land he used to own and some he wanted but never bought. He seems okay, not upset, but just like he is remembering.

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There is a short, peeled stick floating on the water near us, and we all three see it at the same time.

"This is the signature of beavers," Daddy says, looking at me.

Granddaddy points and shakes his head. "I used to hate the thought of one single beaver, you know. The sight of a tree ringed by those sharp teeth and left to rot made me want to bring in trappers, poisoners, dynamiters."

"It made him want to bring in his loggers, beat the beavers to everything intact," Daddy says, "But in the whole picture, the beavers are important to the forest ecosystem. They provide dead trees for the woodpeckers."

We walk on. Around the pond, Daddy shows us a secret. "In this spot," he says, "big bucks cross at noon."

Granddaddy raises an eyebrow and smiles. "You don't say."

"I discovered it by accident. I walked into them so often that I finally decided to try waiting here, and sure enough."

"They cross?"

"North to south, east to west. Right here. It must be some kind of cosmic deer crossroads."

I don't know what this conversation is about, really, but I can feel the shift in air. They are being softer with each other, getting along instead of arguing about beavers.

Now we are headed out, slowly, following a narrow creek to the railroad. Daddy says he watched otters here last winter. Granddaddy is interested, but another

thought is distracting him. He wants to know why this patch of woods has only grown small hackberries and hickories, the “worst species.”

Finally, we climb back up into open space, the clean two-mile vista of the rails and green grass. In the distance, three deer feed in the sunlight.

By the time we reach the car, we have walked all morning. Driving back to town, the adults are quiet, but as we get close to the end of the woods and creeks, Daddy starts talking. He says the contrast between town life and the woods was really important to him as a kid. He loved coming here with his friends, and by himself to be alone. He thinks of this place as magical, untouchable. He is scared of what will happen when he is put in charge, because we live up North. How will he keep track of the woods from across the country?

We drive around near a river, and Granddaddy points out that we are passing the creek we walked along.

“I learned to think in these woods” Daddy says, after a silence. He looks at me. “You and those animals, and the trees all need each other,”

Granddaddy snickers.

Daddy continues. “It’s true. You and they are new generations of wild things, just like granddaddy and I and those big cypress trees are another one.”

Suddenly, Granddaddy pulls over and points his long arm toward the trees. “Look, my old sign.”

Daddy and I lean over the seat.

“Oh yeah, there it is!” Daddy says and looks at me. “When I was seven, my father brought me here and showed me his new bright green metal farm sign. He used the occasion to give me advice about how to treat the woods, to tell me about his business and why you must always cut timber in a renewable way, not just clear cut and ruin forests.”

We look out the window, and there leans the original sign, bending inward, completely rusted over. It is nearly invisible in the tangle of vines and saplings with their dusty coat from the rock road. I have never laid eyes on the sign before, but the stories of it being hung up and admired years ago take hold of me, and all I see is fresh, bright green paint and a dense secret forest.

“I like it here,” I say.



Eva Sage Gordon teaches English in Southwest Spain. She writes fiction, poetry, creative nonfiction, and is working on a mystery novel for children.