

Forgiven Trespasses

On any Saturday morning in May, the birdsong would come rolling in my bedroom from the surrounding hillside long before dawn. I'd be up by sunrise, roll my bicycle out of the garage, and be off for the wider world before the dew was dry on the grass. I was ten, and the backyards were large and brushy and worth finding out about.

There was once money in the town in which I grew up. But by my time all the old families had grown eccentric. Their formal gardens had declined into a weedy patchwork, and frogs and salamanders had taken over their brick-lined swimming pools. Above the town, along the cliffs above the river, the world was even wilder. Here, in the 1920s, well-heeled stockbrokers had constructed larger estates, most of which had been torn down or deserted after the Crash. In the six miles of woods that ran along the cliff, there was rich picking for the unrestrained youths



who ranged in the lower sections. And here, on any given Saturday morning in warm weather, we, the nomadic warriors of our neighborhood, would ascend.

I remember the tract well, a moist mid-Atlantic forest of sweet gum and tulip with the whisperings of gnatcatchers around us, and cerulean warblers, and the lure of ruins. One place in particular held our fancy. The estate was gone, but the pool, with its pergolas and terraces and statuary, was still there. Here we recreated the battles of history. Robin Hood and his band lurked in the surrounding greenwood to sally out and attack King John and his retinue. Here were Indians; here we fought duels in the style of the three musketeers among

the moss-strewn statues and the shallow, rain-filled pool. The place, even at this distance in time, looms as a metaphor, a half-remembered country where the true tyrants of our world—parents—held no sway.

There were other sites in town. The old carriage houses, long deserted, had excellent burying grounds in the soils beneath the rotting wood floors. Some had elaborate stairwells, narrow and worth fighting duels to defend. We found the bodies of rats and possums and raccoons in these old barns, and we sent the resident pigeons aloft in wild flurries. One building even had a barn owl, I was told, but this we avoided inasmuch as it was carefully guarded by someone's eccentric uncle.

The town had streams and stone bridges over roadways into which large drainage pipes emptied. We had read or seen the movie *Les Misérables*, with its famous sewer scenes, and these too we replayed periodically. We tunneled down grates, through narrow spots, and into larger conduits that fed to the bridges and the brooks. Once beneath one of these bridges, a companion was attacked by a vicious muskrat who lunged at his throat, teeth bared—so he claimed—but only managed to get a bite out of his thumb.

It was here, in this landscape, that we learned the art of survival. It was here that I came to understand territory. Children, evil children from other parts of town, would sometimes sally forth and invade our grounds, and so we recapitulated history and defended our land with sticks and showers of stones from one of the old barns where we maintained our Fortress America against the Nazis, the king's militia, marauding knights, pirates, renegade cowboys, bands of thirties-style gangsters, and those myriad imaginary enemies of all forms who would assault our ground.

We found nests, we caught frogs and put them into our mouths on a dare, we collected salamanders and put them in fish tanks to watch them grow, we pulled clumps of onion grass from the moist earth and showered one another, we scaled the peaked roofs of a large nearby church. We brought home to nurse poor pigeons and English sparrows, along with baby rabbits, moles, and mice the cats carried in. Oscar the crow, who my brother rescued and who lived with us

for years, always fixed me with his glinty eye if I ever came near him when my brother was not around.

There were no boy scouts in this tribe. There were no after-school programs. Saturday-morning television held no attraction, and personal computers, to my eternal gratitude, had yet to be invented. We were bounded only by the wilderness of our own imaginations. But, there are times when, staring at the child-empty fields and woods around the town in which I now live, I wonder in what fields the children of this lost generation of wanderers play.

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