

The Big Woods

Ed Abbey

21 March 1983

The idea of wilderness needs no defense. It only needs more defenders.

In childhood the wilds seemed infinite. Along Crooked Creek in the Allegheny Mountains of western Pennsylvania there was a tract of forest we called the Big Woods. The hemlock, beech, poplar, red oak, white oak, maple, and shagbark hickory grew on slopes so steep they had never been logged. Vines of wild grape trailed from the limbs of ancient druidical oaks—dark glens of mystery and shamanism. My brother and I, simple-minded farmboys, knew nothing of such mythologies, but we were aware, all the same, of the magic residing among and within those trees. We knew that the Indians had once been here, Seneca and Shawnee, following the same deer paths that wound through fern, moss, yarrow, and mayapple among the massive trunks in the green-gold light of autumn, from spring to stream and marsh. Those passionate warriors had disappeared a century before we were even born, but their spirits lingered. Their shades still informed the spirit of the place. We knew they were there. The vanished Indians were reincarnated, for a few transcendent summers, in our bones, within our pale Caucasian skins, in our idolatrous mimicry. We knew all about moccasins and feathers, arrows and bows, the thrill of sneaking naked through the underbrush, taking care to tread on not a single dry twig. Our lore came from boys' books, but it was the forest that made it real.

My brother Howard could talk to trees. Johnny knew how to start a fire without matches, skin a squirrel, and spot the eye of a sitting rabbit. I was an expert on listening to mourning doves, though not on interpretation, and could feel pleasure in the clapperclaw of crows. The wolf was long gone from those woods, and also the puma, but there were still plenty of deer, as well as bobcat and raccoon and gray fox; sometimes a black bear, or the rumor of one passed through the hills. That was good country then, the country of boyhood, and the woods, the forest, that sultry massed deepness of transpiring green formed the theater of our play. We invented our boyhood as we grew along: but the forest—in which it was possible to get authentically lost—sustained our sense of awe and terror in ways that fantasy cannot.

Now I would not care to revisit those faraway scenes. That forest which seemed so vast to us was only a small thing after all, as the bulldozers, earth movers, and dragline shovels have proved. The woods we thought eternal have been logged by methods formerly considered too destructive, and the very mountainside on which the forest grew has been butchered by the strip miners into a shape of crude symmetry, with spoil banks and head walls and right-angled escarpments where even the running blackberry has a hard time finding a roothold. Stagnant water fills the raw gulches, and the creek below runs sulfur-yellow all year long.

Something like a shadow has fallen between present and past, an abyss wide as war that cannot be bridged by any tangible connection, so that memory is undermined and the image of our beginnings betrayed, dissolved, rendered not mythical but illusory. We have connived in the murder of our own origins. Little wonder that those who travel nowhere but in their own heads, reducing all existence to the space of one skull, maintain dreamily that only the pinpoint of the moment is real. They are right: A

fanatical greed, an arrogant stupidity, has robbed them of the past and transformed their future into a nightmare. They deny the world because the only world they know has denied them.

Our cancerous industrialism, reducing all ideological differences to epiphenomena, has generated its own breed of witch doctor. These are men with a genius for control and organization, and the lust to administrate. They propose first to shrink our world to the dimensions of a global village, over which some technological crackpot will erect a geodesic dome to regulate air and light; at the same time the planetary superintendent of schools will feed our children via endless belt into reinforcement training boxes where they will be conditioned for their functions in the anthill arcology of the future. The ideal robot, after all, is simply a properly processed human being.

The administrators laying out the blueprints for the technological totalitarianism of tomorrow like to think of the earth as a big space capsule, a machine for living. They are wrong: The earth is not a mechanism but an organism, a being with its own life and its own reasons, where the support and sustenance of the human animal is incidental. If man in his newfound power and vanity persists in the attempt to remake the planet in his own image, he will succeed only in destroying himself—not the planet. The earth will survive our most ingenious folly.

Meanwhile, though, the Big Woods is gone—or going fast. And the mountains, the rivers, the canyons, the seashores, the swamps, and the deserts. Even our own, the farms, the towns, the cities, all seem to lie helpless before the advance of the technoindustrial juggernaut. We have created an iron monster with which we wage war, not only on small peasant nations over the sea, but even on ourselves—a war against all forms of life, against life itself. In the name of Power and Growth. But the war is only beginning.

The Machine may seem omnipotent, but it is not. Human bodies and human wit, active here, there, everywhere, united in purpose, independent in action, can still face that machine and stop it and take it apart and reassemble it—if we wish—on lines entirely new. There is, after all, a better way to live. The poets and the prophets have been trying to tell us about it for three thousand years.

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