



Harvard Forest

Author(s): Philip Stott

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ECOLOGICAL SOUNDING: A BIOGEOGRAPHICAL SHORT STORY

Harvard Forest

*He visited – still flitting –
Then like a timid Man
Again, He tapped – 'twas flurriedly –
And I became alone –*

Emily Dickinson, c. 1862

I

The wind was high in the red oaks and white pine as I walked the silica paths of Harvard Forest, alone. All was soft, with rain and sand, needle and leaf. Dull clouds scudded in from the south over rounded hills; the air was chill, and the maples would soon mirror the sunset in their leaves. I strode on, briskly, past smaller forests of green clubmoss and fern, on by dark stone walls where shrews flattened their bodies in crevice and crack, and on again through plantations of red pines, hunched from the hurricanes of former years. I saw no deer, no porcupine, no salamanders, nor any other form of life, save only the wind in the tall trees, in the hemlock, in the grey birch, and the smooth rind beech.

The path I was following divided suddenly, a left-hand turn descending in gentle curves to a damper, quieter valley. The main track forged ahead, through a closed barrier gate, into denser woods on higher ground, where the way was stony and littered with large acorn cups. I pressed on, round the gate and upwards, breathing heavily as I reached the lonely crest; now the wind howled and sighed yet more, calling me to halt. A little below the hill, where a dank pool filled a hollow by the path, I stopped and climbed the outer boulders of a broken wall, and there I sat, listening, my eyes closed, to the sounds of wood and wind, and to the stories they might tell. How long I sat, huddled on that ancient wall, I cannot recall, but the tales I heard are with me forever. Forevermore.

II

My mind was lost in the flurries of the wind, and pictures formed of long ago, hazy, violet, as if seen through the famous lilac glass of Beacon Hill. First I saw a grove of saplings, each striving to become a tree, but each then dying before its time. Again the shoots came up, and again they fell, their bark riven by some dreadful blight, vile red and orange. Once more the saplings came and went, and, as they faded finally from my mind, I saw one chestnut tree, majestic and bold, grow like a memory. A memory?

Then all went dark, and the equinoctial wind blew fiercer and fiercer still, until the noise was deafening in my head. I cried out, and, as the image cleared, I saw great trees thrown in swathes across the path, and others bent and bowed before the storm. The seething landscape became an ever-changing sea of gale-gaps and writhing trunks, tossed and turned in the Atlantic ocean of the sky. Lightning forked to earth, stripping the bark from stricken trees, while the north was burnished with fire. A searing heat passed quickly by, branding each bole as it went, until the wind fell, and from the blackened earth there came new growth, weedy and weak, of pin cherry, popple, and scrub oak, which flared again, grew once more, and vanished into peace. Peace?

A new light broke the east. Shafts touched first the tops of thin oaks, then white pines, and the hum of a sawmill filled the air, ‘as Bumble bee of June’; the scent was sweet indeed! But slowly, in shifting dioramas of the mind, my sense of forest, of shade and dapple, of canopy and crown, was lost completely, revealing instead curved, undressed hills, with white wooden houses in their folds, and orange pumpkins stacked by neat stone walls. All so well-tended and so-well tamed! So very human! Human?

The houses then grew smaller, becoming little log cabins, until at length, smoke rose from a single tiny sod roof; one brown field, stark and clean, hemmed in by rough boulders, lay in the foreground of my thoughts. A man was building the wall, a cow grazed, and a dog barked. And trees once more clothed the hills behind the working scene, though they too, I could discern, knew of wind and fire, storm and fury. And then, last of all, I heard the echo-sounds of an older people, faint and far, lost forever. *Forevermore.*

III

The wind, a falling acorn, or a branch, tapped lightly on my shoulder, and I caught the sound of axe on wood. A man was busy among the trees.

‘Good afternoon’, I called. He turned, straightened His back, and then drew nearer to the wall.

‘Goodman’, He said. ‘The Wind blows gay today. The Landscape of the Spirit requires a lung, but no Tongue’.

I asked His story.

His only constant was the black gum in the swamps. For Him, the rest was new, and on His fields too, although He did recall the older forests, a different mix of pine, and hemlock, and oak. But that was long ago. Yet He remembered – hard pioneering times. He was sad to see the stone walls so collapsed and ill-kept, but He knew that change was life, and, after all, there is no need for a wall in a wood. His house had survived, He said, the burial ground and all, consecrated. Continuity and change. Why fear it? Old men regret the past, but older still full circle come, and then accept – in Heaven or cold Earth. He must back to the grave, the gift of men, there to feed the new Land.

‘Your name, Sir?’ I asked.

‘Sanderson, Sir. Good Day!’

I should have known. ‘Good Day, Sir!’ But not *forevermore. Forevermore.*

IV

I awoke alone, stiff and cold, still sitting on the broken wall. I shivered. The wood was darker now as light faded overhead. Dusk was falling. The wind was biting, sharper still.

I jumped down, and started to retrace my steps, a slight urgency in my tread lest I should lose the path. Soon I had passed the barrier gate, and I was once again on the main forest road, soft and friendly to the feet. I felt renewed inside, the eyes less heavy, the body not quite so weary; I was regenerated for people, – for company, – for a time. I met two walkers, urban clean and eager, with cameras on wide coloured straps. What irony! Bostonians in their ‘native’ woods, or so they think! Like Thoreau by his pond, Concord-close and sister-safe.

I went on my way, smiling at our folly. ‘Global change’. Why worry! Change is all, was all, will be all. ‘Global stasis’ – now that really would be a shock! Forests come and go. We can not stop

them. I think I will meet Goodman Sanderson again – in an Amazonian wood? – different, of course – a hundred years hence?

His house, by the way, is on the right – just there – full of earnest, young scientists who worry a lot. But I think I'm ready for 'the worst'. Nothing is relevant. All is a prank –

*'What if the poles should frisk about
And stand upon their heads!'*

Emily Dickinson, c. 1859

They have and will too! Transcendentally – (Emerson or Kant?). And Verena went off with her man. Forevermore.

PHILIP STOTT *Department of Geography, School of Oriental and African Studies (University of London), Thornhaugh Street, Russell Square, London WC1H 0XG, U.K.*

Note: The author does not know how Sanderson could quote Emily Dickinson on 'The Landscape of the Spirit . . .'; perhaps he has encountered Mrs J. G. Holland, for whom it was written in a letter of early March, 1866. (See for pedantry's sake: T. H. Johnson and T. Ward (eds), *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 3 vols, Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press, 1958: II, Letter 315, p. 450.)