

a house of trees

Ethan Grant

Those trees were good to me as no trees are anymore good. Those were the trees of shelter, of doomless good will for me, the child in midsummer tramping through the creekside paths in the fallow dirt and fable-sepiaed sun, moving toward nothing, toward a field, toward idleness, silver and absolute. The Journey of the Fox I called it, and I called it *Le voyage de renart*, and fancied I knew something of French in knowing the word *renart*. And I was then Reynard, scuttling wily in the brush in my endless wandering ways, as no Chanticleer crew forth a sullen day, and no Bruin suffered at the farmers' loom.

Those were the times when legends were woven on the wind and birds drizzled their lyrics in the heart of the air. All the rest was a silence; just the air-conditioner rattled around the corner of the house, out-of-sightly a phantom droning his midday tom. Headless horsemen bounded all afternoon through the distant backwood thickets. And the trees bowed overhead, sieving the summerlight into glassy shards; it was a sunburst, a radiance walking from each moment into moment, as each tree tried his turn at the light and worked his sleight-of-hand to explode the sun. Always there, always wagging: the maples, chestnuts, white oak and red oak, the walnut, the beech, the pin oak and bur oak, the pine like a mountain: like a mead-hall:

tented in shadow its thatched beams overhead. Always good, always there . . . a frozen curio on the mantelpiece, a brass bell, a frayed candlestick, a sundimmed portrait of some long-forgotten person at some time-forgotten hour . . . Those were trees of the always, and always the sentinels and audience to all and to me.

Never since has time seemed so separate, and never since so self-contained, as if the life of me then was little more than a prologue, the swelling and easing of an overture, the dominant drifting comfortably into tonic . . . and curtain. Only echoes remain, trickling in the rafters of the ears of those who once sat before the stage. Loudly it rings, deafening at times. Reprise back to entr'acte and back, nebulous motions rising out of the din: My grandpa, straw-hatted and freshly-shaven, walks out in the crisp June morning. He is going to the garden again. He is to plow and prepare the earth for corn, for beans, for strawberries, all as he must, as the cycle demands. My grandma, seated at the kitchen table, her short hair curled and white, her blue-veined hand lifting a second cup of coffee to her lips, watches as a hummingbird dances with himself in the windowglass. The floor registers stream cool air into my world. There is an order here, an order I cannot, and should not, strive to know. All I know now is how all life moves from the

center, and there are networks, all things converging. And here I move. And here I begin—I am young, I smell new things. What dying star sheds his glory on this time . . . Sunbursts. I will follow my grandpa outside today. I will till through the weeds and the scratching leaves in the sacred plots of old wooden fence-posts, gnarled and smothered with lichen and rot. Order is not yet fled from here. Order runs a fence in square about the garden, a great sureness through the thorny wilderness and man-tamed land. The trees arrange themselves at all sides. They sway in the wind airily, they watch, they save for me the mysteries beyond their boughs. Dreamy white clouds pool behind the trees; the trees obscure the setting of the wan morning moon.

Those were the times when night was unknown to me. When all the world would ebb at my beck and curl to rest at the foot of my bed. When a swirl-patterned ceiling saved me from the knowledge of the depth of the night, the stars in their divisions, the black chill, the void, the whole of the galaxy streamed in thin milk beyond the eaves. But neither roof nor walls nor windows kept the crickets from my ears. Nightly I heard the haunted chorus of their tireless throngs, and I knew of the night which set stage for such songs. And yet I slept away my childhood. I slept, and the trees swayed overhead . . . Here. Now. . . Still they sway, these prophets, these sages (and I thought I knew French!), such worldless old counselors in rede above my head. In shadows they move, in whispered candlequiet secrecy while the feverish skies whirl with trivial stars. So June has come again. The orchard is cool tonight, as passion long spent is cool. Moonlight bides in shadow beyond the trees, beyond the grave immensity of earth. I cannot cling to it, its knowledge: It slips through my grasp as sunlight once slipped through brambles, this moment,

this time, the steady machinery in the processes of my life. And I wish so badly to know something, I don't know what, but something, just to know more than the moment before: That tonight the moon will rise and assure me of my standing: That a fox will bark in the woodland broom: That his eyes will flash at me from the dark. I am pointless and I am thoughtless, and the trees break their silence for neither boy nor man. They still stand the same, and whisper the same, but I am not the same—I am utterly at odds with the self of myself who hurtles through the meaningless stagecraft of my place in this world in this time in this act of this cycle of the song. But the trees utter not a word, not one ancient, titanic sigh to relieve me of my questioning. There is only a wind. A phantom tom lost in the drone of a soft, chimney-whispered night. And yet to these trees I am still grateful. These trees have been good to me.

