

## **Beyond the wilderness** (forthcoming, *North Dakota Quarterly*)

Joni Tevis

*I stood in a clearing, she said, much later. Light all around, but darkness above me. Looked up and saw something falling from the sky, fast, something heavy, something dark. Too fast for me to stop. She knew it would strike. I put my arm up to cover my head, a reflex; it would do no good. Oh God, I said. And then it hit.*

### **1.**

As gunmetal clouds piled in the west, he ate his simple meal (sandwich, apple) and sheltered in the mouse-smelling dark of the hunters' shack. Rain came and came hard, battering the standing corn, streaking the leaves with soupy dirt. Lightning forked over the woods, and he saw it out of the corner of his eye, as he stared at that storied ground, thinking about something or other. Near the north boundary line, there was a spot where people said an Indian princess had been buried, and in the back field, a symmetrical hill sloped up to a shelf and then down again. People said it was a mound made for some kind of harvest ritual. He didn't know one way or the other, but plowed it every spring and watered the shoots that grew there.

### **2.**

There, in Logan County, central Ohio, the seasons are distinct, enthusiastic. Spring (black-turned earth) can break your heart with hope, summer (golden corn in the silo) is hotter than you think possible, winter (dark trees, curling smoke) lasts forever.

But this is an autumn story, and just as the other seasons have their colors, so does autumn, brown, for potatoes, for shadows in the empty barn, for frost-killed stalks lying broken on cold ground, for months that leave nothing behind but the land's very shape. Hills curved like a well-loved body. Pond water like chrome, then sunset; then light drains from everything.

My father's father was a hired man on a farm in Logan County. One of eleven children, he'd been raised poor, wrapping himself in newspapers to get through the bitter winters. He worked hard his whole life, just to get by, doing whatever job he could find. Many a farmhouse around there had a roof he'd nailed or siding he'd painted, and he'd swept the schoolhouse floors, driven the bus. But Prall's farm was the work of his life. Ever since he turned fourteen, he'd been plowing and seeding Prall's fields, cutting and stacking and pitching his hay, spreading his cows' manure. He tended another man's land until the day he died and later, when they thought of it, his sons would say, *That's just the way things were then.*

His wife, my father's mother, worked for decades in the hospital's laundry, a job that suited her firecracker energy; she never missed a shift. Years of scrubbing her neighbors' stubborn blood from sheets taught her every trick for

getting rid of the stains a hurting body makes. This was just the work she did for pay; at home she worked harder still. The little four-room house, built long before by runaway slaves, had a floor that canted on its foundation and a bucket of well water that froze hard on winter nights. She stuffed newsprint into the gaps in the wall and papered over so it wouldn't show, raised four boys on potatoes and little else, took baths in the cellar once a week, used a three-seat outhouse out back. She scoured the kitchen floor on her hands and knees, even at the end; she said it cleaned better than a mop.

When winter broke and sap rose in the maple trees, he collected metal spouts from the cans where he kept them, bored holes in the trunks, and hung buckets from nails. He poured full buckets into the sugar shed's great keeping tank and fed the fire all through the night, resting sometimes, smelling dust and old birds' nests, the sweet fog of bubbling sugar. When the sap shrank after long boiling, he pulled it off into cans with *Prall's Syrup* painted on the side. If this touched his pride it was one of many things he never mentioned.

Once the snow melted, he kept an eye out for mushrooms. The calendar was no help; it had to do with a feeling in the air, a certain cool dampness, with a warm breeze promising that the lilacs and peonies of Memorial Day and beyond would bud and bloom again this year. He could taste when it was time, and as he went about his work, he looked for the pointed tops of morels pushing up through the leaf litter; he stepped off the trail and through the maypops, lifting the leaves with the side of his hand. In a good year he filled bag after bag with

mushrooms plucked from rotten logs, from the shadow of spreading walnut or hickory. He soaked them in salt water overnight and fried them next day in flour and fat; they tasted of nuts and molasses, yeasty, like earth, like dough. He fried them in batches and ate until they gave out.

She dreamed, sometimes, of things to come. She knew the pregnancies of other women before they knew themselves, thickening bud of red-tulip flesh: she knew. Of the teenaged granddaughter and, too, of the anxious daughter-in-law: to her she said, *Six months from now, a girl, don't worry, I had a dream about it.* And it happened. (Mine was that predicted birth.) She dreamed of change but kept it to herself, now and then, biding her time.

So passed fifty seedtimes and harvests, most marked by some event: the year he laid irrigation pipe in the back field; the year she bore their last son; the year of the great potato harvest. Their four sons grew to men, married, had children of their own. The span of a life cannot be summed up in a few lines. But this is all I have—nothing written in their hands—this, and what I've seen myself. Arms and napes creased from years of sun; hands knuckled and knobbed from long working.

Fall came hard in 1980, real snow by Election Day, dead berry canes rattling in a cold wind. In the slow time that followed, he caught up on chores he'd let slide during the busy harvest season. He tied new insulation around the cellar pipes, honed and oiled summer tools and wrapped them in rags, noticed the woodpile wasn't as substantial as it ought to have been. So he took his

chainsaw into the woods to clear some brush. It was a gray Wednesday in late November, Thanksgiving eve, and he planned to get home early.

It was a path he'd walked countless times. He scanned the trees on either side of the tractor trail, looking for dead wood, and when he saw a snag he turned aside, pulled the cord, and heard the chainsaw rip to life. Safely upslope, clear of the fall line, he touched the saw to the trunk, and sawdust streamed down.

The work he did required a great deal of selective awareness. He was practically deaf, for instance, to the chainsaw, but alert to the crack of a falling branch. The vibrating saw masked the tree's smaller movements, but within the thrumming undercurrent he felt the tree shift as it gave. He knew there were risks, had had his share of close calls, but trusted himself implicitly; he had to. Then he heard the rotten crunch of a limb, looked up, and breathed *Oh God*. Just as she had dreamed he would.

### 3.

**(Moses) led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ... "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." ... (He) hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. Exodus 3.1-6.**

Ravens croaked, flapping towards a stream bright as mica. The far slopes changed color as a cloud passed over. Flat white flowers bloomed along the trail as he trudged along, lost in thought. The dusty hem of his robe swept the trailside flowers, shaking them on their stems, and he could have been blind for

all he noticed. He was thinking about something—who knew what?—as his feet carried him along the familiar route. Maybe he calculated the extra forage his ewes would need for lambing; maybe he wondered whether his wife had finished the evening meal.

Then, without realizing why, he looked up, and it was like waking from a dream. When he turned his head to the right, it was as though he'd stepped into a furnace, blasted, his eyes watering, his face flaming. Then he saw the bush, a few steps away; the air above it rippled, a braided river of flame. When a twig cracked in the heat, he jumped, realizing that that sound must have been what woke him before.

But something wasn't right. That blaze was burning hotter than most fires did, he knew, and yet the flames didn't consume the bush; its small leaves, instead of curling into ash and dropping to the ground, remained distinct, as did the limbs supporting them. He stepped off the path to investigate.

An old man, he was a herder of flocks and nothing more. That is, until he stepped off the path, intent on discovering the secret. He lifted a foot from the trail and placed it carefully on the desert sand, by that motion transformed from shepherd to patriarch. And approaching the fire he realized that this was more than an oddity; it was a sign that, perhaps because he noticed, was meant for him. Without taking his eyes from the blaze he reached down and unlaced first one dusty sandal and then the other, dropping them in the sand, hardly

conscious of what he was doing. Standing on ground he knew was holy, he waited for the word to come.

**4.**

She made a casserole for the next day and cut up potatoes to fry. Outside, the afternoon faded, and she started to worry; not for the first time. She knew the dangers of working on a farm. She called her third son, my father, and asked him to go to Prall's and check.

In the gray November twilight, he parked on the side of the road and headed into the woods. Wind blew the fallen leaves in rattling clouds. His shoes crunched on the leaves and the gravel; that, and the sighing wind, were the only sounds he heard. No whining saw or chugging tractor, and he didn't like it. He switched on his flashlight, sweeping its beam across the woods from right to left, over big trees he had known since he was a child; he had grown up there, and would never know another piece of land so well as that one.

He found his father lying on the ground, one arm tucked under his body, the other, broken, flung over his head. Blood on his arm, on his face; blood in dulling puddles on leaves, blood pulled away into dark soil. Flashlight reflected off the broken lenses of the dead man's bifocals. The blade of the chainsaw lay sunk in the groove it had dug for itself; when he picked it up, later, it wouldn't start. Ran itself out of gas.

When the coroner arrived, he said the falling branch (wrist-sized) had killed him instantly. He hadn't felt anything after the initial blow, but he had seen it coming. They knew by the way he had thrown the saw from him.

## 5.

I wasn't with him that cold afternoon, and yet in the years since, I've watched it happen again and again. His vision struck him dumb and struck him down; there was no living witness. But a week before the accident, she dreamed herself in a clearing; she looked up and saw something falling fast. *Oh God*, she (he) says, throwing an arm up to blunt the impact. After that, everything changed.

A few months after my grandfather's death, my father took a job in South Carolina, over five hundred miles away. I was a little child, five years old, and my sister had just been born. My father had always lived in Ohio, and so had my mother, and so had her mother, and her mother's mother. We moved south, where my sister and I grew up. Since the Bible was the book we knew best, when I think of my family's particular history, I read it in biblical terms. Like this: he had a vision, of a horror; he sent us on our way, to a place he himself would never reach. That moment of revelation, when he realized his life was about to end—he threw the saw from him—that's the moment I can't let go of. That's the moment I keep trying to read.

What about his wife, his widow? People said *it was a freak accident*, people said *he didn't suffer, it was the best way for him to go*. But what about

her? Did she wonder if she could have prevented it? If she'd said *maybe you could tinker around in the barn today, take it easy, since tomorrow's Thanksgiving; or feels like a storm's coming.* (Wind dislodges the limb and it falls harmlessly in a hail of twigs, smashes on the leaf-drifted ground, breaks into fragments in the deserted winter woods.) Could she have convinced him? He wouldn't have listened. Bullheaded. *Got to do it,* he would have said; *you worry too much.* Cursed with the power to see her grief tearing towards her, and helpless to turn it aside.

He didn't leave much. A black and white photo, taken the year of the record potato harvest. He stands in the cellar of Prall's farmhouse, a potato cupped in each hand, a mountain of tubers behind him, stacked from the floor to the rafters. In this moment, wearing his laborer's clothes and looking proud, he seems to know that sometimes hard work is rewarded, though he couldn't have known what was coming: a good death, if too soon, doing useful work in a place he loved. A life of work, siphoning sugar from trees, shucking husk and silk from corn, leavening soil with manure. I wonder what he thought about, working alone in the field day after day, making those wordless, repeated motions; he was a silent man. The wood he cut warmed another man's farmhouse through a long winter.

For a man who lived his life so tied to the seasons it seems right that his death came for him at autumn's turning to winter. With his body he left a pair of broken glasses, a wristwatch, and a bone-handled pocketknife—vision, time,

utility. To his sons he left blunt red hands and stout fingers. He left those who would remember him and carry his name after he set it aside, and I am one.

## 6.

The pond's ringed now with alder and cattails. Red-winged blackbirds perch, crying *trunk-a-lee*, and in wet years the slate-lined creek is full of speckled creek-chubs and shiners. Worn trails crisscross the woods, and grass grows in the gravel he dumped in the low places to keep the tractor from wallowing. Thickets of brush between the oaks, sugar maples, buckeye, walnut trees; nobody's cleared the undergrowth in years. On the neighboring farms, enormous machines with air-conditioned cabs move slowly across the fields where, as a boy, my father hunted flint flakes and arrowheads.

The last time my father and I visited Logan County, we walked Prall's farm without saying much. In the old hunters' shack we sat in the dust and laddered light. While he sat thinking I went out to the cornfield, dug up a little dirt, and put it in a plastic bag I had with me. I didn't know, then, why I did it. Now I think the old pull towards the place was something passed on to me unearned, like dark eyes and a tendency to hoard, fondness for horseradish and a predilection towards eating watermelon with a knife; there must be countless tics I carry that I think, mistakenly, originated with me. Odd, particular, this family inheritance.

Prall's farm hasn't been worked in years, and his grandchildren grow old; it's just a matter of time, I know, until they sell out, piecemeal, in squares and rectangles. Little houses on cul-de-sacs for the people who work at the Honda plant down the road. But not this. This is mine, this thing I've stolen, scant handful of earth and root threads, taken close to the spot where my father's father died. The dark earth, better than hospital sheets, took his blood, held him close at the end. And now I'll say that land was his, never mind whose name was inked on the deed. He signed his contract with nail-heads hammered flush, in irrigation trenches' laborious characters, in spout-holes, healed now, where maple sap dripped. If I could go back to those woods I would touch my fingers to the round scars in the bark.