The Place

By Quinn Molloy

The place I came from is gone but sometimes I remember it when I’m riding my bike. It’s not really gone. It’s probably still there. I haven’t checked recently. But it’s gone to me and I think about it when I smell woodstoves, or wet leaves, or the sun-warmed sand that collects on the side of a road.

The other kids on the bus called it The Scary House. I wouldn’t disagree. I had been hearing a fox scream at night and wasn’t wholly convinced an animal could make that noise. The bus riders shared my concerns; our consensus was a likely haunting. My dad said it was one of the first farms to be built in town, but I’m not sure I buy that looking back. It was at least very old and had been abandoned for longer than I had been alive when we moved in. The plan was to fix it up one room at a time. Yuppies after my own heart, my parents were.

Once it was a market garden, the kind of farm that grew berries and vegetables. Whatever people were buying that year. They’d pack everything into a truck and drive it down to Lawrence or Boston to see if they could find anyone interested. I heard they had two thousand apple trees back in the day, but all those old Yankees are kind of full of shit so I’m not sure I believe that either. The rest of it, I know to be true.

The farm hadn’t had crops in decades, but you could find evidence of them if you knew where to look. When we mowed the lawn, sometimes asparagus would grow back. My sisters and I would collect raspberries by the pumphouse if we got out before the deer remembered them. There were grape vines along the edge of the old rock wall that produced fruit so sour it was only good for slingshot ammo. The lone pear tree in the back woods if you got through all the thorns. It was too hard to climb, so we admired the pears from the ground.

I was a young scamp in an abandoned house in the woods. I had a bicycle, a walkie-talkie, and no rules. My gang (sisters, other local children) and I took to the forest like a troop of primitive Humboldts. Interrogating every salamander, cataloging every bird, gathering cattails for swordfights. I could see the whole place from above when we felt daring enough to climb the taller of our twin pines. The old farm buildings (in varying stages of decay) and the different forest types (in varying stages of regrowth). Ecological succession in living color. The open fields turned into brush, turned into birch, then hardwood. Between it all the remnants of a community being picked apart by time.

There was a failed attempt to build a new development on an adjacent property. It had fallen victim to the dot com bubble. They had gotten as far as clearing some trees and laying out roads before giving up. We biked down to the unused construction pond to kidnap tadpoles. I practiced riding with no hands. There were never any cars or people. Every year the trees crept back closer to the road and it felt like a wound closing. We kept the tadpoles in a plastic pool and when they got big enough, they would hop away.

When I closed my eyes, I would imagine I was standing on an active farm. A flurry of picking, sorting, stacking. Imagine that the barn was newly painted, it didn’t have a hole in the roof. Men sat on barrels near the doghouse, eating sandwiches and smoking cigarettes. A truck was kicking up dust on its way back from town before the roads were paved. I would run back to the house as fast as I could. The eyes of a hundred dead farm hands watching me from the trees.

These ruins told me their story of inevitability. I knew that place better than I have ever known anything, and with that came the knowledge that before it was mine it belonged to someone else. And before them someone else. And that once it belonged to no one, and never had to explain its actions.

A house in the woods brought me to geography via salamanders and birch trees. To truths all geographers know. That everything is connected. All the places that were before or will be one day are the same and different, threads of an imperceptible mesh that I will never understand.
A great churning of time and place. An interweaving of the structures of land and of men so complete that I am not sure they are distinct categories at all. The knowledge that every day a place is different than it had been the day before, and there’s no going back.

There are things I pieced together about my childhood. Things that seemed incidental when there were fish to catch and flowers to pick. It comes back to me when I am alone and the sun is at a familiar angle. I smell lilacs, a cold frost, something of the sort, and my day gets quieter. Pensive. The house took longer than they thought, had cost more than they could afford. The recession ground on for years and the business couldn’t shoulder the burden much longer. My dad’s arthritis was getting bad. There were medical bills. When the bank came for the keys, he didn’t say anything. The resignation of a man checking out at the punch clock for the last time.

I once found a wallet in the basement of the barn. It was covered in dirt and had gotten wet more than once. In it were business cards, a grocery list, rabies-shot records for a dog, a license issued before my grandparents were born. A man owned this and he carried it with him every day. He brought it with him to work and when he went home to his dog. The man is dead and the dog is dead, and one day I will be too. Someday the only evidence of my life will be a wallet some kid keeps in a box under her bed. I put it in my pocket and walked back to the house. The great churning of time and of place.

One day you wake up and a place has changed so much that it isn’t yours anymore. The local kids had already moved away. I sold my walkie-talkies in a yard sale. I packed everything I owned in a borrowed truck and drove away on the nicest day of the summer. I don’t think about it too much anymore except for sometimes I remember it when I’m riding my bike.