

## ESSAY

### 16-18 “The Woods” by Hannah Woldum

I once wrote a poem about his piece of land I called “The Woods.” These woods were only the dense growth of large bushes and gnarled skinny trees and Bermuda grass gone wild, but to a suburban kid like me they were still part of the country, part of a land that had not yet been built up by car dealership warehouses, gas stations, fast food restaurants, strip malls, and neighborhoods full of poorly built mansions. Whenever I felt in an adventurous mood, these woods were the place to go, a place I would explore.

The road leading from my cul-de-sac wound quickly to the east and then to the south before merging with the back road of the Ford dealership. Where these roads merged, my fields and woods began.

This stretch of weedy fields and tangled forests and cracked patches of hard dirt sloped down from a small ditch of stagnant water – referred to as a creek by many members of the neighborhood whose houses backed up to it – not having any particular name. During the dry season the water stunk of growing bacteria and rotten food. After a good rain its muddy waters began to flow, but only after the encouragement of a five-hour storm. It didn’t even flow like it ought to in spring, for no visible amount of snow ever fell that could melt nicely in March or April.

Despite its filthiness – or perhaps because of it – several living creatures called it home. My younger brother John, a kid who always loved to hang out in the woods and build forts there, told me he saw several water moccasins – very poisonous snakes – while building his tree fort with his friends. This news intrigued me, and several times, on nights when endless homework awaited me on the kitchen table, I escaped to the woods in search of John’s fort and the famed water moccasins. Once I accidentally uncovered some of the boys’ “traps,” which were big holes covered in sticks and grass that were meant to keep animals and humans away from their precious fort.

I finally discovered the fort itself in an ancient tree on the bank of the creek, which meandered through the woods before twisting out boldly into the meadow. The fort sat unevenly upon the tree branches, telling all of nature that children had built it. I climbed up the unsteady rungs and beheld a site that I suddenly realized was beautiful.

The meadow, a wide, level field of random weeds and grasses, lay between two patches of the woods. The creek intersected it almost beneath me and in the distance I could see the Creek Turnpike full of SUVs driving to work or play. In this period of early summer the meadow had bloomed as much as it ever would; black-eyed susans, purple thistles, thorns, and tall green stalks of many different grasses covered the field almost four feet high. Mosquitoes and grasshoppers and hundreds of dragonflies called these plants home for six months, starting in April or May. I listened to the singing around me and for once I forgot the business of my life.

During this fleeting time of early summer, the leaves of the trees in the woods held that elfish, eerie, bright, light-green color that, as Robert Frost noticed, is a very difficult hue to hold. Maybe they’d stay in glory for a week, maybe only a few days. During this time I thought The Woods was one of the most beautiful places on earth.

Fall brought deep blue skies and muted ambers to the woods and meadow. But there was never a peak of color. Rather, while one tree burned its brightest red, the next might be completely green and clothed in leaves, and the next might be completely bare.

The old fort had rotted away in the humidity of summer, and John and his friends made several attempts at building new forts. The fall was the best time to work because the weather finally cooled down to below ninety degrees, and the falling leaves meant visibility in the woods was better than average. But with every attempt, the forts remained magnificent for only a moment before succumbing to the weather; each season seemed determined not to let anyone conquer the place.

Winter cast a yellow, stiff cloth over the land. The tall grasses withered away, the leaves turned brown, falling to the ground or still desperately trying to hold on to their branches, and the place went to sleep. The Woods lost any beauty it had acquired in summer and now showed itself for what it really was, as if it had taken off its lovely clothes and wore only its old withered skin.

Sometimes a rare snowfall surprised the neighborhood, and we kids would get a snow day. Then adventure filled our hearts once again, and we'd trek off on another journey of exploration into the woods. The cold and the snow brought new appeal to the place and every familiar landmark once again seemed new and mysterious.

Throughout the years specific memories of the place have become dimmed, but one still remains. I remember that on my sixteenth birthday, when everything went wrong. I ran to the woods as a place where I could be alone. I had felt stressed out and controlled all day at school, and then impulsively I had gone to the woods that afternoon, to stand by the white picket fence of someone's yard and stare out into nature. Something about it consoled me and strengthened me, and today that comfort gained in the woods is all I really remember about the legendary event of turning sixteen.

Now death is on the horizon; the woods are finally being conquered. Some new subdivision is being built right there in the meadow, and the trees are being cut down, and John's old forts are completely demolished. Cement now covers the hard muddy ground and the little creek was bulldozed over and filled with dirt.

I remember the day I first noticed that something was about to change. While I was walking in the woods with my sister Rachel, I came upon a new sign that read "Land for Sale: Residential." We just looked at each other, afraid of the meaning of this sign. My first reaction was to yank it out of the ground and throw it into somebody's trashcan. That's precisely what I did. Rachel and I pushed on the huge sign with all our might and finally the metal posts bent over far enough and snapped. We ran away laughing, hoping that because the sign had now disappeared, the woods would remain ours.

Sadly, the very next week a new sign appeared. Little by little the signs were replaced with bigger, fancier notices that read "Coming Soon: Ashton Hollow Estates, enormous lot sizes." Apparently some ritzy building company had bought the land and hoped to construct a high-end neighborhood in the midst of our precious woods. Rach and I wanted to destroy this sign, too, in protest, but sadly the new sign was at least thirty feet tall and much too large for two girls to push over.

The saddest moment came when the first bulldozers appeared in a group at the entrance to the woods, as if they were mongrels waiting to attack and kill. After a week, the lovely trees on the edge of the woods were destroyed, chopped up and thrown away with little care. After two weeks, the bulldozers decimated the little creek we had picnicked beside and jumped over, leaving only a tiny indent in the earth where it had been. A month's time brought more trucks and machinery, and now no trees stood on the barren land. Rain came and muddied the ground, making miles of brown goopy gooey

muck. Then the ultimate desecration occurred, the pouring of cement and the formation of roads.

As ugly man-made substances were erected and laid down, an eeriness settled about the place. Trash from the workers littered the ditches and pieces of metal and tools lay scattered across the unfinished roadways. Everything was bare and gray and cold. It seemed like the ghost of the past lingered about in the shadows, haunting the place where beauty and adventure used to dwell.

I don't go there, now. It's too painful. I think I lost some of my identity as a child in the annihilation of the woods. But nothing is here to stay forever, not the woods, not my childhood. I've only begun to realize that life is a cycle of things dying and things being born, both the bad and the good. The foundation of the new neighborhood is built upon the ghost of the murdered woods, and its identity will forever be bound to the crime. But there's hope, too; perhaps my memories of The Woods and my childhood – and the realization that change is inevitable – will begin to shape my new identity.