

## *Place and Remembrance*

**T**he great American naturalist Edwin Way Teale believed that up until recently most people had some lonely spot where they could get away from it all, a little woodlot or streambank that engrained itself in the child's mind so that even in adulthood the place would endure in memory as an almost mystic domain, an enchanted spot somewhere at a remove from current existence.

I had a spot of that sort. Whose place it was, I never knew. The old estate building had burned, or was torn down or otherwise destroyed, and all that remained was the sad foundation and an apron of broken tiles that once served as a terrace, now overgrown with grass and struggling maple seedlings.

Beyond the terrace was a boxwood hedge gone wild and a shallow garden pool of broken moss-covered stone. The whole ruined garden was surrounded by a rich mid-Atlantic forest—great columns of sweet gum, beech, and tulip. And scattered within the gloom of the overarching trees were standing pergolas, broken pillars, the ruins of a garden house, and, most intriguing of all, an ancient swimming pool with a large puddle of standing water at the deep end, greenish with algae, occupied by golden-eyed frogs that dipped beneath the shadowy waters long before you could even think about catching them.

The ruins were perched on red cliffs high above the gray and dangerous river. I later learned the site was one of many such estates that had lined the cliffs in the bright years before the Crash. Here once dwelt the robber barons of Wall Street, and here now lay the evidence of their greed, a morass of cracked marble that served as a forbidden playground for wild bands of children.

The ruined garden still reappears in my dreams.

My friend Kata, who is a naturalist and basket maker, knows another such place. She grew up in Tiburon, across the bay from San Francisco, in the time when the now-fashionable community was a mere railroad town. Above her house, the high grassy hills of the north coast swept up to the sky, and here in her childhood she and her girl gang made grass huts in the hollows and

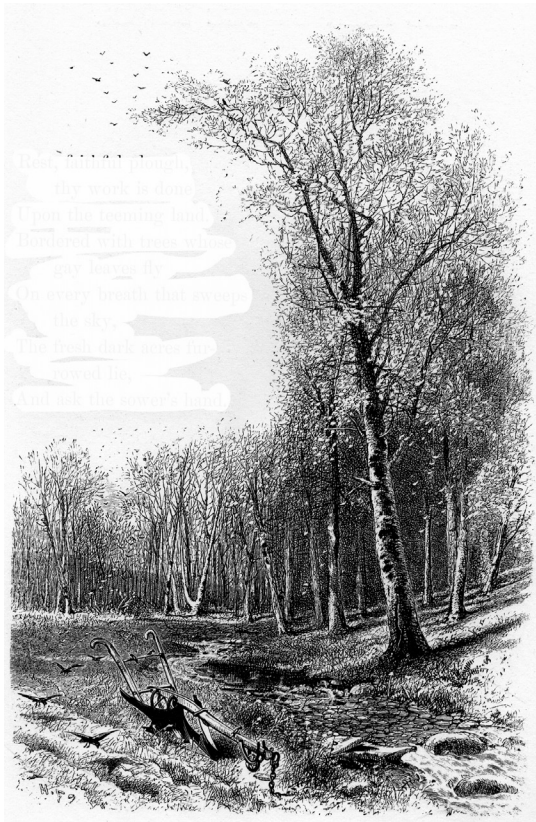
gathered wildflowers: sticky monkey, lupine, poppies, and blue-eyed grass. One day there, alone on the peak of a hill under the vast sky, she saw an immense bird sweeping over the ridge and almost knocking her from her feet. It was not until Kata grew up that she realized it was probably a California condor. She still talks about the event.

Teale writes that he himself held a recollection of such a place.

He had been taken by his grandfather one snowy late autumn day to gather firewood. After a long horse-drawn sleigh ride through the empty landscape of fields and cut forest, the two of them came to an enchanted wood of oak, beech, hickory, ash, and sycamore. Here, while his grandfather loaded the cut wood, Teale, who was all of six years old at the time, wandered off down the vast hallways of the forest trees. An unidentifiable vaguely eerie atmosphere enveloped the dark forest; shrieks and mournful wailings sounded out in the empty landscape as the wind blew through the high branches. He was terrified, but enthralled, and carried on down the forested aisles, periodically returning to reassure himself that his grandfather was still there. He only visited the spot once, but the experience haunted him for years and in his adulthood he went back. He never could find it again.

The list of such experiences that have affected people who work in the field of natural history, or in fact anyone who still has an appreciation for wildness, must be as endless as it is varied—forested glens, solitary streambanks, small trash-littered pockets of urban lots, even, as in one case I know, the wild scrapings of an ailanthus branch on the window of a city apartment building on winter nights. The tragedy is that these semimystical childhood epiphanies are threatened in





our time and in danger of extinction. For a variety of reasons, children no longer wander alone or even in small bands out in the half-wild places that are often within walking distance of even the most urbanized environments. Part of the problem of course is technology, the lure of the computer, and video games, not to mention fear on the part of parents, instilled by the instant dissemination in the national news media of heinous crimes and perversions.

Some of the fears may be rational, although wilderness encounters always did have an element of danger. But one has to wonder, without the experience of such unstructured, unsupervised play, from what source will we draw the naturalists of the next generation.

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