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## Longwall

On a cool summer day a couple of years before we divorced, my husband and I drove on country roads through southeastern Ohio. We'd left the kids with their grandparents for the day and were going to visit Dysart Woods, an old-growth forest preserve in Belmont County. Seeing the sign for the woods, we turned off on a small gravel road, drove another half of a mile, and parked in a grassy parking lot.

Met by a low roar of cicadas, we swathed ourselves in insect repellent and sunblock and started on the trail into the thick woods, with their ferny undergrowth and cathedral canopy.

Ohio doesn't have much wilderness left. Even in southeastern Ohio, which still has significant stretches of woods, some privately-owned and some in state parks, most of these forests have new, secondary or tertiary growth. Not the thick, dark, woods with giant oak, maple, poplar and beech trees that once blanketed the state.

A few patches of older wilderness are tucked between and around alfalfa farms, in hidden ravines, behind dairy barns. Accidental, overlooked wildernesses. Dysart Woods, though, is 50 acres of original wilderness, with 300- to 400-year old oak trees that reach up to four feet in diameter and climb 140 feet into the air. Owned by Ohio University, the woods have two miles of trails that pass by about 100 giant trees, curving in and out of the forest, over dead logs five feet high, up a ridge and back down. Massive, old, dead trees lie on the forest floor, rotting into the soil, providing nutrients for the new, young trees sprouting up. It's a mature forest ecosystem, with many different generations of trees clambering for the bits of light filtering through the canopy and down to the forest floor.

These woods are what Ohio once looked like, back when, as lore has it, a squirrel could hop from one end of the state to another without touching

the ground. These are very near the woods that, just to the north, Ebenezer Zane, the region's mythical road-builder and frontier-opener, hacked his way through as he made his way into the Northwest Territory at the end of the eighteenth century.

Somehow, though, through twists of fate and roads and land ownership, these particular 50 acres had been spared the logging, farming, town-building and surface mining that befell most of the rest of the state's landscape. They were, on that visit, much the same as they had been for hundreds of years. For Dysart Woods, it might have just as well have been 1407.

The fact is, though, the woods that day were on the edge of a frontier, and not the one lying just beyond each of Ebenezer Zane's ax-swings. The frontier here was contemporary and environmental, the ax the high-tech longwall and room-and-pillar coal mining equipment clawing beneath nearby farmland, and the Ebenezer Zane the Ohio Valley Coal Company, which owned the mineral rights to the Pittsburgh No. 8 coal seam, 500 feet below the surface of Dysart Woods.

The fight between the coal company and the Buckeye Forest Council and other defenders of the woods had gone in and out of the courts for twenty years. A decision handed down a few months before our visit by the Ohio Reclamation Commission, however, would allow the coal company to room-and-pillar mine under the woods, and longwall mine right up to their edge.

Room-and-pillar mining involves carving out the five- to six-foot thick coal seam in blocks, leaving pillars of coal to hold up the roof of the mine. Longwall mining is the removal, wholesale, of a seam of coal, for hundreds of yards.

No one knew exactly what would happen to the forest after the mining, but some scientists speculated that the trees' root systems could be disrupted, the ground water diverted, the bedrock eroded. The mining hadn't yet started on the day we were there, but once it commenced, the old trees

could eventually - perhaps decades or centuries down the line - begin to die off.

The trees that day stretched up the sky so far that I had to squint at the bright blue light filtering through the distant leaves to make out if a tree was a red oak, a white oak, or a tulip poplar. The impending fate of these woods floated in and out of my consciousness as we walked on the trail. I wished it were 1407 instead of 2007, that some twist of history had foiled Zane's road, that somehow we'd all missed this particular frontier. I had wanted to visit these woods to capture a sense of being in pre-frontier Ohio, but I could think only of the contemporary frontier we straddled.

Impulsively, I wrapped my arms partly around the rough bark of one of the giant oak trees, and I asked my husband to take a picture.

"Now I'm a tree hugger," I said.

A ways down on the red trail, before it crossed the road and headed up the ridge to meet the blue trail, we stopped to rest. I took a drink from my water bottle, gave one to our dog, and then lay back on the grass and looked up at the bright blue sky dotted with white clouds drifting past. My husband sat nearby. Across the path, a swathe of blackberries ripened in the sun.

For a moment, as the wind shifted, I could hear beyond the cicadan din the faint hum of Ohio Valley Coal Company's machines, just over the hill, with their sharp metal claws and conveyer belts already drawing deep black coal from beneath farms, coal destined for nearby power plants. Soon enough, that coal would burn into white hot electricity, eventually finding its way to the fragile filaments of bulbs in our own home.

"Someday, people will tell their children that there used to be forests in Ohio," I mused out loud, twirling a piece of grass in between my fingers, trying to connect with a man who had been growing increasingly distant.

He nodded. "Yeah," he said, noncommittally.

For a while, we didn't say anything. Lazily, I looked up through the trees, watching faint, high, wispy clouds high in the atmosphere.

“And when the sky is orange with pollution, they might say ‘One day, the sky used to be blue,’” I said.

“Hmm,” he said. “Maybe.”

Slowly, almost unconsciously, I trained my camera lens to the sky between the trees. Finding a clear patch, I snapped a picture, thinking it would be a nice photo to have. A photo of sky. A record of blue. Something to pass down to my great grandchildren, and their children. Something as soft and warm, as comforting and innocent, as a baby blanket.

Vivian Wagner

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