



THE MERCURY

THE STUDENT ART & LITERARY MAGAZINE OF GETTYSBURG COLLEGE

Year 2010

Article 3

1-1-2010

Excerpts from "Out of the Woods"

Eric J. Kozlik

Gettysburg College, kozler01@cnav.gettysburg.edu

Class of 2011

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury>

 Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Kozlik, Eric J. (2015) "Excerpts from "Out of the Woods"," *The Mercury*: Year 2010, Article 3.

Available at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury/vol2010/iss1/3>

This open access nonfiction is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

Excerpts from "Out of the Woods"

Keywords

creative writing, non-fiction

Author Bio

Eric Kozlik is a large brute of a man with a thirty-two inch waist and a penchant for puns. He was reared in a caboose and schooled by fish. When he isn't off wrestling bears for charity or lobbying for Manifest Destiny, he can be found in the Science Center, since that is where he will be locked up his entire senior year. He is beginning to think that an English major might have been the way to go after all.

Eric Kozlik

Excerpts from "Out of the Woods"

Listening

Every autumn, the woods grow quiet. There is a silent exodus—from the gradual draining of chlorophyll in every leaf, to the mass absence of songbirds and piping amphibians. The vibration of every footfall on the leaf-littered turf echoes through the thinning vegetation more openly than in the warm, soft seasons, which only serves to reinforce the isolation of any single trekker. It is the anaerobic hush at the end of a long, deep exhalation. The landscape becomes predictably faded and brittle, and the crest of every ridge feels vaguely like the wind-swept spine of the world. From those high places, it is possible see into the hollows and thickets that were previously concealed, where small things once grew and were born, learning to walk and blossom by the edges of recently-dry stream beds and vernal pools. Abandoned burrows and withered stems inform us, to a certain extent, of their fates.

When I was about ten years old, my father began taking me hunting with him every autumn. Saturdays, we would wake up an hour before the sun, eat some toast, don our camouflage, and disappear into the woods for the morning. The dogs would look at us as we slipped out the cellar door, wondering why we insisted on waking so early when the weather turned chilly. In those days, we stalked the edges of woodland ponds, seeking the exhilarating flush of the mallard, or posted silently in bare stands of oak, awaiting the mythical appearance of the whitetail buck. Besides the occasional twittering of a few remaining birds, the rattling of dry leaves in the wind, and the distant shush of cars, the woods were always quiet.

Whenever I became bored or antsy, frustrated by the cold or lack of game, my father would simply tell me to "listen more closely"—to listen beyond. He said that if I listened beyond the woods, beyond the houses and the road, and beyond the hills, I would hear geese feeding in an empty corn field. He told me that if I listened past the sound of a chipmunk skittering across an old stone wall, around the barking of a dog in the distance, and over the next few ridges, I would hear a pair of bucks locking antlers. I always did this without question, and, as if in response or favor to the man who walked among the trees long before I was born, the forest stretched me, bending my hearing like a young sapling.

Whether or not the geese fed or the bucks grunted, the woods always saw fit, in their season of failure, to grant me some benevolent illusion. Thus, the duo of nature and man filled the silence with portions of each other—it was as much an act of desperation as compassion, a dance to fill the emptiness of an approaching winter.

Out of the Woods

Coming out of the woods isn't like leaving for work in the morning. You can't just grab a cup of coffee and be on your way, because once you live in the woods, make your peace with them, and derive pleasure from the mere distance of city life, the body forms knots like a good pine board—pockets of wholesome imperfection and identity that cannot be planed or sanded out by even the finest of craftsmen. Indeed, once a bond is formed between the self and the landscape, it is very much like an uprooting, like being birthed from a thicket of nagging, pulling vines. In order to enter the world of men, one must first be dislodged from the fringes of Eden that have once again seen fit to harbor a human being. And when you leave, it is completely uncomfortable for a good long time—finding burrs attached to your socks and nettles lodged snugly in your shoelaces, splinters under your fingernails and twigs in your hair. Every pebble in your boot, rubbing against the knots of the soul, is a reminder that you have betrayed something, or have been betrayed.

But what seems, all at once, to be a complete disaster must eventually end in peace. For what is betrayal if not a profession of love? It is love to the point of injury, passion to the extent of rupture, and loyalty to the degree of schism. Betrayal implies attachment, dependence, trust; and its ugly bruise covers the emotional dermis of betrayed and betrayer alike. Even as my quiet woods had left me desperately unrehearsed for the sleepless and insistent turning of the world beyond, the need for progress and unhampered communication, I was not blameless. My gradual separation was self-imposed—I plucked my roots from the rich earth one by one and left holes for the forest to fill in my wake. The long process of removing the thorns from my sleeves and the leaves from my coat pockets was acknowledgement of this, acceptance of human misgivings. Yet, in the end, the nagging subsided, bird calls faded into the background, leaves became items to be raked, and a complacent glow settled around the edge of things.

The Voice from the Whirlwind

It was after my first few months of college that I encountered the retrospective rapture of my childhood. In light of the petty and divisive crises that plagued my fellow classmates (broken heels, dented bumpers, and homework), the relative woes of my youth slowly turned

their faces to reveal shades of grace. Back home, I was not as susceptible to the guileful traps of peer pressure, the passive snares of apathy and indolence, or the demure evil of countless makeup-caked faces. I was an island of youth and competence in the calm seas of my own choosing. At the small, liberal arts college 400 miles away from my sanctuary, however, I became merely another young man from a fractured family—an everyman and a no-man, beleaguered by the cycloptic gaze of my own inward eye.

Weekends, college life revolves around drunkenness and a fervent desire to engage in acts of sexual deviance. I discovered rather quickly that, being a quiet country boy, I was not cut out for such pursuits. And so, when Friday nights rolled around and my dormitory spilled its inebriated and over-sexed contents onto the campus social scene, I often found myself alone in my room, counting and re-counting the speckled ceiling tiles until I fell asleep. In that dark room, I would conjure whirlwinds in search of a voice. I placed myself in various deserts—anger, depression, guilt—to confront God and ask Him why I had so foolishly banished myself from that place amidst the trees. With the memory of snow-covered hillsides and the smell of wood smoke impressed upon my mind in the same way that the taste of fruit must surely have remained forever sweet on the lips of Adam and Eve, I pleaded and supplicated. Always, there was no answer.

Radio Silence

The bush pilot is a unique strain of human being. He loads up his tiny plane with supplies—medicines, mail, and food—and takes to some of the largest skies in the world to deliver those life-saving wares to people who dwell in the heart of the wilderness. His plane holds only the cargo, its lone passenger, and a radio, which is the pilot's sole means of communication with the world beyond his aluminum craft. He relies on this radio without knowing what makes it work or who fashioned it, indeed without needing to know, for his duty is simply to traverse and re-traverse the aerial roads that only he can see, bearing life in his fuselage like Apollo ushering the golden sun. But if something in that small, electronic box or the invisible waves that seek its receiver becomes disrupted, he is assaulted by the soft, menacing static of radio silence. It is a defiance of habit and expectation—to send out a word, a note, a whisper, and not have that sound echoed by whomever he imagines is waiting patiently for the sound of his voice. Blame becomes useless, a knot forms in the pit of his stomach, and the silence of the wilderness assails him as he glides above its placid surface, suddenly detached from the shimmering, mechanical thread.

Radio silence is something that primitive man had no need to fear—electricity could only be seen as lightening, and formal language

was still a work in progress. He was mainly concerned with catching small, furry creatures, bashing them over the head, and eating them. When we consider this in light of the theory of evolution, however, it becomes quite clear that he was really eating manifestations of his former self—small-brained, four-legged, snouted echoes from an evolutionarily estranged epoch. He chased, clubbed, consumed, belched, and went to sleep. Primitive man was fully aware that he would receive no answer if he grunted questions into the smooth, pink recesses of a conch shell, or hollered his ape-like indignation into a hollow log. He led a relatively well-adjusted life, having no reason to long for nature because he slept in it, and no need to reminisce about his former selves, for they were in his belly.

Modern man is not so fortunate. We are, by nature, removed from nature, often forced to substitute the star-studded depths of the universe with the deep silence of inner space. Our thirst for communication further implicates us in this. For when the lines go dead, the cable man has the day off, and the streets lay deserted, we are left only with the sneaking suspicion that we've evolved too quickly, departing too indefinitely from simpler things. On those nights, we resurrect the joyful hieroglyphs that denote the happiest hours of our lives, rolling out the brain's faded papyrus and mouthing the sounds we wish to hear spoken from the past. Just as the moving shadows of leaves on the grass signify the sound of wind passing through bough, we presume that intention will mirror reality. Yet always the silence persists. And so we must desperately search the mind, the spirit, the pit of the stomach for the versions of ourselves that we've long since consumed, suffering in the quiet of approaching winter and perceiving no response from the denizens of our past lives. The pleasant hollows and breezy groves that once embraced us in our youth, we find, have been swallowed up as well, engulfed by the same muteness. What a shame it is, in the words of Loren Eiseley, "that the wooded shores that now confine us lie solely," and deep, "within ourselves."

Before Dawn

There is a time of night when dawn is more of a suggestion than a sure thing, when the visible limits of the horizon soften almost imperceptibly as the globe grinds painstakingly on its axis. Somewhere, in the corner of a dark bedroom, a young man stumbles painfully awake. He emerges breathless from dreams that are frozen in time—dreams of his youth and his woods. They overtake the pleasant darkness of sleep, expanding within the empty places from which all his former selves have vanished. The windows are framed with the frost of a winter morning that a young boy in the woods so many years ago never saw coming. He

rises groggily, blinking in the half gloom, and pulls down the shades one by one. A deep silence shadows him all the while, creeping along the cold, bare floor, crouching behind a pile of laundry, and slipping back under the covers with him when he returns to bed. It is a silence much like flying over a wilderness. For him, it is a wilderness of the mind. On such occasions, he knows, the only thing to do is to listen beyond the wind that sifts through the empty streets, between the bouts of quiet within the silence, and over the pale sliver of a moon—all the way to a secluded corner of time and space where he can be lulled back to sleep by the steady groaning of something old and wooden in the soul.