



## THE WANDERING MAN



The thin, tall man was walking the roadside when he saw the stone wall by the forest's edge. Old autumn leaves blanketed the ground before it though no trees and shrubs stood nearby that may have dropped them. The massed stone wall prevented any more than a partial view of the forest beyond. The man walked the short incline from the road, brought his feet over the wall's top, and climbed onto the other side.

There the man discovered a square stretch of dirt that bore only two or three fallen leaves. The dirt showed dark and compact beneath his shoes. Why was it here? He thought. In a shrub close by, the man spotted an old spade, chipped with black and red rust. He picked this up and dug in the barren patch, casting earth and rocks beside him. He created a hole waist deep. After a last heave, he decided he would not find what was buried in the dirt if anything was. He felt tired from his work and leaned resting on his shovel. As he looked up, he saw a bird fly across the sky and go west. It flew past white clouds into an open, blue expanse. How far might the bird go in that sky? He thought and considered what he might do if he quit the hole and went elsewhere. The man emerged from the earth and walked west through the forest, surveying the treetops. He passed taller and larger trees, the maples sporting high, dark branches, the pines, and wide heads. The man came to a ridge from where a great landscape spread before him. To the north loomed a set of six mountains, tall and heavy, their outline jagged. Granite showed in crooked runs through the forests that covered their sides. I will go see those mountains up close though they are very far away, he told himself. I will know them like this forest here. The tall man descended the ridge.

He took a long, curving way down hills green with poplars and spruce. Pools of water broke the patched, tall grass he met. The hills rose and blocked the mountains from him. He arrived at a denser forest and running brooks. He crossed into a grove of hemlock bunched dark and close. Past the trees, he came to a stream that sparkled with light. How many different places will I find in these hills? He thought as he cut downward. Will I really know them as I go?

The thin man had passed the forest and crossed another bend of a stream when he reached a thicket of dead mountain laurels and vines. A large grey blotch moved beyond him and made the dead laurel branches rustle. What might be there? The man wondered. The man neared and glimpsed a deer through a gap in the trees. The deer was pushing through the laurels toward the forest ahead. The man went slowly and quietly in the open beside it. He drew toward the thicket and the deer advanced, putting several paces between them. Then the man made to enter the thicket. The deer bound quickly from the laurels into the forest and the man sped after the animal. He passed the corner where the deer had gone and found himself among maples at the forest's edge. He no longer caught the sign of the deer.

A lake past the tress sent a light through the dense grove around him. The man went past the maples to the lakeside. Its surface rippled, a steel blue mixed with green. The lake was large and the surface did not show its depths. There must be as much below that is beautiful and that I do not see as there is here before me, the man thought. Let me explore it. The man stripped his clothes by the waterside, stepped from the shore, and dove into the lake. He swam through the steely water for the indigo bottom. Beneath him, the water spread far and wide. The thick, jagged arms of oaks fallen long ago loomed upward toward him; black, snaked vines with soft leaves floated in and out of the dim light. When the man could hold his breath no more, he turned toward the surface; above him floated a hazy ball of sunlight toward which he swam. He broke the surface, swam to the shore, and pulled himself from the water.

The man let the sun dry him and dressed. He next walked down the lake to where something white moved in the meadow grass. The white blinked in and out among the tall blades, never staying in one place. At the shore's end, he entered the grass that rose navel high. The grass was a mesh of dried blades, purple coneflowers, and bluebells. He walked and watched the grass press down and lie flat below his feet. In the densest part of the grass, he encountered white butterflies, moving around three or four pogonias. They flew and did not rest long on the flowers. The white I saw, the man realized.

The man continued into the meadow. He heard water ripple between the lakeside and a far grove of maples. He went toward the source of the sound. He passed part of the tall grass and reached a stream. Its grey water burbled, flowing from the north. He noted the stream's stages through the meadow, the water slipping from one bend to the next. There is some higher land from where this water flows, he considered. He walked the stream toward a woods. The land rose and tall pines closed around him. He surveyed the stream up to where the forest cast a deep shade. I might see into that shadow once I reach the stream bend, he thought. The man walked the bank toward broken rocks. Past these, the light in the forest grew to show him the contours of birch limbs hanging over



the water.

Suddenly, the man heard a wood thrush sing, clear and strong. Where was it? He wondered. He listened. The man left the stream and walked into the woods. He went by pines and spruces and over land that rose in rocky hulks toward the north and east. He heard the thrush always before him, unseen in the trees.

The man reached a level place where a road cut through the forest. The dirt road went north-south; one of many he knew crossed the woods. I could follow the thrush, he thought, but this road will lead me toward the mountains. The mountains that are my goal. The man crossed the pines and started north on the right side of the road. The road stretched hard and dark through the trees. A car passed, going north. It was a black sedan and through its rear window, the man saw the back of the driver's head. The car's taillights went red as the vehicle slowed and took the bend. After the car had gone, the man noticed several rhododendrons in a clearing across the road. A brown-red hummingbird whirred in their blooms. The bird ducked its head into the pit of two or three after their nectar. Their scent has caught him, he thought.

The man faced the road again and walked. A second car neared, passed and disappeared in the distance. Across the road, he discovered several mountain laurels that grew beneath taller maples. The maples were dark because the sun was declining; however, the laurels below them still had the light on many of their long, green leaves. Between the laurels' leaves and trunks loomed dark shadows. The light appeared again on the low shrubs over the ground. The man looked, enjoying the light next to the dark before he continued to walk. A car came south on the opposite side of the road. Through the front window, the driver's face stood forth grey, his clothes black. The car sped away. The man discovered mountain laurels by oaks across the road from him. The light on the laurel leaves and the low shrubs stood clear and sharp in the shade. How does that light reach here? He asked himself. He faced up and observed the light streaming from a break in the oaks to the north and west. He crossed the road into the forest and headed toward the gap amid the trees.

The man walked more quickly and surveyed the darkening forest. He gazed past the treetops toward the sky and at the light on the leaves of the darkest trees. At gaps in the woods, he studied the bulky mountains in the north, blazing red and orange, toward which he walked. He crossed roads and clipped through woods behind homes. He followed the falling light past fern thickets deep into the forest.

The sun had set when the man reached a grove of maples past the road. It had become very dark and he no longer could see well to walk. He stood amid the maples and studied the edges of their leaves outlined against the night sky until he no longer could. Somewhere nearby, crickets chirped. Ferns rustled as animals passed. The man, tired from his hike, sat on the earth and leaned his



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back against an oak. I will go on in the morning, he promised himself. I must know the mountains far ahead. I came for them and I will go to them. He sat listening to the sounds that reached him from the night. Sleep was coming on him and he could not stay upright, so lay down on the ground. He shifted his back on the dead leaves, catching the odor they exhaled before he lay quiet.



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