

from Green-Wood

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Author's note: Green-Wood is named for a 478-acre Victorian cemetery across the street from me in Brooklyn, NY. It opened in 1838 as only the second "rural" cemetery in America, after Mt. Auburn in Boston. The piece is a poetic meditation on my experiences in the cemetery, and on the history surrounding it.

I walk through fall and winter. I walk through spring. I walk against the backdrop of war, the toppling of the Hussein statue, declaration of end of hostilities. Continued bombings. NAMES OF DEAD in paper. I walk by bulldozers, mowers, pesticide sprayers with yellow warning placards: KEEP OUT FOR 24 HOURS.

Tree I trace
from the root spelled "rot"
to "worm" a proto-word
subtracting wildness

let earth conceal them from our sight

A few fine old Brooklyn families—the Lefferts, Schermerhorns, and Bergens—traced their title to land on the Gowanus Hills back to their Dutch ancestors. The depression of 1837 spurred them to sell out to the cemetery.

Smaller landowners refused to relinquish their holdings, a *vexation* that kept the cemetery at first from deeding for burial *a single rood*. An echo of "wild wood" reduced to "twig" or "rod," a measuring stick, a measure of land, then the cross, an instrument of execution.

Weeping Beech

London plane tree

Cedar of Lebanon

Austrian pine

American holly, female

Yoshino cherry

Mulberry from China

each tagged with a metal I.D. number

The weeping beech curves over the road, forming a room of green light. I stand underneath and breathe in it, really three trees clustered together. The *small-teethed* leaves seem edged with fire, shadowing leaves below. I hear a distant bus horn from the Jackie Gleason depot, and close by the sound of sparrows pecking insects from the bark.

The cemetery census from 1987, the most recent, lists thirty-six European and American beeches and their cultivars: the cut-leaf, weeping, and purple. I have counted in one morning more than fifty. Beech trees belong to the genus *Fagus*, named for the Celtic tree god. They also are called “elephant” because of their smooth skin like a hide. This makes people want to cut them. Nearly all have graffiti, the oldest marks grown fat with the widening tree:

JULIA 1970

PETEY G.

BUBBA

7TH STREET CHUCK

ISH [unreadable] 1945

9/14/87 JESUS WAY

1960 RMC

[inside a little house] A.C.

TINY JOEY

D.C. [beneath a crown]

LARRY -N- JEANINE

F.G. 49ER 2001

CESAR

PJ '68

WOLFIE + ANGEL

Anglo-Saxon tribes carved runes in tablets cut from beech bark.

“Book” and “beech” split from the same root. First fence a voice. *Lie*

down ferocious feeling

When the colonists stepped onto the shores of North America, they beheld a sight they could never have imagined in the long-cultivated lands of their ancestors: A vast forest stretched for as far as one could walk in every direction. Trees covered half the continent, spreading 1,000 miles from the Mississippi River in the west to the Atlantic in the east, and from Maine south to the Gulf of Mexico.

Fence, stump of defense. “A thing protected or forbidden.”

The Puritans came with the fear of the dark forest curled inside their minds. Their Anglo-Saxon ancestors planted the seed, but its roots drew life from the nightmares of the ancient tribes of Israel. Outside the walled garden of Eden lay chaos, the haunt of *Sathan* with his *wylye baites*.

Survival demanded war. *Every field was won by axe and fire*. Hauling off logs and prying up the stumps that gripped the earth proved a waste of precious planting time, so the settlers just sowed around them, burning up the trees for fuel as they tamed the soil.

In fact, the forest was not the *howling wilderness* the settlers perceived. The ruin inside the eye. Dispersed throughout were hundreds of indigenous societies. They built villages, cleared the land for crops and burned the forest to flush out game. European settlements survived on Indian handouts, and by planting on land already cleared by natives. After the Jamestown disaster, John Smith commandeered three hundred acres of cleared Indian land at Richmond.

human seeds sprouting stones

Catalpa

Kentucky coffee tree

Inkberry

Spreading English yew

Judas-tree

Maidenhair

Canada hemlock

Rune means “secret, a darkness.” The Norse god Odin uncovered the knowledge of runes by piercing himself with his own sword for nine nights to the *windy world tree*.

The Puritans took comfort from the sight of American beeches, so like the common trees of home.

Plains tribes like the Sioux gained proximity to god by tying themselves to a sacred tree with strips of leather pierced through the skin of their chests. They pulled away until the flesh ripped.

*Given to Odin
myself to myself
I took up the runes
screaming I took them*

In England the Puritans destroyed as a heretical icon the Glastonbury hawthorn, which bloomed in winter. Believers claimed it sprouted from the staff of Joseph of Arimethea, *who craved the body of Jesus*.

*“Home” in its full range and feeling belongs distinctively to English. Lie
down. Ferocious.*

The leaves of the purple beech look dark, almost black, from a distance, but underneath it casts a cool green shadow. I circle the trunk of one and find a gash that splits the tree almost in half. Inside a pale fungus has grown in layers like lace. The trunk looks black and dead as if charred by a fire. The fungus, strangely beautiful, feels moist and airy in my fingers.

hot and total ruin I sign my name here

The land on which Pierrepoint envisioned Green-Wood consisted of scattered farms and pastures on a ridge of rubble left 10,000 years ago by melting glaciers. The soil proved too rocky to farm with much success, and dense stands of trees covered the slopes. The cemetery's champions argued the ground was *use-*

less. A form of enduring,
the ruin or blank
inside the eye

I WILL BE SATISFIED

The area's *fine old native growth* suggested the name Green-Wood to its founders. But they had in mind a *sylvan still life*, not the *frowning forest*. As first cemetery president, soldier and engineer David Bates Douglass set about sculpting a garden landscape. A few decades earlier, Douglass had surveyed the wilds of the Michigan Territory with its governor Lewis Cass. They reported on the economic potential of its resources: geology, mineralogy, botany, and Indians.

Douglass brought order to Green-Wood. He had the trees thinned and the underbrush cleared to create *the aspect of the glade rather than the thicket*. A look coming into the light:

English hawthorn

Big-leaf magnolia

American elm

Italian cypress

Black locust

Scotch pine

ancient whisper for "spear" and "spire."

First snowfall.

I follow a path scraped down to stiff grass to the grave of JOSEPH O. BEHNKE. Beside it sags a half-melted snowman, thorned branch sticking out of its back. 1958-2004, OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM II, 1/258TH 95TH MILITARY POLICE BATTALION. LIVED FOR HIS FAMILY, DIED FOR GOD AND COUNTRY. Carved into the stone: a soldier kneeling with head down, rifle propped in one hand, helmet dangling from the other. The name MIRIAM P. is inscribed below, awaiting her dates.

word a lamp awaiting fire

THE FENCE. In the 1940s, grave owners at Green-Wood donated the wrought iron fences around their plots as scrap for bullets and ships. Today in many places only the gates remain, connecting nothing, *an opening older than soil, an eye.*

More than a dozen condolence notes appear on the Behnke tribute site at fallenheroesmemorial.com. Some come from people who seem not to have known him. Specialist Kovalik ends his note: *I still feel a bit guilty though, and you know why, take care Behnke.*

The first use of the word wood to mean “insane” appears in the year 725. *They bee bitten by the wood dog the devil, and be fallen wood themselves.*

It is too cold to stay here. I walk back toward the gate, head down against the wind. By the edge of Valley Water, I notice a stone inscribed MARTHA, with a seal for the WOMENS OVERSEAS SERVICE LEAGUE, half sunk in dirt. I scrape off leaves and snow with a stick to uncover the last name, EFFIE. A fat white caterpillar tucked inside the I recoils from the stick. It freezes almost instantly in the frigid air.

I shall appear blank, a gleaming creature

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LINK: www.pompompress.com