

## ERIC HOLZMAN

*Elm*, 2015  
Oil on Canvas, 43 x 35 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## JACQUELINE DOYLE

# Saving Trees

## A history of tree hugging

*When I am among the trees, / . . . they give  
off such hints of gladness. / I would almost  
say that they save me, and daily.*

—Mary Oliver,  
“When I Am Among the Trees,” *Thirst*

1

**M**y younger brother and I tuned out our parents’ continuous bickering every night at dinner and escaped the kitchen table as soon as we could. “May I be excused?” we asked, the minute we’d cleared our plates. Permission granted, we bolted out the back door, screen door banging, clattered down the rickety wooden stairs, ducked under the low-hanging branches of the trees by the back porch, and swung around the corner to race across the backyard to our tree house in the large apple tree.

2

I grew up in New Jersey, where Joyce Kilmer wrote his poem “Trees.” We had to memorize it in school. “I think that I shall never see / a poem as lovely as a tree.” That seemed pretty obvious to me in the third grade.

3

The tree house in our backyard was just a small platform nailed into the boughs of the apple tree and some scraps of wood nailed into the trunk that served as a makeshift ladder. My brother and I liked to sit there, cross-legged, hatching our plots for forays into the woods. In spring fragrant white blossoms surrounded us, like clumps of snow.

4

Kilmer wrote his poem in Mahwah, New Jersey, now designated an EPA Superfund site because of hazardous wastes dumped in the abandoned Ringwood Mines by the Ford Motor Company.

5

In the front yard, an oak tree surrounded by damp green moss towered over the road and rained acorns on the ground every fall. I could see it from my bedroom window, a stalwart sentinel. Lilac trees lined the yard, their blooms lavender, their trunks ancient and gnarled, propped up

by two-by-fours. I inhaled their heady scent in the spring, when I escaped the house to sit and daydream and read in a sheltered corner of the side yard, leaning against the slender trunk of a dogwood tree.

## 6

In the 1950s, no one was talking about pollution or global warming, at least not in New Jersey. We studied photosynthesis in school, but we didn't learn why we needed trees to absorb carbon dioxide and store carbon, or that deforestation contributed to greenhouse gas emissions. We didn't learn that carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere had risen over forty percent in the past century. We were studying the *Weekly Reader* and learning about the perils of Communism.

## 7

There was a large wooded lot behind the neighbor's house that my brother and I explored and played in. Three older boys from the street behind ours liked to climb the trees and throw rocks at us, so crossing the woods was a hazardous adventure. Farther down the block we caught crayfish and tadpoles in a tiny stream, dipping our hands in the cold water.

## 8

When I looked up the map of my old neighborhood on Zillow.com recently, I was surprised to see that the wooded lot is still undeveloped, though some of the surrounding houses are worth over a million dollars. Maybe the property belongs to one of the wealthy homeowners. As children we didn't think the woods belonged to anybody. It's hard to tell from the aerial view on Google, but it looks like the gigantic oak tree by the road out front and the hemlock tree outside my bedroom are gone. My brother and I used to shimmy down the hemlock tree at night to prowl the neighborhood, so changed in the moonlight. The trees cast long shadows in the neighbors' yards.

## 9

In the summer we got up early and rode our bikes to the dense woods surrounding Birchwood Lake, where we roamed all day, unsupervised. The ground at Birchwood Lake was damp and covered with a thick cushion of brown pine needles. Tall trees filtered the sunlight, and we clambered over fallen, rotten birch trunks on the narrow paths. Brushing away clouds of gnats, we squatted to peer at green-striped jack-in-the-pulpits and yellow lady slippers, poked at bulbous mushrooms amid feathery green ferns, stepping carefully to avoid red-tinged poison ivy. We climbed trees and we swam in the lake and we caught frogs and turtles and fish. Sometimes we roasted the fish on campfires, each small sunfish about a mouthful after it was deboned.

## 10

Lady slippers and jack-in-the-pulpits are on the endangered species list. Birchwood Lake is still there, but the small town I grew up in has changed into an enclave for the very rich, who have felled the large oak and maple trees and demolished the old three-story stucco houses to build new mansions in their stead.

## 11

I live with my husband and son in Northern California. Developers keep felling trees in our neighborhood. An unincorporated area of former chicken ranches, Castro Valley has long narrow lots with room to build houses behind houses. One developer built two oversized houses with no yards behind a modest house on our block. We could hear the chainsaws after dark one night, as workers cut down the protected trees without permits from the county. The light felt too bright the next day, the sky empty until we got used to the missing trees.

## 12

The pomegranate tree in the backyard of our 1930s house flourishes, and the orange and lemon trees alternate between abundance and a meager output. When they bloom in the spring, the fragrance of the citrus trees is

overwhelmingly sweet. The white blossoms on the apple tree in our side yard remind me of my childhood tree house. The tree overproduces tart green apples, only good for cooking. They attract animals, and one night my son woke to a deer peering into the window at the foot of his bed.

## 13

Two towering blue pines in the front yard are home to squirrels and mourning doves and robins and finches and hummingbirds. Red-tailed hawks soar in the sky and perch on the highest branches. At night we sometimes hear the soft hoots of an owl. The two trees are gigantic, as if they predate human beings on the planet.

## 14

The oldest redwood on the Pacific Coast is an estimated 2,520 years old, the oldest giant sequoia 3,200 years old. A bristlecone pine in the White Mountains of eastern California, over 5,000 years old, is believed to be the world's oldest living tree. The trees dwarf man's written histories and puny achievements. "It took more than three thousand years to make some of the trees in these Western woods," John Muir wrote in *Our National Parks*, "trees that are still standing in perfect strength and beauty, waving and singing in the mighty forests of the Sierra. Through all the wonderful, eventful centuries . . . God has cared for these trees, saved them from drought, disease, avalanches, and a thousand straining, leveling tempests and floods; but he cannot save them from fools."

## 15

Recently, scientists at Yale University estimated that there are more than three trillion trees on Earth. At the present rate of attrition, however, they may all be gone within three hundred years.

## 16

I lie on the couch on our converted porch, looking up into the pines in the front yard. Boughs sway and rustle in the

breeze. Squirrels chitter as they chase each other up and down the trunks, leaping from branch to branch, their tails twitching. Hummingbirds dart in and out of view. I can hear the whine of a buzz saw down the street, someone's lawn mower in the distance, our neighbor's leaf blower closer by, the twittering conversation of the birds. The smell of newly cut grass reminds me of my childhood, summer days running through the sprinkler with my brother, who's now dying of cancer, a thousand miles away. The musical chatter of the birds outside ceases abruptly when a blue jay squawks a noisy warning.

**Jacqueline Doyle's** creative nonfiction has appeared in *South Dakota Review*, *Waccamaw*, *Southern Indiana Review*, *Cold Mountain Review*, and elsewhere. Her essays have earned Pushcart nominations from *Southern Humanities Review* and *South Loop Review* and Notable Essay citations in *Best American Essays 2013* and *Best American Essays 2015*. She lives in the San Francisco Bay Area.