



THE WOODS:

21 Poems by J. Eric Smith

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1. Palinode to the Woods

I.

The woods: a deep symbolic home
for dark desires and fears unknown,
where quiet huts in hidden glades
house lonely ghosts and silent shades.

II.

Shadows cast by harmless trees,
their only voice the blowing leaves,
devoid of menaces and moods,
they're not symbolic: they're just woods.

2. The Devil is in the Woods Again

The house is over two hundred years old,
from an era when slaves worked the land there,
until they died young, their stories untold
and graves unmarked. Like a pit of despair
disguised as a rice plantation, the air
heavy with suffering, ripe with the sin
of those who trafficked in pain, without care.
(And the devil is in the woods again).

The forest closed in, and creepers and mold
ate at the house, the woods darkening where
light once shone. The property never sold,
as the house fell deeper in disrepair:
it had once been good land, the price was fair,
but people would visit, look about, then
drive away, as if they'd gotten a scare.
(And the devil is in the woods again).

I remember when my grandfather told
me he met the devil. (I made him swear
it was true). Down the dark creek trail he'd strolled,
with his dog, when the devil did declare
himself, and called grandfather's name, right where
we stood, years later. I was maybe ten,
looking through old trees and thinking: "beware."
(And the devil is in the woods again).

Grandfather quit drinking and took to prayer
at night. (He died praying). His land had been
cursed, though, and is still dismal, sad and bare.
(And the devil is in the woods again).

3. Walter

Walter was out in the woods digging,
finally gonna build on his vacant tract.
He'd rented a back hoe and a bulldozer,
since he didn't wanna bust his back.
Walter was gonna build a little cabin,
a place where he could sit and relax,
since he'd read that pent-up stress
increased the risk of heart attacks.

He asked his cousin Daniel to help,
they took turns working the back hoe,
as they dug down a bit to lay the foundation
in the spot where the cabin would go.
Walter was digging, Daniel loafing,
when the back hoe's blade was jarred.
"Look n' see what I hit," yelled Walter.
"Might be a root, 'cept it felt too hard."

Daniel peered down into the trench,
then waved to Walter to turn off the hoe.
"Looks like something metal, Walter,
maybe a pipe or a barrel, I dunno . . ."
Walter climbed down from the digger,
grabbed the shovels and they dug by hand.
They scraped the soil from the object,
which turned out to be an old metal can.

"What the hell do we do with this?
And what's it doing way out here?"
"I dunno . . . guess it could be dangerous,
'cause it's gotta been buried for years."
"It's not really all that heavy, though,
so I doubt that it's fertilizer or gas."
"Go get something to pry the top off,
then let's dump it over there in the grass."

Daniel came back with a hammer and spike
and started whacking at the barrel's top.
It was old and pretty well rusted on,
but soon it cracked, with a small wet pop.
"Phew . . . that don't smell right,"
said Walter, as he gagged and held his nose.
They pried the top off, peeked inside,
saw a leg bone, feet, and some toes.

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Walter and Daniel ran out of the woods,
drove straight home and called the police,
who carried off the body, studied it well,
said she'd been there fifty years, at least.
Walter never did finish that little cabin,
he sold the wooded lot, never went back.
Three years to the day after they dug up that lady,
Daniel found Walter dead of a heart attack.

4. The Light

They told us we had to stand in a certain spot,
far enough away from the road
so that the lights from passing cars
didn't cause us to lose our night vision.

We looked due west, down the tracks.
There was an overhead trestle about fifty yards out.
We couldn't see it clearly late at night,
except as a starless black bar above the rail bed.

A little bit further out, the trees closed in around the tracks.
The line had been abandoned for twenty years, at least.
If you hunkered down, it looked like a darkened stage:
trees as curtains, dark trestle making the arch.

Rosamund, Will and I brought a blanket out that night.
It was cold, and the three of us passed the flask.
We'd heard the stories since we were little kids.
We were out there to see the light.

The stories went something like this, depending on who was doing the telling:
A nameless conductor had died horribly on the line,
And his restless spirit still rode the tracks,
when the weather and moonlight were just right.

The old folks said you could see his lantern,
waving slowly from side to side, bumping a little up and down.
They figured he was alerting folks along the way
that his phantom train was coming through.

He'd get closer and closer to you if you didn't move,
until finally drifting off into the swamp
somewhere along the tracks between the trestle and the road.
Then he'd reappear in the distance, do it all over again.

We scoffed about their old ghost story,
told them all we knew about natural phenomena,
things like swamp gas and St. Elmo's Fire.
We had it all figured out as we drove out to the tracks.

We sat there on the blanket looking west
right at the center of the darkened stage beneath the trestle.
Giggling, tipsy, tickling, whispering "boo" in each other's ears,
until the light appeared.

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And we got real quiet. And we got real still.
And we didn't hear a thing,
but damned if that light didn't start bobbing down the tracks towards us,
getting brighter as it came.

We sat there like we'd been electrocuted,
shaking, unable to move or speak.
We'd never actually seen swamp gas or St. Elmo's Fire,
but we were pretty sure it didn't look like that.

Will panicked first, right about the time the light moved under the trestle.
With a wet sounding hiccup he bolted for the road.
Rosamund moved next, a thin squeal emerging from her throat as she ran,
her blanket and flask forgotten.

I still couldn't move. I still couldn't move.
I had that feeling I get in dreams when I'm standing on a cliff,
and I know that any motion's going to send me over the edge.
And I still couldn't move. And I still couldn't move.

The light got closer. Maybe twenty yards away,
when it slowly veered off to the right and bobbed away into the swamp.
I watched it until it disappeared into the mist, and then I looked up,
and it was coming down the tracks again.

Rosamund and Will were yelling at me from the road,
"Come on! Come on! Come on!"
I heard the car start up; the engine roared as Will stamped on the accelerator,
and I imagined being left where I sat.

That broke the spell: I screamed like I'd never screamed before and ran,
never looking back over my shoulder as I sprinted for the car,
desperately afraid that the light might have raced up behind me.
I didn't want to see that.

Rosamund was crying when I got in the car,
and Will pulled out before I'd closed my door.
He dropped us off at home and quickly drove away.
We never spoke about that night again.

5. Green Swamp

C'mon and tromp down to my green swamp
Stamp, man, and stomp down in my green swamp
The flytraps they chomp down in my green swamp
Where alligators romp down in my green swamp

The coastal plain, the rain, Mary Jane, the mark of Cain,
drains the Piedmont into my domain
I don't complain, abstain, ascertain, explain, maintain,
just let the pitcher plants juice my brain so

C'mon and tromp down to my green swamp
Stamp, man, and stomp down in my green swamp
The flytraps they chomp down in my green swamp
Where alligators romp down in my green swamp

The longleaf pine, intertwine, wind the jessamine vine
eight meters high up and feeling fine
I wine the swine, refine, resign, align the spine
pull up from the muck the divine so

C'mon and tromp down to my green swamp
Stamp, man, and stomp down in my green swamp
The flytraps they chomp down in my green swamp
Where alligators romp down in my green swamp

Stare, compare black bear and bobcat there, beware rare air
step in the brown water with due care
Sensory hair, prepare, be aware, dare solitaire
ankle deep sinking without a prayer so

C'mon and tromp down to my green swamp
Stamp, man, and stomp down in my green swamp
The flytraps they chomp down in my green swamp
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C'mon and tromp down to my green swamp
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6. The Artist

he loved the smell
of smoke and ash
but more than that
the flames themselves
he poured the gas
through graceful paths
then gently torched
the tallest tree

the embers fell
as fires danced
he drifted like
a lonesome ghost
through flaming woods
his work of art
the wind blown sparks
like winking stars

7. Ritual

the wind blows round the standing stone
rich with the fragrance of her spells
inside a circle drawn with bone
she dances wrapped in veils and bells

ash maidens hum their ancient drone
naiads emerge from empty wells
the wind blows round the standing stone
rich with the fragrance of her spells

tied to the rock I weep and moan
drawn here by her sensuous smells
trespassing through their sacred dells
a sin for which I must atone
the wind blows round the standing stone
rich with the fragrance of her spells

8. The Monster Tree

I know it's out there, watching me.
I know it's there: the monster tree.
When I can't see it late at night,
I dream it might go on a spree.
I lay there overcome by fright,
and pray for chainsaws, fires and blight.

I've told my family of my fears,
while wiping off my sleepy tears.
But it appears they just don't care.
The tree stands there and no one hears.
It's just not right, it isn't fair,
to live so near that monster's lair.

Then one day I came home from school:
The tree was gone! How very cool!
And like a fool I danced and skipped,
'til I was gripped by fingers cruel,
and saw the hole that it had ripped
into our house, where it had slipped.

9. Overlook(ed)

stone paths sweep through hardwood trees
wet sleeping meadows
upturned slate faces
crumble into the shadows

city seen on eastern bank
no sounds escaping
water on the falls
human noises negating

over the bare tree branches
blackbirds wheel and clot
nervous smiling dog
taking itself for a walk

two miles around the island
all alone today
how could such a place
just be overlooked this way

10. The Guitarist

That mad flamboyant guitarist
came walking out of the forest,
from where he'd last come just two years before,
whoring, as we all knew.

Within days of his returning,
we could sense our wives' hearts burning
while he played his songs in Old Market Square,
and shared stories so bold.

We'd forbid our wives to linger,
they'd react with scorn and anger,
and go to market, where they'd twirl and dance:
he made them feel like girls.

So we met to discuss options,
pondered strategies to stop him,
empty words, since we knew we were helpless,
unless God set us free.

This is the ninth time he's returned:
he's been shot, hung, buried and burned,
but then from the forest he reappears.
We fear that we are cursed.

11. Somewhere Out Past Abington

Somewhere out past Abington
deep in the woods, while hiking,
I came upon a well groomed lawn,
and a garden bold and striking.

Flowers I had never seen,
fruits I couldn't label,
nary a weed that I could see,
by a tree: a little table.

At the table, set for two,
(china, glasses, place mats,
silver tureen of little beans),
in a high backed chair a man sat.

Smiling, waving, called to me,
used my name, said "Hi, Jack!"
How did he know? And should I go?
I set aside my heavy back pack.

Sitting down, look on my face
clearly showed confusion,
"No fear," he said, "except . . . you're dead,
and this garden's an illusion."

"Somewhere out past Abington,
just across the small stream,
that's where you fell, best I can tell . . .
no, you're dead, dead people don't dream."

He reached out to take my hand,
I fled with a small shriek.
Ran through the woods fast as I could:
found my body by the small creek.

Turning back, I found him still
sitting at his table.
Pulled up my chair, said a short prayer,
ate as much as I was able.

He's been gone now several weeks,
per the moon and the sun.
I pull the weeds and plant the seeds,
waiting for the next one.

12. Porter the Pyro

Out near Estill lived Porter the Pyro,
who would dance n' spin like a broke gyro
while burnin' up woods,
peoples' houses or goods,
singin' "Look at the beautiful fire, oh!"

13. Old Peck

It's been some time since we've seen Old Peck
and people are starting to wonder
about whether he's even alive anymore,
it's been six days since he stopped by the store,
and weeks since he called on his favorite whore
for to spend all his ill-gotten plunder.

It's been some time since we've seen Old Peck
though we can't really say that we're bothered,
since he tended to smell like stale grease and beer,
and he'd probably not bathed for the last several years,
livin' out in the woods with the bears and the deers
and that dim bastard boy that he fathered.

It's been some time since we've seen Old Peck,
and we really should do something, maybe,
like round up the dogs and go trudge through the trees,
just to check to see whether he's well or diseased
or been eaten by wolves or sucked dry by his fleas,
or just killed by his favorite whore's baby.

It's been some time since we've seen Old Peck,
well, at least since we've seen him still breathing:
looked to me like he choked on a cracked chicken bone
sitting down in his ramshackle tarpaper home.
When we found him, though, he was not there all alone:
that poor kid of his sat by him, grieving.

It's been some time since we've seen Old Peck,
it's been months now since he was buried.
His boy stood there, crying, alone by the grave
'til the orphanage folks came and took him away.
And his whore? Well, she had a new client that day:
I hear tell that they've since gotten married.

14. Verdigris

pumps and pipe work deep in a forest
churn the rivers and push the creeks
algal blooms and bacterial mats
blossom where the pipe work leaks

copper fittings (once gold and shining),
couplings, bushings, (likewise once clean),
grey-green skin now coats their surfaces
wet from warm condensing steam

humming rotors pushing the fluids,
viscous liquids, sticky and green,
through moss carpets, onto the surface,
oil their organic machine

that green liquid spreads and tarnishes
everything over which it spreads
pebbles, boulders, dirt, wood and metal,
greens replacing blues and reds

verdigris, green, gris, grey grown oxide
pumped through pipe work, the primal paint,
deep in a forest, rotors turning,
hidden 'neath a plaster saint

15. Palinode in Deibhidhe: A Dialog

I.

"That Harris is half-baked, ma'am,
bedbug crazy, unnerstan'?
Don't mess with a man o' that stripe,
'less you're the thrill-seekin' type."

II.

"Ain't no dull moments most days,
what with the hell we both raise.
Runnin' free out here in the woods,
me n' Harris get on good."

16. Location Location Location

This dirt road, it goes nowhere,
just a big loop through the woods,
a place for folks who live here 'bout
to dump their household goods.

That washer in the bushes?
It belonged to Missus Greer.
She musta used it twenty years,
'fore dumping it out here.

There's ovens and there's sofas
scattered all among the trees.
I hear the clank of rusty tin
whenever there's a breeze.

I live here in the middle
of this forest dumping ground,
a happy little camper in
this trailer that I found.

17. Play

we ran into the woods, down to the creek,
picked our sides, chose rocks and sticks,
played war there, after school each day
until we were called home at dinner time

we marched in formation, platoon drill,
with antique rifles, firing pins removed,
column left march, eyes right, present arms,
tourists took our pictures as we passed.

we roll through the desert day after day,
sleep in our boots with pistols on our chests,
dreaming often of our woods and creek,
wishing we were back there, playing war

18. The Cedars of Chalybeate Hollow

Just look at them there cedars,
man, they're gorgeous and they're fragrant,
above the springs
with the red iron water,
they've got to be quite ancient.

We sit beneath them resting,
soon the half of us are snoring,
but we'll wake up
real quick, just as soon as
the chainsaws start their roaring.

We'll cut the trees to pieces
and then sell them in the city,
where fancy folks
put chips in their closets
to make their clothes smell pretty.

19. The Dreadful Couch

That black shed back in the woods, it was old,
and my grandmother said it was haunted.
But I didn't believe in such nonsense and lies
so I walked back there last year, with curious eyes,
pried the door off and saw inside, to my surprise,
just a couch, like the one my wife wanted.

I drove my old pick-up truck back to the shed,
pulled the couch out, and wrapped it up tightly,
took it off to some store (where they cleaned it up nice,
sewed some splits, patched some stains, for a very fair price,
while I waited, exchanging small talk and advice
with the owner, who thanked me politely).

So that night after dinner, I unveiled the couch,
and my wife, she was quite pleased and tickled.
Then we moved things around to make room in the den,
and we found just the spot for the couch to fit in,
at which point we sat down to watch Oprah and friends,
and to eat the cucumbers she'd pickled.

Since that day, things around here have not been the same,
and that couch is the root of the issues:
it goes drifting around the house all through the night,
and it cries out whenever we turn on the light,
and it jumps out of closets, and give us such frights,
and it chews up our pencils and tissues.

So then one day I caught the couch out in the yard,
and, quite vexed, well, I grabbed it and tied it
to my truck, and took off, with it dragging behind,
and I guess that it seemed I was out of my mind
when the cops pulled me over. I've since been confined.
Damn that couch and the evil inside it!

Now I'm stuck here in ward seventeen (it is locked).
And the couch? It crawled home to Grandmother's.
She walked it back out to its black little shed,
and she locked it away with a nod of her head.
And my wife bought a little plaid love seat instead,
where she sits, watching Oprah, with others.

20. Crimes Against Nature

And here's the spot where they did pause
Before the whirling ball of claws
And there's the place where they did stand
And swallowed eggs found in the sand

And then on that dark Saturday
They served us beetles on a tray
And just one time, I think, they found
A broken wing upon the ground

And over there beyond the trees
Is where they hid a sack of fleas
And once down by the riverside
They choked a fish until it died

And over here's where they did fall
Before a huge brown verdant ball
And in the woods one day, I swear
They burned a mass of writhing hair

And once upon a time, I think
They tossed a sack into the brink
And happily ever after they
Commit atrocities every day

21. Lost and Found

i.

The forest amplifies our darkest fears,
it seems as though we've walked in here for years.

ii.

We crawl out of the woods and walk the rails,
until we find another set of trails.