

In a final, higher part of the woods, some of the trees were black and gray, leafless, but wrapped in fresh green vines. The path was a fairway of new gold leaves strewn at the edges with bright vines and dotted with dark green seedlings pushing up through the leaf cover. One seedling spruce grew from a horse's hoofmark deep in dried mud.

There was a little hollow in the woods, broad, like a flat soup-bowl, with grass on the ground. This was the forest pasture of the white mare Itch. Water had collected in a small pool five feet across, in which gold leaves floated, and the water reflected the half-forgotten, cloud-whipped sky. To the right was a stand of slender silver-barked tulip saplings with tall limbless trunks leaning together, leafless. In the general litter and scramble of these woods, the small grazed hollow looked very old, like the site of druidical rites, or like a theatrical set, with the pool at center stage, and the stand of silver saplings the audience in thrall. There at the pool lovers would meet in various guises, and there Bottom in his ass's head would bleat at the reflection of the moon.

I started home. And one more event occurred that day, one more confrontation with restless life bearing past me.

I approached a long, slanting mown field near the house. A flock of forty robins had commandeered the area, and I watched them from a fringe of trees. I see robins in flocks only in the fall. They were spaced evenly on the grass, ten yards apart. They looked like a marching band with each member in place, but facing in every direction. Distributed among them were the fledglings from summer's last brood, young robins still mottled on the breast, embarking on their first trip to unknown southern fields. At any given moment as I watched, half of the robins were on the move, sloping forward in a streamlined series of hops.

I stepped into the field, and they all halted. They stopped short, drew up, and looked at me, every one. I stopped too, suddenly as self-conscious as if I were before a firing squad. What are you going to do? I looked over the field, at all those cocked heads and black eyes. I'm staying here. You all go on. I'm staying here.

A kind of nothing is what I wish to accomplish, a single-minded trek toward that place where any shutter left open to the zenith at night will record the wheeling of all the sky's stars as a pattern of perfect, concentric circles. I seek a reduction, a shedding, a sloughing off.

At the seashore you often see a shell, or fragment of a shell, that sharp sands and surf have thinned to a wisp. There is no way you can tell what kind of shell it had been, what creature it had housed; it could have been a whelk or a scallop, a cowrie, limpet, or conch. The animal is long since dissolved, and its blood spread and thinned in the general sea. All you hold in your hand is a cool shred of shell, an inch long, pared so thin it passes a faint pink light, and almost as flexible as a straight razor. It is an essence, a smooth condensation of the air, a curve. I long for the North where unimpeded winds would hone me to such a pure slip of bone. But I'll not go north this year. I'll stalk that floating pole and frigid air by waiting here. I wait on bridges; I wait, struck, on forest paths and meadow's fringes, hilltops and banksides, day in and day out, and I receive a something as a gift. The North washes down the mountains like a waterfall, like a tidal wave, and pours across the valley; it comes to me. It sweetens the persimmons and numbs the last of the crickets and hornets; it fans the flames of the forest maples, bows the meadow's seeded grasses, and pokes its chilling fingers under the leaf litter, thrusting the springtails and earthworms, the sowbugs and beetle grubs deeper into the earth.

The sun heaves to the south by day, and at night wild Orion emerges looming like the Specter of the Brocken over Dead Man Mountain. Something is already here, and more is coming.