



The Long In-Between

A father's effort to honor his daughter's memory through a rewilding project collides with his neighbor's conventional farming practices.

By Andrew Kenneson

Illustrations by Molly Mendoza

April 5, 2022

I got my first glimpse of the place today. Drove out there by myself and knelt in the dirt and ran my hands through the dry clods. Nobody else out there, save a few crows picking over some years-old corn.

I don't think the seller will be a problem. That land gave all it could give and it won't give any more. The ground is all hard and rocky, rutted out with old furrows and bits of crabgrass here and there. I've seen parking lots with more life.

It's the only piece in that area that butts up to Stanton Forest. The guy across the road seems to be going strong, but not too many other nearby farms are. It's perfect.

I found this old notebook in a desk drawer at home and started writing about all this. We'll see what happens.



April 30, 2022

Everything's signed. Me, at the age of 58 and only ever worked in the city, now the owner of 94 acres of south Ohio cropland. Or what used to be cropland, at any rate.

She'd be proud of me and that made me smile on the drive home from the seller's office. She was always going on about how we needed to give stuff back to nature. "We have so much," she'd say, "so, so much. We have to give it back, Daddy. We gotta find a way."

"Sure, sure," I'd always nod. And now she's gone and I never gave her an answer.

Well, Firefly, here goes nothing.



May 6, 2022

When I stand next to the road, the trees at Stanton are a green row on the horizon. Behind me is the neighbor. To the left and right my land stretches out for about a half mile.

Neighbor's name is Brett. He came by in his truck when I was out there today. "Howdy, neighbor," he said like a cowboy with his head sticking out the window.

"What are you growing?" he asked.

"A forest, if I can."

He looked confused but tried not to show it.

"Soy prices aren't bad these days," he said. "A hell of a lot more in soy than trees. And quicker."

"I'm not gonna cut it down."

He shook his head.

"Well, it's your place," he said and then took off.



May 16, 2022

I've been reading. This land used to be a forest, one of the biggest in the world. Stretched from where the swampland ended in south Georgia all the way up to the tundra in Canada. There were wolves and bears and chestnut trees that showered so many nuts you had to wade through them.

Most of what's left of that forest is in the beams of the old Victorians on Euclid Avenue in Cleveland or in Palmer Woods in Detroit. The rest got burned or blighted and then we plowed it under and grew corn and soy until we couldn't anymore. It's gone, save a few patches here and there.

One of those is the Smokies down in Tennessee. We went when Sadie was 8. I thought she'd want to see a bear, but she talked about birds the whole way down — 245 species there, she said. We walked all over and I could tell that this was a different sort of woods. Deeper, darker. Smelled like old leather and life.

Sadie wanted to camp in the park, but I didn't care to sleep on the ground. Still don't, actually. I woke up in our hotel room to find her on the balcony, staring off at the mountains, her little hands gripped tight on the railing.

We can't do the Smokies here. Sorry, dear, we gotta crawl before we walk. We're gonna start with grassland and then trees. We could just let it go, let nature take her course. But we'd probably just end up with a haphazard field of soy plants. So, grass. And water. And these people over in England think pigs are a good idea. So maybe pigs, too.



June 4, 2022

I don't know where she got it from. It wasn't from me. I grew up in the Columbus suburbs. Lived in the Columbus suburbs. Ran the dealership in the Columbus suburbs after Dad died. My idea of interacting with nature is one of those documentaries with the British guy talking about starfish and antelopes.

But there was a little creek behind our cul-de-sac and she'd spend hours down there, looking at bugs and toads and building dams with rocks. Come back all muddy and I'd hose her down in the backyard, with her screaming and trying to dodge the water.

"Why do we have all this grass and nothing else?" she asked me once as we walked through our neighborhood. "What are the animals supposed to eat?"

Which brings me to the pigs. The pigs can help because they root around and turn up the hard soil. Then they shit everywhere and help fertilize the ground for other plants. Or that's what this guy I called in England said.

But right now my land is like those lawns, nothing for the pigs to eat. And that's saying something, because I've learned pigs will eat about anything, even roadkill. So I gotta plant grasses and berry bushes and other plants to create a first layer of food.

I'll also build a few ponds to try to attract birds and create a different type of habitat. And I gotta do it all before winter gets here.



June 15, 2022

It's not much of a pond, but it will do. Rented a backhoe and dug out a pond at the base of where the land slopes slightly down to the south. It's about the size of the neighborhood swimming pool by the place Sadie grew up.

Then I ran a pipe up from the water main and filled it. It won't stay, but I'm hoping the fall rains will keep it filled just a bit.

Today, I seeded half the place with grass, wandering the whole place with a bag of seeds over my shoulder, tossing them everywhere. It took all day, out in the heat, no shade. A few birds swooped in to eat some seeds, but it was lonely otherwise. I'll come back tomorrow and do the rest.

I went with a mix of big bluestem, switchgrass, and prairie dropseed, which are all tall grasses native to this area. Big bluestem will be shoulder height in a few years. And I did red clover and buckwheat, which are lower grasses. The clover apparently will restore some of the chemicals we need to grow in the soil.

Next week, I'll do wildflowers and shrubs, like black-eyed Susans, butterfly weed, sunflowers, and elderberry bushes. Those will shoot their roots into the dry and compacted soil and break it up, allowing for water and worms and nutrients to get in.

And next to the pond, I planted a few cattails that I dug up from the stream behind the house. They'll probably die in a week, but it felt good to have something Sadie would have touched on the land.



August 25, 2022

The most magical thing happened today. I went out to the land and was walking around like I always do. There's some green shoots all over from the grass I planted, plus I saw a few flowers that I didn't.

Ever since I planted the grass, I've been seeing mice scurrying around eating the seeds I threw down. I was near the pond, watching a mouse maybe thirty feet away dip in and out of my sight as it hurried up and down the old furrows.

And then, wham, a red-tailed hawk shot from the sky and grabbed the mouse in its talons. I was so close I could hear the mouse scream. The hawk swiveled his head, looked at me for the briefest moment and then took off again, heading toward Stanton Forest.

It all happened so fast that I didn't realize I was holding my breath.



October 14, 2022

Fall's here, and I'm worried. We haven't had much rain, and not much of the grass has rooted in. The pond is just a muddy puddle. The cattails are still there, thankfully, but I haven't seen as many ducks as I saw at first.

I'm afraid I didn't get things in quickly enough and winter will kill off everything that's been growing. But I dearly hope it all makes it through winter alright. I could say the same for me.

I drive by the spot where she hit the black ice on my way to work. Even in the summer, I find my foot hitting the brake a little early. In the winter, I go through it so slow cars behind me hit their horns every now and again.

The tree she hit still has the scar, this unholy blotch of black. I thought it might kill the tree when I first saw it two years ago. But it's still hanging in, that old oak. I get a real good look at it in the winter.



March 16, 2023

I didn't go out there much this winter, so there wasn't much to write about. Just twice, both times all frozen over and snow on the ground, the grass brown and the cattails shivering in the wind. A desolate place, really.

But now, spring, and melt. And disappointment. Even this early, there's buds on trees and low lines of green in some of the fields along the road on the drive out there. My place is mostly dirt and mostly empty.

There's some tufts of grass, but it's hard to say what I put there and what the wind did. I must have planted things too late. Or the rains didn't come. Or something else. The upshot is it's no closer to being a forest than I am to being a raven.

Makes me wonder what I'm doing out here. Maybe I'll just sell the place.



March 19, 2023

I couldn't stand the thought of her trapped in the ground. Her mother and I hadn't talked in a few weeks when we both went out to the river that ran about two miles from our house with the urn. It was spring, a few months after the wreck, and the water was a swirl of snowmelt.

The stream behind our house ran into this river. Sadie had it all drawn out on a map in her room, otherwise I wouldn't have known. A summer project, mapping our watershed. She had decided by then that she was going to either be a freshwater ecologist or a zoologist.

We poured the ashes in the river and watched them float away, just a small patch of gray in a sweeping current of brown.



March 22, 2023

I was out all day today with my seed sack, getting grass down all over again. By the end my boots were so caked with mud they felt like cement blocks. Too tired to write more.



March 26, 2023

Today I brought my pigs out. Eight of them, full grown and snorting. The guy I bought them from brought them here in a trailer and everything.

"You got a place to put them?" he asked when he pulled up.

"Anywhere is good."

Guy shook his head and undid the latch and the eight of them trampled out onto the mud. They were all old sows, done producing piglets and set for slaughter when I got them. \$150 a piece, a steal, the guy had said.

I'll be putting corn out for them to eat, but the idea is that they'll be able to find their own food by the summer.

With them out there, I'll have more reason to come back. I'm excited about that.



April 5, 2023

I woke up this morning with a voicemail from Brett. We'd exchanged numbers last fall when we were both looking for a lost dog from the neighbors further down the road.

Apparently, some of the pigs had gotten into his soybeans and rooted up a few plants. He didn't sound too happy about it. "Those pigs are feral. If I see them on my land again, I'll shoot 'em."

Fair enough. I ordered a couple movable fences today. Instead of having them roaming, I'll keep them on an acre or so then move them in a week or so.

But already, I'm seeing more grass, more blooms. When I was out there most recently, there was a whole flock of finches singing and hopping among the green shoots.



July 15, 2023

Full summer, as of a few weeks ago. My Lord. I've got grass and sunflowers up to my knees. There's a couple of geese that seem to have taken up residence in the pond. I saw my first deer a few days ago.

The pigs are basically magic. Anywhere I've put them, a few weeks later, it explodes with life.

For the first time, when I stand on the road with my land on one side and Brett's on the other, I can really tell a difference. His is all these ordered rows. Mine is haphazard. His is all green. I've got yellows from sunflowers and black-eyed Susans, greens in the grass, some orange and red from flowers that I have no idea what they are, and browns where nothing is growing yet.

It feels like mine, this stretch of land. I don't know what to call it. It's not a farm. It's not a forest. It's still in that long in-between. But it makes me smile, looking out onto my misshapen kingdom, a kind of patchwork quilt knit by no one in particular.



August 24, 2023

The letter came in the mail to my home address. It was all dressed up and on legal letterhead. McCovey and Haines, it said at the top.

"To Mr. Gregory Elroy, the owner of property located at 501 E. Larson Road,

We write to you regarding the nuisance you have created on your property at the above address. Our Client, Mr. Brett Tubbs, of 400 E. Larson Road, has noticed a considerable uptick of deer, squirrels, birds, and other nuisance animals entering his property and disrupting his planting, seeding, and growing of crops.

Having farmed this land for 17 years, Our Client has never been so disrupted in his labor. We urge you to cease from all activities related to your "re-wilding" of the property at 501 E. Larson Road including the planting of wild grasses, trees, shrubs, and other flora and fauna and the additional lack of maintenance that might further disrupt Our Client's legitimate farming operations.

If you do not, we will have no choice but to pursue legal action to remedy this situation in a court of law.

Sincerely,

Mike McCovey, Attorney at Law"

Rewilding. It's funny they used that word. Brett had driven by a few weeks back and we'd talked about the weather and the Reds. He seemed over the pigs thing.

I told him the word for what I was doing was "rewilding," which I'd only just learned from some YouTube videos. He'd shrugged. "As long as it don't bother me," he said.

It must have.

My second thought came unbidden. It's working, I thought. It's working.



August 29, 2023

After a long time thinking, I decided to ignore the letter. What could they really do? I owned the land outright. If they wanted to come and take it from me or sue me over a few deer wandering into Brett's fields, they could go right ahead.

I got a call from one of the principals at school when Sadie was 12. Apparently she'd found a baby squirrel on the playground and had been keeping it in her front pocket and feeding it Gatorade with an eyedropper in class. Her teacher had heard it squeaking.

"If I don't have it in my pocket, it's gonna die, Dad," she said over the phone, her voice panicked and teary. "It won't stay warm enough anywhere else."

I begged the principal to let her take it home and we'd take care of it here. I found a shoe box and hooked up a light to keep it warm.

"That won't keep it warm enough. It's gonna die," she said. "When it's that little it's supposed to be next to its brothers and sisters and mother almost all the time."

I had to drag her to school and we left the squirrel at home. I don't know what happened, but when we got home the light had gone out and the baby squirrel wasn't moving much. It died a day later.

She didn't talk to me for a week, just slamming doors and scowling. Any time I walked in a room where she was, she'd screw up her face and yell, "Murderer!" And then storm out.

Look what I'm doing now, Firefly. The opposite of murder.



September 25, 2023

I got another letter. Said similar stuff but then asked for a meeting at the lawyer's office, and I went a few days later. The letter said I should bring a lawyer with me, but I don't know any lawyers and didn't feel like calling one.

The office was downtown, with lots of wood paneling and leather chairs. Brett was there, in the guy's office who sent the letter. He just nodded when I came in.

"Mr. Elroy, you have been in violation of the county's land-use regulations," the lawyer said, his voice oiled and smooth.

"Your land is intended for use in agriculture, and you seem to be doing nothing of the sort. As a result of your negligence to your land, my client has suffered damages from the excessive wildlife disturbing his crops."

There was a silence, as I thought about it.

"What do you mean by excessive wildlife?" I said.

"There's deer out there every morning," Brett broke in. "They're eating my seedlings. And the birds, too. So many damn birds. I just had my lowest yield in 15 years."

I shook my head.

"But it's my land," I said.

The lawyer smiled a thin smile.

"Well, yes, but that doesn't mean you can do anything you want with it. And the law says that parcel is to be used for agricultural use. I hope you understand."

I didn't understand. But I didn't get angry until I was driving home. I looked out the window and at the strip malls and fast food chains and parking lots with little bits of grass and trees in between. And beyond it, for miles, more asphalt and concrete with little bits of green in between. All the way to the ocean in either direction.

As we walked out of the office, Brett had said, "It's because of you environmentalists that people like me can't make a decent living anymore."

I never thought of myself as an environmentalist. But Sadie was right. We did have too much. But, apparently, it was illegal to give any of it back.



October 17, 2023

I went out to the land today and just walked around. I wouldn't say it's pretty, especially now that it's fall and the flowers have gone for months. The grasses are all scruffy and brown. The pigs are all brown and muddy and old.

I think maybe what's scary to some people is that I'm just letting it go. Brett is out there every day on his tractor, tilling or planting. I'm not. I'm just letting it be. I really don't know what's going to happen to it. Maybe that's a little scary to be next to.

On the night she died, Sadie was at my place for the week. Her mother and I had just bought her her first car, a used 2014 Honda Civic, after she'd spent a few months learning to drive on ours. Simple, easy to drive. Safe. Good gas mileage. I thought she'd love it. But she didn't.

"I don't want a car, Dad. I only learned to drive so I wouldn't hurt your feelings. Do you even know what cars are doing to the earth?" she told me when I first showed it to her a week or two before.

It'd been sitting in the driveway ever since, the keys still on the counter where she'd put them. Her mother had dropped her at my place.

And she'd been sulking all week. She'd get like this in the winter. Couldn't go outside except to tramp around the block in her snow boots. Plus, you know, being a teenager.

I thought I might take her to the movies or something. She was sitting on the couch, lookin' out the window.

"Firefly, you want to go —"

"You call me that, but did you even know that fireflies are going extinct?" she snapped.

I balked. I didn't know that.

"Cause there's no more woods for them to live in. They can't just live on sidewalks and front yards. But that's all there is around here."

"Well, can't we do something about —"

"Sure, we could. But people like you never will. I'm not your firefly, Dad."

With that, she stormed out of the room. I sank back into the couch. I heard a car start up in the driveway a minute later. Huh, I thought, maybe she wants that thing after all.

The phone rang twenty minutes later.



October 30, 2023

When I pulled up to the land this morning, there was a sheriff's car in the rut where I usually park. He got out as I pulled in, and he was holding a brown packet in his hand. His name tag said Lt. Briggs.

"Morning," he said, as we approached each other, like we were friends. I nodded.

"I'm guessing you probably know what this is," he said, handing me the packet. I nodded again.

I took the packet and could feel the heavy pages inside of it. This must be how all this ended. We stood there for a second, him looking off in the distance, me listening to the breeze.

"You know, I've been driving by here for as long as you've been doing this," Briggs finally said.

"You think I'm crazy too, probably," I said.

He shook his head and crossed his arms and looked out over my scraggly land.

"I don't. I truly don't," he said after a while. "My family's lived around here for five generations. My great-great-grandfather was one of the men who cut down these woods and tilled the first farms. I used to take a lot of pride in that."

"But you don't now?" I said.

"Oh, I do. But, my kids, they lose their minds when they see a deer. They don't know anything about anything wilder than our backyard."

I looked out on the land. I couldn't say it was much wilder than a backyard, but just then, three ducks took off from the pond and beat their wings over our heads.

"Well, not everyone agrees," I said, holding up the brown packet.

Briggs laughed.

"No, clearly not," he said. "But have you talked to the land trust? Or the people at Stanton?"

I shook my head.

"I haven't been talking to much of anyone recently. Just been out here where it's quiet."

He laughed again, a deep, throaty laugh.

"Well, maybe you should give them a call. They might be able to help you more than the birds and deer."

With that, he tipped his hat and strode back to his car, leaving me with the packet in my hand and the wind blowing in my ears.



February 19, 2024

Well, it's settled then. The land is now a nature preserve. And it's being absorbed by Stanton State Forest.

The people at the land trust straightened it all out rather quickly. They paid me one dollar for the land. Then they transferred it to the state's control. But not before they helped me secure the right to live and traverse the land for me and my ancestors for all time.

That last part was their lawyer's words, not mine. But I like it. For all time.

I'm building a cabin out there. It might be ready in a year. Maybe one day I'll move out there. And I'm finally going to get around to the other pond once the freeze breaks.

Then, trees. It's time to plant trees. We'll have our forest yet, Firefly. Oaks, hickories, maples, dogwoods. I can just see the saplings shivering in the spring air. It's beautiful.

And the fence. I'm helping Brett build a fence around his land. It was part of the condition of the agreement for them to drop the lawsuit. It'll be tall enough to keep out most of the deer.

I don't blame him. The fact is, there's no way for the wild to co-exist next to his rows and rows of soybeans. We wave to each other again.

And the people at the state agreed to one more condition. They're going to call this little patch the Sadie Elroy Preserve.



August 4, 2031

I watched the sun go down from my little porch in my little forest. The birds were singing: sparrows, mockingbirds, an owl a little later.

The trees aren't high or thick enough to block the view and cast much shadow yet, but one day they'll tower over this place and it'll be in shade all day long.

There's water striders on the pond, and birds dipping through to catch them. I saw two raccoons drinking from the other pond yesterday. A few turtles too, years and years after I'd introduced them. Day before that, it was a flash

of fox fur in some of the low bushes. The soil, when I kneel down and cup it in my hands, is soft and loamy. Some nights, there are even fireflies.

I walk the trails most mornings as the sun comes up and see what I can see. Every day, it's something. I walk a lot slower these days, but that's okay.

Some days, in the quiet of the morning, when my mind is focused on a deer track or a birdsong, I can hear her laughing, off in the distance.

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