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# Carve Magazine

**Volume Seven Number Three, May 1, 2006**  
**The Raymond Carver Short Story Awards Edition****First Prize**

## **The Understory**

by

**Tim Horvath**

*“The Understory’ is my first pick. It is a terrific reach through history from the pre- and post-Nazi era in Germany up to the present. Professor Schoner is a Jewish instructor at the University of Freiburg, Germany – Faculty of Botanical Studies. He happens to become a close friend of the Philosopher – and later Nazi convert – Heidegger. With the Nazi rise, Schoner loses his job and flees to the USA, where we find him now worried over a small plot of land and its understory, the small plants and weeds that survive after the mighty oaks and other giant trees have fallen. Schoner honors the silent, unrelenting determination of the understory. The author has created in him [Schoner] a metaphor for human and botanical ongoing. This is a wonderful story, a first-rate creation by a fine writer.”*

– Bill Henderson, President and Editor, Pushcart Press.

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### The Understory

*Anyone but Lear*, Schoner thinks. He hobbles across the pebbled path, toward the periphery of the woods, where he can still plant the walker almost flat. On he goes, “Let not...to true mind’s marriages...admit...impediments.” Even as he pitches himself forward on hard end-consonants, he senses the quote is off: the right author but the wrong words, the right words, the wrong play, maybe not even a play. Not only wrong but ironically wrong. *Anyone but Lear*, he has vowed for a long time, and he is none other.

As he pauses to survey the woods, he feels them staring back, judging, rejecting his desire for entrance. Like he is some illegal, trying to cross a border without the proper papers. The sun catches him as he curses the wood that he wants to be in. This is the most devastating part of age, he thinks. He can laugh at slipshod memory along with the others, the misplaced glasses and pills. The hearing aid is no picnic, but he does not miss the birds nearly as much as the trees they sit in. Aches and pains are jarring, but there are medication and sleep for such things.

He can even deal with the way objects double and then vanish like sea lions bobbing at the ocean’s surface—all of these are compromises he can come to terms with and has. But to be repudiated by the woods, *his* woods—this is intolerable. Of course, he must recognize that the walker (an overly optimistic name, he thinks) cannot possibly commandeer the undergrowth, the splay of fallen wood overgrown with moss and fungus, the tip-up mounds with sideways roots that permeate the plot. From here, he can almost enter in memory. Every inch of the plot is stored somewhere in his brain. Even now, he can taste rampant leaf litter, inhale the ground’s rank riches. Mosquitoes left him alone. Maybe he scrambled their signals. Whatever the reason for their aloofness, their indifference to him afforded him many hours in the woods alone.

But he won’t be alone for long now. In a matter of hours, he will see the blue Subaru hatchback pull up, carrying his daughter and Alan. That assortment alone makes it radically different from Lear—not three sisters vying for land, and

affection in the form of land, but merely one daughter and her husband. He breathes relief at the difference. They will try to convince him, again, as they used to do every few years, as they now do more insistently, less obliquely, to clear out the fallen debris, to clean up that forest. They love the woods, they insist, but the plot is a mess. “A rain forest,” his daughter, Sabine, calls it, “in the middle of Peterborough, New Hampshire.”

He jokes that if they can find an anaconda there they can have the woods, do with them what they will. Raise cattle. Put in a roller coaster. Sell the land to the “developers” who wait like pitcher plants for their prey to stumble in.

Sabine insists that developing the land is not what they want. “We want to be able to walk to the lake on the property. Imagine if we could do that. We could hire someone to carve a trail through there. I’ve already gotten an estimate—a local guy who loves this area, not some tree-hating jerk. And then we could walk to sit by the lake. Our kids could, and your great-grandkids, whenever they arrive. And we won’t have to exploit the McElroys from Rhode Island and wait for invitations to go out on their boat.”

He is familiar with the arguments. And not necessarily opposed, at least not to the principle behind them. He has nothing against boats and lakes to cool down in in midsummer heat, and trails to access those lakes.

But he will wait it out until they drag out that anaconda. Will not submit to the desire to clean up the woods, to haul away the degenerating matter that trips one up at every turn. It is not purity that he is after; on the contrary, it is precisely the lack of purity on which he insists.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the spring of 1930, he is honored with the *venia legendi* followed swiftly by an appointment as *Privatdozent* on the Faculty of Botanical Sciences at the University of Freiburg im Breisgau. He is twenty-four. He is euphoric upon learning of his position. Suddenly he is a peer of his own teachers. But more importantly, Freiburg abuts the Black Forest, the *Schwarzwald*, and yet it is a big city, too, so much more colorful

preserves them, how in it they preserve themselves, having risen up from the leveled earth like resurrected beings from the fallen heaps and mounds, risen in every conceivable way as none other than themselves.

*Tim Horvath*

Tim Horvath majored in philosophy at Vassar, where he learned most of what he knows of Heidegger’s philosophy. After college, he taught high school English for nine years in New York City and its suburbs. Somewhere the way, he picked up an interest in neuroscience and evolutionary psychology, which he indulged by giving talks at various conferences. He is now beginning the third year of the new MFA program in creative writing at the University of New Hampshire, where he studies with Alex Parsons, Charlotte Bacon, and Margaret Love-Denman. He has also worked with David Huddle at the Bread Loaf School of English. At UNH, his story “Lax” won the Lt. Albert Charait Prize, and he’s had three stories finish as finalists in *Glimmer Train’s* New Writers Competitions. “The Understory” grew out of a class called “Forest Communities of New Hampshire.” Tom Lee, the professor, was open enough to welcome Tim, woefully ignorant about anything tree-like, into the class, and encouraged him to use what he learned for fictional ends. “The Understory” is Tim’s first published story. Tim is co-editor for the poetry section of *Entelechy*, an online journal that celebrates the creative collision of literature and the findings of brain science. He lives in Exeter, New Hampshire with his wife and daughter, and is presently at work on his first novel, *Spectra*, about a conservatory-trained pianist whose career is jeopardized by a sudden injury, which he finds both terrifying and liberating.

greatly decayed. Still, he finds a log firm enough to plant himself on as he reads through the article.

What does he hope to find? A personal apology? An admission that he, Heidegger, has wrestled in private with the facts of the matter of the Holocaust for the past thirty years? Has agonized over them? That he made a mistake? A grave mistake, one worthy of a dunderhead rather than what Schoner is certain is one of the most astute minds of the twentieth century?

If he expects any of these things, Schoner is disappointed. Heidegger explains his “brush” with Nazism. Or explains it away. Or attempts to.

On the rest, he is silent.

When he sees the symbol at the foot of the column that marks the end of the story, sees that Heidegger only has a few words left, too few for what he must do, Schoner shuts the magazine.

\* \* \* \* \*

Now, as he hangs on the walker and looks at the plot, untouched for over fifty years, he hears the Subaru sputter and the spitting of gravel that means they are pulling up the driveway to the house. It seemed long when he first moved here, because it was longer than any driveway he’d seen before, but by now he is used to it. In less than a minute they will be here. Soon they will be showering him with bundt cake, or framed pictures of grandchildren in formal attire. Beneath all this will be their agenda: to convince him to clear the forest, to make way for the future. He wishes he could explain to them why he can’t allow this to happen, what the forest means to him intact. But at times like these he feels like he can almost understand why Heidegger stayed silent right up to the end, why he found it so difficult to speak of a past in which he’d been at once king and fool. And he suspects that even now, he won’t be able to say it, won’t be able to name all those left behind—Lechenmeir, Schott, Fiedler, Tannenbaum, Kindler, Schoner, Schoner—parents, friends, uncles, aunts, students, teachers. Nor will he be able to articulate how this plot

and stately than the small village in which he was raised. He is further honored with an office in a building dating from the 1700s. Then again, in this University, which goes back to medieval times, this does not even qualify as the *Alte Universität*.

But it would be more accurate to call the woods both his office and his classroom. Though he is expected to do research, and it is clear that he had better be seen hunched over his library carrel from time to time, the Head Faculty of Biological Sciences supports his idea to take the students out into the woods, their notebooks poised to sketch out the leaves, trunks. He makes them draw, damnit, to make them see. Some drop out, and that is precisely the way he wants it. For soon he makes them learn a good deal of Latin, insistent that they not only know everyday German terms. “That’s *Fagus sylvatica*. Over there, *Picea abies*,” he says. “You must be able to speak of the trees in a way that your mother will not always understand.” As he teases them, he prods them gently with the knotted end of the gnarled stick that he otherwise carries to point to signs of incipient disease, or lightning scars in the bark.

The students want to carry him down the streets on their shoulders, chanting “Schoner! Schoner!” with steins in their free hands. He teases them about carving their initials in the trees. “If I ever see yours, I will carve the tree’s own initials in you,” he says, aiming the stick at Gunther, a promising student that everyone knows is lovesick. Gunther asks for a repetition and then he calls out, with moderate confidence, “AB.” The professor nods; a balsam fir. The students know that he adores them and the trees. They know that his family is days away, that he has no car, no wife, and that his life consists of them and arboreal species.

Their ventures into the woods afford them more time to talk than they would have in an ordinary class or in a laboratory. When they are not bending down to examine an unusual fungus or char marks on the trunk of a tree, they fall into step with one another, and conversation unfurls. Over the semester, he learns whose fathers fought and died in the Great War, whose family’s businesses went belly-up, who studied their plant biology by

candlelight after sweeping up the floor in the store beneath their parents' cramped apartment. And so he gains an intimacy that only the rarest professors achieve so quickly and most never do. Meanwhile, they ask him why he doesn't have a *fräulein* of his own. At first he dodges the question, but they drop hints that some suspect he is a bit of a *fräulein* himself, and so he feels perhaps it would be in his best interest to respond.

"Hans, where can I find a woman who will put up with my long walks? She will wonder where I've been all day, whom I've been frolicking with. I smell like a peasant. And what will I bring her, a spruce cone for a ring?"

But what really gets him famous is the way he makes them clamber up trees. It is what he did as a boy, whenever he could. He remembers his arms extending desperately toward the lowermost branches of a beech behind the cottage in which he was born, and then the day he woke up and could reach them, and then the sense years later that the branch he was perched on was about to snap under his own weight. "If you are not willing to climb, how else will you see what is truly in the canopy?" he asks them. Then he turns their stratagem against them. "If you want to be *fräulein*, stay down here on the ground. If you want to be scientists, then up and away."

They call him Schimmler, because he has taught them the English word "shimmy," which he learned at an international conference held in Paris. Paris! He is the first member of his family to travel out of the country as far as he knows. It is just a play on words and a generic German name. No one has heard of Himmler yet.

And so he teaches them about forest succession, not out of a textbook but in the woods themselves, standing in a *lichtung*, a clearing, calling upward to Rudolf, asking, "What do you see?" If Rudy fell out, would he lose his position and be forced to take up a broom of his own? Worse, would he be jailed? Possibly, but he doesn't worry about such contingencies. He chooses trees that are sturdy and broad-branched, oaks of hundreds of years, and he has his dream job and he has hundreds of years himself, he thinks.

When he says the word "succession," he thinks of the

urge you to take notice of them the next time you are out walking in the woods. Humbly, Schoner."

\* \* \* \* \*

As the years and even decades go by, Schoner watches as the species composition in the forest changes radically. In 1948, pin cherry has shot up from impetuous seedlings, and red maple, white ash, and red oak, sprouted from stumps, rule the upper canopy. He sometimes thinks that if he looks hard enough he will see the pin cherry grow another millimeter before his eyes. When he's not out in the woods, Schoner manages to keep in touch with his American Freiburg colleagues, many of whom have gone on to venerable careers, some returning to Germany after the war, others staying on, or returning elsewhere in Europe. Their numbers include Nobel Prizewinners. As for Heidegger, Schoner learns that he has fallen on grave difficulties after the war, forced to defend himself for his apparent embrace of the Nazi program. His library, it is rumored, has been confiscated. Schoner pictures troops thumbing through the tree guide, seeing his handwriting. Again, with this image in his mind, he writes to Heidegger, but again he hears nothing.

\* \* \* \* \*

Schoner drives to Boston for a copy of the May 31, 1976 issue of *Der Spiegel*. Heidegger has famously given an interview to be published only upon his death. Its publication means, of course, that Heidegger has died. But it is as if he is still alive for the duration of time that it will take Schoner to read this interview.

He drives with the magazine on the front passenger seat all the way back from Boston to Peterborough, where he will walk out onto his property to read. It is only appropriate that his last conversation with Heidegger take place in the woods. By now, the pin cherry is gone. Grey birch has come and gone into decline, still here but weakened and prematurely aged. Hemlock, dark latecomer, looks as though it means to stay forever, claiming even the floor with its dry, red-brown needles. He can see, too, the trees from 1938 pointing northwest, even

stems to release the soothing wintergreen, he admires its hardiness. And where mineral soil has been exposed in the mounds, of all things, paper birch begins to grow.

The fecundity of the plot and the number of species that survive amaze him. Working on the yards of the well-to-do, most of which were cleared of wood afterward, he cannot help but marvel at the greater richness and diversity on his own land, and the number of different ways that it has managed to regenerate itself—through crown releafing and sprouting, seedlings and saplings alike.

But even more wondrous to him is the presence of new species entirely in the understory. They have sprung out of the pits and mounds as though they were just waiting for a storm to usher them in. One day, he discovers the *epilobium sp.*, whose stem will eventually turn red and offer up a white flower. A library visit reveals that this is common in Finland, close enough to Germany to make him tremble. On another occasion, he stumbles onto blackberry plants. And best of all is the common cinquefoil, the glorious yellow flower he decides he'll pin in Sara's hair. He crouches with the guidebook near the ground before picking one, squinting and rubbing for the slight serration that will distinguish it from imposter weeds.

The day he plucks that flower, he decides to write Heidegger. He is short but direct. He knows the chances of his words reaching Heidegger are minuscule. Nevertheless, he writes, wishing he and his wife well, asking where he now stands. He knows from some other Freiburg transplants with whom he corresponds that Heidegger resigned the Rectorate fairly swiftly in disillusionment, and has become seen as rather inconvenient to the Nazi cause at best.

In his letter, he includes a postscript describing the recent gems that he's turned up on the floor of his forest. He writes, "You know, Martin, it's strange. Trees have always defined the forest for me. I climbed in the canopy, because I thought that's where the best, truest view was. But in the wake of the Storm of 1938, I find that the little plants of the understory have become very dear to me, dearer than I could have ever imagined. I will not burden you with their Latin names, but I do

Royal Families of England and France, the border of which is only a few kilometres away. He envisions trees vying for the throne of the canopy, Tudor Firs and Stuart Oaks, and the revolutions of fires and winds that could upend the existing lineages, bringing forth new pretenders and contenders alike. The top of a tree is called a crown. This cannot be coincidence. It signifies, rather, that no matter how rigorous the science, no matter how precisely calibrated one's instruments, trees are, in the end, regal beings to whom we are obligated to bow.

\* \* \* \* \*

It is late September of 1931, and the class is heading back from an eight-hour hike that took them into a favorite stand of oak and yellow beach, a quiet spot a way's off the notched trail overlooking a hidden waterfall. He will take them there again in winter to mark the differences. By then they will be different, the students. He will ask them to note the changes, some obvious, others more subtle, in the grove, and then to note the changes in themselves. In the silent vacancy left by the dormant falls, they will seem much more than a couple of months older, and will feel it, too. As for himself, the mustache he has cultivated in order to distinguish himself from his students will have thickened. He will have allowed it to do so in spite of knowing full well that appearance can belie age—a thin tree can be deceptively old, and a thick one, even peeling with shaggy bark, rather young. It's a favorite lesson, the sort of intuition-defying phenomenon that astonishes them in September, though it might leave them unmoved in December.

As they are returning from the stand, a mood of mirth permeating the group after a swim at the falls, Max, one of his quieter students, gets his attention.

"Dr. Schoner?"

"Yes, Max."

"I'm afraid I may have to...switch from the class."

It is late for a student to leave class except for medical reasons. He is accustomed to students dropping it—many find themselves unprepared for the onslaught of information and the discipline of Latin nomenclature. Others, though they might like

the idea of the class, find their tendons and knees aren't up to the challenge. Still others find that a day of strenuous hiking is no way to nurse a hangover. Of course, those who are cowed by climbing trees have not even signed up for the course, as Schoner's reputation is already well-established by now.

He has watched Max carefully for the past couple of weeks. He is a superb student, and through quizzes and the first exam he can see that Max has a knack for it, and he'll be sad to lose him. He'll be sadder by far, though, if it has to do with Schoner being a Jew. So far, he hasn't lost any students that he knows of to this fact, but Freiburg has no shortage of anti-Semitism; odds are he's lost some he doesn't even know about.

So he's relieved when Max says, "It's not that I want to cut out this class. It's just that with the hour earlier, I miss out on Professor Heidegger's lectures."

Now it makes sense. He has asked them to gather at eight rather than nine, so that they can make the most of daylight hours and cover more ground. There has never been a conflict before. But he knows that Heidegger is the university's true superstar. Winning him from Marburg was a great coup. Students come not only from all over Germany, but from throughout the continent to hear the author of *Being and Time* hold forth at the podium. Some swear to his greatness and brilliance, while others consider him the biggest sham in the university, a propounder of mystical terms, a spider weaving webs in mid-air. He's heard the mockeries, as students parody his jargon, "Dasein yawns in its being-toward-bed," and scoff at his rustic appearance. He thinks about it for a few minutes. Then he turns to Max, and says, "How badly do you want to be there for Herr Heidegger?"

Max curls his lip. "I want to do both. It's not an insult to your class."

"Well, suppose we leave at the original time from now on?"

"I'd still need to leave his lectures early."

"Perhaps I can write a note to Professor Heidegger for you."

"That might work," says Max. "I'm always there for his

the damage in the plot. What he sees is catastrophe. Most of the red oak has uprooted. The red maple has either bent or snapped, plainly crushed under the falling oak or pine. The paper birch is almost all uprooted, bark strewn about like the papers of a raided library. Sweet and yellow birch, decapitated. The fallen logs lie like corpses to the northwest where the wind came fiercest. Schoner can smell the lingering salt air of the ocean even though they're nowhere near it; it must be in the soil now, glacial till heavy with days of rain. As he curses the storm, then, he doesn't know whether to wave his finger up at the sky or down below, and so he does both. Knees sinking in the muck, he hears Heidegger, taunting, rejoicing in the destruction, the closing words of the Rectoral speech: "All that is great stands in the storm."

The storm, though, is forgotten almost as quickly as it came hell-bent through. The next day, Chamberlain meets with Hitler to negotiate over Czechoslovakia. Soon, Hitler will invade the Sudentland in spite of this meeting, and a couple of months later, the world will awaken to the news that Germany has invaded Poland.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the following year, the wood begins slowly, almost imperceptibly, to regenerate, forming a low, tightly-packed canopy. The temptation is to clear the land, to try to get money for the logs, but 275 million trees have been felled in New England, enough to build 200,000 five-room houses. Market value goes *kaput*. Many of the trees have been too damaged to serve as wood anyway, and are only worthy to pulp. He convinces Sara that they ought not to try to clear the land, but allow it to be what it is, to become what it will become. He wanders the plot, hoisting himself over the many pits and mounds that have been formed by the felled trees, heaving himself over the downed wood.

For a year, he watches the red oak as it survives, but then passes away. The pine and the bit of hemlock are also down for the count. But then he notes as sweet birch, a novelty for him, clings to mounds and even to exposed rocks. Snapping the

kept down at the archive in the Town Hall, and learn the history of the land on which they live. It's a beautiful tract, teeming with red oak and red maple, or *Quercus rubrum* and *Acer rubrum*, names like those of old friends. There are also paper birch, yellow birch, and sweet birch on the plot, not to mention a handful of glorious white pines the likes of which New England is famous for. He practically expects to see the King's demarcation on these last, for which of course he'd have to, at least mentally, reprimand the King. He's fascinated by the impact humans have had here, the preponderance of stone walls in the south on pastured land, the massive logging of the White Mountains.

Nineteen thirty-eight is a lean year for a landscaper, as Americans eye Europe warily, and guard their own pockets accordingly. While he dreams of returning to Freiburg, the extended silences of his parents, other family, friends, and former students make Germany seem more and more distant and forbidding.

Then, on a September evening, the most powerful hurricane of the century rips through Peterborough almost completely unexpectedly. They have, at most, a couple of hours of warning. Florida gears up for the storm, and then it is mistakenly thought to have gone out to sea. The Weather Bureau calls for a "chance of rain." By evening, Providence, Rhode Island sits under fourteen feet of water and the street cars have shorted out, setting off a ceaseless cacophony of horns. Schoner is landscaping a house in north central Massachusetts, and Sara manages to get in touch with him. He tries to race home, but the storm soon overtakes him, and he takes sanctuary in a mill in southern New Hampshire. It takes him two days to get home—roads are flooded, bridges out, the rivers that passed underneath having permanently changed course. Sara, having waited out the storm in the attic, is unharmed, but the house is flooded. By the time he arrives in downtown Peterborough, he's seen a lot of damage, but the sight of the steepleless church makes him stop short just where the traffic light used to hang.

First he holds his wife tight, then he slogs outside to survey

seminar, and I participate a lot. I mean, he forces us to. But I feel like he notices that I'm not at all the lectures."

Hunched over a magnifying glass the next morning, examining a diseased bit of bark, Schoner receives a knock on his office door. When he says, "Come in," he is surprised by the presence of the striking figure he recognizes immediately as Martin Heidegger. He knows him from faculty meetings, but up close certain features are accented: the high, barren forehead, hair arching back, the mustache tightly clipped on the upper bank of the lips, and most of all the penetrating eyes. His outer garb is that of a peasant, though a tie lurks beneath.

"Professor Heidegger," he greets him. "Herr Schoner. What brings you to this part of campus?"

From what he has heard of Heidegger's lectures, he expects a booming, larger-than-life figure, but the man is soft-spoken, almost shrinking his way into the tiny office. "Call me Martin," he says. Heidegger looks him over. "So, here he is," the slightest trace of a smile visible. "The teacher who climbs trees."

"Yes," Schoner laughs. "It's a necessary part of my job."

"Hmmm, yes," Heidegger says. "Well, it's as Hölderlin says, 'others climb higher/To ethereal Light who've been faithful/To the love inside themselves, and to the spirit/Of the gods.'"

"Well," says Schoner. "I just do it to get the best view of the canopy."

Heidegger looks mildly embarrassed, or perhaps disappointed. He clears his throat. "In any case, it seems that we have a student in common."

"Ah, yes, Max."

"Indeed. He is a talented thinker."

"He's a talented young man, then, because he shows signs of doing well in my class, too."

"So he'll be leaving my lectures a few minutes early."

"If that's all right. You see, I asked the students at the beginning of the term if they could leave a bit earlier for some of our walks, if they had any conflict. But if it imposes on you, I would certainly discourage him from..."

“Nonsense,” Heidegger waves him off. “It’s all right. To be frank, he’ll learn more in the open air than sitting in a hard chair daydreaming about pine trees.”

“Well, I’m sure that’s hardly the case,” says Schoner, somehow embarrassed himself now.

There is a protracted silence. Then, Heidegger says, “That piece of bark...”

Schoner looks back at his specimen. “Yes?”

The philosopher looks puzzled. “What can you learn from it? I mean, by examining it thusly?”

“Well, I’m trying to figure out what got to it first, animal, fungus, or pathogen.”

Heidegger nods his head, and Schoner can’t tell whether this is genuine interest, or mere politeness. He hears Heidegger’s intense breath, and then hears him ask, “How well do you know these woods?”

“Fairly well,” Schoner replies. Probably an understatement—he knows them, by now, better than any professor at Freiburg, surely as well as some of the woodsmen who earn a living there.

“Perhaps you can show me, sometime, some of your favored routes.”

“It would be an honor, Professor Heidegger,” says Schoner.

“Please. Martin,” he says, scratching above his mustache right into his nostrils.

\* \* \* \* \*

Schoner and Heidegger go on lengthy walks through the *Schwarzwald*. “How is your work?” is always the first thing Heidegger asks him the moment they’ve gone beyond the garden and through the gate at the edge of the foothills. Schoner points out the different kinds of trees, explains the dynamics of the cycles of growth, decay, and regeneration, while Heidegger holds forth on poetry, art, music. Schoner knows some scattered lines of poetry from secondary school, his Goethe and some Trakl.

On one of their earliest walks, Heidegger recoils in horror

German refugees of the time, he goes first to New York, to Washington Heights and Inwood where other German Jews have established a veritable diaspora. Unlike most, though, he feels almost immediately confined by the city, a rat familiarizing itself with its cage. He has no Berlin in his past to become sentimental about, and while Fort Tryon and Inwood Park offer him enclaves of lushness, the city’s traffic and smells and grime threaten to smother him. For the moment, he is reborn under the sign of the ailanthus, the plant which manages to grow out of cracks in the pavement in the unlikeliest places. This sustains him long enough for it to dawn on him that he can offer himself up for a pittance as a landscaper for a family of wealthy German New Yorkers whose handsome brownstone holds a courtyard that quickly becomes putty in his hands, transformed into a veritable slice of the Homeland. A family with whom he can communicate. With a daughter self-assured enough to choose love over social status, and who loves the sounds of Latin names of trees and the German ones as they waltz together up the path that rims the edge of the Hudson. A family who purchase themselves a piece of land for a summer home in Peterborough, New Hampshire, a place so far away from New York and so distinct it seems like yet a third country.

He likes to tell Sabine and others that he won it in a poker game in a musty bar in southern New Hampshire, but those who know him catch the coruscation in the eye of the teller.

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He immediately falls in love with the plot just behind the house; the resemblance to the Black Forest is downright uncanny. Slowly, he begins to learn English so that he can fit in with these suspicious New Englanders. Three times over he is an outsider here—as German, as Jew, and as transplanted New Yorker, though given his experience in the city, he can only laugh at this last. Over the next couple of years, he and Sara make the New Hampshire home their permanent residence. He jokes that all he wants is to learn enough English to turn up his nose at someone greener than he in town. The real underlying motivation, though, is so he can read the presettlement charters

that whether true or not, this is the unsaid thing. There is a certain coldness in Heidegger's demeanor, as though by granting him the ten minutes he did, he was shortchanging someone else.

But even the months afterward, before he could secure a visa to look elsewhere for teaching positions, are hazy. There are conversations with Kindler and others about options. It is still early enough to get out of the country without too much hassle if you have been dismissed from a first-rate teaching job. No one, Heidegger least of all, wants to invoke the outrage of the international scholarly community. Given the events to follow, this will soon seem like a laughable reason to have granted him a visa, but there you have it.

There are conversations with his parents, who urge him to go. He will send for them once he is established somewhere, they decide.

There are conversations with other scientists who have been cut or who know they are next to feel the axe's swing, whether because Jewish or labeled pacifists or communists or simply strapped with the designation "UnGerman." The consensus, particularly of the physicists, is that America is where they'll be most welcome, where they can wait out this passing era and keep pace with the relentless curve of scientific knowledge until they can return to German institutions.

Years later, when it has become apparent how narrow the window he's slipped through is, that already two concentration camps for those deemed political enemies are operating in Baden, where Freiburg is located, he conjures a fantasy. That fantasy looks something like this: he, Schoner, Schimmler, shimmying his way up a tree and slipping effortlessly from branch to branch in the uppermost canopy right across the border into France or Switzerland.

Even the first years in America, when he has to reckon with the fact that his lack of English means he is essentially denuded of academic laurels and qualifications, unlike the physicists who speak a subatomic language which transcends words and who are, in fact, being courted by the American Government—even these are somewhat hazy now. Like most

as he rattles off names with which Schoner has only the faintest familiarity. "Schlegel? Heine? Hölderlin?"

It is only when Schoner realizes he's being, at least in part, had, that he retaliates with equally exaggerated dismay: "Not know a black spruce from a red spruce? Norway from white?" This prompts a lengthy excursus from Heidegger on Goethe's theory of colors. Schoner, accusing him of trying to change the subject, insists on bringing him back to the trees, offering up the same mnemonics he does to his students. After several misidentifications, Heidegger throws his arms up in despair, and Schoner drops it.

After they've gone for several of these jaunts, Heidegger gets him a copy of Schlegel's Shakespeare. He explains that Schlegel was influenced by Herder in his translation, recognizing the playwright not as merely a great dramatist, tragedian, and shaper of characters, but a splendid wordsmith, whose puns and poetry and musicality are inextricable from the works' greatness.

"In Schlegel's rendering," Heidegger says, "Shakespeare is almost German."

Looking through it in the evening, Schoner sees that he has inscribed it with, "To my tree climber, who lends me his forest spectacles."

Schoner in turn gets him a tree identification guide, which he inscribes, "May this be soon as dogeared as *viburnum plicatum*." Though it is a plant he's pointed out to the philosopher, Schoner worries that his inscription is too impersonal. Nevertheless, he cannot risk a joke such as, "Great being-in-the-woods with you," since Heidegger is highly sensitive about the accusations that he coins terms and phrases with flagrant disregard for clarity and logic.

As for Schoner, he feels certain that there is clarity in Heidegger's thought. As they are walking, sometimes, he loses himself in Heidegger's voice, as soothing as though they've been following the banks of a stream. There is always a sense of connectedness, of going somewhere, even if Schoner is lost mostly in the sounds of the words. He can distinguish the grammatical distinctions between *Sosein* ("Being-as-it-is"), *Sein*

*bei* (“Being-alongside”), and his namesake, *Schon-sein-in* (“Being-already-alongside”) but he cannot follow the conceptual distinctions that the philosopher is attempting. At times, Heidegger makes him feel a little like he doesn’t speak German at all. It is something that the scientists will often poke fun at the philosophers for, this lofty propensity for abstraction, which sometimes seems to be a peculiarly German affliction. But in Heidegger’s voice the words are infused with something that makes them as palpable as the furrows in bark.

Though the pair return continually to the joke of their respective intellectual blind spots, they also find themselves returning again and again to science. Heidegger vehemently maintains that philosophy is a science, and Schoner remains skeptical. Further, Heidegger says, science has become too fragmented—he rattles off the various divisions and disciplines in the university as if he is a judge pronouncing a lengthy sentence. “But,” he says, “it is not too late. All science needs to do really is to recover its essence.” He praises the Greeks, how in the true spirit of discovery they had no separate designations for chemistry, astronomy, philosophy, physics, and so were better able to apprehend nature as a whole. At first, Schoner is thrilled to learn of Heidegger’s enthusiasm for such work, for he has secretly lamented such divisions, the petty snobberies and snubbings that they invite. The mathematicians look down on the physicists, who can’t quite do the pure math. In turn the chemists couldn’t hack physics, and the biologists, like himself, are at the bottom of the pecking order, dealing with spotted haunches and big leafy greens, even while the physicists are plying away at the atomic limit of matter. Schoner feels that he is viewed by many, in spite of Freiburg’s prestige, as a taxonomist, or worse, a glorified gardener.

He is also delighted by Heidegger’s reverence for Classical civilizations. At last he’s found an ally who will sympathize with his own insistence on instilling Latin terms in his students’ minds. Heidegger, though, never simply agrees or disagrees, and in this case he frowns.

“The Romans translated everything, but the essences were destroyed in the act. Unlike the Greeks, remember, the Romans

so well, strange through the microphone. Schoner closes his eyes, and as he does he can almost imagine they are ambling through the woods. Branches dip down upon his retina, so real-looking that he feels an involuntary urge to duck. He forces his eyes open. The words sound familiar, too, ordered just slightly differently from many of their conversations. He half expects Heidegger’s xeric laugh, which barely leaves his jaw, and he begins to drift into the usual reverie. But he’s jarred awake. Phrases like “German destiny” and “the historical spiritual mission of the German people.” He hears, “Knowing, however, is far weaker than necessity.” Again and again—it is unmistakable. “German.” “Destiny.” “Historical mission.” “Spiritual.” “German.” “German.” The Rector repeats them like mantras. Wide awake now, he shivers at the thunderous applause that greets each one. He looks around, expecting monsters, and sees worse: aught but the ruddy enthusiasm of a pep rally. Then he hears something about a proposal for Labor Service. Worse, Military Service. What is this doing in his speech? “Teachers...students...primary responsibility to the State.” “The will of the people...asserted itself.” “This...destiny.” Where is the assertion of the university that was promised? Where is Heidegger? Schoner turns to Kindler, who will not return his gaze. Finally, with the flourish Schoner imagines he must bring to his great lectures, Heidegger quotes Plato, “All that is great stands in the storm.” And he is done.

More applause erupts. For some reason, he thinks suddenly of Max, the one who slipped out of Heidegger’s lectures early, years ago.

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His final conversation with Heidegger is a blur to him now—how much more clearly he recalls the aftermath, the implication that he is on the short list of those to be considered for termination. Only because his discipline is out of alignment with the immediate goals and needs of the National movement. Heidegger never utters the words, “It’s not because you are a Jew,” but the two men know each other well enough to know

the Winter Vacation of the year before. Rather, it is that his colleagues have selected Heidegger, wise, sensitive, and keenly nuanced, to lead them. This can only mean that there is greater balance in the National Socialist Party than meets the eye. It means that the bullies and the thugs who protest outside the Jewish Union are but one faction, albeit the one Hitler has exploited in his rise. It means that although Jewish teachers and those who have spoken out against the Nazi cause have been dismissed from their posts at universities throughout Germany, here in Freiberg, there will be a beacon of reason and conscience to carry them through these dark times. Heidegger, who has never breathed an anti-Semitic word, for whom policies and notions of biological racialism would surely be as reprehensible as a proposal to clearcut the Black Forest and supplant it with a city the size of Berlin. Heidegger, who rails against the “common sense of the they,” and thus who would turn a deaf ear to the student outcries that have turned many classrooms into courtrooms and put professors on trial.

So it is with an eagerness verging on rapture that he looks forward to Heidegger’s Rectoral Address. The program has been printed, and its title, “The Self-Assertion of the German University,” is already creating a buzz. Heidegger will, it is thought, speak out against tyranny. He will speak up for the intellectual life, Hitler’s impatience for such things be damned. Schoner arrives in his purple robes with Kindler, a geophysicist in whom Schoner can confide these hopes. The stage is laid out with Nazi regalia, flags and insignia. Behind the podium around Heidegger are men who look no older than students, many in military garb. The crowd is filled with restless students, many in the nondescript brown shirts that make his own outfit feel ostentatious, even decadent. He thinks he sees a former student of his several feet away in brown, but in his studied expressionlessness he might be anyone. The ceremony opens with a few preliminary spurts of bureaucratise, flags twirling, the deafening stomp of boot-heels that rattle the stage. Next there is an oompahpah band, and at last Heidegger takes the podium, diminutive even on his decisive day.

A pause, maybe for effect, then the voice Schoner knows

were a brutal, materialistic people right down to the morpheme.”

Schoner is no match for him as a philologist, so he tries to swing the conversation back to the need for interdisciplinarity, where they will surely agree. “Anything else is sheer stupidity,” says Schoner. The trees grow in the soil. For that, we need to understand nitrogen compounds. To understand these we must understand nitrogen atoms, right down to physics. Labels impede scientific work. Worse, they impede progress.” He practically sings the last word.

Heidegger seems more amenable as he speaks, but in the end he continues to hem and haw. “‘Progress.’ A word to be infinitely suspicious of,” he says. “Science needs to get back to its roots, its origins. In its essence, science has no divisions. But the essence of science has little to do with its practical forms.”

“I’m afraid,” admits Schoner, “that maybe I don’t understand what you mean by the ‘essence.’”

“You’re not alone, then,” says Heidegger.

On many occasions, they loop around to a spot they’ve been that morning, and Heidegger will ask, “Were we here earlier?”

“We were.”

In these cases, Schoner is so sure that the other is thinking, “As with our conversations,” that he doesn’t bother remarking it himself.

In late November, crunching through fresh-fallen snow, they come upon a veritable army of towering pines. Heidegger asks, “How old are these?”

Schoner looks over them, tightly bound with criss-crossing bands of branches at chest height and upward, a stand of the type that gives the Black Forest its name. “Probably a couple of hundred years old.” Together, they search for a downed tree that will reveal its rings.

After they confirm that the trees are at least two hundred fifty years old, Heidegger gazes up, marveling at the lattice-like formation. “They live so much longer than us. For that, and lacking consciousness of their mortality, they call our attention to our own.”

As winter comes through, they ski, and Heidegger is a daredevil, even though he claims he did not start skiing until he was an adult. The philosopher teases him for taking turns too wide, especially on precipitous slopes, and Schoner wonders if this is how his students feel when he antagonizes them for being reluctant to climb. At some point, several minutes behind, he hears Heidegger's scalding laughter from below, echoing off the walls of a canyon. As he skis downhill toward him, for a moment he feels a sudden urge to run him down. Instead, as he pulls into a stop, he tears off his skis and leaps into the lower branches of a beech tree and begins ascending, panting, and calling down, "If I'm such a coward, you won't start to look like a little mouse as I get higher and higher above you." Heidegger stays on the ground, and his voice sounds faint as he calls up, "Schoner, you're braver than I thought."

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By 1932, the University is beginning to feel the effects of political ferment that are still just a ripple, not quite a shudder, throughout Germany. Freiburg may be far from Berlin and Munich, but the National Socialists have struck the universities, like the bark disease striking beeches, youngest first. Of course, soon nothing will be intact, but for now, the Nazis are overrepresented in the schools, but still a minority elsewhere. By now, Schoner has taken on greater responsibilities, sitting on various committees and administrative bodies, which all take away from time he'd rather be spending in the forest. Still, he teaches his class, and gets outside as much as possible. Heidegger, too, has increased his commitments, and while they see each other less regularly, their relationship is still cordial.

The students seem different, though, more brazen, more disaffected, less drawn in by his enthusiasm and his humor. The enthusiasm feels more forced, too. He is reluctant to prod students, even gently, with his walking stick. He doesn't climb trees anymore, after a couple of students filed an anonymous complaint, and he was reprimanded. That felt like a gut-punch, and while he always suspected who it was, and that it was resentment and laziness that had motivated the complaint rather

than genuine concern for the well-being of their fellow students, he could never pin it down with certainty. During classes, he has begun to feel as though he's being watched.

Moreover, the students are more inclined to challenge him directly. "What exactly is the point of all this?" one asks.

He's heard the question before, in a less acidic tone. Nevertheless, he holds his ground and answers patiently. "Germany's forests are a source of her history, her greatness. If we do not understand what is around us, we will never understand who we are or where we are going."

But the students are not quickly appeased by this sort of answer as they once had been. "Where we are going has nothing to do with the woods and these Hansel and Gretel fairy tales," one says. "Germany's greatness is in its blood, its resolve. Our science ought to be about the *Volk*, not the trees."

On a desk in his classroom, someone has written, "Who gives a flying damn what's in the canopy?" Because he holds class inside more often now, he is forced to look at it day after day. And in different handwriting, frighteningly neat and compact, someone has written, "Is a Jew hanging in a tree shade-tolerant?" beside a drawing of a hanged man dangling from a noose. No longer does he admonish them about carving in the trees. Recently, he has sighted a couple of swastikas etched into them, and he shook his head and said nothing. It occurred to him then that the swastika, with its many straight lines, might very well have been invented by a veteran carver of trees.

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But there is one consolation for Schoner in Hitler's rise to power: a mere five months after his ascension on January 30th, 1933, none other than Heidegger is elected unanimously to the position of Rector of Freiburg University. The news echoes through the hallways and from building to building, filling him with some combination of euphoria and relief. It is not merely that by now he considers Heidegger a dear, personal friend, although they have not spoken much in the past few months, and not been on one of their outings since they last skied during