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Cutting at the Fire's Edge

The Saw as a Maker of Habitat

I run the chainsaw until it burps, a sign of low gas, then I make one last cut and kill the engine of Katana, my nickname for my Husqvarna 550 XP. Since I am averse to my saw's chain touching the ground, I place the tip of the twenty-inch bar on my steel-toe boot and rest my arm on the saw as if it were a walking stick. I survey my morning's work of butchery and destruction. I call this the Battle of the Four Armies: me (an army of one) versus buckthorn, honeysuckle, and autumn olive. Katana is my main weapon in this endless campaign.

My enemies are nonnative invasive species that have overtaken the forests of Wisconsin. These three species are half shrub and half tree, and they create an understory canopy that hogs most of the sunlight before it reaches the forest floor, leaving the native plants struggling for survival. The nonnative plants host far fewer insects than native plants, and this in turn means less forage for turkey poults, ruffed grouse, and songbirds. Some of the patches are so thick that I must crawl on my hands and knees, scoot the running chainsaw forward, make a cut at the stump, push the brush aside, and crawl to the next one.

There is also a smaller battle that I wage against Japanese barberry. It is a prickly shrub but it doesn't get much over waist high, so I am less concerned about it than I am about the other ones that grow much larger. It does, however, colonize the woodscape quickly and provide a favorable habitat for wood ticks. Some believe that the spread of Japanese barberry is linked to the spread of Lyme disease. I've been known to burn a whole tank

of gas just to destroy this foul plant. Its cut stems reveal a bright golden color, and I like looking over a hillside of slashed barberry and seeing their putrid yellow remains. It is the sight of victory.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, I did some line-clearance tree trimming on a right-of-way in Fitchburg, Wisconsin. I spent hours bear-crawling under the honeysuckle and cutting the multistemmed trunks low to the ground. Once enough were cut, I killed the saw and pitched the shrublike trees down a steep slope to later be fed into a wood chipper. This right-of-way crossed a jogging and cycling path that was overgrown with invasive honeysuckle. It's what urban planners like to call a "greenway." Some may believe the honeysuckle is an eco-friendly feature of the community, but I see it as an ecological hellscape of monolithic invasive brush.

I hiked over to my backpack, fetched two cans of Leinenkugel's, and stabbed them into a melting pile of snow. They would be my reward for this workout. I topped off the saw with fuel and oil, and I gathered the freshly cut honeysuckle, buckthorn, and autumn olive into huge piles the size of ice-fishing shacks. I mulched them down with my chainsaw, making a salad of woody debris. I cut down through the conjoined branch collars and severed as many limbs as possible in one swipe of the bar. I diced the lateral branches into twigs. Eventually, the once-enormous brush piles were leveled to knee height. Saw mulching is aggressive, fast, and physical work. When I do it, my saw and my body work in an automatic and instinctive trance.

The operator of a chainsaw can be the shepherd of a forest, a tender to the trees. Healthy woodlands are necessary for the contentment of the human soul. Like many other living systems, forests are constantly being invaded by outside organisms. I take great pleasure in destroying these life-forms. After I reduce certain invasive species to a pile of stubby sticks, they eventually decompose and enrich the soil but not before providing "rabbitat," a home to the small animals of the forest. Once I finally finished my battle that day, my underlayer was soaked with sweat and I cracked open one of my Leinie's.

Back when I acquired the property where I currently live, I was aware of a section of five acres that were overgrown with invasives. After a few years, I launched my first campaign: total destruction of the plants' method of sexual reproduction. Buckthorn, honeysuckle, and autumn

Buckthorn stays green after other trees have changed colors, which makes it easy to identify for eradication as an invasive species. The berry clusters are another identifying characteristic.

olive all reproduce by berries. If I cut down the large mature plants, I figured, there would be no more berries. However, berries from years past can lay dormant in the soil and spring to life next year. Berries can also be transferred from a neighbor's unchecked property by birds crapping them onto my land.

Additionally, the cut stumps will shoot up suckers, and they always come up thornier than before—a vengeful defense mechanism. The suckers on the larger stumps can grow to chest height in a year. I always cut them down a year later. One stump took six years of annual cuttings until it finally used up all of its stored energy, withered, and died. On some stumps, I use Garlon 4 Ultra, an expensive and potent herbicide. I use it sparingly: just a quick squirt from a handheld bottle. The liquid is a metallic blue-purple color and has a foul, unnatural smell. Once it's applied to a freshly cut stump, death is certain.

I recalled a quote from Aldo Leopold: "One of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds. Much of the damage inflicted on land is quite invisible to laymen." Many people cannot identify buckthorn, honeysuckle, and autumn olive, but once you learn to recognize them, you see them everywhere. To friends and neighbors, I preach the gospel of identification and annihilation and cajole them to pick up their axes, loppers, and chainsaws to rid the land of these forest-choking invaders. I give the invasives some competition by planting hundreds of hazelnut, pine, and spruce seedlings every spring.

The hill where I clear these invasive species is part of a swarm of drumlins—a group of teardrop-shaped hills sculpted by ice sheets during the Wisconsin glaciation. My property is on the terminal moraine where

the last glacier to cover North America stopped advancing. The Ice Age National Scenic Trail that marks this ancient geological delineation is a few miles from my house. The trail was recently designated as a unit of the National Park Service and is maintained by a small army of volunteers. Some of them are trained to operate chainsaws for cutting windthrow trees that block the trail.

At this location, a subtle change occurs in the Wisconsin landscape. To the north is the Forest Transition eco-region—the gateway to the great North Woods. And to the south and west are two related eco-regions, the Central Sand Plains and the Central Sand Hills. These two eco-regions meet at the northeastern tip of Sauk County, where Leopold wrote his masterpiece, *A Sand County Almanac*. The first two sentences convey the heart of the book: "There are some who can live without wild things, and some who cannot. These essays are the delights and dilemmas of one who cannot."

For me, the *Almanac* is a "dipping book," one of those books you read cover-to-cover once or twice and then, for the rest of your life, dip into now and then to refresh your mind with its ideas. It is a book of essays, a philosophical tome, a nature journal, a record of seasonal change, a compilation of wildlife and botanical observations, an eco-ethics primer, a study of wilderness, a diary of cabin living, and a template for environmentalism before the word was invented. Although many of the essays take place in Wisconsin, it could also be described as a collection of travel writing, as Leopold journeys into Illinois, Iowa, Arizona, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Chihuahua, Sonora, and Manitoba. It is also an instructional handbook on wise and prudent living. To wit: "You do not annex a hobby, the hobby annexes you. To prescribe a hobby would be dangerously akin to prescribing a wife—with about the same probability of a happy outcome."

Wisconsin does not have a county by the name of Sand, as the book's title implies. This fictional name is inspired by the eco-regions of the Central Sand Plains and the Central Sand Hills, an area that was once partly covered by a 1.1 million–acre glacial lake. The soil of this area is sandy and poor for most kinds of agriculture—except for the cranberry industry, which straight-lined the bogs for production. The region contains marshes, meadows, pine barrens, oak savannas, small lakes, cold-water creeks, remnant and restored patches of tallgrass prairie, and sandstone cliffs and gorges unlike any other in the state.