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The Grove

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The Grove

When the Smiths put money down
on that plot of land, it was all
trees. Maples and beech, wild cherry
and ironwood; ash, oak, hickory,
elm. The boys must've measured their
hours by axe-stroke some days as they
put their shoulders to the slow, sweaty
work of clearing land. To make room for
wheat, rye, and oats, for buckwheat and beans
they brought down maybe six thousand trees—
those towering majesties—some saplings
before Columbus laid eyes
on their world's distant shore.

But those boys laid their axes aside
long before the land was bare.
Spared some three thousand of the
land's old companions, knowing man
does not live by bread alone.
They left trees to blunt
the wind, to offer sap for
sugar and fuel against the
winter's cold. Kept a piece
of that old, wild wood where
they could go to think, or,
perhaps,
to pray.

The Smiths left.
The trees stayed.

It was thirty years and good
rail lines later when Seth Chapman
put money down on the place
the Smiths had once
helped farm. Those were
different days: no one kept woods
when they could plant cash crops,
and so tree by tree, all around
the neighborhood, the old forest
was turning into new money. But Seth
could never bring himself
to put an axe
to the trees
on the west end of his lot.
And he told his son the story of why
he'd kept it: of the vision it was
said once opened among the maples and
beech, wild cherry and ironwood, the
ash, oak, hickory, and elm.

There are trees there today
that were tall already when
Joseph Smith was young. And who can
know if God shielded them because
the grove is sacred—
or if He just wanted
to keep at least one
old patch
of green?

—James Goldberg