

# DIRT

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You can see the pine trees growing in the backyard of my childhood home from the street out front. They line the northern edge of the yard, towering over one hundred feet. At the tip tops they sway, their boughs laddered and sticky with sap. Hidden beneath is my playhouse, made from scraps my dad used to build the shed, both painted a dusty blue to match my parents' house. I had to crouch below the branches to reach the door, and every spring I would clean out the cobwebs that had gathered over the winter, dragging all the furniture and other objects out into the sunshine. I remember cleaning the playhouse more than I remember ever playing in it.

Along the back fence is a row of pink and white peony bushes. As I remember it, my mother transplanted them from the neighbors on the other side of the pines, along with a bleeding heart. Before I was born, the neighbors had a garden that extended behind both properties. When they got too old to maintain it, they sold the land, the peonies becoming the new delineation of ownership—the proverbial white picket fence. They bloom every year on Memorial Day weekend. When I was little, I would gather their flowers for vases, turning each cutting over, their spherical buds pointed toward the earth, in a fruitless attempt to shake all the black ants out of their encompassing orbs.

There used to be a handful of trees in my parents' yard. All threatened the foundation, and all were removed before I was a teenager. The one that remains grows in front of the picture windows in the living room: a black locust. I remember standing in the driveway picking up seedlings we called helicopters or squirters and letting them twirl to the ground. It wasn't until just this year, at 35 years old, that I realized I was confusing the tiny, impossible-to-control leaves of the black locust for the seedlings we called helicopters or squirters. I must have played with those in someone else's driveway.

Our neighbors had a lilac bush growing in front of their house beside clusters of deep purple irises. Across the street was a weeping willow, standing guard over the corner where I waited for the school bus to take me to middle school.

Summers growing up we would camp at Louisville State Park, rich with cottonwood trees. Rooting more quickly and more deeply than other trees, their heart-shaped leaves provide an especially shimmery canopy that spotlights the fleece-haloed seeds that float through the air in June and July. The fuzzy seeds eventually collect at the edges of green grass to look like the outlines of continents. We started our

campfires by rummaging for twigs, their resinous wood a ceremonial incense.

Fields of wheat and corn I mostly saw from a distance, on highway drives to rivers and lakes and eventually to and from college. But the distances they convey were always a part of me. The ability to look out in any direction and see forever. The endlessness and impermeability—at once so much itself and yet also something unknowable.

“Tell me the landscape in which you live, and I will tell you who you are.”

—Jose Ortega y Gasset