

Emily Skillings

# The Duke's Forest

What more is there to do, except stay? And that  
we cannot do.

– John Ashbery, 'The Instruction Manual'

I love nature  
but I think it awakens in me  
intensely boring thoughts  
that in the moment seem deep ravines  
and when revisited later  
have lost the light and dark greens  
the wet wood and expansiveness.  
See there I go sniffing.  
I'm an American in Germany  
at the edge of a public forest.  
Today families were out walking.  
The phrase 'taking my constitutional'  
something I've never said aloud  
kept waving its little kerchief in me.  
I walked four miles alone, feeling very pleased  
with myself. *I wish a sweater  
could come in that shade of neon moss*  
I thought at one point, before entering a clearing  
to gasp at a primal energy  
that indoors now seems silly and evacuated.  
In the Duke's Forest I find myself listing  
the names of plants it has omitted  
the morning refreshingly flowerless  
no lady slippers, oxlip, wood sorrel  
no violets or ghost orchids.  
I could go on. I go on.  
This is why I love James Schuyler.  
He doesn't care  
that 'the plants against the light

which shines in'  
is a dull observation. Or that  
'Trees, and trees, more trees'  
is just the layered visual experience  
we all have in the forest, waiting  
to let ourselves take in the sign  
to turn back, go home  
and really hate someone.  
Most days I stay as close to bed  
as possible, even in my mind.  
I trust my brain when she's indoors  
and can bounce the materials  
that seem to float towards and away  
steadily, in equal measure  
creating a kind of scrim  
of thought over the body  
off the surfaces of a room  
mirrors, chairs, passages  
from books, the objects  
that ask me, daily  
to love them. They soak in  
my attention and return it.  
As color? Out in the woods  
there is a refreshing smell  
of decay. Today I saw  
nine pussies in the trees  
One was forest art, carved  
by someone I felt I'd already met  
(it held a wooden jewel or egg  
inside it, the size of a football  
which I manipulated hesitantly  
with my hand). The other 8  
were 'naturally occurring.'  
On my little walk I scratched  
my asshole vigorously  
right in front of a German family:  
Mama, Papa, two kids, two  
little white dogs. This gave me  
great energy. I broke  
off the path of the Hutewald  
to access a large, termite-ridden tree  
climbing into the large opening

leaning back like you might do  
 on a long bus ride. The feeling is gone.  
 There was a weak and milky stream just beyond it  
 and beyond that a tree had fallen  
 no, broken in half (the trunk  
 was still firmly rooted)  
 many years ago  
 and was carved to look like  
 the top of the base  
 and the bottom of the top half  
 are interlocking, a single  
 chain link  
 connecting the two.  
 It's actually hard to describe  
 what this looks like  
 this cloven looming thing  
 the smart wicked from me  
 mind of wild dirt holes.  
 Perhaps you will see something better  
 wood embracing at the wound  
 of separation. In Paris I bought you  
*The Morning of the Poem*  
 at that tourist trap bookstore, mostly  
 because you'd previously  
 expressed your skepticism  
 re: my devotion to it, as you tend  
 to question the value  
 of things I love. You became drunk  
 and silly on it  
 the opposite of my intended effect  
 began buying yourself cut flowers  
 and placing them in the window  
 to take their picture.  
 It seems you are now quoting extensively  
 from one of my favorite works  
 of American poetry  
 in a long poem you are writing  
 to another woman. My student just wrote  
 a brilliant and impossible poem  
 in which the forest extends to include  
 and contain everything, so that a forest  
 becomes indefinable, a catch-all

container for experience, detritus,  
life. He writes 'And when I say forest,  
I do not exclude,' then seemingly lists  
everything that has ever existed  
in the physical world  
beginning with spaces  
like highways, medians, estuaries,  
meadows, parking lots, drainage  
ditches, clearings, and continuing on  
towards sprawling lists of garbage,  
thoughts, feelings, 'piss-sprayed  
shorts,' the lost objects  
of an entire national consciousness.  
I'm so jealous of this poem.  
But the thing about being outside  
you can't really stay there.  
It's getting a little late  
and the panic light  
is seeping in at the edges.  
I'm in the dark of a library  
with slightly bacterial wallpaper  
reading men I love.  
When I say that  
I do not exclude you.  
It had been so long.  
Though it hurts (blasts) me  
repeatedly, unendingly  
I want to go back home.  
A feeling with many thresholds  
with many names.  
So that when he writes  
'Night slams gently down'  
I am not my own way.  
I am far from my own ways.