

BY KATHRYN KRAMER

One autumn afternoon, I headed up the back road for a walk. It was early September, leaves still on the trees, but the air becoming still as it does when fall is coming on, and I was in the abstracted mood this time of year often inspires in me. The hard-packed dirt striped by the grassy median; every rise and hollow which I know as well as I do my own body; the slopes on either side (down on my right; up on my left); the border of ferns and reddening jack-in-the-pulpits – all were as much in my mind as out of it.

As I strolled along, a sound worked its way into my consciousness – a dissonance that gradually translated itself into canned music, getting louder as I climbed the hill. Cresting the rise, I came abruptly upon a gray pickup, smack in the middle of the road, a large black radio atop the cab.

Up the steep embankment, at the edge of the red pine plantation, a man I recognized as new to the area was heaving rocks down into the road, dismantling an old stone wall. I bristled – almost literally; the feeling was intensely physical, a mixture of repugnance and fear, a recognition of something not right as instinctual as a guard dog's, though followed by an un-animal feeling of righteousness.

"What are you doing?" I called.

The man – my neighbor – glanced down at me but went on with his work.

"What are you doing?" I called again, moving closer. This time he paused.

"Just looking for some rocks," he said.

"Well, this is my father's land," I told him, "and I don't think he particularly wants his stone walls taken apart."

He had explanations, which I didn't believe, and to my discomfort was now added the embarrassment of having caught him in a lie.

Maybe he really doesn't know, I thought. Maybe he really thinks old stone walls aren't wanted. He *ought* to know; he *ought* to ask, but what are a few rocks, after all?

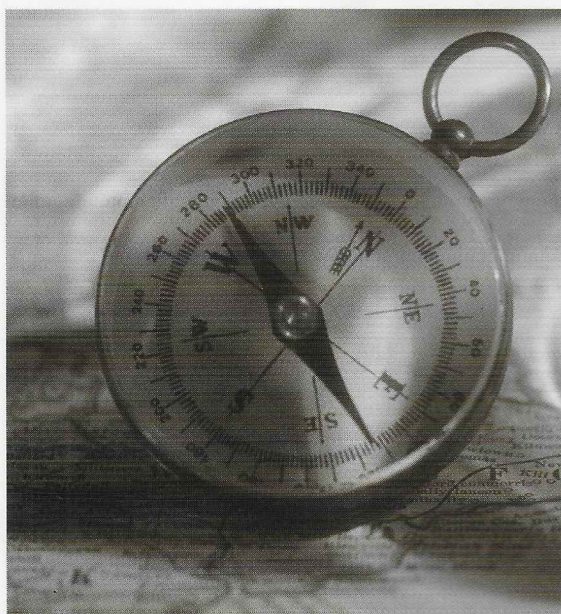
Another truck drove up; he packed up and left; but I was still arguing with myself, stunned by the welter of proprietary outrage, self-satisfaction, and shame the encounter had prompted. At the time, I neither legally owned the property nor believed in private ownership of land in general, and yet I had leapt right into the role of entitled noble, ousting a poaching peasant. I regarded my response with surprise and

some admiration. I didn't know that was in me, I thought.

Through the grove of red pines my father planted forty years ago, then along an old field road that comes out in the steep, no-longer-hayed field below my house, I kept thinking about what had happened.

It was no news to me that I cleave to this place, to these pastures and woods I've known since I was five. For all of my memory, I've known it; it's been the still center of my peripatetic existence. It's where I know what I feel and where I feel most

certainly that I exist. I don't understand how this works, how years of looking at a particular line of hills can make something of the person who looks at it – yet I've experienced it. When you've spent a long time in a place you love – tending it, overseeing it, *knowing* it – it gives you something back. And yet over the years, especially whenever my father, fed up with high taxes and the responsibilities of managing the property, threatened to "sell the damn place," I'd said to myself that I didn't care if I *owned* it, as long as I could be there; maybe we could donate it to a land trust or turn it into a co-op. Yet something stronger than reason seems to translate caring into proprietorship. The thought of these fields and woods being the property



of someone else wrenches me as would an infidelity or someone else bringing up my child.

That day I understood on a visceral level why families break apart over land, why people stop speaking to each other, why people fight to the death over it. Fighting to the death over land is an abstraction to a contemporary American, and to discover that I contained the primordial emotions such a deed springs from both chilled and pleased me.

I followed the hidden road down to the southeast and came out of the pines into a narrow swath nearly overgrown by blackberry bushes; after pushing my way through a thicket of saplings I came out onto a tawny knoll with a large stone all alone in the center like a druidic marker; this small hill, once a grassy meadow, is now almost overtaken by young maple and poplar and cherry, but I see it both ways, as people who have known one another a lifetime can still see the other's youth in an aged face – and what new person, I wondered sadly, could ever know what I know about this land?

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