The first boy who climbed the tree did it wordlessly, so almost no one noticed. He slipped off his dress shoes and used a bare foot to lever himself towards the lowest branch. His hands crawled up the bark, and he pulled himself onto the tree’s limb. This boy was a rock climber and moved with the grace acquired from hours spent hanging. He was at home in the tree. He stood on the branch and looked over the great white tent, towards the cornfields and the horizon.

The other young people at the service paused in conversation and turned to watch him. We had been talking, but our words had held little substance. Right then we were somewhere between grieving and reminiscing, and wanted only to be in the presence of each other, saying little, just being. The boy in the tree drew us like moths to a light.

It was a massive tree, easily a hundred years old. As the only barrier between the house and the sloping field, it must have been left to grow for a purpose. For summertime shade? For a wintertime wind block? What better purpose this evening than for climbing? It was tall, its limbs spaced far apart, and the boy pulled himself higher and higher. His bright dress shirt between the branches looked like a piece of sky.

Now the other boys at the service crowded around the base. Most of them were recent Williams graduates, released into the world but not yet comfortable in their suits. They shed their jackets and kicked off their shiny shoes, happy to be rid of them. They craned their necks and looked up. It was one thing for the climber and another thing for
the rest of them. But they didn’t care. They scrambled onto each other’s shoulders and shimmied up the trunk, strained their arms and heaved their young bodies. Suit pants and scraped hands be damned; nothing was as important tonight as climbing.

And this is how I remember that August evening: a dozen boys sitting in a tree, a silent tribute as the setting sun turned the air yellow. The boys a little too high up and a little too wobbly for our comfort. The whole gathering quiet and watching. We were all there because of him, and all there without him. We knew that if he had been among us, he would have been the first one climbing – barefoot. He would have risen higher than anyone else. He would have pushed the limits, and it might have been okay this time.

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In my memory, the tree that the boys climbed has become a white oak, because it seems like the most monumental of species. *Quercus alba*, long-lived, with ridged and grayish bark. If left to grow between a house and a sloping field, it will spread its branches into a colossal umbrella, as wide as it is tall. *Acer saccharum* – the sugar maple – would have been an equally appropriate tree. The following fall, when his friends returned to school for Homecoming, they placed a plaque for him beneath the enormous sugar maple in Science Quad. That tree is gone now; so are the plaque and most of the students who remember him. But this essay is not about the boy or the tree or his love of nature or the moments when his friends honored him. It’s about the memories that remain in the places left behind, and the slow process of regrowth.

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I did not really learn the names of trees until the following spring, my sophomore year of college, when I took a class on field botany. My knowledge of plants had always
been decent, because I grew up tromping through the Connecticut woods, but there were times when the patterns of trees began to merge and replicate until space lost meaning. One grove could easily be another. A red maple could easily be a sugar maple. When I retreated to the woods, I found this kind of confusion comforting; the trees let me be. The spring of my sophomore year, though, the woods changed. They became a place with a story.

Some devotees of the paranormal believe in a phenomenon called place memory: a physical location remembers the actions that occurred there and people that lived there. If you’re perceptive enough, you might happen upon one of these memories. Passing through an old house, for instance, you might suddenly – and vividly – see the way it looked a hundred years ago. Visiting Gettysburg, you might smell gunpowder and horses. Wandering through an empty college library, you might hear the clicking typewriters of long-gone students. It’s no wonder that people are drawn to this idea, for when you stop to consider it, you realize that the people disappear, but the place remains. In some form, it will always be there.

The woods posses a physical version of place memory. There’s a lot you can tell about their past just by looking at the plants. The spring I took the botany class, we drove all over the countryside searching for plant species and learning what makes them grow. Commonly known as skunk cabbage, *Symlocarpus foetidus* thrusts up in swampy areas and cups its waxy, purple spathe to form the first bloom of spring. *Sassafras albidum* frequents the southern forests of hickory and oak. Snap its twig in half, and you’ll smell a spicy aroma. A pioneer species, one of the first to move in after a disturbance, paper birch – *Betula papyrifera* – thrives in light and rich soil.
This was the alphabet of the woods, and as I memorized it, I began to recognize another world around me. But I needed more time to learn to read the world’s stories, so I took trip after trip to Hopkins Forest. Perhaps another reason people believe in place memory is because our own recollections are inextricably linked to location. Maybe place memory is really memory of places. Scientists have long known about episodic memories, which are formed in connection to specific locations. Not only do we recall exactly where we were during important events, but we also recall events when we return to places.

I realized how much my freshman year had shaped the Williams campus when I came back the next fall. Everywhere I went, I recalled moments I had shared with the boy who would never return. As a freshman, I had tagged along with him and my sister, two bold and mature seniors. I had been a third wheel, but it hadn’t felt like that. They had verged on a parental pair, more than my JA’s could ever be. The experiences I recalled were mostly quotidian – conversations and meals – and I would have forgotten them if the boy had not been seared into my brain like a bright spot that remains on the retina long after the light is gone. Although he was significant in life, he would have eventually passed into obscurity as he and my sister diverged. But death froze the moment and the relationships, and the boy came to stand for a safe time that I could never retrieve, and for something both immense and fleeting.

We went to Hopkins Forest together only once. The first time I returned, I could think of nothing except for him, but slowly the woods began to take over. And this is the tale they told me: even the barest places experience regrowth.
Two hundred years ago, this land was stripped and shaped by hands and tools and the teeth of livestock. Before settlers came, old forest had spread across the mountainside and into the valley. It was a place of beech and sugar maple and hemlock trees. Of cool, sun-speckled shadows, high canopies, and wind that stirred the branches. Then the trees fell, one by one. The work was slow, for the laborers cleared only three acres in a whole year’s time, but gradually the sky opened.

Farmers cultivated the flat land, piling stones into walls and planting corn, wheat and rye. This soil was good for growing because it came from streambed deposits. It was porous enough to store water, loose enough to make room for roots. The other land was not as fruitful, and the farmers turned it to pasture for cows and sheep. Only the wet land and the mountainsides were left alone. Here, pure pockets of trees persisted, alone, amongst fields. It was so empty that you could stand on the slopes where the forest used to be and gaze across quilted land to pick out the distant roofs of the college town.

But then fortunes and industry changed. Eventually, the farms were abandoned, and the land had a chance to recover. The return of the woods followed a particular pattern – the grammar of reforestation. At first the grass grew long, and tall spirea shrubs invaded. As these died, their leaves and stems and roots returned nutrients to the depleted soil. Trees began sprouting. First paper birch – those pioneers that yield enough shade for other species. As life returned, it hid the land’s scars beneath new growth.

Today, the forest is whole again, but it is not the same. The composition of species was forever changed. And although there is now a full blanket of trees, the careful reader – the grammatical reader – can discern the past. If you spot an ancient sun-loving tree amongst younger species, you know it likely lived there when the land was
still pasture. If you see a patch of paper birch, you can tell there was a recent disturbance. You might even come across a half-buried stonewall rising from leaf litter, and you’ll know you’re skirting a deserted farm. These woods speak of mending and revitalization while still remembering.

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Today I have returned to Hopkins Forest a last time before my own graduation. It is a cold spring day smelling like rain and wet earth. After passing through a tunnel of trees, I come upon a fenced-in field, one of the few remaining open places. I pause, and for a moment I imagine a colossal tree – a white oak or sugar maple – stretching tall in the middle of the meadow. A boy climbs and swings among the branches. Another boy joins him, and then a third. In my mind, they are too far away for me to see their faces, and that’s all right to me. They climb higher into the branches until I lose sight of them among the new leaves, and then the tree is gone and I’m looking at the empty field again.

Almost three years have passed since the service. A lot changes in three years. I have become one of the bold, mature seniors that I so revered as a freshman. I am no longer hurting. And I am thinking that if this meadow were left alone for three years, it would be thick with shrubs and white birch saplings, with a promise of new growth to come.
References:

