

Background Baron Wormser is a widely-acclaimed American poet born in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1948. From 1975 to 1998, he lived “off the grid” with his wife and children on 48 acres of pristine woodland in Mercer, Maine, earning a living as a librarian and creative writing teacher. He wrote a book about the experience called *The Road Washes Out in Spring* from which this excerpt is taken. In 2000, he was appointed Poet Laureate of Maine. Since 2002, Wormser has been conducting poetry writing workshops with students and teachers in schools and universities throughout Maine.

Trees

Essay by Baron Wormser

1. **READ** ▶ As you read lines 1–20, begin to cite textual evidence.
 - Underline text describing what the author did to build his dream house.
 - Circle text describing the results of these actions.
 - In the margin, make notes about what the author values (lines 12–20).

Our house was quite literally in the woods. I cut down poplars, a few spavined¹ apple trees, some white pines, and a number of tall, thin, red maples to create an adequate opening to situate the house and let the sun in over the tree tops. The apple trees must have been the remnant of a little orchard that had been planted near where the farmhouse once stood. The others had grown up randomly as the site of what once was a farm became woods. We used a compass to **orient** the house to the south. This was not a development lot that had to have its house squarely facing the street. The sun that came up over the trees could be seen from our bedroom window. We could follow it across the front of the house throughout the day. On a frigid but sunny winter day, the south windows **suffused** a gentle warmth.

¹ **spavined**: damaged, deteriorated, or ruined.

CLOSE READ
Notes



orient:

suffuse:

indomitable:

In front of and in back of the house stood a number of very straight pines that were fifty to sixty years old. We revered them, though we knew any city person strolling in a park—a domain where aesthetics trumped board feet—would see larger and older trees. In rural Maine lumbering is always an issue; one sees very few, really old trees in the endless woods because those woods are being cut time and time again. The works of man, the industry that drives each economic day, are what the Maine woods call to mind. What man leaves behind is happenstance. The cutters might trust **indomitable** nature; they
 20 might trust cooperative, university-based science; or they might be indifferent.

venerate:

When I first began to roam the backcountry where we lived, I was routinely appalled when I encountered tracts that had been lumbered recently. Limbs and sections of trunks that were unusable were strewn everywhere. Young trees had been toppled and left eventually to collapse under snow. Splintered trees whose tops had been sheared off when other trees fell on them stood like big, ragged toothpicks. Huge ruts from the skidders that moved the logs were everywhere. Piles of brush sat like so much unwanted debris. It looked like a war had occurred, a war against the trees. Of course, woodcutting isn't an issue of beautification. It's an issue of humankind making a buck off
 30 some trees that the rest of humankind needs for paper and lumber. The whole notion of trees as something to regard and **venerate** would have seemed bizarre to the men with the chainsaws and trucks. The trees were there for people to use. Such is the way of workaday humanity.

2. **◀ REREAD** Reread lines 12–20. Make an inference about the author's feelings about lumbering. Cite evidence from the text.

3. **▶ READ** As you read lines 21–51, continue to cite textual evidence.
- Circle text that describes the author's initial reaction toward lumbering.
 - Underline details that explain why trees are cut down.
 - In the margin, note how the author describes recently lumbered tracts (lines 23–28).

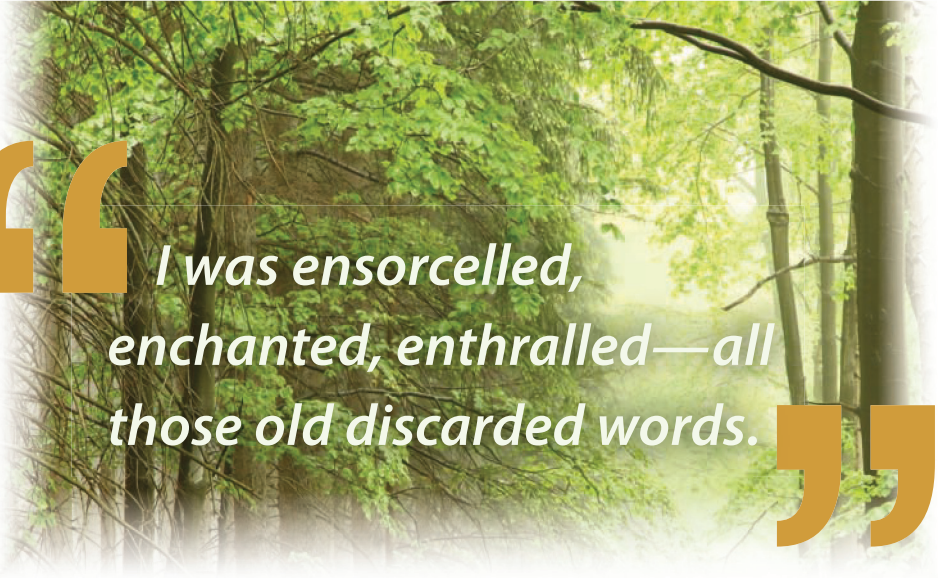
We were fortunate. For us, the trees were not part of any crucial, economic equation. When I cut trees for the firewood that kept us warm and that heated our water, I could pick each tree I was going to fell according to how healthy (or unhealthy) the tree was and whether I should thin that one to allow others to grow. I could fell the tree so it would do the least damage to others. I could use virtually the entire tree because I sawed up the limbs for our cook stove. I could
40 arrange the brush on the ground so that it would compact reasonably quickly. You had to take a careful look to notice that a tree had been felled.

Although we heated our house with the trees I cut on our land and although we had no backup heat whatsoever, more than one woodcutter told me that, despite my exertions, I was doing little more in the woods than playing. I could understand. Anything that didn't honor the dollar equation was recreation. Caleb cut trees, sold them for pulp, and used the money to pay for oil heat. He informed me he was "way ahead" by doing this. When I asked him, "Ahead of what?" he only snorted. He had endured a lifetime of starting
50 fires in wood stoves, getting up in the middle of winter nights to put in more wood, then waking in the morning to the cold misery of ashes. I could have it. I was off in my labor-intensive poetic Oz.

I had to confess that I was quite happy in my Oz of trees. At any time I could walk a few steps and literally be in the woods. In the heat of summer, I had the shade, the coolness, and the ever-changing play of the sifted light. The

4. **◀ REREAD** Reread lines 42–51. What does Caleb mean when he says he "was way ahead?" Support your answer with explicit textual evidence.

5. **▶ READ** As you read lines 52–90, continue to cite textual evidence.
- Underline text the author uses instead of "trees."
 - Circle the sensory language the author uses to describe the trees.



*I was ensorcelled,
enchanted, enthralled—all
those old discarded words.*

analogies to a cathedral were not far-fetched. In the heights of the trees there was audible mystery—pewees and tanagers² I heard but rarely saw. I marveled at the relentless yearning toward the sun, how the maples made their way amid a canopy of pines. In winter I watched the bare forms gesturing like still dancers. I listened to the spry clatter of branches in a strong wind. They
60 sounded like little bones. In all seasons, the waver and dapple of shadow sighed. When I examined a stump, I saw in the growth rings the shapes of years, some bunched, some even, some **protuberant**. I was ensorcelled, enchanted, enthralled—all those old discarded words.

protuberant:

Part of living with the trees lay in considering their ways. Each type of tree was deeply singular. There were the trademark white pines that a friend once likened to huge stalks of celery on account of how their tops waved in a wind. There were the smooth-trunked beeches that held onto their parchment-like leaves throughout the winter and rattled dryly. There were the poplars (or “popple” in the local designation) that were “trash” trees, their loosely fibrous
70 wood considered not good for much of anything. Their diminutive leaves were attuned to every breeze and shimmered with audible movement. In a stiff wind they seemed almost frenetic. There were the deeply furrowed sugar maples along the road to our house that had been tapped to make maple syrup and now were dying as their huge limbs rotted and fell. There were the white birches, with their peeling, papery strips of bark, yellow birches that were not a bright yellow, but a silvery yellow, and gray birches that sometimes were bent almost to the ground from the winter’s snow.

And there were the elms left over from the nineteenth century when farmers had planted whips—slender, unbranched shoots of American elm—to
80 domesticate and beautify the homestead. It was sad to see them—massive

² **pewees and tanagers:** two types of perching birds.

torsos that the seasons were breaking down bit by bit. The wood was gnarled and almost impossible to split. Occasionally, we came upon them in the middle of what seemed like nowhere but wasn't—once a farmhouse had stood there. Sentinels, the elms had died on their watch. Nearby, weathered clapboards soft with decay lay on the ground along with the usual array of rusty pots, pans, and broken crockery. We stared up at the dead trees and down at the shards of lives. The massive, leafless stillness spoke to the wretched indifference of time. Their ruined dignity warned the **encroaching** woods that the arboreal world was a mere wink. Even the most stolid matter was corruptible. They were sculptures of loss.

90 When I looked at one of my familiars, such as the pine in back of our house that had grown up in a gigantic U-shape, two fifty-foot limbs rising from the trunk at around thirty feet, I considered the hazards of growth. Some impediment had caused this curious formation. The awkward tree kept growing as I kept on living. Habit had a sort of genius, yet it might take shapes that made the eye wince. I thought of the terrible ability of living creatures to adapt, to get along, to say the current regime is okay when the current regime is not okay. Eventually a windstorm would wreck those two unnatural limbs that had become trunks. The tree would have lived a reasonably long life, however.

100 Like many people under many regimes, it had managed. Its awkwardness had not been ruinous; its inconvenience was silent.

The bark was surprisingly delicate, and the pitch was sticky. The fragrance was that thick, turpentine sweetness that is pine. I didn't have a problem understanding how people had once worshipped trees. Perhaps, as pantheists³

³ **pantheists:** people who believe that God is identical with the universe.

encroaching:

6. **◀ REREAD** Reread lines 78–90. Make an inference about what the author means when he describes the trees as “sculptures of loss?”

7. **▶ READ** As you read lines 91–108, continue to cite textual evidence.
- Underline details that describe the unusual pine in the back of the house.
 - In the margin, explain what the trees teach the author about adaptation.

