

**Wendell Berry**  
a selection of works



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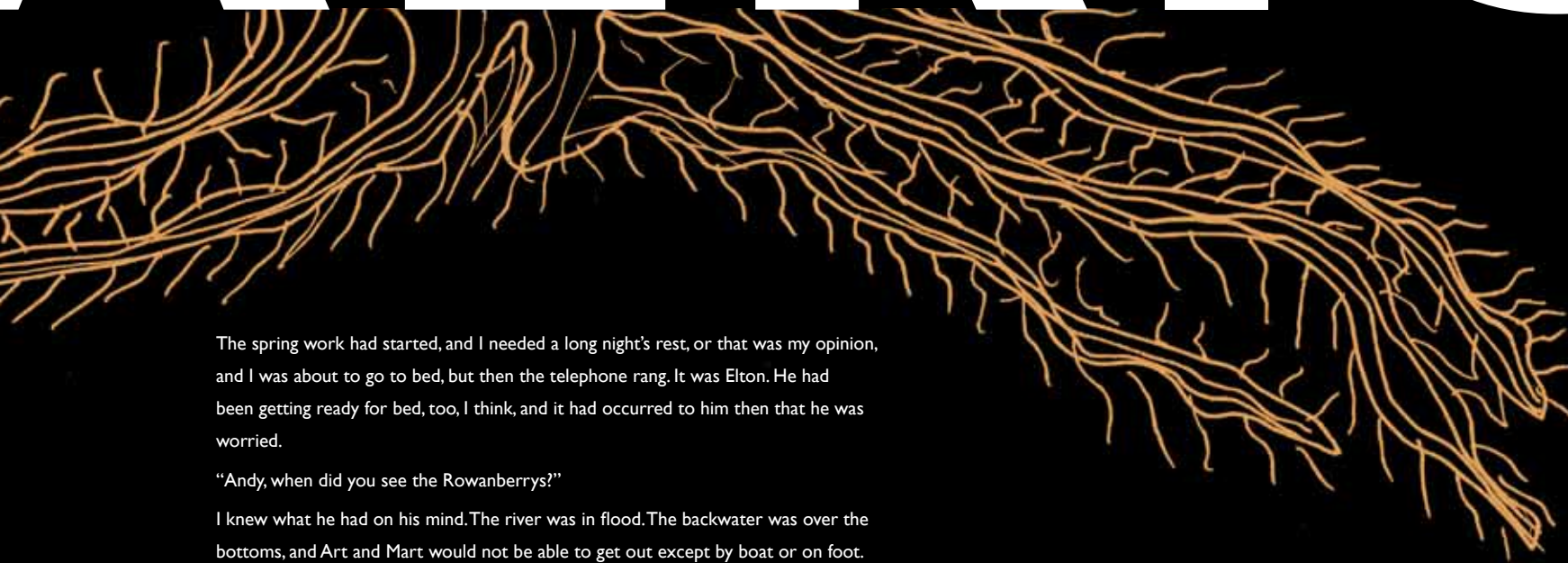
# Wendell Berry

Wendell Berry lives and farms with his family in Henry County, Kentucky, and is the author of more than thirty books of fiction, non-fiction, and poetry. Among his novels (set in the fictional community of Port William Kentucky) are *Nathan Coulter* (1960), *A Place on Earth* (1967), and *The Memory of Old Jack* (1974); short story collections include *The Wild Birds* (1986), *Remembering* (1988), *Fidelity* (1993), and *Watch With Me* (1994); collections of essays include, among many others, *A Continuous Harmony* (1972), *The Unsettling of America* (1977), *Recollected Essays* (1981), and *Sex, Economy, Freedom, & Community* (1993); and among his many volumes of poetry are *A Part* (1980), *The Wheel* (1982), *Collected Poems* (1985) and *Entries* (1984).

In a commencement address delivered in June 1989 at the College of the Atlantic in Bar Harbor, Maine, Berry gave some advice that to most modern graduates would sound old fashioned, indeed backward. But the advice he gave was timeless, and his reminder seems apocalyptic in view of the world's current environmental crisis and, as Berry sees it, America's cultural crisis. In a sense, Berry's deliverance of such a critical message parallels Moses' deliverance of the Ten Commandments, for Berry's advice is also a prescription for cultural healing through the imposition of a set of laws. The laws Berry delivers, however, seem to be Nature's laws. He closed his address (later published in Harper's as "The Futility of Global Thinking") with a series of ten commands, which, he said, "is simply my hope for us all" (22). These instructions are at the heart of Berry's personal and literary world, and collectively they express the thesis informing all of his work, a canon now in excess of thirty books of essays, fiction, and poetry.

# ARE YOU

# ALL RIGHT



The spring work had started, and I needed a long night's rest, or that was my opinion, and I was about to go to bed, but then the telephone rang. It was Elton. He had been getting ready for bed, too, I think, and it had occurred to him then that he was worried.

"Andy, when did you see the Rowanberrys?"

I knew what he had on his mind. The river was in flood. The backwater was over the bottoms, and Art and Mart would not be able to get out except by boat or on foot.

"Not since the river came up."

"Well, neither have I. And their phone's out. Mary, when did Mart call up here?"

I heard Mary telling him, "Monday night," and then, "It was Monday night," Elton said to me. "I've tried to call every day since, and I can't get anybody. That's four days."

"Well, surely they're all right."

"Well, that's what Mary and I have been saying. Surely they are. They've been taking

care of themselves a long time. But, then, you never know."

"The thing is, we don't know."

We knew what we were doing, and both of us were a little embarrassed about it. The Rowanberry Place had carried that name since the first deeds were recorded in the log cabin that was the first courthouse at Hargrave. Rowanberrys had been taking care of themselves there for the better part of two hundred years. We knew that Arthur and Martin Rowanberry required as little worrying about as anybody alive. But now, in venturing to worry about them, we had put them, so to speak, under the sign of mortality. They were, after all, the last of the Rowanberrys, and they were getting old. We were uneasy in being divided from them by the risen water and out of touch. It caused us to think of things that could happen.

Elton said, "It's not hard, you know, to think of things that could happen."

"Well," I said, "do you think we'd better go see about them?"

He laughed. "Well, we've thought, haven't we? I guess we'd better go."

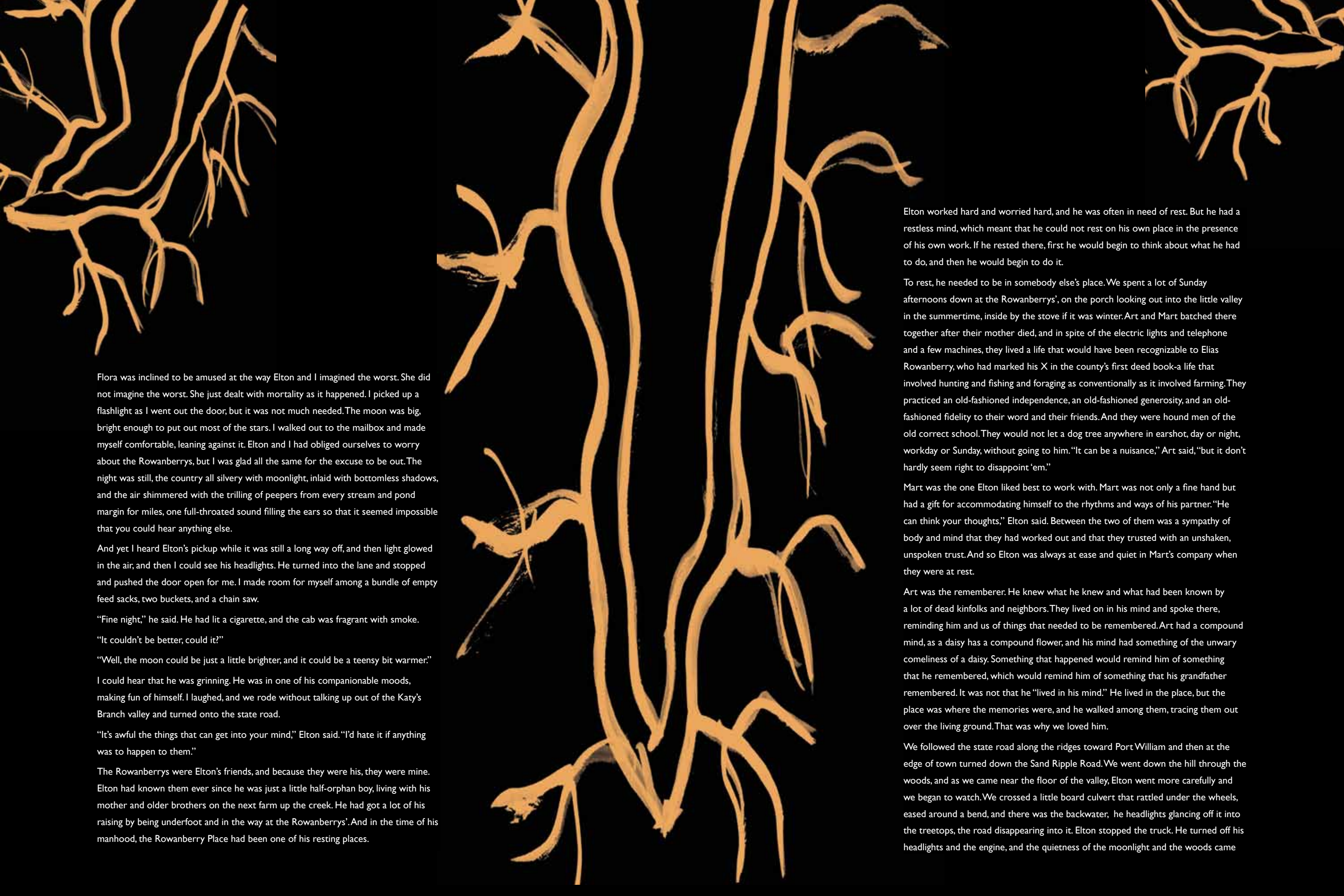
"All right. I'll meet you at the mailbox."

I hung up and went to get my cap and jacket.

"Nobody's heard from Art and Mart for four days," I said to Flora. "Their phone's out."

"And you and Elton are going to see about them," Flora said. She had been eavesdropping.

"I guess we are."



Flora was inclined to be amused at the way Elton and I imagined the worst. She did not imagine the worst. She just dealt with mortality as it happened. I picked up a flashlight as I went out the door, but it was not much needed. The moon was big, bright enough to put out most of the stars. I walked out to the mailbox and made myself comfortable, leaning against it. Elton and I had obliged ourselves to worry about the Rowanberrys, but I was glad all the same for the excuse to be out. The night was still, the country all silvery with moonlight, inlaid with bottomless shadows, and the air shimmered with the trilling of peepers from every stream and pond margin for miles, one full-throated sound filling the ears so that it seemed impossible that you could hear anything else.

And yet I heard Elton's pickup while it was still a long way off, and then light glowed in the air, and then I could see his headlights. He turned into the lane and stopped and pushed the door open for me. I made room for myself among a bundle of empty feed sacks, two buckets, and a chain saw.

"Fine night," he said. He had lit a cigarette, and the cab was fragrant with smoke.

"It couldn't be better, could it?"

"Well, the moon could be just a little brighter, and it could be a teensy bit warmer."

I could hear that he was grinning. He was in one of his companionable moods, making fun of himself. I laughed, and we rode without talking up out of the Katy's Branch valley and turned onto the state road.

"It's awful the things that can get into your mind," Elton said. "I'd hate it if anything was to happen to them."

The Rowanberrys were Elton's friends, and because they were his, they were mine. Elton had known them ever since he was just a little half-orphan boy, living with his mother and older brothers on the next farm up the creek. He had got a lot of his raising by being underfoot and in the way at the Rowanberrys'. And in the time of his manhood, the Rowanberry Place had been one of his resting places.

Elton worked hard and worried hard, and he was often in need of rest. But he had a restless mind, which meant that he could not rest on his own place in the presence of his own work. If he rested there, first he would begin to think about what he had to do, and then he would begin to do it.

To rest, he needed to be in somebody else's place. We spent a lot of Sunday afternoons down at the Rowanberrys', on the porch looking out into the little valley in the summertime, inside by the stove if it was winter. Art and Mart batched there together after their mother died, and in spite of the electric lights and telephone and a few machines, they lived a life that would have been recognizable to Elias Rowanberry, who had marked his X in the county's first deed book—a life that involved hunting and fishing and foraging as conventionally as it involved farming. They practiced an old-fashioned independence, an old-fashioned generosity, and an old-fashioned fidelity to their word and their friends. And they were hound men of the old correct school. They would not let a dog tree anywhere in earshot, day or night, workday or Sunday, without going to him. "It can be a nuisance," Art said, "but it don't hardly seem right to disappoint 'em."

Mart was the one Elton liked best to work with. Mart was not only a fine hand but had a gift for accommodating himself to the rhythms and ways of his partner. "He can think your thoughts," Elton said. Between the two of them was a sympathy of body and mind that they had worked out and that they trusted with an unshaken, unspoken trust. And so Elton was always at ease and quiet in Mart's company when they were at rest.

Art was the rememberer. He knew what he knew and what had been known by a lot of dead kinfolks and neighbors. They lived on in his mind and spoke there, reminding him and us of things that needed to be remembered. Art had a compound mind, as a daisy has a compound flower, and his mind had something of the unwary comeliness of a daisy. Something that happened would remind him of something that he remembered, which would remind him of something that his grandfather remembered. It was not that he "lived in his mind." He lived in the place, but the place was where the memories were, and he walked among them, tracing them out over the living ground. That was why we loved him.

We followed the state road along the ridges toward Port William and then at the edge of town turned down the Sand Ripple Road. We went down the hill through the woods, and as we came near the floor of the valley, Elton went more carefully and we began to watch. We crossed a little board culvert that rattled under the wheels, eased around a bend, and there was the backwater, he headlights glancing off it into the treetops, the road disappearing into it. Elton stopped the truck. He turned off his headlights and the engine, and the quietness of the moonlight and the woods came



down around us. I could hear the peepers again. It was wonderful what the road going under the water did to that place. It was not only that we could not go where we were used to going; it was as if a thought that we were used to thinking could not be thought.

“Listen!” Elton said. He had heard a barred owl off in the woods. He quietly rolled the window down.

And then, right overhead, an owl answered: “HOOOOOAWWWW!”

And the far one said, “Hoo hoo hoo hooaw!”

“Listen!” Elton said again. He was whispering.

The owls went through their whole repertory of hoots and clucks and cackles and gobbles.

“Listen to them!” Elton said. “They’ve got a lot on their minds.” Being in the woods at night excited him. He was a hunter. And we were excited by the flood’s interruption of the road. The rising of the wild water had moved us back in time.

Elton quietly opened his door and got out and then, instead of slamming the door, just pushed it to. I did the same and came around and followed him as he walked slowly down the road, looking for a place to climb out of the cut.

Once we had climbed the bank and stepped over the fence and were walking among the big trees, we seemed already miles from the truck. The water gleamed over the bottomlands below us on our right; you could not see that there had ever been a road in that place. I followed Elton along the slope through the trees. Neither of us thought to use a flashlight, though we each had one, nor did we talk. The moon gave plenty of light. We could see everything—underfoot the blooms of twinleaf, bloodroot, rue anemone, the little stars of spring beauties, and overhead the littlest branches, even the blooms on the sugar maples. The ground was soft from the rain, and we hardly made a sound. The flowers around us seemed to float in the shadows so that we walked like waders among stars, uncertain how far down to put our feet. And

“HOOOOOAWWWW!”

over the broad shine of the backwater, the calling of the peepers rose like another flood, higher than the water flood, and thrilled and trembled in the air.

It was a long walk because we had to go around the inlets of the backwater that lay in every swag and hollow. Way off, now and again, we could hear the owls. Once we startled a deer and stood still while it plunged away into the shadows. And always we were walking among flowers. I wanted to keep thinking that they were like stars, but after a while I could not think so. They were not like stars. They did not have that hard, distant glitter. And yet in their pale, peaceful way, they shone. They collected their little share of light and gave it back. Now and then, when we came to an especially thick patch of them, Elton would point. Or he would raise his hand and we would stop a minute and listen to the owls.

I was wider awake than I had been since morning would have been glad to go on walking all night long. Around us we could feel the year coming, as strong and wide and irresistible as a wind.

But we were thinking, too, of the Rowanberrys. That we were in a mood to loiter and did not loiter would have reminded us of them, if we had needed reminding.

To go to their house, with the water up, would have required a long walk from any place we could have started. We were taking the shortest way, which left us with the problem that it was going to be a little too short. The best we could do, this way, would be to come down the valley until we would be across from the house but still divided from it by a quarter mile or more of backwater.

We could call to them from there. But what if we got no answer? What if the answer was trouble? Well, they had a boat over there. If they needed us, one of them could set us over in the boat. But what if we got no answer? What if, to put the best construction upon silence, they could not hear us? Well, we could only go as near as we could get and call.

So if our walk had the feeling of a ramble, it was not one. We were going as straight to the Rowanberrys’ house as the water and the lay of the land would allow. After a while we began to expect to see a light. And then we began to wonder if there was a light to see.

Elton stopped. “I thought we’d have seen their light by now.”

I said, “They’re probably asleep.”

Those were the first words we had spoken since we left the truck. After so long, in so much quiet, our voices sounded small.

Elton went on among the trees and the shadows, and I followed him. We climbed over a little shoulder of the slope then and saw one window shining. It was the light



ARE  
YOU  
AAALLL  
RIIIGHT?”

of an oil lamp, so their electricity was out, too.

“And now we’re found,” Elton said. He sang it, just that much of the old hymn, almost in a whisper.

We went through a little more of the woods and climbed the fence into the Rowanberrys’ hill pasture. We could see their big barn standing up black now against the moonlight on the other side of the road, which was on high ground at that place, clear of the backwater.

When we were on the gravel we could hear our steps. We walked side by side, Elton in one wheel track, I in the other, until the road went under the water again. We were as close to the house then as we could get without a boat. We stopped and considered the distance.

And then Elton cupped his hands around his mouth, and called, “Ohhhhh, Mart! Ohhhhh, Art!”

We waited, it seemed, while Art had time to say, “Did you hear somebody?” and Mart to answer, “Well, I thought so.” We saw light come to another window, as somebody picked up a lamp and opened the hall door. We heard the front door open. And then Art’s voice came across the water: “Yeeeaah!”

And Elton called back, “Are you aaalll riiight?”


I knew they were. They were all right, and we were free to go back through the woods and home to sleep. But now I know that it was neither of the Rowanberrys who was under the sign of mortality that night. It was Elton. Before another April came he would be in his grave on the hill at Port William. Old Art Rowanberry, who had held him on his lap, would survive him by a dozen years.

And now that both of them are dead, I love to think of them standing with the shining backwater between them, while Elton’s voice goes out across the distance, is heard and answered, and the other voice travels back: “Yeeeaah!”

# Know the Dark

To go in the dark with a light is to know the light.

**To know the dark, go dark. Go without sight,**  
and find that the dark, too, blooms and sings,  
and is traveled by dark feet and dark wings.



The career of rugged individualism in America has run mostly to absurdity, tragic or comic. But it also has done us a certain amount of good. There was a streak of it in Thoreau, who went alone to jail in protest against the Mexican War. And that streak has continued in his successors who have suffered penalties for civil disobedience because of their perception that the law and the government were not always or necessarily right. This is individualism of a kind rugged enough, and it has been authenticated typically by its identification with a communal good.

The tragic version of rugged individualism is in the presumptive “right” of individuals to do as they please, as if there were no God, no legitimate government, no community, no neighbors, and no posterity. This is most frequently understood as the right to do whatever one pleases with one’s property. One’s property, according to this formulation, is one’s own absolutely.

Rugged individualism of this kind has cost us dearly in lost topsoil, in destroyed forests, in the increasing toxicity of the world, and in annihilated species. When property rights become absolute they are invariably destructive, for then they are used to justify not only the abuse of things of permanent value for the temporary benefit of legal owners, but also the appropriation and abuse of things to which the would-be owners have

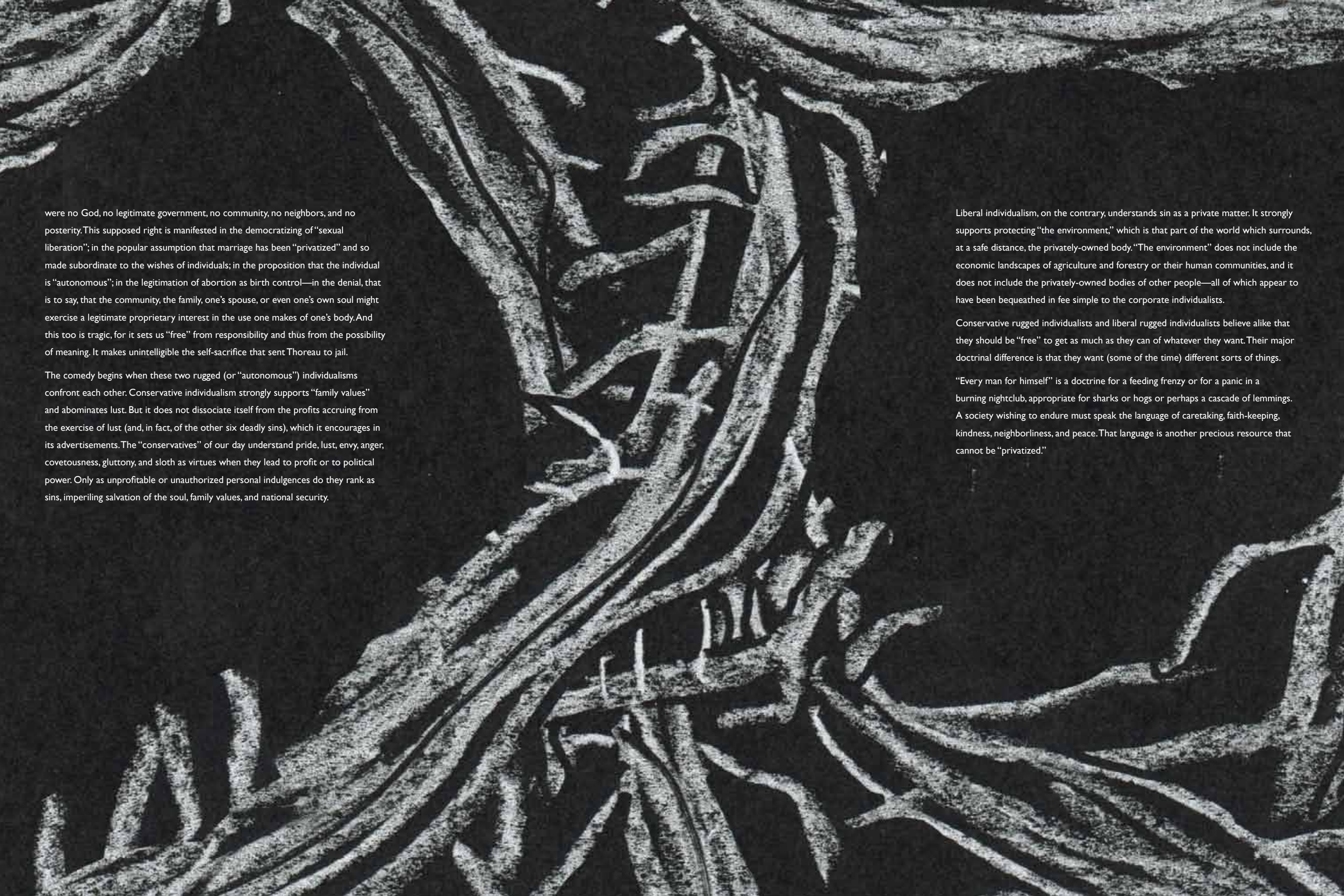
no rights at all, but which can belong only to the public or to the entire community of living creatures: the atmosphere, the water cycle, wilderness, ecosystems, the possibility of life.

This is made worse when great corporations are granted the status of “persons,” who then can also become rugged individuals, insisting on their right to do whatever they please with their property. Because of the overwhelming wealth and influence of these “persons,” the elected representatives and defenders of “the people of the United States” become instead the representatives and defenders of the corporations.

It has become ever more clear that this sort of individualism has never proposed or implied any protection of the rights of all individuals, but instead has promoted a ferocious scramble in which more and more of the rights of “the people” have been gathered into the ownership of fewer and fewer of the greediest and most powerful “persons.”

I have described so far what most of us would identify as the rugged individualism of the political right. Now let us have a look at the left. The rugged individualism of the left believes that an individual’s body is a property belonging to that individual absolutely: The owners of bodies may, by right, use them as they please, as if there

# Rugged Individualism



were no God, no legitimate government, no community, no neighbors, and no posterity. This supposed right is manifested in the democratizing of “sexual liberation”; in the popular assumption that marriage has been “privatized” and so made subordinate to the wishes of individuals; in the proposition that the individual is “autonomous”; in the legitimation of abortion as birth control—in the denial, that is to say, that the community, the family, one’s spouse, or even one’s own soul might exercise a legitimate proprietary interest in the use one makes of one’s body. And this too is tragic, for it sets us “free” from responsibility and thus from the possibility of meaning. It makes unintelligible the self-sacrifice that sent Thoreau to jail.

The comedy begins when these two rugged (or “autonomous”) individualisms confront each other. Conservative individualism strongly supports “family values” and abominates lust. But it does not dissociate itself from the profits accruing from the exercise of lust (and, in fact, of the other six deadly sins), which it encourages in its advertisements. The “conservatives” of our day understand pride, lust, envy, anger, covetousness, gluttony, and sloth as virtues when they lead to profit or to political power. Only as unprofitable or unauthorized personal indulgences do they rank as sins, imperiling salvation of the soul, family values, and national security.

Liberal individualism, on the contrary, understands sin as a private matter. It strongly supports protecting “the environment,” which is that part of the world which surrounds, at a safe distance, the privately-owned body. “The environment” does not include the economic landscapes of agriculture and forestry or their human communities, and it does not include the privately-owned bodies of other people—all of which appear to have been bequeathed in fee simple to the corporate individualists.

Conservative rugged individualists and liberal rugged individualists believe alike that they should be “free” to get as much as they can of whatever they want. Their major doctrinal difference is that they want (some of the time) different sorts of things.

“Every man for himself” is a doctrine for a feeding frenzy or for a panic in a burning nightclub, appropriate for sharks or hogs or perhaps a cascade of lemmings. A society wishing to endure must speak the language of caretaking, faith-keeping, kindness, neighborliness, and peace. That language is another precious resource that cannot be “privatized.”



# In This World

The hill pasture, an open place among the trees,  
tilts into the valley. The clovers and tall grasses  
are in bloom. Along the foot of the hill  
dark floodwater moves down the river.  
The sun sets. Ahead of night fall the birds sing.  
I have climbed up to water the horses  
and now sit and rest, high on the hillside,  
letting the day gather and pass. Below me  
cattle graze out across the wide fields of the bottomlands,  
slow and preoccupied as stars. In this world  
men are making plans, wearing themselves out,  
spending their lives, in order to kill each other.

## For the Rebuilding of a House

To know the inhabiting reasons  
of trees and streams, old men  
who shed their lives  
on the world like leaves,  
I watch them go.  
And I go. I build  
the place of my leaving. The days arc

into vision  
like fish leaping, their shining  
caught in the stream.  
I watch them go in homage and sorrow.  
I build the place of my dream.  
I build the place of my leaving  
that the dark may come clean.

## The Silence

What must a man do to be at home in the world?  
There must be times when he is here  
as though absent, gone beyond words into the woven shadows  
of the grass and the flighty darkneses  
of leaves shaking in the wind, and beyond  
the sense of the weariness of engines and of his own heart,  
his wrongs grown old unforgiven. It must be with him  
as though his bones fade beyond thought  
into the shadows that grow out of the ground  
so that the furrow he opens in the earth opens  
in his bones, and he hears the silence  
of the tongues of the dead tribesmen buried here  
a thousand years ago. And then what presences will rise up  
before him, weeds bearing flowers, and the dry wind  
rain! What songs he will hear!

## Awake at Night

Late in the night I pay  
the unrest lowe  
to the life that has never lived  
and cannot live now.  
What the world could be  
is my good dream  
and my agony when, dreaming it  
I lie awake and turn  
and look into the dark.  
I think of a luxury  
in the sturdiness and grace  
of necessary things, not  
Ill frivolity. That would heal  
the earth, and heal men.  
But the end, too, is part  
of the pattern, the last  
labor of the heart:  
to learn to lie still,  
one with the earth  
again, and let the world go.



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## Colophon

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