

The Yellow Wood—

A WHEATON MEMOIR

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IF EVER A WOOD RESEMBLED THE poet Frost's fabled yellow wood of "The Road Not Taken," it was the wood I associate most closely with my college days. Actually, it was a strip of trees bordering one side of the campus through which students took shortcuts to the road beyond.

There were two favored paths worn particularly smooth by the tread of many an undergraduate foot and they seemed to go their separate ways much as Frost's "divergent roads." However, one was not "grassy and wanting wear." They were both equally worn (as Frost later observed in his poem), but to me symbolic of the poet's road of choice—especially as I was a college sophomore with many decisions to make.

The wood consisted mostly of enormous maples with a few of Frost's beloved birches scattered here and there—a lovely contrast. And the maples were gloriously yellow in the fall. On a blue October day the yellow leaves against the sky seemed brilliant with an almost military glitter.

However peaceful the surroundings, so noisy was the crash of blue and gold above that echoes of countless college bands marching down an endless football field rang in my ears. This was the season for football weekends and I had enjoyed more than a few. And yet, in retrospect, those weekends seemed no more than a series of commas in the first paragraph of my college experience. The paragraph was my freshman year.

The leaves were unusually large and fell fast once the first cold snap occurred. Often I sat on my favorite stump and fingered one of the broad leaves from the ground, tracing the veins thoughtfully. Perhaps I hoped to read some direction—foresee some future less than uncertain—much as a fortune-teller reading a palm.

Now it was a time of new beginnings and second year in college. It was also a time for thought. I hadn't really discovered the wood until this fall of sophomore year, although I had been aware of it the year before.

A fine old gentleman, a former president of the college, used to come and stroll among the trees, unable, it would seem, to stay away from the environment he loved so well. Occasionally I observed him from the dormitory window and he always seemed deep in thought. In my youth I al-

most envied him. For how could he have any more important decisions before him? They had all been made years before and to my naïve eyes he was only here to reflect and remember when his decisions shaped the college.

As for me, I had come no closer to any choice and this year a major subject had to be declared. Life had been all chiaroscuro, all muted half-tones. There had been no sharp black-and-white contrasts.

I had flirted with the idea of writing during the first year and enjoyed a modest success with the literary magazine. I had even written a play, which had been produced on campus. But like the dates I kept on those football weekends, I considered my romance with writing a mere flirtation.

So it was and so it has been for some time now, although the road I have traveled has since led me into radio writing, advertising and related fields. Interestingly enough, art was the eventual major.

In youth flirtation is stimulating, but sooner or later one looks for the "real thing." For today's youth, so attuned to accelerated success, perhaps the "real thing" is grasped and held much sooner in their lives.

Upon reflection, the obvious difference between The Poet and me was his choice of the road "less traveled by." The instinctive courage of my embryonic convictions was quite lacking and I have trod the familiar path, finding it more difficult with each step—always looking backward. As for The Poet, I'm sure his footsteps never faltered once he set out on that other path. He may have paused to observe but never to look back.

I wonder how many walk that familiar path with me, looking backward now and then, even tripping over a gnarled tree root every so often, only to pick themselves up and plod cheerfully on, knowing no other way. We are too far along that path now to turn back, but perhaps there is some gentle bend in the road ahead that may alter our course at least. And here we may pause as The Poet might have paused

and observe. There might even be a tree stump to sit on and catch one's breath and a quiet, golden moment in which to reflect.

I have often thought I would like to return to the yellow afternoons of those woods and youthful decisions, but I am sure they would not be there. The woods of memory never are.

