

## DIVERGENCE

Patrick Madden

By the time I was eleven I had seen several women naked. None of them were real, of course, only glossy pictures in magazines that my friends had borrowed from their unsuspecting fathers or had found at an abandoned paper mill nearby. The magazines had become communal property, and in order to keep them hidden and accessible, we stashed them inside the hollow front door of a rotted out Buick that someone had crashed in the woods long before. And although I often went along with the kids in my neighborhood (after all, I looked at the magazines too), by the time I was eleven things were already beginning to change between us.

For one thing, my musical taste was evolving rapidly. I still clung to the shock entertainment of Kiss, but I played Rush constantly on my Walkman. A friend's older brother always wanted to play U2 for me, though it would take me a couple of years to really listen. The Police were taking over radio, along with a slew of other bands that are remembered today for their similarity and for depleting the possibilities of what you could do with a synthesizer and prettiness. Most of the kids in my neighborhood, a T-shaped cul-de-sac at the top of Emerson Drive, were older than me and were into bands like Pink Floyd and The Ramones. I imagined—as I watched them hammer two-by-four steps up the side of a tree, as I heard them singing, “Hey, teacher, leave those kids alone!” as I tasted their pent-up rage and rants—I imagined that their music was their symbol of rebellion; their black three-quarter-sleeve t-shirts, uniforms of nonconformity. When Kiss was going out of style, right around the time the *Unmasked* album came out, I cashed in on the fading fad by carting home some of the big kids' used records that they said they were just going to throw away.

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Editor: Jim Barnes  
Cora McKinn

Managing Editor: Linda Hauer Adams

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Cover: Two sons and one daughter of Joseph Adams and Lillie Ruth Fredonia Nier (Weaver Adams with black bar and dog, Oliver Adams in Army uniform, and Mae Boling with her children and family friends). Photo circa 1918, Summerfield, Oklahoma.

We had all been into jumping and racing our bikes for a few years, and though my bike was a clunky steel Sears Free Spirit and theirs were light-as-air chrome-moly Mongooses, they let me ride on the trails in the woods behind Bobby Russell's house anyway. Certainly Bobby wasn't going to object. You don't get the nickname "Cry Bobby" for being tough. We worked together on the trails nearly every day in the summer making improvements: tearing out saplings, burning up underbrush, strengthening jumps with rocks and mud, constructing a berm of plywood on the sharp-turning west corner. John Hickey, only one year older than me but many years braver, was the king of distance jumping, and he did most of his practicing in the streets, where five or six of us lined up, lying down in the road, and watched him soar over and beyond us to a hard landing on the street that took its toll on both John and the bike eventually.

At Memorial Junior School in the week before summer, the thing to sign in everybody's yearbook was "See you at the pool." Signing yearbooks was kind of like school Valentines—a perfunctory, detached sort of process—and you could, without any emotional investment or possibility of misunderstanding, be sure you'd see someone at the pool. It was as certain a bet as "Have a good summer." *Everybody* had a good summer. Except for David Sturchi, who was climbing on top of a skylight on the high school gym roof and fell through and died the week before school was to start again. But that hadn't happened yet, and in my neighborhood, when we weren't at the town pool, or when we were working up a sweat so the pool would seem more refreshing, we were usually on the bike trails.

One afternoon John Hickey and I rode back to the trails and saw marijuana for the first time. Although our school bus had passed by "Pot Corner," across from the high school, every day during the school year, the barrier of the windows and the height of our vantage point made the drugs seem unreal. But in the woods that day, behind Bobby Russell's house, it was the kids we knew smoking, and I was scared. I was only eleven, free for the summer and enjoying a warm day, and all of a sudden there it was: a hazy white smoke expanding to fill the volume of its container, an old two-liter soda bottle with a special side valve for sucking. The sweet, pungent aroma engulfed me, though I couldn't see the smoke outside the bottle. My friend and I had wanted to race around the track and measure our jumps, but there just inside the entrance to the woods, with the sunlight flashing through the leaves above and displaying odd patterns of reflections on its plastic curves, was the homemade bong resting in the hands of Billy Baske.

The older kids were as surprised to see us as we were to see the drugs, and they laughed out whispered Heys. We heyed them back and stood in silence.

How you doin'? You didn't see Bobby's mom's car out there, did you?  
We hadn't. But we hadn't been looking either.

Yeah. You comin' out to ride?

We were.

You guys smoke?

We didn't. I could feel the next question. I started to tremble.

Wanna try some?

This was before "Just Say No," and my parents had never spoken to me directly about drugs. My mother smoked cigarettes all the time, my father drank casually every now and then. They had lived through the '60s, and my father had fought in Viet Nam, but they never warned me, never counseled me. I told the older kids no and John followed suit. With the decision I felt a tremendous relief and a camaraderie with John because we had withstood the trial. But somehow I felt that it wouldn't be long before John came back without me.

I imagine I might have heard by then, somewhere in school or in conversation with my father or on PBS, a reference to Robert Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken." This would have been before anyone would have dared tarnish Frost's sincerity, pointing out the sarcasm in the grandiose claim of the poem. I know that I found out much later that Robert Frost and I share a birthday, March 26, and that that knowledge (coupled with the fact that *nobody* good was born March 26) makes me listen to what he says a little more. Then his comment that he'd as soon write free verse as play tennis without a net—*that's* my kind of criticism, whether I agree with it or not.

We enjoy prophetic poetry, people do, the words that recount to us our lives and our feelings and make us think, eerily, that the author knows us. "Two roads diverged in a yellow wood," begins Frost, and suddenly, in my memory, the scene in my woods takes on an amber glow. "Long I stood," he writes, and I picture the uncomfortable pause, not knowing whether to ride or turn back. "I kept the first for another day! / Yet knowing how way leads on to way, / I doubted if I should ever come back." As for Frost, so for me, both literally and metaphorically.

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

At the same time, I realize that none of this was in my mind that day. I was scared. I was not tempted. I was sad, already realizing that we wouldn't be riding on the trails much anymore. In the years that followed, I have imbued that moment with significance, reflected upon it, chosen it as symbolic. John did eventually go back without me. I don't know when, and we

never talked about it, but I knew. We remained friends for a while, playing hide-and-seek, swimming, jumping our bikes over each other. Once I broke a window at his house with a street hockey ball and he took the blame for me. Once his parents found cigarettes in his room and he blamed another friend. While I stayed clear of the woods and the older kids, he tried to straddle between me and them. And today, with a healthier understanding of the irony of Frost's poem, I still return to the meaning I ascribed to it long ago, the meaning that caught hold of the American imagination and made it famous. Because it works for me that way, witness to the myth I've fit a part of my life into. I wonder if poets ever fully comprehend the damage they can do.