

The Question

by Mary Timmons

Along the ditchbanks overgrown with elder bushes and the field roads and terrace rows reclaimed by sassafras sprouts, I've seen nature and man in an endless conflict. I've watched hackberry hedge rows encroach on old cotton fields, where the black top soil had bleached to a pallid pink from overcropping. I've seen bitterweeds cover bottom pastures and gullies, when the thin cows succumbed to the cold March winds. And I've seen farmland, sucked of every nutrient until all that remained of life on the soil was stunted and distorted, gradually, but so slowly, regain its green cover when the despairing owner stopped farming to do day labor in the nearby Blue Bell factory.

Observation has taught me that once the hill farmer relaxes his efforts in the struggle with an encroaching nature, for whatever reason, nature soon obliterates his labors, leaving only dim scars to show for a lifetime of work.

Sometimes with conscious effort, man has struggled his life through to dominate the insistent force always in contention with him. One cold, green spring, Isaac from the farm down the creek came to our house, walking with a long stooping stride, to explain to my father that he had just burned over his pasture to kill the insect eggs that had survived a mild winter. In his hasty exultation over the cleansing fire, he allowed it "to get out" on the land belonging to a farmer named Cherry Jones. Isaac's voice quavered with indignation as he explained to my father how he was willing to burn off Cherry-lad's woods for him but Cherry-lad got plain mad when the fire burned across part of his land. Isaac had told Cherry-lad how a burnt-off woods always brings tender grass and fewer ticks come summer. Afterwards I saw the scourged black land Isaac had burned over for both himself and Cherry-lad. Though my father (and Cherry-lad) cursed Isaac's foolish old ways, by late summer, sage grass and sourwood sprouts again turned the land green. The pine tree bark, blackened by the fire higher than a tall man could where other such scars from other spring fires became the hieroglyphics of man's struggle to subdue nature.

Late in June one year Sheriff Jody made his round through the countryside, more prompted by the warm fragrant day than by any desire to snatch-up wrong doers. When he stopped by our farm, he sat in the old white rocker on the front porch and as he rocked slowly, he told us about the favor he had done for us. He had killed all the young hawks and knocked feathers out of the old hawks that nested in the red oak beside the big road across the bottom. He was pleased at his ability to so favor us; we were depleted at our loss. I remember how we had watched the hawks circle the bottoms and how we had listened to their squeals, piercing and clear from heights almost impossible for the eye to see. We sneaked looks at the nests while the young were being fed and waited to see the parents push the young from their nests when they were mature enough to go forth into the world. Now there were no more red-tailed hawks to sit like majesty on the very tops of long slender pine saplings, swaying in the wind. After the carnage that littered the gravel road for weeks with blood and feathers, we never expected to see the hawks again. But last spring, from some mysterious region, the hawks returned. Once again, we see them circling above the old Willis House pasture and hear their squeals from high above us and know that nature has again rejuvenated

One September afternoon I sat astride my horse on the bluff above Cummings Creek, listening to the rude sounds of a low flying airplane. Almost simultaneously with the engine sounds came another noise — the deadly rattle among the leaves as grains of [Mirex](#) fell. That year whatever powers that be proclaimed the obliteration of the fire ants living in very scattered crumbly sand mounds about the hills of North Mississippi. In the farm literature, the presence of fire ants was treated with sudden, epidemic fierceness. They were as much a scourge as bubonic plague or Attila's huns. They had to be stomped out immediately and decisively by inundating the entire countryside with Mirex, without regard to whatever else might be destroyed. My family protested,

but were soothed by the county agricultural aristocracy housed at the courthouse, and our land was sprayed anyway. That one man with a small bag of the chemical could have dropped a few poisonous grains on each mound on his land in two hours' time, but that solution to the problem was too easy to be considered.

As I felt the grains bounce off of my skin that day I watched a brown thrasher chase a katydid into the wild honeysuckle. Next spring when I rode through the woods, I did not see the brown thrasher, nor did I see many other birds. That spring and summer and for several after, I saw few birds, few insects, and only an occasional gray striped salamander. The woods were strangely silent except for the coarse scraping of sawyer worms underneath the dead pine bark. But by last year the creatures of the woods had returned-and so had the fire ants. No longer are the woods silent. Nature replenished the land.

Not long ago the Viking space craft landed on Mars. The view of Martian terrain transmitted earthward was of a wasteland, barren and bleak. What I wonder about is this: Is there a time when nature no longer encroaches and replenishes?



First Place Essay

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