

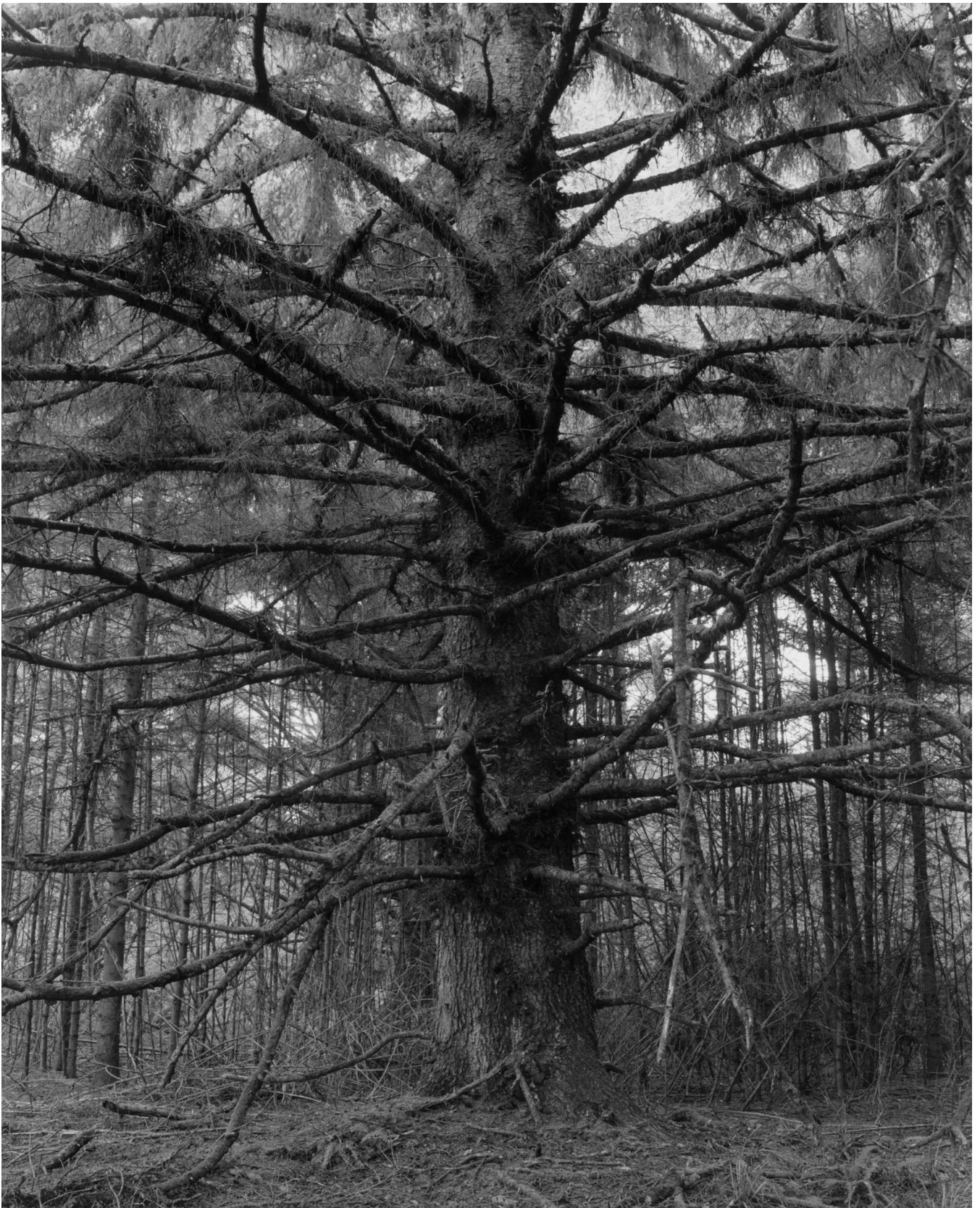
THE CONTROL OF NATURE MAY 29, 2023 ISSUE

WHAT WE OWE OUR TREES

Forests fed us, housed us, and made our way of life possible. But they can't save us if we can't save them.

By Jill Lepore

May 22, 2023



The notion that clear-cutting can be counteracted by the planting of trees is a political product of the timber industry. Photograph © Robert Adams / Fraenkel Gallery



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The woods I know best, love best, are made of Northern hardwoods, sugar maple and white ash, timber-tall; black and yellow birch, tiger-skinned; seedlings and saplings of blighted beech and striped maple creeping up, knock-kneed, from a forest floor of princess pine and Christmas fern, shag-rugged. White-tailed deer dart through softwood stands of pine and hemlock, bucks and does, the last leaping fawn, leaving tracks that look like tiny human lungs, trails that people can only ever see in the snow, even though, long after snowmelt, dogs can smell them, tracking, snuffing, shuddering with the thrill of the hunt and noshing on deer scat for dog treats. I make lists of finds, two-winged, four-footed, and rolling: black-throated green warblers and blue-headed vireos, porcupines and salamanders, tin cans and old tires, deer mice and fisher cats, wild turkeys and ruffed grouse, black bears and, come spring, their tumbling, potbellied, big-eared cubs.

Even if you haven't been to the woods lately, you probably know that the forest is disappearing. In the past ten thousand years, the Earth has lost about a third of its forest, which wouldn't be so worrying if it weren't for the fact that almost all that loss has happened in the past three hundred years or so. As much forest has been lost in the past hundred years as in the nine thousand before. With the forest go the worlds within those woods, each habitat and dwelling place, a universe within each rotting log, a galaxy within a pine cone. And, unlike earlier losses of forests, owing to ice and fire, volcanoes, comets, and earthquakes—actuarially acts of God—nearly all the destruction in the past three centuries has been done deliberately, by people, actuarially at fault: cutting down trees to harvest wood, plant crops, and graze animals.

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Jill Lepore, a staff writer, is a professor of history at Harvard. Her new audiobook, “Who Killed Truth?,” is due out in June.

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