

East of San Francisco, highways snake the hillsides. Above suburban Montclair, the road divides in many directions. Crossing the ridge leads to rustic surprises, to deeper woods, to small quiet valleys, fogged in. There's no traffic today beyond the crest. A small sign in the brush reads "Storm Damaged Trail". Descending in tight S-curves through tangles of oak and madrone, suddenly the road levels and arrows us forward. Tall thin redwoods disappear above us now in the mist. Eucalyptus livens the air. A small post office appears; the sign says "Canyon". The air dampens, the redwoods grow greater. A bent marker warns of a school ahead.

Two-room schools are as rare as white bluejays. Canyon has both. The jay bullies the smaller songbirds, for first pick at the lunch crumbs on the rear porch. In turn the screams, of the running children at recess, chase the jay up through the branches. The school itself stands still in time, it seems. Built in 1918, its dark walls milled from fallen trees at the bottom of the canyon, the school blends well into the redwood forest.

Redwoods need little care however. Children need much, but the woods are relatively safe and forgiving. With 250 people in 56 houses scattered on the hillsides, it's hard to get lost. Following the stream or the slope of the land always leads somewhere. Keeping up with the world outside requires more constant attention. Yet the community persists. In a time of increasing drought and predatory bureaucracy, the regional park system, the East Bay water company, the University of California, and even the neighboring suburbs all hunger for control here. Every adjacent interest wants the whole of Canyon. It would make a good reservoir, a new shortcut in the commuter highway system, a natural park unequal in the East Bay, a safe reactor site for government-supported research. The resulting issues stress the daily life of Canyon, but they aren't the only emphasis. Uniquely isolated, 35 kilometers from downtown San Francisco, Canyon is the last rural community within this urban center. In fact though, Canyon is a microcosm of the world-at-large, diverse and ever-changing. Still there's the difference: redwoods dwarf most anxieties, the forest enchants with its

peace, nature creates slowly, it sets people apart, lets each be more himself. Of course canyons are also teacups: porcelain gossip surrounds everyone, the brittle chatter is always there. The seasons have special influence though. They bind everyone — artists and farmers, the inheritors and the disinherited, computer programmers and treetoppers, the upwardly mobile and the poor — in common preoccupation. The school does also. It roots the community. By law, people can't live in this forest without the school. Canyon is a designated watershed, but educational structures take precedence, even in a time of drought. Otherwise the community could be forced from the woods by the water company. Indeed the school board, as is its right, considered using the power of eminent domain to take land from the water company, for parent parking.

The school has existed for seventy plus years; a new school has been built for the next seventy. The State approved it and made funding available. Curiously this is the first small school to be built in years. It could open the way for more. More likely it will be the last. The state can not afford \$3,500,000 buildings for every 50 potential students. Two-room public elementary schools must then remain a rare and endangered species, in spite of the fact that educators have discovered, learning in small groups is best. Indeed Canyon's redwood setting makes the school a natural clubhouse: it fosters individuality yet fulfills the intentions of community. The children discover themselves, in relation to each other. They invent their personalities yet embrace the world. Parents in turn are inspired by the creative striving of their own children. All persevere, with an expressiveness unusual elsewhere.

In turn, outsiders see that civilization is everywhere, it is not a straight jacket but a need, that may be worn casually, openly, even humorously. In effect though, the children here are growing up in a nature preserve. Logging isn't allowed; the woods aren't thinned. From the rear porch of the school, the children can watch trout climb the creek and spawn in the shallow water. Naturally the children play the games the woods offer, like hide-and-seek, but they play games of their own invention as well, like fish zoo, and magic leaf. The children make up new rules each day, or no

rules at all. It's up to them. Actually the children are allowed to roam freely and live exposed to a degree of danger unacceptable elsewhere. Danger is taught familiarly, simply, as a part of life. And no obviously irreversible accidents have happened. Yes, one year a boy broke his arm swinging off a rope, and a girl fractured her toes when a horse stepped on them. That's just part of growing up. The children are also allowed, as illustrated in their quotes, to hold on to their misconceptions, for a while at least, until they outgrow them independently, or learn the larger truths of experience.

Canyon's been exposed before, in *HAND MADE HOUSES* and *THE LAST RUSTIC COMMUNITY IN METROPOLITAN AMERICA*. Always though the woods grow back around the lives revealed. There's little to see from the unmarked road: the school set back, the post office, a shot-up deer sign, a glimpse of the creek, a dark wood house among the trees. Off-road there isn't much more to see, except how the people live, and trees grow. Yet, the few families who've been here for four generations have seen Canyon go from land-grant to logging camp to homestead, to watershed and weekend resort, to settled community. They also remember another school, long ago, on the other side of the road, in a hollow that became a lake, when the stream flooded. Canyon is a natural swale, it draws damp winds. It's also a rain path through the East Bay hills. The moisture allows redwoods to thrive here. The run-off adds to the water supply of the surrounding cities.

Ultimately most of the children move on, but they always look back. What they remember most is one another. Their difference isn't emphasized in school. What the kids take away is almost invisible. They still see close-up but they look faraway. Together they've tried on their future and tested themselves against their dreams of it.

Most days hawks glide above the houses and jays play in the stream bed. Now alphabet blocks divide the shallow water, a pencil snaps off in a tree, and Melika is learning to read her kindergarten diploma.

Nature grows children slowly. Redwoods teach too. We've emancipated ourselves from the garden of magic. Always it exists here. Still, time never stops, only the photograph. Yet here each generation

newly discovers its future. Childhood as a natural resource forever needs attention. The memory of mountain lions in our schoolyards is almost lost now, but nature's education is still vital. There are other dimensions of course. Innocence doesn't always prevail, and memory is corrupted or fails. Photography also is selective, especially where the walls of privacy stand. And yes, the former wild ones are now at the center of the conservative force. In fact the future promises a more conventional picture, as those who have gone from carpenter to contractor to developer begin to seek work in their own backyard. Lately when a mountain lion come to school, it's in a cage, sponsored by CATS, the Canyon PTA. For now, everyone who lives here gets to go to school here. When there aren't enough children in the woods, teachers advertise and pick from a list of applicants, to keep the school up to quota. But with 22 full cribs in the new baby crop, there's no space in the near future for anyone from across the hills. The state keeps an eye on things though, with reports, funding and forms. Thus the curriculum is relatively conventional. More and more the community accommodates. Sacramento decides the standards, though these change with the times. The state's attitude about the school changes too. Now and then 'unification' becomes the political by-word, but the school always resists being erased. "Necessary small schools" is a legal designation with precedence over freeways, dams and developers as well. Indeed the continuing success of Canyon against all odds is a lesson without end.

Surrounding Canyon, massive concrete roadways define the growing cityscape. Earthquakes collapse them. Rains rupture foundations. Fires free the land. Driven people rebuild, densely, repetitively, indifferently: chemical green smears, hay-covered slopes, scarred trees and free-standing chimneys mark their way. Canyon seems another world. For the children of the redwoods, the dynamic persistence of nature is ever welcome. Danger and chance are a perennial plant.

The goal Elihu set for his camera, from the beginning, was to capture the spark of childhood in the forest darkness, to discover the fullness of community, and to make learning visible, and so tell the story of the smallest, nearest wilderness town and its survival. In Canyon, the school

remains as the well of community. Indeed the children draw on their sense of place, they learn to teach themselves, they become Canyon Kids, they are encouraged to stand with the trees. It happens to outsiders too, to those who look in. This then is the way it's been, for those who are there.

Through these pictures the memory is shared.

Exploring always leads to the unexpected. Sometimes its at your front door. In fact Canyon is a short ride from San Francisco, into a different world. Here the road weaves in gentle curves, following the creek, into the heart of a redwood grove. Here a two-room schoolhouse lives. Elihu knew at once that its pulse could be taken in pictures. He used a Nikon FTN, with 35 and 85mm Nikkor lenses, and Kodak Tri-X and Plus-X films, and made silver gelatin prints on double-weight glossy paper, dried matte, which were then, twenty years later, scanned into a digital file, to be delivered to the printer for this book. We hope you've enjoyed this visit to another time and place, that forever dwells here.

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