



The King of Prussia township and the King of Prussia Inn, circa 1928  
*Photographs courtesy of King of Prussia Historical Society*

SUZANNAH LESSARD

# Edge City

*The way a place changes mirrors  
the way we ourselves are changing*

**I**N THE LATE 1980s, Joel Garreau was a seasoned reporter for the *Washington Post* who had held positions in all the major sections and was ready to move on. Ever since Watergate, the *Post* had attracted ambitious young journalists who all viewed national and international news, essentially Washington news, as the path to stardom. It was a configuration of ambition that reflected the age-old sense of the city as the theater of significant action. To such a young journalist an assignment to the Metro section—to subjects outside the Beltway—was a sentence to the Siberia of no fame. Milt Coleman, the Metro editor, challenged Garreau to overturn this assumption by taking on the beat himself. Garreau had grown up in northern Virginia and had seen the rural landscape there transformed, not just by suburban development but more lately by clusters of high-rise office buildings, elements of the first tier of global big business far from its normal central-city home. He had seen this in Houston, but here it was in the East: he had wanted for some time to get to the bottom of these eruptions. He accepted Coleman's challenge, and the result, ultimately, was *Edge City*, a book that overturns basic assumptions about the composition of our landscape.

What made Garreau's edge cities different from the movement of IBM to Armonk was that they consisted of clusters of corporate architecture surrounded by secondary businesses and even urban-style residential buildings, a splitting off of whole centers of gravity, challenging the hegemony of cities on many levels. I would have to go find them. This wouldn't be easy because, as Garreau pointed out in his book, most edge cities don't have names, nor are they usually defined by zip codes or jurisdictional boundaries, which they routinely straddle. Maps are therefore of no use.

I WAS TRYING TO EXPLAIN to a friend through a party din what I thought edge cities were and my difficulties in even finding them. I can't imagine how he put it all together, but he mentioned King of Prussia, a name I had seen on the containers of prescription medicines. He said something about a lot of corporations there and a controversy around saving an old inn. The inn was at a crossroads—now that was a place-syntax I could understand. A starting point. Plus the place had a name.

I take off down the Jersey Turnpike with a sense of purpose and hope, continuing on the Pennsylvania Turnpike, and just past the exits for Philadelphia, there it is, KING OF PRUSSIA, spelled out clearly in standard white-against-green signage. The exit sluices me off the turnpike onto the Schuylkill Expressway, and then immediately there is another exit and I am down a ramp past another, smaller green-and-white sign to one side:

MALL

NEXT 4 EXITS

only to be dumped onto a battered, clogged old highway that groans with grinding gears and clouds of exhaust. The mall itself, serene as a series of buttes, holds the middle distance. The "exits" are just turnoffs into mall parking lots, except for the one I choose, hoping to catch my breath and get oriented: it turns out to be a svelte, black, frictionless road called Mall Boulevard, which slides me through the mall, dividing it like the Red Sea, and to the back and then abruptly into an eight-lane toll plaza to the expressway from which I have just descended. Scuttling across lines of cars waiting to pay tolls, I escape through a cramped underpass, on the other side of which is a narrow, battered rural road through dusty brush. Then comes mirror glass across the supernaturally wide and groomed entrance to the King of Prussia Business Park.

King of Prussia, even to an American inured to decades of pell-mell growth, is landscape pandemonium: McMansions with horse paddocks attached near a garbage dump, a little Rube Goldberg chemical factory, huffing and puffing as in a cartoon. A persimmony pink apartment building—or is it a conference center?—dwarfing the hills. Fifties suburban development of small one-story houses with wary windows crowded by overgrown plantings. A working quarry. New housing in traditional styles, lightly placed like paper cutouts under beanpole trees. Preexisting landscapes lying about in pieces: serene eighteenth-century houses set back under ancient trees along a winding, narrow lane. Even a bit of Valley Forge is jumbled in, and there I finally take a moment to just sit. Inviolable meadows of full-headed grasses, through which the long lines of gentle hills register softly, wobble against the sky at the crests. Deep shadows in the folds of the land. Over there, along the edge of the woods, a person on horseback. But it's time to get back on unmatching roads: high-speed-fast-getaway-four-laner debouching into traffic-clogged two-laner, and then it's a back road with no shoulder, and then it's a swirling exurban-style road.

High over King of Prussia, the Schuylkill Expressway is an elevated river on pylons, imperiously carving the air. At its highest point it soars over an old church and its close-gathered graves. I have a map, of almost no use, but the riverlike expressway and the actual Schuylkill River do show up clearly on it. Always looking for a topographical feature from which to orient myself, a familiar landscape feature, I want very much to get to the real river. But it is locked away on the other side of some major railroad tracks that also swirl through the hamlet. Eventually, I find an obscure, narrow bridge across the tracks, and then I am in a Thomas Eakins painting: brown stream, fading boathouses, ancient overhanging trees.

ON THAT FIRST VISIT I stayed the night with my beloved godmother, who lived in Chestnut Hill, an old Philadelphia suburb that had become a part of the city. She said that the landscape around King of Prussia used to be one of the most beautiful in the world and that she avoided it now because it broke her heart. I could sympathize with her aversion, of course. But I had on my coonskin cap: I could barely disguise my appetite for this consummate wilderness. My godmother lived in an old house that had been in her husband's family for some time, with a beautiful, mature garden, and I felt her to be whole and also wholly available to me. I loved encountering her there and felt the preciousness of our connection, and yet my interest in King of Prussia put me on the other side of a divide from her: she could not comprehend it. There was something upsettingly serious to her,

as to me, about this difference of opinion. She was not, of course, the first person who revealed to me how deep landscape feeling runs, how disagreement about it can disrupt even loves. Not so, however, with her husband, Pete, a doctor who smoked a pipe and had a deadpan style. He told me that the King of Prussia Inn had been known in the old days as a romantic hideaway to which Philadelphia businessmen took their mistresses.

I wasn't able to find the inn on my first visit, or the next time, though I persisted in looking for it as for the link between the former world and the present. Along the way, I developed a bilingual vocabulary for what I found in King of Prussia as compared with the characteristics of the former world. Where the old landscape is relational, the new one is schizoid, with elements right next to one another that don't relate at all. Where older landscapes are defined by what is special about a given place, the new pieces of King of Prussia could be anywhere—were a part of ubiquity, as I was coming to call it. Our old landscape, formed by the logic of manufacturing, was coextensive. King of Prussia was a mixture of several archipelagoes, like the pieces of incomplete jigsaw puzzles thrown together into a box.

But the quality that I came to see as most profoundly different had to do with an inversion of scale, in which small containers attempted to hold elements far larger than themselves. Though King of Prussia was not technically a hamlet, it was commonly described as such and used in addresses by the corporations. But actually, the supercharged pandemonium that was this so-called hamlet was inside the political jurisdiction of the modest suburban township of Upper Merion. *Beowulf* helped me with this. Upper Merion was a sheep that had given birth to a Grendel: not the first mother to have had an experience like that. But the political reality was still dumbfounding. The corporations of King of Prussia were, many of them, international yet they were governed by the board of supervisors of the sheep of a township, who met in a room next to the public library, where mothers read murmuringly to their babies. Major pharmaceutical corporations had plants in King of Prussia, and the defense industry was there, too, as represented by Lockheed Martin, which had revenues many times larger than those of the state of Pennsylvania. The Lockheed plant was right there on Dekalb Pike, the broken-down highway onto which I had been debouched on my first visit and which was, I had figured out, part of the original crossroads. I couldn't find the inn, but how do you even begin to imagine Lockheed at a crossroads in a hamlet? For still another example of elements too large for their containers, the King of Prussia Mall liked to call itself the "downtown" of Upper Merion. But the mall was the second-largest in America and proudly high end: unlikely that the modest residents of Upper Merion would

be shopping at Tiffany and Brooks Brothers on their daily round of errands. I found a variation on this theme of outside-in, literally in this case, in a back issue of the King of Prussia paper. A local Girl Scout troop, in voting on a campout location, had rejected traditional wildernesses nearby in favor of the mall. Residents were a little annoyed when I brought this up, as if I were laughing at them. In fact, given that I was trying to see forward, given that my explorations of all types of landscapes had pointed toward a condition of living within a kind of man-made enclosure, I thought that the Girl Scouts had been on the cutting edge.

There was something of a continuum to be found tracking back through the story of the Lockheed plant; that it had formerly belonged to the Martin Marietta Corporation, which had, before that, been General Electric. GE had bought the land, on which there was an orchard, in the 1950s. When it finally built a plant there in the '60s, it was informally called "the Orchard" by employees. King of Prussia had been a true hamlet then, in the sense that it consisted of a cluster of dwellings around an inn by a crossroads surrounded by deep country. Running this forward, I was helped imaginatively speaking: the real orchard, later the GE Orchard and eventually Lockheed, was not far from the crossroads where the inn I couldn't find still stood.

Another way I sought to get from there to here, from the landscape of the past to this present riddle, was by seeing what lay about me as related to early place-syntax by means of expansions of scale. The Schuylkill Expressway had superseded Gulph Road at the original crossroads, and the thousands of hotel rooms in King of Prussia were descendants of the old inn. I read in the library that a doctor had practiced next door to the inn and that a cobbler had had his shop nearby. One could then say that the pharmaceutical corporations had replaced the doctor, and the mall, which had plenty of shoe stores, the cobbler.

However, there was something different at work here from an expansion of scale. That was a kind of haphazardness that denies there is any place-syntax at all. It was as if an explosion had happened, a breaking and flinging of shards of the old world that were now scattered and jumbled with bits of ubiquity that seemed innately incoherent to begin with. The almost violent disruptions of the old landscape seemed to be caused by a force coming up from underneath.

Even before GE built the Orchard, a suburban development appeared in King of Prussia, the work of a local contractor. The first inhabitants commuted to work in Philadelphia by local roads. Then GE came in, and other developments were built, and then the interstate and, later, the Schuylkill Expressway eased the twenty-five-mile commute. Those who worked at GE, of course, had no commute at all: indeed, some GE people commuted to

King of Prussia from elsewhere, the first sign of what Garreau later identified as an edge city pattern. Still, in the classic suburban way, most residents of early King of Prussia developments worked in Philadelphia. By the late 1990s, however, twenty-five thousand people commuted to King of Prussia for work, many *from Philadelphia*: Moscow going to Siberia. Meanwhile, Philadelphia, its economic energy draining outward, declined.

From the head of the Rotary Club, Al Pascall, I learned that the inn had gone out of business in the 1950s, when a ramp off the expressway had cut it off from Dekalb Pike. It had been scheduled to be demolished, but when workers from the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation turned up to do the job, protesters stood in the way: one wielded a shotgun. However, by the late 1990s both the exit ramp and the Dekalb Pike had to be expanded, both encroaching on the inn's island, and traffic had become so heavy that there was no forestalling these improvements, so the inn was again threatened. But oh yes, it was still standing, said Al Pascall, who had made saving it a mission.

## Twenty-five thousand people commuted to King of Prussia for work, many *from Philadelphia*: Moscow going to Siberia.

Also in the 1960s, Morris Kravitz, another local contractor, noticing that the country store did not serve all the desires of the new suburbanites in the hamlet, built a strip mall just a bit down the pike from the old crossroads. This was, in fact, still standing during the series of visits I made in the late 1990s: typical, one-storied, flat-roofed, with parking in front. Sometimes when I contemplated the physical history of King of Prussia, that little flat line of the strip mall roof became for me the beginning of the undoing of the settlement form there, first by moving the center away from the crossroads, a chiropractic jolt, but even more so by introducing ubiquity: that strip mall could be anywhere. It brought in an ephemeral, unplaced type of structure, on which signs are more important than anything else about it—travel, for example, in the period of my visits, with a big poster of an exotic beach in the window. I saw the flat line as a first slipped stitch in what, in the period in which the strip mall was built, was still a more or less intact tapestry of forests and meadows, orchards, quarries, quiet river, crossroads, inn. From one angle, I saw in that slipped stitch the gap in continuity that bedeviled my sense of the story of King of Prussia as a place—as a landscape.

When, in the late 1960s, far bigger strip malls anchored by urban-style department stores came into vogue, Kravco, as Kravitz's company was named, was quick off the mark. Ironically, in a way, the company moved back to the crossroads and there built a new-style mall, bracketed by Korvettes and Penney's, right across Dekalb from the Orchard. When, in the '70s, even larger, enclosed malls came into style, Kravco replaced the Korvettes and Penney's ensemble with the enclosed King of Prussia Plaza. Within a decade the company expanded the mall again, adding the King of Prussia Court right next to the Plaza, separated from it only by Mall Boulevard. That is a condensed version of how the King of Prussia Mall became the second largest in the country, outdone only by the Mall of America, outside Minneapolis.

Through all this, GE as a defense contractor, GE Aerospace, was involved in the manufacture of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), including the nuclear warheads the missiles were built to carry. Well, that would do more to the syntax of place than a little flat roof. A bit of local history that caught my eye was that, in the late 1970s, protesters against the production of nuclear weapons started staging protest vigils at the GE entrance that faced the mall, which gave the protesters a constant audience of mall-goers. Sometimes they poured blood at the entrance. Daniel and Philip Berrigan, brothers and priests who had been leaders of protests against nuclear armament, were sometimes among them. The vigils became a fixture at the GE entrance, the participants well known to employees and friendly with both mall and GE guards, even though on occasion they were arrested.

Then one day in 1980, Philip Berrigan, with a small entourage that became known as the Plowshares Eight, breached security at the Orchard early in the morning. The protesters were armed with hammers with which to damage nose cones. According to the protesters later, two nose cones were hammered and Berrigan emptied a vial of his own blood on some blueprints. They were arrested, of course, but when they were tried at the old county courthouse in nearby Norristown they were found guilty only of burglary and conspiracy, and not of criminal trespass, disorderly conduct, or assault. No mention of damage to property, much less to a nuclear weapon. Was that because the good citizens of Montgomery County were sympathetic to a cause that, on the whole, never caught on widely? On the other hand, some retired GE engineers with whom I spoke said, with some righteousness, that warheads had never been made in King of Prussia: that had been done at the Chestnut Hill plant, undermining the protesters' story altogether—in a way. The engineers insisted that what had been made in King of Prussia were the computers to be placed inside the nose cones to guide the missiles. That seemed precise, to the point of nitpicky. That work could well

have required the presence of unweaponized nose cones at the plant, confirming the protesters' story of having smashed two. And of course blueprints of the nose cones could well have been around, or of the computers, or of any number of things, for that matter. What struck me most about these contested details was a slipperiness that seemed a hallmark of Cold War space: it's not here, it's there, in your godmother's leafy neighborhood, as if that mattered—the idea of such a plant in that pleasantly prosperous neighborhood, seeming on the face of it absurd. Then, as if confirming slipperiness, I found no evidence that there had been a plant in Chestnut Hill at all. There was a Philadelphia plant but it was not in Chestnut Hill, which is a part of Philadelphia. Indeed, Chestnut Hill old-timers tell me there never was such a thing nor was it likely that anything of the sort would ever have been located in those serene surroundings. I didn't pursue it further. I had wanted to pin Armageddon down across the street from Tiffany—a new kind of crossroads. But the new geography had eluded me.

The point of the protest at the King of Prussia plant had been to locate the manufacture of warheads in the real world—it is *here*—but it would seem that they had failed, perhaps; perhaps it wasn't *there* after all. But given that the protest was theater to begin with, did that really matter? And didn't the slipperiness in its way reveal the deeper truth, which was that nuclear armament had created a worldwide enclosure in which all places were vulnerable, rendering the difference between one locality and another of less importance than it once was: isn't that why it is difficult, imaginatively speaking, to integrate such an element into a landscape as we normally think of it? The factual wobble with regard to the success of the protest—had they done as claimed, were there really nuclear weapons made there to protest?—and the way it served as a slipknot in the question of how we got from an orchard to ICBMs, how it revealed that gap between the world as we have known it and the world as it has become, seemed of more significance in my exploration of the meaning of landscape, in the end, than the answer to the question raised by the engineers. That the answer was hard to find seemed more important than the answer. It was that gap between how we imagine place and what it has become again, the introduction of a serious wobble in everything, that got at a befuddling quality that is a signature effect of our contemporary landscape in many of its forms—at least at this point before we have really learned to understand it. Though of course there is an answer to the question.

ONE MORNING, I set out to spend some time in the mall, which I have up to now avoided. Malls are the meccas of ubiquity, after

all: who needs to see another? Still, if King of Prussia had a single unifying feature, that would be the mall, its cathedral, surely. How could I pass it over?

As I approach, I notice that the glass doors reflect the parking lot, so that when people go through them they seem to disappear into the lavish landscape of the day as into a shiny pack of cards. When I myself slip into the deck, I find myself in a serene interior that does indeed seem churchlike. The athletic shoes spotlight and suspended in the window of Champs look like birds of paradise. Music, something wide-ranging by Beethoven, close to overwhelms me. I see scripts of every kind, stern scripts, flirtatious scripts, plainspoken scripts, cursive, Roman, italics, but all of them, though spelling out English words, cryptically suggest that the words really don't mean what they ordinarily do—if anything. Normally I get quickly claustrophobic in malls and need to get out. As an explorer, though, I am entranced. Looking down through a well from the second floor onto the first, I observe an overweight mother and small daughter, seated in chairs, eating soft ice cream, a potted palm between them. I am an anthropologist observing inscrutable customs.

Needing a bite myself, I stop in Ruby's Diner. The booths and the stools at the soda fountain are done in a supernaturally red, shiny vinyl, the trim bright chrome, the floors and tabletops white. The staff, dressed in white and red, is young and comically hesitant—a sweet note. At either end of the room, mounted on platforms on a level with the top of the booths, are vintage five hundred-horsepower Triumph motorcycles, one black, one red. Above all this, near the ceiling, is a red plastic track on which a toy motorcycle travels continuously from one end of the restaurant to the other, and on it is perched a Barbie doll, sidesaddle, with one leg raised high in the air and her arms outstretched in a gesture of either ecstasy or despair. In my exploratory state, I find in this an overt expression of feeling nearly as overwhelming as the Beethoven. It is freezing, but the only other customers, two mothers with two toddlers sitting in high chairs, don't seem to notice as they talk intensely, as mothers will when they can steal a few moments from their children. These toddlers are distracted by food, which they throw on the floor: the shiny white floor around their chairs is littered with tidbits.

Wandering some more in the mall after lunch I find the center of the plaza section, where, under a domed colored-glass skylight, a big clock, cartoonishly reminiscent of Big Ben, tolls the quarter hour softly near an elaborate two-tiered fountain in which water pours into a pool in four streams. Nearby also is a glass elevator to the upper level that is ever in use, going up and down with people in it. Sitting near Big Ben with my eyes closed, I hear a train whistle on the upper level and the sound of

water falling on water. I am on the prairie, I am in Rome. The atmosphere in the mall is supernal. Later, in another shoe store window, I see a sneaker, and my anthropological distance slips, because I like the sneaker and then remember I need sneakers, and that is the end of it. I can't hear the music anymore and soon I am eating soft ice cream sitting by a potted palm.

By the late 1990s, Morris Kravitz had been dead for a decade. But Kravco still managed the mall, so I go to speak to two of its principal officers. Like the GE engineers, they are cautious: why am I asking questions? At first, their replies are only promotional. But eventually they let me in on the worry that lurks beneath the supernal surface. One could hardly be vigilant enough, they tell me. For new malls are forever trumping old ones, drawing away a fickle clientele with the allure of novelty and leaving the old ones to scrape by on discount stores and eventual abandonment, bringing down everything around them. If a shop doesn't produce a certain level of sales per square foot, it must be encouraged to leave before its lease is up: not because lower sales matter to the mall's bottom line but because the company cannot afford to rent to "losers." That could lead to the entire mall being perceived as a loser.

## Diaspora Sonnet 44

My paradise is hollowed out.  
I dwell within a famished basin

populated by the purpled crowns  
of Russian thistle. This sage desert

is a dry throat and I am a whole nation  
in my dry mouth. The summons

to reside here, a paper testament.  
From the rock spouts rock and no

people and the wide blue sky  
does not hold my attention. Constantly

I am bewildered by the nothing  
germinating from the landscape.

I thought I would own the visual field  
instead, this abandonment on my tongue.

—*Oliver de la Paz*

The mall managers, they tell me, are in a state of fear over recent research that had shown that the average amount of time spent on a mall visit had dropped from eighty to seventy minutes, a sign that malls as a genre might be sliding down a slippery slope like dinosaurs. This was in 1998. Actually, the problem of holding the interest of customers had vexed mall managers for years. A 1992 solution had been to introduce Disney-style rides. Most famously, the Mall of America had built a Snoopy theme park at its center. But then teenagers were attracted, eventually massing in packs of thousands. These packs roamed the mall on Friday and Saturday nights, alarming adult consumers while themselves spending very little. The problem became so severe that the Mall of America had to ban everyone under eighteen who was unaccompanied by an adult. This ban made national news, which put the Mall of America in an unflattering light—a really bad bind from a manager's point of view.

Thus, while you would never want a bigger or a newer mall anywhere nearby, being No. 2 nationwide had advantages. You could, for example, avoid the trap into which the Mall of America had fallen. A second generation of solutions had been that of bringing in entertaining stores like the Disney Store, in which the product was souvenirs of the store itself, or FAO Schwarz, a toy store that, at the time, was on the ascendancy in malls, trying out live clowns and interactive games for visitors. The feeling I get is of managers being on tenterhooks regarding keeping the mall-goer's interest all the time. As for daily maintenance, I learn that there must be nothing disturbing to the consumer in a mall, nothing to interfere with the impulse to buy. Unrelenting vigilance and diligence is required. If a soda is spilled, the cleanup crew must be there in minutes. Political activity is, of course, out of the question.

Back at Big Ben after my visit with the managers, my experience is different. I now am aware that the seemingly serene atmosphere of the mall is latent with tensions on small and large scales: the spilled soda that must be cleaned up immediately, the danger of a more up-to-date mall nearby or of people abandoning malls altogether because they are sick of Cinnabons. The global economy reinforces this kind of tension, garroting businesses. Competition in the worldwide arena does not leave much leeway for experiment or even for enjoying success. I had noticed that clothing was becoming ever more threadbare, literally, to reduce costs, as if the goal was textiles as close to nothing as possible. On tensions was built the mighty edifice of the King of Prussia Mall. Sitting at the fountain near Big Ben, I visualize the threads in the clothing shops around me connecting this spot to the archipelago of sweatshops near and far all over the world, threads that are becoming ever more ethereal as costs are cut yet further,

and ever more tightly strung to as close to the snapping point into nothing as cost counters could get them: in this I feel connected, there at Big Ben, to the world.

NOT LONG AFTER my first visit to King of Prussia, I went to Italy, and one day, in the Basilica of St. Francis, in Assisi, I was contemplating a fresco in which an oversized St. Francis rides in a chariot behind an enormous horse that has stepped off the roof of a diminutive house into the air. It makes no sense in terms of Cartesian space, or the laws of physics, and yet it makes perfect sense in medieval space in which the Kingdom of God is the primary reality and our mundane environment, with its petty physical rules, is a far second. But what struck me, there in Assisi but fresh from King of Prussia, was that there was something contemporary about the image, too, prompting the first seed of a thought that medieval art could be a useful precedent in our struggles to comprehend our emergent world.

In the Middle Ages the material realm took second place to a spiritual realm that was entirely beyond bodily perception. Now it's the digital enclosure that is becoming ever more primary and all-pervasive, and while there is nothing mystical about it—indeed, the condition of enclosure to which it contributes undercuts our old relation to transcendence—the digital realm is essentially immaterial. To a very large extent, forces we can't see are configuring our world. In the Middle Ages it was the divine; now it's information, electronically stored and manipulated, that is claiming a similarly immense place in our lives, popping up constantly in the very grain of daily life.

In worlds in which material surroundings are unimportant, proportion and relations in landscape and architecture are also unimportant, just as people looking at cell phones are famously oblivious of their environments. In medieval art, a miraculous event, such as St. Francis appearing to reveal the realm of the heavens, so supersedes the importance of daily life in houses that it makes sense to render the architecture as unlivably cramped and dim. The vision of St. Francis and the heavens *must* be out of proportion to the earthly landscape. Similarly, a person on a computer in a room is in a realm that eclipses the room so completely that, in his consciousness, those surroundings barely exist. Of two people having breakfast together, one can be so engrossed in communications with someone on the other side of the world that, to him, the room and person in it and even scrambled eggs have vaporized. The kind of attention people give to their electronic devices could be compared to prayer, in the way it entrances with an invisible largeness while blotting out surroundings. There is, of course, immense silliness in the comparison. But there is a glimmer of



DAVID SWANSON, PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER

King of Prussia, 2015

truth in it that might help us, by comparison, begin to imagine more deeply the conditions in which we now live.

The mall managers told me something that changed my view of King of Prussia: that until the fall of the Berlin Wall, many of the businesses in the hamlet had been manufacturing concerns, but they—all except for a diaper factory—had departed once the wall was down and the global economy accelerated, drawing industry toward cheap labor elsewhere. I hadn't thought of King of Prussia as industrial—I guess it was all the mirror glass. But once I thought about it, this underlayer was rather obvious. It was Pennsylvania, a famously industrial state, and there were gritty seams in which the former era showed, as in nearby Bridgeport. It was in the same period that the wall came down that GE Aerospace, including the Orchard plant, was bought by the Martin Marietta Corporation, which then, in the mid-1990s, was itself bought by Lockheed and then became Lockheed Martin. Lockheed wanted to close the Orchard, a disaster for King of Prussia. In the end, the corporation kept a third of the four

thousand Marietta employees there, to work on a government contract to take a flaw out of GPS that had been put in to fool the Soviets. The mall managers claimed that the decision to renovate both sides of the big mall—the Plaza, the older side, and the newer Court—had heroically reversed decline in King of Prussia. They suggested that desperate landlords, seeing that the mall owners, by this time a consortium of investors, were willing to put money into King of Prussia—spending \$200 million on the mall between '91 and '95—became heartened enough to slap mirror glass on their empty factories and hire some funereal landscapers. Somewhere along the way mirror glass was slapped on the old GE plant as well, perhaps by Lockheed. These cosmetic efforts were effective. I had picked up not one whiff of this time of difficulty, no sense at all that ashes had blown in the wind here so recently. But then forgetting is our habit. It was said in the late 1990s that, because of the wall coming down, the world was only ten years old. But news of this recent makeover made King of Prussia seem even younger than that. In the late 1990s,

when I was visiting, the dot-com boom was in progress. Who remembered that just a few years earlier all of America had felt old and discouraged? Japan had been beating us in technology. The Midwest was in deep rust. Our schools were a disaster. We felt done. As for mirror glass, it offers an overnight new identity that almost deflects the reality of a building altogether, let alone what it might have been used for once. It is the perfect material of forgetfulness.

Eventually I found the King of Prussia Inn, hidden in untrimmed maples on a scrap of land between the exit ramp and Dekalb Pike. I had passed it many times as I whooshed off the

## Pine's Prayer against Lumberjacks

Red-buzzing-spindle-bud,  
Orange-lightning-clover-scale,  
Yellow-moon-blowfish-mud,  
Green-crater-raindrop-prayer,  
Blue-turtle-stamen-flood,  
Violet-paw print-sulphur-hail,  
Black-birdsong-limestone-sea—  
the smallest pea's brain-symphony.

They'll break the forest's velvet sleep  
with axes, fires' glowing eyes.  
With fingers feathered omens deep,  
while breathing, river, river, why  
and how and what their digits creep  
with numbers, dead machines that fly,  
then river, river glowing blush  
of sadness, killing darkness lush.

Grayling ghosts, forgotten fugue,  
lumberjack, log, and hook. Buck  
whose antlers number twenty-two  
will crash the two-legs' temporal luck  
and fold all creatures' blackest blue—  
grayling ghosts, the galax-cruX  
trans-minnow mud, the acorn  
sprouting fish-dust form.

—Brandi George

expressway. I got there on foot, somewhat perilously crossing Dekalb. It was enclosed in chain link, to keep out vandals, but it was as if it were caged because it might itself be a danger or inclined to escape. Its windows were blank and dusty. Leaning against the chain link, I could make out the courses of stone that marked its gradual enlargement. Already both the exit ramp and Dekalb were scheduled for widening, which would mean that the inn would finally have to be moved. Al Pascall, of the Rotary Club, was advocating moving it to a bit of local government land where it could serve as a museum of King of Prussia. The campaign wasn't easy and dragged on after I left, but in 2000 the inn was moved to some land in King of Prussia owned by the PECO energy company, where in 2002 it became the offices of the Montgomery County Chamber of Commerce: a bit of a Trojan horse, you might say, bringing remembrance into the realm of forgetfulness, a tiny dislocated heart for the Grendel.

One day in the last of my late 1990s visits, I went to talk to a member of the Upper Merion board of supervisors, in its meeting room just across the hall from the library. An aerial photo of King of Prussia had been mounted on one long wall, which I examined while I waited. Right in the middle was a large body of water. I had by this time driven all over King of Prussia many times. How could I have missed this prominent feature? When my interviewee came in, my first question was about the water. Oh, that's an old quarry, exhausted years ago, he said. But where was it? Oh, it's fenced off, he said, puzzled as to why I was so interested but generously offering to take me there, if I liked.

We drove to a road on which there was a long stretch grown up with brush, which I had taken to be neglected land being held for development: the kind that just becomes a blank in the mind—you don't see it. Along the way he stopped and pointed into the brush. Through the brush I glimpsed a chain-link fence. That was the quarry, he said. He wasn't coming with me. I got out of the car and found my way through the undergrowth to the fence. Through it I could see only more brush. But as I moved my head around I glimpsed the sides of a huge pit, yellow hardpan, mechanically terraced, very steeply. Nothing grew in the hardpan. How far down the bottom was one couldn't know, nor was there any water in sight. I pressed my face against the fence, and leaned my weight into it, fingers interwoven, and thus bowed it a little. There it was: jewel-like cobalt blue, completely surprising and out of place: the aquifer. ○

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