

coming out of the woods

the solitary life of a maverick naturalist



Wallace Kaufman

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WALLACE KAUFMAN

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*For Erika Salloch and Resi Lord
who have generously nourished
the mind, the body, and the heart*

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They say of money, "You can't take it with you." Morgan Branch proves to be more portable.

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A note on people and places in this book: All of the places, events, and people in this book are real and recorded as accurately as possible from my records, from public records and other documents, and from the best of my memory and the memories of others. In a few cases I have changed the names and other details about certain people to protect their privacy or simply out of the sense that they might want to avoid the embarrassment of associating with other people and events in this book or with the author.

—part one—

Songs of Innocence



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Visitors

Why people are afraid to stay at my house and how I followed Thoreau into the woods and came out with the opposite conclusion.

My friend Bart stands as big as a bear, trained as an engineer, retired from a life teaching and writing fiction. A few years ago he wanted to bring his twelve-year-old son and stay at my house when spring was just stirring the forest. I left him notes on where to spread the wood ashes, how to operate the gas-on-demand water heater, and where I composted kitchen wastes. I was glad to have a house sitter and left for a month's work in the Cuchumatanes Mountains of Guatemala. I particularly liked the idea of Bart and his son being in my house and forest; it was the next best thing to a father-and-son camping trip and a lot more isolated than a spot in a public campground. The house is heated with wood. The forest rubs the windows and roof with its branches. My nearest neighbor lives a half mile south. In every other direction stretch several thousand acres of uninhabited forest. Bart and his son were gone when I returned home a month later. So had the hatchet I use for splitting kindling and small pieces of firewood. After a couple of days, satisfied I hadn't mislaid it, I called Bart.

Yes, he knew where it was. It was in the sleeping loft. The loft is warmer than the unheated bedroom, so I understood why they might have slept there despite the dangerous steep and narrow stairs and the low ceiling beneath which Bart would have had to dress and undress stooped over. But