The Owls/ The Oaks

In the back field I would lie and
watch shooting stars in the dark sky.
Thirty years ago the old lady
who sold me the land had pointed,
"Nobody can ever build back here."
When the Railroad ripped up the tracks,
the town refused the right-of-way.
I asked the owner's estate to sell me
the strip of land behind my house,
wet a foot deep when it rains.
Instead, a man upstate bought ten acres
to build forty-two houses on swamp
forest where owls used to hoot
in centuries-old live-oaks.

I called state regulators and the feds
who said, "We can't worry about ten acres
when we're trying to save ten thousand.
Besides, 'Four-oh-four' permits don't
apply because that creek doesn't
connect to the ocean anymore."
I watched the smug developer
plow down trees with a bush-hog.

II
With "The Oaks" on the subdivision sign,
I thought venerable live-oaks would
surely be safe as community open space,
that he'd leave the holy grove
on the only hill, a dry slight rise
in elevation, vast green canopy.
But the berm of the road
severed half the tree roots,
auguring their certain death.
Between trunks of dying trees
he cut branches two fee thick
and built houses four feet apart.

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Drainage ponds breed mosquitoes.
When hawks, frogs, snakes, turtles,
dragonflies ate each other
in the healthy swamp, there were
no mosquitoes in my yard.
Now, when I hear the dread
swoosh-swoosh
and smell dank poison,
I grab my dog, run inside
and pull down windows
to escape the slow truck
that sprays malathion
to kill the mosquitoes,
the bugs that birds eat
and the birds.

III
On ditched and filled wet-land
a new house three stories high
now fills the north sky, built on
concrete slab that will
sink and crack.
Bright streetlights all night
on a cul-de-sac shine
into my once-dark backyard.
No shooting stars.

By the back fence
I've planted *Arbor vitae*,
bald cypress, river birch
that will grow to block the glare.
On a moonlit spring night
warm enough to open windows
(I may be dreaming)
once a year, I hear two owls calling,
"Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you all?"