

The H.J. Andrews: Forest Reflections, Forest Clouds.

*He recalled a Russian saying:
“A fearful wolf should stay out of the forest,”
but decided to go anyway, take a chance,
or how would he know what went on in the world?*

– Bernard Malamud, *The Fixer*

November 2012: Day One

An Experiment in Solitude

First, start with fingers that cramp for holding the pen for more hours than a washcloth. Let them get their grip back on the formidable keys of your grandmother’s typewriter. She never shirked. You remember this old rhythm of lift and strike, of carriage and bell. The little brown wonder is even named the same as another famous forest: Olympia. Deluxe. As in luxury. As in climax, before old growth, ahead of its decline. Was there a better time than right now? 60 years ago, was there more or less? Priorities shift, sediment redistributes itself along creek-banks. Gravel bars become porous to secret upwellings. Braids plait the impulses of trout.

No doubt there are lessons here: I am meant to glean. A flock of varied thrush, one of my favorite birds, scrapes the mossy lawn under my window, leave tracks like claws. Beyond the scrim of cedar saplings surrounding Headquarters, the real forest idles, breathes, shifts in the wind. Northern spotted owl will have long, contentious conversations with the barred owl tonight. None of it is for me to interrupt or manage or suggest an outcome. My only role in this new-born silence, on this saturated Monday at the helm of so many keys jamming like logs at the mouth of a river, is to sip tea, stay well, take note. Protect the habitat.

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boulderfield lookout suppression stand deadwood blaze blowdown
ogive seedling slow-growth rot cut ouzel pit mound sunshaft
blade trunk angle emit absorb creak moan pitch sap rise fall

mountain pass snow-zone bridge nutrient control-burn sawtooth by-
way leaf-chatter gray squirrel dusk whorl basalt passage burl
raven succession burn seed ridge carpenter beetle needle scree
ruffed grouse bone-yard clinker pull-out vine burrow ignite soar
cloud-birth valley ancient bore river joint bone-chip fuel
success char-pit exposure boundary tangle wash-out hunt flush
fog-bank expiration cold-front climate air-shed reserve zone
intensive impact horizon updraft glaciated saddle descend

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Reflection Plot: Succession Burn

The Bone Yard

I know this place though I have never set foot. Trees poise like paintbrushes for the first dip of fog. The ground, littered with chipped-apart orange meat of cedar, has been flattened into a seam by those who have also walked into the heart of this plot: other visiting writers. Through the stunted and thirsty rhododendrons, they found their particular perch. My view is not the unclaimed view – it has been shared, mapped, graded with roads, monitored from space. It will be visited long after I'm gone: down the road in my little car into another round of life that tugs me daily and keeps my wheels spinning, towards just one more bend before day ends. One more stand, view, peak – what would be missed by not pursuing the horizon, the narrative line, the story of this fire?

I want to know what those before me thought. But more than that – what happened while the trees burned. Did they sing, hiss, pop, splinter? When fire pushed its gold wave too far onto shore, did the cool clay below smell of safety? Like a child in the folds of its mother's skirts, was the fear of small animals tamped? What survived – what got their tails singed on the way out? Who are now bones, beyond recognition?

The previous pass of a boot. No wind. I know what a poet would latch onto.

That riff of coal beneath salal – music that could only be composed by chance, by the cooling-in-unison after the fire pulsed through. Smoke still on the tongue, filtering down through this afternoon's false rain (thirty drops to the entire stand), momentarily charring the grove. The

dampening and re-staining of bodies stripped of their canopy: root-haunches licked like wounds. Trees must withstand. Sentinels – alive and dead, but standing – wear black rings of fire around their trunks like high-tide lines.

I want to see what these spine-straight survivors are capable of in strong weather. Do I dare stand in a place that looks like the Penny Match-playground of pre-adolescent boys? How far can they lean and contort; at what point do they repose? And where do I belong when they are torn from their foundations?

All of the writers before me are dispersed like remnant blazes – each on their chosen charred and collapsing log – quiet voices in the yard of limbs and digits and bones. I know them, somehow, like I know this post-summer relief, this readiness for cold weather. They wouldn't make a sound, wouldn't rustle a single fir cone fallen from where the red-backed crossbills worked boughs like parrots. They would listen for incoming chatter, make room for the infinite storm of silence. This silvered, standing trunk I sit beside supports no living thing – not moss or lichen or even a beetle harbored by bark. It points to the obvious. Up. The path of flames, smoke, prayers, our thinned and managed thoughts. Sun leaks through, so diluted it leaves no sheen on any trunk, rough or smooth. No fingerprint can find purchase.

Still, life goes on in the succession of fire-meets-wood-meets-rain-becomes-rebirth, as it should, dry and quick and pulsing. *Succession Fire* - in which something necessary will succeed what's been lost. Seed to sprout, wood to beetle, bug to bird, hunger to humus. Chained, linked, connected, succeeded – is there one outcome more favorable than the others? Is a voided landscape a failed one? An ancient stand has been cleared – thinned by humans, struck by lightning – and something will take its place. Perhaps not the chain of succession desired by conservationists (opportunistic scotch broom, false brome, purple loosestrife) but nature taking hold of opportunity, regardless. A success of survival, of filling the void, of thriving and possibly becoming dominant.

If the Andrews burned, would it be such a blow? What happened when the forest burned for the native tribes? Would other cultures cultivate/gather what they could – new shoots, roasted roots, opened seed pods – then move on? Were they ever remorseful, cast blame at the spirits, judge the fire the way our society condemns? People flinch at seeing a forest reduced. Our long-term attachment beholds us to future fights and positive-for-people outcomes. Scientists descend to experiment and study and note, monitor what happens to the land: another opportunity at

comprehension, at prediction, at control. We lament, mull, plot, re-strategize, manage, rebuild. We stay put, persist, hunker down for the next epoch. We are not comfortable with bones exposed.

Even after this damp log has seeped through my jeans, I am not chilled. Next to salal and mushrooms, a knot-hole eye regards me from the stump. Whales in the logs. Beached. I have been seeing them along roads and trails, always the large logs, always the same look. The last nub of an ancient tree, now supine and latticed with a creeping beard of moss. Sometimes a mouth splintered open as if casting for krill. They keep watch, eyes bulging like a flying squirrel from safe cover: all pupil, no iris. Nothing filtered, nothing refracted. A black pool, the rot of ages lining its bed. Like ancient clam fossils found above the Himalayan alpine, these bodies didn't shimmy up the flanks of ridges on a world-flood. They were left behind as the world abandoned them. Messengers who've been here all the while.

A raven flies over the southern ridge. I wait a few minutes longer. Darker grey upon grey – dusk closes in. A double-stacked cloud drifts and piles up over a pocket of air, reverse-flowing, like smoke banking – revealing the ridge where before there was no contrast, no relief.

No name to that place on my map.

The cloud washes over, is absorbed, taken in by the blue-black forest like laundry pulled in off the line.

Or a whale diving deep.

One Week In: Dreaming

I haven't occupied the forest so much as it has occupied me. Weather pulls me out of my office; rain finds skin, both exposed and protected, down and on and in. Sunlight ladders down the valley fold, is absorbed by a disheveled green. Gold chips of light, more valuable than water, filter all the way down to where shrews gnaw on subterranean fungi. Kinglets tread so fast from branch to branch, only stitches of song remain as they pass through. All niches are spoken for: so where do I fit in? The terrain of my desk, consuming tea, noting the shift in cloudcover from high gray to low slate. A member of a species – the tribe of writer – that knows so little, too much, has no real reason for being here other than to reflect back. Pool myself. Collect rainwater in a cup, dissolve myth-making, soak dreams from the previous night and sip its long-overdue brew.

Later, the bed is mine again, alone to find the place of surrender. Brain-pan. Night's tip-pit. I would ask the bear hibernating under an upturned rootball to make some room, a sickle's worth. A hide to lean into, to stave the starless river of sleep. A death-like rotting while living, this shedding of a life I have come to depend upon like a well-tended grove. In a climax forest, hope and grief are balanced by steady striving. Attainment can be gained, as well as an acceptance of the eventual decline. In the sweeping descent of duff saddling the once-highest trunk, there is a sweet song in the field of the fallen, peace in the art of giving in. The intimacy of limbs, the jibe of desire. The forest craves to slouch from the forever holding-forth. Skin begins to slide under its own weight. A longing to sleep, to take an equally aging lover into a bed of moss. Where seedlings hatch, carry one needle at a time into the light. Solitude joins solitude creating a place to nurse upon. Straddle time. Let rain slip down bark like the backs of necks. Give up this lonely occupation.

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earthstar lungwort ensatina millipede licorice kinglet clubmoss
wash tree tip-pit chanterelle shelf spotted owl first-snow needle-
choked sphagnum carpet arboretum seep fan cavity
lodge niche riverteeth duff nitrogen-fixed nurse-log bole
shrew leap snag camouflage bushwhack indian pipe trample
earthtongue release spotted skunk waddle flag position bear
grass ghost orchid red-backed vole trowbridge chickadees prince's
pine pod violet break gate osprey deer mouse galvanized
squirrel nocturnal cotton lily study basket grass coral
club lobster vole chipmunk snowshoe hare broadsword turkeytail
filament old man's beard big leaf maple yew flying cloak fir
siphon clear story western red cedar earthball lichen night nest

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Reflection Plot: Decomposition

Green Death, Black Life

Rot requires nothing but time and an agreement not to interfere. It is whole tenures of laying on one's side and never rolling over, until a good reason comes along. A hard wind. An avalanche. Another green body falling from the next ridge over. Some nudging. Place a camera in their midst for forty years, and see how much a grove can lapse without lifting a limb. Wide-mouthed plastic buckets gather time, the next best thing to data. Faded pink flags measure angles of repose. Surrender is a slow-waltz on a thick-carpeted dance floor.

Rot will dazzle.

How eagerly the canopy wants to join earth. Trees fall under their own weight, sacrificing themselves from the living. Rootballs tip and strive towards sky, their subterranean truth exposed. Daylight gets comfortable on its these slick, black, snake-like roots.

In this slump and mold, this bottoming-out, we quietly rot, too. Age catches up and in a mirror we note the blooming sag. Eye sockets no longer rimmed with upturned hope – life's etchings have found their hold. It cannot be helped, might even be embraced, as when I try to climb over a log to get to a new gray mushroom folded up like a sea anemone or a clover, and I fall, but break nothing. Moss-embraced. Soaked through at the seat and the knees, but no need call out for help: this is no real emergency. Only spores would come to the rescue, anyway, claim and mark, find the most ancient thoughts in my ears and pockets. Simply wait for rain to tame this fibrous frustration veining like lightning in the night – at having fallen so close to black rot, of needing to see over the next curve. At being blinded by green, unafraid. At knowing that one day we will join it, too; will idle under owls. Be so easily snuffed. So welcomed to join, at any moment.

Small Mammals: Ground-Truthing

7 am. A weak November sun is trying its best. Small night creatures have been lured by peanut-butter and seeds into traps and are waiting for skilled biologist hands to handle, measure and release them to the bright day. There's enough ginger cookies in my backpack to keep a small crew of interns going – up and down the thick under-growth, sloping towards the next quadrant mapped with bright pink nylon strips tied to trees: an invisible order laid over the scene, a grid I cannot see

or comprehend. I'm aware that my boots are trampling prince's pine and gauging the subtle runnels of vole; of my tired thighs, and the urge to stop and take it all in. But there is no dreaming here – small bodies are close to hypothermic state and the peanut butter is long gone. Wads of cotton in the Sherman traps are a thin comfort against galvanized steel.

Small wonders, here and there. Heart rates slow as we kneel and cup their warm bodies, their idling fear, and inspect the finger-nail-thin ears for an I.D. band (like a forest of hipster rodents). Quick pencil-notes. Pockets, calipers, stuff-sacks. Traps reset, onto the next. How many of these animals are trapped by choice, preferring the full security of a roof and four “walls,” a bed and food, against a night of being hunted? Still, a bear or raven might come through occasionally to pitch about the traps like shiny toys and terrify the occupants. No amount of bark-shards and shadows will camouflage them. Trap-happy Townsend chipmunks scold at being turned out, bite a few thumbs on their way.

A raven patrols the canopy – the same parents and fledgling that have been working the ridge above Lookout Creek next to my apartment, so loud I have been hearing them above the rain in the gutters and my typing. They're making their own calculations of the night, of these backpack-heavy humans trudging so ungracefully up the slope. Scavengers-in-training. There are other birds, too: juncos, kinglets, stellar jays, the Swainson's thrush invisible, but sweet-trilling. I sip water, scan quickly. An osprey nest tops a dead Douglas fir, far off. The lead biologist says he doesn't usually look up: the ground is what he's interested in. All the forest floor's occupants there for the taking, the noticing, data scurrying every which way.

In three of the traps, northern flying squirrels, all female, look fit to be tied, their noses rubbed raw from trying to budge out. After being measured, weighed and identified, they find the nearest tree and climb until they catch a full breath at the top, poise themselves head-down and *fly* to a tree 75 feet away. Daylight doesn't know what to do with their shadows, so quickly they have folded themselves into the forest glade and glimmer. They re-calibrate their morning hunger, turn a cold shoulder, disappear into deadwood.

The sun has climbed as high as it will at this slant, this degree, on this calendar date. A rare, late-season lull. In a while, we'll weave our way back down through the invisible grid, past the reset traps to the trucks, to our afternoon tasks. But first, more cookies passed around, a few more stories. One intern tells of how the juvenile flying squirrels will often bang into trees like cartoon

characters on their first flights. We laugh until the bag is empty. We pause in a grove that is more alive than one would ever guess, from forest floor to high-blue ceiling.

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rapid fog punchbowl cliff crossing corridor juvenile
shrapnel canopy convergence mature scrub log-jamb compost
reservoir lateral moraine glacial field study station gauge test
watershed measure flicker map sub-alpine rain rough-skinned
newt temperate roadkill slide river-bed guardrail milepost
yew hemlock flag red cedar douglas fir spruce alder waver
white oak ash egg sac rhododendron scour oregon grape drip
riffle roar bark fiber knoll cradle cut-bank point-bar run
blind-creek expiration cold-front air-shed climate reserve braid
intensive impact zone channel thalweg filter dipper
divergence rapid pebble beach turtle-back eddy agate
ramp flood grade turbulence viscosity flow riffle willow
surge siphon mudbank ouzle capacity artery fork
vascular needle water-logged respiration tread perch variant
traverse reply locate molder whet submerge hatch fry
larval velocity trip molt upwelling spine migrate return

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Reflection Plot: Old Growth, Lookout Creek

Flood-stage

This cannot be the same creek. Days ago it threaded, wound, slipped, tripped, burbled, found its casual, late-autumn way. Determined, but not in a rush. Knowing where it was heading, but not letting that stop it every now and then from pooling and gazing into clear mirrors. Clouds woke and remembered their birth-gardens, migrated back, one hesitant cloud slipping into a dark stand of

hemlock. In the night, the rest of the flock moved in, too, burdening the branches. Over-flowing. Snow's wet roots threaded sky to ground, nudging the last leaves to give up their summer ghosts. Fall already. Even the thrush got the hint, finally took their appetites south.

Inside for days with a head-cold, with all the windows closed, the creek was muffled by gutter-drip and the roof leaking on the water heater. Running just below the woods, it had become another creature altogether during the two days and two nights of weather, while my tangled, fevered dreams played out. Once back in the forest, though, a bass line I have never heard before registers – even over the rain. The wide-awake woods. Out of control, the creek charges into white-water, cutbank to rootballs. An old-growth log that had been propped up against another, has vanished. Nothing can resist unless it mats itself together, pins itself up against boulders. Or until a better idea comes along. A surge. A trembling. All else is slipstream, beyond eddying. Water pleases only itself.

In the forest, runnels vein through moss, channels escort the flood. Gravel chute. Leaf culvert. Deer paths now shortcuts. Water wants only to be among its own kind, traversing, letting gravity and its strong will guide, to the river. Creek and River are now kin – two white arrows surging downstream, giving up all sense of direction when it comes to the boulderfield. After convergence, in a clear pause, leaves roil, meet each other for the first time, like fish, or abandoned, once-good ideas. Wind convinced trees to let go, let down, expose themselves, dislodge their summer ornamentation. Now leaves sway, try to swim back upstream in effervescent confusion – a treble song of release, the bass line of reunion!

1996 Flood: Gleanings

Above the calmed-down creek, the remnants of that epic Pacific Northwest winter storm has left its mark. A bend is missing, whole groves. Scour-marks remain on cliffs 100 feet above its resting stage, down where water slips over mossy boulders and into clear green pools, as playful as an otter. The air bursts here and there with golden-crowned kinglets. The weather hasn't begun to consider rushing up into the mountains. It's not in any hurry.

But when the sky let loose for three February weeks sixteen years ago, the earth could only hold so much. Ground slid, roads washed away. Farms disappeared under water. Bridges strained with the weight of choked debris, eventually buckled. Foundations shifted. The earth shuddered –

what sounded like cannon-fire came from the creek. 200 foot, 500 year old fir and cedar chuting down the above-flood stage river – canopies, rootballs and all – jambing together like a derailling train. Nowhere to go but into and over and under one another. One whole tree slid into the current, disappeared, then popped back up down-stream, free from the river’s frenzied entanglements.

The lone person at the Andrews, at the time, witnessed this water-shed moment: He felt the top of the tree lodge itself into riverbed, through the soles of his feet. He could not believe what he was seeing – a forest giving up its living and its dead in one rushing swoop. Water, the ultimate gleaner and equalizer. Creek, the forest’s vessel. Much of the evidence of the flood has since been cleared away – by time, by bulldozers restabilizing banks and roads and bridges. The creek reconstructs its identity with each passing cloud. The world shines again. Rain relents. Seeds find lodging in the beached and polished bodies of the ancients, as promising as agates found in a gravel bed. Proof of the ongoing collaborations between water and earth and unmerciful sky.

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scotch broom false brome columnar cougar savannah
 madrone bracken salal vertical slash recover plot prey
 fungi diurnal areal ice-heave plantation cone flush flock
 grove air hibernate cover tremor cache tunnel forage
 subsist substrata terminus saddle ravine lapse season
 forge ecotone rip-rap choke silt updraft flume debris
 mound dormant stem decay sprout ermine stump pica
 horizon updraft storage duff dryki gore patch gradient
 hiatus protection clearcut yearlings fertile elevation parcel
 topographical hunger monitor predator slope scale blind litter

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Reflection Plot: Clear-cut

An Un-clear Story

He says, *We're being watched.*

He mentions that this was once a clear-cut.

Replanted 15 years ago, it looks more like a disheveled Christmas tree farm.

He says, *Way up, it was too steep to log, so they left that alone. Oak and madrone. You could make your way up.*

Watch out for poison oak.

Later, I am back at the base of that softly rounded, southerly slope. Eyes in knot-holes. Raven sweeping its oil-black wings, shouldering the available sun. Acorns wedged between lip of bark and trunk. I imagine all the caches at 2000 feet. Exposed. Hidden. California trees making themselves at home. Dormant butterflies – silverspot, skipper, angelwing – slipped under bark like business-cards in a pocket. This year's litter of mountain lion rest their heads, the color of grass gone slack as September. Paws stretched south, the way the compass really wants to point – towards incoming weather, the mouth of the valley.

He or she or they could be watching, but not caring a fig about me. But I take care, scan the lichen-cloaked, leafless trees for any slumping, purring sign. Making my way up, I am relieved at all the poison oak and thorny rose bushes between the trees. Impassable. Impossible. Instead, I take the road that looks familiar, like it could be a firetrail back in Michigan, the type of woods I know better – the kind that taught me about up-wind and down-wind, and bored, restless men. Resident beer can. Shell-casings. Don't walk too far from the car. Don't linger. A drop in temperature – a thin rain coat won't be enough. Water sheds from the hills' hide, scalloping the road, as tame as a city swale. Water in argyle plaits itself before the next hard rain. I have to know what it knows.

Twenty steps to where a stand of fir saplings part like a garden lane, a deer path leads right through. I could take that, see how far I could get. It's surprising that in clear-cuts, once grown in and left alone, how unclear the way really is. Gone is the jumbled rhythm of bodies-meet-rot, which is not so easy to walk a straight line through, either. Seed-chance and succession, intentionality and randomness thrive on the same slope. The laws of opportunity govern, and management is a game. Here, no order or joy or reason governs, only longing and hunger. Browned bracken fern slump from the killing frosts.

Something *is* watching. Flickers, nutcrackers and jays flash through, telling each other *I'm here!* They come close to a cottonwood, give me a good once-over and report back to each other indecipherable news. I scan the ground for chanterelles, for small mighty things pushing up. Four mule deer hooves lie in a puddle, the cloven front and back split apart into pieces like a sectioned orange. No bones, no jaw, no teeth. Tiny bugs cling to the hooves, cleaning, buffing, devouring. Disregarding time, taking their time, decay in action. Scent of fish, memory of track. Blood is long gone, licked first – off paws, dragged through whiskers, an iron stain on mane.

An old growth stump rots slower than it should, out here where sun can take hold of wood, where a cougar can sink its teeth easily into a throat. I pocket the token hooves, head back to the afternoon's tea before the next wave of rain. Try to tell the clear-cut's bristling tale. But this time get it right. Remember to tell that the unknown held me back and fear kept me to the road, like water, along a once-wild slope slowly filling in.

Science & Poetry Chat: A Low-Elevation Exchange

In the florescent hallway, they get acquainted. Scientist meets Poet. He holds a green gizmo, something that measures, monitors, gauges – a device her son would want to hold on tight to and figure out. The Poet has been laying hands on topographical maps: spread out like tablecloths, she attempted to decipher their raised language, trace their flow, scale with her fingers in 500-foot increments. All her life maps have led to the next map, to the uncharted future, to the blank spaces she craves to sleuth.

Streams shed off green ridges. Fog roams the emptied Blue River reservoir like a whale strayed from its pod – *Whale! yes, that's it!*, the Scientist's eyes brighten. Fog meeting the valley's expiration. Precipitation. Cold air exchange. Heavy air sinking to its knees. But the studies, the terms and names that roll off his tongue as brightly-lit as a tenor solo, like someone versed... they leave her a little more wide-eyed than before, gauging and wondering at what she could latch onto. Airsheds are like lungs, like a body breathing, he says. *Yes, that's it!* She smiles. The Poet grips the three volumes of someone else's verse a little tighter, field guides to un-documented studies happening below the radar. The Scientist moves down the hallway, each room and lab like a data-cloud ready to be explored.

Thanksgiving: Sun After Storm

Two hours of forest-clearing sun and a run in the morning chill. All uphill and downhill, no steady in-between. The asphalt wants to give in, give up after years of slump-marks greening over. Where the road washed out in 1996, a boulder-field stabilizes its steep pitch, already lush with moss. In the cutbank, I take my fill of dripping-fern photos. Verdant studies, decadent in their weight.

A winter wren lands at the edge of day. Below, the creek curves around a 200 year old tree spanning like a bridge, its root-ball reaching like nerve-endings – casters of air, synapses barely firing above a current that scours all thought away. A water ouzel chips on about the day's possibilities, works the water-seam. Downstream the sun is re-seeding itself on a bank of repose, gravel and time its sturdy bed. All paths, high and dry, low and coursing, are lined with desire.

Along the yellow paint-strip, I run. Big leaf maple leaves matt the beveled margins. No rough-skinned newts on a morning this cold and dry. Resurrected ponds are now home for those who have found safe passage and join each other, taking half-submerged, deep-gilled breaths. The season sews shut. I have been here long enough to notice the subtle shifts: the saffron lace of angel fern catching the last light; golden chanterelles emerging on the darkest, wettest day; first snow, as it fell on the ridges; trout threading their way back up-river. Every living thing knowing its place.

Enough aloneness – now anticipation. My family is coming to join me for Thanksgiving, and the run has left me hungry. All the floors in the apartment have been swept, are shining. Towels tumbled dry. Potatoes washed, ready to boil. A bottle of wine to uncork. This place to go over again, first with feet and eyes, then with stories and dreams. An introduction of one family to another. A homecoming. A departure. A gratitude that buckles my heart like a fold in a map, ready to tear.

End of the Experiment: A Farewell

In the next room my daughter colors and cuts paper dolls, while my husband and son try identify mushrooms from the blurry pictures taken on my phone. Dinner dishes are stacked and drying. Chanterelles and pinot noir have left their afterglow. Pumpkin pie waits (or we wait for it). Night has come and we are tucked in, while the moon slides over unnoticed. We are still flushed from being out hiking all day in the old growth along Lookout Creek, a dozen shades of green now when we close our eyes.

In the back seat on the drowsy drive down from the snow-line, the children's cheeks glowed with *full-enough*, mesmerized by bobcat and rabbit and coyote tracks pacing the frozen edge of the road. We drove slowly to stop and steer around rough-skinned newts, get out and watch them plod like prehistoric afterthoughts into the dark. Fog came ahead of the night's rain like a cool-handed messenger, known at once. The weather lacing river-time up. The pause point before the next rainshed.

Everything brought in out of the forest eventually dries out. An extracted river tooth harbors the tiniest of wood-boring worms, which falls to the polished desk. I help it back onto the wood, where it wrestles a minute particle for a while, finds a groove, wedges in, stays invisible. A burl reveals another whale eye. Bottle-green pebbles have lost their glassy finish. Neon green liverwort blanches like old parchment. Life and moisture halt at my hand.

Now my family is playing with the camera, taking fish-lens pictures – they've given up on the blurry mushroom shots. There's silly laughter. There's a relief that we all made it to this point, two weeks without their mother and wife, the one who steers the family boat. I type these last words, about them, about the rain, about the ravine of 500 year old decaying stumps suggesting that we all lean into their firm, red-fibered pillows. The rush of river in our ears: the gift I can give them in return. Tomorrow we will pack up, sweep all the rooms, wipe down the blue and white tiles, empty the refrigerator, turn in the key.

But we will move slowly on our way out, linger like autumn stalling in the foothills. I'll show them a few more slices of the creek, the drained reservoir, the saddle damn below – all the ways water connects, how it diverts out of our lives. Down Lookout Creek, Blue River, the Mighty Mackenzie, all these lesser corridors joining greater ones. We will resist the urge to make our own pirate streams, follow wild tangents, but flow instead with traffic (*all those shiny fish*) back west, then north, the emerald valley thick with a tame river at its center. Drift all the way home. Count all the hawks we see sitting atop freeway poles, as if we and they don't have a hunger in the world. Continue this gray slide in winter rain. Take notes and ramblings to my home-desk and make the promise to come back. At least on the page.

Stoke the dreaming of fire and rot, surge and regrowth. Re-enter the forest from every angle, in all weather, from all points on the compass, in each season. Any forest – any place trees chose to congregate, where clearstories still have conversations with taproots. Where wild life still passes through unnoticed. Otherwise, how would I know if it had all been real?