

**A LETTER TO FREDERICK J. SWANSON
AFTER VIEWING DECAYING LOGS AT LTER SITE 3,
HJ ANDREWS EXPERIMENTAL FOREST**

Dear Fred:

Sometime around 2:00 a.m. I dreamed I was a decaying log. PVC respiration monitors were placed along my body just as they are along the logs at LTER Site 3. And a group of people, perhaps the very group you led into the forest, was looking into the tubes. But I couldn't hear what they were saying, and I wanted to hear what was being said.

I grew very still,
stillness extending until the forest was a constellation of sound.

I could hear the precipitation of needles from the canopy above, the ruffled wing-beat of a pileated woodpecker, the red-breasted nuthatches negotiating something beyond. I could hear each of you holding your breath as you looked in the tubes, trying to still the hum of the vast arteries flowing through us. Then, breathing again, and how each breath inside each tube was a distant ocean. But by the time I reached this point of stillness, everyone had stopped talking, and what had been said about what had been perceived within the tubes was lost to me. I felt your footsteps walking off to wherever was next. I—a decaying log—remained. . .

. . . and slowly woke up in my room. . .

. . . and thought about the dream.

Wondering what is decaying within myself and why I was so comfortable with it; contemplating the vulnerability of exposing myself to being read; the desire to know what others saw within me, and my sense that a secret lies within their seeing; wondering if I might have simultaneously been part of that group looking in tubes, looking within myself; understanding my Self turning to "humus," which is cognate with the word "humanity"; wondering if the memory of a dream is the research "trash" of sleep. I thought of each of us as a conch shell relaying echoes of distant places. I saw my own shell filled with a love of ancient echoes, human and otherwise. I turned on the lamp, opened a book of Tang dynasty Chinese poetry and read "Deer Park," a poem by the Buddhist poet and painter Wang Wei, here translated by Sam Hamill:

*No sign of men on the empty mountain
only faint echoes from below.*

*Refracted light enters the forest,
shining through green moss above.*

As on other readings of this poem, I saw an ancient Chinese forest spread before me. The bloom of green light. But this time it filled with details of HJ Andrews Experimental Forest.

Here there are signs of humans everywhere. For a moment the mountain seemed not quite empty, but that feeling quickly passed as emptiness flooded back. And the poem then filled with my recent memories of the devastation, the complete elimination of forests in China. Where there is no forest, there is no forest to be empty, no forest in which to build an experiment, no forest in which to write this poem, or to even make sense of it.

I brought this book of poems with me for an experiment. I want to know if these ancient mountains poems have the same impact upon my mind when read deep in an ancient forest (a non-human habitation) as they do when I read them at home. I plan to record me reading within the forest and then replay that recording elsewhere. I plan to read them in the same place on different occasions to see how familiarity shifts the experience. To see my own mind's tides. It is a private experiment to be carried out some days from now after everyone's left.

But then you surprised me by reading the poem by Jane Hirshfield while standing next to the decaying logs. And it fell flat. Hollow, barely resonant. What had happened? I cherish her poetry, in fact I brought one of her books with me on this trip. My reaction has nothing to do with the poem, nor anything to do with your reading. Our words don't typically integrate with the ecological nuance of a 500 year-old forest. They pale in the density of the ancient forest—the kaleidoscopic interactions of moss and sunlight, mushroom and cedar, fog and spider. The words are barely formed, inchoate in comparison within this web. Or, maybe I didn't need a poem within this environment as I do in other parts of my life. No need for a window into the forest while standing in the forest.

In the silence following your reading, I saw the poem as research “trash”—no different than the PVC pipes, the blobs of silicone, the little flags, and the aluminum tags. This is all mind debris in different shapes. The question now: What is it within us that integrates with such a complex system, that fills there without falling flat, without needing to dominate, or take control, or exert itself in a way that causes a fundamental disruption? I looked back within the poem.

Each poem is an entity unto itself where we get to watch a mind move. But each poem is also a foundation upon which each of us, on our own, get to build our own temporary mansion or grass hut. And in that mansion or hut, we get to shake hands, share a drink, tangle eyebrows with the poet. These are gifts of a poem. These are also the gifts of the flags and pipes, if that is what we let them be.

And when I encountered the PVC pipes and the decaying logs, I see a similar function: the movement of a mind guided by intent, a foundation upon which my own mind gets to follow. I don't mean this to justify writing poetry or leaving the skeletons of an experiment in a forest. It is not an issue of right or wrong. It has to do with the way minds reach out like tendrils, like roots of a plant, searching for another mind, perhaps Mind with a capital M—that pervades everything. I would like to access that quality of mind that is ancient like this forest. That reaches out to build itself anew upon the nurse logs.

We spend a lot of time on arbitrary distinctions, failing to look at the broader context. The giant highways that cut apart the landscapes: mind debris. The bullets, the Styrofoam boxes, the carbon-spewing cars, the islands of plastic in our oceans: mind debris. These are cause for fury. Poem and spewed-CO₂ are each a statement, an organized wave of energy drawing a line through time. We get to decide which wave to build our mind upon and what debris will follow, because debris always follows. Like this letter.

One you've read this letter, I ask that you set it within the research site and leave it to decompose. I would like for it to feel rain, to become part of the mosses and fungi, to be sucked up into the trees. The words are simply a skeleton. The body is the world itself.

Enjoying our new friendship,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ian Boyden". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Ian Boyden
HJ Andrews Experimental Forest
September 28, 2014