

Joe Bruchac – Blue River Fellow – Spring 2013

AMONG THE DOUGLAS FIRS

Why is it
that one tree dances
while another,
mere feet away,
stands still?

Is it something more
than the vagaries of wind,
the differing shapes
of their branches?

Is it the way
their spray of needles,
like outstretched palms
cup the breeze?

Or is it just
that just like us
some have
at one time
or another
more of
an inclination
to move
to a rhythm
all their own?

All day yesterday and the day before, warm spring wind rippled through this fold between the mountains that holds the Andrews Forest buildings like small blocks of wood in a giant's hand. That wind brought down a dry rain of small branches bearing wispy banners of epiphytic lichens. They nearly covered the road in places like blankets textured with green and grey, woven by the dark threads of the twigs. Pieces of lobaria that look like poorly sewn on patches fallen from an old man's tattered coat.

They still have life, those old men's beards--like the Spanish moss of the bayous of the southeast. When the same wind that brings life to my lungs touches them, they quiver, little flags still representing their nation, one that does not like to let go, that clings to the branches, the trunks, anything that gives them purchase. Here in this forest life attaches itself to life. Even the gate that has been swung back and latched open is plastered with green moss, soft and spongy and drier to the touch than the rusting metal hidden beneath it.

I gathered up some of those fallen gifts from the high branches, knowing what they are, yet my eyes and my brain are still fooled every now and then by the grey sprays into seeing them as squirrel tails. A pile of them rests now on the table next to me, like trophies taken after a day of hunting for meat.

Was there a time that I remember when squirrel tails would be hung from the radio antennas of cars? I know that during my years in grad school when I hunted squirrels I sometimes saved their tails after skinning their warm bodies, feeling the slickness of firm red muscle beneath my fingertips, slicking out their guts and returning them to a hole dug in the leaves, then taking the hind quarters to our two room Quonset hut apartment where my wife Carol, would fry them. We were poor then by the standards of many and our meals often centered around what I could gather from the woods and fields or take with my grandfather's old pump action 12 gauge. Cat tails, dandelion greens, and milkweed in the spring. Pheasant, partridge, squirrels, the berries that came in late spring and summer and fall. Strawberry, the gift of the Little People. Raspberries as red as blood, blackberries hanging in dark clusters on heavy vines, blueberry bushes so laden with fruit we'd fill buckets with them as we gathered on the top of Turkey Hill. We ate them and gave thanks for their lives sustaining our lives.

Cycles. I think of cycles as I pick up one of those squirrel tails of lichen wrapped around the brown bone of a Douglas fir twig. Car wheels run over those fallen bits of the high forest, human feet kick them to the side to clear the pavement. But they are the flags of a nation that is undefiled by being broken, being torn, being crushed into the soil. They fall bearing their gifts of nutrients, nets that hold the earth, the roots, the healing rain.

I press a handful of them against my face, inhale the clean, dry, almost animal scent. A part of me wants to keep them, to never let them go. But I know that is a foolish wish. For they symbolize nothing except themselves and their use is not to be hoarded away as human possessions, as tangible metaphors. A small laugh escapes my throat as I think that because my eyes have drifted to another pile of pale green on that same table—the currency I took from my pocket and dropped there last night. A twenty and four ones. The legendary amount supposedly paid by the Dutch to purchase Manhattan on May 24th of 1626. Sixty guilders, actually, an amount equated to that fabled twenty four simoleons. Money for land, an exchange that has never been truly understood—and why should it make sense—by the native people of this hemisphere, where the earth is often seen and experienced as a relative, a sustaining parent, and not something to be cut up and consumed like a piece of meat.

I pick up the twenty. My least favorite bill for it bears on its face the face of Andrew Jackson, a man whose life and fortunes were saved by his Muscogee allies. Men who, with their families

and those of the other tribal nations of the American south, were forced from their homes and sent toward the setting sun on paths watered by the tears, sweat and blood, of many generations. My Cherokee friends still refer to Jackson as the Devil. It was Jackson who, slightly more than any other president, saw Indians as an impediment to be removed.

Then I take up the ones, the most common of all bills. And on their faces is the visage of the Father of Our Country. The man whose name was placed on the nation's capitol. And when you say the word "Washington," you are doing more than just referencing the first president or even that city. You are talking about policy and politics, about the way things work, or do not work in America.

Rex Jim, a Navajo friend, once asked me if I knew the right way to hand someone a dollar bill, "Like this," he said, holding it out green-side up. "The green and the eagle are on this side. You can always trust the eagle and the green." He flipped the one over. "But you can never trust the man, trust Washington."

I weigh that small pile of bills in one hand and the little bundle of twigs, lichen and mosses in the other. Which one can I hold onto, truly hold? Which one can I carry? And which, by putting it down, will carry me?

CREEK TRAIL

I started to climb,
counting my steps
stepping over
fallen Douglas fir branches
pale striped as the birches
of my own eastern slopes.

A hundred, five hundred steps,
up and down a trail no wider than
the span of two hands,
the ground bouncing
as the countless lives
beneath my feet
push back against
my transient weight.

Eight hundred, a thousand,
Two thousand steps
As the wind breathes
through lungs of green,
as the flow of the stream below
offers its constant harmony.

And then I stop,
not really weary,
but not needing to trade
one glimpse from the top,
still far from sight
for an uncertain
return in the dark.

And though I do not wish to pretend
that the years I carry
equal that much more wisdom
there is one question
I've learned to ask.

How far must we go
before we know
we have to turn back
to return with the light?

What is breath
but the gift of the wind?

What is song
but the shaping of breath

And what do
the old trees do
with the wind?

THE INTERPRETIVE TRAIL

I have followed the trail
that winds back on itself

ever climbing
ever descending

like the uncoiling fern
that opens
as a hand does
to grasp something new
or let go of a secret.

It is a way
like the deer's.
It is a path
like the cougar's.
Twin threads
stitching
up and down
through life
through death,
all the same.

THE CHANGE OF WORLDS
Andrews Forest, Oregon
In Memory of Vi Hilbert, Lutshootseed Elder

No need to be afraid of death D
Seattle said, there is no loss A
it's no more than a change of worlds Em
like the fallen fir that returns to moss. G

And like that tree, we too have stood
lifting up between earth and sky
and as we rise, we know that we
must too descend, coming falling time.

Lah-doke, chah-doke chow D
Lah-doke, chah-doke chow A
Lah-doke, chah-doke chow G
Where are you going? G D

And then our trunks will feed the soil
ten thousand lives and more will thrive
as we transcend this shape we've held
to help this world remain alive

They say that Buddha long ago
while walking through the forest came
to a starving tiger and her young
lay down, gave his body to them

And yet, and yet I must admit
I am not ready for my breath
to leave the music of my heart
that's echoed by my fragile steps.

Still, without fear, let me give thanks
for one more rising of the sun
and let me walk through one more day
as if my life had just begun.

SLUG

What's wrong with me if I feel kinship
with the humble grace of its bark-brown shape?

Extended across the litter of leaves
compacted by careless human feet,
insouciant to danger, it did not move,
even as my heavy steps approached.

True, when I touch it, it shrinks in
upon itself like some cinema heroine
examined by a fascinated ape.

But it still remains faithful to itself
to stay or go at its own speed,
unruled by those modern ideas
of useful time and knowing one's place.

And so, knowing something myself
of another vision, before their clocks came
I say, "My relative, let me help your journey."

And then, undisturbed by the way
its life sticks to my fingers I lift it,
place it off their trail, among the debris.

In such places we may go unseen
by those whose hurrying feet are eager
to take them anywhere but here.