

Working Draft for Decomposition Study

by Carey Bagdassarian
with gratitude to the Spring Creek Project

The land lives in its people. It is more alive because they worked it, because they left this hillside and that creek bottom marked by their shovels and axes. The meaning of this place lies in the rough weight of their hands, in the imprint of their gum-booted travel.

–John Haines

I

Only hours from the forest and I was still searching for the perfect hiking socks. I'd researched websites for a week, I'd talked to salespeople in every outdoor shop from Seattle to Portland on my drive down. I continually texted my concerns and updates to family and friends. And at last I found them, the socks I'd been looking for, in a mom-and-pop gear store. After weighty consultation with the owner who assured me they were extraordinary, I paid for the socks and changed into them right there. This last frontier soundly conquered and my feet safe in an exquisite blend of merino wool, alpaca, and a hint of nylon for the right amount of stretch, I got into my car, fired up the engine, turned the radio loud, and headed to the forest. There, as a writer-in-residence among the trees, to look for the perfect story.

I happened upon a little antique store three miles down the road. I love old woodworking tools and rarely miss a chance to scope them out. Besides, it wasn't even noon yet, plenty of time to get to the forest. I pulled into the parking lot and stepped into the store with the unspent urgency of a mercenary.

The guy behind the counter waved as I marched by, and we both went to our business. A display case in the back of the store housed a promising smattering of tools along with some arrowheads, old musket balls, and a powder horn. A folding knife with a half-dozen loose attachments, all resting on a cracked pouch that could use some leather conditioner, caught my eye.

“Excuse me,” I called out, “can I see this knife here?”

The guy looked up from the cash register and walked my way. He was pretty grizzled, awkwardly tall, no ass whatsoever to hold up his jeans and these goofy John Lennon wire-rimmed glasses way too small for his head.

“That one there?” he asked pointing to the knife. He fumbled with a mess of keys, trying to find the one that unlocked the display case. “Oh yeah, that gizmo,” he explained as he worked the lock, inserting key after key, “Yeah, never seen one like it before or since.”

He finally opened the case, shrugged, and reached in. “Take yer time,” he said as he handed the pouch and its contents to me, “I’ll be up front if you need anything.” The knife had long use to it. But I couldn’t manage to engage any of the attachments, which I now saw to be a flat chisel, a gouge, a saw, a file and the like.

“I can’t figure out how to make it work,” I called out and the guy offered to show me, coming my way again while thumping his glasses onto his nose. I handed him the knife and the file attachment. “Yeah,” he joked, “it’s like the original Swiss Army knife.”

He tried it this way, and he tried it that way, trying my patience, and he couldn’t do it either. I glanced out a window. The sun was maneuvering behind clouds.

“That’s okay,” I mumbled, “the blade’s nicked pretty badly anyway.”

“Yeah, in my twenty-five years of business in this stuff, I never seen anything like this knife,” he repeated maybe by way of explanation for his own difficulties with it. He handed the tool back to me. “You want, I’ll give you a deal. It’s good steel, you can tell it’s good steel.”

I looked at the price tag. Ridiculous with any deal, and you can’t even get the attachments on. “All right,” said the guy as he put the the tool back in the display case. “I like tools,” he added, “I always keep some here at hand in the store. You can work that nick out, ye know.”

“Uh-huh,” I responded, not really interested anymore and mainly thinking I was hungry. Should get some lunch, check in at the main office when I got to the forest, unload my car at my cabin, then meet up with the person who’s supposed to show me around as an orientation to things. There’d be time after that to gear up for a hike. I bounced up and down on the toes of my boots. My socked feet felt vibrant and airy, I

noted with satisfaction. I looked through a stack of old magazines without much enthusiasm, getting ready to leave.

Just then the sweetest guitar playing came from the back of the antique store. It was just an unaccompanied slide guitar, sweet, and edgy and wild raw. That vibration of the metal slide against frets and metal strings vibrated you into some mad longing. Like for sex and fire and things far more ancient. At first I thought the music was coming in over a speaker. It went on for only a minute or so, and I stood dumbfounded blinking as the antique-store guy finished off his riff. He set the guitar back on its rack, just five feet from where I'd looked at the knife not even noticing the instrument. The guy gave his pants a tug up and put his hand on the guitar. "It has good sound to it, yeah?" he said.

"Yeah, and, uh, wow, the playing, too," I stammered, "The playing, it sounds good, too."

"There's another guitar back here, there's two of 'em. Take a look if you want."

They weren't antiques, but brand new, and quiet and sure in meticulous and masterful craftsmanship. The one he'd been playing was smooth polished with rich figure in the dark of the wood and inlaid with silverwork on the fretboard. "This one's mostly koa wood," he explained, "from Hawaii." The other guitar was based on a Martin from the late 1920s, he said, a lighter wood to it, with mother-of-pearl inlay on ebony accents.

"I love these things, you know?" He asked if I play. He took down the Martin model, did a run with fast fingers. I said no, I didn't play. He shrugged, but I couldn't catch the meaning of it. "Over time," he said still holding the guitar, "they're new now, these instruments, but over time as people play them over the years . . . they change hands, you know, these guitars, and they'll take each person's stories and life into them."

Raising the guitar to eye level, he sighted down its long neck. He nodded several times, handed the guitar's magic body to me, and readjusted his glasses. "They sound good," he said again and told me only then that he makes them, that they're his hands' work.

His redemption and my abashment both complete, I got back into my car.

The word *massive* might have been created to describe the trees here. Significant chunks of the H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest have never been logged and this land is home to, among other creatures, the spotted owl. But Andrews Forest is also a place of measurement and so of instruments. Scientists study and monitor the forest's fauna and flora, its watersheds, the hydrodynamics of streams; school kids visit to learn about ecology and to climb Douglas-fir trees. After I check-in at the office, I'm told that some of the twigs on the road are actually rough-skinned newts working their way from the woods to the Blue River Reservoir, there to breed. If you know what you're looking for, they're easy to spot: they're like little brown wedges unless they've been run over. Their undersides are a fierce orange. Steve, one of the scientists, says that it's pretty bad karma to run over something that moves so slow. Not even settled in and already I'm killing newts.

It's been raining for days without end, and the land is sopping in its tree tops, in its soft moss and ferns. Tree decomposition studies are underway at one particular research station several miles from the office, and Tim who's getting me oriented takes me there. Tim's had twenty years in this forest, as a researcher, a writer, a photographer, a walker. It's obvious in his intense knowledge of the forest's ecology and birdsongs. But mostly it's in his alert glimpse through the trees of a flying barred owl that I don't even register. These owls aren't native to Andrews, Tim tells me, over the years they've migrated west through Canada's forests. And they're more aggressive than the spotted owl and enjoy the same flying squirrels and voles for food. In addition, the spotted owl is endangered because of habitat loss. Andrews Forest scientists have determined that old-growth trees are crucial for the species' survival—hence the preservation of the forest.

A quick singularity of motion, that barred owl, and we turn our attention back to the decomposition site. A grouping of fallen trees has been amassed and left to decay over time for a study of decomposition dynamics. Struck as I am by a symmetry with the outside world, I don't quite follow Tim's description of the particulars of these experiments. In Tennessee there's a body farm where donated dead humans are left to rot outdoors under the scrutiny of eyes, notepads, instruments, and computers. Sally Mann has recently documented those corpses in that gorgeous way of hers. I'll never see the body farm, at least not while alive and I'm reluctant to speculate beyond that. When Tim

and I part ways, he tells me that he'll look forward to reading what I write about the forest.

OK then, I think to myself, gotta get to work.

Next to the decomposition site in a lower lying gully there's a wetlands with groves of Western Red Cedar. There are no edges here, everything is wet-soft. Rest a hand too forcefully on a fallen tree's body and it'll crumble, that edge, too, illusionary. No chainsaw has every been here—neither for logging, nor to clear paths for our ease of travel, nor to cut down those trees now left to decompose under watch only a hundred feet from where I stand.

You get here by a short trail off a dirt road, and along the trail there's a passing from second-growth to old-growth forest like entering a different order of existence. They're everywhere, these passings, on hiking trails, on roads, along creeks, in the body of the woods. You sense it, and the experiment is reproducible. Day after day, I try to walk with my eyes fixed at my feet, tuning for that transition into old-growth. I rarely miss the mark—the new silence, the shift in temperature and smell, the different energetics.

In my two-week stay, I return again and again to this cedar grove and the adjacent decomposition site. An uneasiness settles in under this compulsion. At first I think it's just that I don't want to bring Sally Mann's pictures—the outside world—to the forest. I want to encounter it on its own terms and not mine, I tell myself. Perhaps I'm only fighting to subdue my usual expectation of some transcendent, extraordinary, awesome, mind-altering encounter with the land. How many times have I gone backpacking or canoeing in remote places expecting to be changed—something like saved, if I'm to be truthful—only to realize that mystical experiences are not usually on tap? Maybe my uneasiness is simply the obvious, that I'm supposed to write something clever and new about the forest. Or perhaps I'm bothered by the incongruity of stark-white plastic buckets making measurements in otherwise pristine woods, of shiny metal badges discriminating this tree from that. When asked how I'm liking my stay, I say, "It's tremendous, amazing." And I'm tongue-tied to elaborate beyond this obvious abstraction. I'm a freakin' writer-in-residence here and that's what I come up with? As the days pass, my uneasiness grows

into a troubled nuance accompanying all my hikes, my thoughts, and the words I write down in my journal.

I've found that if I walk instead of drive the four miles to the trailhead leading to the decomposition site, I'm a little less cerebral in habit. But still, I'm very happy to have the names of the trees I slowly learn to recognize, the same ones that everyone who has walked through this forest comes to know: Western Red Cedar, Western Hemlock, Douglas-fir, Pacific Yew, Scented Cedar. A graduate student tells me that hemlocks are sad—their tops swept to near drooping, their limbs exhausted with wet sighs—because their cones are so very small. These tree-names pull my focus to a place to start in this rainforest tangle. Every night after dinner, I sit with a guidebook to the trees of the Southern Cascade Mountains, determined to train my memory, correcting it as the days pass and my experience grows.

It rains every day. Everyone at the office talks about it, as humans have always talked about the weather. And here it matters: it's hard enough for the researchers to be in the field hours on end without being cold and wet. I hike up to higher elevations and follow deer tracks in fresh snow. They're soon joined—footstep to footstep, footstep on footstep—by cougar tracks. With the hair on the back of my neck at keen attention, I add mine. A convergence of prey, predator, and observer. My socks keep my feet warm.

At night I'm sure to re-oil my leather boots, mindful especially of their seams, to keep them waterproof. I work my old Filson jacket, plying warmed soft wax into its strong cotton. This taking care of my gear gives me deep satisfaction. After I'd been in the forest for a week, Tim takes me for another hike. We bushwack a five-hundred-foot drop through what might as well be a non-stop clump of fishing line to a fast, full creek. The way Tim's body knows, and mine doesn't, gracefulness in well-worn and fabulously dirty chaps is a deep knowing. It binds him in continuity to those who once lived and worked in such wet country. With the passing days, I manage to learn some: where not to step, paths of lesser resistance, that grabbing at a tree to arrest my tumble can uproot the tree instead. But all that's not about the forest really: it's more about my moving through it. Of course I could make up all kinds of shit about the land and our relationship to it and know the bluff.

The scientist I once was until not too long ago stares with narrowed eyes at the Douglas-fir trees, the hemlocks, and the raucous of moss. There's got to be equation for it all, that scientist, still propelling my brain, declares categorically. Something audacious with deceptive simplicity, an elegant mathematics to capture the verdant and wet, the $E = mc^2$ of the forest. But try as I do, all I get is a squiggled line, convoluted and curving in and out of itself, crossing and crossing and crossing itself until my pen rips through the journal page. And I think of our grand efforts, our mighty labors to grab at the ends of that riotous line to pull it taut into straightness. But you have to do that maybe. Otherwise, it'd be like trees without human-given names for focus and bearing. But as Jim Harrison would insist, those aren't the names by which the trees call themselves.

On a particularly rainy and frigid day, I'm slow to leave for a hike and spend the morning at the office among my own kind: staff, scientists, students, all humans, and their hot coffee. Again, the question, "Are you enjoying your stay?"

"I am," I say, "It's awesome here," and to cover for this imbecile response, I mention that I'm also a chemistry professor. Am I to confess that I'm troubled as if by ghosts?

When asked what brought me to writing, I want to quote Jim Harrison but don't, thinking it confrontational. I want to say that there are different ways of knowing, each with a language appropriate to it. That what you learn depends on which language—that of the body, the mind, the soul, or that of the guts—you use to frame your questions. I want to reveal my conviction that there's a new emergent language at the confluence of those four, a slippery pact between them we haven't yet discovered. But shy to talk about all this, I simply explain that I love to write, that for me it's a language more pliable than that of science. Since no one presses me on what I mean, I let it go at that and walk over to the soda machine to study my choices.

In addition to the nature guide, I'm also reading John Haines at night with a fluorescent reading lamp as sole illumination. His words don't sink to my bones quite the same way in daylight, and I suspect a bright candle would be better still. In one essay he recalls a still cold Alaskan spring and the butterfly he found nearly powerless against it. Haines cupped the butterfly in his hands and warmed it with breath and into flight. For

much of my twenties, Nikos Kazantzakis was my favorite writer and that butterfly story resurrected my once-upon-a-time hero.

I read Kazantzakis voraciously, usually in cafés when I was still learning to stomach espresso without a Coke chaser to down it. What an expansive time, those first years of discovering literature (and reading Mishima in NYC with late-night sushi). Kazantzakis was Old Testament fierce and set the bar for what it means to be human very high. I thoroughly loved him. One day when he was a young man, his head and heart bursting with Nietzsche, Buddha, Christ, and Lenin, he found an unopened chrysalis hanging from a tree branch. The struggling butterfly was clearly visible inside, working to emerge to grandeur. Kazantzakis cupped the chrysalis in his hands and warmed it with his breath until it opened. The butterfly, not yet ready for life, died in the writer's hands.

Kazantzakis knew intimately a restless longing for gods, and he knew also his vitality and genius as a writer. But that knowledge would prove useless here in this old-growth forest. Now, more than twenty years after I last read him, Kazantzakis has me thinking of the loud confidence of Gore-Tex, and Haines of the subtlety of hand-oiled leather boots. But it's not right to diminish Nikos so harshly. And I do so only because I couldn't sustain, as he did, that mad intensity he claimed necessary for life and freedom. Haines knew much of what Kazantzakis knew and also the body of a butterfly. His was a knowing appropriate to the hard land from which he lived, and it was a knowing he earned after years in the Alaskan wilderness. His knowing far surpassed the oiling of boots, of course, but I'm happy that it's all part of the same family tree.

A flame thrower couldn't start a fire here, it's so wet. But unlike Haines, I'm not trying to live from the forest. I'm just walking through, still looking for a story about it, acutely aware that so much of what I know of life is from books. This knowledge, portable as it is in my brain, is what I've brought here with me. But, at its core, to know the forest means to know how to live on and from it. And that is a knowing that is my own body at stake, a gambit I'm frightened to take on.

My scientific work as a theoretician took place in front of a piece of paper, writing equations, and in front of a computer screen, writing code for simulations. I prefer to be outside rather than facing a machine. Would I have remained committed, I ask myself often, to the scientific method had my investigations taken place in Andrews

Forest with the owls, the trees, the coyote scat, that crazy creek whose rush obliterates the chatter in my brain? I have no answer and it doesn't escape me that my work as a writer also takes place largely on a computer.

I bushwack on the way to the decomposition site. The steep ascents, descents, and my clumsy falls exhaust my body to a thumping heart. Something underfoot collapses with a loud snap under my weight. The forest and I are adversaries. I finally reach the decomposition site and sit my tired rain-gear covered ass on a fallen tree, helping things along.

To feel the part, I lie down with the trees. But an overwhelming desire to do situps takes over. I know how to maneuver around city streets, a pizzeria, www.amazon.com. There, I know what questions to ask and possess the language to do so. That's not true in the forest and so I create metaphors and ideas instead. The miniature moss forests growing on bark contain the universe as do fine netsuke carvings and Chinese landscape drawings. The sway of the log I'm straddling, which in turn straddles the creek, is the sway of the Twin Towers.

My connection to the human world remains unshaken. My human voice won't abate. And as I walk though this patchwork of old-growth and second-growth forest quilted by creeks and streams and roads and trails, I see everywhere the signature of the human: metal markers on trees like dog tags, nylon ribbons, water collection devices, pvc pipes. These are questions put to the forest in our human language of inquiry. Even here, it seems, it's hard to give that up. I didn't even recognize the antique-store guy for what he truly was, and he spoke my language.

Perhaps John Haines wasn't preposterously Neanderthal to write the passage quoted at the start of this essay. All around me here there's the rough weight of scientists' hands, in the sharp weight of their instruments, in the imprint of their Vibram-booted travel. But there's also the rough weight of my writer's hand and my own stomping. After all is said and done, scientists and writers both, by means specific to their craft and vision, are trying to give the forest meaning, a meaning that human beings can sufficiently apprehend so as to talk about.

The weather finally breaks to a drizzle and a light jacket. Today feels like a stroll.

Observations are made: The creek's many voices. A piccolo gurgle in that spot there as a bit of white water nudges at an eddy; bass thumps as heavy waters crest the large boulder to the left; the delicate solo of that tiny waterfall, riding the rockface to meet its destiny. Polyrhythm from a topography of sound.

And: Some trees are comfort and consolation, but you knew that already. They'll listen to your story for hours before finally telling you quietly what you fear most. They're to be thanked with a teared-cheek upon their bark.

Other trees are elation and elevation. Touch them and you immediately rise to tip-toes as your spine grow upwards in laughter and in good fun. These trees are to be thanked simply with an enthusiastic high-five.

Some trees are sex, that one there especially. A great kisser for sure and I won't say more.

And some trees pull the very life from you. You drop to your knees before them with heavy eyelids, and you know you'll die if your hands remain on their merciless bark much longer. Should you ever walk by these trees again, you must do so with eyes averted.

Questions are pondered: Does it drive the trees freakin' insane that the creek is so damn loud? Do the trees insist again and again that the creek just slow down—what's the rush anyways—that it take its time, that it forego its swelling cascade for a more dignified existence?

Do the trees proclaim solemnly that *our* exuberance, and that of the moss and fern and salal as well, is in our green waiting?

Does the creek lose patience with all that nonsense and scream out, finally but again and again, Waiting for what? For *what*??

Action is taken in this war of time-scales: I've asked the creek to mind the trees' need for quiet. But maybe the creek's like a video game or action movie and the slow forest secretly enjoys this diversion of speed and noise.

Directions for future work are detailed: I sense there's something the forest and I share beyond molecules, air and water, though you'd think that should be enough. I can't quite put a name to it, but perhaps it's that waiting. When I leave here, I'll drive

straightaway to the Wandering Goat Café in Eugene. Maybe an espresso besodden brain can take better stock of things.

Now the creek's really had it. That 'waiting' again, it scoffs. What in God's-green-earth could you possibly be waiting for?

And in response, the trees say, Exactly.

I can only hold my palms up to the light rain.

III

We've talked some, the forest and I. I've even understood some of the words it's offered, though of course they were in English and that's very good cause for suspicion.

I've hurt its limbs; it has hurt mine. I've craned my neck to the high branches; I've knelt to tiny little stems with lipstick-red heads.

A story did come to me, a true one. Armenian storytellers of days past prefaced their oral tales with "There was and there was not . . ." And so, with a nod to my ancestry, this story very much is and is not about Andrews Forest.

One day long ago when I was quite certain that the amazingness of my thought would steer our planet from its orbit, my grandfather asked me to take him to La Jolla for a few days.

I was a graduate student at UCLA at the time. My grandparents had lived in Los Angeles for years but never visited the beach. Tata, as we all called my grandfather, was in his early eighties then and very much in love with the world.

"My son," he said, "we can go for three nights, maybe four, if that won't interfere with your studies."

I considered his proposal. La Jolla Cove, with its kelp forests and sea lions, was a favorite place of mine. I loved to go running, riding, and swimming down there. I had friends who were students at UCSD. And it was an quick drive from Los Angeles if you beat the traffic. A few days in La Jolla would be great. "Yeah, Tata," I nodded my head in agreement, "that sounds real good. Four nights is fine."

"Thank you, my son, you've made me very happy," he said. And for clarification he added, "I'll pay for everything."

“You don’t have to do that,” said the part of me I knew to be lying. Tata was a generous and fair man beyond bounds. I knew he’d insist on paying.

In the Old Country, my grandparents weaved and repaired oriental rugs, as they were then called. Before losing everything to nationalization, they owned a factory where dyeing wool to the deep colors of those rugs was a day-to-day operation. As a natural extension, they decorated Easter eggs in the same way. “Those dyes weren’t exactly for food,” my mom concludes when telling the story from her childhood, “but my parents both somehow lived a very long time.” They continued their profession in the New Country. First working for others and then, when they formally retired, out of their home sitting together at an old wood table salvaged in early immigrant days. They worked until their mid-eighties, repairing rugs owned by the rich, now dyeing faded wool with permanent magic markers if they could match the colors.

Tata patted my back, “Yes, I do. Of course, I must pay.” And he added, “We’ll make great plans for our trip together.”

“OK, so we’ll leave for La Jolla in week,” I said as I fished my pockets for my car keys, getting ready to leave.

“Thank you, my son. I’ll be ready. We’ll be together, and we’ll see the beach.”

I drove away from my grandparents’ home and returned to the task of redirecting planetary trajectories.

Every day over the phone, Tata thanked me again and again. I reassured him that, no, he really wasn’t taking me from my work. He’d pay for everything, he repeated, gas, food, hotel, everything. “He’s packed his luggage already,” my grandmother told me, “and you’re not leaving for five more days.” Even now, I can see her shaking her head in disbelief on the other end of the line. As a little kid, I’d named her Homama, which actually makes some sort of sense in Armenian, and the name stuck. Before she hung up the phone, Homama said, “You’re doing a very good thing, my son, he’s very happy.”

Homama and Tata are dead now. I’d completely forgotten about that trip for near twenty-five years. The story came back to me, unbidden as these things do, at the Andrews Forest decomposition site.

We loaded up my car and headed south on I-5. Every twenty miles or so I'd pull into a gas station so that Tata could use the restroom. "I'm sorry, my son, but let's stop again. Just to be sure."

I'd exit the freeway in silence. "I don't think I have to go," he'd elaborate, "but it's important to avoid embarrassment."

The closer we got to La Jolla, the longer he'd linger after finishing his business. "Let's go, Tata."

He nodded. "Just one more minute, we don't have to rush, do we? Take a breath. You can smell the sea."

"Yeah, we're close to it," I agreed, though all I could smell was gasoline. "OK, let's go." My engine was running.

An old-growth forest and an old man. Fallen trees in their decay nourishing new life. Shoots of new trees grow sunward from the bodies of their fallen forebears, the vertical anchored to the horizontal. My grandfather anchoring us, his children and grandchildren, as well. His stories and his example as a good man were nourishment to us. But back then I just couldn't see it. Had I had my head out of my ass, maybe I would have learned how to grow old when my time came.

We found a hotel not far from the beach, just a block or two away. A long wooden stairway led down to the sand. There was an open space at the top of the stairs with a bench and a great view over the water. We checked into the hotel and unloaded the car.

With a smile, Tata asked, "Are you hungry? Let's eat something."

"Later, maybe," I said, "I have to do some things."

"Well, your work comes first." He followed me back outside to my car. "Look, there's a grocery store just down the street," he said. I looked to where he pointed. "You go do your work, my son. I'll get a snack now, and when you get back we'll get a good meal together."

I nodded my head and drove off to Torey Pines for a long run, eager for the hills there. Twenty-five years later, I worked up hills in a forest, vastly uneasy, the word 'exile' starting to drum against my head.

When I returned to the hotel a couple of hours later to shower, Tata was in our room and happy enough. “I ate a little,” he said. “I bought a tuna sandwich and ate it there on that little bench. I haven’t seen the ocean in many, many years. After our dinner, let’s walk down the stairs to the water’s edge. I’m sure there are many restaurants selling good, fresh fish.”

“You didn’t go down to the beach when I was gone?” I asked.

“Well,” he hesitated, “the steps are many. Let’s go together after eating.”

“I have to meet some people at the University,” I explained.

Tata’s insight into life’s dimensions was, to the end of his days, Shakespearian. Several years before our trip, the large Armenian community in Los Angeles was abuzz with the upcoming visit of a much respected archbishop—a dear childhood friend of Tata’s—from the Old Country. Though their understanding of God had diverged considerably, Tata was asked personally by the archbishop to host the visit and to give the closing speech. To the neglect of everything else, as Homama stressed repeatedly, Tata wrestled writing that speech for two months. Five hundred people filled the church on the last day of the event. And every single one, archbishop and all, was left weeping as Tata read his words. With the historic visit over, Tata studied the video recording of his speech every single day for a month after, assessing what could have been improved.

So I went to meet my friends. When I got back to the hotel room later—at least I wasn’t staying out too late so Tata wouldn’t worry—I noticed that he’d arranged several cans of baked beans and a package of white bread on the table along with a stack of paper plates and plastic cutlery. The trash bin held an empty bean can and two spent banana peels. Apparently these things registered in my brain for consideration at some much later time. Tata pointed to the microwave.

“My son, do you know how to use this oven?” he asked. I pressed some buttons, got it working, showed him how. Tata thanked me. “Don’t you need to eat?” he asked.

“I’ve already eaten,” I answered.

Even as a teaching assistant in graduate school, I was keenly aware that a few careless words or unintentional neglect can harm a student’s spirit. My neglect of this man’s yearning was monstrous.

And so it went. Except for quick breakfasts in the hotel's dining area, I didn't have any meals with Tata. I didn't walk with him along the beach. We didn't talk much since I was rarely around. After the first night in the hotel, he asked me if I could please get him a new pillow case from the front desk. His smelled funny, he said. I was so thoroughly annoyed by that simple request.

Questions were asked: "We'll eat lunch and maybe dinner together today, yes?"

Answers were given: "I have to meet people." Or, "I have things to do."

And I'd go off to whatever was calling my restless and rushing spirit which had yet to be harmed, though that would come, by careless words or neglect. Another old man told me not too long ago that getting older means living through things you can never get over.

As far as I can tell, the Earth still follows the same orbit as it did twenty-five years ago. I no longer compete at running, or biking, or triathlon. I lost track of those friends whose company I so much enjoyed back then. I turned my back on science but still think like a scientist. I live in a patchwork of science and writing, and the quiltwork running through it all is my restless jiggling between them.

To be exiled means to live estranged from your volition. In my last days in Andrews Forest, I started to understand the obvious: The forest exists because humans haven't cut it down completely. It's enslaved to our volition. Although well-meaning and necessary for the protection of the forest, the questions asked of it by scientists and writers are not those it would ever ask of itself. Andrews Forest doesn't exist on its own terms. With exile there is always longing.

How unobtrusive to my life it would have been to have helped Tata down those wooden steps to the beach, there to walk together along the water for a time, grandfather and grandson. Tata was a refugee twice over, first from his homeland, then from his first adopted country. Had I helped him down those stairs, giving myself to his volition, we would have walked in silence except for the waves, this walking together so easy and so durable. The sunset would have gleamed off his eyeglasses when his head turned just so. Instead, I contributed to my grandfather's exile.

As I sat on a decaying tree, these long forgotten memories came to suffocate me. I needed to get away from the decomposition site, maybe to the cedar grove nearby, unmarred by sawcuts and our intentions.

The grove was cooler, wetter, but what-the-hell I laid down anyway in the moss. And I heard my grandfather's voice say to me, after we'd gotten back to Los Angeles, after I had dropped him off at home, "Thank you, my son. Thank you for taking me to the beach."

My mother is the last chapter of my ancestors. She's the last one: no others on my dead father's side, none left on my mother's. Tata and Homama increasingly inhabit my mom's face and hands and words as she grows older. Maybe I have another chance to get it right.

I already sense Tata's longing settling everyday more squarely in my own soul. So, it isn't exactly a waiting I share with the trees of Andrews Forest, but that is part of it. It's more a longing. And if we don't heed responsibility to it, unspent longing, whether an old man's or an old-growth forest's or our own, will surely and soundly kill us one day.

I have no doubt that there's life elsewhere in the universe. But maybe it's only here that forgiveness is possible.