

Broken Contracts in an Old-Growth Forest

By Callum Angus

On my first day at the Andrews, Fred Swanson toured us through the reflection site where logs are studied through their various phases of decay, in a process that will be closely monitored for the next 200 years at least. The mist enshrouded us the further we probed into that grove of the dead, and I knew I had to get back to that spot. There was a special energy I felt there that I didn't know how to name. And I wanted to name it.

When I finally did make it back, it was after two straight weeks of sun and temperatures in the 70s, unusual for late October in this part of Oregon. The Lobaria had crisped up like potato chips, moss everywhere was dry and crackled slightly when stepped on. Everything seemed changed by the unseasonable warmth. I knew these plants weren't dead, only dormant, that large swings in temperature weren't totally uncommon for this part of the world, but it felt as if everything was holding its breath, waiting for me to pass by so it could let out a big, wet sigh of relief.

I tried not to be disappointed. Two weeks in the wilderness is an extremely special gift, but I knew before arriving to expect moments of boredom and dissatisfaction in the woods. I've always been skeptical of nature writing in which the author stumbles through the forest in a perpetual state of wonder, mouth agape. These enraptured musings leave little room to explore how complicated nature really is. Awe is such an uncomplicated emotion, a blunt instrument, violent in its grammar— most often one is “struck” by awe, as if old growth is hitting people over the head again and again until they have the required epiphany. (If only it really did work that way.) I think, too, that this kind of nature writing promises something that nature itself cannot or will not always deliver to everyone: the promise of elevated experience, enlightenment, the sense of a world opening that you didn't know to look for before, as well as the notion that if you only step outside your door that happiness awaits you. But I've learned that like the students I've taught as an adjunct professor— who can never be forced into understanding, who instead must be gently led to their own conclusions, which often differ from mine— people, too, must be afforded the same patience in approaching the wilderness.

On this last dry day of mine in the Andrews, I thought about packing up and leaving the log decomposition site since the inspirational energy I'd felt before just wasn't there. Instead, I took a few more steps down the main trail, where it leaves behind the white buckets and PVC piping of science experiments and peters off into the woods. To my left was a tall yew, a tree I'd come to recognize as its own forest in miniature, covered as they often are in streamers of moss. This one presided over a collection of cut logs also covered in moss and arranged (whether on purpose or by accident I couldn't tell, all traces of intention long since obscured under lush carpet) in a circle around the yew, so that it looked like the ideal outdoor classroom every student begs for with the first hint of summer in May.

Earlier that morning, I was in a truck with two wildlife techs to check their 36 spotted skunk traps strung out along the forest service road. The theory was that the skunks would be lured to the have-a-hearts by the pungent scent of sardines and strawberry jam, but most of them were empty, which we determined by slowing the truck down to a crawl and saying “clear” (meaning empty), “flipped” (which meant a bear had swiped the bait in an early morning raid) or by saying nothing at all and pulling over. The lone spotted skunk that fell into one of our traps couldn’t be scanned because we’d forgotten the receiver back at headquarters, but my companion was sure it was the little feisty one—number 792—that sprayed him in the face a week ago. She stomped her feet inside the trap adorably, and then ran away very uncamouflaged, her white spots brilliant against the duff.

The wildlife tech, not unlike the adjunct professor, is a contract worker. Trapping skunks is a temporary gig for most, paid for a season, after which they will move on to another site, counting raptors in California or collaring wolves in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula. I heard from the techs in the car that morning a familiar frustration with an insecure work ecosystem: trepidation about seeking more education, and frustration with a system that is no longer interested in sustaining those most enthusiastic about its continued existence. I also heard a familiar sense of adventure developed, whether through adaptation or necessity, during long gaps of “funemployment”, channeled into trips abroad or cross-country on a shoestring budget.

It’s not that we don’t want to settle down, but we know that rising home prices, diminishing savings, and vanishing contracts mean we won’t be able to afford it any time soon. Places like the Andrews are treasured havens, not just for precarious populations of Spotted Owls, newts, and epiphytes, but also for those of us who study and write about the denizens of these woods on our own time, because we’ve found something important there.

The sunlight is slanting in now low beneath the yew, where inside my classroom of one my butt is growing numb from sitting and writing. I think what can be taken away from this class is that there are many strategies for survival. The moss that absorbs water from the air, the tree that transports moisture from the soil through its xylem to the farthest reaches of its body, the epiphyte that uses the tree for height and support to reach the mist in the upper canopy. I’ll spare you the platitude of saying there’s no right or wrong way to survive, that they’re all equally strong, because increasingly we’re learning that they are not. Already we’re seeing plants fall to extinction in the face of climate change, especially those of us that require very specific environments in which to do the work they need to survive.

Old growth forests in particular, this one being no exception, are perhaps most susceptible of all. Their towering trees and robust greenery, developed over centuries, are no defense against the pressures encroaching upon them: globalization, urban sprawl, changes in

climate, pollution. To enter one of these stands today is to see exactly how much help they need just to get by: complex signage and warnings, instructions on where not to go lest your foot come down on a fragile specimen, the last of a handful in its species, not to mention all the experimental equipment scattered about to collect data. I don't mean to speak negatively of these efforts, only to highlight that the oldest, most stalwart, and supposedly well-adapted among us also need considerable help just to get by these days.

About the only ones who don't need help are the large corporations everyone seems to conveniently forget about every time a climate report is released and we're scolded to carpool to work, as if that will move the needle significantly. Not far from this old growth forest sits Amazon's glimmering headquarters, the emblem of this dilemma, rapidly becoming its own ecosystem of high speed servers and exploitation. What's more, they know this. Pictures of their oversized terrariums in Seattle have lately exploded the internet, appealing in their images of self-contained nature nurtured by practices that maximize profits and efficiency over the wellbeing of workers and the environment.

I don't know what the solution is to all this. At times it feels like I can only watch it happen helplessly from my classroom beneath the yew, wondering what will come next to replace it, or replace us.

Yet despite appearances, maximizing profit is not a natural law. Waste is everywhere in nature. Rotten wood and plants gone past, decaying logs and flowers lingering yellow on the vine, too much water at inconvenient times as a result of rain on snow events and literal waste—feces and crap and droppings and scat— all of which gets cycles through, becomes energy, food, movement for something else. Defining profit is difficult to begin with in an ecosystem. Is it what makes a forest grow? Is it what moves through? What's left after a flood? Or maybe it's something that should stay unnamed, to continue protecting places like the yew's moss-covered classroom.