

BESTIARY OF RAIN

For less than a week
I've been walking
among the colossal
trees of the Andrews
Forest, and already it
feels like 73 straight
days of rain. Once,
when I looked straight
up into the canopy,
each drop that wriggled
through became a silver
rocket wobbling in
from outer space.
Other times, I watched
blowing curtains of
rain. Chain mail rain.
Rain that eroded and
reshaped the air, as
rivers do the land.
Meditations of rain.
Today, fog has been
roosting in the crowns
of the Douglas firs—
upside down and
side-long rain, the sun
a guttering star. On
a fern-wet path, I
stop walking, warm
my hands around a
mug of coffee, and
listen. The patient
dripping of rain. But
the trees, I think, hear
the Hallelujah Chorus.

John Calderazzo
May 20, 2010

Crime and Punishment at Belknap Hot Springs

Boulders. Pale flesh rocks. That's what they looked like, the four of them standing waist deep and sweating, facing each other in the main pool. Two potato-faced teen boys, their father, their mother. In a black one-piece, fist on her hip, she pummeled them nonstop in Russian, the boys and maybe the husband, too. Who knows how long this had been going on? Hours. Years.

Now she had the older boy backed against blue tiles. He began to sag like a body-punched boxer who knows his legs are gone. Sentences without punctuation can do that. The father stared off, shaking his head. The boys had red pouches under their eyes. Then their eyes disappeared and squeezed out tears.

She never looked away. Steam drifted on the water. Just past the poolside garden where Spanish-speaking men who refused to raise their heads were putting in rows of nasturtiums and yellow carnations, the McKenzie River tumbled down from volcanic snow country and foamed noisily by. A few miles downriver, in the uncut forest where I'd been staying in a cabin, tremendous Douglas firs waited in the silent rocketry of their growth.

I edged to the far end of the pool. So did an elderly couple who couldn't look away, though now and then they tried to study the high fir-tops along the river. A snail I'd spotted, glued to a tile just above waterline, pushed out its antennae and began to climb toward the lip of the pool.

Now the father was blubbing. What was this woman accusing them of? Conspiring to kill her mother with an ax? At least Raskolnikov was driven mad by his *own* voice. The younger boy had a linebacker body waiting to break out, though I think he knew that even years of pumping iron wouldn't save him. A bald eagle fled upriver.

She kept on. How much worse would she be without these soothing waters, their healing powers, wellsprings deep in the earth?

The snail had crawled half an inch now, its antennae stretched so far out you'd think it could smell the dark soil of the garden, or knew the tumbling river was only a day or two away.

---John Calderazzo, May 24, 2010

ENCOUNTER

Save a job, shoot a spotted owl
---Oregon bumper sticker

After hiking down a logging road through dripping old growth, I glanced up in time to see it finish gliding over me from behind. I might not have noticed except for a stirring of the blue air, which riffled my hair. A spotted owl--my first, landing on a wiry branch not twenty feet away. Then it simply stared at me, its eyes black fingerholes poked into whorls of feathers. When I leaned left, it leaned left, unblinking, as though waiting to see if I'd pull out a chainsaw or the gift of a mouse. *Mouse*, an owl expert explained later. What they use to coax them in, to band or study them. *You know, it could have followed you for miles.* I loved that idea, to be stalked by a spotted owl amid pillars of Douglas firs and Pacific yews waiting in canopy gloom. It looked so small for its two kinds of fame: savior of the spar-filled forests that nourished it, or sharp-beaked shredder of jobs, pressing loggers' homes back into the spongy earth. As we kept on staring, a breeze ruffled its chest feathers, and I wondered how this bag of

airy bones could carry the
weight of its reputation and
not cry out, or snap the tender
branch that held it.

John Calderazzo
May 26, 2010

Onset

All afternoon the sun has been trying to impersonate itself, a white disk shining through the white Oregon sky. But now, still high above the trees, it's starting to vanish.

I can see this through the glacier goggles that I hold over my sunglasses as I stand chest-deep in the hot springs pool alongside the McKenzie River. Even when I briefly lift both glasses, my back to blue tiles, I can see that a dimmer switch has been turned in the sky. Surely this is the eclipse I've been reading about for days.

But nobody else seems to have noticed.

Steam slides over the water. In the middle of the pool, a tattooed couple is waltzing with two small boys who smile and squirm in their arms. The boys glow less pink, I notice, by the minute. The family floats and turns with the grace of balloon animals, even as the rushing, silver-tint river darkens.

Now, the sun's a holy crescent. Soon, it might disappear forever, replaced by the shadow boulder of the moon rising within it, rising as water does when it fills a well beneath my bed at night. Recently, no matter where I'm sleeping, water comes up through the bedroom floor and purls around the legs of my bed, the cold breathing up at me for hours. What else can explain the wet sand in my chest when I wake up?

Just to my right, a green-eyed woman is trading divorce stories with a kind-looking man who drifted next to her an hour ago. They've been laughing and nodding, having gone through something together and apart.

But neither glances even once at the sky--or at the forest of immense trees across the river, where shadows are deepening, and animals that haven't walked the Earth since the invention of fire are beginning to stir.

John Calderazzo

May 25, 2010 (also titled "Solar eclipse over the McKenzie River")

SHAKING HANDS WITH TREES

John Calderazzo

Mid-May, and a rare hard rain has turned to snow--big gloopy flakes splatting down. Here in our northern Colorado valley, where the high plains meet the foothills of the Rockies, snow can fly even in June. By dusk, our backyard picnic table has five inches, and the foothills are glowing blue, rounded off, softened.

Good, I think. We need all the moisture we can get.

So do the ranchers and farmers just twenty or thirty miles to the east. But as darkness brings thicker snow, I start to worry about wind on those huge open spaces. Whipped up drifts can make entire herds of cattle disappear, not to mention the occasional disoriented person who goes out to help them.

I grew up a long way from here--just twenty miles from Manhattan--but I realized some time ago that by now I know this place better than anywhere else on the planet. And late-spring storms worry me.

So I remind myself that they rarely last. By noon tomorrow, drifts in my sloped gravel drive will probably be slush. By late afternoon, packs of bicyclists will again be working their way out from Fort Collins, the asphalt steaming, liquid hillsides flashing in the sun.

Then I notice how badly our big crabapple is sagging.

It's the signature tree of our backyard, and three days ago it bloomed, its pink blossoms suddenly humming with bees. Yesterday, when I happened to duck under it, I heard what sounded like a thousand distant motorbikes at full throttle, and its breeze-lifted blossoms made me think of one of those great ideas in human history—young Mozart, say, feeling the notes of his first concerto coming on.

Just about any tree's a great idea, in my opinion. But this crabapple, which I have yet again neglected to prune, has grown so much in recent years that its size has become an occasional danger to itself.

By 10 p.m., its limbs have bowed to the ground. In porch light, the blossoms glow faintly red, like blood, through hillocks of snow, and I'm starting to think about hidden stresses and fault lines waiting inside the wood. I keep expecting something to crack, and my heart to crack with it. Neither of us needs that, so I pull on a hooded sweatshirt and windbreaker, and trudge outside to shake hands with the branches.

There so many ways to do this with people. A hearty vice grip for good friends. For the elderly, a velvety two-handed embrace. Men in Kenya, I once noticed, offer you the airiest, most gentle handshakes, as though they're afraid they'll rub away your fingerprints, or theirs.

But how do I shake hands with this crabapple?

As the flakes hiss down, my neighbor Gene's bedroom light flicks off. With a gloved hand I give one of the boughs a light Kenyan swipe. It ripples for a moment, as though waking up, shakes off its great burden of snow, then springs up so fast it mashes slush into my eyes.

I almost fall backwards, then wipe my face and laugh.

Still, limbs are probably snapping up and down the Front Range, and God knows what's happening out on the plains. I've recently returned from an old growth forest in Oregon, where a biologist friend pointed out how even Douglas firs the thickness of cathedral pillars can topple in the wind. Or fracture and fall from plain old age. What living thing doesn't eventually reach its limits?

So as I circle the crabapple, I move gingerly in and out. *Hello*, I almost say as I grasp each branch tip and shake.

Now and then I trigger a micro-blizzard. With a broom I sweep upside down at the higher stuff, as though I'm the wind itself corkscrewing up through the gnarled architecture of the tree's growth. Bigger blizzards break loose and pound my shoulders.

Despite my hood, ice water trickles down my back. I shiver, but also smile as the crabapple rises limb by limb into a version of its old self.

When I'm done, I brush snow from a couple of nearby aspens twice my height. Just a few years ago, or so it seems, they were shoots in the lawn I decided to bypass with the mower.

I clean off the hummingbird feeders. Last week I heard the first whirr and click of a broad-tail. The little guy had flown a good two thousand miles to get here, but this might be his first snow. If he can make it through the night, he'll need all the breakfast energy he can get.

Come morning and clearing skies, the crabapple's buried again, limbs to the ground. Back outside I go. *Hi, how you doing?* Nothing cracks. Two days later, the broad tail's back, and a thousand pink-inflected bees are humming like mad.

It doesn't seem possible, but thirty years ago, I spent a school year in China, teaching English. One day, after I'd bulld through the crowds of Xi'an on a three-mile run, I paused to watch the old man who was our campus gardener re-wrap a bonsai in fine wiring. You'd think he was doing brain surgery, his fingers moved so carefully.

Very cool, I thought, even as I told myself I could never summon such mindfulness for myself. But then, I was young and didn't give much thought to the limits of things.

#

John Calderazzo
(inspired by Andrews visit, among other inspirations), June 2, 2012
jcaldera@lamar.colostate.edu
P.O. Box 216
Bellvue CO 80512
Home 970/493-6995