May 16, 2006

THE ANDREWS FOREST QUARTET

by Alison Hawthorne Deming

FOREST TIME

Forest Road 1510
rises up the flank
of Buck Mountain
into the zone of mist
road canted like a shelf
fungus though no roots
hold it in place. Mountain
works at softening its sides—
windthrow, cutslope slide,
hillslope slide, slump,
gully and earthflow
its tools, workday
ten million years long.
DEGREES OF DAMAGE IN BLUE RIVER

Sometimes a giant tree
will crack vertically
opening like a clothespin
from the torque
of a slow landslide
that splits it clean
as cordwood though
not with an axblow

runnel barked fir
striated red cedar
drapery making hemlock
others unrecognizable
as trees so disguised
in veils and sleeves
of lichen and moss--

trees travel, their speed
not perceivable except
after five or six centuries
they stand several feet from
the spot where they sprouted.
How gradual is the increase
in pressure, the tight grain
holding fast against

the strain of slipping ground
until one day some ligature
pops, then the trunk splinters
tears and cracks, the tree
thunders to ground
beginning its death,
two centuries more of Devil's club
(Oplopanax horridum)

caning over the deadwood, fungi
lacing sugary threads
through the rot, moss
carpeting the living room
where beetles build galleries,
voles tunnel nests and decay
grows boisterous giving
its offspring their names.
SPECIMENS COLLECTED AT THE CLEAR CUT

1. Wild currant twig flowering with cluster of rosy micro-goblets.

2. Wild iris, its three landing platforms, purple bleeding to white then yellow in the honey hollows, purple veins showing the direction to the sweet spot.

3. Dogwood? Not what I know from the northeast woods, the white four-petalled blossom marked with four rusty holes that make its shape a mnemonic for Christ hanging on the cross. This one, six-petalled, larger, whiter, domed seedhouse in the center, no holes on the edges, shameless heathen of the northwest forest that flaunts its status as keynote speaker for today.

4. Empty tortilla chip bag.


6. One large bruise four inches below right knee inflicted by old growth stump of western red cedar, ascent attempted though the relic was taller and wider than me, debris field skirting a meter high at its base, wet and punky, nonetheless, I made my try, eyes on a block of sodden wood, reddened by rain, as fragrant as a cedar closet here in the open air, the block of my interest wormed through (pecked through?) with tunnels the diameter of a pencil. How many decades, how many centuries, of damage and invasion the tree had survived! But the relic felled me, left me with its stake on my claim, and even this was jubilation, knowing that nothing was mine of this ruin, mine only was the lesson that the forest has one rule: start over making use of what remains.

7. One hunk of Doug fir gray as driftwood, length of my forearm, width of my hand, depth of my wrist’s width, woodgrain deformed into swirls, eddies, backflows, and cresting waves, a measure of time, disturbances that interrupted linear growth to make a form as beautiful and liquid as streamflow.

8. Lettuce lung (*Lobaria pulmonaria*), lichen raising its green skin to light, its tan skin to dark, forest mediator, alligator leather attached to a twig that fell, rubbing in its story about the skyride epiphytes catch for free.


10. Skat. Pellets the size of Atomic Fireballs, hot candy I loved as a child. This, more oval. Less round. Not red. But brown. Specimen dropped by a Roosevelt elk savoring the clear cut’s menu of mixed baby greens. One pellet broken open reveals golden particles. Light that traveled from sun to grass to gut to ground to mind. Forest time makes everything round, everything broken a story of the whole.
Is it possible there is a certain
kind of beauty as large as the trees
that survive the five-hundred-year fire
the fifty-year flood, trees we can’t
comprehend even standing
beside them with outstretched arms
to gauge their span,
a certain kind of beauty
so strong, so deeply concealed
in relationship—black truffle
to red-backed vole to spotted owl
to Douglas fir, bats and gnats,
beetles and moss, flying squirrel
and the highrise of a snag,
each needing and feeding the other—
a conversation so quiet
the human world can vanish into it.
A beauty moves in such a place
like snowmelt sieving through
the fungal mats that underlie and
interlace the giant firs, tunneling
under stream sides where fry of
cutthroat trout live a meter deep
in gravel, fluming downstream
over rocks that have a hold on place
lasting longer than most nations,
sluicing under deadfall spanners
that rise and float to let floodwaters pass,
a beauty that fills the space of the forest
with music that can erupt as
varied thrush or warbler, calypso
orchid or stream violet, forest
a conversation not an argument,
a beauty gathering such clarity and force
it breaks the mind’s fearful hold on its
little moment steeping it in a more dense
intelligibility, within which centuries
and distances answer each other
and speak at last with one and the same voice.

--lines from Claude Levi-Strauss