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Clearcut Ironies

A consideration of the narratives behind logged-over areas

by

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Clearcuts are anything but clear. I realize while a thorny blackberry vine lassoes my ankle. I shake it off in disgust, falling forward only to snag the shoelaces of my other foot. The blackberry bushes are everywhere in this logged site near H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest in the Oregon Cascades. Sweaty and cursing, my legs trip every fifth step or so. I never walk at a leisurely pace (as any who know me will testify), and this reckless, impatient lunging would only zap every iota of energy. Already, my sweatshirt clings to damp arms, and I wheeze as though having run a mile. I'm maybe forty yards from the road.

I wonder what my purpose is here—to take notes for my thesis, go for a quick hike, or mourn the dead.

The exposed hillside slopes upward into a convex crest. Higher up, a few sapling firs rise among a tangle of prickly brambles. Other short trees flash brilliant scarlet or shimmering gold, contrasting with the yellow green of the young firs. This variety of autumn foliage is absent from the surrounding coniferous forest. Yet the floor of the clearcut appears starkly barren with tangled thickets of colorless thorny twigs, sparse straw-colored grass, and bleached rocks. Nevertheless, this place possesses an odd aesthetic appeal.

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Scattered remains are everywhere—bearing evidence to the casualties. At the forested perimeter, the living support the dead. Fallen timber has weakened some of the trees, and a few of the wounded have degenerated into hollow, exoskeletal shells where the slightest whisper might send the entangled mass collapsing on my head.

I imagine one of the loggers—heavy heel boots braced against a rock half-buried under a carpet of moss and detritus, calf muscles rippling and knees groaning from the constant strain of negotiating steep terrain. Perspiration drips from the forehead, stinging the eyes, and temporarily obstructing vision of where the tree would fall. The deafening, angry screech of the saw becomes a muffled sputtering hum, but the logger’s ears still ring. Anxious with anticipation, a boot skids on the rock, scraping several inches of slippery moss and exposing the blackened, moist surface. The logger stumbles but manages to regain a foothold. Knees protest. The hundredth sigh of the morning escapes chapped lips and aching muscles as the fir thuds to the forest floor. Do we know his (or her) story? Do we understand the dangers of the work, or what it’s like to be vilified by the same people who use these timber products?

My eyes meet a blue sign, fixed by industrial staples over the prominent reddish furrow of the bark. Marked with a Forest Service logo, the paper reads “Boundary Cutting Unit” in bold with “Unit 26” written underneath. The Douglas-fir is also prominently marked with a red square of plastic and cream ribbon. I visualize them as beacons shouting, “stop!” to the loggers. What spared this tree the fate of the fallen? Was it too small to harvest, or did it just happen to fall on the correct side of an arbitrary line? Who decided where to draw that line, and what were the stories behind the scientists, legislators, and politicians who advocated on various sides of the forestry debate?

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Decades or centuries from now, how would this forest appear had we not cut it down? Many of us might envision towering ancient conifers, their trunks giant pillars holding up an emerald cathedral and flowing ferns bowing at their grace. We might wonder what charismatic creatures lurk behind the giants: deer, bear, or perhaps a prowling cougar. These images are deeply ingrained in our minds, and we often fail to recognize that most of the world does not look this way.

We lament the loss of old growth, and rightfully so, but we also tend to ignore the scarred aftermath, abandoning it to the mercy of blackberries. We turn our heads in disgust when we drive by bald mountains and curse when logging operations approach our homes. These large swaths of land become the hideous monsters we cannot face, even though we created them. We may feel better by “replanting” some of these lost forests—with monocultures of pitifully low biodiversity.

Everyone should stumble through a clearcut, feel the spiny blackberry rope around their ankles, feel the thorns slip beneath their pants and rip through socks, hear the wind flittering through the canopy of conifers a few yards away and sense an eerie void. Not because clearcuts are beautiful, nor because they are ugly. They are both of those things and more. We should experience one to sense our role in writing the story.

A red-tailed hawk pries my gaze from the sign. I scan the cloudless sky, expecting to see it riding the thermals in slow figure eights. Instead, my ears trace the sound again to the top of a 30-foot snag. It takes flight and soars over the surrounding landscape, likely in search of rummaging rodents, or maybe waiting to take an opportunistic strike at one of the dark-eyed juncos dancing in the thicket of brambles.

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The snowfields of the high Cascades are visible to the southwest, sky blue and white blended into fuzzy edges as if smudged paint. I smile somewhat guiltily. There is something ironically captivating about this scarred section of land. Damaged but not dead. Wounded but not a wasteland. Healing is recognition.

Unit 26: the history of this place and its future deserve a nobler appellation.

I imagine returning at night to listen for the sounds of tentative hooves crunching across discarded twigs and dry bracken, sense the animal pause as it catches my scent on a barely perceptible twilight breeze. Then I lie against the marked tree and gaze beyond the destruction at the stars.

I am a part of this narrative.