



Headwaters Forest Reserve

BURL

ENVISIONING A VERNACULAR FOREST

Jerry Martien

WHAT IT IS

An outgrowth on the trunks of trees. The sawn and finished wood, especially of the maple, the buckeye, the walnut, prized for the intricate patterns of its grain—but none so large or valuable as the burl of *Sequoia sempervirens*.

A huge gnarled protuberance wrapped in deep, convoluted ridges of hairy red bark, often sprouted from a collar of bud tissue several feet above the forest floor, but also higher up, an offshoot or another trunk. A clone of the parent tree.

A reproductive alternative to the redwood's improbably tiny cones and seeds, a reserve of incipient growth triggered by stress or wind-break, fire, drought, or just old age. Even after "death," a tree rotted into the forest floor will send up burl sprouts, a fairy ring where a stump decayed, in a row along a rotted nurse log.

But this survival strategy had not foreseen axes and saws and human ingenuity. In the old photos the hills resemble a graveyard of bouquets sprouting from redwood headstones. So when questioned about what they'd done, the lumber men could say: "Look. They grow back like weeds."

When the big trees, then the second growth, then the jobs were gone, many of them turned to what they knew. They became seasonal wildcrafters, berry and mushroom pickers, and from the stumps they cut burl. Small chunks got turned into bowls and lamp bases, live sprouts became baby redwoods sold at roadside tourist shops. But the most prized forest product was a sawed-off slab of the largest burl.

Unlike the straight-grained lumber they produced by the millions of board feet, woodsmen had always admired burl for its knots. The owners and bosses wanted burl for their board rooms, coffee tables, and bars. Burl became a small industry along the Redwood Highway: burl curios, lamps, book ends, or my favorite—a wall hanging, with a built-in clock. Set into the stored memory of a hundred million years—a gold clock.

In reducing the ages to hours and board feet, a lot of human history also got lost. That loss is glorified in logging museums, old machinery in front yards, tourist attractions and industry promotion, but like the burl souvenirs it doesn't tell the older story. That rusty steam donkey was not just a faster way to move logs, but another break in a failing relationship. The Redwood Country brochures don't remind us—and it's way too slow for the news cycle—that our proud histories of civilization are essentially a story of deforestation. And bound together as we still are, this story of trees and humans is approaching an existential crisis. We forgot how to talk to the forest. Worse, we forgot how to listen. When we gaze upward at the monumental redwoods, when we study the whorled grain of a burl table, we are looking for a language we've lost.

GHOST TOWN, GHOST TREES

The sign on the locked door says *No Admittance Till Time Of Hearing*. We're ten minutes early.

It's a chilly May morning. Noel and I stand in front of the pale green buildings holding take-out coffee with both hands. We met earlier at the Park & Ride south of Eureka, where Elk River empties into Humboldt Bay, rode down here in her little car stuffed with all the paper and gear of a nature professional. In the woods at night she calls spotted owls for a timber company, as required by the fragile truce that ended the Northwest Forest Wars. By day she comments on timber harvest plans for EPIC (Environmental Protection and Information Center). While she drove she filled me in on the details of THP #1-08-026.

The THP (Timber Harvest Plan in forestry-speak) calls for clearcutting 146 acres of redwoods on the North Fork of Elk River. It's one of the last episodes of an environmental crime spree that began in the late 1980's when a junk bond trader took over Pacific Lumber and began liquidating thousands of acres of "underutilized assets." Two decades later, just as we moved to Elk River last fall, his Texas corporation, Maxxam, went into bankruptcy. But Scotia Pacific, a zombie "lumber distribution company," kept logging, and for weeks a funeral procession of redwood trees rolled by our new front door. Now it's spring, and despite the Great Recession they're ready to roll again.

The Fortuna office of CDF (California Department of Forestry, still in the first year of re-branding itself Cal Fire) is surrounded by asphalt and cement with narrow borders of closely trimmed grass. National and state flags hang from a pole front and center—a small outpost of the Redwood Empire. The Friendly City, as Fortuna advertises itself, has traditionally been governed by timber and ranching. It was a popular destination during Redwood Summer for environmentalists wanting to be pepper sprayed and arrested. A decade later, redwood tourism is picking up but the mills want every tree that isn't in a park. At 8 a.m. the door opens and a woman directs us down a hallway to the hearing room.

I've written a response to the THP, describing what I've witnessed in four decades of occasional visits and my first year of residence in Elk River: landslides, silt washing down roads and logged-over slopes, a river bed overflowing with mud, orchards buried and gardens drowned, residents forced from their homes, the once abundant salmon just hanging on. In 1998, after a decade of Maxxam, CDF was forced to declare a moratorium on logging in the watershed. My letter said it should be reinstated.

But it was my first THP and I tried to sound like I knew more than I did. Echoing the jargon favored by CDF (Cal Fire), the truth of my experience got lost in the failed charade—like repeatedly referring to the Habitat Conservation Plan as the CHP. Its conclusion was an alpha-numerical elegy: “CDF, by its approval of flawed THP’s like 1-08-026, is presiding over the liquidation of the Elk River watershed.”

Noel’s letter nailed the regulatory talk: she cited the inadequate SYP (Sustained Yield Plan), cumulative watershed effect, failed reinvestment of habitat, winter ops (operations), and new roads and landings. Plus adjacent Level 1, 2, and 3 streams, Level 3 NSO (Northern Spotted Owl) activity centers—and for good measure, degraded water quality and the loss of spawning beds and pools for juvenile salmon. Finally, she said Scotia Pacific’s precarious financial condition was the result of a business plan based on unsustainable logging practices. “Drop this plan,” she wrote in plain English. “Work with local residents to restore the watershed.”

Of course the purpose of this meeting—the building and grounds, the arcane procedures, the regulatory double-speak—is to prevent that from happening.

I’d pictured a room full of lumber guys and enviros sitting around a burl table debating the merits and hazards of 1-08-026. The room is barely big enough for the three of us and the hearing officer’s desk. He greets us, acknowledges receipt of our letters, says the meeting will be conducted by phone. His name tag says Frank.

While we sit around the desk waiting for calls, Frank starts telling us about growing up in Crannell, a now vanished lumber town on the coast near Trinidad. In the early 1900’s eastern investors bought 3,400 acres of coastal redwood, built a town and mill and began clearcutting much of the old growth that rebuilt San Francisco. Little River Redwood finally closed in the 1930’s, \$4 million in debt, but new owners maintained Crannell for the work force that continued to supply logs to their larger mill near Eureka. At the end of the 1960’s Louisiana-Pacific bought the company, logged the second growth for a couple of decades, and eventually tore down Crannell before selling to another corporate timber entity. Frank’s father worked for L-P, he says. A great place to grow up.

For a few minutes of reminiscing we speak the same language. I recall an old friend, a much-loved local music teacher, who played piano for the Trinidad Movie Club the night they

showed *Nosferatu*. Afterward, he said he was reminded of Crannell, where he also grew up. It was a generation earlier, when the town had a theater. His mother played piano for the silent movies.

Everyone loves our local history. Not many want to connect it to the present condition of our forests and our rural communities. Frank isn't going to be one of them.

The phone rings. The calls take only a few minutes. Goodbye, Scotia Pacific. So long, Water Quality. Thank you for your comments, he says.

Upper Elk River has its own vanished lumber town, part of the Headwaters Reserve. A mill and a company store, a cook house, a dance hall, a village of 400 people—all gone but the moss-covered fragments of buildings and rusted machinery. Off the trail, amid the second growth redwoods, you can imagine a once vibrant life and culture, hear the faint sound of a piano. But the ghosts of the trees are far more present than the human ghosts. The giant stumps are eloquent in their silence. A conversation ended here.

THP #1-08-026: APPROVED.

THE SAME ROAD TAKEN

I'm standing with Humboldt Redwood Company forester Tom Schultz, looking down a stretch of freshly graded log road. A veteran of 35 years in the woods, Tom seems like a competent and reliable guy. Below us a bulldozer is pushing dirt and broken branches to the outer curve of the road where it forks off into the next gulch. The terrain is incredibly steep, the soil fine and friable. Not very long ago, geologically speaking, this was the bottom of a bay. Coastal redwoods love it. But take away the tree canopy, let it rain hard—not that unusual around here—and the soil heads downstream to be a bay again.

"If we'd known back then what we know now," Tom says, "we might've done things different."

He says this while we're out of earshot of Rob and Kristi, who are looking at another section of the road where a previous logging operation dozed over an ephemeral stream. The ground and vegetation are just beginning to recover from that event, but now HRC wants to open the road again. It's on Kristi's property but they hold an easement, so she's faced with two

bad choices: re-open this old road, over the stream and up an 18% grade; or cut a new road using the better practice that now goes into grades and crossings—except they'd take a wider swath of forest, 25 feet on both sides.

I've lived in Elk River half a dozen years now, just enough to qualify as a resident. Rob Di Perna, like Noel before him, works for EPIC but with an expanded job description. He's an environmental watchdog whose knowledge and tenacity I've come to highly regard. Besides this parcel of forest, Kristi Wrigley owns a house and orchard just upriver. Forty years ago I used to buy apples from her father. Now house and orchard have been ruined by flooding, caused chiefly by Tom's previous employer, Maxxam. She doesn't think his new bosses are much of an improvement.

San Francisco billionaire John Fisher picked up some 220,000 acres of Humboldt County forest from the bankrupt Maxxam, but then found that his new Humboldt Redwood Company owned less standing timber than they'd estimated. A five-year moratorium on logging had spared some of Elk River's forest—but now a disproportionate amount of redwood has to come from this watershed, including a couple of hundred truckloads of second- and third-growth over in the next gulch.

Tom is genuinely proud of the work they do. I wish the work was more of his choosing. An employee buy-out of Pacific Lumber was proposed, but lost to the junk bond king. I'm sure it would have led to better forestry and a healthier community, but as it is Tom has no say in Maxxam's business decisions. And as Kristi points out to anyone who will listen, "good" logging after decades of bad logging is not helping the forest recover. Cutting trees is not what an enlightened forester would prescribe. But that's what is required by HRC's business plan, and their lawyers write the WDR—that's Waste Discharge Requirements—which allows so many parts per billion of their sediment to muddy the water and our conversation. Tom's logging, they say, is improving the forest.

Kristi decides it will be less damaging to re-cut the old road. A couple of weeks later a powerful October storm will turn the road (and then the river) into what we call Elk River latte.

On every timber harvest plan application there's a little box next to this disclaimer: *All the significant adverse effects of this THP have been mitigated to less than significant effect.* Check here to erase the past. So even when you know better, you can repeat it.

YOU SAY FOREST, I SAY WOODS

I was asked to put together a writing exercise for some fifth-graders attending environmental arts camp. We'd be out among the trees at Pamplin Grove Redwoods.

Where does Robin Hood live? Everyone knows: Sherwood Forest. *Where's that?* England, a few kids might reply. *What does Sherwood mean?* No hands.

It means Shire Wood. *What's a shire?* Now we're back on solid ground. It's where Hobbits live! Right. It's like a county. Humboldt County would be a shire, these trees might be Humwood.

But you wouldn't say Humwood Wood, right? *Sherwood Forest* is like saying the shire's woods' forest. Why two words for the same trees?

Because *wood* is—what's the language they speak in England? Another cinchy one. But *forest* comes from a French word. So what's a French word doing in the English woods?

The fifth graders might not know about 1066 and William the Conqueror, so here they learn that the language of the French royal court was Latin. *Silva forestis* meant something like a forest (*silva*) in the jurisdiction of the king's *forum*—which also had an older meaning, *foreign*—meaning outside of ownership by any individual. The trees had always belonged to the *county* (Old French *conté*, comparable to the English shire). But the French kings, including William, said: No—the forest belongs to *me*. And all the kings of England after William said: If you want a tree from your Sherwood *Forest*—or a deer, or even a stick of kindling—talk to my Count.

The story of Robin Hood is in the difference between these two words: the *wood* that belongs to the English of the Shire, and the *forest* claimed by the Norman-French King—and enforced by his Reeve (administrator)—the Shire-Reeve of Nottingham.

Now I'd gone way past fifth grade. Worse, I'd crossed the front lines of the forest wars. I'm sitting in a Fortuna elementary school classroom, laying out my lesson plan for the woman

who invited me into this project, plus two dedicated teachers, their principal, and several nature professionals fulfilling their public service requirement. In Fortuna, dependent on a major timber company and the bureaucracy that's supposed to regulate it, ownership of the forest is not questioned. The consulting geologist has been assured that his lesson on erosion doesn't have to mention logging.

Everyone exhales a little when I finally get to the writing prompt: *So Robin and the Sheriff meet in a grove of old trees. Are they in the Shire's wood or the King's forest? Describe their meeting as if you were a tree, talking to another tree.*

As it turned out, I didn't take the job. Instead of 11 fifth-graders it would be 40 fourth-graders, plus their teachers and parent-aides, sitting in the redwood understory. And could I bring some wide-lined notebook paper?

I felt like I was abandoning the kids, but it didn't seem fair to ask them to do something their elders had failed at for decades. In fluorescent offices, writing rules for watersheds in a dead language; in the tavern after a day in the woods, TV speech filling the air—no one able to say what the forest is saying.

Just before the freeway, on the way out of town, a large sign with an arrow points back to where I've been: *Burl Country*.

LITTLE THIEF/ BIG THIEF

When the old forest was cut, its roots lived on for a time as they had for thousands of years. Older than the trees, a subterranean forest, deeply intertwined and intimately in touch with the dark earth. What has happened to us, they must have cried out, in whatever mycelial language is spoken by roots.

The Euro-Americans, in their heedless, headlong ingenuity, had felled and limbed and bucked and dragged away one of the earth's great stores of memory. Look how fast they sprout back up, the lumber men marveled—their paychecks, then as now, depending on not seeing the forest for the board feet.

Our efforts at preservation and restoration, great and laudable as they are, will never plumb the depth of this loss. Many of the stumps that didn't come back are still out there in the

woods, mute witness to the 50-year rotation “harvest” of the trees that did grow back. And there’s another loss not acknowledged here: just as we divide the past from the present, the old forest we logged from the new forest we manage, we choose to believe that human culture—woods culture—can also be engineered back to health. We’ll do it with parks and social work.

Orick Man Arrested, says the online bulletin. The charge is stealing federal property. Poaching—the removal of a large chunk of burl from one of our redwood parks. And when park deputies apprehended the thief at his home, they discovered a quantity of methamphetamine—so add that to the damages. And maybe throw in rural desperation. Despite the huge new headquarters of Redwood National Park, Orick remains an abandoned logging town, its off-highway poverty invisible to the eco tourists. The accused—Roy I’ll call him—is himself a burl sprout of our real economy and culture.

The mug shot looks bad, even for a police photo. Gaunt and hollow-cheeked, maybe in his early 30’s. Long stringy hair already receding, a complexion you don’t want to see on people still living. Roy looks like the ghost of a redneck—or the ghost of a hippie, I can’t tell any more. The dead end of a culture, either way.

In his far-ranging *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*, Robert Pogue Harrison traces the history of deforestation that accompanied the rise of cities, and the momentous shift from our belonging to the forest to thinking the forest belongs to us. Mercifully, he also provides a counter-narrative, with writers like Thoreau and Muir and organizations like Save The Redwoods League. Despite its toxic avarice, Western culture has retained some of its ancient reverence for forests. The idea of a sacred grove persists. Harrison reminds us that Karl Marx, in one of his earliest statements of the rights of poor, argued that Germany’s new laws against gathering wood violated an ancient contract between people and the forest. Value, he might say today, originates not with labor but the gift of sunlight.

In the New World the Europeans re-encountered—and promptly suppressed—what they’d forgotten: that forest means *foreign* to individual ownership. Harrison reminds us again

that William the Conqueror brought to England this idea that use of the forest was his royal prerogative. Not like our private property—that would come later, with the overthrow of church and king—but in the way William *embodied* his kingdom. His *venery*—hunting the deer in the forest, also in bed attending to matters of *Venus*—re-enacted an old emblem: “taking” the sacred hind in the royal forest gave proof of his potency and the kingdom’s power.

When William found that the Saxon lords had severely depleted England’s forests, and declared them property of the Crown, we see the result in the story of Robin Hood. But in William’s view Robin was a Saxon despot whose rule weighed heavily on land and people. William was asserting his responsibility as lord and protector of *vert* and *veni*. He had forests replanted wherever possible. Where Saxon settlements had expanded into woodlands, they were torn down and planted with trees. So the King was a radical conservationist. And Robin was a poacher.

If this seems long ago and far away, think of Teddy Roosevelt, hunter and preservationist, buddy of John Muir, creator of national parks, sending the US Cavalry to remove poachers from Yosemite. In the same spirit he led cowboys charging up San Juan Hill, these martial origins still characterize the mission of the National Park Service. Outside the nation’s parks, Teddy’s regulatory zeal was soon abandoned, and any sage brush capitalist could exercise his royal prerogative over whatever he could seize. Roy’s crime, Marx might say, was being inside the park and poor.

The online response to Roy’s crime is vicious, especially from liberal enviro types. The electronic mob will never get to see perp photos of the greater culprits, the poachers who wear suits and ties and steal entire forests. We’ve saved so little, how could he do that to *our* trees?

Roy has a single online defender, who only notes that the park service photo of the damaged redwood shows a dead stump. The stolen burl died long ago, with its parent tree. It’s no defense of the crime—the cycle of decay and renewal is more essential than the tallest tree, and the Park Service now combines policing with an ecosystem view of their mission—but we should recognize that Roy is now part of that ecosystem, and another sign of how terribly it’s damaged. The government buy-outs that created our newest parks gave millions to the owners, but the dollars thrown to those who lost their jobs, to be retrained as watch repairmen and bar

tenders, did little for the human culture that was part of the woods. The late Judi Bari, a powerful speaker and organizer during Redwood Summer, insisted that workers and environmentalists had a common interest in healthy forests and healthy people—which is no doubt why somebody tried to blow her up.

In the online photo a park ranger is measuring the cut where the burl was removed. (Everything about redwood evokes this obsession with bigness.) But the picture reveals more than the scale of the crime. The covert removal of that huge slab of wood—a six-foot vertical cut with a long-bar chainsaw—was a feat of considerable woodsmanship. I know there are plenty of laid-off workers who use their skills in more creative ways, but let me suggest we look at the people we *do* find excuses for, the timber barons our historians revere, the corporations our resource agencies grovel before on a daily basis. Had the owners managed their holdings with even a little less greed, and had the regulators done their jobs, Roy and many others might still have jobs.

One word for the forest—another for the woods. One law for King William, another for Roy and the people downstream. Serious reparation is long overdue—in *every* part of the ecosystem.

When the forest canopy is gone and the earth exposed to rain, run-off accelerates, erosion fills the river with mud, and flooding increases. A human generation or two later, as the roots decay, the remaining network of hollow channels carry water like a leach field when it rains. So even as the second growth canopy comes back, flooding and erosion become worse. The roots are gone, but the place that misses them lives on.

SINGING IN THE WOODS

The hill is tall and the pathway is tangled in the weeds of the words.

Forest advocate Rob di Perna isn't walking a real trail, he's describing the regulatory language of our public resource agencies. His work sometimes takes him outdoors, witnessing and ground-truthing logging plans—like when Kristi Wrigley had to choose between two bad

roads. But more often he's putting in long hours of research, following a trail of obfuscation and slippery language.

Rob has taken over the Elk River beat for EPIC, much expanded from Noel's part-time job of responding to THP's. The Environmental Protection and Information Center has become a strong ally of Elk River—still the poster child of the North Coast's trashed watersheds, but it would be even worse without them. Their support is partly in response to Kristi and her upstream neighbors, whose letters and phone calls and 20 years of testimony have given public officials, timber companies—and environmentalists—an earful. At one of my first watershed meetings, listening to them unload their anger and grief on the brand-new eco-friendly Humboldt Redwoods boss, it was like hearing testimonials of war crimes. A decade later, I understand the truth of that likeness.

Rob's words are from EPIC's newsletter: "Timber Productivity—A Promise Unfulfilled." It describes centuries of logging, conversion, and mismanagement of North American forests, slowed only occasionally by protest and lawsuits, until California's 1973 Forest Practices Act promised to end the wanton destruction. But the advertised reforms and regulations have not achieved their stated aim: *Conservation Balanced With Maximum Sustained Production*. Silted-clogged rivers, disappearing salmon runs, and diminished monoculture forests are undeniable evidence of a goal not reached. Not even close.

What happened? "Agency administrative and regulatory frameworks have failed, plain and simple." *Sustained Production* was defined by timber companies, validated by bureaucrats and data crunchers, and approved by timid or compromised political appointees. Geologist Robert Curry foresaw decades ago that regulating forestry by counting parts per million of sediment in a steep, naturally erosive, actively seismic landscape, would provide enough uncertainty for generations of lawyers and guarantee that any adverse decision would end up in court. That leaves *Maximum Production* as the guiding principle, with *Conservation* no longer attached to any real meaning. This is Rob's tangled path.

In his journals Thoreau notes that the forests of England were once overseen by a Lord Warden, an officer of great dignity and import. He was served by pairs of district officials, one for *vert*, one for *venison* (our departments of forestry and wildlife), who divided their districts

into “walks,” with a woodsman and a gamekeeper presiding over each. Thoreau said his walk was ten miles from his house in every direction.

Rob’s walk takes him hundreds of miles from home. He puts on a suit, pulls back his hair, and with brief case and facts in hand, jumps into his Honda and drives to where the fate of our forest is decided. He knows the regulatory language better than some of the regulators, but he’s often over-ruled. As much as Noel’s old job—THP’s by day and owls at night—the work can be depressing and lonely. So it’s crucial that Rob also has a literal forest to walk in, and another, deeper language. As he walks, he sometimes sings. You can even hear it in his writing:

*The hill is tall
and the pathway is tangled
in the weeds of the words.*

Teacher and ethnobotanist Robin Wall Kimmerer reminds us of the limits of our present conversation with trees, and suggests we look to Native tradition for deeper ways of talking. “Interview With A Watershed” describes her interaction with old growth fir trees in Oregon’s Andrews Experimental Forest. Observing the sophisticated technology in the woods around her, she reminds us of the limits of statistical discourse. Even poetry, she says, our best approximation to sacred speech, has not sustained the human conversation with trees. We need to re-learn the language of the forest, Kimmerer says, an idiom we only vaguely apprehend and can’t begin to speak. As I follow Rob on a trail through the redwoods, listening to his song, I wonder if he’s not only walking his walk, but also practicing that talk.

Hair untied, backpack and hiking gear, Rob is guiding three environmental veterans among old growth trees we’ve never seen. He’s now a docent to this corner of Headwaters Reserve, with a key to the gate on the old logging road we followed out of Fortuna. The little town still clings to its lumber culture, but it’s beginning to see a future in tourism. The chamber of commerce promotes these trees as if it had invented redwoods. Who knows, maybe some day the town will be able to tell the real story of these trees to its children. It’s another task of restoration awaiting us.

The trail crosses steep ravines, up and down among fern and rhododendron, huckleberry higher than our heads. The towering, widely-spaced trees let in shafts of late morning sun—cathedral-like, I would say, but they are what cathedrals aspire to. Rob’s

narrative and our questions wander from biology to politics and back, and from the ancient history of these trees to the still visible slashes of blue spray paint that marked the largest for cutting—till the government gave the junk bond king enough money to go back to Texas. It's not a happy story if you know how much *wasn't* saved.

But the living forest is a healing counter-narrative, and Rob has that other, restorative language. As we walk, the history lesson stops and he begins singing about environmental activism. We walk behind him, listening, then encourage him to sing another. Rousing, political, sometimes funny, the songs must cheer and sustain him—as they do us—in the struggle with corrupted laws and language. And I want to believe the trees hear it, and remember this ancient human practice of trail singing.

Some scientist will want to confirm it with data, but it appears that the lyric voice, sometimes in poetry, more often in song, is another kind of “management tool” we need in our forests. And where the music leads, the rest of the arts will follow.

IN THE VERNACULAR FOREST

We separate *working* forests—trees as a monetary investment—from the forests we invest with feeling—*sentimental* trees, if you will—but this line between use and beauty is creating unsustainable biological islands amid diseased and fire-prone tree farms. Parks and reserves are more critical than ever, but they should be considered temporary measures—until we learn how to erase that line. Their blessings will not only relieve the stresses of civilization, they can teach us how to get *over* civilization before it kills us.

For most of our time together, instead of a management/resource relation, trees and humans have inhabited the earth as companion species. Our public temples, with their tree trunks of stone, issue timber harvest plans and water quality orders, forgetting that their authority derives from real groves where ancient agreements were made. The forests remain witness to those decisions. The wardens of forests—persons and communities—are not above and apart from the history and culture of its trees. Such people might be hard to distinguish from the wildlife, their speech inseparable from the place it binds together.

People who make their living with wood, or work in the woods, use a language familiar to the brothers and sisters of their industry, art, or trade. Like the vernacular developed in the logging camps, a *working* language has to be as accurate as the signal of the whistle punk. Similarly, a community engaged with wooded places creates its own vernacular—from *vernaculus*, a home-born slave—which becomes, in its speech and its music, a rich and pleasurable conversation with locale. (See Robert MacFarlane’s *Landmarks* and its delicious glossaries.) When we visit the ghosts of lumber towns, we listen for those old words, faint music among the stumps of trees.

Now imagine such a community—*vernaculars*, call them—at a present-day public meeting, struggling to make themselves understood. As they listen to the twisted jargon of the timber industry and its regulators, what can they reply? When Gandhi coined the term *satyagraha*—literally *holding fast to truth*—he brought a sacred language into colonial courts where the prevailing discourse was as close to a dead language as they could get it. Think of the English yeoman—the *vernacular* Robin Hood—on trial for poaching, speaking English in a Norman French court. That’s the language we need now.

Some of my neighbors can speak fluvial geology when necessary—math and science are another kind of *satyagraha*—but they also cut through the Latinate regulatory fog when they say *logging* instead of *management* and *mud* instead of *sediment*. Their voices carry long experience and deep grievance, and give those common English words the force of sacred truth. Though it loses in court every day, a language backed up by lived experience, household words supported by natural facts (good data), will outlive the false narrative of corporate forestry. And so will acts. Getting in the way of machines is an essential part of recovery. But while the occupation of forests may require literal tree sitting, it might also mean moving *away* from fire-prone forest edges, tearing down some of those Saxon villages. It means re-engaging an old conversation, in which we listen as well as talk in the forest’s terms.

Freeman House, a pioneer of community-based watershed restoration, imagined a place whose citizens—or denizens, as he preferred—embodied a vernacular culture. In *Totem Salmon*, in his essays and lectures and the example of his work in the Mattole Valley, he taught

that restoring nature also requires restoring communities. And like recovery of the person, it's something best done from the inside, by those conversant with the territory.

The vernacular approach, he said, holds "the only hope of keeping some ecosystems alive long enough to learn the things we need to know to live in them." That is, places maintained by those who know them and recognize that they are also being nourished by this relationship. Living in the place you work—*living your work*—is another part of our attraction to the ghosts of company towns. Only now our task is to *live* in such community, while bringing the forest back to life.

We see from the example of Freeman House that a person may be a burl. The denizens of the Mattole Valley, in decades of restoration work, show us that a community is also a burl. Sprouting in other communities, people and organizations undertake a dialogue with the place they live. Replanting trees, restoring streams, learning to live with fire—there are many ways to occupy a forest. It begins with a conversation: a small-scale mill, a cooperative forest reserve, a walk in the woods.

Besides ghost towns, I can now visit living communities to witness that conversation. I can go to Northcoast Environmental Center for news of the woods, and to advocates like EPIC when the trees need a voice in court. I go to places of refuge, like the Andrews Experimental Forest where Robin Kimmerer interviewed a watershed and translated its message to us. Artists who reside in the growing network of such places, immersed for weeks in conversation with water, trees and rocks, become messengers who carry the ancient story. Even after brief gatherings in these burl-places, I feel their residual power. *Why not stay here?* And then: *Why aren't there more places like this?* And when I get home: *What could make Elk River more like that?*

Patterns emerge from wood grain. A burl is a set of instructions: Look at it this way, you'll see a redwood tree. Look that way, the tree is a forest. The forest becomes a river. A watershed. Or a watershed council. Something decentralized, organized in the way nature makes decisions. The way a forest decides to move, or a burl to make a new tree.