

Denizens of Decay

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A cashmere cowl of fog shrouding the night ridges thins and frays, retreating from morning sunshine. Light travels downward through the remaining vapor in angular rods that pry through green interlocking fingers of conifers whose arms are joined to furrowed trunks of dinosaur skin. The trees are so ancient and wise that to guess their age seems disrespectful. Yet even these Old Ones die. Their lives might end slowly from disease, leaving them stately and upright and home to wood-boring insects bringing woodpeckers who excavate holes that become home to owls. Other giants are uprooted suddenly by Pacific storms, toppling with a muffled WHUMP to lie in state on the forest floor at the full mercy of incessant creeping moisture creeping. The wetness brings a host of microbes who feed on bark and heartwood, disassembling those who spent their lives as Owl Mother, Vole Lover, Shade Giver, and Protector of the Multitude of Greens. The crumbling interior of each log becomes a wet sponge, impervious to those penetrating shafts of sunlight, a dead host to many new lives.

Inside the log, an Oregon Slender Salamander lies tucked into a moist interstitial space where the bark has separated from the inner wood. She is pencil thin, no longer than my index finger, and has slipped easily into this tiny place. Her back is brick red herringbone, the color of her heartwood home, her belly a flurry of white flakes in a dark sky, skin slightly swollen by a clutch of eggs beginning to accumulate

yolk that is the first food for the next generation. In the wetness of spring, the salamander will spend her days in this log, venturing forth only when darkness sends the drying sun behind the ridges, keeping hungry garter snakes and birds at home.

Her beauty is painted onto a skin so thin that water travels effortlessly from salamander to forest and back again, so thin that oxygen made by needles in the canopy moves easily into her body, so thin that carbon dioxide flows freely outward, her small gift of reciprocity to the trees. Her life depends upon this free exchange of gas and water from skin to forest and back again because she has no lungs. Her ancestors jettisoned these at least 60 million years ago, an act of evolutionary trust in which they committed themselves and their descendants to lives of abundant moisture and oxygen. Lungless salamanders will never know the soft rise and fall of their chest before sleep.

For Slender Salamander, there is vulnerability in this singular devotion to dampness. Her skin must remain moist and porous, and this openness is the very thing that causes her to lose water easily. She must love humid darkness, revel in the press of her flanks against moist wood, delight in tiny bits of decay that cling to her head and legs as she negotiates the tight channels of her log. She must love this place. Because in summer when sunlight falls unimpeded from impossibly blue skies, when every footfall on the forest floor raises a resounding crunch, Slender Salamander senses certain death by desiccation. The womb-like wetness within her log is a refuge from this annual version of climate disruption.

In spring, the long-dead Douglas fir becomes a birthing ward. Deep within the interior of the log, sheltered from the summer heat, Slender Salamander lays a cluster of six or so eggs, encircling them with the moist finger of her body, warding off predators and fungal infections. Her egg-bound young have long, feathery gills. But they will never feel a flowing spring or standing pond or any other water beyond the protective capsule of their own egg. Within this log womb they will hatch into tiny, fully metamorphosed versions of their parents.

This small reproductive rebellion has liberated Slender Salamander and all of her lungless direct-developing kin from freestanding water, an evolutionary revolt that opened the vast reaches of moist but waterless western Cascades to occupation, eliminating perilous spring breeding treks to ponds filled with aquatic predators, water that could disappear in the summer drought. Better the damp reliable safety of a large log.

Slender Salamander and her ancestors have hidden, eaten, and procreated within these logs for perhaps 20 million years, far longer than humans have dwelt in these forests and an occupation incomprehensibly ancient compared to the mere two centuries since people began hauling the trees from the ridges to become dry lumber for human houses rather than moist rot for the homes of salamanders. Surely there is an accumulated intelligence in the longevity of Slender Salamanders, a way of living shaped by eons of evolution into a commitment to their place so complete that salamanders and logs have become singular and inseparable.

What would Slender Salamander teach us if we could squeeze in next to her, sit at her tiny four-toed feet, and listen to her small breath that is not breathed? Maybe

she would show us the difference between *timber*, a human construct measured in board-feet, and *forests*, whose all-inclusive complexity defies measurement. We might discover the value of silence and how insight sometimes slips quietly through previously unrecognized doors. Perhaps we could learn to open our skin to the world.