

Walks in Woods. [from A Garden of Bristlecones (1996)]

After such knowledge, what forgiveness? Think now
History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors
And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions,
Guides us by vanities. Think now
She gives when our attention is distracted
And what she gives, gives with such supple confusions
That the giving famishes the craving.

--T. S. Eliot, "Gerontion"

Exposure.

When I walk in this forest of the Great Basin, sometimes a great sadness comes over me. Going to the bristlecone forests is not very much like going home. I remind myself that this kind of forest grows here, in a landscape of great beauty and of great terror. The forests seem to offer an openness, not the protective openness of the ponderosa forests of the Kaibab Plateau, nor the luxurious enclosure of forests of the west slopes of the Sierra, but something else.

It does not take too long to learn where the old trees will be growing, and I can find them now, in most ranges of this region. What I feel in these forests, and especially on the ridges where the old trees grow, is something personal and yet not personal at all. I want to use the word consolation, yet know it is not the right word. It is not that I accept these forests as a consolation, but that I find they are where I belong some of the time. These forests do not console. What I experience in them is not happiness, but it might be joy.

In National Geographic, Edmund Schulman and friends sit on a blanket as a foreground for the Patriarch Tree--"its age is a mere 1500 years"--as they "break their tree study with a picnic." The friends seem to be a family. A father pours a cool drink out of a metal jug for a young boy while the boy's mother watches. The picnic is contained in a cardboard carton marked "Burgie."

I have gazed at this photograph wondering what is wrong with it. Certainly it is posed. (As a child, I myself posed for such photographs which later appeared in National Geographic. I know how these images are constructed.) Schulman sits, somewhat awkwardly, on the right side of the blanket. I place my right hand over his image and see the family group, totally absorbed in its own drama, oblivious to its surroundings. I place my left hand over the family group and Schulman is alone, staring into space. There are two images here. They are not easily combined.

What is a picnic? I wonder about the Patriarch Grove as a site for a picnic. It does not seem an appropriate setting for a pleasant or amusingly carefree experience of eating in the open. The Patriarch Grove is certainly in the open. It is as exposed a place as can be imagined, and when I am there I feel exposed as I have felt part way up the face of El Capitan, surrounded on all sides by thousands of feet of vertical naked granite. This place, among the trees right below timberline, seems to me a place where one is not amusingly carefree, but rather at a site that calls for thinking as carefully as one can.

Walking Around in a Daze

Time grows sacred high in these forests. A walk around an old tree might follow certain conventions, like a ritual, because one way to think is to walk around. A walk under the aspect of sacred time has often been depicted as a circular ritual, presided over by some god who stands left foot at the beginning of history and right foot at the end, making a gesture of Revelation, saying: "I am Alpha and Omega."

What is revealed? Consider a version of this walk invented three centuries ago by the Anglican cleric Thomas Burnet and discussed at length by Stephen Jay Gould in Time's Arrow, Time's Cycle. This is a walk of faith, where God's words and work, established in concord, lead to harmony. On this walk, the earth's history seems to move clockwise, in seven steps. It begins in chaos, the earth without form and void. Following the resolution of chaos into a series of smooth concentric layers, earth assumes the perfection of paradise. The third step is the flood, a punishment for our sins. The waters retreat, leaving the cracked crust of the earth we live upon, "a broken and confused heap of bodies." In times to come, the earth shall be consumed with fire, made smooth again as descending soot and ashes establish concentric perfection. Finally the earth shall become a star. I think of Burnet's walk as an interesting narrative, but I do not believe it.

What can a modern person make of Burnet's theological-geological walk? It is an abstraction, unconnected to my experience. My generation has its own abstractions. I read a book where a mathematician speaks of genetic changes as one-dimensional and multi-dimensional random walks in random environments. David Ruelle writes in Chance and Chaos, "Random walks in a random environment are known to proceed very slowly, because to go from one mountain to another it is first necessary to climb down, and this is a very unlikely process." Ruelle writes that the random walk tends to be trapped on tops of a small mountains. The mountains he describes are models, like Burnet's earth, and the walks he takes are evolutionary mathematical journeys. Nobody walks literally upon such mountains.

During the three-hundred-year transformation between Burnet's and Ruelle's thinking, the bristlecone itself stands unmoved and yet embodies time and change of an era an order of magnitude greater than this human history of mental travel. The bristlecone pine presents itself according to competing human theories of time. An observer faces at least one dilemma, torn between linear contingent history and a cyclical complete history. How to solve the Gordian knot of time? Reconstruct it, as Ferguson did? Cut it, as Currey did? Untie it, as Fritts attempted? Time is invisible, and yet it is embodied. People read it in trees. Can they read, resolve, untie time? My friend Michael Branch tells me that Emerson wrote, "That science is bankrupt which attempts to cut the knot which always spirit must untie."

As it seems to embody the line of time, a weathered snag might be an arrow or vector, or a quiver of them, pointing up or down, in or out, west to east, north to south. A tree seems to reach, from the ground upward into the sky. Many die in this act, but not entirely. Traveling through their own latitudes, bristlecone pines have been a unique phenomenon, born out of imperfect life and truly tentative. The oddness of each tree's form represents perhaps what Darwin found in life, a quirkiness characterized by abrupt twists or curves, peculiar traits, accidents, and vagaries.

This linear and contingent tree seems to suggest a world of irreversible change and in its form, represents some genealogical plot, be it progress or digress. Its complexity, according to the archetypal branching of any tree, becomes so stark and

irregular, asymmetrical and sharp, that it suggests more than just a tree, as Darwin Lambert has observed.

Trees are so closely related to human ideas of time that humans, trees, and time cannot be untangled. Each tree embodies some idea of time. Each old tree is different from the next one. What holds them in common is, strangely, the differences people perceive in them. None seem to agree in position, value, structure or function. Why are there different trees in similar positions? or similar trees in different positions?

Because each tree seems unique, each seems to reside outside human conceptions of time. If each tree behaved according to prominent human conceptions of time, then each tree would hide and display some perfect form, shaped according to some law of its immanent regularity, but difficult to perceive, just beyond the reach of understanding. Changeless and eternal, its life somehow concealing a symmetrical cycle, each unique tree--from this perspective--would reveal or reflect some set of recurring conditions or laws.

Each tree's history, as read by people who think obsessively of bristlecones, is told in terms of human time. This tree, in the present. Look at it. It expresses its life. Shall I treat the present tree as an object maintained by physical processes, revealing the work of physical conditions, or a living being striving for a definite purpose? Or shall I depict it as a piece of architecture, as nature's sculpture?

Does change come to the tree from inside or outside? According to the perspective of time's arrow, a tree's life is a set of irreversible changes, like a chess game. Trees are faced with cooler climates, more complex life, catastrophe perhaps, or maybe the opposite. According to the perspective of time's cycle, the tree's changes have no direction except to elaborate some stately cycle, and a tree's form is a rational incarnation of rate and state. Every tree transacts some cyclical business with its environment. Yet if a tree's life is an actual cycle, its very regularity suggests a paradox and a psychological abyss. "If moments have no distinction, then they have no interest," writes Gould. If everything in the form and meaning of a tree repeats, then no event has distinction. We enter the world of Herman Melville's "truest of all books," Ecclesiastes, in whose cycle, made of "the fine hammered steel of woe," "All is vanity."

As Ecclesiastes suggests, it depends on how old you are. A young man might be an empiricist, insisting that experience precedes expression, believing that any true theory of trees must rest on observation, be framed by a large body of evidence, which leads by induction to theory. The young man might be a creator of theories, but only after many renewed attempts at expression. Walk again and again in the forest, he might say, until you get it right. But an older man might be a "theorist," believing that there is no such thing as pure induction, that all theories come from theory, that we are all victims of these ways of thinking, and every tree represents what we bring to our perception of it. It is a simplistic idea that any theory was born of, or triumphed entirely, by field work. It seems, finally, that one must be young and old to see the tree from its linear and cyclical aspects.

Do physical objects have purposes shaped in human terms? Final causes? Are they put here for us? Scientists are not supposed to believe this, but do they act as if they believe this? What does it mean when one spends a human life making a forest into a tool for reading time and change, or spends a life painting endlessly the forms of these trees, if not that they were put here for us and we were put here to utilize them? Beavers

do not ask why they chew on trees, but surely men do ask, even if they never know fully what they try to digest, or why.

All of this is a great deal to think while taking a walk in a bristlecone forest, but it is all there, potentially, for those who wish to approach.

Fidelity

People snatch up truths, as they do in Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio. An old man might have a theory about snatching: "that the moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood."

There is the philosopher's tree, for instance, representing truth achieved through intellect, a tree of identity and difference. For this tree, the question of "the other" is a complex of questions, of the relations between the one and many, the reduction of the many to the one. There is the artist's tree, of wholeness, harmony, and radiance, sought through strategies of silence, exile, and cunning. There is the sociologist's tree of the diaspora, sowed or scattered outside traditional homelands. There is the businessman's tree of commodity. The meanings of these trees are determined by the orientations of the minds grasping them. Several meanings might be grasped by a patient person who chooses carefully, who tries not to snatch, who places the meanings before the mind as an array without hierarchy. But nobody knows everything, and nobody can place ideas before the mind without making choices.

How then can one achieve fidelity to these trees? Some people attempt to know or love them all by loving one tree, in the belief that choosing to know can be choosing to love. These people sometimes focus on an individual, seeking the one extravagant gesture containing them all. And others achieve fidelity by focusing on no one tree, but encounter one after another. Consider the following exercise, where I attempt to embody the bristlecone pines in language and diagram my sentences as sets of possibilities. The elements of each sentence can be shuffled within this hierarchy, to create a new order.

Young pines grow in advantageous exposures,
 where tall straight forests flourish,
 their trunks covered with bark all around;
their shaggy sprays of foliage bow and bend,
 cluster dense and lawless on lee sides,
 diverge like hair charged by static electricity,
 in all directions,
 regarding gravity but not submitting,
 the needles themselves uneven,
 dense, and compact, fat and thin,
 like some digression or conflict
 blooming as if by inner compulsion,
leaping out of symmetry or order, in endless iteration,
 tentative yet insistent, dark yet careless.

Old trees,
 thick and contorted,

knotted and twisted,
the limbs themselves convoluted near their base,
one or many of their craggy spikes
isolated or clustered,
high above the foliage,
sometimes called aeries, but dead ends,
so the trees seem to grow and stop and grow again;
their lives have been pruned by relentless wind and drought and ice
but persist,
in a spiral of live bark up a single limb,
like a seal struck by lightning,
as it exposes and scours a bright strip of heartwood
down the bark of a straight and healthy tree;
this line we call strip growth
is to the lightning scar a negative,
it does not indent but projects,
like a glove turned inside out.

Mostly, heartwood meets the eye;
naked, skeletal, gray, and split, caked with lime,
or bright, sharp, and polished at the upper treeline;
as if vision came from the direction of the wind;
in many recognizable forms,
some stark and striking,
some that seem to multiply,
almost always irregular;
past middle age, when anomalies become substance,
diverging forms keep their distance on steep hillsides,
ring by ring their differences multiply,
by accretion, proliferation,
the increments of their changes
not quite coherent,
like loose sentences,
of the kind we are told to avoid,
in series.

In the White Mountains

There is no sign for the Methuselah Tree, and the Forest Service interpreter to whom visitors listen at the Schulman Grove before taking a walk, claims even the new district ranger doesn't know which one it is.

All the old trees have little numbered aluminum tags nailed to them. Near the likely region of the oldest one, even the scraps of wood are tagged. TMC 281, TMC 290. There is no point in asking about these tags. They are referenced to collections in Tucson, and we are not supposed to see them. Searching is illegal. We are instructed to stay on the trail, because it is feared that we ourselves, as agents of erosion, will damage and undermine the remaining old trees. This is a reasonable fear. I have been told that

60,000 people a year now visit the Schulman Grove, all during a very short summer season. Yet, knowing only a little about the nature of these trees and of the methods used by the early researchers, one knows, without doubt, where the Methuselah Tree ought to be.

People come here even though the tree is neither monumental nor labeled. They come here via a long and arduous drive. They batter their autos on the steep gravel track between the Schulman and the Patriarch Groves. They come even though there is only one dusty camp spot in the region down in the band of Piñon and juniper, with no water. They come to see the oldest thing, and then they don't see it, or if they see it, they don't know it is THE ONE, and yet they seem mostly pleased.

These places, we are told, are not really for us but for scientific study. Thus continues the institutional idea that the trees and these mountains are primarily a scientific resource. That, we are told, is their value, or more precisely our value. Don't touch, don't leave the trail, we are told. Don't pick up anything.

I am a walker; I feel that now as I walk. I must saunter among the trees, even if on the trail. Indeed, I find myself often retracing my steps along the trail to make sure I have not missed anything or misunderstood. Yet everything seems quite simple around here. There are the trees and the rocky slope, the sun and the wind, life and death. The trail is like my mind, taking me to the place in a certain way and not in others, denying me certain things it would not have me know. I am told, for instance, that it used to pass close to the Methuselah Tree but was reconstructed to avoid this relic. I will not say whether I am ever tempted to leave the trail; I will not incriminate myself.

At one point, I see the oldest mountain mahogany I have ever seen, much older than the one outside my kitchen window; this one has been dated at more than 280 years, or so I am told. There is no sign. There is a bigger mahogany somewhere on Wheeler Peak, perhaps the biggest one in the world. It has a sign. Everything has been measured and has a date here, but no date is distinct. I see many old trees, am among so many old trees, that finally which is the oldest among them seems inconsequential.

Walking among these bristlecone pines is a great relief, for it has helped me to see myself more clearly, and what I see is that I am a fifty year-old man who would walk for a long time among these trees whose lives are of a different order than himself, just for the pleasure in it. Surely there is something large and monumental as well as small and tortured in this realization.

But we want to interact with the trees, and consequently we break the rules. My teenage son climbs high up into the forked golden boughs of a dead and polished snag in the Patriarch Grove. I had forgotten to tell him not to do so. I walk by, oblivious; he speaks to me, but I cannot locate his voice. I do not expect to find my son twenty feet above the ground. And when I see him, I know he shouldn't be in a bristlecone, but it is too late. He knows too, and yet they are so beautiful together, I am silent. Because I do not know what it might mean to him to be within that tree, I respect his way of being in these woods.

My wife steals off the path too, as she has been doing for years, to find places where she can sketch. She has produced many paintings of these trees, and sold some. There will be more. As you can guess from my family's behavior, these groves are insufficiently policed.

Our walks, of course, are fanciful. When one writes it is of memories. So are my wife's drawings and paintings: she will draw every one of these trees, if only she lives long enough. At the university where I teach, whose insignia is an image of the bristlecone pine underscored by the motto "Learning Lives Forever," in the middle of our campus, at the base of a grassy knoll, there are some supine limbs of dead bristlecone, brought from the mountain, the wood gray and rotting. Some of my cynical colleagues have been heard to mutter, "Learning takes forever, you mean." That may be true, but it is a more universal dictum than they suppose. What has the bristlecone learned, absorbed, or recorded, in its long life--ignoring for the moment whether it is conscious or not--which we may learn from it, now that we are ready? Or, more darkly put, what have we not learned from this bristlecone, we who will someday die, from these trees who seem to take forever dying?

The bristlecones seem to be at the source of so many kinds of knowledge that we acquire by looking at the inner and outer forms of the tree, at its surroundings, conversing, reading, drawing, painting, studying photographs, and writing. And yet here on this mountain, in the sky, there are still the trees themselves, inexhaustible, old and young, monumental and insignificant, living and dying, big and small, of the past and of the future. What little we know of them seems to have demolished so many singular or linear theories of ourselves, of the single source of civilization, of a single line of history, of simple cycles of weather. Look off to the northeast and see them trail across the mountainsides until they fade in the distance, with no end in sight, perhaps some of them older and more mysterious than any we have yet discovered.

Still, I wonder. People have only recently been ready to learn anything from the bristlecone; our relations to this tree until the mid-twentieth century have been very casual. Now, when things seem to have gotten serious, we have to ask another question. What are we trying to know?

We cannot escape the present. We do not have the luxury to evade history, except through deliberate ignorance, a path I cannot take. Consequently, when I go to the bristlecone forests, I carry with me all the language and all the perceptions I have read about the tree. Perhaps because I am conscious of the sources of these words and perspectives, I am less constrained by them than I would be if I went in ignorance. Perhaps I should pretend to see as a child. (As if I could enter the photos printed by the Nevada State Commission on Tourism.) In fact, I know that knowledge limits, constricts, restrains, but also liberates by opening and widening my perspectives. All of my time in these woods is in some sense stolen time. I take my walks among these trees and choose.