

James Bertolino

Andrews Forest Poems and Journal Notes
October 8 to October 15, 2012

A Sweetness

I'm remembering how fit, how strong
my father was well into his seventies.
He found no task daunting, and always
knew ways to build and repair things.

Yes, he was sometimes grumpy,
but I recall the last time we sat
outside in lawn chairs below the enormous
oak: our conversation ranged widely,

and there was in him a sweetness
I'd rarely seen. One thing that saddens
is that I never pressed him
to speak Italian, which might have

brought blossoms to the Old World power
and persistence he gained from
his Italian parents.

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In the old days
I might say: "I'm

70 years old-dig it!"
But these days things get

dug in and dug out.
You don't agree?

Well then, you can just
bug off!

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The stream water swirls

around boulders in the sun,
creating a confluence of brightened
shapes-like a phalanx of ants
on their way to important business.

And just below them there is a lumpy
rumpus where the water tumbles
over small mossy rocks.

The ants are headed there,
where it is like a playing field: imagine what might get tossed or caught.

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The sound of the water over rocks,
repeating its mantra: we are this
fluency, fluency, fluency.

The sun steady over the towering trees
says nothing, but sees and knows all
this forest has ever done and, like my life

without you, my darling, there would be
no forest without the water and sun.

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Around the Bend

Where the stream widens
and offers a small beach,
there are two ducks-one of them
female.

When I fake the sound of ducks,
they both turn their heads
in my direction, then look away:

they've been visited by quacks before!

Then they both step into the water,
and the brightly colored one paddles

in circles around the other, as if to say:

"Let's get on with this!"
Then they're gone, upstream and
around the bend.

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The Descent

Sitting above Lookout Creek
on a knobby cliff, I notice
below me a perfectly round

cap on a mostly submerged boulder.
It looks like it could be the lid
on the deck of a submarine.

I would like to open this four-foot wide door and descend into the forest catacombs. But now

an amputee grasshopper climbs
my jeans and stops to look at me.
I believe he is saying I should not

waste my ability to think
on that wet rock. The moss is
enough. You are blessed.

Then he leaps at an angle off.

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White Boulders

The round and whitened boulders
are bordered by light green foliage
below the massive, heavily shadowed
rock outcrop that supports a stand of trees that reach toward the mountain ridge above.

This isn't the setting for some drama

or idea, this is the exquisite world we rise and fall in. And below it all is moving water that finds, and sweetens, and carries life.

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Gazing down this deep, rock-studded gorge is like looking back over the 70 years of my life: there are immense boulders in the path of Mona Creek, but the life-bearing water always finds its way. In the distance there are swaths of dazzling green beside dense, hard-edged shadows. At the farthest reach of vision, rising out of the morning mist, is a mountain cloaked in trees. Above that, endless blue.

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Saved by Moss

It seems right-
here on my angled perch
atop the rocks above
Lookout Creek-
to feel I'm on the verge
of slipping off and
tumbling 30 feet
into the rushing water.
Only a half-inch thick
carpet of moss
saves me.

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Toothpicks

All along Lookout Creek
there are enormous
old growth Douglas fir
that have become uprooted
and fallen into and over
the water. I call them Toothpicks
of the Forest Gods.

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Your Report

Give me a thick forest
When I have worked long
And am ready to rest.

Still the bell's ding-dong,
Because silence is always best.
And if you think my way is wrong,

Come forth and join in my effort.
Not till then should you make your report.

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A Note On Science

Rupert Sheldrake demonstrates how contemporary science is riddled with assumptions and prejudices, with beliefs about the "immutable laws" of the universe. As a certain Native American genius told me: "everything change."
Speed of light too fast for you? Wait a couple days, or head up-country. A time may come when we all have pet black holes-that is, once they get their appetites under control!

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On Lookout Ridge

Why are some of the most spectacular sites in the high mountain forests often littered with shattered bottles and empty shotgun shells?
Or is desecration simply a human trait?
Are there other species that purposely desecrate their environment? I'm embarrassed to ask, because I fear the answer is "no!"

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Flight From Lookout Ridge

Were I an adventurous flying squirrel,
I would dream of climbing
the highest tree, and from that lofty

vantage look out over the valleys below, and the forested peaks beyond. Then, fully trusting my fur-covered wings, I would launch into a thousand-foot flight and become the hero of my life.

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The Salamander

This Northwest forest is all about water, and the beautiful reddish-brown *Ensatina* salamander I met this morning is proof. I watched him (or perhaps her) waddle across the wet ground, sprinkled with orange pine needles. She looked like a cartoon salamander, with her tender, protruding eyes and delicate rib-like folds. I watched her swim gracefully under a two-inch deep puddle.

When she emerged, and paused at the edge, I carefully gathered her up, then made a cave from my hand. With her sweet head peeking out, she seemed to relax when I gently blew warm breath on her. It was as though she was thinking: "Huh.

This isn't so bad. Nice bed." When I placed her back in the puddle to enjoy watching her swim again, she just floated there, limbs splayed out. For a few moments I looked up into the trees, enjoying the mist cloaking them.

When I returned my gaze to find my salamander, he had completely disappeared. So well-camouflaged in his color and shape-no matter how carefully I scanned the puddle and dirt around it, he was gone.

And, of course, he had to have been within a foot or two of where I'd put him down.

I wondered, how could a man become that invisible?

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Pondering

Looking with pleasure up a mountain stream, then following the path of water down through channels in the rocky stream-bed, I notice the flat area of a rock slab has a bowl cut into it, where the water seems to slow and swirl, as though it is taking time to consider its own flow, where it has been, and what it remembers. When that eddy rejoins the rush, it seems brighter, with heightened flecks of white.

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10/13/2012

Ensatina

It's evening and I'm sitting where Lookout Creek and Mona Creek converge before emptying into the Blue River Reservoir. It has been a wet, misty day, and the Andrews Forest is gorgeous-just as a Northwest forest should be.

I have an almost life-long passion for salamanders, and today I met and gently handled eight of the ruddy-backed *Ensatina* species.

Like poets, they breathe through their skin.

Water rushing over rocks could be the theme song of my spirit: always changing, always the same.

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10/14/12

Ministering

About the time her father was home
spending his days lying on the couch-
recovering from bleeding ulcers-he suspected he had not fathered his youngest of three sons.

He verbally punished that wide-eyed three-year-old, and would growl and slap at him whenever he came close.

Now that brother is a Fundamentalist Christian missionary, ministering to convicted prisoners in the American Southwest. He claims to find that work gratifying.

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Another Forest Condo

A 75-foot high Hemlock has had
its top blown off, and
some raptor has built a nest
on the flat part.

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There Must Be A Plan

I can't seem to get enough
of the churning white-water troughs.
Why, I wonder, do these deep forest
places remind me of my life?

I've been hard at work living
for 70 years, and some days it seems
like I've just begun.

Who do I think I am, that I expect
intelligent others will want to read
what I write? It reminds me of
my Uncle Hubris, who was always
surprised if you didn't offer him candy.

Well, I prefer whiskey-
Irish if you've got enough.

I'm missing Gary Snyder this week
at a university about 100 miles from here, but he'd understand, given the mosses, salamanders and old
growth trees I have for company. I did bring three of his volumes along.

But I am bereft of a plan. Or should
I say, The Plan. I think I'll know
by the time I head home.

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The Fall

So I've taken my first Andrews Forest fall-not a bad one, as these things go, but the scrape on my right
leg, below the knee and on the right side, did bleed. The damage to my right thigh, on the outside, is ten
times as big, and kinda hurts, but no actual blood.

I was climbing down some precipitous, and slippery, rocks (slippery due to the rain last night) trying to
access my new favorite spot on the Blue River, and I realized I'd taken a new approach. Deciding to
proceed nonetheless, I braced myself against a large, rotting log, and began to carefully clamber down.
Yes, as you might expect, that log crumbled and I slid about eight feet over a rough rock face. I should
note here that in one hand I was carrying my journal, and my small pack was slung over my neck and
hanging alongside my right shoulder-neither suffered any damage. The ruckus, by the way, spooked a
group of four mallards, three of them males.

When I had come to rest, and checked myself out, I concluded no major harm had been done, and
looked for a place to comfortably sit. I found a dry, flat rock, where I settled, and pulled from my pack
the single cold beer I'd brought-it was, after all, past 3p.m., my new Andrews Forest cocktail hour.
I sipped my beer slowly, and felt almost no pain. Then I proceeded to write this.

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10/15/2012

Forested Dance

Water swirling around boulders
in this mountain stream
is embodying a dance-as it slips over
moss-covered rocks it enacts the sexy moves.

Then, like a tarantella, it rushes, with great spray,
to tumble over a hard edge in a movement
that is clearly masculine. Negotiating the downed
old growth trees and rotting branches

might be called the Cossack jitterfrog.

There is steady music, especially with the rainfall
that has joined the dance. At the edges
and in the eddies the currents become subtle,
yet more thrilling than what must be bold.

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Mother Earth

We have damaged our Earth,
yes, and the horror continues.
But we know what we must do:
Save this Planet. It will be difficult,
but we are the only species capable
of success. But then, the daring philosopher
Kathleen Dean Moore has this to say:
"If the Earth were your Mother,
she would hold you under water
until you no longer bubbled."

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Ten-Foot Gnarly Stick

I found this great stick on one of my brief
hikes in Oregon's Andrews Forest.
Its length is slightly arced, and it has
rich character. I comprehend and treasure it
as the arc of my life. My seventy years begin
at the blunt end, and it runs pretty straight
for about three feet. Then things get very interesting:
there are sudden curves, and protruding knobs,
and it never marks a straight line for more than
a few inches at a time. There are gouges,
dark spots, and places where it threatens
to split. But there is a steady progression until
about nine inches from the end, where it makes
a sharp, left-hand turn. What, I wonder,
can that mean?

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Ravioli

When I was a young bachelor

living along in a tiny apartment,
I fondly recalled the Italian dishes my mother
would cook for my father, and his seven kids.
So what did I do? Take my turn at cooking?
No. I wasn't that kind of bachelor. Instead,
I fully enjoyed my cans of Franco American
spaghetti and Italian ravioli by Chef
Boyardee. A glass or two of red
jug-wine was often an added,
and welcomed, feature.