

Primordial Chords

By Tim Fox

After a long hike along steep, winding trails and logging roads, I finally arrive at my destination: the headwaters of Lookout Creek, deep in the central Oregon Cascades. A chill breeze slips through my chosen campsite on a patch of level ground in the autumn old growth. Night draws near. I run through a mental priority list: set up the tent, filter water, dinner. But first, I force myself to insert a pause into the evening's busy survival schedule. For a few moments, I simply listen to the creek song and marvel at this place, at the personalities of the giant gnarled boles and silvery barkless snags that tower above me.

The idea that trees can have personalities might strike devotees of the objective ideal as anthropomorphic, but standing here, I see genuine individuality in the wealth of unique features each of the trees has accumulated over the two, three, four century spans of their lives — broken tops, hard leans, whorls, burls, stove-pipe leaders, side cavities, impact scars from toppling neighbors scoring glancing blows on their way to becoming nurse logs. These trees, both standing and fallen, are the main characters in the great ongoing story of this grove. I will be a part of that story for one, brief night.

I fish the tent out of my pack and set it up in the pale glow of cloud-and-canopy-filtered light. With layers of shadow heaped one upon one another, nightfall closes in quickly. Soon, the Earth's shadow will strike the coup de grace. This calls for a fire, a little rebel sun to shine on into the darkside hours.

I gather stream cobbles — six fist-sized stones in all — and arrange them into a ring around a seventh stone already imbedded in the ground just behind my tent. Then I collect twigs and branches slender enough to break over a knee and snap them into eight-inch lengths. Any longer and they will protrude from the little ring.

My full attention settles on the task before me. Fire. Engagement in the release of sunlight and heat hidden away in wood strikes a primordial chord. I'm resynchronizing the rhythm of my existence with an ancestral pulse that spans tens of thousands of years and has, only since the advent of electrical substitutes, been pushed outside the realm of universal human experience.

As a child of electrified suburbia, I have lived far enough removed from fire that I must compromise on ignition, using two sheets of well-traveled newspaper and a lighter. But from there, the flames are of this place. Seeing the wavering glow, and feeling the raw heat that erupts from a few tiny stems helps me appreciate how much energy stands latent, quiet and cool in the great woody columns all around me. Within these trees and snags, the sun is here even as the darkness consumes all the forest except for this tiny isle of light.

A clear perfect note whistles from the campfire: hot steam-air sounding through a burning stick. Is this a recapitulation of some long-ago moment of inspiration that resulted in the first flute?

I listen rapt until the woodwind falls silent. The leafy crackle of small flames whispers on. Finally, the flames gutter and transform into threads of smoke. Sporadic pops diminish with the ember-glow. Time to sleep.

I cast one last look around the subcanopy blackness and duck into the nylon cocoon of my tent. Once inside, I slip into my sleeping bag and squirm around with larval determination to find a comfortable position. A heat like solar fire radiates from my chest: thermal residue from the day's exertions. I nod off to the rhythm of my heartbeat.

The next day, hiking the road, rain washes over the forest in slow pulses, heavy at times, falling from a sky dark as dusk. Paradoxically, the deeper the overcast, the more vibrant the gold and red maple leaves. Their radiance dims with each rise in the light. Concurrently, the patter on leaves, earth, backpack and warm wool hat quiets.

Everything interprets rain in its own way. The thrum of drops on dogwood leaves differs markedly from the splats that resound from impacted rhododendrons.

I listen for more variations in the rain to take my mind off aching muscles. A ruffed grouse bursts into the air from the roadside thimbleberries not five feet to my right and lands in a low fir bough some fifteen feet further on. Well within rock range. And there are rocks aplenty.

I've turned a grouse into dinner once before, when the bird struck a bedroom window and died shortly thereafter as a result of the impact. But thoughts of predation rub up against the reality of my cumbersome backpack. It impairs the ability to participate in the immediate landscape. That my successful participation in this instance would also make me a poacher is interesting. I realize that many of the options for direct wild participation are, in modern society, forbidden. Hunting laws and property laws dictate what activities are permitted in specific places at certain times. Technically, even the jay feather I found earlier in the day and tucked in my hatband is illegal; who's to say I didn't kill a bird to procure it?

Here, in a designated research area, I can draw creek water to drink and burn twigs for warmth, but to do much more would be in violation of the rules imposed on humans in relation to this land. I'm not allowed to kill the grouse without a license. I'm not allowed to catch the fish at all, unless it's part of a research project accepted by the authorities. And you can bet any such project would not include eating the test subjects.

In short, participation in the land is only socially acceptable to a point. Then it becomes criminal, in some cases for good reason, though my situation reveals the unavoidable defect in modern law. It's inflexible. Due to the necessities imposed by a mass society, law suffers from the weakest-link mentality. It assumes the worst in all of us and restricts accordingly.

I'm not ready to become an outlaw today, so I wish the grouse well and resume the rhythmic plod up the road toward my next camp site. In the unvarying repetitiveness of my footfalls on the graded, graveled surface, my mind assumes an equivalent state. Long straight stretches follow gradual bend after gradual bend. My eyes anticipate rounding each, and in that anticipation, my awareness slips many minutes ahead of where my body is. I trade presence for longing. The result is impatience.

The rumble of an engine rises above the rain-song, shifting my attention from forward to aft. I step off to the side of the road, out of the illusion that it is but a wide footpath. A large burgundy pick-up truck rolls around the bend I passed a couple minutes earlier and reaches me in a couple seconds. Cloud-glare on the windshield makes it impossible for me to see inside the sealed cab. I wave and the silhouette of a hand appears in the driver's side window, then the truck has passed. It rolls on into rain-washed obscurity around the next bend five or more minutes walk ahead of me.

Standing on the roadside breathing hard, sore under the weight of my pack, I marvel as I never have before at the amount of energy required to propel this vehicle up a relatively steep grade at such a relatively rapid velocity. The truck's weight exceeds mine by an order of magnitude plus change. How many campfire's worth of energy has it consumed to travel from wherever it started to this point, high in the Lookout Creek watershed?

And how different that ascent has been from mine. The driver sits inside a warm dry compartment and facilitates forward advance with nothing more than slight pressure applied to a floor pedal with single foot.

Sitting in a posture of stillness and repose, the driver moves across vast distances much more quickly and effortlessly than the mode of travel for which the gluteus maximus evolved: walking.

Seen this way, the trade-offs involved to facilitate floating like a genie in a bucket seat surrounded by a bubble of warm air and moving at ten, twenty times the speed of walking, comes into focus. Considering energy use in terms of campfires fails to account for it. Whole trees, even the giants of the old growth grove, would have their full measure of hidden sunshine extracted and released in a barrage of contained explosions — each with more energy than my campfire used all evening — over the span of just a few minutes.

Not only that, confinement within the glass and steel bubble cuts off contact with the rain-song, the bird-voices, the pika's peep from a cut-bank rock pile, the chill of damp air on cheeks, the scents of decaying leaves and wet humus, the continuity of the seasons as translated by squirrels in their frenzied dashings from one high fir branch to the next, cutting cones that hit the ground with loud, frequent thumps. In short, sensory integration into the immediate surroundings is almost totally impaired.

The unfolding of the landscape also ceases to take place at a pace the mind can keep up with. In a vehicle, nearby subjects pass in an incomprehensible blur. The wonder of water droplets lined up like amphibian eggs on rain-bent stalks of roadside grass goes unseen. As does the pile of fresh scat — six inches of coiled fur an inch in diameter tapering to a point — that causes my heart to involuntarily quicken. I cast a furtive glance into the forest. Does a pair of yellow feline eyes look back? I'll never know unless the mind behind those eyes decides otherwise.

Like the grouse, I hasten on, re-tuned to the immediate and revitalized by the knowledge of my true place in the song of life.

That knowledge turns every sound into a voice. Every edge is sharpened, every shadow deepened. Every footfall is a destination capable of yielding a surprise: a beginning, or an end. And every breeze carries a message . . .

Every instant is a gift.

This is what it means to be alive!