

WILD GINGER

THE JOURNEY FROM ignorance to seeing is made by borrowing others' eyes. A friend points out the litter of disassembled fir cones under a tree in one place, and I become a person able to see them in others. Able also to see what is not, in that moment, there: the squirrel working the cone apart with fast, industrious teeth and dexterous paws, freeing its nourishing seeds.

As this spring's writer in residence in the Andrews Experimental Forest, in Oregon's Western Cascades, I've been given a paper to read on the "invisible present." It points out that we perceive acutely changes that are relatively quick, but are blind to the gradual. A one-year vanishing of salmon is a recognizable crisis. If each decade a wildflower blooms a day or two earlier, we notice only if we've kept a notebook in hand.

Time is not the only governor of the invisible. Attention's direction also matters. What quiet facets of spirit have withdrawn from minds loud with overfilled hours? What creatures have vanished from memory because they once were valuable for making interesting hats? Or, conversely, because their homes were built upon without any thought for their value at all?

Pacific yew (whose bark gave us first taxol, then tamoxifen, drugs used to treat breast cancer) grows only amid the big hemlocks, cedars, and Douglas firs of the Pacific Northwest. These trees depend in turn on a lobed, crinkled, thick-veined lichen that looks like a cabbage leaf or seaweed. Seemingly everywhere here, snagged

in branches, windblown onto the ground in small curling pieces, *Lobaria* fixes nitrogen directly from air, changing it into a form plants can take up through their roots once the lichen has fallen from the canopy and been altered further by the soil's own trans-



forming creatures. *Lobaria* takes hold only in forests eighty to a hundred years old. Yet without it, the ground's stores of nitrogen may be quickly depleted. Had there been a few more decades of ignorant lumbering, there'd be no old growth, no *Lobaria*, no yew trees performing their ancient, crone-like *Noh* dance in the understory's shadows, and taxol's anticarcinomic properties would have been lost. With it, the lives of friends I love. If no one is looking, no one will see.

Still, this forest's human usefulness is not the reason for the joy I feel in its presence. If the blizzards and brunt of almost sixty years have taught me anything that can be spoken, it is to want what the poet Robinson Jeffers described: "I have fallen in love

outward." Unremitting self-concern suffocates. As with the body's own breathing, the gestures of mind and heart that sustain are the ones that include, exchange, reach outward with hands held open. In this place, I feel a life whose center is the whole, the commons of air, water, light, soil, animals, insects, incline, stone. An old-growth forest—incomprehensible, multistoried, particular—is not ours to manage or mine. We are its. What relief that recognition brings.

In the physics of ancient Greece, Love was said to hold the world in place against Hate's entropic dismantling. Gravity, I've been told, is a "black box" concept, still not fully understood. "The strong force," "the weak force," "strange attractors" . . . why not call these quantum connections love? It's as accurate as any other name for what we know of the world.

Each individual scale of a Douglas fir cone wears the shape my friend showed me: the rear half of a fast-moving mouse whose front end has burrowed into the pale brown bract. Two pointed, racing hind feet; a tail so straight it extends past the end of the scale—there is no way to tell if the mouse is returning to a long-familiar refuge, seeking the cone's hidden seed, or fleeing this troubled invisible present into a future equally unknowable and unknown. All I can see is a story of change and connection: one being-form becoming, in front of my eyes, another. Mouse racing into the fir-cone pattern that makes it.

Nearby, wild ginger is growing. Good for tea, my friend says. 🐾