FALL MEDITATION, 2020
NEW HAMPSHIRE

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All felled, felled, are all felled;
Of a fresh and following folded rank
Not spared, not one . . . .

(Gerard Manley Hopkins)

Trees are our oldest living companions. Among the most beautiful and useful creatures in nature, trees have been cherished since ancient times. From the dawn of humanity, they have been our silent companions, present in our most enduring tales, telling us many things and teaching us many lessons. Who has not heard of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in Eden, of the Bodhi tree, of the Cross? And more recently, of Hans Christian Andersen's fir tree, J. R. R. Tolkien's Ents, and—very recently—John Vaillant's golden spruce? Artists, poets, and philosophers have long turned to trees as a clarifying and consolatory force for our human struggles. "Nothing is holier, nothing is more exemplary than a beautiful, strong tree," Hermann Hesse wrote a century ago in his sublime love letter to trees. "They struggle with all the force of their lives for one thing only: to fulfill themselves according to their own laws, to build up their own form, to represent themselves."

Trees speak an astonishing, sophisticated silent language and communicate complex information. German forester Peter Wohlleben explores this secret world of signals in his wildly popular book *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate*. What emerges from his study of our oldest earthmates is an invitation to see for the first time what we have spent eons taking for granted and, in this act of seeing, to care more deeply about these priceless living wonders who make life on our home planet not only infinitely more pleasurable, but even possible at all.

Many, if not most, of us don't give nearly as much thought to trees as Wohlleben does. We are not foresters. For us, trees are simply there, part of the collective whole of outdoor scenery. There are so many of them, their sheer numbers defy us to think much or feel much about them. We see them as "resources" for our use. We make floors and furniture and houses out of them; we chop them up and burn them in our fireplaces; we cut down their branches when they threaten our power lines; we build boats and ships with them; we make railroad ties, baseball bats, telephone poles, wine barrels, and paper bags out of them. If we are more genteel in our approach, we collect their flowers, fruit, berries, and seeds, we sit in their shade, we watch them sway in the wind, we marvel at their strength and majesty. All in all, we usually ignore their simple quiet presence as they go on giving life to each one of us: air, water, food, consolation, repair, health, the vision of natural beauty. They are at once prisoners of our eyes and victims of our use or abuse, our inattention and indifference.

It takes but one experience of seeing and hearing them go down, lost forever, one cataclysmic event to awaken us to who they are, what they say, to what we have been missing. Witness a deliberate attack on them, look long and hard at the breathtaking damage that attack inflicts, even if only on a small neighborhood scale, and it will do something to your soul.

Across the street from where I live, a large, thick stand of trees stood at the intersection of contradictory ways of looking at the world. Developers started to clear the tract of land for what will be

ISSN 1559-9388 (online version), ISSN 1559-9396 (CD-ROM version).

five housing lots. These trees had been growing there for a long time. They were already numerous and tall when I moved here 22 years ago. No dead trunks have I seen rotting on the forest floor. All the trees were strong. They formed a community of arboreal neighbors with me and, more importantly, with each other. For a tree is not a forest. On its own, it cannot establish and maintain a consistent local climate in which to flourish. It is subject to the whims of wind and weather. But when many trees are gathered together in one place, as they were here, they create an ecosystem, writes Wohlleben,

> that moderates extremes of heat and cold, stores a great deal of water, and generates a great deal of humidity. And in this protected environment, trees can live to be very old. To get to this point, the community must remain intact no matter what. If every tree were looking out only for itself, then quite a few of them would never reach old age. Regular fatalities would result in many large gaps in the tree canopy, which would make it easier for storms to get inside the forest and uproot more trees. The heat of summer would reach the forest floor and dry it out. Every tree would suffer. . . . Every tree, therefore, is valuable to the community and worth keeping around for as long as possible. And that is why even sick individuals are supported and nourished until they recover. Next time, perhaps it will be the other way round, and the supporting tree might be the one in need of assistance.

If a tree can be only as strong as the forest of which it is a member, then the trees across the street were strong. This stately community of over one hundred trees was intact, home to dozens if not hundreds of birds, mice, voles, squirrels, chipmunks, and hundreds of thousands, more likely millions, of insects. I have seen foxes, deer, and once, possibly, a coyote emerge from it and walk, trot, or run down my long driveway into the woods on the western side of my house. This small woodland was also home to poison sumac and poison ivy as well as to more fragrant growths like lilies of the valley. The rising sun, for longer than I'll ever know, blew its warming beams through it every morning.

Trees help each other in a particular and very special way through their root systems, either directly by intertwining their roots or, as Wohlleben explains, indirectly by growing fungal networks around the roots that serve as a sort of extended nervous system connecting separate trees. An invisible, infinite number of biological pathways and connections allows trees to communicate with one another and allows the forest to behave as one single organism. So trees are much more than what they are to us, or for us, or even in relation to us. They are unique miracles of relation amongst themselves, entangled in incomprehensibly complex symbiotic webs of inter-being, constantly in communication with one another through the chemical signals transmitted by the fungal networks attached to their roots—a hidden wood wide web beneath our feet. The depth of such arboreal intelligence baffles us. And herein lies a metaphor for the universe. Herein lies the ancient, unchanging law of life: everything in the universe is connected to everything else. Long before Wohlleben explained scientifically that a forest is much more than what you see, John Muir, the great naturalist and writer, wrote that everything in the universe is "hitched" to everything else. "One fancies," he writes, "a heart like our own must be beating in every crystal and cell, and we feel like stopping to speak to the plants and animals as friendly fellow mountaineers . . . we feel ourselves part of wild Nature, kin to everything."

How different this way of seeing is from that of Descartes and the behaviorists who followed him, who saw dogs as mere unfeeling machines, and who conducted upon them the most excruciating experiments. Does seeing trees as unfeeling entities exhibit a similar arrogance? Is seeing them as mere "resources" yet another sign of our anthropocentric hubris? Are we environmental terrorists who abuse the natural systems that keep us alive? Until the juggernaut we call the Industrial Revolution got

underway, trees and people used to be good friends. If we now choose to see them as fellow beings, as kin, as Muir did, are we subjectifying the universe? Ursula LeGuin writes, in the preface to her final poetry collection, *Late in the Day*, that that is precisely what she has been trying to do in her work, "because look where objectifying it has gotten us." Objectifying co-ops and exploits. Subjectifying involves "a great reach outward of the mind and imagination." Objectifying distances; subjectifying connects. Relationship, regardless of what beings are related, is always complex and always reciprocal. Everything is "hitched" to everything else. In our relationships, we humans are intensely aware "nodes" of relation in an infinite web of connections, "simple or complicated, direct or hidden, strong or delicate, temporary or very long-lasting—. . . infinite but locally fragile, with and among . . . all beings including what we generally class as things, objects" (LeGuin).

But to truly see and listen to, say, a tree as more than a source of life-lessons, as more than an object of admiration or even worship, as more than a metaphor for our own lives, requires the kind of regard for it that philosopher Martin Buber explores in a passage of his 1923 existentialist masterpiece, *I and Thou*. Buber illustrates the distinction between I-It and I-Thou relationships with the example of how one regards a tree. "I consider a tree." Buber proceeds to enumerate the various ways in which I can perceive a tree: as a picture, as movement, as a species, as an expression of physical laws. In all these ways, the tree remains an object to me. I have an I-It relationship with it. Buber goes on: "It can, however, also come about, if I have both will and grace, that in considering the tree I become bound up in relation to it. The tree is now no longer *It*. I have been seized by the power of exclusiveness." I have now entered in to an I-Thou relationship. I don't have to give up any of the objective knowledge I have about the tree. But the tree is now more than the sum of its parts. Its value does not depend upon my impression or imagination or knowledge of it. "It is bodied over against me," Buber states, and has to do with me, as I with the tree—only in a completely different way. Now the relation is mutual.

Another 20th-century philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, speaks about relationship in a similar way, as a "Face-to-Face" reality. "Face," with a lower-case f, reveals age, ethnicity, race, even socio-economic status. "Face," with an upper-case F, is what seizes us by love for the Thou-ness of the other, be that other tomato plant, alligator, sparrow, child, tree. To live in faith, says Levinas, that is, to live in the flame of one's fullest aliveness—is to be seized by love for the Face. Faith is surrender to every Face through which and for which you have been seized by love. The Face "orders and ordains" us. Even before I react to it, the Face's first demand is: "Thou shalt not kill me." I am responsible to the Face. I have a non-reciprocal relation of responsibility to the Face. This responsibility is transcendence *par excellence*. Transcendence is the spontaneity of responsibility for another Face, be it human or non-human. Seen in the light of Levinas's philosophy, ethics can be said to be an ongoing engagement with particular literal and metaphorical Faces. There is great danger in leaving ethics without any emotional impact—leaving it with no connection with the living, breathing, unsystematic complexity of life.

"What is eerie," writes John Vaillant in *The Golden Spruce*, is that "despite the logging industry's profound impact on our lives" and landscapes, "few people outside the industry have actually witnessed a logging operation." There are at least a couple of reasons for this. The first reason owes much to "the average consumer's lack of interest in the origins or true costs of the resources we take for granted." Consumers are at one end of a spectrum by which the industry's discrete production processes (all connected to the minutest detail by economic transactions) divorce them from direct contact with the trees, the living pieces of the planet, that have come to them as wooden commodities in some sort of finished state. Loggers are at the other end of the spectrum. Loggers don't know where their trees go,

carpenters don't know where their wood comes from. The provenance of the roll of paper towels on your kitchen counter is anyone's guess.

Another reason for ordinary people's ignorance of the logging process is the fact that most of us live at some remove from where the logging takes place—a location where, unless we are extremely physically fit hikers or mountain climbers, we probably wouldn't survive a single day. In this sense, logging is like factory farming. Here too, our complete lack of exposure to factory farmed animals and the horrific conditions under which they are housed and slaughtered desensitizes us to the process by which a cow becomes a cheeseburger. Logging operations, like factory farms, are hidden away from public view, laid out on thousands of acres owned by big corporations. Ordinary folks can no more stroll into an active logging operation than they can onto a factory farm. These places are not tourist attractions. They are extremely hazardous sites where dying on the job is a frequent occurrence for loggers as well as slaughterhouse workers. Injury and death rates for these workers are 20 to 30 times higher than the national average.

So, on October 28th, when mechanical prototypes of Cretaceous-period dinosaurs invaded the forest across the street, I was in a certain sense privileged to have a clear view of what a logging operation involves, even on a small scale. The logging machines muscled their way noisily into this bucolic space, establishing their claim to the land and its trees. The first to arrive was a feller buncher, about the height and twice the width of a large refrigerator. It rode on four tires, each as tall as a man, each fitted with carbon ring skiddle chains. These made of the buncher the ultimate all-terrain vehicle. It strode in clanking and rattling, crushing small bushes and shrubs, on the lookout for bigger prey. You could call it a treehugger, in a sense. In front, on the bottom, it was equipped with a horizontal saw at least two feet long. As it approached a hapless tree, its two pairs of arm-like claws, one at the top, the other near the bottom, grasped the tree in a deadly embrace while the saw rapidly sliced through the trunk. The feller buncher then strode off with its guillotined victim still vertical, held stiff, to an unseen spot where the claws would unclench and the tree would fall to the ground with a great thud. The buncher worked from early morning to late afternoon for two or three days until all trees one foot or less in diameter had been hauled off. Its appetite was ferocious: it could fell and carry off five trees within 20 minutes and return for more in its unrelenting *danse macabre*.

The second dinosaur, a knuckle boom loader, was short, squat, and equipped with one gigantic pair of hanging claws that could be maneuvered every which way to grab fallen trees, meter-long logs, branches, and twigs left behind by the feller buncher. It is also known as a log grapple. It too was fitted with the same kind of huge chained tires that crushed and mauled whatever was in their way. The knuckle boom loader rattled around all over the tract of land until the end of the first week of the massacre, scavenging voraciously, dragging off large logs and smaller bits of wood and branches.

This behemoth worked in tandem with a man wielding a chainsaw, the serrated blade of which was about two feet long. A chainsaw is basically a motorized bicycle chain with sharp teeth that runs about 60 miles per hour. Over the past 80 years it has become the most common piece of equipment in a logging operation. In its power to devastate, if not in its scope, it can be compared to an AK-47. The saw dispatched those trees whose trunks were too stout to be embraced by the feller buncher. One morning, mouth agape, I watched from my window as the agile young fellow's saw cut clean through over 20 trees in, it seemed, as many minutes. After determining the natural lean of the tree and the optimal direction of its fall, in order to control the fall the man cut a wedge in each tree. The wedge had to be cut at just the right depth for each tree; if the wedge cut was too shallow, the tree could settle back on the saw. If that happened, the tree had a 360° falling possibility—an extremely dangerous situation—over which the logger would have no control. Once each tree was cut, the high branch tips quivered at first,

then the tree swayed and shuddered, finally emitting a loud, long cracking sound as it toppled over in a cloud of dust and leaves.

I thought of the bewildered birds in their beds, the squirrels whose playgrounds were being plucked from under them. “Where is my home, where shall I sleep and protect my young, and shelter in the rain, and run and play?” Scientists such as Marc Bekoff, Frans de Waal, and Carl Safina, among others, have proven that non-human animals experience the same feelings of fear and terror at loss of their surroundings that we would. Their lives are as meaningful and important to them as ours are to us. So it is not at all outrageous for us to put into our own poor words the feelings that they express in their own ways of communicating. Doing so doesn’t anthropomorphize them, but allows us to feel with and for them, to have a jot of compassion for their suffering, some bit of empathy for their plight.

It is hard to explain the feelings that come over you as you watch a debacle like this unfold. At first, you are fascinated by the power of the machine taking down a tree in a fraction of the time it would take a single person to do so. It would not be possible for many men cutting down each his own tree at the same time. Each tree needs a large space in which to fall and expire, and human lives would be in danger. One man armed with a chainsaw is sufficient to execute the required damage. Such is the efficiency of an extractive economy.

Following hard upon fascination is a sense of revulsion that a being so large, so tall, so old as a tree can be broken in such a short time. This is the kind of revulsion you feel when you realize that something truly awful is happening. These trees have flourished on this land for many decades, some for more than a century, and now, within a few unholy minutes, what took nature much time and effort to nurture is being callously destroyed by human hands. It is awful because the mortal combat is unequal, unfair. If trees could also wield chainsaws, things would be different. But they cannot defend themselves. For all their size and splendor, they are powerless. They cannot escape. They are at our mercy.

The sense of the awfulness of the spectacle yields to anger. You begin to feel with the tree. You begin to feel pain in your chest. Unconsciously you hold your breath as the tree falls, your heart hurts, your soul weeps for such waste. You are angry because this botanical butchery is, to put it simply, just plain wrong. It wastes the world and our time in it. You are deeply angry—not in an outer incoherent, violent, or icy way, but in an inner painful way that compels you to acknowledge that what you care for is being hurt or about to be hurt, that you cannot prevent this from happening. You feel the rawness of your implication in this world, that you belong to these trees as much as they belong to you.

Writing can be an expression of the purest form of anger because it is an invitation to bring compassion and care into the world by making the mind sharper and clearer and the heart more open and generous. Peter Wohlleben, the forester turned writer, moves his readers to appreciate his own anger when he writes: “When you know that trees experience pain and have memories and that tree parents live together with their children, then you can no longer just chop them down and disrupt their lives with large machines” (Wohlleben). You are angry at the ignorance of loggers—mercenaries—who know as much about the hidden life of the trees they are felling as a butcher knows about the emotional lives of the animals he is butchering. Instead of seeing trees as priceless living wonders, as never-to-be-repeated individuals, those who cut them down—and even more so those who pay them to do it—see trees as mere currency. They turn something beautiful and alive into a commodity to be sold and bought, into something that exists only to be used. John Muir, a century before the environmental movement, put a fine point on this:

> Any fool can destroy trees. They cannot run away; and if they could, they would still be destroyed—chased and hunted down as long as fun or a dollar could be got out of their bark hides, branching horns, or magnificent bole backbones. . . . Through all the wonderful, eventful centuries since Christ's time—and long before that—God has cared for . . . trees, saved them from drought and disease, . . . and a thousand straining, leveling tempests and floods; but he cannot save them from fools . . . .

Our world clearly suffers from a nature deficit disorder in which comfort with hell-bent moral and cognitive dissonance is required. What sort of people destroy trees? People who know the price of everything and the value of nothing.

In "Proverbs of Hell," the poet William Blake stated: "A fool sees not the same tree that a wise man sees." In his letter to a Reverend John Trusler in the summer of 1799, he wrote:

> I know that this world is a world of imagination and vision . . . but everybody does not see alike. To the eyes of a miser a guinea is far more beautiful than the Sun, and a bag worn with the use of money has more beautiful proportions than a vine filled with grapes. The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the eyes of others only a green thing which stands in the way. Some see nature all ridicule and deformity . . . and some scarce see nature at all. But to the eyes of the man of imagination, nature is imagination itself. As a man is, so he sees.

It all becomes a question, then, of what kind of person you want to be. You have a choice to make between ways of seeing. You can choose to see the tree as a fool does, or as a wise person.

In the end, you are overwhelmed with a sadness too deep to describe. It stays with you as the chainsaw continues to spew sawdust into the air, like dead men's ashes. It stays with you as the knuckle boom loader with its mammoth claws drags the dead bodies off the field, one after another, limbs flailing in the wind. It stays with you all day. You cannot unsee what you have seen. You cannot unhear what you have heard. You know this sadness will be with you tomorrow, and the day after, and the day after. Sadness at what Shakespeare called the "bare, ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang."

The third piece of artillery in the war being waged on these trees resembles a long-necked T. Rex. This one is a crawler backhoe loader—an excavator equipped with several nefarious attachments euphemistically known as "ground engaging tools." The tool on this particular excavator was a toothed one. This loader moved not on tires but on tracks, like an Abrams tank. It did the heaviest work, taking down the biggest trees. After a chainsaw primed the tree to fall in a certain direction, this excavator raised its loader bucket to a desired height on the trunk and pushed. In a few seconds, the tree cracked and crashed. This backhoe loader pushed to the ground every tree with a diameter greater than a foot and a half. There were several such trees.

One of them was the largest tree in the forest, an oak at least eighty feet high. For the 22 years of my habitation here, I saw this oak when I sat in my green club chair and looked outside the window. I saw it deal with the beauties and challenges of every season. I saw birds sometimes explode out of it in great numbers when a moment before it seemed not a single bird was hidden in the tree. I saw the snow fall into the welcoming spaces where its branches met its trunk, nestling there in a way that a mother holds her child, in a way that made me wish to be the snow. For 22 years, this great oak greeted me as I walked or drove out from home bent on some errand. The errand done, it welcomed me back home. I paid attention to this tree, and somehow it paid attention to me.

So when just a few of the largest trees were still awaiting their fate, I approached Jeremiah, the young chainsaw fellow. “Do all the trees have to come down? Can’t any be spared—especially that one,” I asked, pointing to the oak in the distance. “Believe me, m’am” he answered, “if I didn’t have to, I wouldn’t cut that tree down.” “Can you ask someone if it can be saved?” I asked. “I’ll ask someone higher up in my company.” “You would do that? Oh, thank you,” I replied. That day, I had hope. No one came near the tree. I noticed that day and the next that Jeremiah cut several more trees in its vicinity but stayed studiously away from the oak. The young chainsaw wielder clearly stood on the cutting edge in every sense. I began to believe that maybe the oak would be left alone, that it would be allowed to survive, to stand its ground. Maybe Jeremiah decided on his own not to cut it down. What a brave young man, I thought. I wondered what would happen if he refused outright to cut the tree down. I wondered if he got paid by the hour or by the tree. Would he lose his job? Could he afford to do that? For a tree?

All wondering was in vain. The “owners” of the land wanted every tree, without exception, taken. They had bought the “property” to build five houses on it. Each house would squat on its own little treeless acre. But the destruction of all the trees didn’t have to happen. Excellent, well-trained designers and landscape architects try to merge, as much as possible, the human building effort with respect for the needs of nature. Here, it seems no one thought of giving the land some consideration. But I had no rights in this matter. It’s always the same story, the same conflict: two adversaries battling for the same thing, for different reasons. Never enough land, not enough love. So on the fourth day of November, the month of the dead, the hired hands came for the oak.

Oak trees have been around for millions of years, and from the beginning of recorded history have been venerated and at times worshipped. They were sacred to the Greeks and Romans, to the Celts and Slavs, and to Teutonic tribes. Just as the lion is the king of beasts, the oak is the king of trees. Many species of oak grow in North America and throughout the world. According to a recently published article in *Scientific American*, theirs is a remarkable evolutionary success story. Over millennia, as land bridges alternately connected and disconnected North America and Eurasia, oaks also migrated north and south and north again, as glaciers advanced and receded. Northern red oaks (L. *Quercus rubra*) are the dominant oak in New Hampshire. They have massive trunks and dark, rough, deeply ridged bark. They also have a reddish inner bark and a full, vase-shaped crown. In autumn their leaves turn brown and hang on for dear life into the winter. Red oaks house and feed many species of wildlife and keep a forest healthy. The *National Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Trees, Eastern Region* states that older red oaks have deep roots and stout, spreading branches, and they can grow to a height of ninety feet and live between 100 and 300 years. The *Field Guide* also mentions that the red oak is “a popular handsome shade and street tree, with good form and dense foliage. One of the most rapid-growing oaks, it transplants easily, is hardy in city conditions, and endures cold.” And oaks, along with other trees, also register pain. Their pain signals, however, do not travel with the nanosecond speed of ours, but only a third of an inch per minute. I find consolation in this, knowing that, at that pace, my oak will likely not feel pain when its time comes. The speed of the saw will preclude that. Yet some researchers have stated that trees, as they are being cut down, emit an ultrasonic scream—something not hard to imagine.

I know, deep down, that I have been keeping a death-watch over my oak from the first moment this ugly business began. Now it is about 9:45 in the morning. I know the tree’s moments are numbered. Jeremiah is kneeling in the street, checking his saw to make sure it is up to the challenge. I go outside and stand at the end of my driveway, a few yards from where it will happen. At 9:55, Jeremiah places the saw against the trunk, less than two feet above ground. The saw starts to snarl and rattle. I don’t want

to watch, but I have to. I have to be here. He slowly moves around the tree, the saw plunging its entire length into the trunk. When he has gone about three-quarters of the way around, a man arrives with the big excavator. Jeremiah climbs into its bucket, and the man hands him a length of heavy chain. The bucket gets Jeremiah as close to the tree as possible, and he throws the chain around the tree several times, trying to catch it with his left hand as it comes around. It takes a while; the trunk is over three feet in diameter. He is trying to lasso the tree as if it's a wild animal. He is embracing the tree, trying to catch the chain. It is not the same kind of embrace as the one I gave the tree last May, impulsively, the first and last time in 22 years. At last, he catches hold of the end of the chain and secures it around the tree. The man secures the other end of the chain to the knuckle boom loader a few yards away. He gets back into the cabin of the excavator, lowers the excavator's bucket, Jeremiah jumps out, and the excavator delicately places the bucket against the oak's trunk at a height of maybe twelve feet. The excavator pushes. The knuckle boom loader pulls. The tree cracks and leans slightly. In an act of terrible ferocity, the excavator keeps pushing until the great tree can no longer sustain itself. It falls, in one fell swoop, almost gently, almost as if it knows its time has come and resignation is the only option. At about 10:20 A.M. it is finished. It has taken two men and two machines 25 minutes to bring down what it took nature decades to build. O tree, you have done nothing to deserve this death. The world is poorer for the loss of you, you whose action, in the end, "was no stronger than a flower" (Shakespeare).

Jeremiah walks over to me. He keeps saying "I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry." I thank him for having waited until all the other trees were felled. "The tree was very old," he says, "probably close to 200 years. You can count the rings . . . ." I walk back to my house thinking, oh the deaths we've dealt since we learned to navigate the world with a knife. Blossoming in me for days, grief and rage have become inseparable. As Frost wrote of a young birch,

> The most efficient help you ever hired
> Would know that it was there to be admired,
> And zeal would not be thanked that cut it down
> When you were reading books or out of town.
> It was a thing of beauty and was sent
> To live its life out as an ornament.

The next morning, I go out to count the rings in the stump, before they come to pull it out of the ground. I brush the sawdust off with a whisk broom, take off my gloves, sit down, and start counting. When I approach the dark center, I have already counted well over 100 rings. But I can't see well enough through the darkened wood to keep counting. Sick trees decay from the inside out. The rot is somewhat mushy, and the tree will show more outer signs of decay as well, such as numerous dead branches. But the darkness I see and touch here is not decay. It is heartwood, the central, supporting pillar of the tree. It's what gives the tree its strength. In many ways it is as strong as steel. I twist off a small sliver of heartwood from the center of the stump to bring home. Then I sit on the stump a good while and talk to my tree, to what's left of it, the air cooling my face. I am grateful for the deep joy you have given me. You have stood here since before I was born and have taken everything that came at you—all the sun and rain and ice and snow and heat and wind. And you just kept on growing, unabashed, developing from the inside out in tune with your own laws. How I have admired you. How I hope to become more and more like you. Thank you for letting me sit on your stump now. After a while, I look around the stump and notice two large pieces of wood, with bark and inner bark and eggshell-colored flesh. I pick them up to bring them home. They're not going to have all of you. I look around at

the devastated landscape, at this cemetery where just a few days ago a thriving citizenry of diverse green beings lived and breathed out their life-giving oxygen. Dozens upon dozens of stumps are sticking out of the ground, some of them leaning like sorry grave markers. And they will soon be vandalized, pulled up and ground down.

I come into the house, pressing the small remains of this great old oak with its rough bark tight against my chest, wondering where to put them. A small part of the tree is now in my home. I place the large piece on the sill of the window from which every day I would look out and see the great tree. The smaller piece I put on the mantel. I can touch part of the tree every day now, whenever I look out the window over the place where it once stood. But how I wish it were not so!

Tree at my window, window tree,
My sash is lowered when night comes on;
But let there never be curtain drawn
Between you and me.
. . . . . .
That day she put our heads together,
Fate had her imagination about her,
Your head so much concerned with outer,
Mine with inner weather.
(Robert Frost)

Two days later, the outer weather inviting, I run some errands. As I drive down the street parallel to mine, I see huge piles of trunks stacked up neatly on this other side of the hill. They wait to be hauled away. Even with the car windows up, I catch the heady fragrance of cut pine and maple and oak. It perfumes the air—"sweet-scented stuff when the breeze drew across it" (Frost). Now, the uprooting of the stumps has begun. The excavator opens its jaws and clamps them down on stump after stump in the killing field. When I get back home around eleven in the morning, it has settled on the great oak's stump, and pulls up hard. Here it is, the deracination, the eradication (L. *radix*, root) of what is left of the oak. The day before, I had thought of asking for the stump—what use could it be to anyone?—but changed my mind. I do not want for myself, for my use, anything from this tree that could be considered useful. I have two beautiful "useless" fragments to cherish. The enormous dignity and courage of this oak precludes a final violation. I return to a passage by Hesse: "When a tree is cut down and reveals its naked death-wound to the sun, one can read its whole history in the luminous, inscribed disk of its trunk: in the rings of its years, its scars, all the struggle, all the suffering, all the sickness, all the happiness and prosperity stand truly written, the narrow years and the luxurious years, the attacks withstood, the storms endured."

When the excavator finished its work a couple of days later, the whole land now lay skinned alive, eviscerated, disemboweled. The detritus consisted of four gigantic piles of mangled, entangled stumps and roots. For several days now, what is known inelegantly as a stump grinder had laid its 50-foot length of metal on the land, waiting patiently to be fed the trees' remains. The lettering on the side of this horizontal stump grinder read "Peterson 4710B." I checked online. Someone was selling a pre-owned Peterson Pacific 4710B for $389,000. Wood pulverizers apparently don't come cheap. Looking at the machine, I couldn't even imagine how it would work. It was just a big long rectangular blue metal box. It finally got started on November 13. The excavator's toothed jaws picked away at a pile of stumps and roots near the grinder and dropped mouthful after mouthful into the back end of the grinder. The

grinding took place somewhere in the invisible middle of the machine. The front end, which had been horizontal to the ground, was now lifted high at about a 45-degree angle, a conveyor belt running its entire length. The pulverized wood traveled quickly up this belt and after being ejected to the ground eventually created a neat conical mound of sawdust. The mound grew quickly as the pile declined. When the pile had been ground to sawdust, the excavator and the grinder moved on to the next pile, and so it went until all four piles had morphed into high mounds of sawdust. Then the 18-wheel semis arrived. The excavator dumped the sawdust into them. At least three semis were needed to truck away all the sawdust. This whole dreary process lasted close to a week. Finally, their nasty, brutish, and short work done, the machines and their operators slinked away. All that was left was a long high hill, a tsunami of soil that will be leveled before building begins. The trees that had grown there, this thriving long-lived community had been reduced to all its components—leaves, branches, twigs, trunks, roots—no longer in any relation to one another. Death came for these trees, broke them into millions of inanimate pieces, smashed them beyond all telling and weeping. Entropy reigns.

On November 10, I went looking for acorns. I poked around with a stick in the soil at the street's edge near where the oak had stood, trying to find some whose seed had not been eaten by squirrels, other rodents, or birds. A neighbor drove by and asked jokingly, "Are you looking for money?" "No," I answered. "Something better." I wanted to plant an acorn, hoping to grow an oak—what poet W. S. Merwin calls "unchopping a tree." It's better if you can harvest acorns from a live oak, but it was too late for that. I gathered twenty acorns. I had read that you have to put them in a bowl of water. If any float, they will not grow. Seventeen floated. I planted the other three, each in its own pot. They take four to six weeks to germinate. By my reckoning, if my experiment is successful, something green should show itself between December 9th and the 23rd. It is Advent, waiting time. Waiting for new life. Hoping.

I'm a high school junior in a biology class. The teacher says, "Nothing in nature is created or destroyed." She says this more than once in the semester. I don't ponder it much, and it will be decades before I summon up enough interest to do a little research. It's a law of nature, the law of the conservation of mass, or energy, the first law of thermodynamics: nothing in nature is created or destroyed; it is transformed. This is an overwhelming thought. All matter, which is energy, is converted from one form into another. The mathematical equation for this is given as $\Delta U=Q-W$, where Δ is the change in internal energy U of a system, Q is the net heat transfer (the sum of all heat transfer into and out of the system), and W is the net work done (the sum of all work done on or by the system). This is a potent formula but I don't have the mind of a trained mathematician or physicist, so I turn to John Muir. His words light a fire in me:

> And yet when we look into any of her [nature's] operations that lie within reach of our minds, we learn that no particle of her material is wasted or worn out. It is eternally flowing from use to use, beauty to yet higher beauty [acorn to oak?]; and we soon cease to lament waste and death, and rather rejoice and exult in the imperishable, unspendable wealth of the universe, and faithfully watch and wait . . . the reappearance of everything that melts and fades and dies about us, feeling sure that its next appearance will be better and more beautiful than the last . . . an infinite storm of beauty.

From a religious point of view, this is divinity at work in the universe, this is God at work in nature, at work in God's house. The psalmist writes, "Zeal for your house consumes me." This is "house" construed not only as church or temple or synagogue or mosque, not "house" only as built by human

hands but "house" as built by Godself. Nature is the house of God on this our earth. Nature is a cathedral—the first and most wondrous cathedral. Our spirits will not survive if we destroy it.

I have read that only one in 10,000 acorns will become a tree. It takes two years for a red oak's acorns to mature. One oak will produce well over 1,000 acorns in a single autumn. The exception to this is that every two to ten years, northern red oaks product a huge crop of acorns, overwhelming predators like squirrels who leave some acorns uneaten. Most red oak acorns, however, having spent a winter on the ground, do not survive to germinate in spring unless they have been buried by squirrels and not retrieved.

I think of that one small, surviving, uneaten acorn that was buried well over 100 years ago in just the right place, at just the right depth, at just the right time. It germinated, blessed by soil, sun, and rain, and it rose, slowly, imperturbably, overcoming unthinkable odds to become a great tree. The rogue defiance of that little acorn! I realize it will be a miracle if one of the acorns I potted germinates. If it does, I will have to give myself over to its keeping for several months until it becomes strong enough to survive transplantation outside. If it doesn't, it wasn't meant to.

I have tried here to reconstruct the forest, to regather the trees by remembering them and honoring their memory. I will keep the old oak and all the trees of the destroyed woodland community in the forest of my heart. And perhaps a flock of sweet birds will come and sing.

When I am among the trees,
especially the willows and the honey locust,
equally the beech, the oaks and the pines,
they give off such hints of gladness.
I would almost say that they save me, and daily.
. . . . . .
Around me the trees stir in their leaves
and call out, "Stay awhile."
The light flows from their branches.

And they call again, "It's simple," they say,
"and you too have come
into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled
with light, and to shine."

(Mary Oliver)

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