WILDERNESS REFLECTIONS

Into a Stand of Aspen

This wilderness is indifference manifest to our presence, our absence, our staying or our going. Whether we live or die is a matter of absolutely no concern to the wilderness.

—Edward Abbey

There is a memory, preserved for now in the fragile housing of my mind, of a place in which I wandered as a child for a very long time. It is long before I will become a physician, although I will find myself here often after my medical career starts. I am thirteen years old, and the white trunks of aspen trees stretch out before me, behind me, to every side of me. After five minutes of walking, nothing changes in the gray dawn light. The aspen here are old growth. There is ample space of clear forest floor between each tree, and an infinite number of “paths” through the forest in every direction from me. With every step, a new set of paths appear. I think I am going south but I cannot know for sure. The trees are uniform in that uniquely aspen way, their differences too subtle for me to use any one for reference. They are so tall that the nearest mountains are out of sight. My only other guide is the morning sun, and it will not penetrate that high canopy for hours. For now there is only a diffuse gray-golden light all around. The stand may stretch for miles, but I have no way to tell.

Several miles away we had stepped out of the truck in the pre-dawn blackness and heard their calls all around. They echoed through miles of dark forest amongst many groups, some very near to us. They were deep, harmonious, powerful, of massive windpipes—whale songs in the mountains. I had never felt so haunted. A distant explosion had cracked through the cold air—one of the bulls had stepped on a log. The songs and the sharp reports of shattering branches echoed around us and through us. My dad and the adults decided the group should split up at first light and proceed in all directions like spokes of a wheel. That area of the forest was spruce and fir, and we had crossed a few roads on our way in—it should have been easy to navigate.

I went with Richard, an older man and friend of the family since before my birth. Our path north from the truck brought us on top of a herd before we had known it. They exploded away from us out of the trees, an avalanche thundering sixty yards, ninety yards before rifles were even drawn level. They became flashes of color in the most distant gaps of the forest, and then they

vanished. Our gunsights still quavering with the cadence of our pulses, our pulses still throbbing in our ears, marking the ticks of human clocks, we turned to look at each other. This was not Richard’s first hunt, but it was his first at 10,000 feet. His emphysema would not stand for much more of this. He sat down to rest, but he urged me to continue. I went onward, northward. Into a stand of aspen.

Some have said that the largest living organism on earth is not a whale, but the quaking aspen. *Populus tremuloides* will reproduce in the arid West by root sprouts from an original tree rather than by seed. An entire stand can be a single organism, casting up and cutting off stems as it needs. Tree rings are meaningless to the greater organism; a stand may be thousands or even a million years old with no way for us to know. The trees govern themselves, even thin themselves, without intervention. Wandering here, intellectual trivia becomes primordial reality. I am walking on, or amongst, a giant that is ancient, primeval, enormous. I can’t call this place (thing?) a maze or a labyrinth as those names imply it was made to confound; that it was made to do anything for me is doubtful. These trees, vast and silent in the morning light, exist quite apart from me. I look behind me and see no acknowledgement of my passing, no sign of my own existence even where I had just walked. The forest floor is covered in countless autumns of leaf decay, muffling my footsteps and betraying no trace of a footprint. The trees are as still as they were before. My ears ring with their silence, broken only by an occasional trunk creaking in a breeze I cannot feel. If I cry out, the trees will continue their silent watch and the stillness will take hold again. The rifle, instrument of force, precision, violence, is a useless toy slung over my back. The elk, the lesser giants I had followed, melted away like phantasms into this greater giant hours ago. I am alone here.

The thing to do now is walk in a straight line. Even out here, if you just walk in a straight line long enough you’ll hit a road, a river, something to guide you out. The key is to go straight and persevere. I press on, reciting these simple lessons from my dad and my childhood. Walk straight and persevere. Cling to the simple truths when all else is confusion. Straight lines when there are an infinite number of paths; perseverance when there is no end in sight. These are lessons to make

sense of what is beyond us and greater than us; now in the forest, one day, in the hospital. I have to say the mantra more loudly in my mind as the white trunks look no different than they did in the beginning, when I first realized that my hunt was finished. Fear rises in me as I realize what I feel from this living world that I am inching over. It is not that the trees here harbor menace toward me, but that they harbor nothing at all toward me. They are *indifferent* to me. A footstep, a scream, a rifle blast, a human death... meaningless blips in the unrecorded history of these ancients. I am no master of this forest, I am an insect. I am a creature subservient to time in a place that is timeless. What am I, that they should be mindful of me?

There is an aspen stand that has no memory of a child it once enveloped. It is nameless, or its name is not mine to know. It is ageless, or its age is none of ours to know. There is a humming, immutable, the pulse of the trees that begins underground and travels through root into xylem, xylem into leaf, leaf into air. The humming has a cadence that we cannot understand, marking a time that is not the time we know. It is the ringing in the overwhelming silence, the mystery in the heart of wandering men.

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