

The Secret Life of Trees

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he leaves are off the trees now. Last night's storm denuded them. The leaves are already pasty. The maples across the street at Home Hardware look gangly. Some trees look supple and pose with statuesque resolve. The arbutus is particularly bold this way. But these ones look confused and somewhat warty, a bit gnarly, naked when dry, nude when wet. Still, I like them because they stand expectantly on Cook street and seldom tip their hands.

I suppose we've all wondered what it would be like to be a tree. One might be dimly aware of being a part of the brain of the earth protruding in a neural and branchy way out into the world of air, branchy and probing, a bit touchy-feely, each tree a bare nerve if somewhat anesthetized in the nudity of winter. Elsewhere, though, it's summer; the leaves are out and the trees are decoding the dada light into life so that the brain of the earth, protruding everywhere in the form of trees and other plants has on its mind all the seasons at once, darkness and light, warm and cold, the sun and the earth's core, distant and near, and these thoughts eddy in its mind like weather over the face. So the mind is always changing yet, in the normal course of affairs, perhaps, is balanced in its capacity to weigh these things, a kind of music and so it forgets very little since almost everything is happening somewhere on its surface or below. That may be the normal course of affairs. Let us hope we don't derange it into obsession with fire or ice.

We could be the dreams of the earth or we could be a bad bug, parasitic on its balding pate, or we could be a nightmare or we could be transported here from somewhere else and the brain is wondering how we got here or we could be the appointed or unappointed caretakers too much entranced with our tools and craft or we could be preparing to leave or we could be dinosaurs of sorts and never will or we could be from here but have forgotten, it was so long ago. We could be many things.

In the meantime, the trees are quiet, slow. Perhaps the winter is a time requiring courage in a tree. Only courage, to a tree, might be a kind of viscous liquid rhyming with porridge, like sap or maple syrup, a thick, green juice requiring judicious attention to how freely and quickly one lets it flow through the limbs and roots.

Two fire trucks just went by. The trees did not seem to bend, to look. They were probably not alarmed. They don't mind dogs either.

Apparently the center of their lives moves to the roots in wintertime. I have heard that many types of trees look very much below as they do above. This strikes me as mirrorish and I have wondered about the nature of their secret lives underground amid the worms and dirt and hidden passageways and streams.

The roots of some trees plunge so far down into the earth as perhaps to be in contact with the dark waters we hear of now and then.

Trees and knowledge: our books and letters and homes are made from trees. The oxygen we breath is the excrement they produce in their harvest of sunlight. We breath the sweet air of tree farts. They, in turn, probably appreciate our crap. What a strange relationship when we love each other's crap. Still, it's good that our crap is dear to some creatures as is the trees' to us. We need them. Probably they don't need us, though. If they were remotely human, they would wonder by now how we could be both completely negligent towards them and yet need them so badly. They would observe this in our lives elsewhere. They would consider the nature of betrayal, how we cut each other down. They would consider what we build from destruction. Briefly, or as briefly as a tree may be brief. Then they would concentrate fully on harvesting the sun or, in wintertime, perhaps, the history, the family tree of trees, history of the earth.

They probably don't think anything of this at all, of course. They certainly haven't said anything to me. They're at least taciturn. It is pleasant, though, to imagine them quietly coping better than we do. Or, depending on one's mood, to imagine them as being not below but beyond such problems. A pleasure to bestow upon or acknowledge in living things a wisdom and endurance otherwise difficult to locate in oneself. Fool's play, some would say, it's God or yourself you seek, not a tree. But the shapes things take are not so simple. And how is it we come to them anyway but by a song of sorts? We tend after pretending. Maybe there was a pretendency for bodies to fall before they started falling.



Of course, the trees, for instance, continue to fall all the same, whatever we pretend. At this particular point in time my best answer is to continue to imagine their secret life. Everybody's talents are required to build a world.

“Cathedral Grove” near here is aptly named. The way the sunlight streams down through the forest in ladders of gold-silver and the sheer stature of the Cedars and Douglas firs lends the place an impressive atmosphere. I’ve often heard people from here who have traveled to Europe try to describe their sense of the presence of history in Europe. I’ve had that impression here most strongly when I have been in some of our uncut forests. The impression was that people had walked this way for centuries, through the same peaceful cathedral of giants, and that if the giants could speak, one would all too willingly stay. I wonder if the Salish languages say something of the spirit of their cogitations or have words for the signs they give up, like silent body signs, a hand opening to the secret thing inside, the gift?

It is improbable that trees are of any religion whatsoever, I think, though they may be scholars of both the sun and the earth. I once saw a guy standing like a tree in the summer with his arms raised to the sky. I went away and tried it for myself when no one was looking. I think that’s the closest I have come to knowing anything worth knowing about trees. I appreciated them more and learned a bit about sculpture and dance. Trees are so still yet alive, and their life really does show though they are still. Mostly, perhaps, in the history of their decisions on how to both harvest the sun and survive within their particular circumstances. Sculptors would have their works attain this curious property. And something about dance because the movements of the arms, in dance, are sometimes exploratory as the growing of branches. Which we see sometimes in time-lapse photography done on growing things.

But the guy I mentioned was living the life of a tree in summertime, when the leaves are aflutter and the sun is out. How would you do it now that the tree is bare and it is raining? Ah, well then you would have to discover the secret life of trees in wintertime. I don’t feel like standing naked out in the rain beside Home Hardware on Cook Street with my arms up.

Too many robberies around here, for one thing, though, of course, such a robbery would be perplexing to any right-minded robber. Only slightly more surprising, however, than the recent one when somebody robbed the dog-grooming place (of \$12.84). I poked my head out the window at 4 in the morning, having been wakened by the radios of the police. “What’s going on, Officer?” I inquired, three-quarters asleep. “There’s been a break-in at the dog-grooming place,” he replied, amiable. I considered it for a moment, and so became even more confused: “The *dog-grooming* place?” I asked, quizzical. “Well,” he said, his timing admirable, “I guess things are tough all over.” The trees, transplanted into urbanity, may have grown amused.

Me and the trees are subject to several varieties of confusion on Cook Street. No need to add to it. Shouldn’t bewilder the robbers. The trees wouldn’t care, of course, if I was out there in the buff. They’ve seen stranger and less funny things. In our town the secret life of trees is never far away from the secret life of the city. For my own benefit, though, I think I’ll sit here, as usual, and try to just imagine it.

I recall having experienced something like it as a child. Just got caught out in the rain, no doubt. And still far from the real thing because it was summer time. Anyway, I was naked and up to my ankles in a mud puddle. I remember wriggling my toes in the muck, enjoying the warm rain on my face. But really, that is quite far from the life of a tree in wintertime.

Instead of birds in the branches, one would be most conscious, perhaps, of the worms and other subterranean creatures tickling and traveling the length of one’s root branches. Maybe, given that we will all be six feet under or scattered to the wind and thence to the ground sooner or later, burned or buried,

it is best that the secret life of trees in wintertime remains secret from us. And this may be part of their knowledge that we don't normally share.

There have been cases, of course, where people have been buried underground for some time and have lived to talk about it. Particularly in avalanches. There would first be extreme claustrophobic panic. But then, if one survived the panic and was able to breathe a little, there would be an earth of strange cogitations. I have not read accounts of the phenomenon. The closest I recall is a book by William Golding (Pincher Martin) which explores the consciousness of a man adrift in the ocean. I suppose *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is relevant here, to some extent. It was written by yogis whose main study was death. They sort of set up a university of death. These were the type of yogis you hear about who have themselves buried alive for days and even weeks on end and sometimes live to tell about it. It must have been a happening university, what with the faculty changing at such a rate.

However, I am in no hurry to practice dying so literally. And, really, one would think that for all the difficulties trees have in wintertime, they would finally be much more at home underground, like a hedgehog in a hedge, than we would be. Which presumably would alter the experience fundamentally.

Though the evergreens are evergreen, I am told that the center of their lives, as with the deciduous trees, migrates south during winter. This migration, unlike the birds', affects only the location of the center of their lives. Like the migrations of stay-at-homes. As the seasons change I am in the same place and mostly things right here are pretty much the same as they were before, but I migrate subtly to the indoor, isolated, yet somehow more keenly intellectual winter. Seeing the trees utterly leafless today, I am reluctantly convinced that winter is here. The trees don't look particularly pleased about it either, fright wiggish. All the same, I suppose the trees and most of us will muddle through. See you in the dark.

