

Jeremiad of a Bad Drought Year (essay)

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1.

In a wet season, the tulip-tree prospers, roots wriggling through humus and pinching slick clay, branches forcing out wrinkled leaves that unfurl, stretch taut, shake down shade on trailing squaw-weed and dark pipsissewa. And the sunlight through leaves is green and gutters when the wind blows. Some, pressing stethoscopes to trunk, say it's possible to hear sap rise; veins groan as they strain, they say, laboring.

In a wet season, the tulip-tree swallows sun, is the Appalachian forests' prize. Straight and thick-boled, it would make a good canoe; its fibrous bark Cherokee twisted into fish nets, plaited into strong rope. Early in the season it drops painted buds to the ground, tender petals dipped in orange, and by this token makes its lineage known: magnolia. The blooms of the famous Southern magnolia, white and peach-smelling, are so delicate they cannot be touched; even careful fingers burn the petals brown.

But in August of a bad drought year, I watched the tulip-tree choke on sap curdled from want of rain. Too soon it dropped leaves, bone-colored, to litter the trail like tossed paper; its naked branches rattled. In August of a bad drought year I hiked to the mountaintop, and under my feet frazzled grass crunched, and no beetle buzzed, no snake rustled. My shoes left no print on the hardpack clay. In a wet season, I had seen clouds darken to charcoal there, seen rivers of rain

flush the bald clean of ground quartz and pine straw. But there was no rain this year. The trail smelled of earth baking. My feet pounded leaves to dust, and I could not count the dying trees.

2.

He wakes in a dream, tongue thick with dust, robe sweat-damp. He knows where he is: a battleground outside the city, the valley of dry bones. Squinting against the sun, he stares across the plain at the skeleton-stacked canyon, waiting. Then the voice of the Lord rockets across the noontime desert, howling around hoodoos, asking: *O man, will these bones rise again?* What can he say? Ezekiel answers, wisely, *Lord, thou knowest.*

Then it happens: wind blasts down the valley and knocks the bones to the ground. They clatter as they fall, raising dust, and as the wind gusts the bones rise and pair, sorting themselves from their stacks. Bone to bone, they twirl and knit, dance like leaves, figure the old fit. Pale at first, sun-bleached, the bones redden and sprout sinew, thick cords of muscle, unwrinkled skin.

In the valley of dry bones stands a blank-eyed army. They are the standing dead; their placid faces do not crease in shock, their limp arms do not clutch their chests. Then another, softer wind steals through the valley, and the army of men does live. What they do next we are not told.

3.

On a short summer night in the bad drought year, I walked through dark woods that shivered with lust for the burning. Stars glinted in an obsidian sky, the air too dry to tat a cloud. I kept to the trail, the day's heat still rising from it, and in the darkness saw a lighter stretch ahead. As I walked towards it, the sound of rasping and grinding, quiet at first, grew loud. When I stepped from dark woods into gray light, I saw that I was in a clear cut, pines stacked in ragged piles, snarled roots upended. All around me was the sound of chewing, millions of mouths crunching wood: pine beetles. No bigger than a pencil point, but capable of killing thousands of acres of pine woods, pine beetles love dry years; drought-weakened trees can't fight. To slow the beetles' spread, foresters cut infested trees; when the tree dies, the beetles starve. It stopped me short: the hole in the forest, piles of uprooted trees, and worst, the infested pines that still stood, their needles tinder-dry, an army of the dead. I haven't walked through that clear-cut in years, haven't seen the skinny pioneer species (by the creek, alder; in the sun, Virginia pine) that must be, already, turning the scar into something like forest, but I can't shake the vision I had, gnawing mouths and drifts of sawdust, on a blighted midsummer night.

4.

Once, in a wet season, a summer storm caught me on the mountain ridge. Storms can cook up fast in the lower Smokies and this one had, stalling above the creased gorges; I didn't notice until the air darkened and thunder knocked. Say the sky was a glass of milk and the storm a root-clutch steeping there; say the sky drained of color as it will in the long summer dusk. Say the sky thickened and piled like a bolt of denim at the textile mill down the road, the one that shut down after forty hard years: now bearded grasses crack open the parking lot, lay raw clay bare. Say the sky unburdened itself like the mill on its last day, when workers packed looms on flatbeds and wrapped them in yellow tarps, and drivers tightened the straps to secure the machines for the long haul down to Mexico. The newly out-of-work watched the trucks pull out of the lot, making for the freeway, and long after the trucks disappeared, the diesel they burned hung heavy in the air. The people tasted the hard time come upon them, and it tasted like diesel. Say the sky above the mountains turned dark as the abandoned mill's blind exhaust vent, that the screaming of crows was like skittering claws on metal. And then the rains came.

The storm clamped down like a heavy thing and set to pounding. Wind ripped through the gorge, bending and shaking the trees, and thunder hummed low like big trucks rolling. Lightning flashed its keen steel scissors. A town girl caught without shelter, I ran down the trail looking for a place to ride it out, found a crevice under an overhang and crawled in. Ant lions' conical traps dotted the powdery ground, and dark lampshade spiders crouched against the granite

ceiling. Hunched in last year's leaves, I watched the storm erase the trees across the gorge, turn the nearby hemlocks into dark thrashing shapes, sheet the trail next to me with water. Cold rain blew in, and I hugged myself, scared, when thunder split with a sound not like a slammed door or a dropped dictionary, not like a kerosene bomb or a bulldozed wall, not like bent metal screaming: like something inside my head, a nightmare cry pushing out. Lightning flashed close, closer, and when it struck a near hemlock I heard sap sizzle and smelled ozone, and then the thunder cracked loud with a sound like earth breaking, and I screamed.

Then the storm passed, strips of blue showing in the torn sky, and I crawled out of my hiding place to hike the slippery trail (broken branches, split trees) down the gorge, where the creek ran thick and fast, yellow with mud, over swelling boulders. Carefully I pulled myself up to the cable crossing and tight-roped over the roiling creek, and if I had shouted I could not have made myself heard over the water's roar. In the bad drought year I prayed for this, the violence of rain, to be alone in the wilderness when everything came crashing down.

5.

Who will stand witness to the miracles of our time? Who will tell of the workers who loomed sheets, spindled thread, edged the millions of towels that once dried dinner dishes and damp bodies all over the world? The people learn to drive

postal routes, serve coffee and fried eggs, restock shelves at the discount store. Or they look for work and cannot find it, and when their socks wear thin they darn them, and when the patches wear through they tear the fabric into strips, knot strips into rope, stitch rope into rugs. They move in with relatives. They halve dosages, stop subscriptions, fix beans. Boil a bone, make a soup. They know how to make things last. And some nights, to save electricity, they sit in the dark, as my grandfather used to do. He sat on the old brown davenport as night fell, and would not light the lamp. Like him they sit in the dark, figuring, wrapping themselves in hard hope.

In a faithless time I have gone to the desert and seen there ocotillo, devil's buggy whip, naked canes rising from the stony ground. Gray, stippled with thorns, it rattled in the wind, and no plant has ever looked so dead to me. But I've seen, too, the desert after rain, when the ocotillo's tips force out petals red as any cosseted rose. The ocotillo plays at death, crying a song to the cold desert wind; the ocotillo in bloom is a god's hair ablaze with fire, or blood.

This was my vision: Go to the tulip-tree in the depth of the bad drought year, carrying a pick if you can find one, or a sharp stone, or a spade. Clear the fallen leaves; bear down on the spade until your arch blisters; dig a trench in the brick-hard clay. Take off your shoes (cracked from walking); bury them there. Cover them with earth. Tamp it down. Leave your footprints there, dancing.

The night after I did this, clouds gathered and flung down rain. The drought broke as the Baptists, the Methodists, the Presbyterians had all prayed;

as I had. Then I went to the place on the mountain's flank where bright water poured from a jutting pipe. People fill their jugs there, say that water heals, those minerals make bones strong. Where granite gleamed with wet and moss sparkled with mist, where water gushed from a dark stub, I cupped my hands and drank. I buried my shoes at the foot of a mountain tree. Let its roots, well-watered, twine around those rusting buckles; let rain crumble that old metal into strength.

6.

There was a break in the battle: not a truce, but a pause during which both sides admitted their exhaustion. The factions retreated: David and his men into the cave of Adullam, his enemy into Rephaim Valley. The late sun shone red on the wall of David's cave. The men kindled fires of dried dung and thorny branches, husbanding the scarce wood; they scrubbed their blood-caked bodies and swords with sand, roasted a snared goat and ate of it, gulped their rationed water. The watchmen took their places. The others, weary unto collapse, unrolled their mats but would not lie down before David.

He sat on the dusty cave floor, staring at the dwindling fire. Something about fire can make a man nostalgic. Perhaps he thought of how he came to fight his first battle. He had gone to the encampment on an errand, taking provisions to his brothers; he had been a boy then, and eager to go. He was sick of his town, knowing every dwelling and rut in the road, how the marketplace

smelled of sour milk and the tannery. He walked out the gate with a cloth-wrapped bundle: cheese to bribe the commander, bread his mother had baked, a bag of dates for her favorite son. How well she had known the commander and what he would demand. But when David arrived at the encampment the tents were filled with the groaning wounded, and the place resounded with the enemy's daily taunts. He had not had time for homesickness; that would come later, when even the stars and sky seemed different than they had when he lay in the field, surrounded by his father's herds, insulated from the dew by a blanket his mother had woven for him.

Would that I could drink the water of the well of Bethlehem! he said, suddenly, startling the men from reverie. *To taste once more those sweet waters.* The others nodded their heads gravely, keeping their eyes on the fire, looking at him and then at each other. And to each other their eyes asked, *Is this a test?* But he did not see their glance, and gazed at the fire a long time before stretching out on his blanket. Soon he was sleeping the heavy, silent sleep of the career soldier.

They were three, even then his most trusted, those permitted to rest near him. But that night they did not sleep. Smothering the fire with sand, they passed the guards with a silent nod, picked their careful way down the canyon, and ran a looping oxbow around the enemy camp, their sandals' slap the only sound. The sleeping town of Bethlehem was strange with the presence of enemy invaders. No snores or muffled love-cries came from the cloth-draped windows;

no dog shambled down the street. Clay ovens ticked in the cool midnight air. Did they silence the enemy guards with their swords? Did they glide past so skillfully, keeping to the dark places between houses, that no one detected them? Somehow they made their way to the well, lifted the heavy lid that dripped with condensation, and hauled up the bucket. Did they drink? They had no time; wrapping the jar in a worn tunic, they turned to go. The moon sank as they ran across the desert, and they were keenly aware of every stone's shadow that could hide a man, every gully where a spy might crouch. Would they have heard the whicker of an arrow over the pounding of their breath? Would they have noticed if one of their group fell? The sky lightened as they ran into their own camp. They waited outside the cave until he rose.

Where have you been this night? he asked. *I heard the three of you rise and run down the canyon path.* His face was weary; he looked like someone who, a betrayer himself, knows he will never be able to trust anyone. And one of the three pulled a bundle from his side, unwrapped a cloth, and held up a jar. *Water from the well of Bethlehem,* he said, and sat down, feet still dusty, shins thorn-scratched. David held the jar tentatively, as though it were a serpent that might strike if not carefully handled.

Stand up, he said. Taking each man's face in his hands, he pressed his mouth to their stubbled cheeks. *I cannot drink this,* he said. *This could as well be your blood, my men, you who risked your lives for my pleasure.* The sun rose over the edge of the desert, and in the valley below, the enemy girded for battle.

David fell to his knees, holding the jar to his chest, and the men instinctively put out their hands, shielding the vessel from harm. He raised his hands above his head and brought the jar crashing to the ground. The water seeped into the dry sand. *This is my offering to the God of Israel*, he said. *This blood of my men, these waters of my home.* Clay shards shiny with water, and the sun drying them. The dark patch shrank, lightened, disappeared.

After that morning they were good as betrothed, David and his men, filial and pledged, they who would make together a history to be remembered long after their passing. They risked their lives to slake his thirst; they carried his home in a jar. He poured it out as the only use worthy of a holy thing. Did this offering please his God? The sun licked up the water and it rose invisibly on its long journey, gone as though it had never been, until clouds gathered over the desert and dropped down rain. For water is a thing used hard, and used again; water is older than the bodies it laves; water is a relic scrubbed by charcoal and root, and sparkling still as on its first bright day. Thousands of years later, the story survives; can't you see the cup outpoured? Can it be that even now, at this late hour, the very blood that swells your veins carries something of the waters of Bethlehem?