



CHRISTOPHE VORLET

CLEARCUT FEELINGS

BY R. LOUIS RICHARDS

They had at times stood stark still, listening long to the greatest of silences. At others, they leaned back and danced as dervishes with the spray of life's waters through their bows, assisting each other's balance against hurricane and gale. They had known the screams of lions and eagles and the chatters of squirrels and songbirds. They arose in a world where death had always come in the time best suited to life and its relations. Now, it seems, a general death has come to this forest and the families of its wild community. It has arrived out of time as its naked self, with no life about it at all.

I watched this clearcutting proceed, sitting concealed in a natural blind at the edge of some trees. Trees that are, as evidenced by colored ribbons and spray painted marks, soon to be another scene of destruction. Over a few short weeks I have watched since that morning when I was alerted by the foreign sound of whistles, signaling the movements of the yarder's long cables. I came up here to find this war, this sad battlefield. Helmeted and red suspended soldiers used weapons that fired and refired the same chromium razor bullets on continuous revolving chains. The fallen victims were strangled and dragged away by a noose. Yellow and orange metal beasts seemed to dine on the larger body parts within the broken circle.

For now the industry will shift its focus to other ridges and canyons. A seemingly absolute and final silence has fallen loudly with the departure of truck and yarder tower. As I walk out into the freshly killed landscape the pungent smell of sap, almost overpowering, mingles with and covers the damp aroma of the ripped open surface soils. The Douglas firs smell stronger than the cedars, spruces and hemlocks. All are trying by the power of that ancient intelligence to seal off their terminal injuries.

Big leaf and vine maples will crystallize their sugars at the point of severance and try to grow back from the roots come Spring. Prolific alders, sprouting from millions of seeds, together with the tenacious maples and countless dozens of varieties of shrubs, ferns, flowers and berries will proclaim their regenerative

life force, only to be poisoned back to a grotesque and slow living death by a rain of hormonal disrupters sprayed down from venomous helicopters. With birds, bugs and "weed trees" absent, one engineered and cloned variety of tree, one variety for which the industry projects a profitable future market, will be substituted for the genocided diversity.

The familiar odor of the Douglas firs has transported me back to a Christmas tree lot on a December corner of my childhood. I remember creeping through a sawed off pygmy forest. The sacrificial young firs were trucked in and resurrected upon wooden crosses along the boulevard just a block away from my family's stuccoed box of a home in L.A.'s suburbs. I was a 7 year old wild man crawling, knees and elbows, ducking below the branches and avoiding giant alien invaders, known as such by their habit of walking upright. I stand here now and identify as a returned forest dweller, ironically reincarnated in Smogville. I never felt at home until I found a real forest. Now it gets ever harder to find one.

After three weeks of opaque gray, the sky this day is showing that depth of blue that only comes here from the far north with winter's dense arctic air masses. November has brought, once again, a drenching to the western slope of the Cascades. The place where I stand was wholly unprepared to accept the rain. Rain that in other years would have been readily welcomed. An ethereal ghost forest stands upon a congregation of empty weeping stumps. Amid dissevered branches, trampled ferns, piles of sawdust and ripped up duff the scents of fir, cedar and spruce are strong. Far too strong.

Like the image of the severed "phantom leaf" of Kirilian photography, the great old trees are holding on to their auric fields. Organized life currents and static electricity invisibly describe missing trunks, limbs and needles. Energetic impulses above me in the static air strain to pull missing sap where it can no longer flow.

This community of trees with its ferns and fungi, salamanders and birds, squirrels and bears has been surprised by a sudden, sweeping and unnatural change. Even at this height of trauma it desperately strives to heal itself. The primal instinct inherent in each living organism seeks to maintain the energetic patterns of its material form. But the single marketable portion of some central and essential life forms within this diverse system have been removed, trucked away to a muddy sorting yard in a noisy valley below.

I could hear little but the roar of the churning chocolate stream as I made my way up the damp canyon. The scene up here in the cut is eerily silent except for my frequent falling down in the slippery mud and the springy web of slash. I arrived just before the big yarder machine was pulled away from its small circle of bare ground within a large square of newly opened sky. I hid and watched, hearing the loud cracking exhaust of the diesel tractor as the telescoped tower slowly began to move. Left on the puddled muddy landing are fragments of cables, some pop and tobacco cans, leaked or spilled black and red oils, a cracked blue plastic bucket and a few empty oil bottles.

Ringling the abandoned landing is a broken circle of a mound. It is crudely penetrated from up-slope by the dead end of a now useless coarsely rocked road. The mound is built up from tens of thousands of discarded limbs and treetops in a tangled heap. The yarder tower's guys and holds, thick steel ropes, yesterday were released from six huge stumps and coiled, each on its own spool. The last forced utility demanded of these six great entities was to facilitate the destruction of their neighbors and kin. These patient giants not long before had stood in random ranks as they had for over five hundred peaceful years.

It is four days later. Again I am standing here amid the post-sylvan debris. The opened soils that had smelled of a living dampness have quickly dried to a hard dustiness that rises in my footsteps. With four clear days, and the nights of freeze-drying chill, the roots of the disappeared trees, in a futile effort to quench the thirst of their phantom bodies, have sucked all moisture from the land's surface. The misty fogs that have hung above in the community of crowns each Fall morning for a thousand years have vanished into the blue vacuum.

I have purposely stayed away for three days. After fasting and imbibing teas brewed from local shamanic botanicals I have drummed, danced, prayed and dreamed of this place for four nights. It has come up in my visions, projected in silver-green against a deep bottom of the ocean blue-black. I saw again great trees standing as if still alive in the silvery shades of self effulgent light. What was most peculiar in my dreamscape was that I could clearly hear the voices of these trees.

That they could regain and display their structure and form seemed at first wonderful. But then the hearing of the voices opened to me an empathy of torment. What I heard was akin to the moans, sobs and wails of mothers come to retrieve the bodies of their good children from a bloody field of battle. Now, as I walk this scene in waking daylight my dreamsounds come back too real.

I ascend a steep ridge toward the largest stump in the clearcut. It was the giant tree I had known as the biggest, for miles. Taking on a temporary distance from the reality of my feelings I have decided to go up and count its annual rings. For a few moments I forcefully detach from my emotions. I enter the quantified mind set of commerce where trees are but logs. I try to think about board feet and how many houses that one trunk could make, the body of that single incredible big tree. Instead, what I see is a man behind glass high above a city adding figures in a column.

I decidedly reject that mentality which has become strange to me. How could I forget my time sitting with my back pressed against this familiar friend? Not for even two minutes can this be done. This tree, my loved and respected intimate, was murdered and its massive middle has unceremoniously been hauled away. Its topmost tip that each year has born ten thousand flying seeds now lays almost a football field's length above me up this ridge.

I can only climb atop the great stump from the uphill side. The downslope drop is all of twelve feet. Standing on its edge, I survey the expanse of denuded landscape. I see a half mile by half mile square of terminated natural progress. I try to numb out again. No use. I lay down on my back, arms thrown back above my head. My feet and hands are inside the six inch thick bark line perimeter. How long had this gentle giant waited for such a violent end? I again resolve to count the rings.

Rolling over and rising up to my hands and knees I begin to push my index finger out from the center dot, counting each concentric circle. "At least five years," I'm thinking, "to reach the elevation of the stump. Six, seven, eight, nine, ten..." The rings start out quite wide. This tree probably grew up in a burn started by a pre-Columbian lightning strike. Standing as it had on the south face of this promontory ridge it would have had a head start of maybe fifteen years of rank growth before the maple and alder began getting most of the Summer light, narrowing the annual rings. As the rings in the twenties begin to thin down I look ahead of my finger across so many hundreds of years I have yet to tally and my eyes fill with tears. I can no longer see to count.

I look up from on all fours at the blurry nightmare of this damaged world. My grief is heavy upon me. In sad hopelessness I lay my forehead at the center of the concentric unbroken circles where my beloved tree's natural being was terminated. At once I feel the sensation of falling. Eyes tightly closed, my visual sense is of diving headfirst into the dark Earth. All is now seen in the same luminous silver light of my nights of dream visions. I see myself passing through giant roots tied securely to fractures in the rock. Salamanders, grubs and worms sense my presence and telepathically acknowledge my passing. I see them glowing within iridescent rainbow auras. I tumble through layers of basalt and sandstone. I feel my breathing light and easy and my lungs fill with something so much finer than air. I sense I am being wordlessly informed by coupling with an intelligence coming into me through my own heart center.

An expansive and timeless feeling in my chest occupies the whole focus of my sensory experience. A knowing arises from within me in a language that this is "only the singularity of the joy which is life." I laugh inside because the words that form seem the single greatest attainment of understatement. My thinking mind tries to intrude upon the experience but this is entirely too vast. Irrelevant thoughts can only surrender and dissipate before the magnitude of the feelings.

My focus begins to shift, to expand, and I see Earth as a translucent planetary bubble. I know instinctively and immediately of every kindred spirit and where around an entire planet they endure. I see how many we are. So many pulsating lights, connected by loving threads in the oneness of our intention. A voice congeals out of the fluid totality of my sensations. A voice both male and female resonates with a rhythmic flickering of the silver glow in all the living centers, saying clearly, "Take heart. Don't give up. Defend my Earth."

With a feeling of sudden shock I jerk my head up to see the full moon rising in twilight over the clearcut. I'll spend this cold night here on the stump, warmed from within. I feel strengthened in a way I cannot fully grasp. That my life will never be the same is all I can ascertain.

R. Louis Richards (aka The 99th Monkey) lives along the Columbia River near Naselle, Washington. His last article in the NCTE, *Reality Chex*, appeared in the December 1995 issue.



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