



I would like to introduce you this month to a long-time friend and mentor, Gulley Jimson. I first met Gulley at the City Lights Bookstore in San Francisco. Eleven of us rattled down the coast via Highway One in a faded blue 1948 Volkswagen van. The year was 1962. At 19 I had begun emulating certain groove cats in a disgustingly post-adolescent fashion: Mose Allison sweaters, an English tweed coat, a pipe and matching leather pouch, Miles Davis records, a Mort Sahl sneer, late evenings in coffee houses discussing Kerouac. Shoot, San Francisco was the "Beat" capital of the West Coast and here we were! Guys with berets and cigarette holders engaged long-stemmed ladies in earnest conversation on every street corner. Seedy old men [Communists I figured] lurked around bookshelves. Over by a stack of *Das Kapital* and *The Daily Worker*, I saw a substantial poster which said: "It's not the Vision I had. Gulley Jimson."

"What does that mean?" I asked my buddy.
"No idea. Never heard of a guy named Jimson."
Next fall I became earnestly acquainted with the infamous Jimson. My notions about art and the creative process forever changed.
I haunted the college art department that year. Fabulously quirky things occurred in art departments. Painting and poetry got all mixed up with saxophone music and Satsuma plum wine. This was the time of art "happenings." A bunch of students might get together, say, and beat some sticks together in the student union, while some guy rolled around the floor trussed up in a gunny sack. Very avant garde. Living art, you know.

The spirit of Gulley Jimson permeated the very air art students breathed in the 50's and 60's. Occasional whiffs of Ayn Rand also blended with the smell of linseed oil and mineral spirits.

And then, wonder of wonders, my aesthetics professor, Graham Conroy suggested we read Joyce Cary's *The Horse's Mouth*. There was Jimson. Sixty-seven years old, feisty, impoverished, iconoclastic, given to fits of fancy and artistic rage, suffering the pratfalls of daily existence, art intoxicated and visionary. Like Sherlock Holmes before him, Gulley has become for me real as living flesh. Consumed with the need to create, the painter Gulley Jimson endures any privation, flouts convention, undoes those close to him in a singular pursuit of art. Jimson considers William Blake [Old Billie] one with true artistic insight, one who gets his inspiration direct from "The Horse." Blake saw angels perched in trees. Gulley Jimson constantly re-invents his visual world as well, driving to place the shapes, images, colors, and textures down on a surface. Gulley thinks big. Epic subjects are his meat. *The Fall - The Creation. Lazarus Rising from the Dead.* He likes to paint on walls:

"But what knocked me down was the east end wall. Twenty-five by forty. Windows bricked up and all smooth plaster round. Sent from God."

Gulley constantly sees the natural world mimicking art. The keen-eyed artist/poet refashions nature with a painter's eye.

"Clouds all streaming away like ghost fish under the ice. Evening sun turning reddish. Tree along the hard like old copper. Old willow leaves shaking up and down in the breeze, making shadows on the ones below. Need a tricky brush to give the effect..."

"Half past morning on an autumn day. Sun in a mist. Like an orange in a fried fish shop. All bright below. Low tide, dusty water and a crooked bar of straw, chicken boxes, dirt and oil from mud to mud. Like a viper swimming in skim milk. The old serpent, symbol of nature and love."

Looking through Jimson's eyes, the world is in a process of constant artistic transmutation.

"The candles kept growing into silver porches, and the flowers walked under them like green girls with chorus hats. Their flames looked at me like the eyes of tigers just waking from sleep."

I suppose I'm most deeply indebted to Gulley Jimson for his advice on viewing painted art. No aesthetician could have done it better. This is straight from the horse's mouth. Try it, gentle readers on your next museum visit. It works.

Gulley: "Don't look at it. Feel it with your eye. And first you feel the shapes in the flat -- the patterns like a carpet. And then you feel it in the round. Not as if it were a picture of anyone. But a coloured and raised map. You feel all the rounds, the smooths, the sharp edges, the hollows, the lights, the shades, the cools and the warms. The colours and textures. There's hundreds of little differences all fitting in together. And then you feel the bath, the chair, the towel, the carpet, the bed, the jug, the window, the fields, and the woman as themselves. But not as any old jug and woman. But the jug of jugs and the woman of women. You feel jugs are like that and you never knew it before."



Tucked here, between mountain, s hush and ocean, s roar, our eastern scenery runs deep green with trees. Spruce trees loom there, outnumbering the rest, on dark mountainside walls: *Picea sitchensis*, Sitka spruce, the most coastal of coastal trees. Sitka spruce trees hug the shoreline - seldom growing more than 15 miles from Pacific saltwater, they have one of the narrowest ranges of all trees. And, shrouding the thin coastal margins from the balmy north-central California coast to Alaska, s tundra margins, they have one of the longest latitudinal ranges of all trees. In our own neck of the woods, short second-growth spruces cover clearcuts in dense, shadowy stands. But our remaining old-growth coastal forests abound with giants - massive cylindrical trunks, often more than 6 feet across, often more than 200 feet high. Some spruce have 100 feet of bare trunk towering below their lowest branches. Some tower to 300 feet, and may be included among the tallest trees on Earth.

Look close: marbled mosaic bark breaks apart in scales of brown and reddish-grey. Sharp, pointed needles bristle stiff, hurting hands that grab them. Shallow roots creep along the ground, tripping hikers and playing hell with concrete foundations. Soft cones dangle with papery scales, while spiky tree tops point skyward. Symmetrical branchlets protrude at near-right angles from yet larger branches, while big branches protrude at lateral angles from the trunk. These largest branches become stout, horizontal beams on the older trees, providing mossy, perched nesting sites for birds, such as the marbled murrelet (which now vanishes with the big trees). Accumulated, organic branch-top crud creates shallow rooting sites for huckleberries, ferns, and seedling trees. On older trees, branch ends sway, dangle, and droop, long strings bristling with needles, pointing to the ground.

Sitka spruce, s success as a coastal tree lies in this design. Tree roots need air, and shallow roots fare well in our soggy soils - with these shallow roots and a mild tolerance for salt, spruce can grow right to beach and marsh edges, creating forests of "tideland spruce" where other trees do not grow. With strong but light wood, it is a tough tree, tolerant of stiff coastal winds. In summer, when the forest goes dry and most trees struggle, spruces catch coastal fogs. (Here, summer fogs come in thick and wet, on southbound sea currents and upwelling waters, which brings summer, s hot, dry air into contact with chilly water from the ocean, s deep depths.) Sharp needle points gather condensation into dripping droplets that funnel and tumble down drooping branch ends to thirsty roots below. On a foggy day, old spruces make rain.

Spruce trees can live for well over a thousand years. It is not uncommon to find trees, still living, that stood tall when Columbus was learning to take his first, toddling steps. Ancient spruces still stand in local State Parks, like Ecola and Oswald West: huge living things, persisting witnesses to entire centuries when these beaches buzzed with Native American life. To these north coast peoples, giant Sitka spruces served as a pillar, connecting the Earth to the heavens, serving as a conduit between these two realms. As such, giant spruces were landmarks of intermediate cosmological power. Things too powerful to be kept in the mundane world were placed in lateral spruce branches. Shamans perched their ceremonial regalia in high branches for off-season storage, lest they become tainted by the workaday world. (Rumor is, shamans would hold meetings, sitting in the lower branches of gnarled spruce trees, such as the "Octopus Tree" of Cape Meares, and lookout platforms were built amidst pruned tree-top limbs.) Human burials, enclosed in split cedar coffins, were sometimes placed in heavy, horizontal spruce tree branches (a practice which continued until quite recently in some remote parts of the British Columbia coast).

Tall, straight trees held particular power for children: afterbirth would be placed at the tree, s base to ensure an infant, s health and growth. Later, when the child grew out of its cradle, the cradle, too, would be placed at the tree, s base to help the child grow upright. Later still, "baby teeth" would be placed there, so that new teeth would come in straight. Also, spruce boughs were used as charms, carried by hunters, fishers, or whalers. Bristling with sharp needles, boughs gave protection from evil - prior to ceremonies, brooms of spruce boughs would be used to sweep out the longhouse, ridding it of bad power. During important ceremonies, people who dozed or misbehaved were whacked unceremoniously with spruce boughs.

But there were more mundane uses of spruce, too. Thin rootlets would be steamed, split, and woven into a number of things: water-tight cooking baskets, gathering baskets, food storage baskets, woven mats, or conical, waterproof basket hats. Spruce thongs shored up joints between cedar pieces in the sides of houses, canoes, and boxes. Branch wood was fashioned into digging sticks for roots and clams, roasting sticks, harpoon shafts, and a host of other tools. Spruce pitch, heated and strained of its impurities through colander baskets, served as a chewing gum and a salve for skin irritations and other ailments. Mixed with other ingredients, spruce pitch was also used on torches, as a glue, or as a waterproof coating for canoes or hunting and fishing tools. One could eat its inner, cambium bark, which has mild laxative properties. One could chew its light green new needle growth (used by some today as a hops substitute in the brewing of beer), acrid and citrus like, an excellent source of vitamin C. There was not much one couldn't do with spruce.

The peoples of Europe have regarded spruces somewhat differently. A nuisance to early settlers, spruce trees were toppled and burned, making room for grazing land and low-yield "stump farms." Later, technological advances would speed up the process, and dynamite blasts shot stumps sky-high. Commercial spruce logging took off, too, during the First of our World Wars, when spruce wood, lightweight and strong, caught the attention of airplane manufacturers. "Spruce camps" sprang up along the coast, to support the airborne war effort, marking the first moments of intensive logging, roadbuilding, and construction along much of the open ocean coast, Cannon Beach included. Ironically, Oregon coast spruce littered the fields of Europe, and word is, when the armistice was signed, toppled, ancient, Cannon Beach spruces were left on the ground to rot.

Commercial coastal logging boomed after the Second World War, and has proceeded with few interruptions ever since. Spruce trees have been cleared at an unprecedented rate, a cataclysmic sweeping away of the old forest - most of our ancient trees have been fashioned into toilet tissue and dimensional lumber, newsprint and cardboard boxes, to feed a global consumerist frenzy. Gone are the pillars to heaven: in the contemporary cosmology of capital and consumption, the spruce stands for little more than wood fiber. Pre-European spruce forests no longer

exist outside of the few, officially protected pockets on the Oregon coast, and every ancient tree toppled by the wind is a statistically-significant local loss. Seldom are spruce trees allowed to reach the age where they grow the thick, horizontal branches that once supported shaman, s gear and seabird, s nests. Seldom are spruce trees allowed to reach the age where mature, dangling branches form, efficiently catching fog drip (and therefore summertime fog drip is dramatically reduced in "managed forests," a fact that may compromise the long-term competitive advantage that spruce has held among coastal trees since its genesis.) Meanwhile, in the moist coastal corners of the British Isles and elsewhere, seeds from this coast reforest degraded lands, long ago stripped clean of trees to fuel the Industrial Revolution, a history which seems to be repeated on each new, occupied continent.

Go out, among the spruce trees. Stand among the big ones and look up, where drizzle falls on foggy days, and vast branches have supported centuries, burdens. There is a historical depth to match that height. There is something to be found there which deserves attention, which demands that we reconsider our own peoples, treatment of the spectacular forests which occupy the narrow, coastal margins.

For an enlightening, introductory discussion of spruce forests on the Oregon coast (and several other environmental zones of this region), see Stewart Schultz, s *The Northwest Coast: A Natural History*. (Timber Press: Portland Or., 1990).

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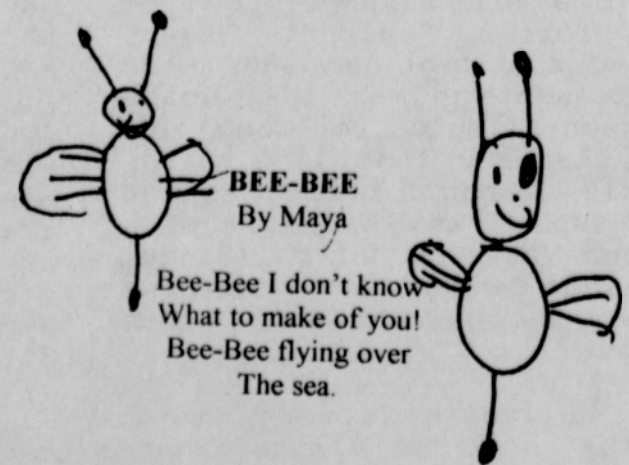


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