

A Prayer

(At FOH, Aug. 12, 2018)

Jesmyn Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*; Peter Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees*; David George Haskell, *The Songs of Trees*; Richard Powers, *Overstory*; Annie Proulx, *Barkskins*

Oh God

I didn't mean to
when I cut the wedge into the dead ash tree
and then the curf-thin back-cut
like drawing a blade
the heartwood creaked and then groaned as it leaned over into its fall
and caught the hawthorn on the other side of the path
shattered its living trunk
a knee's height from the ground
a great splintering buckle
that sent spikes of hidden interior wood
secreted away over moons and suns of quiet dark growth
in a lightening fast strike
shards of broken wood shoved into the daylight
a compound fracture
of the entire skeleton

A tree doesn't die quickly
even like so
twisted, ragged and torn
the living threads of tissue run from leaf to root
and it could carry on
for months
into next year
maybe longer
not because its tenacious or brave or just that tough
but because
it can

It pains me and it offends me
the way I folded the ash over onto the hawthorn
folded the hawthorn against itself
I know the wound
which is now irrevocable
unhealable
it is true and it is real
as the slow rot which it will now have no defense against
So I kneel with the saw
at its foot

and deliver the last cut.

I didn't mean to kill it
it was accident
careless, yes
and there is the guilt
So later in the afternoon
when my daughter and nephew point out the ants
a fast moving swarm of red ants
moving across the driveway
I hold steady and watch
stay my feet
which are tempted to crush as many as possible
I've killed at least one creature today
and can't bring myself to premeditated killing
even though
these ants look like a harbinger
a prophecy
something I've never seen before
the way they arch like a single body
across the ground
two, three, four hundred of them
then draw together quickly
tendrils out again
running, scouting, scenting, picking up stragglers
gather again
and immediately extend along their chosen line
they are out of place
and yet they have a plan and purpose
and they bring as many along as they can
and I think
ten years from now
I'll remember that this was the first time
and now they will never leave

Oh God

I am an immigrant too
a spreading and vicious homesteader
murdering and raping and pillaging
unconcerned with the ghosts that fan out in the wake behind
because I don't see ghosts
hear them, feel them, need them
I'm the happy pioneer's son
and if the land and the lowly who live in it
have no voice
then how could their ghosts?

You know this
You also know
that without the witness and whisper of the ghosts
I can't fully receive
the sub-sonic heart frequency
of the living
whose children have been taken hostage
by the whims of angry goat-scapers
taken far away
locked away
bodies that created each other
cleft by lies
concrete
miles
air space
wickedness
immigrants whose fault
is coming to these borders at the wrong time
who I see in the headlines
before scrolling on across the electric grid
for something easier
something that will entertain instead of pain me
something that will distract instead of discourage me
something black and white
instead of liver red and brain pink
NBA basketball
a game that has nothing to do with real life
this will steady me
score the most points
win the most games
earn the most money
but I know
I know better
What is the real news?
Trading of valuable black men
by franchise owners
sending Kahwi and Demar against their wills
to distant places to work for new masters
I'm far from the first to notice
and I understand the nuance
but still

Oh Jehova
how many African-American boys
long to be Kahwi and Demar and LeBron
how many in this small neighborhood

not just African-American
European American also
how many of us wanted to be Magic or Larry or Michael
remember their names
Jeffrey, Todd, Darius, Endaisha, John, DeMarco, Shevorn, Zell, Kenny, Danny, Kendel,
Darnell, Shawn, Michael, Sherod, Eric, Daria, Robert, Gameliel, Arrion, Gavin, Gabriel, Curtis,
Aaron, Ironn
Not one of us was transfigured
not even close
not even close to close
and what else was there
football or hip-hop
but those are the same Shangri La-la
in the same unreachable golden land
on the same far-off ebony shore
a child's fairytale
which has to give way
to adult pressure points too soon
too soon
and when that happened
when those sweet nothings
turned into nothing
and the only role models offered
turned out to be unattainable
how many followed the lead
of their fathers and uncles and brothers
how many of them found the prison justice system
perfectly constructed to grind out
the last of the fairytale dream
and leave it a pile of dry sand
at the edge of the parking lot
separated like generation
after generation
after generation
How many, Jehova,
I'm asking
You know
how many

Ironn
hear it in his name
bright and pure
an ancient pulse of the earth's heart-core
elemental and refined at once
beautiful and strong
We saw him on the playground

ball in hand beneath the hoop
arms, torso, calves
responding exactly to his imagination
whereas our bodies were lost in translation
and our imaginations were still working at simple addition
he was multiplying and dividing
algebra and calculus
experimenting in three dimensions
while we were still stuck to the blacktop
We were all drawn to him
in that young helpless way
girls and boys
he was the prince magnet
we wanted to be close
and for a while
in my memory of the passage
I was the white to his black
he the black to my white
for a time we were bound in the same ore
seeing the same next year
trekking the same path
in that time
no options or possibilities were necessary
because we were tight
and no heat could pull us apart.

Yahweh,
you know how that time ended
you know the intense fire that pulled us apart
even though I couldn't understand it
until it was too late
and even now am looking for the arsonist
doors kept opening for me
and kept closing for him
I went to private school then college
then the luxury of a job in an artisan bakery
he went into violence, bullet wounds and jail
last I knew
It wasn't that way for everyone
one became a principal
one a detective
one a police officer
truth is
most of them
I don't know
But I know about Ironn

and I know about young black men
and I know that while opportunities
were diminishing for him
they were mounting for me
in ways I couldn't imagine
or deserve
even though we came from the same neighborhood
same street
same block
same generation of housing
same Burger Dairy for the same Now-n-Laters
walking underneath the same maples and oaks and Chinese elms
on these streets
I walked away
pointed in a slow-emerging direction
by my family, my religious community
my culture
and I am haunted by this
haunted by the fact
that I now walk lightly under trees
in easy air
while the last I know of Ironn
is epidemic loss

Oh God,
home is so far away now
so much migration
so much travel
so much time
when I come back to this place
there is a clear echo
of the home I left
I hear it in the songs of these voices
I feel it in the memory of the tree we planted for Timothy
I see it in the ceiling tiles of this building
I smell it in the basement musk
I taste it in this communion
Here
where the most precious embers
of my family and my church family live
here
the sound is strongest
here
the mycorrhizal fungus-braids
are still active and transmitting
between the roots of this parent tree

and my own child-roots
I am still receiving your benediction
It is sweet and powerful
In coming here
I also have to acknowledge
the many trees in this forest
which I no longer have connection to
I see them all around
or maybe I see only parts of them
maybe they have been whittled and winnowed
maybe they have been encroached upon
by outside forces
their living space appropriated
maybe they are gone
or maybe I remember them as they were
when symbiosis was natural
and we called each other cousin
when our movement was rhythmic and seasonal
and our growth
was dependent
on the same sun and rain
in equal measures
and the wider environment had not yet
been expressed
been revealed
in us.

Oh God,
you know what I am struggling to name
you know the grief of lost friendship, kinship
lost love
and how keenly
the grief
is magnified
in the house of those who remain
and share it
which is also your house
this house
You know the kind of sorrow
that bubbles
like anaerobic methane
in the marsh muck
or builds within the blood
of the child who leaves
and wants to come back
but the riches of another kingdom

another people
another ecosystem
another city
just down the road
are so intoxicating and enticing
that he never returns
not fully
not even prodigal
And you know
the fever of condemnation
that sweats through the body and soul
of one who fears
he has done too much for himself
and too little for others
gloried only in the cathedral interior of the forest
and neglected
the broken and ravaged forest edge
he makes convenient excuses
and weaves a confusing web
of practical realities
to confirm the excuses
until the moment
he hears
the soft echoes
sees the forest in its timeless structure
senses that there may be ghosts
eternal beings
gathering at the outskirts
in the ground
in the plants
and in the animals
in all the creatures
in the animate and inanimate
beings
to whom
it is past time
he started listening

Oh Jehova
they are whispering wildernesses:
they say
there are no dead
death yes
but nothing remains dead:
they say
life gives to death

death gives to life:
they say
a thousand spring up
when one falls
a million spring up:
they say
resurrection is a birthright
generous evolution is a deathright:
they say
God is more than diverse
more than triverse
God is multiverse
and at this moment
the multiversity of God
is dimming at a rate
unlike any other time
in the history of time:
they say
as the great life systems of earth die
so does God:
they say
the harm we do to each other
is harm done to the Earth
is harm done to God
no analog
no correlative
no metaphor
no equation
the harm we do to each other
Latino children separated from parents on the border
white supremacist and racist attitudes given succor
fascist intolerance creeping into our hearts and minds
blithe cynicism in the face of careening climate change
is
harm done to the Earth
is
harm done to God
Listen to these unbelievable ghosts:
they say
this Earth-God can die
it did once already
not so long ago
though we haven't comprehended what the resurrection means
nor the prophesied New Heaven and New Earth
the Kingdom of God
the Peaceable Kingdom

Oh Yahweh
a tree is a beautiful living thing
it grows in the soil
a beautiful living thing
made from millions of years
of rock formation
wind and water erosion
and millions of living and non-living bodies
The ground has a name
which you know
a tree has a name
which you know
and ten thousand leaves
each with a name
each leaf
performs a sacred function
without which
the blessing would be withdrawn
sunlight
carbon dioxide
water
soil chemicals
turned into sugar and oxygen
breathe and tremble
breathe and tremble
this is a miracle
science knows
but can't say why
green-filled chloroplasts
layered one on top of the other
in a geometry and color-scheme so old and perfect
that it stretches back
to a moment
just after dawn of the third day of creation
after the oceans gave rise to land
before life washed ashore
Without these stacks of chloroplasts
memorized by some of the earliest DNA
and unfolded into the exponential choreograph of leaves
creation may not
have had a
fourth
fifth
sixth
seventh

day.

Oh Yahweh,
the harm we do to Earth
we do to one another
the harm we do to one another
we do to Earth
because we are earth
the same as every other being
We imagine that the other beings
live among us at our pleasure
to serve us
we who are but a little below your angels
coal
and oil
and sand
and stone
and water
and corn
and wheat
and ants
and worms
and cattle
and dogs
and cats
and flowers
and trees
to satisfy our needs
Should I imagine
that they travel with us
to plead with us
to plead for us
like Abraham in Sodom
like Jonah at Nineveh
like Christ on the cross
“they know not what they do”
like Black Elk
“a holy tree should have flourished in a people’s heart”
Dare I imagine
that these silver maples
and these red oaks
descended in direct lineage
from Noah’s ark
from the receding ocean of ice
that covered this land
fifteen thousand years ago

dare I imagine
that these silver maples and red oaks
are speaking
slow winding words
pushed from roots into the soil
shed through bark
transpired in water
crafted in flower and fruit
spread out in a sheltering tent
a canopy of leaves
over our heads
sifting down around us
whispered words
constant, rhythmic, seasonal
the repeated urging
the voices of those
transformed by death
into everlasting generosity
Dare I admit to hearing?
Who has not heard them?

Oh God,
how can I pretend not to see
the unrivaled power of these beings
there is no greater or more miraculous power
on Earth
than that which is quietly acted out by these leaves
oxygen
clean air
clean water
food for every insect and animal and fungus
tools and shelter and fuel
for we who require them
no force more profound and essential
yet also ubiquitous
and taken for granted
and largely defenseless
a lavishly unconditional
life-giving power
yet vulnerable
non-resistant
Can it possibly be suggested that
rather than the biology of leaves
seen through the prism of Christ's example
it is the biology of leaves
which is the model for Christ?

How shall I stand in a forest of mother-trees
or walk down a city street
crowned over by arch-and-buttress trees
producers and beneficiaries
of so many life-changing leaves?
Should I declare the Gospel of Trees
the Gospel of Leaves?
And what does it say?
Repent

Oh Jehova
in my bones
in my flesh
in the slack eddy of my soul
I fear it is too late
or too impossible
or too much
how can I repent
turn and change
how can I even want to
let alone
the wide aching chorus of humanity?
This world is not good enough for us
it does not satisfy us
in the cavity of our souls
we know it never will
we will never be content with the lot of life
on this world
never enough sugar
never enough pleasure
never enough rest
never convinced that we are loved all the way down
The fruit of the tree
of the knowledge of good and evil
is spliced into our genes
we know too much
we forget even more
vast rivers flow behind us
sweeping down from the stars
carrying the first lights
the first darkness
the first atoms
the first attraction
from your singing lungs' exhale
meandering rivers
roll away before us

over the rounding curve
carrying bile and sludge
runoff and soil
old breeds and new breeds
gods and goddesses
into the verdance
of your welcoming inhale
We stand on the banks
we roam the banks
we thrash and invent
and dream and kill
and make love
and engineer
and destroy and manufacture
and curse and pray
on the banks
on the banks

Oh Jehova
the river is lined
with trees
trees of life
whose leaves are for the healing of the nations
the Balm of Gilead
a poultice
a healing tea
profound medicine
Trees
which draw the impurities
from the land and the water and the air
whose bodies touch and taste and ingest
all the fury
and all the disease
cradle in their boughs
wrap in their roots
all that is hurt and despairing
in our human heads and hearts
and instead
give sweet fruit to eat
and leaves with healing power

They beckon us
come down
don't you want to go down
follow the trunks
follow the roots

the low hanging leaves point the way
down to the river
oh father, oh mother
oh sister, oh brother
come on down
the leaves are heavy with scent
with pheromones
messages
the words we are dying to hear
the words that would enable us
the words that would free us
the words that will heal us
every nation
the brash and bumbling Americans
the smug and sneaky Russians
the angry Iranians
the bleeding Syrians and Iraqis
the Mexicans, the Canadians,
the Chinese, the Koreans
the Hondurans, the Guatemalans
the Zimbabweans, and Somalis
the Germans, and the Brits
the Rohingya, the Palestinians, the Roma
the Jews, the Laplanders, the Inuit,
the Potawatomie, the Miami, the Ojibwa,
the Algonquin, the Houdneshonee, the Shawnee,
the Lakota, the Ute, the Powhatan
the Guarani, the Wichi, the Toba
the Hutus, the Tutsis
the nation of desperate men
the poisoned white-right nation
the Me Too nation
the opioid nation
the righteous Black Lives Matter nation
the drive it like you stole it nation
the imprisoned nation of two million
the slave nations, past and present
the Polar Bear and White Rhino and Monarch Butterfly nations,
the Buffalo and Elk and White Tail Deer nations
the Coyote and Wolf and Eagle nations
Squirrel and Rabbit and Raccoon and Possum nations
Mosquito and Tick and Stink Bug and Gypsy Moth nations
Cottonwood and Walnut and Bur Oak nations
River nations, with creeks and streams
Mountain and hill and plains nations
nations of the near past and the deep past

ghost nations, infant nations
if there is anything that can heal you
it is here
on these trees
in these leaves

Oh Alluring Mystery
these words are a dream
they are a weak song
which belongs
to an overly-earnest
middle-aged white man
who never traveled far from home
and knows little about the real suffering
of real people he has never met
and can only fabricate the pain
of former friends and classmates
What is it that you want to say?

The leaves on every tree
and every blade of grass
do archetypal work
surpassing the Titans and Jotuns
the work is for their own benefit
yes
but most of it
is direct manna
for countless others
Let them do their work
If you are afraid of being fully human
curious, on the move, enflamed
be comforted by leaves
fully engrossed in their purpose
never a doubt in their calling
let them do their work
If you are afraid of losing your humanity
relinquishing technology, becoming animal
observe these leaves
simple, elegant, sensitive
they will show you your work
let them do their work
If you are afraid of being consumed by relationship
overwhelmed by responsibility
watch the leaves
see how they work
let them do their work

If you are afraid of destroying too much relationship
disconnection, dissociation, indifference
notice a single leaf
and the ties which bind
let it do its work
If you are afraid that there is more cruelty in the world
than can ever be assuaged
consider the leaves
torn, bitten, eaten, burned, killed
always unfurling
blossoms, perfume, seeds, rich food
let them do their work
If you are afraid the Beloved Kingdom
will never be established
believe this
every leaf is known and named
by the Unquenchable Lover
every leaf on every tree
is designed and intended for abundance
exuberance
profligate extravagance
beauty where there was austerity
life where there was stasis
joy where there was senselessness
every leaf is a perfect expression
a poem
of the Lover's good urge
of the underlying cosmic purpose
to come and go freely
from the tension of creation
work and rest
live and die
gather and release
enter and exit
receive and give
not either/or
but both/and
all at once
that is the Kingdom of Fools
it surrounds you
rises through the cracks in the pavement
grows in your gutters
stands guard over your homes
musters when you turn your backs
catches the corner of your eyes
floats in the morning and evening shadows

crashes into your dreams
breaks beneath your machines
the Kingdom whispers in the wind through new leaves
pools into water-pearls on nasturtium leaves
pulses in the purple veins of sassafras leaves
voices song in the flutter of quaking aspen leaves
beckons hither with the sensuous scent of tomato leaves
spreads in the feathery wings of beech leaves
on this planet
on this Earth
in this moment
leaves to heal the nations
let them do their work
be drawn into their work
join them in their work
be born again into their work

At the base of the crushed hawthorn
new leaves

Amen