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Childhood, Imagination, the Forest

Sever

Spring 2015

One summer when I was about thirteen, I decided to live for a week in the forest near my house. I had read up on edible plants, but pretty early on I took to raiding my father's garden. In retrospect, I suppose my experiment in rewilding was a perfect success, since raiding the garden is exactly what the deer and gophers did.

I spent a large part of my childhood in that forest. I watched it assailed by progress. My family was among the first wave of profaners. Every year a new parcel of farm, orchard, or woodland would be converted into ugly, poorly made houses. The very ground was scooped up by bulldozers, contoured to fit the look the subdivision's developers were projecting.

I noticed the effect on the creek I always played in, wading miles upstream in the summer, walking dangerously on a cracking sheet of ice in the winter, crossing falling logs, catching crayfish, giving chase to the deer since they didn't have any wolves to run after them anymore. The more woods were replaced with subdivisions, the worse the floods became, swelling the creek, brown and gorged, washing away its banks

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year after year. An island I once could leap to, gone, ancient tulip poplars that towered overhead, undermined and knocked down, the rocky bank where I let my pet garter snake go when I realized it wasn't happy, silted over. An old railroad bridge where years later I learned they had executed an abolitionist preacher and a black militia man had been wounded and escaped, swept away.

My forest, though, the greater part of it, remained, protected by some law or another. In most places it was a long strip, just wide enough that I could ignore the houses on either side, walking from cliff to marsh to pine hill without ever coming in sight of what I recognized for civilization. And the length of it... I never got to the end. On some summer expeditions I would go for hours, albeit at a snail's pace perhaps, until I reached some glade that I imagined humans had never set foot in before. Only later would I learn to distinguish first or second generation forests from old growth. In the meantime, how perplexed I would become on discovering a rusted length of barbed wire or an old junker in the midst of what I was sure was pristine forest.

The wild is often characterized as pristine. One element of the myth of the pristine is changelessness. In books, the intellectually rigorous will mention how nature is always changing, how even when it finds stability it cycles. They write the same thing about acephalous societies that are not properly "historical" in the Marxist sense. I had read these texts and understood them, but the idea was meaningless, or at least unactualized, until I took in all the intimate changes in one particular forest over a span of decades.

The concept of pristinity conveys a certain fragility. Wilderness is not wild unless it is untouched. I see it reflected in the tendency of postmodernists not to talk about freedom, to read any kind of influence as a form of corruption and thus a circumvention of liberty. So close, yet so far, they have deconstructed the self, and found liberty meaningless because they still use

the rationalist, Enlightenment concept, based on sovereignty, a naturally endowed lord over his domain. Another kind of freedom dwells in the world where the self only exists through its relations, and the freedom of one does not end but begins with the freedom of another.

I find another echo of pristinity in the thinking of the primitivists, who believe that freedom and wildness ended with one invention or another. It also stalks the thinking of the back-to-the-landers, who thinks that nature does not exist in the cities, nor capitalism in the countryside.

My bedraggled, polluted, eroded, young, bounded little forest saved my life. While my yearmates were learning about how to be popular, dress well, and play football, I was learning about life. This whole horrible farce never would have been worth it for me without that. And the wilderness that taught me had probably grown up in the space of a mere seventy years, since the Depression I reckon, on what had previously been farmland, clearcut by the English at least two hundred years before.

The wild is everywhere, ceaselessly pushing back. The *only* thing it needs from us are cracks. In the city, in the countryside, all of it impoverished by centuries or millennia of progress, wildness and freedom are active forces. Those who say there is no outside to capitalism never talk about crab grass or sparrows. They are almost right, but there is one tiny, infinite thing they forget, and it is the most important thing of all.

The purpose of anarchists is to destroy. We don't even need to destroy all of it. Confounded by words, we will have a hard time figuring out what exactly is meant by *all of it*. We only need to destroy enough of it, make enough cracks that sunlight and rain filter down to whatever poor dust is left beneath, enough so that the machine can't reassemble itself, and nature will do the rest.

If we still wish to live after all this horror, we can also worry about cultivating what grows back, the way beavers or even

deer shape their habitat. We can do that as gardeners, as humans, as beings who choose to live. The anarchist tradition also suggests a passel of marvelous future worlds, each of which are worth talking about it. But anarchism is the bastard child of civilization, the umbilical cord hanging ragged, another purpose in mind for the dagger clenched between its teeth. Anarchism's destiny is to murder a certain future. To be tasked with destroying and replacing would convey an awful lot of power, even to a vocation that forswears power.

Games of imagination came naturally, unbidden, while I wandered in the forest. The other kids played video games, and while I never kept myself entirely pure from that pursuit, I quickly noticed an inverse relation between imagination and the consumption of imaginary worlds. I always preferred computer games to video games, the more open-ended the better, and especially those that allowed character development and the exploration of other universes. Nonetheless, they had a numbing effect. I found that with just a stick, and perhaps a friend or two, in the woods I could accomplish so much more, and afterwards I felt exhilarated, alive, kept up at night thinking about what adventures the next day would bring.

One of the greatest blocks of cement that we anarchists must crack is that which has been poured over the faculty of the imagination, with more being poured every day. People who cannot imagine other worlds are dead. They are zombies, they will never be revolutionaries. Anarchists who cannot imagine other worlds might as well roll over and rot. All of their words are moribund, fetid things. The nihilists who willfully confuse the drafting of blueprints with the exploration of imagined futures have to resort to pyrotechnics to cover up their fundamental frailty.

And while everyone has their own method for surviving repression, I find that imagining other worlds can disrupt the hegemony of this one. When I face a line of riot cops, sometimes I have to laugh, because what I see are corpses. I love

ple are ignorant of, and as they grow, have their backs rather than beating them down, honor their wisdom and lend them our confidence, so as they grow, they might trust their experiences, and speak a little louder, dare to go places where we could not tread.

from scratch but from the misery that our ancestors left us, shouldn't ever talk in public about spirituality, nor shamelessly make collective rites. Maybe we should feel ashamed of our spirituality, and only talk about it in whispers. Maybe it's not strong enough to come out into the open yet. Perhaps we should only attempt the most timid of steps forward, trusting that if we suggest a vague outline, the next generation will be able to fill in some darker shades, to talk about their nascent spirituality a little louder, and on and on until eventually we have something robust that can be passed on with confidence.

I might talk about the times the deer woke me up in the middle of the night, snorting and stamping at me as I lay in my sleeping bag, or the night I felt the contours of all the land for a half mile in every direction as an extension of my own body, as I listened to gust upon gust of a powerful wind rush over the pond, past the cliff, through the marsh, up my hill, and then suddenly crash all around me, rocking the trees back and forth then leaving us in silence until the next gust. But I am not good at talking about those things. They were very private moments.

I know that many of my friends have moments like that too, that they have never shared with me. I also know that when I'm holding a friend's baby or taking care of a toddler, there is no limit to the stories I can tell or the songs I can sing. It's funny the way adults will talk about magic with children but with no one else. They're not simply taking advantage of the youngsters' gullibility to tell a tale no one else would listen to. What's actually happening is they are confiding in these children a part of themselves that they need to exist, but don't have the confidence to nurture on their own. The cycle becomes endless when we are taught never to learn from what children do best.

This time around, we can do it differently. We can tell our secrets to our children, tell them about magic and spirits, share in the private knowledge of the other worlds that so many peo-

the politicians in their pretty suits, because those are the same suits they are wearing as they are forced at gunpoint to clean up Superfund sites. And when I'm sad about friends in prison, I look out my window and see gardens where roads had been, and I know our fight is worth it.

The anarchist imagination has a lot to offer. But imagination rooted to place is even more potent, more alive. All the games I ever played in my forest are there waiting for me. And all the people who live in a place, though they do not dare to be anarchists, can imagine changes in their surroundings that could never be born from an ideology, and that the cleverest of all the anarchists would never think up, unless she were also from that place. One of the contributions of an anti-colonial, anti-rational anarchism is the importance it gives to the particular, against abstract schemes and universalities. There can be some benefit in anarchists debating levels of technology, one vision of the world versus another, but only if they realize that all they are doing is playing a game. For the winner of that debate to impose its vision on the world would be the cruelest violence. It is a million specific places that human communities must relate to, each of them different. Freedom will triumph when everyone actively imagines their own surroundings, and remakes themselves within the specific place that holds them up.

The forest also calls on our spirits to exult and express themselves, against the confines of a world that is rational and materialist, both in its dominant expressions and in the theories of its dissidents. Clumsily, like a baby first learning to swing its chubby fist, I began to pray in my forest. I would light candles, meditate, and feel the other living beings around me. Completely lacking guidance, I turned to books on Daoism, Wicca, and Native American spirituality. I didn't know anything about cultural appropriation (I think I still don't), but still the books on European paganism seemed the most

appropriate to me. (And being on stolen land, “appropriate” is not the word I would use today).

I am reminded of the recent controversy in the Pacific Northwest, with a couple Green Scare prisoners and their immediate circles dabbling in Norse neo-paganism and its attendant, crossover white supremacist iconography.

It’s curious how some white people look to the Scandinavian pagans for a link to authentic, ecocentric European traditions. I could claim a line to that myself, if I wanted. Some of my ancestors were Vikings who became farmers. When I was a teenager I carved my own set of runestones and laid them in my little forest shrine. Since then it has occurred to me that what’s most interesting about the Norse is not their funny alphabet or their Prometheus-Christ god hanging from a yew tree, but all the ways that they became what I hate most about this world. Why lie and see them as pure earth children when their brand of paganism made them so susceptible to statism and ecocide?

Nowadays, I cherish my ancestors for all their ugliness, their mistakes, their horrors. I cherish my ancestors for their puritanism, their involvement in genocide, in the KKK, in clearcutting one continent and then another. I cherish these things that I hate, because this is all they gave me, and if it does not serve as a positive compass, it serves as the map of a minefield, warning me of a hundred possible missteps.

Why would so many white children, who in general despise their parents and ignore their grandparents, want to emulate their ancestors? Trauma is always the first hand-me-down, and I’m pretty damn sure our shit did not start with the Industrial Revolution.

The European pagans, at least those who populated or neighbored the Roman Empire, cut down their forests and created many more states than they overthrew. Turning to them might be better than mining the remains of colonized societies to manufacture spiritual models, if those were the only two op-

tions, but the truth is, there already is an unbroken spiritual connection between the ancestors of the West and its forlorn modern children, and it isn’t to be found in any book, for it’s writ large across the world. Our heritage is ecocide, patriarchy, monotheism, the State, alienation, along with a hundred half-forgotten stories of rebellion against these forces.

I understand the need for authenticity, but everyone who feels it should understand it as a red flag, warning us away from the inherent artificiality of a search for the authentic.

The recent anarchist children’s story, *The Witch’s Child*, provides a sort of negative history of the West. Instead of proletariat and bourgeoisie, the classes it posits are the uprooted and the rootless ones, which I read as colonized peoples fighting to reassert their way of life, and people who have been colonized so completely and so long ago that even the memory of it has been obliterated. This last category certainly includes me and most people I know. We have no remaining spirituality, only the need for it.

It occurs to me that most comrades who attempt to fulfill this need fall into some rationalist assumptions about self and victory. Namely that a person is simply one body and one lifetime. In fact each of us is the nexus of a million beings and the inheritor of a thousand generations, whose lives will play out in many lifetimes to come. What kind of idiot would think that life ends with brain death? It would take years of education to make a person so ignorant.

Facing the problem of spirituality, all of us rootless ones assume that we must and we can come up with a solution in a single generation, in a single body. But how could that be? If an old growth forest, by definition, cannot spring up in a single generation, how could a single generation in a human community create a healthy, earth-centered spirituality?

I don’t trust people—at least not white people or westernized people—who talk about spirituality. I think that’s a healthy impulse. Perhaps those of us who are starting, not