

EATING DIRT

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We tumble out from pickup trucks like clothes from a dryer. Earth-stained on the thighs, the shoulders, around the waists with muddy bands, like grunge rings on the sides of a bathtub. *Permadiirt*, we call it. Disposable clothes, too dirty even for the laundry.

Just two hours ago we fell out of bed and into our rags, still crusted with the grime of yesterday. Now here we are, spilling from one day into another, as if by accident, with unbrushed hair, stubbled faces, sleep still encrusted in the corners of our eyes. We drink coffee from old spaghetti sauce jars, gnaw at protein bars dressed in foil. Cigarettes are lit before feet hit the ground, and the smoke drifts up in a communal cloud.

We tighten the laces of our tall, spike-soled boots, strap on soccer shin pads. We dig through rubber backpacks for Marigold gloves and duct tape and knee braces made out of hinged aluminum and Neoprene. We tug it all out in preparation for a kind of battle. We're proud, and yet ashamed.

There is something bovine about us, our crew. We let ourselves be steered this way and that by the barks of our supervisors. At the same time we hate to be told what to do. We slide waxed boxes from the backs of the trucks and fling them down at the road. *Handle With Care*, the

boxes read. *Forests for the Future*. Nothing about this phrase is a lie, but neither is it true.

Young planted forest dots the valley the way hair grows in after a transplant. Loggers crawl the mountains. Their trucks climb in the distance, like white bars of soap carried by ants. Trucks going up, trucks going down. The tidal motions of bush work, up to the peaks in the morning, down to the mainlines in the evenings. Logging roads cross-cut the landscape like old surgical scars. Few residents but plenty of business. Every crag and knoll cruised, engineered, divvied, high-graded, surveyed from the air. *Creamed*, as we are fond of saying.

“Damn cold,” we mutter, rubbing our palms together. We’re in shadow, and the air has the stale, uncirculated feel of a cold-storage room. A preserved chill. There is nowhere to hide from it. No inside to duck into for warmth. Ancient forest surrounds us at the far edges of the clearing. Wind-beaten underdog trees with flattened bonsai crowns. Douglas fir with the tops blown off. Gnarled cedars with bleached wood tusks protrude from lofty, lime-green foliage. Trees with mileage, like big old whales with harpoons stuck in their flanks.

A buzz develops all at once and out of nothing at all, the way bees begin to vibrate when they’re about to flee the hive. A box of seedlings is ripped open. A paper bag torn. Bundles of plastic-wrapped seedlings jumble out. The stems are as long as a forearm, the roots grown in Styrofoam tubules to fit in the palms of our hands. We like this

thought, it lends a kind of clout— trees grown to our ergonomic specifications.

Boot spikes crunch around in the gravel. A runaway seedling rolls down the road. We jostle around one another, hungry for the day that awaits us. We throw down our treeplanting bags and kneel down next to them and cram them with trees. We do it with practiced slapdash, as cashiers drop groceries into white plastic bags. We bump shoulders, quick-fingered and competitive, like grannies at a bargain bin.

Treeplanters—one word instead of two. Little trees plus human beings, two nouns that don't seem to want to come apart.

Pierre is 55, the oldest among us. Jake likes to call him "Old Man." Jake is the youngest. He calls himself "Elfie" in the third person. Rose is a child of treeplanter parents. Her middle name is Blueflower. Wherever she goes she brings a coffin box full of wardrobe changes. Nick is red-headed, like Richie Cunningham. He doesn't drink, though he used to. Some call him "Risky," like the business. Melissa is an Australian with a constant smile, a spray of brown freckles, buxom lips. She arrived late. Heads turned. There were bouts of sudden shaving. There is John, our Jack of Spades. When he smiles his eyes are empty. And there's me, forgetting to take notes. I push myself into the huddle and switch off my thinking mind.

Before long we've abandoned the scene, an explosion of litter, brown paper and Saran wrap snaking around on the road. We stomp out in every direction, right and left, up and down the mountain. We lean

into the next minute and the next like runners in blocks. We don't know how to work without pitting ourselves against one another, without turning it into an amazing race. Otherwise piecework is grindingly relentless, countless tiny things passing negligibly through human hands. An inaudible gun goes off over our heads and the day begins. The sun is our pace clock in the sky.

We came as one, and now the space between us stretches like the filaments of a web. Soon there will be wind, but for now all the moisture has crystallized and fallen out of the air. We see the puffs of our breath. Our nostril hairs crisp with each inhalation. Our treeplanting bags ride heavily on our thighs. Human saddlebags, one pouch in the back and one on each side. In our daydreams they have sentient, subservient lives. They fill themselves up, we whistle them to life, and they trot out to do the job on their own.

Until someone invents a treeplanting robot, a plane that shoots seedlings from the sky, it's just us and our speed spades—gardening trowels with long wooden necks, plastic handles, blades like oversized coke spoons.

We size up the weather and shake the cold out of our hands and scope out the massive job that looms before us. We eye it up the way rock climbers stand at the bottom of cliff faces pondering spatial puzzles of slope and texture and rock. How many people are doing just this right now, somewhere in the world? Planning and plotting and procrastinating chores many times their size? A hundred boxes of file

folders. A great wall of dirty dishes. A graduate thesis. A long row of toilets to attack with just a scrub brush and a can of cleanser. The body recoils. It feels wrong in our cells. Our neck hair stands up on end.

Clearcuts are illogical landscapes, lunar in their barrenness yet bristling with big texture. The bucked limbs, the twisted trunks and the rotten heartwood. The massive stumps. The logs worth less than the cost of the haul to market. Travelling through clearcuts is an unstable, three-dimensional affair. Imagine a field piled thick with car parts, knitting needles, coat hangers. Imagine climbing through hurricane wreckage. Add slope and cliffs and waterfalls and weather. Slash is a forest's post-mortem revenge, a sharp-toothed terrestrial sea. It's not our fault but it might as well be. Every day the land takes a bite out of us.

There is a clearcut in the Bowron River valley southeast of Prince George that's the size of a small nation. The evidence could be seen from space. When we fly over the province we witness shaved slopes. When we drive, slash and stumps are a highway blur through the windshield. In B.C. we live among clearcuts like people of the tropics live in the sugarcane. *Cutblocks*, they are called in the logging trade, like something you could snip at with scissors.

In our first years as treeplanters, the wooden carnage was shocking. The skin of the earth pulled back, underneath a sad, organic gore. A cutblock is monotonous, an endless field of broken and sun-bleached wood. Monster homes, coffee tables, telephone poles, boat hulls, coffee-shop stir sticks, firewood, magazines, Kleenex. Half the

world seems made out of wood, but a clearcut is still dead boring. We wanted to cry, but couldn't. Said we would quit, but didn't. A numbness of attention crept over us, of the sort induced by mega-mall parking lots. There was nothing to jazz our rods and cones. We were growing up, paying taxes, burning holes in our own pockets. We were learning to see without seeing.

Who talked us into this? Who gave us our first taste of treeplanting? A brother, an old roommate, a friend who slept on the couch — it's always someone else's fault. Whoever it was, they hooked us, poured it into us with their stories of pay dirt and adventure. We let it slip down the back of our throats. We hopped buses to Thunder Bay. We drove rust-chewed jalopies west through the flatlands. We practiced with Popsicle sticks in the flower beds of our parents' back yards. We were young and impressionable. We needed a one-to-10 list of instructions to roll a joint. We needed maps just to find our way back home.

Now we could plant trees blindfolded in a pair of flip-flops. *Lifers*, we call ourselves, as junkies talk about one another. Where is the friend, where is the pusher now? He's a real estate agent. Or she's a mom behind the wheel of an SUV, with scars on her shins to remind herself how she could bend and yet be strong.

A horseshoe of mountains, checkered with clearcuts. A finger of inlet pushes into the land. Vancouver Island. Or just "the island," as people

call it, as if the world already knows its name. The northern tip, with its rugged folds and its light dusting of residents, its history of abandonment. A century ago the Danes arrived and 10 years later, they fled. Then Europeans, Canadians, Americans. A hundred years of coming and going, waves of settlers failing in their various ways to scrape a living from the rain-soaked land and the broody, cold ocean. Here nothing wants to grow but trees. Even the aboriginal peoples have dwindled down, done their own kind of surviving. They are called the Nahwitti, at least by anthropologists. What would they say if we called this our office, our corner of the world to bash around in?

Far from glinting steel buildings and espresso foam and the breath of a million zipping cars. The trip from Vancouver involves a ferry, four hours of driving, and finally a long, winding gravel road over a mountain pass, pocked with holes in the summer and clotted with snow in winter. A dune of white to climb with tire chains and snow tires. On the other side is Holberg, a tiny village of woodcutters. Their houses nudge up to the jutting inlet amid the tall firs. Trees, trees, trees. From snowy peaks right down to the tideline, where seaweed often dangles from the lower branches. You could feel pushed out to edge of the storm-hammered shore. You could lose yourself amongst them.

There is no place big enough to house us all, so we're billeted, like a sports team. We live in the motel and in the old logging barracks for a month that stretches into two. These accommodations feature lumpy mattresses with synthetic spreads. Our toilets flush with

disposable razors tied to string. Mouse poo in all the cupboards. But there is TV, always good satellite TV, no matter where in the wilds we find ourselves. We wander around opening and closing doors, turning *Survivor* on and off. What are we doing besides looking for an escape hatch? The ceilings look spackled with crushed popcorn. The curtains are the colour of Pringles.

On the road to Holberg, where the line on the map turns from solid to dotted, there is a cedar snag nailed with thousands of shoes. It commemorates the footwear with which hikers have made the journey to Cape Scott, as if the old soles exhausted themselves on the voyage. As if these visitors had climbed up, over and become different people, grew new footprints on the other side.

Airliners glide the skies on their way to Asia. We vanish like fleas into the fur of the land. We look for moss and signs of dirt, searing holes in the ground with our eyes. We find spots, and we stab as if to wound them, throwing our weight behind. If we're lucky our blades penetrate slickly, as a knife slides into melon. If not, we've got roots, rock, wood, grass—barriers to chip at with the blades of our shovels in search of elusive earth. We dig around in our left-hand bags and come out with the trees, one by one by one. Douglas-firs with slick, wet needles, dangling between our thumbs and forefingers, twigs dressed in green

whiskers. Drooping cedars with their young fronds the shade of tennis balls. Twenty-five cents a tree.

We lean into our shovels, pushing forward as if to open a heavy door. Rectangular holes break open at our feet. They sigh a mouldy breath. We bend at the waist and slide the roots down the back of the spade. We've found these trees new 100-year homes, though we seldom think of it that way. We tuck them in with a punch of our fists. We haven't stood up and we're already walking. Bend. Plant. Stand up. Move on. Our work is simply this, multiplied by a thousand, two thousand, or more. Goodbye, little bastard. Have a nice life.

Bend. Plant. Stand up. Move on. The work is crushing—one could claim almost literally backbreaking. But while the hands are busy the mind is free to wander. Old thoughts float up through the murk of consciousness, like dirt from the bottom of a washing machine. Memories unfurl. We smell the imaginary aromas of childhood. We feel ghost emotions with fuzzy outlines, like the nerves of phantom limbs. Some days we're like bugs crawling around in Velcro. Grubbers in the soil, incapable of dreams. We feel small and insignificant, like we could flake away from the curve of the earth and splash down in the open ocean. Sweat trickles between our shoulder blades. We do a lot of gazing down.

"Do you like work?" we ask one another in the moments in between.

"Not really," we agree.

We can't say what makes the job so addictive, but it must be more than the money. Here no one minds if we're weird and introverted, if we cut our own hair with nail scissors. No one cares if we're chronic stoners. We could plant trees naked if we wanted to, and indeed, some of us have. Here there's no limelight to hog, no way to weasel out from toil. The work is either done or it isn't.

Our hands are scratched and scabbed, our fingerpads etched with dirt. They feel to us, our own digits, swollen and pulsating, like the hands of cartoon characters when they bash themselves with hammers. We came chubby and pale at the end of the winter. We shrank down and hardened, like boot leather dried too fast. We have calluses on top of calluses, piled up on our palms and soles. Farmer's tans. Six-packs. Arms ropey, muscled and veined. We consume 6,000 calories every day. Food goes down without much chewing—not so much eaten as garburated. At night we nosedive into sleep with our engines still gunning, to the sound of our own venous hum.

A rainforest, minus the forest. Naturally, it rains more than it doesn't. On wet days our lives are tinged with dread, a low-grade Sisyphean despair. We've seen moisture come down in every degree of slushiness. In every shape from mist to deluge, so loud we had to shout over its pattering din. We've seen it descend sideways, seen it slither in long strings. We've even seen rain blow up. The wetness envelops, it slides down the skin. Our boots fill up with water.

But not today. The storms have crashed in and rumbled out, and there's a crack of blue in the sky. Glorious white sunlight knifes through bulbous clouds, the kind accompanied by choirs of angels. "What is that glowing orb thing burning up in the sky?"

"I don't know," we joke, "but, goddamn, it hurts my eyes."

The fog slinks away, and we can see the mountain peaks all the way down to the ocean where the waves glitter coldly. We hear low rollers throwing themselves on bergs of black rock, sliding back down the pebbled beaches.

In between cold fronts, our toil feels rhythmic and Zen-like—for hours at a time, almost easy. We aren't shivering or clenching, and we aren't watching raindrops tremble from the tips of our noses. In rare sun our world looks burnished and magical, like the pages of a giant-sized storybook. Even the clearcuts. We're punch drunk on fresh air.

On fine days there isn't anything in life—no crisis, challenge, no mission impossible—that we couldn't conquer with just a deep, dark sleep, a few cheese sandwiches, and the hot, steady steam of willpower. We look out, at the end of the day, at our fields of seedlings. They shimmy in the wind. *There, we say, we did this with our hands.* We didn't make millions and we didn't cure AIDS. But a thousand new trees are breathing.

The days go by in intricate visuals and bodily sensation and zooming clouds and hundreds of schlepping movements accompanied by five-second shreds of thought. None of these with a beginning or an end.

If this mountain had a face, some of us would be toiling away on its forehead, where everything has a funny way of travelling up. Sound, wind, birds. Other planters slip over the brow ridge and down the cheeks, and we hear them crooning out to one another. We hear snatches of a male baritone singing “Sweet Transvestite” from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Someone has a lit a joint, and the smoke wafts up in notes of skunk and moldering grass. Perhaps we hear others badmouthing us, and we’re surprised to find ourselves bruised. It’s the work that does it to us. The repetition is like psychic sandpaper. We’re too tired to front, a little stonewashed around the heart.

Our foremen traverse the cutblocks on foot, or they cruise the roads in trucks. Checking, maintaining, shepherding us through the day. Ravens soar by with their heads and tail flaps swivelling, in search of lunches to attack with their intelligent beaks. Wings swish through the air overhead.

On the road below, Adam unloads seedling boxes from the back of the truck and then stops to blow snot out of one of his nostrils. He’s our captain, a nimble-minded Polish dude, built like an ox, with shrewd blue-green eyes. The diesel engine gurgles. Sweat glistens on the top of his head where a lean V-shaped tuft of hair grows. He smokes furiously, flipping tree box after tree box down to the ground while issuing tactical

directives into his walkie-talkie. In another century he'd be a Slavic warlord in fur and jackboots, poring over maps in a tent with snow blowing in through the flaps.

Adam peers over the edge of the road to where Carmen works, knitting at the land.

"Carmen," Adam calls down. She stoops to plant a tree, ignoring him the way people on busses pretend not to hear by armouring themselves with iPods. She stoops and climbs some more.

"Carmen," he calls again, cupping his mouth with his hands. "You've got to wear your high-viz." Day-Glo orange vests, the kind worn by traffic herders. Requisite bush couture. In case we fall and crack ourselves open, so a helicopter can find our pieces from the air.

Carmen stops to glare at him. "Go fuck yourself," she says. She puts her head down and goes back to work. She kills herself in the field as the single moms do—fevers pushed to the ends of thermometers. Fast and yet slow, at the speed of someone hunting for a set of house keys, something small but vital and lost.

Who knows what this grudge is about? It doesn't seem to need a reason. We discover vendettas the same way we learn about everything: break-ups, crushes, rumours of hiring and firing. Information, around here, circulates like airborne particles, like microbes passed skin to skin. In the end know too much about one another, yet never the whole picture.

Carmen and Neil orbit around one another in tighter and tighter circles. The romance unfolds before our very eyes. It blossoms at night in the kitchen, amidst puddles of olive oil and husks of garlic peelings. Huddled chats on the steps with cigarettes and cans of Lucky Lager. Love: we creep up to it with our hands outstretched as if to the heat of a woodstove. What we are expands and contracts like a rubber band, encircling us, crushing us all together.

We fall from the trucks at dawn. Nine hours later we crawl back in, stooped like gorillas. Our bodies feel rusted—even our armpits are sore. It's as if we've been pummelled by small, firm objects. Lemons in a pillowcase. A fatigue so thorough it bungles speech, so deep the whole world gleams.

We travel in a convoy of four pickup trucks, each one screaming around bends, kicking up flumes of beige dust. Adam conveys his crew to their off-duty comforts. Beers, joints, bags of potato chips eaten with dirty fingers. The weary anticipation is palpable. The soundtrack for the moment is Emily Haines singing: *Tu sais que je n'aime pas ma réalité*. Over and over again. The CD has been wedged in the drive for days, and no one has been able to coax it out.

As our truck hits the road bumps we settle into a nearly comfortable formation, like anchovies dovetailed into a can. We can't wait to arrive at the place we call home, let a hot shower melt us away.

Nowhere beyond the village is there a single paved road. There are no bed-and-breakfasts. No cellphone reception. No signs to tell us to slow down for the children. No one wears seatbelts. We don't care. Our cheeks are hot pink. Twigs and fir needles nestle in our hair. We are stunned and tired and indestructible.

Dirt. We're striped with it, smeared down the sides of our necks. We've found mud in all our crooks, washed it from every cranny. We've eaten it by accident and even on purpose, just to see how it tasted. On our tongues it felt like sand stirred into cold butter. It tasted just like money.

What have we learned in all this time? How are we improved after a million stooping acts? We've cried in frustration, seen pain so brilliant it glowed. We've sobbed with laughter, submerged ourselves in paroxysms so violent, our ribs were sore the next day. Does this happen elsewhere, in cubicles, in elevators. Is it possible in ironed attire? We know how to climb landslides. How to walk on the guts of the earth so our feet never touch the ground. We know how to hang on by the fingernails and toe spikes. We know how to fall down backwards and forwards, and also how to get up. Where will we take these skills at the end of our tenure? When we quit this miserable, beautiful life.