WE FALL OUT of bed and into our rags, still crusted with the grime of yesterday. We’re earth stained on our thighs and shoulders, and muddy bands circle our waists, like grunge rings on the sides of a bathtub. Permadirt, we call it. Disposable clothes, too dirty for the laundry.

The sun comes up with the strength of a dingy light bulb, dousing the landscape in shades of gray. The clouds are bruised and swollen. We stand in a gravel lot, a clearing hacked from the forest. Heavy logging machinery sits dormant all around, skidders and yarders like hulking metallic crabs. The weather sets in as it always does, as soon as we venture outdoors. Our raincoats are glossy with it. The air hisses. Already we feel the drips down the backs of our necks, the dribbles down the thighs of our pants. We’re professional tree planters. It’s February, and our wheels have barely begun to grind.

We stand around in huddles of three and four with toothpaste at the corners of our mouths, sleep still encrusted in our
eyes. We stuff our hands down into our pockets and shrug our shoulders up around our ears. We wear polypropylene and fleece and old pants that flap apart at the seams. We sport the grown-out remains of our last haircuts and a rampant facial shagginess, since mostly we are men.

We crack dark, miserable jokes.

Oh, run me over. Go get the truck. I’ll just lie down here in this puddle.

If I run over your legs, who will run over mine?

We shuffle from foot to foot, feeding on breakfast buns wrapped in aluminum foil. We drink coffee from old spaghetti sauce jars. We exhale steam. Around here you can hang a towel over a clothesline in November, and it will drip until April.

Adam and Brian are our sergeants. They are exactly the same height and wear matching utility vests made of red canvas. Heads bent together, they embroil themselves in what they call “a meeting of the minds,” turning topographical maps this way and that, testing the hand-held radios to ascertain which ones have run out of juice. Their lips barely move when they talk. Their shoulders collect the rain. We wait for their plan of attack as if it is an actual attack, a kind of green guerrilla warfare.

At the stroke of seven, we climb up into big Ford pickup trucks with mud-chewing tires and long radio antennae. We slide across the bench seats, shoving ourselves in together. Five diesel engines roar to life.

Adam sits at the wheel. He has an angular face, hair and skin turned tawny by the outdoor life, arresting eyes the color of mint mouthwash. He pulls out at the head of our small convoy. His pupils zip back and forth over the road’s unpaved surface. He drives like a man on a suicide mission. No one complains. Speed is the jet fuel that runs our business.
While he drives, Adam wraps his lips around the unwashed lid of a commuter mug. He slides aluminum clipboards in and out of his bag and calls out our kilometers on the truck-to-truck radio. Logging trucks barrel down these roads, laden with bounty like land-borne supertankers. Adam slides his maps into various forms of plastic weatherproofing. Multitasking is his only speed—as it is for all of us—too fast, too much, and all at once. We’re pieceworkers, here to make money, a lot of it, in a hurry. Earning our keep can feel like picking quarters off a sidewalk, and it can feel like an emergency.

Logging routes are like human arteries, main lines branching out into fine traceries. We pass from civilization to wilderness on a road with muddy ruts. Old snow decomposes along the shoulder. The land around here is jaggedly three-dimensional, fissured with gullies and brush-choked ravines. Mountains bulge from the seashore. We zoom through stands of tall Douglas-firs, conifers bearded with lichen. A green blaze, we’re driving so fast, skimming along the surface of our known world.

Most of us are veterans. Crusty, we call each other, like those Special Ops who crawl from war-ravaged mountains with wild hair, matted beards, and battle-mad glints in their eyes. Sean and Pierre were doing this job, they sometimes remind us, when the rest of us were in diapers. Pierre is fifty-five. He tells us he has a resting pulse rate lower than Lance Armstrong’s. He tells us a hundred things, every day, in great detail. He shows us the display screen of his digital camera. He shows us photos of ravens and skunk cabbage. Snapshots from his civilian life—his faraway kids, his foxy lady friends.

Sean is both wiry and muscular. He has a titanium hip. Some of his clothes are as old as his tree-planting career—threadbare,
unraveling around the edges. He plants trees for half the year and windsurfs the remaining portions. His lips and cheeks are speckled with liver spots from a life in the sun. But like Pierre, he’s still going.

Jake, at twenty-one, is the youngest. Jake calls Pierre Old Man. He refers to himself as Elfie, in the third person.

Elfie’s not digging this action, he says. Elfie thinks this is fucked up.

Oakley and Jake are best pals. Jake is short and muscular, and he talks in rowdy shouts. Oakley is tall and sturdy. We always know where he’s working, because his lunch box is a plastic tub that once contained a body-building supplement. Find the Mega Milk on the side of the road and you know Oakley’s beavering away behind the rise. Oakley and Jake play Hacky Sack for hours every evening, and Pierre documents this, too, with his digicam.

We spend a lot of time in trucks, and it’s here we get to know one another. The crew cabs are our living rooms, the bench seats our sofas. Nick is redheaded. He reminds us of Richie Cunningham. He doesn’t drink. He says he used to. Some call him Risky, like the business. Carmen knits. She’s a single mom. Her boys are at home with her parents. On commutes she clicks away with her needles at socks the size of kiwi fruits.

Sean has more seniority than anyone, and he has an inexhaustible supply of jokes to prove it.

How many tree planters does it take to screw in a light bulb?
One. But you’ll find five bulbs in the socket.
What do you call a tree planter without a girlfriend?
Homeless.

No one is offended. We’re unisex guys, the men of man-days. The work wears us down and lifts us up, everyone together,
equally. Sometimes we glance sideways at the old-timers and we wonder just how long we’ll keep doing this job. We think: *Take me out before I end up old and battered and stooped like Quasimodo*. But we’re halfway there already. It feels as if we’ve been doing this job for a thousand years, and our bodies are rusted with it.

I nestle among my work comrades as I have done for nearly twenty years. The rituals and routines of planting trees are as familiar to me as boiling water or brushing my teeth. But February always shocks me. Usually, I’m unfit after a lazy, indoor winter. So is K.T. He’s my boyfriend and also my co-worker. We’ve made a life of it—city dwellers in the winter, tree planters come spring. Now, after one week on the job, even my eyelids feel sore. My palms and heels are blistered. I still yearn for the comforts of home. The ease of the easy chair, the depths of my own downy bed.

Soon enough these cravings will evaporate. In eight hours I’ll be too tired to care. To say planting trees is my day job is not quite right, because to do such work is to give one’s whole life, albeit temporarily. There’s no room for taking notes. When I plant trees, both hands are entirely spoken for.

When Adam hurtles us around the bends we slide into one another. Our toes bump against a heavy-duty jack, coffee mugs with broken handles, a soggy wool sock, an empty sandwich bag smeared with mayonnaise. Our breath clouds the windshield. The blower can’t keep up. Someone farts silently, and the smell creeps out among us. We veer down branches and forks. Fat drops tap the windshield, shed from the arms of the trees. We crash through puddles that look like chocolate milk.

Nowhere beyond the village is there a single paved road. No signage, no radar enforcements, nothing to tell us to slow
down for the children. There are no bed-and-breakfasts. No cell phone reception. Where are we going at such heedless velocity? We couldn’t point to a map with any certainty and name the road, the creek, the bridge. Most of the time we have no idea where the hell we are.

Vancouver Island, a three-hundred-mile stretch of land hovering off the British Columbia coast. Locals call it merely The Island, as if it is self-evident, as if everyone should already know its name. Its southernmost portion dips below the 49th parallel, like a toe, into American waters. Less than a million people live here, most of them clustered on the south end, which is pretty as a postcard—sunny, mild, and bustling with tourists. Shopping malls, hanging flower baskets, hippies in Birkenstocks and crocheted toques, alternative-healing centers and covert marijuana farms. Marinas bristle with yacht masts. Halfway up the island, the temperature drops and the clouds sock in, even at the height of summer. The North End, Up-Island. The kind of raw geography Hollywood seeks out for movies about warriors in furred robes who wield maces and battle-axes. Cold, pewter-toned lakes. Cedar trees with dead spires like sharpened joists rising from the forest. Bald eagles filling the air by the dozens, circling on thermal currents.

Vancouver Island lies in the middle of a region known, in theory anyway, as Cascadia. It’s an area defined not by national borders but by a shared climate and a history of geographic isolation. A strip of land that tilts toward the sea as if nudged to the water’s edge by the coastal ranges. It begins at the 40th parallel at Cape Mendocino in California. It encompasses Oregon and Washington State, as well as portions of Montana and Idaho. It runs north along the coast of British Columbia all the way to the
Gulf of Alaska. In popular imagination this is the landscape of the Pacific Northwest, defined by ocean, mountains, and rain.

Weather systems skid toward the coast in spiraling pinwheels, picking up moisture along the way. They make landfall, dumping up to thirteen feet of rain a year. If you were born in the desert or raised in the heat, the monsoons are a form of water torture. The chill works its way under sweaters and scarves. It whistles under the doors. Winter here is a monotonous gloaming of cloud and puddles, a soul-craving for the sun. Mist-loving plants creep in around the edges of civilization. Rooftops, lawns, even cars grow moss. The air smells of mushrooms and compost. Rain seeps into every pore.

Snow seldom persists. Fires rarely burn. The soil is unctuous, like brown shortening. The conditions are perfect for temperate plant life and for several species of decadent tree. In the forests there is nowhere to look without a plant in the way, without ferns and moss and branchy lattices. Chlorophyll proliferates with a patient aggression. The canopy blots out the sky. Sometimes the only sound, besides the dripping, is the silent roar of matter breaking down and melting back into the soil. Amid the huge trunks and sunless rot, one can easily believe that the forests are winning.

Perhaps it’s no surprise that the population of Cascadia is relatively small. It takes all three of the region’s major urban centers—Vancouver, Seattle, and Portland—to make a population rivaling that of New York City. Until the mid-nineteenth century, this corner of the continent wasn’t part of any territory or confederation. It had no laws or government. Cascadia was little more than an unexplored possibility, a mercantile interest shared between Britain, Russia, and the United States. No infrastructure existed except for the services provided by missionaries and
the Hudson’s Bay Company. The United States had declared itself a free country for seventy-two years by the time the Oregon Territory attained any official status. British Columbia joined Canada more than three hundred years after Jacques Cartier stuck a cross on the shores of the Gaspé Peninsula.

European explorers once sailed the long way around to get here, an eleven-thousand-mile voyage around Cape Horn. The trip was so long and stormy and bereft of provisioned harbors that many ships turned back, their crews plagued by scurvy, their rigging battered and in need of extensive repairs. The only other route to the west coast involved an overland journey through what are now eight provinces and ten states—by wagon, horse, and canoe and on foot. So arduous was this trip that a century passed before newcomers began to trickle west from Atlantic to Pacific. The same journey one can make today in an airbus without even needing to eat on the way.

The Pacific Northwest was once the edge of the known world, shielded to the east by snowy ranges. By non-navigable rivers that plunged from dizzying heights into canyons and seething gorges. To the west lay unfathomable sheets of ocean. To get here, you had to be obsessed, greedy, insane, or perhaps a touch of all three—qualities, you might say, that still linger in the air today.

For most of its colonial history, Cascadia was a wet, woodsy hinterland. But behind the geographic challenges lay a gold mine in waiting, a superabundance of natural resources. The Pacific coast has a mild climate and, once upon a time, had a teeming fishery. In pre-Columbian times land and sea fed more people than anywhere else in North America. Since then, Cascadia has supplied the world with bulk ingredients. Furs, fish, metals, and not least, lumber.
Euro-American immigrants didn’t begin to arrive in any serious numbers until the nineteenth century. They came via the Oregon Trail, a grueling two-thousand-mile trek from the Missouri River to Oregon City, now a town on the outskirts of Portland. The journey involved a months-long expedition by covered wagon along a wild, rutted, and frequently muddy track. In some spots the route was so precariously steep that wagons had to be hauled up or lowered down with ropes. When a wheeled conveyance—containing belongings and food rations—bogged down or broke apart it was left by the roadside to weather and disintegrate. For many this was a one-way trip. The mountain grades were so intense they proved impossible to scale in the opposite direction. Departure did not guarantee arrival. Travelers faced snowstorms, floods, wild animals, and disease. Accidents and death due to primitive, trailside medical care. Starvation and even cannibalism. And yet they came in droves. They’d succumbed to the allure of prosperity, a fresh start on the emerald coast.

Perhaps nothing captures these aspirations better than the trees themselves, which grow so prodigiously it defies the imagination. Some of the tallest trees in the world can still be found here. The mighty redwoods of California. The cedars and Douglas-firs of British Columbia. The Sitka spruce, the state tree of Alaska. Some trees are as old as the Magna Carta. They look dead on their feet, rotten hearted. Their growth rings tell of countless droughts and deluges.

The coastal region supports more biomass per square foot than any of the planet’s tropical rainforests. There is simply more living matter breathing, dying, and metamorphosing here than anywhere else. But these are fragmented glades, the remnants of a forest that once spanned, virtually uninterrupted,
through twenty degrees of latitude, nearly half the length of the North American continent. Most of the original forests of California, Oregon, and Washington are now gone. The big tracts that remain grow north of the 50th parallel—the world’s last great temperate rainforest by the sea.

**OUR TRUCKS** climb the nameless mountains the way airplanes ascend, nosing up at the sky. We switch up and back along steep, cobbled surfaces, flattened shards of white rock chiseled from the mountain by road crews who dig and dynamite their way through. We climb into the belly of a cloud. The light brightens; the view widens. Before long, we find ourselves in the middle of a clearing. It feels like relief, this release from the canopy’s darkened tent. Big trees surround us at the edge of the clearing, what’s left of an old, gnarled forest. Storm-battered firs with flattened bonsai crowns. Gnarled cedars with bleached wood tusks protruding from lofty, lime-green foliage. Trees with mileage, like big old whales with harpoons stuck in their flanks. Handkerchiefs of mist drift among them.

We tumble out of our trucks like clothes from a dryer. Fog clings to the warp and weft of our tatters, the fine hairs on our cheekbones. Cigarettes are lit before feet hit the ground. Our smoke drifts up in a communal cloud. Most of us smoke. Brad has a way of making it look delicious, of holding a cigarette high in the crook of his fingers and putting his whole hand to his face. Those who don’t wish they could, just for the portable comfort.

We gear up for the daily battle, grope around in our vinyl backpacks for wetsuit shirts and watertight containers. Gear hijacked from other sports—shin pads, knee braces made of hinged aluminum and Neoprene. We slide our feet down into tall leather boots with spiked soles. Loggers’ boots, made for
walking on bark and slick logs, made to bite down and stick. We lace ourselves tight. We slip our hands into heavy-duty gloves. We tug it all on in preparation for battle. We’re proud, and yet ashamed.

There is something bovine about our crew. Brian threads his way around between us. He has a wavy thatch of side-parted hair, freckles, and a devious grin. He is a rapid-fire talker. He barks out a bunch of words so compressed and contracted they sound like a foreign language. We let ourselves be herded this way and that. 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 wholly true.

We chortle darkly, rubbing our palms together. There is nowhere to hide from the cold. No inside to duck into for warmth. A buzz develops all at once and out of nothing at all, the way bees begin to vibrate when they’re about to flee a hive. Box upon box lined up on the side of the road, each one filled with 240 trees. Ready for us, by the hundreds and thousands, lined up together like bullets. A box of seedlings is ripped open. A paper bag torn. Bundles of plastic-wrapped seedlings tumble 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 idea, since it lends a kind of clout—trees grown to our ergonomic specifications. Tree planters: little trees plus human beings, two nouns that don’t seem to want to come apart.

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 tree-planting bags and kneel 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. As if there weren’t enough, thousands and thousands, to go around.

Before long we abandon the scene, an explosion of 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 do our work without pitting ourselves against one another, without turning it into an amazing race. Otherwise piecework is grindingly relentless, tiny objects passing negligibly through human hands. An inaudible gun goes off over our heads, and the day begins. Somewhere behind the clouds 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. Adam doles out my work space, a hectare of clear-cut hillside. As he points out the boundaries of my daily turf I watch our breath puff out in clouds. And then he launches into his fervent, head-down walk, leaving me to the twists of the day.

At the lip of the road I peer out at the land. My tree-planting bags ride heavy on my thighs. Human saddlebags, one pouch in the back and one on each side. Every day, they turn gravity up a few notches. In my dreams they have sentient, subservient lives, like the magic broomsticks in *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice*. They fill themselves up, I whistle them to life, and they trot out to do the job on their own.

Until someone invents a tree-planting robot, a plane that shoots seedlings from the sky, it’s just me and my speed spade—a gardening trowel with a long plastic neck and a D-handle, a stainless steel blade shaved down with a grinder to resemble
a big spoon. It feels in my hand the way spears must to Masai tribesmen, not merely a tool but something like an emblem, an extension of the hand and limb.

I’m not too bad at planting trees, if only because of the practice. I have climbed the flanks of a hundred mountains and hoisted my limbs over countless logs and stumps. I’ve stuck a million seedlings in the ground. I’ve met quite a few people who’ve doubled and even tripled this number. Or so they claim. I don’t mind reading bush maps or flying around in helicopters or driving big pickup trucks. I hardly ever get cold in the rain. But I am not a natural tree planter. I have the hands of a typist. Being filthy and clammy makes me hate myself. And most of all I’d rather plant a pretty tree than a fast one. Which is one thing a tree planter should never do if she intends to earn a living.

My mornings are hours of reluctance and loathing. I size up the clouds and decide if it will rain or not and if am wearing the right kind of clothes. I swallow one last cookie. I blow warm air into my fists and scope out the job that looms before me. I 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 putting off chores of epic proportions. 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 my cells. My neck hair stands on end.

Planting trees isn’t hard. As any veteran will tell you, it isn’t the act of sowing itself but the ambient complications. It comes with snow pellets. Or clouds of biting insects so thick and furious it is possible to end a day with your eyelids swollen shut and blood trickling from your ears. There are swaying fields of
venomous plants like devil’s club and stinging nettle. There are
sunburns and hornets. There are swamps rimmed with algal
sludge to fall into up to the armpits. There are leeches and ticks,
bears and cougars. There are infections and chafe and boils and
trench foot. It’s possible to be so cold you feel dreamily warm
and so hot you fall into shivers. Over time the work has the
bodily effect of a car crash in extreme slow motion. Sometimes
our bosses make off to Mexico with all the money. Besides that,
the task itself is thankless and boring, which is to say it is plain
and silent. It is also one of the dirtiest jobs left in the modern
world.

What could compel a person to make a career of such a
thing? I have always wanted to find out.

Airliners glide through 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 our shovels. If we’re lucky our blades penetrate slickly,
as knives slide 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.

I push into my shovel as if it were a heavy door. A square of
earth breaks open at my feet and sighs a moldy breath. I bend
at the waist and slide the roots down the back of my spade. My
job is to find these trees new one-hundred-year homes, though I
seldom think of it that way. Douglas-firs with slick, wet needles,
twigs dressed in green whiskers. I tuck them in with a punch of
my fist. I haven’t stood up and I’m already walking. Bend. Plant.
Stand up. Move on. The work is simply this, multiplied by a thousand, two thousand, or more. Twenty-five cents a tree.

Goodbye, little bastard. Have a nice life.

A rainforest, minus the forest. On wet February days our lives are tinged with dread, a low-grade Sisyphean despair. Moisture comes down in every degree of slushiness. In every shape from mist to deluge, so loud we have to shout over its pattering din. It descends sideways, and it slithers in long strings. We've even seen rain fall up, propelled by ocean gusts. There is no way at all to stay dry, despite our rain gear, which comes with intrepid names like Wetskins, Pioneer, and The North Face. The wetness envelops. It begins at the scalp and dribbles down the back of the neck, all the way down the spine until our boots fill up with water.

Some days we're like bugs crawling around in Velcro. Grubbers in the soil, incapable of dreams. In this gigantic landscape it's easy to feel small, as if we could flake away from the land 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 during the moments in between.

Not really, we agree.

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. 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 at least a thousand new trees are breathing.