

## ROLL TIDE

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*The King's English, Spring 2009*

I'm not a lumberjack. Nor am I a collier, steam-driller, or digger of canals, and I'm certainly nobody's soldier. For the most part I'm a man of my time. Caught up in the urgency to reduce human impacts upon the earth, I strive with millions of others to live more enmeshed with nature rather than in opposition to it. I'm well aware of my reliance on industrial products such as plastic, combustion engines, and two-by-fours, yet I use these items in lock-step with guilt, and guilt possesses mitigating powers. It also assuages, however falsely. If I feel guilty about driving rather than biking or burning more energy than I need – by turning up music, say, or eating a New Zealand apple – then I'm a better person for being aware of the transgression than not. This, at any rate, is what we tell ourselves. Yet for all the contemplative ju-jitsu between ecology and human comfort – writhing right within it, in fact, largely unseen – is manhood. This, then, is what trips me most, perhaps trips us all. For all my beliefs that humans will be both happier and healthier by living more lightly on the planet, and for all my strivings to do so, the fact remains that I'm a man. There's a destructive tendency to this state that's not so simple as it seems, and for far too long it's been at best a peripheral topic in the recent decades of environmental wrangling.

Southeast Alaska, to be sure, has been heavily logged, but you'll find plenty of forest. Most people from the lower forty-eight, in fact, like me, are astounded by the vast timber ranges here. From Connecticut, I moved to Alaska ten years ago after living in the Bay Area. Though California's remnant redwoods maintain their ethereal pulse, Alaska's Sitka spruce tracts, hemmed in by glacial mountains to the east, fill orthodox devotees with a pagan penitence and force ardent agnostics, even atheists, to directly

confront the possibilities of creation. A couple days and nights out amidst these rain forests – with their towering trunks, dripping mosses, and splintered sunlight, all of it boxed in by mountains and ocean – may not quite be enough to overturn a skeptic, but I doubt they'd shake the feeling that something god-like at least dwells in the margins. Nature, of course, does this to people, which among hordes of other reasons is why we need to preserve it.

Metaphysics, mysticism, numinous experience – all the traces of mysterious purpose that largely define our being human are laid out on the hoof in nature, raw. If we never ascertain a verifiable fact – which we don't – the myth-making, the comfort we take in cosmology, and the powers inherent to abstract thought largely constitute the foundation of our kind. Whether it's deep faith in the specificity of Abrahamic creation, Eastern mystic tradition, the more recent exhumations concerning a life-force such as Gaia, or the occasional rejection of it all, nature – the universe's cryptic Braille – is the source, and in Southeast Alaska you really feel as if you somehow stand within both its twilight and its dawn. Suffused as such you can't help but excoriate efforts to damage the place in any way. Being human, however, is not so an easy an affair, for there are more parts to us than dishonesty allows, many in conflict, and many more of which we wish we could excise. Most of those, however, we privately know we can't. We can stem them, control their flow, but we'll never snuff them out, and though we might say we do, I'm not sure we'd really want to anyway.

Of the human traits most often regretted, then, our capacity for destruction is high among them, and destruction resides most prominently within men. We wish this was simple, and yearn to make it so, but it's not, and when we're being truthful we know this. Creation comes out of destruction. Nature, if it tells you nothing else, will tell you that. Creation requires process, and process requires the ends of things, and the ends of things means violence. There's no other formula. Whether it's the subtle accretion of decay needed to sustain a forest, the perpetual terrors required of the living ocean, or a thing more simple, like the construction of a beaver dam, for nature to continue living it must continue dying. Human creation is no different. The violence needed to feed and house us, to ensure we have fresh water, and to keep us warm or cool is simply a mirror of the creative destruction found in nature. More and more we lust for a day when we'll have the new cabin without the tree-felling or the marble flooring without the quarry, the electricity without the coal stripping, dammed waterways, or throbbing derricks, but how does that happen with so many men in the world, and just how much

are we collectively willing to sacrifice? Put more properly, do we simply want the violence required of our lives to remain herded in unseen corridors, begrudgingly accepting the repercussions it emanates from there?

The Pacific Northwest is the same as the world-over. Death made the place. Southeast Alaska is simply its northern-most extension and by far the portion most intact. Salmon, of course, make these forests what they are. Beginning in May with the sockeye and chinook and ending as late as January with the coho, the forests imbibe salmon flesh. From the spruce, hemlock, and cottonwood in the spire to the willow and alder in the median to the devil's club, mosses, flowers, berries, and ferns in the understory, everything grows fat on the rot of anadromous fish. Salmon bring in marine nutrients by the ton, bleeding them out directly or through bear dung and wolf, eagle and otter, mink, jay, and magpie. I see this at my feet each season, feel it in my own muscle and bone. Having subsisted off the scraps of forested New England acreage for so long, I dreamed of places like Southeast as a kid. Having come here, I've been lucky, as my job gathering salmon data for biologists in the Fish and Game department brings me in closer contact with these ecosystems than most.

The work is mobile. You go where the fish are. In spring that means the juveniles, capturing and tagging them as they out-migrate from freshwater to salt. For the last few years I've headed south, about four hundred miles below my hometown of Yakutat to Misty Fjords National Monument, a place little different than it would otherwise be had humanity never existed. Retreating glaciers rip steep, U-shaped valleys through the mountains, with time and salmon supplying the forests what they need. Cedars grow this far south, red and yellow, and their soft, lace-work limbs mingle with the stiffer network of spruce and hemlock. Avalanches boom down their annual chutes all April, thundering off opposing mountains. Wolves, marten, otters, mink, and beaver abound in these valleys, brown bears too along with black, and droves of migrating passerines and waterfowl descend here every spring and fall, gathering what food they need on their way into and out of the north.

Once, far upriver, I picked chinook smolt from a trap set out in the open river wash as a ruffed grouse drummed from an alder stand. A dozen mountain bluebirds worked from a nearby log-jam, picking caddis off by turns, darting out, arcing for the kill, returning to ingest. I separated the fish, releasing the finger-length coho and Dolly Varden while dropping the silvery chinook in a bucket.

Movement, no bird, flashed in the jam. Twenty yards away a wolverine rounded the logs, sniffing, loping, probing the interstices for a last scrap of winter salvage. I didn't move. It looked up, scenting me. A blond wishbone garnished the black and rusted fur along its back, and it was close enough that I could see the curved claws on its out-sized feet. Even at that distance, though, I could barely make out the black marble eyes in the dark face, but they were there, watching. It gamboled off, losing itself in the alder stand where the grouse had ceased its drumming. I didn't know what to do. It's been beaten into us for so long that life has simply evolved, nothing more, and that we're under no circumstance to anthropomorphize nature or in any way ascribe to it our human projections. Such partitioning, however, suffers in the woods, where it's often difficult to not believe you've witnessed the godhead, or in closer proximity that it has witnessed you. Reverence is the only response. There's a comfort in such mingling, this blend of consciousness and sensuality, and a fertility, and of course the terror too, but all of it is for the good, and all of it entirely human, which perhaps means it's all just simply animal. Life, though, is an abundance, and there's more to it than the occasional screws of philosophical hunch. We have flesh that needs attending, after all, with needs of its own to serve. More often than not, then, more than we even know or would dare admit, nature is loved because it keeps us both comfortable and alive, and it's in this capacity that we can either address or turn away from a generative violence lodged most inveterately in core manhood.

People, of course, Europeans anyway, have marked Misty Fjords. Prospectors roamed up and down its every drainage over a hundred years ago, and trappers too, along with loggers, found it at the same time. In the tide lines you'll see mammoth cedar stumps covered in saplings and shadowed by a century's worth of forest growth. Nowadays, with the land protected, only occasional bear and moose hunters visit the valleys, and never for long. A few private cabins cluster along most of the estuaries, but the people don't visit much and don't venture far when they do. Mostly, then, it's just agency employees – state and federal – that seasonally use the wilderness, performing modest management tasks. Fish and Game has temporary tent frames in two of the valleys, snug to the river banks. Old-growth spruce looms above them, and we park our boats in eddies along the rivers. In one camp I recently worked a spruce had tipped gradually further each year toward the water, looming over the boats, and we obtained permission from the Forest Service to cut it down. This is a National Monument, though, designated wilderness, with no chainsaws allowed. Juvenile projects are short but intense, about five weeks of work in cold,

rainy weather, trudging up and down icy river banks every day for ten hours or more. Still, the daylight surges during April, green-up occurs, and returning birdlife energizes the valleys. We had an old double-bladed ax in camp, and I agreed to chip away all month after work.

At the start I was certainly mixed. I didn't think the tree posed a hazard, for one, and it probably would've fallen many years later during winter floods. Mostly, though, it was the simple fact of cutting it down, particularly that it was so old – a hundred and fifty feet tall and forty inches through the base. I looked up the trunk, then circled. Whether these notions are conceived or not is irrelevant to me – I passed a hand over the rough-chip bark and felt something, imaginary or otherwise. I grew up on The Lorax. Stewardship and a land ethic were pounded into me first by my parents then by my own hand. I'd been through enough clear-cuts on foot to loathe them, sensing the dearth amidst the stumps. As with many like-minded people I lessen my wood-use when I can, and when I can't simply try not to think about where the paper I need and the roof above me derive. There's friction here. We wonder about falling trees in the forest making no sound, but many of us secretly assume that if we don't see the violence that brings us what we need then it most likely doesn't exist, not really. I'm no lumberjack, then, and never will be, but there was an ax in my hand and a tree before me and it wasn't long before I submitted to what I most often bury but know is always there, pulsing.

The face cut comes first. On the river side I needed to cut about a third of the trunk out before chopping through the back. That would send the tree where we wanted, into the river, where we'd make a much-needed dock of it. I've always loved hand tools. Not the skilled ones, such as planers, routers, or chisels, as I have no talent for finery, but the rough-hewn sort – axes, sledges, picks. You can swing these for hours on end and the task at hand is always simple – dig a ditch, pound a stake, split some wood. I'd assisted in felling a few trees with a chainsaw and knew enough to know that two cuts were necessary. The first couple hits didn't show much effect, just a pair of slits, but the third knocked the bark off, revealing the moist tree-flesh inside. The tide was up and the chips swirled in the brackish eddies as they flew off the bank. A seam opened across the face and each thwack echoed like a distant rifle shot off the opposite mountain face. Just inside the bark the cambium was wet and red but beneath that the wood came off in drier, yellow chunks. I worked for an hour. People needed to sleep, including me, but I didn't want to stop. I could pound for five minutes at a time, take a few breaths, then repeat.

The ax nearly moved itself through my hands and the impact came up through my fingers, through my body. Some skin rubbed off my palms but once the initial sting subsided the open air felt good on the wounds. Sweat ran freely despite the cold, and by the time I stopped a neat grin a few inches deep spread across the trunk. I've walked through forests and sat amongst them for long stretches, feeling like a guest amidst a people whose language I didn't speak but wished to learn. Before going to bed I leaned on the ax a while, examining the cut. This tree wasn't alive. It was going to be a dock and I was going to make it one.

Some days we worked too late and others the rain fell too hard, but I hacked away when I could. With the face cut complete I turned it around, beginning the deeper back cut. I'd have to go at least half way through so needed about a foot and a half wide gap. I didn't mind. I'd found the rhythm. You come at a down angle for two or three swings then drop the ax low and bring it up. Palm-sized chunks an inch thick or more fly off, sometimes ten yards, making coarse mulch. I balanced on firewood rounds to get better leverage. Robert Frost said the fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows, didn't he, but that could be mulled later. The only facts I knew just then were that I could swing this ax all day and the first faint pops of a tree near to falling. It was a matter of vision now, seeing which chunks kept the thing standing. Two strokes down, another up. Pop. One gone. Pop. Pop. After a final hit the trunk leaned forward, jumped off its stump, and fell down. The tide was out and the weight and branches sent the mud flying, with the trunk resting ten yards out in the river at low water, just like we wanted. Bureaucratic haggling had put the river under state jurisdiction, which meant chainsaws were legal now. I picked ours up and went to work on the limbs. To me these tools are a pox. Mostly I hate them, and for the usual reasons – how we use them to run ecosystems into the ground, the noise, the two-cycle smog, and their great capacity to convert hectares of creation into dull commercial tokens. Yet how can you not enjoy one when it's in your hands? It's only one tree. What a marvel they are, such genius of efficiency, their brilliance of economy, the music of wheels and cogs, the glorious hum of a spinning chain. Walk along the tree's body now, ten feet off the ground. Zip-zip. Two limbs gone. Zip-zip-zip, three more, shorn off at the trunk, pretty as you please. In twenty minutes I was covered in sweat and oiled-down sawdust, and over a hundred feet of tree was stripped bare. We anchored the thing in the mud and tied the boats to the end. A dock was made, and our jobs were that much easier now.

Reconciliation. That's the trick, isn't it? We're always trying to reconcile. Life twists us in opposite directions and we usually want to go both ways. Our only option is to be our own arbiter, and our only hope is that it's possible, that we're not simply rationalizing some deep-throated hypocrisy. In certain degrees I don't think this is difficult. We all need shelter, yet we know more development not only eats up land on site but eats it up elsewhere to bring in the timber, concrete, window panes, plumbing, and all the rest, all of which was created by process, or destruction of the natural world in the form of mines, oil rigs, feller-bunchers, and refineries. No one, though, wants to live in a cave or a bare shack, but we can work to lessen the damage, and more and more people are doing so in the form of smaller houses built more efficiently. Forego the addition. Seal up the windows. Renovate instead of build. Solar and wind. Transportation, too, is making equal gains, with hybrids, bus systems, trains, monorails, bikes, and walking, along with re-worked town planning to facilitate it all. Progress is made everyday. We're learning, then, how to reconcile, to arbitrate between our need for comfort and convenience and the equal need to preserve the planet that feeds us body and spirit.

As difficult as this can be, however, it's the easy part, for what do you do when it's not you're head or even heart that needs a peace-maker but your own blood? What do you do, in other words, when you're a man? I love the woods, and have from earliest life. The sound, feel, smell, and deeper intuitions garnered from a breathing landscape make up the most of me. I despise the depredations my kind has inflicted upon the natural world, from the gross abuse of resource extraction to all the wars engendered procuring those same resources. But there's more, isn't there? There always is. If it was only my reliance on resources, and more than reliance but outright enjoyment and comfort, then I could live with that. Restraint, frugality, mitigation – these traits will eventually take hold by will or necessity, and I have faith in my own abilities to contribute. That's not it, though. There's that tree, and more than that the throbbing knot of energy that welled up inside then released with every swing of the ax. How does that get reconciled? By most definitions I'm no model of masculinity. I'm un-mechanical, clumsy with a stick shift, and passive with women. Business cycles and car races are of no interest to me, and I shudder to think how close we came to never learning of Emily Dickinson. I also lean heavily on the pacifist side of human nature, but we remember things, don't we, and we bury from the world what we wish we could bury from ourselves. If I disapprove of warfare, I've never forgotten the pristine joy of hitting other men on a college football field, and am loath to think how easily I

could've been manipulated to combat at that same age. Now for the tree. That wasn't any newfound, here-and-gone sensation. Destruction runs in the grain of men. Women are sprinkled throughout the extraction trades and do fine work – miners, loggers, oil drillers – but mostly these are the province of men, simply because to destroy is the passion of men. As I chopped pieces out of that spruce I'd look around occasionally at the mossy, grown-over stumps. Nothing but saws, axes, mules, and men did that, and we trace that audacity backward, to the beautifully filthy French trappers, roaming over and across the continent, trading with native peoples, nearly driving the beaver to extinction, and the mountain men that followed them. After that was the true onslaught, the one we currently despise. All of us, men and women alike, create things out of destruction, even revel in the process, but it's manhood that wars directly with the natural world. Take the Erie Canal alone, with its barges of "lumber, coal, and hay" as the folk song goes. Men tore up the earth, as well as themselves, to put that ditch in, and then the forests of the Lakes region to feed the exploding nation ore and wood. We live now in the toxic aftermath of that era, but also amidst its subsequent comforts, and the tension between lamentation and enjoyment is at best taxing, at worst unbearable.

Misty Fjords is among the most beautiful, spiritually enriching places I've been. Part of me has seeped into it and in turn some of it has leached back into me. Yet it wouldn't take much to walk into those forests with a couple dozen other men and go to work toppling trees. We'd sweat like mad, curse, limb them up, and send the wood down-river to a mill – cedar, spruce, and hemlock. Houses would be built from them, homes. Cabinets and armoires, models of utility and beautiful to behold, would be made, cedar shingles too, and wood flooring from the hemlock, adding a natural touch to any kitchen. Sitka spruce, as well, is prized for cellos, violins, and pianos, and what beauty and movement would emanate from these? By even my own gauge I'm lightly defined as a man, so if I struggle to tamp these urges down then what of mightier men, those pumping oil, mowing down forests, ripping up anthracite shafts, tearing the tops off mountains, and killing one another platoon by brigade by civilian block? Manhood is elemental, closest to water. Flow can be dammed, diverted, even controlled, but eventually it goes somewhere, as does manhood, itself abhorrently destructive. The processes, however, that bring us light, heat, shelter, and food, even aesthetic pleasures, begin with it, and modern life has whisked this destruction to unseen places, severing too many synapses between process and product for the violence to be sensually immediate. We've been divested,

then, reaping the bread without the sweat, but the sweat continues to run and is killing us even as it maintains us, so what of it, what do you do with it, this city-building, city-razing, life-sustaining, destroying-angel flood, this rolling tide of male energy? Where do you want it to go, and how do you get it there?



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Mike Freeman** recently moved to New York to marry after living in southeast Alaska for 10 years. "Roll Tide" is taken from a developing collection set in Alaska titled, "Theosophy North: South by Southeast." Additional excerpts appear or are forthcoming in *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Gray's Sporting Journal*, *Weber: the Contemporary West*, and *LBJ: Literary Bird Journal*. He can be reached at [mkwfreeman@yahoo.com](mailto:mkwfreeman@yahoo.com).