

The Journey (A)

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By Douglas Whiting

Sunny seaside hill in range of same
Red apple on full fruited tree
field of more
We reach toward neighboring sea
Brown unbroken barks
Breezes fogs gulls suns
Sea air rolling off waves and hills
Bringing me

I know how the heat of the sun feels on me. I know what it feels like to grow and stretch under and on this wind/sun blend. To have ants scurry and search for scraps and cracks along my skin. I became here from the selfsame blend of sun and wind. Warmed by the rays. Cooled by the fog, and danced, buoyed by the never ending shifts of pressure. The cool ocean of air moves. I dance.

The arm the purple orange
the fat the round the red
the whole world
I dance on my own.
I am full of sun's life.

And I know what that smell is. That is the smell of lunch. Burnt beans and tortillas and aguacates. Dented, worn jugs of cheap plastic holding precious water. Bitter smell of restaurant fat and sandwiches cooked in it. The food, the workers, their clothes, the dust and the bags.

My lunch is another kind, for a meal, too, am I. And for a meal, I too, will have water. But where they have their sandwiches and salads, I will add only the sun and the air.

The flies mask the sounds of the day. They wake much later than us, and sleep long before night. But in between, they are legion and their sway is wide. Nothing can be done without their accompaniment.

The flies are nothing, though, compared to the bees. Without the bees, I would never have...become. I remember the bee that...made me. The sun was warm and free of the foggy morning. The bees were all around. One landed on me and it happened. I started. After that I grew and the petals shrank to a tiny memory. And I was this thing that grew. And grew. I began to think I would outreach the sky, but I finally slowed and stayed. My hard green became mottled with red. I softened and sweetened.

Now, as I sit fat, ready, and waiting, all these things begin: The flies are joined with a hundred other flying creatures, many of whom follow the chemical toilet on wheels that has been nearing us for a week as it made its rounds through the field. The smells of the men multiplied beyond measure, as do the sounds. Motors, tools, cell-phones and chirping walkie-talkies, people and their voices. Cursing and joking, singing and yelling, barking out orders, crying with laughter. They had been competing with the gulls for weeks and now had stage front and center. The ground fairly shook with them.

The crew was twenty in number, with two teams of ten. Each team had ladders to go up and several tarps that were spread beneath each tree. With ladders in place and tarps down, the picking began. The five on each ladder performed a dance where all but one carried a large duffle bag of heavily reinforced fabric, wide open at the top and cinched closed at the bottom with wire, to hold and then release us, the picked cargo. All motion was in steering us to the crates and the truck. Pick the tree. Shake the tree. Clear the tarp. One Two Three. Try to keep the primo fruit separated from the bulk. Bulk fruit would likely be used for juices, freezing and baby food and was of lower value.

The primo was the gold. Sellers could get up to a dollar a piece in the big city stores. And so the dance. Hold the ladder while another goes up. Take his full bag for an empty. Pass off the ladder and take the bag to the cart. Empty into the bins and head back to the tree. Shake the last few branches, sort and bag the dregs. Haul it all over eighteen feet to the next tree. Lather, rinse, repeat. A good team, working full tilt, can clear a hundred trees in a day, or over 30 tons of fruit.

I know what it feels like to have the tree next to me shaking. Too know that soon it would be me. But what else?

When I had just became, there was a strange day where the sun went dark before it went down. It was tall overhead, and it just...started...going away. Like some dark sun was sliding in front of it. Very slowly, a dark curved line marking its progress, this new, black-red disk, superimposed itself upon the sun and upon us. For a long, long while, the regular rhythm of the days was interrupted in some deep, tidal way. And like the ebb and the flow of the sea, the equation balanced, equilibrium returned. It was an awesome display of offhand power. I gazed at the replaced sun with wonder. This same shift I now felt as my space was nearly broached by the eager hands.

I have a memory of skydiving. Don't ask me how this is possible. I am, after all, a Fuji apple. But I have the recollection. The primary element is one of peace and astonishment as I drift under my sail. But between out of the plane and rapture is a void. My instructors say it is common, especially with first time jumpers. The mind is not able to take in the flood of information arriving with the leap from the plane. It is too much. With no comparable set of experiences, a system overload occurs, the jumper loses awareness, oftentimes "coming-to" to find his parachute completely deployed and the plane gone out of sound and sight.

I now had the same sort of void in my memory. I recall the crew getting closer and closer; the sounds and the smells they delivered. Then, just as the first ladder is tipped my way - a break - a void of memory - a vacuum. Nothing. Overload. The hold.

I felt I had been robbed. My mind tampered with by vandals. Who had taken my memory? How had I arrived inside the bowels of this huge shipping vessel? How did I get from the branch to the bag? I checked for injury and found none. No bruises, cuts, or tears. Yet I am coated in somebody's slime. Somebody got hurt. This is of only marginal interest to me. Though I like to think of myself as a spiritual creation first and a morally guided entity, my empathy is not the sort to make me search out the injured party. I am all about self-preservation, and I seem fine.

And pissed.

Pissed that I had missed the show. Whatever bravery I had tried to muster in the moments before my harvest: GONE. Whatever terrors along the way from branch to bag to cart to truck to ship: GONE. Recollections. Savoring. Learning from? Tales to tell my grandfruit? All gone.

I spent so much time being angry I almost missed the trip.

The produce aisle was the first time I felt really crushed. Even though I technically have no nose, it was the odors that trapped me at the Albertson's. Nine different kinds of apples from nine different points on the compass, with nine different malodorous trails, including poisonous smelling stuff like insecticides, growth stimulating hormones and fertilizers. Pile me up on a high

table in a cold, giant warehouse with cold light, air conditioning, and another nine different chemicals for keeping the floors clean. Jammed into the sack at the orchard with a bushel full I never felt so out of room, or out of place. I flew into a plastic bag, and rode the cart to the place where I was exchanged for...money, they say it is called? I dunno. Anyway, I was moving! And wide awake, this time.

The ride in the car stirred old memories, maybe from the trip north. The house had some of the scents of the store, and a few from the fields. It was a warm home and seemed to be a place of gestation and birth. After I was sliced and served - an oddly painless process - I was eaten and seemed to sort of spread out all over the area. Part of me was traveling in the bodies of the two humans who ate me, part on the knife blade, part was in the trimmed core quarters that were added to a large, familiar smelling compost pile out back, and a still deeper part was in the seven dark maroon seeds that I had been cradling since long before the workers collected me on the farm.

I know how it feels to swell on a branch in Chile. And now, a new sensation: many times the sun has set and risen here on my compost home, and with the passing of time, a new chorus of voices is stirring in me. I know how it feels to sprout. I know how it feels to take on water, swell, crack and send out a new tendril into the earth.

Don't you?

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