

On Being a Tree

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Photograph: Becoming as a Tree, Berkeley, California, 2012 | www.mariamman.net/

The landscape around the old mining town of Julian offers more surprises than just precious metals. Last year I drove to the Anza-Borrego area for a one night camping trip at the Tamarisk Campground. The freeways out of LA with so much traffic had at last become a highway, a throughway, and eventually just a road. Like the traffic I had gradually calmed down and eventually I was alone on the road. There is a moment in the landscape where the climate zone shifts from fertile foothills with live oaks and apple trees to the desolate emptiness of the desert, beyond the reach of the clouds. The experience was of me driving out of this world, out of the pseudo-reality of internet and news cycles, out of myself, even, into a place where time no longer applies. So I stopped the car and stepped out of the fog into this other world. The dirt and the rocks, withered weeds and the relentless sun, a gentle breeze, it all seemed very real, but I felt it as through a veil. Into a place without sound, without movement, unto a theater stage, but more real than reality, that is: not into another place on the map, but in a parallel world, untethered from the one where I have a job, an address, a name. I felt giddy as well as anxious, both closer to myself and more removed. A mystic experience, perhaps, a derealization, I guess. I felt grateful for the opportunity to feel something, anything, that deep. The self dissolved yet was also found. Words are tricky here, as I want to be clear about what I felt, yet words don't seem designed for this. I leaked out of my head and into this vast deserted space. Into the granite mountains (it might have been North Pinyon Mt). On another day I might say that I wanted to be on that mountain; not to conquer it, but to find something. Ostensibly myself, but that is too literal. No sooner did I feel the longing or I experienced already being there (as we do in dreams) and I recognized that mountain was myself.

Only later I realized that these are old lands; native Americans have imbued these spaces with meaning long before me. Long before industrious colonizers started digging for precious gold native Americans sang their souls into the desert. Songs that opened up the earth in another way, that made the mountains whisper in response and anyone who cares can still hear it. Listen carefully, for much depend on these songs when you wander into the desert.

The modern winding mountain roads in the foothills closer to the ocean have given me many pleasurable hours of driving during various trips since that day. Any city dweller can appreciate that landscape from the safety of their tin can. The vistas, the roadside fruit stands, the variety of mountains. All perfectly lovely. Last week I drove to Paso Picacho campground and there suddenly a view opened up beyond the fertile foothills into the desert and a looming barren peak rose in the desert. I blurted out: 'Well look at you! You are gorgeous!' The area is inviting to me as a hiker, despite snakes and tarantulas. Though hiking there in this heat would be very dangerous. I am sentimental, not careless.

Hiking is negotiating heat and scree, chaparral and boulders. Elevation can make it challenging to breath, and then endless vistas from a peak can also take your breath away.

Then both the needs of the body and needs of the soul make you gasp for air. These are places of transformation, portals into this parallel world which is so precious to me. A few weeks ago I hiked Hot Springs Mountain, on land owned by Cahuilla and Cupeño Indians. I was traced silently by a large golden eagle right after I picked up a feather of one. As if the eagle connected via the feather. I recalled how eagles supposedly bring prayers to heaven, but I had no prayer; I could not think of a desire, a need which the divine needed fixing. And reflecting on this absence of want my perspective slowly shifted. As if the eagle brought a prayer down to me - and God's prayers are blessings. I felt seen by the eagle, seen by nature, seen by God. I experienced myself not as incomplete, as lonely, a work in progress, but as grounded and completed. And with the self completed, I fell out off my body and dissolved into the landscape.

I understand that depersonalizations and derealizations are described as terrifying by mental patients. To me, these are glorious moments that help me to live, that make life worthwhile. Perhaps my experiences should be described by other words, as they are perhaps a bit frightening, but surely not terrifying. Frightening only like jumping in the deep end of a cold pool. Giving up control, not losing it.

As I came back to the campgrounds at the trailhead, deserted because of COVID-19, I lingered in the gentle breeze and the shadows of ancient oak trees and felt light and giddy, and quiet, and fragile. These gentle giants insisted on my gentleness in turn by not being too loud, too sudden in movements. I cherished the canopy of shade in the summer heat, the solitude, the quiet. The nearest paved road is miles from there, but an even deeper quiet was here. I sure hope to spend a night there after the pandemic. It might get crowded then, which seems so unimaginable now.

And there are always the trees. I have been drawing so many last year. Recently a bit less, unfortunately. Last week I hiked Cuyamaca Peak, apparently a Spanish bastardization of a native phrase meaning 'behind the clouds'. Which is descriptive of the foothills. The peak itself has been violated by communication towers. But there were still stretches of rocky trail, covered in various shades of red and burned umber, sienna and ochre. An almost theatrical landscape, with views of rolling hills covered in yellowed grass (Naples yellow!) and a few clusters of trees, with the Cuyamaca lake below (a nice little lake from a distance, but alas a somewhat dilapidated tourist attraction hawking its apple pie). The hike was mostly nice. I feel comfortable in that world, and that snake was just another critter I was happy to share space with. I spend the afternoon reading and napping in a hammock at the campground, sipping a cold beer from the cool box.

Next morning I read some more about theories of consciousness and only got serious about packing once it got hot. Driving back through Julian, I recognized parts of the road, and even that tree where I had stopped at last year to take a picture.

So many trees I wanted me to stop and draw them and pay my respect to. My tree drawings are about psychology. I have said: they are not portraits of trees per se, nor botanical studies, but placeholders of human experiences. That will do for an artist statement. But as I was driving through the heat, I saw so many trees which called out to me, that I lost the distinction between them as placeholders in a game I had bought up, and me. At first individual trees tickled my curiosity, and I wanted to draw. Then more and more trees seemed to be possible expressions of parts of my existence. I was surrounded by trees which all expressed me. They became me, and I slipped into them. I was engulfed by a forest of souls and I just slipped in. There was no distinction between them and me, their soul and mine. I got a sense of their time scale and their slow movements, a sense of them being at peace with being there. I felt grateful, at peace, and I smiled.

The book on consciousness has a chapter on altered states of consciousness, I realized that somewhere between hypnosis, drug induced hallucinations and religious experiences, my morning was filled with what was labeled as a mystical experience. A footnote in a chapter of leftovers on consciousness. I wasn't going to fight that, didn't feel the need to do that. To have these experiences is what moves me, sustains me. I am not so worried about what label to use here or what pretend-knowledge can be derived from it. The mystic experience is itself enough, doesn't need justification through facts or ontological treatises. I was deeply grateful for the experience, and was also hopeful that after what seems like a long period of depression my soul is alive again, was capable of these adventures. My soul might have a future, might be eager to do things. Like being a tree.

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California Live Oak near Mt Palomar. Graphite on Paper, 2020 | www.gershom-art.com