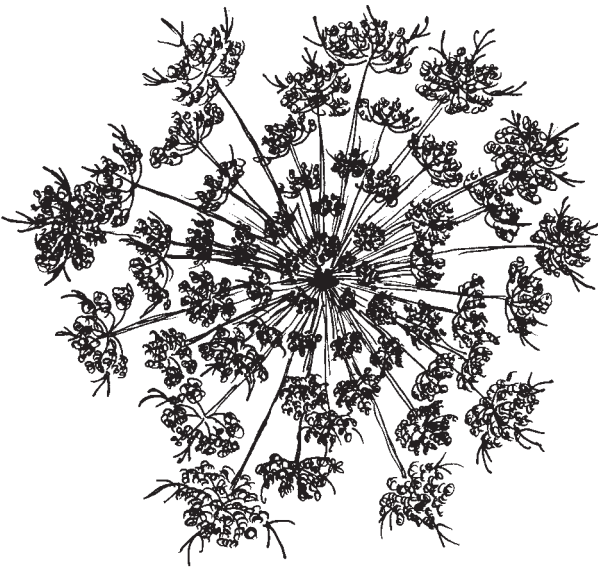


The Tangled Bank

WRITINGS FROM *Orion*

Robert Michael Pyle



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Leaves That Speak

I happen to live in a paradise of leaves. On the whole, the Pacific Northwest, and the maritime rainforest in particular, photosynthesize more with cedar scales and the needles of firs, hemlocks, and spruces than with full-blown, deciduous leaves. But this particular place is an old Swedish farmstead founded by an immigrant, by way of the Midwest, who cared more for horticulture than agriculture. Eventually he returned to Sweden, leaving the farm to dairy-herding descendants for the next seventy years until I came along. But before he sailed home, H. P. Ahlberg planted and nurtured a remarkable array of European, Midwestern, and native trees and shrubs, several of which are now the largest of their species in the state. The by-product of this fine arboreal legacy is a floristic melting pot of trees from many places reproducing together, a bastard ecosystem that coincidentally spawns, each spring, this paradise of leaves.

As I write, the furrowed broad blades of European hornbeams press toward my study window, overhung by the downy pink unfurlings of the greatest red oak's leaves. The forest beyond grows daily more clogged with the many-greened vanes of English oaks, Swedish birches, and adventitious, exotic sycamore-maples, all growing in company with each native conifer that might be expected on such a site. Along the margins, the freshest spring greens of all express jointly in the luscious tissues of Eurasian beeches and native vine maples and the new growth of Sitka spruces. Then of course there is the panoply of form and verdure of the field layer, the understory, the ground plants, and the chaotic accumulations of more than a century of gardens.

When the people who were here before the Europeans first confronted bibles, books, and treaties, they could see that these strange new objects held great power for their colonial owners. Some of them referred to the black-marked pages as "talking leaves," since they seemed to mediate speech as they turned in the wind like the leaves of trees. Sequoyah, a young

Cherokee man, determined to provide his people with this power, which seemed to come from “making words fast on paper,” as he put it. Sequoyah proceeded to develop the only complete alphabet ever constructed by an individual. For this mammoth achievement, which resulted in rapid literacy among the Cherokee people, Sequoyah’s name was attached to the genus of the most massive trees in the world, the giant redwoods—trees whose own leaves are merely tight, overlapping scales.

The metaphor of the speaking leaf is a powerful one. Yet in our quickness to adopt comparisons, we sometimes forget to honor the original image upon which clever metaphors are built. While ours is a culture dramatically affected by printed pages every day—prattling pixels on our computer screens notwithstanding—we spend relatively little time attending to the actual objects: real leaves. Oh, we rake them, burn them, and mulch them in the fall; stand in their shade in torrid summertime; and watch our philodendrons twine around our windowframes, if we remember to water them. But how often do we go deliberately out-of-doors, especially to listen to the leaves speak?

My odd homeplace, rich as it is in botanical contradiction and the happenstance of growth, differs little from any other vegetated zone in the complexity of its conversation. The textures, flavors of green, progressions of season (those hornbeams will be October gold, those oaks, fragrant red rags), are only the accents. The leaves speak in the dialects of warblers, the whispers and growls of the wind, the minings, riddlings, and stridulation of insects, and the chemistry of their own compact with sun, soil, and water. The point is that wherever leaf comes from bud, grows, falls, and goes to ground, the colloquy is endless and endlessly nuanced; yet seldom really heard.

Sequoyah’s achievement was indeed large, and the dedication of redwoods in his name suitably proportioned—though he never saw such trees. Nor did his honor reach worldwide: in Britain, *Sequoiadendron gigantea* trees are known as Wellingtonias, sharing the honor of being named after Lord Wellington with rubber boots. But I doubt Sequoyah would care. Besides inventing an alphabet, he knew a language that few of the owners of the new talking leaves could hear. Each of us could strive to learn that

Leaves That Speak

lingo, could go forth among the silent plants, to listen, to hear what we will, and to learn from the old talking leaves. Only then can the black-marked pages of books, of magazines, of this journal, find their fuller meaning.

Autumn 1997

In the Eyes of . . .

Yesterday, at the old brick-bound pond that now serves as the compost pit, I met two slugs. One, a big, splotchy banana, was suitably arrayed on a banana peel. The other, a European brown, browsed a corncob. While the two imposing animals made an impressive molluskan tableau, I had to admit that I took more pleasure in the *Ariolimax columbiana* than I did in *Arion ater*. The olive banana slug is the more attractive of the two, and an important native species; while the brown slug, stubby and dull, is an alien species that represents a serious challenge to maritime gardens like ours.

That night, when I spotted a six-inch leopard slug at the cat's dish, my easy distinction between "good slugs" and "bad slugs" became conflicted: *Limax maximus* is another introduced slug, a serious competitor for pansies or lettuce, potted plants and potatoes. But it is also wonderfully handsome, long, sleek, slate-on-gray spotted and striped like our silver tabby, Virga. Too, this species exhibits a fabulous pairing: the hermaphroditic creatures dangle from a slime strand sometimes ten or twelve feet long to copulate and trade sperms. Once I begged Thea to let me watch an enamored pair copulate to completion before being frozen for the compost along with the gallons of browns and pints of little milkies. But then I decided to rescue them to watch their post-coital behavior, and they later escaped from the terrarium. Their kind has been much more numerous ever since. My mercy—or curiosity—had an unpopular outcome, despite the undeniable comeliness of the leopard slug.

So where lies beauty in nature? Clearly, in a place both focused and refracted by our own biases. Most of us would admire an alpine meadow rife with wildflowers or a resplendent quetzal. But do we all see what George Orwell saw in the common toad, or what I see in a slug? I know very well otherwise, just as I don't find each slug as appealing as the next. We all know the "Eew, gross!" emitted by teenagers who can't grasp their teacher's delight in a particular insect or slime mold. It seems we discriminate wildly in our attraction to the natural world and its elements.

Two experiences abroad underlined with permanent ink just how relative human fascination can be. Both incidents arose from field trips during meetings of IUCN (the International Union for Conservation of Nature). The first was a general assembly held in Ashkhabad, the colorful capital of Turkmenia. I was confronted in the hotel lobby by General Abraham Joffe, a major figure in the Six-Day War and head of the Israeli Nature Reserves Authority. A large, gruff man, the general had just come back from a cruise on the Kara Kum Canal, a desert aqueduct that flows toward the Caspian Sea. "How was it?" I asked.

"All shit and frustration!" the general fumed. "Bad Russian beer, stuffy boat, and nothing to see but camels and endless reeds!" I told him about my trip to the Repetek Desert Reserve. We were to have sought the great gerbil on camelback, but plied the dunes in Soviet half-tracks instead, and never glimpsed the rare endemic rodent. "And tomorrow?" he asked. The Kara Kum Canal, I told him. "Ah!" he burst out. "It is a wonderful trip! You will love it."

And in fact, I did. General Joffe was right about the beer. But squeezed onto the bow with a Scot and an Egyptian, I found the Asian air off the water refreshing; the camels, coming down to drink between mountains of cotton, completely novel. The tall reeds indeed blocked much of the view, but they also supported a constant cross-channel traffic of brilliant blue-cheeked bee-eaters. And at lunch, in a native stand of tamarisk (a thirsty exotic in the American Southwest), I enjoyed my first face-to-face Asian monarch butterfly, *Danaus chrysippus*. What was "all shit and frustration" to the general had been a marvelous day out for me.

The other eye opener took place in Kenya, following a meeting at Tsavo National Park. Touring parks and reserves afterward, our vanload called at Samburu National Park to try to see leopards, reticulated giraffes, and Grevy's zebras. As well as the great naturalists Sir Peter Scott and Kai Curry-Lindahl, our contingent included two British wildlife officials who had been largely responsible for the inclusion of the rare, slender-striped zebra on CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species). Naturally, Jane and John wanted to see "their" zebra in the wild. The leopard and the giraffe obliged, along with bustards, rollers, and gerenuks. But the much-sought equid remained aloof. Finally, in a tropical rain like

an overturned bath, there stood our quarry—a single Grevy's zebra, abject in the deluge.

A few days later, passing back south through the Great Rift Valley, we stopped for gas. The Pope had been to Nairobi. People from all over Kenya had flocked to see him and were returning home. John Rudge, one of the Brits, was pumping petrol when he was descended upon by a large flapping nun in an excited state. "Oh!" she cried, hoping to share her rapture with a fellow European. "Have you been to see the Holy Father too?"

"Why, no," said John, equally excited by his recent audience. "We've been to see Grevy's zebra!" The sister's mouth dropped in absolute incomprehension.

Around here, a rabies scare has sent the populace scurrying for shots if they so much as spot a bat in their bedroom. As I netted a pretty little pipistrelle in my study today and turned it back out, I smiled wryly: how quickly caution becomes paranoia, and ignorance, revulsion. Of course, the consequences for bats have not been funny.

As members of the community of life, perhaps it should be our goal to find nothing in nature ugly; to revere the basic beauty of each living thing; to erect no hierarchies in our appreciation. But we are not made like that. When it comes to landscapes, plants, and animals, and certainly one another, we are creatures of strong preference. We are the beholders, and our eyes are ever crossed by our personal aesthetic, bias, fears, and favorites. It is good to recognize this. And perhaps it is enough always to try to expand our range of tolerance for the "ugly," even unto admiration; to seek the elegance of fitness in all things; and to realize finally, as Darwin said, that the tangled bank is clothed with "endless forms, most beautiful and most wonderful."

Winter 1997/98