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The Tree Beyond Imagining

Seeing is not believing. Any tree "acting out" in such hog-wild and crazy ways—or so I used to feel—can't be truly arboreal. This one thinks it's a mad dog. Here's another trying to prove chaos might be a conifer. Yet another so riven, so warped, it looks like self-knowledge. Or is it just pretending to summarize World History? During our first acquaintance I ran across examples so willful and creaturely that my glance often boggled at believing what it saw. How could a juniper, I would ask myself, be throwing a fit?

Botanically speaking, of course, a juniper can't be perverse. As a dirt-common member of the cypress family it can at worst be only an oddball conifer. Other arboreal species may echo states we recognize in ourselves, but none I've run across seems so moody and emotional. Lifelong, we humans conceal our intimate histories, even while a version of them gets slowly written into our faces. This tree's neurotic past, however, appears at a glance, visible through no matter how many feigned identities. And though cone-bearing species may be tricky to tell, one from another, the one I have in mind is easy.

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Beneath erstwhile needles that evolution has smoothed like snakeskin, and under cones shrunk to beads, a greyish-brown welter of wood appears. If it looks like tensed muscle and sinew, that illusion and the preceding traits do add up to generic juniper. But if the bark is shaggy as hanks of unbraided sisal; if the absolutely motionless trunk seems to be groveling in frenzy or twisting like smoke; and if in even the best-behaved specimen you see branches that mime devastation having a temper tantrum, you know you're not only dealing with *Juniperus osteosperma*, Utah juniper. You know the example before your eyes is a special case: a high-desert strain of that species, one growing where it ought not to try.

If animal, such trees would be camels, and almost are. But what camel drinks sand? Hence the near-incredulity. On a sun-spattered, all-but-windless morning in Utah, for example, you stand smack in front of one, gasping at its self-tormented trunk fed by red sand; or fed by far less, a crevice in rock which that sand once was. Yet on naked stone those knotted roots have knuckled down to sipping a trunk and limbs into life. From a low writhing branch you might strip off a fibrous dangle of bark the creature seems clad in, all threads and shreds and tatters, like a beggar's rags. Obviously the bark's stringy hairs are real. Just as clearly, its tree *as tree* lacks full credibility. The riven trunk, the gesturing limbs in every style of passion, cannot be anything Nature approves, much less intended. So you're bound to wonder about botanical vandalism. Novice-like, you stand there in southeastern Utah just staring and shaking your head: "Surely someone has *done* this?"

Fact is, among Utah juniper of the high desert, flabbergasting abnormality is the norm only among individual trees defying limitation. Lots of rock, lots of sand, lots of wind, and very little rain can make juniper stands growing there, at the far end of possibility, an outpost of marginalized eccentrics. Not the whole species. No, the stressed-out examples I'm talking about, the

trees you can see without quite believing, grow where they almost can't—at their ecological edge. We think timberline a question of mountain altitudes beyond which no conifer can rise. For desert junipers timberline may be a limit drawn in the sand, not by rarefied air but by rain, lower than which there is none, or as good as.

Thus, it's by taking root at the threshold of impossibility that this most irrational tree grows against all reason. A Utah juniper at the edge of its range is either so distraught or far gone in perplexity it can't make sense of itself. "Do you suppose I'd have grown this way," it seems to snort, "if I'd had any idea what I was getting into?"

Although the specimens I admire would indeed make more interesting museum pieces than many a prize now under glass, I realize that bringing just the tree inside wouldn't do. You'd need to bring along with it the thin air of its Southwestern plateau. You'd need too that powdery fine sand red as rust, rippled dunes sparsely tufted with greasewood or Indian rice grass. And skies blue as chicory petals. Floating puffs of cumulus too, their undersides tinted by the red miles beneath them. Birdsong as well; rock wrens, horned larks, mockingbirds, vireos, piñon jays. And scrub jays, cowbirds, towhees. And vultures. Above all, you'd need desert sun with its glare, its incomparable clarities, deep shadows; its refusal to lie.

On the Grand Canyon's south rim, I have spent hours of clear weather, more intrigued by its pygmy forest of piñons and junipers than by the view. Happily roving among outcrops of chert and Kaibab limestone, well-content at being scolded by piñon jays, I have come upon deep depression and recovery—both alive in the same tree. How had it grown so depressed, I wondered. Through wrestling for its own affections? Or by being too much a shape-shifter ever to tire of dilemma? And how had recovery and relapse grown from the same trunk? Because its

moods, like ours, don't believe in each other? There I found trees giving instructions in bravery. Found them more typical than not. To look at such lives and say "struggle" doesn't touch it.

During that same afternoon I stumbled upon a juniper who had once been a witch and couldn't quit practicing; then found countless others its bad example converted. As if they had used witchery to request eternal life and youth, they seemed the picture of what happens when only the first half is granted. The picture of how losers look when they win.

There amid the deranged and violent I also discovered "good" trees battenning on the same rimrock; witnessed all the living optimism, all the hurt joy that can scuffle upward out of rock and suffer open. In wresting a living from limestone's long famines of rain they must sometimes have felt that enduring there was next to impossible, yet endure they had.

We admire most, I suppose, those virtues our souls utterly lack, or need more of. Even after twenty years, therefore, I'm apt to be spellbound by the drama of a particular trunk and limbs. Feeling sympathy and awe before such pure indomitability costs nothing, I know, because I've often stood that way a longish while, unaware that I was; as if hoping a touch of juniper courage might agree to come with me.