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October 1999

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Tom Lynch

A Black Range Christmas Tree

BARE HILLS OF SULLEN SAND and scraggly creosote shrubs trundle by the van window. At intervals a yucca, bolt upright, breaks the monotony. The jagged slopes of the volcanic Doña Anas, astonishingly steep, drift along the near horizon. Eastward, vast treeless plains and low barren hills stretch away to the distant San Andres range.

Driving north from Las Cruces on I-25, one departs the relative green of the sheltered town of tree-lined streets and enters stark desert. The view while skirting the southern edge of the Jornada del Muerto is hardly promising for an expedition, like ours, in search of a Christmas tree.

But Margaret and I and our two small boys, Cody (6) and Riley (2), insist on this family quest to wrest a Christmas tree from the wilds. A dayglow orange permit and an instruction sheet from the



Gila National Forest lie on the dash. A saw and axe rest under the rear seat. Our border collie, Chloe, hunkers on the van floor, anticipating she knows not what, but anything is better than another dull, dull day around the house with only a neighbor's cat in the yard to enliven the

boredom. Cody is busy munching his way through a pack of Ritz, passing a crisp wafer from time to time to his little brother. Strapped in, little else to do, the boys eat better while travelling than they ever do at home. At their insistence, this and every time we pile into the van lately, Los Lobos plays from the stereo, "La Pistola y el Corazon." For some reason they've settled on this as the only proper travelling music; and truly, while I've grown a bit weary of the repetition, it's a fine soundscape to accompany a drive through the southern New Mexico landscape.

To our left, the Rio Grande flows beneath the base of Robledo Mountain, named for a soldier with the Oñate expedition of 1598 who died and was buried nearby. Passing through here, Oñate followed the Rio northward. He established himself first near Yunque-Yunque Pueblo, which he renamed San Juan, and then at San Gabriel. In a few years Oñate would be discredited and the new Governor, Don Pedro de Peralta, would move the capital to a new location, La Villa Real de la Santa Fe de San Francisco, more conveniently known today as Santa Fe. But, as the ox-drawn course of empire plodded past him, Ensign Robledo lay here, enseeded in the rocky soil, flesh transmuted to bacteria and worm and dung beetle and mesquite and cottonwood and creosote and acacia and rattler and scurrying javelina and blossoming miraculous orange prickly pear, energy diffusing, nutrients cycling, and bones calcifying cell by cell... a transfiguration undreamt of in Santa Fe. He's commemorated, if not very much remembered, by his name on this peak.

As we roll northward, smoke lifts

from fields in the valley, the burning of ungathered pecan shells, broken branches, withered chile stems, and other assorted agricultural waste. A familiar archetype: the old year goes up in smoke, making way for the new. Savory haze drifts toward the summit of Robledo and adjacent Lookout Mountain. Lookout, as its name suggests, was used by the cavalry as a perch from which to peer out for signs of the Apaches who resented and repelled the incursions of first Spaniards and then white eyes into their homeland. Lookout Mountain contained one of many heliographic stations in southern New Mexico during the late 19th century. These stations flickered the sun off mirrors to signal morse code messages from fort to fort and to warn townfolk of the approach of the disgruntled Apaches. They were instrumental in the eventual defeat of the Apaches and the capture of Geronimo.

For centuries travellers through here were at risk. The journals of those who survived, as they recount this passage, are full of forboding. In 1847 young English traveller Frederick Ruxton recorded his succinct anxiety: "I was now at the edge of this formidable desert, where along the road the bleaching bones of mules and horses testify to the dangers to be apprehended from the want of water and pasture, and many human bones likewise tell their tale of Indian slaughter and assault." The town of Las Cruces is named for the crosses planted upon some of those who perished.

These days, our sympathies are all with the Apaches, valiant defenders of their homes from imperial incursions. But 120 years ago a family of white eyes such as us would have been at great risk here.

Cruise-control set, driving lazily along, I fantasize that we're in a buckboard rolling dustily down the Chihuahua Trail...husband, wife, two blue-eyed boys, and a sheepdog trotting behind. A band of Apache warriors rides from beyond that ridge, horses wheeling among the yuccas. As they're squinting down the barrels of their pilfered Sharps rifles, I shout, "Hey, wait! We're *good* white people. Viva Geronimo! Viva Victorio! My wife here," I gesture, "she teaches *new* western history. Me, I teach lots of Native writers in my classes (well no, no Apaches it's true, but next semester, I promise). The boys here, they like frybread and powwows . . ." but the fantasy begins to fade about the time the first shots crack, crack, crack, and echo.

Today, we pass descansos, small white crosses adorned with faded plastic roses, marking where some more recent travelers met their maker, not arrow and bullet-riddled but bloodied in a heap of groaning metal. As we speed by I try to read the inscriptions, but 75 mph allows little time to squint and decipher the letters. Some are long-neglected, others appear carefully tended, but each encodes a tale of a life unexpectedly ended.

The highway edges the valley above Hatch. Bare fields suggest that by now the chiles have all been harvested. I'm reminded of Jimmy Baca's fine poem "Green Chile," which honors the fields south of Albuquerque.

*All over New Mexico, sunburned men and
women
drive rickety trucks stuffed with gunny-sacks
of green chile, from Belen, Veguita,
Willard, Estancia,
San Antonio y Socorro, from fields*

*to roadside stands, you see them roasting green
chile
in screen-sided homemade barrels, and for a
dollar a bag,
we relive this old, beautiful ritual again and
again.*

Baca's roots tangle deep in the boulders of the Manzano Mountains; mine barely break the soil here. But if love of chiles counts for anything, at least a few of my gringo genes, those governing taste, seem to be at home here. Raising a fork-full of roasted green chile to lips, with piquant anticipation, I belong—if anywhere—here. Is there, indeed, a more be-here-now experience than the strident surge of serrano and jalapeño from taste bud to cerebellum?

Baca has, though, in his northern bias, forgotten the famous chiles of Hatch, the world chile capital whose highway exit we are now passing. For his oversight, he should be sentenced to read his poem at the Hatch Chile Festival, Labor Day weekend, when the red chile queen, and, yes, the green chile queen (adorned in appropriately colored satin gowns) receive their sashes and crowns under the hot and dusty New Mexico sun. To people of suitably refined taste it is far better to be the chile queen of Hatch (red or green) than to be Miss America herself.

The boys, too young yet to savor the spicy chile, still recall with pleasure our visit to the festival last year. And what is it they remember? Ah, snowcones under the dusty tents, sugary red juice dripping down arms and licked from chins, and the aura, if not the giddy capsaicin singe, of roasted chiles. Margaret, on the other hand, less enamored of piquancy and recalling the crowds, the heat, the

relentlessly bright sun, and the bitter taste of alkali dust in every breath, vows never to return.

As we skirt the sandy red hills near Hatch, the Black Range far to the northwest slides into display. Tinted with the green of juniper, piñon, ponderosa, Doug fir, and spruce as it rises to 9,000 feet, the Black Range does indeed show dark, if not quite black, above the tawny rangeland. Up there is where we'll find our tree.

Due south of the Black Range rises the hooked summit of Cooke's Peak. This prominent pinnacle, with springs, a fort, and a stage stop nearby, played a major role in the Apache wars, but when I see it I think of Sharman Apt Russell's tale of giving birth in the adobe house she and her husband built in the Mimbres Valley. As evening approached during her long and exhausting labor, she lay down to rest. "From the windows," she writes, "I could see the tip of Cooke's Peak turning to lavender. The hills below were silhouetted against a royal blue in which a single planet shone." This is the image I associate with Cooke's Peak—not as the locale of blood-soaked stones, scalped skulls, and fierce death, though it surely did witness such, but as the lovely peak glimpsed in a moment of respite by a woman in childbirth. Even if the peak itself lingers through time with seeming indifference, each new tale alters its delineaments in our mind's landscape.

The highway crosses the Rio below

Caballo Reservoir. As we cross the bridge, tire-sound on the road louder for a moment, I glance upstream. A line of cottonwoods stands heavy with withered but unfallen leaves. A few slim streams of water, the fabled Rio Grande, braid sinuously through brown sand. Caballo Dam and the one above it, Elephant Butte, close their gates this time of year when no farmers are irrigating. The reservoirs slowly fill until spring irrigation season while the Rio drops to a trickle. The flow out of Caballo

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reservoir is sometimes reduced to two cubic feet a second, not nearly enough to sustain river life.

New Mexico grants water rights according to the laws of prior appropriation and beneficial use. Of course neither the river nor its creatures had lawyers involved when these terms were drawn up, so the river itself, while surely prior to all other claims, and at least as beneficial as any, can run dry, its fish gasping for oxygen, while irrigation ditches gurgle through thirsty fields. As Susan Tweit laconically notes, "in New Mexico, rivers, streams, and other free-flowing waters have no rights to their own water." The consequence is that most of the native fish in the Rio Grande are either extinct or close to it. The Rio Grande Silvery Minnow, which inhabits the middle Rio from Cochiti Dam (N. of Albuquerque) to Elephant Butte Reservoir (N. of Truth or Consequences), was listed as an endangered species in July 1994. The Silvery

Minnow has been reduced to 5 percent of its historic range. It is completely gone from the Pecos. Drawing on the provisions of the Endangered Species Act and challenging the traditional way water is allocated in the Southwest, a recent court decision ruled that middle Rio Grande streamflows must be maintained at a level adequate to protect the Silvery Minnow.

We leave the highway and river channel, turn west onto a wide plain. Somewhere near here Cormac McCarthy ends *The Crossing* with Billy Parham wakened by the false dawn of the first atomic blast. That flash occurred about 60 miles north-northeast, where the plain of the Jornada del Muerto lies in the shadow of the Sierra Oscura, a location that almost seems picked for the apt poetry of its names. When we drive through this territory, I always sense, sometimes below the level of consciousness, the resonance of that site. A sort of magnetic field emanates, binding the lives of each of us in a common trajectory like charged particles through the atomic age.

On both sides of the road a creosote conformity stretches almost as far as the eye can see, dotted here and there with manufactured housing, late 20th-century America's contribution to world architecture. We climb a rise; a bit of grass appears under the creosote. We're transitioning through the first of a number of life zones. My Biotic Communities of the Southwest map changes here from a tan (chihuahuan desert scrub) that tints the Rio valley and lowlands, to a brown (semi-desert grassland). As we traverse the map it will change to a chocolate (great basin grassland) and then quickly to lavender (great basin

conifer), blue (petran montane conifer forest), and summit out on purple (petran subalpine conifer forest). That's as high as the Black Range gets, no alpine tundra.

We pass the inconspicuous sign for the Ladder Ranch, one of Ted Turner's many holdings in New Mexico. The sign's humble scale belies the prodigious scope of Turner's activity. With 1.35 million acres, Turner is the largest private landowner in the U.S. The Ladder Ranch is 155,000 acres, and the Armendaris, across the Rio behind us to the east, is 360,000. Up north, Turner's Vermejo Park Ranch, at 580,000 acres, is bigger than the two combined. Turner's trying to restore some of the wild that has been decimated in the West, raising bison instead of cattle, gathering wolves for later release, replacing invasive weeds with endemics. He's even working towards a release of condors. (A fantasy flits through my mind. If, when I die, condors soar these turquoise skies, I can imagine a sky burial like they have in Tibet. My body left on some high drear ridge for the birds of prey to feast upon, sustaining them as they drift through blue air.)

Turner's project is a great experiment, too bad he comes with so much baggage: liberal (so they say) media mogul, husband to "Hanoi Jane" (not my bias), owner of, ugh, the Atlanta Braves (my bias), and arrogant as only the super-rich can afford to be. Turner's wealth enables him to take great risks, lose big, and walk away unscathed. His livelihood doesn't depend on ranching, so he suffers the stigma of "hobby" rancher. This undermines him in the eyes of some since he can't really serve as a model for the many ranchers who live closer to the

margin; on the other hand, when his experiments do work out, others can apply his lessons to their own land without incurring the risks he did. While I'm wary of one person owning so much land, and while I worry about so much wildlife being susceptible to the whim of one ego, on balance, given the likely alternatives, I'd have to say I'm grateful Turner's vision is being applied in my neighborhood.

We climb another rise and the creosote is gone. There's grass now, though it's sparse and looks cow-blasted. Admittedly I know little about rangeland, but like most environmentalists in the West I try to keep up on the grazing controversy. Not too many miles south of here, eco-rancher Jim Winder runs the Double Lightning ranch. I toured it last spring and heard him explain how to gauge range quality, flipping over cowpies to see how quickly they were decomposing, and noting the diversity, not just the lushness, of the grasses. A sign of ecological health is the rapidity with which nutrients and energy are recycled through the system, signalled most readily by a rapidly decaying cowpie. If the cowpies harden and stack up from year to year, you've got a bad ranch. Winder keeps his cows bunched and moves them often, has fenced off the creek to protect riparian habitat, and has stopped shooting coyotes. He's planting some Rio Grande Chub, an endangered species, into a creek on his land and

“Turner’s trying to restore some of the wild that has been decimated in the West, raising bison instead of cattle, gathering wolves for later release, replacing invasive weeds with endemics. He’s even working towards a release of condors.”

favors reintroducing wolves in the nearby Gila. He's the first rancher to begin marketing "wolf country" beef, beef raised by ranchers pledged to support, not to frustrate, the return of the lobo. Though some environmentalists believe such a creature is apocryphal, I'm convinced that Winder and the others he's aligned with in the Quivira Coalition are indeed that hopeful mutation, the environmental rancher.

The road climbs and rounds a sharp, cliff-edged turn. A few ocotillo wave overhead. The road follows Percha creek and its ancient cottonwoods into Hillsboro. In the 1880s this was quite a lively mining town and the seat of Sierra County. It's perhaps most remembered by history, when it's remembered at all, as the site of the trial of Oliver Lee and his cohorts for the murder of Albert Jennings Fountain and his young son, Henry.

Representing the Southeast New Mexico Stockgrowers Association, Fountain had charged Lee and 25 other cattlemen with rustling. He was returning from filing indictments in Lincoln to his home in Las Cruces. Aware that he was at some risk, he had brought along Henry, his 12-year-old boy, thinking no one, not even rustlers, would be so dastardly as to attack him while with his son. But Fountain and his boy disappeared on February 1, 1896, near White Sands. Blood and other evidence were found, but their bodies have never surfaced. Tracked

by Pat Garrett for two years, Lee eventually turned himself in and was charged with the murder. Because of Fountain's popularity in Las Cruces, the trial was moved to Hillsboro.

My reading of the evidence convinces me that Lee was guilty, if not explicitly red-handed, then at least of hiring the killers. But a jury of his peers did not agree, and, after deliberating only seven minutes, acquitted Lee of all charges. The murder remains officially unsolved. Fountain lives on in the Fountain Theater of Mesilla. A roadside sign marks the location of his disappearance on the road between Las Cruces and Alamogordo. Lee's life is marked by Oliver Lee State Park, on his old homestead. The descendants of the two still live in the region, and still aren't speaking.

When the mines closed, Hillsboro fell on hard times, and in 1938 the county seat moved to Hot Springs (now known as Truth or Consequences). Today there's an effort at reviving Hillsboro as an art colony and retirement community. An annual apple festival, the same weekend as the Hatch Chile Festival, celebrates the produce of the orchards in the area. We pass a number of signs announcing apples for sale, though nobody is around to sell them and I suspect the signs remain posted all year, apples or no. Several other signs beckon more promisingly with "Pie" and "Cider." I nudge Margaret and point with my chin, but she frugally shakes her head. I could play dirty and innocently ask the boys if they'd like to stop for pie, but decide not to be sneaky, and so we pass through, alas, without stopping. In mid-December the orchards stand bare along the creek,

naked trees in orderly rows awaiting the change of season to burst forth once more in a galaxy of pink blossoms.

A few patches of snow appear along the road, further indication that we are climbing. The boys get excited. "Riley, look, snow!" Cody clamors. I check the rearview mirror, see them peering out the window. Where we live, snow is a precious gift, never back-achingly shoveled nor cursed as it drifts deep over cars, but rare, ephemeral crystals the boys marvel at and prance through. Shortly after Hillsboro, farther up the creek, we enter Kingston. Many maps of New Mexico list Kingston as a "ghost" town, but evidence suggests that at least a few corporeal forms still linger here among the more evanescent ones. Like Hillsboro, in the 1880s Kingston was a large and lively mining town. In his *Black Range Tales* James McKenna gives the population in 1882 as roughly 2,500.

McKenna tells of a big Christmas bash given by Pretty Sam to inaugurate his new casino. The boisterous party was attended by a motley cast of frontier characters. "The crowd was a strange one. All were wearing their glad rags. Those who had dress suits had been asked to wear them, and not a few appeared with swallow tails, white shirt fronts, and stove-pipe hats. Officers' uniforms were also to be seen and a few brand-new pairs of overalls and brogans." McKenna claims it was "the biggest bang-up in the annals of Kingston." And so it is likely to remain.

There's comfort in knowing that our excursion through here is part of a local tradition. McKenna describes how, in the weeks before Christmas, "every burro that came into town over mountain trails

packed a Christmas tree, a big bunch of mistletoe, or a branch of red berries.” Our burro is a Toyota Previa, but we, like those miners more than a century ago, join in this old festive ritual of bringing the mountain greenery into our home. And, intent on our mission, we zip by the turn into town.

Long before us, and long before McKenna’s miners, the collecting of evergreens from mountains for ritual purposes connected with the renewal of life had become a tradition in the Southwest. Especially among the Pueblo Indians, winter solstice celebrations and dances are common. Many of the masked dancers, called Kachinas among the Hopi, wear collars of evergreens and carry spruce branches. On the cover of Frederick Dockstader’s *The Kachina and the White Man*, a Talávai, or Dawn Kachina, is shown holding a small evergreen tree that could easily be mistaken for a Christmas tree.

The Kingston miners, and we today, were not responding to this Pueblo tradition, but to our own cultural inheritance. In the pre-Christian era in Europe, the Romans, Celts, and Teutonic peoples all had winter solstice festivals that included honoring evergreens as emblems of life’s persistence amid dreary winter. The Romans adorned an evergreen with trinkets and topped it with an image of the sun as part of their Saturnalia Festival. In 320 A.D. the Christian church fathers in Rome selected December 25 as the day to commemorate the birth of Christ. With no scriptural evidence for the exact date of Christ’s birth, they chose this day in part because it coincided with the winter solstice festivals of the people they were trying to convert to

Christianity. The items associated with those pagan festivals—holly, ivy, mistletoe, and evergreens—items that embodied the seasonal renewal of life on earth, were transformed into Christian symbols of the promise of an immutable, eternal, and transcendent life.

The climb steepens. First piñon and juniper, and then a few ponderosas line the roadside. As we ascend, we’re moving quickly through the colors of my biotic communities map. We swerve around corners on a very windy road with many switchbacks. I go as slowly as I can. The kids, thankfully, seem immune to motion sickness. Icy patches linger in the shadowed sections of road.

Finally, after a climb that always seems longer than the last time, we reach Emory Pass and the Gila forest overlook. There’s a picnic table in the warm sun and a truly vast vista beyond: The mountain plummets to juniper foothills and creosote flats far to the river, then the cliffs of the Caballo Range, and beyond that the Jornada del Muerto basin, the San Andres mountain chain, White Sands Missile Range out of sight down in the Tularosa Valley, and then the bare summit of Sierra Blanca, 150 miles as the raven flaps, floats on the horizon. Casual connoisseurs of scenic views, we munch on



tortilla chips and cheese, fried chicken from Albertson's. Swig apple juice. The boys eat quickly so they can play in the snow, all 2 or 3 wet inches of it. I don't have a thermometer, but even at this altitude in December it must be around 50 degrees. Riley plops down in some slush, grins, and ignores my chastisement. Cody throws snowballs off the cliff, a long way down. Chloe, glad to be out of the van at last, prances and rolls on her back in the snow patches.

I peruse the instruction sheet from the Gila National Forest. We're to cut only a juniper or a piñon. It doesn't strike me that a juniper would make a very good Christmas tree, so piñon it is. Douglas firs, I always thought, make the best Christmas tree. Twelve years in Oregon make me partial to them, and they're also the tree most commonly marketed in the West. There are quite a few Doug firs in the Black Range, but the rule sheet says not to cut them. Piñon is the New Mexico state tree, and, I read, the most plentiful tree in the state.

We're quite happy to look for a piñon. The brochure gives height limits and other guidelines. We're not to cut either within 100 feet or within sight of a road or trail. The accompanying map show us areas that are off limits. But it's about a 7th generation photocopy of a poor map to begin with. Mainly I note that we shouldn't cut in the Aldo Leopold Wilderness, which begins not

too far north of here. There are some other splotchy and hard to decipher areas we should also avoid, but the map is so difficult to read that one could with justice plead confusion if caught in an out-of-bounds area. But then, who is to

catch us? What are the chances Smokey the Bear is out patrolling the trails for Christmas tree crooks on a December Sunday afternoon?

These rules are no doubt well considered, and they're enforced mainly by the honor system, which I do my best to

comply with. I must confess though—and I would think the statute of limitations would have expired by now—to a breach of protocol 7 years ago in California. Margaret and I were living in Oakland. We decided to drive to the forest for a tree, but from Oakland the nearest forest land where we could cut one was a 3-hour drive north to the Mendocino National Forest. We figured we'd make a day of it and enjoy the scenery in the wine country. Eventually we reached the forest near Clear Lake and while driving into the mountains we somehow took the wrong road (they weren't well marked and we'd never been there before) and ended up far from the zone in which we were allowed to cut. It was getting dark. It began to snow. The dirt road was growing slick. It seemed that by the time we would get back to the correct road and into the cutting area it would be completely dark, and who knew how much snow might fall. After such a long drive we certainly

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weren't going to go home empty handed. Well, what to do? I pulled off a side road, kept the engine running, slipped up a hill, furtively downed a tree, dragged it back to the car, roped it quickly to the roof, and off we drove. Feeling guilty (I guess I still do), I was sure a ranger was waiting to pounce on us, but, of course, none did. Though contraband, the tree served us well.

After packing away lunch, and after the boys have had a good time plopping in the snow, we load up for our hike down trail. I set Riley in the backpack and swing *it on*. *Cody bugs us to carry the saw; we give in*. It's an old carpenter's table saw, not really suited for the task we have in mind. Every year as I carry it through the woods in search of a Christmas tree, I tell myself I need to get a decent, sharp bowsaw, but then I never do. Maybe next year? We follow the trail north along the *sides of steep slopes, looking, looking, looking* for a suitable piñon. There are plenty of nice Doug firs, as well as white pine and ponderosa. But the farther we hike the fewer piñons we see. Suddenly it hits me, we're at the upper limit of their life zone. The pass is at 8,178 feet. When we get home I confirm my suspicion by *discovering that 8,000 is given as the upper range for piñons*.

In a promising spot we wander down a ridge. There are indeed a few piñons here, but they are really too scraggly and unsymmetrical. Choosing a Christmas tree in the forest is an art. We don't expect to find a perfectly formed tree like those in commercial tree lots. *If we'd wanted that sort of tree, we could have found one down the block from our house, not 2 hours away in the mountains*. Still there are aesthetic and

practical considerations. The tree should be the right height, between about 5 and 8 feet. It needn't be perfectly symmetrical, but it should be reasonably balanced, if only so it won't tip over. Piñons tend to be round, without the conical shape most people associate with a Christmas tree. If one side is flattened a bit, that's OK, that side can go against the wall. But even with these considerations, one can't be too particular. I'd be happy to search for hours, but some of my partners are less patient. As we trudge up and down steep hills, Riley, even though he has an easy *time of it in the backpack, gets crabby and starts whining in my ear*. Cody is contented for a while, but now begins to pester, "here's a tree, how 'bout this one, here's a good one," though none we see are really suitable. Things are beginning to get unhappy.

Margaret and I decide that we had *passed plenty of good piñons on the drive up to the pass, and, since we don't want this to degenerate into a whining session, maybe we should head back to a lower elevation and try our luck*. If we don't find a tree soon, the boys will lose all patience, and then so will we.

As we hike back towards the van, we *keep an eye out just in case*. I spot a sunny south-facing slope that looks like good piñon habitat. Walking around for a few minutes off the trail, I spot a perfectly nice piñon growing from a gambel oak copse. With Riley perched on my back, I circle the tree once, twice, gauging it. Touch its needles. Not too tall, not too short. *Size can be hard to assess in the woods and I try to envision the tree in our living room, not under the tall firs and pines on a mountain side*. Not too scraggly or misshapen. I call to Margaret,

“check this one out.” She and Cody come over through the brush. “Looks good,” they concur.

There’s always this moment of truth. Yes, this, of all the trees, is the one.

I take up the saw. Cody fears the tree, as if it’s 100 feet tall, will fall on him and backs quickly away. I bend under the branches, lift them with my left arm, place the saw blade against the trunk, slide it back and forth. The blade cuts into the bark.

The rich scent of pine sap, oozing from the phloem, mingles with regret. It’s done. After a few more strokes, I back off and let Cody, and then Riley, each take a turn holding and jiggling the saw while I snap their photos. When I go back to sawing, Margaret takes a photo of me. In contemporary America what is a more essential part of our rituals than the camera? In a minute or two, even with this inept saw, the tree begins to tilt, then bounces on the ground. Mountain light fills the empty air its branches have abandoned.

“Surely it’s not anthropomorphic to acknowledge this tree’s pleasures in life, its sensuous intimacy with wind and rain and bird and sun and soil, to grant some mysterious form of sentience.”

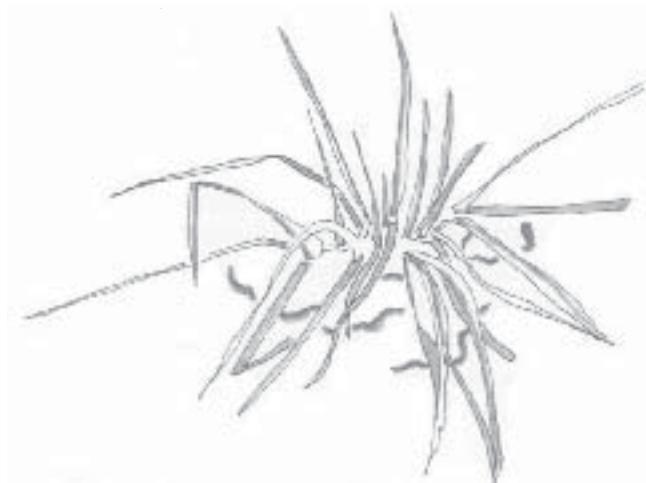
It’s only a tree after all, not an animal. But it too, I don’t doubt, was enjoying its life here. Surely it’s not anthropomorphic to acknowledge this tree’s pleasures in life, its sensuous

intimacy with wind and rain and bird and sun and soil, to grant some mysterious form of sentience. Indeed to deny such seems anthropocentric, a bigotted solipsism. And, and this is the crucial part, were the tree inert, this ritual would lack potency.

We have friends who avoid the killing, who decorate a live, potted Christmas tree. Afterwards, they plant it in their yard, where, with luck, it will live to a fine old age. I’m sympathetic to this, and could almost be persuaded. My instincts, though, resist what my rational faculties are drawn towards.

For this is, after all, a sort of sacrifice. We have chosen this tree among all the others to embody the endurance of life, and, paradoxically, to use its death as a celebration of life. How conscious need we be of this? It can be argued that if we aren’t aware of the meaning of our rituals, they are hollow forms. But our subconscious knows, our body knows. In the doing is the meaning. The symbolism is secondary. As Shunryu Suzuki distills it with Zen precision, “experience, not philosophy.”

We call it a Christmas tree, but it is older, broader, richer than that. Despite what the marquees in front of churches often say this time of year, solstice, the



turning of the year from growing darkness to growing light, is, quite literally, “the reason for the season.” Surely the birth of a child on a winter’s night renders faith actual, and the Christian story is a potent and generous rendition of the seasonal archetype. But the persistence of life amid the cold and dark is embodied, not just symbolized but actualized, in evergreens, even in this humble piñon.

With our electrically lit and centrally heated homes, with our food bought from store shelves, not earned from the hills of our own hunt and the fields of our own nurture, our sense of relief at the turning of the season is muted. We hold nature at bay, honor more immediate artifacts, forget that every head of lettuce in the grocery store is greened by the sun, every apple reddened, the muscle of every steak, like our own, tinselled by the solar voltage. So we forget to celebrate the subtle swing of the year, dismiss the rebirth of all life in favor of an obdurate concern for our own, exclusively human, salvation.

Margaret takes up Riley in the pack, Cody trots ahead with Chloe, and I follow, dragging the tree down the trail through snow, mud, and slush.

Back at the van, the boys climb into their seats, strap in. I maneuver the tree through the rear door and lo, though one branch dangles near Riley’s face, it fits, so there’s no need to tie it to the roof, a trying chore. As we twist and turn back down the switchbacks, we wryly note the many, many fine piñons at lower elevation. Next year we’ll probably search lower.

We cross the creosote flats back towards the river. The low sun of winter afternoon drops behind us. We head

straight towards the palisades of the Caballo Mountains, exceedingly rugged in this yellow light, each cañon accentuated in dark shadow. The boys grow quiet, Margaret tries to nap. We turn south along the river. I note in the Rio bottom-land the winter shades of ochre and whiskey-tan whisks of tamarisk. Speeding along I-25, the shadow of our van speeds along through the creosote and mesquite beside us.

Later, the tree stands in the living room, adorned with ornaments, glittering with lights. Even if we don’t participate in the ritual ourselves, most of us are so familiar with Christmas trees that we take them for granted. But how odd. To bring a tree into our house, to adorn it with lights and ornaments. It stands and pulses a few weeks in our home like a visitor from another world. And it is. It is a visitor from a world we have forgotten. Walking in from the kitchen, glass of brandy-laced eggnog in hand, do we ever note the strangeness of this?

I light a fire. Margaret and I read a Christmas tale to the boys. Then they go to bed. We stare into the tree flickering with lights, remember where we found it.

*our tracks in wet snow—
under Orion’s stars
a stump oozes sap*

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THE RIGHT TO VRRRRRUUMMM!

"I feel like I am losing my rights as a U.S. Citizen," said Ken Schare, who rides all-terrain vehicles in the summer and snowmobiles in the winter. "I love the mountains. I love the forest." — from an AP wire service story about the U.S. Forest Service plan to limit trail use in White River National Forest, August 1999.