

MEMENTO MORI

Day 3 - The Rot Plot

As a life-long amateur student and ardent admirer of rot, this place suits me. Duff is my preferred matrix. At home, I prefer lying in the litter in the young forest surrounding than lying on the couch indoors, of which I'm also quite fond. As I write, I'm sitting in the duff – perhaps fifty feet deep — of the rot plot , which is the affectionate name for the decomposition monitoring site of the Andrews Forest. My back is against the mossy trunk of a fallen giant that as best I can tell is being allowed to decay all unobserved. But all around me are remnants of 16 old growth trees of four species that were cut 23 years ago to establish this project intended to determine the role of rotting wood in the nutrient cycle.

The sections hold their shape surprisingly well, but they are decorated with the tools of measurement as well as thick mosses: plastic buckets welded in to measure their respiration (carbon dioxide!); tubes to measure water retention; and "cookies," foot-long rounds cut out and mapped every year or two to trace the paths of invertebrates that have taken up lodging there to assist in the process of decomposition. It looks like a children's playground. It is among the most peaceful places I know.

But wait! Are rotting trees the only thing that contributes to the nutrient cycle? What about the vertebrates? The duff extending many yards beneath my bottom is certainly filled with the bones of many creatures that have fallen here — mice and voles, foxes

and racoons, and almost surely the occasional elk or deer. And in the thousands of years that this forest has grown, and replaced itself, and replaced itself again, isn't it at least possible that a brown bear or even a grizzly has expired right here? Potent nutrients! And they aren't being measured! This startling oversight will surely skew the analysis 177 years hence. If I were a scientist, I'd be concerned. I understand the need to minimize variables in a controlled experiment, but this is the Nutrient Cycle we're talking about here! As a humble representative of vertebrates everywhere, I feel excluded — and not a little insulted.

I would like to make a formal offer toward the remediation this situation.

You can have my body (preferably after a natural death without chainsaws).

You may insert tubes into the orifices of your choice. Surely my scarred liver and blackened lungs will not skew your data any more than it's already skewed. I realize that my offer presents problems. Surely your worthy staff will find a way to overcome legal obstacles. But after the first winter, the sight of my decaying corpse with its eyeballs damaged by birds may very well offend, if not alarm, touring groups of students. I suggest you stash me under a rootwad with a tarp handy to hide me before the students arrive. We must take care that we don't lose promising new talent.

In the context of your mission, there are even more pressing concerns. Twenty-three years after my demise there'll be little left of me other than a scattering of bones and an interesting skull. Vertebrates decompose faster than trees, faster even than the silver fir.

One medium-sized mammal in 200 years isn't going to make even a blip on your graphs. I will need to be replaced perhaps half a dozen times before your 200-year paper is published. Not to worry. It is my hope, indeed my expectation, that my act will serve as an inspiration to others. You may well end up with a waiting list that might even include some of your senior scientists. I've written elsewhere that the oldtimers here seem to have become part of the forest. Well, let's see them walk my talk.

After I am fully incorporated in the duff —rich company! —I pledge to attend the conference convened below by Jerry Martien, an excellent poet of my own region inspired by this very same place —and whose poem, in part, inspired this document.

Here speaks Mr. Martien:

return of the dead log people

(after Fred Swanson, at the H.J. Andrews
Experimental Forest Long-Term Decomposition Site)

thank you for your participation in the blue river bone orchard's first bicentennial morticultural conference: the role of the dead in carbon budgeting. But don't think of it as over and done / we are still everything to come

all the indignities you're afraid will happen to you
happen here

all the mortal invasions you keep from the house of the living / from the porches
of your ears / the eaves of your seeing / openings you don't want eaten into /eggs
hatching like little ideas in your brain / microbes growing furry unspeakable
words on your tongue / the dark juices of your heart
gone to feed the living

upstart salal and Oregon grape
sapling of cedar & hemlock & fir
thriving in our cold wet breath

perceived by you as a chill in the air / in your bones /those green bones
with which you thought you'd walk away from here
unchanged

but in your breath now
our breath

& in our breath
these words

which you will remember by a new / stiffness in your limbs
a whisper in your many-branched veins / & at last by

silence

& time

& your dust will rain on us with the rain & we will take you in as easily as you
breathed our air today

we eagerly await your input.

Sincerely,

Freeman House

CC: Director, PNW Research Laboratory