

THE BRISTLECONE

High on the talus, a twisted tree angles its burnt limbs to the sky. Furrowed crescents where the bark's shed off. The Black Tiger Fire of '93 killed it. One day I met a walker who stopped & said the tree's a bristlecone. A crew from the University had made the climb, bored a sample, confirmed the species in a lab. Scarred burn marks, bark torn by wind, sun, snow, & hail. But a local friend who knows the land, a botanist, expresses doubts. He thinks the Old Timer's a limber pine. Once after a November visit sun & wind, I lay down for a nap, the knotted roots the windscraped branch—

...and dreamed McClure showed up that day
alive as you or me.

 You didn't die I say to him
 I never die says he—

He lifts his hand
but not to mine. No tossed off phrase
comes to his mouth beside that pine.
Torn savage whorls, like the tree's
rough bark

 his eyebrows lower.

 “Now's the time to take up
Shelley's poems,” says he,
voice gruff as I lean to hear the words.

 “No hermeneutics
fit the poems. The professors,
they mean well but always
get it wrong.
Divine love, anarchy & grace,
that hard cold eye
intending murder to the state,
songs of hope for people in his train.
His care for children,
 love of wild terrain,
hand-built boats, & temples open to the sky—
he searches for the heart of exile, the way
he tosses ash on
 gods, on law, on demagogues.”

 “Read the surface.
It's in the words you see.
You cannot bore a sample from the tree
to know his thought.
The bark has scarred & burnt. Shelley lives
in limbs of this old pine. Greet those you meet with love—
the one *upaithric* act—”

That word!

Upaithric. A power trembles through the soil. Physics of wind & storm spur hard dark clouds across the peaks. And then— his white tufted hair & brows quicken to black, blood enters his cheeks, the way wind whips the last coals of a fire to glowing life. But dry quick rain, the black hair stormed by hail goes white, chaff to the storm. His words torn by wind the vision scatters.

What's left: a corkscrew charcoal trunk, bare limbs,
the flint white clouds.

Under a changeful sky, you & I could live like that say I.

I never die, says he—

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- *upaithric* (yoo-PAI-thric), fr. Greek.
Under the open sky.



For Paul & Bhakti
with love
Alan Schelling
19 Nov. 2021

