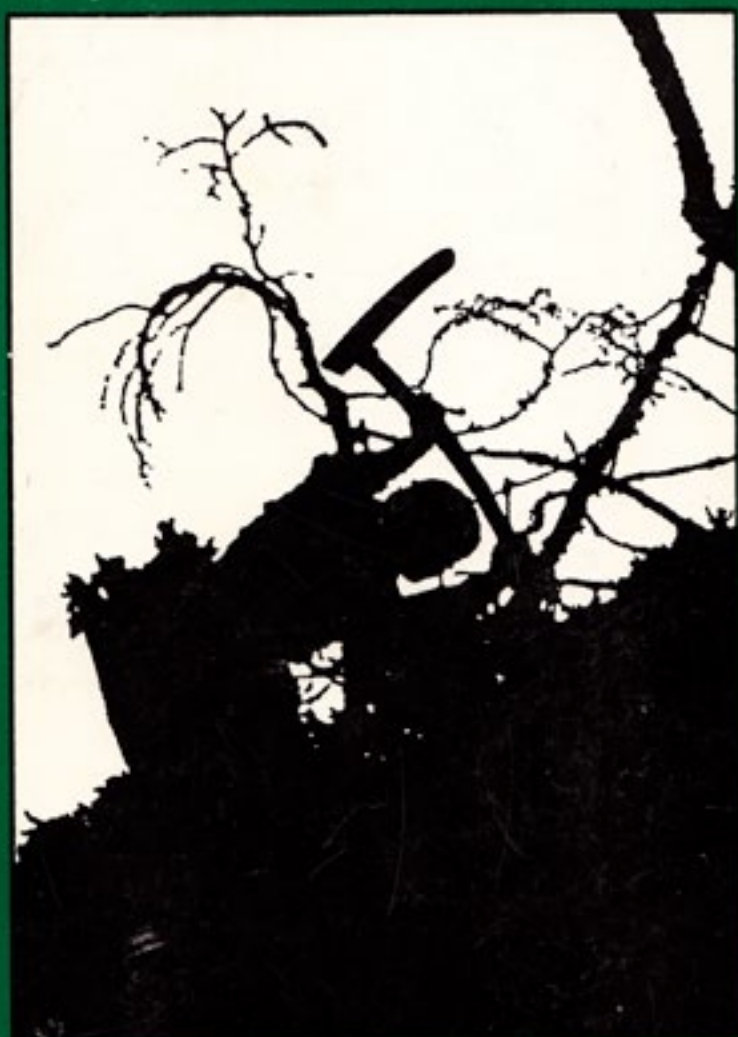


# Close to the Ground

One Treeplanter's Geography



Howard Horowitz

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HULOGOST



EUGENE

1986

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Illustrations:

Sidney Rust        *All illustrations, except:*

Rick Sherman     *page 4*

Howard Horowitz   *map*

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## A YEW BOOK

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*This book is dedicated to the treeplanters.  
You may not make much money,  
and are not always welcomed in roadside motels,  
but you have earth on your fingers,  
and land at your feet.*



# ONE TREEPLANTER'S GEOGRAPHY WESTERN OREGON & WASHINGTON SITES



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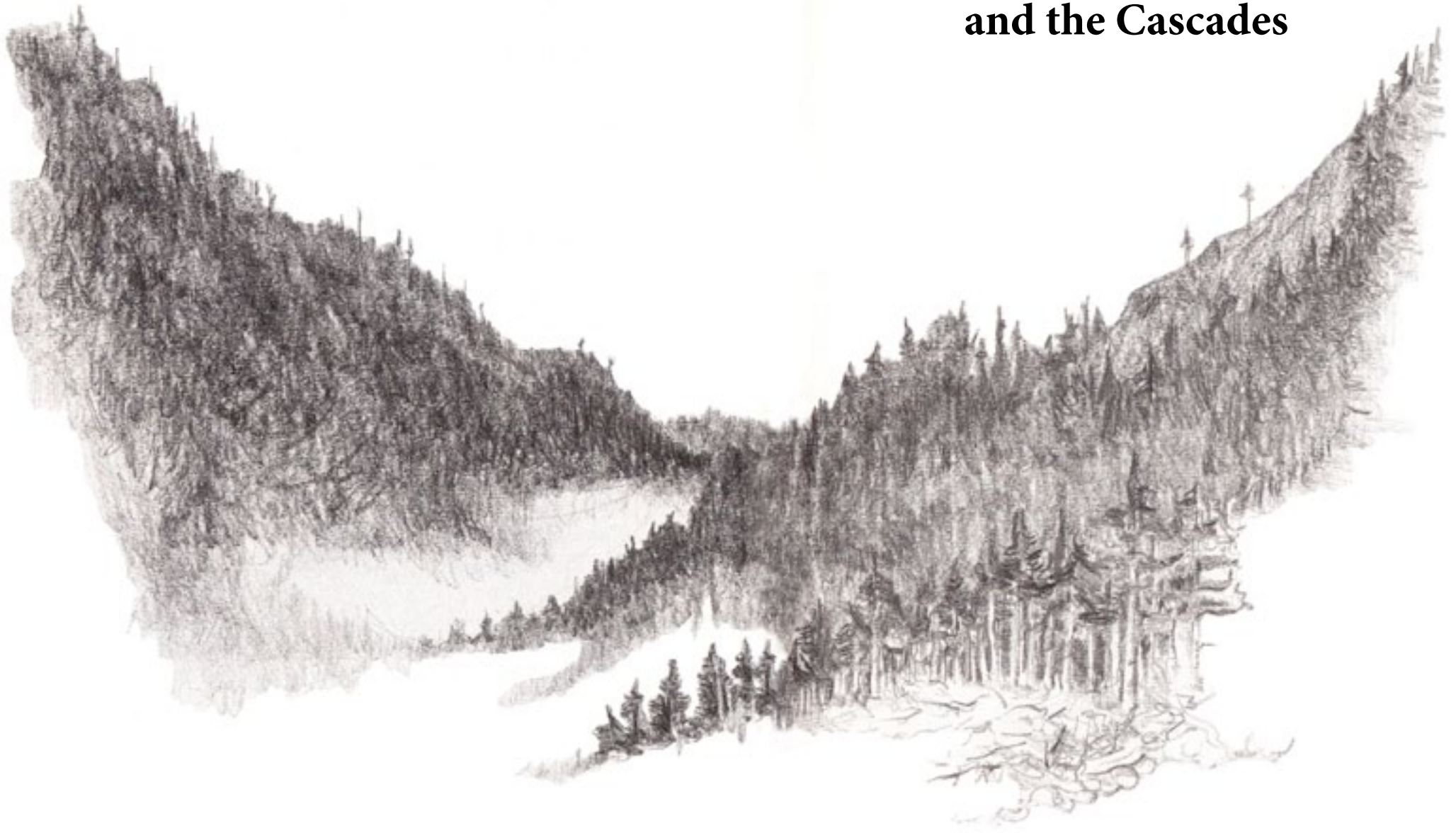
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**In the Coast Range  
and the Cascades**





## STEAMBOAT

Sunrise -

the long ride to work  
is an eye opener  
(for the driver, at least):

first freeway, then two-lane  
by the covered bridge,  
around reservoir curves,  
up and over the Bohemias,  
past the big sugar pine  
near Steelhead Creek,  
then switchback up in dust  
behind a log truck  
to the landing, at last.

Sunset -

the long ride back.  
We settle into the crummy  
with the inertia of the weary.  
Our bones know  
the geography is big here:

ranges of ridges,  
canyons and ledges,  
enough bends of the river  
to feel the rhythm  
of the land.



## COOS BAY

Drop off  
seven hundred feet  
to the bottom.  
Mudball trees, muddy slopes, oops!  
- grab on to a reprod -  
and down again, to the flat  
a mat of bracken,  
broken logs and brush:

every step a decision  
on how to get there.

At the treeline I lay down  
take five  
look up into the rain  
and I'm ready to begin.



## MAPLETON

Planting trees  
is one way to make a living  
in Oregon, if you don't mind  
walking up and down  
mountains.

The company  
will give you a hoe,  
a bag of trees,  
and low wages.

The seedlings  
are treated with poison  
so don't put your hands  
to your face.

The inspector will tell you  
if you're planting J-roots  
or if your dog  
is digging up trees.

The tent blew down  
last night. Hot oatmeal  
sure tastes good.

Six weeks of rain  
and you don't feel wet any more.

## OAKRIDGE

Face down, look around  
flick the tree into the ground.  
Move three steps, swing that dag  
pull another one out of the bag.  
We weave across the slope  
with the rhythm of gorillas:  
keep the pace, eyes on the ground  
"slash is cash".

Sky, waterfall  
white patch, green ridge:  
images pass in and out  
of eyes which see only the next  
planting spot...

but once in a while  
I plant a special tree  
- good roots, good ground  
a large rock for shade -

pause, feel the breeze  
and look at the giant  
at the edge of the unit  
great - girthed  
and leaning to the east.

## SHELTON

First, the overview  
when you step out of the crummy  
onto the landing,  
and lace your corks  
near the salvage cedar  
log deck:

ridge over cutover ridge,  
ragged treeline silhouettes  
and patches of fog.

Each unit has a road at the top  
and a road at the bottom.  
To cover this ground  
you bag up heavy,  
spread out along the top  
and "bump" down  
(cutting out cliffs  
along the way).

On the steepest ground  
you could work on,  
and the wettest,

this is poetry  
to the feet of a good crew.

## WYNOOCHEE SWARM

A summer contract  
to build a fire trail  
fell way behind.  
Summer is over,  
and squalls are rolling in  
off the Pacific.

As the crew faces default,  
one hundred off-season planters  
stop piling slash, picking fruit,  
or drinking beer,  
and roar up the Wynoochee  
with shovels, pulaskis, and saws.

The last day  
is celebration:

as the tribe howls and leaps  
over the campfire,  
rain gently soaks hemlock limbs  
on the ridge above the river.

What lingers, at last,  
is the overview:

ridge over cutover ridge,  
ragged treeline silhouettes  
and patches of fog.

## BLUE RIVER

The Logrollers bid and won  
these old replants:  
we're the second or third crew  
to work this slash  
(you can hardly get  
150 trees per acre).  
It makes for good-paying work  
and lousy reforestation.

The job has that charm  
of Blue River, that hex:  
a shadow in the bones of this place  
darker even than the firs.

A week of work  
at the base of Wolf Rock,  
    nocturnal soaks at Cougar  
    (moonlight and steaming water  
    to soothe sore muscles);  
then one morning  
we are snowed out  
for a month.

( You can swallow  
only so many burgers  
at the cafe,  
or take so many baths  
at the hot springs.)

Other jobs beckon:  
we invested  
in a piece of the Rock  
only to lose it  
in a veil of snow.

## GOLD BEACH

There's plenty to think about  
planting trees...

the ground the hole the roots  
the next planting spot  
the last plot  
the other end of the line  
the situation in Iran  
the situation in Gold Beach.

Replanting  
the Wildhorse Creek drainage,  
I feel like a medic  
in a war zone.

Sunny day  
getting hot after noon  
plunging brown-tipped trees  
into bone-dry holes.  
When will we get back up the hill  
for lunch?

Watch that spacing!  
We missed three spots  
in that rockpile...

walking up & down mountains  
planting lies  
for the U.S. Forest Service.

Some day, even the road  
blasted through the slope  
will be healed  
by falling rocks.

## DETROIT

The last morning  
on the way to work  
    (firs and fog  
    out the window,  
    a smoky blur  
    of endless curves  
    and fitful sleep),  
red-eyed planters  
weary from 22 days in a row.

Day by day  
the atmosphere worsened;  
crews were grim  
the Forest Service sullen.

Pound the rocks on Outerson Ridge,  
hit hemlock roots on Upper Leone  
dig through duff on Who-Cares-Where Gulch  
and curse the inspector  
on Penalty Plot.

    The slopes  
    were a battlefield  
when General Mahlon rode out to the fray  
to confer with his troops  
about the renegade chiefs (but no indians)  
he thought were threatening  
to regain the land.

Feeble sun at dawn  
sky dark by noon  
and then a downpour -  
no raingear,  
no contract time,  
nothing to do  
but plant.

The job was done  
- two thousand acres -  
but we lost money,  
and more than money:  
    equanimity  
    in the middle of a storm.



## DORENA

The moral act of planting trees  
can be a charade:

    bundles of 50 stashed in a log,  
    "stuff and stomp" 1200 a day.

Our crews would never do that  
(we hope), but the more subtle tricks

    - cut out the corner  
    if you get away with it,  
    space a bit wider  
    than the contract allows -

are irresistible,  
since the government also plays those games,  
and they stack the deck.

After years of talk, the B.L.M.  
offers a new kind of contract:  
    bidders study each site  
    and develop a plan.  
    Pay depends on survival,  
    not daily inspection.

For an hour each morning  
we cull trees on the landing.  
The crew plants slowly,  
choosing spots with care:  
    the beginning  
    of stewardship.

## HEBO

Nasty weather  
and the thickest  
thickets (salmonberry,  
devil's club & viney maple):

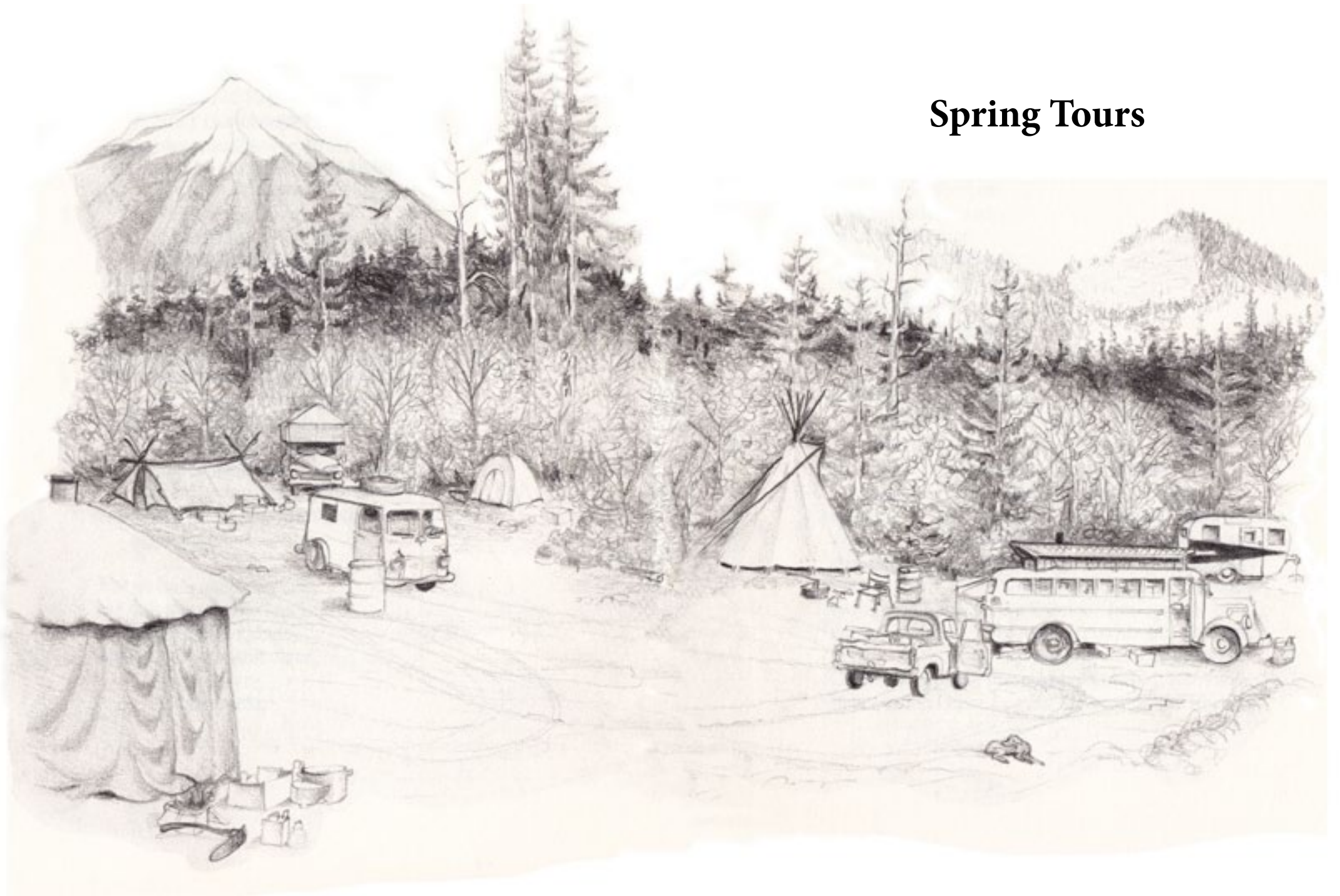
hell to walk through  
worse to plant through.

Breaking out into the open ground  
just as the sun breaks out  
over the ocean  
    and over dunes,  
    the winding estuary, pastures  
    and reaches back to forest  
    at the base of the hill,

I sit back  
and wonder  
how lucky am I  
to be planting trees.



## Spring Tours



## IDAHO

It's Great  
to plant  
trees in  
Idaho, when  
snow melt roars  
in the Clearwater,  
& when frost crisps  
the brushfields red  
in the Bitterroots.  
Steep ridges of shrub  
and rock, young larch  
and fir, bleached snags:  
remember the great fire  
of 1910, when Pulaski  
forced his men into a  
mineshaft, to survive;  
when the train got away  
from Wallace on flaming tracks.

Luck still touches some of us: remember  
the crummy, upside-down in a pond (the con-  
sequence of driving to camp without headlights  
after the bar closed in Elk City). Good money  
and good times on a Kelly Creek clearcut, in a  
Pierce tavern, in the Grangeville Hotel. Remember  
swimming holes on the Salmon, hot springs baths,  
the log truck driver dancing with his daughter,  
a bear with rose hip scat, a meteor shower in  
Orion, the woman that night in Orofino. Remember  
Idaho is too Great to pass nonstop on the freeway.

## MONTANA

The Potluck crummy  
broke down  
on the way to Montana  
and on the way home.

Broke and down:  
    pay for a food share  
    pay for a crummy share  
    pay for a love share  
    even if you don't get one.

So few women  
and so many men.

Jolie and Ann  
tried a short-cut  
and got lost.  
They didn't need the search party  
but that's what can happen  
when you follow your heart  
down a deer trail.

Hot  
day after day, hot.  
Sun-baked planters  
scalp the ash  
to mineral soil.

At night  
stars and breeze  
Red Stars party  
Thumbs party  
Potluck sulks.

Ann when I came  
and saw you:  
a wild woman,  
changed in six weeks  
your hair and eyes  
your sun-burnt face.

We lay down  
in the hot tent  
and cried.

## KAIBAB

Hard ground: rocky, flat  
clay, baked in sun  
covered with grass:

still, we force trees  
into this ground  
every eight feet;  
most die, abandoned  
in the Arizona sun.

Five weeks of hard labor  
without birth, a miscarriage  
of reforestation:  
scalp off the sod,  
swing blade into rock,  
wrestle with gumbo...  
the exhaustion of 12 hour days,  
penalty plots, replants,  
and the threat of termination  
by default.

Even here, though,  
in this dizzy blue air  
at the edge of a canyon,  
hidden between the rocks  
is a good spot -

soil  
a hole opened  
a ponderosa pine  
planted in the ground.

## COLORADO

Planting at 11,000 feet  
is so heavenly:

aspen groves, beaver ponds,  
the view across the valley  
to the snows of the Sharkstooth.

Take a breather  
every few trees  
and try not to think  
about mosquitos.

Shadeblock  
with big rounds -  
spruce seedlings  
won't survive the sun.

When scalping,  
avoid the dogtooth violets;  
but remember (the inspector will)  
that an aggressive attitude  
towards the ground

(wallop the hell out of it  
with your dag)

will create plantable spots  
in the most unlikely places.





## ST. HELENS

An explosion  
of roads, log trucks, and planting:

jobs  
in the heart of devastation.

For miles, a shock  
of brittle trees and mud-choked streams,  
gray land of ash and pumice.  
Even here, though, a few clumps of lupine  
and huckleberry flowers near a snag  
remind me that green is irrepressible

and that fruit will sweeten  
the dusty mouths of bears.

As I bend  
to plant a tree  
the mountain coughs  
a plume of smoke.

A devil's face  
was carved by a logger on a stump  
before the blow. It stands alone  
a totem in a gallery of fire  
recalling roots too deep to fathom.

While the face keeps grinning  
at the mountain, a shudder  
rolls up my spine  
like a harmonic tremor.



## Finishing the Bag





## LOWELL

Early one wet morning  
I miss the crummy  
and settle for breakfast  
in Goshen Truck Stop.

At 6:30,  
Skookum pulls up for coffee  
on the way to Lowell:  
it's a different company,  
mostly strangers,  
but the kinship of the treebag clan  
overrules such technicalities.

As the crew winds its way  
up Winberry Creek  
into the "working forest"  
(a misty montage of clearcuts,  
old growth patches & logging shows),  
and the bottle gets passed  
around the smoke-filled crummy,  
I recall a unit  
so steep and deep  
that old Murray retired  
rather than hike down  
to inspect it.

Looking out over the landing  
at Skookum's job,  
the ground looks familiar:  
we planted here last year  
but half the trees died.  
I must have been called back  
to plant the other half.

## AT THE END OF THE ROAD

Clear sky -  
they'll shut us down by noon  
for low humidity.  
We'll be lucky to finish this dog,  
make thirty bucks and  
never come back.

The crummy  
runs out of gas  
halfway up the mountain  
but another rig is behind  
to pile into.  
The job is way out  
at the end of the road.

Crew starts late  
- bag up at seven -  
then hits the sod  
and beargrass.  
(Sod, the planter's bane -  
five whacks to open a scalp  
then sharpen your blade  
and rest your back.)

100 trees later, moving slowly  
I sit on a stump  
while across the valley a helicopter  
flies back and forth, spitting 2,4-D  
in the air,  
onto tanoak and fir, bare ground  
and a blue-gray outcrop  
of serpentine stone.

Voices  
carry a long way across slashpiles.  
The Contracting Officer  
(out from town to shake things up)  
was sitting on a log  
with the inspector.  
"Watch it. You allowed  
a twenty-incher on that plot.  
No hemlock roots in the margin.  
I want clean scalps.  
They're getting away  
with murder."

I just kept planting  
and never said a word.



## AT THE BOTTOM OF THE UNIT

Our path  
is tangled in brush  
we don't want to control;  
on the other hand,  
it can be a stinging lesson  
in defeat.

The larger picture  
may be good, bad, or indifferent  
(it's hard to see  
through the thicket).

Have we forgotten  
how we got here?  
Each of us covered different ground  
but somehow it all seems the same.

Before the long climb out  
we stop and have a good laugh  
even if, perhaps, it isn't funny.



## CUTTING BRUSH ON THE FOURTH OF JULY

We should have known better  
after seven years of conflict  
about contracts, life styles, orange peels  
and sprayed units.

Last year at a conference  
over a cocktail, the government's man  
told me our arms should be cut off  
for the trouble we caused.

We didn't learn from the past  
or didn't pass what we learned

so it's Independence Day  
and we are in Waldport  
whacking weeds.

Chickens roast on the beach  
firecrackers pop at city hall  
but deep in the hills  
on a dead-end spur near Cannibal

some gringos  
are learning how to swing a machete.

Foxglove, thistle, tansy, and fern  
cut like butter, but salal is a burn.

Wages are down, prices are up  
the tax revolt is breeding -  
but we are luckier than most  
this year: we work for freedom.

## JUST PLANTING FOOLS

*Tiller 1974*

One winter day  
the Logrollers  
- desperate for work -  
were dumb enough  
to keep planting  
as rain changed to snow  
six inches deep.  
The inspector,  
even greener than the crew,  
never shut us down.

The rewards:  
frost-bitten fingers,  
wide spacing to replant,  
and the image of Dirt  
in the lead, charging uphill  
into the whiteness.

*Tiller 1977*

Homegrown  
invited the Hoedads  
down to the river  
for summer meeting.

Two hundred planters  
conducted business  
in the buff, on the bluff  
above the water  
(and plunged in to cool  
when the issues got hot).  
Later, in moonlight  
near the campfire,  
mudpits and music:

foolishness  
so bright  
the distance of miles and years  
fails to dim the memory.



## TRYING TO REFOREST A CUT-OVER HEART

This heart  
is like a hundred others:  
rocky & steep,  
gullies washed out by erosion  
veins choked with debris  
    from old loggers,  
    old lovers.

The view from the landing  
is a full-color map of hell.

Don't be too trusting on the way down:  
the old log may give underfoot.  
Watch out for boomer holes, bouncing rocks,  
hornets. Should you stop to loosen  
that heavy bag cinched around your waist,  
be ready to run  
if a limb cracks overhead.  
The brush can overtake you,  
rise in your throat,  
enclose like a ribcage.

    Look up - hard to see!  
    climb out - hard to move!  
    The thorns cut and sting  
but oh! those sweet little berries!

Down at the bottom  
is a place even hunters avoid  
where deer trails go nowhere

from nowhere, and you won't know  
which way you are going. In these thickets  
your best bet is to follow the moon.

In some places the land sinks  
beneath the vastness of its own weight:  
the Great Wall is visited by fishes.

We never know what to expect on this job:  
downpours, windows of sunlight,  
shafts of darkness, onrushing logs  
caves etched by years of corrosion  
a land of green stones...  
In the middle of these worked-out spoils,  
in the shade of an old stump  
    look!  
    A plantable spot!

Climbing back out is the hardest part:  
a ledge in the crag to hold onto,  
overhanging limbs to pull oneself up with.  
I have to rest awhile  
as my heart pounds in my chest  
    and the tongues of silence  
    gather in my throat.

## TREEPLANTING TERMINOLOGY

*Some of the vocabulary used by reforestation workers may be unfamiliar to the general readership:*

<b>Bump</b>	A crew strategy in which each planter works back and forth along his/her own treeline but always meets the planters on either side.
<b>Crummy</b>	The vehicle used to drive the crew out to the job site.
<b>Duff</b>	Layer of reddish-brown organic matter which must be scalped through to plant a tree in mineral soil.
<b>Hoe, Dag, Hoedad</b>	All names for the treeplanter's tool most commonly used for hand planting. Also may refer to a member of the worker-owned company Hoedads, Inc.
<b>Inspector</b>	The field agent of the government or lumber company who follows the crew and takes plots on their work.
<b>J-root</b>	An improperly planted seedling; inspection reveals that the roots do not go straight down in the ground.
<b>Landing</b>	A cleared flat area, usually on a ridgetop at the end of a spur road. Logs are hauled there by cable; also the access point where planters bag up with trees.
<b>Line</b>	The boundary between the planted and unplanted ground. Planters move along the line with the front planter as "lead" and rear planter as "tail".
<b>Mudball Trees</b>	Seedlings that come from the nursery with clay-mud root wads; very heavy load for planters to carry in their treebag.
<b>Plot</b>	An area inspected for planting quality; trees are checked for root placement, spacing, scalp size, etc. Plot results determine pay percentage.
<b>Reprod</b>	A young conifer seedling already growing on the planting site.

<b>Scalp</b>	Clearing away of the vegetation around the planting spot.
<b>Slash</b>	Woody debris left behind after a site has been logged.
<b>Unit</b>	Standard administrative jargon for worksite, usually a clearcut; identified by name and number.

### NOTE REGARDING 'MAPLETON':

"The seedlings are treated with poison":

In 1974 when these lines were written, Thiram was applied to planting stock as a deer repellent. It didn't work, and sickened planters. The Hoedads and others fought the use of Thiram. It is no longer used, at least on federal contracts.



Howard Horowitz established his "kinship with the treebag clan" by planting trees on hundreds of clearcuts between 1973-1982, primarily with the worker-owned cooperatives Hoedads and Second Growth. He is also a biogeographer with a Ph.D. from the University of Oregon. He has conducted field research on appropriate vegetation management with Groundwork, a forest workers' research group. Since 1982 he has taught geography at Ramapo College of New Jersey.

These poems bring treeplanting to life,  
illuminating the highs and lows of a remarkable occupation  
that employs thousands of people in the Pacific Northwest.  
The physical beauty and desolation of the landscapes,  
and the joys and rigors of the treeplanter's lifestyle,  
emerge with clarity and power in  
*Close to the Ground.*



How fortunate we are to have the eye and the ear of a poet in Howard Horowitz. One of those people with "a hoe, a bag of trees, and low wages", that helped establish the forest worker cooperatives that range the Pacific Northwest working the woods.

Howie writes of this experience with the perceptions of a poet and a geographer's sense of place. In well-crafted poems he evokes the pleasures and agonies of the work, the qualities of the dirt and the ground at each place. "Poetry to the feet of a good crew."

Here too, are the years of conflict with forest managers over toxic chemicals, watershed protection, and the principles of good forestry - and the bitter paradox: "Walking up and down mountains planting lies for the U.S. Forest Service". And behind it all, the great presence of the forest and the land of Cascadia.

-Jeremiah Gorsline  
*Empty Bowl*

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