



JANISSE RAY

**ECOLOGY OF A
CRACKER CHILDHOOD**

"Well done and very moving" WENDELL BERRY

Ecology of a Cracker Childhood by Janisse Ray
Excerpt from Chapter 3: Iron Man

Forest Beloved

Maybe a vision of the original longleaf pine flatwoods has been endowed to me through genes, because I seem to remember their endlessness. I seem to recollect when these coastal plains were one big, brown-and-tan, daybreak-to-dark longleaf forest. It was a monotony one learned to love, for this is a place that, like a friend, offers multiplied loyalty with the passing years. A forest never tells its secrets but reveals them slowly over time, and a longleaf forest is full of secrets.

I know a few of them.

Longleaf pines are long-lived, reaching ages over five hundred years. As trees mature, their heartwood becomes so heavy and thick with resins that saw blades bounce away from it, and if saw teeth manage to enter the grain, they quickly gum up and dull. Heartwood mills a strong everlasting timber the color of ripe amber that earned longleaf the name "heart pine." Parcels of the tree, especially stumps and the area of the heart, are more heavily tamped with resin, and that wood is called "fat lightered," though people use the two names interchangeably, "heart pine" and "fat lightered," and sometimes they only say "fat," as in "Put another piece of that fat on the fire." It is so rich with concentrated, cured sap that it burns like a flare and has long been used, in very small pieces, as kindling; the resinous knots were early lanterns.

In the heart rests both the tree's strength and its weakness. After about ninety years, pines often are infected with red heart, a nonmortal fungus that makes the heartwood softer, more porous, and more flammable, and that which often hollows out the pine and makes of it a refuge.

You don't think about diversity when you look at longleaf. In a fully functioning longleaf woodland, tree diversity is low. A single species of pine reigns in an open monologue of tall timbers (except on sandhills where occurs an understory of turkey, post, and bluejack oak). The trees grow spaced so far apart in pine savannas, sunshine bathing the ground, that you can see forever; they are as much grassland as forest. The limbs of longleaf pine are gray and scaly and drape as the tree matures, and its needles are very long, up to seventeen inches, like a piano player's fingers, and held upright at ends of the limbs, like a bride holds her bouquet. In 1791, naturalist and explorer William Bartram, in his *Travels*, called the Southern pinelands a "vast forest of the most stately pine trees that can be imagined."

The groundcover, a comforter laid on the land, contains the diversity. Wiregrass dominates -- it's a flammable, thin-leaved, yellowish bunchgrass that grows calf-high and so thick it resembles a mop head. From this sinewy matrix of wiregrass all manner of forbs,

grasses, and low shrubs poke up. At every step, another leaf shape or petal form begs examination and documentation.

Meadow beauty. Liatris. Greeneyes. Summer farewell. Bracken fern. Golden aster. Sandhill blazing star. Goat's rue. Yellow-eyed grass. Purple balduina. Beautiful pawpaw. Pineland hoary pea. Wireleaf dropseed. Hair grass. Little bluestem. Lopside Indian grass. Toothache grass. Britton's beargrass. Gopher apple. Dwarf live oak. Low-bush blueberry. Blackberry. Runner oaks. Splitbeard bluestem. Honeycomb head. Croton. Clammey weed. Dog tongue. Rayless goldenrod. Narrow-leaf sunflower. Black-eyed Susan. Dwarf wax myrtle. New Jersey tea. Inkberry. Dwarf chinquapin. Cooley's meadowrue. Chaffseed. Sandhills milkvetch. Spurge ipecac. Wireweed. Sandwort. Blue lupine. Winter-flowering pixie-moss. Claspig warea. Pigeon wing. Toothed savory. Hairy wild indigo.

One hundred ninety-one species of rare vascular plants are associated with longleaf/wiregrass, 122 of these endangered or threatened.

When John Muir conducted what he termed his "floral pilgrimage" to the Gulf in 1867, somewhere on the fall line between Thomson and Augusta, Georgia, he described "the northern limit of the remarkable longleafed pine, a tree from sixty to seventy feet in height, from twenty to thirty inches in diameter, with leaves ten to fifteen inches long, in dense radiant masses at the ends of the naked branches." "The wood is strong, hard and very resinous," he wrote. "It makes excellent ship spars, bridge timbers, and flooring." Later he added, "I thank the Lord with all my heart for his goodness in granting me admission to this magnificent realm."

What thrills me most about longleaf forests is how the pine trees sing. The horizontal limbs of flattened crowns hold the wind as if they are vessels, singing bowls, and air stirs in them like a whistling kettle. I lie in thick grasses covered with sun and listen to the music made there. This music cannot be heard anywhere else on the earth.

Rustle, whisper, shiver, whinny. Aria, chorus, ballad, chant. Lullaby. In the choirs of the original groves, the music must have resounded for hundreds of miles in a single note of rise and fall, lift and wane, and stirred the red-cockaded woodpeckers nesting in the hearts of these pines, where I also nest, child of soft heart. Now we strain to hear the music; anachronous, it has an edge. It falters, a great tongue chopped in pieces.

Something happens to you in an old-growth forest. At first you are curious to see the tremendous girth and height of the trees, and you sally forth, eager. You start to saunter, then amble, slower and slower, first like a fox and then an armadillo and then a tortoise, until you are trudging at the pace of an earthworm, and then even slower, the pace of a sassafras leaf's turning. The blood begins to languish in your veins, until you think it has turned to sap. You hanker to touch the trees and embrace them and lean your face against their bark, and you do. You smell them. You look up at leaves so high their shapes are beyond focus, into far branches with circumferences as thick as most trees.

Every limb of your body becomes weighted, and you have to prop yourself up. There's this strange current of energy running skyward, like a thousand tiny bells tied to your capillaries, ringing with your heartbeat. You sit and lean against one trunk -- it's like leaning against a house or a mountain. The trunk is your spine, the nerve centers reaching into other worlds, below ground and above. You stand and press your body into the ancient and enduring, arms wide, and your fingers do not touch. You wonder how big the unseen gap.

If you stay in one place too long, you know you'll root.

I drink old-growth forest in like water. This is the homeland that built us. Here I walk shoulder to shoulder with history -- my history. I am in the presence of something ancient and venerable, perhaps of time itself, its unhurried passing marked by immensity and stolidity, each year purged by fire, cinched by a ring. Here mortality's roving hands grapple with air. I can see my place as human in a natural order more grand, whole, and functional than I've ever witnessed, and I am humbled, not frightened, by it. Comforted. It is as if a roundtable springs up in the cathedral of pines and God graciously pulls out a chair for me, and I no longer have to worry about what happens to souls.