



“The Fabled Asp” by Barbara Ruth

Aspens don't live long in tree-time,
forty to one hundred fifty years,
but that's only the outward story
you cannot date us by our rings; that is not our nature.

Beneath the ground, each grove a soul,
Growing in the clonal manner, all roots united.
Within the grove we do not birth or die, except as metaphor.
We send up stems, each with its stories, hand-talking,
its quake: we are a quaking people.

Even “we” is metaphor.
Think of Martin Buber's “I and Thou,”
then think of Rastafari's “I and I.”
I am we. Within a grove there is no “you” among us.
Would a human call her hand “you”?
So with us, with me.

Each grove is both “I” and “we”,
made unique by soil and slant of sun.
Our eldest grove has eighty thousand years.

When fires blaze we release what grows above
and hug the ground beneath the ground.
Our roots abide, await.
In time we will send up a stem,
see what becomes of it. Send another, then another.
We can wait years.
Eventually a stem takes hold, makes branches, catkins, bark.



Behold! An asp suddenly appears,
fabulously shimmers, whispers, joins with sun and wind to mesmerize.

See how our leaves are round and jagged both,
come back, see how our bark has furrowed in its aging.
Don't neglect our understories:
nine-bark and cinquefoil, arnica and paintbrush, snowberry and wild rose.

When a stem falls back to earth
we do not say "it died."
We say, "It is returned to Source."
What that stem, that tree came to know
breathing, quaking, reaching up to sky
will replenish us.
In time it sinks beneath the soil,
nestles in our coil of roots, becomes a strand inside the web of all that is unseen,
describes the feel of wind on bark, snow on quaking leaves,
and we renew, reshape our roots in story-nourished spirals.

Our groves descend from many stocks:
Chinese, Japanese, White, Grey, Swedish, American, Bigtooth:
We all quake. It's what we're known for. The slightest breeze twists us fluttering.
Not only wind shimmers us;
in still days of high summer
we shiver from reflected heat.
With our quakes we circulate our soul-force through the canopy
and give each leaf a chance for sun the way we like it:
oblique.

Look for us near rivers, streams.
Hear us calling in the wind.
Because our heart pulses deep in earth,



after raging fire, when you think the forest was destroyed, hold on.
Our stems are coming through the ashes,
once again to be the place multitudes call home.

Around the world tales of us unfold:
Scots call us fey and place our leaves beneath their tongues for silver speech.
Greeks bury treasures under our protection.
Caledonians made crowns of us to call the spirits of their dead.
Basque shepherds displaced in Nevada
carved their lonely stories on our trunks.
Chinese use the light/dark of our leaves to teach duality of yang and yin.
Across the nations our two-spirit leaves invoke
moon and sun, night and dark,
not this/not that.

In the language humans make of flowers
our essence transmits courage, tunes
the dreamer to the dreaming world.

One story persists, drifts from wind to wind:
our leaves are women's tongues
telling what they know, what they dream,
pleasuring each other heart to heart.

We sing of signing in the wilderness, sigh in relief for silences broke open.
Some secrets we hold fast, but we will tell you this:
so many times the fabulous
turns out to be true.

© Barbara Ruth 2008