







# THE LARCH

*A love story*

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY RANDY BEACHAM



**F**OR AS LONG AS I CAN REMEMBER having known them, I have been wanting to write about larch trees. I've been putting it off for fifteen years because, for one thing, it's like writing about lichens, or a clock that moves its hour hand only a fraction of an inch each year. (During my fifteen years of procrastination, one of the old giants has perhaps added only a half an inch to its girth. And yet, magnified throughout the forest—millions of such inches—surely the power of glaciers has been equaled.) But also, I've simply been afraid of attempting an essay about the larch, such is the reverence I have for the tree.

They don't speak, not even in the wind, really—unlike the souging and clacking limbs and trunks of the limber lodgepole, and the playing-card deck-shuffling clatter of aspen leaves in summer and fall—and even their dying comes slow. Sometimes a big larch will remain upright for a hundred years or longer after it's died—perishing in a huge fire or, occasionally, just dying, and finally rotting—and even after they fall over, snapping the other trees around them on their way and shaking the earth with their thunder, they remain there, solid and real, for centuries, and in many ways as alive, or more so, in their decomposition—possessing, or housing, more writhing life in that rotting than they did even in the upright living days of green and gold.

They are, of course, every bit as glorious in life as in death. While among the green and the living, they possess numerous attributes, one of the most underrated of which is that of water pump, intercepting snowmelt and surface sheet flow that might otherwise drain off to the nearest road and be carried away from the forest, unutilized. But the larch capture and claim and hold within the forest that water, and they convert it to astounding height, and to magnificent breadth.

What else is the function of a forest, first and foremost, if not a place to do this: to capture and filter water, and merge with sunlight, to create intricate being, intricate matter?

The big larches don't just claim and hold that runaway water; they circulate it, too, each tree a miniature weather system unto itself, returning hundreds of gallons of water to the ecosystem each day in the form of transpiration, a fine, even invisible mist emanating from the needles, just as lung-damp breath is emitted from a man or a woman; and on cold and damp mornings, you can see the same clouds of steam rising in plumes from the larch trees as you would see sifting from the mouths and nostrils of a forest of men and women.

This is not to say that the larch are gluttons, greedy water scavengers and totally out of control. One of the reasons they can get so big is that they can live so damn long, if you let

them—if you don't saw them down. Around the age of two or three hundred, they really begin to hit their stride and, having clearly gained a secure place in the canopy, they can concentrate their efforts almost exclusively thereafter on getting roly-poly big around the middle; and in the Yaak Valley, where I live, there are larch that have lived to be six and seven hundred years old.

They can prosper with either seasonal or steady access to water, though they can prosper also on the drier sites, such as those favored by the ponderosa pine. When need be, they can be prim and frugal with water, as in a drought, calibrating their internal balances with exquisite deftness to slow their growth as if almost into dormancy, where they hunker and lurk, giant and calm, awaiting only the freedom, the release, of the next wet cycle.

And they tolerate—flourish in, actually—fire, about which I will say more later.

Like any tree, they have certain diseases that can compromise their species—dwarf mistletoe, which sometimes weakens them through parasitic attrition, and larch casebearer beetle, which is kept in check by the fires and by the incredible battalions of flickers and woodpeckers (pileated, black-backed, Lewis's, downy, hairy, northern three-toed, and more) that sweep and swoop through these forests, drilling and rapping and tating and pounding, searching and probing and pecking and cleaning and aerating almost ceaselessly during the growing months. But for the most part, the larch remain relatively secure, in a world where so many other trees—fir, spruce, dogwood, oak, pine—are undergoing an epidemic of rot and beetles and blight and gypsy moths and acid rain.

Who can say for sure why the great larches are—for now—weathering the howling world so well, in these decades of such intense environmental degradation. From a purely intuitive level, I suspect that the answer has something to do with the larch's ancient jurisprudence—with the way it has evolved so carefully, so precisely, so uniquely and specifically to be safe in the world.

The larch is two things, not one: a deciduous conifer, bearing its seeds in cones but losing its needles each autumn, and it has selected the best attributes of each—the ancient conifers and the more recent deciduous trees—to fit into the one place on earth that would most have it, the strange dark cant of the Yaak, tipped into a magic seam between the northern Rockies and the Pacific Northwest.

Or perhaps their sturdiness, their calm and elegant forbearance in a world filled with drought and fire and disease, comes not from their wise evolutionary strategy of keeping one foot in









each world, but from the fact that they lie so extraordinarily low, sleeping or near dormant for the eight or nine months of the year when they either have no needles at all (the first little spindly paintbrush nubs not sprouting out some years until May), or their needles have already shut down production and have begun to turn bright autumn gold, which can happen as early as August. Perhaps, by sleeping so much, they age only one year to other trees' two or three or even four years.

In this regard, they are like a super-aspen, or a super-oak, calibrating their explosive leap of life to reside perfectly within that tipped thin window of sunlight and moisture in the Yaak, the three-month growing season, and then shedding their needles, just as the oak and aspen drop their leaves, once that period of growth has ended, for there's no need to invest in keeping them, dormant or barely alive, through the winter. Better to shut it all down and sleep completely.

But the larch are like a super-pine, too, or a super-fir, possessing the eager colonizing tricks of the conifers that have flourished for the last eon in the huge landscape-altering sweeps of drama that follow the large fires in the northern Rockies—casting their

seed-sprung cones from high above, down into the fertile ash, and in that way stretching like a living wave, or like an animal walking into new territory.

(In the northern Rockies, some things run from a fire, and other things follow it—elk following the green grass that follows the autumn-before's flames, so that in one sense, perhaps as seen through squinted eyes, the elk can be said to be the grass can be said to be the fire, with very little difference in the movements of any of the three of them—all three generated and directed by the same force—and to that series of waves can be added the larch, colonizing those new burns and then reaching for the sky, rising slowly into 150-foot peaks that can take centuries to crest.)

So the larch, like the Yaak itself, is two things, not one: fire and rot, shadow and light. And in keeping with another of the stories of the Yaak—the fact that what is rare or even vanished from much of the rest of the world is often still present, sometimes in abundance, here—the larch are the rarest form of old growth in the West, though in the Yaak, they are the most common form.

Biologist Chris Filardi has looked at the maps of distribution for larch, as well as the habitat type found here, and has declared that the Yaak is “the epicenter of larch.” This species is the one thing, I think, that is most truly ours. So many of the Yaak’s other wonders are down to nearly the thin edge of nothing—five or six wolves, fewer than twenty grizzlies, a handful of lynx, a dozen mated pairs of bull trout, one occasional woodland caribou, a handful of wolverines, fourteen little roadless areas, one pure population of inland redband trout . . .

The larch, however, are at the edge of nothing. This is the center of the center. Increasingly, I am convinced that the larch trees possess, more than any other single thing, the spirit of the Yaak.

**THEIR INTERIOR WOOD**, all the way through, is the red-orange color of campfire coals, a darker orange than a pumpkin, darker orange than the fur of an elk, and while I haven’t found a scientist yet who can or will dare guess why the inside of the tree, never seen except when the tops snap off, or when the saw bisects the flesh, should be that firesome color, you would not be able to disprove, I think, the notion that there might be some distant parallel pattern or connection, out at or beyond the edge of our present knowledge, wherein fire likes, and is drawn to, the color of the larch’s interior; for the larch is nothing if not birthed of fire.

And again, not just any fire, but the strangeness here, in the Yaak, of fire sweeping through and across a lush and rainy land that, when it is not burning, is rotting; and which is always, even in the rotting and the burning, growing—with seething, roiling life, and life’s spirits, being released in every moment of every day and every night upon this land.

I have thought often that the shape of their bodies is like that of a candle flame. Broad at the base, measuring three, four, sometimes even five feet around, they maintain that barrel thickness for what seems like the entire rung of their length, before tapering quickly to a tip not unlike the sharpened end of a pencil.

This phenomenon is even more pronounced when their tapered tips get knocked off by wind or lightning or ice storms, leaving behind what now seems almost a perfect cylinder, and which continues living, even thriving, without its crown—able somehow to continue photosynthesizing and maintaining its vast bulk by the work of the few spindly branches that remain. Sometimes only a couple of such branches survive to nurture that entire pillar, so that one is reminded of the tiny arm stubs of another primitive, *Tyrannosaurus rex*.

**THERE’S SOME DEAL** the larch have cut with the world, some intricate bargain, part vainglorious gamble and part good old-fashioned ecological common sense. They’ve cast their lot with

the sun rather than the shade, having evolved to colonize new open space, such as that which follows a severe fire, or patches of forest that are infiltrated by slashes of light whenever other large trees fall over. Because of this, they race the other sun-loving trees—the pines and, to a lesser extent, the Douglas firs—for that position at the canopy where they can drink in all of the sun; where they have to suffer no one’s shade.

But if they expend too much energy in that race for the sun—if they channel almost all of their nutrients into the vertical component of height at the expense of the horizontal component, girth—then they’ll run the risk of being too skinny, too limber, and will be prone, then, to tipping over in the wind, or snapping under a load of ice or snow, or burning up like a matchstick in the first little fire that passes through; and what good is it then to gain the canopy—to win the race for that coveted position aloft—if only to collapse, scant years later, under the folly, the improvident briskness, of one’s success?

When the larch and lodgepole are found together, as they often are up here, the larch will have been hanging just behind and beneath the lodgepole for those first many years, “choosing” to spend just a little more capital on producing thicker bark, both for greater individual strength—greater static strength—as well as to get a jump on the defense against the coming fires. It’s always a question of when, not if.

However, as the lodgepole begin to reach maturity and then senescence, the larch begin to make their move; and as the lodgepole complete the living phase of their earthly cycle and begin blowing over, leaving the larch standing alone now, the wisdom or prudence of the larch becomes evident even to our often unobservant eyes. It is then that the true glory of the larch is manifested.

Seventy or ninety or a hundred years old by this point, the larch will have developed a thick enough bark, particularly down around the first four or five feet above ground level, to withstand many if not most fires.

And now, with the competition for moisture and nutrients removed, and the canopy more fully their own, the larch are free to really go wild. They didn’t have to out-compete the lodgepole for those first seventy or a hundred years; they just had to tag right along behind and below. But now they can “release,” as the foresters call it: having the canopy to themselves, they continue to grow slightly taller, but now pour more and more energy into girth, and into a thickening of their bark—battening down the ecological hatch against all but the most freakish, outrageous fires.

(So deep become the canyons and crevices, the corrugations of that thickened bark, that a species of bird, the brown creeper, has been able to occupy and exploit that specific habitat: creeping up and down those vertical gullies, those crenulated folds a few



inches deep, picking and pecking and probing for the little insects that hide beneath the detritus that collects in those canyons, and even building its nest in those miniature hanging gardens.)

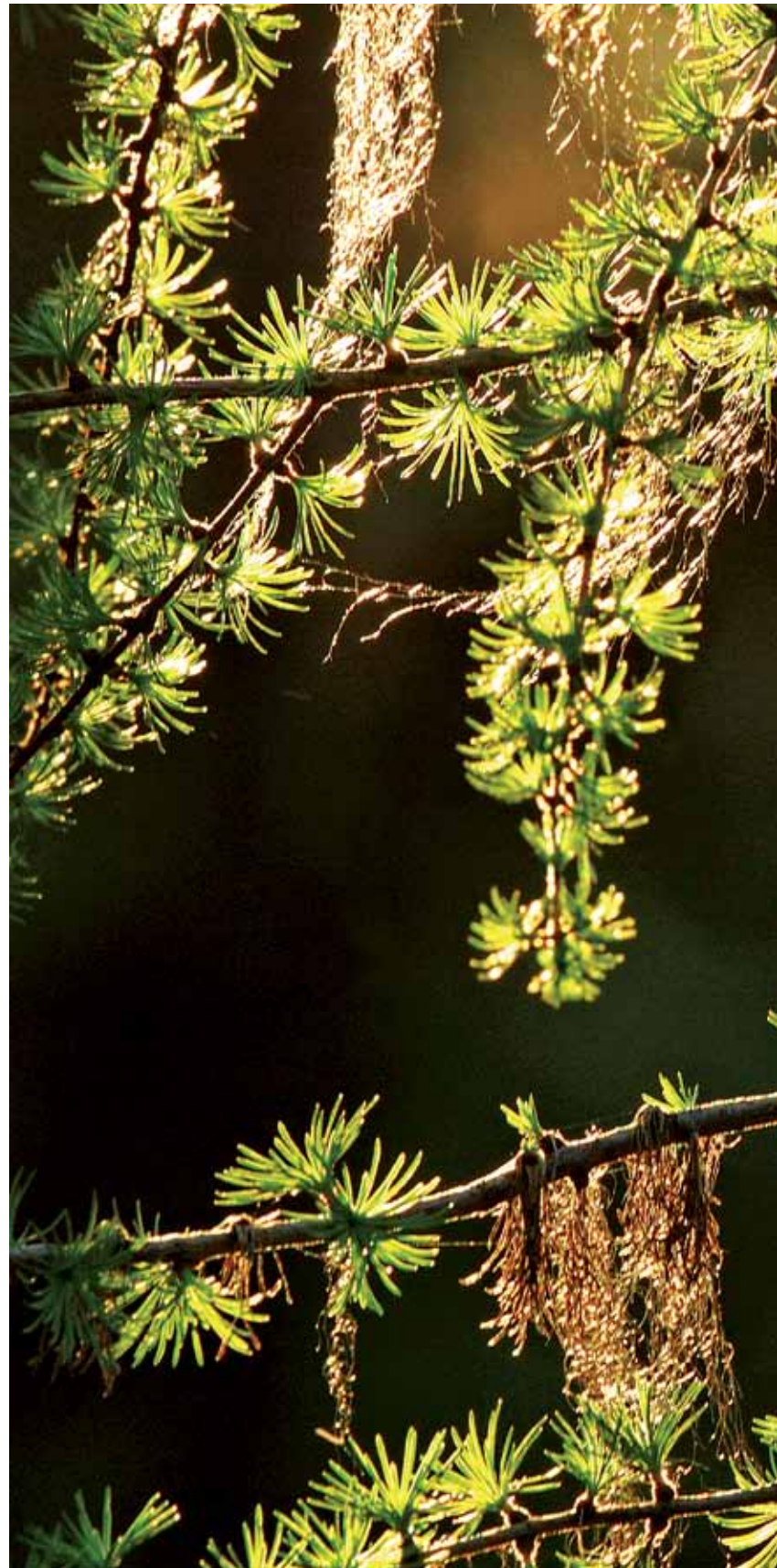
Again, fire and rot are equal partners in this marriage, in this landscape quite unlike any other. And burn or rot, it makes no difference to the larch, really, how the lodgepole dies, for in their close association, the larch is going to feast upon the carcasses of the lodgepole, and assimilate those nutrients: either in the turbo-charged dumping of rich ash following the fire that consumes the lodgepole but only singes the thick bark of the larch; or in the slower, perhaps sweeter and steadier release of those same nutrients from the fallen lodgepoles as they decompose. The forest will always burn again, but on occasion fire may not return until after that dead and fallen lodgepole has rotted all away, has been sucked back down into the soil and then taken back up into the flesh of the larch, the larch assuming those nutrients as if sucking them up through a straw—which, in effect, it does, through the miracles of xylem and phloem.

At this point, of course, it's off to the races for the larch. They just get bigger and bigger, in the manner of the rich getting richer. And they seem to put all of this almost ridiculous bounty—sometimes, literally, this windfall—into the production of girth; they pork out, becoming still more resistant to the perils of fire and ice and wind, so that now time is about the only thing that can conquer the giants, and even time's ax seems a dull gnawer against the great larches' astounding mass and solidity.

IT COULD BE SAID that the growth of the lodgepole represents reckless imprudence and a nearly unbreakable flexibility, while the larch is all solidity and moderation. And if the lodgepole symbolizes the dense connections of community, and the notion that when one is hurt or bent, all are hurt or bent, then the larch is inflexible and isolate, the loner, seemingly independent in the world and as rigid, in his or her great strength, as the lodgepole is limber—the larch standing firm and planted, almost ridiculously so, in even the strongest storms, while all around the rest of the forest is swaying and creaking.

(Sometimes the force will be so great upon the larch that they'll snap and burst rather than bend, and their top will go flying off, cartwheeling through the sky like a smaller tree itself, and afterward, the damaged larch will set about its healing, sending up a slender new spar or sucker in place of the old top, cautious but determined, and unwilling to cede anything, not even unto death—remaining standing for a century or longer, even after the life force has finally drained out of it.)

Western larch weighs forty-six pounds per cubic foot, dried, here in the Yaak; it's the heaviest, densest wood in the forest. It's like a cubic foot of stone, standing or fallen.











Often they're so heavy, so saturated with their uptake of nutrients, that on the big helicopter sales, in places so far back into the mountains, or on slopes so steep that not even the timber industry's pawns in Congress will have been able to appropriate public finances to build roads into those places, the sawyers will have to girdle the big larch trees a year or more in advance of the logging. This allows the life, the sap, to drain slowly out of the behemoths so that then, when the helicopters do come, and the girdled trees are finally felled, their dead or dying weight is considerably less than if they were still green, and the helicopter companies are able to save money on fuel because there's less strain on their engines.

As powerful and unyielding as the larch is, it only becomes more so as it ages. You can read the individual stories, year by year, in the growth rings sampled by an increment borer or, in the case of one of the giants being felled, in the cross section made by the saw and sawyer. The spaces between the growth rings expand and contract through the years, charting the individual's explosive early growth, and then the slowing-down, as if for a breath of air, and then, when a fire or wind comes through and cleans out some competitors, an expansion again, and to me

such tales of thinning and thickening read like the scan of a kind of silent music—a symphony of rise and fall, contraction and expansion, segue and chorus.

Fire, ice, and wind: the larches' responses to and shapings by these elements are dramatic, as is the flamelike alacrity with which they leap from dormancy each spring, and with which they retire for winter's slumber each fall—but I have to say, I think it is their patience by which I am most impressed, and of which I am most envious.

I want to believe they will be well suited to the coming temperature variations, the dormancy demanded not just by winter's extremes, but by the coming heat and drought of global warming. I know they lack the pines' flexibility; that they do not know how to sway. Still, I believe in them, admire them, am in love with them.

And I dream of someone, one day, being able to walk from the summit of the Yaak to the Canadian border in a swath of uninterrupted old-growth larch ten miles wide, as once existed, as evidenced by the remnants still present, both standing as well as stumps. I dream that someday a hundred years from now a traveler—man, woman, child, or moose; bear, elk, wolf,



or caribou—could set out on a warm summer’s day and pass through the leafy cool light of an old larch forest, the duff soft underfoot and the air smoky and gauzy with the sun-warmed esters and terpenes emanating from the bark, and the odor of lupine sweet and dense all throughout the grove—and that the traveler could walk and walk and never leave the old growth; could walk all day and then into the night, through columns of moonbeam strafing down through the canopy, and still be within the old forest; could pass out of this country and into the next and still be among those old trees.

The shape and nature and spirit of this land would accommodate such a vision yet. It is only up to our hearts to ask it.

I LOVE THE ODOR of them, I love the sight and touch of them. I love to lean in against them, to spread my arms around them, to touch the thick laminae of bark, to sit beneath them in storms while all else sways, as branches and streamers of moss whirl through the air.

I love to listen to the pileated woodpeckers drumming on them, and to the scabble of little clawed animals scrambling up and down the bark of the living, as well as upon the fallen husks of the dead.

I love to see them lying on their sides in the ferns, rotting slowly—resting again, with the rain and sunlight still feeding somehow their magnificent and rotting bodies, even as they continue feeding the forest around them.

In their yearly dormancy as well, while losing the gold fire of their needles in autumn, they give back to the soil, particularly if a fire has just passed through, for the myriad wind-tossed casting of their needles acts as a net and helps secure the new bed of ash below, which might otherwise wash downslope and into the creeks and rivers, scouring the watercourse and eroding the soil.

It is a beautiful thing to see in the autumn, after a fire, those gold needles cast down by the millions upon a blackened ground. The two colors, black and gold, seem as balanced and beautiful as gold stars within the darkest night.

Late October and early November, after they have just gone to sleep, is the time I think of as being most their season. The sky above feels fuller in the absence of their needles. There is suddenly more space above, in a time when our spirits need that—in the dwindling days of light, and with winter’s fog and rain and snow creeping in.

One night a damp wind blows hard from the south. In the morning the hills and mountains are covered with gold. It’s an incredible banquet, a visual feast, and our eyes take it in all at once, and a thing stirs in our blood, a strengthening and quieting-down both; and farther back in the forest the bears begin to crawl into their dens, seeking sleep also.

If the gold needles had stayed up there against that cerulean October sky forever, surely we would have eventually gotten used to them, and taken them for granted.

HIKING DOWN off a mountain from far in the backcountry, I stop at dusk, weary, and without shedding my burdened pack take a seat on an old fallen larch, one of those ancient giants from the last century, its heartwood finally rotting but its outer husk still firm.

The immense log is covered completely with the gold confetti of its descendants growing all around it, and there is no table or other furniture I have ever seen more elegant or beautiful than that impromptu bench, nor more timely—I was tired and needed a place to rest, so I sat down and it was there for me—and I sit there resting for a long time, watching the dusk give itself over to dark.

And just as there is no furniture that could be the equal of a fallen larch left in the woods to rot or burn at its own pace, or under the pace of this landscape that is so intensely its partner, surely there can be no gold-lined streets of heaven superior to what awaits the residents of this valley on a fine October morning after a night during which the wind has blown hard, when our dreams of a night sky filled with swirling, shimmering gold are exceeded only by the beauty of reality as we first step outside to see one more glorious season being born into the ceaseless and enduring world. ✎

## Meditation at Five Islands

There is no help for it after all,  
nothing to keep one’s unlive lives  
from dragging their heavy chains  
along the bottom of the sea,  
full fathom five and so forth.  
The heart wants what it wants,  
which is everything. The brine  
air and the hundred-year firs  
and the secret music cupped  
in the polished nothing of a shell.  
There is no way to feel in the hand  
the solid mass of the life one has  
lived, to know what it is. There is  
only the walk down to the shore  
and the stones held in the palm,  
and only the sea to look to, as far  
as one can, which is only so far.

— Dave Lucas