

Popple, Popple, Oak:

I was walking on the road early this morning, in that wonderful time after first light when everything seems to be lit by some internal, muted source. The raindrops on branch ends pipe this light out and away from their trunk, fall, and are immediately replaced by the next drop. Plop.

My reverie was in full swing. I was fairly close to transcendent bliss when a sort of sing-song cadence interrupted it. The feeling was that of a slap and not entirely welcome. A voice was reciting the names of trees, in no particular order and seemingly without a destination.

"Hickory, elm, elm, elm, cherry, hickory, cherry, oak, oak, oak, oak, elm." Then a pause. And then, "Oak, oak, elder, elder, elder, hickory, dogwood, dogwood, dogwood, basswood, nice big one too."

Out of the mist walked our good neighbor Chauncey, his boots crunching the gravel and his head tipped slightly up and back. You may remember Chauncey from up the road. "Popple, popple, popple. oak, oak, popple, popple." I refocused my mind from reverie to sociability and offered a "Good morning, Chaunce. What brings you out.." when I was cut short by a gesture of his left hand and a slightly annoyed expression on his face. Chauncey was concentrating and, from his point of view, he was the one being interrupted. His hand was now shoulder high, palm facing me, in the classic Hold On a Second, Can't You See I'm Busy, gesture.

"Popple, popple, oak, oak and popple. There. That part's done. Ah, Saunders, good morning. Didn't mean to be impolite but you caught me in the middle of my count." Chauncey went on to explain to me that each spring he marches down the road and enumerates, to the best of his ability, the trees that grow on either side of it. I'm not sure how far up the ridge or down towards the creek his census encompasses. And I didn't ask because he would have told me. I know it takes him about a week to do the east side of the road and less than half that time to do the west side. Why, you might ask, does one side require so much less time than the other? Fear of falling. Chauncey is famously afraid of going over the edge, especially since last August. And since the west side of the road is the down-slop side, and steep, Chauncey does not tread too close to the precipice. Ergo, limited field of vision, fewer trees, faster count.

This may seem a smidge unscientific to you. You're right. It is. What one must understand about Chauncey is that good science is not his main concern. Good trees are. Chauncey has a pecking order, a place on his scale for each of our myriad tree species. To hear Chauncey tell it, his rating system should be universal and to use any other would be

sheer folly. He's quite passionate about it. He works on a scale ranging from one to twenty-three (don't ask why).

He invited me to walk with him back in the direction from which he came, the count having already been completed there. And, marking his place in the road with blaze orange spray painted ("C" for Chauncey) we commenced. The purpose of the invitation was so that I might learn something of the proper order of trees.

"Red oak, eighteen. Mature, straight cherry, twenty. Box elder, seven. Just look at the way those branches go all helter skelter, no order, stinks when you cut it too. But it is a maple after all. You can get decent syrup from them provided you have an unlimited number of trees, endless time on your hands and slave labor to cook it down. Being of the Acer (maple) persuasion is what keeps it from falling below a five. Shagbark Hickory, twenty-one. Takes a hundred years to reach ten inches in diameter. The wood is fabulous; they should still be making golf club shafts out of it. Provides high energy food for all manner of forest dweller. Remarkable tree."

I was rather enjoying the monologue when the question occurred to me. "Tell me, Chauncey, what's a twenty-three in your system?" "There isn't one. If I gave a twenty-three I'd have no where to go. I'd be saying that I'll never see a finer tree. Rather limiting don't you think, not to mention vaguely depressing from a hopeful future sort of perspective. I mean, if you say that you've seen it all, what would be the point of going on?" He's right.

"So I guess you feel the same way about the bottom end of the scale, right? If you hand out a one it would be just as limiting." He didn't hesitate. "Buckthorn, one." And so it went for quite a lovely while.

"American Plum, fifteen, paper birch sixteen.."

Finally, when he felt he had shared enough of his knowledge he smiled a satisfied smile, bid me a most pleasant morning and turned to resume his count. Standing beside a blaze orange "C" he began again. "Popple, popple, oak..." I didn't have the heart to tell him that he was beginning from a mark he had painted three days ago, several hundred yards from where he left off this morning. And so, away he went, into the fog and out of my day. "Oak, cherry, popple, popple, oak."