About the Cover

Robert Farina, 'Bristlecone, Schulman Grove,' 1985. Pentax 6 × 7, Kodak Technical Pan film. CC-BY-NC-SA 4.0

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It's difficult to know whether it's alive or dead. Bristlecone Pines achieve their extreme life spans by growing incredibly slowly in dry, subalpine climates with highly alkaline soil: the most ancient specimen has been estimated to be 5,067 years old. Their wood is extremely dense, and their 'sectored architecture' allows strips of the trees to live when other, nearly indistinguishable parts have died (NPS, 2016). Even completely dead trees can stand for millennia after their demise, looking much the same as they did when living. With their uncertain 'life,' Bristlecones, like the vegetal kingdom in general, confront us with an opacity we tend to think of as a deep interiority. 'To find a tree's memories,' one science writer argues, 'you have to look past its leaves and even its bark; you have to go deep into its trunk, where the chronicles of its long life lie, secreted away like a library's lost scrolls' (Andersen, 2012). The prospect of reading into the dark heart of vegetation beckons the historian and the textual critic as well as the mystery lover and the scientist. Yet insistence on seeing the hidden interior can be both obstinate and damaging; the Bristlecone is legendary not only for its age but also for the story of Donald Currey, the glaciologist who, in pursuit of legible tree rings, cut down the 'Prometheus' tree, the oldest known Bristlecone at the time of its death (NPS, 2016).

There are other ways in which plants can flower in human language and narrative. Living at scales beyond our experience, plants like the Bristlecone Pine inspire imaginative comparison: the trees are as old as medieval cathedrals, even as the pyramids. Individual Bristlecones have been named for Biblical patriarchs (Methuselah) and Greek deities (Prometheus). In the traditional lore of the Owens Valley Paiute, some pines were formerly men (Steward, 1936, 373). Our cover plant looks like a monstrous woody crustacean, a twisted skein of yarn, a vein of marble sprung free of earth and reaching skyward. This imaginative work already animates the public discourse about Bristlecones. Taken seriously, such language can encourage an expanded sensing of vegetal life. For our purposes in this issue, thinking about the ways we perceive and narrate the partially dead/partially living may also help us navigate the medieval, another ancient subject that is both gone and present.

I owe the expansion of my own sensing of plant life to my father, the photographer behind our cover image for this issue, and my mother, a gardener equally adept with a camera. The walls of our house were covered in close-ups of nodding columbine flowers, meticulous lupin leaves, grainy driftwood knots, and single stems glowing with dew. Landscapes featuring the towering redwoods of the Sierra Nevada provided a contrasting scale and sense of the size of our human bodies. Watching the images develop in the darkroom and seeing how colors transform when captured on black and white film (a blue sky can darken dramatically) opened my eyes to the hidden qualities of things. Those secrets were not tucked away in some deep interior

but were right on the surface, revealed by patient attention and a different way of perceiving the light.

References

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