

Carving Black Walnut

I moved into a cabin vandals had damaged on the west slope of the foothills of the Sierras. I repaired the cabin to pay my rent, replaced broken windows, replaced burned boards in the back deck, cleaned up garbage around the cabin, whatever needed doing to make them more liveable.

Along the ridge across the highway from the cabin, I landscaped yards, carpentered, repaired plumbing, replaced broken windows, whatever people would pay me to do so I could pay expenses for living.

I carried my guitar and hiked through pine trees and manzanita brush, over a ridge, across an ancient footbridge above the clear-running creek. Moss swirled long tendrils in the current under the bridge. Wind smelled like very early mountain spring and brought cold rain. I walked out of the wind into Sam's front room. His wife had gone to work, and his children had gone to school.

We played guitars and sang songs. I noticed a dark, triangular piece of wood in his wood box. I picked it up and said, "This is black walnut. You can't burn this. It's valuable. They sell this stuff by the pound."

Sam said, "One of the places I worked, they put that with the stuff they wanted me to haul to the dump. It's a blank for a rifle stock, but it cracked, so they threw it away. You want it?"

"I do. I could carve that. Anything but a rifle stock."

"It's yours. After we play some music."

We played songs and worked out rough spots in the way our music went together.

We visited and ate lunch and played more music.

I hiked the trail home, carried my guitar and the black walnut.

The next morning, I carried the walnut wood out into sunlight. I cut off the narrow end of the triangle, where the wood had split. A small spiral in the wood's grain suggested a cheek and an eye. I carved away wood toward a face in the wood.

I carved the heavy, dark brown, close-grained piece of wood toward forms in my mind, two women, back to back, an older, heavier woman facing one way and sharing part of her

back with a younger, slimmer woman, large with child, facing the other way. The heavy, dark wood began to represent three generations.

For a while every day, I carved the tightly-spiraling grain until it looked like a young woman's cheek and eye, then her shoulder, her arm, and behind her, growing from her, an older woman beginning. Carving blended patience with vision.

I worked outside on a table I built from scrap wood. When it snowed or rained, I moved inside. I had no electricity. I worked partly by touch and held the wood to the light from the window to see what to do next.

Spring came. I got contracts for blister rust control, quiet work in the Sierras with hand tools, no machines, no poisons, for the Forest Service. I gave the repaired cabin back to the people who owned it.

I camped in the forests where I worked. I had no place to store possessions. I couldn't keep much beyond the essentials for survival and work.

I sold my carving tools. I gave the sculpture to a friend. She said, "It doesn't have to be finished. It's emerging. This one emerges from this one, and another will emerge. The form still emerges from the wood."

Yes. Still emerging. Like life.

I thanked the wood for the figures I found in it. I thanked life for wood, for growth, for learning I gained from carving, from finding figures in heavy, dark wood. I kept memories of rich smells of wood opening to new forms. Trees and brush and grass and forbes grew around me on the mountain where I lived when I carved and when I worked on the mountain.

On the mountain, I worked through summer on blister-rust contracts. I walked through forest and soaked up sunshine. Moving toward my future was like carving black walnut with no clear idea of what I worked toward, defining what the wood would be by what I discovered about it each day.

I walked in sunshine across steep slope, between trees, through growing brush, grass, flowers growing toward the sky above a clean, cold stream running wildly beneath budding currant bushes toward the ocean.

Anxiety about the world, about my future, my life, lessened. My thinking slowed. I felt more and more at peace. Answers to every question I could ask about my life would come to me slowly, like figures emerging from black walnut, like water running in the stream toward the far-away sea, like sunshine soaking into me and causing wild plants all around me on this

mountain to grow toward the sky.