

# Populus tremuloides: We Are One

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*S. J. Kariko*

Watch the deer's ears—  
are they both towards you?  
Is one angled back? Look around,  
see what she's listening to,  
they can sense things.

Learn to read the ears of the deer.  
Listen for when birds stop calling, when  
songs change, calls shriek out,  
shrill across the sky.

Look where trees are torn up,  
ant mounds clawed apart,  
no guarantee our team will stay safe,  
so look to the ones we can learn from—  
watch the deer's ears.

After the nurse was found  
partially eaten and cached, to be  
finished later by the mother bear,  
and at least one, if not both of her cubs,

we listen on cobbled banks, our bodies  
electric seeing fresh tracks

we spring at the ping of a pebble  
falling on the shore.

Now, mountains disappeared for more than a week,  
smoke slows me down 'til I end up  
at the clinic seeking relief—  
more steroid inhalers to bring breath back in.

This smoke—  
from wildfires two to three states away,  
ponderosa and fir, cedar and spruce,  
beetle-killed, sap-filled—exploding  
across highways even lakes.

This smoke—  
of young firefighters  
perished in these blazes,  
whose ash and spirit is mixed  
with lodgepole and owl and ground  
squirrel and telephone poles and their vehicles—  
all traveling cross our country now  
to where I sit, here, in this aspen grove.

Aspen, they are one.  
Standing together, a single organism,  
sharing ancient roots, some 80,000 years strong.  
Aspen come back first. Need  
fire to compete with conifers.

Their green-white bark  
blackens around where  
branches sprout out,  
deer rub velvet off,  
elk incise toothy lines  
and young cubs climb.

These storied trunks reach all at once into thick sky,  
fingerling branches entwined under a now orange moon,  
leaves hanging on edge, ready to move at the slightest...  
They dance—

whirling together,  
on long flattened petioles,  
such delicate attachments,

*Populus tremuloides.*

Standing just below  
leaf and wind,  
story and sky,  
we listen for the deer's ears  
from now—until when?

At the clinic, they tell us  
that even if we begin driving east today

we'll still have two days through smoke.

I try to imagine this: our country

blanketed—while grizzly cubs are

driven to a zoo, to be

fed by humans, for the

rest of their lives.

*Populace tremuloides*

*Inspired by events while conducting field research in the living laboratory of what is currently called the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. Written with a tender heart for the nurse, the bears, the firefighters, and all of their loved ones; and in celebration of Pando—possibly the oldest living stand of aspen trees on our planet.*