

James Dott

## Working in the Woods, 1980

The fall I moved back to Eugene from New Mexico,  
got a job building fire trail around clear-cut units  
in the Willamette National Forest: Row River, Quartz Creek, up the  
McKenzie.

The boss was a long-haired, bearded hippie redneck named Ted,  
skinny hyper guy who loved to “plow the snow,”  
snort coke that is, only on weekends though,  
beer and pool on weeknights,  
told me once that Alpo canned dog food and Dinty Moore Beef Stew  
were exactly the same except for the label and the price.  
By Thanksgiving I was running the saw to buck through down logs.

In mid-December Ted hired a kid, nineteen he said.  
He started on a Monday and right away began  
bugging me to let him run the saw,  
said he'd been using one since he was ten,  
said he had a bad leg from a root-wad that  
crushed it when he was setting choker.  
That's why he had a limp, though it came and went.  
Ted, overhearing, told him, “Quit buggin' Jim. Hired you to dig trail.”

On Thursday at lunch Ted asked him, “So you're getting married?”  
“Huh? Oh yeah. Got to. Girlfriend's pregnant.”  
After work over beers  
Ted told me he'd had a call Wednesday night  
from a jewelry store in Springfield  
wanting to confirm that the kid was employed  
since he was applying to buy an engagement ring on time.

On Friday the kid whined and begged  
to get paid early for his week's work  
—normally we got paid every other Friday—  
pleaded that he needed it for the down payment on the ring.  
Ted grudgingly obliged, “You’re damn lucky I brought the  
checkbook, kid.”

The kid didn’t show on Monday,  
didn’t call in.  
Ted wasn’t too surprised.  
The rest of us didn’t mind, he hadn’t worked that hard.

But now  
I wonder how it all worked out,  
how the kid paid off the ring, or didn’t,  
if they’re still married, or living,  
and their baby, who’ll be clearing forty soon.  
How’s *that* kid doing?