

The Simple Gift by Beth Turner

To the south of the almendra and liana forests, an old man hobbled here and there between the burnt remnants of trees. He occasionally paused, mid-step to lean on his cane and cough as clouds of smoke blew down from the north. This did not deter him from his task, however.

On his bent back, he carried a large canvas bag. Every few paces, he reached into this bag to pull out a handful of its contents, which he scattered over the ground. A smile spread over his leathery face each time, and he nodded in satisfaction before hobbling on.

Soon the sun was high above the scorched land. Sweat began to drip into the wisps of the man's beard, but he did not stop for water, and shade was nowhere to be found.

Nearby, a young rancher observed his elder's efforts. He was concerned, so he called out, "Hey, old man! You better stop and drink, or you'll collapse!"

The old man raised a weathered hand and waved it to assure the rancher that no such rest was necessary.

"He's crazy," muttered the young rancher. Still, he was worried, so he grabbed a half-full canteen and made his way over to the bent figure.

Once he caught up, he thrust the canteen at the old man, who begrudgingly took a drink. "What are you doing that's so important, anyway?" the young man asked.

His elder simply grinned and held open the bag.

"What's in there?" asked the rancher. He peered in. "What? Seeds from the forest? You foolish old man," he muttered. "We clear and burn the forest so we can have a place to raise our cattle. This is our only way of life, and you're ruining it. Stop trying to bring back the forest!"

The old man simply closed his eyes and sighed. "Young man," he said in a voice as weathered as his skin, "Stop and think. What is this Earth to yo

"It's my way of life," stated the rancher.

"But by burning the forest, do you leave a way of life for your children, or your grandchildren? Young man, this world is not only yours to use. It is a gift from us to the future. What are you giving your grandchildren?" Here the old man paused. "Nothing. You are giving your grandchildren nothing but a mute and battered Earth. It is our duty to make the Earth hum with life for the generations to come."

The old man hefted the canvas bag up to his back and staggered forward a few paces. Almost as an afterthought, he whispered, "I want my grandchildren to shiver at the howl of the monkeys and to have the joy of knowing the forest."

"Old man! Wait!" cried the young rancher. He easily caught up with the fellow and swung the sack from the old man's back to his own. The old man smiled and kept walking. The young rancher sighed, reached into the bag, and scattered a handful of seeds.