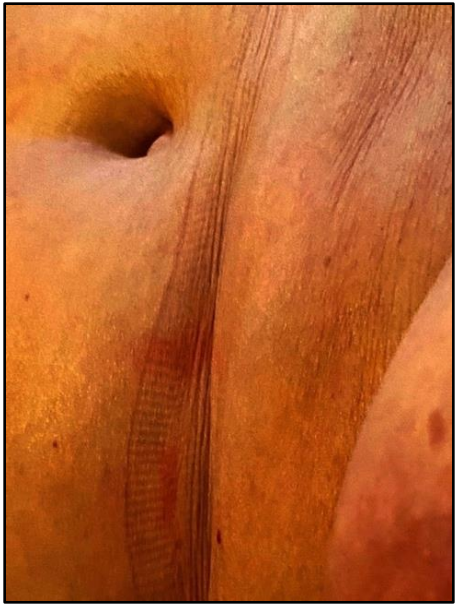
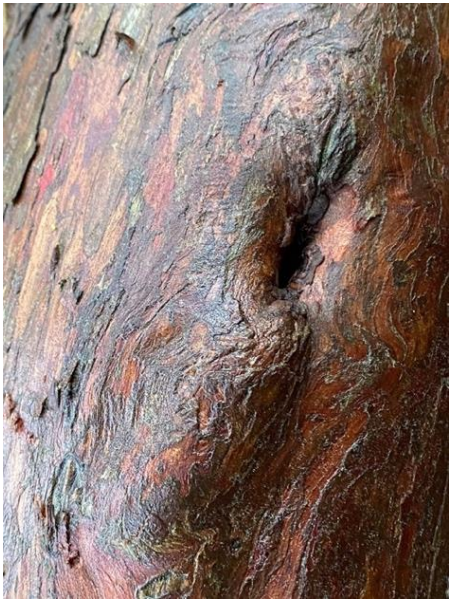
Going Underground with Betsey

Prologue: A view from the Trees

Now I am a woman longing to be a tree, planted in a moist, dark earth
Between sunrise and sunset—

"Speaking Tree" by Joy Harjo





I was born a tree...that's *my* favourite "origin story,"
the umbilical cord connecting me to my mother
left a belly button echoed in the cedar I befriended
on Cortes Island in the summer of 2024.

"Look at those majestic papery birches," my mother would exclaim, transfixed on the trees outside her bedroom window, quoting Robert Frost. She was a tree person, too.

As I photographed her in her 90s, I probed with my camera her sculpted hands,
veins creating tributaries and craters, like the curled leaves, shrivelling up on the ground
on the October day when she died.

Hands and leaves, both in glorious decay in their spiral of life.

Now I have my mother's hands.

So does the Russian Olive tree I planted in her memory.

In my front yard, I marvel at the red maple,
planted in honour of my son Joshua in the mid-1980s,
It now towers above our house, as he towers over me.
What storms it has weathered, its gnarly knots
carrying stories just as my gnarly knuckles
narrate my 80 years.

Betsey loved maple trees, too.
With her students she planted 200 maples
around the school where she taught
in the mid-1800s.

What stories do those maples tell, Betsey?

What other native trees surrounded you
in that forested area of Ohio?

How were they transformed as your family
and other settlers cleared the forests and
created homes and villages?

Did you see trees as I do,
as relatives or dear friends?