

Red Trees

Part I

First, the acorns fell.

The red trees are dancing in the wind,
and bunches of leaves are running over the lawns.

In photographs, my young father
and his siblings would scatter over these sidewalks,
running out of church with arms wild
and smiles wide.

Today, I am passing through these neighborhoods,
cold to my eyes but colorful in my memories.
These streets, in years decades apart,
are where my father and I were both children.

When I was growing up,
he would take me up here on visits to his mom and dad;
it was just him and I.

I remember our Sunday mornings,
first in the pews and then around the kitchen table,
enjoying the best pancakes I have ever known.

I remember the books he read to me
in the room he and his brother shared;
I would fall asleep in the top bunk.

I remember our Saturday summer nights,
racing together on our bikes to beat the sunset home,
coasting and sweating on hills, coming back from the lake.

I remember our trips up here on Friday mornings,
especially when I got to skip class —
driving under glowing clouds,
nearly bouncing on the radio waves of 60's pop,
stopping at gas stations bordering wheat fields
and walking out with salty snacks under the rising sun.

And I remember, just before one Thanksgiving,
Grandmother's car accident.

I remember Dad's halves of the anxious phone calls
being relayed cross-country through our living room,
and seeing Grandma together during her final weeks
in the nursing home, on her back in bed, bitter
and immobile in her neck brace.

I remember seeing the trees bare in town
for the first time at her December funeral,
and all the cars lined up like pebbles around the block.

I remember Dad lending me a tie,
seeing my cousins in their dress clothes,
and feeling strange in a familiar place
as we processed in for Mass.

I remember that the eulogies were long
and that the homily was quick,
and that I heard many new stories after her burial.
That is the end of my childhood memories.

Red Trees

Part II

*First, the acorns fell.
Soon after, a twinge entered the trees.*

I do not see the colorful leaves that cover the trees lining the avenue. Rather, as I walk past Dad's childhood home, I see just the gray branches underneath, as if naked skeletons, without leaf or blossom.

Dad and his friends grew up on this block. Here they wrote skid marks on the sidewalks with their bikes, earned scuffed knees and bruises with their dares, and played raucous games across the lawns.

Their siblings were close too, and their entire families became close, weaving themselves together with school, sports, jobs, and hobbies.

Today, not one of the kids still lives in town.

Gradually or suddenly, each one of them left as they grew up. According to the stories, they went away to explore colleges, careers, and universities, and it seems they chose the best wives, husbands, and jobs that the foreign lands could produce.

They have transplanted their roots.

I have seen them come back here, to their original hometown, but only for moments. They have been gathered together like flashing but fading leaves in small cyclones by weddings, funerals, class reunions — things they enjoy or are still bigger than themselves.

After being blown briefly together, they again settle apart.

And so I wonder, as my feet brush through crumpled leaves and acorns plunk on roofs around me, about each of them — but especially Dad. What was he like at my age after leaving, shortly before he met Mom? Why didn't he or any of his siblings marry a childhood friend?

And what did each of them, and Grandma and Grandpa, think about Mom when they met? What were the stories Dad shared with them before? Did he take her home for dinner?

And I wonder why, when Dad and his siblings were seemingly so close to their parents, did they choose to live so far apart and away? What light in distant stars called them from home's warm-fire hearth?

I look to what they left behind: these pockmarked streets and now-strange houses, the barren fields where the Catholic school used to be; and the zig-zags of all their lives around me paint no discernible arcs or great blossoms of spirit.

So drawn forward by aches, but with no guide for where the good future truly lies, I come back to these scenes and paths, worn-in, then forsaken by my ancestors.

I pause.

The leaves rustle over the skeleton trees, and I listen for truth in the cold wind.

It is silent.

Red Trees

Part III

*First, the acorns fell.
Soon after, a twinge entered the trees.
Now, the leaves shiver and fly
in the white north wind.*

The dry, sunburnt leaves crackle as they are blown away, and I am ready to be taken with them; standing in the sharp, steady wind, I feel a subtle yearning within me — almost like a free-fall.

I am waiting at Grandma's grave, and Grandpa's is just a few feet to the left. The ground is not yet hard from frost, and it's clear that the grass is done growing until spring.

I am waiting for my father.

The last time we were together, here, we were burying Grandpa's remains. I remember Dad placing us behind most of my cousins around the grave, and the scent of snowcrab blossoms soaking the air.

I remember the feel of the soil as I shuffled my feet when the priest invited us grandkids to step up and bless the casket with holy water; and I remember him outwaiting our prolonged, silent hesitation.

I remember going back to the old house, and watching my father and his siblings around the kitchen table split up and share Grandpa's final possessions, now theirs.

I remember being back home, and for months finding the beers we took from Grandpa's basement scattered around the house, nearly-empty bottles keeping company with disarrayed books, food wrappers, and the greasy TV remote.

I remember the unsettled silence in the rooms, stark against the colorful jumble of storytelling I heard in our extended family, and I waited — I waited for a renewal of tale-telling from Dad.

In silent waiting I received only silence.

So today, alone amidst the splintered acorns and beaten leaves, I wish for Dad and I to be back together, and for us to revisit the places he shared with me when I was small.

I wish to hear the full truths of all those tales I heard years ago, so their memories may come to fulfillment.

I wish to hear stories yet unknown told in their bare nakedness, without gloss or restraint, so I may gain answers to all the questions I know now that I didn't know before.

I wish for a renewed bestowal of my name, life, and purpose, and for these to be given together. For as the years have passed since childhood, it feels as if I've been walking deeper into a continually darkening night, while all the streetlamps are being gradually extinguished as the road signs are taken away.

And remaining and smoldering in my chest is the black fear that the voids carved by my desires and longings will continue groaning and growing within me, and never be filled.

And I have remained, and remain myself — surrounded, unknown, and abandoned.