

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/2

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Dawn Redwood

THERE'S A SMALL VILLAGE IN THE MOUNTAINS of southwestern China, way up near the source of the Yangtze. It's called Mo-Tao-Chi, and it's so tiny you won't find it on any map, even if you use the modern spelling: Modaoqi. Sometime in the middle of the last century, during a year of war and revolution, a weary botanist stopped at a temple there to rest and recover his spirit.

And there, in the temple courtyard, right at the center, he saw an immense tree he didn't recognize. It looked a bit like a Sequoia, but the stems were different. It had the same soft red bark one could easily peel away in layers, the same fragrance, but the leaves were opposed instead of in pairs. One way to measure trees is to find 'diameter at breast height,' to stand at the base and put your arms around it. He tried that, but it was so large his fingers couldn't reach halfway around.

He asked the monks if they knew who planted it. They said it had simply always been there, back through the generations. It was there when the temple was built, the courtyard had been designed around it. They said it dropped its leaves every winter, and they returned with a soft, succulent green in mid-April. He gathered some seeds, and took them away with him, with the monks' blessing. It turned out to be the Dawn Redwood, until that day known only through fossil records. Every Dawn Redwood around the world finds its origins in those seeds he carried away.

It was a warm day in April, and Miranda and I were driving through the countryside. She'd packed a picnic, not in a basket, but in a striped canvas bag given to us by a poet in West Virginia to celebrate our visit there. I didn't tell her where we were going, I just said I knew a nice place to stop. We turned off the main road, and traveled a long ways up a gravel drive.

Suddenly, right in front of us, a whitetail came bounding across our path. I stopped, worried about others. That's when I heard the barking. He was being chased by a pack of feral dogs. They were too fast to count, but there were at least four or five. They plunged into the roadside brush right where the deer went through, right where the thorny devilweed grew. He'd lost a tuft of hair on one of the thorns. I only noticed it because it caught the sunlight. He never made a sound. The dogs' barking faded off to the west, and we moved on.

The estate was separated from the wilderness by a wrought-iron fence, twelve feet tall, too high for any deer to jump. After what we'd seen, I half expected to find an angel with a flaming sword guarding the gate, or a trio of watchdogs. But there was nothing like that, just an electronic eye. When our wheels passed it, the gate slowly opened. We waited a moment and drove through. It closed softly in the rearview mirror.

The owner was away. She'd told me I could visit whenever I wanted, but I left a note for her when we parked near the big house, just in case. We started along the path around the east wing, where sculptures were

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placed, almost hidden among the trees. One was like a bent leaf, formed in copper, big enough to sit in. It barely noticed Miranda's weight, bending almost as if she were a light breeze.

We continued along the path. I was carrying the striped bag. She, unencumbered, almost danced along, delighting in the garden. Where the pathway curved, she noticed a small tree, with small white tufts at the tips of its stems. "What kind of tree is that?" she asked.

"Pussy Willow," I said. She didn't notice my smile, but did notice a small sheet of hammered bronze, tied to a trunk with thin wire. *Viburnum*, it read.

"I'll never believe anything you say about gardens again!" she said.

It was a relief, a kind of burden lifted. We crossed the stream over a cascade of rocks, barely keeping our feet dry. Her balance was perfect, lightfooted, sure. Mine was more like a bear's, heavy, lumbering, as if a salmon would leap in front of me at any moment.

"Come on, California!" she said. "Hurry up, we're burning daylight, and I'm hungry."

There were Canada Geese on the other side, a few mallards, some turtles sunning near the shore. A large pagoda stretched out over the pond, its redwood posts circled by woodboring bees. She laid out our food on a wooden table near the rail, all the while worrying about the bees. I told her not to mind them, they weren't interested in *Emmental*, or even in *jambon cru*. The lilies hadn't broken the surface of the pond yet, even the lotus leaves still hid themselves. We sat watching swallows wing close to the water, catching the bees that concerned her.

After Champagne we left our things there, and went over the bridge to a new path. It gave out onto an immense lawn, close trimmed. And there, in the center, was a Santa Rosa Labyrinth, newly constructed from cobbles and tamped rose granite dust. A sign asked us to remove our shoes.

She went first, barefooted in her flowered skirt, the air warm, and the stone cool against her feet. I watched for a moment, and then followed at my own slower pace. There was only one path, one route to the center. It was a matter of simple geometry that our paths would run parallel, never crossing, but proximate, facing each other. The first time it happened, I reached out, across the invisible barrier, took her in my arms, and kissed those lips, as rose as any stone, warm and soft and open. But her feet stayed on her part of the path, and mine on mine.

It happened a dozen times as we moved towards the center, an open space like an altar. I could almost feel the energy swirling there, like a vortex above the medial stone. When she reached it, she lay down against the cool stone, her waist perfectly placed, as if the labyrinth were a wheel around her, and her waist the hub, the medial point of every radius, the still point of the turning vortex. When I arrived, she reached up her arm, inviting me to lay beside her.

Later, I opened my eyes, and looked around. At the field's edge, close by the stream, someone had planted a Dawn Redwood. It seemed eternal, as if it had always been there, waiting to be discovered. I could see its soft

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bark, halfway between amber and rose, and I knew I could take it in my hands, and peel it away in layers. It was mid-April, and the green was just appearing at the tips of its stems. The ancient tree stood there, nearly naked, its form perfection, stark against the late afternoon sky.