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I Now Burn Pellets in My Stove

When I was young, eager, born to boots and Levis, I worked in ditches with a shovel, in many ditches of Mother Earth. Once I worked with an old man who was scarred, had one leg, and had spent a long part of life on a shovel. In a short conversation amidst our work at earth on a late afternoon he said, "Life is as simple as a tree. It blossoms, it leafs, it gives oxygen, it holds earth, it seeds, it burns or rots away."

The image cast by the shovel philosopher was formed forever. He had paused at his work by leaning on the long handled spade, an unusual move for a machine of a man, and added, this shoveler, this small mover of earth, "A tree bears significance." But he never said what it was to harvest a tree, cut its limbs, slab or cube its trunk, split the logs thrice or more, stack them, burn them, feel the heat a second time or third time. Revel in it. Well, he couldn't know everything, or so I thought.

Then I came to know trees and how they pass me by. Oh, the significance.

Time is now passing down through me and my wood-cutting-hauling-splitting-stacking-lugging-dumping ashes days are gone. They slip away with assorted debris behind the patella, cartilage degeneration, an ACL's incessant chatter. No more will I venture alone into the deep forest, chain-saw at the ready, fuel at hand, lunch packed in a brown bag and a cooler, the silent forest pitching camp around my sudden noise, shutting me off from the rest of the world, swallowing up all my motored echoes, my static roars. Back then bird life and animal life went on, but I saw none of it. The tirade of a few crows would come at me some days, the imperious bark or yap of a fox retreating into the back of some blow down or into a hole of sorts, but little else; the reach of the nasty chain saw went much further than the limb or torso it was at.

I know you'll believe this, that I have such a thing for trees, that I listen for them. I have heard them in the night, in the agony of a tearing wind, a limb's crack and fall like shrapnel at work, then even from beneath warm, rugged coats of bark. What is also heard as if it were ankle deep bites of an ax is my grandson tossing a ball at the end of the house, past the garage quiet as an empty box this April day before grass begins its perennial struggle up through last year's leavings. Only an hour earlier we found a last handful of snow, squatting much as a mischievous toadstool playing hide and seek with spring, beneath our quarry of leaves scattered about like small talk. In a last act of winter, or spring's prime, for that matter, he first molded it to form, and then flung it the length of the yard at our maple tree, as far away as second base.

He doesn't know the huge, double-trunk maple talks to me on legend nights, that it says, "Hold. Hold. Hold on." Or sideways broad leaves catch hold of southwest winds, desert-fed, saying. "Sun is in this wind." Or that split limbs whistle words I hear through housebroken wood, sills, uprights, joists, lintels, tree gone to endless duty; "I lay claim a space for you. I mine this territory here for the repose of your soul." I acquiesce that

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dark roots carve a deep earth sepulcher. It is written: When I lay my spirit down, when my final breath is frost and blood is brighter by stars, the soft room within those roots will accept my tenancy.

Generally my grandson hears the storm barrage-like in gray tree limbs during northeasterly wars, or hot calamities lightning loosed last August from its heart, bright blue flares and white phosphorous powders arcing to an incomprehensible light, like God's eyes had outright exploded the final incandescence. Occasionally, at a different level, I hope he hears the tree empty its buckets of heart-flamed leaves extracted from the core of fire only autumn can ignite, or he hears new spring trickle from a miniature ladle a bare half an inch beneath the bark.

Will he ever hear the true talk, hear it speak of pain, or how many miles its roots have gone dowsing underground? He hears the other benchmark sounds I've forgotten, the ones that echoed my early life; gunshots from a baseball bat, chattering of hockey sticks like old folks in a circle, crowd noises, fathers prodding the shadows of their egos to a capability neither one of them could ever reach, perhaps loss with a bad taste in the mouth.

We pause to listen, to hear the sounds of our times, the creaking on the back stairs, a visitor we believe is not there, but is heard. What my grandson hears he must grow with, not that he must have my ear, or even accept my thoughts, but if some night in August, when the moon's a peach basket and the old calendar's thicker and he puts his ear to the tree, he might hear a deep root break, he might hear a breaking heart. Oh, will he hear the other voice?

Once I heard the other voice talking about a legacy of flight a tree begins: This is a time of apples and cinnamon, when summer is piled in ashes, its wreckage strewn with roses in the lane. One order hands tight reins to a temperate relative. Autumn, in a frenzy, sets its fiery course though this night calls out loudly for woolens. Woodpiles begin to disappear, curl their hot and puzzling ways up dim chimneys' thickened throats, just to return as faithful as birds in March's menagerie. The ingots of my industry, stacked in July warehousing like golden corrugations, freed a Phoenix from its grave; an armful of red oak splits, dropped beside the iron stove, housed bright August's final bee. Sleepily from her wooden nap, struggling to bring airborne the fat thumb of her being, she faltered on the kitchen floor. Nine times she rose and nine times reaffirmed her thick impotence, wings less rapid than she dared, Earth too much magnetic force. I couched her in a mitten deep inside cored maple tree, and urged winter down the road, urged its coming and quick passage. In May, when woodpiles return, when bouncing robins dance on matchstick feet, I will watch her children aviate the lilac bush, the mountain top.

Secondly, there was a sound in the eye: This midnight's as thick as conspirators, stars secreted like listening devices waiting for one breath to find me out. In the woodpile I can't see, a snake settles where my hand left a moment's warmth on a slanting of birch plunging past white, its coils wound tight as bark. Field mouse, beneath owl's infrared eyes and sudden wing thump, hangs about and gathers into minutes. The only flag is pennant of skunk, the tail-up streamer recalling every vengeance borne on mysteries of abiding shadows. High darkness and a collective of agents

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are pierced by the peephole of a nail-head star, deities' confederate beginning revelations, yet I stand in the shadow of a tree.

The voice also muttered low about logs, friends, and hard Februarys, an exclusive eulogy for fire-taken Paul Jodoin, at midnight rushed up into flames. Logs and hard Februarys go rigid with identities; iron hanging by its teeth on beams wearing bark and cracking up white, ax's cold tooth buried in the scattered face of a stump like a map slicing its hemispheres, ice pond riding earth skillful as eon's sled, my hands stiff as knots sucking up white frost. A friend cuts night's news short; doesn't just go away, leaves the nail half driven in a tree coming together again. Nothing's as cold as a fire out and a man traveling with his smoky February of an odd year. His smile falls from wood but mouth has no identity, or logs, or trout washing under the year as long as river's been, or a place of the image his jacket hangs, not worn out, hardly worn out at all.

Or then it says, just after midnight folds itself away: The old, gnarled ant-toured pear tree, bent beside the house, has angry skin, wears many years' bruises, the applied rod, frenzies of a whip, manacle marks where my brother's chain fall held the brute mobile, a '37 Ford engine, as he faltered through the mechanics of July. In the smashed fist of upper limbs one moon of October, afraid my breath was seen, that an aura glowed my tell-tale place, I soft-chimed my belfry hideaway, saw chums as mice scatter in shadow.

In winter this tree contorts whistles. I've seen it Septembers boiling like an olla stew, whipped by Caribbean madness up the coast from Hatteras, but promising only kindling. Its roots are like best friends, summons servers, tax collectors. All my years it has dared dread December its bidding, worn alien icy crowns sometimes diamond-bright into spring's heart. (She has never known this: in a high fork, sun-bleached, pruned by the hard seasons, her name is another bruise, letters clumped bulgy as toads pretending they will leap. I was fifteen at the carving and feel the knife's handle yet within my hand, the single breast, hear her windy name sighing through the splatter of leaves, vespers of youth. Oh, Love, when hearth fire strikes into the names of these limbs, we shall be warm again.)

To fall asleep here by my pellet stove, feet up on an old stool, not yet used to a recliner, is to dream back to those days when I gathered the wood supply, when I felt the heat of wood a second time, or felt like the throwback that I was, hustling, working my tail off, beating the system at its own game, surviving. Oil prices were on the rise and I rebelled. Some Saturdays in the '70s were a six-pack day of splitting wood, stacking the corrugations in their pile against the fence, feeling the yesteryear in my bones, the vaunt carousing in my soul. A Saturday of July was shoving against oil, against cartels and gougers, and the reality of middlemen; it was a three-beer push on the maul handle. My shoulders shot nerves into fibrous white oak, into elm never letting go, maple that reported splits clean as fire-crackers.

I saw an Arab watching me through the eye of a coin hung on edge. I heard the flag sing in front of the house, my drummer high on a hill, and, in strange field, crevice and creek, from here to the Montanas, gunshots of the maul, chain saw's deep roars, my Howitzers in the fray.