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Cross Sections

Not a whit, we defy augury; there's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it is now; if it be not now, yet it will come: the readiness is all.

William Shakespeare. *Hamlet*

I was sitting at the table shaded by our front porch roof. Summer had established itself in long sunny afternoons and in fjorded shadows under the sugar maples. After the dramatic changes of spring, once the trees have turned green, summer changes are subtle until the trees burst into color in the fall. The trees and shrubs are green, the lawn is green, and though waves of wildflowers pass over the green fields--sometimes white, sometimes violet, sometimes yellow--they seem to decorate the fields rather than define them, and it is easy to feel that the world is stable. When in the dead of winter, we hope for spring; in summer, we settle in as if bewitched by Circe into the illusion of eternal life. As I sat on the porch, I felt the appropriate general contentment, with only mild background nervousness because of the doctor's appointment later that day about my stomach pains, which must be due to anxiety, I assured myself. My focus shortened from the wide sweep of the landscape to the sugar maples near the house and then to the second maple from the road as I began to search for the hole the flicker had chipped into one of its trunks in his unsuccessful attempt to reproduce himself.

Without its leaves, that maple tree, one of the thirteen sugar maple trees around our house, looked like a vase full of dead flowers. At about eight feet off the ground the trunk, three feet in diameter at its base, swelled to almost five feet in diameter, and from the widened top, eleven trunks arranged themselves in various sizes and states of life or decay, three of them so long dead that the bark was falling off of them in places. The bark of the vase was heavily creased, patterned, chipped, and flapped. In summer, the crown of leaves that floated around the top of the tree began about fifteen feet from the ground and arced up to forty feet at its top; however, the tree was close enough to a neighboring sugar maple that their two crowns seemed to merge, but didn't. As when two positive magnetic poles are brought together, some invisible force flattened the two crowns against each other, seamless but separate.

For many years, I had leaned against this tree all the dead branches I had picked up off of the grass before I mowed, probably because those branches were closest to that tree. I never thought that the dead branches might mean something was wrong with the tree. I thought of them mostly like leaves—something that fell off the trees in the normal course of things, natural pruning, a minor annoyance that came from having trees as neighbors. For years, I leaned the dead branches, some eight or ten feet tall though most closer to three feet, against the tree on the side away from the driveway. Before I finally got around to removing them to someplace else, the result looked like an intentional arrangement—a bonfire or half a tepee skeleton.

One morning a few weeks before I was sitting on the porch, as I walked by this tree, I noticed fresh looking punky woodchips scattered on the ground. Looking up over the point of the tepee and about fifteen feet above the ground I saw a round hole in the largest of the dead trunks. Of course, many small holes punctuated the trunk, but this was a serious hole, a few inches in diameter. The evidence pointed to some kind of woodpecker working on the tree, perhaps one of the downy or hairy woodpeckers that we had been seeing or the pileated woodpecker we had been hearing. We had also seen a flicker on the ground around the bird feeder. I began watching the hole closely, and a few days later, when I came out onto the porch and listened, I heard the pock of something chipping away at soft wood. I went down the porch stairs, across the driveway, and around the tree and looked up at the hole; the mustachioed face of male flicker popped up and looked out.

Flickers are exciting birds: large—over a foot long—with intricately striped brown backs, off-white bellies daubed with black spots, narrow black bibs at their necks, and long, slightly-curved beaks. Our flickers in the eastern US have bright red shield-shaped spots at the bases of their necks and the males sport black mustaches. They spend quite a bit of time on the ground, and because woodpeckers are designed to hang off the sides of trees, they have a kind of stooped walk. Between the garish outfit complete with mustache and the stooped walk, a flicker looks like an old 19th century band leader. Hoping for a family of flickers, I checked the hole two or three times a day, but the only bird I saw working on it was a male. I speculated that male was creating a fancy house to attract a female, but eventually, since no female appeared, work on the hole stopped and the flicker disappeared. Without a brood of baby flickers to distract me, I began to worry.

The trunk the flicker chose to chip his nest into was about a foot in diameter and seemed to emerge from one of the larger trunks. The part that it shared with that main trunk had a wan look about it, though that larger trunk looked healthy. Though the trunk with the nest is it was so dead that most of it had no bark left, the flicker hole was in a spot where there was still bark, close to the point where the dead trunk separated from the main, and I worried that his chipping away would have thinned out the walls of the trunk surrounding his abortive nest and in a stiff wind the trunk would break at that point and crash to the ground. Maybe he realized that and left, or perhaps, he was bit of a loser and chose the place badly, but the female flickers all knew better and so rejected him. Ironically, however, despite my interest in him, I would not know whether it was the nest builder or not if later in the summer a male flicker appeared, walking stiffly in the grass, thrusting his beak into the ground. If every year for the next twenty I saw a flicker, I would not know how many individual flickers played a part in that pageant. So from my

point of view, flickerness springs eternal, but each flicker chips out only so many holes. I wondered how many more chances this flicker would get.

Back when I was searching for the source of the chips, I had noticed that another one of the dead verticals had broken out in a woody shelf fungus, some kind of polypore fungus. I know the fungus attaches itself to the tree, but this type looks more like something growing out of the tree rather than on it. Like the tree itself, it adds a new layer of tubes at the bottom each year. A cross-section shows that the larger creases on the outside of the fungus run all the way through and like the rings of the tree gauge the life of the fungus. According to my *Golden Guide to Non-Flowering Plants* (an indication I am not as serious about fungus as I should be), a fungus like this can be up to 35 years old. Its presence is not, however, good sign for the tree; such a growth is a symptom of a dead or dying branch.

On the opposite side from the tepee, in the crotch of the tree where all the trunks come together, Virginia creeper grows, hanging down on the trunk, the only green at that point in the tree. The five creeper leaflets in each compound leaf fan out like the five fingers of the palm of an open hand—an arrangement called “palmate.” This creeper does not look particularly vigorous since its source of soil is only what is caught at the base of the trunk network. Perhaps rotting bark is also contributing. Either way, the plant is creeping up the tree, adding more handprints, working its tendrils into the bark’s crevices. One of the woodier branches of the creeper hangs down, its tendrils brown, shriveled, and useless.

As I sat on the porch, everything I could see--trees, grasses, birds, people--each one was playing out its allotted time and then dying. But each death would not make the place grim and ugly, a desolate wasteland, because the place itself can sustain a certain level of life and that life was moving through it, a birth slipping into each opening created by a death. What I saw was the place's capacity made visible in individual lives. I could feel life flowing through the place and I was included; I was flowing through the place too. And I saw that it was the way it should be: I could not stay here in my current form forever, like some rock the stream flows around. Besides, even those rocks get worn down to nothing eventually, and they are dead to begin with. I felt good about realizing the justness of my own death; I felt a sense of relief, as if I had somehow loosened death’s hold on me. I was enlightened, drawing a profound lesson from nature. I could almost hear the sound of one hand clapping.

Alas, my enlightenment lasted about four hours; “unenlightened” implies that the person has not yet been enlightened, so perhaps I was de-enlightened when later that afternoon, I saw our doctor about the stomach pains I had been having. He kneaded my stomach, producing a variety of pains, and became very interested the throbbing in my abdomen. “Let’s do a CT scan of your aortic artery,” he said casually. He told the nurse to schedule the CT scan and then began to explain that, based on his examination, he was checking for an abdominal aneurysm, a thinning of the arterial wall that balloons out and may rupture. He did not tell me that I was facing immanent death, but when he found out I was scheduled for the scan in a week and a half, he got on the phone himself and

scheduled it for the next day. He did tell me that an aneurysm required surgery and that if they find one, I would be very lucky since they are often asymptomatic, a silent explosion set off by my own terrorist body.

As the doctor's office door hissed smoothly closed behind me, all my philosophical insights deflated in the late afternoon sun of the parking lot. My situation was a stark reminder that so many things can go wrong with the body. If I am having this problem, why not something else too? It was by the merest chance that I was alive at all, and since so many delicate systems had to function correctly just for me to remember my phone number, it all seemed impossible. I also felt churlish because that day was Madalene's (my spouse) last day on a job she was pleased to leave and she was looking forward to the break from pressure, a break that she needed. She and her celebration should have been the center of attention, but once I shared my news with her, she had something else to worry about, and because I was so anxious about the test and its implications, it was like a barking dog that put us both on edge. What happened to my insights of the afternoon, my understanding, that something so appropriate as death ought not to be feared, that my own death was the price I had to pay to live? Even if I did not subscribe to that attitude completely, like some medieval saint, shouldn't there be at least some residual benefit? Had I learned nothing?

What is true in the forest may also be true in the city, but place is very much a part of some truth, and truth discovered in the shadow of a sugar maple on a summer day will need to be rediscovered in the doctor's office surrounded by stethoscopes, boxes of rubber gloves, and wall charts illustrating the stages of malignant melanoma, almost as if it were a new insight. I should not have expected to learn a great truth like the beauty of my own death in one place and be able to carry it with me wherever I went. The sugar maple did not challenge my comforting conclusion, and it was undisturbed by the tension between its own dead branches and green leaves.

The CT scan machinery, a huge doughnut with a table that slides into the circular hole, looked like a Flash Gordon prop. Every few seconds the table moved, the technician told me, “O.K., hold your breath,” I held my breath, something happened, the table moved again, and I exhaled. We repeated that ritual for about twenty minutes. The machine was taking electronic cross sections of my body, x-rays cutting through my body the way a saw cuts through the trunk of a tree. But a CT scan of a human body does not produce the regular pattern of concentric circles visible on the tree stump, and reading the rings of organs and vessels and bones in the human body is not so straightforward. Later, when I saw a CT scan of a human abdomen, it reminded me more of the illustration of a flickers' nest I had seen pictured in a field guide to nests: a cross section through a tree, the heartwood rings replaced by a clutch of eggs, circular shapes arranged inside the membrane of the tree's bark and outer rings. The test showed my aortic artery was normal.

A further sign of my de-enlightenment came with the sense of relief I felt after getting the results. As I sat on the front porch again, dawdling over supper that night as if I had plenty of time, I thought of how time does not come in dramatic vistas, but like glances through a window, in small parsimonious bits. It goes the same way, but it is gone in huge quantities, as if a dripping faucet becomes a lake capable of waves with a

thin further shore and a hint of a lost city. But that image suggested a fluid and malleable past. I looked again at the second maple and thought about how most of that big tree's bulk is its solid, dead past, all those rings recording the summers and winters the tree has lived through, each episode becoming the tree. What can be the point of comparing the sugar maple and me? Death is not a burden the tree bears: its dead center bears the burden of the tree. Around that dead past it pushes its future out in a thin tissue of living surface hidden behind the bark and in an ephemeral cloud of leaves that come and go. Our bodies are alive all the way through; it is our brains that are full of our dead past, our memories that make us what we are, a past so much more real than our future. Like the old sugar maple, as more and more of my conscious and unconscious mind fills up with the past, the future loses some of its bulk; in fact its proportion in my life is constantly shrinking as the growth point, where the future is transformed into the cells of the past, moves further and further from the center until I wonder how long the structure of my life will hold against the dragging forces of gravity, whether I will be able to keep shifting position to maintain the increasingly lopsided balance.

Months later, long after the flicker left, high winds one afternoon knocked down the dead central trunk, but it happened far below the flicker's hole. I had worried needlessly. The trunk was in pieces in the grass below the tree and the flicker hole was facing up, clearly visible so I was able to examine it closely: The broken off truck containing the flicker hole was 12 inches in diameter and the hole opening was 2.5 inches in diameter with the cavity going straight back about 6 inches and down 10 inches into the trunk. The hole was just as it should have been, right in the normal range for flicker nests, but normalcy does not guarantee eternal life. There is no safe place, no place that stands still so that we get a time out; the tree and I are dying because living is dying, and we must die well our whole lives, over and over.