

### Maple 3: The Tree of Appearances

But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" And he said, "I heard the sound of thee in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; and I hid myself." He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?"

*Genesis 3:9-11*

Whether awake or sleeping, at work or at rest, I always set the problem before me, until at the very last, when the maple trees in the garden in front of the abbot's room were in full crimson, I reached the final enlightenment.

--Suzuki. *Mahayana Buddhism*

When the third sugar maple loses its leaves, we cover our nakedness. Its leafy branches shroud the south window of our bedroom, obscuring our neighbors' house and thus their view of us so that as the tree becomes naked, we pull the shade as we become naked. We live among trees--the mixed hardwood forests of northern Pennsylvania—and we call the people who come from great distances to watch the trees begin the process of stripping off their leaves "leafpeepers," like Peeping Tom's lurking around the neighborhood. Sugar maples are an especially big draw because the costumes they begin to strip off are so gorgeous. On cold fall mornings when the sun hits their scarlet-gold leaves edged in frost, they could be wearing sequins, and later in the day, glowing in the sunshine, they sway in the wind shedding their leaves promiscuously, almost throwing them at the audience, imposing their show on the landscape. I have heard that for some fastidious types the fallen leaves are a nearly sufficient reason for cutting trees down; to my knowledge, I have never met such a person, but it is not always clear what perversities hide behind respectable facades.

And any attitude can be complex. Even those who condemn the human striptease, by that very act of condemnation, acknowledge its power. The gradual revelation of the body, the peeling away of gaudy layers excites because it promises, it implies, it hints at the fulfillment of a wish. And even though the stripper is only acting, like any actor she is

creating the illusion that she is actually revealing herself, her real sexual self on the stage. The guardians of television morality are clearly more concerned about the illusion of sex than the illusion of violent death. What illusion is the maple tree creating? That death itself is an illusion? But it is not so much the naked tree or the naked woman that is the show. Anyone who could take only one photograph of a sugar maple would undoubtedly take it during the "fall foliage" season, when the tree is beginning the process of shutting down for the winter, and it is her costume that identifies the stripper, not her nakedness.

Of the thirteen sugar maples around our house, the third one along the driveway has been tended to the most. It has a long straight trunk and the first branches from the main trunk begin about twenty feet from the ground. The branches arc in a way that remind me of a statue of a Phoenician woman, a tall figure in a blue dress that exposes her breasts, her arms akimbo in the air. Branches were amputated from the tree to produce this effect, but they were done properly and the bark has grown back over the edges of the nub so they look like huge belly buttons. However, on the side hidden from the house, a crease runs the length of the trunk like a zipper up the back of a dress, not meant to be noticed.

A long branch from this tree also hangs down so that it hovers at the top of the line of sight of someone sitting on the porch. Once I began thinking about the tree and watching it closely, I noticed that toward the end of August, that branch was full of maple samaras, paired wing and seed combinations. When I was growing up, we called them helicopters and would break them in half, toss them in the air, and watch them twirl to the ground. I remembered them as all dry and light brown; they just appeared from nowhere, fell from the sky. But I noticed on the branch overhanging the porch that the seed pods were green and gradually turning brown from the wing tips in. As we approached the end of that September, light green still shone in the pods, though the wings had been brown and dried out for a while. At that point in my study of the samaras, I assumed that the tree was still entirely green, but then I could see yellow leaves here and there, sometimes two or three, sometimes half a dozen in a group. When I looked uphill at the tree from the garden, I saw, in the cavities between the protruding big branches, colonies of yellow-orange tinged leaves, whose effect was the insinuation of impending change. Though separated by broad areas of green, the small clusters of color undercut the green's symbolism the way a few gray hairs question the youth of someone with dark hair.

Three days later, the tree dampened by a mist of rain, the clusters of yellow leaves and red-tinged leaves and their implication of change began to emerge against the green background. The clusters no longer seemed purely individual but part of a developing pattern, though the colors were still only a hint of change, not yet the harbingers of an inevitable process. Though it still took some imagination, the idea that the tree might change color from green, the stable state of things for so long, no longer seemed so ridiculous or impossible. The green seemed vulnerable, as if it were sitting on top of something that was shifting beneath it, ever so slightly, and beginning to shrug the green off.

As the days shorten, the hormone balance in the tree shifts so that growth retardant hormones begin to dominate, and the tree starts shutting down operations and sealing off the connection between itself and the leaf by forming a protective layer within the cells of the abscission zone at the base of the leaf stem. As the tree stops replacing the chlorophyll in the leaves and it breaks down, the carotenoids and anthocyanin are

unmasked; the yellows, oranges, and reds emerge that begin the show and signal that the tree is about to abandon its leaves. Biologists are unsure of why the trees go to the trouble of creating this display, perhaps to warn away insects by signaling the presence of poison or to protect the leaves, losing their chlorophyll, from the sun. Either way, scientists are beginning to assume that the donning of the bright costume of autumn serves a protective purpose; it is not simply an accidental byproduct. By the middle of the second week of October, the green was gone from the third tree, and it was at the height of its gaudy color.

Of course, there is a sense in which the tree with its flaming yellow, red, and orange leaves is most fully itself. The ubiquitous, uniform green of summer that turns the countryside into a massive food factory, sucking up raw materials and churning out finished leaves and rings of wood, takes its winter vacation and the deciduous trees relax, let their true colors show, and celebrate their release from the tyranny of labor. Then they strip themselves naked and sleep. But if we define trees the way we define ourselves, by our jobs, by the work that we do, then naked trees are the mere skeletons of themselves. But mythically, at any rate, we preceded our work, and our need to earn a living by the sweat of our brows—by raising annual crops rather than by picking fruit off of trees in a garden—came only after Eve and Adam acted on their desire to know the truth.

The Fall of Man also made the striptease possible. In that mythical time before the Fall, the clothing and the body were the same thing. I suspect too that there was no Fall of Trees before that time either, that those mythical trees were always green so that a tree with leaves was all there was: no question of when the tree was fully itself. The snake was punished for its part in the first human sin; surely the tree was not without blame. I can imagine the scene:

And after the Angel drove man and woman from the garden, the Lord God said to the tree that contained the fruit the eating of which conferred the knowledge of good and evil, "I made you to spring from the earth and reach toward the heavens, your branches dividing from trunk to branches all the way to twigs. And I adorned thee with leaves, containing images of yourself traced in the veins, and with fruit beautiful and fragrant. And in return you have helped to ruin my people. Fie on you. Now you must lose your leaves and fruit and they will fall from you to the ground and rot. And like Man and Woman you shall die"

And the tree was sore abashed and said to God, "Lord, please show us mercy. You condemn us with Man and Woman; show us the same mercy so that we may hope."

And God said, "I will make you a sign of the promise of rebirth; your leaves will fall off, but they will grow back; you will die but new trees will spring up from your fruit."

And one of the sugar maples spoke up and said, "This is all well and good, Lord, but Man and Woman have not proven themselves to be particularly bright when it comes to trees. How can we be sure that after all the leaves fall off, they won't think we're dead and cut us down for firewood? "

And God said to the Sugar Maple, "Before you shed your leaves, I will turn them colors that will make you seem like you are arrayed as a king." And

God looked upon his trees that he had planted in the garden and he felt deep pity for them, for what they would suffer at the hands of people. And he showed mercy and he said. "Someday a tree shall die to liberate all trees. And people will invent plastic."

In Judeo-Christian mythology, then, it would be a tree that made stripping possible, perhaps because it requires a sense of shame, a sense of the forbidden and the requisite knowledge of clothing and nakedness. Since animals don't wear clothing, they cannot remove it in an inflammatory way. Perhaps the striptease is definitive: "Man is the animal that laughs" replaced by "The human is the animal that performs and watches the striptease."

The sugar maple does strip off its leaves, but where is the tease? Is it that once the leaves are all gone, the tree is no longer fully itself; it has hidden itself behind its nakedness rather than revealed itself? Unlike the beauty of spring, which blossoms into summer, the gorgeous color of fall ends in the illusion of death. The beauty disappears. Death and the striptease again arrive together. But that is also true of the human stripper. As she gradually eliminates clothing, she eliminates her persona and the choices she has made to create the performance on the stage. Her choice of persona or costume reveals more about her than her nude body, and it is the illusion that she has created that attracts and excites the audience. At the end of the striptease, that inaccessible illusory person disappears behind the nude body, a costume that embodies only one choice--the decision not to hide her nakedness behind a tree. And then the show ends and she is gone and the stage is naked even before she leaves it.

Perhaps what we strip away defines us. The naked winter sugar maple is dormant, waiting for a better, brighter, warmer, longer day when it will be itself again, its renewed self. Toward the end of summer, as I look at the branch that bends down and inserts itself into the view from the porch, it is difficult to find a perfect leaf; most are chewed or pitted or speckled or parasitized or edged in brittle brown. Spring will be a chance for the tree to start over, to be young again as the sap rises in the tree and swells the buds. So that is one way to read the allegory of the leaves: we strip away old habits to create the possibility of a new self. But stripped we are no longer the self that we were and not yet the self we are to become. We make way for the new, naked self standing exposed in the window, hidden in the leaves. But is that naked self an illusion? Perhaps we are not really ourselves again until we put on our new habits, habits that begin as choices, but as we wear those choices, they become an indistinguishable part of us, the way people recognize us. We are not each seen as a person in clothes but as a person including clothes. Our habit becomes us whether or not it becomes us.

The sugar maple outside our window gradually shed all its leaves, unlike the white oaks up in the woods that cling to their tattered garments all winter. And the leaves laid around on the ground beneath it, compressed in a blanket that was gradually peeled off by a wind that once merely shook them, then rattled them, and then rolled them across the road and up the embankment and into the field. Some of them were mowed up into the grass catcher on the back of the tractor and dumped onto the compost pile where, mixed with the grass cuttings they were sucked up with, they rotted down to earth again and became available for the next round of leaves. And outside the bedroom window, the

sugar maple waited out the winter, meaningless and pregnant with meaning, a mother of metaphors, revealing by hiding.