Maple 5: The Tree of Memory

I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after.
-Wallace Stevens

i.

The mound in the front yard was evidence of a death. Based on the logic of the sugar maple trees growing along the road, this oval swelling of the ground about two and a half feet by seven feet should have been a maple tree. At one point last summer I wanted to see what was left. After I clawed back a layer of light brown, crispy dead maple leaves and then a layer of brown-black, damp dead maple leaves, the remains of the tree emerged--half a dozen low-lying, angled projections, dark red with moisture, all under a foot long, with the central group arranged as a parody of the Sidney opera house. Some of the wood was solid and firmly attached to something under ground; some of the wood was rotted and would easily break off. I did not break any off; I had at least that much restraint. In the center of the mound was a hole about 10 inches in diameter at the top, which ended in dark rot. Poking around in the hole did not reveal the entrance to a tunnel leading to some secret place. There were two holes about the perimeter into which I had seen chipmunks disappear, but whenever they emerged, they were more like noisy neighbors than Lazarus back from the dead.

Also around the outside of the mound were smoothed impressions that marked where roots had snaked away from the trunk before disappearing into the ground. But those roots were gone leaving only those ghostly tracks. Since we had not mowed among the ruins of the stump, what was once a single plant had become a small community--Jonquils, sheep sorrel, violets, dandelions, hawkweed, some grasses, and one lonely hosta.

The dominant plant form, however, was crown vetch, an invasive exotic. When the compound vetch leaves first open, the leaflets creased along the center line, they look like feathers. When the elongated ovals open opposite each other along the central stem they retain a feather shape and the tissue paper thickness of the leaves ape the feather's lightness. The story of crown vetch is a classic. Unlike Dutch elm disease, introduced inadvertently into the U.S. in 1931 in logs imported from Europe, or starlings, intentionally introduced into New York's Central Park so the United States would have all the birds mentioned in Shakespeare, crown vetch, which comes from Europe, Southeast Asia, and North Africa, was introduced by experts in plant life, the same folks that brought the multiflora rose to the northeastern U. S. and kudzu to Florida. Crown vetch--hailed by state transportation departments throughout the hilly Northeast as the answer to anti-erosion prayers--was planted on embankments with abandon. It grows quickly and covers the ground thoroughly. It resists drought and seems to grow well in poor soil. However, the root system is not all that robust and after it has crowded out all the other plants, including the indigenous ones, crown vetch can be washed away in heavy storms, leaving a naked hill ready for erosion. Because it grows so aggressively, it has also become a threat in parks and natural areas where folks want the native flora (or at least the invaders who have been there for a while) to prosper. Ironically, all the research done at the agricultural schools up until now has been on how to propagate it, not on how to eradicate it so we are not sure about the best strategy to control it. My favorite fact that bears on eradication is that a large field of pure crown vetch cannot be burned because there is not enough mass in the plants to sustain the fire. Natural selection has been very, very good to this plant. It is likely that left alone, the crown vetch will take over the stump area and destroy the little diversity it has.

ii.

The plant life in the stump area had begun to grow in earnest the summer before last, once I had cleared away the heap of rotted stump debris that had covered the spot. That summer I was cleaning up the rubble left over from demolishing our old porch pillars. The new wooden posts, railings, and stairs were airy but still looked substantial enough to support the massive roof. In fact, the new porch looked like it belonged on the house even more than the old porch did. Of course, the pillars had not disappeared; they had merely been transformed into rubble. Some of the cements studded rocks had been dumped into an old dug well covered with rotting boards outside the back door. Once the rocks reached the top, adding a little dirt erased what had been a dangerous eyesore. The rest of the big rocks were piled under the porch itself.

On the day I would clean up the stump area, I was shoveling up from the ground around the porch the small stones and cement shards that remained of the pillars, putting them into the wheel barrow, and then rolling it to the edge of the front yard where the runoff next to the dirt road was digging nasty trenches. I would dump my load into the trench, do a little smoothing with my foot, and go back for more. I was using a shovel to scoop up, scrape up, and eventually pry up the rubble, and what real estate agents call "the landscaping" was beginning to look more photogenic.

North of the stairs, with its protective apron of stones removed as a result of my work, a barberry bush came out of hiding—an insidious "pricker bush" that some people think is decorative. Ours was a Japanese barberry, the kind introduced to the U.S. in 1864 and propagated as an ornamental. It has since become a forest pest and even deer don't like to eat it. These plants hide a wide network of roots in the ground, hoping that at least some of them will escape the remover so the plant can start over. Ours was making good progress, using the stone rubble as protection below and hiding itself in the bridal wreath bush above. I decided it was time to take it on. I used pruners to clip it down to a nub, creating a nasty pile of thorny branches. Then I started digging. Barberry roots are quite yellow, like saffron-colored rice, and the bark was used to dye fabric. According to an early 20th century herbal by a Mrs. M. Grieve, the yellowness comes from Berberine, an alkaloid, and a bitter tonic made from both the bark of the plant and root "proves an excellent remedy for dyspepsia and functional derangement of the liver." I, however, used the yellowness as I scraped and sliced various roots to make sure I was following out the right root network, so that I would remove the whole growth.

As I worked, the ruined remains of the stump in the middle of the front lawn caught my attention. The pile of broken and rotted wood chunks was emerging as more and more of an eyesore as we cleaned other things up. Since the shovel and wheelbarrow were at hand, I took the shovel and began to poke at the stump's corrupt body and was able to shovel away about half of it. I dumped the wheel barrows full of crumbs and chunks around the Chinese Chestnut we planted in the back yard; we would have preferred an American Chestnut, but they are not resistant to the chestnut blight introduced in the U.S. in the early 20th century. The chunks around the base of the tree created a faux-woodchip effect: an eyesore becomes landscaping, of sorts. After I had shoveled away debris from what remained of the stump, I found some roots radiating out, swelling just above the ground. They were still solid, but had become detached from the body of the tree and any deeper root structure so I was able to pry them out. When I was done, there was not much left showing above ground. With both the bush and the stump out of the way, I had no choice but to return to cleaning up the porch rubble and moving the longstanding porch project closer to completion.

iii.

When we first moved into this house, the roof and floor at the south end of the big front porch that ran along the east side of the house sagged badly. The porch was a massive affair—30 feet long and 12 feet wide with a hipped roof that at its highest point went a third of the way up the second story windows and a gabled roof over the wide front stairs. At the corners and next to the cement steps, four stone pillars ran two-thirds of the way from the ground to the roof, each surmounted by three square wooden columns made of one-by-six boards nailed around a hollow center. Between the pillars ran railings with enough wood in each one to make a small shed—foot-wide one-inch thick boards on the top, beaded lapboard attached vertically front and back on a framework of four by sixes. These were full measurements, not the nominal ones of today, and the wood was heavy, old wood.

I remember getting a sense of the size of the porch when we ate on it once. My mother, who lived in town, and her brother, who lived in Arizona and came this way rarely, were over for supper. Some part of supper had burned and the house was full of the acrid smell of smoke. Madalene suggested that since it was a beautiful summer evening, we eat on the porch. We moved tables out to the porch and pushed them together to make space for the seven of us and had what my mother would call a jolly time. I saw the porch then as a room, and realized what a large room it was even though the south end was unusable except to hold the weight of one person stepping carefully. The stone pillar at that end, planted in the ground right beside a retaining wall, was tipping away from the porch and the wooden column leaned back to compensate. The next pillar to the north leaned less, but it too contributed to the sagging. Originally, the railing and floor were attached to the pillars by wooden inserts into them, and the south end the porch had not only pulled away, but the inserts had also rotted. I had braced underneath the porch with a couple boards, but the bulk of the porch was so great that only one person at a time at that end of the porch seemed appropriate. And clearly the situation was only going to get worse.

We did not want to get rid of the porch. Whenever I drive through small towns in Pennsylvania and New York and I see old houses with the scars of their amputated porches, as if some disease swept through the place and stripped old houses of their porches, often replacing them with housing-development-style prosthetic stoops; the removal makes the houses look commonplace and embarrassed. We did not want to do that to our house. When, after a few years we had completed some of the more pressing projects—the roof, the septic system, the wiring, the plumbing—it was finally the porch's turn. We decided to keep the floor and the roof and have the pillars, columns, and railing replaced with wooden posts and a railing with balusters. Brad, our contractor, came over and propped up the heavy porch roof with beams filched from the barn, staked into the ground, and wedged against the roof. He climbed into his pickup and waved happily as he left me to do the demolition.

To save money, I was to knock down the pillars. The columns came out easily, but the stone pillars, cemented into monoliths, were another story. The cement caps on each pillar came off intact or at least in two pieces. Then, wielding a new sledgehammer bought for the project, I started on the pillars themselves. The first few whacks on the first pillar were very satisfying and mortar between the stones crumbled easily, but about a quarter of the way down the pillar, everything changed. It was as if the mortar for the first part had been mixed by an apprentice, and now I was getting to the master mason's work. I swung the hammer down from the top and around from the side looking for weak points, but there weren't any. Finally I learned that if I picked one spot and slammed it over and over, eventually a crack would open up and a small piece would come off. I hoped that the apprentice had done most of the work. Alas, he had not. Knocking down the pillars turned out to be tedious, bone-rattling work that I could do for only short periods of time for each session. It took much of the summer to remove the four pillars and the steps.

One day while I was working on the porch, bouncing my hammer off of a pillar, I noticed the stump, which was at that time still a stump. The decomposition process was becoming more noticeable, the fissures and cracks deeper, and it occurred to me that perhaps it was time to think about removing it. I had my hammer in my hand and the temptation was too much to resist. I swung and a great section collapsed into chunks, punky shards, and crumbs. After weeks of incremental progress on the pillars, the effectiveness of my repeated blows to the stump gave me a sense of progress. When I was done, it had become a shapeless pile of rubble, a riot of grays and browns, all the way from dry bleached light gray to moist, almost black, dark brown clumps of rotted tree.

iv.

For a long time before I smashed the stump, it had been becoming gradually easier to break pieces off with a casual gesture. During the time it was still a stump and the thought of breaking it up had not even occurred to me, I broke off one narrow, six-inch long piece that looked like the tower of a strange castle, a snaky tower with an irregularly crenellated top and oblong animal-hole windows at various levels, something from a book of dragon stories. The wood was light and fragile, like paper maché, and it separated along the annual rings so that from the side it was no longer a castle but a book whose pages had been wet and then dried together, the pages wrinkling in harmony but spread apart by the expansion of the book. This piece embodied some imaginary quality of the whole that appealed to our youngest child, Clare. When I took my first swing with the sledge hammer, the only remaining evidence of her interest in the stump was the remnants of a miniature stick ladder, which over the years had lost ever more rungs as they fell out like baby teeth with nothing growing in to replace them.

When we had moved to this old farmhouse thirteen years before, the stump on the spot was about two feet high and almost three feet in diameter with a hollow center and a gothic arch opening that ran half way up on the side facing the sidewalk. A profusion of white-striped hosta plants grew around the base on the side away from the sidewalk.

Clare was eleven then and saw it as a kind of doll house. Whether or not the stump was the inspiration is unclear, but the elf figures that she made did become identified with it. She had seen similar dolls in a catalogue and later in a store and decided after examining them that she could make ones that were just as good. Clare was constantly making things; such productivity was so much a part of her that we hardly noticed it. When on some days she would go down in town to my mother's house to work on a sewing project, my mother would marvel at Clare's activity and dedication when she would tell us about the day they spent together. In the case of the elves, using pipe cleaners wrapped in yarn for bodies, small balls of stuffed pantyhose with embroidered faces for heads, and unbleached wool from her mother's spinning wool for hair, Clare fashioned the figures. Dressed in clothing of bright felt with pointed felt hats, the dolls did indeed look like elves. She embedded a series of twigs in a crevice inside one side of the stump to form the ladder that ran from the floor to a ledge over the door, where she used pieces of moss to form a sleeping loft. Their housekeeping was more or less elaborate as Clare transformed various natural objects—small pieces of slate, rocks, sticks—into their furniture. The family she created to live in the stump reflected our own—the two parents and three children, though the youngest was a baby. Later she made a grandmother and then added a grandfather, a character she had not known in real life. They ate dinner and slept and had conversations and went on adventures in the neighborhood around their home. Clare created an imaginary world with the stump as its center, and despite all the life that swirled around and within in it, Clare and her elf family knew it only as a dead stump to which they brought the life; its life as a tree was part of someone else's family.

v.

Down the road from us live an older couple who have lived in this immediate area all their lives and had, in fact, inherited the land we live on and sold it to the person we bought it from. The wife's sister, Tina, had been married to Slim, who had inherited the house from his father. Sitting in the living room of their double-wide prefab house one afternoon, I asked the couple about the tree, and they remembered how, after it died, Jim, who had managed the farm further down the road, had cut it down using ropes to keep it from falling on the house. They were not sure exactly when it happened or what killed the tree. According to Tom Wessels, a New England ecologist, maple stumps generally rot completely in 25 to 30 years.

In an aerial photograph that includes our house and surrounding area made on October 10, 1969, I can just make out, with the help of a large magnifying glass, some of the sugar maple trees around our house, and one is centered directly in front of the porch. That means that on August 25, 1969, when my future wife and I met in Columbus Ohio, the sugar maple that was to become the stump still lived in the yard.

After I talked with the neighbors about the tree, they found two 8 by 10 photographs of the house taken long ago during a snow storm. Again, they were unsure how long ago, but one picture taken from the north end of the front porch shows the hill across from the road as a treeless expanse of snow, a startling view since forty-foot tall pine and spruce trees now surrounding the clearing across the road and continue for acres. I counted the annual rings on some of those trees that were cut down, and they were 40 years old; in the 1969 photograph the trees are small enough to have spaces between them. So the photograph from the porch must have been taken before 1960. But the second photograph was the real prize. There was the tree that would become the stump, standing large in front of the house, with its old porch in tact though with a slight lean detectable in that southern pillar. The skeleton of branches on that tree is as real in that picture as the branches of trees that were still there in the actual world. Holding the picture in my hand, I felt that I had opened a door and walked into another time. It was the kind of surreal feeling I can remember having for the first time in high school, seeing in our ancient hygiene book a picture of some girls playing field hockey with a square brick building in the background. I had never even seen a field hockey game, but I had a powerful sense that I had been there, that I seemed to have a memory strong enough to make me feel for an instant like I actually was there.-

I have found, since that experience, that sometimes old photographs have an aura that draws me into them, and memory and imagination become confused. The photograph of the house brought the missing sugar maple back from the dead, living in a memory I cannot have had. The combined familiarity and inaccessibility produce an odd pang. On the one hand perhaps it is just the cheap thrill of nostalgia, but it may also be feeling how the past is lost to us. My father died before Clare was born so she can know him only in photographs and in the stories other people tell about him. I must imagine what he might have thought of her, and she will need to pretend he existed, making him up out of the pieces she has gathered. Clare has her own memories of her paternal grandmother. But even my much greater store of memories of my mother is decaying over time; I look at photographs of her and am surprised to remember how large a presence she was, how her attention branched out into so many lives and how, now that she has died, I keep in touch with my siblings around the empty space her absence has created. Something that is not there can shape the space around it.

vi.

My mother died of a rare form of cancer, bile duct cancer. One of the effects is that the cancer cells take root in the bile duct leading to the liver and eventually block it off; as of yet there is no effective treatment for it. It is nearly impossible to remove the whole tumor and it spreads. One end-of-the-summer day last summer, unhappy that the crown vetch was clearly taking over whole stump area, I ripped it out to give other plants a chance. By way of penance, I did some research on crown vetch that evening and discovered that according to John Gerard's *Herball or General Historie of Plantes* from 1633, Crown Vetch (called Axewoort) "openeth the stoppings of the liver, the obstruction of the spleen, and of all the inward parts." A sugar maple tree turned to vetch, my mother dead from cancer, and the pronouncements of a seventeenth century herbal--all connect across space and time to form a triangle that is both in my mind and in the world: the border between inside and outside is smashed and what is half remembered and half imagined spills out and the pieces become so mixed with the facts around them that cleaning it all up will be impossible, and a few scraps of the outside world will be left in the thoughts that return to the mind and some glints of imagination will be left behind in the dirt and rubble. Some evidence will survive.