

Maple 8: The Spring Tree

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Yesterday upon the stair
I met a man who wasn't there.
He wasn't there again today
I wish that man would go away.

-William Hughes Mearns, *Antigonish*, 1899

If you live on a dirt road in northern Pennsylvania, the first sign of spring is mud. There are more poetic early signs—the colts-foot flowers along the roads and streams, the song of the red-wing blackbird—but when the road begins to turn to pudding, that's when winter's grip begins to unclench. Since by the phalanx of thirteen sugar maples separates our house from the dirt road that curves up our hill, their resurrection is also a leitmotif of our spring. I had hoped to illustrate a maple sugar spring by describing it in the eighth of the thirteen sugar maples growing along the road. I am writing these essays about the sugar maple trees in what I like to think is a noble effort to focus on one tree at a time in a world where individual fate and statistical analysis have begun to blend. The scientific approach to the natural world has been good to us, but one unfortunate byproduct of the ubiquity of science is that non-human individuals in nature have been absorbed into groups, and the particular sugar maple disappears into species *Acer saccharinum*. Approaching each sugar maple tree as an individual should reveal some truths hidden from the scientific method.

But this eighth tree was a problem for me from the beginning because, unlike the other twelve, it seemed to have few distinctive qualities. It was the narrowest in diameter of the mature sugar maples—all planted about twenty feet apart—narrowest perhaps because it was closer to the road than some others or it had genetic differences that made it smaller. It could, I suppose, have been planted later, but it fit the twenty-foot pattern so well that that seemed unlikely.

Since this tree had fewer distinguishing characteristics than the other trees, it seemed a good candidate for describing the coming of spring and the inherently compelling transformation that begins with a bud the size of a caraway seed and ends with four or more leaves and sometimes a cluster of flowers at each bud site. Following such events as they unfold in that tree would supply more than enough material to go on and on about the tree despite its apparent blandness. Having made that decision, I set my notes aside and moved on to other trees, realizing I would need to be prepared for observing the tree in spring. However, when I later began to make my spring observations I was surprised to discover that none of the branches on this tree were low enough for me to get a good look at the buds.

As I stood there in the mud, wallowing in self recrimination and wondering what to do next, I noticed out of the corner of my eye a maple branch that curved into my line of vision like a snake hanging down in the jungle. It was attached to one of two smaller sugar maples. Though the eighth sugar maple is about one and a half feet in diameter and the next mature tree is almost two and a half feet, these two trees between them are only about six inches in diameter. In saying there are thirteen sugar maples, I have pretended these trees do not exist since they do not fit the pattern of either time or place. I did not think my excluding them in the first place hurt my credibility. I must draw a line somewhere. Each year many sugar maple seedlings sprout in the flower beds around the house, in less-mowed parts of the lawn, and in the underbrush under the

sugar maples and other trees along the road. Some persist for many years. Leaving them out and focusing on substantial trees is not unreasonable. I could not write a thousand essays.

Because I could reach their low-lying branches, I was tempted to deal with the problem of the out-of-sight buds by treating the two unmentioned--and therefore non-existent--smaller sugar maples as if they were the Spring Tree. Who would know? So I decided to go ahead and began watching them, recording their response to spring, keeping them a secret. But now that it is time to pull off the deception, I can't bring myself to do it, not without telling you. If you will agree to continue reading this essay, then we will be together in this, and when I explain how the small hard burgundy buds on the Spring Tree look in the severe, short days of February, we will both know that though the buds are real, they are on another tree, that they reflect within reach something too far off to see for sure.

The buds that the sugar maple packs away for the winter do not seem to be headed anywhere, so clearly the end of a process rather than a beginning, though in fact they are both. Certainly they seem like something battened down. The small scales in offset rows form a finial at each branch end, a small pointed oval, delicate and perfect. We would not expect a pineapple-post bed to sprout fans out the top of its four posts or the ornament atop a cupola in the middle of a mansard roof to burst into feathers. If we did not know already that trees have leaves, we would never conclude from the bud that leaves were coming. But, of course, what we think matters little. The leaves come.

First the color of the buds deepens, the brownish red becoming just a bit redder as they swell. Then the buds slowly elongate, almost sliding open, and the scales become the tips of green petals that reflect the overlapping structure of the initial bud. The dark red bud scales

become isolated spots on a green surface of the much larger buds, which begin to blush rose at their tips. They reach this point usually around mid-April in the Pennsylvania mountains. I always thought that these primordial green petals would turn into something, but they don't. They are just shells, and the next step is that the bud tip begins to split and the tips of folded leaves emerge so when they are part way out, the buds look like paint brushes. But at this point a problem also emerged. High above, the Spring Tree was not making paint brushes: it was making flowers.

It seems that hidden in the information on sugar maple trees, so cleverly concealed in the text I never noticed it, was the secret that sugar maples do not produce seeds until they are at least 30 years old. While the two small trees began to turn green, all around them the mature trees were turning a golden yellow, especially impressive when the setting sun shone across the tree tops and the haze of flowers leaped into the foreground. Sugar maples flower every year, but the quantity tends to be cyclical and this year was clearly a peak year. But the setting sun also made it obvious that the Spring Tree was behind the others in its fluorescence. I thought of using an extension ladder to climb up to the lowest branch, about 20 feet above ground, so I could get at the Spring Tree's flowers, but when I scoped out the terrain, I discovered that the neighboring trees eliminated east and west, a planting of ours eliminated the south and on the north side, the ladder would be on the road in the middle of a blind curve. I tried binoculars, but as soon as I put them to my eyes I felt fairly foolish for thinking such feeble magnification would increase the detail enough. So I was forced to look at flowers on the low hanging branches of the other mature trees, even though this essay is about the Spring Tree, not them.

The flowers that popped out of the ends of the buds with the leaf tips looked like scourges, tiny bundles of cords with lumps at their ends, devices that fanatics use to flog

themselves for their sinfulness. How ironic that these tools for mortification of the flesh resemble a tree's reproductive organs. One bundle I looked at had 20 flowers, each at the end of a filament about an inch long. The flowers resemble the ghosts from the old Pac-man game, elongated half-circles with fringed bottoms and a diameter of .1 inch. When I looked closely at the little flowers I discovered that most had four little pods protruding from the bottom, but a few (out of my bunch of 20, about 4) had two longer feelers. The four pods turn out to be the male stamens and the two feelers are the female pistils. My research also showed me that according to the Cornell Cooperative Extension, my 1 out of 5 female to male ratio is fairly high since 1 out of 10 and sometimes 1 out of 50 is more common, though they note the proportion can vary widely from place to place on a tree.

The flowers, hanging from the end buds and many of the side buds and flailing in the wind, obscured the emerging leaves, but the leaves continued their growth until freed from the enclosing case which became a fading, shredded collar around the base of the stems. When they first emerge completely, the leaves are creased and have the delicate, unfinished feel of butterflies unfolding their wings, but when the leaves are open but still creased and hanging limply from the branches, they most clearly resemble bats. As the foliage fills out, it creates cavities like small caves shaded from the sun, and the leaves seem to hang down inside them in gothic folded ranks. In years when there are few flowers and the bat stage dominates all trees, as it does the two smaller trees this year, for the brief time the leaves create an archetypally disquieting vision of choirs of bats ready to burst into thunderous flight.

It seemed appropriate to describe in detail the way the folded maple leaves mimic bats, but unfortunately I had a problem. I am a college teacher and during this late April, when the sugar maples are most active so are my students; they too produce leaves and I am overwhelmed

with student work requiring crucial and sometimes elaborate responses. I tried to get out everyday to look at the trees, not always successfully. Sometimes, when I did go out, I was so rushed that I would just clip a twig off a tree and put it on my desk next to the computer where it would gradually dry out and shrivel. I did manage to see the bats on the smaller trees, but I did not look closely with the specific question in mind, “How are they folded?” so that when I came to writing about the folds, I was not sure I remembered correctly, and the leaves had flattened and lost any sign of the folding. I was sitting at my computer, my fingers resting on the keyboard trying to decide whether I should just skip the description of the folds or depend on my haunted mental image, when I looked at my pile of cuttings and realized I had a desiccated example of an advanced paint brush. Soaking in a small jar of water for a few hours made it pliable. Then I squeezed out the excess water and carefully separated one leaf from the small packet. I pinched and pulled gently and the leaf started to open. I was caught by surprise when I saw that the center section had two, small, pointed ears, and with the still wrinkled sections on either side, what I held between my fingers reminded me of a small brown bat I found dead on the driveway in front of the barn and of the way that when I took a stick and spread its arm, the rumped material under that arm became a scalloped membrane. As I finished spreading the leaf out and saw that it was a tiny but complete maple leaf, I felt the same sense of surprise at something becoming itself as I had with the bat. When I let go, the leaf refolded itself and I could see clearly the folds creased up on the veins and down in the gaps between them, so that is the way the bat leaves would have hung.

But this year the scourges are overwhelming the bats, spoiling the effect on the mature trees and I focused on the flowers, looking most closely at them each day I could. At the same time I was watching the sugar maple closely, in one class I was teaching, I had asked each

student to observe a plant that each one chose and record its spring metamorphosis in a journal. Each Wednesday, the students would read to each other in small groups what they had observed and recorded in their journals that week. After weeks where there was no change in the plants except that the students would discover more detail in the plants as they learned to see them more clearly, on this day many of the journal entries showed things were beginning to happen. One student who had been unable to identify her plant through the winter and early spring called me over to see her journal.

She had taped a cluster of leaves and flowers to the page of her journal once her plant leafed out. At the beginning of a class, she called me over, pointed to the specimen and asked if I knew what it was. And there, so familiar and obvious to me that it was a shock, were four sugar maple leaves and a scourge of flowers. I thought to show her how there were two kinds of flowers and pointed out a male flower with its stamens. But I could not see the protruding pistils of the female flowers until I saw two tiny blades protruding like two small ears from a flower remnant which barely concealed the tiny swelling ovaries. This would become the double bladed samara, the helicopter of so many childhoods.

That evening, I checked one of our trees and discovered a female flower with both the protruding style part of the pistil and the beginnings of wings. I had thought the pistil ends would become the samara wings, but this flower proved that they fall off and the ovaries grow wings. On these very young samaras, the wings looked like ears on a wide-headed teddy bear, but as days passed, the diameter of what would be the seed thickened, and the rib and membrane of the wing lengthened. Toward the end of the summer, the dried samaras will detach from the trees and spin to the ground and next spring we should be awash in sugar maple seedlings.

The male flowers had their fall in the spring. As the stems holding the female flowers thickened to support the growing samaras, the thread holding the male flowers thinned and the flowers shriveled and the four stamens protruded more. They hung limp while the strengthening female stems began to arc. Finally they fell off the tree singly or in twisted clusters. They caught on crevices everywhere. They coated the roofs and the parallel dirt tracks on the driveway and the breeze would stir them into the air so that at times we seemed to be inside one of those snow globes, only shaking stirred up not snow but maple flowers. Wads of them collected on the porch and the stirring of the wind tangled them into larger and larger bunches. As the weather warmed and we decided to eat on the front porch again, I swept up tangled masses of flowers. When I looked at the damp rag I used to wipe the dust off the porch table, I was surprised to see that it was greenish yellow—sugar maple pollen.

As I looked at the rag, I realized that trees create only themselves. Though they spread pollen everywhere, this thin coating on the unsympathetic porch furniture is meaningful only when it finds the tiny sticky platform of the pistil. When we recreate ourselves, microscopic sperms and ova must find each other in a dark tunnel, but we can also create what is not ourselves and through our creations form our sense of self. I step back from what I have created and see how it falls short, how it does not embody the self I had hoped it would. It always falls short. This voice you hear in your head as you read this essay is not my voice, it is your voice, but it is not you. It is not me either: no matter how hard I try to make the “I” my true voice, it is always a construct, a reimagining. By creating this “I” who is not I, I distance myself from myself and in the space between is what? The gap between the winter of the self I am and the summer of the self I would be is the potential for growth. Spring perhaps.

Though I have been unable to say anything about the Spring Tree directly, I would have been able to say a great deal about it if the sugar maples were interchangeable, if the Spring Tree had not kept asserting its unavailability to illustrate a process common to all sugar maples. But in becoming so perfectly unsuited to showing the coming of spring, by distancing itself from the very events that need to be revealed, it becomes the negative from which the picture of spring can be developed. The Spring Tree's absence from the essay about it is the strongest assertion of its individuality, and ultimately the only true thing is that individuality. This all would have been so much simpler if I had just lied to you, since in the truth of fiction, the real sugar maple would have disappeared into a fully formed imaginary one. I wonder if perhaps this essay is like the film *Becoming Jane*, which is a gleaning of bits and pieces from Jane Austen's novels to construct a sort of biography of Austen. The whole time I watched I was aware of the superiority of her fictions, how she had assembled comments, characters, and events into a fully realized whole, and this film seemed like an unrealized patchwork. Perhaps this essay needed to go one step further and create an imaginary tree that embodied spring, but at some deeper level spring is not to be embodied; it is to be endured.