

Richard Hoffman

A UNIT DEPLOYS

after Tu Fu's Ballad of the Army Carts

Yellow schoolbuses idle at the curb, exhaust rising in the cold from shuddering tailpipes. The soldiers' gear is lined up on the lawn outside the armory. Inside, where the families are gathered, you can hardly hear a thing for the brass band and the pipers playing patriotic music. People are weeping, parents, wives, children, dabbing at their eyes with shredded tissues; some have faces like welts with eyes, while others look disoriented, dazed. The soldiers, boots as black as onyx, names in black on canvas strips above their hearts, wear a strange new kind of camo, all gray angles, for an urban setting.

On a signal they move outside, each retrieving his gear from where he'd left it on the grass, and board the bus like a hockey team off to a tournament. Their families follow them outside, small children hoisted onto shoulders. Some still hurry back and forth to see which bus will carry their loved one away. Then the driver of the first bus in the row grinds the gears and thunks it into first, and the sound of it sets off renewed, involuntary, stifled crying among the families as they wave at the buses pulling away, one after the other, in an orderly convoy.

ARBOR VITAE

“Trees are Earth’s endless effort to speak to the listening heaven.”
— Rabindranath Tagore

MY NEIGHBOR ACROSS THE STREET wants to cut down the tree in the front of her house; she says its roots are compromising her foundation, and besides, she wants more sun so she can grow flowers in her front yard. I try to talk with her about it, but find I am surprisingly emotional. A few years earlier my neighbor next door took down a row of white pines between our houses because they were dripping sap on his car in the driveway. I loved them for the way they held the snow in the winter; the windows on that side of the house were like Hiroshige snowscapes. I tried to argue with him when the arborist’s truck pulled up and I saw what they were about to do, but I lost. The trees were on his side of the property line, if only by a foot, and he had made up his mind. I steamed about it for a couple of days, but we’re a tight little urban neighborhood and holding a grudge was never an option. But here I am nearly begging my neighbor across the street to spare the red maple in front of her house, and I’m surprised at the strength of the feelings that have been stirred in me. I get on my bike and head for the park nearby where I can sit by the lake under a favorite willow and think about it.

The truth is I was feeling a little embarrassed by the whole thing. It was undeniably sentimental; what was the point of arguing about a single tree? I had enjoyed the pines next to my house; I understood my reasons for wishing they’d been left standing. But the truth is that I never really paid the tree across the street much attention. Still, it seemed worthwhile to try to figure out why I felt so desperate on this one little maple’s behalf.

Our relationship to trees is a conspiracy, literally. We breathe together. It is symbiosis on a grand scale. Every schoolkid knows this. We take in oxygen and breathe out carbon dioxide. In comes the good air, out goes the bad. Trees are our very life support, and we, along with the other animals, are theirs. We sustain one another, we conspire for the common good of carbon based life. It only remains to be said that the “spire” in conspire is, etymologically, spirit, the breath without which we would die, and not only metaphorically.

So I see the relationship of people to trees as a conversation that involves quiet, attention, listening. What people have always done with breath, with spirit, is make stories, and I have no reason to believe that trees don't similarly shape their breathing. Trees listen, then they tell their side of the same survival narrative. We have this conversation continuously on the molecular level. When the trees speak they tell me of course of water (they even sometimes make the sound of it quite convincingly.) They also talk about light. When I breathe in deeply in a forest, a light brightens just behind my eyes as surely as I see a canoe when you say the word canoe or conjure my daughter when you speak her name. Trees tell me other things as well; they seem to know me. Sometimes they tell me things that I don't know I've heard until a long time after. Our breathing, I imagine, tells the trees of joy and desire, anger and injury, and is often shaped into the long sighs of sorrow. We tell it all, in every chemical flavor, storytelling virtuosos who by now, after a couple of million years, know how by heart.

It may be that trees have given us language itself. According to Robert Graves, our alphabet, descended from ancient runes, derives from the patterns of branches against the light of the moon; Anglo-Saxon runes were called by the names of trees: elm, beech, birch, locust. I am unwilling to dismiss the idea—it occurs to me too often—that trees are a superior species. According to Andreas Feininger, there are trees on the planet right now more than four thousand years old! Trees may have been the presences who called us from the waters long ago, breathing life into our brachiating lungs, then as now our beckoning siblings, body to body, need to need, gift to gift.

This is why, when I am dispirited, I like to sit in the woods.

And yet, I know that others find this essential conversation elsewhere. My wife prefers to walk the beach in colloquy with water, waves, and tides. She is someone who finds her renewal in motion. "I'm exhausted," she says, "I need to go for a walk." She can walk the sand by the waterline for miles and return somehow unburdened, happy. I suspect this has to do with the years she spent in Sicily as a little girl, and on ships in the Mediterranean, and crisscrossing the Atlantic (her father is a retired ship's engineer); the first whiff of salt and she gets that half-smile on her face and the look of a woman listening carefully for something she can almost but not quite hear.

And under the willow, by the lake, in the moment just before the feelings are right there with me, fully now, a surge of mourning, a hot splash in my chest, I get it: my spirited defense of my neighbor's tree is not about my metaphysics, but my grief.

The house where I lived until I was thirteen, with my parents and three brothers, was a narrow brick rowhouse that still had one of the old slate sidewalks. The slate was heaved and cracked by the roots of a huge tree that shaded the front of the house. My brother Bobby and I, along with our gang of kids from up and down the street, had always enjoyed it as a challenge, first on our tricycles—you had to get up a good head of steam and you had to lean hard as you crested and bumped over the crack or you'd spill over sideways—and later on our roller skates. My father called it "that damned hemlock" because the roots were working their way into our cellar, threatening the foundation.

So I grew up thinking that the tree was a hemlock, but it could not have been because a hemlock is an evergreen, and this great tree, home-base for all our streetgames, was deciduous. I realized this only in adulthood, and many years after the tree was cut down. It made me wonder what kind of tree it was that I had leaned against so many times, forehead against the rough bark, hands over my eyes, looking into the dark and counting backward.

The bark was deeply furrowed, coarse enough to tear your knuckles on, and black, but if you broke off a piece it was a burnt orange color and light in your hand like cork. I went to the arboretum. I went to the library. From what evidence I could gather, I decided it was a black walnut. I remembered the hard shrivelled nuts and the twigs with their pith like white styrofoam that I carved with my thumbnail. I remember using a hammer to smash open the nuts and more often than not finding the cases mysteriously empty inside. I remember the thrill of discovering, later and all by myself, that a little hole in the shell meant a worm had bored its way inside to eat the nutmeat. Then it was fun to bet with Bobby, for a baseball card, or five penny candies from the corner store, and shatter the nut with a hammer, find it empty, and collect.

But it turned out I was wrong. The black walnut I had remembered was somewhere else on the block. The tree in front of our house, whose roots wormed their way into our cellar, was a linden.

I discovered my mistake years later, using a handbook to identify a tree that grew by the house where I lived then. It was the shape of the leaf that changed my mind. Two memories convinced me. The first was of the branch outside the bedroom Bobby and I shared: the leaves were not the walnut's pinnate frond, but crooked hearts, simple and sawtoothed, that had fixed themselves in my consciousness, bobbing and tossing in the wind through years of now forgotten daydreams. The second memory was of the

rusty imprint of a leaf on the smooth slate sidewalk when the ice that had trapped it there melted, a kind of snapshot fossil.

One day I came home from a friend's house to find it had been cut down. I believe I was nine that year because Bobby, a year younger than me, had just been diagnosed with Muscular Dystrophy, the reason he had become so weak, the reason he fell down all the time and why we couldn't play together outside anymore, why he had been moved from our bedroom downstairs to the first floor, and why he would die before we could be adults together. The stump was nearly two feet across, with a six-inch hole in the middle filled with water and ringed by darker marrow-wood. My feelings surprised me. My father had mentioned it would be cut down. He wanted to be rid of it. "It busts up the sidewalk and that's all we need is for some old lady to fall on her ass and sue us." No doubt I had shrugged.

But seeing the stump, surrounded by sawdust and woodchips, was a different matter. It was shocking and sad at a time when I believed, for reasons it has taken me decades to understand, that it was a betrayal of my family to feel sorrow. I almost cried. I almost mourned. I would have if I had let myself look up to see the blank sky and the looming eaves and the black wires lined with bewildered sparrows.

When the tree was gone, the slate was taken up, the offending roots were cut and removed, and a concrete sidewalk poured. The stump remained, darkening and softening, rainwater held in its hollow center, black as the pupil of an eye. In that dark mirror you could stare directly at the sun, moving among gray clouds, a dull coin pale as the moon.

"Well, you don't have to worry, Rich," my neighbor calls across the street to me while I'm putting out the trash. "The tree belongs to the city. They sent a guy out here, a watchacallit, an arborist, who says I've got to live with it."

What would she think if I told her to try listening to it?