

Tree Songs

Narrative: Sue Schuit

A few minutes ago every tree was excited,
 bowing to the roaring storm,
waving, swirling, tossing their branches
 in glorious enthusiasm like worship.
But though to the outer ear these trees
are now silent, their songs never cease.

- John Muir

Hard science tells us that the sound of the wind in the trees is not “literally” tree song; trees have no control over the sounds wind causes as it vibrates limbs and rustles leaves. We can’t hear wind, only the sounds it makes as it is blowing through something.

One of the more melodic and appreciated “somethings” is the wind blowing through trees. I’ve always loved the different songs the trees sing in different seasons. The grindings, crackings and groanings, the sometimes muted and muffled or the startling booming noise of tree limbs rubbing irritably against one another on a frigid winter day. The sleeping tree’s grumbles reminds me of a restless night tossing and turning or the annoyance we feel and the complaints we utter when the alarm goes off and we must exit the soft, warm bed and force ourselves to enter another cold, winter day.

Spring’s song is softer, the first murmurs and whispers from the waving catkins and just-emerging leaves; the cold groans and grumbles of winter become mild complaints and quick skirmishes as branches lock or tussle in mock sword play.

Summer tree song – you’ve blinked and trees are in full leaf. The low wind whispers and swirls, the high canopy gales heave the tallest trees and create powerful sounding swooshes in a warm wind you barely feel. The summer rains that require a hard, pounding drench or a long, steady soak to make it thru the dense cover and wet the ground underneath. Many times during the dry months I cross my fingers in hopes that the sounds I am hearing are not wind, but blessed rain. Summer rain song and summer wind song is difficult to distinguish and the two combined can be a godsend as well as downright alarming and awe-inspiring.

The fierce autumn storms; the driving rain and high winds change the rush and swoosh tune of the summer to sweeping rustles and tossing spins. Withered leaves launched can be heard clattering and bouncing as they drift down to add to the layer of crunch underfoot. The obstinate oaks manage to hang on to their stiff leaves in the squalls as the maples let go in gusts of gold and red.

Psithurism

The sound of the wind through the leaves has been termed psithurism (*sith-err-iz-um*). The naturalist author and founding member of the RSPB, W.H. Hudson, suggests in *Birds and Man* (1901), that psithurism is salubrious. He describes the sound of wind in the trees as “very restorative” – a mysterious voice which the forest speaks to us, and that to lie or sit thus for an hour at a time listening to the wind is an experience worth going far to seek.

The sonic qualities of psithurism seem to smudge the border between music and noise. The American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882) described the sound in “A Day of Sunshine”:

“I hear the wind among the trees
Playing celestial symphonies;
I see the branches downward bent,
Like keys of some great instrument.

The type of leaf, the season and the species of tree all work together to create a unique sound, or as John Muir put it: “*Winds are advertisements of what they touch*”. He described how, in the wind, each tree expressed itself in its own way, “singing its own song, and making its own peculiar gestures”. Of all the tree species the sounds of the pine seems to have captured the imagination of naturalists more than any other. Muir suggests pines are the best interpreters of the winds. “They are mighty waving golden-rods, ever in tune, singing and writing wind music all their long century lives.” (*A Wind Storm in the Forests of the Yuba*, 1878).

Thoreau also had an affinity for the wind through the pines: “The white pines in the horizon, either single trees or whole wood, are particularly interesting. The wind is making passes over them, magnetizing and electrifying them...This is the brightening and awakening of the pines...As if in this wind-storm of March a certain electricity was passing from heaven to earth through the pines and calling them to life”. (*Journal of Henry David Thoreau 1855-1861*).

Eastern thinkers also noted the distinctiveness of pines. Shunryu Suzuki (1904-1971), a Zen monk and teacher, describes with typical equity, psithurism and the mind:

“When we hear the sound of the pine trees on a windy day, perhaps the wind is just blowing, and the pine tree is just standing in the wind. That is all that they are doing. But the people who listen to the wind in the tree will write a poem, or will feel something unusual. That is, I think, the way everything is.” – Adam @ AWA Tree Consultants

Iconic

“Among plants and trees, those with large leaves have a muffled sound; those with dry leaves have a sorrowful sound; those with frail leaves have a weak and unmelodic sound. For this reason, nothing is better suited to wind than the pine.” – *Liu Chi* (1311-1375)

The pines indeed sing a good song but I would argue grace and beauty coupled with song merits great praise. While my song may be a bit softer, not quite as melodic, perhaps a bit muffled, there is no argument that my dance is superior. The maple's song and dance are notable.

Who would say this of a falling pine needle?

"A withered maple leaf has left its branch and is falling to the ground; its movements resemble those of a butterfly in flight. Isn't it strange? The saddest and dearest of things is yet so like the gayest and most vital of creatures?"

— *Ivan Turgenev, Fathers and Sons*

Again, make no mistake, the pines sing a good song, they carry a tune; additionally, the wind sweeping through pines release their fresh, piney scent. But I would argue some fine points are still missing. The song isn't the sum, one needs the details too. My striking looks, my charisma, my beauty and grace. Add the dance to the song and the stately maple takes first place.

My Story

Once they came on a maple in a glade,
Standing alone with smooth arms lifted up,
And every leaf of foliage she'd worn
Laid scarlet and pale pink about her feet. *Robert Frost, Maple*

History really comes down to what it is willing to divulge. Just as scars create a good story, history is full of precarious actions, tumultuous dealings and nefarious deeds. But the real history is simply a chain of events, a timeline of happenings. There are forks in the roads and unlikely twists and turns which ultimately creates a pattern (in hindsight), fading into obscurity until it reappears again.

It can be fascinating stuff or simply mundane incidents with predictable outcomes and expected results. The story never ends, it's happening right here, right now, urged on by the ancestors whose ghosts may or may not linger in the past.

In any case...

This story, my story, begins approximately 150 years back. One of countless maple saplings, my chances were slim and simply beating the odds of nature is a story unto itself. My history is marked by years of drought, by years of rain and sun and wealth; events that cause distress, or weather that impacts my health.

My story then may seem mundane, not of much interest, perhaps, to you somewhat tame. So, I'll switch the topic to the events that I've seen; the changes and names of a younger Racine.

Your Story

'Do you know you remind me of a tree-
A maple tree?'

'Because my name is Maple?'

'Isn't it Mabel? I thought it was Mabel.'

'No doubt you've heard the office call me Mabel.
I have to let them call me what they like.'

They were both stirred that he should have divined
Without the name her personal mystery. – **Robert Frost**, *Maple*

150 years back the question of shall I tend to the forest, or pasture my cows would have received an incredulous look followed by laughter. Trees were work, in the way, infinite, and worth much more dead than alive. They had to be levelled for building - and profit - and farming (depressing that the same question still receives the same laughter from many today - despite recognizing that tending to the forest in our current reality is a task that may, literally, save us from ourselves).

The Racine of 150 years ago was still a land of trees despite the rush of settlers. An 1858 map of Racine County, Mt. Pleasant Township, identifies my land as section 11, perhaps yet unsettled but already fronted by Milmine Rd. Milmine Rd. may have been the namesake of George R. Milmine which, history states; the death of Milmine: Infant of George Milmine, 1877 – Mound Cemetery. Milmine Rd. is also listed as; “Milmine Rd was a continuation of Spring St. from the old bridge.” – surveyed 3/12/1850. Milmine Rd. it appears, was also known as Middle Rd. near STH 31 and was referred to as Milmine Rd. outside of Racine City limits. – Racine County Historical Museum.

A portion of this road was also known as Peter Keen Rd and an order to lay out this portion in the Town of Mt. Pleasant south is dated August 3rd, 1830. It appears that this road may also have been named the McGregor Rd and it is designated a town road, Emmertsen Rd., in 1926. – Racine County Historical Museum.

A portion of Section 11 history moves on to an 1878 map comprised, in part, of 82 acres owned by C. Anderson while the remainder yet appears “unnamed”. Directly across Milmine Rd., 160 acres of Section 12 is owned by H. Newman.

I am now a young maple and have not yet set my first flowers. The shadow I cast will not yet reach the road I abut. My land is now clear and 80 acres of Section 11 is held by J. Frank, 1887; 1899, C. Tange; 1908, N. P. Christianson and 1924, Hans Emmertsen.

The Pattern (in hindsight)

“Hans Emmertsen was born in Denmark, 76 years ago, and came to Wisconsin in 1889. He operated a farm in Mt. Pleasant for many years; and was a member of Dania Society.” – June 12, 1939; Mrs. Emma Emmertsen, 73, widow of Hans Emmertsen, died Wednesday afternoon at the home of her son, Emmert Emmertsen, in Mt. Pleasant – Sept. 24, 1942; Emmert Emmertsen, Age 83, passed away Saturday, December 24, 1977; Mrs. Emmert Emmertsen (Olga), age 86, passed away August 7, 1978; and Florence Emmertsen, 80, passed away

Saturday, October 17, 1998. She is survived by two sisters, Cathryn DuVall, Myrtle Jacobsen; Patricia Duvall, William Emmert DuVall and other great nieces and nephews. She was preceded in death by her parents. Mr. Richard DuVall, age 41, 504 Emmertsen Rd. passed away on Thursday, 7/13/1989. Cathryn DuVall (nee Emmertsen) passed away, November 9, 2004, survived by a sister, her son, her daughter, grandchildren, great-grandchildren and daughter-in law, Linda Duvall; preceded in death by her husband William and son, Richard DuVall. - various excerpts, various obituaries, Racine County Historical Museum.

Obviously, the details are missing, it offers the hints of the patterns, with no meat on the bone... A simple listing of names with predictable outcomes and expected results. The years have erased the stories that live in the past, the history that isn't divulged; the deeds of a life, the hidden truths and old tales. They're locked in the past; the stories and deeds of the times of their time. Namesakes and signs, statues, place stones and family stories still live on and survive, perhaps urged on by the ghosts who may or may not linger in the past and our collective love and respect for the ones who came before us.

“Don't adventures ever have an end? I suppose not. Someone else always has to carry on the story.”

— J.R.R. Tolkien, The Fellowship of the Ring

Tree Song

I may not be one of the WORLD'S BEST TREES, an exotic tree set in a spectacular landscape; a site for pilgrims in search of overwhelming awe. But don't let that detract or minimize my beauty or the power of my song.

Not even the grandest tree is immune from the decisions of men and women. It may even be that they are in greater peril.

Nature can be majestic and powerful. Nature is also subtle and discreet. You may pass me by, unnoticed. But the most ordinary scene, the one right outside your door perhaps, can be an endless source of fascination. Nature is the great spectacle - folks can sit on their porch and watch it go by; if one focuses there is so much to see.

“Where did you go to, if I may ask?’ said Thorin to Gandalf as they rode along.

To look ahead,’ said he.

And what brought you back in the nick of time?’

Looking behind,’ said he.”

— J.R.R. Tolkien, The Hobbit or There and Back Again

I think there are many that are in need of the long perspective I can provide; I am the reminder that you are surrounded by living witnesses to years far beyond your memories. Primal spirits beneath the soil, angels singing in the winds; everywhere poems and prose marvel at these ideals of perfection and eternity, as if they, like me, are a visible part of the scenery.

Get out of the weeds
Shallow roots in the soil
Get into the trees
Reaching up towards the light.
– Sue Schuit

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