

At five in the morning he heard again the sound of the train. Always unexpected but never surprising. An inevitable sound. A sound of rolling mourning, defining space in its distance or in its proximity, defining time in the way history swallows memories. It is a sound that signals neither departure nor arrival, rather a continuance that we all know to the marrow of our bones. Wherever you are, whatever you are doing, when you hear that sound, a part of you is stopped at the railroad crossing, watching the slowly relentless roll of the coupled cars, graffitied boxes, black tank drums, multicolored containers, and you can never imagine any of these carriers being unloaded, their only reason for being is to endlessly travel on snake rails across the plains, crying their somber horn of acquiescence. When you hear the melancholy lament of the train's call, you feel it deep inside, somewhere just below the heart. A lost soul on an endless wander in purgatory.

He had been late to bed the night before, working long into the dark, digging the hole in his yard in which he planned to plant a tree, a tree that would have lovely blooms in the spring, brilliant leaves in the fall, and still be attractive in bare-branched winter. He had no idea what kind of tree. His plan was to travel to local nurseries in the new day and seek the advice of experts to help him select the perfect tree, the tree that would sing of nature's optimism, that would grow with strength and hope in the coming months and years. He would sit in his living room chair and gaze at his tree, feeling at peace, finally, with his life. Or so he imagined.

Sitting at the dining room table after breakfast, finishing his coffee, he googled "trees to plant in Texas" to continue research he began the week before when he first came up with this idea of planting a tree. There were the ubiquitous Redbuds, the myrtles, the various oaks. The ever beautiful but smelly Bradford Pears (he had friends that hated those trees, said they should be eliminated from the world although he himself always loved seeing them in the spring with their abundant white blossoms, signaling that here was a voice in nature that expressed hope, if not for a better tomorrow, at least for the reliable continuity of renewed life.) Flowering blossoms, he thought, would be what he would want to see.

When they were first together, he and his wife would often visit nurseries, shopping for plants and shrubs. Neither of them were particularly adept at gardening, but in their early home days, the desire to cultivate some beauty of their own they saw as an outward demonstration of their heady young love. And heady it was, as they were still awash in their mutual erogeny. He knew her desire,

she felt his lust. They moved in together within a month of their first meeting. One afternoon, laying together after making love, she said to him “let’s plant a plug of flowers for every fuck of ours”. And with that they began their nursery habit.

Their flower garden became the envy of the neighborhood.

His shoulders and hands ached from last night’s efforts. He had found the rusting shovel and pickaxe in the corner of the garage and an old pair of work gloves in the corner of his closet. He tired now more quickly than in those earlier days, but the work felt good and the hole he dug, almost five feet deep, too deep actually for the tree he would plant, opened to him with a kind of beckoning, the promise of a plan.

Arriving home with a spritely young pear tree in a five gallon pot, he thought about the hole he had dug, how he would have to fill it some before placing his tree. He went into the den to sit and think, looking blankly at the bookshelves, remembering those planting sessions, echoing of eros, and the enthusiasm they both had. He pulled from the shelves one of the many photo albums they had assembled and began traveling through the memories they contained. Trips they had made, to Europe, to the west, selfies in front of cathedrals, at restaurants, at the ocean. And he could recall which days they were, where they had stayed, where they had made love, how they had kissed. Unrecorded events that sat silently in between each photo. He remembered them all.

There were ten of these albums in all.

He got up and went to the linen closet and took one of the newest linen bed sheets, found some sturdy twine in a kitchen drawer and brought the ten photo albums into the bedroom where he wrapped them with great care in the bed sheet then tied the bundle tightly with the twine. It took almost no time to put the bundle into the bottom of the hole, shovel covering them with enough dirt to bring the level up to the right height for the tree, then with a struggle freed the root ball from its container and carry dragged the tree into position in the hole. In fifteen minutes it was done, the dirt mounded just right, a shallow trench encircling the drip line, and the tree generously watered.

During the time it takes for a train to pass through a railroad crossing, as you sit in your car tapping the steering wheel, the second hand of your kitchen wall clock begins to slow, the spaces between the clock markings begin to expand, wars are fought, armies defeated, Michaelangelo completes his David, you kiss your wife tenderly on her sleeping lips. All the while, the train sings its doppler serenade to the awaiting plains of scrub and grass.

These thoughts played half-dreamlike as he lay in bed, the train having awakened him with new nudges of possibility. He sat up and looked about the bedroom, noting all the items scattered about, books here and there, figurines, chachkies, souvenirs from various events, ticket stubs, brochures, old gloves, piled clothes, caps. Empty DVD boxes, bongo drums next to the bed. Pictures on the walls. He picked up his journal and began to make an itemized list of all the things he could see and name.

After a breakfast of cold coffee and stale bread, he began a new page listing the items occupying the counters in the kitchen. Toaster, coffee maker, blender, bottles of oil, spices, sugar bowl, saltshaker. Pretty hand-made bowls piled with fruit. Not so pretty everyday bowls stacked on an open shelf. He moved to the dining room and started a new list. Table runner, place mats, old mail on the table, pictures on the walls. On to the living room and more lists. All the things that occupied surfaces, the coffee table, end tables, and shelves of precious things. Valuable vases from Santa Fe, a fake Rhino horn from Africa.

He did this in every room of the house. The den took an especially long time with its floor to ceiling shelves filled with five hundred books. He catalogued them all, along with the pretty table lamps found merrily in a local thrift store that he and his wife loved to visit. This was during their home decorating days.

He did this for every room in the house and by noon, he had compiled several pages that he tore from his journal and put in a green folder that he labeled "A Complete List of Loose Things". Then he went to the local Home Depot looking for boxes and back to the nursery to find more saplings.

It took him another two days to dig the holes and plant the trees. Whenever he would take a break and rest his tired arms, he would sit in the iron patio chair and bring thoughts of his wife to mind. Remembering her perfumed smell, the softness of her skin. Jokes they shared, trips they planned. Then he would resume his work, refreshed, with the fresh vigor of remembered youth. Finally, the work was done, each tree placed in its hole. Beneath each muddy root ball, a box packed with the bric-a-brac of his life, each with a list taped to its top, each box wrapped in the finest bedsheet he could find (when the linen closet had no more he went to the mall and bought more sheets, always those with the highest thread count.) All of these sacred bundles tied tightly with rough twine.

Sitting in the afternoon light of the next day, he marveled at the magisterial quiescence of the empty walls and shelves, the bare table surfaces, the zen of a decluttered house. He thought of the shared silence he and his wife would hold between them on their long road trips, the rumbling tire song of the pavement taking them to reverie. Spaces of contentment. Not that they would never argue, although argue would be overstating disagreements they might have from time to time. Silly things really. Different tastes in movies, books, careers.

Over a distant horizon, he heard again the sound of the fading train and remembered seeing at Home Depot the day before that a small excavator could be rented for not too exorbitant a price. He never knew that.

By the time the excavator was delivered to the house, he had spent several hours visiting YouTube sites learning everything he could about how to operate the machine. His best friend, who lived on a mountainside in Idaho, had once used one to carry and place large blocks for retaining walls and he had no problem with handling the excavator. Except for one small slip when his friend took off some siding of his house, it all went fine. How hard could it be? And, after all, *his* yard was not on a mountainside in Idaho.

He decided to dig one very large hole, eight feet deep, eight feet wide, and twenty six feet long. The size of a UHaul truck. Operating the excavator was surprisingly easy he thought as he piled high the dirt to the side of his hole, his mind wandering in the strategy of his next moves, his body alive with this new obsession.

A week later, when the rented front loader arrived, he was ready. The furniture covered in pristine white cloth, tied with thick white cotton rope. All of them lined up on the back patio. Dragging them outside had been difficult, but he didn't want to hire any help for this. He had to do all of this by himself. After placing each wrapped piece as carefully as he could, side by side at the bottom of his hole, he began covering them with the freshly dug earth, filling the trench to the top. Now he could hire help from the nursery to plant the seven stately yews, his secret safely below the workers' reach.

Weeks after the completion of his work, he still revelled in the result. Empty and full at the house had now been reversed. The yard, once open and bare, was now a forest of young growing trees of all different kinds, framed on the back by seven sentinels of evergreen. Inside, almost nothing remained but the rooms themselves, sanguine in their observational silence. The quiet knowing of emptiness, bare walls and floors, passive recipients of sun and shadow. And sound. Sounds stayed longer now. Subtle floor creeks and the songs of mockingbirds would linger and mingle, floating to the ceiling like an upward drift of snow white pollen. The lonely call of the train would stay in the empty rooms longest of all, a reverberation of eternity.

When his wife returned home, they greeted each other in a happy embrace. This trip had been too long and they had both been missing each other. The warmth in their hearts reached up to their eyes, their cheeks pressed, their lips kissed.

With a twinkle animating her sly smiling face, she said "I like what you've done with the place."

And with that, hand in hand they went back to the bedroom and like two red and yellow maple leaves having given up at last their hold to their tree, they fell gently together on the lone bare mattress left in the room. Facing each other side by side, their hands entwined between them, their foreheads almost touching, a passage opened between their minds and they shared a dream of being together, riding in their car on the road to Amarillo.