

Nana's Tree

The Japanese word for cherry tree, *sakura*, is sometimes synonymous with “flowers;” these trees are so important to this culture that their name can encompass all flowers. The wistful beauty of these trees is a symbol of *mono no aware*, or “the pathos of things,” which can be expressed as an awareness of the transience of life. The trees we see here in America are usually ornamental, of the variety that bear no fruit. Once a year, however, these cherry-less cherry trees burst into exuberant bloom, and their trunks are suddenly crowned with a brilliant explosion of pale pink flowers. Each blossom itself is rather small. The petals, light and membrane-thin are just barely attached to the deeper pink center, from which extend the pistil and stamens. Breaking with the color scheme of the rest of the flower, the anthers are dusted in a yellowish pollen that sometimes shakes off onto the petals themselves. When seen all together, though, these flowers captivate and dazzle one’s vision with their collective beauty. Sadly, their bloom is only brief. Within days, the frail pink petals begin to fall, and more and more of the stark branches show between the flowers.

A cherry tree grows in the front yard of my grandmother’s house in Long Island. When I was little, my parents and I would drive up from the city to visit her most weekends over the summer, and only slightly less frequently throughout the rest of the year. As we approached her house, I could recognize it by the sight of her cherry tree rising over the ivy-covered fence that separated her property from the road. I used to climb that tree at least once every visit.

She stands below me as I hoist myself upwards. I can’t help scraping my tiny hands on the bark that always seems to be bursting with knots and ridges, as if it had to be stretched out to fit around the trunk. In some places it is smooth; in other places cracks are spilling out little

bubblings of more tree. These sticky edges catch at the skin of my hands. I am only eight, and I keep climbing. I wind my arms around the only branch I can reach and walk my feet up the trunk. I swivel my whole body up to straddle the branch. Below, Nana claps for me, so freshly proud of me every time I reach a higher branch. I call down to her--I want her to climb up after me. I want to show her what it is like to be above the ground. But she won't come. Several months ago I made her chase me home from the library. She tripped over the curb of the sidewalk and fell, landing hard on her shoulder as I sprinted ahead. There was something very serious about the injury, something I didn't quite understand. It seemed to me she was someone who shouldn't fall. She now raises this same arm, with some difficulty, and motions me to keep climbing, an amused smile on her face.

I climb into the upper branches. I am swallowed into a cocoon of leaves and twigs that scratch at my face and hair and I can barely see the world outside through this veil of green. I catch one of the twigs in my hand, running my fingers over the strange little bumps that I know will become flowers--my way of foretelling the future. I hope that I will be here to see the tree bloom. A picture of me as a baby stands on Nana's coffee table: my father is holding me in front of the tree, and we are surrounded by a storm of swirling petals. My hand is outstretched, trying delightedly to catch one of them.

Eventually, I started high school, and decided I was grown too old for the cherry tree, if it is possible to outgrow nature. I preferred to sit inside and talk to my friends on the internet, sacrificing the flowers for a computer screen. My father often tried to convince me to go with

him to arboretums, or on simple walks by the ocean. I resisted. Nature would always be there, I thought.

As I grew away from nature, I grew away from my grandmother. She was becoming more fragile, and it disturbed me to see her increasing old age spilling out between her bouts of energy. Her faults began to outweigh what I loved about her. I no longer looked forward to our visits to her house, and once we arrived, I often couldn't wait to return to the city and to my network of friends.

One day in the early fall of my junior year, I sat in her living room, curled up on the couch. The air outside was warm. The sliding glass door to the porch was open, and I heard a fluttering. I looked to see a bright red cardinal land next to one of the lawn chairs. He ruffled his wings and cocked his head to the side, proudly stabbing his crest of feathers into the air around him. I knew that it was a male because Nana had taught me that the females were a dull brown, so that their nest would be less noticeable to predators. For most of my life, she and I pointed cardinals out to each other whenever we saw them. I almost called out to her now, but before I got the chance, he flew away. My parents and I left that afternoon.

That weekend was the last time I saw my grandmother. Perhaps it was natural, our growing apart as we aged, passing out of one cycle of living into a new one, just as the cherry tree gained and shed its flowers each year. But I am sorry I missed showing that last cardinal to her. I had always felt that she would be there forever, that there would be many more cardinals to show her. Realizing that bird could have been the last one she shared with me makes me feel an unfamiliar agony. Maybe, if I had been quicker, I would have some final moment of her to

hold on to. All I have now is her standing, waving from the front door as I put on my headphones.

We sold the house this past summer, but over spring break I got to see the cherry tree in bloom once more. Most of the flowers were gone, but some still clung to their branches. I wanted to climb it again before we left, so while my parents waited in the car I walked across the front lawn, trying not to step on the fallen petals. I stood by the trunk. Petals cascaded down around me. I was now head and shoulders taller than the lowest branch, and I easily swung myself onto it, trying to free myself of the concern I felt about ripping my clothing. I sat there for a few moments. I'm not sure what I expected. I tried to smell the pollen in the air, but the scent was so faint I could detect nothing. Finally, I pulled one of the blossoms from its branch, tucked it into my pocket, and climbed down. I gave the cracked and sap-stained trunk a little pat before walking away, feeling incomplete. After all, how do you say goodbye to a tree?