STONECOAST REVIEW

University of Southern Maine

Summer 2021
Issue No. 15

STONECOAST REVIEW

UNIVERSITY OF
SOUTHERN MAINE

SUMMER 2021

ISSUE NO. 15

Contents

Fiction

Drama

Poetry

Creative Nonfiction

Visual Art

Adam Sowards

Seeds

Our collective lives and times in the twenty-first century prime us to see doom, destruction, and decline as the basic condition of the world, an existential cul-de-sac shaped like a coronavirus, smelling like wildfire smoke, and sounding like a death knell. Yet life cycles. This essential revolution upends our sense of history as a timeline laid out like a one-way street taking us from past to future, birth to death, beyond the point of no return. The dirt path beneath my feet and the pine trees before my eyes reveal this vitality every time I slow to observe them. There, ends are no longer terminal but continuations, markers only of generations, the etymology of which is rooted in breeding, procreating, begetting.

This brings me to nature's reminder of renewal, the expectation of spring when autumn slows into winter. "I have great faith in a seed," Henry David Thoreau wrote in 1860. "Convince me that you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders." Thoreau's vision was expansive, even universal, for his words came from a scientific paper explaining the succession of trees. Mine is more personal, for mine sprouts from family. Wonder is not limited by scale.

After squeezing through the aisle amid kids' flailing arms and legs, I would spill out of the school bus and hurry down our long gravel driveway. Halfway to the house on many fall afternoons, my grandparents puttered in the garden and I would stop to help them. Granddaddy may have grown vegetables there, but I mostly recall flowers: the gladiolas he brought my mom on her birthday, which corresponded—magically every year it seemed to me—to when they first bloomed; the colorful strawflowers he dried and hung with twine in one of our outbuildings and later decorated cork boards with.

But the flowers I remember most were Sweet Williams. In my memory, as vivid as today's sun even though it happened nearly four decades ago, Granddaddy cut them near the ground and handed me the bunch. Following his careful instruction, I stuffed the brown stems into a paper bag and shook. Just weeks before, the flowers spoke in reds and purples and whites. Now desiccated, they released their tiny black seeds with a portentous rattling as they fell into the tan bag that normally would have held my sack lunch. *Cut / shake, cut / shake, cut / shake*. We repeated this rhythm until the rows were gone and we were ready for spring planting. It is the only time I have collected seeds, but Granddaddy sowed and gathered them throughout his life.

Granddaddy was raised on a cotton farm in the West Texas plains where the horizon never ends; taught school, including agriculture classes, thereabouts for a short time; and longed to farm himself. He moved his young family to Alaska in 1950 hoping for the opportunity to homestead in a place where that was still, improbably, an option. The Alaskan homestead never happened, and the family moved to Illinois, then to Tennessee, and finally to Washington state where the flower garden sat forty miles north of Seattle amid my parents' few dozen cattle, big hayfields, and grassy yards. Among my earliest memories are the flowers and bushes that filled the front and back yards of my grandparents' home, spaces that felt prickly with bark pathways instead of lawn and with decorative concrete blocks that formed short walls and ledges out back. Uncontained in this riotous garden was the kinnikinnick and its little red berries that dotted the branches that crawled toward open spaces.

I don't remember him planting a tree, but he did. From a seed. I learned about this tree, a ponderosa pine, when I was much older.

Although all my grandparents lived in my hometown, my cousins did not. One of them was born five days before me, making us especially close as children when our families gathered. Those occasions included raucous games of kick-the-can, chilling ghost stories, and daring Magic 8-Ball sessions late into the night. Until we entered high school, his family lived 300 miles away in a small Idaho college town where my uncle taught geography. About the time Granddaddy died, they moved to Oklahoma, a decision that

bewildered me. I paid little attention, though, because by then our families had become estranged for reasons my teen-aged self did not understand but only felt. That Idaho university rarely crossed my mind, until I was hired to teach history there in 2003, roughly fifteen years after they left.

Grandmother provided a nest egg that helped me buy my first house, a modest Cape Cod-style beyond the edge of the town's old historic district. The year I moved to Idaho she visited once. At 86, Grandmother came to revisit where her son's family had lived and to see how her grandson might make a place for his young family. During that visit, she told me the story of the tree.

This is how I remember it: Once, while visiting my uncle's family in Idaho, Granddaddy picked up a seed. He brought it home and planted it in a pot and carefully nurtured it. Against odds, the tree germinated and survived. The spindly thing grew despite differing climates in western Washington and northern Idaho. Granddaddy eventually returned it to Idaho where my uncle planted it in their yard on Seventh Street, the house I remember running around and hiding in what seemed like a small forest but probably were just bushes and a handful of trees. When my uncle left town for what seemed to be a better job, and what soon became a divorce, he dug up the tree and asked close friends to transplant it in their yard. A story of the seed came with it, so that the tree might be protected in its new habitat.

The story didn't pin itself to my memory when Grandmother told it. I had just started a new job that demanded time; I had a three-year-old daughter who deserved attention; I had a new community that drew my interest. I was overwhelmed. And I felt impatient with the story. It seemed possible that it contained partially accurate information at best. A family tree in this new town just another unlikely echo that sounded from my grandfather to me, through an uncle and cousin I no longer knew.

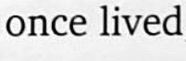
But distances collapse in the twenty-first century. The following fall, my cousin had learned I'd moved to his hometown and reached out from Scotland where he now lived. After we reconnected, I asked my mom to share this news with Grandmother. Meanwhile, my mom and her brother arranged to share Thanksgiving dinner, a reconciliation after almost two decades of mostly silence.

In her last years, Grandmother kept meticulous records. She constantly took photos—of people, centerpieces, hats, anything—

to keep track and order her days. She'd place them in notebooks organized by theme or by person, a form of record keeping inscrutable to others. When I received the Adam Family Tree three-ring binder, the printed-out email informing her that my cousin and I were corresponding had been dutifully placed at the back.

One morning, just before Thanksgiving, Grandmother opened the door to her condo; she may have felt shortness of breath and needed to let cool air in through the screen door. She sat down and her heart stopped, as peaceful a passing as one could hope for.

My uncle still joined my family that year for turkey, stuffing, butter rolls—and reconciliation. I have always thought that the news of these reunions between her children and grandchildren signaled to Grandmother that she could release her hold on life. She had been ready to join Granddaddy for years.



The Latin words that "coincidence" derives from mean "to fall upon together." Sometimes things do, I've learned; life cycles tightly in time and space. And while coincidences are often random, they are not inherently so. For me, residing in a small town where my mom's brother and his family once lived, for example, coincidences were inevitable.

Here are three about my neighborhood.

1. When I first started at the university, a professor who had won the previous year's campus teaching award spoke to all of us rookie faculty. A few weeks later, he sat in the audience as I presented research at a campus colloquium. Because my work connected to that of one of his graduate students, he sought me out, and we all met later for coffee. Nick was the first faculty contact I made outside my department, someone who took an interest in what I studied, welcoming me as a potentially valuable colleague.

2. The town operated a free bus that stopped a block from my house, next to a two-story brick home, which stood behind trees and hedges almost secretively. One morning as I waited for the bus, another neighbor joined me there, and we started talking. After I learned that she had been in town for decades, I asked, as I usually did in such encounters, if she knew my uncle's family. Debbie did; they were part of a regular dinner group.

3. The year after Grandmother died my daughter started

kindergarten. Most mornings, I walked her to school, a mile-and-a-half round trip jaunt that gave us time together dodging the fall leaves, winter snow, and spring rain. The route took us past the bus stop and brick house and down a short road still, incongruously, unpaved in the middle of town.

In my jumbled and overcrowded memory, I don't know when I learned that Nick lived in the brick house at the bus stop where I waited with Debbie and walked past with my daughter almost daily. I don't know when I learned that Nick's wife shared my daughter's name. I don't know when I learned that one of the trees in Nick's yard was the one Granddaddy had planted.

But I do know I learned it while my daughter still let me walk with her to school. I told her the story of the tree we passed, the tree from my past, the tree whose seed my granddaddy pressed in the soil, watered, watched closely, and nurtured to life. Somehow, out of all the possibilities in town, we ended up living one block away. She never knew Granddaddy and barely knew Grandmother, but their roots still grew nearby.

I sometimes make pilgrimages to the pine, driving down the streets of memory, trying to reckon with the past, mine and my family's. This family tree remains real, steady and sturdy and deep, a clarion worth heeding. So when I hear it, murmuring from within and sounding like nostalgia, I go.

The last time I went, I parked a block away, across the street from the old house I left a decade ago. I scrutinized the corner lot. The Siberian pea shrub hedge that I wrestled with for years was gone, a bright wooden fence giving shape to the backyard instead. The new owners had ripped out all but one of the sweetest-smelling roses I've ever known. The small serviceberry bush that I planted during a brief fit of native-plant gardening, wedging it into a minivan to take home from the nursery, now burst forth nearly as high as the house's roof. If I could somehow gain entry to the second-floor office where I worked so many hours, and where I slept during the last year of my marriage, I would now be able to look straight out into the branches rather than down on them.

The familiarity of the place felt strange, changed, and charged. The bitterness of the divorce that prompted me to leave that home

has faded during time's passage, only a faint acridity still hung there.

I climbed out of my car and walked one block east to Granddaddy's tree. The sidewalk took me past the neighbors' house, their unkempt garden, and a brown picket fence. The crisp autumn air and scuffing of my feet through the fallen leaves recalled those years when I walked my daughter to school. Compared with the old house's living ghosts, this familiarity felt comfortable. It fit, like my girl's hand in mine, walking along her path to the future.

The house with the tree sits on a corner of a busy street and a short, quiet one (now blacktopped). The tree is tall, much higher than the house, the product of thirty-plus years of stretching toward sunlight. But it's not even the highest tree in the yard. When I first learned of the tree's address, in fact, I thought it was the bigger, more prominent pine along the busy road instead of the more modest one next to the short street. Although tall, the tree is not thick yet, less than a foot in diameter. And as a juvenile ponderosa, it has yet to develop the jigsaw-like bark that age will bring. Its gray bark is only ridged, the red that will come forth later, popping bright on sunny days, is still hiding in the small cracks. The tree is still emerging, as are we all, the full height and breadth and shape decades away.

I took photos, feeling self-conscious, and hoped the neighbors wouldn't glimpse me and question the intentions of a lone man staring at a house, not realizing it was the tree that pulled at my attention, that what I was witnessing, what I was honoring, was the act of an ancestor.

"Are we being good ancestors?" That is the most important question, according to Jonas Salk, the American medical researcher who discovered a polio vaccine. As I age, as our children fledge, as my parents tiptoe to and beyond the threshold of American life expectancy, Salk's question sits heavily in the air, like smoke when the forests burn every summer. But being a good ancestor is seldom simple.

Our collective ancestors pursued the good life, seeking prosperity and ease for us, but eroded the planet's ability to support life and stunted our great inheritance. Granddaddy pursued a good life for his family, which took him away from home often and moved

his family every few years for more opportunities and greater security. My mom suffered from such mobility yet also told me that Granddaddy taught her about unconditional love. She learned resilience, a necessary trait for people and nature to adapt to rough changes.

In a bumpy, potholed world, we long for stability, a steadiness that might anchor us, that can root us in place, in family, in love. We seek steadfastness. But the ground beneath us shifts, sometimes abruptly like a landslide or earthquake and sometimes in the slow disintegration of divorce and cancer.

After four decades I can summon the smell of charred sweetness from the tobacco Granddaddy lit in his pipe and from the match he allowed me to blow out when I was little. In his last years, living with an arrhythmic heart and lung cancer, my grandmother kept his slightly long fingernails neatly trimmed and filed in an act of care I've never forgotten. I still see those hands, pressing into the dirt, planting seeds with faith in their futures.

When we moved to the house where I write these words and made a new home, my wife Kelley planted kinnikinnick in our garden to honor these memories. I think of Granddaddy whenever I see the berries and the spreading branches that drape over our own concrete blocks that form a wall in our backyard. I'm learning how to collect seeds, plant hope, and know that few ends are final. ❖