

I was once young and flexible, bending and swaying in time with the rhythm of the wind. But as I've grown, I am less so; less susceptible to the vagaries of weather. I don't bend and dance in the same way now because I don't need to. My roots are spread far and wide and they anchor me to the earth deep below. I have no fear of weather; I am immovable against wind, oblivious to rain and I shake off snow with a just shudder of my branches. I am food for insects and shelter for the wildlife and the people who live around me. I feel as permanent as the earth but although I've been here for many years and have watched the world changing all the time, I can't think of another time that I feared as much from change as I do now. All of the things I remember are tightly wound inside of me, each layer down to my core forever marked by the memories. Memories so old and plentiful that they flash past like a glimpse.

The earliest memories are of a field topped with wide open never-ending skies and the ground that stretched out below me was carpeted with yellow wheat, rippling in the breeze. Farming families worked hard in this field to bring that wheat to life, the ground broken by the trudging beasts and seeds scattered by hand. During the warm golden days of autumn when they harvested with those animals and bent low in the heat to bind the wheat into stacks, they would break to eat and talk and then sleep with their hats on their faces beneath the shade of my branches.

With the field bare after the harvest, I stood alone throughout the hard-white days of winter when the shadows were short and my people rested and waited for the sun's warmth to return. But they gathered on the shortest day in small groups around me to give thanks to whoever they believed in and to ask for another good year. Then they would break the life-sustaining bread made from the wheat they had toiled to grow and raise toasts together with strong drinks, pouring some on the ground in a gesture of sharing with me. The mistletoe that flourished and dressed my brittle winter-bare branches adorned their winter festivities, while music and laughter accompanied the sneaking of shy kisses underneath it. Giving thanks with them, I stretched my branches above their heads like a hug to hold them to me and using the wide trunk of my body I sheltered them from the cold.

When the earth had completed another rotation in space and the sun returned and gave vibrant green life to my leaves again, young couples married in my shadow, my branches decorated with flowers and ribbons. The pollen from my own brief blooms drifted and twinkled in the shafts of sunlight while small songbirds called out in celebration. Acorns as symbols were woven through the headdress of the bride and my branches were carried with the wildflowers in the bouquet she clutched to her. Friends, family, and onlookers came to watch as they promised their love to each other and with a feast cooking on the fire nearby, musicians played late into the night and the lovers danced by candlelight. With the bats and the owl for company I watched from above, my branches dancing gently in time to the music and the crackling fire.

Time moves on, as is its way. The animals harvesting the fields became machines, noisy and smoking and rudimentary in comparison to those today, but nonetheless doing the work so much quicker. Large, dark buildings appeared on the horizon, with smokestacks that coughed their pollution into the skies ceaselessly. My villagers wrung their hands and cried as their children grew and left to work in those factories. While I grew stronger and wider with each change of season, the field became smaller and smaller and it was merely the blink of an eye before those industrial buildings on the horizon were upon us, the cottages and gardens of the nearby village replaced with long red rows of tightly packed houses. The streets outside were full of playing children and dogs, hunched work-weary men, and tired women with hands raw from never ending washing and cleaning.

I was enclosed then by a low fence and a new road ran nearby, the vehicles making a vibration that I felt throughout my roots and their fumes dirtied the walls of the red rows of houses. This road didn't stop the wild animals coming to me for shelter though. The ever-observant owl was still resident, a descendent of the same one that watched over the villagers all those years ago. Insects made their home in the knots of my outer bark and tiny rodents spent the winters deep in my dark mossy roots. Small birds huddled together during the worst of weather, knowing they were safe because I would never fall. Once, a rope swing was tied to my strongest branch with a tyre secured to the end. The children from the nearby terraces would compete amongst themselves to swing the highest and others would scramble through my branches to see who was brave enough to jump down, encouraged by the whooping of their friends. The less rambunctious among them would sometimes tuck themselves into a fork in the branches and sit quietly out of view, sometimes in contemplation, sometimes whispering their secrets to me. I remained still and watchful as these children grew, but eventually they left like all the children who came before them.

This is how it has been throughout all the years that I've stood here. The changes are consistent, they mark out the evolutions that take place as time passes. But the most recent changes are different, there is something sinister, something final in the air. Tall fences with advertising tarpaulins attached have been set up all around me and as far as I can see. The people in the terraced houses have been leaving slowly and the streets are quiet because nobody comes to replace them. Men in hard hats and dirty boots come to look at me, holding clipboards and talking matter-of-factly about me. I am measured and marks are spray-painted onto my trunk, what they mean I do not know. The wind makes the tarpaulins flap against the fence and the relentless noise sends the birds fleeing. The owl has long-since taken up residence further away and the rodents and insects left me long ago too, their food gone when the fields and nearby hedgerows gave way to buildings and relentless traffic.

Men wearing hard hats and driving large vehicles arrive one day. They gather to point and examine me, with one obviously in charge giving instructions to the others. Another man breaks away from the group while the rest retreat to the vehicles they arrived in. He returns to me wearing goggles and carrying the dreaded machine. The sound of the chainsaw fills the air, its diesel fumes blue and strong-smelling. Everyone watches as the malicious spinning teeth are held to the marks that were made on my trunk and as the chainsaw starts to cut through my layers of lives past, I know that this is the end for me. All of the changes I've witnessed, all of the development I have stood and watched over and now I'm in the way of it, I am no longer required. The exertion of felling me is showing and the man with the chainsaw needs to push hard, but he persists, encouraged by those watching on. The chainsaw has reached my core now, my very beginning, and I feel movement in a way I've never felt before. I am struggling to hold myself steady, but I try to stay tall against the gravity that now wants to pull me down. The man holding the chainsaw is red-faced and breathing hard now, my size almost defeating him, but he doesn't stop. The teeth keep cutting and I finally reach my breaking point. He knows it too because there is a crack like thunder, it's so loud that he stops the saw and retreats quickly. My last seconds seem to move slowly, I think for an elated moment that perhaps it won't happen, but then the sky moves sideways and my great trunk cries out in screams as the ground rushes up to my branches and I am gone.