

On the Absence of Trees

How could I blame you, dear father?

Your father leaving you when
you were just fifteen.

I think about
this when pondering
my own adolescence:

hours spent
waiting in waiting
rooms just waiting to
be seen,

seen surrounded by
outdated sports
magazines with
illustrations of what
it takes to be a champion.

When I stop and think of grandad, all I recollect are nicotine-licked fingertips pressed against a plastic Camel filter.

Tar scarred lungs drag out time into an anthracitic laughter.

Sometimes, I envision the enkindled mass of his half-lit cigarette drops and turns to dander on the collar of his sky-blue striped polo.

(I saw him wear it in a picture that you kept in a shoeshine box made of cedar on the top shelf of the closet in your home office...)

And sometimes, I listen to the western wind that sweeps across the prairie where I live and call to mind the only day he visited the house that I grew up in.

It was summer.

I was much younger.

Could such wind, now older, have swept that cinder off his shirt and sent it eastward to where his ancestors once lived before some of them came to America in the late nineteenth century and settled in the Ohio River valley?

Or would that orphaned ash combust as when a nebula begets a lutescent star or kills it?

I don't know.

Maybe nothing happens.

Because of this,
I wonder what it
must have been
like for him when
as an infant his
father left him
without food or
shelter. And how
he would come to
find a home with
families surnamed
Steele and Roberts:
proper sounds,
adopted, reek of
something taken.

(and pinned to the
portrait was a
medal he earned for
serving during the
late spring of
1944.
Underneath the
picture were a few
loose papers that
mentioned factories in
Pennsylvania and a
mother. First
name: unknown. Last
name: sounding
foreign...)

Still, I hold onto the
story that he told
me one early
afternoon as we
sat on the front
stoop below your
bedroom window.
He said it was
because he had flat
feet, as I do, that he
petitioned to be an
army doctor. Though
years later when I
retold the tale, you
said it was not true.

And now when I look
back at the shameful
glance that I would
cast toward my worn
sneakers as the medical
specialist examined
me for signs of puberty
though I was not born
to be a man, and that
I wished you would
comfort me after it was
over, I stop and think
how your father's
past could cut
you in two pieces.

And now I know
we could not face
what we could not
handle. I believe it
is for this reason that
you told me of the
persimmon tree and how
it made for the finest
fairway woods and
drivers. On my fifteenth
birthday you handed
me a rusted club made
from its resistant timbre.
A gift from your late father
now for me to carry.

And now each autumn
evening, as the eastern wind
bellows through the cedar
deck behind my home,
I sit in a wrought iron
chair and admire the razor
straight horizon. Neither
leaf nor branch interrupts
the monarch sky as it
departs into the majesty
of twilight. Then I consider
the persimmon tree and
how it often produces
fruit that's too astringent
to consume all on its own.

At the end of each winter, farmers set fire to the fields behind my house.

the wind...)

(as the wind,

The first time I saw that dirt burn, I thought I heard a young boy screaming.

But I don't know.

happened.)

(maybe nothing