

## 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outdated sports  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