

On Trees and the Body: a Lament

Her rings tell an old story
in layers of cellulose
added one year at a time
over hundreds of years.

The memories live in her cells
and those of her stately sisters
passed on
over and over
through meiosis;
each cell division reflecting
the division in the surrounds.

Echoes drift through
the shawl of Spanish moss
draped over her shapely arms
stirring memories from
her Georgia mind.

Though years of rains have
washed away the stains
whispers still travel
underground
through the mycelium
maintaining the message:
You're not safe here.

Trauma lives in the body.

Not just in the bodies of trees
for in the lifetime of these
three men swung from their branches;
"strange fruit" not grown
but placed by mobs of 100 and 300
enraged white men
(women and children, too)
in a festival atmosphere
with picnics
under the shade of the same trees
that held victims aloft.

Trauma lives in the body.

It's in our national DNA
Replicated in our RNA rhetoric
Unzipping and zipping to take
the messages of domination
and terror and fear
year upon year
and transporting them for replication
in our bodies
generation after generation
passed down from grieving mother
to grieving mother
to frightened son
and wary daughter.

We replicate hate from these building blocks
from the auction block
to the block knocked out from under to
running around the block.

From a man running through a field or swamp to a
man running in a neighborhood
and a trio gunning
and recording
and ending
a life
at the roots of the live oaks in Georgia
that knew his ancestors.

Trauma lives in the body.

From the gallows in the oaks
and in a Paris, Texas field to
a pickup truck bed in Georgia
to an asphalt street in Minneapolis
to the visually screaming threat of a
hastily-constructed gallows at the Capitol
this year.

THIS year.

Those who say lynch law
was only in history
fail to see
what is right before them—
a mystery of selective blindness.

From the White House
past the sycamore
dedicated to Emmett Till
on the Capitol grounds they marched
dragging decades of white grievance
flying flags of fear with
symbols and slogans of supremacy
to uphold the status quo.

The images ignite cellular memory.

Trampling hopes for decency
and the grounds designed by
Frederick Law Olmstead (with
trees aligned to show the Capitol
only in its best light
and hide the unsightly)
less than three miles from
where another Frederick penned
a letter to a friend, Ida B.
the Brave Woman who
called for an end
to the Southern Horrors
trying to document
these atrocities,
monstrosities of
justice rebuked.
To #saytheirnames.

Yet still,
there is fresh blood at the root of the trees.

How will we break
this train of transmission
this chain of fools
is it foolish to hope
something can reveal—
can purge these alleles—
that make us unfeel the
suffering of fellow humans?

To take another's breath away
is to defy the Giver
who grieves in moans
like the creaking of branches
too long burdened unnaturally;
arms should be cradling,
not killing.

Trees can relieve with their shade
with branches made for good fruit,
branches made for squirrels,
and nests, and climbing
and beauty and majesty
and raising their hands in praise
to the Maker.

Trees that have weathered
the storms of hundreds of years
bear the marks of whether
they bore life or
were used to deal death.

Trauma lives in the body.

And we who have weathered
generations
a nation steeped in violence
and oppression
bear these marks in our souls
whether our hue is
of oppressor or oppressed
we are all less
than the fullness
that God crafted us to be.

Lord, have mercy.

Lynching makes a mockery of tree and body;
Hatred makes a mockery of humanity.