

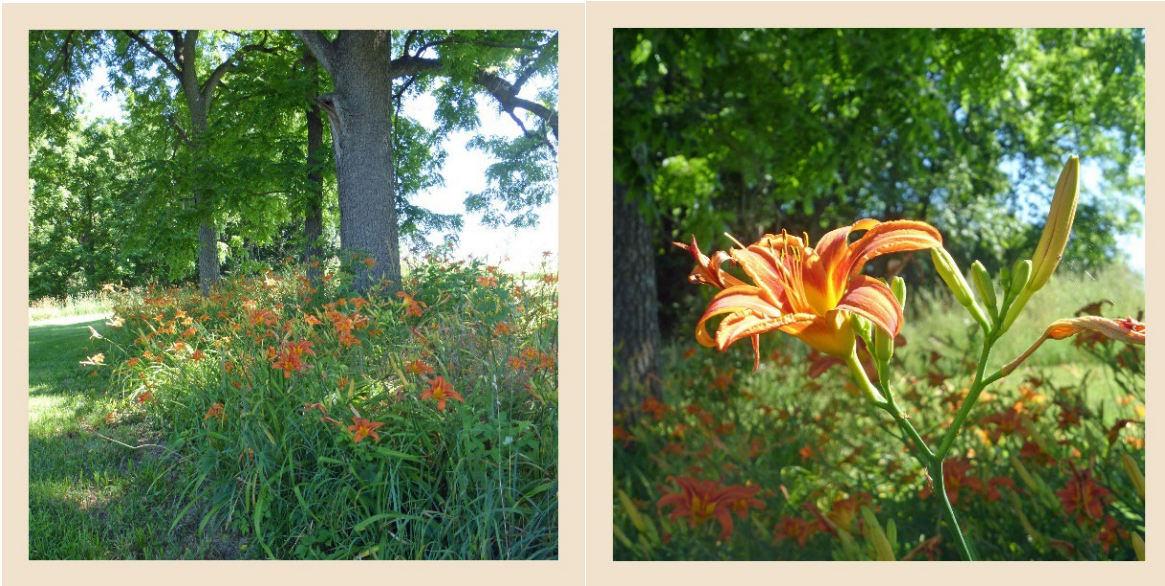
Tree Memories



Some old trees stand as markers in a life. For as long as I have lived, these three black walnuts have stood here with a bed of lilies at their feet. Their descendants have planted themselves everywhere, every age and size, all over this farm at the edges of woods, in ravines, by fence and fields, wherever there is space for a new black walnut tree.

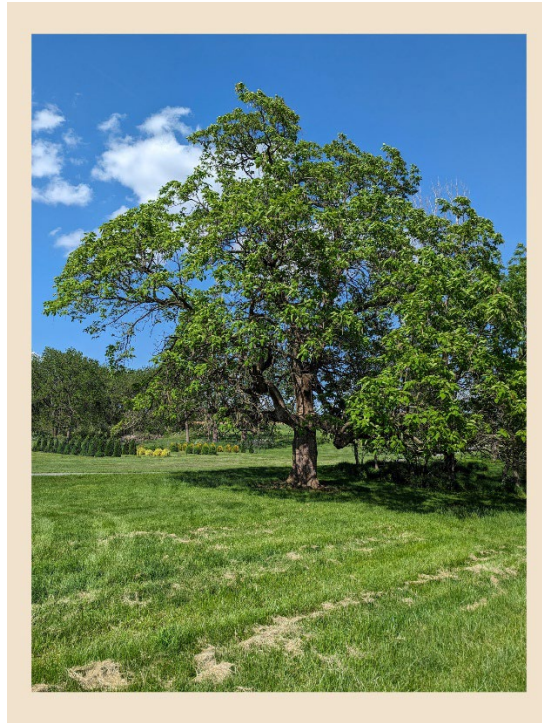


The ancestral three look upon the nursery now, witnesses of other times.



I think of the lilies as my mother's because they were important to her, though she did not plant them, they date back to the old times here, like the trees. Every year we watch for them to bloom, because she did; they used to bloom every year at the 4th of July, now around the third week of June.

In her last summer—we knew, she knew, it was her last summer, her cancer was well advanced—she came to see the lilies one last time. The day was hot, I waited for her by the shed. When she came, she took my arm, and we walked slowly in the heat of the sun to the shade of the walnuts and the lilies. If we said anything I don't remember it now. We stood there for a few minutes with the lilies, I don't think she spoke, we just gazed at them, taking them as memory, and that was all. You could see she was in pain, the few minutes of seeing the lilies were all she came for. I walked her to her car and she left, back to town, and she never returned. I don't know what her thoughts were, but I also know, one day I will.



The old catalpa goes back long before our time. It was planted in the front yard of the original farmhouse here. Likely the people who planted the black walnuts and the other ancestral trees on the farm planted the catalpa too, in the 1920s or 30s, I'd guess. Wandering over this place as a boy, it seemed, we make our marks by what we plant.



The catalpa leafs out late every spring and every spring I worry till it comes back. I know it is getting late in its life but its descendants are many and everywhere here. Even so, I hope I never see it dead, I wish for this old catalpa to be here longer than me.



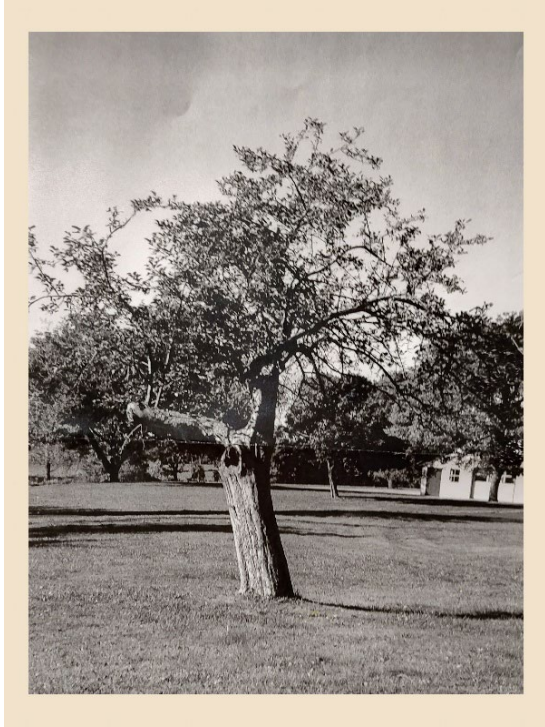
I hope some kid will make swords and fight duels with the seed pods someday, like every kid who's ever been here, just like I did. Some things should be.



There was an apple orchard in the area west of the black walnuts, weathered and gnarled old trees, and almost all were removed after the first chickenhouse went up in 1953.

By 1961 only one old tree remained out there, and it marked the limit of my ball field, where I played solitary baseball games between two imaginary teams. Home plate was about 200 feet from that apple tree, and a ball that landed beyond it—as far as I could hit—was a home run.

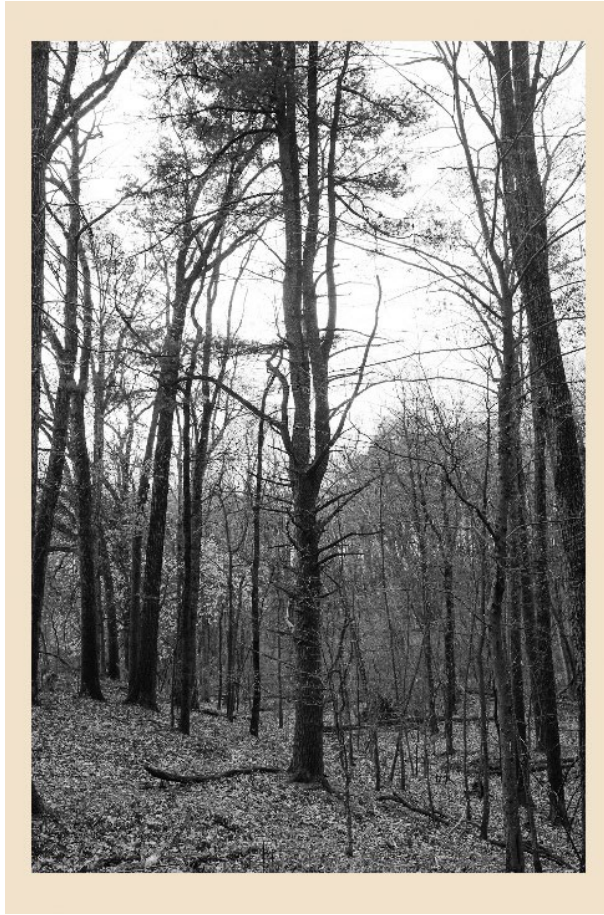
I played a lot of games on that field. Two teams, each player with individual skills, and I did judge outcomes fairly depending on what I hit. From the chickenhouse came an ongoing murmur from the crowd ... a ball that landed on the roof added some commotion now and then. Afterward I made boxscores of the games. This was baseball for me.



The last old apple tree hung onto life for years, decaying slowly, home for snakes, feeding birds and the critters who took the few remaining apples. Even when it was only an empty shell, we left it to stand as long as it could, couldn't remove it, it was like a memorial, stooped and frail, an elder at its end.



Nursery shrubs now grow where that tree once stood. But if I stand where my home plate was, I still see my ballfield, and the apple tree, and the beyond where my home runs landed, although, truth is, I couldn't hit a ball that far now.



A few yards from here, there used to be an old chicken coop, set there by my father so it overlooked the ravine, to be a place for us kids. Shaky old thing, same red as the barn, two glassless windows toward the ravine below.

He would put me here when I started to hunt deer. In the cold autumn dawns I was assigned to sit in the coop with the .32 Winchester; if a buck came down the ravine, I'd have a shot. He allowed me one bullet—if you know what you're doing, he said, you'll only need one. Even then I was aware how wise that was. After he had seen me settled, he'd go off with his .308 and take his stand somewhere else, not too far, not too near.

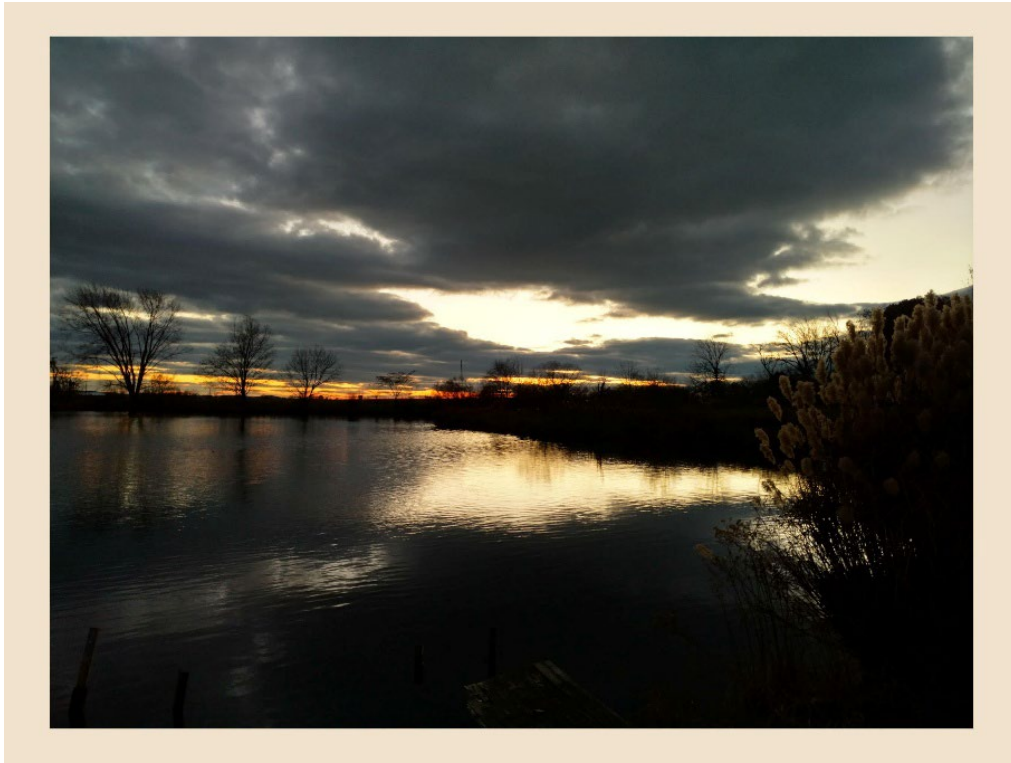
The coop is gone, but this ancient pine is here, and the fitful stream still flows or trickles down in the ravine according to its season, the deer are still following it too, gray woods in autumn dawns, toward the wild cold thickets where they shelter, not too far, not too near.



In the early 1950s, just a few small trees were beside the pond but by the 1960s, big weeping willows ringed it, their long strands dangling low over the water, so that the pond was shadowed and dark, its banks soft and its depths hidden, and to a boy a little mysterious always. For awhile there was an idea that you could grab some willow strands and swing out over the water and then swing back like Tarzan, but this theory proved to be incorrect. These old willows all died or were cleared later on as a new dam was put in and the big pond was built too.



This pond is so vivid in concentration, life feeding, life fed upon, life breeding, life traveling on. You see little visions all through the year; the tadpoles wriggling in the cool shallows of May; deer wading on the hot summer days, they dunk their heads and necks, come up dripping, cooling off; all day the swallows diving, swerving, picking off bugs above the water; the egrets that roost on a row of catalpas in September evenings and after a few days you can see their white droppings on the green of the leaves below; the cat at the bank to drink, how he crouches warily like a tiny lion at the water hole. In the winter, tracks across the ice; red and frozen remains of a kill, dragged across the snow, spread through the cold meadow grass; sometimes we've found a skull and a nice rack of antlers. Life is about getting through the winter, said my father once. A raft was in the mud at the bank to make a sort of dock. Turtles warm on it, herons stand on it, geese. We stand on it too, look out over the water, see if there's a muskrat to spot, or a mink, a kingfisher, an osprey.



If I could have only one last moment here, I think I would want a November sunset, where the last light glows behind the old bare trees lined up to the west, the light and the trees that have not changed for as long as I have been here to look at them, and it is good to remember, in this moment, that none of these things are ours.