

Butterflies Traveling a Lonely Road

By Andrew Smith

Trees are places of origin, places where our myths begin. Many cultures and religions trace their beginnings to a sacred tree. The most familiar example of this is Adam and Eve, who began in a garden, where grew the Tree of Life. But this same sacred tree is represented throughout the world in countless stories and tales. They seem to say, “We came from the trees.”

If you prefer science to myth, you can trace our lineage back almost 4 million years, when a small, tree-dwelling primate left the forest behind and began to explore the open savannahs of Africa. This frail ancestor of ours also puts our genesis in the forest. They are very old bones, but they seem to say, “we came from the trees.”

When I was a kid, back in Ohio, we had a red maple in our back yard. It was not an exceptional tree, 50 or 60 feet tall, maybe 25 inches in diameter. It turned bright red in the fall.

That tree was sort of “Boy Headquarters” for my brothers and I. The dog was tied back there. A tire swing hung from a sturdy branch, and the limbs were spaced to make for easy climbing. It was far enough from the house to keep us out of that trouble, and close enough to the creek to get us into that trouble. We climbed, carved on it, and generally hung around back there when there was nothing else to do.

We used to take turns winding each other up in the tire swing and then letting the thing spin itself out, all the way down to the ground, until it started to wind back up again. Then we’d fall out of the swing and laugh hilariously at our inability to stand up while the world spun like a top around us. I suppose it shows just how old and jaded I really am, that I don’t enjoy a good bout of dizziness like I used to.

And the cats, when we could catch them, liked to go for a spin in the tire swing too. We’d twist the rope until the tire was up over our heads, and then drop the cats in the hollow of the tire and let the thing unwind. The cats loved it so much that after the tire had finally stopped spinning they’d just lay there in a jelly-eyed trance, like cat puddles in the bottom of the swing. But eventually they’d ooze over the rim of the tire and drip helplessly to the ground. So we knew they enjoyed the ride as much as we did.

And one year, the butterflies came to our tree. It was in the fall, and we were having a cookout in the yard. My grandparents were there. I was bored, so I snuck off to see if I could fall in the creek, or run a fishhook through my thumb, or catch a frog. When I went in the backyard I noticed the maple tree was shimmering.

It took me a minute to see what it was, because they were almost the same color as the autumn maple foliage. Our tree was covered in thousands, or maybe tens of thousands, of orange and black Monarch butterflies. On every branch and every leaf butterflies fluttered. And more came, floating through the air, dropping from the sky, and landing on our tree; until it was a maple tree no longer, but a reborn thing, a butterfly tree.

To the nine-year-old boy that I was, that tree was like a proof that magic existed in the world. To wake up in the morning and know that today could be entirely different than any day that came before –that is the essence of a miracle. Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy seemed like shallow cartoons compared with this real, potent magic. Magic from a butterfly's wings.

Parents and neighbors came to see the tree. The old man who lived across the pasture said the butterflies were migrating. They went thousands of miles every year, he said, to some mountains. Once every few years they would stop on that particular tree to rest. Nobody knew why. There were bigger trees in our yard, but they liked that one. I understood why. My brothers and I liked it too.

In the morning the butterflies were gone. I haven't thought about them in years and years. They were as common as mosquitoes when I was a boy, and on any summer day you could find them floating between Queen Anne's Lace and Timothy grass, in backyards, and along stream banks. They were everything we meant when we said, "butterfly."

I just read that Monarchs are, possibly, heading for extinction. The mountain forests where they winter in Mexico are being over-cut, and the resulting loss of habitat could drive the species out of existence.

The news stabs like a hot poker through the memories of my boyhood, through the myths and dreams of my own existence. I trace my origins back to a tree. It's a tree with a tire swing, where kids play and dogs bark. It's a butterfly tree.

So this one is for the butterflies, for the magic they brought me when I was a boy. And the hope that they may always fly.