

A Last Custard Cup

by Sydney Lea

The cup was never used for custard; it held my father's coffee or a drink he made for us children, one he called milk punch. The cup may be made of terra cotta, but it would make too facile a metaphor for fragility; of the original set, it's the one to have survived. What I really recall anyhow is the gentle hand that warmed the milk, added the vanilla, sprinkled the nutmeg. Its simple gestures seem golden now.

And if I want a figure for fragility, that's easy enough. I remember following a game trail a few Marches back, for instance, my first hike after two knee replacements. I meant it to be easy, but a winter gale had laid tree after tree across the track. I'd be out longer than I'd planned, but that seemed fine to me. I thought of all the animals that had depended on the trail for pursuit or escape or mere travel. Fragility everywhere.

My father has been gone sixty years, and his cabin in the woods belongs to others. To think of his early death is still to grieve; but I was brooding on more recent loss as I walked the ridge that morning: My friend David, champion wrestler and marathoner, had been buried a week. I smiled to recall his goofy wit and his typical, frumpy attire, as drab as this cup. No need for adornment if you look like David.

But I have reason to offer cheerful testimony too: Unlike my late friend, I could keep moving that late-winter day, inspecting each tree before I grabbed it for a handhold on the snow- and lichen-coated downslope, making sure a rotted trunk wouldn't break and send me cartwheeling. I could still dream up strategy, and my body could still do its best to obey it.

I recall being confused by how many dead trees remained upright after a big blow that winter while so many live ones had fallen. I soon speculated that it was a matter of simple physics. Even leafless, the oaks and red maples were far more top-heavy than the limbless and boughless dead trees. The wind had found more to shove at on the live deciduous trees, and of course the conifers had all their needles. Again, I resist glib

analogy, such as my own enduring like those rotting standing trunks, and David's perishing like the sounder ones. Besides, I'd just had two limbs restored back then, not destroyed, so the scheme wouldn't bear inspection anyhow.

Dad's milk punch showed his kindness, but its memory also brings back the morning yammer of crows, which heralded our day of dapping for sunfish or swimming amid the lazy twang of frogs at pond's edge or, come dark, playing capture the flag as cicadas and katydids trilled.

I pour the joy of those memories into the cup, and I mix it with bluets now abloom in our meadow, warblers among the sumacs this morning, last night's banter of owls, and the wails of northbound geese crossing a big moon. These are common in New England's late winter to the point of cliché, but they never grow tiresome, any more than autumn's asters, winter's hop hornbeam florets, the sound of my snowshoes' crunch on crust. I add the affection of David and others, especially my wife, our children and grandchildren. I'll drink up all I can, not just vanished things but the bounty still poured on me too. To my astonishment, I'm eighty-three; I might have died well before scribbling any of this, which I suppose makes of these reveries a survival narrative, at least in part.

Moments back, amid radiant petals sifting from our blooming crab in a mild breeze, a fox peeked out. Its bright fur reminded me of those storm-rent orange boles on the ridge that old March morning, each flaming in death, each shining on its way to forever.



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