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THE COTTONWOOD BRANCH

by

Shane Peterson

Last summer, I was sitting by a pond on a hill, reading about warfare. I heard some crackling that sounded like fireworks. At first I thought it was thunder or an explosion, until I saw a large branch from a cottonwood tree slowly rip itself off its trunk and crash into the foliage below. The sound of the impact was so loud that the ducks from another pond on the other side of a nearby stream started shrieking and fleeing, their whole world having been shaken and terrorized by an ungodly force they could neither see nor understand. It might as well had been a bomb that fell from the sky. The falling branch caused a much slimmer tree standing next to the cottonwood to collapse soon after. This second fall sounded as an echo of the first, merely rustling through the other branches during its descent.

I set my book aside and headed down the hill through the bramble of trees to investigate and saw the splintered stump on the trunk where the branch used to be. Perhaps it fell due to the weight, having grown too large and too thick to hold onto the trunk. It was the size of a small tree, smothering everything beneath it. One large

stem stuck into the dirt like a knife in a wound. Leaves and twigs were scattered everywhere like the shrapnel from a cannon blast.

I felt the wood beneath the bark at the broken end of the branch, which stuck out like a compound fracture. It wasn't hard and dry as I expected wood to feel; it was succulent and soft like the inside of a melon. It felt like flesh. I realized then that the branch, like the tree, used to be alive. Water ran beneath its bark like blood and trickled from the wound. I had just been reading about how wounded soldiers with detached limbs often think that the limb is still there. It made me wonder if the old tree was conscious of one of its members breaking off, and if it had felt anything akin to pain.

I hiked back up the hill as the dust began to settle and the birds began to quiet down. Peace had been restored. The water in the stream kept flowing and nature kept cycling as if nothing had happened at all.