Every Living Thing
John Michael Cummings

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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol20/iss1/4

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The windstorm, sneaking into town after dinner and blindsiding century-old oaks and elms and maples, both upset and exhilarated Anne Thompson and her husband. Its torrid August bluster had miraculously spared the skinny white poplars stuck in the corners of their yard, but the uprooted and defoliated dogwoods around them became an impressive ring of wreckage, bringing TV vans and cameras into their neighborhood. Except for pieces of bayberry shrubs, blown to the edge of the grass and tinted with a silvery afterglow of life, their property had altogether missed damage from a waterless thunderstorm now balling itself into a mini hurricane just south of Cape Cod. Parents and siblings and friends had called, excited to chat with the celebrities in the Parkwood Hills neighborhood, the hardest hit, mentioned on every channel.

They had bought their rich blue cross-gabled Craftsman house last year in time for the July family reunion (headquartered at her mother’s but broken into excursions to wherever daughters and sons had made their lives). So the house, unhurt by the storm, gained another notch of family standing; it proved invincible, a true Thompson. At the reunion, Uncle Gary, barely recognizable from private grief befallen him by his latest divorce, had rocked on the porch swing most of the evening, saying the view down the street of sharp-shadowed Victorians reminded him of Jean’s hometown in upper Vermont. Luckily, the swing, while tossed like a dinghy during the storm, had not gouged the recent coat of Mediterranean blue.

“... but we’re fine,” Anne and Michael gaily informed their callers, the evening of the storm rounding midnight, flavored with the salubrious tang of a holiday weekend.

After work the next day—eight hours passing so quickly with the distraction of excited wind-swept coworkers and clients—the couple went walking through the neighborhood to survey the downed trees, still being limbed and sectioned and hauled along the side streets.

“Oh, look at that one,” Anne moaned, her voice rising with a hint of girlish thrill. “What a shame.”

In a grove of patchy evergreens along the unlined road ahead of them, a tall slender pine stood broken at its center, its upper half resting trustingly against the shouldering tree nearby; the arrangement, to her alerted feminine faculties, resembled someone catching an ailing friend, so that this vignette of the aftermath gave the storm a ruthless and indiscriminate nature—striking randomly, leaving a senseless and untraceable path of dying trees.

“It was the tallest of them,” her husband consoled, his face lifted to the sky. The opened wood at the break flashed as a fresh blazing wound, shiny and smooth and colored like wheat glossed by
wind. As they walked closer, around dusty orange pylons and backhoes parked for the night, he pointed to where the halved tree, while falling, had sheered a ladder of sizeable branches from the shouldering tree, the force of friction raking away strips of bark. "It'll probably die, too," he announced with grim fascination.

The skinned bark had bunched in the notch, where the upper half of the broken tree had wedged itself, and the late evening sunlight penetrated the fibrous dangling sheaths, as pink as steamed skin.

"You think so," his wife chimed, aroused by his lustrous tone promising death. "What a shame."

On the street paralleling theirs lay a dusting of green leaves, some lying faceup, as almond-shaped spots of dark jade, others prone, the undersides tinted with a silvery-lemon hue—the phosphorous pulse of death—so that the street looked like a papery green mosaic. Anne wondered if someone would sweep the street or if the mess would rot there for months, into winter. But at the end of the street, where the view of houses on the perpendicular avenue widened and brightened, her discovering the enormous elm lying like a dinosaur between two snobbish stately Tudors filled her with the stimulating shivers of deep satisfaction, of benefiting from the misfortune of others—these prominent old-timers on this street, so rich and dainty and distant. Since moving here she had envied them; now she snickered at their misfortune. The pipeline-sized body of the elm rested thunderously on the soft lawn, the flung branches impaling the treated earth, the limbs and leaves scattered yards away, a fresh jagged fissure of bright wood at the base, the ground cluttered with shredded and flaky debris from when the trunk had obliterated under strain. Like a rock wall, the hard textural body of the elm had embedded itself into the ground—tons of hardwood landing!

"Wow!" they said more than once, timidly approaching the disaster area, eying the monstrous reptile slam between the homes.
“That’s terrible,” she continued. “How will they ever get it out?” The tip of the elm, its limbs retracted like those on a wrapped Christmas tree, had reached a picket fence on the far side of the upper lawn, and as they moseyed toward another side street, she hoped this gigantic slug of a tree had crushed the so-precious so-elegant fence, rolling across the lawn of the estate. “They’re lucky it didn’t hit their house,” she added.

Their curiosity pulled them into town, past the hospital, the library, the police station, and each intersecting street served as a channel in a maze where they followed the thrilling displays of destruction—the felled oaks taking with them a stone wall laid a century or two ago; the savagely up-lifted beeches, removed from the ground below the roots and leaving gaping holes in yards; and the smaller limbs stacked alongside the road, amputated in the high winds. Bright sores from where the storm had dismembered limbs dotted the high trees, a few left with sharp curled splinters for arms. Cleanup had begun in places, exposing sides of buildings and views of yards the way a close haircut deceptively alters the proportions of a face. But the damage had mortalized and injured what had loomed for decades as organic statues thinning and filling every other season. The trees around them had been quietly alive.

Walking faster than he, she earnestly absorbed the degrees of harm, guessing in thousand-dollar increments the compensation each conquered tree had caused—one clipping as it fell a span of molded cornice on an apartment house, knocking away several dentils like a fist against teeth. But the thrills were subsiding, both in ravig and in number, and her feet, landing in shallow sailing sneakers, hurt. The streets, like an escapist movie, grated their eyes with a systematic visual pounding. So when they happened upon the town park, thinned of foliage as in winter, the large sawed-off trunk stubbed before them like a fantasyland mushroom revived her awe of this kind of death.

“That poor old tree!” she cried, running toward the moist gleaming disc, the size of a tractor tire. The surgical surface captivated her; she stroked the pattern of concentric white rings, her index finger tracing the bands inward, her face lit with marvel. “Smell that?” she inquired, breathing in the fragrance smoking invisibly from the wound. Her hand cupped, she swept handfuls of sawdust onto the grass—grass masked in places with a bone-white paste of wood chips spewed from a chain saw yesterday and made doughy overnight by dew.

Her dim-eyed husband looked tired, bored, reluctant, slowed by his weight, ready to go home. “Yeah, that’s too bad.”

“I don’t remember this tree, do you?” she suddenly posed, more to herself than to him, looking
up as if expecting to recall what had occupied this space in the sky. She extended her arm across the top of the trunk, the distance from her shoulder to her fingertips not quite its radius; hers became a pictorial limb, pliable and motorized, placed upon the stump in a gesture of contrived arrogance, as if she expected to compare lives.

Three days later, after the last few piles of logs and limbs had been hauled from the streets, the Thompsons learned Uncle Gary had died overnight in his bed, from what doctors concluded was a failed heart even though his EKG, taken not quite ten days earlier, had proved normal.

"He was on his way downhill for a long time," Anne's mother concluded grimly, though with a zesty hint in her voice of a private glory for her having flown to Columbus to help her older sisters with the funeral, after which they all stayed an extra week to sort through his house, cleaning sinks and rooms, boxing whatever the three sisters agreed to take. He had been drinking a lot in recent months, neglecting his poodle, Fritz, whom his last wife had left with him, and ignoring the bills, as well as the garden in the backyard he had lovingly tended in early summer. Marge picked a box of tomatoes, precisely ripe upon her arrival, "for the kids," Anne and Michael, she told her sisters, who watched quietly appalled with her tidy and thrifty conduct at such a time.

News of his death alarmed Anne of course. "Oh, it's so terrible," the niece responded, reminding herself as her mother detailed what she knew to ask if anyone had heard from Jean. But her mother, not her, had become the celebrity this time, so any insinuation of someone's profiting from the death would come only from her. She, rather than her daughter, was receiving a flurry of eager calls from distant friends—from old Mr. Sullivan, nearly dead himself, who had served with Gary in Korea; from a school friend whom Marge had not heard from in years, saying she had noticed the family name in the paper and thought she ought to call; and from a local circle of acquaintances, some Marge could hardly picture, each blindly claiming Gary as a fine man, his passing such a shame.

Anne offered to help in whatever way; she sought to involve herself in this disaster, happening without her in another neighborhood. Hearing of Uncle Gary's demise infused her with a morbid quest to see how others closer to him were reacting, to know how they suffered—a quest as ardent as when she and Michael had hiked nearly every street in town to see which houses had lost trees during the windstorm. Talking to her mother, she fought to restrain the excitement seeping into her voice, to sound fashionably glum, but his death had induced in her a grisly vigor to piece his entire life into an amount of compensation he had owed others, but escaped the duty of repaying.

"What a shame," she found herself saying to her husband, whose legs still ached from the walk. "He really wasn't that old."

"It is too bad," he managed to offer.

"I never really knew him," she admitted, her husband not listening. She felt not personal loss but gain, for a space in the world had opened, and even if the movement of property and valuables and of those staking claims would exclude her altogether, the line leading there had still shortened.

At the edge of the yard she spotted a leftover limb, its leaves no longer silvery as if glowing and living, but curled and brown and wrinkled, quite dead. Uncle Gary's existence had transpired as a blurry landing, as indeterminate and unclassifiable as the different trees she had navigated the last few days in her unscratched car. But like the massive tree trunk in the park, his death left behind him the unfamiliar space his life had occupied, and this boundless area took only a day or two to fill and forget.