Knowing

Ryan Pesch*

*Iowa State University

Copyright ©2010 by the authors. Sketch is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress). http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch
Knowing
Ryan Pesch

There was a crash
There was definitely a crash
And a rending
And splintering
All of those things

The young man sat hunched over on the bench next to the white pine tree with his elbows on his knees and shook his head slightly from side to side. Again. The same thing he had done the day before, as the tree stood there watching the repair work erasing all signs of error. His wardrobe was consistently drab, his hooded sweatshirt accumulating a bit more dirt each day. He never changed. The pine tree had been observing people here for quite some time, but none of them shared this man’s complexity, his departure from the routine. Others paused to sit in the shade or to talk to someone, but they never thought about where they were, never looked around as he did, seeing the depressions in the ground and the needles as they browned. The time between 11:45 and 12:15 became his time and, as he inserted himself into the habitual flow, things gradually accommodated his constant presence.

The recovery was slow, but things began to regain a semblance of normalcy. Passers-by no longer stared at the man as he hunched there, his head poking slightly over the walkway as he sat stooped, and some started swerving subconsciously even when he wasn’t there. He was not the only one who took advantage of the spot between the trees, of course, but the white pine noted that he was by far the most consistent. Students had little use for the hardened stone bench when any one of the surrounding buildings held the promise of cushions and climate control. When one day his sweatshirt finally relented to the pressing heat, moving to a tied position around his waist briefly before disappearing completely, more than a few people had some difficulty recognizing him. He was gaunt and, though it looked like his lips were stretched, he never smiled.

With no hood to pull up to shield his face from casual glances, his posture changed. No longer did he slump forward on the granite bench. Instead he sat, arms crossed and feet splayed out in front of him, taking up still more of the area outside the small alcove in which the bench sat. His stitches were prominently displayed, but his defensive glare tolerated no questions.
On the weekends, when the flow of students became more sporadic, the young man would sometimes stay seated for hours, his body shifting gradually to avoid the sun as it found its way in through new holes in the branches. He was the only one, it seemed, who came simply to sit, which made it notable when one Sunday afternoon, his cell phone made itself heard. The pine tree, only privy to one half of the conversation, would have been unable to say what it was about the talk that affected him so, but when tears turned circles of dry dirt into tiny raised rings of mud, there could be no doubt that the words hospital, apologize, and nothing more to do carried with them a heavy toll. He left abruptly.

The dark and cold were split
Each medium shattered:
Dark by piercing light
And cold by burning pain

The man didn’t show up the next day, or the next, but Wednesday night, with the humidity of April threatening fog, he showed up in a suit, sitting for a while with his elbows firmly anchored to his knees. He stared straight down for nearly an hour, mindless of the dew gathering on the threads of his jacket or the polished surface of his shoes. The tiny drops coalesced on the slickness, then slid down the sides to the soil below, leaving streaky paths on the leather in their wake. Eventually, with a nod, he pressed himself up and walked first to the tree, where his hand lingered on part of the trunk before he turned and walked back the way he came.

There was no longer a rhyme or reason to his visits. The afternoon still suited him sometimes, but the students passing at noon began walking a normal path past the bench and even started taking advantage of the area themselves. At night, couples sat, laughing or just looking at each other and idly tracing the damaged portion of the tree trunk as they nervously shared their secrets. One day, the white pine saw the man approach only to realize the bench was taken. He spun on his heel in an abrupt about-face and, spurned, strode off with short, choppy steps.

Rapid healing without recovery
As scars stay
Silent reminders

It was mid-summer by the next time the tree noticed him, and he was not alone. His shirt was buttoned and tucked loosely into his khakis, and his hand was clasped with another’s, that of a young lady. They meandered their way past the bench, not really going anywhere it seemed, and his eyes darted only once to the
trunk of the tree before focusing again on her smile. She giggled at something he said and called him Adam, and they wound their way off into the Saturday afternoon, still smiling.

People kept on using the place, kept on ignoring it, until an older woman stopped by. She remained for a while on the walk, just tracing the place with her eyes, scanning around as though seeking something subtle to show her she was in the right place. Her eyes lingered on the trunk of the tree where almost no blemish remained, and worked their way backward from there to the road a ways off, following some line no one else could see. She shook her head, straightened her narrow shoulders somewhat, and firmly walked into the cobbled semi-circle containing the bench. She knelt before it, her straight black dress wrinkling in a bit of an unseemly way, and extended her hand to trace the laser-etched words in the granite:

In memory of Lawrence Soh
Talented musician

She sat on the bench and looked around briefly, as though confirming her suspicions that her son had passed on humanely and, without so much as a sigh, got up and left as unassumingly as she had arrived. The tree, as though anticipating this, would be the last consideration paid by the family, shook free a flurry of cones that sprinkled the ground and left a sent of sticky sap on the things they touched.

There was a lull as things grew colder, and people rushed by with their heads low to avoid the seeking wind, and Adam made such infrequent appearances it was as though he had forgotten the significance of the place entirely. The tree had no way of knowing that Adam had moved and that the few times he saw him each month were the result of a two-hour commute. The brevity of his stays belied the fact that he still thought constantly of the night almost a year ago. For all the tree knew, the occurrences of that night were long forgotten and, as the snow drifted up over the bench, obscuring the etching on its face, there was nobody to trace the now-healed trunk, which had reformed around the metal left wedged in the grain of the wood. As the years passed, the tree became used to the questions, the speculations:

I wonder who Lawrence Soh was.
I heard he was the youngest member of the philharmonic.
Did he die here?
I heard he was crushed by a car.
No way.

And only Adam and the tree could recall the events that led to Lawrence’s death. How the blizzard had leveled the snow, and the only sign of error had been
the slight bump as they hopped the curb. How the party hadn’t been worth it. How the keys had ended up in Lawrence’s hands when his older brother had been too drunk to drive. How the tree had appeared, and despite their hands going up in front of their faces, how it had kept coming until the car stopped and Lawrence didn’t. Nobody save the tree knew how much force had gone into the blow hurling Lawrence from the car, and nobody but Adam knew the shame and sorrow in his mother’s voice when she learned of what happened.

Nobody but Lawrence had known how much it hurt, and nobody at all knew why the doctors could prolong his life for weeks but couldn’t save him. But the tree knew that Adam kept coming back. Years later, after none of the students could remember why Lawrence’s bench was there and none of them knew to step slightly to the side to make room for the man, now middle-aged, who sometimes appeared there, the tree recognized him and appreciated his presence.

The tree didn’t know about Adam’s daily pain, about how he woke up sweating and screaming, but it could guess from the way his posture changed, slumped and bent more with each year. When his mother died too young, ashamed of having outlived her son, his elbows buried into his thighs on the bench. When he was fired due to cutbacks and left un-hirable without a diploma, his head never again looked up from his shoes. And finally, when his wife left him for a more cheerful man, his head remained looking up indefinitely as he spun around like a piñata from an upper branch.

And the white pine kept the metal of the car deep inside as it grew up and out and, above, in its branches near the sky, a few strands of nylon rope were caught, gossamer threads waving casually in the breeze.