

THE TREE ANGEL

Ingrid Soren

*Being swallowed up therefore in the miserable gulf of idle talk and worthless vanities
... I lived among dreams and shadows, like a prodigal son feeding upon husks with
swine.*

Thomas Traherne, 'Centuries' III/14

I never did find the bridleway that led to the disused church that Saturday morning. I turned the car back several times along the winding road but there was no signpost. I'd been there once before, to this isolated chapel of pale clunch built a thousand years ago when man's soul was still tuned in to itself. I remembered it as a simple space divided by a squat arch, a chancel, a monolithic altar, the timbered roof of a barn, a flagstone floor. Light shunting through narrow windows, the silence a presence, a touch on the skin. Outside, gravestones half-hidden in the long midsummer grasses, tall elms shimmering, the patter of summer rain.

Some invisible hand did not allow me to disturb the memory that morning. It led me instead across to another part of the land under a wind-blown sky. The fields were breathing quietly on a planet seemingly deserted by Man. Where had everyone gone, fled from this beauty? herded into the safety of supermarkets and traffic jams? sucked down the vortex of a computer screen? No matter, sighed the land, here is peace. The branches of a plane tree dangled over the bridge, its leaves drinking from a pool like a deer lapping water.

Over the sound of my footsteps along the grass path I heard the wind in the maple tree at the top of the wheatfield. It was singing, an angel's wings brushing against its leaves, an angel more massive even than the dark tree. I had never thought angels would be so vast, always imagining them to be the same size as us humans, but now I knew they are giants of the invisible world, bigger even than our biggest trees. That morning as I walked I realised that angels choose special places on earth to rest. They come in to land, giant transparent birds seeking somewhere safe where they can fold their wings, a place away from men among the wild grasses and near clear pools. There was one there that day, lightly touching the maple. The leaves responded with a rustle.

A smoke-blue haze rose off the ripening wheatears beside the footpath, bread of life from everlasting to everlasting. But who among the grain-merchants walks the field and loves these proud armies touched by summer breezes under the white mountains of heaven, clouds piling into a cobalt sky?

The outstretched branches of the ash that shelters the footpath behind my house invite the angels too, and I often wish they would lift me from the grass and take me into their invisible world. As I pass I hear an exhalation, the leaves breathing the breath of God. Trees, angels, soul-lungs that breathe for us and protect us under the sun that burns a hole in the sky by day and the moon by night, rending the veil between our dazzled eyes and an invisible beyond.

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