

EXCURSION - Two become Tree

Returning to Montana for the second to last time in June 2021, and following my encounters with the burying beetles (*Nicrophorus Americanus*), my excursions into the scrubland outside my mother's house brought me into contact with another "miraculous" experience. There I found two young pine trees growing in the middle of the sage, along a path between the stone circle and the site down by the ditch where my mother took her life. To contextualise, there are very few trees for miles around in this area of the Bitterroot Valley. Mostly there are sage bushes, and a few fruit trees my parent's planted near the house. However, one tall ponderosa pine stands at the edge of a pond between the house and the sage field. This ponderosa was perhaps the only tree in the area when my parents first purchased the land in the 1990s, and the road leading to our property was called "Ponderosa drive".

Over the decades, we never saw this tree propagate in any way that we can recall. But seeing these two trees here now, side by side, nearly four years after my mother and her husband died one month apart, finding these trees felt like an eerie coincidence. I verified their species (yellow pines exhibit clusters of 3 needles), which made them almost certainly the offspring of our old ponderosa. I looked up how to measure their age and found them to be fast growing trees. The growth factor for yellow pines is not a fixed index based on diameter, but is generally considered to be roughly 12-18 inches per year (kansasforests.org). I then took the following measurements:

Height

1) 5'7". (67")

2) 4'8". (56")

Circumference

1) 9.5"

2) 4.5"

Diameter

1) 3"

2) 1.5"

Dividing the height of the trees by the median growth rate (15" per year) gave me possible ages of 4.4 and 3.7 years. It had been approximately 3.6 years since my mother's death, a month less for my step-father.

As with most miraculous experiences, this could be chalked up to coincidence, but following my other encounters, particularly those with the beetles and the clouds, the “anomalies” were starting to feel less anomalous and more like periodic reminders that the world is far more mysterious and less prosaic than my habitual mind wanted to think. If my mother, or even molecular material aspects of her, became thinkable through the figure of a tree, it followed almost inevitably that my emotional sense could expand newly into interspecies worlds. It had already begun with more symbolic encounters (robins and deer), but was now starting to shift in less-identifiable (trees vs. mammals) and more abject (beetles/carrion vs. pretty birds) directions.