

Will Wells

Recognition

From a bench in Union Station, I watched
the passing crowd and spotted Dad among it,
though he'd been dead for decades and never
traveled far. The gait was right, expression too.
How could I sit and simply let him pass?
I called to him and grabbed his raincoat's sleeve.
It really was him. Then not. Frowning, he spoke,
Not one of us can ever be ourselves.
But there he stood, a man not quite my age,
who'd died before I had the chance to make
things right. He turned to go, but paused again.
We sat together on that bench and wept.

The Empress Tree

for Morgan Elizabeth

According to Chinese lore, a father
must plant an Empress tree
within a week of the birth of his daughter
and harvest it when she marries.
Its heartwood must then be carved
into a box that she will carry

to house the treasures she wishes to carry
off with her. When she opens it, her father,
living or dead, can speak through its carved
ornament, a root to the rest of the tree.
Although she has gone off to marry,
it pledges enduring love for his daughter.

Every spring before evokes his daughter.
Breezes jostling pink empress blossoms carry
scents pungent as the day she'll marry.
Till then, he'll offer the love of a father
and tend her well, just like the tree --
until the jewelry box is carved.

And once that box is carved,
any swaying branch suggests his daughter,
absent now like a cut-down tree.
He'll recall the days he had to carry
her in his arms, an unsure, youthful father
who couldn't imagine her old enough to marry

or himself old enough to watch her marry.
Although age has surely carved
its mark on him, he'll reclaim the father

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that he once was, watching his tiny daughter
dance her first recital, learning love must carry
a spreading canopy like a thriving tree.

Not knowing the tradition, I didn't plant a tree.
Morgan, with just three months before you marry,
I've grown a poem that's meant to carry
precious intangibles. My pen has carved
this wedding gift for you, my daughter,
from your proud and doting father.

The phoenix roosts only in an Empress tree.
Daughter, you're the sapling planted by your father.
Carry this carved box of words, and marry.