



SORGHUM TREES

by Deborah M. Fox

I have never seen a sorghum tree. I don't know if their bark is rough or smooth. I am not familiar with their shape or the way their leaves move in a storm. If and when they blossom, I don't know what scent they send off into the world. I only know that they grow in Australia.

My son may travel to Australia soon, and if he does, he will coexist with these trees. They will become a part of his background. He will come to know what season it is by looking at the state of their leaves, maybe by smelling the air. And I won't have that experience with him, and he may not think to share something like that with me. It may not seem important enough compared to everything else he will want to say. But years after the experience, he may be reminded of these trees, when the morning sun creates a certain quality of light that filters through his window, the way it did through the leaves of the sorghum. This light may leave him wistful; it may produce an indecipherable longing in him for something contained in those Australian days.

My sorghum tree was the dark blue of the Paris sky after a late afternoon rain, pale clouds moving beneath like ghostly shadows. I think that was the time of day when I felt most homesick, because the sky wasn't anything like a Philadelphia sky. It was beautiful, but it was otherly too, and that brought on my yearning for familiarity. Sometimes what is familiar is preferable to beautiful, even if it is ugly, even if it is a sky made gray by factory waste and car exhaust.

I think there is an irrevocable change that occurs in people who live among vegetation unfamiliar to that of their homeland. An adjustment is made, whether conscious or not, whereby touchstones of emotion and reminiscences are recalibrated, if however slightly. So that when a rainstorm comes, it is perceived through a filter unlike the original. Removed from a familiar angle of the sun, our memories and dreams shift. We think we remember being somewhere, when really we never were. We think we know what we will see if we walk to the end of a certain street. We think, but are seldom certain.

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