

SINGING TIMBER

Susan Travis

In this piece, I've expanded a segment of the eulogy that I wrote for my sister's funeral, ten years ago. She was known by many friends as "Timber." I expected that my sister would fade into a comfortable corner of my heart, like my mother before her. She hasn't, perhaps because I haven't sung with the intent to heal, perhaps because I don't want her in a comfortably fading corner. There's a lot to our story, but the end began in this way.



A mighty tree falls. Without witness, does it make a sound? A thunderous pounding and crashing against the earth? Or, if no ears are near, does it silently land, tossing dust, scattering birds, and crushing a tangle of bracken and blue lobelia under bark and limb? Some argue this point with great vigor, while others shrug, leaving the question to languish among the mysteries of physics and whatever sciences apply to such things. Yet, I submit to you, dear Reader, that I know the answer to this question, at least, in the way that an ache pounds against the soul, which, though perhaps without ears, nonetheless feels thunderous loss. I know the answer as a poet knows that the crescendo of the toppling timber ends in the trill of birdsong, and that meandering butterflies sing arias as they flutter on to other realms.

I know these things, because "Timber" fell in my forest. My tall willowy sister, "Timber," fell with a mighty crash that shook our earth, broke our hearts, and rattled our very souls. Together, we unloosed a primordial cry as if we were aborigines under an equatorial moon. I don't know if we actually screamed, but it seemed we did, and I for one, know that to this day, I harbor a screaming soul. It's not about death; that's sort of the easy part. But, in its wake, an emptiness yaws, chock-full of a thousand moments echoing with her life and laughter. It's a long, low bass note—that chock-full emptiness over which rumbles the crash of a towering trunk ending into the earth—and all around, pound hearts like the boom-boom-boom of tribal drums. That's the harmonious crashing sound

that ending makes, as it begins.

“Don’t die,” I begged. “People die,” she answered. “F-bomb, *that!*” I said. “Yeah, f-bomb, *that!*” she giggled unblinkingly, breathlessly, in the midst of dying. In the dry, dying giggle, I hear the asserting burbling brook, the muted melancholy melody of her wit and funny ways. Bubbling, tinkling softly with the odd minor note that accompanies a smile wet with tears. That’s my broken butterfly girl, the willowy comedienne, who despite the quaking in her knees and heart, pulls belly laughs from a cheering crowd. The ingredients of song . . . little trills and minor notes—they give dimension, so that to us, what appears as the light flutter of tissue wing, is to the butterfly, the mighty whooshing beat of its own eagle wings. Grace notes against the thunderous drumming.

Is there a sound when timber falls and no one hears? My dear. The earth hears . . . not with ears, but with the soul.

