



A catalpa tree

I think that I shall never see
A poem lovely as a tree.

A tree whose hungry mouth is prest
Against the sweet earth's flowing breast;

A tree that looks at God all day,
And lifts her leafy arms to pray;

A tree that may in summer wear
A nest of robins in her hair;

Upon whose bosom snow has lain;

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Who intimately lives with rain.

Poems are made by fools like me,
But only God can make a tree

Trees

Joyce Kilmer (1886-1918)

We moved to 811 Trafalgar Road in the summer of 1966. We were attracted to the place because of its big yard (about 7/8th of an acre) and lots of trees. Near the street, next to Sachse's, stood a gnarled, twisted, tree, with a trunk about 3' in diameter, about 30' tall, and a spread of about 25'. We were told it was a catalpa by our tree "guy", surveying the property when we moved in. He advised taking it down, but I ignored the advice because I hate taking down living trees.

The arbor day foundation website lists the tree as a northern catalpa (*catalpa speciosa*) and says:

This is a tree that demands your attention. White, showy flowers. Giant heart-shaped leaves. Dangling bean-like seed pods. Twisting trunk and branches. How could you not stop to take it in?

The catalpa tree is found in forests from southern Illinois and Indiana to western Tennessee and Arkansas. First cultivated in 1754, the wood was used for fence posts and railroad ties because of its resistance to rot and the tree's fast growth rate. Common names for this tree are many and colorful—including cigar tree, Indian bean tree, catawba, caterpillar tree, hardy catalpa and western catalpa.

The tree was new to me. Minnesota is too far north for them. Even here they are not common. The only other one I know of was in Sachse's backyard. Millie Sachse was afraid it would fall on the house in a wind storm, so, one day, it succumbed to the chainsaw.

The tree has various names, among them cigarette or cigar tree because of its seed pods. The pods are 8" to 20" long, about 1/4" wide, and pointed allowing them to

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stand upright when they hit the ground – another of nature's wonder to ensure procreation.

I have no idea how old our tree is, seeing it was already huge when we moved in.

The tree has been through hard times. It lost a huge branch overhanging our yard 25 to 30 years ago in a summer windstorm and another one overhanging the street about three years back in a freak 30 second micro burst.

Now it has just one branch over hanging the street and a volunteer branch growing from where the one overhanging the yard went years back.

You want to upset the neighbors, take the catalpa down. I would have an uprising on my hands. The neighborhood kids would be upset. Hardly a day goes by without a child peering in the hole at the base of the trunk, no doubt looking for the “tree monster” or an older child using gnarls on the trunk to climb to look down the hole where the volunteer grows.

Catalpas have hollow trunks. You can see light from the hole at the base peering in the hole at the top.

The wood is light as a feather. Maybe good for fences, but not much else, not even for the fireplace – burns too fast, but it provides endless joy for the eye; spring, summer, fall, and winter.

The tree is about last to leaf in the spring. It blooms mid-June and is finished by my birthday. It starts producing seed pods in mid-July. It drops its leaves about the same time as most other trees and covers the lawn with seed pods.

Sitting in my chair in the Great Room I have a full view of the tree. It is amazing how many times I see someone taking a picture of the tree or somebody posing beside it for pictures.

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What a blessing!

Thanks to Jill for the photographic montage of the tree.

