Etiology

Thomas Mira y Lopez
Whenever my mother and I drive to her house in Pennsylvania, she asks me to take a look at the Ohio buckeye. It is a ritual I am familiar with by now. I carry the bags inside and leave them on the kitchen counter, then move the food from cooler to refrigerator. She takes the black poodle out of his travel crate, praises him for being so patient, eyes him closely as he romps around the field, and when I have slid the ice packs into the freezer and the poodle has discovered for the hundredth time the hundredth smell at the base of the pine, she will call to me through the screen door. “Come, Tom, come see dad’s tree.”

She does not know how much I begrudge this ceremony. She does not know that, after two hours in the car next to her, all I want to do is open a bag of tortillas chips, pop the seal of a jar of salsa con queso, and stand over the counter dipping a dozen or so chips into cheese. Or, rather, she does know this: she is my mother. If I eat too much, she knows the next thing I will do is take a nap. The poodle’s walk is timed so that she can call out to me before I become too involved in the process of dipping and chewing, before I feel full enough to grunt a refusal and shut the door to my room. She might even know that I do not care about the buckeye, that I attach no importance to it, that I do not even particularly like it. She is my mother. Maybe she knows that she has only to expose it enough in order for me to care—like the way when I sit down to eat take-out with her on Monday nights, she knows she only has to refuse to change channels and I will watch *Dancing With The Stars*.

In Pennsylvania, I trudge outside and around the house and walk up to the tree. I circle it and give the trunk a hesitant pat, squeeze its diameter, unsure how to touch it as I am unsure how to pet the dog. “It’s beautiful,” she will beam, standing there, watching me. “It’s grown so much.”

There are five rivers in the Greek underworld. They are the Styx, river of hate; Acheron, river of pain; Cocytus, river of lamentation; Phlegethon, river of rage; and Lethe, river of oblivion. I like to think that, taken together, these rivers form a rough Kubler-Ross model for ghosts.
In their enumeration, Lethe comes last, the final stage of grief. Its waters serve as a general anesthetic. All those who drink from them forget their former state, their joy and grief, pleasure and pain. This potential, this river of morphine and drowsiness and opiates, sounds quite tempting when poetized, when it becomes, as Ovid writes in the *Metamorphoses*, the place “where dream-haunted poppies grow, hanging their heads above wet ferns and grasses...and weighted eyelids close each day to darkness.”

Yet my uncertainty about Lethe stems from its source. Arriving in English from Greek via Latin, the word is rendered as either oblivion or forgetfulness. To me, these two words, speaking the English that I speak, are different: oblivion is a permanent state, forgetfulness temporary. I would like Lethe to mean the latter—a soporific that acts nightly not just to erase all memories of pain and suffering, but to restore those memories upon arising and transform them into something acceptable, into a new and peaceful state. But I suspect Lethe is really the former: that once you drink these waters there is no going back, no middle ground or middle island upon which to stand.

My father planted the Ohio buckeye in 2004, the year my parents bought this second house in northern Pennsylvania, fifteen minutes south of the Delaware River. What makes the buckeye impressive is that my father planted a seed, not a sapling or nursery tree. This seed, bay horse brown with a café au lait spot in its center, resembles the eye of a male deer and so gives the buckeye its name. My father planted the seed in 2004 and, in 2006, it had grown to a four foot sapling. In 2012, my mother estimates the tree at twenty feet tall. Buckeyes grow to a height of forty-five feet. Their diameter measures fifty centimeters. They live for eighty years, a human lifespan. That is, the lifespan of a lucky human.

It is crucial for my mother that this buckeye not just live and flourish, but survive. She will scoff at the afterlife, yet all the same, animism and reincarnation exist for her within this tree. She has assigned a spirit to it, wished it a narrative to fulfill these beliefs.
That spirit, of course, belongs to my father. The body is his as well: the hands that scooped out the pocket of earth and laid the seed to rest are now the buckeye's leaves, his limbs the branches, the mind that decided to plant the tree exactly there are its roots, stretching ten feet downhill from the squat evergreen, thirty feet from the house so that my mother can gaze out at it from the window above the kitchen sink.

One does not need to pay for passage across Lethe. Charon the toll collector ferries the dead only across the Styx or Acheron. As payment, the dead must each give Charon an obol, or he will not allow them to cross. An obol holds little value; the coin is equivalent, roughly speaking, to the daily wage of a skilled worker in ancient Greece. It is no fortune in itself, but it adds up. If Charon does not receive his payment, the soul can not cross and is fated to spend eternity in limbo between the world of the living and the dead. To prevent this, a family would place an obol in the deceased's mouth, under the tongue or on the lips. This became known as Charon's obol: a viaticum, bus fare and a bag lunch, provision for a journey. The otherworldly narrative one can conjure from a small circular object, seed or coin, grasped in a hand.

My father's seizures began in 2003, the year before he planted the buckeye. They were minor, except when they were not. Those were the one or two nights he spent in a hospital bed at Mount Sinai. Medication could treat them, except when it could not. The seizures still recurred, however minor, and by the summer of 2006, my father no longer worked in the garden or the field. He complained of his right hand cramping, of losing the dexterity in his fingers. He no longer drank black coffee in Duralex glasses, the way he had growing up in Brazil, nor did he have a glass of Sandeman port after dinner, the way his mother did. He did not drive and this frustrated him. When I came to visit, I drove him from New York to Pennsylvania and he remained silent, watching the speedometer.

I was not around that summer—I worked on a farm near my

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college, weeding by hand, complaining of the straw that would scratch up my arms—and so I did not witness these regressions. I could hear them, however, if I chose to. His voice had started to slur by then, the lip a little twisted, and so he sounded over the phone as if he had just woken up from a nap, disoriented, not entirely in his present state. I was not around that fall either: it was junior year and I went to Rome to study abroad.

In September of 2006, my father suffered a massive seizure while visiting his mother in Brazil. Two surgeries later, the right side of his body was paralyzed and he could no longer speak. By October, he was back in New York, flown twenty-four hours in a Medevac plane alongside my mother. She told him, when she was planning the evacuation, that he would be able to recover in the country, that they could watch the mother-of-pearl sunsets together and count sheep on the opposite hill. I nodded along. My father did not say anything. In November, after a little over two months of silence, he died.

Once one crosses the Styx and Acheron, there is still a ways to go before reaching Lethe. The dead, Plato writes in Phaedo, are sentenced to different parts of the underworld according to their earthly acts. Murderers, for example, are sent to Cocytus; those who have outraged their parents to Phlegethon. Once they have served their time there, the current brings them to the Akherousian Lake, where they must call out to those they have wronged and ask to be set free. If their plea is accepted, they may leave; if not, they are borne back into the rivers. These rules are meant for the dead. Yet if the living may travel to the underworld, if the living sometimes search for loved ones or drink from Lethe, why can't they be judged as well? Why don't they float in the waters of Cocytus and Phlegethon?

The buckeye has become, for my mother, something tangible my father left behind. Unlike other memories, it does not decay or fade, but gains in strength over time. It is there, so solidly there, impressing itself on the landscape. My mother can mark its progress and measure its height as if it were a growing boy. She can perceive its existence as remarkable, just as

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she perceives mine as such—her only child, born to her at the age of forty-two, after already one miscarriage. She can nurture it, this memory of my father before his illness—the scientist who loved trees, who loved experiments like burying seeds in the ground or sifting through bear shit he found on the road, oblivious to the implication that the bear, the danger, might lurk nearby. She sees this and envisions a new, sturdier body, a body that grows skyward without shaking or collapsing.

Yet still, despite the buckeye's heartiness, she worries. She frets over it and fusses. She thinks of razing the trees around it, the squat evergreen and the weeping willow, holdovers from the previous owners, even though they do not steal the buckeye's sunlight. The buckeye, in fact, robs theirs. She fears she will not be able to sustain it, to keep it healthy. She believes it owes its vitality to itself, to whatever magic was within my father's hands that could create a living thing.

She worries, in particular, because she believes herself a hopeless gardener. "Not just hopeless, I'm cursed," she will half-joke. I do not want to believe her (how could my mother, the woman who swaddles the poodle in a towel after his bath and holds him in her arms like a newborn, fail at nurturing?), but the evidence is there. The plot I weeded the year before is as overgrown as ever, the sole mark of her success the petunia bush she transplanted. She speaks of her garden to strangers and, when they politely inquire what she grows, she snaps back, "I grow weeds." It will not immediately be clear that she is serious. Out back by the cellar entrance, she will point with pride to a handful of white flowers that have grown amidst the tangle of tall grass. They are weeds, not wild flowers, but they are to some degree the result of her hand. Rumors of her inadequacy have apparently spread. The gardener who lives down the road does not return her calls. She does not know why. "I'm cursed, I'm doomed." She has left several messages, asking for his services, offering him to name his price, but he has not called back.

Given the chance to keep something, someone, healthy all over again, she has enlisted my help. I weed around the base of the tree, I lay down mulch and wood chips. I build a wire fence around the buckeye's

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perimeter to keep out rabbits. We both have no idea what we are doing, but these acts are of utmost importance—if I refuse or complain, the tree’s life hangs in the balance, we could lose him all over again—and so we walk out and admire the buckeye each visit, as if we were visiting a living tomb, as if we were trying to grow the thing on good karma alone.

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In 2008, my mother bought a tree in Central Park also in memory of my father. A horse chestnut, specifically. My father now divides his time between two trees. It stands in the North Meadow, along the path my father walked each morning to and from work. Standing beside this tree, you can see Mount Sinai to the east. The hospital’s medical center, a large black building, fills the skyline. My father worked in this building as a cell biologist and was transferred there as a patient after my mother flew him out of Brazil. It was where he died. Adjacent to the horse chestnut lie the fields where he watched me play soccer growing up, I the goalkeeper, he the assistant coach by virtue of being Brazilian. Nearby, a five minute walk away, are the trees where he buried the pet hamster and cockatiel on his way to work, after we found them at the bottom of their cages.

I read about Central Park and a man named Elmaz Qyra one morning at my mother’s kitchen table. The New York Times is profiling the dangers of the city’s trees. Like my father, Qyra liked to walk in the park after work. When he had finished his shift as a busboy, he walked a few blocks north to the 59th street entrance and headed to Poet’s Walk. One time in late February, 2010, he went for a walk after a heavy snow had fallen. At 3:00 p.m., the Times wrote, if there was any sunlight, Poet’s Walk must have been wondrous. The park, his wife said, reminded him of his childhood home, of his parents’ farm in Albania. What Qyra did not know, as he walked alone along the promenade, was that one of the trees above him was due to be removed. The year before, a limb had fallen from it and
damaged another tree. A five-foot cavity swelled within its trunk and fungus infested it. Elmaz Qyra passed beneath it and a fifteen-foot limb as heavy as a refrigerator fell, split his head open, and killed him.

After my father was hospitalized in Rio, I visited him there. I flew from Rome and stayed for two weeks. Over those two weeks, my father in then out of the ICU, I gained between five and ten pounds. I liked the food in the hospital cafeteria and it killed time. There was not much to do: hold my father’s hand, read Graham Greene, watch soccer or CNN, masturbate, nap, wipe my father’s brow, play solitaire on my iPod. Staying overnight in the hospital room, I would sleep from eight in the evening till ten the next morning. My mother did not sleep. She lost fifteen pounds. She started smoking again and exhaled a lot, either smoke or sighs. She sighed so audibly that I thought she did so on purpose, wanting my attention or awaiting my comment, but she claimed she was unaware of it.

My father lost even more weight, thirty pounds if I had to guess. Around a half pound came from his skull. A human skull weighs a little over two pounds and doctors removed a quarter of my father’s to perform the second operation. They did not install a plate and so the left side of my father’s head looked deflated, as if collapsed in on itself. There seemed nothing separating brain from skin. The skin, the hair shaved to a stubble, flapped and breathed of its own accord. If I pressed hard enough with my finger, I thought it would sink all the way into the skin until it touched his brain, the damaged organ I could not see.

Needless to say, my father did not have much of an appetite. I began to eat the soft, warm foods off his tray: macaroni and cheese, apple sauce, mashed potatoes, flan. The nurses who brought in the meals would do a song and dance each time as to how delicious the food looked, how hungry my father must be, how he needed sustenance to get his strength back up. I looked on while they did this, picking out which food I would eat first, the nurses little knowing that they were performing for me.

To eat and sleep, of course, is its own form of forgetting. If you
were not awake for it, it is hard to say it really happened.

I cannot see the buckeye the way my mother sees it. My father
does not stand tall within it, this ugly, puny thing choking the water and
stealing sunlight away from the evergreen. Its growth is not representative
of his spirit or his hand. There are few memories for me of my father in the
country, none of his working the land. When my parents first bought this
house, during the visit when my father planted this seed, I stayed in New
York. I was still in high school then and their overnight trips meant that I
could hotbox our bathroom with my friends.

Still, I yearn to see it and him with her eyes. Now he rises bal-
anced, where before there was asymmetry and paralysis. Now he grows and
feeds on water where before he shrank, withered from the inability to retain
fluid. Now bark armors the pith within his trunk, where before nothing en-
cased his cerebral tissue or separated it from his skin. Now the wind rustles
through his leaves and sometimes it even howls, where before there was
only silence.

This is all, I suspect, just another way of forgetting. Or of remem-
bering only what we want to remember. The river of Lethe runs under-
ground and feeds the buckeye. By placing my father in this tree, my mother
has chosen to remember him as he not always was: as strong and healthy,
flourishing instead of decaying.

Form, however, collapses. My father's body, my mother's supersti-
tions. And what happens when that balance breaks down, when the surface
level can no longer hide the structural frailty underneath? Trees rot, des-
siccate, become infested, drink too deeply from poisonous waters. Oblivion
lasts until it does not, until a branch snaps and falls in anger at its being
forgotten.

Forms indeed collapse. Within her own memory, my mother has
begun to mix-up names. She calls me Rafael. She calls the dog Tom. She
calls my father Tom or Celso, the poodle's name. Sometimes she says your
grandfather, when she means your dad. She no longer catches the slip, it
passes unnoticed. I used to correct her every time, to jump on the chance of being right. But now I no longer do so. I let it slide.

Her memory is sharp in other ways. "Do you visit dad's tree?" she will ask me. She means the horse chestnut she has purchased in Central Park. I tell her not so much. If I walk by it, I will make note of it. But I do not often happen to pass it—I no longer play soccer or baseball on those fields, I have no reason to cross the park and visit Mount Sinai. I read a book underneath it once, J.D. Salinger's *Nine Stories*. If I tell my mother I am going anywhere in Central Park, she will want to know if I plan to stop by my father's tree. "No, mom," I say, "I'll be a mile away." I ask her if she ever visits the tree and she says no, she doesn't often end up around there, it's out of her way and a bit hard to go to. She means she can see that big black building looming to the east. But she's glad the tree's there all the same.

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My cousins and I would play a game called Monster under the horse chestnut tree at my grandparents' house in East Hampton. My father would chase us around the yard, his face twisted in a rictus, lip upturned into sneer. "Now I'm coming to get you," he would shout, once he had given us enough time to reach safety. If my father found and caught us, he would wrap us up in his arms and the game would be over. To avoid him, we hid under the canopy of the horse chestnut tree. When we heard him coming, his stomp and growl, we began to climb the tree. We climbed a limb near the tree's edge, one that ran along the ground until it rose upwards again. My father would palm open the curtain of leaves and scowl, feigning disorientation, giving us time, pretending he did not know we had run to where we always ran to. For reasons unexplained, he could not climb the tree. Elevation was our safe haven, we had made it our rule. If we climbed beyond his grasp and kicked free of the hands that grabbed at our ankles, he could do nothing but look up at us—our chests breathing against bark, arms hugging the tree limb, feet dangling—and glower. Then the
game would end.

Eventually a branch necessary to climb this limb snapped off. It was our first foothold and, without it, we were helpless. My father nailed a two-by-four to the trunk where the branch had been. Our feet could not wrap around it the same way, but it remained fixed and we could climb the limb again. I know that even if this limb were to continue growing, this two by four would stay in the same place and persist, at the perfect height for a four-year-old's step. This, to me, is stable memory, oblivion's antithesis. That is, until a new owner decides to prune the branches, or lightning strikes the thing, or hurricane Sandy or Amelia or Rachel or Alexandra or Hannah moves in off the Atlantic, or the branch just rots and poisons the tree and I die.

The last time I heard my father's voice was on my birthday. I was in the shower, in Rome, and my cell phone rang. It was an international number. I turned off the water and answered. It was October and my mother was at Mount Sinai, my father having been transferred back to New York. She wished me happy birthday and put my father on the phone. He was doing better and could form a few sounds. Mostly sighs. The word hey. He made it half-way through happy birthday. I waited on the other end, head leaning against the tiles, naked, dripping wet.

The last time I heard him speak a sentence was at the airport. I had an evening flight to Fiumicino, he was to fly to Rio de Janeiro the following day. I do not remember what he said, but it must have been along the lines of: "Be safe, Tom. Remember x, remember y. Love you. Be safe."

I asked my mother why didn't they call me from the hospital more often, if my father could manage a few words. She said she didn't really know. "Dad was tired," she said, "It was very hard for him." He preferred silence. It was hard to know how he felt about us, if he was mad I was not there, if I were acting the right way or hurting him further. We could have just remained speechless over the line but I do not say that, just as my mother does not ask me why I did not call the hospital myself or why I stayed in Rome.
The above is not exactly true. The last time I heard my father’s voice was not on my birthday or at the airport, but a few years after his death. He had recorded the message on the answering machine at the house in Pennsylvania. I would call from time to time, when I knew my mother was not there. His voice sounded distracted, caught off-guard, because either my mother or I had just walked into the room. You could hear the kitchen chair creak as he leaned in when the recording began. I did not tell my mother I did this, but I am almost certain she did the same because sometime later, when I was away or abroad, she changed the recording to an automated message and erased his last remaining words. Though I would not have done so, I can only hope the agony of deleting his voice, the willful choice to forget, weighed less for her than the agony of hearing it. While there is no account of what Elmaz Qyra heard before he died, others describe the sound of a falling branch in various ways. It can sound like a thunderclap. It is the creak of a floorboard in a horror movie. A booming. A loud crack or snap. It is something. It is a warning or a taunt or a condemnation.

Trees rot because of fungus and internal decay. A tree suffers a significant wound, anything larger than three to four inches in diameter, and rotting fungi will establish their presence in the time it takes it to form a callous over its injury. It is a common phenomenon for a tree to suffer significant injury: lightning can strike or a thunderstorm can break a limb; roots can be damaged underground or insects can infest it; there is human harm, say someone who prunes one large limb instead of several smaller ones. As a defense mechanism, trees will compartmentalize their decay to maintain structural integrity. That is, fungi will only rot away the dead wood in the center of the tree. A tree can sustain the hollowing of its core as long as new rings are forming and widening around its circumference; its structure can bear a central emptiness if there is something to compensate. Just as humans—my suffering mother, my sick father—will do. Some trees do a better job of compartmentalizing decay than others. Oaks, for exam-

Technically, my mother did not buy the horse chestnut tree in Central Park, but an endowment for it. The Tree Trust of the Central Park Conservancy offers New Yorkers the opportunity to “create a living memory that will last for generations to come.” In exchange for a donation, the Conservancy will engrave a paving stone in honor of the endower along the southern end of Poet’s Walk. The endower also receives the more or less false sense that he or she owns a tree.

Donations range depending on the tree endowed. For $1,000, you can purchase a new sapling. For $5,000, a remarkable tree. With this and all subsequent prices comes the engraved granite paving stone. For $12,000, a tree cluster family. For $25,000, a historic tree, planted 150 years ago at Central Park’s inception. For $250,000, you can purchase groves or allées. Groves are a cluster composed of four or more trees of the same species. Allées are “a unique arrangement of two or more rows of the same species.” The example the Conservancy gives is of the majestic American elms along Poet’s Walk itself. With these come an engraved bronze plaque.

My mother purchased a remarkable tree. Her engraved granite paving stone, must read somewhere on Poet’s Walk: “Endowed by JUDY THOMAS in honor of RAFAEL MIRA Y LOPEZ.” But I am not sure. I have never visited it.

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I flew from Rome to New York in early November. I landed on a Thursday and was to fly back Sunday, but my father died that Sunday night and I stayed. That day, around noon or one in the afternoon, a doctor told my mother and me that my father would not last very long. I told my mother I would be right back. I took the elevator down the eight or nine floors from the ICU my father had been moved into the night before, and stepped out onto the street. Across Fifth Avenue was Central Park and I be-
gan to run. I ran into the park, past the dust field, past the North Meadow, past the horse chestnut where my father’s spirit would later reside, out onto the Upper West Side and north ten blocks until I reached the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. I entered and told the man behind the donation booth that I would like to buy the $3.95 candle. I handed him a twenty and he told me he could not make change and pointed to a sign. I left, bought an Apricot Linzer cookie at a pastry shop next door, came back, put a five dollar bill on the counter, took my candle, and threw the cookie at the man. I walked down the nave until I reached the bed of candles by the altar. I lay the wick in a neighboring candle’s flame and placed mine among the others. Written on the glass of the other candles were messages and well-wishes for loved and lost ones. I did not write anything, but I did make a wish. A wish that, if I were to say what it was, I’d be afraid wouldn’t come true.

I took a cab back to the hospital. I watched the New York Giants lose to the Chicago Bears and that night, figuring things would hold, I told my mother I was going back to the apartment. I would have a bite to eat and get some rest. My aunt had just driven down and we ordered take-out, General Tso’s Chicken and scallion pancakes. The food arrived and a call came from my mother. “You should come back,” she said. I did. When I arrived, my father seemed the same and I fell asleep in an armchair at the foot of the bed. The overnight nurse came and left and, after she did so, when the Cheyne-Stokes breathing began, my mother told me, “You should come to the bed, Tom.”

A remarkable tree is an interesting name for a common horse chestnut, especially when one considers that the Conservancy is naming things that do not know they have names. But a remarkable tree is exactly what my mother believes this chestnut to be.

Endowments help ensure the maintenance of Central Park’s trees, but the Conservancy does not inform you what happens if your particular tree is damaged or destroyed. This is a valid concern. On Halloween in 2011, an unexpected and unprecedented snowstorm damaged 1,000 trees.
in Central Park. Earlier that year, Hurricane Irene destroyed 100 trees.

Before these, a thunderstorm downed more than 100 trees in the park on a single day, August 19, 2009. Hundreds more were damaged, many fatally. This was the most severe destruction the park’s trees had sustained in decades and it was concentrated in the northern third of the park where my father’s horse chestnut stood. The city temporarily closed the fields at North Meadow in case of falling branches. The storm was a microburst: straight-line winds reached speeds of 70 mph. “Central Park has been devastated,” said Adrian Benepe, then Parks commissioner. “You have personal relationships with certain trees and now they are gone.” “We’re not going to be around in 80 years when they grow back,” said Donna Castellano, director of operations in the cardiology department at Mount Sinai.

The storm destroyed another horse chestnut close to my father’s, yet my father’s tree went unscathed. “It was terrible,” my mother reported to me, “but what a miracle. Nothing happened to dad’s tree. How lucky.” It survived with only a few broken branches. It had earned its remarkableness.

After you watch someone die, an odd minute passes when you are unsure what to do next. It is a minute removed from time’s flow, even though you are very sure of what time it is. After my father died, this happened. The nurses were not yet informed, the hall was silent, it was 11:11 p.m. There was not much for us to do. I did not know whether I was allowed or supposed to touch him. What I did—with the knowledge that one day I would look back, hovering over myself and scrutinizing these actions—was take a penny from my pocket and place it in my father’s hand. This was not easy, place is not the precise verb. I had to uncurl my father’s hand (his right hand, the one that had been paralyzed, though now it made no difference), stick the penny against the palm’s flesh, and then close the hand again. But the penny would not stay put, his hand did not want to clasp it, and so I wedged it in between his index and middle fingers, near the lowest knuckle.
Why I did this puzzles me. I knew it would at the time and I believe that was part of the reason. It was not Charon’s obol exactly—I did not open my father’s mouth and lay the coin on his tongue—but it was an act of superstition. I am not a pagan or a polytheist, I do not believe in Hades or the underworld. I am the son of a scientist. But, all the same, I told my mother as I struggled with his hand, “He might need this.”

I believe now that this was not just superstition, but forgetting. Passage paid for not on Acheron or Styx, but on Lethe. I was, in a way, trying to obscure or distort memory, to make surreal or unreal what I would otherwise have to account for as the truth. I was not being me, but watching myself be me. That bad old habit of pretending you’re a character in a movie: this is one way of dealing with a situation you are unprepared for, to watch what motions you will go through as if from a distance. I watched myself put a penny in my father’s hand because I knew I would later replay that moment and not what happened the minute before. I ran a mile and a half to the Cathedral when I could have taken a cab because it was more cinematic.

I did, in fact, take a cab back. During that ride, I called my girlfriend and told her I would not make my flight to Rome. I asked her, sitting at her desk in Massachusetts, to go online and sign into my email. I gave her my password. I asked her to write an email to the director of my study abroad program informing him of the situation. I asked her to write it pretending to be me. I told her to sign my name at the bottom.

Milton calls Lethe “the wat’ry labyrinth, whereof who drinks, forthwith his former state and being forgets.” I say Lethe because, when I look back upon that day, I see someone other than myself going through those motions. I see someone who, when not eating or sleeping, was wrapped up in the business of being another; who already then was planting a seed to obscure the past; who was busy constructing a labyrinth of oblivion. I see a boy who was prepared to wave happily goodbye to memory and father if it meant circumnavigating the rivers of hate, pain, lamenta-
tion, and rage. I see someone content to lose sight, to let the boat slip into slick, still fog, if all it left him was a penny poorer.

The trees Elmaz Qyra walked underneath were the allées, the American elms of Poet’s Walk that can be purchased for $250,000. “These elms,” the Conservancy writes, “are one of the largest and last remaining stands in North America, and one of the Parks most photographed areas.” It goes on: “They form a cathedral-like canopy above the Park’s widest pedestrian pathway.” The American elm that killed Qyra, the one scheduled to be removed, the one within which a five-foot cavity swelled, was given a special name for the way it always appeared bathed in light. It was called the Ghost Elm.

I called my mother to find out what she inscribed along Poet’s Walk and discovered I had it wrong. She said she did not buy an endowment for a horse chestnut. She wanted to but they had none available. She bought an endowment for an American elm.

Midway through The Aeneid, Aeneas descends to the underworld and reunites with his father Anchises. When the Greeks sacked Troy, Aeneas fled the city carrying his elderly father upon his back. Before he reaches what will become Rome, before even Dido and Carthage, Aeneas lands at the city of Drepanum in Sicily. There, Anchises dies. A year or so later, Aeneas breaks off a golden bough, gives it as a gift to Proserpina, and wins entrance into the underworld. When eventually he finds his father there, he sees a multitude of people drinking from a river and asks Anchises what they are doing. Anchises tells him the following: “They are the souls who are destined for Reincarnation; and now at Lethe’s stream they are drinking the waters that quench man’s troubles, the deep draught of oblivion...They come in crowds to the river Lethe, so that you see, with memory washed out they may revisit the earth above.”

So, you see, I had it backwards. The living do not drink from Lethe; the dead do. It is not my mother and I who drink for oblivion, but my
father. Its waters wash his subterranean roots, wipe out all memories of pain and agony and paralysis and monstrosity, and perhaps, I hope, restore him to balance and peace. A tree that readies itself to grow and survive, to stand in symmetry, to speak in whispers and wind but to speak nonetheless. He would, of course, in his preparation for earthly life, forget all else. He would forget us, his wife and child, he would have to. It would be a fair trade, I think. The most my mother and I could hope for is something animate, something spirited and numinous to pass between us, some flash of sun to glance off the buckeye and catch my mother’s eye at the kitchen window, or some pattern of light and shade to fall across the pages of my book as I sit on a rock underneath my father the remarkable horse chestnut.

But maybe that is not so. Let us pause on that rock, that tree, that American elm that survived one thunderstorm and more to come. Let us stage another cinematic scene. Imagine an incision of more than three to four inches in diameter, imagine a fungus creeping in, imagine decay and rot and the loss of integrity. Imagine the penny was needed, but it fell loose from his hand. Imagine that Lethe was the wrong river all along, that really we the living are still stuck on the Styx or Acheron or Cocytus or Phlegethon, that the waters still bubble with hate and pain and lamentation and rage. Imagine that there is no end to that, no true forgetting, that whatever already happened will continue to gnaw and plague and eat away at me and my father and mother. Imagine that that’s how eternity works. And now, imagine that I have actually come to visit my father’s tree, that I have come to sit on the rock underneath its branches and read a book and occasionally look out at the children playing soccer and, farther away, the large black building where he died. And what if I have it all wrong, what if, just what if, the sound I heard before the branch fell and split open a quarter of my skull was not the boom or crack or thunder or creak others described hearing, but a voice, his voice, his deprived voice, and it was mad as all hell and it said to me, “You motherfucker, you monster, you tried to sleep and eat your way past me, you tried to pretend I wasn’t there, you piece of shit, you stayed away while I was dying, you ingrate, you fuck, you

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ordered Chinese food two hours before my death, you asshole, you masturbator, you were content to let me go if it made your life easier, you selfish son of a bitch, you, you, you, you, you, it’s always about you. But now I’m coming to get you.”