

Pine seed angel: Backyard tidings

by [Gordon Atkinson](#) in the [February 8, 2005](#) issue

When my parents bought their home in Marshall, Texas, in 1984, there were 96 mature trees on their one-acre lot, many of them towering pines that rise 75 feet or more from the ground, covering their house with a peaceful green canopy. These giant pines are beautiful but deadly. Now and then an unbalanced growth pattern or a particularly savage storm disrupts the delicate balance of one of these trees, causing it to topple. The tree leans and the ground bulges. Roots snap with gunshot concussions as the tree begins to fall. It picks up speed as it plummets, stripping branches from its neighbors and crushing everything in its path as it settles violently into its final resting place.

My parents have lost 30 trees like this in 20 years. Two fell at the same time once, crushing their carport. A year later, one struck a glancing blow on the back of the house, destroying power lines and causing minor damage to the roof.

The house has yet to sustain a direct hit, but it seems inevitable, given the number of trees around it. Mother Nature is obviously determined to take back her land. Thankfully, she seems to be in no hurry and is apparently not a very good shot.

I sometimes lay myself down upon my father's manicured grass and gaze with wonder at the tops of these pine trees as they bend and sway in the breeze. There is a deep and powerful groaning when giant trees bend. It is an earth mantra that will drive all but the most jaded of souls into a state of prayer. Lying on your back in a grove of trees is a rare and awe-inspiring pleasure. If anyone asks you why you do this, let that person be to you as a gentile and a tax collector. There's no talking to some people.

I was in this very posture of restful worship when my eye caught a fluttering movement near the top of one of the pines. A weathered cone cracked open in the heat and finally gave up its precious bounty, allowing a single seed to fall. A tiny membrane attached to this seed caused it to whirl in the air like a helicopter, spinning it round and round as it descended from on high like an angel coming down a spiral staircase.

I watched the flight of this seed, charmed and fascinated, until I saw it come to rest on my father's lawn. It struck me as a desperately hopeful gesture. The tight blades of grass prevent these seeds from reaching the soil, and even if one seed did, the weekly visits from my father's lawnmower will not allow baby pines to develop.

The environment at the bottom of this grove is no longer suited for procreation. Gone is the tangled undergrowth that once provided shade. Gone is the bedding of needles that once protected seedlings from the cold. Gone are the trunks of ancient ancestors, decaying slowly into rich and scented mulch. And gone are the saplings that once dotted the ground at the base of these trees in a wonderfully haphazard pattern.

The nursery of the old woods was graded long ago and turned into something pleasing to human eyes. My father's yard is beautiful, but there is a disturbing sterility in the landscaping with its overbearing symmetry, its brick borders, and the "chit, chit, chit" of the sprinklers.

In spite of the hopeless situation below, the trees remain faithful to their calling and fill the air with their spinning angel seeds. Some fall on the driveway and are swept away. Others fall on the asphalt road and die in the shimmering heat. Still others fall on the grass and are shredded and sucked into the lawnmower bag. There seems to be no fertile soil for the seedlings of these ancient and dignified sowers, though their own presence bears witness to a day when the yield was a hundredfold.

Still they launch their floating angels, each one bearing a gospel tiding of hope. The fidelity of these trees to the calling of the Grand Creator stirs my heart and then breaks it.

If things continue in this way, with trees falling every year and none taking root, the day will come when there will be no native-born trees around this house. It will look like the houses in the new subdivisions, with thick grass and store-bought saplings that seem more like pets than trees, utterly dependent on humans for water and fertilizer and with staked cords to hold them erect.

I think the situation seems hopeless for these East Texas pines, but then I see the world with human eyes and a human sense of time. The ancient trees drop their seeds with a detached dignity, apparently unaware and unconcerned about what we humans are doing down below. Trees take the long view. One day we may be gone and the house crushed under the weight of massive trunks. A winged seed may

catch an errant breeze and drift in from a nearby lot to settle into the tattered remnants of one man's lawn. Sheltered by fallen leaves and wind-blown debris, a seedling may sprout, signaling the beginning of something new.

And what of me, the man in the grass at the bottom of the grove, who watches these events with momentary interest before going back inside for a second helping of lunch? What of this man?

I would be faithful like the trees, with a gospel as impossible and hopeful, and a method as childlike and innocent. I would take a long view that is beyond me and outside of my simple vision. I would draw upon the promise of power and renewal that comes with faith and faithfulness and leads me to grace and gracefulness.

I would know my place and my purpose in this world. And knowing would be enough for me.