

The Cottonwood
Cin-Ty Lee, Aug 2010

My favorite tree is the cottonwood,
Populus fremontii, tree of the people,
Yet it lives alone or with a few companions,
The only verdant object in a parched sea of sand and rocks, the desert
For where the cottonwood inhabits
Springs forth life-giving waters from the ground,
Frogs, birds, insects and coyotes abound
The tree too is full of life,
Goldfinches singing, pendulant oriole nests adorning its bows
Each of the thousand, heart-shaped leaves, are so delicately attached
That even the slightest hint of a breeze causes the leaves to tremble in unison,
It's like a soft white noise, a thousand trembling leaves singing a most glorious chorus
The chorus continues, even in the fall, when the leaves drop listlessly to the ground
Generating a puffy, crinkly carpet of leaves
This too sings when the wind blows or a mouse scurries through

But the cottonwood can also be silent
In the late spring, when the cottonwood blossoms,
The tree becomes decorated with fluffy white cottonballs,
Perched silently like a myriad of sentinals, waiting for just the right breeze
And when it comes, these white auras levitate ever so slightly,
Then off they go, like a muffled snowdrift through the desert,
Like an armada of little warships, in search of the next desert oasis to lay seed
How far they go, I don't know

The cottonwood can also take away life,
The unsuspecting cottontail that travels from afar to re-hydrate
Becomes prey to the coyote, the master of all opportunists
Or the ebullient mouse that blew his cover from beneath the leaves
He is mince meat for bubo virginianus, the great horned owl
And when it comes to man, the cottonwood takes just as much it gives
More than treaties are tragic disputes that have taken place under a fully leafed canopy
Was it over the water, the shade, a place for the cattle to range?
Or was it a lover's quarrel or a stand-off between the desperado and the sheriff?
How many battles in the wild wild west has our cottonwood seen?

The next time you look at a cottonwood
Pay close attention to its bark,
Furrowed and ridged, gray and friable
Sad because it's been broken down
Happy because it keeps wonderful company.