

EIGHT MINUTES AND FORTY SIX SECONDS

Howard Faerstein

In the first sixty seconds I kept watch on the towering sugar maple. I counted limbs growing from its trunk and limbs growing from those limbs. I tallied ten.

Then there were all the side branches to add.

Night air outside the open window was cool with a subtle breeze. In that second minute twilight showed the contrasting buff and black of a bobolink's head. I wondered how much bend was left in the bough, how it reached toward the risen moon, how it stretched beyond the roof.

In the third minute I saw palm-shaped leaves lengthening, aphids scaling veins.

I wondered how much rot infested the bole, if carpenter ants tunnelled through the stems.

There was a quickening in the fourth minute. Early May fireflies lit up the street and the multi-lobed leaves began to breathe. The sound was deafening.

In the fifth minute a garter snake coiled around the tree's base then slithered through a thicket of saplings. I saw it flick its forked, black-tipped red tongue.

I saw it retract it.

In the sixth minute a sapsucker began its rhythmic drumming. Loosened bark dropped to the grass. Scolding house wrens rattled when a red-tailed shadow passed over.

In the seventh minute a spider was taken by a sparrow. Wind came up and the maple's dense crown waved like cornstalks. Patches of blue sky slipped like ice through the night.

Then the eighth minute when there were no longer any minutes,
not the minute before or the second after,
not the first spring migrant
not the last blooming aster.

Suffocation.

Nothing o'clock.

For eight minutes and forty six seconds
we watched a man cuffed and pinned to the pavement
repeating over and over *I can't breathe*.

We heard his call for his mama,
the full weight of a cop crushing his neck,
the man's breath extinguished.