
StarTribune Editorial

Our perspective

Star flowers

Abiding the dark, rejoicing in light

A magnolia in Minnesota is an improbability. Spring upon spring, its flowery audacity startles the landscape. Especially in the wake of such a bleak winter, such loveliness is mystifying. How strange to live at a latitude that leaps so quickly from bitter ice to blossom! How remarkable to see a delicate southerner outlast northern tyranny. But here on the tundra, that's how it happens: Winter ends not with a whimper, but with bursts of white laughter.

Do you suppose the magnolia is a Buddhist, or simply an optimist? Impossible to tell, for trees are uninclined to speech. Either way, the magnolia seems to know something human beings strain to grasp: Hard weather happens. Cold and dark, like loss and change, know their way around the world quite well. When they show up for a visit, there's no sense in acting surprised. Better to hunker down, learn the lessons a storm can teach, and contemplate the morrow.

Somehow, this is not the human way. We interpret life's storms as betrayals of life's promise — imagining that the original deal involved a rose garden. We can't get used to Mother Nature's sense of justice — to the way weather and time crash so heedlessly through our lives. Thus no matter how much warning the forecaster grants, we're never quite ready for what's coming. We feel tricked when rough weather descends. Our dreams freeze in mid-plot, and we curse the cold for wrecking the play. We rage against common circumstance — lamenting our ordinary losses as personal affronts.

This isn't at all the magnolian approach — not that the trees are telling. Observation proves the point: As

you wander about town, you'll hear no whining from the star flowers. Their philosophy calls for wordless transcendence — and for blooming where they're planted.

And they're planted in so many unlikely patches: Hidden in a Minneapolis back yard, a grand teenager of a tree has cast off fridity in a storm of 500 blossoms. Rising unceremoniously from a ditch, an ancient magnolian trinity spills its seasonal offerings onto a lonely road. Huddling against a St. Paul rooming house, a forlorn little shrub has mustered just two delicate flowers — each exulting in the implausible made manifest.

Ask the magnolia, or ask the men under the bridge, and they'll tell you the truth: The world dishes out enough ice, wind and cruelty to break every tender branch and every beating heart. And indeed, its perpetual onslaughts leave behind many a snapped limb and mind.

It's the same story year after year, but amazing all the same. Somehow, and more than sometimes, the world's fragile creatures manage to prevail against its harsh winds. Astonishingly often, it seems, life's cold crucible forges remarkable things. From its vessel come prisoners who free their persecutors. Sufferers who become healers. Beleaguered children who grow up wise and strong. Their presence in the world seems so very unlikely — for how can a bitterness leave room for beauty?

There are philosophers who will tell you how, but let them speak another day. In this season, we keep faith with the magnolia — which abides against odds the wintry dark, and proclaims the light with a show-er of stars.