

Trees

a story
by Michael Descy

An old man in my neighborhood locked his backyard behind fences six feet tall. They kept the animals out, including me. He grew trees like you've never seen, supple bodies that blended into many arms, luxuriant with fruit. Oranges dangled like jewels. Oranges like I'd never seen before. Their flesh was the color of blood.

I loved those trees. From my bedroom window I marveled at how the wind shook the red-orange globes as they dangled from their rafters. My mother fretted at my fascination. Guarded by rules and ruled in by fences, those trees stood apart from the oaks and elms populating the rest of my world: there was a point to climbing them. My fingers itched for it.

A great big pine tree stood in front of Cathy's house, right by the road. Cathy's my neighbor. It was her lookout. It was the only tree she could climb. Every afternoon, she parted its skirt and disappeared inside. She clambered up the bones of that tree, up legs and spine, and sat within its rib cage to look out between the folds. She could see everything from there, she told me, encased in the chest of that old tree. Everything.

My brother always took his girl-of-the-week into the old man's orchard. He told me everything he did with them. These days, you wouldn't be impressed. He read them poetry. Blossoms swelled like lips hot from kissing. Petals fell like ashes. Fruit erupted as if inflated by each tree's fingers. Fruit so swollen that, whenever the tree was shaken, their juice dripped, anything but orange. Like human hearts, hung from a woody skeleton, they spilt their secrets. The wind was always blowing.

Cathy. Her parents cannibalized each other with words, shouting as if their house had no windows. I never could figure out how pigtails and summer dresses came from the two-headed monster that birthed her. She sat next to me on the bus each day and didn't speak. Only inside the evergreen was she brave.

My brother sent me on a quest. My labor: to extract a particular item that Agatha—or was it Amanda?—had left in the old man's orchard: her brassiere. He had flung it up into the branches of a tree. Too heavy to climb for it, he boosted me over the fence to retrieve the lace

and spaghetti straps. Once inside, I wrapped my hands around the trunk of a uniquely decorated tree and pulled myself upward. Its limbs shook and leaves shimmered. Juice sprinkled down on me. I plucked the marvel from the leaves: my first bra. My brother's third that month at least. I had never seen one before, at least one that wasn't my mom's. I picked two oranges, one for each cup, and slid down, palms flypaper sticky from the juice. I had to wring out my shirt. I slung the bra over my shoulder and scrambled out.

I walked home as the sun was setting. Voices blew out the windows of the house next door. The trees shook. I pulled an orange from of the bra, peeled it, and listened. I dug my teeth into its flesh. Red juice stained my teeth and streamed down my chin. I listened. The yelps. The screams. Cathy was crying. My ears too were stained. I knew that sound. Anywhere in the neighborhood, you knew that sound and it haunted you like a Siren's scream, every afternoon. You understood even if you didn't really understand. Her parents, deaf from shouting, didn't hear her, didn't hear what I heard amidst them: a third voice, rising like vapor from a cannibal stew—a pot of human hearts put to boil.

Cathy burst out of her house as if she, or it, or everything was on fire. Her house *was* burning down, only with flames, without fire. That's why the wet from her eyes couldn't make it stop. She scrambled through the folds of the pine, and hid inside. She clambered up. Needles scraped her knees, branches scraped her palms, tears scraped her cheeks. Everything was red all over. She climbed into the chest of that tree; I saw its green dress shimmy all the way up.

I stuffed the remainder of my orange into my mouth, and ran to the tree. I looked inside and was showered by needles. She was still climbing, past the chest, into the throat of her tree, where the branches were pencil thin. They broke off in her hands, but she didn't want to stop. My heart leapt. I scrambled up after her, black bark and green quills sticking to my hands. I shouted her name, and she sobbed and lost her footing, sliding down into the pine's hollow chest once more. A heavy rib caught her. Her dress was torn. Her eyes dripped saltwater.

I looked up at her and said her name once more. Cathy. I smiled and held out my hand.

Eyes wide, she looked down on me. Her last tear dropped. It splashed in my face. I handed her the other orange.