

What Makes a Forest

One – Mango

I like to imagine that my grandfather's studio still stands in Samoa. It is hidden away by mango trees in the village of Vaigaga. Smoke exhales from a makeshift ashtray in the corner. Charcoal runs over paper. The lines of the landscapes drawn welcome me in.

The melody that he hums as he works is the same one that my grandmother sings. It swirls on her breath as she hurries about the kitchen, making sure that we have enough to eat. She taught me to cook. What would he have taught me if he could?

Sweetness of mangoes seeps from the wood of the grove. A gentle breeze lifts pages of sketches into the air and watches as they float back down to the floor. Little butterflies. Little charcoal wings of a man's soul.

A pair of glasses rests on his forehead, holding his curls at bay. He pays no mind to the breeze. His teeth press into his bottom lip as he concentrates on his art. There is a gap between his two front teeth that is just like my father's.

I imagine him teaching me how to hold a pencil, laughing as charcoal smudges across my cheek. A childish, comedic attempt to imitate the way he puts his pencil behind his ear when he is thinking. He tells me that there will be days that feel as if all of the mango trees have died. "Some days," he says, "it will be hard to paint the world as beautiful because it will not look that way. You will have to be strong. The beauty will come back."

The voice I give him is full, aged with life and smoke. I would have liked to hear him speak. I would have liked to have heard these things from him, rather than having to find them out on my own. It would've been nice to be prepared for how it would feel, practising drawing churches, not daring to believe in God.

Bittersweet, is my imagined world. It is so golden, so different from my own. There he rests above ground. Here my memory holds him as his life falls like ash through my fingers.

When I draw, I am like him, my father says. The way I hold my pencil, the way I trace the veins of leaves to practise drawing branches. How I have finally mastered the art of sticking a pencil behind my ear without painting my face. My father says that it all reminds him of his dad. I smile when he says such things, even as I suspect he says them just to warm me. “It's okay,” I say. “Even if it’s only because I share his DNA that I sometimes share his image, that’s enough for me.”

When the mangoes I buy from the store come with their leaves still attached, I imagine that he is with me. In Summer, I leave a little slice of fruit outside for the breeze that – in my mind’s eye – frequents grandfather’s studio. This way he too might know the sweet feeling that fills me, thinking of how we are alike in blood and art. The warmth of how he would understand if I were to tell him how tempting it is some days, to pour all of my love into my art and leave nothing for myself, just so that I don’t have to see the bad days.

Two – Pear

I also imagine what my great-grandmother would have understood about my blood, if I had asked her about how it ran through her veins. Perhaps one of the times that I visited her could have held the answer, if I had paid more attention. Every Tuesday I would visit, dissolving into the rosy smell of the house’s soap.

Memories of the place mix with my wonderings. Piles of old newspapers turn into my great-grandmother’s way of keeping words on hand. So that she always had a way to speak when she didn’t have time to wake the breath inside her lungs and call it to swirl through her vocal cords.

Browning newspapers. Glass jars. She never threw anything away. Bottle caps filled old crystal bowls in the liquor cupboard. They would clink when cars drove by too fast. A muffled choir of accidental windchimes sounding from the shelves.

It was years after that I realised – while counting the dates upon her gravestone – that she held things so closely because of the Depression that she had seen following the Second World War. Even in adulthood, she could not shake the idea that another great collapse would leave her

rationing the taste of life. Stealing again from her childhood neighbour's pear tree. Surviving from the fruit's bitter taste.

She was afraid to let life get too close, in case it was snatched away from her again. I would find her courting the sun from a little wooden bench in her backyard. Its light would kiss her skin and warm her for the Summer, but she always left a jacket sitting next to her, as if she expected the sun to suddenly turn to rain.

Cakes in tins lined with thinly sliced pear. Salty liquorice. Coffee and chocolate. The many stomachs that she filled without saving any food for herself.

The first time she saw my hands streaked with green, she asked what trees I was climbing and if the sun could touch me from where I stood in the branches. The second time, I bore the marks of the forest upon my clothes and she asked me if I would bring a pear-tree branch when I next visited. Each time after that the house would smell of pears and rose soap. The scents mixed together into a garden of raw, green life.

To thank me for the branches, she would take me in her arms and hold me tight. Although she never told me so, I could tell that the branches reminded her of the bad times that had gone, and of good times that could not be missed by dwelling on the past. This was important to her. She was forever moving forwards.

The one thing that she did tell me, she told me often, voice deep with the weight of her tongue. "No matter what," she would say, "think of your skin as precious."

At twelve, I asked my mother why Great-grandmother seemed so focused on my body.

My mother's voice was soft as she told me that each wrinkle of my great-grandmother's body had survived the Second World War. She had had to bleach her skin so that she would not be taken away by the German soldiers marching in the marketplace.

I stood in silence for the longest time after hearing this, and felt my skin ache with my great-grandmother's.

Before I knew this, years passed that were full of my shame at carrying such a mix of colour on my skin. Now I am sorry that I ever bore such shame when I should've been carrying pear leaves and holding my great-grandmother's legacy close to me.

She didn't speak about the burning that she sometimes still felt upon her skin.

Silent, her suffering. The gold of her that the war took. Pain. Shame aching on the backs of her hands. The things I wonder. What could she have taught me, were she vulnerable enough to admit the price of her strength?

I cut pears into fine slices in the same way that she showed me. I wonder if she would approve of how I talk about the origins of the gold in my skin. Healing. Sharing. I am so proud of what my body has survived, and I talk openly of the years that it survived my hate, showing how strong my love for it is now. What would she think of that?

Would she be proud of how I, too, get my pears from the neighbourhood tree that grows on land that no man claims? Does the smell of the fruit cooking in my oven reach her? Does she know that I make sure that the slices I bake are shared as far as they can go?

Three – Walnut

A week after I found the neighbourhood pear tree, I was walking with my friend in the damaged parts of our town. The parts of the city that the earthquakes shook. The ground there was cracked from the weight of us, walking in shoes stuffed to the ankles with the detailed plans for every one of our future heartbeats.

Walnut trees grew from the cracks in the pavement. Their roots twisted through the asphalt, forming perfect chairs for our young bodies. We leaned into the tree trunks and stirred the dry grass full of fragmented wooden stars. A little universe of the hours spent teaching my friend how to crush walnut shells without breaking the walnut inside.

My friend offered me the first whole walnut that he opened. I thought – as I held it in my hand – that it was what a heart must look like. (I had recently been told that hearts didn't actually look anything like the red shapes that everybody drew, so I began to think of them as looking like actions as simple as giving without thought of receiving, or sharing a walnut.)

We ended up splitting it, deeming the first one too meaningful for just one person to have.

Our voices could be heard beneath the walnut trees through all of Autumn. Each time that we thought that we were out of walnuts, the leaves above us would whisper and a few more would drop at our feet. The trees inviting us to stay, just a few moments longer. It got to the point where the two of us could be found in the late hours, half asleep, kept safe among knotted roots.

We talked of things that were not as beautiful as the walnuts or the shell-constellations at our feet. Fear. Loss. The first pains that we were experiencing. How metal called to my friend's skin at his lowest moments. How the kiss of it helped him to forget the words his parents screamed at each other in the evenings.

The smoke people used to hide their flaws, making them cough and turn translucent. Our first harshnesses, we bared to each other. The two of us, crying with how deeply we felt things.

We didn't understand that these broken things would not be the last that we found. We didn't understand why anyone would break something as gentle as a walnut – or a heart – if not with the intent to share it with a friend.

Come this year's Autumn, we visit the trees for the first time in a long while. We gather the first walnuts of the season and present them to each other just as we did back then. We remind ourselves that tomorrow, we will be just as whole as we are now. Two halves, holding together, just as we promised that we would.

Four – Willow

Four, maybe five years later, I sit below the willow trees on the riverbank of my hometown. I think of my still unbroken promise made with walnut shells. Friendship. The many different forms that love takes. In my life it first tangles itself in the roots of a walnut tree. Second, it intertwines her hand with mine and smiles as she smiles up at me.

Underneath the willow trees, the two of us lie. She rests in my lap, weaving together fallen branches. I run my fingers through her hair, untangling the truth of us until we are the most simple thing that I have ever known. Suns rise. Rivers run. I hold her. It is nature.

Nature; the wind blowing my whispers through draping willows before reaching her ears. I do not mind. This way, all of the trees know that we are here. Weep as they do, for they can only see her. They can't hold her the way that I do. They can't fight for her the way that I have.

Cold words. Children's eyes, covered by their mothers when she kisses me. Swords wielded by the months that first saw us become lovers. There were so many people who couldn't stand to see us walking hand in hand. It was too different for them.

Their unsure eyes followed us around the supermarket as I held up a bag of apples, saying to her, "Honey. Hey, honey, if I buy some, will you take half?"

Now, following faces smile at the way that I veer off path to admire the flowers I see when I am walking with her. Now, they ache as she pulls me back in, arms around my waist, reminding me that my body could walk into something that hurts if I keep leaving it in the middle of the street like that.

Now, the barista at the local coffee shop has memorised the words I use to double check that the coffee orders have almond milk instead of whole milk. My lover has one of the worst immune systems I have ever seen, but she still comes to sit with me by the river in Spring, so I always buy the coffee when we are out for lunch.

She sneezes twice and laughs at herself before presenting me with her final weaving; a green and yellow crown of willow leaves. Her hands linger on my face when she places it upon my head. I am careful to make sure that the leaves don't poke her in the eye as I lean into her.

She is as sweet as the three extra sachets of sugar that she steals for her coffee order, and she is more beautiful than every sunbeam that has ever had the honour to shine upon her face.

When I fall, I fall for her the same way that the women before us did, whose time did not allow them the freedom of walking in public with their hands clasped. Our grip on each other tightens as we think of this. How lucky we are, to love so openly.

I keep a little notebook of my poems, dedicated by subject – without meaning to – to her. I read them aloud sometimes, so that every past persecuted lover may hear that their legacy is free.

Little ink scrawls. Kisses of pencil lead. The leaves from the crown she made for me, pressed next to the first poem that I ever wrote for her.

Five – Maple

For now, maple is the last of the trees that I hold within me. Its wood makes the surface of my writing desk. Rings of its life hold the marks of my first words, scratched into the desk while I was still learning to write. Letters first run crooked, like a creek through the mountains, then straight as a river running into the arms of the sea.

Many different days watch me run my hands over the markings and hear me wonder how my younger self would feel about me now, as well as all of the stories that I hold.

Sweet syrup, rising from the wood of the desk. Ink spills and little pencil lines. If the maple keeps its honeyed soul – its red-brown glow – after the day that it is cut, maybe I can keep mine too.

One, mango. Two, pear. Three, walnut. Four, willow. Five, maple.
Five trees for an artist who carries herself with pride. Five trees for a lover and a writer who hopes. Five trees to carry the stories that I have heard and the echoes of the lives my blood has lived before it reached me. Five trees to make my forest.

Maple; how I write each breath down. The words of me.

Mango; my art. How I am learning to find the balance between the sweetness in the world and the emptiness of the space where life should be. The people that have held me. Those that I miss, and those that I will meet.

My hope for better days, kept safe inside a walnut shell. My pride; the tallest branches of a pear tree. Reminding me how to care for myself, showing me how to be unashamed by the beating of my heart.

The willow, always, is my love. It grows on the banks of my blood stream, weaving through my bones, holding me up. With its embrace, the forest inside me comes to life.