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Body of Bark

Caroline Harvey

This is the body I live in. My skin, the smooth bark stretching over bones that grow and break and heal and grow.

This mouth and tongue, the rattle of leaves that warn of storm and wind, my voice calling out into the middle of the night blue air of summer, shouting into the cold brittle of winter when the silence is as loud as grief.

We did not ask to be born, to be these animals of industry, but here we are. The earth did not beg for us to stand here, to dig our feet into the dirt, but this is where we become, where we build our brick houses, child after child, our families growing, breaking, healing. The beech tree in upstate New York

that looms over the sledding hill of my childhood home, it did not ask for me to climb it. But I did. That smooth grey bark, how it shined luminescent in my favorite dusk light, how when I tried to sleep its leaves would sound their shimmer like the sweet sirens of seductive legend. How it called to me, tempting me out into the starlit night

of deep purple August, how in my bare feet and hand-me-down T-shirts I would strut like a quick and quiet peacock, scamper to the top of the hill and find her—this beech tree—unafraid of the shadows. So sturdy. So grounded and still in contrast to the inside ocean of my own turmoil. I knew her knots in the dark, would hook my tiny pink hand

onto that first hitch in her trunk, swing my right leg over the low branch, then my left foot finds that one irregular notch,

and I pull myself higher, and then higher again, until I can lay my
body out flat, my toes dangling over the side and
combing the air, my head a pile of wild hair nestled into the
fork where she spreads out

underneath me, wide as a bed fit for a god. These are the moments we adore:
the trees we climbed, the mud pies we made for the mothers
who tolerated our follies, the flowers that amazed us, the moon that
never abandoned. These are the moments
when we do not feel ourselves as separate from the land, when nature
swallows us whole and we can revel

in our smallness, in our indisputable, bone-deep connection to the places
we call home. And now, how to grow up into cities? How to
strap our feet into shoes and strut, not to the climbing trees, but to the office,
to the computer screens, to the briefcases and to the
four-door sedans that carry us so swiftly over the dirt that we can no longer
feel the cool stones we once so fully loved.

But look again at your mouth. Tell me it is not still filled with beech leaves,
Tell me that your skin is not still the glow of sun's dusktime fade.
That your carefully chosen grown-up words are not still, sometimes, just the
shimmer of a branch in spring. We cannot pretend,
even though we move with radical and fumbling urban speed, that our bodies
are not still made of bark.

So we are called
called
to the work:
to the work of the growth and the break
and the heal and the growth and the break
we are called
to the trees, to the trails
to the break and the break and the healing
to the Big Sur cliffs, to the Massachusetts mountains
to the Guatemalan volcanoes
to the growth, to the break, to the healing
to the rivers in Thailand

the glaciers, to the ice, to the breaks,
to the temples in India
we are called
to the heal
to the places where the dirt knows us by name
where we can dig our feet in
and sweat through one more season
of heal, of growth
of change.

Once, in the winter, home for a holiday, I hiked through the snow
to that shining beech tree. I was young. I felt
daring. The sun was bright in the noontime sky and I launched myself onto
a newer, slimmer branch. I will not ever
shake off the sound of that limb cracking. How in my foolishness,
the tree that I loved

split in two. I clamored to keep my body from tumbling to the ground, but
watched the poof of powder as that splintered branch
settled into the snow beneath me. How I mourned for that branch. Felt the
guilt grow in my body like a weed. My sister told me then
how the strength of things changes over time, how in the cold
of winter's grief

the tree holds less water, and therefore less resilience. We tried
to fuse it together using rope and duct tape.
All afternoon we tried to give the tree back its broken arm. We failed,
but we were better for the trying, better
for the knowing that sometimes even the things we most love
break.

I haven't been to that house in five years, haven't climbed that beech in ten,
but last month my mother sent me a photo.
The beech leaves blooming huge in the ripe beginning of spring. The light,
just how I remember it: a little bit of silver
and a dash of gold, the ground not quite green, but trying,
becoming, almost, again.

I cannot see in the photo how the broken limb healed, if it grew again, or if it rotted
and fell. But in the morning, dressing myself for the work of living this
adult life, buttoning down my collar and pouring myself into
slacks the color of duct tape, I try and remember to feel
that cool bark stretching itself across
these small hands
these tiny hands
that refuse
to quit.

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