

The Blood Tree by Aimee Parkison

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Opening the bedroom window overlooking the garden, Raymond finds floodlight dahlias sweating in the monkey grass, shaggy petals hit by heavy rain. Their battered heads fall, childlike in the mist, leaning down to the ground as if in sleep or shame.

Bats have been flying round the flowers, he thinks, returning to bed and to his sleeping wife, Silvia. Gently, he pulls the sheet over her shoulders and settles into her warmth.

He wakes to find the bedroom faintly lit by moonlight, and Silvia gone. She's nowhere in the house.

Near midnight in pouring rain he drives with the brights on through the windy neighborhood. Silvia walks barefoot in her dripping nightgown in the middle of the street. Headlights fall on her, and she shields her face. He jumps out of the driver's seat and pulls her into the sedan.

Silvia has been sleepwalking ever since her sister Ashley died.

When she wasn't researching, Ashley lectured on the way trees keep people alive by absorbing and storing carbon dioxide. A biologist studying deforestation, erosion, and greenhouse gasses, Ashley left the United States on a green grant to collect soil, water, and air samples in Central and South America, western and Central Africa, western India, Southeast Asia, and the island of New Guinea. Ashley had disappeared in Australia, and was presumed dead.

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Silvia stopped sleeping. After laying awake one night, she ventured into the dark backyard at sunrise and encountered a sculpted body of branches in bloom, spun with honeysuckle, behind the shed: a masculine head carved of curious mist crowned by yellow dahlias, hands of lilies with metallic green hummingbirds flitting over fingertips of fungi.

Like a man, it was walking behind the neighbor's shed in the shadow of white figs.

The figure caught Silvia, held her down, and kissed her sharply with a thorny tongue that placed a seed inside her mouth. It held her mouth shut until she swallowed the seed. Or so Silvia said, pointing to the backyard outside the kitchen window.

"That's where he disappeared, into dahlias, to become a pile of yard cuttings."

"He?" Raymond said. "This was a dream. You finally fell asleep. You were sleepwalking because of those sleeping pills. They're dangerous, honey."

"It was a man," said Silvia. "I cut him with the clippers, and watched his branches bleed."

"Stop taking those damn pills."

According to Silvia, the man's body was a tree and his hair was vine. He called to her at night, pulling her out of her dreams, leading her deeper into leaves. His eyes were locusts, his face webbed.

He kissed her, filling her mouth with flowers before whispering, *Ashley?*

* * *

In Sylvia's bruises, splashed over her pale flesh like sooty water, Raymond spies two girls. Sisters. The bruises color as she heals, black to blue to violet to burgundy to grayish pink to light green and brownish yellow, finally fading in long thin scratches, like claw marks scoring her arms and legs.

Wine-colored twigs sprout from Silvia's arms as he plucks weeds from her back.

Silvia kisses Raymond deeply, and his mouth fills with petals.

* * *

"This is where," Silvia says, pointing to an abrasion on her left shoulder where lichen grows. "It aches."

Bruises peel away from Silvia's skin and fall as leaves fluttering down to the hardwood.

"Killing trees poisons the air," she whispers, breathing honeysuckle into Raymond's mouth.

On the television screen, Ashely clings to the glass podium like a lover:
Clearcutting is mass murder, but from the moment of the murderous act, it takes decades for the deaths to happen. Everyone in our time is passively participating. Through global warming, we're all serial killers.

Raymond wonders if it could be true, if deforestation murders people he'll never meet. If the victims live in a future he'll never see and die in the future because of trees cut down today.

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Silvia coughs white petals while disguising herself in dirt and shadow. Somnambulism, that lovely, soft word, captures nothing of its danger. Noctambulism is better. The doctors say Silvia is merely sleepwalking. Raymond wants to watch her day and night, but he has to work during the day and sleep at night.

That's why he ties her to the bedposts with a long rope binding her wrists and ankles.

"Gentle," Silvia says, "but not too gentle."

* * *

Finding her gone, her side of the bed empty and warm near untied ropes, he rushes out barefoot in the torrential rain and runs through dark streets before realizing he needs to circle back for the sedan.

Out of breath after starting the sedan, he notices the flower garden in his headlights. Light pools over Silvia's naked body.

Crushing dahlias, she's sleeping drenched, surrounded by dragonflies and mint. By dawn's first light Raymond digs her legs out of the garden. He plucks her arms like

pulling a large plant from the dirt. Toes plunging deeply into wet sod like roots, her fingers clutch earth, as if burying herself. As if the Earth doesn't want to give her up.

Prying her from the dirt, he carries her through the yard.

Blood-blotched dahlias straighten in mist as he stumbles under her weight. Swatting circling insects, Raymond cradles her nakedness. A faint whiff of skunk drifts toward aggressive mint blossoming in Silvia's hair, attracting hordes of bees, butterflies. Sylvia opens her mouth; black swallowtails sail through, wings splashed in midnight blue.

Pollinators light on her nipples, which smell of giant flowers. Wasps swarm.

In the house, Raymond closes all the windows and locks her in the bedroom to protect her from insects. With a tiny flashlight, he examines the bruises blooming in black dahlias on her pale arms and discovers weeds growing from her armpits. Her bruises now have new shapes, patterns of blood evolving into a face imprinted on a tree.

* * *

The next night Raymond finds Silvia walking down the dark cul-de-sac near greenspace. She clings to saplings in the nude. The night after he finds her on an overpass in her gown, walking so close to the edge of the tree line. He wants to call to her, to scream her name. He remembers not to yell or wake her. If startled, she might fall into traffic.

Moths flex their wings around her eyes.

She darts under the railroad bridge where fire pits glow. Among the oaks, she crawls into tree-hidden caravans. Enormous webs sparkle in distant streetlight. Beneath silver maples, a man's shadow becomes the shadow of branches in the darkness.

* * *

Because Silvia hasn't slept for days, she must sleep now that she has taken her pills. Her dark hair springs from the pillow like an unruly bush. Raymond covers

her nakedness with a soft pink blanket. She's sticky and smells of sap. A tiny twig sprouts from the hairs of her left nostril. He attempts to remove the twig deep inside her nose. Seeds drop from her hands. Pollen clings to her fingernails etched in leafy veins.

* * *

Caught in motion-sensor lights outside the bedroom window, the porch swing sways near the sedan as if someone has been sitting there. It's like a game — someone is there, someone Raymond can't see, waiting beyond his field of vision.

Inside the bedroom where Silvia is sleeping, a willowy shadow in the mirror travels among silhouettes of chairs, lamps, and tables. Blood trails from the kitchen to Silvia on the bed near rust-colored stains.

In the bathroom, Raymond showers, wraps a thick towel around his waist, and then stumbles into the kitchen. He takes stock of the recent remodeling as he brews a pot of strong coffee. Stainless steel appliances, ceramic tile flooring, granite countertops, everything Silvia wanted has been splashed with blood. Reaching for bleach and paper towels, Raymond stares at the coffeemaker, which hisses.

As he watches coffee drip, he thinks of the way Silvia used to nestle beside him.

Pale light rises behind the pines, clouds whitening sky. Raymond sits on his back porch as sunlight gleams over the aluminum carport. He imagines Silvia's dark curls rooting across the embroidered pillowcase, pink threads silken. The yard flutters with birds, opossums watching from oaks below a nest of squirrels circling, chasing each other across the bark. Behind the pines, power lines cut through greenspace behind the cyclone fence.

* * *

The next evening at the neighborhood watch meeting a cop lectures on safety. The cop tells everyone to keep their eyes peeled, to look out for anyone who isn't where they are supposed to be.

Raymond thinks of Silvia peeling the lids away from her eyes. He feels unnerved and leaves the meeting early to examine a place in his backyard where two fig trees grow close together, easy for a man to hide behind in the dark.

Approaching his house from the back, Raymond creeps like a trespasser to gaze at Silvia through the bedroom window. Inside, Silvia brushes songbirds out of her long black hair. Dragonflies mate in tandem above Silvia's unruly curls. She tears from her scalp tangles and hunks of hair, snagged on long vines.

* * *

"Figs," Raymond whispers the next day when trying to think of an excuse to inspect his backyard and the neighbor's yard by morning light. Only last week, his nearest neighbor, an elderly retired teacher, showed him her gun collection as she rocked on her porch swing with seventeen-year locusts buzzing near her roses.

Gazing out at the fig trees, Raymond wonders about the animals living in the branches at the end of summer. He's trying not to think about what Silvia confessed about the man who waits for her where the fig trees grow.

The trees are alive with animals shacking up in the heavy branches, ravaging delicate fruit hidden behind dark leaves. Birds shake the trees. Leaping and diving, they make the leaves shiver and dance. Raymond imagines what hides in the shadows of the branches fed by fruit ripening in the sun.

Mint flowers in the garden, aggressive weeds taking over; bees swarm the swallowtails, black and yellow. The floodlight dahlias mix into roses near blackberries and grapes.

Crows light on the roofs of the storage buildings and dive into the leaves of the fig trees. This is how Raymond knows the figs are ready for Silvia. She craves figs a certain way — mature, ripe.

A white radiator sits abandoned near the fig trees. Raymond approaches the radiator. He wonders what it's doing there, ruined by rain and covered in a spatter of rust like dried blood.

He reaches for the figs. He fills his hands with figs. He will feed them to her.

The figs are so fragile they split and drip all over the carpet when pinched by her gritty lips.

Raymond loves the fragility, watching Silvia's brittle nose grow sticky with her smile. As delicate as she appears, he understands that she will never again be like other women.

Her future ends in a grove, not a grave. Her heart is heartwood. The boughs of her arms house butterflies. Roots from her hips, a lengthy taupe skirt trailing her ankles, pull water to her trunk.

Silvia feeds wildlife the fruits of her body. Her flowers, pollinated by wind, are covered by tufts of stiff hair. Globe-shaped blossoms, her sensitive breasts swell as nutlets mature inside her.

If Silvia is becoming the thing her sister died to save, Raymond wonders how long she can remain in bloom.

She is cherry tree and hawthorn, a nesting site for birds, a woman of dark red fruits ripening on the zigzagging stems of her ribs. She branches with blossoms, her floral scent filling their house, swelling with bees, birds, fireflies, and butterflies.

Her arms grow through the windows, and Raymond counts the dragonflies as friends. He kisses her often, and with every kiss he becomes further entangled in the sunlit canopy of her hair.

Between her legs, olives grow, ripening from green to black to brown.

"The blood tree is real," says Silvia as she feeds Raymond. "Ashley sent its seeds to me, and I swallowed them."

Raymond often stays up at night, listening to Ashley's podcasts. Even after her death, Ashley is still teaching people how plants keep people alive.

Deforestation is mass suicide. Violence against nature is violence against people.

Raymond wonders if Ashley went somewhere she wasn't supposed to go, following paths through dense forests until they ended. Before Ashley

disappeared, she theorized the forest's struggle for survival would become the world's struggle.

In a podcast shortly before her disappearance, Ashley relates a dream, inspired by folktales, in which she discovered a tree that bled human blood in the Congo, where she was courted in the forest by a man whose body was a tree and whose hair was vine.

Searchers in the Congo found leopards, and buzzards scattering remains camouflaged in wild flowers blooming near a stream. The decayed body, nude, devoured by insects, no longer resembled a woman.

"Ashley invited this," whispers Silvia, her breath mist.

Silvia's wet mouth is like a flowerpot busted in the rain, dripping moistened dirt onto the figs in his fingers. Her thorny tongue grates against earthworms, writhing behind muddy brown teeth, to reveal a tiny seedling growing inside her throat.

Raymond sees the man of branches in the trees of the backyard. His hands of honeysuckle bejeweled with metallic green hummingbirds.

Raymond envisions predators and insects. Somewhere in the trees, flowers bloom near a clear stream carrying strands of Ashley's hair.

Raymond longs to see the blood tree.

"Where is it?" he says, losing patience.

"Look," she says. "Come here. Get closer."

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The Brother

Freeze

Chung decided to get lost, and not because his mother had told him to, though she had, and not because his sister had given him that look. *Leave while you can.*

He took Roach Street north. Turned east on Republic. No one but he walked these sidewalks. Cars slowed as they passed, concerned for him. Maybe. Maybe they figured he was crazy, going out in temperatures like this.

Winter Weather Advisory, the TV had shushed under his sister's howl. Snow showers expected, windchills nearing zero. But the apartment had become its own furnace, spouting soot and burning his eyes and nose. His sister's breath became thick with smoke when she got angry or anxious or tired or felt any major emotion other than joy, which was rare. She liked to pretend she had it under control, that her emissions were intentional, but he knew better.

Republic Avenue met Ohio Street and Chung knew unmarked territory awaited him. He walked often but had never passed Ohio before. Here lay the houses of respectable people. No apartments. No dumpsters overflowing with his and his neighbors' lives, open to the public eye. Here lay privacy, where his mother and

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sister's screams were for their ears only. No concerned or irritated or fed-up neighbors knocking on your door.

Ice blanketed the sidewalks and so he took to the street. A stray cat skittered across its surface twenty feet off, ears flat, muscles trembling in flight. "Take cover when the animals take theirs," his mother would warn. "They're wiser than you'll ever be."

Still, Chung didn't turn back. He followed Republic to Faith Drive, spotted a park in the distance, its stunted oaks and sun-grayed play equipment stunning against the unburdening sky. Snow melted into the knitting of his hat, collected on the smooth polyester of his coat. He could stay here a while, really let the freeze cut into him. When he got this cold, he was reminded of the lake where he and his sister almost drowned a few years back. How after such a short time his body felt in sync with the water's rolling, his blood matched in temperature with the water. He hadn't felt a harmony so clean since.

A plastic bag wafted past him, flying higher as it moved away from him. The wind carried it across the short field of the park, over the levee. Chung followed it.

On the levee's graveled top, he spied a stretch of trees a baseball field away. The bag caught in a low-hanging branch, and when Chung approached, its metered snap rasped in Morse code, or so Chung thought. *D-O-O-R*. Like his sister and his

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mother and her mother before her, he knew that some beacons must be recognized.

That couriers of better truths came in unexpected forms.

Snow dusted the treeline and in its serpentine crawl, Chung discovered a river lazing behind it. He crossed the crunching grass, found a trail down to the bank, muddied from overuse. Across the landing lay discarded packs of cigarettes, frosted beer cans, and the slick, gaudy wrappers of condoms, whose use he'd begun to contemplate more and more. He cleared himself a spot, felt the chill of the earth against his legs as he sat down. Ice had frozen over the surface of the river, leaving only the edges free and coiling amidst the disruption.

The lake. The sinking. How time slowed when he and his sister were under. His sister's smoke had come soon after, and he—he had come up altered, too. The smallest trouble floored him, stripped his vision, and contorted him. Where his sister had gained in strength, he floundered. Often, he wondered if deep inside him some yet unseen power waited—would make him more than his current useless self. If not smoke, why not an ability to breathe underwater? Why not a core of ice to tame his sister's fire? But no. If anything, he had been hollowed out by the near-drowning, a void that grew over time, that had to be crammed full or otherwise capped if he was to be of any use to anyone.

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Though he had ventured out in all the wintry clothing he owned, his toes numbed in his boots and his fingers stuck together. His breath came as white spears, falling on the hard-packed ground. A fox watched him from across the river. A whistling wound through the trees and reminded him of his mother and sister.

Not so long ago, when Chung was alone in the apartment, his mother at her small auto-dealership job, and his sister roaming the country with her new friends, Amy and June, he had flipped through his sister's magazines, secret, coveted each impressionable page. Didn't mind the grease of his fingers leaving their marks. Didn't care for the makeup tutorials or the *Which Season Are You?* quizzes. He ran his thumb over the shirtless, beachy photos of Matthew McConaugheys and Nick Carters. He pictured the carving of their cheekbones, their sweat-shorn foreheads cast under the golden light of his tiny bedroom. But then the rounded eye of a front-facing Channing Tatum broke him out of his reverie, his gaze too direct. Living. And so Chung flipped five, ten pages down, until he found a story framed by illustrations of ice-melt-skinned blond-haired men and women and children in swimsuits against a snow-washed sky. They leapt, suspended mid-air, a black pool of water reeling below their feet. *Polar Plunge Keeps You Healthy and Young*, a garish title claimed. Apparently, Norwegians and Scandinavians practiced polar

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plunges—jumping into icy waters following exercise or the sauna—for centuries in order to rejuvenate their muscles, promote circulation, and, potentially, improve their immune systems. The language of the article proved hyperbolic, and its quotes mostly came from Northeasterners who claimed *a better connection to their European roots* after participating in the plunges. On the last page of the article, a photo splayed Russian citizens, cast in stark blacks and whites, facing down a cross carved out of a frozen lake. Apparently, Russians too, partook in plunges, though they did it, reportedly, for Jesus—to celebrate the Epiphany. To honor the cathartic power of water.

The ice-carved cross came to Chung's mind now, peering down the rigid face of the river. Yes. He needed a reset. An awakening of his own cast his blood to boil, his heart to shivering. Chung stepped forward, toes inches from the water.

As if responding to his movement, suddenly, the water ceased its churning. Thickened to ice.

Wonder, Heat, frustration, rose to Chung's cheeks. He bent down, picked up a rock, raised it up, up high and threw it down with all his twelve-year-old might.

The rock bounced, skidded five, ten feet downstream.

Chung's breaths caught in his throat, usually a signal that his blackouts, his flailings, were minutes, seconds away. He held his breath, knelt to remove his

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shoes and socks. He stripped his pants and coat and shirts and knit hat. So agitated was his body that the cold kept its distance.

He stepped, gingerly at first, for he didn't really believe in the river's rebellion. He ventured to the river's center, toes neither losing color nor melting the partition denying him entry. When the ice grew utterly unrelenting, thick as limestone, Chung jumped, kicked his knees to his chest, stuck out his fists, arms to wings, and pounded his bare feet and all the weight of his slim body into the ice.

Nothing.

He raised his leg, as he had done in Tae Kwon Do all those years ago, and beat the ice with the heel of his foot.

Nothing.

He was stomping, thrashing, wild, when he noticed the snow-misted fox approach from the side. He paused, felt, finally, the thundering in his chest and head, the lift of his oxygen-loaded brain. He watched the fox, its little claws kissing the ice, its back arching playfully before, with too knowing a gaze, it sank to its back, stomach to sky, languid tongue to cheek.

Chung thought to pet it or pick it up or mirror its prone posture, an offering, but before he could, his muscles strained, throat closed, vision clouded, and all that white fell to black.