Harvest Time

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The willow at one end of the yard, my younger brother and me at the other end. It was huge and old, a towering cathedral of rotten limbs. Bent, naked black branches creaked, shifted, and an old crow flapped at us from within. The grass was littered with fallen branches and they crunched under our feet as we got close with our saws and hatchets and clippers. There were sprouts all over it, exploding out from the trunk as sickly yellowish suckers with odd misshapen leaves. I clipped those away first to get us closer to the tree. The sky was all clear, but slow contrails bloomed like feathers. My bro worked on the old garbage can, set on cinderblocks in the center of the yard and made a deep sienna with rust and heat. He stuffed in fistfuls of branches, crunched them up into small fistfuls, then sprayed lighter fluid all over and flipped in matches methodically. I snipped away at the suckers, adjusting my gloves for a better grip and smiling into the upper branches. You’re next, I mouthed. The tree was full of bugs. The leaves were covered with tiny beetles that smeared apart into purple stains when I brushed them off my arms. Dad was inside, waiting silently, or watching TV, and he wouldn’t say anything to us. I’d wanted to take the tree down for a long time. It was dangerous, the bigger branches, the thick arms could snap off in a storm and land on a car or bust a window. Old crows liked to gather in them, in the branches, to squawk at us and shit vile-smelling shit on the flowers. It had to go.

My bro came over, framed against the blazing fire with an ax in hand, his shirt bulging oddly with new muscles. I smiled at that. Up the tree you big monkey, I said and he grinned, scampering up nimbly. I handed up the hacksaw and he set to work on a long limb near the bottom. Flakes of sawdust drifted on my head as I cleared the suckers and piled them all together like a discarded hula skirt near the can. The bottom of the tree was naked, all stubbly with the sucker ends bright green and sappy. I stood on an exposed root and peered at my bro’s
feet. His hands and face were invisible in the clouds of dust and green leaves. The saw squeaked and blurred above. I set to work on the trunk using the hatchet, skinning away the bark. The tree was a shiny gray underneath, all rippled and smooth. I pulled off my gloves and touched it.

I felt watched and glanced back over the hatchet blade to the window and caught a face. He pulled back quick and I smiled. The tree was an old thing between us. He wouldn't say a word. Always silent. Like when he shot my dog. Oh, she was old, though, so old and sick. He didn't say that, I just thought of it afterwards, of why he did it. Later I figured she was an inconvenience to him, a nuisance, sick and strange.

It took me a year to come back, but when I did, my brother was there waiting on the steps out front. Do you ever feel the world reflects from us? he had asked. Like the sky, showing us how we feel sometimes. No, I said, the sky is an ocean flowing above and our reflections are dim in the volume. What? he said.

I made him carry the rest of the luggage into the house. Load up the pack mule, I yelled. Yes massah, he grinned. My brother was just my shadow self, to go where I go, move as I move, only slower and at a distance.

When we were kids, Dad had sat out there on the steps in front of the house. He didn't go out to read, like I did, but just to be alone and quiet. He would stare up at the sky, for hours just stare, especially at clouds, not moving. He didn't do that much anymore. This view of the sky was all that remained, with cumulonimbus clouds like shells spread over the horizon.

The can blazing and my bro taking five in the shade. I went inside, daring him to speak, to utter a syllable and I would vent all I had, give him a year, a monologue to spew forth, but he sat still, hunched forward in his chair, and as I walked behind him I was a little astonished at how gray he was. I splashed cold water on, down my shirt, over my eyes, and choked drinking it, sputtering.

Back out in the yard, I fed the can, smashing it down and in with a sooty branch because it was too hot to get near now. I spit on the rusty, dented inside and it sizzled. I moved under the willow again and closed my eyes, tilting
my head back, and when I opened them, a sudden mass of green fell down.
Bombs away! he shouted from above.

You gonna help? he asked. What's help, what's the definition of help?
I asked. I sawed at a branch. There were termites in there and they spilled out
around the saw in a liquid white stream of scrambling life. My brother hacked
at them, but I pushed him away and observed them closely. They only want to
know why their houses are exploding, I said. Fuck that, he said and ran inside
for bug killer. I flicked them off my arms curiously, giving flight to wood
eaters. No more sweet pulp to digest. The branch came apart as he sprayed and
they burst out of one end, scattering on the yard. Bro took the branch and set
the termite end over the can and they sounded like popcorn, very tiny popcorn.

The sun was getting low. I could feel the cicadas buzzing in my head.

He just went down and shot her. We never discussed it, no talk. Words confuse
and cover up, they obfuscate, my professors said. They darken.

The branches snapped cleanly, easily. Crows circled overhead, but we waved
them off and chucked bits of bark skyward. I looked at him slowly. The tree
was losing its shape. The upper limbs gave way with pressure.

The neighbors were all pressed to glass or inches away from dialing the
fire marshal. We talked loudly for their benefit. When a good branch came off
he yelled, Cheerios! Wasps butted at my head in confusion, sleepy from the
smoke. I peeled down to shorts, throwing clothes messily. We hacked at it
clumsily with the hatchet, sweating so big drops plopped off our eyebrows, but
the trunk was too thick for us. The fire was getting low and the branches were
slimy with rot now and would only smoke. The sun was a perfect ball, balanced
on the end of a tree branch.

There were some books inside, old things, dusty on the shelves. I mentioned
this offhand to him and we moved inside together, pushing each other to get at
them. Dad creaked stealthily, soft footed and still in pajamas. We plundered the
bookshelves, I piled them up in my brother's arms, laughing as he disappeared
behind a skyscraper of words. He staggered out with his load, spilling tomes in
transit. I heaped my own arms with forgotten stories and didn’t wait for him to return. I pressed the books to my bare chest and seized their crimped spines in one hand. They burned well, nice bricks, carefully arranged in an ascending spiral out of the can. The neighbors leaned forward as crispy pages floated high. They were rising at last. We felt the silence then, felt the silent years push close.

I felt him at the window again, his silence pressing in pale measures. I looked at him, at my brother. I saw him again, walking by my door, gun on one long shoulder, almost whistling in completion of a simple task. I could still feel the slick bag we buried her in. How silent she was then. I looked at him, over the flames, in the dusk. Mosquitoes were finding us, even with the smoke and heat. We watched each other silently for minutes until I couldn’t find anything to say, or remember what I wanted to tell him.

We blinked in confirmation. We gestured in silence, the flick of a finger, a twitch to signal readiness. He did not protest as we gathered him up. He did not look at us or at anything. He was slight, much removed from himself. No longer a giant, but a child, cradled between us now. We gathered him up carefully, all cool in grays and carried him outside, into the failing light. The sky was diluted, pushed back, and the neighbors were out now, appearing at last all around us. We stood near the fire and together we folded him, breaking and snapping rottenly, his arms turning inward so his shrunken hands balled into the armpits and his spine crunched loudly but quick and he kept watching the vanished light and only gasped a little at that and his legs bent over behind his back and we stuffed him into the can and jumped away at the flames snapping hungrily. We all gathered around the fire, with the willow wrecked behind. I couldn’t see his face, it was hidden behind his pushed up hips, but I watched the golden sparks race around in his arms, seeking out every bit to burn. I felt the night get still as he reduced. The color gathered here with us, in a too bright orange on our faces.

We gathered round the fire as night rose, and staring at the fire, at the fallen sun beyond that, we felt this final heat, and this lovely light. And I felt all the old crows gathering in me.