

Memoir excerpt:
"The Tree"
by Monica DiGiovanni
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MILKWEED by James Wright

*While I stood here, in the open, lost in myself,
I must have looked a long time
Down the corn rows, beyond grass,
The small house,
White walls, animals lumbering toward the barn.
I look down now. It is all changed.
Whatever it was I lost, whatever I wept for
Was a wild, gentle thing, the small dark eyes
Loving me in secret.
It is here. At a touch of my hand,
The air fills with delicate creatures
From the other world.*

Because our street was the perimeter of the suburban development I grew up on, the house I lived in faced an empty lot that opened away from my house to relatively untouched land. Often the trance of my fenced universe would find me wandering across the street, over there, as if being called or pulled. The unbuilt lot began with a narrow edge of sumac and poke, and opened into a small field that led to a dank marshy area among coniferous trees. My adventures started once my sneakered feet left the pavement of the road dividing my family containment to the wildness. From there, curiosity leading the way, I would head straight for the giant pine tree, the swamp or, simply follow the pulses of whatever shift of nature was the most compelling.

There was a large chestnut tree at the front of the lot. In late summer as I crossed the street I would pause to gather enough of the bruised, hard, green nuts to crack them open with rocks, attempting to harvest something I knew to be edible inside. I had no idea what to do with it or knew anyone else who would know what to do with it. Sitting in the

street with rocks, working hard to smash through the green hull then the smooth, brown shell to access the tender fruit would take some time. Once to the source I would persist in disengaging the not quite ripe, uncooked meat to turn it between my child's hands thinking of ancient Indian cultures who knew what to do with it. I even went so far as to bite into a nut or two hoping for the satisfaction that comes from a fresh-off-the-tree apple in autumn then stare at it blankly not knowing what to do next and so would discard my experiment of pummeled potentiality where it was.

A few feet in at the edge of the lot in late summer there were also pokeroot bushes with ripe berries that I knew to be poisonous. Still I would pick them, smearing toxic purple juice on clothes and staining my fingers. The berries have a particular plumpness and smooth, taught skin. When pressed gently between two small fingers the flesh of the fruit would be near to bursting with a rubbery satisfaction. Of course sometimes, pressing too firmly, a berry would burst leaving splashes of juice across my cheek so that when I went home my mother, looking quickly, thought I was bleeding.

Beyond this first row of denser growth the field opened up to patches of brambles, blue chicory, goldenrod and tall brown grasses. When the winds were still the grasses propelled from the earth like free-standing cat whiskers. When captured by a gentle breeze they moved the sound of playful whispers inside me, calls to notice the seed heads hidden inside cupped, rigidly edged leaves. As I ran thumb and forefinger along the length of a stalk, I risked tiny lacerations to connect with the feeling that something so sweet smelling and soothing to be near could also be dangerous to touch. If I passed through the field too quickly I would sometimes endure shallow cuts along my legs and arms as if offending the head-high billowing ecru fronds. In mid-summer I'd carefully

peel back the first sheathing leaves of the stalks and pluck the seed heads for a nibble setting free the milky sap within.

Among these gatherings of quietly bristling, languid tendrils the insects, small rodents and small birds swiftly browsed and co-habitated with the milkweed. Also producing a milky sap, the milkweed with proud stalks and lazy pale red-purple flowers in late spring, tiny pods in early summer, larger pods in mid-summer and finally in early fall the dry husks setting free the snowy puff-tailed seeds. These I would collect and use as stuffing for doll pillows for my elderly neighbor's ongoing dollhouse project even though I didn't play with dolls and oddly, my neighbor and his wife didn't have any children. I enjoyed, for about 10 minutes at a time, peering into the small rooms through the windows to see what new furniture he had collected or decoration he had added as if decking out a mansion a few incomes larger than our neighborhood would produce.

The small field yielded into a surprisingly dark, thinly wooded area. Off to the right most boundary, against another encroaching development, were boulders piled around the base of a tall, sturdy pine tree, probably via construction at one time or another. The extra elevation of the boulders made it easy for small bodies to sweep themselves up to the broad lower limbs. From there it was as if the tree invited miniature hands and feet to clamber one branch over the other until you could feel the wind sway the pinnacle branches and hear the internal cracks and pops of tree limbs meeting their center. What is that sound? Where does it come from? The sound of a tree swaying and creaking like a ship at sea is the sound of that tree communing with the world around it. The internal striations rubbing microfine edges, creating the song of growth and endurance brought me thousands of years into the past.

After clambering over the clumsily stacked boulders I would hop up to latch my small frame to the boom-like lower branches, hands searching for the other side as arms coiled over the top to hoist up and on to that first step towards the top of the neighborhood. From there, time would dissolve as the ground left me and hugging the tree from trunk to limb I found my way to the more buoyant upper branches. When I reached my own personal pinnacle where the distance between me and the rocks far below spun too much tightness through my chest, with what I now know as vertigo, I would hook hands and arms around the limb above the one I was standing on and would stay for a long time, kind of dangling there, searching the peak of the tree for nests of which I never saw or wildlife which was sometimes maybe a squirrel. Warm summer breezes assuaged the disappointment of my animal loneliness, keeping company with that deeper pulse. The gentle sway of my perch and the view offered a gratifying alternative perspective from my usual contained existence. Hanging there is partially how wildness was born in me; this is how I was meant to move forward into the world. Exploring “other” I pressed boundaries with unbridled curiosity. Watching other trees sway on the same breezes as mine, I was dancing with the wind. Naming the families whose rooftops I could now peer over, noticing Frisbees and other debris waiting for the next storm to blow them back to their game. Being that girl who climbed and gathered scrapes and bruises I was whole in myself.

Sometimes climbing the tree meant the company of a cluster of neighborhood children, usually myself and a handful of boys accosting the tree like an infestation. At the top with us all up there the swaying was more noticeable, there was no chance of seeing wildlife while we competed to reach the highest limbs. My brother always managed to find a limb or two above me; he had the advantage of his natural recklessness

pushing him onward. Later on when I was alone, I would return to conquer those last few upper limbs when I could think and concentrate without distraction the thrill of it all suppressing my fear of falling. Often, once at the top I would linger there long enough for dusk to sink the world into midnight blue so that climbing down was a steady touch and go dance between intuition and the soles of my sneakers finding purchase on the jagged bark. At the bottom when the fear of falling to the rocks below was beyond worry, the lower limb made me slightly sad knowing whatever was next would not be nearly as invigorating. I would leap to steady earth beyond the rocks with a rush of achievement feeling like I knew something no one else did. Covered with sap and satisfied with myself I would be ready to go home.