**Trees**

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***In Malaysia, the Sng’oi people believe that a person and a tree can belong together, and that the relationship lasts for life.***

When I was 6 years old, my best friend was a tree. She was a Mimosa and stood in the backyard of my childhood home. Her smooth, gray bark made her easy to climb without getting scratched and her wide, dense, canopy provided shelter. Nooks formed by branches cradled my small body as sunlight filtered through the narrow openings of the fern-like leaves like fairy lights. In summer, when the tree blossomed with puffy, cotton candy-colored flowers, she was magical.

***The distant ancestors of humans lived in trees until about 4.2 million years ago.***

 That same backyard offered an elaborate playhouse with a play stove, refrigerator, and wood cabinets. The roof even had shingles. I chose the tree instead of the playhouse as my refuge because she offered another world instead of a miniature of what I already had. I spent countless hours nestled in her branches, reading, writing poetry and daydreaming; wishing I could find a way to turn her into a home of my own, so that I could sleep there. Once, fueled by a story about a treehouse I read in the comic “Ducktales,” I tried to create a pulley system so that I could lower and raise myself and other things up and down via ropes. The experiment ended when my mom had to rescue me after I wrapped myself in a jump rope and ended up dangling from a branch, unable to extricate myself.

 ***The Japanese coined the term shinrin-yoku, which loosely translates to forest bathing.***

 That is when my love affair with trees began. I’ve always been drawn to forests, especially dense, old-growth woods. Going into the woods feels like entering another world, a magical world in which shelf fungi become staircases for fairies and phosphorescent fungi glow with an otherworldly light. I love to gaze on moss-covered boulders, glacier erratics that drifted here during the ice age, and imagine what they have witnessed.

***Evergreens release phytoncides which are airborne essential oils. These give humans an immunity boost.***

 Throughout the pandemic, when everything became too much, I hiked the trails near my home where tree trunks wear furry, green moss as form-fitting dresses and young saplings sprout from decaying stumps. Nurse logs, decorated with colorful fungi and lacey lichen, lie under hanging moss dangling from branches like streamers. The forest was my celebration of life amid global death, an introvert’s party.

***A tree is often used to symbolize a deity, or it may stand for what is sacred.***

 When we couldn’t attend church due to stay-at-home orders, I found serenity in the woods. The sound of birdsong and wind rustling through the branches were my hymns, the pine scent my incense. When sunbeams penetrated the canopy and dappled the earth, the forest became my cathedral, the treetops arching into the heavens.

***Spending time in nature has a physiological effect on the human body. It decreases levels of cortisol and lowers blood pressure.***

 When a knee surgery stopped me from hiking for several months, just sitting outside was enough for a while. But after three months, I started feeling depressed, uneasy, and having trouble sleeping. Thinking that just getting outside was what I needed, I started with short walks around my suburban neighborhood. But that didn’t help. Then I found a trail with ramp access and a smooth, gravel path that was lined by forest on either side. The minute I stepped onto the trail, I took a deep breath and my nostrils tingled with the scent of evergreen trees. I didn’t hike that day, but managed a slow walk aided by trekking poles. But even with my halting gait, a sense of calm washed over my body. I didn’t just need the outdoors, I needed trees.

 Like I always have.

 Like I always will.