

The Arborist

It was my mother who first taught me how to forest-bathe. *Shinrin-yoku* – the act of sitting amid trees, letting the hush and the shadow of the canopy wash over you, breathing out your thoughts like bubbles rising to the surface. They pop and disperse in the air, and the trees convert your carbon to new oxygen, waste to fuel: you breathe out, and the trees breathe in.

It has an ancient sound to it, syllables that ring like the gong of a distant monastery or whisper like the paper votives on a windchime. Few of the California yogis and tantric gurus who advertise ‘*Ancient Japanese Healing technique! 5-day meditation Intensive Course – learn the secrets of shinrin yoku*’ realise that it was a generational fad of the ‘80s, a campaign by the Ministry of Agriculture to combat tech-bubble burnout; even fewer are willing to admit it. But my mother has the proof, stuck to the pinboard in our sun-drenched kitchen: a faded copy of the three-leaf, blue-green brochure that was delivered to her family home in Nagasaka in 1987, two years before she left Japan for good. Every time my mother sees a flyer pasted on a store window or stapled to a lamppost in our neighbourhood she laughs, one of her secret laughs of good-natured derision, and tears off one of the long rectangular fingers. We keep it as an inside joke between the two of us, a souvenir of harmless Western absurdity.

I’m not judging anyone who finds these courses appealing – *shinrin-yoku* saved my life, and my mother’s too, in her own way. What the ‘5-day intensive meditation course’ misses is that the point of forest-bathing is to go slow. Trees grow slowly, each year adding only a centimetre, perhaps two or three in a halcyon year. Nature refuses to be rushed. My mother taught me that people are a bit like trees: we all need water, and sun, and a safe place to grow. She wiggled her toes in the dirt like she was sprouting roots. I was five years old, and learning how to plant bulbs in the autumn to bloom the next spring. ‘When that man’ – that man was my father – ‘tried to take those things away from me, I gave them back to myself.’ She smiled, her round face glowing with sweat and the triumph of her own self-sufficiency. I was proud of her, too.

When I was little, I could totter around the garden for hours while my brother played Mario Kart in the upstairs window, glancing down in a surge of panic whenever he remembered and finding my dark head rising like a mountain from the sea of yellow waving narcissus. Our house is tall and narrow; the garden generous and broad. The walls lean just a few degrees towards the street, so that my window on the second floor overhangs the front door by two or three inches. I thought it strange when I was younger – as if the house was running away from the garden. My mother grew her herbs in the shadow of the creaking oak tree at the very back of the garden, bounded by a shore of purple and pale hyacinth. There are pictures of me with a bowl-cut and bangs romping through these flowerbeds in my denim pinafore, the pocket of which my mother embroidered with vines and small winking violets. My ankles smelled of mint of rosemary, and my short fingers grasped the knobbly end of a wasabi root; I remember absently licking my fingers and sitting on the step to bawl my eyes out as the taste seared over my tongue. Most plants then were my height, except for the heavy-limbed oak tree, under which I built my fairy houses in the nooks of the massive roots and set the tables with sticky leaves and the tops of acorns. It was a haven apart from the sirens and exhaust of the city, a blooming paradise where I spent my whole summers and most afternoons after school, revelling in the ever-placid San Fran weather.

Yumiko took the brochure down often, touched the green and blue pages, now a bit yellowed and brittle from years of cooking with sesame oil, and read out the government-issued recommendations for the hundredth or thousandth time. Her fingers caressed the characters hesitantly, as if she needed the extra contact to understand them; her eyes were not enough. She told me that one of the photos reproduced on the third page of the brochure was of *Aokigahara*, also called *Jukai*, the Sea of Trees – a forest on the northwestern slope of Mount Fuji, not far from the village where she was raised. The soil is hardened lava, and there are caves that fill with ice in winter. The porous lava rock absorbs sound, and in the silence people think they hear the flitting of *yūrei*, the ghostly spirits that inhabit the forest. It was controversial even in the 80's, when the photo was printed: the *Jukai* has been known as the 'Suicide Forest' since the time of the shoguns. Nagasaka, my mother's hometown, doesn't exist anymore; it was absorbed in 2004 to make the city of Hokuto.

My mother had the green touch, hands that dug and watered, pruned unruly branches and summoned new sprouts out of the impassive earth. When I was a little older, entering middle school, she taught me the art of grafting: cutting a branch off one tree – the cut must be made at an angle, so that there is a broad diagonal slice of green, living flesh – and placing it into an incision in another, then binding the wound tight with twine. The flesh of the receiving tree closes around the graft, knitting the veins of the old and the new so that soon they grow as one. It made me feel queasy at the time; I was certain that our trees could feel the slice of the knife, that they would bleed. And they do – warm sap that seeps slowly and can be gathered to make various traditional remedies, or to put in your tea. As we stood under the oak tree securing a new cherry sprig, my mother bent a spry branch down so the tips of the leaves tickled my face like wispy fingers. I imagined for a moment how my father, or grandfather, if I'd met either, might have caressed my face, pinched my cheeks, ruffled my hair. She seemed to intuit what I was thinking.

'When your father went away, he left me with your brother, the garden and you. And that was all I needed.'

In my childish obstinance I replied, 'But they don't *really* need you. Trees grow just fine on their own.'

I regretted the words before they had left my mouth. She never shouted – the ingrained demureness of a Japanese once-housewife, perhaps – and even now, she did not raise her voice. The look she gave me, of pain sharpened with a steely edge of anger, was enough to cow me. At thirteen, through the haze of my own burgeoning insecurities, I understood that it was my mother who needed the trees. She needed them to need her.

When my grandmother – my mother's mother, and the only member of her family I had even seen pictures of – died suddenly, my mother planted a myrrh tree in her memory. She had returned to Japan for the first time in 20 years at the news of her mother's decline, and while she had prepared to be away for a few months at least, nursing at her

bedside, the end came swiftly and abruptly just a few days after she arrived. She returned home two days after the funeral, the myrrh in tow. I sat at the round kitchen table with her and held her hand, and we gazed out at the newly planted tree that stood near the window in our yard. It was a strange one for southern California – knobbly and bent, with a halo of spiny leaves, it would be more at home in a rocky desert or among baobab trees in some distant place, but that was my mother's special power: she could make anything grow in our garden, whether it wanted to or not. 'A bit spikey, isn't it', I joked as the branches of the tree tapped against the window like aged fingers. 'In fact, it encapsulates my mother very well', she replied with the faint glimmer of tears behind her eyes, and we burst out in laughter.

It was my mother's habit, her way of coping. Anytime someone close to her died or went away, she would plant a tree in their memory. It was as if she felt she could commune with them just by sitting close to the tree, touching its branches and chatting to it just as she would have spoken to the person it remembered. When my brother, who a few years ago had left for university, announced he would be getting married and moving out of state, my mother planted a beautiful flowering almond tree in his memory. 'He's not dead', I reminded her as I helped her manoeuvre the slender trunk into the hole we had dug in the ground towards the back of the garden, near the oak tree. 'I know, honey, but I like to keep him close,' she'd responded in her lilting, almost sorrowful voice, and I dropped the matter. As it turns out, however, he might as well have been dead, since after the wedding he took a job abroad, moved to Europe with his new bride, and hasn't come home in the three years since – although he calls my mother every Sunday afternoon like clockwork, and she takes the phone and sits beneath the almond tree. I expected this loss to hit her harder, especially after my father's disappearing act, but she weathered it in her usual calm, impassive way, like a slow and silent tree, although the circles beneath her eyes became deeper and she would take down the brochure from the kitchen pinboard more and more frequently.

My mother is stalked by loss. Not long after my brother got married, the branch of the company she worked for declared bankruptcy and liquidated, and she had to say goodbye to many good friends she'd known for years – the type who, whenever I would bring her

a *bento* for lunch at work, would put their hand down towards the ground and say ‘when I first met you, you were this big!’ I suggested that she keep in touch, maybe organise get-togethers over brunch once a month, but most of her friends took jobs out of state after the liquidation and she didn’t see them again. That was the year the garden became an orchard. Neighbours began to call our garden ‘the arboretum’, in a peculiar mix of genuine appreciation, shamefaced jealousy and San Fran erudition, and my mother was ‘the arborist’.

As I got closer to graduation, I started to muse what tree my mother would plant in my place. A cherry, to match my brother’s almond – but she has a cherry already, and she doesn’t like to repeat. Perhaps a plum, sprouting bright red blossoms in the midst of winter – a beautiful contrast with the snow, if we had ever had snow. She favours fruit-bearing trees over the rest, except for the myrrh, which gives fragrant, gummy sap that she uses to soothe her headaches, or muscle aches after a long day in the garden. An intense feeling of guilt chased these feelings – I would be another loss, another tree to talk to in the garden to mask the absence of the real person. I accepted a college offer in-state, so that I could come home on the weekends, once or twice a month. My mother could breathe a sigh of relief, in one of those private moments when she has her hands buried deep in the soil and lets herself feel.

It was a sunny April day when I found my mother in the kitchen. I held the letter of acceptance tightly to my chest, almost shaking with excitement to tell her my plans. She had her back to me as she worked over something on the countertop, her shoulders tense with the effort. I noticed the *shinrin-yoku* brochure face-up on the table, open to the picture of *Jukai*, the Sea of Trees. I faltered briefly, wondering if this was the right time, if she was in one of her moments of peculiar mourning – for her friends, her mother and her son, for the life she had anticipated and lost, for Nagasaka. She heard me shuffling in the doorway and turned around, and her expression was unlike anything I had ever seen cross her round, lined face – grieving, determined, her eyes bright and lurid. I took an unconscious step back, and stuttered out some unformed question. She merely shook her head sadly, as if I were a toddler with dirty knees in my pinafore, asking about my father – a look that said, *you don’t understand, but you don’t have to. I’ll take care of*

everything. She said only, 'Come with me to the garden.' She grasped the brochure tightly in her hand as she passed the kitchen table.

I followed her outside on wobbly knees. She was standing quietly on the step, gazing out over the garden, her orchard, as if she were a windswept old sailor stood at the shore of a vast, frothing sea. 'Do you have a favourite part of the garden, Hinako?' she asked calmly, her eyes shining out of her face, glimmering under a thin film. My full name fell heavily on me – I was used to diminutives from my mother's mouth, *Hina-chan* or *Koko*, or *little sprout* when we were in the garden.

'Why?' I responded, hardly hearing the word. There was a rush of wind amongst the trees and their limbs stirred fretfully, though I couldn't feel the breeze where I stood.

'Do you prefer it here near the window, like grandma, or over towards the back, with your father and brother? Grandma always liked to watch me cooking, you know, but the back of the garden gets more sunlight. I wouldn't want you on your own with my friends –' she gestured to the lefthand side of the garden, where she had planted a mini-orchard in honour of her old friends from work: a poplar for Joan, laurel for Daphne, a willow and an elm for the sisters Staya and Kimaya, and a spreading olive for the janitor, Benjamin, who had always secreted sweets for me from the front desk when I came to do my homework in the lobby after school. 'No,' my mother said, more to herself, 'Better to keep the family together.'

I was reeling from the mention of my father. She had never once told me that the oak tree was planted for him – she despised him so much, wouldn't let us see pictures of him or meet his family, though she once mentioned that they lived in California only a few hours away – I never imagined she would have planted a tree for him, too. My gaze found the oak tree at the far end of the garden, in whose roots I had built my fairy houses, the sturdy limbs I had swung from until I was too tall and my feet reached the ground. Now the tree was moving violently in the wind – though still I could not feel it, under cover of the porch – its leaf-choked arms stretching out as the roots creaked and groaned under its own weight. The almond tree to its left swayed in the same wind, its slender trunk

vibrating as if electricity were running up from the ground and to the end of each flowering branch, shaking the petals free in a cascade that reminded me vividly of snow, and of the photos my brother would show me from his college ski trips to Canada.

My mother was frowning, her mouth a thin line of disapproval, but her eyes were wide and pitying. 'Is it easier if I choose?' she asked, putting a comforting hand on my arm. The wind rushed through the orchard, making a sound like the oncoming sea as it sweeps up the shore, though on the step where we stood the air was uncannily still and quiet. I thought wildly for an instant about the lava rocks in *Aokihagara*, how they absorb the crunch of your footsteps, even the pitch of your cries if you wander off the trail, and how the silence makes the visitor imagine he hears the whispers ghosts. What if those distant wails are not spirits, but people still alive, lost in the forest, the trees swallowing their cries?

My mother's hand tightened on my arm, a vice grip. I could feel her close-cut fingernails, that always smelled like parsley and sesame and whatever other vegetable she had been chopping, pressing painfully into my skin. But still her eyes were pitying, affectionate, and her lilting voice when she spoke sounded on the verge of tears. 'I wanted to let you go, I did,' she pleaded, responding to an accusation in her own head, 'but I couldn't risk it. You're all I have, my little sprout, I couldn't lose you, too.' She clutched the paper brochure in her fist like a baton, the blue and green seeming almost to seep from the pages onto her skin – or rather it was her skin leeching the ink, turning the palm of her hand a deep, vegetal green. The rushing in the trees reached a fever-pitch, and at last I understood that there was no wind.

I still don't fully understand what happened next, or what I did, but I am coming to terms with the idea that are parts of my life, perhaps the majority of it up to this point, which I can't and won't understand. Some things are better left to the silence. What I do know is that I am a quick study. I spent my childhood in that garden, leaning how to dig and water, how to prune unruly branches and summon new sprouts out of the earth. I even learned how to graft the limb of one tree onto another – although I don't do that

anymore, now I know that trees can bleed. I did not inherit my mother's green thumb: I received it, slowly, gradually, as roots gather nutrients from the earth and turn them into new branches, tender green leaves.

There is a bonsai on the kitchen windowsill now. It sits quietly, demurely, taking in the smells of cooking sesame oil in the kitchen and the whiffs of parsley and hyacinth from the garden. I keep the window open wide most days, and the wizened branches of the myrrh sometimes touch the green halo of the bonsai when the wind blows it in the right direction. I still collect the little paper fingers from the posters of tree-bathing gurus as I find them around the neighbourhood or stuck up in my college dormitory. I started my degree a few months ago, but I come home every weekend to take care of the garden. My mother missed my graduation. I've begun to search for my father's family, and I made contact with my aunt earlier this month. She had no idea that me or my brother even existed, that her brother had a wife and children when he went missing almost twenty years ago. The police have asked me to come in for an interview, and I've decided I'll bring the bonsai with me for emotional support. I talk to it often, especially when I'm feeling lonely, and gently touch the winding branches. The neighbours have started calling me 'the arborist', but I have no plans to add to the orchard. Not yet, anyway.