

Tree Boy

Tree Boy shows up late for class. Tight white T-shirt and steel-toe boots, his work pants washed soft and stained with tree gum. I have seen him wield a chainsaw and I have heard him go on about early photography. Talbot. Cartier-Bresson. He tells me about the places he's lived, but I can only envision him near the Pacific. A life on the Olympic Peninsula. The scarred legacy of logging trucks and poverty.

Tree Boy is both the darling and the rogue of the graduate program. A scholarship brought him to the school. Necessity makes him work on the grounds. Because he is so gifted—so clearly without need of a mentor—the faculty never lets him forget it. Offhanded comments about his worker status on campus: Tree Boy cutting down university limbs and using the take for art supplies. With their fancy pedigrees from the other coast, it's as if he embodies what they loathe most about this town so far north and west that they may as well be in Alaska. But when it is time to dole out teaching appointments or awards, they always give him the nod.

Tree Boy rents an attic near the edge of Lake Union, his windows facing west, facing home. I drop him off. He doesn't invite me in. But he begins to sit beside me in class. Or wait for me, hanging in the doorway of my studio, holding a paper cup of espresso, a crumpled brown bag full of peaches. He claims he doesn't take pictures anymore, that a photograph can never live up to the real thing. But when I show him the prints from the year I lived in Rome, he says he'd like to have one.

Tree Boy wanders into my studio late one evening. He pulls a pencil from behind his ear and absentmindedly runs it through his cropped hair. From scalp to nape and back again. He tells me he came to see my work, then stares at my photographs in silence. As he moves from shot to shot, I feel naked beneath his gaze. And I am. I've been making a series of self-portraits—close-ups of my body—so close that the landscape of skin is often unrecognizable. The crease of an elbow. The blurred edge of my inner thigh. Still, I know that he can tell the difference. Without asking, he removes a contact sheet from the wall and sits down in my chair holding 36 versions of my left breast in his hand. He looks up and tells me my photos are childish.

Then he asks me if I want to get a beer.

Seattle feels benign after Chicago. Too green and too pretty. Too sedate. There is a sinister side, but it's camouflaged behind the blooming wisteria, the innocuous bungalows built on its hills. Like Mt. Rainier, I only catch glimpses of it. Endless misty months and so many bodies of water—a wrong turn and I find myself on a long bridge, bearing it out until I can turn back on the other shore. My internal compass useless. No single lake to define east, almost as if there is no east. No light rising at dawn, only the occasional flash of color, fog lifting late on a summer evening and the ache of an overdue sunset disappearing into the Sound.

For nearly a semester I watched him trimming trees or dragging brush and loading it into his battered pickup, the white paint worn away and smooth patches of primer exposed. For months I longed to be one of those branches. To have him pull me toward him and cut me free. To feel myself falling and falling. To be the branch he sculpted into a seductive shape and placed in the gallery for everyone to see. Except Tree Boy always destroys his installations. He creates

exquisite objects, then burns them to ashes, never documenting any of it, only coming round at the end of the exhibit to sweep the remains into a metal dustpan.

As we cut across the quad, he describes forest fires on the peninsula when he was growing up. I ask him if this is the reason he burns his work.

“No,” he says, looking at me as if I’m stupid. “But it always ends in flames.”

Before he torches it, I sneak into the gallery and photograph his most recent installation. Careful couplets etched into pine. I smooth my hand over the wood, feeling the letters as if they were veins in his lean arm. I think about the eventuality of fire, his work returning to the land as ashes beneath the suffocating ceiling of a northwest sky. Later, I tell him that he should write, and he gives me a half-hour lecture on the futility of words. The next day he brings me a copy of Berger’s *Ways of Seeing*, the binding splintered, the pages warped with damp. Flipping through it, I see his perfect penmanship, initials and phone numbers lining the inside back cover. I stare at the list wondering who the people are. Mostly, I wonder how many of them are women.

Every so often he calls and asks me to look up a number. I insist on returning the book, but he refuses to take it back. He tells me that he has already read it, that he has no use for it.

I keep it like a reliquary beside my bed.

I look for answers buried in the chapters of Berger.

I commit the phone list to memory.

Even my dog has a crush on Tree Boy—she’s as shameless as an undergrad. When I bring her to school she whines and cries, pawing insistently at my door. I let her out and she wanders down the hallway, circles in front of his studio, curling into position and wrapping her tail around her. I tempt her with treats, but nothing works. I give up and go into the darkroom, lose myself in the bulb’s red glow, the comforting smell of chemicals. I linger until everyone leaves in search of dinner or cigarettes, and then I develop the roll of Tree Boy’s work, watching the silvery images appear in the rush of water. I hide the prints in a folder and label it “kindling.”

It goes on like this for weeks. I stop listening to music so I can hear my gate squeak open when he comes by. We cook late-night meals and eat sitting on the floor. He sketches me by candlelight. We drink bourbon, neat. When we are alone, he never touches me. But when colleagues or professors are watching, he will trace small, slow circles with his fingers on the inside of my wrist or stop midsentence to brush the hair back from my eyes.

One night he talks about the women he’s slept with. How he touched them. And how he wanted to. Almost whispering, he tells me about his old girlfriend. How he loved to give her a bath, sitting on the cool tiles beside the tub, rinsing warm water through her hair. How after she kicked him out he ran barefoot in the Cascades until his feet were so raw and bloody that he crawled two hours back to his truck, passing hikers and mountain bikers and family picnics.

He says, “Seattle will only ever be about her.”

Tree Boy tells me I will never make a really great photograph because I’ve never done without. I want to think he’s mistaken. Part of me worries he’s right. He makes a point of mentioning my bourgeois upbringing, the shrinks and family vacations, the private schools.

“I’ve always worked,” I say. “It’s not that simple.”

He looks at me and smiles, in a way.

I try harder to show him who I really am. I tell him about my lovers in Chicago. The bass player, the bike messenger, the architect. I tell him what pleases me—that if a man touches my neck, just so, I will come. I tell him I like to get fucked from behind, preferring not to see faces unless I’m in love. I tell him too much and convince myself I haven’t told him enough. I tell him about my first camera, a Brownie. I tell him my favorite tree, the magnolia. My favorite saint, Lucia, the tender image of her eyeballs plucked out and placed on a plate before her.

And I tell him about long, sticky days passed at the stables. Peeling off my clothes and swimming my horse into the lake, sliding off his glossy back and being pulled by his tail through green water. And I tell him about the day he was castrated. How they left his testicles to scorch in the pasture and how—even at nine—I was compelled to photograph them as each day passed. Lumps of skin and blood shriveling in the August sun.

The telephone wakes me just before dawn. Tree Boy calling for a phone number. He softly says the initials, not offering anything more. I resist reciting the number even though I know it by heart. I put the phone down on my pillow, pretend to fumble and look, before reading out the country code for Italy, the long string of numbers beside it.

I am the branch after all. The willow that bends and bends.

But Tree Boy wants to snap me in two.

I keen my ear for the sound of his chainsaw when I’m at school. I search the parking lot. His truck isn’t there. For seven days he is missing from campus. My dog keeps her vigil in front of his studio. I call all the Seattle numbers from the back of Berger. I listen closely to the sound of each woman’s voice before I hang up. I contemplate dialing the number in Italy. I carry Ways of Seeing out to the grill instead. I soak the cover with lighter fluid, toss in a match, and martyr it like San Lorenzo, watching it burn as if waiting for the book to sit up and confront me.

In the morning, there are only ashes and gray clumps of charcoal that I poke through the grate with a stick. I switch format and continue photographing my body. I slice the images into pieces and reconfigure them, trying to turn myself into someone else.

And then there he is, lying in my hammock, my dog stretched across his chest. I don’t want him to hear how happy I am to see him.

“Tree Boy, “I say, throwing a guilty glance at the Weber.

“I missed you,” he says.

But when I look back, he is stroking the dog.

We climb into his truck. He turns the key in the ignition, then shuts it off, leans close, and looks at me for a long time. Just when I think he is finally going to kiss me, he reaches over and locks my door. He starts the motor again and shifts into gear, waiting until we get to the end of the block before turning on the lights. One beam weaker than the other, peering down the deserted street.

We cross a bridge, then another, heading out of the city. Trees thicken along the roadway. When he reaches to downshift, his hand brushes my leg.

“Listen,” he says.

And I do listen. Only I'm listening the way I listen to the songs on a CD that precede the one I really want to hear.

He tells me about the painter he fell in love with, not for her brushstroke—which was brilliant—but for her soft Kentucky lilt with long, honeyed pauses, her penchant for the term “daddy.” How he cheated on his girlfriend of seven years to pursue her. How it all began. And how it ended. How the painter was sleeping with his favorite professor, and how she followed that same professor on a Fulbright to Italy.

But by then it was too late. His girlfriend had tossed everything he ever cherished onto the driveway in the rain. For weeks she backed her car over his possessions, over his portfolio, and even over the photos he had taken of her. Ruined drawings catching on fence posts. Crumpled slides collecting with the mud and the trash along the curbs and in the drains. How what remained was eventually ground into the pavement or vanquished by moss, fecund green tendrils reclaiming the memory of who he used to be.

“So you were in Italy,” I say.

Tree Boy drums his fingers on the steering wheel, and the lame headlight blinks out as if in response.

Sharp curves in the dark. Air forcing its way through the window and rattling the glass, the hermetic strip flapping against the door. For a moment, the trees open up and, even at night, I can see that the hillside has been devastated with logging. Only the stumps left behind, forlorn as headstones, amidst the furrow of tire tracks.

He pulls onto a dirt road. Scrub and branches drag against the underside of the pickup as we bump slowly along. I watch his hands, opening and closing around the wheel. He kills the engine and we roll to a stop.

He gets out and shuts the door. My dog leaps out of the back, and they both disappear in the darkness. Traitor, I think. I lift up the lock and feel for the handle. It comes off in my hand. I stare at it for a second, then put it on the dash and roll down my window. Twigs crunch underneath his boots as he comes around to my side. He opens the door and I hop down, nearly falling into his arms. Warm air and the feel of his hands. The smell of damp earth and fresh laundry—the smell of him.

Rocks ping, scattering, as we walk further and further, into the trees. The dog's collar jingles as she trots on ahead. A bird lifts from its perch in the darkness, limbs rustling. When we come out of the woods, the low red moon shimmers on the lake. I remember reading somewhere that seeing the moon's reflection on water has long been considered a cure for hysteria. I almost laugh. But now I want him more than ever.

Each detail of his betrayal only made me desire him more. I heard it as a kind of confession—him realizing that he had gotten it all wrong. Like he'd adjusted the aperture to finally put me in focus. And I don't care where he's been. Whether it was Italy or nowhere. And I don't care who or how many he's fucked if it means that now I am in the center of the frame.

The air is full of the promise of heat. His fingers move lightly across my collarbone, grazing my throat. I close my eyes. I don't want to see anything. I only want it not to stop.

It stops.

My eyes flutter open and he is already wading into the lake, his jeans soaked up to the knee. He gently takes my hand and coaxes me into the water beside him, then vanishes. He reemerges further out, floating on his back in the dark water—only I am the one who is drifting. Tall trees and a pomegranate moon. But I want the fruit pried open. Wet red seeds juicing my mouth.

Finally, he swims toward me and leads me back to shore.

I am almost surprised when he lays me down. I unbutton my shirt and he runs his callused palm over the curve of my ribs. He is neither cautious nor rough—almost clinical—as if I am timber he is inspecting for flaws. He unzips my jeans, peeling them down over my hips and resting his wet face against the flat of my belly. I can feel the stubble of his newly shaved head, the droplets of water against my skin. He circles my navel with his tongue, then lower, stopping only to guide my underwear down over my legs.

I want nothing more than the feel of him inside me.

But first I want him to kiss me, soft and slow and for a long time.

He tugs off his wet shirt and drops it. His stomach is taut, his chest bare and smooth, a tattoo of the Madonna over his heart. The ink's gone green and her face is wet with tears. I sit up and reach for him, but he takes both my wrists, clenching them in one of his hands. His body is so beautiful that I suddenly feel self-conscious. I have photographed my labia and hung the image on white walls for everyone to see; I have never felt quite so exposed.

It doesn't startle me when he pushes me down.

Or when he moves and, still holding my wrists, puts his knees on either side of my shoulders and hovers above me.

He unfastens his belt, the buckle nearly cracking me in the face.

And it's not that I don't want to.

It's that he has never kissed me.

That I can't bring myself to ask him to.

I take him in my mouth and I remember how slowly his book seemed to burn. The way the pages silently furred and went black. Sparks flaring in the wind and floating around me. Bits of char and ash falling at my feet.

As if this is all too intimate, Tree Boy loosens his grip from my wrists, moves his leg away from my side, and lifts me up toward him, rolling me over. Rocks cut into my knees and my palms slip in the mud.

And this is not how I wanted it: Tree Boy's hands parting me as branches. Tree Boy's wet jeans sawing the backs of my thighs.

I am the bough that grew too full and needs to be cut back.

I am shade where there should be light.