

Van Gogh's Peach Tree

by Kyle Hemmings

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(based on the painting Peach Tree in Bloom at Arles, C. 1888, by Vincent Van Gogh)

There is a boy. The boy is standing in front of a munificent peach tree in all the splendor and atrophy of his afternoon existing. Shadows? Yes. There are midday shadows, hiding and seeking, long and greyish to offset the bright reds and violets and oranges which reflect the sun's mercurial dispositions, its flare of temper when one gets too close. The boy collects the peaches and sucks their sweet juice until the tree becomes very angry and says *I am nothing more than a jealous pit, hollow*. The boy is sinking into the ground, into the shade and soft dirt. The tree is pulling the boy into the ground with its long and winding roots. This tree, this trollop of a tree in its jejune existing. The girl. The girl enters the picture. About his age, nineteen years and summers under. She has a big heart and knows the boy from old schoolyards built over grass and stubborn weeds. She saves the boy from the sinking, and at her house, far from Arles, she sits him on a bidet, cossets and undresses him, savors the taste of his sticky skin and washes him off. Your tongue is warm, says the boy, like the sun. The sun has two faces, she says, and I am the one that shines at night. They grow and become branches off each other. Years later, they move into a house and produce a garden of Eurasian roses, schizocarpic fruit, pear trees that keep a gentle sway in the wind. The picture of the roses in a glass jar is kept on the wall of an old woman's home in Arles. She loves to tell visitors that there's a story behind that painting, how she saved it from the Germans during the occupation. She tells them how a girl once saved a boy from the gravity of his own shadow, the cruelty of a hypnotic sun. But as years passed, he did not survive the holocaust of roses under a barbed sky. As she tells them the story, she offers

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them a bowl of fruit grown in her own garden. She complains how her limbs are stiff, refers to herself as an old tree that can no longer sway. But I saved that boy, she tells her guests. In some way. Then she apologizes, perhaps denying that she was once someone reckless and very young, the taste of sweet jism on a hot afternoon, the torpor of heavy summers, the sun, like a schizophrenic parent, both kind and unforgiving.

