

The Art of Joy

by Laura Preble

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The girl who was me stands in a sandbox with upraised arms, honey hair tied with olive yarn in two ponytails. She says nothing, but wants me to pick her up. My two outstretched hands deliver her from the sand and stand her on the gravel of the playground. She silently motions for me to follow, so I do.

She leads me to a tall, old oak, leafy with summer foliage. She climbs it, agile, to a comfortable fork in the branches. Now I see another version of myself, older, sitting across from her in the tree. This one, though, will not look at me, and sits, huddled, face turned away.

I ask what the girl would like to tell me, and she produces a red, juicy apple. She takes a bite, offers it to me, and I take it, taste it, let the juice run down my chin. The older me still crouches, face turned away. I ask the girl what she wants, and she tells me (without words) "to play." I sense joy, freedom, the sense of the wind on her cheek as she turns her face to the sun. It feels like the pure joy of innocent youth, the time when there are no pressures, no worries, nothing but the moment, the wind, the tree.

I address the woman, who will not turn to look at me. A glass wall appears between the two, the older and younger. The small one, though, climbs above the glass wall to a higher branch. I tell the older version of myself that I am ready to hear whatever she wants to tell me, but she still remains silent. Watching the coltish one climb effortlessly from branch to branch, I want to follow, but I stay still, heart heavy with obligation, feeling the need to stay with the woman I have become.

Please, talk to me, I ask without words.

She turns to show her face, which is horribly bruised, swollen, battered, painful to see. Her eyes bear closer relationship to mine than to the eyes of the young girl climbing above, who now sings a wordless tune to the sky.

Remember when creation of art was pure joy, not commerce?

