

EXILE

Susan Neville

The winter had been dull and relentless and cold and grim, as gray as my hair and fading skin and *I*, having recently turned 70, and despite having promised myself that I would try, over what might (according to actuarial tables) be my last decade on earth, to greet each morning with joy and gratitude, had failed at that promise.

Every morning for the past year I had awakened in a despair that felt like the spilling over into the day of nightmares that had grafted themselves onto my daytime mood. It was an almost physical heaviness I woke with, right below the heart.

So you can imagine how it surprised me when, on a rainy day in early spring, temperatures beginning to rise, amid the new green of awakening grass, that kind of day that can only be captured in watercolors, if at all—how surprised I was when out on some useless errand I stopped at a light and found

my spirit actually soaring at the sight of hundreds of Callery pear trees in delicate white bloom.

So much white! Veils of white on all corners, in those odd triangles of land left after the roads had been constructed. They blossomed all around me, on every embankment, out of the ground like retention pond fountains. There was a force in their beauty. Fountains of beauty, yes, endless and renewed, a bubbling froth bursting forth but silent. Silent. The fresh green and the white were so vivid (in their watercolor way) that they temporarily blotted out the gray sky and all the concrete and for a moment I felt alive again.

I had lost a Bradford pear from my own yard several winters earlier when a tree I'd planted and nurtured revealed its weakness and split in two in the middle of the night. The wind, the arborist explained, though I suspected more than wind. Some dark intention. We'd awakened to half the tree lying on its side, the gash of splintered tree flesh. What was left standing upright wasn't worth saving, so we had it removed. I had loved that tree for what I saw then as its perfection—its flame shape, its pure white flowers, the red leaves in the fall, glossy green in summer. Every year for two decades it had blossomed and then burned for me and for my little family, there in our own fenced yard.

Shortly after the tree was carted away, my husband died in his sleep. His heart. Our son had died ten years earlier, in Afghanistan. Our daughter had moved out of town with her husband and children, and I was left alone.

And so I began thinking about the tree's dark side. I believed that the blur of white I saw before me, the sight that so lifted my spirits, was also evil, if trees can be called evil. Evil in its consequences I suppose, though not intent. Moral or natural evil? Both perhaps. But evil has its own beauty, and it took me by surprise that morning. A supposedly infertile cultivar, the Bradford, planted for its loveliness, perhaps by my own hand, had bloomed and forced its tiny fruit down the gullet of birds that then shat them out over the area before me. Anyplace that was not concrete had welcomed the seedlings, without question. And this is how Callery pears migrate, spreading like a virus that stuns with its annual beauty but de-evolves to a root stock of brambles with four-inch thorns, thorns so sharp they puncture the wheels of tractors sent in to remove them. You can't even burn the trees away once they've established themselves like this. Four new stems will appear for every one that's consumed in flame, the arborist had told me. And the fragile quivering white will continue to spread and choke out every other plant in its path, like a handkerchief soaked in chloroform. Touch the spindle and sleep, my pretty wildflowers. I

felt some guilt I suppose for having once loved them and for loving them still. On the other hand, they were lovely trees, related to the rose, designed over years of cultivation to please the human eye.

I thought I saw movement through the trees. Who or what? An animal, most likely. I'd recently sighted a fox walking down our street, in the daytime, and the coyote population continued to explode. Something was happening in the world. Things were on the move. But that wasn't it, I told myself. There was nothing in that particular wash of trees and thorns worth foraging for and wouldn't be for years.

My sleep for nights after was fitful. In my dreams I saw the glass coffin of fairy tales, a child with skin as white and powdery as moth wings. I dreamed of the prick of mother's blood falling on snow, hair the blue black of a raven's wing, the magic mirror, the poisoned apple, the possibility of a story unfolding before me. It was madness, but a relief from the nightmares of the past year. For about a week I had the dream, after some of the blossoms had begun to fall off the trees and the leaves begun to change from peridot to emerald. I dreamed of the leaves as well. They sounded like glass chimes in the wind of my sleep, and they obscured my view inside the thicket.

Then one morning I awoke feeling that I had to find a way through the thorns to see what they were protecting. While I wouldn't have admitted it, I had this sense that I was being called by my dreams to free something: perhaps a lovely, enchanted child. This experience of the sublime on a berm near the highway and the shopping mall had led me to the strange conclusion that somewhere hidden inside the limbs and brambles was someone or something needing rescue.

Though only in fairy tales, I told myself, do children go to sleep and live without sustenance until true love awakens them.

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I decided on daytime for the fool's errand. I took my late husband's car. I had no need for two cars, but I hadn't brought myself to sell his or to clean out his clothes closet since his death. And when the Marines sent my son's belongings to me, after his death, I put them in his room with his childhood things. We were empty nesters and had kept his room a shrine to his high school self. We had expected his return. My husband's car was an older model Civic, like half the cars on the road in this unimaginative city in this unimaginative country. It was a practical car, one that wouldn't call attention to itself or to me. I brought a grabber that old people use to help them pull on their socks, and an

empty trash bag so I could make a small effort at picking up roadside trash. I wore a backpack and packed bottles of water, a thermos of coffee, a first aid kit, some garden shears, and sandwiches, though it couldn't have been more than 200 yards from one side of the thicket to the other.

I parked at a restaurant at the edge of the mall and headed toward the ramp separating the parking lot from the trees. There was usually one homeless person flying a sign at the foot of the exit ramp. The homeless at this particular exit were regulars, as though the ramp itself were home. They seemed to take turns rotating through, and today a familiar white woman, in her thirties or early forties, wearing a long skirt and fisherman sweater, with blond locked hair, looked at me with my backpack and trash bag suspiciously. She had a large sleeping dog at her feet, a golden mix I think, and her pack was the khaki of Army surplus. I'd seen her at this corner many times before, and at other corners as well. I wondered where she slept, if she was an addict or mentally ill or simply a grifter. I wondered about her family. My usual response to panhandlers was to acknowledge them and smile but not offer anything that might be used to service an addiction.

I climbed over a guard rail, dodged cars on the ramp, and climbed another guard rail, grabber and trash bag in hand. I began gathering napkins and paper

cups and crushed cans that were pressed up against the trees. Close up, making my way inside the thicket seemed like an impossible task. The thorned shrubs, the most recent generation, were as thick and impenetrable as I had read they would be. I don't know why I thought a child might have made a path where tractors and fire could not have, but as I recalled from the fairy tales, the thicket grew around the child as she slept.

I continued to pick up trash and moved along the outside of the woods until I was closer to the raised highway. The sunlight flickered artificially as cars went by above my head. I had on a long-sleeved jacket, long pants, and thick boots. I was wearing garden gloves. Finally, I found a place where the pear trees were still tree-like, and I stepped forward to where the limbs arched toward the ground. There were a few white petals under the tree, like a flower girl had dropped them for a bride. I remembered our two children playing under our pear tree when they were young.

I took my garden shears out of the backpack and discovered a way to navigate, slowly, by shuffling my feet so I wouldn't step on a thorn. I used the shears to cut canes off the most dense of the bushes, though there weren't as many as I thought there'd be. It became clear that I was discovering something someone had already discovered and kept partially open, a path. And it felt as

though the Callery pears subtly, perhaps even consciously, guided me with an opening, a beam of light, a nudge against a shoulder or hip. Come inside, the pear trees beckoned. We're harmless.

The sun disappeared behind clouds and with the glossy leaves surrounding me, I felt like I was suddenly swimming in green. The woods smelled like algae and fungi with only a note of exhaust fumes from the cars going by us.

Us? Yes, there had to be an us. I could sense something with me among the generations of vegetation. I'd never lived alone until recently, and at first, I couldn't bear it. I felt untethered, and I had developed this recurrent feeling that I was being watched by something or someone. In the woods, though, I seemed to become one with the watcher and no longer felt its gaze on me. How odd, I thought. Anyway, I had gone from my parents' home to marriage, had raised children in a house I still lived in, a house filled for years with our friends and our children's friends. I was never alone. For fifteen years or so, all the neighborhood children ran in and out, freely helping themselves to the juice boxes in our refrigerator, the crackers and cereal in our pantry, on their way from one backyard to another, until one day I woke up and they were all gone, and I realized, too late, how beautiful it had all been.

There are still children running through my neighborhood, but they don't come to my door, even at Halloween. I had thought of offering the new batch of children cookies as they ran by, but they might take one look at me and think *witch*. I would have felt the same at their age.

Our children had grown up being told that all creation (an odd word, isn't it, as though the importance of what "is" is that it was made where nothing had been before) had their best interests at heart, and we'd done our best to prove it to them when they were young. They were given mothers and fathers to love them, siblings and friends and grandparents, schools with kind teachers, playgrounds and toys and swimming pools and a new subdivision planted with rows of pear trees whose flames of white sheltered their buses from the sun and woke them every spring from the winter sleep that followed Christmas. Look at me! Look at me! the children would say as they went through their days, and we looked at them as though they were the centers of a benevolent universe and we, their parents, were its messengers.

As I cut through the understory with garden shears, I thought of the things we had tried, unsuccessfully, to shelter them from. Our inevitable midlife crises: betrayal and debt, illness, the death of friends and grandparents, old age,

the occasional crime. Whispered nighttime arguments between married couples who at times were so angry they were surprised at their revealed capacity for violence. Often the conflict centered on the sudden blossoming of threatening forbidden love that seemed, at the time, so real and so important, a call so necessary to answer. How many young mothers had I talked to on my deck over the years about the cheating spouse, or their own midlife affairs. I'm leaving, one would say, but more often than not, they weathered the drama, and the family stayed intact and years later might awaken to the reality, the danger they'd come so close to, and the utter strangeness of what they'd been through.

No one, nothing, prepares you for how much you will love your children and how unthinkingly and selfishly you can hurt them.

I walked further into the thicket and couldn't keep the thorns from scratching my face and wrists. The few blossoms that were left on the trees smelled like fish, and it mingled with the green lichen smell. It wasn't unpleasant particularly. At one point I tasted blood. In the fairy tales, the prince (always a prince) is outside the thorns and then inside kneeling on the ground beside the coffin, the girl's blue (always blue) silk dress and pale skin, uncorrupted. We don't see the sticks and brambles in his hair, the ripped waistcoat, the scratches on his face and arms. There are no maggots in the coffin, only

rosy cheeks and angel hair. I kept going, kept cutting and walking, following the semi-path.

Finally, I got to the point where I couldn't see cars in any direction, though I could of course hear them. At that point, too, the sound of vehicles was equal from all sides, and I knew that I'd reached the center. Of what? What do you call this triangle of land, this place that had crushed the native vegetation with thorns and flowers?

I called it *Golgotha*, though I honestly did not know why. It came to me out of nowhere, the name. There was nothing at the center that I could see, and the sense of being watched or accompanied left me. I was alone in a strange place, a foolish old woman surrounded by exiles. If I stayed here, no one would miss me, and the discovery brought with it (as perhaps I'd known it would) all this rage. I wished I had something more than shears with me. I wished I had a sword or an axe or hatchet that I could use against these oh-so-perfectly deceitful, yet ultimately innocent, trees.

And if I was forgotten, who would remember my son and husband? Some part of them, a chimera, still lived in me but would die with me. Was the universe this cruel underneath it all? Had I been lying to our son all along? And what of my daughter, and her sons? They were living in the sweet years now,

and I wanted it to last, and I wanted them to be aware of it. I wanted to believe I had brought my beautiful children out of nothingness and into love, that my participation in their existence, however naïve, was more than an invitation to suffering. I believed this in the golden years of their childhood, that life would be kind to them, that they belonged here. Now I stood by myself, in the middle of an exodus, bloody scratches on my wrists and face and ankles. Would I take it all back if I could, my part in this? That's not a question you should ask, I told myself. Nevertheless, in the middle of the Callery pears, in the stink of their blossoms, I asked it.

Of course, I pulled myself together. I picked up my things, the pack with its sandwiches and water and its unused first aid kit. I made my way back out of the place, into the river of exhaust fumes. On the way to the car, I gave the panhandling girl with the dog and the empty eyes (she had been someone's beloved child, as had I) everything I'd brought with me and, with the fear that I might, despite my best intentions, fail at this, promised I would return soon, bringing gifts.

SUSAN NEVILLE's latest collection of stories, *The Town of Whispering Dolls*, was published in 2020 and received the Catherine Doctorow Prize for Innovative Fiction. The recipient of the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction, and the Richard Sullivan Prize, she is also the author of seven collections of nonfiction.