

## Pruning

“It was just a colour out of space—a frightful messenger from unformed realms of infinity beyond all Nature as we know it—H.P. Lovecraft, *The Colour Out of Space*.

Poison had made it into the soil. Inez held the gardening shears at her side, anxiously opening and closing blades dark with earth as she stared up at the dead tree. The sycamore stood at a deranged angle, leafless, its branches so dry and twisted they looked like antlers arranged in some pagan configuration against the blasted-white winter sky. She fixed her eyes on the distance that rolled on and on into a landscape hardly more than ash.

Inez found it difficult to accept a land so dead and pigmentless had been lush and green just a few short months ago, but the thing in the mine worked quickly, quicker than anyone could have imagined. Ray-John Webber, who worked for the J&A Coal Company since ink had wet his high school diploma, had been the one to find it.

“I thought it was just some sort of artifact,” he told the regulars down at Spigot’s Taphouse, wrapping soot smudged fingers around the condensation beaded neck of a Coors. “Like the arc of the covenant in *Raiders*. I didn’t even know it was there until my pick hit it and it started gushing this red gunk everywhere, almost red like blood but faded, like the worn side of a penny.”

The thing in the mine leaked for weeks. It leaked while the professors of archeology and anthropology who came all the way down from the Miskatonic University in Arkham, Massachusetts took photos and studied the symbols etched across its ebony surface. It leaked

until its strange fluid flooded the mineshafts and they waded through it with their jeans wrapped up to their knees. It leaked until its blood seeped deep into the soil. Nobody cared much, at least not until the bass and trout started to float dead-eyed in the river, a string of white bellies that flipped up and bobbed in water that had turned into the color of moving rust.

The river still ran red. Inez's grip tightened on the shears' rubber handles as she watched the rapids coil over each other like the dark bronze backs of copperheads. She thought of her mother, a good country woman who'd traveled to this land all the way from Venezuela, how the old woman would bend to the crops in the morning, muttering thanks in the manner her own mother had taught her. Inez didn't know poison had ebbed into the well. Her mother complained of feeling funny, not sick exactly, but not quite right either. She shut herself in her bedroom and napped off and on through two days. Inez was the one that found her. She dropped the breakfast tray she was carrying, both soup and the shattered china bowl scattering across the floor when she caught sight of her mother's eyes. They had filled up overnight, nothing more than two jellied eggs in an ashen face, a corpse staring through a hollowed body that had been eaten from the inside out.

Remembering her mother, watching the crimson current, Inez bent to the soil, the shadow of the way her mother would mutter thanks to the corn and, after sifting through the ash that had replaced the greenery, she slipped her finger between the shears—the first joint, the first segment, that crease in the flesh pinched between the serrated edges—and snipped. The tip of her pointer fell into the soil, small and pathetic, a pink rose petal with a half-chewed nail.

The pain was hot and bright as the blood that gushed forth. Inez clenched her teeth, moved her finger up, the second joint, the second crease now snagged between the blades. Her husband had died next. Inez remembered seeing him that last time, only seeing his head shivering in the toilet at the hospital. He'd looked up once, blinking in confusion, unable to remember her name, and she missed the way he used to say it, each syllable spoken tenderly off the tip of the tongue, always like a song sung sweetly but out of sync. But by then he'd forgotten the sound, the poison he'd drunk clouded its shape, the memory of it leaking through his ears with the gray matter and brain that dribbled down his temples. She still wondered why the water had never made her sick, was still waiting for the signs: the veins that ran in a black web through skin, the teeth going loose in their beddings. Sometimes, after all she has lost, she probes her molars, hoping to feel one tilt, hoping for an end to all the pain.

Remembering her husband, Inez snipped the shears and the blood spattered onto the dirt in dark patterns she could almost read. She moved the blades farther down, the next segment, the rest of her finger trembling and waiting. She did not want to remember what came next, how by then the river had went to her father's brain, made him crazy, made him fanatic.

"It whispers. It talks. Can't you hear it? It mutters just beneath the rapids." He'd said after shoving Inez to the ground, wiry in old age but still unbelievably strong from the years he worked laying brick. Immovable as stone itself, he grabbed Inez's son, grabbed her Guillermo around the neck and guided him toward the copper tinted water.

“I can hear your mother,” He gazed deep into the water’s scarlet undulations. A blood drop emerged from the corner of one rheumy eye. “She cries out below the current. She says the most beautiful things await us all, the most beautiful colors, like Christmas lights in a rainstorm. *¡Novia! Mi astuta-loba, ya voy ¡quiero ver!*”

Inez’s father edged off the muddy bank, the river frothing over he and Guillermo’s shoes in foam the ugly shade of iodine. Guillermo reached for Inez, his stubby child-fingers splayed and grasping the open air.

“Momma!”

Inez seized her father’s arms, his muscles alive with insanity beneath her fingertips, jerking and twisting as if she she’d snatched hold of a sack stuffed with viscous centipedes instead of a man. Inez hadn’t expected the knife, the small foldout blade he’d bought in Italy during his excursions in the Navy, the one she’d watched him whittle with on the porch countless times, so oddly gentle in the way he would manipulate its movements against the wood. There was none of that craftsman’s care and skill when he plunged the knife into Inez’s side, lodging blade between ribs.

Inez stumbled backwards, stricken into an appalled silence as she glanced down and saw where he had their family name *Vasquez* etched deep into the handle that now jutted from her stomach. Her father waded into the scarlet-kissed water with her son. He gripped the back of the boy’s head, a twisted holy-man about to administer a blasphemous baptism.

“It’s okay, *Nieto*,” he said, soothing the boy. “Your grandmother says it’s the most wonderful place. Can’t you hear her in the water? She says it’s a dream land. Don’t be afraid, my little *pollito*. There are baseball fields there for you to play on where the children laugh until they scream because the games go on and on and on. There’s snow cones there, too, the cherry syrup so sweet the coating never leaves your tongue, just stays there cloying and sour forever and ever.”

He lowered Guillermo’s head to the poison-apple colored water. “Can you smell it, *pollito*, can you smell the snow cones of your dreams, so sweet and maddening it’s like sugared moth wings beating in your skull. That’s the smell of dreams, *pollito*. Something familiar but not quite right. That’s the smell of dreams.”

Her father dunked Guillermo under, the bubbles from his scream churning in the coppery current. Inez tore the knife from her side and buried the blade deep into the soft crook of her father’s neck. Warm blood gushed between her fingers, then streaked and vanished in the red water. He turned and looked at her, his expression wounded. Reaching up, he touched Inez’s cheek the way he had when she was still a small child perched on his knee, his fingers feeling like they did then, tough and leathery from working with land and stone, but so gentle, always careful to use only the tips where there were no callouses.

“*Mi niña, pequeña angelita*, I only wanted to see the lights.” The ones’ in his eyes were already fading, and Inez clung to him, weeping into his bony shoulder and desperate not to let his body fall and become further desecrated by the red river.

Remembering the grizzled but careful touch of her father's fingertips, Inez clenched the gardening shears' rubber handles and snipped the third segment. The pink wad dropped bleeding with the others at her feet. She could feel herself growing weaker, unsteady from blood loss and oddly cold as the beginnings of shock began to ebb into her body. She moved the blades over the final crease of her index finger, set right against the bony ridge of her knuckle, the remainder a pale and bloodless stump that shuddered in the cold air.

It wasn't long before what Guillermo ingested from the river began to change him. His back pulled down into an arch as he walked, the spine bending him forward until his gait became a regressed troglodyte stoop, until finally instead of walking he rooted through the house on all fours, snorting and grunting in chopped, pig-squealed syllables that resembled nothing of humanity. Her sweet boy who she once watched sing in the lightest voice, unashamed before all his classmates at the Christmas assembly, began to warp before her eyes. The fingers on both hands melded together, becoming fleshy cloven hooves with two trowel shaped black nails. His nose upturning and flattening, the nostrils shrinking into bestial slits. It came so she couldn't stomach the sight of him anymore and locked him in the cellar. She did peek through the trapdoor once and saw a dark piggish shape crouched in corner so terrible that it made her scream at the top of her lungs and never want to open the cellar again.

It wasn't long before she began to hear the red river whispering, too, faint muttering voices that drifted across the fields that had withered to ash and crumbling charcoal, the voices of everyone she lost chanting promises of resurrection in turn for sacrifice. A pain in exchange for the pain she felt at each loss, crucial pieces of herself given for each loved-one taken. The

pieces and severed segments of her finger piled at her feet were offerings to their absence. It was a living thing, this river, a slithering copperhead-god that squirmed from a black universe older than time itself. Inez could see her family in the current—her mother, her father, her husband—distorted screaming reflections that shimmered across its faded bronze surface. Both her severed finger and the gardening shears dripped. There were still so many loved ones to go.

There was Auntie Maria who'd drowned herself in the river's depths, nothing more now than a body that floated and bloated the floral printed dress she always wore. There was Uncle Nino who used to do a spot-on yodel just like those old Ricola commercials until the river water rotted his esophagus and collapsed it into his chest. This wasn't even counting distant relatives: stupid cousin Stanley with the lisp, cousin Martha, George, Ronnie, Louisa, Jose, Winslow, Benny, Franklin, Joey, Rosie, Ricky, Caleb, Ronnie, Joe-Joe, Suzie, Larry, and even great uncle Tony with the limp. Southern family roots run deep.

Inez opened and closed the gardening shears and flexed her remaining fingers. She would probably have to finish off on her toes.

#### Contributor's Note

Josh Wilson has been writing fiction and poetry for a little over seven years. His work has appeared in a few small indie-presses that publish the horror genre. His influences run from Clive Barker, Stephen King, and Shirley Jackson all the way down the spectrum to Franz Kafka, Cormac McCarthy, and William Gay. He spends most of his free time reading, spending time

with his fiancée, Danielle, and being bothered by his abnormally hyper French-bulldog beagle mix, Raz.