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Arbor Day

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Tracey: Arbor Day

ARBOR DAY

Sara Tracey

The Bushmen of South Africa think that, by a glance of a girl's eye at the time when she ought to be kept in strict retirement, men become fixed in whatever positions they happen to occupy, with whatever they were holding in their hands, and are changed into trees that talk.

—Sir James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough*

How many men I must have turned to trees those days
before I knew. An audience of teachers, brothers,
middle-school boyfriends
growing leaves while I sang, off-pitch,
in the sixth-grade girls' choir.
An orchard conjured in the cafeteria.
What words would they have for me now,
speaking through lips of creased bark?
What fruits would they bear?
What thorns?

The boy whose birthday cake I couldn't eat,
my stomach lurching, his mutt's head
burrowed between my knees,
wrapped me in a shroud of weeping
branches. Safe in this shadowed place,
he whispered through branches, told me
that we loved his best friend
in the same, gut-curling way.

One boy bent his head to kiss me
in the back seat of an '89 Cutlass,
his fingers inching up the edge of my shirt.
His roots pierced the floorboards,
his branches held fast to my blouse.
I struggled out the back window,

watched cherry blossoms bloom,
and walked home topless.

My father, supine in a hospital bed
grew roots that sprawled, choked pipes,
left everyone gasping for breath.
Some days I find my mother tucked
against his trunk, her eyes closed
as he tells her what he's seen.