

Cycle.

Spring:

This is how we begin: unfurling, soft and vulnerable. It is quiet before you, but now everything is budding. We watch you experience sound, sight, laughter, dancing. They toss you gently, lifting you up to grasp our waving branches. It's like the tip on the roller coaster that leaves you with a stomach where your heart should be and very little air. Yet somehow, you still manage to prepare for the shriek as you cascade down.

We want to ask you: what is it to put one limb in front of the other? To be on the ground, barefoot and wobbling? We only know what it is to be rooted, to be able to bend as the wind blows. Falling is the end to our cycle, it's our death, but you do it like it's breathing. You simply roll and prop yourself back up, crying and laughing in equal measure.

Watching you grow into your voice has been a gift. You make notes like the birds' songs that are now transforming into sounds alike to the chatter of the squirrels. The pacing of this newfound noise grows faster and faster every day, reminiscent of how we watched you learn to stand, and then almost immediately discover you could walk, then run.

You sit beneath us when you play with your teacups and your imitation bears. You braid our flowers into your hair and string them together into bracelets and chains. The dolls in your hands wear them, and so does the fluffy white puppy that chases the shadows with the wind.

We become base when you play tag and what you hide behind, giggling while the seeker calls your name in exaggerated tones. They find you eventually, crouched down with muddy hands pressed against your mouth to stifle the soft squeals. You laugh, stand up, and the game resumes.

On gentler days you paint pictures under the sun and picnic in the grass. You bake big fluffy cakes that are piled high with frostings and sweet berries. It covers your fingers like gloves of spun sugar.

One time, you even dared to climb our branches. We held as still as we possibly could, fearing any twitch of wind in our leaves or bend of our boughs. Your hands clasped each limb confidently, and each foothold was found with ease. But in the next moment, you were gone. We felt the weight of you dissipate, heard the scream that shook each bird from their nest above, and felt the impacted stillness as you landed on our roots with a crunch so deafening it billowed outward into the air. Then it was the silence that became intolerable.

In that moment, we realized that falling could be like death to you, too, if it happened just right. Your sap is red and runs more like rain than ours. But it is still sticky and thick. We stood over you, helpless, watching as it seeped into our roots and as the wailing began. They found you after what felt like eternity, and you were carted off by many hands and overlapping voices. We did not see you for days, and even after you healed, you never climbed again.

When you returned to us, you incorporated more sedentary things. You played cards, and you sat for hours looking at small bound rectangles with delicate print on them. In the beginning of your newfound hobby, you read the words on the pages to us, talking of worlds neither of us will ever experience, but eventually it became a silent act. Those leaves of text now make you hold your sides laughing and occasionally they make you curl up on our roots with sorrowful shades. You cling to yourself, hiccupping and sniveling. Once you even threw one across the yard, fluttering, rustling, and landing with a thud. You picked it up rather sheepishly a few minutes later and smoothed its crumpled pieces, sniffing and sighing while turning the pages. Sometimes you stay out reading until the sun dims and the stars glow, and you bring our own

small source of light. You are made of magic - able to carry a piece of the with you even on the darkest of evenings.

Summer:

This is when you become. We watch you define what it means to come home, to be home, to stay home. We see you stop more frequently and finally admire the view.

It is a time of friendship and adventures. Everything is critically important, and each moment has the cadence of either a beginning or an end. There are the biggest, brightest days where you lay stretched out in the sticky air laughing until your stomach aches in protest. You sit propped up against our sturdy, sun-warmed trunk, and our leaves shake with happiness in the blissful wind. Often there are others with you, and they too shriek with glee. Though, as time ticks on and you keep growing, not many of them choose to stay.

It is a somber event when the big fluffy dog passes away. You run out in the summer storm and collapse beneath us as the heavy blobs of rain sink into the grass at our feet. The drops of moisture blend into the streams of salt that shimmer down your cheeks. We bow down too in the onslaught of the keening wind. We want to ask you: what is it to miss someone? To lose them to the burden of time? Loss seems to be something different in our cycle. We regrow after we fall, and you don't seem to have that experience.

When the storm has passed and you resume a regular breathing pattern, everyone gathers in a little heap and digs a massive hole around our roots. You place the fluffy white creature gently there while we promise you that we would cradle him for as long as his bones remain individual pieces.

In the following years we watch you become embodied, strong, and empowered. You find pride and you use your strength to fiercely protect those around you. You carve out space

for your loved ones in a world that is not always so agreeable. You sit with them as they grieve, and you cheer with them as they triumph. You only let them collapse when they wish to fall, and when they do sink to their knees, you hold them close.

Soon, the days our flowers start to wither, and leaves become poked full of holes. We are being hollowed, carved away from the inside out, internally consumed. This is the closest we have experienced to our cycle ending, a much more permanent death than the one we witness every winter. There is an awareness that the termination of the cycle may be necessary, but we find an even greater loss in the prospect of not being able to watch you grow.

When you realize we are so violently ill, you gather up books that have trees on the cover and flip through each one, loudly proclaiming when you finally locate one that looks like us. Then you come back with even more volumes stacked precariously in your arms. You have a desperation we hadn't seen before. A drive to learn, a need to know. We only know what it is to cycle: to grow, bud, bloom, decay and fall, along with death, of course. But you seemed to wish to know more. For the first time since you were small, we watch you drag a ladder up to us and with aching slowness you climb it, knuckles white and breath shivering. Once you reach the summit you, ever so softly, survey each of our wilting leaves. You cross-reference the holes in our foliage with the glossy images in your hand, nodding and sighing to yourself as you move a pen along a shred of paper tucked into the pages. Then you climb back down with just as much tentativeness as the coming up and cart the ladder away.

There is something about the firmness with which you hold your gaze that reminds us of when the big fluffy dog was sick. There is something in you that we cannot place: fear. You walk out to us shortly after the sun rises each morning and sit at our roots, talking. Even the birds to quietly listen. You seem to be just as aware of our potential death as we are, if not more so.

The sickest day is followed by an all-encompassing noise. It is clattery, loud and mechanical, and it has a clicking tone that is similar to the voices of squirrels, but far more violent. The birds scatter in shock and circle the air, screeching. You are yelling too, your voice not laced with fear but rather anger. We have not seen you so completely overwhelmed with feeling since the grief of the fluffy white creature. You come stumbling out of the house, limbs sporadically flapping in front of your face. There is another who you are speaking to, and they are the one who hold the chugging-noise-machine. You reach them and, calling even louder, repeat one word over and over. There is an urgency to your tone, desperation. You sound as though you are about to lose something precious, like it will be taken away from you against your will. The one who your distress is directed at turns off the noise and begins yelling back. They say something that left you with your mouth agape, gasping for air. Your eyes are wide, round, and watery and with one final howl you turn and run toward us, legs dotted with red lines from running in the sharp grass. Breaking down into tears you throw yourself to our roots and plead and beg until the one with the noise raise their hands in the air and turn away to head back into the house. When they are gone, you wrap your limbs around our trunk and weep, repeating a new phrase only to us.

Autumn:

This is when you know. When you acknowledge how short each cycle truly is. We want to ask you: how much do you bend under the weight of your wholeness? How do you bear the hopeful yet heavy burden of the fruit you have so consciously grown?

You have become so poised. You stand like a being that knows exactly who they are. You delve into the world of self-expression while our colors begin to change. There is not a singular shade that outshines another, nor is there any sort of control over what we become, but

you, you have that power, that control. We watch you wake up every morning and choose to be as gentle as the yellow or as vibrant as the orange; the hot pink and red when you are feeling passionate, and the brown when you are feeling calm.

The people who visit you now are different. They hold an air of permanency, of intimacy. There is depth, meaning, and history to these friendships. It's still sometimes about tea and flowers, but it is also so much more. They aren't as hollow as your dolls, nor are they as fragile. They bring you things like comfort, and contentment, as well as the occasional sadness and hurt. One visits more and more frequently, and soon they become an always, and we see them nearly every time we see you. You carry so much joy around them, and you are always animated and lit up with them, like when you were small.

Then there is another. You carry her out beneath the branches above and dance with her, holding her up above your head so that she can reach up and tickle our waving hands. She laughs, she smiles, and she dances too. With each rise of the sun, this child reminds us more and more of you. Her smile is a mirror to your own, and her laugh is a ghost which haunts our memories of seasons past. She, like you, loves to sing like the birds and run in circles around our trunk before jumping exaggeratedly from our roots. She grows up the way you did and soon it's her that's making invisible drinks for dolls and placing tiny clothes on the stuffed bears. She too hosts tea parties for the fanciest of imaginary animals, and you play with her, drinking your own invisible tea. Together you build crowns out of the leaves, turning and weaving them into each other's hair. Now she's the one ducking behind us and crouching down as you seek for her. Her friends come visit and join in the simple mischief. She runs like you used to and they spin in circles and together weave between the pillars of our trunks. We see you watching from the windows and laughing as she zooms around the edges of the dilapidated fence. You have created a cycle of your own.

We watch you care for her with the same tenderness as you did for us when we fell ill. Together the two of you read big books with thick colorful pages, many of which have trees on them alongside painted animals with smiling faces.

One day, she too decides to be brave and try to climb our branches. You are away, tucked inside, and we find ourselves once again bracing for the impact, waiting for the red sap to run. But to our surprise, she succeeds in her task and sits up in the branches joyfully until you come running, waving and calling in fear. Nevertheless, she hides up there when you aren't looking and not once did she fall.

Winter:

This is when you understand you have lived fully. We look back and see the overlapping cycles we have lived with you. From our first budding to your first breath, from your running and walking to us reaching higher toward the clouds. From your falls and pains and laughter and joy. Now your wrinkled face now mirrors ours. We both sit hunched. This stooped position is new to us both. We want to ask you: What is it to know that one day you will not be here; that you will not remember who you were? What is it like to know that you will lose your mind and your body? To lose your movement? Our mobility is how it has always been, but you have gone from sprinting, running, and throwing your limbs above your head, to a determined comfortable pace, to being deliberate, tired, slow.

You rest beneath us as often as you once did, but this time it is in a precariously perched chair that is woven around our roots. You have a blanket stretched across your lap while you knit an identical copy of the one around your shoulders. There is a mug of tea that sits on a table beside you. The tea is made of the flowers you once picked in Spring, long dead and dried now. We remember that harvest fondly, and so do you as we hear you tell the stories to the small

children who lay in the grass at your feet. They wear knitted sweaters and drink hot chocolate with whipped cream swirls. You are drinking up every precious second of time that you have left.

Your ending is one of stillness, of finally coming to rest. Your family lays you down under our limbs and covers you with blankets and hands. Your hair is grayish-white, like the snow that is bound to set in in the next few rises of the sun. It is peaceful here. Your hand reaches up towards us, we are waving gently. It reminds us of when you were small and reached up to touch us. There is a lot less laughter in this moment than in our memory of you dancing but the contentment is still palpable. Everything is soft, quiet, and final. You are unfurling, and with every moment growing ever more still. We, the silent wall who, again, cannot spare you from a serious fall - an end - we watch you fade, wispy, delicate, and so very small as the wind kisses you goodbye.

And then it is our turn to end; crinkled like old paper jammed up in the back of a desk drawer, yellow and crumbling. We no longer hold our heads high, but rather bow them in contemplation, nodding off into peaceful sleep; into hibernation. It was loud before this, but now with each passing day it becomes quieter and more still. The one who reminded us so much of you has not visited us in many days. She explained that she needed to see the sun from some other view.

Our brittle boughs snap so easily that we barely attempt to move for fear of breaking. Our leaves creak and crackle with the lack of hydration. The chill still foreshadows snow, and the damp gray mist rests suspended all around us. We cannot see the way nor know where it is we are headed, and yet it seems familiar. This is the opposite of blooming; it's a decay, curling up and within until there is nothing left but to release and cascade down to the detritus below. We seem to hover there before we land, feeling flight and movement in our final moments.

This is how we end: winter takes us with browning wings, and like ghosts, we reach up one last time. We feel each root as it disconnects from its tether, the tipping, then the cracking thud as we come to stillness entirely. Our bodies rest parallel to the earth for the first time. This worst is over, it has happened, and we have come to understand that

You were always worth the Fall.