

## ***RETURN OF THE DANCING TREES***

By Susan Hodara

A surefire way for me to rekindle the passion I felt when I met my husband, Paul, is to imagine that he's dying. Then I turn to his face only inches from mine as we lie in our bed and peer into the familiar lines, the blackened pores of his shaven cheeks, the beard below flecked with gray.

We are still young enough to move freely from one place to another, to raise our limbs and stoop to tie our shoes without a second thought. I consider the idea of some unknown cancer, or picture us shriveled with age. I prod myself to know for just a moment that Paul will be dead, until that knowing stirs up the neglected embers of his preciousness to me. In the silence of the early morning, my heart refills with a love born almost 25 years ago, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

Try as I might, though, the feeling is elusive, slippery and hard to hold. I stare hard at Paul's eyes, closed in sleep, wondering if the power of my gaze holds enough energy to force them to open. But if they do, he will smile and move closer to me, and the touch of his hand, the scent of his breath, the oppressive rush of heat in my socked feet below, will banish my games of death.

Days go by as we scuttle about our own paths, our daughters turning to women and fine lines etching themselves around our eyes. Rarely do we need to be in love to get through our days, but privately I fear my own loss of the fervor I had early on and that back then had all but governed my life. I picture it digging underground like a sand crab disappearing with a passing wave, lost in the land of our differences and the inevitable frays of our conjoined paths. It is not often now that I have access to that intensity of our

love, a feeling that's not just a given but a thrill, a reason, something to do in itself. My morbid fantasies are my crutch for a spark; unbeknownst to Paul, I seek occasions when I feel it again without that crutch, buoyed when I do by hope for our lives ahead.

It was a slow Sunday that found Paul and me in our living room, I on the black leather sofa against the wall, he on the brown cushioned chair facing me, the *New York Times* fanned out on the coffee table between us. Sunshine streamed outside, the darkened gold of late afternoon, while inside strains of Bob Marley shared the room with us. I struggled to read, fighting the beat of music, unable to grasp the words on the page, and then jumping to the last paragraph in a vain attempt to follow the article backwards. I looked up to the white wall on my left.

The sun was setting on my right, easing behind the small forest of wintry trees that cluster behind our house. Today it was a wall of bare branches that swayed in the wind, screening the light, projecting shadows of gray lines across our living room. They were in sharp focus by the time they hit the wall, flattened trees moving side to side, lines crossing one another gracefully, forming ever-changing tiny diamonds that elongated and vanished and reappeared a few inches away. They caught the rhythm of the music and danced as only branches can.

Trees have always danced for me, framed by glass windowpanes and compressed into patterns of lines. I used to watch them from the window of my living room when I was very young, maybe seven years old. They'd dance to "Swan Lake," the ballet I'd been taken to see twice. I waited for the

part when the theme of the music took over near the end, its crescendo of minor chords so deliberate, halting and heartbreaking to me even as a child.

There, through the slats of Venetian blinds, it never failed that the trees would find the heart of the music, its beat and melody becoming their wind. They'd blow more fiercely when the strings played louder; they'd sway oh-so-gently at the quieter parts; they seemed to bend with grief at the finale. They knew both tempo and tone, and I felt they danced only for me, a private performance of drama and beauty.

Now they were dancing again. You had to be there at just the right moment, when time and weather, sun and trees, window and wall were aligned. Paul looked up when I did, and followed my eyes to the wall.

"I like the shadows," he said. "They're keeping time to the music."

And there it was again, a flood of my love, ushered gratefully into the room for as long as it would stay. It was this kind of seeing that had made me love Paul years before. My expression didn't change, though, and Paul went back to his newspaper, never knowing that I thanked the trees for their fanciful display..