

Confession

Mark Sheffield Brown

The trees wear
copper-lit skin tonight.
Spread out and still in the cold,
they look like slender Kenyans
holding up thousands of hands,

stars in their palms.

I don't pray
to trees—

otherwise,

I would press my cheek to the nearest
elm on this walk,
and take the bark's wide-tooth
bite into my skin
as reproof
for not coming sooner.

When I whispered my sins
into waiting, wooden
ears, my steaming
breath would soak
under gray skin.

Someone would walk by and
see me, arms around a tree,
tears dripping from
my face, whispering
crazy, repeating,
O, *forgive me, forgive me,*

and he would join me, arms around
the copper-colored giant,
and let
his dark things run
out like a pack of ashen dogs.

Together we pray to this tree,
its branches neither reaching up nor
hanging over,
its skin cold and orange, rough
against us as we hold tight—

More would join us.

Seeing two crazy men whispering
to a campus tree on a January night
moves people

and before midnight a small crowd
would circle the tree, breath
 rising
in little ghost shapes disappearing
 into the tree's palms.

We would sit in a circle,
 hold hands,
 and touch each other's chapped faces,
knowing every bad thing the other
has done
 and love him still
 in that way you can love
 a stranger
 in the middle of the night.

Finally, eyes dry and stinging,
 we would begin to leave.
 Work tomorrow.
 My husband wondering,
 My kids.
 It's cold.

Leaving last,
 I would look into the tree's bones
 filled with stars and black,
 and listen,
 and wait.

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