

Mason Meyer

The Crystal Tree

One morning God awoke and knew he must create Beauty. And so, he stretched out his hand and commanded a single perfect plum to appear, royal purple skin drawn taut. When he stepped down into the infinite meadow of the world, God called the earth by name and the earth bent to his word, forming a hill. God stepped to the crest, each footstep a commandment, then bent down and buried the plum in loam that was dark and smooth as ink. "I will visit you again," he said, "and I will be proud of my work."

When the tree finally awoke it was springtime. He unfurled his single leaf like a sail into the gentle wind that blew from the south, and deeply breathed in the heavy odor of chocolate and the light perfume of lilacs, each of which had traveled thousands of miles just to be savored by the infant tree. The tree was weak, and his fragile needle-trunk danced with the breeze as perilously as the flame of a candle. The sun was high and the earth was wet, and the tree was happy simply to be.

The first night was cold, and the tree wished to curl up into a ball. But the ground, as always, was warm, and the tree pushed with all his might to dive deeper into this heat. With each strain, the tree felt his roots find new purchase in deeper ground. All night long the tree reached into the ground, and when dawn finally came, he wanted nothing more than to touch the warmth of the sun. Bracing his body against his new roots, trunk erect despite the wind, the tree reached skyward and grew.

Day after day, the tree shot upward, and night after night, the tree spread downward. On the sixth day, the tree was rewarded with a second leaf. On the ninth day, it rained, and the tree's roots darted through the oversaturated soil like snakes burrowing into their homes. In the third month, the tree was surprised to grow his first branch. In the seventh month, the tree watched as his first leaf dropped from his body, cradled by the wind. The autumn wind blew in the opposite direction, and the tree wondered if his leaf would make it to the land that smelled of chocolate. By the time the first snow arrived that winter, the tree, now a full yard tall, was proud and tired. He went to sleep, knowing that he would wake again in the spring.

One spring when the tree was five hundred years old, a poet labored up the hill the tree called home. He fell to his knees upon reaching the crest. "This is surely the most beautiful sight I have ever seen," the poet said, and he was correct. The tree was the most beautiful thing in the world. His canopy of leaves rose like a cloud. His trunk was large as a house and textured with centuries of wisdom, and his hundreds of thousands of emerald leaves danced in the breeze with the surety that comes from knowing many things.

The poet was the first human the tree had ever met, and the tree watched curiously as the poet spent the day seated with his legs folded, scribbling words the tree did not know how to read with his pen on paper.

"What are you doing?" The tree asked eventually.

"I am writing a poem," the poet replied.

“What is a poem?”

“It is art. It is beautiful words.”

“Why do you write?”

“So I may be the creator of beautiful things.”

The thought had never occurred to the tree before, and he pondered it until the sky reddened and the poet finally rose.

“I have finished my poem. I will share it with all, so every person in the world may know of your beauty. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye.”

That night, the tree did not force his roots deeper into the ground. He was troubled.

The following morning, an artist carrying her canvas, paints, and brushes reached the crest of the tree’s hill.

“Are you a poet as well?” The tree asked.

“No. I am an artist.”

“So you do not create beautiful things.”

The artist scowled at the tree. “There are many ways to create beautiful things,” she said. “I read of your beauty in a poem, and now I have come to capture it myself in a painting.” And she began mixing her paints.

All afternoon the artist painted, and all afternoon the tree thought of the artist’s words. And then, in a single moment of ecstasy, the tree understood. The wind stopped and the air grew tight as the tree felt the full power of the world settle deep inside his trunk. The tree lowered his largest branch to the artist’s face and brought forth all his desire in a single word as he called for a flower by name.

And there before the artist’s eyes, the tree invented the flower. The tree’s leaves parted as a bulb of pink grew larger and larger. Then, only moments later, the sphere burst, and dozens of lace-thin petals opened to the world, revealing a radiant yellow heart. Small filaments reached out from the heart, as if begging the world to draw closer, and the air was immediately filled with the intoxicating perfume of honey and milk and fresh bread and young grass. The artist dropped her brushes in awe, knowing her own work had been outdone, but the tree was not yet finished. The tree called for a flower once again, and again, and all through his canopy dots of pink exploded into being until the green of the leaves was hidden entirely by a sea of pale rose. The artist was unable to speak.

“Finish your painting,” the tree encouraged. “And include my flowers. May your painting allow my beauty to reach the hearts of countless people.” And just then, the tree felt a fire in his belly, and like a flash of lightning, three streaks of pure crystal erupted from the tree’s roots in bands that slithered up the trunk of the tree.

“Part of your trunk has turned to crystal!” the artist exclaimed. The tree was enamored, and he twisted and turned his body to show how the shifting crystal caught the afternoon sunlight, pristine streaks of refracted light falling on the artist’s face.

The following day, God walked up the hill.

“You have earned your first crystal,” God said.

“What does it mean?” the tree asked.

“It is my gift to you. It means I am pleased with you. You are beautiful.”

“Thank you,” said the tree. “Look at what I have created.” And the tree twisted his branches, revealing the dance of hundreds of thousands of blush petals.

And suddenly the sky went dark and thunder roared as lightning crackled in God’s furious eyes. “Do not forget that I am your creator,” God warned. “Just as I have created you, all that you produce is mine to celebrate. You speak with poets and artists, but you do not write poems; you are the poem I have written.” The tree shrunk back as light returned to the sky, and God plucked a fragile flower from a low-hanging branch. “And you will be more beautiful still.” And with those words, God stepped back to heaven, leaving the tree to reflect on his art.

All the next day and night the tree was silent. The morning after, the poet who first wrote of the tree’s beauty returned to the hill, waving his hand as if greeting an old friend.

“Good morning!” he called. “I saw the painting of your flowers and crystal and knew I must see them for myself. They are more beautiful than any painting could ever hope to capture. With your permission, I would like to write a poem about them.”

And suddenly, the word of God still fresh on his mind, the tree realized the great misery of the poet, condemned to spend his life creating beauty, but never being truly beautiful himself. In this deep sadness, the tree began to shed his flowers one by one, letting petals fall like tears to the ground.

“Stop! Stop!” The poet cried. “What are you doing!”

And then the tree was no longer sad but angry. “You write poems of love as you retire to your bed to sleep alone. Be beautiful!” The tree shouted, trembling the ground with the size of his voice. With each petal that touched the ground, the crystal streaks in the tree’s trunk grew larger and more iridescent.

The poet looked hopelessly upward to the tree. “I don’t understand! Shedding your flowers is a tragedy.”

And suddenly the tree’s patience was exhausted. “Be beautiful!” the tree roared, frothing sap seething from his bark. The poet fell to the ground as the earth shook. “BE BEAUTIFUL!”

The poet rose and fled without another word, and having learned nothing, spent the evening writing a poem about the tragedy of a hundred thousand falling petals.

When the poet cautiously returned a few days later, the hill was covered in the corpses of the fallen flowers, still just as pink and delicate as the day they bloomed.

“I wrote a poem about your falling flowers,” the poet began. “It is the most famous poem that has ever been written. It is all people will read.” He paused. “I must thank you, though in truth I still find it a tragedy.”

And when the tree heard these words, a belief settled deep within him. "Tragedy is Beauty," he told the poet, and no future artist would ever sway the tree's mind from this one immortal truth. The tree felt his crystal grow with God's tacit agreement.

As spring turned to summer the tree learned many things. He invented fruit, and learned how to fill his branches with thousands of decadent dark plums. He learned transience. He learned how to make his flowers wilt, and his fruit rot. Every day the tree had visitors who would sit in admiration as they created naïve art, and every day more of the tree's trunk would turn to crystal.

On the first day of fall, when over half of the tree's body was crystal, a young boy eight years old ran up the hill. The tree could sense this boy was special, and so he dropped his ripest plum right at the boy's feet. The boy scooped the plum up and took an enormous bite, crimson juice dripping down his chin. Then, noticing a rabbit creeping up beside him, the boy passed the plum to the rabbit, who happily began nibbling on its flesh. Suddenly, watching the rabbit, the boy began to cry, and the tree was touched.

"Dorian," the tree called, addressing the boy by name. "Why do you cry?"

The boy looked up into the tree's shimmering branches, sniffing and wiping his red chin with tattered sleeves. "That was the most delicious thing I have ever tasted. I'm afraid I will never taste something like that again."

And the tree knew that he could not scold this boy. "Is that all?"

"No," the boy said, another tear running down his cheek. "I am very unhappy. My father is a jeweler. Our home is filled with pretty jewels, but I am sad."

At this, the tree straightened his trunk, and the sunlight refracting through it fell on the boy's face in ripples. He arched his branches over the boy's face and spoke with perfect authority. "Happiness is not Beauty. Beauty is tragedy. Beauty is pain. Your life shall be a novel, for you are very beautiful, like me." And when the boy heard these words, he trusted them. "We are alike. Come to visit me each day. If you bring me a gift, I will give you a plum in return."

The boy nodded, "Goodbye, Tree."

"Goodbye, Dorian."

The next morning, before the sun had finished rising from the mountains to the east, the boy was there, single-purposed and determined. "I have brought you a gift!" he cried as he bounded up the grassy hill, hands cradling a diamond the size of a plum.

"Here." The tree lowered a branch, his largest plum right before the boy's face. "Take this plum, and set your diamond in its place." The boy plucked the plum, and as he held out the diamond, the crystalline twig that had served as the plum's stem accepted the diamond as its new fruit. It was diamond on crystal, clarity before clarity, and the crystal bands of the trunk grew yet again with the artist's satisfaction. The rabbit stayed home this time, and the boy devoured the plum to the pit.

Each day, the ritual continued. The boy brought rubies and emeralds in exchange for plums and the tree's canopy glistened in the sunlight as though it were filled with fireflies. The boy would trace each speck of light through the expanding crystal of the trunk.

“My father knows someone is taking his gems,” the boy said one day, noticeably thinner, as he offered a vibrant black opal. “He has started locking them in his room. But I have learned to climb on the roof and through windows.”

After many weeks, the autumn air was beginning to crisp, and the boy climbed the hill with his head bowed.

“What do you have for me today?” The tree asked. His trunk was now all crystal save for a few strips of wood and bark.

“I have given you all of my father’s precious stones.” The thin boy lamented. “I have come to ask for just one more plum.” The tree did not move. “Please!” The boy begged. “Without selling the gems I have stolen, my family has no money for food to eat.”

“I’m terribly sorry,” the tree said, and he admired the boy intensely. “Is there nothing else you can offer?”

The boy was silent for a moment, searching for something to say, then turned to head home.

The following morning the boy climbed the hill a bit more slowly than usual with a sheet of gold leaf in his hands. “I have no more precious stones,” he apologized, “but I can offer my father’s metals.”

“Here,” the tree began, and he lowered a branch. As the boy ate ravenously, the tree shed three leaves, gently offering them to the wind. “It is autumn, and it is time for me to lose my leaves. Would you replace them with gold?” And so the boy fashioned three almond-shaped leaves of gold and fixed them to the tree where the leaves had just fallen.

The days grew shorter and colder and the crystal tree grew ever more beautiful as his canopy filled with all sorts of precious metals among the gemstones. The musical tinkling of gold on diamond in the breeze filled the tree with joy, and he soon learned to use his precious gold and silver leaves as mirrors, reflecting beams of sunlight directly into his crystal trunk. He glowed with brilliance, and the artists who visited wept at the limitation of their own paints.

It was soon the first day of winter, and there was only one remaining plum in the tree’s entire canopy. The boy, dressed in nothing but the same threadbare shirt he wore the day he first met the crystal tree, shivered as he climbed to the hill’s crest. “This is the last thing I have to offer you,” the sad boy said. He held out his mother’s silver ring.

The tree, understanding, flourished his branches in a dazzling display of light. The agitation sent his last remaining leaves flying to the lilac fields in the south. He tenderly offered the last plum, nearly frozen, to the boy, and accepted the ring in trade. The tree flattened the ring into a foil with his will and fashioned it into his final leaf. As the boy plucked the plum from its glassy stem, the tree felt an immense warmth in his belly as the last streaks of wood disappeared from his body. The tree’s body shimmered and he suddenly knew that he was now wholly crystal, not a speck of wood remaining. He had transcended his original form completely, now a crystal tree with gold for leaves and gems for fruit. With that satisfaction, the tree began to feel tired, for it would soon be time to sleep for winter.

But the tree was also unsettled. The word of God was heavy on his mind, and the tree knew that he must become more beautiful still.

When the gaunt boy finished his final plum, he began to cry.

“Don’t cry, Dorian,” consoled the beautiful tree. “I will greet you next summer with a bountiful harvest.”

But the boy only cried harder, shivering in the cold. “My family has nothing,” he wailed. “Not even the wood to build a fire. I will surely freeze before the winter is over.”

At this, the beautiful crystal tree, the subject of the most exquisite paintings, the hero of the most bewitching poems, realized the only thing more beautiful than his current form. He bent tenderly over the boy and spoke slowly, each word like a footstep of God. “Go home, Dorian, and find an axe. Return to me then. In my heart, deep within my pellucid body, there is wood, and you will be warm,” the crystal tree lied. And Dorian trusted him absolutely.

The boy paused for a few moments, then looked up at the crystal tree in fear. “No!” He shouted. “I cannot bring you an axe. How can I allow you to die so I may live?”

“I have no more plums, it is the only thing I can offer you,” the tree insisted. “For making me so beautiful.” His words were brighter guilt than his canopy.

The boy brought his cold red hands to his face as he turned and ran.

For days, the tree did not see the boy. His hill was filled with visitors, people who had heard of the majesty of the wholly crystal tree and knew they must see him with their own eyes. Day and night the tree was surrounded by his admirers, and he used his mirror leaves to fill his pure body with radiance. He was love, he was war, he was happiness.

One evening, just as the sun was setting, the crowds began to thin, and the crystal tree found himself alone, knowing that it was time. The boy, blue in the icy air, limped up the hill, a heavy iron and oak axe dragging on the ground behind him. The red glare of the sun pierced straight through the tree’s crystal trunk, and his whole body was fire. Even the sapphires in his canopy gleamed a brilliant fuchsia in the glow.

The boy collapsed at the crest of the hill. “If I don’t do this, I will freeze and die tonight.”

“Do not fear. It is my gift to you.”

“After all you have given me, I cannot bring myself to hurt you.”

“It will not hurt; I will not feel a thing.”

The boy was silent for many minutes, his eyes too frozen to weep. And then, with an air of finality, the tree promised, “it is all right, for I am Beautiful.”

The boy stood and stepped close to the crystal trunk. It was so large that even if he had twenty copies of himself, all holding hands in a circle, they would not be able to reach around it. The boy set his hand against the crystal, cold as ice, then heaved the axe over his shoulder. In a single movement, he swung the axe with all of his strength. Its supple arc swung out to the right of his body, destined to collide with the crystal tree. The iron head of the axe was speckled with light as it raced forward. Bursts of orange appeared as they were reflected from the gold and silver foil in the tree’s canopy, and subtle waves of a calm red cascaded down the axe’s form from the light refracted

by the trunk. As the arc reached the midpoint of its journey, the boy's warm heart caused his tears to thaw. Suddenly, the tears he had been unable to shed before were cascading down his face.

The iron hit the crystal with a ringing knoll like a church bell. In an instant, the crystal tree shattered, and billions of razor shards of dead crystal shot outward, a swarm of translucent locusts bolting from the hive before descending upon the world like a plague. The boy had no time to shield his face, but he had time to scream, and it was this scream that prompted God, the elect to whom beauty means only Beauty, to stand from his throne, in rapture at his creation (for God knew that at this moment the world was perfected), and with the full authority of the universe behind him, to call Time by name and command it to stop.

And in this last moment of the world, God beheld all that he had made. And God saw that it was beautiful.

Far away, there is a poet stuck for eternity dipping his pen that will never rust in ink that will never dry. There is an artist hunched over her canvas that will never be finished. But here, the shattered tree is an infinity of beauty, the boy a roaring carmine cloud as shards of crystal carry his blood farther and farther beyond his body, his emaciated face that of an angel, and his scream sustained without end. On top of this hill the tragedy of the crystal tree and the boy is captured for eternity, a duet of purity, the odors of chocolate and lilacs still wafting up from the south, the wine-red setting sun now an inferno in billions of microscopic lenses suspended in the air, tiny fragments sending flaming light off in all directions, an infinity of beauty for Ever.