

# I Was in Love With a Tree That Swallowed the Sky

The cutting of a beloved tree felled my heart. Then a bird came.

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By Laura Hillenbrand

Ms. Hillenbrand is the author of "Unbroken" and "Seabiscuit."

I bought my house in Oregon without ever having set foot in it, without ever having even been to the state. I bought it knowing I might never make it here, that I'd have to risk my life to try. In my rowhouse in the clatter of Washington, D.C., my only view was the back of another house, about as far as I'd ever been able to see during years spent largely housebound with an illness that was finally beginning to let me go.

One day five years ago, I saw a photograph of this house and its gobsmacking view of a mountain, of shining rivers, of forests and hills that folded over one another into infinity. I hung my heart on that view, bought the house and one morning six months later, climbed into an RV and set off for Oregon in hopes of inventing my life out of nothing.

On an autumn day, I finally arrived. One of the first things to arrest me was the Norway maple in the backyard. It was an exuberant explosion of a tree, its foliage so full that the branches kissed the ground. Each summer, the tree bounded outward in all directions, growing perhaps two feet; each fall, its torrent of huge orange leaves whirled through the air like laughter. The tree was so in love with life that it swallowed the sky.

This year, in which everything has felt sundered, the tree became my refuge. In the mornings, I began carrying a pillow to it and ducking under the branches, finding myself in a magical green cave. As the leaves sifted the breeze around me, I'd sit on my pillow and meditate, embraced in the dappled, ebullient, immutable light.

Last summer, a neighbor stopped me. He said the tree was overawing his yard, devouring his arbor and eclipsing the rivers and mountain. People live here for this view. I knew I had no right to deprive him of it. Heartsick, I asked if I could give the tree one more season. He said yes.

An arborist suggested felling the tree, but I couldn't do it. He said he could cut it far back. It wouldn't look good, he said, but it would survive.

He came on a sultry morning four weeks ago. I stood on the deck and whispered my apology to the tree. It was especially resplendent that morning, the leaves glittering and scattering light, casting shade on the sweat-shining men gathered beside it.

The growl of saws, the crack of limbs, the churn of the chipper — all of it tore me, making me ache with guilt and loss. I couldn't bear it. I went inside. There was a violence to all this rending that felt too much like everything feels now.

In the evening, silence. I went outside. The maple still stood. Its lower branches were gone, but the central limbs remained, grand and defiant, arcing into the sky like fireworks, bursting into a joy of greenness.

In the space once crowded with leaves, there was something new. A little dogwood had long hunched beside the maple, almost unseen, slowly drowning under it. Some of its branches were wizened to sticks, with only a few pale leaves on the tips. Now those leaves were at last breathing the sunshine, and in the new clearing of sky, the landscape tumbled on forever.

The maple was not gone, but reimagined, and with it, the dogwood beneath, and the whole world around them. I gazed at all this beauty, feeling my grief arrive at gratitude.

A scrub jay swooped over the lawn and lit on the bare dogwood branch, in that open space of sky. Done with her day's labors, she rested, occasionally fluffing her feathers and grooming herself, then settling to gaze toward the mountain as the light passed through yellow and orange and red and the deepest blue. As the last light died, she flew away. The next evening she was back. And the evening after. One day she brought her baby, who sat on the branch, beating her wings and calling in her small, new voice, as her mother hunted the lawn for food. Every evening since, they have come.

After these days of rending, of loss, of violence, of grief, of convulsant change, may we find a beautiful, grateful reimagining. May we land as the blue bird does, resting and peaceful.

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Laura Hillenbrand is the author of "Unbroken: A WWII Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption" and "Seabiscuit: An American Legend."

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