

SWING TREE
By Emma Holmes

Emma Holmes was the 2013 Paul Engle “Glory of the Senses” Essay Contest top prizewinner.

When I was very young, my family lived in a small white house on a neat little street a few blocks from the local high school. I remember its bright red front door, the garage dented all over from the many times our neighbor’s son had crashed into it on his bike. I remember the wallpaper in the stairwell – how it captured a long stretch of the New York skyline, traced out in tiny golden lines. I remember the raspberry bushes, the pots-and-pans cupboard (a favorite hiding place of mine), and my father’s garden that seemed to stretch to the ends of the earth. I remember many things – but best of all, the trees.

The backyard was presided over by two of them, monstrous things, big and strong and *old*. At the top of the hill, scarcely a stone’s throw away from the kitchen window, stood the Swing Tree (which was, on occasion, also the Hammock Tree or the Second Base Tree), so named because of the little plastic swing which hung from it, suspended artfully in the air by several feet of fraying yellow rope. At the bottom of the hill, the more stately Shed Tree draped its branches over the chipped and peeling walls of my father’s tool house.

Though the Shed Tree was prettier to look at – uniform and straight, with hardly a knothole out of place – it was the Swing Tree I loved better. Its twisted roots provided the perfect space for holding snowballs in January, building pixie houses in June. Its gargantuan trunk served me as a caster, an impassable mountain, the leg of a giant who had the misfortune of stumbling into my domain. I couldn’t count the number of times I’d fallen asleep, pressed into its side, a chapter book I’d been pretending to read draped across my knees.

I had done that very thing, in fact, one late afternoon in the summer of 2002. After an exhaustive twenty minutes spent trying to make sense of a book titled *Wuth Ring Hits* (a popular favorite by Emily Bronte, nicked from my mother’s bedside table), I had slipped blissfully into sleep, waking only when a scattering of fat raindrops dripped onto my cheek. The blue sky I’d left behind what felt like moments ago had been overrun by great black clouds, and the air was heavy and damp. Quick as a flash, I scurried inside, clutching the book to my chest. I’d barely shut the sliding door behind me when rain began to fall.

At first, it was a light thing. Gentle as a feather, softer than snow, the rain fell quiet and soothing. But by the time dinner ended, the night had been consumed in storm.

It was not a fairytale storm. The wind howled, to be sure, but it simply sounded like wind – not moans or screams or the like. Water fell to earth in great drops, mixing the ground to a river of mud; I heartily looked forward to putting on my ladybug boots for a romp the next morning. Lightning cut through the sky like a great white knife – and every once in a while, a hug burst of thunder would shake the floors and make me grin like a fool. My younger sister, by contrast, lay balled up on the couch, a mess of shaking limbs, knit blankets, and Shirley Temple curls. At three years to my six, she wasn’t nearly as worldly, and as such still retained the childish fear of storms.

As another great rumbling of thunder rattled the windows of the house, I darted into the dining room. I wormed my way through seat cushions and chair legs until I could rest

comfortably on the ground beneath the dinner table, my curious, wide eyes facing the sliding door before me. Through the glass, all was an amalgam of blacks and greys and browns. The pounding of raindrops on the roof, the deck, the windowpanes, all mixed with the cacophony of thunder. In the kitchen to my left stood my mother, separated from me by a tall counter and a neat row of bar stools. Hair pinned up, she hummed as she cleaned the dishes.

I listened, I watched. Thunder rumbled yet again, my elbows tingling as the ground vibrated beneath them. The wind picked up, rushing faster and faster, beating on the walls and roof as if it were trying to get in. I heard my little sister whimper, and pushed myself into a sitting position, half my mind telling me to comfort her, the other half commanding me to stay and watch.

Suddenly, there was silence. After the raging of the storm, the absence of noise seemed almost violent; it sucked at my ears, stopping me in my place. I could feel the rush and pulse of blood through my veins. The tiny hairs on the back of my neck stood up. And then the world exploded.

My yell of surprise turned into one of pain as I jumped, head colliding with the underside of the table. Nearby, I heard the dish slide from my mother's hands. Chunks of wood flew in all directions, tearing into the ground, smacking against the siding, flying across the roof. By the sound of it, several shingles had been knocked loose.

The Swing Tree was on fire.

Flames licked at its bark hungrily, flicked their way along the yellow ropes of the swing, one of which had already snapped. Oblivious now to the pain in my head, I stood, pressing my hands to the glass in front of me. I watched with a mixture of horror and terrified awe as the try by which I'd sat less than four hours ago was consumed in red.

A sudden shower of sparks flared up, hissing as they made contact with the rain, and a huge branch twenty feet up split from the trunk. The sound it made was a gunshot, a cymbal crashing, the snapping of ice over a frozen creek. It crashed to the ground just feet from the kitchen window, throwing up another wave of sticks and dirt.

Face white, my mother rushed up behind me and scooped me into her arms. Shouting for my father, she carried me farther into the house, eventually sitting me down on the couch next to my sister. One arm around each of us, she forbid me from entering the kitchen or dining room.

Pushing off her embrace, I craned my neck to see around the corner – but the Swing Tree was out of sight. All I could see was the huge branch and the strange, wavering orange light of flames against the black night behind it.

It was almost a week before my father would let me into the yard again – time enough for sticks and roofing and lumps of melted, twisty plastic to be cleared away. Time enough for the mud to recede, for the grass to begin creeping back in. Time enough for the Swing Tree to be cut down.

Upon first entering the place, I was struck by how strange, how alien it seemed – a great hole all the way to the sky where once there had been wood and leaves and branches; in place of the dappled green glow, broken all over by shadows, a full circle of sunlight arched across the ground. And where the Swing Tree – *my* Swing Tree – had once stood, there was nothing but a stump.

Mutely, I shuffled over to it, set my hand atop the smooth wood. If I closed my eyes, I could still feel its rough, jagged bark beneath my fingers, see its massive trunk disappearing into the forever above me.

I looked to the neighbor's house, at their backyard covered in gnarled oaks. Once I had thought it dismal and gloomy, but now it seemed a truly wonderful, wild sort of place compared to my own. Without the tree, there were suddenly fewer spots to hide. Fewer places to play, to make believe. There was nowhere to hang the hammock, no swing that could take me, on a good day, all the way up to the clouds.

I closed my eyes, angry tears leaking from their corners like another tiny shower of rain. Though the removal of my beloved tree had in truth made the backyard larger, in some vastly significant way, it had also made it very small.

I go back, sometimes, to that house. When the weather is nice and I have time to spare, I take a stroll through my old neighborhood on the way back from school. I walk along that neat little street with all its neat little homes, and I watch and I look and I listen.

The front door has been painted over white, but I still remember it as red, bright as the cherries on a sundae in summer. The garage door, too, has been replaced, and my father's garden is no more. Even the raspberry bushes have been uprooted and torn away. But the Shed Tree is still there, standing straight as a sentinel, its branches arching up and out and over the lawn. I like to think it's reaching out to the spot where its brother once stood – to think that I am not the only living thing that now remembers it.

Yet even if the Swing Tree has disappeared from the minds and thoughts of my family, or of my neighborhood, or even, at times, from my own memory, the lesson it taught me remains. Sometimes we have a tendency to overlook those parts of us that are most fundamental to our own being – and it's not until they are torn away that we notice how important they were. Nothing should be taken for granted. After all, it only takes a second for everything to change. The blink of an eye. The pause between breaths.

A single flash of lightning.