

Arborescence

Jack Graveney

Jack Graveney has just graduated from the University of Cambridge with a Starred First in History and German. His work has been published in The Oxonian Review, ERA Magazine, and the Cambridge Review of Books, and he is currently writing a book about class. Jack is the Content Editor of CJLPA.

Marcus did not know what to expect. The man with whom he had spoken on the phone made little sense. A number of names had been mentioned, people he had never heard of, and at times Marcus thought the voice on the other end of the line must have been speaking in a foreign language, unfamiliar noises which were sometimes guttural and heavy and sometimes airborne and breathy, and sometimes somewhere in the middle. All he had been able to make out was a time and address, which he scribbled down in his pocket notebook, a present from his mother. He mentioned the phone call to his colleagues at the firm afterwards and they had laughed and told him to ignore it. Marcus got the impression that they knew the precise identity of the caller; they cast each other and him a withering glance, one of exhaustion with acts of naïve moral charity.

This glance and all it contained failed to dissuade Marcus. It was his first year working as a tree surgeon, a job he had obtained thanks to no small hardship on the part of his mother. School had not been for him, and he had left glad to see the back of the place but with the impression of stepping out into a great black void, a world which held precious little for him. He enjoyed being at home with his mother, helping around the house, tending the allotment down the road. Whilst he worked the family's small plot, the world came alive and spoke to him in a voice he could understand. It radiated an energy which he greedily harvested, inhaling dirty gulps of wisdom. When rain fell, he lay there and felt dirt turn to mud underneath his skin, droplets pitter-pattering against one cheek as the other pressed down into the soil.

In the corner of the allotment stood the carapace of an old oak tree. From time to time, Marcus would crawl into its cyclopic orifice, mummified in a cocoon of bark, and summon thoughts of regrowth. After a while, the tree would be whole again, his twisted legs rooted deep and gorging themselves on water, his rigid torso elephantine and stark upright, his fractal of arms and digits craning outwards to a thousand ripe eyes enthralled by a feast of light. Each time, Marcus murdered this resplendence. He had no choice. When the hollow birthed him into the sunken night, he would feel a death within him and hear a groan of ancient mortality reverberate between his bones. He could sustain but one being at a time.

Marcus found himself winding his way along a country lane, towards the address he had been given on the phone. Bordering the lane was a ribbon of deep-set and seemingly impenetrable hedgerow, adorned with protuberant knuckles of red. Tarmac soon gave way to gravel, gravel to agitable dust, and a thatched cottage came into view. Densely packed behind strabismic windows Marcus could make out piles upon piles of books, blotchy embossed spines of deep burgundy and myrtle. Reading had always been a struggle for him; his aptitude for languages extended only to those of nature, of incremental growth and seasonal change. Words on the page seemed too deeply engraved, too inarguably fixed and unamenable to care.

In the instant between Marcus opening his van's door and stepping out onto the shoddy earth, the cottage's occupant had appeared outside and was waiting expectantly for him. This transition was noiseless. It was as if the occupant, a bald and elderly man of slender proportions but penetrating gaze, had intangibly passed through his wooden door. Marcus hollered an abrupt greeting and gestured to the logo glaringly emblazoned on the van behind, as if to assure him that the visit was legitimate and well-meant. The man, whose name he would later discover was Reginald, remained silent until Marcus had almost reached him. Then, softly, he spoke: 'Would you show me your hands?'

The request's ambivalent innocence captivated Marcus. Its tone was that of an infant, yet it lacked any hesitation. It was conscious of its own importance but would not deign to insist. Marcus's hands rose and presented themselves, palms up, to Reginald, who fixated upon them as on a ritual totem or unearthed relic. His mien was that of a primitivist artist stopped dead, undone in all pretensions by a deep-set nobility tantalizing close and yet utterly alien. Darting eyes inventoried their particularities, caressing each crease, mentally untangling the knot of palm lines. Each grope for understanding teetered on wonder's precipice. The older man's eyes widened, and his breathing deepened. After a time, Reginald took Marcus's hands in his. These were immaculate, as if smoothed to marble over decades by the desert's swirling sands. They were luxuriously, almost grotesquely unblemished. Conjoined with Marcus's torn and callused digits, they evoked a coupling of the sacred with the profane.

Suddenly, the old man broke off and, in a manner now sprightly and invigorated, pulling books from shelves, grandly gesticulating at framed images, almost dancing now upon his feet, indicated for Marcus to follow him inside. Marcus understood little of what was said, but he picked out names, names which evidently bore weight and yet floated, floated daintily through the room, weaving and darting between the stacks of books as if making for the exit, as if possessed of a life of their own, yet dragged inexorably back in by Reginald's orbit, by his intimate need for them and them for him. Names like Calvino, like Petrarch, like Havemann, Joyce, Gass, like Améry or Handke, Swinburne, Enzensberger, or De Quincey, names which meant nothing to Marcus, nothing at all, yet whose pace and structure and rhythm, whose atmosphere, entranced him. Behind this cosmos of names hung a painting, a painting of a large room, large and empty, devoid of furniture, chopped in half at the waist as if looked down upon, empty that is save for three men, prostrate on their knees with their arms extended before them, their heads bowed and tilted, their hands hard at work, for they are scraping the floor, hard at work scraping the floor, and the product of their labour is curled around them in ringlets like snakeskin.

Reginald finally halted and drew breath, but the atmosphere which now thronged throughout the room survived his voice. It seemed to take on mass and effervescent direction, carrying the two men out of the backdoor and into the garden. Here Marcus set about to work, unbidden, unable to hold himself back. His hands grew into tools, his fingers became sharp and incisive, tweaking and upending, his palms moulding and sifting through material. He held nothing, it was part of him, it was all part of him. And as he worked Reginald read, perched in a rocking chair which tumbled gently back and forth, his fingertips resting against the delicate gold lettering of the work's spine, his thumb and forefinger darting forward to turn each page, his voice—his voice breathing magic into every word, magic which poured into Marcus's ears as he worked. The young man bathed in these words, they supported him like a hammock tied between two trees, and though still he could make neither head nor tail of most sentences they upended him all the same. The saplings tilted their nascent trunks in hope of finding the voice, and the sun itself leaned back and listened as it sliced its way through the sky.

In this ecstasy, this synaesthetic rapture, Marcus laboured deeper into the garden. Beyond the saplings, the hedgerows, the beds of flowers, he emerged into a glade. At the centre of this clearing stood—and here his spine tingled with sublime excitement—the carapace of an old oak tree. It could not be the same as that in the allotment, but to Marcus it seemed a homecoming nonetheless. Down on hands and knees he went, pulling himself inside, the dead and dying wood coyly scratching his skin, until he was sealed within, his thoughts focused on one end: resurrection.

Spurred on by the undulation of Reginald's voice, its variant speed and rhythm, as if he were a shaman summoning up some forest sprite or more ancient chthonic brute, this came quickly. In what felt like a matter of instants, this symbiosis of word and plant and man was complete. From his sumptuous vantage point, Marcus surveyed the garden, the house, the small smooth figure of Reginald, a smile woven across his face, his hands still clasped around the book from which he was reading. The sun was setting by now, leaving him alone in the sky. When night fell, he saw the old man rise from his rocking chair and re-enter the cottage, which also settled into sleep. The idea of returning to his prior state, of slaughtering what he and Reginald had wrought, was a sin too great for Marcus to consider.

The intermingling was too narrow, the metamorphosis irreversible. He was a stylite and this tree his pillar. It was with the contentment of radical and unremitting self-sacrifice that he finally rested.

The next morning, he awoke to music. Raindrops dabbled against his branches. Reginald's words rang loud and clear. Their harmony left nothing to be desired.