

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/1

Christian Wagner
Katydid

There was a year when my oldest cousin Victoria said nothing but the word, 'bop.' The stairs, the radio, everything was bop. Once she pointed at my grandfather. When it came my turn to point across the kitchen table and say, "Bop," it was to ask the old man who I knew only by that name if I could go play in the front yard with my brothers and my cousins.

"Go on, get out of here!" Bop shouted, stomping around the kitchen and waving his big hands and ears like an old miser.

Soon my mother was on her feet shouting back, rattling off all the grievances of the past day, the past year. Things from when she was just a little girl, about how he never bought her new shoes, how he had put down Roland, the best dog of all time, the best dog actually that anyone has ever had in the whole wide world.

Bop was angry. "He was going to die anyways!"

"You're going to die, too. Want me to put *you* down?"

"He was a dog, Amy! A fucking dog!"

Anyone watching my face might have assumed I was watching my first horror movie, perhaps a year or two early (I was in second grade at the time), or that I was sitting through my parents' first divorce hearing.

The truth is, all I could think of was how incredibly Bop-like my grandfather was: the giant head, the age-compressed spine, the two-sizes-too-big shoes, the black and silver sword-cane that everyone knew he didn't need to get around. That's my Bop, alright, I thought, as father and daughter threw flaming words across the kitchen, some hitting their intended targets causing wild outbursts, while others stuck with a *thwack* into the dirty wallpaper over the sink, vibrating like a plucked string.

"Go out and play with the other kids, Christian," Mommy said.

"Yeah, get the hell out!" Bop shouted.

A confused look came over their faces, one of those rare moments when the resemblance between generations was simply undeniable, but a second later they were at it again, hurling rocks and boulders across the room, exploding over the cabinets and counters and covering the floors in finely ground dust and rubble.

The shouting followed me out to the front porch, where the screen door didn't do much against them. But it was Spring; it was hot and it was humid. Tomorrow was Easter, and then they'd all have to get along.



The front yard smelled like rain, though there hadn't been a dark cloud in the sky all week. It was a smell that coated nearly all of my memories at that house, making them smooth and glossy and cool to the touch.

My grandparents did have a backyard—a pool, too—but you'd have to be out of your mind to play out there. Sure, it was bigger and more spacious than the front yard, but you'd be dodging little surprises left by

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Roland or Rocco or Benny or Bandit or whoever it was (Bop went through dogs like cigars) until you called it quits. If that didn't get you, then there were the bugs to deal with: thick, black swarms, swirling all around the yard like God was planning an eleventh plague.

So that left the front yard, small and lumpy and full of little sprigs of poison ivy.

And the tree. Just visible beneath its many branches were my older brother Ben and my cousin John.

It was a beech by all methods of botanical classification, but this was no ordinary beech. This was a ten-trunk monster with bark like elephant skin and leaves like donkey ears, exploding out of the ground and shooting trunks out in every direction. Some reached high in the air, sewing seams in the clouds with sunlight-devouring fingers, while others hovered at waist level and made beelines toward the street, like they were making a run for the border. Still others journeyed upward a few inches from the central knot before plunging right back into the soil from which they came, deciding mid-flight that their teeth had been cut for dirt instead of air.

Ben told me once that if I got real quiet and put my ear up to one of those trunks, I could hear a heart beating inside.



"Christian, look at this," said Ben. He was sitting on his heels with his nose about an inch from one of the branches, while John mirrored him on the other side.

"Where is everyone else?" I asked, jogging down the front steps.

Ben waved for me to quiet down, his eyes transfixed on the branch. They were the kind of eyes that haven't quite decided if they're blue, or if they've actually just been green all along, the kind of eyes you don't question when they tell you to shut up.

John turned around. "They all went into town."

"Will you be quiet?" Ben said.

I got down on my knees next to Ben and looked up and down the branch. All along the top of it were fresh cream-colored nicks from yesterday's climbing expeditions.

"Right there." Ben pushed his finger towards a leaf sprouting from a knob of wrinkly bark. John smiled on the other side of the branch, his glasses drawing shadowy rectangles over his cheeks.

I blinked, looked again. "What is it?"

"An alien," Ben said. John laughed.

"A katydid."

Ben gave John a dirty look, one of those keep-your-opinions-to-yourself looks that Mommy gave us if we said something was "stupid" or "lame." But John just kept looking and smiling.

And that's when I saw it, coming into focus like a developing Polaroid.

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First the antennae, then the eyes, the legs. Everything was green and translucent, wearing little gold flecks of sunlight like jewelry.

"Why doesn't it run away from us?" I asked.

John said, "It wants us to think it's a leaf." He was only a couple years older than me and Ben, though an ocean of wisdom seemed to divide us.

I asked him what he had said it was called.

"Katydid," he said. "A leaf bug."

I leaned in to touch the tip of its wing, but just as my skin came within a millimeter or so, the katydid skirted a few inches along the branch. I pulled my finger back, putting it in my mouth as though I had been burned.

"Can we keep it?" I asked. The insect's pale green abdomen had begun to throb slowly between its leafy wings.

"Like a pet?" Ben asked.

"Yeah, like a pet," I said. He rolled his eyes, but I was serious. "We could give it a house, with leaves and other bugs, and then it wouldn't have to be all alone. Maybe it wouldn't want to run away anymore, because then we would have its food."

Ben shrugged, looking at the little insect, standing so perfectly still on the swaying branch. For a second my vision blurred, and I thought that maybe it really was just a leaf after all, but the slight churning motion of its mandibles brought the whole picture back into focus, and there it was again. The alien.

"I don't think we should keep it," John said.

"Why not?"

"Just think about it. We don't even know what it eats."

"We could give it a lot of things and then see what it likes," I said.

Ben considered this for a second, turning his head sideways and looking suspiciously at the bug.

"What if it eats something gross, like skin?" he asked.

John looked from me to Ben, to the katydid, his smile loosening with just the faintest traces of worry. He took off his glasses, wiped a pearl of sweat from his temple, and replaced them neatly into the slight depressions on the bridge of his nose.

"I just don't think we should keep it."

I tried to think of something to convince John otherwise, but the sound of Mommy and Bop's tangled voices pulled our heads toward the house. The screen door swung open and my mother tumbled out onto the porch, her shoulders pulled up to her ears as a final blast of debris showered over her, Bop's voice echoing out into the neighborhood.

The door hissed shut on its hydraulic hinge. Mommy took a deep breath, sighed, and let her shoulders relax. She smiled down at me, Ben,

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and John, though the sound of Bop's muttering was still audible from our spot under the tree.

"How's it going, guys?" she asked, picking her way through the knotted trunks and branches until she stood over us, beaming with her hands on her hips.

"There's a caddy-bid," I said, pointing.

Sher traced the line of my finger onto the branch. "I don't see anything."

"It's right there," I said.

But where the insect had been was only the rough, gray surface of the branch. There was no sign whatsoever that anything had ever been there.

"It was here," I said. "You scared it away."

My face felt warm, and tears welled up in my head. I ran my eyes up and down the length of the branch.

"Oh, I didn't mean to, Honey. Here, maybe we can find it again."

"No we can't," I said, "it's gone."

Ben and John exchanged a glance, and I sat back on my heels pulling up fistfuls of grass.

Mommy said, "I'm sure if we just look around we might find it."

She pressed her lips together, as though if she just pressed hard enough she could put my shattered face back together again. At last she smiled, having found what was searching for.

"We might even find something better."

This made me stop and think. What could be better than a caddy-bid? John looked at her dubiously, but I was too busy thinking about what other little creatures might be hiding in the yard, just waiting for me to find them.

Ben got up. "Yeah, I don't think we can find it again."

"Ben—"

"We almost didn't see it the first time. I almost stepped on it."

"Why would you say that to your little brother?"

"Well, it's true."

The image of the katydid, freshly crushed under Ben's shoe, was enough to crack the thin layer of hope that had settled over me.

Mommy sighed, changed the subject. "I was just about to pick something up for lunch, if any of you three wanted to come."

Ben said sure, John said he was okay. Uncle Wayne had taken him and some of the older kids for pancakes that morning. He was still pretty full. I said nothing, my chin nailed to my chest.

"Want to stay here with John, or come with me and your brother? We can bring you back something if you want to stay."

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I frowned at the grass, half-expecting a swarm of the backyard bugs to jump up at me.

"I'll stay."

"That's fine," she said. "Just make sure someone's with you if you start climbing. John, will you make sure he doesn't go up alone?"

"Yeah, no problem Aunt Amy," John replied.

She and Ben made their way through the mass of branches out to the driveway where Daddy's car was waiting. John and I watched silently as the wheels crunched over the gravel and down the street before disappearing around the bend.

I picked at my fingernails. "Sorry for making it go away."

John said, "You didn't make it do anything, Christian. It went away because it wanted to go away. That's all."

For a while we sat in silence under the twisting shade of the beech tree, watching. Listening. All around, leaves waved in the sun, thin like paper. Each one seemed to be alive, as though if only I could look at them the right way, catch them at the right time, they'd all grow legs and an abdomen. If only I was patient enough, I might see them spread their wings all at once, lifting off into the dying light with sun blazed on their glossy backs. But the sun inched its way across the sky, and the leaves stayed leaves. For now.

John got up.

"Where are you going?" I asked, pushing myself to my feet.

He reached his hand up into the nearest mass of branches and hoisted his body into the air. He kicked his legs around for a foothold, and in just a few seconds he was sitting in a net of branches overhead, his legs dangling down by my nose.

"Come on," he said, "we'll find a new one."

"A new one?"

"Yeah, there's probably a lot more in this tree," he said, sweeping his gaze through the nearest branches, then the ones all the way at the edge of the yard.

"How many do you think there are?"

John grinned. "Who knows? There could be fifty. Maybe a hundred."

I closed my eyes, imagining a hundred katydids (though in my mind's eye it was really more like a thousand), all standing in a perfect row down the spine of a branch, each one still like a tiny green statuette as their filament antennae wavered in the breeze.

From the house rose the sound of Bop's bursting laughter, the kind of laughter that only Uncle Clyde could inspire. I looked at the screen door, and pictured them both slouched in the decaying kitchen chairs with their heads thrown back.

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“Christian,” John said, reeling me back into the here-and-now. His arm was reaching down towards me. “Want to help me look?”

“Yeah,” I said. If I had smiled any wider, my lips might have fallen clean off my face.

I took his hand in mine, planted my foot on the branch where the katydid had been, and jumped. John helped my momentum up into the little tangle he had found. It was a little cramped for the two of us and swayed dangerously under our collective weight, but I didn’t care. I was too busy scouring every leaf and branch for katydids.

They felt close. I was jittery all over. Every time I wrapped my hand around a branch, I found my mind inventing the flutter of insect wings between my fingers, or the faint feathery sensation of being tickled by wandering antennae.

The tree was holy, sacred. To speak too loudly was to disturb something beautiful, an atmosphere teeming with invisible life so real that you could feel it vibrating all over your skin, that buzzed with an electricity that zigzagged up my spine and over my scalp. Every breath seemed to risk disrupting the magic all around us.

“Where should we look first?” I whispered.

“Wherever you want,” he said. “They could be anywhere.”