The Dance of the Trees
Amy McElroy

As I hike with my eight and ten year-old daughters, a canopy of branches cradles my soul from above, filtering sunlight in droplets down to earth and patterning my arms in warmth. The shimmer plays through the leaves and tingles my skin like a best girlfriend's breath in a singsong, grade-school game of "going on a treasure hunt."

My older daughter, Joy, slips on the path and says the sensation of falling “tastes like spearmint.”

In the park, the giant oak tree greets us at the back entrance. “I love the way it dances in the wind,” I say.

“Yes,” Emma says, looking up at the tree with her springy curls. “It’s dancing and glistening. Like a disco party. And our feet are the beat.”

I inhale her poetry like another layer to the breeze, watching the liquid energy channel through her as she spins under the fluttering leaves.
Alone in the small clearing behind the house where I grew up, I am torn apart by leaves blowing in the trees, the breath of their dance ripping through my chest like pain from a deep stretch. The magical place where the green meets the blue, blue of the sky quietly spills into that new hole inside me. To renew my true organic self, the musty loam of the forest floor fills my nose and lungs. Like a winding branch of ivy threaded through the needle of my fingers, they are woven into my consciousness, which I stitch onto the page. The forest births me and I return the words to the Earth.

Under my skin, I feel the wind as it begins to rise and move across the woods from left to right like a percussion symphony, with every instrument from the tympani to the softest tingle of the cymbal. Then, with the wave of a hidden baton, a dark summer cloud covers the sun and stills the air. I meditate in the moment of the forest, the silence growing warmly up my torso.

Deep in the Santa Cruz Mountains, I am struck by the number of plant species, trees and creatures living together in the fabric. The forest floor of giant clovers bobble in the wind on their stems, waiting for fairies to land. Branches of waxy green leaves, wrinkled in deep diagonals veins, canopy my path.

Torn bark of Redwoods, like vulnerable exposed flesh: You stand bleeding before me. Your juicy layers exposed by the light, unravel years of dark mysteries and glimpses of the forest’s long history. Yet every breath of the wind whispers hints of secrets still buried beneath the most ancient, fertile soil.
Rotting logs, return to the musty underbrush. Bluejay hop and dance branch to branch like a jitterbug. Squirrels are in the trees above. Bobcats stalk nearby. Bumblebees zoom past, and gnats hover in clouds that follow me.

They all feed, serve, comfort one another. Holes in fat leaves trace paths of beetles. High in the trees, squirrels’ nests droop with false tails. A blackface stump, cut off at the knee, receives a winter coat of moss to speed forest clean up. Fallen trees are caught in freefall by next-door neighboring trunks until the corpses have hollowed enough to drop gracefully.

Together they overcome, weathering seasons, generation upon generation. Immigrant newcomers, taken into the fold, find their place gently or not. There is depth in this arrangement that goes on far beyond what I can see.

There is no ultimate truth; we can only dance around the edges, like blue jays or clovers in the forest. And there is no perfect or imperfect dance. They are all equally true.

When I lay dying, take me to the woods where the sun slants the trees and I breathe the cool rich taste of years of sweet decay all the way through rotting bones to my toes—where the music of shadow meets light and their dance becomes more glorious than where they stand alone.