

Second Place

Grades Eleven /Twelve

Black Walnut

By Josie Benson

We stand at the end of the driveway, teetering with our heels hanging over the edge of the curb, framing the house with our hands and imagining countless combinations.

“I think it’s the bushes. They’re too asymmetrical,” you say.

“If you put another bush there, we won’t be able to see out the window,” I say.

I’ve been trying to tell you this for the past hour. Or, more precisely, that I won’t be able to see—it’s the window of my room we’re talking about.

“But it will look right,” you say. “Balanced.”

I sigh and turn to survey the yard. The irregular dips have—for the most part—been smoothed so that a lawnmower can roll over them without stalling. And the new coat of paint that your wife wanted makes the house stand out—purple may not be my choice, but it’s better than the previous pale mint green that had cracked to reveal the bleached wood underneath.

“Dad.”

You turn to look at me.

“What?” you say, your voice lilting like a guilty man’s. “It doesn’t look right.”

I kick a clump of asphalt that has broken free from where the driveway meets the grass. It bounces a short way up the driveway before skittering off into the lawn, where I know a lawnmower blade will strike it.

I leave it there.

I picture my room with a new shrub in front of the window, the stripped branches stretching across like bars in the wintertime, the light green and brown a permanent part of the room’s color scheme. Before my mental image is complete you speak, your voice hesitant. “Well, do you think the soil is good enough? The holly bush was dying.”

I stand there, my feet now planted in the grass, unsure of how to answer. Are you deferring to me because you don't know about gardening, or because you want me to make the choice?

I look again at the house and think of the complexity of the plant life surrounding it. The black walnut tree in the backyard kills almost everything except the grass in a fifty-foot radius. Mom said it's because its roots release a toxin. It killed the peonies I transplanted from her house.

Meanwhile, the Virginia Creeper has coiled its way up the trunk of the tree, seemingly choking it like the kudzu of the South; but really, it doesn't affect the growth of the tree. The thin tendrils of vine fit neatly into the crevices of the bark, like pipes in a trench.

The roots of the tree are winding their way around the house, pushing up the turf into the lumps that litter the front yard. The driveway is starting to buckle as a root searches its way to the surface, reaching past some underground obstacle in its search for nutrients. You always tell me to drive slowly over that bump, even though it's no bigger than the drop from the end of the driveway to the street.

"I don't know," I say in a bored voice. I walk up to the house, unsure of whether you're following me. I notice that the yew, a shrub that was there before we moved in, is starting to discolor. Maybe the area affected by the black walnut is widening. I look at the shrubs we planted not too long ago, and wonder if they're the type that will survive and live together with the vitriolic old tree, or if they'll succumb to its underhanded means of survival.

Jason stares at us from the window. I wave politely, and continue walking around the house, surveying our work. Sometimes I can forget he lives here—he just sits so quietly in his room. That is, except for when he tantrums. Most days, it's like living in that split second between when you turn on the stereo and when you remember you left the volume dialed too high, that small moment of silence before the sound comes crashing into you. And even after he's settled down, I can feel him sitting there, all his suppressed energy just waiting to erupt. That type of feeling in your own house is unnerving.

I'm not sure what I'm looking for in the yard, my eyes skimming over the earth drying in crumbles from our last planting efforts—only that there's something to be found. I don't want a shrub in front of my window; that I'm sure of. But maybe light green and brown are perfect colors to go with pale blue walls. Maybe it's better to be separated from the outside by more than a thin sheet of glass. Glass breaks, after all.

I remember when, shortly after we moved in, I was playing with the kids from this neighborhood and one of the older boys decided to throw the walnuts that fell from the tree during

a storm. The fibrous green husks looked soft like fruit, like they would give against barriers, but were nothing less than solid when launched towards the window of what would later be my room.

I remember the window being boarded up for weeks, but you tell me it was only a few days. You also tell me that no one uses plywood boards—those are only used in movies, during hurricanes, and in poor neighborhoods. But my memory is adamant.

I picture myself inside the house, being forced to look out through an array of foliage. Then, I picture myself as someone simply driving through, someone on the street looking at houses. You do have a point. With another shrub, the landscaping would be more symmetrical, it would look better; we would look like our neighbors.

It would only be from inside the house that you would be able to tell that something was unbalanced. You would only be able to see what effect our outward appearance has on our lives if you were standing in my room, looking outside.

I look again at the discolored yew. The walnut tree is sequestered in the back yard, but its effects are far reaching. It would be useless to get another bush if the tree is just going to kill it anyway.

I look at the bushes we've planted in the past few weeks. I did research, looked through Mom's old gardening books and on the internet, to find plants that could tolerate the presence of the walnut—then I directed you to the shrubs with sweetly scented flowers like forsythia, rhododendron, rose of Sharon.

I hope these sources are reliable. We invested time and money in planting these shrubs. They had better live, especially since it was on my advice that you selected these particular types.

I realize that I don't actually know what we should do. Really, I just want the tree gone, for the ecosystem hidden away in the back to resemble the one in front. Yet, to actually remove the tree would, I feel, be to desecrate the nature in our backyard, something I've had neither a hand in creating nor a right to destroy.

I dig my foot into the recently disturbed dirt, not caring that the dust puffs up and resettles to cover the toes of my white shoes.

You come up behind me. "What do you think?"

I weigh my options and decide I have to tell the truth. "I don't know," I say again.

You are visibly stricken. Landscaping isn't cheap. "But we planted all those other ones. It will look horrible if everything in the front yard dies."

"I know. I'm sorry."

And I realize it would also be horrible if the tree were to die. I think of all the other things I learned about the black walnut while doing my research. That black walnut trees prevent erosion, and so its absence would be bad for the already bumpy yard and its thin soil. That the flavor of wild-harvested black walnuts is prized over the milder English walnut, but its shell is harder and thicker, tightly bound to its husk, much more difficult to remove. That in the spring, like a maple, its trunk can be tapped to release a sweet thick syrup that can be drunk. And as I now know, that while some plants are poisoned by its toxins, not all are sensitive to its protective mechanisms.

I walk inside, feeling neither victorious nor defeated. And I can see you out the window, your head cocked, squinting at the bushes, standing with your feet squarely on the curb, imagining various possibilities.

