Daphne, After

*Based on tales from Greek mythology and the poem “Wicked Women” by Anny Milner.*

I turn over inside my bark, and shudder at the chill air that sweeps through my branches. No matter how long summer seems to last, eventually the days must shorten and the wind must howl. My leaves have already begun to change, to detach themselves and spiral down. They collect around my roots, a mass of curled, crumbling husks. They intermingle with the leaves of my sisters, carpeting the dry, cold ground between us.

It was early spring when I first turned into a tree. He railed and raged, striking me with his fists, but it was now *his* body that bloodied as he threw himself against my strong bark. I reveled in my strange new freedoms: I would stretch my new leaves up to the sun, slowly push my new root-toes deeper into the earth, and spend hours watching the nesting birds raise their chicks on what had been my left shoulder. The satyrs dance through the woods, their music tumbling through my leaves. The nymphs in my new sister-trees awakened from their long winter slumber, and gathered around me, marveling. For the first time, I was able to stop everything and simply watch the earth burst into life. I was able to pinpoint the exact day the goddess returned to the world: it was the day a doe had her fawn in the shade of my leaves.

Then the first summer came, and it was even better. The sun cradled me, and the earth embraced me. *He* came with an ax, thinking to destroy me if he couldn’t have me for his own. He told me he had spent the months trying to reverse the spell, but no “cure” was to be found. He meant to chop me into firewood, and burn me in his fire. The wind laughed through my leaves. I shook with fear of the ax. But the earth had claimed me: my life was not his to take. The wind twisted through me, and called the wolves and the vultures. With time, even his bones were scattered away from my base.

That first autumn, I could again pinpoint the day the goddess left our world of life for the world of death. I felt the sudden tug and change in every one of my leaves in a single instant. Trees are slow: time does not work for trees as it does for mortals, or even immortals. We are attuned to each and every detail of ourselves, and so in that instant, I could feel each and every leaf *pull* from me a fraction of an inch, and start to change. That first night of autumn, the wolves of the forest howled their grief at the goddess’ departure. As a child, I had been afraid of wolves. I would shudder under the covers of my bed, cringing against my siblings whenever a new wolf-cry would cut into our bedroom. But the wolves here raged with me when he came with the ax, and they grieved with me when the goddess left. We are still very different, but sometimes it feels like we have the same heart and blood, attuned to the same tides of the natural world.

As the first winter began, I became more in tune with the moon than the sun. She spilled her silver light over the silver ground, and though my branches bent under the weight of ice and snow, it was impossible to ignore the deadly glory of the season. That first winter was when I finally gave myself up to this new life. A young squirrel shuddered and died in the hollow of my roots, and in the moments after its last gasping breath, I was ready for it to be over. I had felt the summer rain against my leaves, I had hung icicles from my branches, I had witness and been party to so much death and love and loss in the cycle of the year, and I was ready to be done. I wanted my legs back; I wanted my arms! I wanted to run through the forest with the deer, not helplessly watch them pass from my unchanging place in the forest. I wanted to pick up the squirrel with my human fingers, and cradle it against my chest. I would have rubbed warmth into it, and held it close to the fire of my own body. It would not have died. I would have gathered food for it; I would have cared for it! I began to hate my dependence on the sun, and I longed for my own inner warmth. I longed for my legs and my hands, for the agency I had had in my human shape.

I howled and prayed, begging the earth to release me. She refused, but kindly. She sent snowdrops to me, then winter iris, then yellow jasmine and witch hazel and phlox. They grew in circles from my base, covering my roots with color and hope. I began to dream of spring, and I gradually began to notice more of the natural world around me: the lee of the trunk sheltered a vole in a storm. An owl took up residence in my uppermost branches, using my former fingertips as a perch from which to watch for prey. The owl survived, and the vole survived, because of me. I thought back to the birds who had raised their young on my shoulder, and of the many animals who had eaten and gained life from the man who died at my roots. I began to take more notice of the life that made the death whole, and with this knowledge I finally made my peace with my new shape.

Since then, there have been many springs and summers and winters and autumns. I couldn’t tell you how many; trees don’t really care for that sort of thing. Each cycle carries me closer to the earth, and farther from my human self. Each spring, the nymphs of the other trees step out of their bark and are at once one with their tree and free of it. But some part of me must still be human, because no matter how hard I try, I can never do it.

This morning, the clouds darken. I sway in the wind, heaving a tree’s creaky sigh. It’s going to be a long winter, I can already tell. My leaves have been late in changing this year, but it’ll come.

It’s days like this when I wonder what it was all for. I changed for my freedom, for the sovereignty of my body and mind. It was an act of desperation, and it saved me and cursed me in one fell swoop. I have spent many long days, months, and even years musing over the irony of how my escape, my search for freedom, ended up robbing me of my power in the end. My last act as a human with free will was to change myself into a creature with no free will at all.

When she can feel me thinking these things, the earth shifts below me. I know she is displeased with my bitterness and cynicism after all of these years, but on these long, slow autumn days, when I can feel the death creeping in through my leaves, I can’t feel much of anything else. *Your time will come,* she whispers to me, but I am past listening. I am resigned to my fate, but I don’t have to be happy about it, or pretend that, after all this time, I believe her when she says such things. This, here, is my time on this earth. This existence is my fate.

I am so preoccupied with my own troubles that, at first, I don’t notice what is happening at the edge of the clearing. When I do, I straighten up, interested. A young man who I have never seen here is making his way carefully towards me, clutching a bundle in his arms. He looks around, as if to make sure that no one is there to see. As he draws near, my branches thrash with anger when I see what he carries, what he intends to do. There is a baby in his arms, a newborn. He sets her, naked, next to my trunk, and then turns and leaves without looking back, taking the blanket with him.

When I was a human, I knew of this practice. Often, when a new baby is not wanted, it will be simply abandoned. The child is left to die of starvation or exposure, or even the teeth of some hungry forest animal. The temples discourage this practice by taking in unwanted infants to be raised as dedicates of a god or goddess, but it still goes on.

I screech inside my bark, the remnants of my fingers clawing to break out of their many twigs. But once again, I am silent to the outside world, and I am trapped. The baby soon starts crying, tiny fists clenched and flailing. Already, I can hear a wolf howling in the distance, calling to his pack-mates about the noisy meal in my clearing.

She is so small and alone in this vast, dark wood. This is so much worse than the squirrel, for each of her cries pierces clean through the part of me that is still, or once was, a human girl who was also scared and alone. I look deep within myself, painstakingly spreading my consciousness through every fiber of leaf and every piece of bark and every filament of root. I call to the earth from my whole being, but all she does is sprout a trio of crocuses at my base. So I turn away. I turn from the earth, and towards the baby.

I see her, a small writhing figure, already tangled in one of my roots and covered with a dusting of my leaves. I see her, but I push farther. Her head rests on one of my roots, and I push my tree-vision on. I feel, for the first time since my transformation, light and airy. I look at the baby, and I see her essence. I grab hold of it with my hands—no, my twigs, but my fingers…I am betwixt and between, tree and woman, mortal and divine. I am a jumble of energy and emotion, but I know that this is something no mortal should ever be able to do. I do the only thing I can think of: I take the essence of the infant and stretch it up, shaping tiny branches with minuscule leaves attached. I stretch it down, sinking small roots into the welcoming soil. I curl protective bark around naked, vulnerable skin. I make her strong. I give her life.

For the next several seasons, I am haunted by what I have done. How could I have inflicted on a helpless child what was done to me? I saved her, yes, but I also condemned her to this life. At least I had some sort of choice in the matter when I became a tree! It was my decision then, but I transformed this child without her ever asking for it. She was far too young to understand anything at all, and I took her human life from her as surely as those wolves would have done.

It helps that I am able see her. These last few years, she has grown. Inside the bark, she is a toddler, happy and oblivious to her strange nature. Autumn has started again, and she is almost a sixth of my own height. This past spring, I noticed glimmers of essence in the nymphs and wild creatures that came through the glen, but I tried so hard to stop seeing it that eventually, I did. I can only see the little girl now, and even that is disconcerting.

I am ready to settle into another winter, but I can feel the subtle shifts of the earth under me. *Daphne,* she whispers. I had almost forgotten my name; it has been so long. *Daphne. You do not see:* this *is your answer. This is your strength. Open your eyes.* I have listened to too many cryptic comments from her over the years, though, to pay this much mind. Perhaps I should listen to her when she speaks to me; I did at first, but the novelty has long since worn off. I just want to rest, to sink into the seasons and the rhythm, to give over my consciousness to this world.

The humans on the other side of the forest, however, seem to have other ideas, though. My time as a tree has truly given me some perspective on humanity: most of the time, people truly make no sense. Currently, it seems that they are all screaming and shouting and running through the woods when they could be *sleeping,* and allowing everyone else to get some rest, too.

The first human makes it to my glen, and collapses some feet from me. It is a young woman, her dress torn and stained, her face streaked with tears and scrapes. The angry roaring of the other people is getting closer. She sinks to her knees, and I feel sick with the memories her despair pulls to the surface of my consciousness. Despite my fears and regrets and misgivings from the past several years, I find myself gazing not at her, but *into* her, seeing her soul, the essence of her being. All those long months of shoving away this new sight have done nothing: her being shines before me like a fallen star.

She grabs fistfuls of leaves and dirt, back hunched over, shoulders shaking. I can *see* her prayer soar from her body. I can feel its hum as she beseeches the earth for help. The earth, however, is silent. The prayer glimmers, and in spite of myself I reach out and touch it. *Go to her*, the earth whispers to me. And, for reasons I do not understand, I do. I absorb her prayer into my own essence, and reach out and take hold of her. I show her a tree shape, and ask a silent question.

*Yes*, she cries, shaking. I give her roots and branches. I swath her in beautiful yellow-gold leaves. I sink her into the soil, and draw her up to the sky. Her topmost leaves brush gently against my bottommost ones, and I can see her joy and relief. The rest of the band of furious humans storm into the clearing, and continue on. We are unscathed.

It was much easier this time, to change another person. The forest around me sparkles and glows with the essence of a thousand thousand creatures, and I shake a little to behold the beauty of it. *This is how the world always looks to me,* the earth says. *It’s wonderful*, I reply.

Though she, like me, chose this fate as the better of two terrible choices, the elder girl soon realizes how trapped she is in her new form. *What is done cannot be undone,* the earth says to the both of us, and I can see that this is true. Time moves forward, not backward, and so must we all. I can no more change her back into a human than I could change an adult back into their child-self. We cannot go back, none of us. I feel her anger and grief for what she has lost, and again I wonder if I did the right thing. The toddler-tree next to me didn’t live as a human for nearly long enough to understand what she has lost, but this older girl knows. I see so many of my own early struggles and realizations replayed in her.

As the days go on, the older girl in the tree loses her leaves. We settle into a hard, cold winter. She is quiet, and her aching sadness hurts me. I am the one, this time, to send winter flowers to bloom at her roots. I’m not sure how I can do it. I see the world as it is, I grab a piece of it, and I shape into how I want it to be. And, all of a sudden, it *is.* The tree-girl is inconsolable, though, regardless of what I do.

Spring comes, and I have an idea: if I can make a girl into a tree, can I make a tree into a nymph? I study the nymphs of the clearing for a long while, making sure I understand them. Then I reach out to the girl in the yellow-gold tree, and cradle her essence once again. I bend, I twist, I shape: she steps out of her tree for the first time, floating slightly off the ground in the way that very young nymphs do. Her skin is the same color as her leaves, and her eyes are wild with delight.

When summer comes, I change a brother and sister into trees when they come to me. I don’t know how they knew who I am or what I can do, but they come, they ask, and I answer. I make them both nymphs, and do the same to the toddler in the tree at my roots, who has now grown to be a little girl. Each time it becomes easier, and each time I feel more at home with this strange new power.

It is autumn now, once again. My leaves are changing and falling, and my heart is heavy at the prospect of another winter confined like this. Suddenly, an idea occurs to me: if I can change the essence of others, can I change myself?

It is much more difficult to even see my own essence, much less get a grip on it. I can feel the earth watching me, but I can’t begin to guess at her thoughts. I twirl inside my tree. It feels like I am getting larger, as if my chest, or my trunk, is opening up. I wrestle with my mind, my body, the jumble of the two, and finally, finally: I step out of my tree, on my own two feet for the first time in so many years. I feel the leaves underfoot, and begin to cry. I turn my face to the sky, to the coming storm. My tree is solid and comforting behind me, and I know that I can always return to it. I entered my tree as a human, but I do not step out as a human. I do not step out as a nymph, either. I am the newest goddess of our old world, the goddess of the lost and the fearful, the goddess of those who come seeking shelter in my woods.