

FROM THE PRIVATE LIVES OF TREES

BY ALEJANDRO ZAMBRA

Julián lulls the little girl to sleep with “The Private Lives of Trees,” an ongoing story he’s made up to tell her at bedtime. The protagonists are a poplar tree and a baobab tree, who, at night, when no one can see them, talk about photosynthesis, squirrels, or the many advantages of being trees and not people or animals or, as they say to each other, stupid hunks of cement.

Daniela is not his daughter, but it is hard for him not to think of her that way. Three years ago Julián joined the family. He came to them; Verónica and the little girl were already there. He married Verónica and in some ways, also, Daniela, who was hesitant at first but little by little began to accept her new life: “Julián is uglier than my dad, but he’s still nice,” she would say to her friends, who nodded with surprising seriousness, even solemnity, as if they somehow understood that Julián’s arrival was not an accident. As the months passed this stepfather even earned a place in the drawings Daniela made at school. There’s one in particular that Julián always keeps nearby: the three of them, at the beach, the little girl and Verónica are making cakes out of sand, and he is dressed in jeans and a shirt, reading and smoking under a perfectly round and yellow sun.

Julián is uglier than Daniela’s dad; on the other hand, he is younger. He works more and earns less money, smokes more and drinks less, he exercises less—doesn’t, in fact, exercise at all—and he knows more about trees than about countries. He is less white-skinned and less simple and more confused than Fernando—Fernando, because that is Daniela’s father’s name, he must have a name, even if he isn’t, exactly, Julián’s enemy, or anyone else’s. The problem is exactly this: in this story there are no enemies: Verónica has no enemies—Julián has no enemies, Fernando has no enemies, and Daniela, except for an insolent little classmate who spends all his time making faces at her, has no enemies either.

Sometimes Fernando is a blotch on Daniela’s life, but who isn’t, at times, a blotch on someone else’s life.

Julián is Fernando without the blotch, but sometimes Fernando is Julián without the blotch.

And Verónica, who is:

For now Verónica is someone who hasn’t arrived, who still hasn’t returned from her drawing class. Verónica is someone who is absent from the blue room—the blue room is Daniela’s bedroom, and the white room is Verónica and Julián’s room. There is, in addition, a green room, which they jokingly call the guest room, since it wouldn’t be easy to sleep in that mess of books, folders, and paintbrushes. The big trunk, which several months ago stored their summer clothes, serves as an uncomfortable sofa.

The ends of their days have settled into an established routine: Julián and Verónica leave the blue room when Daniela falls asleep, and later, in the guest room, Verónica draws and Julián reads. Every once in a while she interrupts him or he interrupts her,

and these mutual interferences constitute dialogues and light conversations, or sometimes important, decisive ones. Later they move to the white room, where they watch television or make love or start to argue—nothing serious, nothing that can’t be fixed immediately, before the movie is over or when one of them gives up, wanting to sleep or have sex. The usual end to those fights is a fast and silent screw, or maybe a long one, replete with moans and laughter. Then five or six hours of sleep. And then the next day begins.

But this night is not an average night, at least not yet. It’s still not completely certain that there will be a next day, since Verónica hasn’t come back from her drawing class. When she returns, the novel will end. But as long as she is not back, the book will continue. The book continues until she returns, or until Julián is sure that she won’t return. For now Verónica is missing from the blue room, where Julián lulls the little girl to sleep with a story about the private lives of trees.

Right now, sheltered by the solitude of the park, the trees are commenting on the bad luck of an oak—two people have carved their names, as a symbol of their friendship, into his bark. “No one has the right to give you a tattoo without your consent,” says the poplar; the baobab is even more emphatic: “The oak has been the victim of a deplorable act of vandalism. Those people deserve to be punished. I will not rest until they receive the punishment they deserve. I will traverse earth, sky, and sea in their pursuit.” The little girl laughs hard, without the least sign of sleepiness. And she, urgently, anxiously, asks the inevitable questions, never just one, always at least two or three: “What’s vandalism, Julián? Can you bring me a glass of lemonade, with three spoonfuls of sugar?”

Did you and my mother ever carve your names into a tree, as a symbol of your friendship?”

Julián answers patiently, trying to respect the order of the questions:

“ONE OF THE GREATEST LITERARY EVENTS OF RECENT YEARS.”

**—ALFONSO CORTÍNEZ,
LAS ÚLTIMAS NOTICIAS**

“Vandalism is what vandals do, vandals are people who do damage just for the joy of doing damage. And yes, I can bring you a glass of lemonade. And no, your mother and I never carved our names in the bark of a tree.”