

THE TREE IN YOU, by Aimee Nezhukumatathil

It makes me smile (and sneeze) to know
during this time of year in Oxford, MS
everyone's lungs marble just a bit green
and gold from so much loblolly pine pollen –

fistfuls of it – you can send a tiny golden river
down your driveway if you dare to rinse off
your car. Or maybe you can't help but pick up
a chartreuse catalpa leaf – wider than my father's

brown face – and carry it like an extravagant fan
around The Square. Creamy blossoms of little
gem magnolias dot this velvet ditch
with exclamations and cardinals chirp out

metallic songs when they find the perfect pecan
or elm to call their own. And last week – just off
Molly Barr Drive – some squirrel brothers made
a riotous mess of a hollowed-out tree, cackling

their little squirrel laughs at any mockingbird
or house finch that tried to share. So be it.
The birds have already claimed their trees.
The hawk, the chalky white-faced titmouse –

all have claimed their trees. Even the moon has claimed
her tree. But what tree has claimed YOU? By which
I mean, what is the name of the tree in you?
Are its branches climbable, ready for a tree house

complete with a spy window and rope swing
to dangle in its lap? Is your tree edged in apples
and the hum of drunk wasps? Does the tree in you
whisper? Does it crackle and snap in a storm?

Maybe you don't know the name – but you know
its peculiar shape, how you can draw the outline of it
with a soft pencil, or the taste of its juice and bitter bark.
Perhaps you remember how its leaves fit the inner curve

of your hand and one time when you were nine, after
an argument, your mother found you hiding underneath one.
She just brought you some lemonade and didn't say a thing.
Just sat next to you while you sipped. How you remember

the silver shimmer of that tree when you and her
walked back home in silence, holding hands – what if
you can't for the life of you remember what *that* tree
is called? Breathe easy – that tree is already in you.

