

# The Vigil of Evergreen

by Niamh MacCabe

There was a time, there must have been, when I was nearly the same as everyone else. Sleep, breathe, eat, breathe, sleep. There was a time I used to be head up, walking around all devil-may-care, kicking up the bloodless leaves, not an ounce of cop inside me, never once thinking of where it was leading, all this falling, this pull, never once feeling the drag to the ground, and down below, never once hearing the spool winding backwards.

Sleep will come back to me, in the end. I know a falling will come. First, there's work to be done, formidable work. I remain ready-set, wily as a weasel. Ears up, eyes fixed. I'm no fool, I know the fall I'm facing, known it a long time now.

I've walked this forest for years. It recognises me. Not the individual trees, they come and go, rise and fall, divide and conjoin in orgiastic mayhem. Tender green tips reach up, roots fondle roots underground. But the whole forest, as one, now that is a tangible thing. It talks to me. Sometimes I talk back.

The most perfect tree is Evergreen. Imagine choosing to be anything else? It issues newborn leaves each spring, sprouting them out between the old hoary ones. It holds on tight to every year's growth, never lets a single leaf go. Not until it gets sucked back down to the ground from where it came, stooped with the years of hoarded foliage. By then Evergreen is already half dead, and decides itself to fall over, to give up and give in.

There's this. Something starts at the centre of the planet. A type of idea, weightless. Maybe a kind of neuron from inside this gigantic spherical magnet gets sent out. Hard to put a word to it. I have felt it, a transmission rising resolute through the earthen layers, surfacing wet and cold at dawn, or dusk, reaching up to Evergreen, delivering its message; 'Time to go', and slinking back down below before you know what's happened. I've heard it, thousands of times now. A low, airless crackle, solemn, seductive, appalling. The old tree lies down and the ground takes over. Bright sky then spills over an infant Evergreen, sap sputters up through tiny stems, the fight is back on. It could be considered sad.

No, Evergreen doesn't need me, fair play to the wondrous beaut. It's the others. The ones whose baby shoots get dragged off them every autumn. Despite all the work they've put in, reaching up and away from the ground, it comes to nothing. The peculiar thing is, back they go to making buds again next spring, after a dark winter of mourning, as if nothing happened. Straight back in, as if this time it'll be different. I've seen each leaf shrivel up with the fear when summer is over. They know what's coming, it simmers in the stem. It doesn't matter how beautiful, nor how green, each one succumbs in the end. All will fall, reeled back within the earth that they came from. It's hard to make sense of it.

One day. Do you remember, Evergreen? Are you listening still? In a single day. About five hours. Something terrible, terrible. Hours for the first thing, when I was with him. When I left it took days, days and nights, maybe a solid black month for the whole thing to finish, finishing for

so long, finishing forever. That was a long time ago, a long hard time. All inside me was rearranged. Terrible still. Terrible to this day. You remember, Evergreen.

It's morning and I'm off again to my tree with my bag of tricks. The summer solstice played out a few weeks ago. Tick-tock, the daylight has begun to be rationed.

Every year since it happened, I go to a different part of the forest after mid-summer and select a tree. I have difficulty choosing. Last year I did a spectacular young silver birch, the leaves still sapping green. It took me weeks and weeks, tangled up in the filigree of lean black branches, from when the dawn air lightened until the darkness took over well into the summer night. The little heart-shaped leaves were difficult to work with, my fingers pricked red raw and the creamy eyeballs in my skull gone askew. But they all deserve a chance and for as long as I'm still vertical, I'm not giving up on a single one.

This year, I headed east. I found a rowan tree, old enough to have proved its viability and young enough to warrant my help. I set to. I selected a slender needle from my tricks-bag.

Rowan leaves are fragile, the unfortunate things. They fancy themselves as strapping, hardy ash leaves. They're nothing like it in truth. The leaflets are arranged around a stem, about twenty to each. But each baby leaf thinks it's the only one.

I chose a silk thread, azure-blue in contrast to the leaf's green so that I could map progress as I worked my way around the spindly branches. I started at the terminal leaf, needle gently piercing the fine-grained cuticle.

The first one is always challenging. I breathe and sew, breathe and sew. I often wonder do trees feel pain, do they panic, sap fizzing, do they sense the struggle going on inside and out, the rising and falling, the push and the pull.

I pulled the thread through, centred between apex, petiole, waxy edge and midrib. I hummed a lullaby to the tree, and the little tune hushed the fear from the leafling. I had calculated that one unbroken thread-length was best for use on all leaflets radiating from the central stem, doubling it up and releasing as I sewed. I had tied a tiny knot at the end, and chose the first incision cautiously, beside a minuscule vein for strength, and to provide some form of ballast for my knot.

When I had a neat line of stitches perforating the leafling from side to side, I sewed down towards where the leaf clung nervously to the axis, weaving the silk thread with the blade's vascular system. On reaching the leaf's base, I circled it twice, trussing the embroidered leaflet to its central stem. I pulled the thread taut, without strangling the living anchor, then stitched my way back up the adjoining leaflet in an unbroken track of blue filament.

I worked through each glossy blade, fastening them all in turn to the stem, careful not to tear the tender green lamina, or angle any leaf away from its orientation towards the sun. Each one of them has a predestined pecking-order position on the stem which I do not entitle myself to interfere with, my parameters being rigidly set. To follow the rules without enquiry is the strongest weapon in my tricks-bag.

Once each leaflet was tied, I wound the thread around the main stem, binding down to where it attached to the slender twig and circling there, the bright blue thread distinct against the wet darkness of the bark. With little left of the thread, I loosened the last few swirls around the twig and ran it in under them. Pulling firmly, I made sure it had bound, that the coming weeks of residual growth would ensure the thread would become well embedded in the tree's flesh. Thus the leaf was rendered safe.

It is trying work. It will take many more weeks to finish this rowan. Each stem bears several leaflets, each twig bears several stems, each secondary branch bears several twigs, the trunk is a host to the multitude of branches reaching outward and upward, away from the centre, the attachments getting weaker and more vulnerable the further from the trunk.

But those powerful branches attached directly to the trunk have resolve. They will bend for no heavy weight of younger branches, will bend for no suckling transient fruits, bend for no storm, for no silent howl emanating from below, no prayer screamed into the bole, they will bend for no yearn tugging at their rooted strength. The lonely hawthorn on the open mountain-side has learned to bow and sway to the prevailing wind's wishes but the tree at the centre of the dark crowded forest has no such humility.

The terrible tree at the centre of the forest. On that day. Your blood must run through it, Evergreen, your roots must entangle somewhere below.

It's still there. I skirt around the centre but never will I go in. I won't breathe the air, I won't walk the ground. As slight as I am, as feeble, I still have my will. I have my resolve. Never again will I walk that dark ground.

On that day, I was walking, close to the middle. All was quiet, the trees used not talk, the earth used not pull so hard, so terrible. I was walking, devil-may-care, I didn't know, head in the clouds, kicking up the ground. I heard something, not trees, nor leaves, nor roots. I heard something coming from the middle, I didn't know, how could I have known? I went over closer, went down on my hunkers. Limbs compacted like a folded hare. I looked through the veiny undergrowth towards the sound.

There was a man, in a clearing. I watched him. He was gathering bits of half-rotten branches from around the base of an ash tree, piling them together to construct what resembled a poor man's pyre underneath an ash bough which forked and forked again as it diverged outward and upward. He would step onto his construct and jump light. The weaker branches would crack. He continued the build, checking its strength, and I had cause to wonder. Good, firm cause to wonder. But I stayed rooted, too busy gawking, like a fool through a bush, too damn stupid to turn my head and walk away from there, to turn and slink away, weightless, and forget about it all.

When he had the rotten pyre high enough, the top mess of branches raised up by the compressed detritus beneath, he stood on it one more time. It remained firm, hoisting him a metre or so above ground. I still watched. I watched him reach inside his dirty corduroy jacket and remove a thick, oily, black rope. He looked up at the bough above him. Holding on to one end, an ignorant knot tying a hemp circle together, he swung the other end skyward. Circling in an arc around the bough, the rope's loose end whistled back to him. He reeled it in, hoisting the crude noose up until it hung as a black halo above his uncovered head. He swirled the loose end several more times around the bough, pulling it taut. Raising his arms, he gripped the noose in one hand and the parallel rope in the other. Lifting himself up, he tested the resolve of the overhanging bough by imposing his weight onto its sinews. The rope grouched crankily but the dispassionate bough remained unmoved.

He lowered his legs back down, and climbed off the scaffold. He tugged at the rope's loose end. Confident that it had found steady purchase around the ash's bough, he wound the remainder of the rope around the trunk, tying it at last.

He returned to his rickety mound of dead wood and climbed back up, mindful not to snap any of the weaker branches. Straightening himself on the rugged perch, he brought his thin legs together and took some time to find balance. Stork-like, his ox-blood boots shifted, making small adjustments. Then he stood still, resolute, staring ahead, one hand clasped in the other. I recall he cleared his throat.

Imagine that. Imagine even remembering that. The sound was dry, wispy.

He reached up to the noose and slipped it over his head. There I lay, hidden, watching the whole thing like it was mine. He tightened it around his neck, the knot a clenched fist at his ear. He sighed, a slow exhalation, guillotined at the end with a snap of a cough. Then he leaped into the air and, on his descent, kicked scissor-like at the pyre of sticks beneath him. They scattered in all directions leaving him swinging wild from the bough. His hands flew to his neck, clawing at the black rope. The sound he made was a fractured, crackling whir, I can hear it to this very day, still whistling through me, down each crooked vein. A terrible, terrible thing.

His booted feet lashed out. With nothing left to strike they danced a hopeless savagery, one boot flying off and landing sole down, rough ox-blood tongue lolling, right in front of my hiding place.

Gawping at the dangling, leather tongue, a roar sprang from me. I jumped up and ran to him, grasping at his thrashing legs. I heaved him up, above my shoulders. His heels dug into my belly, his whistles spat down on me. I tried to hold him there, putting myself between him and the earth's magnet. But I am slight, there never was much to me. His balance shifted, veering left, then right, back and forth, back and forth, tick-tock. Cursing the damned drag reaching up from beneath the ground, I tried to correct my stance, but the more I moved, the more he swayed and spun, writhing sideways, this way and that.

My arms were weakening. I howled at him that I couldn't do it, I couldn't hold him much longer, I'd have to let him go, I was sorry, I was so sorry for all.

I sang the sorry, loud and shrill, to null his punctured chokes. The earth's silencing drag overrode my keening and broke my grip. I fell face down onto the detritus of his scaffold.

I turned to look. He was still struggling, still rasping, still kicking out at the pull, his face purple, eyes bulging and feral, staring ferocious at me, his hands clutching at the embedded rope, nails ripping wounds into his turgid neck. I squealed at him to stop, to give up, give in, there was nothing more. I twisted around to run. As soon as my eyes left his, I knew what I had to do.

I leaped high into the air and threw my arms tight around his jerking limbs, binding myself to him. Lifting my legs, I wrapped them around his feet, and there I hung, monkey-like, clutching his spasming body, my parasitic weight adding to his. His hands left his neck as he tried to grasp at my head, his fingers hooking the long strands of my hair, his body squirming to shake off my deathly grip. But I had firm resolve.

Coupled in torment, we swung as a pendulum, ticking off each miserable second, each minute. My face remained buried in his knees. I perched cross-legged on his feet, my legs encircling the back of his calves, my arms embracing him, my commitment unbreakable. Rocking back and forth, I hummed my lullaby, and in between each sugary verse, I hushed his airless groans, soothing his suffering as I felt it fade. I delivered him to his end.

Over time, a long unspeakable time, the abominable pendulum wound down to a stop. My lullaby had become a looping mantra. In the descending silence at the centre of the darkening forest, I turned my face up. Black blood had congealed around my companion's nostrils and spittle dripped from his sideways sneer. He was gone at last.

My small monkey-body had seized up. I unfurled my cramping limbs, reached my foot down, found solid ground, and dismounted. Turning my back on the man, the rope, the bough, the tree, the ground at the centre of the forest, I walked away. With each step, the earth's countless tentacles sucked at my soles. Blood pooled in my feet, yearning to seep down through the layers, and beneath, back to the centre, the beginning, back to before. Though my eyeballs were focused in front, my ears registered the low crackle of the bough behind me, the solemn sigh of the rope, the drip drip drip of the man's creamy spittle counting out my steps as I left him there, turning on his knot.

I walked for miles, walked for days, all inside me re-arranging. I hid at night, finding some low bush to crease myself into, held wakeful by visions of the suspended man. He was an absurd sundial in the centre of the dark wreathing forest, spine straight as a zealous sapling, shrouded by the web of branches overhead, destined never to be illuminated by the sun's rays, never to count out with his circling shadow the seconds, the hours, the days, the years over the uneven ground, tick-tock.

The summer night is closing, the moon beginning to glow through the latticework of rowan leaves above my head. I am sitting cross-legged in the centre of the tree. Everything to the right of me I have done, everything to the left I have yet to do. The unstitched leaves flutter like cornered moths, some losing their grip and falling. The earth maintains its deathly pull. It will take many more weeks to finish. The silken blue sutures on the secured leaflets reflect the weak moonlight, and the interlaced thread-tracks create a vast miniature city glimmering through the branches.

My bag of tricks strapped to my back, I climb down the tree. I will lay atop the velvet ground tonight, face up, spine straight, limbs extended, fingers splayed, all of my body flat to the earth, feeling the drag downward through my pulsing organs, my lungs, my heart, my belly, my womb. I will not move until first light.

When the morning shimmer blinks through the leaves still clinging to the tree, I will curl my form up from the ground. I will search out sustenance, a tender baby rabbit, a horde of glistening navy slugs. Bellyfull, with my bag of tricks by my side, I will resume my needlework, breathe sew, breathe.

A long long time to go, Evergreen, but sleep will come to all in the end, all will eventually fall, standing up or laying down, all will eventually sleep.

Born in Dublin, Niamh grew up in Paris, in north-west Ireland, and in Washington DC, where she graduated as a visual artist from the Corcoran School of Art.

She worked overseas in the Animated Film industry, returning to rural Ireland to raise her children. She began writing in 2014.

She is published in Aesthetica's Creative Writing Annual 2016, Bare Fiction Magazine Issue 7, The Incubator Journal Issue 8, The Bristol Prize Anthology 2016, and has forthcoming publications in Wasafiri Spring Issue 2017, Structo issue 16, A Furious Hope Anthology 2017 and Ireland's Own Winning Writers Anthology 2017.

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Carried in Waves Short Story

**Longlisted:** Fish Publishing Short Story

Fish Publishing Memoir

**2016: Winner:** Wasafiri New Writing Prize

**Winner:** Molly Keane Creative Writing Award

**Winner:** Ireland's Own Writing Competition

**2nd place:** Bare Fiction Magazine Short Story Award

**Special Mention:** Fabula Press Nivalis Short Story Competition

**Shortlisted:** Fish Publishing Short Story

Cuirt New Writing

Bristol Short Story

Mslexia Short Story

Over the Edge New Writer of the Year

Allingham Festival Flash Fiction

Dalkey Creates Writing Festival

The Ghost Story Supernatural Fiction

Atlantis Short Story

**Longlisted:** Fish Publishing Memoir

Colm Toibín Short Story

Over the Edge New Writer of the Year