Excerpt from *Ghosts in Trees*

By Lauren Pauley, Second Place Winner, 2021 Writing Appalachia Contest

It was strange, but the old sycamore tree at the end of the street held my entire life in its branches. Summer and winter, growth and decay, life and death. It used to be my brother Fox’s favorite spot. After he died, it was mine.

It was nearly a mile to get there, though: past all the houses in our dusty neighborhood, vibrant and swelling in the swing of summer. I walked past all the clotheslines and clothespins, clothes ballooning and collapsing in the wind, all the crawling weeds and bone-dry soil, all the yelling kids running around with shirts either three times too big or three times too small. Past weather-beaten trucks and sweating grandmothers and screened-in porches with creaky, chipped floorboards. Past dead, yellow grass and chattering mamas and sticky-faced toddlers clutching at ankles. I kept my head down, feeling the mountains’ eyes on my back.

The road eventually turned to nothing but dirt and dust, and that’s how you knew you were nearly there. Just a little way further, to where it was quiet and no words could reach you. Just you and the trees and the dust at your feet.

And there it was, the old sycamore. It was thick with life, wind coursing through the branches, time peeling away the brown bark. I could look all the way up, tilt my head the whole way back, and still not see the top. Fit right in with the mountains, silent and solemn and slow.

I had to keep myself from running to it that day, a restless rustling burning through my limbs. I wanted to see Fox so badly my chest hurt.

He always took his time, though. It was a waiting game. A waiting and praying game. So I sat against the strong trunk that day and tried to calm my pounding heart. The wood was steady at my back, sticky with heat. Overgrown grass clutched at my bare calves; lazy bugs floated by my nose. There was only the rustling of leaves in my ears and the cool breeze on my cheeks. I closed my eyes and leaned in.

The next time I opened them, my brother Fox was sitting next to me.

“Jesus,” he murmured. He was squinting at my cheek. He had the worst eyesight when he was alive, mainly with reading and close-up stuff, and I guess it carried over to his spirit, too. Mama always said he needed glasses, but every time he got a pair, he’d either break them or lose them. Eventually, Mama gave up, and so Fox was a permanent squinter.
“Benny Brewster,” I told him. Suddenly my cheek didn’t hurt as bad.

Fox scowled and stared at his knees. His fingers twisted in the blades of grass.

There was no word for it, how I felt when Fox appeared: my brother, alive again, eyes just as green and hair just as wild as the last time I saw him. His jeans were all torn up, his black sneakers falling apart, his arms taut underneath his worn blue sweatshirt. It was the same outfit he had been wearing the night we found his body. I guess he didn’t really need to change clothes anymore. Guess he didn’t need much of anything anymore.

“You gotta stop lettin’ him beat up on you like that,” Fox told me. “The ol’ one two, like we practiced, remember?” His finger hovered for a moment next to my cheek. Then something in him went cold, and he clenched his fist instead. “Ain’t right, Ash, ‘n you know that.”

I had no words to give him, his appearance alone being enough, much more than enough, so I let the rough bark graze my head as I gazed upwards at the blue sky.

“If I’d a been there,” Fox muttered. “Woulda punched the livin’ hell right out of him, I would’ve.”

A glow was spreading somewhere in my chest. I watched the thin clouds as they drifted above me, soft and slow. The sun was warm on my cheeks. I took a deep, slow breath and let the corners of my mouth drift up.

Our legs stretched out in front of us, thighs grazing. Silence settling. I suddenly wished Fox would hug me. He used to reach out every night before bed and just embrace me, even when we got older and I’d flush with shame. I tried to remember what that felt like, having Fox around all the time. Arms, strong and warm, wrapped around me. Safe in my older brother’s embrace, even without Mama, even with Dad petrified on the couch. But I had to let the feel of his leg against mine be enough. I was real careful with this version of Fox: asking too much of him might overwhelm him, make him wilt away like an old flower. And there was no way I could deal with that.

“How’s Dad doin’?” My brother asked me.

One cloud was slowly making its way across the face of the sun. “Same as always.”

“That bad, huh?”

I let out a sigh that I didn’t know I was holding. Turned so that I was facing Fox.

“What all can you see during the day? Where do you go?”
He frowned at me. “Ash, I told you I can’t tell you. Wouldn’t make sense in words, anyways.”

I thought of Charlie’s shiny trombone. I thought of the thud in my bones as I hit the ground, the dust that floated into the air. I thought of the exhaustive heat of the school bus. The relentless stream of everyday life. “But can you see us? Can you see”—

A sharp crack rang out from somewhere above us. Fox gave me a startled look, his green eyes like saucers. Then I blinked, and he was gone.

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About the Author: Lauren Pauley is a WVU English major from Winfield, WV. Her story is an excerpt from a longer work of fiction set in West Virginia about a boy named Ash who is navigating the death of his older brother, Fox. Pauley’s work explores the connection between the natural environment of Appalachia and our own spirits. She was inspired to write the piece for English 352, Appalachian Literature of the Environment, with Dr. Ann Pancake.