

Growing

I order tea. I don't like tea. I ordered it because I don't like it, because I must order something and I cannot consume whatever it is. Anything I drink will slide down my trachea and into my lungs, and anything I eat will not feed my body.

I thank the waitress when she brings my tea. If she notices the curling coarseness to my voice, she does not react. The steam on the tea curls, too, just as my hair curls on my head, just as the roots curl in my lungs and the branches curl around my bones.

I wonder if anyone can see the stiffness in my limbs. The waitress walks through the swinging door to the back of the diner, and I watch the door swing back and forth and back again, and I try to breathe. The roots constrict my lung tissue, inside and out.

I have a snake. His name is Vinnie, and I love him. But. Ever since the plant began growing beneath my skin, his curling around my arm puts me only in mind of how natural it must feel to him, how his instincts must hum at hanging from a tree. I don't even know if corn snakes climb trees, but the image has lodged itself in my head and will not leave. I know this: I have not been back to my apartment in three days. I don't know if Vinnie is still alive. I'd hope my girlfriend would feed him, but she might be too caught up in my disappearance to take care of him, the snake that she has tolerated only for me. Probably Vinnie has escaped, and is hunting the mice in the apartment building. Maybe he's happier, even without the branches of his owner.

It started as a tickle at the bottom of my lungs. An itch behind my diaphragm. I had trouble breathing. The doctor said it was an unknown organic material that I must have breathed in. The next doctor said it was probably asthma. The third said the same as the first. When I finally got an x-ray from the fourth, I saw the curls of the roots, and the tiny sprouts of the

branches around the ghostly ribs, and I suddenly felt the shape of it inside me, pulsing with my heartbeats. I stopped going to doctors. But it was too late to be ignorant.

Even so, I ignored it. I told my girlfriend that the doctor's visits had turned up nothing. She believed me; why wouldn't she? For weeks, I feigned normalcy. If Michelle thought I was acting strangely, she obviously chalked it up to work stress. It only took a week, however, for my drinks to start entering my lungs instead of my stomach. I never choked on it; the roots greedily sucked it up much too quickly for that. It was a couple days later that I realized that I wasn't getting energy from food anymore. I was eating normally, but the nausea and shaking made it clear that I was either very sick, or. Or something else was consuming the nutrients that I put into my stomach.

I tried eating harmful things. But the plant devoured everything, unfazed. So I stopped eating and drinking all together. It hasn't stopped the growth, but it's the only power I have.

Sleeping was the worst. Laying there, still, in the dark, there was nothing to distract me from the feeling of the branches growing out from my lungs, aching slowly, moving around my heart and lacing under my collar bones, before parting the muscles from my bones and burrowing into the space, twining down my shoulders. Others, moving down, lining my stomach, jumbling through the outlines of my intestines, moving around my hip bones and down my legs in the same excruciating way as in my arms.

I haven't slept in weeks.

Michelle knew something was very wrong, if she hadn't already. I'm not sure how well I hid it from her. Maybe she actually knew I was lying from the beginning. She talked about how I should leave these particular contractors to find someone else to design their building, as obviously they were being far too demanding. I hadn't been to work since I'd made the decision

to starve out the plant, but Michelle didn't know that. She hinted at taking a break, she left a bottle of melatonin conspicuously on the counter, she hugged me far longer than she used to, and she made me hot chocolate that I pretended to drink. I was miserable, and so was she, because we loved each other and she didn't know how to help and I didn't know what to tell her.

I didn't want to leave. But I was laying against her on the couch as we watched a show, when one of the curling branches under my shoulder moved against her skin, and I felt her stiffen. And I knew she'd felt it, and when I sat up with excuses queued on my tongue, I found that the vines in my vocal cords were just a little too tight.

Michelle looked at me. Her eyebrows were furrowed, her expression somewhere between concern and confusion. I couldn't explain the thing growing from my lungs, and as the silence grew, her worry began to calcify. I could see the resolve growing in her eyes, and I wouldn't face it. So I ran.

I almost sip the tea, but the smell of it brings me back and I set it down sharply, cracking the handle off. I can feel the branches curling around my finger bones and I wonder what will happen when they emerge.