Shane Lake
The Bone Trees
The whole thing started
with one tree made of bone
an oversized femur
sticking up like a trunk
with more bones for branches
bones hanging like fruit
in the middle of a field
one of the few remaining
fields that nobody owns.
Word spread the way
it does in small towns
and all the adults quit their jobs
forgot their children
in front of TVs
abandoned their laundry
in the middle of a wash
even left their windows open
and doors unlocked
fleeing to the field
to see the assortment of bones
tossing back and forth
like a skeleton wind chime
and they all stayed for days
just staring and laughing
a few people crying
but most of them dumbstruck
touching the slick white boughs
palming their undersides
as if to weigh them
hands heavy with calcium
until everyone fell asleep
woke up and dispersed
in no apparent pattern
like a drop of ink
in a glass of water.

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By the time people returned
to their homes
there were bone trees all over
filling backyards
tangled in clotheslines and
ruining swimming pools.
They popped up in rows
in the most troubling of places
some in the middle of roads
splitting the pavement
like miniature earthquakes
disrupting traffic
like deer
with wild antlers
sending cars and their drivers
up onto sidewalks
into telephone poles.
A skinny row of white
surrounded the doors
of the town's library
so everyone gave up
reading books or listening
to them on tape
and just watched
the movie versions instead
because the video store
was two towns over
and not one single bone tree
had grown over there.
In the middle of a playground
they at first spoiled recess
until the children discovered
the bones broke off easily
and the boys were soon
chasing the girls around
until they grew dizzy
and collapsed
out of breath.

One bone tree grew
in the sheriff’s front yard
and he didn’t even mind
in fact
he loved the tree
more than anything
he had ever seen
in his entire life
got out each night
to sit on the porch
and stare at the thing
like it would be gone
the next day
bones glowing like ice
in the moonlight.

Soon enough
people started looking
for someone or something
to blame
so they blamed it on the birds
dropping bones
from their beaks
for the jelly inside
but the birds said
no no no
we are just like you
we are just so hungry
for that sweet sweet marrow
and these trees
made of bone
are impossible
to build nests in
so why on earth
in a million years
would we ever
do something
to ourselves
like that?

Next they turned
on Mr. Peterson’s huskies
the three of them known
for burying bones
all over town
stalking around
with salivating grins
until they found
a new water hole
but they denied
any involvement saying
no no no
it could not have been us
we know nothing
about gardening
and now there are far too many
bones for us to bury
and this town just bores us.
So the people were stumped and spent the next several days sitting in kitchens scratching their heads and inventing new sandwiches until finally the scientist spoke up and delivered his theory about how the whole thing was a long time coming that their secret histories could be traced to the roots of all their oldest trees that fossilized and spread, the earth beneath their feet a pile of bones pushing up to the surface like the buried alive until one day the ground cracked and up came the bones growing from the roots
Down at the church
it was panic and chaos
as pastor Paul preached
to the full congregation
that these trees were a sign
from the devil
a physical warning
of the terror to come
all because people
refuse to listen
to the word of God
and instead choose
to watch football
and drink cold beer
on the day of the lord
or look at flesh
with pulsing lust
and thoughts of pleasure.
“The devil does
not take a day off,”
Pastor Paul warned his crowd
and had Mr. Hall
growing into trees.
And after the silence
and after some thinking
everyone shook their heads and
no one asked questions
not wanting to offend him
because after all
they liked him
but he was only a scientist
so what could he possibly know
about this kind of thing anyway.
throwing his arms up in the air
shaking his head
and screaming out noises to ward off the bone spirits
while Mrs. Brown covered the ears of her children and headed for the nearest exit as the oldest living woman sat in her pew and awaited instructions.
The Pastor urged everyone to gather their necessities and flee the town as quickly as God would allow their feet to move for the devil was near and surely plotting some sort of invasion.
TV crews
from the major stations
parked their vans
in the town’s biggest driveways
and a fit of jealousy
swept across the country
once people turned on
their TVs and saw
all the magic
in this part of their nation.
People in every state
wanted trees
of their own
buried bones
once given to dogs
in the ground and waited.
Some towns tried fertilizing
their cemeteries
watering them regularly
hoping for some sort of reincarnation
but most people
were just too impatient
and painted their trees white
from bottom to top
tying little chicken bones
to the ends of the branches
tricking themselves
into thinking
that if they looked quickly
enough no one could tell
the difference.
Some started rumors
that China had grown
the first bone tree
centuries ago
and kept it a secret
but of course this was a lie
and of course none
of the other schemes worked
and when people realized
they could not have
what they wanted so badly
they were so angry
that they pretended
the whole thing
never happened
and went back
to starting puzzles
they would never finish
and trapping lightning
bugs in jars.

A special town meeting
was called for a night
when the men did not bowl
and the kids did not
have to go to bed early
and the number of people
that went was so great
their shoulders were touching
and the room got heavy
so the doors were opened
and the people exploded
out of them onto the grass
behind the town hall.
They decided to move
to the high school
football stadium because
at least it could provide
bleachers for them
to rest their legs
while they argued
about ownership of the trees
most people angry at the few
who wanted the bones
to be dug up or bulldozed
and tossed into piles at the town dump.
“You can’t destroy something that is not yours”
was repeated like a mantra and met with a reply of “Yes we can.”
It went like this for hours on end to no satisfactory conclusions folks raising their voices getting red in the faces and clenched their fists like they were trying to shake the water out of a raindrop until someone said plainly in a rare quiet moment “Let’s not try to figure out everything at once.”

It was a long winter in which most things died. Not all things.
At some speck of history people attached themselves to the poor idea that everything dies in winter but it is only most things. The bones on the trees did not change color or fall off or get raked into black plastic bags with other bones. In a farm house kitchen a black kettle whistled and it felt like all of our bones were taken from our bodies stacked into freezers and given back to us. Outside the dogs were going wild a whole pack of them
fresh from the woods
of another town
barking at the smoke
rushing out of the chimney
like a cloud
that looked like an alligator
chasing a child
across the great swamp
of sky
a child made of smoke
made from fire
made from wood
chopped in a yard
by a different child’s father.
The child’s floating
was much too slow
and in one fit of smoke
he was crushed
into a scatter of bones.
Some people claimed
this was how the whole thing started.
Others joined the search party
but did not discover
any clues.
After four days
everyone gave up
and began tracking blackbirds
falling from the sky
but this proved too difficult
as it was cold
and the birds did not want
to be tracked.
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