

An Ash Tree in Os

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Artist statement

The short story features Sámi characters and practices. However, it is not mentioned explicitly that they are Sámi. In summer 2020, Wendy moved to Norway. But already before, she did not learn only about Norwegian culture, but also tried to inform herself about Sámi practices through folklore books and articles (some recommended by Sámi), visits to their lands, and talks and homestays (not in touristic sense) with Sámi and Norwegians who have Sámi family members and have maybe Sámi blood themselves. In the 19th-20th century, policies discriminated against the Sámi and their practices, which led to erasure of knowledge and stories. She felt that it would be unethical to feature only Norwegian people in a nearby future and erase Sámi in the land that inspired this story on loss and wounded/contaminated/damaged landscapes and healers. Wendy is currently rooting in Norway and is a plant mum of four.

The story

I stared out at the swamp, the master cook of nature and the grave of many. I could feel the wounds of the swamp, like I felt my bruises. The swamp and I were full of so many stories—minerals, fungi, rot, bacteria, and ashes of our ancestors. We were all in this together.

One moon after the Reckoning, Sigrid returned to Geitrams Tunet. She arrived together with the cranes. Tjiddtjie and I heard that the cranes were flying over the land where she had moved as a young woman, looking for money, fancy clothes, and a rich partner. To a land with skyscrapers, almost no place for the more than human world. I had found someone here, but that Creature has never been a partner to me.

Perhaps Sigrid had followed the cranes back to the north. When she arrived at the farm, nobody was there, except for the cows, the *geitrams*, the ghosts, the microbes and other invisible friends of the farm.

Marta, her mother, was carrying hot stones to the brooks, an old ritual of these settlers.

Sigrid did not come alone. Not with a partner. Ida was only eight years old when she lost the Creature that had sown his seed in her mother. We passed the farm, the reindeers saw them first, weeping, and we walked further. We had other things to do.

We did not like Sigrid and Marta.

We were angry at Marta who had taken our lands away.

We did not like Sigrid when she was weeping about the losses of the Reckoning. She wailed that she didn't know how to survive all this. They had taken everything away from her.

They did not realise that Tjiddtjie and I were living in the Reckoning for our whole lives.

Save the future, some of these white people yelled in the year of the Reckoning. We saw the last social media posts. We heard the radio talks. Save the future of the soil. Save the future of food. Save the future. Only now they were screaming it. Only now the Reckoning harmed them too. And the skyscrapers collapsed. And many people learned that money cannot save you from toxic metals and microplastics in your blood. Sigrid kept weeping. It annoyed us. The reindeers thought her grief was a spirit and were anxious. When Sigrid was a child, she never had a scar. I was already full of bruises when she left the lands of Os for the rich south. She was still a child when she returned.

Finally, Tjijtjie told Sigrid to make a fire. *Start cooking, stop wasting our time.*

Tjijtjie turned to the little Ida and told her to look in the ashes. 'Until spring arrives again.'

My family mourns by listening to the fire, learning from the wisdom of the ashes, and what can be grown out of it.

When Ida's body was in spring, when all our bodies were in spring, they came. The Collectors. The new world came with new rules and technologies. Ida got a chip in her left wrist, so she could hear the trees. Marta and Sigrid thought it was odd. 'How can you hear trees?' Tjijtjie and I thought that this new technology made sense.

Ida was sent to a special program in the south, to learn how to care for the sick land. They called this program the Landwork.

The event known as The Reckoning occurred a decade ago. It was a brutal awakening to longstanding early warning signals. Tjijtjie pointed out that these signs had been evident for centuries. In the centuries leading up to The Reckoning, it seemed as though magic had vanished from the world. In reality, it was always present, but our minds, bodies, souls, and lands were so polluted with narratives of alienation and superiority that we stopped to believe in its power.

Then came the first ecoterrorist attacks and a major pandemic. It was frightening, yet I, still young and so naively in love with a man who was not good for me, could not imagine that things might deteriorate further. I believed naively that both my Creature and the world could change for the better. I should not say man anymore. According to our queens, it is better not to use words for what is lost, so we can forget our loss and heal sooner.

Then it happened. It happened already after Sigrid had left Geitrams Tunet. What I witnessed that year left me in shock; Tjijtjie claimed she had foreseen it all. My father, brother, and boyfriend—all the Creatures—got killed in this wave of destruction. The concept of femicide was familiar to me from constant news coverage, but androicide was unexpected. To my knowledge, few Creatures had survived the Reckoning; I haven't seen one in ten years, but I heard rumors occasionally. After the Reckoning, we needed to repair and rebuild everything. Leaders like Marta were decisive. She named the catastrophe the Reckoning, she had always liked her bible stories. Under her leadership, I reluctantly joined a farm operation, despite preferring not to work for someone like her. My family believed collaboration was preferable to isolation.

In those initial years after the Reckoning, we were bombarded with myriad stories and theories attempting to explain the events. If we wished to avoid a second

cleansing—this time potentially wiping out women—we had to nurture and heal the land and its systems. The new leaders introduced several innovative programs, including a radical educational initiative. At the age of seven, children are taken to a barren area to plant and care for trees over three years. They engage in activities such as observing, note-taking, drawing, and writing landscape biographies to foster a living connection with the landscape. Then they would start working in the most contaminated regions, trying to regenerate them.

And Ida was the first girl of our community that would join this special program. We would not see her for decades.

We thought this rupture from her daughter would break Sigrid.

But Sigrid started to have daily conversations with the big Ash Tree in Geitrams Tunet. Every old farm has a tree that protects all the old wisdom of the land. The farm tree protects the farm, the land, the people, the animals, the ghosts. Some people say a ghost of the ancestors lives in this *Tuntre*, this garden tree. Others claim that the wasteland, the *geitrams*, the cows, the ash tree, the farmer and her mother, the wolves, are all entangled and prosper and suffer together.

Even Tjijtjie does not know if the *Tuntre* is a settler, a Sámi, or a Viking thing.

We observed that Sigrid started to transform. She changed her farming techniques. The worms in her soil became more active. She learned to make lemonade from *geitrams*, the plant that came to these wastelands, via the railroads that the settlers had built. She learned about fermentation and composting, and listened to Aunt Myr and Granny Goat. She became an *ildsjel*, a fire soul, and we found each other.

We were in our early forties when we finally became friends again. Tjijtjie said she also saw that forthcoming. ‘You liked each other as children too much. I only do not know why you it took so long for you both to repair your friendship.’

I tried to not let my eyes wander off to the swamps in the north and murmured that we used to have other interests in the old world.

Sigrid started to organise evenings and invited all the farmers and milk maids. Together, in the evenings, next to the fire in the winter, and under the ash tree, they shared stories, songs and observations. Sometimes about a river changing course. Where new rhubarb was spotted. When the first mushrooms and berries emerged. A story about a sickness for reindeers. A song for healing broken fingers.

Sigrid said she got advice from the Ash tree on how to compost. She knew everything about the cycle of life and death, and this was translated in her cooking. Her cooking was marvelous. It was healing. Some sick women came to her and returned as stronger animals back to where they came from. Sigrid told me it is not only the process or the ingredients, but also that making space and time for listening was the real alchemy. She was a radical too. She invited tax collectors and adopted sex workers to her table. Even when the new world limited travel and construction in many lands, women found their ways to Geitrams Tunet.

One day, one of the queens wanted to visit her. We were already in our late forties. Sigrid told the queen's messenger to meet her in the summer farm, higher in the mountains and deeper in the forests, close to some sources where the reindeer gathered. Some milk maids told me that Sigrid and this queen spent a long night talking in the summer farm. The next day, when I bumped into Sigrid in the heart of Geitrams Tunet, I asked why she held the meeting there. Sigrid threw a quick glance at the ash tree, but it happened so quickly that I didn't know if she was indeed looking at the tree behind me. 'I have someone to protect', she said.

Afterwards, in the main room of Geitrams Tunet, she hung a portrait of another queen.

Queen Myrtle, the queen who became the queendom, who sacrificed herself for the greater cause, who composted herself to the contaminated lands in the south. In these twenty years after Ida left for the Landwork, we had only one fight, and that was about Queen Myrtle. Sigrid had put Akka dolls close to the portrait. 'I do not see Myrtle as a mother goddess.'

'She is a mother. She sacrificed herself for the greater good.'

'She killed people too.'

Sigrid turned to me, with fiery eyes. 'She had to! We all had to! For a better future!'

'A better future? For you, white people? We were burning for centuries, and nobody listened to us. Our waters, our bodies were dammed! Did we kill people to change the course of the river? No, we sang, we never used violence like this queen of yours!'

'But you all got a better life because of their work!'

'We lost them!'

'The Creatures?! Did you not forget that a Creature abused you and your mother? I saw the bruises. I saw it, Elve! The Creature deserved it, and the swamps gave the punishment that it deserved!'

My body shuddered as if a snake had just slithered down my spine.

'I am sorry I brought this up,' Sigrid said. She had calmed down.

'Did you not think the Creature became so monstrous, because your family destroyed his land, his body, his being?' I asked.

Sigrid became pale.

'But you, white people, think all monsters have to be slayed down,' I said. 'You do not see we can heal monsters too. Darkness is part of our lives. Without darkness the fire is not visible. We have to be hopeful. We have to respect that everyone copes differently with darkness.'

Sigrid sprang to her feet. The heat was back in her face. 'Why do you see me as the villain? You were the one who pushed that Creature in the swamp!'

Then she slapped herself, but I was already hit by the truth. I ran away, with the reindeers. I was in the mountains for a couple of months, avoiding the swamps and the whispers of the past. Even years later I could feel the bruises of the Creature. I tried to forgive myself for my stupidity, for forgiving him every time, blaming the old world, people like Marta and Sigrid, for my own reactions and actions. For years I had conversations with the goats, even a regular goat I called Auntie Goat, or with the bogs and the pines, the reindeer, the mosses, about their wounds, my wounds. The

landscape forgave me, I felt it in my marrow, but I wondered if I was imagining it all. If the landscape and I were all the same. I knew from Marta and Sigrid that we are all made of bacteria, constantly in exchange with the more-than-human world. I myself had come to the conclusion that if the landscape was so polluted that I must also be polluted. I might not even be pure Sámi. In our community, there were rumors that Tjijtjie did not just exchange reindeer skins with the old farmers. What does that actually mean? Purity?

The necessities of daily kitchen life brought me and Sigrid back together. She was holding a basket full of white button mushrooms. We looked at each other, and then we hugged each other. We did not talk about the Creatures anymore. But she started to work and organise better, trying to fix and heal what her ancestors did wrong to the land. Sigrid, this woman with a bone in her nose, became a steward of the land. Tjijtjie said she was more Sámi than us... or whatever that means.

Twenty years had passed since Ida had left, when Sigrid took me away from the big table where our farm community was seated to the fire hearth. Both Marta and Tjijtjie followed us with their eyes, but kept the other women occupied with the stories. Sigrid told me she had stopped producing nightsoil.

The drones came the next day, a day later the doctor. She had a tumour in her intestines.

Tjijtjie and I heard stories about isolation among the settler women in the times before the Reckoning. Women did their laundry and cooking in separate houses. In the name of efficiency. But it broke many roots and the soils of their lands degraded. The Reckoning was painful, but the rupture and crisis lead this time to healing.

We did not leave Sigrid alone in her last days. I helped Marta with the cows. It was almost the same like herding reindeer. The drones helped with the heavy work. I sang *joiks* to Sigrid. She liked the one about the reindeer and lichen trees, and let me sing it many times.

Sigrid also gave me instructions on how to finish the fermented beer.

'Teach it to my daughter when she is back,' she asked me.

I gave many offerings to the Akkas, and especially to Jabme-Akka, the mother of death. I put knives next to her dying body. Tjijtjie added her favourite kitchen knife to the table where we collected her luggage for her trip to the underworld.

Once, I asked her if the Ash tree could heal her.

'Why?' Sigrid asked.

'You can hear the Ash tree, don't you?'

Sigrid smiled softly.

I hesitated. 'Is that why that queen came to visit you years ago? She knew you had the gift.'

Sigrid nodded.

'Why do you not choose for a longer life, to join their luxuries? You might even see Ida.'

'I am not afraid for death, but more for what I might become if I join them.'

And that is when I realized how much I adored her.

Sigrid gave me her last smile. 'By the way, that tree is already taken.'

'What? Is there a spirit inside? Can she not heal you?'

Sigrid shook her head. 'No, that spirit does not master the magic of life and death. It is a woman's domain.'

I looked up. 'A woman's domain?' I repeated carefully.

'You heard me,' she said.

I felt a warm fire in my heart. 'Now, I know why you wanted to meet the queen in the summer farm.'

'That spirit taught me everything. We are all healthy because of that spirit. Please protect it's secret.'

'I will,' I said, and I kissed her hand.

At the full moon, the big ash tree in the heart of the Geitrams Farm lost a branch, and one hour later, Sigrid's dead body was given back to the bears and wolves. We ate all together. It was a *bålkos*, a meal next to the campfire, and we were wrapped in skins of reindeers and cows. In the end, Tjijtjie sometimes said, we all become ash.

The name of the farm was a bit ironic. *Geitrams*. Fireweed. Rosebay Willowherb. This colonial plant has so many names. She was not better than the human settlers. She colonised the land too, erased the stories of other plants, and the land got contaminated. The colonisers penetrated the earth. There are still holes, remnants of the violence. Empty mines. The *nissen*, these canny earth critters, were chased away by the settlers, who were hungry for copper and other metals that would make them rich. The irony of fire is that Sigrid, blood of the settlers that destroyed the land, unrooted herself to find wealth in the south, but returned and brought back the magic. After the Reckoning the *nissen* came back. Some of them assisted the milk maids in Geitrams TUNET. They were brewing the beer in her absence.

I was angry after her death. At some point I was so blind with grief that I even wished the settlers had never come, so I would not have known all these losses. I wanted Geitrams TUNET to go up in flames, and I wanted to gaze into the ashes, smell death, come home in the soil.

Tjijtjie found me when I was weeping in front of the Ash tree. She said we had lost a sister. She looked at the Ash Tree, and sang about a story in the Viking tradition about a Creature who sacrificed himself for more wisdom. He hung himself on an Ash tree. Yggdrasil. The song made my breast bone quiver and for the first time in days I could breathe again.

'She is now part of the Tuntre,' Tjiddtjie said. Well... *start cooking, stop wasting our time.*

When the cranes returned, three years after Sigrid's death, Ida came back from the Landwork. She was 31 years old, old enough according to the Trees, to take over Geitrams Tunet and be the steward of these lands. Marta, who had been gazing at the cows from the top floor of the *stabbur*, the storage house, had seen her arriving and had rung the *matklokka*. We all thought the food was ready and walked in the direction of the kitchen. We were delighted when she stepped up to be the new steward. Ida walked out the car and looked directly in the direction of the Ash tree. I gasped.

Ida had lost an arm. She told us later, at a big table, where every seat was taken, one of the Landwork's tasks brought her to an island full of leprosy patients. 'We burned the disease away,' Ida said. 'Another sacrifice for the greater good.'

Ida had become a big healer. She looked so much like her mother.

At the first evening, I saw her observing the Ash Tree. I remembered the chip in her left wrist. None of the woman in Geitrams Tunet knew younglings, who had returned... Ida was the first who had left and returned from the Landwork. But we had heard that it was true. The new generations can communicate with trees because of the chip in their wrist.

Ida made herself home soon. She was not afraid of the big tables, of the strangers that did not know about her mother's passing, or the women with their own scars, who knocked unannounced on the farm doors. Ida respected the Akka dolls at the entrance of the door, and close to the fires. She knew the land. Even now I have scary thoughts that Ida is even older than Tjiddtjie, and that it was never Sigrid's daughter that returned, but an Akka or another spirit who had taken over her body.

On the first evening, Ida summoned Marta, Tjiddtjie and me. We found Ida looking at the portrait of queen Myrtle. She had a strange fire in her eyes. She invited us to sit, and joined the table. One of the nissen served us warm milk. I wondered if Ida had always been left-handed.

She asked us about the Ash tree. 'Who did talk with the *tuntre*?'

We were all surprised about her question.

'Nobody, except your mother.'

'Nobody of the younger ones?'

'You are the only one who returned from the Landwork so far.'

Ida heaved a sigh of relief.

'What is the matter with the Ash Tree?' we asked.

'There is magic in ... *him*.'

I nodded. My suspicion was true. There was more magic in that tree, and it was male. Marta and Tjiddtjie did not look surprised either. I realized we all had some idea that this Ash tree was not a normal tree.

'If the queens know,' Ida continued, 'they will come and burn the Creature.'

'He...' Marta became red. She was not used to saying this word anymore. 'It helped Sigrid, Geitrams Tunet, us all.'

'Yes.' Ida turned to us. 'He is not a monster.' She sighed. 'We have to make a sacrifice. We close the farm for all the young women who can communicate with trees and betray him, or we report the Creature.'

In the background, the fire in the fireplace danced. Ash fell to the stone floor. The soil met our soul.

'Well,' I started. 'We are good at grieving. The choice has always been easy for us, indigenous beings.'

Ida looked up, frowning her eyebrows.

I wondered if she got my sarcasm.

'I am sorry for that,' Ida said.

'For what?'

'For the world before the Reckoning,' Ida answered.

The fireplace crackled. My eyes wandered to her right shoulder, and then the place where her arm should have been. 'We all made our sacrifices and have our wounds,' I said.

Ida smiled. 'I see you.' She put her other hand on my shoulder. She looked so much like Sigrid. 'The choice has never been easy, but for this land to thrive we need him.'

I nodded. 'We are all in this together.'

Tjijtjie clapped. 'That is decided. *Let us start cooking, stop wasting our time.* Who brings the sheepskins outside and prepares the *bålkos*? Nissen, can you prepare the coffee? And who here fancies some *pinnebrød*?' And that was it.

Now I am staring at the swamp that had swallowed a Creature. I still had scars from the many fights with him. That Creature was not good, but I never wished that the land and its queens would swallow them all. I learned to cope with the big losses of the Reckoning, by listening to the songs. They are still here. In the shadows, swamps and soils. In the minerals, fungi, rot, bacteria, and ashes.