

MEGAN HARLAN

## The Art of Bonsai

The Intersection of Life and Plants

**T**ake this brick path, the one curving past the rose and lavender bushes, walnut and lemon trees, to the edge of this California garden. Enter the pergola housing dozens of bonsai—all dripping wet, because my grandmother, who cultivates these miniature trees, just watered them. My favorite is the mature giant redwood on the middle shelf. In the wild this species can top three hundred feet; here it's the size of a house cat. Smell the deep forest, as filtered sunlight dries the damp from its sweet grizzled bark, tack-sized needles, moss edging the glazed crimson tray. Bonsai thrive outside, but their smallness needs sheltering, like tiny animals with fast-beating hearts.

Now, take a different path, the slate stepping-stones leading to my family's urban backyard, where my son has started to bonsai a redwood tree. In our house, *bonsai* has become a verb—to grow a planting (*sai*) in a tray (*bon*). See it there, under the coiling exposed roots of an old star jasmine, in the deep blue rectangular pot—that spray of fringy needles. He is using a seedling dropped by a giant redwood in our city—the sole survivor of a long-vanished grove, where circles of young trees once sprouted in orbit around large parent trees, in family lines reaching back to the Jurassic.

These two paths can never cross in real time or space. But the art of bonsai trains such vastnesses into living miniatures. Techniques of mimicry and extremely aggressive pruning allow us to contemplate a tree's true relationship to its landscape—including the sky, the earth, the passage of time, and ourselves. As the tree grows small, we grow giant—our heads grazing its upper atmosphere. This change in proportion plays other tricks on our perspective.

So let's still stand in the pergola in Willow Glen, where I am about eight—the age my son is now—watching my grandmother snip her redwood bonsai. She stares and nods at the tree as she sculpts, as if in a slow-moving daydream. This is a backyard form of magic, I am sure of it: sleight of hand with the laws of nature.

Sometimes she holds the edges of the glazed tray to gently shake free the loose needles. The pot, shaped like a large portrait frame, fascinates me as much as the redwood: the vessel is the bowl of the tree's horizon, the width of its sky. You can pick up the world that holds this redwood tree, hug it in your arms, place it anywhere you like.

And here we are in Berkeley just the other day, as I help my son water his fledgling redwood bonsai. We talk about time as we pat firm the soil: it will take a few years for his seedling to grow the roots to support a tree. We need to water it daily, trim the root ball every few months to stunt the tree's height, yet thicken its trunk, cut all branches except the smallest, pluck all but the smallest needles, one by one. Then, over many years of enough sun, enough protection from wind and chill—long after he has graduated from college, perhaps when he has a family of his own—the redwood bonsai will reach maturity, all two feet of it. With proper care, it might live fifty years. Grown in its natural habitat, a giant redwood's life can stretch to two or three millennia. The art of bonsai collapses time's effect on a lifespan to about the space of a nest.

Here, these two paths can be grafted together: one leading to decades ago, and what I grew from; one leading to what I grow now. Oh, and that third path surging away from me: the future, lifelong mythologies for my son—like that time, he might someday remember, that he tried to bonsai a redwood tree. In my mind, these paths spread in gnarled, vital branches. Yet their scale is microcosmic; they take up, mysteriously, no actual space. Like the fact that he will never know her, or she him: an enormity somehow too small for the head of a pin.

She hands me the small pruning shears, asks me to help her trim away a long needle. I turn to him, ask if he can find the tiniest needles on his seedling. He smiles before he searches, as if delighted that the smallest forms could, over time, figure the growth.

**Megan Harlan's** creative nonfiction appears or is forthcoming in *AGNI*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *The Common*, *Superstition Review*, and *Under the Sun*. She's the author of *Mapmaking* (BkMk Press/New Letters), winner of the John Ciardi Prize for Poetry. Her short stories, journalism, and poems have appeared in *TriQuarterly*, *The New York Times*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *PBS Newshour*, and *Poetry Daily*, among other publications. She works as a writer and editor in the San Francisco Bay Area.