

Ideals

THE tree stood straight and tall against the dome of sky. It swayed gracefully as the gentle breeze played in its thick leaves. The branch-skeleton was a hand with long, tapering fingers, reaching up to touch the clouds and hold the blue sky.

Perry stood in the circular shade and looked up into the tree. His neck ached in front from stretching. The tree was speckled with sunlight. The leaves whispered to him softly.

He longed to climb the tree. He'd tried before, but he hadn't been *quite* big enough. It had grown up with him — young and promising, always a little more than he could handle. This was *his* special tree of all the trees in the woodlot. Someday, he'd always thought, someday I'll climb that tree. I'll sit in the top and see forever. Maybe today — He'd forgotten his errand, wood for the wood box. He let go of the hatchet and gently touched the soft bark on the trunk. The leaves whispered to him softly.

"I'm coming. I'll try it," he whispered back. He stretched to reach the first crotch. His leg was barely long enough. His sun-bleached jeans pulled tightly across his knee. He gripped the branches and boosted — but not quite. His face reddened. His pulse pounded in his temples. He gave a grunt and hauled himself into the tree.

He wiped his sticky hands on the tail of his T-shirt. He panted slightly.

He leaned back in the coolness of the tree and gazed at the top. I wonder what it'd be like to sit in the top. I'll bet

you can see fer miles 'n' miles. 'N' everythin'd be below ya. Gee. It'd be neat.

He started to climb. He hoisted himself from one crotch to another. The bark scraped his hands. A branch switched his face and stung his eyes. He had to stop a minute before he could see again.

Occasionally he looked up to see the top. The sunlight spilled in, as through a chimney-hole, speckling down among the leaves. The leaves were little peep-holes, opening and closing against the blue sky.

He was closer now, closer to the top than he'd ever been before. But the branches were smaller — weak and supple, giving more under his weight. He reached for a branch, a pretty one, still green, with two soft leaves close to its tip. It snapped backward in his hand. He grasped another and started upwards, before he felt it give. He slid suddenly backward, jarring to a stop, his foot wedged in a crotch.

His palms burned. A tear oozed down his smudgy cheek. The top — he wasn't going to make it. The tree and sunlight and sky fused, a wet kaleidoscope of colors, swimming together and slowly swimming back to shape again. Slowly, oh, so slowly he felt his way back down the tree. The switching branches got in his way. He didn't dare look up. He couldn't bear to see the sunlight speckling down among the leaves.

He bumped against the ground and sat there, a lump of gloomy thought. Then he looked at the tree, and he hated it. It was smug and snobby and mean. It wasn't going to let him share the sun and the sky and the forever. It wanted them all to itself.

His hatred swelled like a red balloon. It drummed in his head. His hand fumbled in the grass beside him. His stubby fingers gripped his hatchet.

He hacked at the tree — blindly, savagely, ferociously — smashing its soft bark into pulpy nothingness. The tree swayed in the breeze. The leaves whispered, swished, and scattered as the tree smashed against the ground.

Perry looked up, surprised. The drumming stopped. There was the top! Now he could sit in it!

He ran stockily to the top and climbed in among the leaves and branches. He sat cross-legged, straight and proud.

He looked out of the leaves. There was the ground! No sky — no clouds — no speckled sunshine! No view forever! Just ground. Ordinary old ground.

He drifted in disappointment. It stunned him. *This* wasn't the top he had tried to climb to. *This* wasn't anything at all — just a heap of torn leaves and broken branches that scratched and pulled at him as he scrambled out. The sky kaleidoscoped before him, just the sky. At his feet lay the tree top. He had brought it down to him. And it was dead.

—*Mary Jean Stoddard, Applied Art, Sr.*



Saffron — scarlet leaves rush sighing, dying to the ground
Forsaking black sterile skeleton arms.

The teal blue sky with pulled-cotton wisps of clouds
Deadens and darkens and dulls.

The earth gutted — picked of its golden crop.
Brown broken stalks, black frost-edged leaves
Trembling with the feet of the hunter.

The spotted dog nosing the dying ground flushes
The gold-brown pheasant — his wings tear at the sky
Beating the blue with fear.

A moment — an eternity.
The bloodied azure head will spot the crushed leaves
With flecks of red.

—*Lou Hale, Sci., Sr.*