

The Writer in the Garden

Award winning RHS / British Library entry
by Gillian Hovell, BA Hons

Thousands of stories live inside me, but they must remain hidden for now. They grow deep within me, as I stand, tall and alone, in the formal garden. One day I shall write them, but not yet.

For now it is winter and the crisp, frosted grass, spreads like a frozen lake, around me and separates me from my fellows. The brittle frosts do not worry me though: my thick bark, brown and furrowed as it is, wraps me, and those stories deep within me, in a warm embrace. However bitter the icy blast of the north wind, my flattened leaves will continue to shine green and fresh. It takes more than a season's chill to defeat me.

I know that when the thaw finally comes, I shall add another foot to my height and another circle of branches to my crown. My scaly twigs, with a magician's sleight of hand, will produce pointed green cones to dangle from my fingertips: these will grow woody and brown, soon falling, scattering their seeds on a dry, bright day: the miracle is fresh every year.

Later, in summer, I shall no longer be alone. Couples will sit beside me on the cropped grass and fall in love, while children play chase around me, snatching my branches in their small hands and dropping them on the earth. Their racing feet will crunch over my fallen leaves and release a rich, sweet scent into the air around us. Idle tourists will run their fingers across the fibrous ridges of my trunk, watching fascinated as flakes shred off at their touch. An old man will come – he always does - and stand beside me, his back bent, and he will stare at the view although he sees nothing except lost memories. I remember when he and his love were one of those couples, both gazing at the landscape below yet seeing nothing except each other.

When the sun begins to fade in autumn my leafy neighbours, huddled together across the lawn, will blush and crinkle as if with age, preparing to sleep once again through the coming cold. I, however, do not sleep. I stand and watch through the coldest of seasons.

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So the seasons have rolled by since I sprouted and was planted here, over a hundred years ago. Even at this age, I am a youngster: across the ocean venerable brothers of mine, who are hundreds of years older, scale the Redskins' mountainsides. They tower over other evergreens and a few stretch a hundred and fifty feet into the air, more than twice my height. Many stand alone, as I do, so they can reach to the skies unimpeded. Weather, decay and even fire cannot slow their progress.

It is my good fortune that I was brought to this formal garden. Here I am cherished and allowed to grow tall. Not all my brothers have always been so fortunate: some have been herded together, unable to display their elegant columns in open space. They exist to be used, not to be admired and gazed at: it is their softwood hearts they are treasured for. Cut down in their prime, their tough and reliable trunks will be resurrected as tools to write stories with. However, all is not doom, for in their place others will be planted to replace them, growing tall and straight, aiming for the clouds until they in their turn will give up their precious wood to live on in another form.

Perhaps one day I too shall be felled by a saw or an axe. When that day comes, I may be reunited with some of those people who have sat or played near me. They may hold me in their hands and together we shall write and stories will flow from me, for I shall be their writer, skimming over the pages.

Pencils are made from trunks like mine – from the heart of the Incense Cedar - and so I pray that my heart shall live again and I, reborn as a hundred thousand pencils, shall write stories to thrill and inspire, repaying my debt to the people who nurtured me when I stood, tall and alone, in the garden.

The Incense Cedar (calocedrus decurrens) has been the traditional wood used in pencils for 100 years. One good-sized tree can produce 300,000 pencils. It is also widely used as a handsome ornamental conifer in formal gardens due to its narrow columnar form and resistance to decay and cold.



Gillian Hovell