

"Komorebi"
By Kalila O'Quinn

There used to be a fig tree in the yard next to mine
It grew along the fence and would drop its sweet fruit into our grass
With permission from our neighbors, we would pick figs every summer
When the brown bulbs were ripe and their delicate flesh tore easily under our teeth
Year after year, the figs would grow and so would I
There came a day where I could pick whole handfuls by myself
And was smug about it
Because my little sister wasn't tall enough to reach the higher leaves
And was forced to settle for the low-hanging branches
White buckets of fruit would come home with us
Many shared with friends, most kept for our own enjoyment
All picked for free but infinitely priceless
[pause]
The tree came down eventually
When a new neighbor decided that he didn't like the look of it
Even the stump was removed to ensure efficiency
At ten years old, this was an irreparable loss
Precious summers, dozens of buckets, hundreds of figs
Gone within a day
Much, I have come to realize, like life
In a month, I will be graduating high school and attending college in Columbia in the fall
I have lived in Aiken all my life
Aiken, with its antique Southern charm that attract attention from all over
The cobblestone paths in Hopelands Gardens
Lined with flowering blooms and cool streams
The quaint local university
Where brilliant minds are nurtured to success
The hot Steeplechases and polo fields
When the sundresses and khakis make their first spring appearance
The charming downtown streets
With their familiar bookstores and art centers and homes
The miracle of South Boundary with its arcing trees
That feel like a warm embrace after a long day
There is a Japanese word—*komorebi*—that I feel describes this shaded street perfectly
Despite its lack of an English translation
Komorebi embodies the phenomenon of sunlight filtering through leaves, casting a soft
glow on shadowed ground
A phenomenon understood by anyone who has traversed down South Boundary and felt
the warm kiss of summer on a languid Sunday afternoon
It is a familiar sensation, among many others, that I will miss as I spend the next four years
surrounded by Columbia's soaring buildings and glass-lined streets

And I find myself anxious about this approaching change
As I prepare to leave the only home I've ever known

[pause]

In her book *The Bell Jar*, author Sylvia Plath compares life to a fig tree
Each branch bursting with a ripe future
Every leaf lush with possibility and opportunity
She sits at the tree's roots, aching with hunger despite the fruit around her
Because she cannot decide which to pick
And as she waits, more figs shrivel up and fall to the ground
Wasted, uneaten
Some days, I share her sentiments
When the future's foliage feels too thick to see the sky beyond
When I worry so much about the unattainable figs at the top of the tree
That I let the ones within reach wrinkle and go bad
But I've spent my whole life at these roots
And I have come to learn that it does not matter what fruit my future bears
If the soil from which it grows is not rich
With love and community
That is what Aiken is to me and to so many
A place of kind strangers and good friends
A place that has held its antique beauty while keeping up with an ever-changing world
The fruit that I fail to pick
The fruit that falls
Is not failure
It is a chance to learn
And to love better next time
And the wrinkled figs that litter the ground at my feet
Will eventually return to their roots to enrich the soil from whence they came
And make those next fruits that much sweeter
Like them, when I face trial
I am reassured by the knowledge that I can always return to my roots
To my home
And, as promised by the Bible, I will "sit under [my] own...fig tree" and I will not be afraid
As I rest in the shade and watch the sunlight dance at my feet
The *komorebi* illuminating the fruits of a future sprawling overhead