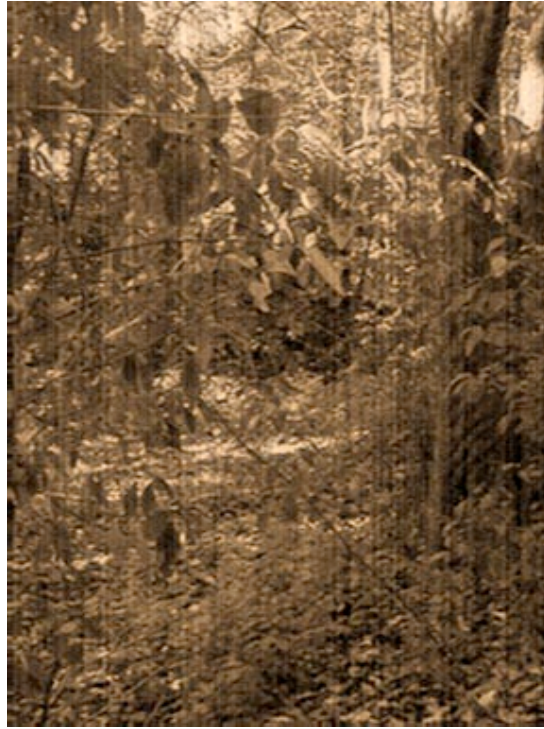


## WHAT TREES HAVE DONE

By Nicholas Pendleton

Part 3 (of 3)



The distant crowd noises of the trees continued to ascend the face tube of my object, all now sending commands to my blood, pulling me in ten directions at once. The abundance of oxygen I was being fed was too pure and it began to make me lightheaded. I lurched forward swooning, reaching for balance against the slender trunk of a young maple. I instead crashed into grass, mud and dead leaves, nearly rolling down the steep bank and into the stream. Wendell's chess set sat scattered in the black mud along the stream, the board partially sitting in the water.

I twisted on the ground, trying to roll over so I could regain my feet. In the midst of the insistent voices, a sharp but slow call cut through the others, smelling of rich pinesap: "He must choose for himself."

The trees became silent again, and after much struggle, I was able to get to my knees. The cumbersome apparatus had exhausted me and I tried to catch my breath against a gnarled old oak. The tree was as wide as I was tall, the canopy reaching for the clouds and blotting out the sun. Its thick roots were sewn through the packed soil like a palsied stitch-disappearing into the ground only to loop up to the surface some feet away, then branching off and plunging down into the earth again in a near-infinite network of rigid tubes.

I panted, and the tree released to me a sweet, soothing air that eased my breathing. Its trunk was a stable pillar against the storm of the spinning world. I wondered if a mother and father, or people like them, could maybe exist in a tree.

I began to relax and was soon filled with a warm liquid sense of well-being. I exhaled a question of the oak, and a gentle response issued back up the plastic tube of my object. This tree would take care of me. It would teach me to play chess.

I slid feet-first down the bank of the stream, retrieving the scattershot pieces of my former uncle's chess set. The board

was half waterlogged, the corner third already bulging and warped. The pieces were caked and smeared with black earth. But the entire set was accounted for, and the lesson would proceed.

The board and pieces were set up between the giant oak and me as I attached the face tube of my apparatus to the ridged hide of the tree's trunk. This is when the change occurred.

Large splinters began to protrude from the apparatus' backpack, piercing into the tender flesh of my back as though I were lying on a bed of random and intermittent nails. Ambient noise-distant birds, wind-rustled leaves, the babbling of the stream, even my own breathing-vanished. The inside of my apparatus healed over in a rigid yet flexible skin, the openings around gloves, mask and hat sealing tight until I was encapsulated within a seamless cocoon.

The breathed voice of the tree was no longer a distant whisper or suggestion, but a solid force that caused every cell of my body to quiver with each prolonged syllable. The voice was neither male nor female-it was the voice of blood, of wood, of bone, of living things, of God.

The rules of the game were fed to me in long, slow sighs. The oak tree, playing offense, slid forward the first pawn using my own hands. I in turn made my first move forward. This was the first week of play.

With one turn complete, I was delirious from lack of food, drink and sleep. The situation was remedied by first a slow trickle of fluid into my object, then an increasing stream. The pungent aroma of sap permeated my new skin as it filled with water and rich nutrients. In a matter of one short hour, I was totally submerged in liquid inside my apparatus. No crease or pocket was left unfilled. The heavy, cool solution filled my stomach and chest, my ears and sinus cavities.

"Do not be afraid," the old oak said. "You will not die like the other."

I exhaled through the liquid, knowing now I could still breathe, and asked, "Why did my uncle die?"

The response resonated flat and deep. "He did not understand wood."

Within a day's time, the liquid began to drain out and into the ground through the new hairlike roots growing from my crossed legs.

I moved the next pawn by the tree's command, and then made my own move. This concluded the second week of play.

I was then enveloped in a second bath and emerged different yet again. At first I believed that the tree was talking more rapidly, almost to the point of regular human conversation. But then I noticed that the world outside had increased in tempo as well. Raccoons, opossums, birds, deer and even the skunk beneath my house passed in blurs with instant exits. Leaves fell with the weight of stones and decayed in a matter of days. The sun rode the curve of the sky like a high flung ball, trailing wide arcing shadows until night dissolved in and gave way to the stars streaming overhead and rotating on some hidden apex in the heavens. Rains fell in sporadic torrents. Winds blustered and were suddenly gone.

It was not the universe that had sped up, but I that had slowed down. I was now in sync with the rhythms of long-lived beings that counted not days or months, but years and centuries. I was in time with the trees.

The tree moved again. I countered. The first month of my instruction was complete.

My roots had grown deeper. I was beginning to experience my first acts of self-nourishment. Play on the chessboard was becoming more difficult as the game progressed. The cardboard was warped and decaying and covered with withering leaves. Pieces had to be lifted to negotiate the tender new roots growing over and through the field of play.

Moves were made, some pawns and one of my knights decimated from the struggle. This was the end of the first season.

The molten metal hues of autumn bled in around me as the game progressed. We parried and more pieces were sacrificed: two rooks, a knight and four pawns. Then the tree revealed to me my critical error. I was now in check. In the

silencing blanket of winter snow, I conceded defeat.

We played a second match, and though I was beginning to learn, I was left with my king stranded and helpless in a mere four moves. Another year had passed.

I suggested another match, but the board was destroyed, the flaking remains molded to veins of roots and the packed soil. The pieces, made of plastic and thus non-biodegradable, nonetheless began to disappear into the ground, buried deeper and deeper by time and nature's housekeeping.

The oak suggested a new variant on the game and commanded a nearby maple to die, to fall, and in so doing forfeit a cross-section slab of its trunk to our endeavor. This new, roughly circular board revealed the rings of many decades until the centermost core-the years of its sapling youth-disintegrated into powder, leaving a puckered opening in its place. Resinous amber-like geometric crystals grew over the new surface, breaking free, revealing hardened sap chessmen of an entirely new design and function.

I took one of the new pieces in the wiry, black branches that had begun erupting from the tips of my fingers. It was cool and smooth; light, yet dense. It emitted chittering bursts of silent laughter as my oaken fingers rolled its body over and over in the kalidescoping surges of sun and moonlight.

I asked the tree, "What is this new challenge?"

"It is our game you will learn," it replied. "This is Chess With Trees."

It had taken a decade for the new game to manifest. I was no longer a boy in an apparatus; I had become a man in a skin of ashen bark.

"What is happening to me?" I asked.

"You are the prototype for a new design. More than a man, more than a tree, you are becoming something else: Our next invention."

When the first hominid cousins of mankind appeared, it was the trees that offered them protection from the elements and predators. The trees were already concocting a strategy for the far future ancestors of these erect yet dim animals.

When the time came, they showed new species of intelligent primates how to manipulate and feed fire from the medium of their own bodies. The trees had already settled on their course of action and were just beginning to experiment with how they might bring these radical designs to fruition.

By the time my ancestors settled this land, the trees knew that this would be the site for the sixth invention of the trees.

The first invention of the trees was the axe, so that humans might harvest and grow strong and abundant on their refined flesh. Soon followed the second invention: the saw. The third invention of the trees was a biological blight that plunged an entire species of their brethren into the yawning maw of extinction. Their crime had been rebellion against the scheme of the fourth invention. The fourth invention of the trees was my apparatus that Uncle Wendell had briefly stolen from me. The fifth invention was a learning device to be used to facilitate the growth of the sixth invention of the trees, a device known as Chess With Trees.

The trees knew chess. They had planned and schemed and plotted from time immemorial, waging secret campaigns amongst themselves in efforts to tip the balance of power in their clan's, copse's, group's, grove's, forest's or jungle's favor in the struggle for dominance. Treaties were forged meticulously, then broken. Mobile varieties of living creatures were manipulated to carry out assassinations of individuals or the many, using every strategy available, whether it be the mass slaughter of clear-cutting or fire, or by the subtle introduction of malignant parasites. Whole species were choked from the social

hierarchy, deprived of proper air or adequate soil moisture. Ancient elders and tender young saplings alike were poisoned or exposed to harmful solar radiation. The wars of the trees constituted a global conflict waged over millennia of accelerated motionlessness, patiently creeping to this single point in the endless progression.

My oak tree guardian was the teacher. Chess With Trees was the tool for my understanding and indoctrination. I was the eager student. Snow gave way to brown, matted leaves to rich, green grass. Cold spring rains morphed into humid, electric summer storms. I was feeding always now from the ground and sky, always aware and open. I was ready to begin my education.

### **Chess With Trees**

Chess With Trees is a game that can be taught only during engagement. The rules are imprinted on the breath of an immobile living thing that ages very slowly. To fare well is of mortal importance, for if you make too many errors or lose too swiftly, you will be assimilated into the cospire of trees by the stream, will dissolve away to nothing in the same manner as Uncle Wendell. You will effectively die as a human. This is not what you or the tree want to happen, but proceeding with caution is not an option; you have reached a critical time in the molding of this sixth invention.

A game that is learned as you go, Chess With Trees is a struggle. A struggle to integrate all of the information flooding your body and senses. A struggle just to keep up. A struggle to move in a body that is only partially reinvented. As each piece is moved along the rings of the board, growing closer to the center aperture in an ever-increasingly complex system of rules (some rules seemingly impossible to translate to the objects on the board), your mind crumbles and rebuilds itself.

I was too new at games and had lost my way. A vital mistake had caused me not only to lose a number of integral chessmen, but myself into the ground. I slipped into the compacted earth where worms and grubs wriggled through me. Suspended all around me were bits of material that were quickly becoming not my uncle Wendell. I could not go this way. Wendell's lessons could not be my own.

I groped in the hard darkness. I gripped something substantial and pulled myself skyward, finding more purchase among the hungry roots of the oak tree. I climbed, using the roots as hand- and footholds, evading the serpentine strikes of my teacher. Tendrils of moist fiber constricted around my ankles and wrists, trunk and throat, but I held tight and refused to surrender my progress.

I shouted into the soil, directing my breath as an equalizing weapon against this bitter new lesson I refused to comprehend. The roots hesitated. I shouted a second time, thrusting upward again, and my bindings slid away. A small piece of me erupted through to the surface, touched the inside of my own body, and I saw the move to make. I had won the round and learned the mechanism of the game. I slithered back up into my skin with a new confidence.

Clouds scurried overhead, a rolling smoke over transparent glass. Everything was gold and brown and red again. Blink. Everything was white again, dormancy and death clothed in cleanliness. More white came. More white fell. Everything was buried in frigid silence. Yet we played on, reaching the center of the chessboard, the amber pieces plunging one by one into the center void only to invert themselves on the underside of the board and hold fast in defiance of the sciences known to mankind.

My moves were coming more swiftly now, instinctive, both arms working at the same time, enticing two pieces to merge into one, causing single pieces to divide into groups that worked in small tandem armies. For a time I thought that the tree was beating me with moves coming in lightning-swift strokes that my retranslating eyes could barely decipher. Soon I realized that it

was I who had slowed even more, taking on a new potential for greater agelessness. I played on.

Fifty years more had passed. I should have been a very old man. I should have been dead. I was neither.

My body learned the new patterns and new variants. I had become the co-author of my own retrofitting. With each creeping step back to the edge of the chessboard, I was changing.

I learned how to perfect feeding from the earth and sky. I learned to manufacture things inside myself that no moving creature could ever hope to accomplish. I learned to inhale from myself and exhale into myself, to make my body its own closed circuit of self-reliance.

I learned to unfurl plump green leaves from the growing number of my fingertips. I learned and adopted the technology of bark, xylan, parenchyma, pentosan, chlorophyll and absorbed this radical new vocabulary into the handbook of my sapience. I learned I could fall victim to new hosts of parasitic beasts, insects and diseases and created chemical defenses to ward these off. I learned I would need more than a single set of arms to survive the new Play Criteria; that limbs would occasionally need to be shed and replaced for the overall good of what I was now rapidly and successfully becoming.

I learned to keep my roots fine and shallow on a pair of more rigid legs, for I was to forever and always be a moving creature with sap running thick in my blood. I learned that immobile life-moss, lichen, algae, grass, vines, shrubs and even the trees themselves-would praise and cheer the approach and departure of this fruit-bearing animal in acknowledgement of my authority. I learned that the quadruped, the avian, the simian-including Man himself-would fear and even worship my existence in body or mere image.

There was no longer night and day. I could feel the rotation of the planet and the revolution around the sun. Time passed so quickly that everything appeared to hang completely still. Eternity yawned before me. A millennium passed as I inhaled its breath.

The new processes were tried at and failed, then tried again and perfected, and I could see that our game was nearing completion. As the endgame approached, the chessboard had become dark, brittle and grooved. The chess pieces had dulled and lost their sharp edges. I saw an opening in the tree's game suddenly and I bent this advantage to end the struggle. Checkmate: the final fusion of higher order beings.

Time slowed; that is to say, I began to speed again to the paces and rhythms of the mobile. I looked to my opponent and teacher for approval, but the old oak was dead, a crumbling husk standing in a world that had completely changed. The copse of trees, but for the corpse before me, was gone. The stream had faded to a shallow creek. The homestead on which my uncle Wendell and I had lived was leveled, leaving only a dry dun plain.

At no time in the game of Chess With Trees can one say, "See, here is the end." It will always be in motion and can never be stopped once two willing and eager parties agree to engage in the melee. One's experience of time can be altered, sped up or the flow impeded, but you can never go back to the start, which never really began at any one point in the first place. There is only forward. There is only progression to certain points.

I am the sixth invention of the trees.

I am Dennis-in-the-Tree.

I am the new pillar of an aging world.

Beings of the highest order are driven to invention. Many inventions are frivolous, short-lived or utterly useless. Some, however, have a staying power that surpasses the intent of the inventor. But all inventions, I believe, are created for only one purpose: because they *can* be created.

I had originally thought the inventor of my simple apparatus, my possession, my object, to be a lunatic or a genius or both. But in the end, he was just another slave to breathing. I, on the other hand, had never invented anything; I had only created variations on a theme older than humanity. I was a pawn become a combination of king and queen.

I was no longer a slave. I would live beyond the end of all that surrounded me. I could tear myself from the soil and disappear over the curve of the earth. I could command life and bend reality. I could pluck gods from the ethers and teach them the hard lessons of my complete supremacy. I would shout and laugh and play in the endless vistas, plunging into the watery depths of eternity. I would subjugate the mobile and immobile alike, and they would feed from my body. I would reach through the dome of heaven and drain the planets and stars of their power to glorify my own. I would consume wonderful homemade treats in the marketplace, lost in a handcrafted heirloom conversation piece. I would improve lives.



**END**