

# SIRIUS VISIONS

a speculative fiction magazine specializing in the literature of hope

## **A Dark Wind in the Whisper Tree**



fiction by Nina Kiriki Hoffman

# A DARK WIND IN THE WHISPER TREE

by Nina Kiriki Hoffman

The whisper tree stood in our front yard longer than I could remember. My room was on the second story near the front of the house, so the whisper tree whispered me to sleep from the time I got too big for the crib in Ma and Pa's room to the day I moved away from home at nineteen. Even on windless nights the whisper tree whispered, as if it had a heart bumping inside, and lungs to push and pull breath in and out. On nights when there was a whip to the wind, the whisper tree almost talked.

The summer I turned fourteen was full of wind, at least at night. Daytimes my older brother Murphy and my little sister Tiffany and I went to the lake. It was so blistering hot you'd think the sun dropped closer for a visit. But at night the warm wind came and made the stars flicker. I leaned on my windowsill most nights, smelling dew on lawns, jasmine, and dust, watching the stars and bats, the flicker and fade of lights on other farms, listening to the whisper tree, and some nights whispering back to it—so low I knew Murphy and Tiff and Mom and Dad would never be able to hear me.

It was a summer I spent waiting and hoping and despairing, and I told the whisper tree what I hoped for, what I feared. In our family we expected to come into talents somewhere between ten and fifteen, and I never had, and I was convinced that summer that somehow I never would. I was full of the dark of the moon, mournful and spiritual and suffering like I expected to die, and thinking on what a waste the rest of my life would be. I would have to be normal and most likely the family would kick me out because my blood was too thin, and I would have to find a normal man without talents to marry. I guess you get that way at fourteen, looking for romance and seeing it in death and disaster. A lot of mysterious things look like disasters to you, too, that later turn out to be something else entire.

August came in like a cremation. One night I was leaning out the window, waiting for the night wind to lift the sweat off my face, when the whisper tree spoke. "Scarlett," it said. "Scarlett." I looked at it, wondering how, after all these years of indecipherable murmurs, it had spoken my name. But it wasn't the tree that spoke. Something dark and long was tangled up in the leaves of the whisper tree. As I watched, the dark thing swayed and struggled. "Set me free," it said.

It did not look at all like a person. I couldn't make out what it was. I wondered if I should wake Murph or Tiffany. They had both come into their talents and could probably deal with a strange dark thing talking.

"Scarlett, help me," said the long dark thing, and I thought, what the hell, I had been thinking of myself as good as dead anyway, so I went downstairs and outside. The grass rasped against my bare feet and brushed the hem of my nightgown with dew. A dog over the hill barked a long howl. I looked at the face of our house. Not a light showed. I wondered what time it was. It could be any time, barring dawn, because the wind always quickened then.

"Scarlett."

I went to the whisper tree and gripped some of its long, leaf-dripping branches. The dark thing was snarled in amongst them like a burr in hair. "Tree, whisper tree," I said, stroking the branches down along the leaves, which were smooth and cool and glossy. "Let go." I pushed through the curtain of lacy leaves and put my hands flat against the whisper tree's rough bark. I felt a pulse under my fingertips and couldn't tell if it was the tree's or my own. "Something's trapped, whisper tree," I whispered. "Please let it go."

The dark thing rustled in the upper branches, then fell to the ground. I kissed the whisper tree and whispered thank you to it, then parted the curtain of leaves and went out to look at what had come loose.

In the gray light of stars, I was not sure what I was seeing. It looked like a tar river with a bump in the middle—a flowing darkness eclipsing the grass; part of it seemed to be straightening another part, preening like a bird. But no beak.

"Who are you?" I asked. Maybe it was a cousin who got stuck halfway through a transformation, or somebody who got born by mistake.

"I have stroked your back and your face every night this summer," it said. "I am the wind."

"How'd you get stuck in our whisper tree?" The instant I said that, I wondered if it was rude. I had never talked to a wind before. Darned if I could remember anybody who had.

"I don't know. Lift me up," it said

"What?"

"I don't usually get solid. I can't get off the ground. If you lift me up and run with me, maybe I can get airborne again."

I tried to pick it up, but it was worse than water, flickery as a dream on waking. My hands went right through its edges. Then I hit a solid part in the middle, round and a little bristly. I grabbed that part and the rest came up with it. It couldn't have weighed more than a dandelion, but it felt like something was pulling against me. Felt like playing tug-of-war with a balloon instead of a rope. Then I got it away from the ground and wrapped the dreamy part around my shoulders a few times.

“Now, run,” it said.

I ran down the grassy verge of our long dirt driveway toward the road a quarter mile away. The thin part of the wind trailed behind me like a cape. I held the round part up above my head and ran even though it felt dumb running with my arms up. When I had almost reached the mailbox, the wind lifted free of my hands. I slowed, breathing harsh, feeling the blood pound in my head, burn in my cheeks; pressing my hands against the edge of hurt round my ribs as they expanded and contracted.

The wind blew on past me, a tide of dark, spreading and stretching in all directions, zigging and zagging and rising. It lifted my hair, tugged my gown, thinning out until I couldn't see it anymore.

I felt terrific, like I had just flown the greatest kite that ever was and let it loose up in the sky, no need to tie it to me with a string. Letting it loose was much better than claiming it.

As I started back toward the house, the wind blew on my cheeks and cooled them. It darted between my fingers and eased along my palms.

When I got to the whisper tree I slid between the waterfall branches and pushed my way in under the dome of leaves. I leaned against the trunk, here where the wind didn't reach, and laid my ear to the rough bark. Above me the leaves whispered to each other, but under my palms I felt a pulse, and in my ear, I heard a slow beat.

“Whisper tree, why did you catch the wind?” I asked.

“For you,” the leaves whispered. “For you.”

The next day, when we were on our way to the lake, with Murph snapping his towel at my bare legs and Tiffany, who came into her powers early and never let us forget it, making rocks in the road dance ahead of us, I felt a little nudge from the wind. It blew my hair forward. I grinned.

Murph snapped at me, but his towel whipped around and tangled I his legs. “Hey!” He got it unsnarled, then gave it a few practice snaps. Tiffany stopped to watch.

He snapped it at me and it wound around his waist this time. Murphy got some water magic late in his fifteenth year, only a little, but enough for him to stay in the house and not get kicked out for normal. While we both talentless we were best friends, but things had changed since then. “Hey!” he yelled again.

I just laughed and laughed and ran away up the road ahead of them. It was the first laugh I had had all summer and it felt wonderful. When Tiffany rattled a bunch of stones after me, the wind blew them all back.

At lunch Tiff and Murph told the folds that I had got my magic and it was air magic. They made a cake, like thy do for everybody at changeover. The wind came

onto the terrace and blew the candles out for me. The cake tasted like faith and hope and fear. For a little while I was completely happy.

When I finished my cake and everybody was congratulating me again, I felt like an impostor, but I didn't tell anyone that it was the wind blowing and not me. I was just too scared. And I was scared that the favor I had done for the wind would wear off and it wouldn't help me anymore.

I thought about this that night, as I leaned out the window and looked at the stars and the whisper tree and the grass, as the wind touched my face the way a best friend might. There was Home, and there was the World, and I wasn't ready to leave Home yet. The whisper tree must have known that. What I could do, I decided, was get ready to leave Home—practice friend-making and money-making and conversation-making, and all the other skills I would need—but enjoy being Home as long as I could.

It wasn't until this year I realized I had found my talent after all the summer I turned fourteen. It took moving away from Home, and marrying somebody lovely and normal, and having a little baby to teach me. Because my little Sarah talks. She talks all the time, telling me how the world feels and looks to her—so exciting, so amazing, everything for the first time!—and what she likes and wants and hates, and nobody else can understand her, not even my husband Clark.

No one else in my family can talk with trees and wind and very tiny babies.

