

The Arborist

by Gillian Greenbaum

Logline: When an eternal flood forces humans into the trees, a man tries to build a more stable future for his people. In doing so, he causes more harm than good.

OVER BLACK

THE ARBORIST (V.O.)

I was only a child when the world
flooded.

EXT. FOREST - NIGHT

Lightning strikes. A scared young BOY holds his MOTHER's hand. The tears on his face are nearly indistinguishable from the rain. His mother picks him up and holds him close to her chest. She is in her thirties, a waif of a woman with auburn hair that falls to the middle of her back. Just in front of her, FATHER slashes through underbrush with a machete, but the wet plant matter tangles around the knife. The father is an extraordinarily tall and well-built man with angular features.

The water is up to their knees and rising quickly. The Boy squeezes his eyes shut, and when opens them to peek, a large, sturdy tree branch has lowered to allow his parents to clamber on. It rises slowly into the air, further from the rapids of rain and debris. They shimmy closer to the trunk for safety. Father places a hand on the trunk of the tree and lowers his head in a subtle nod. Another branch shifts to keep the rain off the family.

THE ARBORIST (V.O.)

Their kindness saved many. We
thought we would return to our
homes and rebuild when the water
receded. But it never did.

EXT. FOREST - DAY

THE ARBORIST (V.O.)

I never again felt the prickle of
dry grass or soft mud underfoot.
Many more were born having never
seen land. Only endless raging
water.

The faint sound of RUSHING WATER. A WOMAN is teaching her daughter to walk along a large flat tree branch. Near the trunk on a flat area rests a small hut made of driftwood and fallen leaves. The BABY totters towards her mother, losing her balance briefly, but a branch of the tree rises to steady her. She giggles and holds onto the branch as it slowly extends, guiding the child to her mother.

THE ARBORIST (V.O.) (CONT'D)

And yet, we didn't mind. Neither did they.

A MAN appears from above, being lowered by a vine. He lands on the flat area and the woman carries their daughter over to him. He opens a rucksack and pulls out a blue and purple spiked FRUIT. He offers it to his wife, and she takes a bite. The interior is soft and pink. Juice drips down her chin. He takes a bite as well, and then pulls out a small bit of the flesh and tucks it into the child's mouth.

THE ARBORIST (V.O.) (CONT'D)

We ate their fruit and spat the seeds into the water to be carried far away and take root somewhere. Assuming there was any solid ground left. We chased away weevils and woodpeckers. They sheltered us and carried us. We needed each other.

EXT. FOREST - DAY

WATER RUSHES louder now, much closer.

Father rappels on a vine tied to his waist. As far as the eye can see, a rushing river stretches like a horizontal waterfall. Eddies whirl behind each tree; splashes from rocks spit high into the air. A large NET made of vines is stretched between two trees, collecting anything washed downstream. Father looks up. His vine rope is an extension of a tree several hundred feet above, and two other men on a branch toss down other vines. As he descends, the branches of the giant trees gently drift out of his way, clearing a safe path.

He reaches the net and grabs on, climbing down to sort through the debris. A few large logs, scraps of iron, and other remnants of the world before the flood are caught in the net. He ties them into a bundle with one of the vines, and the tree starts to pull them slowly up through the air.

Something has caused a blockage further along the net, creating a buildup of pressure. The vines of the net strain against it, doing their best to hold onto the trees they're connected to. Father climbs sideways along to free the problem. When he reaches it, he sees that it is a large FISH. He smiles and ties it to another vine to send up as well.

The water flows freely through the net now, and he tugs twice on his own vine. He starts to ascend slowly, the sound of water fading. The trees once again move their limbs out of his way.

THE ARBORIST (V.O.)

But nature is constantly evolving,
and we too must evolve or risk
being swept away by the current.

Suddenly, a loud CRACKING sound echoes through the forest. Father hurtles downwards, back towards the rapids. branches from nearby trees shoot out to catch the rope. The falling cracked branch catches in the tangle, halting his fall. But the momentum is too great. The rope around his waist stopping abruptly causes his body to fold completely in half, snapping his spine.

The two other workers arrive, having slid down the trunks like firemen. The branches recede, all except the few supporting the weight of the broken limb and the limp body of Father. They look at each other, then bow their heads in respect. One of the men takes out a bowie knife and slices the dangling dead vine. They watch their comrade fall silently into the water and get caught the net. The trees holding the net slowly lift the vines out of the water and Father's body rushes underneath.

THE ARBORIST (V.O.) (CONT'D)

There is nowhere to bury the dead
in the air.

INT. HUT - EVENING

Inside a hut similar to the one we saw before, Mother leans against the tree trunk sobbing with her head in her hands. The room is illuminated by a football-sized FIREFLY crawling slowly along the bark. The meager walls have drawings stuck to them with tree sap: shreds of thin bark scribbled on with charcoal from cooking fires. A drawing of a forest flooded with water. A sketch of a tree house. A crude family portrait. The two men from the gathering site stand near the entrance somberly. They place the large fish in front of her and turn to leave. She jumps up suddenly and screams, flinging the fish out after them before collapsing in a puddle of tears. The Boy, now 12, emerges from his hiding spot in his hammock of vines with his pet, a blue and gold baby BIRD. He sinks into his mother's lap and wraps his arms around her.

THE ARBORIST (V.O.)

She never again left the safety of
the trunk of our home. For how
could she ever feel secure again?

INT. HUT - MONTHS LATER

THE ARBORIST is nearly 13. The hut has grown slightly, with a makeshift table in the center and some curtains separating rooms. He sits cross-legged at the table and furiously works on elaborate diagrams of pulley systems and rope bridges connecting enormous treehouses. His bird perches on the table, cocking his head to the side as if examining the plans. Mother kisses him on the head as she passes. As soon as she is behind a curtain to the other part of the hut, the Arborist grabs a bag and he and the bird step outside.

EXT. HUT - CONTINUOUS

Huts like theirs are everywhere, high and low, connected by constantly moving branch bridges. A woman hangs laundry over a thin branch. Children play pick-up-sticks with fallen twigs on a nearby platform. An older man pulls on a rope that raises buckets of water from below. There are no bolts, no nails, no stumps. The trees support the structures and the structures support themselves. As the trees shift, so too do the bric-a-brac buildings.

A branch extends towards the Arborist, offering him a ride. He slaps it away and pulls out a homemade GRAPPLING HOOK. He throws the hook and it snags on a nearby tree. He ties the other end of the rope to his own tree and hooks a makeshift zipline. He zips across the forest, pushing away approaching branches as if swatting flies until he runs out of grappling hooks.

Looking around, he sees that he appears to be alone. He gazes up at the tree he has landed upon. It is exceptionally tall, taller than any of the surrounding trees, and has thick broad branches. From his bag, he pulls out a large ROCK and a battered metal STAKE. After a final furtive glance for onlookers, he positions the stake and gives it a good, hard WHACK. The stake pierces into the tree easily, and the wood lets out a long, low CREAK. A trickle of sap emerges from beneath the stake and attracts some strange-looking insects. Bird immediately snaps them up.

The Arborist continues nailing stakes into the tree, hacking off branches in the way, and adding wooden reinforcements. We realize he is building a STAIRCASE. When it is finished, he descends the stairs carefully, holding onto the rope handle around the tree. He tests each step softly at first, and then harder until he is jumping from step to step with all his might. When he reaches his starting point, he whoops with joy. Bird chirps along, flitting back and forth. The sun begins to set, and as he heads for home, the tree does not move.

EXT. TREEHOUSE - YEARS LATER

The treehouse is complete. It is two stories tall, spanning across several smaller trees as well as the main one. The walls are sturdy and secure railings line the porch. The boy, now nearly a man, gently leads his petrified mother along a rope bridge. She has a rope tied around her waist attached to her son. She clutches it for dear life. Then, she looks up from her feet to see the glorious treehouse. Mother sets her feet on the secure platform and wraps her arms around her son in a hug. For the first time in years, she approaches the edge of the platform and leans against the railing to look out. She smiles.

EXT. FOREST - YEARS LATER

The Arborist ascends through the trees in a large bucket-pulley, pointing and shouting words we can't make out to workers. His colorful bird swirls lazily about him. All around the Arborist, they hammer and saw. As he rises, the structures become more elaborate. The Arborist ages as he goes, from young energetic man to bearded and eventually grey. Bird grows larger as he rises too, until he is the size of a labrador. The primitive technology advances: pulley systems carry supplies back and forth. Cranks bring up water. The tree branches no longer move to clear a path. In fact, none of the branches move at all.

What began as treehouses are now wooden palaces. The bucket stops at one such mansion, and the now aged Arborist steps off the bucket to greet a PLUMP MUSTACHIOED MAN. They shake hands and the plump man hands him a large piece of salvaged metal and a fish wrapped in leaves.

THE ARBORIST (V.O.)

As it happened, most people were searching for that security too. I sold hundreds of houses in exchange for building materials, food, and favors.

INT. HUT - THAT NIGHT

The Arborist works at his table in the simple hut he used to live in with his mother. Bird naps on a perch in the corner. The walls still have his old drawings on them, but they're nearly covered with new, more technically advanced sketches. He works by the light of the firefly, shaping nails from the block of metal and absentmindedly eating charred fish.

THE ARBORIST (V.O.)

Time passes. Generations come and go. We evolve.

EXT. FOREST - DAY

Children ride ziplines through the trees, playing a game to avoid impeding branches. The pulley system for bringing up water is now a water wheel, which also powers a transportation system of buckets running between some of the larger trees and buildings. The trees are somewhat duller than they once were.

THE ARBORIST (V.O.)

They do not remember when we had cardinal direction, they only know with the current and against, towards the mossy side of the tree or the bare side. To the young, the trees are just trees. They do not remember their magic.

An even older, frailer version of the Arborist sits on a branch near his hut sipping herbal tea out of a carved wooden teacup. A weak tendril of vine from his unharmed tree struggles to reach out and touch his hand. He hands the cup to the tendril, which withdraws slowly.

THE ARBORIST (V.O.) (CONT'D)

From nature we are born, to nature we return.

He lies down and closes his eyes. His breathing slows until he finally draws no more breath. The branch lowers, angling itself down with what appears to be great effort. The dead body of the Arborist slides off, down into the water.

FADE TO BLACK.

EXT. FOREST - DAY

Next to the first house the Arborist built, on the tall strong tree, is another tree: a WILLOW with long red branches. The breeze rustles them and they brush against the big one.

THE ARBORIST (V.O.)

My mother loves my father with every fiber of her being. I can feel that love pulse through their roots.

(MORE)

THE ARBORIST (V.O.) (CONT'D)

He may not be able to move, but she reaches for him when she gets the chance.

THE ARBORIST TREE is a simple but strong base, slightly smaller and younger than those surrounding. Bird is perched on one of his branches, eating the bugs that crawl through the chasms of the bark. From the tree's perspective, a young man swings to the Arborist Tree using a more advanced version of the Arborist's old grappling hook. He looks the tree up and down quickly, and without hesitation hammers in a contraption that connects him to the grand pulley system. He shouts to some other young men nearby, who start to crank the pulley, sending building materials and workers over.

THE ARBORIST (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Metal is colder and sharper than you ever expect it to be. The icy burning never subsides.

The Arborist Tree subtly greys, spreading outwards from the metal contraption. The young men don't notice as they continue using more advanced drills and saws to build the basis of a house.

THE ARBORIST (V.O.) (CONT'D)

The stiffness in my limbs hurts almost as much. But these boys don't know any better.

From afar, we watch a timelapse of the building of the house, families moving in and out, additions and advances to the structure. The tree greys further, the crevices in the bark deepen.

THE ARBORIST (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I must bear my punishment. For I am the first Arborist.

END.