



# A Parchment of Leaves

*Silas House*

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**A Parchment of Leaves** Silas House

Winner-Kentucky Novel of the Year, 2003

Winner-Award for Special Achievement from Fellowship of Southern Writers

Nominee-Southern Book Critics Circle Prize

Nominee-BookSense Book of the Year (longlist)

"So it is that Vine, Cherokee-born and raised in the early 1900s, trains her eye on a young white man, forsaking her family and their homeland to settle in with Saul's people: his smart-as-a-whip, slow-to-love mother, Esme; his brother Aaron, a gifted banjo player, hot tempered and unpredictable; and Aaron's flightily and chattery Melungeon wife, Aidia." It's a delicate negotiation into this new family and culture, one that Vine's mother had predicted would not go smoothly. But it's worse than she could have imagined. Vine is viewed as an outsider by the townspeople. Aaron, she slowly realizes, is strangely fixated on her. But what is at first difficult becomes a test of her spirit. And in the violent turn of events that ensues, she learns what it means to forgive others and, most important, how to forgive herself.

## A Parchment of Leaves Details

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Author : Silas House

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# From Reader Review A Parchment of Leaves for online ebook

## Sara says

What I liked most about this book is that it never for one second pretended to be something it's not. It is what it is...a story about people, a way of life that is gone and the struggles and changes that come along with living. There were never any gimmicky moments of magic or mystery...it has a very down to earth feel. Beautifully written and engaging right until the very last page.

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## Cheri says

When Saul, a young man of Irish descent, first sees Vine, a young Cherokee woman, standing half in the darkness of the doorway, her face *"lost to shadows"* he finds himself searching for words to describe her.

*"Her eyes were chips of coal; her lips, the color of peach light at dusk."*

He approaches her with payment from his mother for saving his brother, which Vine tries to refuse, and then asks him if he is not afraid of her, because of the rumours of her being able to kill men with her curses. He never believed such things, he tells her, but that the others do believe that.

*"'You ought to believe,' she said. 'I've got plenty of magic about me.'"*

And so they marry, and at first they live with Saul's mother, Esme, until they finish building their cabin, and then they have a place of their own, and it isn't long before they have a baby, a daughter they name Birdie. Life is hard in these Appalachian mountains in Kentucky, but life is good.

And then the country enters WWI, and Saul's job location as a logging foreman is moved to a mountain far from their home. And Vine's world shrinks a little with him gone. Saul returns home as often as he can, but she finds a friend in Serena, a local midwife, and she has Saul's mother nearby, and his brother, Aaron, which may not always be for the best.

Vine's mother had believed in God, her father *"versed us in the ways of the Quakers."* She recalls one day when they were hunting up ginseng and her mother rose up saying *"'Shh. Listen.' Her watery eyes would scan the treetops as a gentle breeze drifted over. 'That's the Creator passing through.'"* But, until Vine held her baby girl in her arms, she hadn't seen, hadn't believed.

*"'God,' I said when I looked down at her. They all thought I was just saying this in amazement, I guess, but I wasn't. When I looked down at my baby, I felt like I was looking down and seeing the face of God. Peace washed over me. It is an unexplainable thing, holding your baby for the first time. It's a feeling you can't put a name to, so I won't try. But I'll say this much: I felt like we were the only people in the world that night. I felt like nobody else existed except for the people right there in that room. Even Saul was a ghost, steering his horse around steep mountain roads on his way home."*

*"I started believing the day my baby was born, because I could look right down and see proof of Him."*

Everything in this story is so beautifully and lovingly brought to life, I felt as if I were there, but there is also such a strong sense of these people as real and filled with all the potential for love and life, laughter and

sadness, hope and joy, it feels so very real and honest and I could feel it all.

And there is joy, and yes, even a deep sadness in this story that permeates it for a time, but this is an incredibly beautiful story, beautifully told overall.

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### **Josh says**

I'd been trying to get around to this one for some time. The fact that it was voted as one of the April reads within the group "On the Southern Literary Trail" was just the nudge I needed. How poignant that the timing just happened to be the same week that the redbud planted off our back patio was in full bloom (granted the 1/3 acre subdivision plot I occupy certainly isn't within the spirit of the turn of the century Eastern Kentucky in which House describes the redbuds, flowers, creeks, meadows, hog killings, and house raisings). It was a step back in time, but the primary themes are no doubt relevant to our modern world just the same.

For some, the author's gentle approach might not hit the endorphin receptors with enough vigor, but for me, I think he did a masterful job of writing in so many elements so subtly. You really don't become aware of how impactful the entire thing is until you have just about finished it all up. Much like Clay's Quilt the story is largely a character story; personally, this one was more captivating. The basic story line is that a Cherokee beauty who had been raised to almost flee from her heritage does just that by marrying a young local boy who had originally been sent to clear the timber from the mountainsides towering above her family's home place. In leaving with her man, she says goodbye to this world, and the struggles of a "normal life" ensue. Much more than that would be spoiler.

At the heart, it is a story about family, humanity, meanness, kindness, secrets, love, infatuation, personalities, and prejudices. Do bad things happen for reason of curse, chance, or perhaps to provide contrast to the great and good things of life? Forgiveness is powerful, sometimes undeserved but necessary in most cases. People are going to keep being mean to one another, and the trick is to decide whether to let other's poison seep into your pores or allow it to only sicken those who emit it. Vine, the main character sums it up when she states:

"It will come back on you, what you've done," I said. "A person can only do so much wrong before it catches up with him. Someday it will find you out!"

4.5 stars that gets rounded to a 5 because of House's interest in great music (he also blogs on modern folk, indie rock, and Americana music) and by virtue of a great looking book cover.

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### **Ctgt says**

**I walked out to the tree and put my fingers to a leaf, smooth like it was coated with wax. I could feel its veins, wet and round. I had always found comfort in the leaves, in their silence. They were like parchment that holds words of wisdom. Simply holding them in my hand gave me some of the peace a tree possesses. To be like that-to just be-that's the most noble thing of all.**

Hills of Kentucky, early 1900's.

A small group of Cherokee live on Redbud Mountain outside of town. Vine, a Cherokee girl, is thought by some to be a witch. Men who have gone to the mountain to clear lumber often meet with peculiar accidents after seeing Vine. Saul and his younger brother Aaron decide to venture to the mountain in hopes of earning money only to see Vine and fall under her spell. Seems she is not a witch but one of those mesmerizing beauties that captures the fancy of any man who meets her.

There is not much of a driving force to the plot, we just follow along as two people, their families and their communities become entwined while love, hate, prejudice and guilt play out around this one couple.

There are quite a few fantastic moments in this book as the characters consider the natural world around them,

**Daylight is the time God moves about the best. I've heard people say that they liked to watch the world come awake. But the world is always awake, sunlight just makes it seeable. In that moment when the light hits the mountain, when the sun cracked through the sky big enough to make a noise if our ears could hear it, I would be aware again of all the things that had been going on throughout the night. Morning just made it easier to hear. Light takes away muteness.**

**I wondered if trees were God. They were like God in many respects: they stood silent, and most people only noticed them when the need arose. Maybe all the secrets to life were written on the surface of leaves, waiting to be translated. If I touched them long enough, I might be given some information that no one else has.**

and life in general,

**I had laid awake some nights wondering why other women had men who laid drunk all the time, who took their fists to them. Some women had men who wouldn't work or had another woman in town or whipped their children a little too hard. But here was my husband's great wrongness and I should have seen it sooner. He would always choose his family over me.**

A wonderful story of love and redemption.

**I wondered if we were out on the earth only to destroy every beautiful thing, to make chaos. Or were we meant to overcome this? Did bad things happen so that goodness would show through in people?....There was so much good in the world that surely evil could not overtake it.**

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**gina says**

One of the best books I've ever read. I wish I had read it instead of listened to it though because I wanted copy so many of the lines. I will probably ask for a copy as a gift so I can underline and mark in it. The

writing is beautiful and speaks to my southern soul. Also, it felt like he was in a way writing my families story. I've always wondered how in one generation the intermarriage of a Native American to a white person could loose all connection to their heritage. This book answered this question for me clearly. It happened on both sides of my family- leaving me disconnected from my Creek heritage through my dad and my Cherokee heritage thru my mom in one swift marriage during the time of "The Removal" in Alabama. So many indians hid out and still faced persecution and eviction from their lands decades later for other reasons. Often the NA's would purposely shun their heritage in order to "fit in" and so "it would be easier" for their children just as Vine's dad did for his daughter.

There is so much more to this story than the theme of Native American detachment to their culture and ways. But I don't want to spoil it for anyone who hasn't read this wonderful book. I highly recommend it to anyone who is Southern, descended from Native peoples, or loves all things southern. I will hold so many of the words of this book close to my heart. So many beautiful lines that sum up all that is the weather, nature, and joy of the southern appalachian landscape and peoples.

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### **Carol says**

I have nothing negative to say about this book. It was truly excellent. I always feel weird about giving five stars, feeling obligated to give \*some\* kind of constructive criticism. Here? Nothing. I can't find one thing. Believe me, I tried. (I don't give five stars very easily.)

So I guess I'll talk about all the things I liked:

When it comes to Voice, Silas House is up there with Mark Twain. I could literally hear these characters talking. I now plan to read everything else he has written, based on this one book alone and his amazing talent with capturing character voice.

The descriptions were heart-wrenching and beautiful. I loved how House used elements of nature and the scenery to tell the story. The story itself moved so slowly, so effortlessly; it was a little like the seasons changing. You see it happening in front of your eyes but don't realize that it happened until you look back on it. That's the way I feel about this book. It snuck up on me.

If you told someone what the book is about, the plot itself, they'd probably shrug and say, "Doesn't sound all that interesting." But somehow, the way House writes it, it's riveting, like you've never read anything even remotely like it in your entire life. So my advice is don't even bother reading the synopsis. By the end, you won't be reading it because of the plot anyway. You just inexplicably won't be able to put it down.

Favorite quote: "I walked out to the tree and put my finger to a leaf, smooth like it was coated with wax. I could feel its veins, wet and round. I had always found comfort in the leaves, in their silence. They were like a parchment that holds words of wisdom. Simply holding them in my hand gave me some of the peace a tree possesses. To be like that - to just be - that's the most noble thing of all." p. 218

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### **Stacey says**

This is a gem! A beautifully written story about Vine. A Cherokee woman that it is said is so beautiful that

those who see her will die. However, Saul will not be deterred and takes her as his wife. She has to leave her people and her home to be with Saul, an Irishman. As she makes a new home with Saul, his family, and a new way of life tragedy strikes. Secrets start to build and are revealed. How heavy is the burden of keeping promises and secrets hidden? Who can be trusted and how strong are the bonds of love? *A Parchment of Leaves* is a fantastic read.

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## **Julie says**

3.5

A reader can usually rely on two strong traditions which stem from the American South: solid storytelling and an authentic use of Voice. This Southern writer, Silas House, is capable of both here. For a younger writer, he has an unusually good grasp of Voice in his protagonist, and he weaves a story that you want to jump in and embrace.

Setting is lush here, too. *A Parchment of Leaves* is reminiscent of both *A River Runs Through It* and Charles Frazier's gorgeous *Cold Mountain*. For me, there was the added bonus of a Cherokee leading lady as well.

I have two complaints, though, and I hope they don't detract from what is good about this book. This story has "mainstream appeal," which I would describe as. . . good for the writer and good for sales, but less good for me, the snobby reader who'd much rather crack open *Cold Mountain* and read it again than recommend a lesser novel.

Also. . . from an editing perspective. . . this was so incredibly and unnecessarily wordy. The woman's hands never shook, they shook like a willow in a breeze on a cold day in winter in the mountains. A man never sat and thought about the consequences, he sat in the silence with the gold-pink of dawn shining in his face while images of what he had done danced around him like wind blowing through a sycamore tree in the autumn.

Most writers are guilty of writing too much, not too little. If I had been his editor, I'd have shaved about 100 pages off of this book. Sparse prose can be beautiful, people!! On that note, I'm wrapping up this review, so I don't carry on the naughty tradition of overwriting.

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## **Karen says**

Beautifully written book about the love between a young couple in rural Kentucky 1917. Vine, a young Cherokee woman and Saul, a young Irishman.

The story shows their tender relationship with outside prejudices that they overcome, as she leaves her Cherokee community and they move into the young man's mother's house till they get their home built. His mother Esme, is a wonderful character, who becomes very close to Vine.

Saul also has a brother Aaron, who falls in love with Vine and pays her unwanted advances, and this becomes a huge part of the story, especially after World War I begins and Saul takes a job away from home for a great paying job that he feels will set them up well for the future.

The landscape and hard work of this life in Appalachia was much to my liking, highly recommended

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## Libby says

A raving fiver!!! Astonishingly good. This is a book I could read again and there aren't many of those. The novel is set in 1917 Crow County, Kentucky. House grew up in Laurel County, Kentucky and says he based the fictional Crow County on the neighboring county of Leslie, where he spent much of his childhood. 'A Parchment of Leaves' is about home, belonging, love, family, betrayal, all loose and wondering around everywhere in the pages of this novel. The protagonist is Vine, a full blood Cherokee girl, who it is said was so beautiful that she bewitched all the men who saw her. "The truth was this: her beauty had so transfixed their thoughts that they could not keep their minds on the work at hand. They could think of nothing but her eyes - round and black as berries - and her brown arms, propped up on the slats of the paling fence. They saw her strong jawbone curving toward her chin, her blue-black hair flapping behind her like clothes hung out to dry. They were mesmerized by the image they had caught of her, and they carried it up the mountain in such a way that they neglected to watch where they were walking or the angle of their axes or the intensity of the fires they built." Then one day, the beautiful Vine meets Saul Sullivan, an Irish logger. Their meeting is dramatic and unforgettable. The details of Vine's and Saul's family are rich. The reader feels as though they know each member of the family, especially Saul's brother Aaron, and his mother, Esme, who take on roles as important secondary characters. House carries us into the rush of the US towards its materialistic future. We see the townies look down on the folks from the hollers and see the prejudices as they were then, basic, and raw, unfiltered. Vine is dazzling, and Saul is earthy. Esme is the mother hen that embraces them both, and later, we learn of Esme's secret. Aaron is a boy who grows up to become the wrong kind of man. The reader learns that the meaning of family is always shifting and that sometimes the foundation is pulled out from under that meaning so that it may topple altogether. What a delicate and fine textured story House weaves. Vine moves a redbud tree from her old home place to her new home. She coaxes it to live because she has moved it at the wrong time of year. Vine talks to the tree and pets it. Here's a quote from the novel regarding the redbud tree. "Then I noticed the new leaves on the redbud tree. The purple buds were being pushed away to make way for the leaves. I walked out to the tree and put my finger to a leaf, smooth like it was coated with wax. I could feel its veins, wet and round. I had always found comfort in the leaves, in their silence. They were like a parchment that hold words of wisdom. Simply holding them in my hand gave me some of the peace a tree possesses. To be like that - to just be - that's the most noble thing of all." Vine takes a lot from nature, from her setting, and as we see in this quote, she soaks it up like a sponge. However, it doesn't seem a coincidence that the redbud tree is also known as the Judas tree. Vine never seems separate from nature, but always part of it, and as her story plays out, the backdrop is the constant of the creek, the birds, the things growing in her garden, and her home that springs up from the trees that create it. House has created a lush setting and teemed it with characters that I grew to love.

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## Chrissie says

This book is beautiful.

The story is about the marriage of a Cherokee woman and a white Southerner, but that is **just** the beginning. The husband's brother falls in love with her too. It is about love relationships between man and wife and deep friendship between women, coming to care for another and doing what is right. What if laws do not protect you, what do you do then?



The story happens before and up to the conclusion of the First World War. The setting is Appalachia, the Kentucky hinterland.

The Southern writing spoke to me. Beautiful, simple and expressive. The spoken words are not grammatically correct, but neither should they be.

The characters came alive for me. Each character's essence is evoked both through actions and words. The women spoke to me, each in their own way. Each became a separate identity. Character portrayal is a strong element of this book!

Religious beliefs and traditions are seen through Southerners' own eyes. Beautifully drawn but without a hint of proselytism.

The plot grabbed me and never let go. It got me thinking. What would I do if I were in that predicament? One reflects upon if one **should** keep silent or if one **should** speak out the truth.

I loved how the story ended. It is beautiful, but it isn't corny. It is well drawn and care is taken to make it believable.

The narration by Kate Forbes is totally fantastic. You simply cannot adjust speeds on your Iphone to achieve perfect tempo; it is only through a talented narrator who knows when to pause and when to rush ahead that the ideal tempo is attained. Forbes masters this. Her southern dialect is never hard to understand and adds to one's appreciation of the author's lines.

Gorgeous lines and gorgeous narration. Southern culture drawn with finesse. Quite simply a lovely and engaging story.

That this book has won numerous prizes doesn't surprise me in the least:

\*Winner of the Kentucky Novel of the Year, 2003

\*Winner of the Award for Special Achievement from the Fellowship of Southern Writers

\*Nominee of the Southern Book Critics Circle Prize

\*Nominee of the Book Sense Book of the Year Longlist

I will be picking up more books by Silas House very, very soon.

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### **Kirk Smith says**

This is a very good piece of Southern literature that is satisfying in a nostalgic way. \*\*I could identify with Vine, the main character (of Cherokee descent), quite well as my own great-grandmother was Cherokee. At the heart of this book is exposure to the way racism has always been fueled by land ownership rights and the way that laws always restricted rights of persons of color while quite obviously favoring White European ancestry. This book exposed me to "Melungeons", a census classification of a tight-knit group of people with dark skin, and black hair, that had Turkish/Moorish as well as African, American Indian, and White European heritage. America is after all a big melting pot. I loved the way it made American history seem very personal and fueled my imagination!

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## **Diane S ? says**

When Saul marries Vine, a young Cherokee woman, they settle in Kentucky, the Appalachian mountain region. They live with Saul's mother Esme until they can build their own cabin. They eventually move into the new cabin, and have a daughter they name Birdie, and for a time they are happy. It is, however, a time of war, WWI, and Saul, a logging foreman will have to work away from home on a distant mountain. Saul's younger brother Aaron has long pined for Vine, and even though he has a wife and child of his own now, Saul's leaving gives him the golden opportunity of finding Vine alone.

The beauty of the Appalachian mountains, so wonderfully and visually described, can picture the setting in my mind, almost smell the wildflowers. Stunning. The love between Saul and Vine, their little family, can be emotionally felt. The longing Vine has for her own family, missing Saul, trying to cope alone, feeling shown, not just told. This is only the second book I have read by this author, the first an arc of one that has not been published yet, but they both have common themes. Characters that feel forced to do something out of their nature, an act in which they will carry a large portion of guilt. Something that will cause hurt to others peripherally involved as well as to themselves. Secrets kept that will slowly fester, spreading out until they find it possible to forgive themselves, and try to set things right.

This author is fantastic, his storylines, the way he tells the story, the details he includes, for me raises his fiction to a higher level. The prejudices of the day, Native Americans, thought to be second class citizens, looked down on. Dislike, hate for the things we fear. Some things change, some don't. He includes many things, important issues, love for family, connection to the land, all in a relatively short novel. I have discovered a new writer to cherish, and will be reading more from this author.

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## **Connie says**

4.5 stars (rounded up to 5)

Vine, a beautiful Cherokee woman, spent her childhood in the Kentucky mountains in the early 1900s. There is a superstition that she puts curses on the lumbermen that come near her. Saul, a man with an Irish heritage, falls hard for her. Vine leaves her Cherokee community to become his wife and join his family. When World War I begins, Saul leaves their area for a job cutting pine trees which will be used in the production of turpentine. Vine is left behind to care for their young daughter. Vine is upset because Saul's brother Aaron is stalking her and she feels unsafe. But when she tells Saul about her fears, he will not speak to his brother about it. Vine realizes that Saul's "great fault" is that he would always choose his family over her. Eventually a confrontation occurs, and Vine keeps a secret from the rest of the family. Forgiveness of others and herself is an important theme in this story.

Vine loved the natural world and she senses the presence of God when the wind rustles through the trees. She misses her Cherokee family from Rosebud Camp so she planted a tiny rosebud tree at her new home. Vine "talked to the tree every day, willing it to live." She describes the leaves, "They were like parchment that holds words of wisdom. Simply holding them in my hand gave me some of the peace a tree possesses. To be like that--to just be--that's the most noble thing of all."

The story is also about the prejudice that some of the townspeople have against the Native Americans. Silas House's great-grandmother was Cherokee, and she was an inspiration for this book. The author transports us to the Kentucky mountains a century ago with characters talking in the local dialect, fiddle music, poetry,

and everyday events on a farm. There are great descriptions of wash day, a snake bite, a pig roast, a country dance, and a Pentecostal service. This book has a winning combination--beautiful writing and an engaging story--and would be a good selection for book clubs.

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## Cheryl says

Sometimes you just want a simple story. You read a book and it's so lyrical and bewitching that you can't seem to put it away. And when you do, the story calls to be picked back up. This was one of those books. Simple, sensuous prose and a strong "voice."

In the prologue you get to see the mysterious main character, Vine, who is said to be so beautiful that she puts a spell on the men who look at her:

*A thin smile showed itself across her fine, curved face. Her hair was divided by a perfectly straight, pale brown line down the middle of her head. She did not wear plaits, but let her hair swing behind her. It was so long that the ends of it were white from the dust in the sandy yard...The whites of her eyes were as clear as washed eggshells.*

She is Cherokee Indian. The voice I speak of is that of Vine's: a pure, simple, melodic tune that comes across in ungrammatical verbiage and peculiar syntax. It is alluring because it is not too often that you see such commitment from a writer to his first-person character perspective.

This a tragic love story with a fine ending. It is about the harsh realities of family and community. Two brothers of Irish descent, and one Cherokee woman caught between a web of lies and deceit. A mountain town in Kentucky; a Cherokee Indian community isolated within the town, on what is referred to as RedBud Mountain. A town that considers them a threat. A woman and man from both ends of the town fall in love. Imagine the drama there: a woman who must leave her home and settle in with a community that shuns her kind. Inwardly, she struggles to keep a part of her family and heritage with her:

*I spied a little redbud growing in the shade of the woods. It was just beginning to shed its leaves and I knowed it was the wrong time to dig it up, but I had to have it. I went round to Daddy's shed and got a shovel and a swatch of burlap. I dug up the redbud, careful not to break the main root. I was real easy with it, whispering to it the whole time. I pressed damp dirt against the roots, wrapped it in burlap, then soaked it the round ball in the creek. It was surprising how light it was. It was so full of life, but it was no heavier than a finger. I put it out onto the shed, and little rivers of water run down the boards."*

If I fell in love with "voice" in this novel, consider me equally in love with "place." House's descriptions of the mountains are beautiful. Maybe it is because I currently live in a mountain town not too far from where he describes. I've driven around the mountains of Kentucky and North Carolina that he writes about, and I too have been fascinated with the Bristol, Tennessee and Bristol, Virginia lines that he describes. Go to a store across the street and they will tell you that you're in Tennessee. Head across the street again for some coffee and you're now in Virginia. Fascinating. When he mentions birdcall and toads mating and creeks running, and crickets and...oh just the melody of the mountainside, he leaves me entranced because I'm

reading exactly what I hear daily and those sounds are coming through the pages at me. I've never been to the mountain hollers where Vine stays and still, I have enough imagery that I can envision them.

Sometimes good stories and lessons emerge through beautiful simplicity.

*I walked out to the tree and put my finger to a leaf, smooth like it was coated with wax. I could feel its veins, wet and round. I had always found comfort in the leaves, in their silence. They were like a parchment that holds words of wisdom. Simply holding them in my hand gave me some of the peace a tree possesses. To be like that--to just be--that's the most noble thing of all.*

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