A photograph of almond blossoms on a tree branch, with the text overlaid. The image shows a close-up of a branch covered in small, light-colored flowers. The background is a dense network of thin, dark branches.

~Almendros~

Laurence Salzmann

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A Story of Almonds

I have always needed almonds.

Find me in the mountains of Tibet, the plains of Mongolia, the ranchlands of Argentina, and I will be in an almond grove. Beneath the petaled trees, with a chunk of onyx, smashing the outer shells and coaxing out the cinnamon-colored flesh.

The story of this need begins in Andalusia. Before my birth. In this canyon I now stand above. Home of Canyonman, who turned the soil in which my father once grew.

We lived in a fine house down the road. My father pressed olives, and, through smart dealings and hard work, owned olives groves for miles around. His press was crafted by Mauriccio Termini, known throughout the Mediterranean as the finest maker of olive presses.

My mother and father married early, and she was soon pregnant. She could pinpoint the evening it happened, in early June, before dinner, because, that same night, she began to dream of almendros. And not of any almendros. Of the almendros of the Canyonman.

The Canyonman lived in a steep valley separating our plateau of land from the hills rising up toward town. The only road leading in was blocked by what we believed were corpses of children. If any child in the pueblo refused to eat vegetables, or come in for dinner, they would be threatened with the spells of the Canyonman. He was the Man in the Closet, the Boogey-monster, the Sandman of our Youths.

He was also a stunning gardener. Anyone taking a moment to peer down into his canyon could tell as much. And his almendros were known far and wide as sweet enough to buckle your knees.

Six months into my mother's pregnancy the dreams of the Canyonman's almendros had grown into a heavy desire. My father, having known of the Canyonman from his youth, and having witnessed his spells, could not fulfill my mother's wishes. Not that he refused to try. He spoke with the old almond growers to discover where the finest almonds grew. He went deep into the Sierra de Fibreletas, into the terraced groves surrounding the town of Lubrin, to pick the sweetest almonds known to man. But not, my mother insisted, as sweet as the almonds that came from the almendros of the Canyonman.

It was on a cool night in January, after a week of rain, and after a week of being inside the cortijo listening to my mother howl for almonds, that my father went into the canyon. He did not come back.

My mother took on all the guilt for the horrible fate of my father. It was her diabolical urges for almonds – or the creature's inside her – that led her husband into the canyon. Sometimes, even now as I travel, my eyes peeled for the flicker of white petals of those twisted, black-barked trees, I think I can still hear her screaming at me as I floated in her stomach.

Perhaps it was my father failing to return, perhaps it was the desperate need for the Canyonman's almonds. But the following morning, six months pregnant, my mother put a blanket over her shoulders and descended into the canyon. And there, sitting among his chickens, was the Canyonman. As she recounted to me, without a word, he took her into the almond grove, examined a tree, and broke open an almond. As she stood chewing, her million desires satiated at once, Canyonman told her that it was her husband, the father of the child in her stomach, that she was eating.

She vomited. Canyonman waited patiently, handing her a wet cloth to clean her lips. He went on to explain that, the night before, his dogs had set upon a man harvesting almonds from his grove. As they tore his pants the man pleaded for his life. So, said Canyonman, he let the man live. As an almendro.

So now, said Canyonman, you may eat your fill from my grove of almonds.

What about my husband? asked my mother.

He will die when the winds blowing down from the Sierra Nevada pull the last of his petals from his branches.

And how will he live? asked my mother.

He will live if you are able to make him speak.

How will I make a tree speak?

The Canyonman shrugged.

That is your job. And he left her.

She stood beneath the tree, letting the petals brush across her forehead. She tasted a petal and swore it tasted of her husband's skin. And then, in a fit of anger and desperation, she seized a branch and yanked. It broke off with a terrible moan, a moan she recognized as her husband's. That night she returned home with the branch in her hands, and slept beside it.

My mother resolved herself to make her husband speak.

Of course, like any good Andalusian, my father loved dance. So one evening my mother, in the last light of day, coaxed a beautiful girl from town to wear a skirt and dance inside his branches. Although the girl danced enchantingly, no voice was heard.

She tried herself to make him speak, singing his favorite songs, then singing her favorite songs, pleading with him to utter the smallest syllable. Finally she broke down in tears. The Canyonman, watching from below, looked north toward the Sierra Nevadas.

Sometimes she thought he moved. But she knew that it was the winds gathering strength. His petals were already starting to fall.

My mother, afraid she would never see my father again, had his image painted. Soon our house was filled with images of almond trees. Beautiful images, painted in the last throes of sunlight, the undersides of the branches illuminated by the low sun.

My mother, at a loss, visited las cuevas, where she came from. Over a hundred gypsies had dug caves into the earth. My grandmother, unsurprised by what had befallen my father, cursed and sent for the brujeria.

We must sing in Spanish to him, said the brujeria. We must make him cry.

My mother's brother, who hated my father, heard about what had happened. Late at night he stole into the canyon and shook the branches of the tree, eager to hasten my father's death. Satisfied there were no petals left, he left. The next morning my mother discovered just two petals, hidden in the crook of a limb, left on my father's branches. She tore at her hair.

She went back to las cuevas and found the brujeria.

These are not the winds of the norte, said the brujeria. Your brother shook your husband's petals loose. The Canyonman has caught him. He will never be seen again.

My mother began to cry anew.

We must not waste time weeping, said the brujeria, taking my mother by the shoulders. We must sing to him now, the brujeria said. The ants are coming out of the earth. The heavy winds are not far behind. These two petals will not last long.

So that same night, the sound of oranges thudding on the ground as the wind shook them loose, they approached the tree that was her husband. My mother pointed to the tree that was my father. One lone petal remained on his branches. The brujeria began to sing.

Nothing happened at first. Then the branches began to shake, the bark began to quiver, and suddenly, cutting through the wind that blew around them, the tree broke out into a scream that sounded, my mother told me, like a thousand dying birds.

There was a flash of lightning, and there, crouched before her, his pants torn, covered in the dirt of the canyon, was my father.

They hurried out of the canyon, and moved across the ocean, to the United States, far from the almond groves of the Canyonman, where I was raised.

As I grew into a man, I was told this story again and again. Although the terror has kept me from these almendros I now stand above for fifty years of my life, desire now overwhelms it. As Ugolino said in Dante's Inferno, when asked if he ate his children, "hunger soon overcame sadness."

The End

Brandon I. Jones ~ Mojácar 2007

A Story of Almendros: <https://vimeo.com/9190758>

A Story of Almendros tells the tale of a man tormented by an overwhelming desire for almonds. And not just any almonds – the almonds of the Canyonman.

Drawing on the tradition of magical realism, Almendros looks back in time to southern Spain, where the man's mother struggles with her own desire for almonds. The Canyonman's spells hold sway over her life.

Laurence Salzmann's photos and film illustrate the tale, written and narrated by Brendan I. Jones. With grace and subtlety, Salzmann introduces witches, violinists, young village dancers, and misanthropes in this story of yearning, spells, and enchantment. Almonds, olive trees, and oranges enrich this sensual, stark tale of love. The story points to the larger need – and eventual impossibility – of compromising our own deep-seeded desires.

























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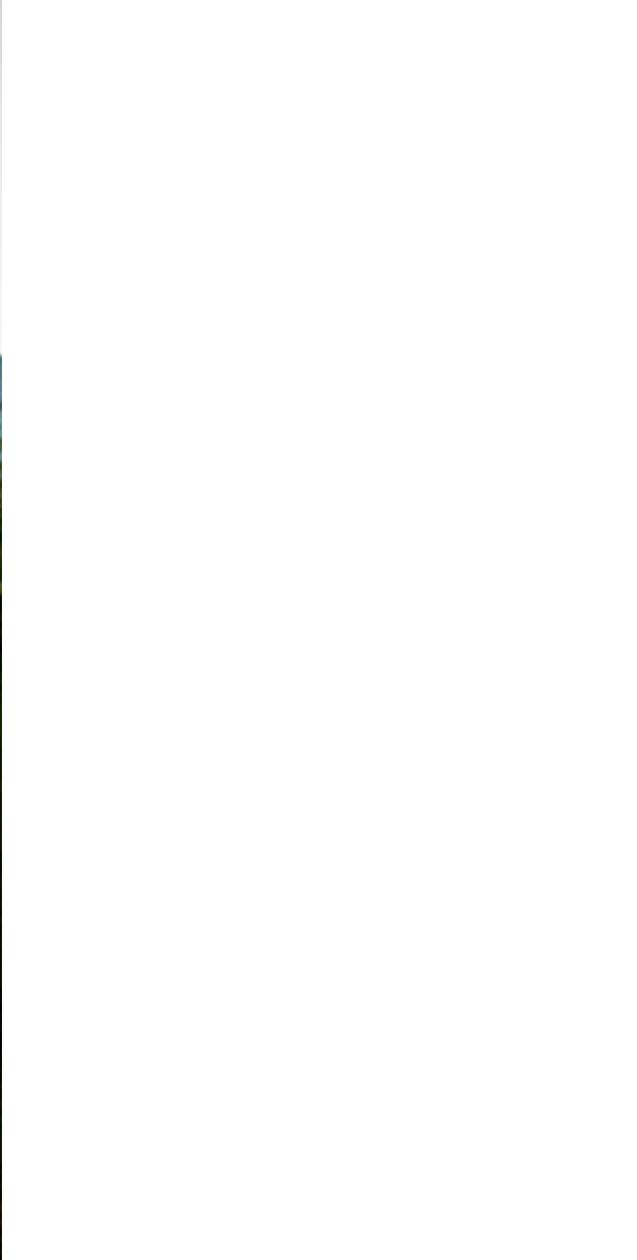






*That night she returned home with the branch
in her hands, and slept beside it.*









Almendros

Almond trees blessed with white and pink blooms.
Contra el cielo azul y la tierra blanca.
Each day with you is a joy.
Solo un mes para disfrutar de su belleza.
Sadness come when rains and winds blow your blossoms down.
And the excitement of your full bloom is gone.
One or two trees in the distance remain in flower.
Bees buzz their blossoms.
Las avejas revoletean entre sus petalos.
Now it is time to say good-bye,
To wait anew for another blossom time.

Lorenzo Salzmann

Thanks to the Fundación Valparaíso, Mojácar, Almería, Spain.

Its founders Paul and Beatrice Beckett who graciously left their beautiful estate with its many almond trees to serve as an artist retreat for artist who come from far and wide to enjoy the beauty of its landscapes and be inspired.

During my short time at Fundación Valparaíso, during February 2007, I was fortunate to work with other artists in residents. They were Brendan Jones who wrote a script for "A Story of Almonds", Mariana Sanchez who acted in the film, and Ana Uribe an artist whose paintings of almond trees were the inspiration for the photographs I made. Thanks are due to Antonio and Marie Laurel members of Fundación Valparaíso staff at that time.

A Story of Almendros: <https://vimeo.com/9190758>

February 28, 2007
Mojácar







Laurence Salzmann is best known for his numerous photo-documentary and film projects, namely *The Last Jew of Radauti* (1974-76), *La Lucha//The Struggle* (1999-2004), *La Baie//Bath Scenes* (1974-76), and most recently, *Misk'i Kachi//Sweet Salt* (2017). His *Almendros "Almonds"* (2007) photographs were made during his residency at *Fundacion Valparaíso* in Mojácar, Spain. There he worked in collaboration with Brandon I. Jones and Ana Uribe V, departing from his usual documentary style to create the *Almendros* series, and his video *A Story of Almonds* inspired by Washington Irving's *Tales of the Alhambra*.

