He started as a young two-winged green creature of the air, whirling and spinning, up and down; freed from his parents' grip the child danced in his freedom for a few hours. Then he settled slowly to the ground, in a place among dry, crunchy leaves, violet roots, and soft, brown earth. The weather turned cold; white powder from the skies covered the leaves and the roots and the tree-child, and incubated them all in silvery splendor. The snow went away, and in its place came water and ooze; and then dry winds and sunshine. And the tree-child discovered he was changing: his wings were gone, his body had tiny arms and legs, that grew longer every day, his shell-skin was splitting, and his body was swelled with moisture and energy.

As the days passed the tree-child got bigger. His many limbs got longer, his body fatter. He grew and grew, every day finding new things about the area he lived in. He discovered the violet roots had purple children; there were lots of little yellow cup-children; one day he saw another tree-child, with whom he had contests to see who could reach the farthest, or who could stretch his neck the farthest, or who could see the most. The roses and violets and buttercups passed, and the leaves fell, and more green creatures were freed to fall to the ground all around the tree-child. He felt the cold winds and knew that the second winter of his life was coming.

The first years passed in a pattern of sleeping under the snow; waking and growing under the rain and sun; and succumbing to autumn's partial death. Eventually the tree-child became aware of other trees much like himself, only some were bigger, some were smaller. The nearest one was a young tree-lady of beautiful proportions. She was a mother to the younger trees: she showed them where to put their roots and how to drink the water that was in the ground and how to make leaves green, and all the other things a young tree needs to know. She was very fond of the young trees, but her favorite was the tree-child. He was closest to her; in fact sometimes she would reach down with her long arms and hide him, or protect him from thunderstorms and snowstorms. Her roots and his intertwined under the ground, soaking up water with its
life-giving food. They lived in a beautiful harmony through the years of the tree-child’s maturation.

The tree-child became a young adult. The love between him and the tree-lady changed from mother and son to man and woman. Their ages mattered little: they were so close physically and mentally an inseparable bond formed between them. Day and night, rain, sun and snow, all the year round they loved. Their arms grew among each other’s, and their feet followed the same paths in their search for food. Because she was older and bigger, the woman’s body seemed to surround him, keeping out the strong winds. She strove so hard to protect him that he hardly saw any sunlight or felt any rain on his leaves. She guided his thirsty feet with her own, but because hers were bigger, they drank most of the water themselves. But the younger tree was so overcome by love he could not see these things.

The tree-youth grew paler as time passed. His leaves were thirsty from lack of water, and his body ached from dryness. Without sunlight he could not make food. He was slowly dying. His love for the woman overshadowed the pain of his crackling body. The couple lived on in beautiful bliss, aware only of each other and the tremendous happiness they felt. She grew stouter and taller in her joy; he grew hardly at all, and his leaves were brown instead of green. His branches broke off in the slightest breeze, though the woman tried to cover him. She slowly became aware that he was dying, though she did not know why, or what she could do for him. He knew it soon, too, but he never complained of the agony. They continued their love-filled existence, never speaking of death.

Winter came again; then spring, the starter of new life. But this year there were no buds on the tree-man’s fingertips. There was no awakening of new life in his body, for there was no life left in it.

REAL-TIME ROADS

Al Bersted

Long city pavement
repaired in a picture
by men in tar and
coveralls
lone city pavement

painted green
never seen
for the mud
that spurts
bloodless grass