



"Like walking from a dream into a mythical land both familiar and delightfully strange. A tale of tolerance and survival, in a fascinating and beautifully realised world."

— *Trudi Canavan, bestselling author of the Black Magician trilogy*

WALKING THE TREE

KAARON WARREN





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PRAISE FOR KAARON WARREN

“Like walking from a dream into a mythical land both familiar and delightfully strange. A tale of tolerance and survival, in a fascinating and beautifully realised world.”

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“*Slights* displays a true knack for style and a highly imaginative vision which I look forward to seeing explored more fully in subsequent work from Kaaron Warren.”

Strange Horizons

an excerpt from
WALKING THE TREE
Kaaron Warren

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Aloes — AILANTHUS — *Cedrelas*

The trader from Aloes travelled with them, laden with jars of jasmine oil.

“I’m not sure what you will make of the market we share with Ailanthus. The market holder is odd. He camps by the roots of the Tree, waiting for market time. He does nothing else. I am glad to be the trader, though. This walk, fifteen days, this is a good walk.”

The market was better built than the one between Ombu and Aloes. The market holder collected driftwood in his waiting time. He stained it orange by scraping some of the bright moss off the long Limbs bent towards the sun.

He built shelves into the natural crevices of the trunk and here he stood goods of all kinds. Lillah recognised some of Ombu’s jars, but it seemed he had items from everywhere in Botanica.

Sea sponges, decorated plates, painted nutshells, necklaces, hair clips, perfect shells. The teachers

and the children cooed over the treasures.

The market holder and the trader did their business, then he leant back against the Tree, knees spread wide, his sulu tucked between his thighs. He smelled very sweet, not such as jasmine, but clean and fruity.

"You live here all the time?" Melia asked.

"Too many things to transport now. And I can't leave these things out for the monkeys."

"Or the ghosts," Thea said.

"There are no ghosts here. Not in this place. That's why I chose it."

Thea pointed at a fissure beside him. "What about in there? That looks like a ghost cave to me."

He turned. "No ghosts, teacher. You are safe here. Would you like to stay with me? It's a lonely life but a fine one."

He smiled, his teeth large and blunt. Lillah was not sure if he was joking. "You are too old for any of us to choose you, market man," Thea said. "You are old and ugly and dull."

Her anger surprised everyone. The market holder turned his mouth down. "I would like someone to stay with me."

"You would soon tire of a companion," Lillah said.

"Yes. You're right."

Melia spoke to him, more questions and more, while the others looked at his goods.

Morace stood by the fissure, arms stretched up,

hands holding the sides of it. He leaned in, sniffing the air in there.

“Morace!” Thea shouted. “Leave that alone. Leave the ghosts alone, you stupid child.”

“There are no ghosts,” the market holder said.

Borag squealed. “Don’t go in! The ghosts will take you and put a ghost child in your place.”

Zygo rolled his eyes into his head and walked stiffly, his arms out, towards Morace. “I am dead-but-walking,” he said. “I will steal your heart and feed it to the fishes. I will eat your mother and your father and I will spit their bones out all polished and white.”

Morace screamed. “Keep away from me!”

The children were agitated. Tired. The teachers were warned this would happen once the excitement faded. “Does everyone have their smoothstones?” Erica called out. “Hold them in your hands, take comfort from them. Touching the smoothstone is stroking your mother’s cheeks, being lifted by your father.”

“I don’t have mine!” Borag said. Her voice was high with anxiety, disconnected somehow. “I dropped it!”

“Maybe you put it in your bag. Or someone else picked it up.”

“Why would someone else pick it up?” Zygo said.

Yet when they searched the bags, there it was in Zygo’s things.

“Somebody put it there!” he said.

The teachers felt panic, unhappiness around the children.

"Let's move on," Lillah said.

"There are crabs ahead," the market holder said. "Too many for me to eat. Where you see the Tree hanging low in the water, you will find too many crabs to eat. They like rocks or limbs to crawl on. They don't mind bones, either. These are the tastiest crabs you will ever eat. They love to be eaten. They crawl along the sand with their claws and with their tiny voices they call out, 'eat me!'"

The children leapt about with excitement, mimicking the talking crabs. Morace and Rham made them all laugh with their play; two crabs fighting over an old fish-head. Lillah smiled at the market holder, impressed at his knowledge of children and their humour.

He said, "You know how good crabs are? Did you know that the ones which eat humans still taste like humans, they say."

Corma nodded as if she knew all there was to know.

"How do you know how humans taste?" Rham asked, and the other children laughed at this. Lillah kissed her head, thanking her.

"All right, let's pack up and look out for crabs as we walk," Lillah said. They waved goodbye to the market holder. Corma's husband Hippocast had exchanged a shell he'd found for a necklace of seeds; Corma looked happier than before.

The children ran ahead, finding the crabs. Zygo found the most, draping them around his body and dancing, ignoring the pain of their nippers. They cooked up a feast.

Having Corma and Hippocast with them changed the nature of the walk. The children loved having Hippocast along, because he never tired of playing the games they loved to play. He was nervous to be away from home so he laughed and joked most of the time to take his mind off his fear, and it was hard to be serious with him around. It was hot, most days, so hot they tried to walk in the shade of the Tree, dunking themselves in the water whenever they paused to eat or rest.

After a while, Lillah began to tire of the constant chatter and laughter, and to need some time alone. She held back; when Melia raised her eyebrows questioningly, she shook her head and waved Melia on.

She could think alone. Not that there was much to think about, but she had taken her first lover, made her first new friend, and managed to keep the children alive so far, so there were some things.

Her father had heard of Ailanthus, and their prowess at cooking. He'd said, "Your mother would have stopped there if she could. She envied an Order that worshipped food like these ones do."

"But we liked her cooking."

"It wasn't enough for her. She wanted it to be worshipped."

So Lillah looked forward to this Order, but was nervous as well. What if they expected her to have some knowledge? What if she couldn't tell the difference between their food and that of the two other Orders she'd eaten in?

She caught up with the school. They were tired and ready for a break, but she knew they could make the next Order by nightfall if they hurried. It was a worthwhile effort: they were all tired of sleeping out of doors.

The sun was setting over the Tree when they arrived. The first thing they saw was a hand-built rock pool, which sat on a part of the sand where the sun reached most of the time. It was filled with rainwater, they were told later, which was collected in carved wooden bowls and poured through cloth to keep it pure.

"Look at it," Melia said. "Clear. Clean. Imagine what it tastes like." She bent down and paddled a finger in the water. Tasted it. "It's okay. When I find a place with good, fresh water, that's where I'm staying."

Three young women came up to them, children running at their feet. "Welcome to Ailanthus. We are happy to have you here, aren't we, children?" The children cheered and laughed and they began to chase each other around the adults' legs.

There was far less fanfare on arrival in this Order. Everybody was busy, gathering nuts, cooking,

preparing the feast. Corma was taken to the Birthman so he could see her shape. Her husband, Hippocast, was collected by the young men. "I'm supposed to go straight home," he said.

"You cannot leave your wife with child. She needs you here. You need to look after her," he was told.

Borag watched the cooks; saw how the root vegetables they grew were pale pinkish in colour, perhaps from growing near the flowers. The flowers growing here produced a sweet sticky substance.

A woman came up from the water, a large fish flapping in her arms. She ran with it, heavy feet almost tripping in haste.

She knelt down and let the fish wriggle into the fresh water pool.

"He won't like it. But you watch. In a day, maybe two he'll puff like this." She opened her mouth and breathed out heavily. "And he won't taste so salty." The teachers gathered the children and the woman taught them about the saltiness of the fish, how to lessen the salt for a better flavour.

The children knelt by the pool and watched the fish.

"Does the salt come into the water?" Rham, the cleverest student, asked. She fiddled with her wooden puzzle.

"Yes, it will cloud the water so that we can't use it. We empty the water, fill a new rockpool with

fresh. It's hard work but worth it for the good fish we cook."

Rham became obsessed with catching the moment the fish breathed out, and with the changes in the fish as the hours passed. Morace kept her company while he could, but crept away at times.

"He's flopping about!" Rham called. "Come and see."

So Lillah was there when the fish opened his mouth and puffed out a cloud of salt which floated then dissolved as they watched.

Once the fish released its salt, it was killed in the water, a quick slash across its gills.

"It needs to die quickly or the skin will toughen," the cook said. "It needs to think it is alive until it is dead."

While the fish eyes were still flickering, it was scaled and washed, gutted and beheaded. The head was thrown into a large pot for a soup.

The fish was rolled in the sticky flower pulp, then in crushed nuts. Then it was wrapped in large leaves and thrust into the fire.

"This will crisp the skin while keeping the flesh soft."

"Those pots are huge. How did you make them?" Borag asked.

"We understand the fire. We find the metal on the beach; everybody does. But we know about the fire, and the heat, and we build the metal into the pots. That is why we are the greatest cooks along

the Tree. We make these pots big to remember the people who used to live. The tall as a Tree people. If we forget them, they will be angry with the child-birthing."

To make a sauce, the cook used nut oil, a dark brown, highly scented oil which did not burn easily.

The children lost interest in the process after a while and just wanted to eat. The Order's children showed them how to gather the nuts that fell, nibble up the left over bits and crumbs, while the grownups shooed them away. They compared their smoothstones; the Order's children were nervous to show theirs, saying that it meant bad luck for a stranger to see your stone.

"Where are your bonsai?" Thea asked the young women.

There were exchanged glances. "We don't follow the bonsai here. We feel it is taming the Tree and should not be done. Don't you think you can damage the Tree that way?"

Thea shook her head in a way which meant, I never thought of it that way, and will never do so.

After the welcomefire, where the jasmine oil was exchanged for nut oil, they talked about fire as the cook gave them further instruction.

"Listen. You know the sound a fire makes. You know how hot it is by the way it sizzles and crackles. Now we put the bread on."

The cook threw little round rolls of dough into a square pot on the fire and shook it in a frenetic motion until they darkened.

“Every part of the Tree is edible if you cook it right.”

The bread was perfect with the nut fish. Lillah soaked up the last of the wonderful sauce with it. She felt very full, not ill. She felt so well and great she wanted to climb to the top of the Tree and shout.

There was more food, though: sweet things and salty, things fried in the nut oil and served in great mounds.

Borag and Lillah watched, taking it all in.

“Not everyone will share their knowledge,” Lillah said.

“Knowledge not shared is wasted,” the cook said. “I am happy to have people listen to me and to pass on this food.”

The teller told the story of an old man who loved to eat the tender flesh of babies. He deep fried them whole and crunched them, bones and all.

“They still hear him. They say he’s inside the Tree, crunch crunch, you can hear sometimes.” The teller took a piece of fish, cooked with all its bones, and crunched it, swallowing it dramatically, eyes rolling.

“They say his brother took to the sea, fishing out water babies all salty and sweet. They say if the brother ever comes to land, just his foot on the sand

will turn the grains to poison along the Tree and all children will die a throat-parched death."

He touched his ears as they all did, to honour the missing.

Thea swam for seaweed, and they used that to soothe tired feet and sore muscles. Thea sat watching, refusing treatment.

"Thank you for the seaweed," one of the men said.

Thea said, "There would have been more if any of the children helped to collect it."

The men were larger here. Fleshier. They seemed to breathe more loudly, but they were busy, active all the time. They made the teachers laugh with their antics.

Corma, feeling for kicks in her belly, watched it all, sighing sometimes. Hippocast sat with her, brought her treats and told her happy stories. She felt her stomach more frantically, stopped, looked at him. "My baby isn't kicking."

They roused the Birthman and he looked at her carefully. "It's ready to come. Sleeping, ready to come. We must prepare."

Lillah found all of the men attractive. There was one with curly, wild hair, and she wondered what it would feel like to get her fingers tangled in it.

He noticed her smiling at him, and jumped up with a sweet for her. She shook her head, so full of food she couldn't have any more. He popped it into

his own mouth and led her off to show her the kitchen in his small house in the roots of the Tree. A small monkey sat on the roof, chittering. It watched her carefully.

"Is that your wife?" Lillah said. "She looks angry."

He shook his head. "That is not my wife." He didn't smile when he said this, and Lillah lost some interest in him. A man without humour was not so attractive.

"You don't use the caves here?"

"No! Never! It's dangerous inside the Tree. Once a teller stepped in there to speak more closely to the Tree and he was never seen again. We found a clump of his hair three days later; that's all. It was stuck in a clump of sap and we knew this meant that the Tree is blood and flesh and bone inside. We like the Treehouses. They are warmer. Who would sleep inside the Tree?"

"You have no courage. I would sleep in the Tree." This from another man, one Lillah hadn't noticed before. He was grey about the temples, although he didn't seem old.

"Don't listen to him. He's gone grey with terror, can't you see? From stepping inside the Tree."

"There's a place where the Tree whispers. You can sit and listen if you like. If you close your eyes, you can almost make out the words sometimes," the grey man said.

"Is it the ghosts?" Lillah asked.

“I think it’s people living on the other side of the Tree. I think the island is around, not along, and that if we tunnelled through the Tree we’d be able to visit each other.” Lillah looked at the grey-haired man with admiration. His thoughtfulness reminded her of the sensitive market holder.

The curly haired man said, “He knows that if he tunnels through the Tree he’ll kill it, so his crazy theory will never be disproved.”

The grey-haired man said, “Sometimes I whisper back. Tell them things I don’t want people to know.”

Lillah chose him. At least he was brave, and curious.

“I try to scratch the words as I hear them,” he said. She saw his walls were a mess, scratched lines lifting squares of Bark away. There was nothing readable. “In other homes, they press coral in to make shapes and patterns. That is all it is though; patterns. There is no meaning.”

He stopped to listen, standing still, unblinking. It frightened her; she felt if she collapsed to the floor in a faint he wouldn’t even notice.

She took off her shirt and began massaging her nipples, rubbing them roughly and enjoying the all-over tingle when they hardened. This he noticed; took one of her nipples in his mouth.

His sucking was too loud, almost squeaky. Lillah wondered how she could get away from here.

Could she just push him away and say no? But her body took over and she desired sex after all. It's very addictive, she thought.

Afterwards, she said, "Aren't you more afraid of the sea than the Tree? Of what dwells in the sea, what lies beyond the sea?"

"That's not our business. The Tree is our business. We think nothing of monsters of the deep here."

He had a second small room in his house, walls lined with metal, and the floor was hard, too, striped through with metal and tough on the feet.

"You are clever with metal, all right."

He nodded. "We have to be. We are taming the Tree by not being so reliant on it. The Tree grows each year, towards water. Stealing our land sliver by sliver."

Lillah found this adversarial relationship with the Tree odd, and wondered if other Orders she'd visit would have a similar attitude. They carved symbols into the Trunk, things she didn't understand.

They were sorry to leave Ailanthus. The food was wonderful, and they would miss that flavour, but they took bowls of nuts with them and they knew the method. They hoped they could cook for themselves.

Corma sat sulking on a rock as they prepared for the next walk. She said, "Do you know how many babies die here? Have you seen the bones?"

"Of course more babies die here. More babies are born. Can't you understand that? Just as many die in Ombu. You said yourself they are experts at this. They know how to stem the blood."

"They'd better not use spiderwebs. That's all. I don't want those on me."

"No, I asked. They use shredded coconut fibre. You'll be fine. You're eating better than you've ever eaten. You'll be fine."

"Go climb the Tree, Lillah, I won't be fine. I'll never remember all their rules."

"They need rules to bring luck. Babies take luck. You need to follow them because your baby will take luck."

Lillah's grey-haired lover said, "We need a lot of extra luck. We have more babies and babies need all the luck they can get." His father, who had looked at Lillah in an unpleasant way, said, "Babies steal the luck." He didn't like the children; the teachers had warned their charges to keep away from him.

"Some men are never chosen, and that makes them angry and bitter," Melia said.

"I was chosen. How else would I have a son, you monstrous fool?"

Lillah's lover pulled his father away and Lillah put her hand on Melia's shoulder.

As they left, one of the women came up and tried to press a gift upon them. "Take this for my brother," she said. "I miss him so terribly."

It was a beautiful ring, carved from the bone of a large fish.

"We can't do that. We are not chartered to take gifts from anywhere but our own Order."

"How can it hurt? How can it be wrong?"

"We cannot risk the bad luck it might bring," Lillah said, knowing that would make sense to the woman.

After she'd gone, Melia said, "Why do they think we should cart their foolish gifts for years for them? We can't carry everything."

"Thank goodness for rules," Lillah said.

They were fully half a day away when Morace noticed he wasn't wearing his hat. Every minute that went by made Lillah happy; he was learning to do without it.

He couldn't breathe, though, once he noticed, and he blinked his eyes to clear the tears.

"My hat, Lillah. I've left my hat."

The temptation for cruelty was great; she could justify it as being in his best interests. She pulled the hat from her backpack though. It was up to him and she didn't want the guilt of taking the hat from him.

"I saw it as we were leaving."

The look he gave her was one of pure adoration.

They were further along, another one meal's walk, when a young boy caught up with them. He shook with exhaustion, his hair wet with sweat.

“What is it?” Morace said. “Why are you running after us?”

Agara gave the boy some water and the children put down mats for him to lie on.

It took him blinks but he was young and healthy. “It’s that girl, Corma, you brought her with you. She’s having her baby but it is not going well.”

“You have your Birthman.”

“No, they have sent me because it is going very badly. The girl is screaming and fighting, she says they are killing her baby.”

“Where is the husband?”

“He has gone to sleep like this.” The boy stood, then rolled his eyes back and collapsed to the ground.

“Sometimes people sleep when they don’t want to be awake. He sleeps like a sea snake, my mother said. They want you to come back and help.”

“I’ll go. Agara, will you come too? The rest can camp here until we get back,” Lillah said.

“I’ll go,” Thea said. “The children will be sad without Agara.”

“Not sad without me?” Lillah said. Thea did not understand how cruel her words could be. How foolish she was.

It was a good spot to stop. The leaves were quite light overhead and the sand wide. There were rock-pools with small silver fish, easy to catch using a shirt.

Lillah and Thea couldn’t keep up with the boy

once he'd regained his puff. He didn't answer any of their questions and it became a game with them.

"Is there a band of snakes living around your ankles?"

"Is your father a good cook or does he make you eat your sand raw?"

"How many leaves does it take to make left-over plates for evening meal?"

Thea and Lillah thought they were funny, but the boy ran faster until he left them behind.

"I guess he's not ready for school," Thea said.

It was strange to be walking in the other direction for so long. The horizon looked wrong, at a strange angle, making Lillah felt dizzy.

As they approached, one of the fathers, a long scratch on his cheek, ran towards them.

"A ghost has taken her. More than one, perhaps. We don't know if one has taken her child. She calls for you."

"She's not from Ombu," Lillah said. "Not from where we are from."

"Still, she calls."

Lillah and Thea both knew that women in birth can seem possessed. They heard a low moaning, almost like the seawalk after a long rain, drying out in the sun.

They entered the room and were sickened by the smell. Vomit and shit, and always jasmine, the jasmine oil over the stench of everything else.

Corma saw them and moaned softly. "They are

trying to kill me.”

“They are not.”

“I am dying.”

“No, no you’re not,” but the Birthman behind her, holding her shoulders steady to guide her, nodded his head.

“You moss-muncher. You liar,” Corma screamed.

Lillah walked to the bed and held her hand. Her pulse was irregular and weak.

“Is the baby coming?”

“No baby,” the Birthman said. “There will be no baby. There will be flesh and bone for the Tree.”

One of the children ran in carrying a turtle.

“You see? This will hold your child’s soul. It will drift safely over the sea to the Island of Spirits.”

He placed the turtle beneath the sheets, between Corma’s legs.

“He will snap up the soul.”

“Aren’t you going to help her birth?” Hippocast said, woken from his faint.

“Of course. Water, you. And ask the women for some soft cloth.”

Lillah went out, but put her hand on Thea’s shoulder. Stay. She did not like the way the Birthman behaved, how sad he seemed.

She went out and spoke to the people there. One woman humphed, a furious noise. “Wasted on a failure. Our good materials. This one will die. It is clear in her blood beating, and the colour of her.”

“Why do they send us the weak ones? This place

is for the healthy.”

Lillah looked at their faces. They liked healthy births, easy ones.

“She won’t fail.”

“She already has.”

Lillah went back inside, feeling numb and helpless.

Thea sat by the bed. Her large hands twitched, plucking imaginary leaves.

Corma was void, empty, her head forward, shoulders slumped, hands untouched. The sheets were red with blood.

Hippocast wailed, “Why didn’t you staunch it? This is what you do.”

“The ghosts had her. There was nothing I could do.”

“The ghosts didn’t have her. She’s healthy and strong. If you’d helped she would have been all right.”

The Birthman said, “No. The baby was taken some time ago. You know what happens to an old bird. Dead in the roots. You’ve seen it. Smelt it. This is what poisoned her. I let her bleed hoping to release the poison, but it was too late.”

“What about my baby?”

“He will not be saved.”

“How do you know it’s a boy?”

“Only boys kill their mother.”

Lillah wept with Hippocast. He shook with it. “Cut her open!” he shouted. “Take my baby out so

at least I can know his face.”

The Birthman nodded. He took a sharp knife and sliced Corma across the belly.

“My sweet Tree Lord,” he whispered. “My sweet, sweet Tree Lord.”

They heard a baby cry.

“It... is a boy. He lives.”

They stayed with Hippocast overnight, but Lillah knew they could not remain for much longer. She said to Thea, “We must go now. We can do nothing for the baby.”

“Can Hippocast care for him? Perhaps I should stay with him.”

“That really isn’t up to us,” knowing that Hippocast would not want Thea.

The Birthman said, “This baby was born dead and yet his limbs moved as if filled with a sea serpent, a frightening sight.”

“Do you think perhaps the baby was alive all along, then?” Lillah said. The Birthman didn’t comment.

“I wonder what would have happened if the baby was born malformed. Corma spent so much time in Jasmine before agreeing to leave. Do you think she knew, as she died, that it was her own fault? That she caused her own death and almost killed her baby? And she would have thought her baby dead as she died. That’s what she would have died believing.”

“Be quiet, Thea. You speak poison.”

As they prepared to leave for the second time, Lillah’s grey-haired lover came to her and held her. “Perhaps you are meant to stay with me. Perhaps this tragedy needed to happen to bring us together again.”

He kissed her hard and passionately, but she didn’t like it. She was sad to be so attracted to his mind, and his words, but not his body.

“I’m sorry. It’s not time for me to stay. I liked being with you.” She kissed him. She left.

In her mapping, Lillah told the Tree: *Birthman Birthman more than one, rules for safety rules for luck, fish in water puffing out salt, fish in nut coat.*

Here, the Tree grows soft nuts. The leaves are soft and the Bark pale and tender.

WALKING THE TREE

by Kaaron Warren

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next **Mistification**

extra! When she'd finished writing Walking the Tree, Kaaron took the unusual step of producing a second book, written from the point of view of Morace. The eBook includes the full text, and there's a download link in the paperback that gives you access to an online version.