Softer Worlds

It was a day in early October, and though it was past noon, the world felt chilled the way pre-dawn does. In my memory, at least. In my memory, a fine mist stands on the ground between the grass stalks and over the surface of the river. Memory is funny that way—it alters. Tilts to fit your mood. Builds a bridge between the feelings of when it happened and when you’re recalling it. This memory, in truth, occurred less than a week ago. If I really try, I can cut through my editorial touches, but why? In truth, it likely felt cold because I was hungover. In truth, the world has been getting hotter every year, and up until just recently, it had felt like summer even in September. In truth, there was no mist, and the rainfall that came at the end was just a small sprinkle, barely noticeable, that died out in under two minutes.

But regardless, it was an early October day. A morning, with a mist on the ground as I traversed the fields and the paths of Mill Creek Park with two of my oldest friends. The way we used to when we were younger. Or at least, the way I remember we used to.

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We all tell stories. Even if we don’t think we do, we do. Our whole existence is our brain telling a story—what our childhoods were, what we like and dislike, who we are, who other people are, their intentions toward us, if it’s too hot or too cold, when the seasons begin, and what they signify. There is no 100% accurate reality. Perhaps we could split hairs, argue about ego death and mindfulness and how these can help in reaching the “true” truth—but those too are just stories. It’s all polluted by our subjective experience. By the stories that have been imposed on us and that we’re imposing on the world.

My mother was a fantastic storyteller. We would ride together through Youngstown in her taxi, me with a bookbag full of books and pens and papers, her with a head full of encyclopedic knowledge of all the secret parts of the city.

There, an old Victorian home that had been sold away and segmented into apartments after the death of the Last Great Matriarch, who still—according to my mother who had lived there as a student—haunted its halls. The quiet man with the pock-marked face who often walked up and down the length of Mahoning—he would glow green at night. The result having been struck by lightning, she said.

She showed me the blast furnace and told me about company homes. About a flaming river. About a world shuttered. She told me about the steel bridge in Mill Creek Park—the Fairy Tale Bridge to some, but the Witches Bridge to us—and the woman who drowned herself in the river below after being jilted by her lover. She told me about fairies that lived in the leaves of the trees in that area in particular and how they would tempt you to join them.

“As a changeling, you especially have to take care,” she said.

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My mother is long dead on that morning in October. Over a decade dead. My friends—whom I met in high school—have changed. I have changed – beyond just new tattoos and a few newly chipped teeth.

We take a rest by a river in the park. Sit on stones and watch a small waterfall—the size of a single step on a staircase—babble over into a pond.

“Could live right here,” one of my friends says. She points into the woods at a small clearing and describes the layout of her shack. Soon, my other friend is joining in. Planning how to find and prepare the food, how to deal with unwanted guests, how to stay warm. A common joke we made among us when we were younger and anxious about the upcoming demands of full adulthood. The grind of jobs and the already stagnant wages and rising inflations.

“Let’s go live in the woods,” we’d say. A chorus to any existential complaint that has since taken the internet by storm. But in my memory, it was something shared just among us. Before memes were what they are now, and before anyone had died.

I watch silhouettes of us shimmer on the surface of the water, and in the sparsity of their detail, it’s hard to see any age at all.

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I’ve always loved fairy tales. Old wives tales. Perhaps because of the similarities between them and the ones that my mother told. She, too, was a wife, though she never grew old. One of my favorites is about a girl in iron shoes. She has to walk the world in them in search of her lost husband.

After my mother passed away, nothing from the woods came to claim me as its own in her place. So, I left. Like the girl in the story, I too walked the world in my own way, and often it felt as if I had my own weight that I was dragging as I did, and that there was something I was searching for. From here to there, I trod on and on looking. For what? I wondered. Love, money, a home, something to teach me how to shiver. I saw more woods, but never ones that seemed as sprawling or particularly verdant as Mill Creek. None whose stories I knew. I was placeless, tale-less. And each step I took, everything felt so heavy.

I went on looking, but often it felt like all I ever found were locked doors, and strange men with blue beards.

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Back in Youngstown, after my return, my friends and I move on from the river and down a path through the woods. We tell stories. Of how we remember things when we were young. Of how things were when I went away. Of how the park has changed. New trolley, disappeared geese, moving wetlands. Of how the area has changed—or not changed. Low wages, high housing costs, dead friends.

When I was away, I dreamed of Youngstown. Of the leaves on the ground, of shadows passing across them. Mine, my friends’, my mother’s. The haziness of the apparitions diffused the effects of time and mortality. Youngstown sat crystalized in my memories; safe and encased in glass.

Being back, I feel as if I am waking, disoriented, from a long dream. At first, everything appears as it should be. As it was. But with a closer look, I can see the changes. Freshly emptied fields, my old haunts shuttered, grey hairs growing on my companions’ heads, wrinkles like cobwebs beneath my own eyes.

The glass shatters, and I wake knowing no place is truly ever safe.

Above us on the path, grey clouds have spread over the sky, but I am too busy watching our shadows on the leaves, listening to the voices of my friends, to see them. It wasn’t until the rain was falling that we noticed them at all.

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In tales, curiosity is dangerous for girls. Wander off the path and more often than not you find yourself between someone’s teeth. Look where you ought not, and often you find your blood on someone else’s hands. This was a favorite theme of Perrault’s. One that has a lot of contemporary feminists quite angry with him. While the Grim brothers’ version is more popular (and ends on a more positive note), he’s the first credited author of “Little Red Riding Hood.”

Perrault was the champion of morals at the end of fairy tales, responsible for some of the most insidious lessons girls would learn in their youth. *Suffer your husband’s cruelty, do not disobey, do not open the door…*

I did not realize how invisible he was until I was teaching a fairy tale class of my own. I thought that everyone knew Bluebeard, but not a single one of my students had ever read it before. I was shocked. I thought it might be a generational gap.

Until after that class, when I was expressing my shock to a man from my own generation on a first date, he too said he didn’t know it. Had never heard it.

“Tell it to me,” he said. This, I thought, might be what I had been searching for. Wandering for. And so, I told him.

What I found, of course, was blood.

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On that day in October, that’s all a scar. A story to be told, and if possible, forgotten. Home, I had thought. Home, I had searched for.

Home became a desperate mantra. Home, back to the woods, back to safety. And so, I came back to Youngstown, which had been home, once, and remained safe in the glass globe of my imagination.

I came home, and on that day in October, I found the forest as I had dreamed of it. I found the voices and shades of my old friends.

When the rain came, we didn’t run for cover. It wasn’t that kind of day. We ambled, slowly as we had from the river as I talked – about the blood. About the journey. About the need to come home.

We emerged from the woods, damp and shivering, as the rain stopped.

“This land is here to heal you,” my friend said. Above the field, the clouds lay curved above the empty field. The wet grass glistened. It was as if we were encased in a snow globe – save and sound. I saw it for the home I had sought.

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If this were a fairy tale, the glass never would have cracked. Youngstown would be as I remember it in my youth, all my friends alive and laughing. I would be as I remember in my youth – bright and hopeful, and with far less scars. Girls in fairy tales never grapple with the fallout of what has happened to them. Girls in fairy tales have whole and fair skin, their thoughts are just passing shadows against the leaves, and their days are spent in the sun.

Instead, I work two jobs to survive. When I tell people I have a Ph.D. in creative writing, they tell me they never saw the point in English class. That they don’t like to read. That they don’t get it. There was no resounding horn, no family gathering to welcome me back with open arms. Instead, I found more empty fields. More holes in the road. But that isn’t how the story is supposed to end. Youngstown knows this. It’s scrawled across the underside of the bridge in the woods:

“Not to spoil anything, but it all turns out alright in the end.”

Another new addition since I’ve been gone. Perhaps written by someone who still believes in stories for now.

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When the rain fell, it felt cleansing, and after it stopped, and my friends and I were making our way back, it felt like it meant something. It felt true when my friend said: “This land is here to heal you.”

Now it is December, and in between there have been hurts, and long hours, and little pay, and what feels like so much time, but none of it owned by me completely. Myself, not owned by me completely. And all around me, people telling me they don’t believe in stories.

When you hear something enough times, it becomes true. Was it a benefit or a curse that my mother spent my childhood telling me stories? That I came to believe in them so ardently I shaped my life to their form? In pursuit of them?

Youngstown once felt like a place peppered with stories. That sustained itself on stories since it was given little else. But now, that seems choked out. Smothered, finally, by a snowstorm of circumstances.

But without a story, nothing changes. Stories are that, in essence. Change.

This land is here to heal you, this land is here to heal you, this land is here to heal you – this is a new mantra I have been carrying, since that day with the rain. This land is here to heal you. Not to spoil anything – but in the end it all turns out alright. This land is here to heal you.

In stories, the hero returns home. He brings with him all the weight and knowledge he gathered from his trek through the outside world. But is that the end? He has changed. Home has changed.

This land is here to heal you. But also, you have to heal the land.

That is how the story goes.

I am no hero returned. Youngstown is no land encased in glass. But it is home. All over, the world is growing ill. All over, there is blood, and low wages, and so little time. All over, people are falling out of love with stories. It isn’t only Youngstown that feels like it is dying.

But here, my loved ones walk both in the flesh and in story. There are steel bridges stretched over running waters, and the woods with their dark nooks and hidden caves where anything might be hiding. A place where a story is possible. Where a life is possible. Where, just maybe, everything may turn out alright in the end if you believe for long enough.