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Tales From The Fells

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"But it is a fairy tale, Dr. Mortimer," said Holmes. "Of course, but fairy tales would not survive without the kernel of the truth", replied Dr. Mortimer".

*The Hound of the Baskervilles*
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Introduction

Huddled together hiding from the others, the two children whispered in the dark their secret plans. He made faces that sent her into peals of laughter quickly suppressed; no one wanted to be punished for making too much noise, and they did not want the adults to hear of their schemes. They would sneak out in the night, into the woods, into the cool, dark, thrilling woods. The air would be full of strange sounds, insect wings and rustlings in the shadows. There would be bears, but they would trick them. They would walk silently as they imagined their Native American ancestors had done, one foot in front of the other. They would collect magic rocks, shiny things, start a fire, sleep on moss.

Days were spent alone, far from the adults, walking through the forest and up and down the mountains. Though the boy was slightly younger, he generally led the way. They carried a flint and burned things in campfires and then searched for more things to burn. They examined vernal pools for tiny life forms. They planted scavenged seeds, and dug clay from the ground to make plates and cups, dolls and armies. The smell of wood smoke, apples, and the soft decomposing forest floor would stay with them forever. It would enter their dreams and insidiously shape the adults they would become.

She carried her Brownie camera, rare and prized, a hand-me-down from someone who had “no time for such nonsense”. There was a time when she wanted to take a photograph of a crude stone pyramid, something old and mysterious with a yawning dark mouth of an entrance. Running towards it down a slight slope, she noticed a movement out of the corner of her eye---a copperhead snake! Adrenalin shot through her as she leaped over the snake, took the photograph, and then ran leaping again over the snake and up the hill. Perhaps she had the heart of a mountain lion after all. Perhaps she discovered that in the woods...

photos taken by me as a child
Our relationship with the natural world is complicated and under scrutiny as we make irrevocable changes to the earth. We enter the woods to get lost, and to find ourselves. We walk there to find thrills, peace, inspiration; to hear ourselves think, to be surprised, to make profit. Our childish fears may have changed from bears, monsters and getting lost, replaced by adult fears (bears, unsavory humans, getting lost). The woods may frighten us or be a place of comfort, but it is rarely a neutral experience. When we lose access to these spaces, it affects our ability to find our place in the natural order. Loss of wild natural habitats not only impacts the health of the earth, its flora and fauna and our physical bodies; we suffer a collective spiritual loss. *My work is concerned with the natural world as a place that fires our imagination, and our imagination is exactly what lies at the root of our abilities to survive, to invent and to problem solve.*

*Tales From The Fells* is an allegorical multiplatform work with deep roots in my own childhood experience and a numinous approach to the natural world. It consists of the construction of a mythical realm populated by large-scale feral creatures and their talismanic objects, made primarily from organic and plant materials. These are then used as installation elements and components in image making, and organized utilizing a fairy tale framework to provide a particular point of access as a way of focusing on specific concerns, or to trigger connections to previously archived stories. The viewer is given an opportunity, particularly in the outdoor installations, to make further connections through the senses of touch and smell. I invite viewers to play, to engage, to feel wonder and curiosity, to let their imagination run free. Fairy tales that I have written inform the visual work. My final product seeks to distill the varied forms this has taken over the past two years while retaining the materiality and tactility I have insisted on throughout.

*Myth as a semiological language.*
To understand the potential advantages of using a fairy tale framework in contemporary art settings, it might be useful to look briefly at the function of fictional narratives in general. The human imperative to generate and consume stories is evident given the wide geographic distribution of the practice, and the amount of time devoted to either inventing or participating in fiction delivered across various platforms. Tens of thousands of years ago we were telling each other stories, and as Jonathan Gottschall states in the preface to his book, “The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human”1, most of us “still hew strongly to myths about the origins of things, and we still thrill to an astonishing multitude of fictions on pages, stages and screens...We are, as a species, addicted to story. Even when the body goes to sleep, the mind stays up all night, telling itself stories” in our dreams. Our appetite for tales appears to be insatiable.

While it is obvious that we seem to need this engagement with storytelling activities, it is not apparent exactly why. Despite studies by scientists, psychologists and, most recently, neurologists, we still can’t pin down an explicit relationship between storytelling and evolutionary imperative, nor can we define or prove any other role central to the human condition. Origin stories about story origins abound and attempt to explain our appetite for fiction in terms of survival or other benefits.

It has been noted that the form that mythic stories take is remarkably similar across divergent cultures and geographic locations. Theories regarding this deep patterning emerged with structuralism and structural anthropology, notably in the writings of Claude Levi-Strauss in the late 1940’s. Structuralism is a model of human cognition positing that elements of human culture must be understood in terms of their relationship to a larger, overarching system or structure. It looks at the support rather than the overlying content, and draws the conclusion that there are grounds to suspect our brains are primed to create these myths through a sort of cross-cultural pattern recognition, or through a systematic processing of units of information. The purpose of this may be to create models for use in explanation or problem solving, to invent imaginary alternatives, or perhaps to suggest working methods or tools. Contemporary neurology is more likely to take an opposite view from the structuralists, and would reverse the notion of simpler ideas underlying more complex expressions of detailed thought. Whichever school of thought may be true, lived experience and observation are enough to tell us that engagement with fictions in many formats is widespread, important, and most likely serves a practical objective. My own feeling is that the time we spend immersed in stories is probably multi-purposed, perhaps a sort of calisthenics for the imagination, and that an active imagination contributes to the development of the personality, underlying our perception of the world and our abilities to problem solve and adapt.

Experience and observation also confirm the reciprocal relationship between our consumption and creation of mythologies. Studying which tales we hang onto, retell, rewrite, and adapt can teach us a good deal. The stories we grow up hearing impact our emerging personality and are then refracted and reflected and disseminated

into culture once again. Rebecca Solnit has a wonderful passage that addresses this in her book, *The Faraway Nearby*, “We think we tell stories, but stories often tell us, tell us to love or hate, to see or be blind. Often, too often, stories saddle us, ride us, whip us onward, tell us what to do, and we do it without questioning.” To quote Gottschall once more, “fiction subtly shapes our beliefs, behaviors and ethics...it powerfully modifies culture and history.” Marina Warner, whose writings on fairy tales are prolific and profound, makes large claims regarding the influence of these tales in “Six Myths Of Our Time”, a book of essays also presented as a series of BBC radio talks. She argues “...the fictions and narratives of a society contribute as fundamentally to its character as its laws and economy and political arrangements...”

Roland Barthes acknowledged and wrote about this power of myth, and was concerned, justifiably, about the ways in which myth takes history and renders it “natural”, confusing nature and history in order to create cultural norms of a certain point of view. Barthes’ writings in *Mythologies* are perhaps most on point to serve my purpose, that of justifying the use of these written and narrative tropes as scaffolding for the expression of ideas in art practice. He claims that above all else, *mythology is a language, a system of communication, or a message*. In addition, it is a semiological language, one that employs signifiers or symbols to embody values. Barthes describes mythology as a study of "ideas-in-form". He says, "Mythical speech is made of a material which has already been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication..." (my italics). This translates, for my intentions, to access; access to a world of accumulated, archived and deeply ingrained models of sequence and expectation. It means that the work can be entered easily and is available to viewers of varied ages and backgrounds. What one takes away from it after that depends on a number of factors, but it diminishes exclusivity, something that is important to me.

**Nature myths, natural magic, talismanic objects, green men?**

When one walks in the woods, there is generally evidence of someone having been there before, and not just having been present, but having left traces. These traces often reflect a desire to organize, or explain, to leave behind a chronicle, report, or statement. Many times, these organizations of found materials mimic or are inspired by patterns found in the surroundings. Each of these odd constructs leaves behind clues to one person’s story, struggle, meditation, or desire to understand.

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6 Ibid. p. 110
In natural environments we find ourselves in direct contact with raw, exposed cycles of birth and decay. We are aware of being in an unprotected space, of potential danger. Dwarfed by Nature’s intense physicality, we invent stories to explain it, or as a means to gain an illusion of control over it. We observe the ways in which nature adapts, compromises (or doesn’t), loses and regains ground, and survives. From origin and animal myths to Hansel and Gretel, from Zeus and his thunderbolts to Yananamo myths of the soul-eating moon, Peribo, from whose red drops of blood humans were formed, the natural world has proved to be the ultimate story generator. Some of these tales have become myth and some have crossed over into the major arcana of religion.

Diverse terrains give rise to specific monsters and gods inspired by the particulars of their geographies. Examples include the powerful jinns of the desert, made of smokeless fire, the yetis of the North and mermaids of the seas. Vegetative deities similar to my own creatures have pre-Christian origins, and have originated independently in many separate cultures. They seem to represent a primal archetype, historically associated with rebirth and the coming of spring, or as protectors and guardians of the forests. They have appeared as architectural decoration, as faces or full figures made of leaves. Versions of these types of creatures have appeared in art, literature, mythology and movies, and include figures both fierce and farcical, like Father Christmas or Holly Kings, and in more recent incarnations, Swamp Thing (comic) and Groot (comic and movie, Guardians of the Galaxy), both made entirely from living plant material.

Monsters have the potential to be scary, benign, or even inadvertently evil, allowing them to perform a number of roles. According to Stephen Asma in *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears*, the idea of “monster” is a “flexible and multiuse concept”, a “cultural category”. We then fill this vessel with what we bring to the table and to varied purpose. It is in this sense that I create and use monsters: they are a type of container. Monsters are bound up with our feelings.

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of insecurity and vulnerability, and therefore they make an ideal vehicle to carry the issues I am concerned with: those of vulnerability, safety and transformation. In addition, the word “monster” comes from the Greek “monere”, to warn, therefore to be a monster is to be an omen.

We ascribe magic to the natural world and to artifacts found there. We gather healing medicines from the world’s forests. Nature’s systems of capillaries and cantilevers help us to engineer our own constructions and provide architectural models. We gather rocks, seeds and pods, acorns and pinecones. We bring home tokens from the forest and pocket “lucky” items. These objects can seem magical even to the most jaded of us. An acorn or a smooth stone in the hand is capable of breaking through our dissociative tendencies and placing us firmly back inside our bodies.

The collection and use of durable natural objects as talismans for healing and magic is an ancient practice. Shamans around the world use magical herbs and funguses to enter the spirit world, these ephemeral substances aiding the shaman in becoming insubstantial as well, in order to travel through less corporeal realms. However, they collect teeth, bones, feathers and more solid objects for gaining power and strength. These are often fashioned into magical tools, rattles, keys, swords, daggers, or instruments. Shamans have been known to swallow the teeth of their enemies or wear headgear of antlers. Skeletons, or the idea of being reduced to a skeleton, are often part of shamanistic training. 8 Shamans use these natural artifacts to heal both body and souls.

Fairy tales draw on these precepts of natural magic explicitly and often, the natural object at hand given a new meaning and function. The manner in which I work is an extension of making connections like these while adopting story as structure. The natural world is more than just a setting for sculpture or a backdrop for stories; it is an active participant in the work I make, it is my native language. I often feel that I am only revealing what is already latent content.

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In nature, one thing always suggests another: roots and branches are tentacles, dendrites, lightening, systems of transport. A line of rock cropping up is a spine, stegosaurus plates, armor. These connections, combinations of pattern recognition and embedded ancient narratives where the natural world meets the narrative impulse, are the raw materials of my process. One thing becomes another; a round burst of flowery lichen or an acorn cap becomes a moon. A pattern and texture more suited to the wings of a moth covers a bone. If you invert the scattered fungus and decay that spot the golden leaves of autumn, you get stars and nebulae on a background of blue. I take material from the natural world and transform it, meaning changing as the materials change, the real world transformed into an allegorical one.

Embedded in my work methodology, there has always been the quest for either the perfect medium for the expression of a particular aspect of the work, or an interest in experiencing the same thing presented in multiple formats. For example, this procedure of exploring changing meaning through material variation can be clarified by looking at the incarnations of the "soft bones". I am initially taking material from the natural world and transforming it into a different natural object. I am curious about how that would look in photographs, so I arrange them, photograph them, and print them digitally or in albumen, kallitype, and platinum, each with its own parameters of color and surface texture, and cultural and historical connections. I photograph them in different settings, indoors and out, in varied lighting, day and night. I try building them into a garment to be worn. I create them as a huge sculptural installation, a rib cage big enough to walk into. I let objects decay and reuse the material to build new pieces. I write a story to see how this content can translate into words. This is not dry experimentation. I am playing with themes that resonate for me: dichotomies, ideas about danger and safety, strength and vulnerability. At the same time, I am exploring questions as an artist, seeking accuracy and sincerity in the delivery platform. But this precision may not be the end goal; perhaps this is more about the variety of experience and changing meanings rather than revealing a perfect match of medium to content.

My working methods mimic that of nature. There is iteration within and across platforms, and there are many repetitive tasks and gestures. Most of what I create is ephemeral; much of it decomposes and returns to the earth. Nature selects patterns and architectures that work for a variety of purposes and materials, working over time, along fault lines, and with variable forces such as weather. I, too, am flexible, allowing myself to be led by the environment, by the foundations and arrays already present, and the natural forces at work. I am receptive to what Nature reveals to me, and how I can shape that to create content that becomes discourse, in other words, art.

I not only choose to make multiples of objects, such as the teeth, bones, and moth wings, but also the act of making these consists of layered rhythmic actions. The construction of the larger bones requires building a rigid structure and then
applying many layers of paper mache, first, layers of strips, then layers of mashed pulp. Shaping the objects involves smoothing and applying pressure with my hands across the entire surface of the bone countless times. Left outdoors as installation elements, they will go through the reverse of this process, the outer layers melting away with rains, the inner core of wood eventually decomposing. The smaller bones covered in willow catkins are created by meticulously curating the shape and size of each catkin and applying them one at a time. The teeth are shaped individually by hand from natural earth clay, and like the bones, will lose their shape due to pressure and weather, also returning to dust and dirt. I find this repetitive working method meditative, not unlike the sand mandalas created by Tibetan monks. The beautiful and intricate designs are built grain by grain over a long period of time and then deliberately destroyed in a ceremony that ends with the sand being returned to the earth.

I use photography in a very different way than I did as a younger photographer; that practice has also slowed down, become more conscious. Then, it was about quick capture, documentation of fleeting moments, of people who might just be passing through. It wasn’t until later that I began to photograph objects or intentional tableaus or scenes. Now, after going through ethical quandaries regarding documentary and street practice, I take a more collaborative approach to my subjects and am less comfortable shooting at will.

I currently make use of photography during several stages of production. I employ sculpture and photography in a reciprocal fashion when I am in construction, stopping frequently to photograph the three-dimensional pieces for documentation, to consider how they are reading, to further inform shape and orientation, and to make decisions regarding angles for shooting. Each creature has a “good side” (though they can be viewed in the installation from all sides), a point of view that works best for photography in the specific scenario. Photographs also help me to determine when their positioning is conducive to expressiveness and to best convey particular emotions. Lighting and atmosphere are carefully considered when photographing pieces in the natural setting. The images are intended to be more than mere documentation of an evanescent product. Photography being my first love, these images are also intended to be able to stand alone, and carry their own meanings and impact.

Photography lends veracity to objects that are clearly fantastical. Even in the digital age, there are vestiges of authenticity in photographs, in knowing that the referent was in front of the camera at some point in time. In addition, because I am working with both sculpture and photography I have access to the additional strata of meaning that results from representing what is already representational.

**The rooms of experience.**

I have presented materials and ideas in several different “rooms of experience”. I realize that this is not quite the precise and perfect word, especially applied to work that lives, at least in part, out of doors. However, it does imply a contained experience, a discrete space, and in that sense is appropriate. The significance and meaning of the work depends on which iteration of it one is encountering. I do not
have the same expectations for the viewer in each of these distinct “rooms”. These restatements of connected ideas through a variety of materials offer unique experiences. They are related but with consequent changes to meaning and the type of activity engaged in, ranging from a broad sensory interaction to the specificity of scripted tales.

*The installations in the woods* represent the least mediated staging of the work, with the broadest interpretation, and function primarily as sculpture. In this context, the physicality of the objects is primary, the narratives non linear. Variables such as smell, the moisture in the air, the comfort of the viewer’s walking shoes, past connections to similar spaces and the natural dangers of the woods all play a role in viewer experience. In these surroundings, the slightest scent or a brush against stone or bark can trigger memories of previous encounters with these materials. The friction in the work comes from the environment itself as it provides a wealth of potential dangers and discomforts ranging from major to minor. The scale of the sculptures also influences the comfort level of the viewer. This “room” is primarily meant to “…evoke a nonverbal, nonconceptual experience…”10 that is nonetheless overlaid by potential narratives related to the content and form of these objects. It provides an irrational experience of delight in touching and smelling that defies expectations or concise explanation.

Most of my installations are done in publicly accessible spaces without advertisement and are come across by hikers, dog walkers, children or anyone finding themselves in the woods on that particular day. The majority of people I have had the opportunity to interact with during these outdoor experiments are surprised, curious, and many ask immediately if they may touch the objects presented or take photographs themselves. This makes for a radically different experience than is possible for the pre-informed art observer. It is largely evocative. The conscious employment of objects that link to anthropology, such as the bones and teeth, may lead some viewers on a sort of anthropological treasure hunt. Others, more drawn to the creatures, may potentially invent mythologies of their own, as I do, to explain what they are seeing, to undertake a magical adventure.

*Indoor installation:* I have attempted to handle indoor installations in a variety of ways. This is a more contrived and mediated situation. It consists of more conscious and deliberate choices regarding objects and narratives. Here the element of surprise differs from the unexpected encounter in the woods. It may be reinstated, even foregrounded; the result of the incongruity of the placement of natural and fantastical items into what is generally a sterile and modern architectural structure. Their purpose becomes more of a question for the viewer, and less of an easy extension of the natural world. The juxtaposition of natural and manmade can become the focus. Depending on the selection and display of objects, and the

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possible inclusion of images, focus can be shifted in various ways. If images are also present, there is the additional dialogue between image and object to consider. In my final product I am addressing this in two ways, one installation meant to highlight tactility and fantastical narratives, the other spotlighting ideas about multiplicity and transformation.

**Images.** Further alteration and negotiation is required if one is given access to only the images of the original objects. While one loses the tactile input, this does place the creatures and their world squarely in the viewer’s imagination, while subtly playing with notions of veracity and indexicality inherent in the photographic medium. In some cases, the images may become more powerful as a result of their meta-representational nature.

There is a different type of seduction to images than the charismatic pull of the three-dimensional object begging to be touched. Without other context, without environmental cues, a viewer of photographs can rarely resist completing the narrative that exists outside the frame. There are times when the photographic images I make are clearly illustrative, drawn from a story or even from an amalgam of several stories. Others work best without access to the written explanations, thereby insisting on narrative participation by the viewer. I have personal preferences for some images as photographs and others as illustrations, both applications being valid as expressions of the conceptual core of the work.

Finally, there is the written word version of the fairy tale stories themselves. Writing these tales has become part of my studio practice. Sometimes the stories inspire the visual work, and sometimes vice versa. These are much more explicit, choosing particular narrative threads from among the myriad possible. In one sense, this limits the meaning of the work to what is told in the tale. However, it also offers an opportunity to make connections to and comparisons between older stories and these retellings, meant in some ways to challenge the ways in which those established tales tell us to behave, think, and believe.

With my own roots being in the Appalachian Mountains, the stories of deserts and their magic are not mine to tell. *Tales From the Fells* finds geographically compatible company in fairy tales and myths from the western European forests, those written and recorded by Hans Christian Anderson and Charles Perrault, and the Teutonic fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm. The stories I have written are intended to challenge the canon while retaining a deep fondness for the form. While I hope these stories can be appreciated by readers of diverse ages, I am very interested in the current analysis and spirit of change in children’s literature. Maria Tatar, Harvard professor and perhaps the world’s foremost scholar on fairy tales has said many times that there is a need for us to identify the content of the stories we tell our children. Children’s tales have separated from the free tradition of storytelling in the workplace and have been reinterpreted as cautionary tales aimed at producing docile minds. In addition, authors of books published for children are addressing a host of issues around topics such as feminism, and gender and race inequalities. Writers like Roald Dahl, Maurice Sendak, and many others have attempted to deliver a karate chop to the tired formula of the admonitory tale, and allow for the possibility that these stories can empower children rather than simply shape them into manageable humans.
They are attempting to disrupt the “fluffy bunny” mentality by offering children some truths.

“You must allow that children are small, courageous people who deal every day with a multitude of problems, just as adults do, and that they are unprepared for most things. What they yearn for is a bit of truth somewhere.” Maurice Sendak

Conclusion

Consumption of fairy tales (more legitimately called “wonder tales”) has seen an exponential rise in the past decade. Fantasy writers like Neil Gaiman top the bestseller lists with fairy tales aimed at both children and adults, and old fairy tale themes are being told or reexamined in many popular television series and movies. Video games with fantasy themes are ubiquitous and millions of people spend hours a day immersed in these worlds. It prompts a question about why we seem to need fairy tales at this particular time, and I believe it represents something more than a diversion.

In a New Statesman article published this year appropriately titled, “Why We Need Fairy Tales Now More Than Ever”, Rowan Williams states, “Our environment, the fairy tale says, is unpredictably hostile and destructive; it is also unpredictably full of resource.”12 We are not seeking an arbitrary happy ending, or an escape; we are looking for hope. As Neil Gaiman, paraphrasing G.K. Chesterton as written, “Fairy tales are more than true: not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten.”13

It is no accident that I am making this work at this point in our cultural history. At times it seems that everything is in critical movement. The arenas in which I function are in rapid transformation: our relationship to the natural world, the retelling and altering of old tales to reflect current shifts in cultural paradigms, even the nature of photography itself are all in flux.

Through the process of working I can explore and comment on these changes. Through the action of observing and engaging, viewers are given a chance to connect to feelings and ideas related to these spheres of discourse.

WORKS CITED

Appendix 1: Two Original fairy tales

The Four Ghostly Tasks

Ivy Noelle was born six days before Christmas. Everyone said that she was the most beautiful baby they had ever seen. Even the midwife, who had delivered many babies, (and who confessed that most could not truly be described as beautiful) said that she was the loveliest infant in her long career. The child lay next to her mother in the sunshine and was loved by all. Time passed, and she grew into a feral, wild little thing. Her hair was long and dreadlocked, and she was always barefoot. She laughed like other people breathe, naturally and without thought. Her mother, who
cared little what others might think, accepted her ways and encouraged her to be the free spirit she was. She never knew a bad day, rainy or sunny. She called her mother “honey”.

Ivy loved her older brother intensely, and nothing pleased her more than to make him laugh. He was quiet and serious by nature, and often found himself rescuing small creatures and insects in danger of being trampled by her dancing feet. She invented stories and ran wild with the boys next door. They dressed as monsters and animals, kings and queens. They built forts in the woods, sucked the honey out of honeysuckle blossoms, fed chickens, and ate with their fingers. As she got a bit older, she spoke and wrote in made up languages, inventing alphabets written in shaky letters that looked as though they were alive. Ivy Noelle was exactly who she was, which was just fine with everyone.

One day, when the sky was cloudless and blue, a bomb fell. It killed many people including all of Ivy Noelle’s family. She alone survived. The land came under the rule of cruel men who left a trail of destruction in their wake. She was sent to live with distant cousins and could not understand what had happened. Grief made her unruly and reckless, and at times, full of rage. These relatives had no time for her wild ways. They made her live outside in a shed and do all the chores. Always a small girl, she was very much unsuited to these tasks. Her clothes were worn to rags and she was hungry and cold in winter; but though the dogs were allowed indoors to sit by the fire, she was never invited. In summer, she longed for cool water in which to bathe, or shade to rest in for just a minute, but these things were never allowed. She was not looked after in any way. She battled illness after illness and was worked to the bone. Eventually her spirit was crushed and left her body, an invisible wisp in the cold wind.

The swallows that flitted about freely nearby, recognized in her something familiar, and using their beaks and fanning the air with their long, lovely, tapered wings, they guided the little spirit into the woods where it drifted through the trees like smoke. Now as it happened in that forest there lived a shaman, also quite an untamed creature, and in the habit of leaving talismans and protective items in the woods for children who had lost their way. The creature became aware of the poor little floating spirit and called upon the moths of the night to hover around the soul and keep it from settling into the cold ground. There were so many moths, the beating of their wings made the spirit quite warm, and she felt their soft, fluttering, velvety touches around the edges of what can only be called her vaporous body. On the shaman’s orders, they guided the little ghost to a place where the nectar of the many flowers that grew there evaporated into the air, and this was like food for the exhausted soul. After a few days, during which time many of the woodland creatures offered what service they could, the little ghost began to be visible, less transparent, more like a cloud than a zephyr or wisp. It was then that the shaman spoke to her for the first time.

“Little ghost, it is within my power to help you regain your human form, but it is impossible to do this without your assistance, and much of the work you must undertake yourself. If you will help me for a time, I promise that you will regain your corporeal form and the strength to leave this wood.
I need to make a hat of protection with leaves of the oak, but not just any oak, nor just any leaves. I require leaves of bright red, deeply lobed with exactly seven points. Please fill this hollow stump with as many as you can gather.” At first the little ghost was quite daunted—after all, how is one to gather anything without hands? But thinking hard, she concentrated on leaning into the wind while focusing what air she could gather into small puffs, and before you know it she was “gusting”. She propelled herself with breath through the air and found that with practice, she could rustle the dry leaves on the forest floor. From there, it was not so difficult to imagine sorting the leaves and directing them to the hollow stump with this billowing motion. When the moths and the birds saw what she was trying to do, they pitched in to help, and after several days and a good deal of exertion, the task was accomplished.

The creature was pleased to see that the tiny ghost did not give up, but persevered and prevailed. “Thank you, small spirit! This is a job well done. Next, I need to make a pair of wings, large enough for myself to wear (the creature was about seven feet tall), and for this, you will need to bring me quite a number of small wings. These may only come from moths and butterflies that have died when it was their natural time. It is not difficult to find some. Please take care that they are not damaged.”

So off the little ghost went, and found that she was now capable of moving quite swiftly, flying rather than drifting. The same moths who had so selflessly helped her before came to her aid once more and showed her where to find their burial place, where many of their kind went to die as they felt the end coming. The ground was littered with their feathery wings, in velvety browns and tawny golds, some silver and marked with spots that resembled eyes, arrows, or night skies. The wings were indeed very fragile and she had to take great care. It was not possible to float many along at once, so the task required many trips back and forth. The exertion put some color into the little ghost’s---well, cheeks can’t really be quite right---into the ghostly cloud that now looked much more like cotton candy. She was beginning to change shape, with a hint of limbs and head starting to form. The creature accepted the wings and when all were assembled into a larger pair, they were very breathtaking indeed.

Now, the shaman spent some time teaching the little ghost about the special magical plants that grew in the woods, and she trailed along observing much and learning a great deal. Often distracted by small animals at play, she would join them, and so made many forest friends. The creature next set the ghost the task of gathering certain fungi for a potion. At first, the ghost had no idea how to do this, and time passed without any progress. The ghost hadn’t the strength to pull them from the ground or cut them from the logs on which they grew. At one point the little soul cried in frustration, attracting the attention of some nearby chipmunks and squirrels. One of the tiniest chipmunks had an idea. “Lead us to the plants you seek, then I will cut them at the base from the ground with my sharp teeth and Squirrel here will help me to carry them back in his cheeks. As long as Squirrel doesn’t swallow them, even the poisonous ones shouldn’t hurt him.” The ghost protested that this was too great a favor to ask of Squirrel and was far too risky. Squirrel, however, felt certain that he could transport the fungi in his cheeks as he
often did with nuts, without swallowing them. The creature’s list was long and included many different kinds of fungi and mushrooms. There were some that looked like flowers dipped in red and orange, big flat brown ones the size of dinner plates, ruffled varieties in yellow and green, purple, spotted, squat and tall. There were even some that looked much like ghost herself so recently did---pale, white, and fragile. She discovered that these were known as “corpse flowers”. The little ghost had learned quite a bit about the things that grew in the forest from her time spent with the shaman, and with the help of her animal friends, this task too was completed, and the little ghost was feeling quite a bit more solid now.

The creature made various potions with these, and even a bit of soup from some of the tastier mushrooms. Now that the little ghost was becoming somewhat more than a ghost, but not yet a person, she also needed some more solid food and nothing in the world ever tasted better than that soup, not before or since. The creature knew that it would help give her strength and she would need it for one last task. “In the forest, there is a magical animal. It looks like a deer but is very small, smaller even than a cat, and of a light golden color, like the leaves of the gingko tree. I want you to find this animal and to protect it at all costs, as I sense a danger coming and no harm must come to it.” Feeling quite fortified by the soup and all the recent accomplishments, the ghost went off in search of her charge.

A creature that small is naturally quite shy, and for some days there was no sign of it. The ghost slowly glided through the woods, along stream banks and through areas dense and dark, and on to places where the trees thinned out enough to let some grasses grow and rays of sunlight stripe the air. The diminutive specter spent some time wafting in and out of the beams of light, because it tickled a little and made her feel happy. She was not yet so solid as to lose her buoyancy, and most objects still passed through her. Suddenly, she had a sense of something glittering just off to her left, and she heard a faint rustling. She quickly ducked behind a tree and peeked out to see what it might be. There, prancing and playing in the sunlight, was the very creature she sought! It was the tiny deer, with oversized and pointed ears like a fennec fox and miniature sparkling antlers. The little ghost was captivated by it, and even had the shaman not assigned to her the task of protecting it, she would let no harm come to it. Soon the two were dancing through the brilliant banners of light together, their laughter tinkling through the forest like bells.

That night they found a cave formed in the trunk of a huge tree with great mossy “toes”, lined inside with a soft emerald carpet. The little animal hopped in, turned a circle and covering its nose with its tail was immediately asleep. The ghost swirled around, drifting down around it like a blanket, and there they slept through the night. The next day, and for many days after that, the two were inseparable friends. Together they explored the woods, which seemed to go on forever, and every day there was some marvel to see and something new to learn. Once, they came to a place where the earth was full of mica and the ground sparkled like diamonds. They discovered that thin sheets of the mica made beautiful windows for their hideout in the hollow tree, as lovely as stained glass in a cathedral. They collected small treasures with the help of their friends, the chipmunk and squirrel, and organized them according to their beauty or usefulness. The ghost had learned much from the strange shaman, including how to do some small bits of magic using these talismans.
All was well and peaceful, and the little ghost was content, thinking little about returning to the world. However, as time passed, bits and pieces of her previous life began to surface, until one day she suddenly recalled all she had lost and fell down grief stricken. She cried hot and countless tears for many days, feeling that her heart was breaking, unable to believe that her family was truly gone; in fact, she herself was gone. She pictured them in her mind to fix their images, so as not to lose them ever again. Her forest friends ached for her, but knew that there was little they could do but be there for her while she was in pain. The tiny deer never left her side, but nuzzled her and licked her hands and face. Finally, spent of her tears, the little ghost built a memorial there in the woods. Using some of the best of her collected artifacts, she created a space to remember and to celebrate those she had loved. Though she missed her mother horribly and wished so much that she were there to guide and help her, she also was sure that her mother would want her to move on and to live fully. Thinking of her brother, she silently promised him to be careful not to step on the smallest creatures of the forest, and to think of insects more fondly, as he would have liked. She observed how the dead trees in the woods nurtured many living things. She saw how the patterns of nature were repeated inside and outside of the plants and animals there, and it became possible to consider that when one thing died, its particles and atoms were released to become other things. Gradually, she was able once more to find the joy in each day.

Time passed, and the small spirit had almost forgotten about the last task she had been given. Yet danger has a way of making sudden and unforeseen appearances, and indeed it found its way back to our heroine and her tiny companion.

On a particularly lovely day in spring, the pair was walking along a new path, and they were delighted to find that it wound through stands of orchids known as lady’s slippers. These were the most delicate pink with puffy lips like purses and a pair of trailing and twisting petals. They glowed against the dark backdrop of the woods, the only color in the landscape other than some splattered, pale green lichens. All was quiet, when the little animal suddenly raised its head in alarm, sniffing the air, and a sound of barking dogs came distantly through the woods. This was followed by sounds of something large crashing through the trees --- hunters! There had never been hunters in these woods before and they hardly knew what to do. The pair began to run towards their tree shelter, the tiny deer bounding and leaping, zigzagging in its fear, and the little ghost flying as fast as she could. She wanted to pick up the animal so that they could move faster but was still without the means to do so. In their panic, they lost their way and the hunters were growing very close. They found themselves backed up against a rock wall and turning to look for another route, they faced a group of men on horses and their snarling dogs.

As it happened, these men were from the armies that had dropped the bombs that killed the little ghost’s family, though she had no way of knowing that. Since their arrival in that land, they had ravaged the green countryside and in their greed had emptied many forests and lakes of their fish and fauna. They were laughing and talking about the rewards they might expect for bringing down such a rare creature with what appeared to be valuable horns. They thought nothing about the ghost, as she was barely visible. Terrified, but knowing that this was her mission and task, she followed her instinct and flew between the men and the frightened animal. In that
moment, her love and sacrifice returned her to human form just as the men released a volley of arrows that found their way straight towards her, piercing her body, protecting the animal from harm.

For a second, there was stunned silence, as even those wicked and thoughtless men had not expected to find they had murdered a girl instead of hunting their quarry. I suppose she should have died for a second time at that moment, but instead Ivy Noelle rose up, lifted high in the air on the very magnificent wings she had helped to create; a spirit, a human girl, both at once. She turned in anger toward the men, eyes flashing, but her first concern was to comfort the tiny deer, so she bent down and picked up the trembling creature. When she stood up and looked back, the men had fled, terrified that they had seen a ghost or an avenging angel, and were never seen in those parts again.

Ivy Noelle carried her tiny friend back to their tree home, with its silvery windows and mossy carpet, and she prepared some broth to calm the creature and for her own dinner, as she felt quite hungry! Somewhere in the woods, the shaman was nodding his head, knowing that his trust in the fortitude of that tiny soul had not been misplaced. Here the thread of the story has been lost. I do not know if she returned to the world after this. Some say that she did, that she married and had children of her own and walked with them in the woods, teaching them the ways of the natural world and its magic. Others say she never left the woods, but joined the shaman to assist with the work of helping those in need, the tiny deer never far from her side. Somehow, I imagine that life in the forest might have suited her best, but who can say?

**Vera June and the Magic Teeth**

Once upon a time there were two sweet children named Eldon and Vera June. They were not orphans, but indeed, they might have been better off if they had been for their parents were quite awful. The father was a huge and hairy beast of a man who would, at times, sit on top of them if he thought that they might be feeling joy in some small accomplishment. Their mother was small and sly, a sorceress of exotic poisons and a compulsive teller of lies. She pretended to be a caring mother while actually keeping them sick and weak by feeding them her evil potions. At other times, she would feign sickness herself and demand to be waited on hand and foot. Sometimes she would bury them alive and dig them up later just for fun. Growing up in this house, with two adults who toyed with them like cats do their prey, was all they had ever known. Vera June sometimes yearned for warmth and kisses and someone to hold them and keep them from harm. Instead, she and her brother lived in fear and darkness, day after day. In spite of this cruel treatment, they were as thoughtful and good as two children could ever be.

As time went on, Eldon became very quiet, and every night Vera June dreamed that her teeth had fallen out or were broken or stolen.

As Eldon grew thinner and weaker Vera June became afraid that he might die. Each passing day found him closer to death. Vera June could see the bones under his skin and he slept most of the time. His sister made up her mind to save him, but she
did not know how. One night she dreamed of a green forest. Many times Vera June had thought of escaping, but until the dream vision of the woods, she had no idea where to look for help. When dawn came and the parents still slept, she half carried her brother and they escaped into the woods.

They entered an ancient forest that felt both friendly and strange and quickly became lost. The pair walked deeper into the woods, hungry and alone, and Vera June was sure they had crossed their own path more than once. Only songbirds and the rustling of creatures in the shadows broke the silence. Eldon became too weak to go on and Vera June made a bed for him out of soft mosses and told him to rest. She wandered, though not too far for fear of not finding her way back, looking for berries or roots that they might eat and making a cup out of bark to bring back water from a nearby stream. Vera June tried to feel hopeful but as the light faded it became hard to tell one green thing from another and she sat for a moment, fighting back tears.

Suddenly, Vera June had a feeling of being watched, and when she looked up she saw a tall, spindly figure, green as leaves, with eyes as big as teacups. Her heart nearly stopped, for the creature was easily eight feet tall and carried a quiver of arrows with bow loaded and ready. The creature stood right in front of her on the path, looking down upon her from its great height. She was very afraid, but the creature merely gazed into her eyes in a serious way, as though seeing inside her. Then digging in the claws of one large, mossy foot, it set off at a brisk pace, making a sign for her to follow. Fearfully, she allowed herself to be led to a clearing.

In the center of the space was a huge pile of teeth, some tiny and white, and others large and yellowed. A second creature, somewhat smaller and with pointed antlers was sorting what seemed to be teeth and bones, pods, nuts, and acorns into neat piles. Odd bones covered in something resembling dandelion fluff, were arranged by size on shelves of bark. Though they were frightening to look at, Vera June also felt very much like she wanted to touch them. The light in that place was beautiful, like sunshine and moonlight mixed together, and the scent of pine and herbs made her feel sleepy and happy, even while still a little afraid.

Both creatures were tall and thin and seemed to be made from living plants and moss, and Vera June could not have said if they were plant or animal. Their large claws worried her, and they never uttered a word, though she seemed to hear them inside her head as plainly as though they had spoken. They seemed kindly, offering her broth and filling her homemade cup with water. She nodded thanks but wanted to run to Eldon right away with this food and drink. She tried to tell the creature about Eldon in her own language, hoping that it might somehow understand. This seemed to work and the green creature followed her to where Eldon lay in the dim light in his bed of moss. He looked so ill and so still, that terror gripped her heart until she saw his chest rising and falling just a little in his sleep. By now, Vera June believed that the woodland beings meant her no harm, so when the creature scooped up Eldon and carried him off she followed, this time more hopeful than fearful.

After the children had eaten their fill, the creatures held them close, covering them with quilts made of strange cloth covered in mysterious marks and drawings, and the children spent the night in the magical clearing. Vera June half awoke at one
point and thought that she heard frightening sounds as if a violent battle raged nearby, but when she woke she wasn’t sure and decided it must have been a dream. She snuggled closer to the creature and drifted back to sleep.

In the morning, Vera June awoke to a rhythmic, dry, brittle sound, like a rattle or odd scraping. She opened her eyes and saw the creature dragging its long claws through the pile of teeth as though looking for something particular. It seemed to be singing very quietly, or chanting and soon it approached Vera June and filled her pockets with some of the teeth. She was also given a hat covered in spikey red pods for Eldon. The creature put a sort of vest made of the strange fuzzy bones on Eldon, as armor. Vera June understood that they must return to their home and that these items would keep them safe. She took the hand of the monster and looked into those eyes the size of dinner plates, and silently gave thanks. The creature hugged her close for a moment, and then the children were on their way.

Kindness gave Vera June strength, and she saw the forest differently since meeting the creature. She helped Eldon as they walked towards their home. He seemed to get stronger as time passed, and while Vera June was full of joy to see his health returning, she grew very worried about what might await them upon their return. At one point, a huge wild animal came crashing through the trees, planning to make dinner of the children. In a panic, Vera June threw some of the teeth between them and a fence of bone sprouted from the ground, like giant ribs, surrounding the children until the ferocious animal gave up and went away.

As they neared their house, Vera June grew more and more afraid and her heart began to pound. Suddenly, the mother and father came out of nowhere, looking murderous. Their father ran at them, his breath hot and trees falling down as he poured the ground, his heavy footfalls closing the distance between them in great bounds. The small and sneaky mother made as if to welcome them home with loving arms, then changed into a shrieking bird with a sharp beak and dove at them. Eldon was still too weak to fight and Vera June felt frozen to the ground with fear. Her heart was as loud as a drum and beat faster and faster, while her ears rang like sirens. Still she could not move. She held her brother tightly to her and thought that they would surely die when suddenly she heard a roar, and just as suddenly realized it was coming from her own throat. Her mouth was full of many pointed teeth. She looked down and saw that her hands suddenly ended in long furry claws like those of the creatures in the woods. She roared so loud that windows shattered, and she slashed and tore with those teeth until the ferocious animal ran away.

The two children clung to each other in the sudden quiet, panting and expecting at any moment that the pair would return and attack again from the shadows, but they never did. When they felt sure the parents were gone, Vera June sowed the teeth into the ground all around the house, and as before, the fence of bones appeared to protect them. She cleaned the house with birch twigs and burnt herbs to rid it of any remaining evil spirits. Next, the children made that house as cheerful as it had previously been dreadful.

Vera June and Eldon grew up and were good to each other, and one day they left that place to raise families of their own. They loved their children truly and were good neighbors, always at each other’s houses with the children playing together and shrieking with laughter. Vera June never forgot about the green creatures of the
forest, and though she often walked in the woods when she felt sad or troubled, she never saw them again. Sometimes she thought she saw traces of where they might have been, and there she would leave a small gift or offering that they might find.

No one saw her teeth again, because they only came out when she needed them, but she knew they were there, and that was enough.

Appendix 2: The Elements Outdoors
Appendix 3: A Field Guide To The Materials
Field Guide to Materials
Tales From The Fells

Ginkgo
Strength and longevity, enhances memory

Wildfire Pods: Playfulness, adventure, beauty, grace, endurance.

Heliconia: adoration, great returns. In Greek mythology, Mt. Helicon, home of the nine muses of the arts and sciences.

Green Amaranth: Immortality, healing, protection.

Protax seeds: named after the son of Poseidon, diversity, courage and strength.

Saffron: Donovan: Motherwood, the feminine, magic and intuition

Spring

Bark: Protective.
Used for medicinal purposes.

Kakumi Fern Curly: fascination, confidence, magic, shelter.

Acorn
Luck, prosperity, strength, parental, immortality.

Materials used:

Mica
Clay
Bone, Odocoileus virginianus
Velvet fibers
Silk
Wood
Photographic emulsion

Bark
Moss
Protea
Fern curls and leaves
Bromeliad
Ginger
Tillandsia
Heliconia
Palm Bloom
Amaranthus
Rosemary
Rose
Wisteria
Birch bark, twigs and catkins
Willow curly and pussy willow
Oak, acorns and leaves
Lichens and bracket fungi
Castor bean pods
Gingko

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Green Man Mythologies

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