

The Storyteller
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Part I: Climbing Trees

This is how it starts: it was a stretched out night at the end of summer, one of those nights when twilight goes for hours and hot day gives grudgingly to cool evening.

A thousand miles with a single step—I went walking, pacing along sidewalks pulled long and rubber band thin. I went walking and I hummed as I walked, some tuneless song that no radio ever played. The lawns were still green. The trees still had all their leaves, and one bare-chested old man with a hoary beard was gardening by porch light. It was a nice enough night.

The clock ticked past midnight on to thirteen. Cars finished going home and I turned towards downtown. A pregnant moon began her long swim across the sky, bright enough to rival the streetlights with her shadow-casting. My feet strained to leave the earth and my fingers snapped on empty air. Percussion, man, percussion.

Out of downtown's glass and steel imitations to where trees are real. One block of park left over, tucked away in the city's refrigerator until downtown gets hungry. The trees remind me of the old man digging in his yard—cracked, unshaven, and unbowed. It's time to start the story, time to climb up up and away.

The tree is comfortable with its age, unashamed. I cling to it and feel out hand and toeholds. It's a big old tree with deep roots. I don't know how deep they go until I look down and down and see something big and scaly writhing and gnawing at them. Can't shrug with my hands full, so I keep climbing up until I'm climbing down, lowering myself down a stone tower. Down to the ground to get out of the rain that's not falling.

Part II: Grendel's Chessboard

The ground is black and white in rank and file
squares, a chessboard miles and miles
wide. The tree turned tower is a rook,
black and proud as the ships which took
the Greeks on their chase after Leda's daughter.
Round-headed pawns stand shield to shield across the ten-year slaughter
that has laid waste to swift Achilles and proud
Hector. It's a war story, a story of shrouds
and bloody fog.

I'm tucked in amongst the white
pieces, standing armored marble in the night
watching the board. Statuary army
all around me, crested helms and armor
gleaming in the watchfires. No grass between my toes
just the night and the squares flowing
and flowing.

Here's a horse
of great stature, black marble knight. It takes a course
through the air, over the wall of pawns,
treacherous and majestic. The day dawns
red over the black and white squares.
Priam, tall and crowned king stares
with weary and unbelieving eyes at the
empty Greek camp, the black pieces seen
no more, the looming horse.

The knight drifts
gently to Ilium's master, the king castled and
strong. Hesitant at fortune, Priam's hand
reaches out with an apple. The black horse bends
a thick and graceful neck. Lips pull back and teeth extend
to take the apple, Dis's second.

The horse's black lips pull back and keep
pulling back along the white skull and deep
chest. It's Grendel! Skyscraper tall
and starting a feud of his own with the whole game. Hall
wrecker and man-slayer, Grendel's rage
brings early resignation. Pergamus's aged
king topples in the gesture of defeat.

To my left the monster stands,
roaring at the board, taking pieces in his hands
and rending, ripping and tearing,
hurling broken stone. I'm staring,
rubbernecking, straining to know
just how much damage Grendel will sow
in this fresh rampage. Bishops shatter,
castles shake and shudder. Black hooves and white clatter
on the marble as the pieces flee
the carnage. I hide in the lee
of a broken chariot. Hecuba the queen
falls sobbing and a Trojan with a clean-
cut face carries a bearded old man away

Away strikes the right chord. They say
beware of Greeks bearing gifts,
so I shy from their ships and lifting
sails. Grendel's got the walls down
and I don't see any national guard choppers around
to open fire as the hall-wrecker climbs Apollo's
temple. Casual-cool, I run and forego
my chariot-shelter. Time to hit the road
and hope for a ride.

Part III: Odysseus the Drifter

Once I've put Troy into the past
I slow down and start snapping
my fingers again, trying to find
the right rhythm for this new road.
The dying are dead and the dead
are buried beneath the marble
that Grendel knocked to the ground
I keep walking, waiting impatiently
for the story that starts with
Troy's fall to find me.
Thumbing it down crack-paved thoroughfares,
No cars come, no kind drovers
riding wagons, no wheels at all.
The sun's going, slowly turning the sky.
I hear the harsh cries of gulls. Up
drives a boat of a midnight blue convertible.
Tires squeal and stop.
The driver's got dark glasses
and stubble strewn thick as stalks in the field.
"Looking for a lift?" he asks.
"Yeah man, I am. You offering?"
The driver nods. He knows the roads.

This guy's a dean of the down and out
A twisting man of many turns,
Tough-talking and tanned
molten by miles and miles of driving.
"Where you headed man? Going home?"
The driver shakes his dour head and answers,
"Years and years I've yawed
and pitched on patchy pavement.
Cursed I am, kept off highways and straightways
Bound always to winding backroads by

a voodoo mama in a dark valley
when I made a meal of her many
cattle.” The grinning drifter is called
Odysseus, doomed to wander.
His tale’s classic, full of tall peaks
and deeps low and lengthy.
A good story for going down the road
beneath black skies and gem-bright stars.
I see lights ahead, lamps hung high
and a parking lot packed with
all manner of cars and ships high-masted.
A bearded old man bows as we back
into an extra-long space in the lot.
“Hey, this place got a name?”
“Heorot.”

Part IV: Heorot

I lose the drifter somewhere between the car and the antler-hung door. The place smells of coffee, pie, and unwashed bodies. People everywhere. Viking raiders and Crusaders and Mongols and sailors clustered around their tables and swapping tales. “Remember the time...” Jason’s got his Argonauts jammed into a corner booth and Gawain’s asking the waitress if she knows where to find the Green Chapel. This is a place of pause, a truck stop for the errant hero, a refuge from the road’s monsters. The mat’s welcome is worn to hospitable nubs.

Heorot is noisy. The sandals and boots and spurs clack and pad on the linoleum. Sinbad pushes past me in search of sails or a roc. The counter’s chipped by the constant passage of heroic cups, plates of glow-greasy food, and the weight of errant hands. I grab a seat and order some coffee. It’s good, blacker than the night is blue. Puts a little fire in the belly and quickens the blood. Orpheus, on the road with Jason, breaks out his lyre. The Crusaders bring kettledrums, the Mongols one-string fiddles. I can’t hear my coffee for the noise.

Then I see her lounging in the doorway. Oak tall and reed slender, hung in silk. Her eyes defy any particular color, her skin is day and night and her hair is sun and moon. Nobody else notices. She smiles poetry and breathes myth. When she beckons, I follow, drawn word by word in her wake towards a particoloured tent on a plain of endless mirror. Clouds hide the sky and the full moon soaks into them like a dollop of heavy cream. Heorot is gone and there are only the tent and the muse. She pulls back the flap and whispers me inside.

Part V: The Teller

I'm alone.

But not quite.

The stars are there. And now something
other
else
old.

I see old before I see a face. Old as the
hills
stars
the slow dance.

All this is just floating, me and the old and the stars and the nothing.

Old has a face. For me that face has a beard and is eagle's roost craggy. I've seen it before, the Teller's face. The Old Man of the Mountain. The Man in the Moon. The Sage. Call him whatever you want. At the start of my walk, riding Aeneas' back at Troy, parking cars at Heorot, and now he's just floating next to me, the Teller.

"Prophecy in all things."

"Prophecy?"

The Teller nods. The stars in his eyes do not move. "The teller of tales is a teller of fortunes."

"Prophecy."

"In all things."

"I dig. Legacy."

"In all things, legacy."

"They're after me, always here."

"That is the teller's legacy. Every story is an echo and makes its own echoes."

"Can't hear for the noise."

"Tell what lies beneath and above."

"Prophecy?"

“Legacy.”

“Telling. But echoes are heavy as stones and steady as mountains.”

“Pliant as the ocean. Light as the hair of a dandelion.”

“I dig. Who’s the muse?”

“Prophecy.”

“Truth?”

“Truth is beauty.”

“Beauty is nothing. Give me truth.”

“Telling is truth.”

“Telling lies.”

“No. Telling tales is telling the world.”

“I dig. The world’s small and full.”

“The world is full and always empty.”

“Echoes?”

“Don’t tell the echoes.”

“Tell emptiness?”

“Tell the wind. Tell games. Tell journeys. Tell motion and tell the future. Never tell emptiness.”

“Legacy and prophecy, echoing empty in the full. Dig.”

“Dig deeper. What are the echoes?”

“Truth. Too much truth.”

“Not enough truth. Finite truth in infinite void.”

“Every star has a tale.”

“Prophecy.”

“And every tale lights a star.”

“Legacy.”

“It’s a hard thing, the telling through the echoes.”

“Make your own echoes.”

“I dig. Clap hands and stomp feet. Dance.”

“Tell. Yours is to tell. Echoes on echoes and new sounds.”

“New sounds where they crash. Prophecy.”

“Truth. And the telling is hard. Echoes are hungry.”

“I dig. Keep telling, keep moving, keep on.”

“Not yet. Listen. Tell the story of the dawn and the plain.”

“And the echoes?”

The Teller flashes pointed teeth. “And the echoes.”

Part VI : The Plain

Grey dawn and the tent and the Teller are gone and the muse returns. Not in the flowing gauze and slipsilk trappings that drew me from the stag-hall, but in coveralls stained and torn. Her hair’s chopped short and her hands are callused with careful labor. Her smile nests in weary wrinkles as she passes me tools—tiny chisels, hammers, needle files. Gone is the hope of shared breath. Then she’s gone too and all I’ve got are these tools and a block half-formed by the stories of war, road, and hall.

They come out of the fog with the sunrise—beauties and monsters collected to jeer at the unfinished lump of a tale. The noise of tawdry bangles, coarse singing and bellowing pipes, a parade of demons and dancing gypsies. Hags and harpies and jotuns and alfar and a hundred handfuls of flesh-eating ghouls. I hold the tools and stare at the lump and think about the Teller, about prophecy and legacy and echoes. The sun moves but the monsters do not. They get louder as the light reveals the flaws in my working, grow bold enough to touch me, to test me with their claws and whispers beneath the cacophony. I shudder and set chisel to stone.

The sun burns the fog to a fine ash that settles in the din. No silver mirror, now the ground is grey and hurling itself in barren waves at the horizon. I clench my teeth and wish for coffee. And I keep at my carving. I am telling a story of movement, of being moved and chasing the eternal elusive. The story's got legs and the monsters are close. I throw myself across its back and whistle it into motion. Away. And away and away.

Part 7: Over Hill and Under

No hitch hiking now, I need
to spur my own story forward.
Headlong my flight, heeding nothing
My story's got stony legs,
runs swiftly down ruin's road
as a wild-eyed white horse.
Over hill and under hill
The hollow hills, heavy with wonder
The sunless land where stories die,
caught in the coils of tellers'
madness, the snares made by mind.
This is the deep end, deadly dreaming.

The story is colt-skittish
Not finished yet, still finding shape
and seeking breath as I spur it on.
Sky wide, a butterfly soars ahead
on wings of fire, the wake of its
flight a flurry of black flakes
that sting like hot ash, leave scars.
Heavy gears spin painted stars and
a tractor tills fields of candle tallow.
Trumpets carved of bone, the triumph
of unseen hands, echo hollow.
Hooves pound on a dark path of steel.
I crouch low, cling to story's neck
in sheet metal thunder, mint harvested
before a castle composed of smoke
Trees wrought of glass, gleaming orange
in the sunless land where stories die.

Balanced on a fallen branch
the muse crouches, curls a beckoning finger
as I ride recklessly past.
Too slow I turn my head
in the viscous air—she's vanished.
Speeding timeless, suspended in twilight,
I'm half-drowned in stories' dreaming.
Wending and winding on the white horse
'til the third day, weary, dawns.

Part 8: Urban Chessboard

Sunrise kills the orange light
There are trees tall as pillars right
and left of me and the horse
that is my story. The rambling course
draws me on and on.

Orderly now, the trees go monochrome
Black and white with grey leaves, home
to no birds. Alternating ivory and ebony
a grid, a chessboard again. The story runs free
and pays no heed.

Sleepless, strung out and heavy-eyed
I hold to the story, ride
it for all it's worth as the squares
Surge from the board, stairs
and windows and walls speeding
into the air. Trees become buildings needing
inhabitants. Unbidden they come,
Drawn by the hum
of my voice and the rhythm of hooves.

They're my own echoes,
the echoes of words already flown
from my mouth. They take life,
beating hearts, breathings lungs on this field of strife
where Troy once dwelt.

Musicians with bells on their shoes
crowd a boardroom, talk of losing
melodies and finding harmonies. Silver birds
perch on windowsills. Smiling shepherds
wander the streets without flocks.

The white horse caroms ever on.
Poets sit on black benches, eyes gone
to far off places. Cooks labor in
cavernous kitchens, warmed by firing
ovens.

Leaves from buildings once trees
drift to the street. Faces stare at me
from the windows and I stare back
from the white horse, eyes red from lack
of rest.

I spur the story horse on, faster
and faster. Wary of this, the last
hurdle and the first. It rises
before me, born of my sighs
and colored by the midday sun.

Unfolding itself into a great
creature, tall as buildings, straight-
backed with flesh white as clouds,
white as the horse and shrouded
with shadows no light casts.

The horse rears and tries to turn,
tries to flee, to throw me down
but I force it steady, make it face
the endgame in this place
of square on square.

Tapered fingers reach with an extra joint, no
nails, just fingertips horn hard and slow
sensitive as lips. Moves with pond'rous grace
sculpted as the ocean sculpts cliffs' face
with unthinking care.

It towers over me. Eyes black
as Grendel's false skin stare the horse back
three stuttering paces. And the horse is inert,
a statue again. The creature's hurt
eyes flash question and accusation.

A name. A legacy and a prophecy.
This I have yet to give. I see
it then, the Teller, the Muse, the horse—
all beneath its white skin. A name.
A name for this word-born
beauty.

“Story.” In a raw whisper, it’s the
name I give, the prophecy and the legacy.
The horse comes alive and I ride
again, on and on past the new angel
in the city of black on white.
The wind swirls over and through,
ever restless.

Part 9: Out

It blows through me. I set heels to the horse’s flanks and it’s a Harley, painted white and gold. I gun the engine and head full throttle into a parking garage. Up and around, up and around. Fire out the tailpipes and the headlight goes in a shower of blue sparks. To the top and off the edge...

And the motorcycle is a blizzard of leaves and early acorns following me down as I fall from the tree. I hit the ground hard, stare up at the branches. I can still smell the horse, but I smell the end of summer and see an old man, bare-chested and hoary-bearded, staring at me from his garden.

That’s how it happened. That’s the way the story goes and it’s truth if you don’t believe it and a lie if it makes you happy and it’s a story if it blew from a far off place and you felt it. A story is like that, like the wind and a long walk at the end of summer. Yeah. Just like that.