



Ceridwen's Cauldron



Myth, story and our relation to the earth
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Tired of all who come with words, words but no language
I went out to the snow-covered island.

The wild does not have words.
The unwritten pages spread themselves out in all directions!

I come across the marks of roe-deer's hooves in the snow.
Language, but no words.

—Tomas Tranströmer (Swedish, 1931-2015)
translation by John F. Deane

The Stories We Live Inside

When I was twelve years old, Hitler was elected president of my summer camp. We were playing a game, what the counselors had told us was a “political simulation.” It took place in an imaginary country called Strawberryland, and during the game we elected leaders, bought snacks, and earned play money by doing small chores. There were political parties, elections, and leaders who campaigned for our votes. We listened to their speeches, voted, and saw the snacks change from cheap popcorn to expensive chocolate cake depending on who was elected.

As the game went on things began to change more decisively. Finally there was no work to be had, all the play money went out of circulation, and a bearded counselor from “the Red Party” started waving a toy sword and giving speeches in which he promised to “Make Strawberryland great again.” It was then that some of us had a realization: we were being tricked. This game wasn’t about Strawberryland but about pre-war Germany, and was in fact a test by the counselors to see if we were smart enough to avoid electing Hitler or not.

We were excited that we had figured this out, and felt powerful: we were smarter than the counselors! So we began telling our new insight to everyone who would listen. By this time, however, it was late in the game, darkness had set in, and crowds of boys were walking around chanting “Red party! Red party!” Whether or not we had figured out the “real” story didn’t matter anymore: the supporters of the Red Party had signs, momentum, and a chant. We were no match for them. As we tried to get everyone to snap out of it the giddiness of that moment began to slide into something darker, as though we were all at sea and subject to a current too powerful for any of us to resist.

There was one last election, but the results went unannounced. Then the game ended and we all walked on a path through the forest—crickets making shimmering music around us, stars overhead—and gathered around a campfire the counselors had prepared. The bearded candidate from the Red Party stood up with his arms

outstretched. “I am your new leader!” he shouted. The crowd cheered. And then another counselor, in apologetic tones, told us that the game had been a simulation of pre-war Germany. Shock and silence settled in, and a few in the crowd began to weep.

Years later I became a counselor at that summer camp, and asked about the game. I was told that it hadn’t been repeated, as the counselors had agreed that it had been too traumatic for all involved. But now that I have become a regular teller of stories that night comes back to me. Because it was one of my first experiences of what it is like to slip out of one story and into another, and of the power of any story to organize—like a magnet, or a star—the world around it.

Not long ago I told a Norse myth to children at a public library. I began by explaining to them the cosmos of Nordic mythology, describing to them the various gods of that world. Right away a six-year-old girl’s hand shot up, and when I called on her she confidently toldnformed me that “There’s only one God.” I gave a less-than-perfect response, saying that “Back then” people believed in more than one god. Without spelling it out in so many words, I essentially told her that the story was a relic, a dead thing from an age and a culture less enlightened than our own. Some minutes later, however, we came to one of the climactic moments of the story, when the frost giant Thiazi takes the form of a golden eagle so as to steal the apples of immortality from the gods. As the eagle took flight I gave a shout and pointed to the corner of the room, and was amazed to find that, yes indeed, a golden eagle was perched right there. Not an actual eagle, but the golden eagle that is at the top of every American classroom flagpole. It was a small room and the flag had been there the whole time, but I hadn’t noticed it. It felt to me as though I’d insulted the story by calling it a relic from the past, and it had responded by saying “Look buddy, there are big dumb violent frost giants all over the place, greedy for power and desperate to live forever, and your federal government might just be one of them.”

Every nation must have a story if it is to survive for long. More specifically, any election is at heart a competition between stories. The last American presidential election was a contest between two stories that could be summarized as *I will make life better for all of us* and *You are oppressed by an evil system and I will destroy it*. The second story has evil in it, and the promise of big, explosive action—it provides exactly what many big-budget films provide. The broad outlines of that story are shared by the American revolution, the Star Wars movies, and—to some degree—activists on both sides of the political spectrum.

That story—*You are oppressed by an evil empire, and I will destroy it*—has felt true to me at various times as well. I felt it keenly when I was a shy adolescent, sweating my way through public school. But it felt true to me in my twenties also, when I worked as an environmental activist going door-to-door in the suburbs of Minneapolis; and it made sense to me in my thirties, when I moved to New York City to study poetry and earned my rent by working in midtown Manhattan. (I still remember the view out those office windows: steel and glass, power without imagination, a world run by frost giants.) In each of these situations that story helped me to understand both myself and my surroundings. But that story is only one of many. Just as in that long-ago game at summer camp, it turns out that there is more than one story: other options are possible.

Humans think with stories, whether we are looking at deer tracks in the snow, numbers on a graph, or people in the street. In many ways stories are the maps we use to navigate the world around us. For this reason an education in the traditional stories of the world is also an education in possibility. Because no story is the only story, and to know that is to rattle the door of whatever room it is that holds you, making it possible to someday open that door and take one furiously wild step into the forest outside.