

The Perilous Realm

Faërie is a perilous land, and in it are pitfalls for the unwary and dungeons for the overbold. All manner of beasts and birds are found there; shoreless seas and stars uncounted; beauty that is an enchantment, and an ever-present peril; both joy and sorrow as sharp as swords.

In that realm a man may, perhaps, count himself fortunate to have wandered, but its very richness and strangeness tie the tongue of a traveler who would report them. And while he is there it is dangerous for him to ask too many questions, lest the gates should be shut and the keys be lost.

Faërie contains many things besides elves and fays, and besides dwarfs, witches, trolls, giants, or dragons: it holds the seas, the sun, the moon, the sky; and the earth, and all things that are in it: tree and bird, water and stone, wine and bread, and ourselves, mortal men, when we are enchanted. - J.R.R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories', *The Monsters and The Critics*, Boston; Houghton Mifflin Co., 1984, pgs 109 & 113.

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I fell deeply under the spell of dwarfs. I visualized them so intensely that I came to the very frontiers of hallucination; once, walking in the garden, I was for a second not quite sure that a little man had not run past me into the shrubbery. I was faintly alarmed, but it was not like my night fears. A fear that guarded the road to Faërie was one I could face. - C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, New York; Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984, pg 55.

When I was a small boy our family lived in a little house on Slayton Settlement Road. One day I sat playing with my toy trucks beneath a Crab-apple tree in the front yard. Happening to glance up through the branches, I was startled to see, for a brief instant, the unmistakable silhouette of a witch riding her broom-stick across the western sky.

It was an illusion, created by a twig and a leaf and my own movement, and I realised this almost immediately. My momentary fright was replaced by relief, although I still felt uneasy enough to go and play indoors for the rest of the day.

This was my introduction to Faërie, and to the paradox which is its main characteristic. It was a genuine fright, but one which I have ever since dearly wished to experience again. Not that I've ever wanted to see an *actual* witch soaring across the sky. One of my favorite movies is the 1939 version of *The Wizard Of Oz*; and my favorite character in that film is the Wicked Witch of the West. But to meet such a creature in person would be a terror, a violation of living reality. The *illusion* is what I crave.

Across from our house there was a lane that went back into the woods; my father often took my sister and I for walks down this lane. Occasionally we went beyond the end of the lane and followed a footpath up and down steep little hills through the trees to where a plank bridge crossed the waterfall of a small stream.

At one point beside the path there was a small falling-down shed. When I first saw this shed I immediately recognised it as the house of Old Tom the red fox, a character from a favorite fairy-tale. I envisioned a fox, wearing blue suspenders and smoking a pipe, sneaking out the door to hide in the woods when he heard us coming. I wondered if he was watching us from behind the trees, and I hoped for a glimpse of a red tail and

blue suspenders.

Twenty-five years later I walked down the lane and followed the footpath (now worn and rutted by the tires of ATV's) to the little waterfall. It seemed much smaller than I had remembered. Several yards downstream two half-buried lengths of moss-covered wood were all that remained of the bridge. Closer inspection revealed that they weren't planks after all, but rather split logs.

I couldn't find the shed, or even the ruins of it. I wondered now if it had ever existed in the first place, or if my own imagination had invented it and later tricked my memory into thinking it was real. I walked back to the road and stood beside my pick-up truck, looking across at the little house where I had played so long ago, now grown shabby with the passing of the years. The Crab-apple tree was still there, but I couldn't go to it. This gate to Faërie was shut, and I no longer had the key.

Our next-door neighbours on Slayton Settlement Road had children who were close in age to my sister and I, and we would often walk across our yard to visit. One time we stayed until nightfall, and had to walk home in the dark. The mother had made candied apples, and she gave my sister and I each one as we prepared to go.

Beyond the dark woods and hills across the road the lights from the town of Lockport made an eerie glow in the sky. The beam of a distant spotlight swung back and forth across the heavens. As our neighbour sent us off into the night with our candied apples, she pointed to the strange lights and cautioned us. I don't remember what it was that she warned us of. The phrase "Beware the spirits" seems to stick in my mind. But she must have been making a joke, teasing us, whatever she said.

Yet I was instantly terrified, and couldn't get across that dark yard and into the light and safety of our own house fast enough. My imagination had kicked into high gear; I just knew that that ominous glow in the sky was from some evil place, and the wooded hills were alive with sinister beings; I could almost see them: tall and mighty, clothed in flowing robes and dark hoods; featureless, but watching with malevolent eyes.

It was another frightening experience, but again the fear was exciting. A night that was empty of the 'unseen' held no attraction. But a night populated with creatures of fantasy, however grim or hostile they may be, was part of the Perilous Realm. I had once again stumbled over the borders of Faërie. Since that time, shadowy visions of angelic watchers, both holy and evil, have always filled my dreams and imaginations. I see them especially in the distant glow of lights in the night sky, and in the setting sun as it sinks through cloud banks into the west.

When I was six years old our family moved to West Somerset Road in Appleton. This is where I grew up. The cornfields and apple orchards, hedgerows and woodlots were my boyhood playground, and still are sometimes. And Faërie is there as well. Those who seek the Perilous Realm with map and compass will never find it. It is not limited to any one time or place. And a visit to Faërie can never be planned; it is a purely chance meeting of environment, circumstance, and (especially) attitude.

One day I walked out to the road to get the newspaper. Pausing at the end of the driveway to check for any traffic, I heard the sound of laughter close by. Or was it far away? I couldn't tell. It confused me enough so that I first looked directly around me to see if the neighbour children were playing nearby; but I also looked down the road to the next nearest house, a quarter of a mile away. I saw no one, which only added to the strangeness of the laughter. It had sounded as if it had come from the ditch right beside me, but also as if from a far distance.

I walked back up the driveway with my newspaper, and by the time I reached our house I was convinced that what I had heard were the voices of genuine fairies. They were talking and laughing together in their own land,

their voices drifting across the border into our world for just a moment.

That was my last glimpse of the Perilous Realm for a long time. In the troubled adolescent years that followed, the pressures and traumas of life closed in around me, and I lost sight of Faërie. Not until I was in my mid-twenties did I wander back into the daydreams and fairy-tales of my childhood. But I did so gladly.

The adventures I had in Faërie when I was a boy were each triggered by different circumstances, and were each of a slightly different nature. But they were all accidental: the mark of true Faërie. I hadn't *planned* to see a witch through the Crab-apple tree, or to come across the house of Old Tom on an afternoon walk (regardless of whether it had really been there or whether my imagination had altered my memory in later years). I hadn't *planned* to fill the woods across Slayton Settlement Road with sinister watchers after a visit to the neighbours, or to hear the laughter of the Good People while fetching a newspaper. But these things did happen; and their unexpectedness sharpened each experience, and my memory of them.

Being an adult somewhat changes things. Faërie is closer to me now, because I like to surround myself with it. I've seen the real world; it frightens and disgusts me, and I avoid it when I can. I spend much of my time wandering the wide lands of fantasy and imagination. These have evolved and matured a bit over the years. The fairies of my boyhood (tiny sprites with gauzy wings) have been largely replaced by the Elves (as Tolkien imagined them: tall, beautiful, wise, and powerful). I still visit Oz and the Hundred Acre Wood, but many of my daydreams and visions are now of Beleriand, Alelith, and other more 'sophisticated' realms of the imagination. A dark wood at night still makes me fearful; so I take to the midnight woods whenever I can and enjoy the fear.

And I have even happened upon *true* Faërie in recent years. One evening I was wandering the woods and orchards along the shore of Lake Ontario. After watching the sun sink behind the golden waters of the lake, I crossed the gravel beach at the mouth of a small creek and entered the shadows of a wood. I walked along a dry stream-bed that twisted and turned between steep banks through the trees. Out of the corner of my eye I glimpsed a sudden movement. A vague shape glided swiftly down into the gully and out of sight; I saw it only for a second.

I stood very still for several minutes, but finally decided that it must have been a trick of fading sunlight and leaves moving in the light breeze. I continued along the stream-bed until I came to a sharp curve. Just then I heard a sound. From around the bend there came a clear and melodic voice, either singing or speaking lightly. I peered around the bend and saw among the shadows the unmistakable figure of a girl dressed in white. But just as quickly as I caught sight of her she was gone, vanishing into the gloom. I stared into the dark wood until my eyes burned; I listened until the very silence seemed deafening in my ears. But I was alone. Who she was or where she had vanished to, I never learned.

One summer afternoon I watched two coyotes chase a pair of hounds across a hayfield and into the apple orchard where I was working. One coyote was grey, the other black, and they made those dogs run for their lives. One of the hounds, a big gaunt Redbone, kept glancing back over his shoulder as he ran at top speed, something I don't think I've ever seen an animal do before. He was terrified. The two dogs leaped the train tracks and ran directly past the apple tree I was standing in. The coyotes saw me before they reached the tracks and stopped short, hesitating. And then, to my wonder and joy, the grey coyote lifted his head and let out a long quavering howl. A thrill of excitement shot through me. This was a wild and lonely sound straight out of the ancient hills and pathless forests.

For a moment the tame, ordered world of man vanished from my eyes, and I found myself surrounded by something older and stronger. I was alone and small in a rustling shadow-world. Cold stars glittered overhead; the bare trees stood as twisted silhouettes against the winter sky. Mysterious shapes moved furtively beyond the

edge of sight; yellow eyes peered from the darkness. A slow, stealthy movement and a snap of twigs. A sudden pounce; a small, short squealing. Gleaming fangs buried in warm fur; blood on the snow. Dark shapes gather and move in. Slitted eyes stare and crouch. A snarl and sudden rushing leap...

Then I blinked, and I was back in the apple orchard beneath a warm sun, watching two coyotes frisking and bounding into the trees on the far side of a summer hayfield. This experience was more an instant act of imagination than a vision or illusion, but there was still an aura of unexpectedness to it. It was as though I had suddenly discovered something new; and I remember thinking to myself: "So even Faërie has its dark and savage side."

One night I went for a midnight walk in the farmlands north of the Lake Road. It was an 'elvish' night. A full moon sailed the cloudless sky; low mist hung motionless over the hollows and marshes. Small creatures snapped twigs and rustled leaves in the hedgerows; birds called across the night air.

I paused in my wandering at the edge of an old orchard which looked out from the crest of a hill over a low-lying field of tall grasses and cattails. Looking around at the moonlit scene, all silver and mysterious shadows, I felt a sensation of enchantment stealing over me, a feeling of 'otherness', as if I were standing upon the very borders of Faërie itself.

I became aware of a curious rustling sound close by; and looking down I beheld a sight that caught me and held me spellbound in amazement. Dozens of field mice were leaping and bounding in the grass right at my feet. They weren't running away in fear, or quarreling amongst themselves, or even foraging for seeds in the grass. They seemed to be simply jumping and prancing about for the joy of it, frolicking beneath the full moon.

The enchantment swept over me in a rushing flood. I was no longer on the borders of Faërie; I was deep within that land.

Among folktales it is said that children born on a Sunday have the gift of being able to see the Elves and other beings of the Perilous Realm. I was born on a Sunday, a fact I didn't know until quite recently. And one night I stood on a certain hill over-looking the night world, suspended in silver moonlight. And while the heavens wheeled above me in silence I looked out over the earth; and I could see as though through a shifting curtain: beyond was another world that unfolded like a story, a fairy-tale. The unfolding was an endless shift and swirl of beauty and sorrow, a timeless dance of fantasy and wonder. There in that dance is collected the laughter and the tears of all those who know and love the Perilous Realm, and who mourn its fading from the world. I could recognise some of that laughter and some of those tears . . . for they are mine.