



TO SEE AGAIN the Pastoral Miles

By: Phillip Melchers

The two of us sat at the edge of my parent's yard. On the other side of a decaying and wooden farmer's fence was a field, a swamp, and then in the distance our destination: A tall hill where the secret tree grew. It was early October and I had left my Universities' campus in Montreal to spend the weekend out in the country with you, Miles, our family dog, far too energetic for your own good, too stupid to know how old you really were. On my shoulders was my pack, and in my hand was the loop of your leash. I gripped it securely as guilt tugged at me from two different directions. I could see within the dark of your eyes, shimmering excitement, but by the greys that snowed over your muzzle, I could also see your age.

"Miles, you stupid dog, don't you think we're a bit old for this?" I said. We had not travelled to the secret tree since we were both much younger. As a kid it used to be my favourite

adventure to take with you, but then I grew older. Eventually the tree, once so far-away, didn't seem so distant anymore.

You cocked your head at me in attempted comprehension. I laughed to myself when I realized that the word "old" had never even been put in your glossary. It made me feel silly that I would ever even bring up the word at all. Beside me was a black lab who was elderly, but certainly not old, and I, coming into adulthood, was acting as though I had been the one affected by dog years. I threw my boot forward and kicked the planks of the old fence out of their notches. Age be damned, I knew then that we were both still young.

The pastoral scene we came into had been uncultivated for quite some time and although the plant life grew feral, it never grew to be too tall or too wide. The seasoned horizon before

us was autumn brown, the turf like brass. The greens of summer days once remembered in yesteryear were now faded. The remains of dried thistle, like tiny gothic towers, spiked burdock, and a singular dead oak tree decorating the scenery only as monuments to a life passed.

With flashing memory I could see you as a young pup, off leash, covered in burrs, racing through that very field. Dashing and darting, spinning and spurring, nipping at the heads of blow balls and taking reverence in watching them explode. As a kid I had to take my time crossing the field as shorter strides tended to struggle with the uneven terrain. Often you would sprint circles around me before I could even reach the edge of the field. Now I was the one taking the lead with you sauntering behind me. You were just an old dog, sombre in step, which casually paused to sniff at every dead plant. As though coming with your age was a sense of tender appreciation only recently learned.

I took a lesson from your example as I slowed down my stride. As though learning a new language, I began to truly comprehend the soft, cold-kissed wind that curled around my flesh and felt like the touch of a parting friend. In my lax steps, I gazed towards the bright blue sky, so vivid, and saw how contrasting it was to the ground's earthly brown. Better yet, it was in this careful stride that I had become like a conductor composing symphonies, the dried leaves, fallen twigs and dead grass each crying out their own sound from under my foot. The satiating crunch sounded beneath my feet, refreshed the world once so morbid and still. We soon both walked not in furtiveness but instead like titans stomping over the dried bones of creatures long fallen. As a kid the adventure was always about getting to the big tree so far away. Now much older I had wished to never reach that which seemed to be coming closer and closer all too quickly.

The murky swamp that we came towards was the colour of copper green, brown and white, like old pipes rusted past their prime. The once solid ground had now become mutated by the presence of the dismal swamp, and the closer we came the more we had to fight against the suctioning grip of the mud beneath us. It was the grasps of ghouls trying to pull us under, the minions of the swamp beast who slumbered in wait for the next little boy to come and be gobbled up.

The beast that dwelled in that swamp was drawn many times in my childhood, a creature created within the Crayola spectrum. His drawn back was covered in thin spiky hairs; camouflage to help him hide within the stalks

of pussy willows. Those were marked by drawn squiggles of “almond.” His beastly hide, thick, wart covered, and grotesque, was conveyed by the colour “asparagus” with additions of “rose red” to represent the bulbous warts glowing like fire on his skin. “Dandelion” was his eyes, drawn by repeating circles within themselves; a hypnotizing gaze. His smile, “opal black” was drawn as a single upward curve. His grin, a ruse to trick Children, for the swamp beast was truly never happy.

As a kid I made it my duty to staple pictures of the beast unto the tree trunks we found around the swamp. The memories of my childhood became imagined as an array of posters amongst those trees. “BEWARE,” the posters would say with its words written in the crayon colour known only as “red.” As I stapled up the pictures, using a “borrowed” staple gun from mom, you, Miles, were my ever so vigilant protector. Rolling around, getting muddier than muddy, looking and smelling more retched than the swamp beast himself who would stay away in fear.

The posters had disappeared but remaining in the tree were the staples. Remorse haunted me as I thumbed over the stitches rusted numerously in each tree. I thought to myself, *what of the paper once held here, what of my drawing? Did those images come to bleed off the paper, to fall on the ground? Was lingering here the awful taint of the swamp beast? Oh Miles, I thought silently, where now is our horrific beast?*

I soon found that the fears of my childhood did indeed linger in the ecosystem of this foul swamp. I found it netted in the spiral of cobwebs, made once perfect but now decayed; cursed by the winds of rotted time. I found it within the newts, toads, and snakes I discovered years ago but now gone. Their children raised in the crayon blood of the beast decayed. I found it in the swamp plants: the ferns, vines, and flowers, now bare in the autumn weather; leafy blanket no longer, the thorns of their unashamed branches for all to see and just as water does trickle from land to creek, so too carried with it must have been the blood of the beast. The beast’s presence must have then been resting within the murky waters we had to cross.

Our bridge was a fallen tree that we used to travel over the swamp from time after time. The toppled trunk wide enough to safely cross, its rough bark, a degraded grey, became augmented by colonies of fungi spread across its surface.

When you were a pup you would always take the lead on these journeys. You were always the guide, the ever valiant leader, the one who

made me feel safe, and always the one who defended me from the swamp beast. That day when I had stepped onto the trunk, you stayed behind me; your back leg shaking, a pathetic whimper escaping you. For the first time ever it appeared you had become aware of your age, that you were scared, but don’t you see Miles? It was from you that I learned how to have a dog’s courage. So when you thought yourself too old to cross, I brought you into my arms and carried you with me.

When we came to exit the swamp, the air had become fresh once again. I let you out of my arms and together, side by side, we began to walk up the tall hill where the secret tree grew. The Olympian status that I had once prescribed to that hill had been greatly over exaggerated within my memories, and yet, this did not stop its ascension from feeling any less victorious. The air had not become colder, but crispier, solid and embracing. This feeling of rising, of climbing this hill, of leaving the swamp behind, was a joy I had always remembered from my childhood, but as I came to feel it again did I realize that the true face of those moments had been lost to me.

We came to see the secret tree before us, its bare branches like the explosion of a firework, frozen in time, bursting upwards from its tubular trunk. Its brilliant stretch reached across the sky behind it like a many handed giant opening its arms in welcoming embrace. The glow of the sun off-centre, painted the tree darkly within its own umbra, surrounding it with a golden wreath that shined brilliantly. We came to rest at its feet, feeling as though, once again, we were children well journeyed and fatigued.

As we turned to sit down, in my eyes I could see the entire journey we travelled. Before us I observed the desolate wastes inspired by the ensuing autumn, but in the escape of my mind’s eye, I could recollect exactly, the perfect visions of the green life that lived in yesterday’s adventures. Every time we sat at the feet of the secret tree, we sat as the heroic lords we were—the journey traveled, the beast passed, and the secret tree to be our glorious throne highly ascended. It was here, where present mixed with past, that I could see within the eyes of my childhood the blooming green of swamp and field alike; could I see the vibrant life of summer adventures from all too long ago. Closing my eyes, I drifted through those escaping thoughts, my age peeling off of me like layers of an onion.

As it was our tradition, I pulled a saran-wrapped PB&J sandwich from my pack, split it, and then gave half to you. As a puppy you would eat your half in three large bites, and then proceed to beg for mine. As an older dog you did the

same—some things never change.

At first I laughed but then with honesty, did I start to weep,

“I’m scared, Miles,” I confessed to you, “I’m scared of things disappearing. I’m scared of time becoming memory, memory becoming fade, and fade becoming nothing. I’m scared to lose all that which becomes crushed under the weight of coming adulthood. I’m scared of the day when I would finally come to lose you.”

That’s when you looked at me, wagged your tail, and slobbered your saliva covered tongue over my cheek. Once again, you showed me how to have a dog’s courage in the face of human imagination. I looked at you Miles, and I saw a dog too energetic for his own good, too stupid to know how old he really was. You seemed to look at me, a man too worried to live, too stupid to know how young I really am. I looked at you, saw your age, and came to know all too well the fear of the ever-ticking of time’s infinite clock; I had become afraid of time passing, yet what was time except for just another word that you had never learned?

When we were together on that hill, it had seemed to me that the storm clouds of the past were coming to roll into the unseen skies of the future, leaving the present in a state of perpetual downpour. As I looked at that field, as I remembered the way it was before, did I come to realize that it was storms of yesterday that became the nourishment on which the future feeds? That Canadian autumn day marked the death of a present once had, now made into a past, and yet never really gone. Instead, stored was a memory engrained, feed for future days.

It is winter now, months since our last journey together. Our place of adventure now blanketed in slumbering rest under sheets of snow. As I tell you this story, you have fallen asleep on my lap, my gentle hand still lovingly stroking one of your large ears. You seem to be much older this winter than you were that recent autumn passed. So as you dream, as you yelp and shake your legs, I tell you this story. I wish for you to remember properly our latest journey to the secret tree. The snow will leave in time, and so too will you (you are growing to be too old) Whenever you decide to end your story, know that from your grave will a thousand flowers bloom, and know that from those blooms will new life feed, and know that this life will turn to face death but only to give birth to more coming flowers. So there you’ll be—a great part of a much greater cycle. When it becomes time for summer to return, I’ll find you there beside me still as we once again make our way towards that tall hill where the secret tree grew. **LH**