

A Fairy Tale for Black Parents

an invited submission by A. Williams

Once upon a time a sweet boy was born to adoring parents in a vast kingdom where everyone knew that freedom and justice reigned. He had beautiful brown skin that shone like polished copper in the sun, and eyes that were dark and warm and bottomless. His parents loved him, and he grew swiftly under their tender, attentive gaze.

The boy was like a quick brown fox when he ran through the grass, his lean arms flashing at his sides. He was like an oak tree when he stood with his feet planted in the soil, his body braced against the wind surging in from over the distant blue mountains. He was like a roaring thundercloud when he was angry, stampeding through his peaceful home, upsetting plants and frightening their tabby cat, leaving trails of saltwater in his wake. And he could be anything, because all of these things were in him: the fox, the tree, the thunder—the raw and dazzling essence of nature. For he was one with the world, and the world was one with him.

“You can be anything,” his mother told him.

“You can be anything,” his father said.

When he was old enough, the boy determined he would set out on a great

BP B. Peterson

Given the topic of this children’s collection, would you consider re-titling? Our suggestions:

- The Distant Blue Mountains
- The Boy and His Quest
- The Tale of the Boy and the Rune of Knowledge

AW A. Williams

I see your point. How about, “The Fox and the Tree and the Thunder”?

BP B. Peterson

Yes, I love that!

BP B. Peterson

Lovely!

quest in search of knowledge, which, the stories told, lay beyond the great river, through the winter forest, and beneath the blue mountains. His mother pleaded with him not to go, but he held her hands in his and said, “Once I have knowledge, mother, I can trade it for a small piece of land and raise my own family, and we’ll visit you so you can bake my children molasses cookies and father can teach them to fish and hunt.” Though his mother wept until she filled four wooden buckets and a porcelain teacup, he departed, carrying with him only the things his parents supplied him: a gourd of wine, a cloak of wolf fur, and a small leather sack for collecting berries and nuts.

BP B. Peterson

Love this!

AW A. Williams

Mothers have an unlimited capacity for heartache when it comes to their children.

After three days of travel, the boy reached the great river. It climbed northward, uphill, its current fierce and feral, its surface white with froth. The boy looked out, across the river, but it was so immense he could not see the other side. He built a sturdy raft out of wood, using young, supple branches to lash larger branches together. As he crossed the river, a giant trout with terrible teeth leapt from the water and swallowed him up. The inside of the fish was cold and wet, and it smelled like briny death.

BP B. Peterson

Maybe something less scary? Maybe, simply, “the other creatures it had eaten”?

AW A. Williams

The fish eats children. I’d think elaborating on that would be much worse.

The boy did not panic, though, for his parents had raised him to be strong and to think quickly. They had prepared him. He emptied his gourd of wine onto the tongue of the trout, and it spit him out onto the opposite shore, saying he tasted like oblivion. The boy was injured—he’d lost a finger and two toes on the terrible teeth of the giant trout, but he was grateful: How lucky that he was able to escape with his life.

BP B. Peterson

Children may not comprehend this. Perhaps the trout can offer him a wish?

AW A. Williams

A wish? What good did a wish ever do anyone?

And now, he knows to be afraid of the water.

He tore a strip from his cloak, bandaged himself, and continued his journey. After three weeks of travel, he found himself in the winter forest. The forest

was cast in shadow, and the trees were gray and bare, their skeletal branches stretching toward the ashen sky, though it was midsummer. The boy looked beyond the forest and could see the blue mountains towering over him; he was so close he could smell the dense blue stone when he inhaled. As he weaved his way through the dead trees, great shadows drifted beneath his feet over the desiccated grass. He looked up to see that the sky was full of birds as big as bears, as big as houses. They were swooping and diving, rolling and gliding silently in the slate sky. Sprinting, the boy ducked his head and hoped to reach the edge of the forest before nightfall, but a bird saw the flash of his copper skin rushing beneath the naked white winter branches. It plunged with a deafening shriek and snatched up the boy in its talons.

BP B. Peterson

Consider the winter forest being covered in snow? This might be a better visual for children.

AW A. Williams

In this region of the kingdom, there's no snow.

In the air, the birds battled over the boy, for they all wished to consume the warm blood inside of him, the heart of him. He was batted about by wings covered with giant feathers of blue and red and white, and he was hooked with massive beaks as sharp as cut glass. He was dropped.

BP B. Peterson

I get what you're doing here (the birds attack the boy when they see him: brown skin among white branches), and I think it's really important. But, can we soften this? Does it have to be blood?

AW A. Williams

Of course it does. Hunters always seek blood.

The boy fell and fell and fell. He hit the ground, but he was not killed. He rose and, this time using his cloak of wolf fur to conceal himself, worked his way slowly to the edge of the forest and the foot of the blue mountain. When he arrived, he saw that he had traveled through the night and that it was dawn. He saw, too, that he had lost an eye. But he was grateful: How lucky that he was able to escape with his life.

BP B. Peterson

Consider changing these colors?

AW A. Williams

Yes, sure. How about: azure and crimson and pearl.

And now, he knows to be afraid of the sky.

At the base of the great blue mountain, the sun was rising behind the forest, casting warmth and color on all the land, and the boy thought that things must get easier, now. He picked a red flower at his feet, thinking to tuck it into his

pocket and bring it home to his mother. Alas, trolls emerged from the blue mountain, appearing from hidden crevices as if conjured out of the stone. Hundreds of them, half as tall as the boy and twice as wide, detained him. “That flower,” they rasped, “did not belong to you, and you must pay the debt: 400 years of bonded labor.”

Now, the boy was reasonable, for his parents had raised him thus. He didn’t feel this an appropriate punishment, but the trolls would not hear it, and the boy had no recourse. These were the rules, and he had broken them. And so, for four centuries, the boy worked digging holes, for the trolls sought the earth’s treasure, buried deep in its damp layers. This digging was a ceaseless task. He would dig, finding only occasional traces of treasure, until he could dig no more: Every hole led only to **corpses**, their brown skin parched and peeling from their bones—this kingdom was built on these bodies, and there was no digging beyond them. After 400 years, the trolls marked him with a brand on the back of his neck to show that he was free, and the man (for he was no longer a boy) was released, and he was grateful: How lucky he hadn’t picked *two* flowers.

And now, he knows to be afraid of the earth.

He followed a tunnel into the blue mountain, feeling his way through the dark for miles and miles, up steep inclines and around passages that twisted like stony whirlwinds. He finally came upon a room in the heart of the mountain. The room was set aglow around a small golden rune in the center, which radiated a bright, warm light. He had found knowledge! Holding it aloft, the man thought, “At last, I can be anything!”

The man carried it home, the precious rune wrapped carefully in his leather

BP B. Peterson

This is a bit graphic for a children’s fairy tale. Perhaps *remains*?

AW A. Williams

Leave as is.

BP B. Peterson

By now we know this is a tale about fear. Consider having the protagonist overcome this fear, to learn a lesson.

AW A. Williams

He does learn a lesson.

BP B. Peterson

Right, but the lesson for a children’s fairy tale about fear shouldn’t be “I should’ve had more fear.”

AW A. Williams

Yes, I agree it shouldn’t be. Leave as is.

sack.

He knew now to be afraid of the earth, so he made no digressions at the foot of the mountain, no sideways glances at the beautiful flowers that joyfully flooded the ground around his feet.

He knew now to be afraid of the sky, so he skirted the winter forest, going miles and weeks around it rather than travel through, flinching when he heard the call of a song bird.

And he knew now to be afraid of the water, so he walked weeks out of his way to find a bridge to cross the great river, and he shuddered as he felt the wicked spray caress his ankles.

He was older, his back hobbled, and his hands rough and dark. He was limping and missing an eye, and he'd lost a finger and two toes. There was a hole in his side, a puncture wound. He didn't know where it came from, and it wouldn't seem to close or heal or stop leaking. His skin didn't shine like copper any longer, but he was free again—he could be *anything*. He thought about the children he would have one day, soon. They would be beautiful, sweet children who were one with the world, as he was, and always had been.

When he returned to the vast kingdom (where freedom and justice reigned), he took his knowledge to buy a lovely cottage on a nice piece of land. Alas, the sweet old lady would not sell him the cottage. She gestured with long, pale fingers at the brand on his neck and said, “You seem like a sweet boy. If it were up to me, I'd sell you this cottage,” and the man said, “It isn't up to you?” The lady said, “Oh dear me, no,” and she laughed at the sky as if he'd told a very funny story. “It's just the way it is, so sorry.”

BP B. Peterson

Since this never comes back, I'm not sure what relevance it has to the story. Cut?

AW A. Williams

Sometimes we don't realize we've been wounded, but we carry it with us, always.

BP B. Peterson

Typically, in fairy tales, the main problem of the narrative is solved. Is there any way he can, in fact, obtain a home in the end? Perhaps through some magic with the rune, or somehow through my earlier suggested wish with the trout?

AW A. Williams

Don't be ridiculous. Fish don't gift houses.

He limped toward the swamp where she told him he could trade his knowledge for a wood hut, thinking all along of the beautiful sweet children he'd soon have, children who could be anything, because they lived in a kingdom where all was free and just. No matter they'd live in a swamp rather than a forest; as long as he could raise them with love, they would grow swiftly, and they would have in them the fox and the tree and the thunder. They could be anything.

A bit lost, the man felt a rumbling in his stomach and realized he hadn't eaten in days. He happened upon a bush abundant with plump blackberries, and, hungry, thought how lucky he was. He ate until he was sated and then filled one pocket with berries for later; he felt in his other pocket for the rune, where it hummed with warmth. The scarlet of a king's guard uniform flashed in the distance, and the man waved; surely, the guard could set him on the path to the swamp. Suddenly, he was kicked in the back and thrown down into the mud. The berries in his pocket scattered, and the sack fell to the ground, the rune glowing faintly through the leather.

A king's guard stood with his shiny black boot on the man's spine. "Take your hands out of your pockets and put down your weapon," the guard shouted, kicking him. "I don't have—" he tried to say, but there was mud in his mouth. There were four other guards standing around, blackberries bleeding beneath their heels, their hands on the hilts of their swords. They held his face in the mud, and he gasped, "I can't breathe," and they said, calmly, "Stop fighting us, we're here to protect you."

The man thought to himself, *I learned to fear the water and the sky and the earth. If only I had learned to be afraid of men. If only*—but his thought is

BP B. Peterson

This doesn't really make sense in this context. Revise?

AW A. Williams

Stet.

cut off, because he is killed by the king's guard. The man's body lies still in the mud, the guard's boot still on his back, for several minutes before anyone notices he is dead. In the distance, the sun rises over the vast kingdom, casting warmth and light on all who live.

END

<Q: We're so happy you accepted our invitation for this special collection, but I'd like to remind you of the call for submissions. In particular: "modern fairy tales that maintain elements of the classical, including heroes and villains, magical elements, and universal lessons. These tales should be written for adults with children in mind.">

<Au: Yes, I read the call very carefully, and I believe my story responds to the prompts perfectly.>

<Q: Can we discuss? There is not a clear villain here. Also, fairy tales are intended to edify or uplift: Children who listen to them should feel as if they—like the hero in the story—can overcome great obstacles and dangerous foes to come out the victors in the end. I'm aware of your familiarity with the genre, which is in large part why we invited you to submit to this issue. I'm actually, personally, a fan of your work, "The Decontextualization of the Feminine in Fairy Tales" and "A Qualitative Examination of the Cultural Evolution of Fairy Tales." That said, we were hoping for something more adherent to the traditional, or typical fairy tale, where there is, typically, something of a happy ending (the downtrodden experience a reversal of fortunes, the evil witch is dispatched, the wicked queen is destroyed). Consider:

- a. The man buys a home in the swamp, which turns out to be built on some kind of treasure (which he finds as a result of his experience digging).*
- b. The man finds that the troll tattoo has given him some kind of magical powers.*
- c. The man isn't killed in the end.*

These are just a few ideas. Spit-balling, if you will.>

BP B. Peterson

Perhaps one of the other king's guards can step in to help him? We don't want to imply that the authorities in general are the bad guys here—this is just one villain. In fact, maybe he can show up earlier?

Fairy tales typically teach a lesson (e.g., loyalty, bravery, kindness, integrity, hard work), but if the protagonist doesn't learn to overcome his fear, it's unclear what lesson this story is teaching.

Can we discuss?

AW A. Williams

We can discuss.

<Au: Delightful that you're a fan of my work. I can see where you're coming from. New ending?>

The man's parents recovered his body. His mother tore at her breast and his father sank to his knees. His mother left saltwater in her wake everywhere she went for the rest of her life, and his father never rose again. The king and the king's counsel compelled the guard to send the man's parents an apology. After a short vacation, the king's guard returned to duty, where he continued the work of protecting the vast kingdom, where freedom and justice reigned forevermore.

END

<Q: Thank you for considering my suggestions and revising your ending. However, this doesn't resolve my earlier concerns at all. Also, this is now 400 years after the start of the story—his parents are still alive? Things are still the same?>

<Au: Seriously?>

<Q: I'm sorry? I don't follow. I'd really like to work with you to make this work for us. Can we discuss something less bleak?>

<Au: Right. I understand. New ending?>

After three years of mourning, the couple birthed another child—another boy. Instead of letting him run through the grass and stand up against the wind and race through the house and go out into the world to seek knowledge, instead of these things, they kept him locked up in their house, in safety. And this son did not become beaten and broken and enslaved. He was not killed. And they lived together—alive—ever after.

END

<Q: *Not being killed can't be the lesson of a children's fairy tale.*>

<Au: **Agreed. Leave as is.**>

<Q: *Your writing is lovely, and we apologize sincerely for all the time you spent working on this, but I'm afraid this piece just doesn't align with our aesthetic and our view for this collection. We wish you the best luck publishing it elsewhere, and we're sure it will find a home.*>