When the Forest Shed Its Veil

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I was eight years old when the underlying mechanisms of the universe began to reveal themselves to me. As I strolled between pin-pricky evergreens, my magic dowser steered me exactly where the forest wanted me, a handlebar controlling wispy legs.

It was a daily affair after my release from mom's homeschool lessons. After geography (dry), history (why?), maths (huh?) came the reassurance of moss, the generations of squirrel squatting and bird squawking, the flesh and breath of tree trunks teaching me the infallible syntax of the natural world before they were chopped down for paper so mom could attempt to teach me the same thing in our living room.

My walks were lovely and predictable until the pine aimed that pinecone at my head. As the dowser began to lose momentum, I was struck in the cowlick by its spines, sticky-outy like my stubborn hair. My vision pulsed once, twice, and I looked up, slanted, slightly indignant. The tree had caught my attention for a reason; it was changed. The top wasn't a treetop at all anymore. It had shed its tree-ness.

The tree's veil of polished definition had slid off and revealed the core, the inner molecular coilings, the magmatic roilings, the histories and future tendencies. The rest of the tree still looked as it always had—nibbled mushroom entrance at the bottom of the trunk, trunk carved in wrinkles like an elephant's skin, skin rings all present and accounted for by the students of the world, up-up-up, same old, same old tapering layers of tangible needles and pinecones that all worked together to create the expectation of a tree—but at the top, that razor-sharpness stopped. In its place was

a mystifying green hue, swimming with life. It was indescribable, almost four-dimensional, like hundreds of film negatives laid over each other, capturing eternal consciousness in one lively blur. I spun around to look at the other treetops. It wasn't just the one magical treetop; it was the whole canopy. It was beautiful and beyond comprehension, the undefined sky above it a vast treetopper of who knows. This should've confused me. It didn't.

It made sense that my human eyes didn't observe the true shape of things; that clarity in presentation obscured reality. After all, this forest had had centuries to figure out how to present itself. It felt like an act of intimacy that it had trusted me enough to drop a part of the facade and let me in on its ancient secrets. Or maybe it was just tired of keeping up appearances for the few people who came here.

Looking up again, I was thrilled to find a red shadow creature hiding in the treetops. It had little horns and in place of skin were strokes of green. Green for camouflage, said dad. The red shadow moved and morphed. A prehistorically large Cinnabar moth, a bouquet of roses, kindling of the Christmas hearth fire. Maybe.

This world was much bigger than I'd previously considered. I was okay with that. I spent hours trying to figure out what – and who – I was seeing from our kitchen window. Once, I saw a black shape circle the green of the forest. It had wings like a raven and a long, thin tail like a rat.

From the mouth of the forest I could see my house in the near-dusk. Even though my dad had built it with his own two hands, I found it in its true form, grainy except for the light of my ladybug lamp streaking up and down and right at me from my bedroom window like a halo. My house was surrounded by dozens of pixies, like golden-bright, flickering orbs. A figure stood in the garden. A lamppost (we didn't have one). A tree (could trees grow in one afternoon?). Dad.

Mom was alarmed when I told her. She demanded I take her to the exact spot where I'd seen the shadowy tree-man and rat-raven. I told her that wouldn't be possible, as they were ever-changing, and – more importantly – because the world had entrusted only me to see. That confused her. Confusion annoys moms. She dragged me to the forest, her sweaty palm sheathing mine as we walked.

I brought her to a little forest window that looked out on a lush green clearing surrounded by a dense blackness of trees. It was the ideal spot for watching the world at work. Secretly, I hoped mom wouldn't be able to see what I saw.

As we set our eyes on the distant landscape I enthusiastically pointed out the stag in the background. Mom said 'it's a toppled tree.' We walked a bit closer. His antlers grew beautifully, adding more boughs. I pointed them out. Mom said 'it's a goddamn tree.'

We walked through my invisible separation from reality. The forest put its veil back on. A tree stood in front of me.

'But mom, the fallen tree isn't true,' I said.

'Well, then what is true?' She spit out the last word like an insect had flown into her mouth.

I didn't answer. How could I explain that I could see everything and nothing; that that was the beauty? My silence annoyed mom. She sighed profanities and tugged me back through the clearing. At the edge, I turned around. A big deciduous lifted its arm to its mouth and shushed me.

With each passing season, my small world lifted its curtain a bit more. It embraced me. By the time I turned ten, large parts of my home had exchanged their faux clarity for buzzing reality. The world looked like a dream. Like magic. And when the threshold would finally cease to exist, I would become entwined in that magic. I was excited and slightly impatient. To me, the world before the threshold, the world I was still a part of, had lost all

meaning. It was empty beauty, like how dad assured me he had too much love in his life to die.

I saw him standing in front of the house all the time. Waiting. I cried warm, thick tears whenever I crossed the barrier and he became disguised as that horrible rotary clothes dryer. Jasmine detergent wafted from his old shirts mom still wore to bed everyday.

Mom had trouble coming to terms with my new appreciation for the world. Her initial worry had given way to apparent deafness whenever I talked about something new I'd seen. When her dismissal achieved no effect, it turned back to worry. Worry also makes moms mad. She began talking about 'taking me away' from my beloved home and 'sorting me out' or 'setting me straight.' I screamed and cried and hid and bit. I didn't want anything to mess this up. I was so close.

One early morning, she carried me, still asleep, to the car and drove us all the way to town. The town was unbelievable. The people were beautifully inconspicuous, like dewdrops on the cool morning grass. I told my mom how the gargoyle fixed to the cathedral fluttered its blurry wings, tired of performing the statue. Mom had reverted back to silence. Too captivated by my newly expanded world, I didn't realize I was being brought to its conclusion.

Less than two hours later I was in the car again. My pelting tears worked hard to replicate the true world, but as soon as they cleared everything was hideously defined. Glasses rested before my eyes like a sneering wall. Mom said I looked great, that it was better this way. I felt betrayed by her. Betrayed by my eyes. By the world.

As we drove onto the uneven road that led up to my house, I removed the round frames from my nose. Dad still stood in the garden, waiting to console me. Maybe.