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This Body is a Grave

H. Pueyo

La Tulipe

Rose Jean Bostwick

Why We Need Myth

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La Tulipe

by Rose Jean Bostwick

After midnight, we will practice austerity,
but before midnight we may eat well and gossip,
and kiss if we are married or betrothed—
and dance chez Latulippe.

La Tulipe was once a woman,
a Rose who once loved men and dancing and kicking and
screaming
mostly in joy. Sa tulipe was once coveted by many here—
perhaps sa tulipe is why the handsome stranger shows up une
heure avant le Carême,
extending a Rose, failing to remove his black gloves when asked—
for it is sin to be object of envy, a woman looking like sex.
We suspect sex is what drew the stranger,
whose carriage melted snow, to Rose.

Perhaps the Devil is why Rose now sits in a nunnery:
rattles her bars, teeth clenched, practices deprivation,
lets an old woman scrub her austere back in the bathtub.
She floats in rosewater playing *il m'aime, il ne m'aime pas*,
remembers men
and how it felt when they watched her dance—
dance just one minute too late, just

one minute past midnight with just one stranger—
Of course, now there is no man to love Rose but God.
Perhaps, we mutter amongst ourselves, there never was.

Why We Need Myth

by Joshua Fagan

The word “myth” has too often become synonymous with mere misconceptions or errors. We talk about the myth of Columbus discovering the New World or the myth that no one bathed in the Middle Ages. Some myths can be harmful, such as the idea of colonists and Native Americans living peacefully and sharing a Thanksgiving feast. Other myths are merely silly, such as George Washington chopping down a cherry tree.

Such flippant uses of the term have diluted its original meaning: stories about bygone eras passed down from one generation to another, defining the worldviews and moral-philosophical systems of a culture. We talk vulgarly of “myths” that don’t belong to the past and have no great significance to anyone. Even *The New York Times* runs articles about “The Myth of Comfort Food.” *The Washington Post* has separate articles entitled “Five myths about fast food” and “To improve your diet, know these four food myths.”

There is nothing wrong with these articles, and correcting misconceptions is a noble goal. The problem is the devaluing of the concept of myth. Ask the average person what a myth is, and their answer will be a variation of “very old stories that people used to believe were true.” Such an answer is reductionist, even if it’s not factually incorrect. The value of myth, why we should keep retelling the stories of Achilles or Odysseus, is discussed significantly less frequently. Myths, be they Greco-Roman or Chinese or Native American, are different in kind, not just age, from the average modern blockbuster, including the superhero films that critics so often compare to myths. While myth and fantasy share certain elements, myth ultimately breaks far more decisively from scientific,

quantitative understandings of the world to reveal essential psychological and moral truths that extend beyond the level of the individual.

Even back before the widespread use of scientific methodology to determine what “really” happened in the past, myths created distance between themselves and the present. Myths occur in a shadowed past where the rules of the present don’t apply. Even Homer, who lived so long ago that the details of his life are uncertain, synthesized older stories about the Trojan War, and even those older stories called back to an ancient, primordial era when gods and humans freely interacted. Hercules, Aeneas, and Achilles, among others, had divine parentage, yet if you asked Homer whether Zeus was currently impregnating women, he would likely say no. The difference between the mythic past and the present is not merely a difference in years, but a difference in how the world functions.

This is the reason why the stereotypical fairy tale opening is “once upon a time.” As the famous L.P. Hartley quote goes, “The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.” The conclusion of Virgil’s *Aeneid* is a climatic, dramatic showdown between Aeneas and the warrior Turnus. During their fight, Turnus manages to lift an enormous boulder to hurl at Aeneas. The Mandelbaum translation describes how “twice-six chosen men with bodies such as earth produces now could hardly lift that stone upon their shoulders.” The mythic past is elevated, containing qualities that the present lacks. Even *The Lord of the Rings*, one of the more convincing modern attempts at creating a mythos, takes place in our world, but in the distant past, when magic still existed.

Myths thus don’t depend on their thematic closeness to the specific events of the zeitgeist. They don’t depend on being relatable, at least in the straightforward sense that the word is often used today. Modern readers don’t relate directly to the story of Antigone’s struggle to bury her brother against the wishes of Creon, because that’s not a struggle that’s relevant to us. Even ancient readers didn’t

relate to the tales of legendary Chinese emperors or Scandinavian kings, as the vast majority of the people who knew of these stories weren't of noble blood. Myths were relevant to those who lived in the past for the same reason they're relevant to us now: because the inner truths of these stories allow us to escape our individual, material circumstances and connect with a larger, more capacious view of the world. In doing so, we understand ourselves and others better.

Thankfully, the influence of mythology hasn't faded from public consciousness. Greek mythology in particular has enjoyed a vibrant afterlife long after the educated populace stopped learning Greek. There are more obvious manifestations of Greek mythology, such as *Percy Jackson* and *Hades*, and there are more subtle uses of it, such as Celine Sciamma's dazzling *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*. The story of Orpheus and Eurydice experienced an enormous surge in popularity a few years ago, thanks in part to Sciamma's film, but more overtly because of the immensely popular Broadway musical *Hadestown*. An article from *The Week* even described it as the myth that "took over 2019." Refreshingly, the popularity of Greek myth hasn't come at the expense of the mythologies of other cultures. Latin American and East Asian folklore is far more prevalent in the mainstream than it was ten or twenty years ago, leading to a much more diverse and lush cultural tapestry.

The problem isn't that myths are no longer popular, but that we've forgotten how to look at them. This failure is not our fault. The world in which we live is significantly different from the world of the ancients. There are benefits to modernity, of course, and I doubt that many would consciously want to travel back to a time when the average life expectancy was about half of what it currently is, but there are also drawbacks to the modern world, and these should be acknowledged. As authors from Michel Foucault to Robert Putnam have demonstrated, consumerist, materialist society severs the individual from history, from a sense of community, and from

the more mysterious parts of their own psyche. There is only what Virginia Woolf calls the aridity of the I. The world becomes solely a collection of facts and figures that the individual can sort through.

This is a problem because the individual perspective is innately limited. Contra Descartes, there is no perfect, crystalline, unclouded way to see the world. There are only fallible, narrow perspectives that remain tied to our limited experiences. Reasoning is hardly sufficient to understand our own tempestuous psyches. To presume to understand even friends and loved ones through only our individual, isolated perspectives is indicative of a characteristically modern kind of presumptuousness.

All well-constructed, well-written narrative has the capacity to elevate us outside our limited experiences into a broader, more elemental understanding of situations, emotions, and experiences. Not everyone has the same experiences, but the same types of experiences—personal transformation, dissatisfaction at societal expectations, acute cognisance of our own failings—take different forms and shapes.

Myths are not the only kinds of stories that can lead us beyond the confinement of our individual perspectives, but they are particularly well-suited to cultivating this kind of awareness. Like impressionist or Cubist painting, their freedom from having to be merely physical, representational depictions of normal reality allows the essence of the internal, psychological truths they depict to shine more clearly.

Modern fantasy like *Game of Thrones* or *Harry Potter*, or even many contemporary conceptions of myth, take place in a world that's different from ours in that it contains scenarios or situations alien to our reality. Yet these worlds are still, with rare exception, still fundamentally aligned with our perception of our reality: there are atomized, self-contained individuals whose actions respond to social and economic factors in a way that we find more or less rational. What's lost is wonder, enchantment, strangeness. What's lost is the

sense of elemental, mystic patterns of experience in which our individual experiences are only small pieces.

Myths are not in danger of being extinguished. Unless the fundamental nature of living in the world alters to such a degree that laments, celebrations, and rituals no longer have any purpose or meaning, we will continue to retell myths. What's missing is a broader understanding of the concept of myth. The opposite of myth is not truth or history, but rather the ordinary, the egoistic, and the utilitarian. For myths to provide us with the value they've been providing for millennia, we must resist adulterating them into pale shadows that repeat our tepid platitudes back to us. Myths are not untruths. They're ways to see the truths that remain hidden from our ordinary method of looking at the world.

This Body is a Grave

by H. Pueyo

From the depths of my core to the moons in my sky, I am dead—
let me stay like that.

Dead or drowning in corpses, the difference is pointless after a
while. I grieve them; I devour those who try to fill the holes they left
behind. My beloved children, my removed limbs, the fire I no longer
have.

This is what I am now that all life has gone from me: a freezing
sphere, pale in my redness, orbited by spectral twins. My vermilion
sand is the ruins of my cities. The dust that clouds me, the ashes of
my past. The water that once flew down my geological veins exists no
longer in my drained valleys. Feed me, they say, but my lands have no
nourishment left. They are just the bones from which my remaining
skin hangs.

I wasn't always like this. We weren't.

Once, I was full. I had streams and ponds and lakes. I had rivers
brimming with fish and colonies of intricate coral in my oceans. Most
importantly, my offspring roamed the deserts of my body, and they
were alive. Their labyrinthine burrows extended for miles, their
marvelous artistry swirled in my dunes, their musical languages were
the only ones I allowed to give me a name. Crimson in my home,
they called me. I refuse to accept any other title.

Nowhere would you have found better children. They sculpted
the rocks in which they made their shelters with the end of their
curved stingers, creating devoted love letters to their motherland. In
return, I warmed up, protecting them from my natural coldness. At
night, when they woke up, their bodies were alight, fluorescent,
glittering in my otherwise empty darkness. From above, their golden

tagmata looked like specks on the sand, and they lit up tiny lanterns that served as perfect roads and maps.

They sang as they traveled, the clicking of their pincers and mouths blown by my loving breath, and I sang with them. They found my oases, my walls of ice, my hot springs. Careful, meticulous claws snatched burrowed worms and fished mollusks with devotion, as if my body was a temple, and they were grateful followers. My little ones never took more than what they needed, and if they did, I would have forgiven them for their self-indulgence like a parent who can never say no.

And then it ended.

The end is never as fast as we wish it to be. Nor is it as easy. I first noticed the invaders as I swallowed a strange substance into my atmosphere. It was stiff, indigestible, so unlike we. From that foreign matter I had mistaken for a meteorite came the creatures, marching, organized, severe. At first, I was curious: they were much taller than my delicate children, whose bodies were flat and near the ground to move gracefully on the soft surface of my sand sheets. They were also numerous and powerful, their muscular bodies moving with impressive synchrony as if they shared a single mind.

The trespassers landed early in the morning. My children slept soundly, but they would not have had a better fate if they were awake. Their ten pairs of eyes could not form images and were ideal for their dimly-lit lives, but that made them more fragile to attacks.

My perfect creations never stood a chance.

The enemies followed their trails of lanterns and saw their glimmering bodies, star-like, on a mantle of darkened sand. It was then that I found that their external skeletons were very easy to break. One by one, they were taken down and used for different purposes: their complex venom was milked and bottled, their hard shells were used as raw material, their fluorescent claws were

removed and kept like prizes. Soon, the trespassers realized they could eat them as well.

When they ate, they devoured.

Immobile, I could do nothing but watch as they cracked their abdomens with their jaws while they were still alive. But I love them, I wanted to say. But they're mine. My docile heirs succumbed, their lanterns stolen, their sculptures removed to be exposed elsewhere. As if it had not been enough, they began taking from me as well. They drained my water, they drilled my land, they farmed my minerals.

My anger shimmered, rumbling. Those were my children. My most beloved descendants. I could not bring them back to life—I am a limited maker. What I could and did was to avenge them. So my groundwater boiled, my volcanoes erupted, and my seas washed over them. Reacting to their presence, my immune system triggered an inflammation; I burned, hurt, reddened, swelled. The vessel in which they came drowned in my magma, consumed by the quakes breaking my soil.

Inhale.

Exhale.

The thieves were dead; everything in me was dead; I was death itself.

As I assumed my new role, my structures began to decay. There was no place for oceans and rivers in a corpse, so my water dried and froze. There was no place for heat, so my volcanoes no longer had supplies, turning into hollow craters. At last, the cold took over me.

Millions of years have passed, and I grew more and more frigid. My carcass shrinks. My pain keeps moving in waves, from the inside to the outside, a ghost of what I once was. I will rest, I think, feeling my residual conscience dissolving in a pool of molten gold. And I would have, but a new invader came.

And another.

And another.

And they keep coming, leaving little seeds of activity in this vast graveyard. My soul reanimates as it moves on my sand, a mockery of the children of my past. My liquid center stirs. My wind blows, covering the new assailants in dust. It's not enough. They pierce me and violate me. They take samples, like the ones before. They plan to live on me. They plan to rob my children of their catacombs.

Now, I'm awake again. Silent, watchful, resentful. Turning colder by the day. My spirit might be weakened, but I remember and will gain control of these aged bones. When they return, I will be ready, and I promise—anyone who dares disturb my silent mourning will be as dead as we are.

Notes on Contributors

Rose Jean Bostwick is a lesbian writer based in Montreal, Quebec. She has published one short fiction chapbook, *And They Were Roommates* (Bottlecap Press), and has placed work in *Schuyhill Valley Journal*, *Wrongdoing Magazine*, *A Thin Slice of Anxiety*, and others. Read more of her work at rosejeanwrites.com.

Joshua Fagan is a writer and critic currently residing in New York City. His creative work has previously been published in venues including *Daily Science Fiction*, *The Fantastic Other*, and *Star*Line*. As an academic, his work focuses on the intersection of literature, myth, and technology in the aftermath of Darwin, and his critical work has been published in *The Robert Frost Review*. He is the founder and editor-in-chief of the literary speculative-fiction publication *Orion's Belt*. His YouTube channel has received over 1.6 million views.

H. Pueyo is an Argentine-Brazilian writer and translator. She was awarded an Otherwise Fellowship for her work with gender in speculative fiction, and her stories have appeared before in *Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Clarkesworld*, *Strange Horizons*, and *The Year's Best Dark Fantasy & Horror*, among others. Her debut bilingual collection *A STUDY IN UGLINESS & OUTRAS HISTÓRIAS* was published by Lethe Press in 2022. Find her online at hachepueyo.com.