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THE SONG OF THE MOTHER OF WATERS

by Evelyn Cooper

Long ago a tree stood in a parched canyon, a place as white as bone and empty as windscored shell. But the tree was content.

The canyon had once been a fertile valley, greening, blossoming and fading with the seasons. Many small rivers had threaded its meadows, and a lake had rippled peacefully at its end. But one long winter had brought savage storms, and the lake had burst its banks, flooded the valley, ravaged - almost uprooted - the tree. And to protect itself, then, the tree had drawn upon the earthpowers. Who may judge defenses raised against death? The tree enspelled the valley itself.

In one night the valley earth had bleached to bitter sand, sand made to absorb water, all water, and to take it utterly away. In a breath the sand spread around the tree, single-purposed and acid and empty. And in the second breath the floodwaters were gone.

The tree had not been flooded again. The memory remained, knotted deep in its roots. And occasionally the tree was faintly aware of nameless, liquid incursions. But the sand always repelled these, efficiently and without effort; and the chalky shore of the small lake far across the canyon remained unmarrred by leaf or blossom. The tree withered slightly in its farthest branches. It was not concerned. It knew that its roots ran deep and that it could last a very long time. Its attention was fixed upon the risk of death by drowning; it did not notice the more subtle threat of drought.

In that time the rivers ran of their own accord, chose where to go, uphill or down.

One day the river came to a stone embankment, smooth, sheer and high. Once, the river would have leapt the stone lightly. That day the river could not make the leap, and no longer wished to try. So the river stilled there, a silence in the stony deeps.

And in the silence was a song.

What is the song of the mother of waters? The notes of that song rippled and rang over the river, endlessly sweet: the splashing of the green-dappled forest brook in its stone bed, the sparkling spray of a fountain, the serene purling of the deep lakes and the surging roar of the salt oceans; the drumming of rain and the touch of mist. A rainbow flung its colors like a banner above. The river remembered, at first faintly and then clearly as the rainbow, what it was to sing; and then the river wept, but did not know it. And the watersong took the river away.

The river shivered, once, and then it let go and flowed, blended beyond finding. It was singing, singing with many others but also singing with its own voice; and it forgot, in the song, all fear of being alone.

Time flowed seamlessly on. The arching rainbow went bright and dark as the sun came and went, and the foamflowers blossomed blue and faded again, and the river did not count the days. The river learned many things, the things which must be learned without words; and always, the river sang. But one day under the luminous sky memory came to the river. It remembered leaping over stones in the riverbed, landing in a splash, gilding softly past moss on its banks. It remembered the scarlet flowers of April; and it left the Mothersong of waters and went travelling again.

The river wandered through many lands. It had lost much of its loneliness in the singing and so it flowed peacefully, sharing itself with the roots nearby, allowing itself to be caught up, as needed, into rain. But memory had returned, and with it, the old grief.

One day the river came to a bank of bright sand. The river remembered death, and guarded itself, and looked.

In the pale canyon the tree still stood.

It seemed unchanged, as though the river had only left yesterday. It was still gloriously tall and splendid, the foliage brilliantly emerald; and with a catch of pain the river remembered that the tree had always been beautiful. Anxiously it scanned the leaves. The edges were still dry. Perhaps drier than before; perhaps not. The river rocked gently, uncertain.

And suddenly sensed it.

Fear.

The waterless roots, deep in the desert, were wither-
And when the tears had all been borne away the river said farewell to Its vision of the tree watered and splendid and of itself watering the tree; and it looked at the tree and said 'You are right. I should not have tried to touch you without asking if you wished It. I am sorry.'

It was over, and the river turned to go, back with the mother'song, back to the source of waters, but a deep voice rumbled over the desert behind It and It turned back.

'It was you all those years,' said the tree, affront and recognition mingling in the bass tones. 'Yes,' acknowledged the river. 'Why?' asked the tree.

The river paused and then said, carefully, 'It seemed that you were withering.'

There was a long silence filled with the tree's shimmering incredulity. But finally, for the first time in the long uncounted years, the tree shook itself. A cloud of shriveled leaves rustled free of the ancient branches and settled slowly to the sand. Long strips of dry bark shredded from the trunk, fell like tinder to the ground.

But how could the river ever truly know? Had the river itself not thirsted - to be needed? How, then, could the river know the tree?

And, worse, if the tree had truly thirsted, had not the river, attacking, only sealed the tree more deeply into its thirst?

The reflections rippled down through all the years, and for the second time the river wept.

The tree shrank from the watery tears.

And when the tears had all been borne away the river said farewell to its vision of the tree watered and splendid and of itself watering the tree; and it looked at the tree and said 'You are right. I should not have tried to touch you without asking if you wished it. I am sorry.'

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The breeze carried the acrid smell of dust.

The tree said nothing, but the river sensed its fear.

'I might be able to help you,' said the river, aware of the annihilating sands. 'I don't know. Will you allow me to come in?'

'Withering?' asked the tree.

The river was silent.

Long waves of rumination rose like sap through the tree: the shuddering memories of the flood, the rooted aversion to water, the reluctance to risk such upheaval again; all of these were felt again, but, finally, they gave way.

The tree sighed, and wind caught in its branches. 'Come, then,' it said.

The words rose and blended with the other notes in the singing wind. The river lifted and poised on its bank, considering the sands, wondering how to cross them. And as the river paused there, the change, of itself, began.

For the ancient spell was released even as the tree spoke. Suddenly the air lost its acid tang. The sand softened, darkened, into the deep rich brown of earth after winter. Moss spread in soft green patches along the riverbank. In rocky crevices crimson flowers unfurled, and the wind, freshening now and singing through the erstwhile desert, bore a scent of honey. The mothersong rose and flowed like a river around the tree, and sang, as it flowed, with all the voices of rain and new green leaves.

The tree straightened and shook its branches in the caroling wind. Already its leaves were glossy green. 'I had forgotten,' it said, its voice low with wonder. 'How could I have forgotten?'

When the song faded it was starry night and they saw that the song had drawn a crescent channel from the river toward the tree, an inlet which almost, but not quite, touched the tree's base; and the banks of the inlet were lined with foamflowers, intensely blue with foamwhite hearts. There was one for every tear the river had wept.

The river travels yet throughout the worlds, for that is the way of rivers. It runs more lightly now, though, and those who sit beside it and listen to its waters rise smiling. And sometimes, in the dark of the moon when the foamflowers blossom, the river pauses in a crescent inlet, and spins stories of its travels for its friend.

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**EDITORIAL**

Seems like it's been a long time since the last Mythic Circle and, well, it has been! A rich, full summer, including Mythcon XIX in Berkeley with Ursula K. LeGuin as author GOH. Christine & I ran a writers' workshop at the conference and were thrilled to see more than a few members of THIS workshop (The Mythic Circle) in attendance. We had P.C. Hodgell speak to us about first breaks and related topics and we'll run a transcription of her talk (as soon as we transcribe it!) We do need to apologize for how late our responses to letters and submissions have been for the last 4 or 5 months, and plead our crazy lives: Christine is back in the classroom this fall as well as writing on contract and I'm making music whenever possible, travelling back and forth between Connecticut and Los Angeles, and coordinating the Not Tolkien Calendar calendar project which, sadly, has been delayed to 1990 (the artists voted and so it goes - we'll keep you informed, though).

While we've been busy with our lives (the nerve of those editors, having private lives—!), a raging torrent of submissions has flooded us, forcing us to reconsider what we're trying to do with this magazine. We decided our original concept is valid: a writers' workshop in print, offering constructive criticism from our readers, but that we need to make some policy changes: primarily the decision - all else being equal - to favor submissions from subscribers over non-subscribers, in the ongoing effort to keep this project afloat (please see our new guidelines, page 36).

See, when we started, nigh on two years ago, our task was to break even within two years (and generate the smallest possible puddle of red ink in the meantime) - if we don't break even, we fold. Simple as that. Because, we remind you, we're sponsored by the Mythopoeic Society (a non-profit organization) and the Myth.Soc. is anything but a sugar daddy. So please urge your writer and reader friends to subscribe (hint - give subs for gifts) and maybe we'll get Mythic Circle saddledstitched yet.

Speaking of staples (a jug of wine, a loaf of bread and - oh, Christine says not THAT kind of staple!), we thank Stan & Angelee Anderson for the generous donation of a HEAVY DUTY stapler so now our issues will no longer de-collate under the strain of intensive reading...

We do need to know how you feel about the quantity and quality of poetry we've been running - more-less? another poetry-intensive issue soon? Let us know (and remember, we assume we can print your letters unless you tell us otherwise).

And finally, a correction: in the American Fantasy Issue (MC#6) we accidentally left off the subtitle to Douglas Rossmann's "The Finishing Place" - "A Cherokee Tale Retold" should have followed. Our apologies to Doug and the second edition of MC#6 has been corrected. You'll notice the related story in this issue: "The Tobacco Seekers" (another Cherokee tale retold).

So - happy holidays and we'll see you in 1989.

- Lynn & Christine