



## Creative Writing Dissertation Creative portfolio and critical essay

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### Last Night

When we began our training, it felt like the start of forever. That's how they made it seem. Just watch and listen, they said, and you'll be fine. You'll cut away the undergrowth, you'll navigate by the stars and you'll have this job for the rest of your life. And why wouldn't they say that? They couldn't have known.

The sun is rising. If I turned around now I would see it, big and orange and partially eclipsed by the roofs and towers of Cinderfall. The heat of the first rays rolls over my shoulders and down my back, and my matchet feels alive in my hand. No matter what my mind says, my body still believes it was born for this job.

Until now, my fire has been the only light for miles around. It's been burning all night, but it can probably last me another. As I bury the ashen log under a mound of earth, I reflect on the journey ahead. It's a beginner's Way, so I should be done by nightfall.

For breakfast I have a lentilroot. The first bite sends a cascade of chewy pulses into my mouth. I scoop out the rest and keep the outer casing. If anything goes wrong, I'll need the extra protein, and maybe the natural anaesthetic. It goes into my pack along with my bedroll and I head into the forest.

Some Ways need tending weekly, and I've watched them grow, evolve over the years. Trees growing new armour, meadows of greengill becoming miniature forests of their own underfoot.

Some Ways are like old friends. When I get round to taming them, it's easy to tell how they've changed, and we're back on good terms in an instant.

Some Ways are easy to lose. Even forget. I barely recognise this one at all.

To the trained eye, a path is still visible. The plant life never truly adapts. A thick clump of tangleweed falls to my matchet, and I can see just how long it's been. Insects scatter as sunlight sweeps away the cobwebbed dark. A loud crack splits the air and I flinch as a leafy tendril snaps towards me. With a wild laugh, I bury my blade into its roots. Maybe I do remember something about this Way after all.

"Perilweed!" Barked the chief, stopping the group yet again and holding up a clump of foliage. It struggled in his hand. "A dangerous foe to the inattentive traveller." He relaxed his grip and the leafy tentacles began to crawl up his arm, enveloping his hand.

"Swordsmith!" he bellowed.

"Yes sir," I shouted back. He liked to pick on me, grill me in front of my fellow trainees. In the end I'd thank him for that, though never to his face.

"Can you identify signs of venom in this particular genus?"

As I stepped closer, I could see shocking violet veins webbed throughout the leaves and stem. They seemed to grow darker and wider around the chief's wrist.

"Come on, Swordsmith. Take this long by yourself and you're dead. Or worse, your client's dead."

"Yes sir," I replied. "Presence of venom indicated by purple pigmentation."

"Well you'd better do something about it, hadn't you!" The chief's voice was strained now, much to the amusement of my classmates.

Without hesitating, I drew my matchet. More laughs from behind.

"Gonna chop my hand off, are you Swordsmith?" The perilweed had now passed the chief's elbow.

My face glowed red, but I did not sheath my blade. I tensed my arm and hurled the matchet to the ground. A small snapping sound, a splash of violet, and the chief's arm was

free. The class followed his gaze as it moved from me to the matchet buried in the earth. Beside it, a small green stump flailed about, spurting purple liquid.

"Not bad," muttered the chief. He stood up, brushed himself down, and marched off. "Come on you lot. If we don't make camp in a clearing, the Nightsbane will strangle us in our sleep."

They don't call this the Waking Woods for nothing. As I trudge through the undergrowth, I can hear the whispering trees reach out to each other, some plotting against parasites, others vying for what scraps of sunlight remain unclaimed. The river bubbles with gossip and crystal notes of laughter somewhere off to my right. Way Tamers are trained to listen to the language of the forest, to discern which areas are in need of tempering and when. This one has gotten particularly big for its boots, but still my matchet swings with a certain... reluctance.

I've been walking for maybe a couple of hours, and no creatures have crossed my path. This isn't surprising; animals tend to avoid the Waking Woods if they can. Rabbits can get caught in junkblossom traps and slowly eaten alive by the leaves. Insects dare not land on flowers for fear of the hot-petaled fireclimber. I often get the feeling that I'm only safe thanks to the blade in my hand and my Way Tamer scent. But this is a beginner's Way, designed to give trainees a diverse forest education. I ought to have seen or heard some fauna by now.

I search for the widest tree in the immediate area. One big enough to form a ditch around its roots. It doesn't take me long to find the largest ochre tree in sight, and sure enough there's a consistent depression in the ground, like a moat surrounding a stout fortress. Within this trench, as I'd suspected, there lie a series of evenly-spaced loops, camouflaged amongst the moss. Junkblossom traps.

I draw one of my daggers, and slowly pinch the end of the closest loop between finger and thumb. It doesn't react, but I can feel the tension in its botanical sinews, warm and quivering. Turning my dagger over in my hand, I hold it between finger and thumb, inserting the handle into the noose. Then release my left hand.

Immediately, the plant is eating away at the leather of my dagger's handle. I shiver, imagining for a moment that it's my wrist caught in that carnivorous grip. Before the handle dissolves, I begin my experiment, shaking my dagger in all directions amongst the leaves. Junkblossom just wants its prey to play dead, for a lonely trapped rabbit to wait quietly while it steals a limb, before limping off weaker and more easily caught. But rabbits are smarter than that. They travel together, protect each other; and a hungry rabbit would be foolish to refuse a broken junkblossom trap.

The noise of my struggle means I can't rely on my hearing for movement, so I turn my head frantically, trying to take in all of my surroundings at once. The echoing noise stops and I look down. The plant has made short work of my dagger already, but for all of my thrashing, I haven't seen any change in scenery. Where are the animals?

Behind me, there's a rustle from the bushes, and I turn.

From out of the bushes to our far right ran a squirrel. Behind me, one of the other trainees jumped, prompting an outburst of giggles and jeering from those around him. The squirrel did not react; even the smallest of animals were accustomed to the presence of Way Tamers and their less-than-covert young.

The squirrel had other things on its mind than obnoxious noises. As I watched, the trees around us began to shake. Suddenly, between us and the squirrel there was a bear. Three bears to be exact, a mother and her two cubs. They weren't looking at us. The cubs weren't looking anywhere in particular, but the mother was staring straight at the squirrel. All three of them looked underfed. Hungry.

Under the beady gaze of the chief, every one of us stood perfectly still. We couldn't intervene in situations like this. According to the code, all life is equal to a Way Tamer.

I believed that once.

Without warning, the bear rushed at the squirrel with a high-pitched bark, and her children ambled after her. The squirrel darted up the nearest tree, but was quickly pursued by the hot determination of a mother who needs to feed her children.

I don't know how long the chase lasted. The plant and animal kingdoms do not measure time. After a while, however, both parties began to tire. Whilst predator and quarry did battle around the clearing, the cubs gave up early on and sat in a patch of shade while the skirmish happened around them. Even some of my comrades set themselves down in the

grass as the fight wore on, but I and a few others remained alert. The chief was always watching.

Eventually, a sound like the snap of a whip broke the monotony, followed by a loud, sustained scrabbling noise. The squirrel had got itself caught in a tailtrap vine, right at the base of an ancient, knotted tree. Another laugh came from the group as it became clear that the source of the scratching sound was the mother bear's paws against the trunk, too big to reach the squirrel, trapped as it was.

Defeated, the animal collapsed on the undergrowth. Perhaps it would have continued its fruitless pursuit, had another familiar sound not split the air. The bear cubs yelped as the ground below them began to smoke, emitting an acrid hiss. The fireclimber had got them, and now their petulant yelps added to the symphony of distress in the clearing.

The chief was the first to move once the bears had slunk off. He strode over to the large, ancient tree, knife in hand. But it was not the sharp snap of plant matter that carried on the afternoon breeze.

I thought about asking him why he did it. Feigning academic interest. But I knew how the conversation would have gone.

"I just want to be the best Way Tamer I can be. Could you run me through your thought process when--"

"It was instinct, Emory, instinct. Runs in the blood of true Way Tamers. I wouldn't expect a Swordsmith to understand."

I reach into the gully, blindly feeling around for the pieces of my knife. All being well, I can boil the leather when I make camp, and make a new haft. Otherwise my body is stock-still, and I don't take my eyes off the bushes. I can't.

My mind is saying rabbit, but my nose disagrees. The smell doesn't match. Another sudden rustle from the bushes makes my whole body start. My left hand releases the blade it just found, and a snapping noise from below tells me I don't need to fix the handle anymore. But it's a fair trade. The noise is enough.

The rabbit bursts from the undergrowth, a grey-brown streak of panic and courage. Its familiar movement slows my heart. A forest without animals is a hostile place.

And yet, the smell remains. Way Tamers are taught to rely on the nose above anything else. Tired eyes and even ears can be tricked, but the nose never lies. Something is wrong, and this might be my only chance to find out what.

The rabbit is heading straight for the ochre tree, ready to rescue a fellow intrepid from the clutches of the forest. Time to prepare my own clutches.

Three movements: One, my matchet slashes quickly through the rest of the junkblossom traps; two, it rucks up the moss below. The pungent mulch underneath ought to mask my scent. I don't have time to fashion a trap of my own, so I really do only have one shot. Three, I position myself so the rabbit is running right at me, and brace myself.

I saw her coming, but she still managed to run right into me. Trembling all over, half the forest in her hair, and wracked with sobs. I held her still, and checked her vitals. No bites, no rashes, cuts only superficial. The vines were not venomous, but a few of them were attempting to knot her hair into further disarray.

She was in such a state of shock that she stood and let me perform my examination without complaint. It was only when she sat down gingerly and whispered, "thank you," that I knew she'd noticed my presence.

"How long have you been out here?" I asked, "Where's your Way Tamer?" She just shook her head, and resumed sobbing.

Eventually I got the story out of her. She had a son; he'd run away from home during the night, and last been seen heading towards the forest.

"The whole district is on alert," she gasped, her chest still heaving from panic. "People keep saying he ain't gonna come back. You'll help me, won't you?"

I nodded.

She was amazed by everything. My ability to see paths where she couldn't, the vivid beauty of the flowers, the dappled sunlight on the ground. It helped to calm her down, so much so that I worried she'd been bitten by a slumberleaf. But whenever we stopped to rest, she'd work herself up again.

"Do you think he's okay? My boy? What if... what if a bear's got him?"

I put my hand on her shoulder, deciding not to point out that animals are not the biggest threat in the Waking Woods.

"It's all his own fault, really," she'd repeat. "He and his father, they had a huge argument in the middle of the night. Woke up half the street. Dread to think what it's done to business today."

Focused on negotiating a particularly thorny patch of needle-moss, I said nothing.

"I had to go from house to house, apologising on their behalf. It's just not seemly to be heard shouting in the early hours of the morning. Perhaps in the outskirts, but certainly not in Dragon Heights. I barely got to sleep for the shame of it. Carlan managed to calm him down eventually, get him back into the house. But then of course, we wake up and what do you know--"

She had finally seen my raised hand. When the echo of her voice died down, I could hear clearly what I had suspected. A rustling, botanical growl, mixed with an unmistakably human voice. I readied my arm to hold her back, but she just stood there, eyes glazed over. Is that him? Her words were silent.

I placed my hands on her shoulders. "Stay here. I'll be right back."

Beyond a curtain of hanging vines was a shadow-streaked clearing, with an ancient hollowgrip tree at its centre. I bowed low, suppliant before the Wild Mother. The sounds of the wood ceased, and the whole forest leaned in to witness my next move. Over my shoulder, the woman stood still, frozen to the spot.

A thundering roar shattered the silence, and suddenly I had an opponent. Before me was a panther, shaking off the leaves of its hiding place. A limp form hung from its black jaws, and blood dripped from shining teeth. The beast found my gaze and began to snarl, edging slowly closer. My fingers curled around the handle of my matchet.

The creature turned, but the eyes stayed firmly on me as it padded to the base of the hollowgrip's trunk. A wet flopping sound as the body fell from its jaws and onto the roots. Then the tree began to move. I bowed low again, as did the leopard. It is one thing to stumble upon an ancient tree, quite another to see one in motion.

The twisted top half of the trunk unwound, revealing long tendrils that scoured the air and came to rest upon the salmon at the tree's foot. One limb pierced it clean through the heart, and with a deft flick threw it into the newly-opened hollow trunk.

I came to the right conclusion just before the mother came to the wrong one.

"It's eaten him, hasn't it!" A thump at my back. Not strong, but not weak either. "It's eaten him! How could you let that happen!"

I tried to hold her back, but the Hells hath no fury like a mother. Ignoring the still-prostrate leopard, she began to pound the trunk with her bare fists. "Give me my boy back! Let him out! Bring him back to me!"

I took a step towards her, dismissing the leopard with a flick of wrist and steel. The mother turned towards me, face set.

"Is this what you do then? Play the good guy, then lead us into traps to feed your creepy plant friends?" Her voice croaked with grief and effort.

As if to confirm her theory, the nearest tendril shot towards her, wrapping her waist and covering her mouth, muffling her surprise.

"It's just trying to defend itself! You attacked it first! What were you thinking?"

Muted screams were my only reply. I took a breath and cleared my head. I had one crucial piece of information that she didn't have.

"Hollowgrip trees aren't carnivorous! It couldn't have eaten your son! It didn't want to hurt you, it just--"

Another scream as smaller, sharper branches began hovering around her. I had to act now. With a muttered prayer and a silent curse, I ran towards the tree.

A tendril found my matchet immediately, wrenching my arm and pulling me off balance. I switched legs and spun towards the branch, bringing up a dagger to meet my other blade. With an ear-splitting crunch and an explosion of bark, my right arm was free again. An earthy squeal burst from the tree, but no pain came. My true intent was recognised, but the tree had made a friend; it wasn't going to give him up easily.

My matchet sliced through the mother's restraints, and she collapsed. Her arms hung limp and bruised by her sides, but her voice had suffered no such exhaustion. She yelled incomprehensibly, kicking at me as I lifted her out of harm's way.

"Please," I said, setting her down on a stump. "Just let me get your boy back." I put my ear to the tree. Now its defences were down, the familiar quiet of the clearing had returned. Through layers of bark, I could now hear a faint munching sound. I bowed once again, fully prostrate this time.

"Oh, Wild Mother," I wailed, making sure the woman could see what I was doing. "This son of the city has brought you much joy, of that I am sure. But, with the greatest reverence, I must beg for his return. Your assailant is nothing but the mother of this child, and she wishes to have her family once again united. As a Way Tamer of the Waking Woods, I make this humble request."

The tree cracked and groaned, as if chuckling at my melodrama, but it worked. The stout limbs that made up the hollowgrip's winding trunk split open almost to the roots, revealing a pale pre-pubescent boy, nibbling on the remains of a salmon carcass.

I walked them back to the edge of the forest in relative silence. Behind me, I could hear fervent whispering as she comforted and scolded the boy all at once. For my part, I was lost in thought. Navigating by instinct, my mind was still in the clearing. Way Tamers are taught to self-analyse all the time, but this was something different.

The distinctive spires of Cinderfall came into view as the trees began to thin out. "Here we are. No charge for you, I understand it's been an ordeal."

"Too right it has," muttered the mother, not quite under her breath. She trudged out of the wood without a backward glance. But the boy turned to me.

"Thank you. I didn't mean to get as far as the forest. I just started walking and it didn't occur to me to stop. Even trapped inside that tree, it's the first time I've felt free in months."

I didn't reply. It's unprofessional to ask personal questions of clients.

"Is your dad a Way Tamer?" He asked.

"No, but my mother was. My dad makes blades. Like this one," I gestured to my matchet. "Dad wanted me to join him, but I was always more interested in mum's job."

"My dad's a potter," the boy said quietly. "He wants me to be a potter too."

"I see. Well just... you make sure he knows that you're his son first."

"Okay. Yeah, okay. Thanks."

He smiled, slipped me a few gold pieces, and ran after his mother. I watched the two of them as they reached the Braid, hailed a caravan, and set off for Cinderfall. Side by side, two pictures sat in my mind. The mother, targeted and restrained by the hollowgrip tree; and the boy, protected and provided for by the forest. She had hurt the tree, so it had hurt her. He had tried to forge his own path, and the Waking Woods had held him in its arms, made him feel free.

After what seems like hours of work, of careful watching and waiting, I am holding the rabbit in my arms. The unfamiliar scent is now overpowering. It smells like bad compost, decay without life to redeem it. It stirs memories, or shadows of memories. Things I've worked hard to forget.

The toy heartbeat races in my hands. I clutch it like a baby until I feel its pulse calm down, then I begin my examination.

It doesn't take long. I can't believe I didn't see it until now.

One leg is different from the others.

Muscle tissue gleams purple and grey, bruised and exposed to the midday sun. The limb quivers like a malformed suckling runt, draining the life from its host. My hand reaches instinctively for my belt, but then my mind catches up. I've no way of telling how far the canker has spread; amputation could make things worse.

I remember the traps, and the lentilroot skin at the bottom of my pack. Cradling the rabbit in my right arm, I tear the plant matter into pieces with my teeth. It sniffs at the food half-heartedly for a while, but soon pain gives way to hunger and the two of us share a meal in the shade of this ochre tree.

I've seen an animal in this condition once before, and then I didn't recognise it for what it was. Thankfully this time it's only a rabbit.

I haven't rested since early this morning, but the rabbit starts to wriggle in my arms. I set it down on its front legs, eager to see how it works around its deformed haunch. It finds its feet easily enough, but as it begins to scamper off I watch as it loses its footing every few metres. Each time it rights itself with a squeal of pain on its back legs, shakes its head and tries again.

I smile and see it to the edge of the clearing, impatient to get back on track. If I don't finish taming this Way by nightfall then... then...

I mean, it all grows back eventually.

But just as I'm about to rejoin the trail, the rabbit catches my eye. I mean it catches my eye. From across the clearing, it spins around and stares unblinking into my face. I turn, and it begins to stumble back towards me. It keeps eye contact as it bounds closer, and once again my nose catches that deathly smell. There's a glint in its eyes, perhaps even a glow...

This time the memories flow unabated.

About a year into the job, I was based for the first time on the far side of the forest. As the nights draw in, many travel east to escape the cruel winters further north and west. Our busiest time of year. I'd drawn the short straw and watched as my fellows settled down to sleep, trying not to begrudge them the mook-wool canvas above their heads.

Torch in hand, I walked around for warmth, trees silhouetted in the yellow light. I tried to pretend that it was only the shadow of night that made them appear black, only a trick of the moonlight mutating their outlines.

I tried not to stray too far from my post. There could still be clients approaching at this time of night. Away to my left I could hear Alyx coughing in his tent, pitched some distance from the others. He wouldn't be much use to anyone for much longer, poor man. It was only our depleted numbers that compelled the chief to post him at all.

"Hello?" A quavering voice to my right. I raised my torch, turning in the direction of the greeting. I bowed when I saw her.

"You seek passage through the Waking Woods, madam?"

"Yes please. And quickly, if you don't mind. I came across some... unsavoury strangers on the road."

"Of course, madam." I knelt down beside the nearest tent and woke Allyria.

"I've got a delivery I'm afraid."

She rubbed her eyes and sat up. I placed a hand on her shoulder. "Do me a favour. Don't wake Alyx. I'll do another watch when I get back."

Allyria nodded and gestured for me to go. When I stood up my client was standing right behind me.

"Apologies madam, are you travelling to Cinderfall tonight?" "Just get me to the Braid, I can make my own way from there. Do it quickly, and this is yours." From an inside pocket she produced an eye-sized ruby. Its flawless facets caught the torchlight, a forest fire in the palm of her hand.

"This way madam, please stay close behind." I turned and began to walk into the forest. "My name is Emory Swordsmith."

"Ryn LaVergne," she replied.

"And what do you do in Cinderfall, Ryn LaVergne?" Most clients enjoy some small talk, especially at night.

"I keep my head down, stay quiet and look where I'm going," she said with a wry smile. I nodded and quickened my pace. Not the best idea I've ever had.

If animals see light and hear noise, they'll probably stay away. Noise means humans, awake humans with sharp things. Light and no noise, on the other hand...

My only warning was a low growl. Then the door burst open.

"What's this I hear?" Bellowed my father. He was an intimidating man at the best of times. "You're going to leave me to go off hacking at plants?"

"I'm not leaving, I'll still live in the forest."

"Oh yeah? And who's going to smith when I retire? Your sister?"

"Maybe," I parried. "Xandra's strong, skilled with tools."

He bared and gnashed his teeth. Anger huffed and puffed from his nostrils.

"It's my job to protect you. I've always known that. But if you're going just going to throw your life away in the woods--"

"Throw it away? What, like Mum did?"

"It's too dangerous out there for a smith. Other kids, taming's in their blood." He was trying to sneak around me, but I wasn't fooled.

"So I'm not good enough, am I?" I pounced. "I'll hold my sword wrong and chop my own hand off? Or lose the path and get lost? Maybe I'll--"

"You could die out there!" He cut me off. The anger in his eyes had given way to fear. "It happens to the best."  
We sat in silence for almost a full minute. He struggled with himself, but the fight was won.

"What was that thing?" Ryn's voice wavered with shock. Confrontation over, I let my blood-stained machet fall to the ground.

"Dire fox."

"Why would a fox attack us?"

"Fear. Hunger. Survival. They drive us all."

"It doesn't look like a fox."

She was right. Its back was arched, like an angry cat, and two of its legs were twisted and inflamed. The all-too-familiar smell of death and decay drifted from its mangled maw, the white glow fading from its open eyes.

"Let's go," I said quietly. Ryn nodded, eyes still firmly on the corpse as we left the moonlit grove. I talked from then on, but she didn't say a word. We reached the edge of the forest in the pink pre-dawn light.

"The Braid." I gestured to the road, peppered with travelers and beasts of burden. "I'm sorry it wasn't faster."

"You saved my life tonight," she replied, taking out the ruby once more and placing it in my hand. "Perhaps I can help you one day. You'll find me at The Staff and Lantern."

I saw her safely onto the road, then made my way to the village. I had to tell them about the dire fox. Tell them it was spreading.

"Emory!" The whispered voice appeared in my mind, bypassing my ears.

"Albearn! Thank the Mother," I sent my reply. "In the woods--"

"Wait. Listen carefully, my boy. My visions are coming true. The plague has reached the village."

I stopped walking.

"Alberith is treating the victims as we speak. They're sealed off from the rest of us, but they are many. I advise you not to return tonight."

Silence between us.

"You had news for me?" Came the Prophet's voice once more.

"What about father? And Xandra? Are they alright?"

"The Tamers are doing the rounds now. Anyone unaffected will be moved to quarantine in the morning."

"I have to see my family--"

"Please, Emory. Go back to camp. Tell the others. Do not return until we know it is safe."

So I went back to camp. I took my promised second watch, and at breakfast I broke the news.

The plague continued to spread. We could not stop it. We could tame the forest, keep our clients from succumbing, even learning of the scourge. But they saw its effect. Trees not green with life, but with venom. Beasts and humans alike mutated beyond recognition.

The quarantine camps were safe. Until they weren't. There seemed to be nowhere the plague could not reach. We prayed every hour to the Wild Mother, but still it would not stop. I accompanied a group to Cinderfall, searching for shelter, magical advice. We were refused the first, the second proved ineffective. Before we left, a mage with a knowing glance whispered to me that rubies have the power to ward away pestilence.

When my sister was struck, I gave the ruby to her, but still she passed, not one week before my father too succumbed. In my dreams I sit by their sickbeds, crying as they wake up with glowing eyes. The last phase. I toss and turn, helpless as the brightness fades to nothing. I alone remained untouched by the Lastlight Virus. In less than three years, everyone else was gone.

I clutch the ruby to my chest as the rabbit leads me deep into the centre of the forest. Light begins to fade as the canopy closes around us. Heartstrings hang from low branches, tugging at my arms as I struggle to keep my guide in sight. My head is filled with whispers in primordial tongues, but all around me is silent.

I lose sight of the rabbit as it rounds a thick, ancient trunk. Tripping in the half-light, I follow. And then I see it.

A black... mass hangs in the air at the base of a bellerophon tree. Smooth and fluid, it shifts in shape and consistency, never resting. I make a move towards it, but its surface bristles at my approach. A smooth tentacle reaches out and begins to stroke the rabbit at my feet.

“Why am I here?” I whisper, though already I have my suspicions.

The liquid form responds. It shimmers and shifts, a dark spectral tree floating before me. From the shadows appears a human silhouette, blade in hand. The matchet connects with a branch, then the trunk, and with every blow, a hole appears in the fluid surface.

The Way Tamer staggers, begins to mutate, but still it goes on slicing at the tree. Only when two pinpricks of light pierce its face does it finally stop.

The shapes dissolve back into the writhing mass, but the puncture marks remain.

A black beating heart, riddled with holes.

I lay down my matchet and fall to my knees.

“Mother,” I whisper. “I’m so sorry.”

The sun is setting. It hides behind the dense forest before me, but beams of orange pierce the blue sky above me. I turn and face Cinderfall, see the long shadows of its towers fall across the Braid. My matchet still lies in that clearing, and there I imagine it will stay, buried by generations of plant life.

I lift up my arms and stretch the tension from my body, before starting off towards the city. I can call in a favour at the Staff and Lantern.

As the last light of day fades into the west, I wonder if the forest will miss me too.



### ***Last Light: A Creative investigation into Individualism and the Environment***

The initial concept for this story was a physical journey through a fantastical landscape, enabling a journey through the mind and memory of the lone protagonist. The story that emerged follows this framework, focussing on the individual, while also engaging with the wider relationship between humans and the natural environment. For Emory Swordsmith, guardian of the forest and last of his kind, the forest is integral to individual identity. Through his reflection upon his own memories throughout the story, he and the reader realise just how much the reverse is also true - individualism and solitude is vital for the survival of his rural environment as well.

Kazuo Ishiguro seems a natural source of inspiration for such a story, an author famous for exploring what David James calls 'The fundamental interrelationship between memory, movement and place.'<sup>1</sup> The protagonist of this story, Emory Swordsmith, does display parallels to Mr. Stevens, the central figure in Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*. Both men are surviving members of a dying breed: Stevens belongs to an old guard of 'great' butlers which is fading into history, and Emory truly is the last survivor of the Way Tamer tribe. Both travel alone in a rural setting, and see a great importance in memory. Indeed, Ishiguro's characters often find their companions in memory: for instance, in the 'present' narrative of *Never Let Me Go*, Kathy has outlived her friends, and they exist only in her memories of them. It is significant, then, that Ishiguro's latest novel inverts this trope: in *The Buried Giant*, protagonists Axl and Beatrice have each other for company, which is just as well, since their landscape is pervaded by a mist which 'fills this land and robs us of memories.'<sup>2</sup> As an author whose use of the past has deliberate weight and purpose, Ishiguro's styming of memory must also bear meaning. In her review of the novel, Arifa Akbar points out: 'the fog of forgetfulness obliterates memories of war and the desire for vengeance, but also retards any healing process. Past horrors are buried rather than faced'<sup>3</sup>. Ishiguro uses the mist in order to comment upon a society which refuses to learn from the mistakes of the past, disabling hopes of progress. With this in mind, *Last Light* underlines the importance of memory and reflection, with particular emphasis on the relationship between humans and the natural world.

As with any fantasy tale, my story is to an extent an exploration of a constructed world; in this case, the Waking Woods. It is clear from the outset, and from the very existence of the Way Tamers, that the forest is a dangerous place, a wilderness distinct from cities or villages, hubs of 'civilisation'. Emory must deal with all kinds of vicious plants and animals, and in the end must face the reality of the plague which has wiped out his community. However, while the wilderness may be a dangerous landscape, it is also one of escape and individual expression; a place, as Greg Garrard writes, 'for the invigoration of those tired of the moral and material pollution of the city'<sup>4</sup>. Setting the Waking Woods so close to its backdrop, the towering city of Cinderfall, reminds the reader of the fine line between the two contrasting landscapes. In the 'lost boy' flashback, the boy has run away from the city to escape his fate, taking on his father's mantle of potter. Like Emory, he has ventured from his home in order to find independence. In this way, Emory acts as the central metaphor within the story. Having rejected the path his father (and his last name) has determined for him, he forges his own path by choosing a life in which he literally forges new paths through the Waking Woods.

The world of the urban is not merely physically close to the wild, rural setting of the story: it is also a constant presence within the forest itself, coming in the form of the people who are shepherded safely through it by the Way Tamers. The fundamental differences between the two spaces show themselves in the terror and anger of the boy's mother, and the disgust of Ryn Lavergne in a later flashback. However, in Emory's moment of epiphany, both he and the reader learn that the forest's most dangerous threat - the mutating plague known as the Lastlight Virus - is the result of a negative relationship between humans and nature. Garrard identifies the movement from nomadic to agricultural societies (and eventually cities) as 'both the cause and the symptom of an ancient alienation from the earth,' in which people 'define "home" as opposed to "wilderness" and... view the fruits of their labour as the consequence of a struggle against nature'<sup>5</sup>. For the city-dwellers, the wild is a necessary evil; a dangerous place that must be braved in order to farm or cut wood. Even the Way Tamers are guilty of

<sup>1</sup> David James, *Contemporary British Fiction and the Artistry of Space*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2008), p.96.

<sup>2</sup> Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Buried Giant*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2015), p.176

<sup>3</sup> Arifa Akbar, 'The Buried Giant by Kazuo Ishiguro, Book Review: This isle is full of monsters', *The Independent*, 26/02/2015

<sup>4</sup> Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, (Abingdon: Taylor and Francis, 2011), p.66

<sup>5</sup> Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, pp.67-68.

this attitude, seeing their job as overcoming the dangers of the wild. They must convince their clients that they are protected from whatever threats the forest may pose, and in doing so they seek to destroy, to tame, rather than to befriend or co-operate with the nature that surrounds them. Emory, like the forest, is caught in the middle of what R P Harrison calls a 'war between two fundamentally opposed concepts of the forest. One is the concept of the forest as resource; the other of the forest as sanctuary'<sup>6</sup>. As a servant of the Wild Mother, Emory is sworn to protect the life in the Waking Woods; a fact that is implied by his reverence rather than stated outright; but it seems the Way Tamers seem to privilege certain lives over others. There are times when this is clearly justified, for example Emory's choice to protect Ryn Lavergne's life over that of the dire fox which attacks her. However, Emory's flashbacks reveal that things are less clear-cut than they appear. The Way Tamer code maintains that all life is equal, yet the trainees are encouraged to kill an entire perilweed plant, simply because a traveller may put a foot wrong. For the Way Tamers, the forest is both resource and sanctuary: a dichotomy with which the protagonist struggles throughout the story.

Thus returns the individualism which sits at the heart of the story. As the story continues, it becomes both catalyst for and solution to Emory's dilemma. Though he expresses doubt about his job throughout the story, it is only through memory that he realises his mistake: he has escaped one tradition (forced inheritance of the family trade), only to become part of another, the Way Tamers. In *The Remains of the Day*, 'Stevens admit that "but for the tranquility of the setting," his recollections would never have been examined with quite the same scrupulous wonder.'<sup>7</sup> Solitude is integral for the clarity of reflection achieved by Ishiguro's butler and my Way Tamer protagonist. Moreover, James identifies within Ishiguro's work a suggestion that 'although the most ordinary of objects [or in many cases, locations,] are often backlit by the pleasures and ravages of the past, they need not always be solicited as stale artefacts to what might have been.'<sup>8</sup> Indeed, they can have a tangible bearing on the events of the present, just as Kathy's memories in *Never Let Me Go* aid in her decision to resign from caring for Tommy. Similarly, Emory's reflection upon his memories plays a large part in his eventual decision, as does his state of solitude: he is now alone, independent of the tradition he has come to doubt, and must move on; just as the forest must be freed from its destructive relationship with humans. Now, as he rejected his father's profession, he rejects stewardship of the forest, forging his own path once again, and leaving the wilderness to heal without being tamed. The themes, concerns and outlook of this story are perhaps best encapsulated by its title. Last Light is a direct reference to the plague that threatens the forest and wipes out most of the Way Tamers. Similarly, the 'light' could refer to Emory, the last lonely guardian left defending the forest in a world that wants to use it as a resource. However, the revelation at the story's end gives the title a more hopeful meaning. In reality, the forest used the plague to purge itself of interference, and now that end has been achieved, healing can begin. In this case, Last Light could refer to the final phase of the virus, the glowing eyes before the release of death; or allegorically, the last walk taken by the last Way Tamer before he and the Waking Woods part ways. The fates of Emory and the forest are intertwined: he cannot be a true individual unless it is also allowed its own solitude. The story calls for a different relationship between humans and nature: not one of exploitation, but of mutual benefit and respect for the individualism of the other.

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilisation*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p.123.