

The Whispering Woods / Coed Sy'n Sibrwd

by Tamar Eluned Williams & the children of Powys Schools

Once upon a time, everything in the land of Powys was forest. As far as the eye could see, a thick, dense woodland grew. The roots of the ancient oak trees, some thousands of years old, pushed deep into the soft damp earth. They reached out to each other. They spoke. They kept the land safe.

At the centre of the forest, where the ground raised itself to a small hilltop, stood the oldest tree of all. *Ar y bryn, roedd pren. O, pren braf. Y pren ar y bryn, y bryn ar y ddaear, y ddaear ar ddim.* This tree was the oldest tree of all: a vast, sweeping oak tree with branches that seemed to hold up the sky, and a trunk so wide no human being would be able to encircle it with their arms. If you did put your arms about the trunk, however, you would notice that this tree's bark was different to all the others. The bark of this ancient tree was carved deeply with shapes and spirals, with the language of the land: the curved horns of a stag, the long lean running backs of the hares, the shimmering rivers, the leaping salmon, as if the history of the whole turning world could be read upon it.

This tree was no ordinary tree. It was a place where two worlds met: this world, and the world of the tylwyth teg, the fairy folk – the otherworld. The world of magic, where it is always summer. The world where souls go when their time in this one comes to an end.

The tree stood on the hill. *Y pren ar y bryn.* The hill stood on the earth. *Y bryn ar y ddaear.* The earth stood on nothing. *Y ddaear ar ddim.* The tree held everything – the balance of two worlds. The worlds turned and time passed.

Time passed. The great forest shrank just a little, as a human beings began to settle more and more of this land. More people came. They cut down trees, built castles and farmsteads and ploughed the earth.

Then, war came to the land of Powys.

War came with the people, because where the people went, they brought war with them. War became constant: battles between different lords who ruled little pockets of land, war between men who decided they were kings without consulting anyone else, skirmishes between this world and the other.

Even the world of magic, the otherworld, was drawn into the battles happening in the human world.

And so it was that a fairy woman found herself walking through these woods, in the deep purple twilight, a fairy woman who was neither young nor old, for the people from the otherworld do not age as we do. I say she was walking but it wasn't walking that she was doing, she was dragging herself, painfully, for she was deeply injured. Her mind was a blur of the battlefields she had seen, the sounds of war that still rang in her ears – she could not think properly – she had no memory of where it was that she was supposed to go. She needed to find a tree, a tree that stood at the heart of the forest, an ancient carved oak tree, for there she could cross back into her world, where she would be healed from her injuries. But the beat of her heart was growing weaker and weaker. Her wounds were very deep.

She knew her time was running out.

As she stumbled on, the fairy woman's head spun. There seemed to be others moving through this wood with her, some from this world and some from hers, moving in the same direction, towards the centre of the forest, for the war that was being fought was a great one. Many lost souls needed to cross to the world of magic. The wood was full of whispers.

The fairy woman's vision clouded. She was not going to make it home. She could not take another step.

Then, suddenly, she found herself spinning upwards, ankles wrapped tightly in vines, caught in a trap like a fox. And upside-down, her world spinning, she saw a face before her. Another young woman, red-haired, a quiver of arrows on her back. The red-haired woman appeared to be speaking but the fairy could not hear the words she said.

The next thing she knew, she was lying on a soft bed of leaves in the warm glow of a fire, deep in a cave. The red-haired woman was moving quietly about her, tending to her, healing her wounds, for that was why she lived in the forest – she knew which plants could stitch a wound together, which could soften a fever. For many weeks, the fairy woman moved in and out of sickness, and the red-haired woman cared for her, patiently and slowly, until she was better. Sometimes the fairy woman was conscious and sometimes she was not, but she often looked for a long time at the sheet of red hair falling from the other woman's head, lit in the glow of the fire, and thought it was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

And within time, when the fairy woman was healed, the two of them fell in love, and they lived in the red-haired woman's cave, deep in the woods, and the fairy woman forgot – or tried to forget – that she had once lost her way in the woods and had never reached her home. They were happy, so happy, but their happiness was always tinged with loss because the fairy woman was never quite settled. Once she was well again, she'd go out walking in the forest, sometimes for hours, sometimes not really knowing what it was she sought. She had fitful dreams. She would wake in the night, covered in sweat, and say to the red-haired woman: "The tree, the oldest tree, the one with the stags and the salmon and the secrets of the world on its bark, where is it?"

But though the red-haired woman knew where the tree could be found, because she knew the forest like her own skin, she would not say, because she knew if she did, her fairy lover would return to her own world, and she might never see her again.

Seven years passed in this way, and like I said, the two women were happy, but not as happy as they might have been, because there was a deep homesickness for her world in the heart of the fairy woman and, in the red-haired woman's heart, a shard of fear lodged that one day her lover would leave her and find her way home. Weeks would pass when the fairy woman seemed to be at peace and happy, but there were always nights when she would wake, shuddering, and say, "The tree, the oldest tree, the tree that holds the story of the land, where is it?" and the red-haired woman would soothe her, but she would not say.

As the years passed, the land of Powys became a place of peace. At the same time, slowly, the fairy woman healed. Her body had healed a long time ago, due to the red-haired woman's skills, but because of the peace and joy of their life together, slowly, the fairy woman's mind began to heal too. As it healed, she began to remember things – flashes, fragments. She began to walk deeper into the forest, following her memories, patching up the parts that had been lost.

Always, always now, she woke in the night. "The tree, the oldest tree, the one that holds the worlds in balance. The tree on the hill, where is it?"

But the red-haired woman, her heart now cold with terror, would not say.

One day, quite by chance, the fairy woman came upon a certain path leading deep into the forest. As she followed it, the ground began to rise below her feet, and the path sang to her, and she knew, all of a sudden, that it was leading her home. She began to run, joyfully, and as she did, the wind picked up the beat of her running feet and took the sound back to the cave where the red-haired woman sat tending their fire, and she leapt to her feet and began to run too, calling out in desperation for her lover to stop.

But the fairy woman could not stop running, even if she'd wanted to. Summer was within her grasp. She sped on, towards the very heart of the ancient wood, and there it was, the hill – *y bryn, ac ar y bryn, y pren* – on the hill, the tree, and the earth below it and the worlds held by it, its bark etched with hares and rivers, the rising moon and the setting sun, and the fairy woman was pulled towards it but as she reached out her hand to touch the bark, to step back into her own world after so many years, she heard –

A cry behind her.

And she turned to see the red-haired woman, her love, tears flowing from her eyes. In that moment, the fairy woman's heart broke. She was caught, halfway between this world and the other, in the heart of the tree itself, where everything stopped. The sap in the tree's veins stopped flowing. The bark closed over the fairy woman's face. She was frozen in time, in the place between the two worlds. She could not go forwards or backwards, but was held, because her heart was broken, and she had left too much of herself in our world to be able to return home.

And so it was. Although the red-haired woman returned to the tree many times, she could not see her fairy lover, but the fairy could see her, looking out from between the cracks in the bark. The fairy woman watched the red-haired woman as she came to the tree, every day, for years and years. She watched as the red-haired woman aged, as her hair turned from red to grey. She watched as the woman's back grew bent and she walked slower and slower as the sadness and loneliness weighed heavily upon her. But the red-haired woman, now grey as the hills, never stopped coming to the tree. Even when the usual number of human years had passed, she did not die. Perhaps some of her fairy lover's magic had been left with her. She became almost as ancient as the tree itself.

And all about her, the forest filled with whispers.

The human woman thought her fairy lover's loss was just her sadness to bear. She did not realise it was, in fact, the world's.

Because the Otherworld is the land of fairies, it is also where the spirits gather, the souls of people who die in this world. Sometimes, they go there willingly. Sometimes, they have to be chased down there by the King of the Otherworld, Arawn, who rides through the skies with his sleek white-furred, red-eared hunting hounds. But that's another story...

Now, with the ancient tree frozen as it was, with a broken heart at its centre, there was no way for those unsettled spirits, those unwilling, lost, or lonely ones to pass into the otherworld. The way between the worlds was shut. Instead, the lost souls lingered here, in our world, on the fringes, in the shadows and the swirling mist and the dark places, crying out for help, filling the woods with whispers.

In Brecon, the spirits of nine thousand soldiers who fell from the peak of Pen y Fan waited, furiously, for revenge.

In Llanymynech, the ghost of an old man's lost daughter followed him, dressed in white and sobbing for help, as he walked with his greyhound through a ruined village.

In the Elan Valley, the spirit of a girl who'd wandered away from home was trapped in stone at the bottom of a lake, only revealed when the drought came, and the water receded.

And the ghosts of two lovers who had once kissed in the moonlight under a canal bridge but could never truly be free, clung together, crying in the darkness.

These spirits were among those who wandered the earth, unable to find peace with the way between the worlds broken as it was.

Stories began to thread through the land, stories that wove like tendrils of mist, filled with fear and danger. Tales of a dragon, breathing red-hot fire, who plunged down from the Crug above Brecon and rendered three farms to ash. A great water creature that slept below the water of Llyn Llangorse, rising only to feast on human flesh. The people were scared. There seemed to be great unrest, as the otherworld tried desperately to re-establish its connection with this world, as the veils between the worlds shuddered, as things bled through, and other things, creatures and people and fragments of magic, got stuck here and could not return.

At the heart of it all, the great tree that had once held everything in balance stood on its hill, with a broken heart below its bark, frozen in time, and began, slowly, to die.

With so much unrest and fear in the land of Powys, there were those who sought to take advantage. War began to break out again, only little pockets of fighting here and there, but enough to strike fear into the hearts of those who could remember what it had been like when war had been constant. Bands of soldiers began once more to move through the land. Sometimes they fought for one lord and sometimes for another. Often, they just fought each other for the sake of fighting. The ordinary people put their heads down and hoped that trouble would pass them by.

In a small cottage by the edge of the whispering woods, where the lost spirits gathered and cried in the shadows, and where, it was said, there lived an ancient witch who knew everything there was to know about the world, a young girl stood in her vegetable garden and shouted at the top of her voice.

"OWAAAAAIN!!!"

There was no sign of her younger brother. She tried again. "OWAAAAAIN!!!" Late for dinner, always out and about causing trouble, that was Owain. Ffion was constantly worried about him, especially now with the soldiers about, and the woods full of whispers, and the witch who lived in the forest.

She turned and looked at their little house, with the smoke curling from the chimney and the rough thatched roof and the chickens scratching in the dirt.

This cottage – their home – was all they had. It was only small – a thatched roof, a small vegetable patch, and some chickens that were forever escaping. But it was warm, and comfortable, and their place of safety. Owain and Ffion's parents had died a long time ago and this cottage held all the good memories they had of when they'd all been together. The fireplace where they'd cooked their dinners. The big kitchen table where they'd eaten and told stories and jokes. The flowers in the hanging basket by the front door, planted by their dad. The chicken coop mended a hundred times by their mam, after every chicken escape attempt.

Ffion looked about once more, in increasing worry. Where was he? She took a deep breath.

“OWAIIIIIN!!!”

There he was – a little streak of dirt – covered in mud from head to toe, running out of the woods, brandishing a stick. He got to the garden wall and jumped it, scattering chickens.

“I’ve been practising, Ffi!”

“For what?”

“For war!” he said, and jabbed the stick like it was a sword, and Ffion’s stomach dropped in fear.

“You’re not fighting a war,” she told him sharply.

“Why not?”

“Because there’s things to do here. The chickens need rounding up. The carrots need pulling.”

Into the little cottage they went, Owain still talking a mile a minute and tracking dirt everywhere, and Ffion’s heart pounding with terror in her chest as she tried to hide it from Owain.

“My friend Tomi says that the soldiers are taking any boy who is old enough to fight to join the war. They went through the village just yesterday.”

“But you’re not old enough to fight,” Ffion said, “and it’s not our war.”

“I can fight!” he said, and he showed her his moves and nearly knocked the big iron pot of stew onto the floor.

“Listen to me,” Ffion said to her brother, ladling stew into bowls with unnecessary force. “If the soldiers come, you run and hide. You don’t try to fight them, and you don’t let them take you. Don’t go out on your own, do you hear me? Stay here, where it’s safe. If they come here, I promise I’ll protect you – I’ll fight them off.”

Owain was sceptical. “With what?”

“With – with this!” She picked up the saucepan hanging over the fireplace and waved it over her head, trying to make him laugh.

And then she put it down again, and hoped against hope that their little cottage was far enough away from the village that the soldiers would not find them here.

But she was wrong.

Because war was spreading. The soldiers needed men to fight, and food to eat, and they went from village to village and took both, leaving destruction and horror in their wake, and when they ran out of men they took boys, boys who had never wielded a weapon in their lives.

When the soldiers came to the little cottage on the edge of the whispering woods, Ffion was in the kitchen chopping vegetables. Later, she thought she’d heard a scream, just one, as they picked her brother up and bore him away as if he weighed no more than a bag of flour, and took the eggs from the chicken coop and the potatoes and carrots from the storage shed for good measure. By the time she had grabbed her saucepan, just like she said she would, and stumbled out into the garden, there was nothing left but the bootprints in the soft mud beyond their garden wall.

“OWAIIIIIN!!!”

It was one final cry of desperation and, this time, her brother never came back.

Perhaps another child would have given up, and they would have been right to do so, because Ffion knew that it would be an impossible task to find her brother, to fight the soldiers for his return, and bring him safely home. Children taken by soldiers never come home. But Owain

was all Ffion had, him and their little cottage and their chickens, and she had promised to protect him, and she had failed. He was all she had, and she had failed to keep him safe.

But what could she do? How could she get him back?

After she'd finished crying, Ffion packed a bag with some food, strapped her saucepan on her back, and set off. But she did not set off in the wake of the soldiers. She went to the whispering woods. Because to get her brother back, Ffion needed help.

Don't go into the whispering woods. That's what people always said. The woods were teeming with the spirits of lost souls and, in the heart of the forest, an ancient witch lived. They said she knew everything there was to know, and she'd give you anything for a price. And so it was into the whispering woods that Ffion went, despite all the warnings, burning with fury, raging with a need for revenge. She would raze the whole world to get her brother back and the witch of the woods could help her do it.

For a day and a night, she walked until she had quite lost her way. The trees about her were filled with the whispers of lost voices, and to Ffion they seemed to say, *"The witch of the woods is watching you. Turn back now or you'll be lost too."*

She refused to listen to them. She walked on, for another day and another night and by now she was so tired she could hardly think, and the voices had got louder. *"The witch of the woods is watching you. Turn back now or you'll be lost too."*

Her mind now was full of the stories of the witch, the tales people told, how she was fearsome and furious and ate children, immovable as rock and not a shred of kindness in her. But she'd come so far and there was no other way. She took her saucepan from her pack and carried it like a sword.

A third day and a third night and now the voices were so loud, they were all Ffion could hear: *"The witch of the woods is watching you. Turn back now or you'll be lost too."*

"SHUT UP!!!"

Because suddenly Ffion was as deep into the forest as it was possible to be and there before her was a cave and it was the witch's cave.

Ffion walked up to the cave. She held her saucepan aloft, just in case she needed to fight. There was no bell to ring or door to knock, but she raised her voice and shouted.

There was a long silence, and finally, something – someone – slowly emerged from the darkness.

The witch's hair had once been red, a long time ago, but now it was grey. She had once been loved, but so long ago that she could not remember what it was like. Her face was deeply lined, like the bark of the trees that surrounded her. She stared at Ffion with eyes as bright as the night sky above. She did not speak.

"I need your help," said Ffion. "You're the witch of the whispering woods. I need you to help me."

The witch looked about with hard eyes. "It is so loud," she said, finally. "So many voices."

"Aren't you listening to me?" Ffion brandished her saucepan, desperately. "My brother has been taken by the soldiers. I need you to help me get him back. Use your powers."

The witch's eyes snapped back to Ffion. "Many have come here, over the years, to seek my power and knowledge. Some come with spears and some with swords and now, it seems, a saucepan. Do you think they have succeeded? I help no one for no one helps me."

"I'll give you –" Ffion broke off. What could a witch want? What did she even have? "I'll give you this saucepan. It's the best thing I own. Just please, help me."

The witch of the woods sneered at her and spat on the ground. "A saucepan! Child, your brother's blood will stain the ground before I give you aid. Come back when you can give me what I want, for my price it will be paid."

And into the cave she disappeared.

Ffion did not leave. She waited outside the cave as night fell. She thought long and hard. What could a witch want?

When the sun rose the next morning, she went once again to the mouth of the cave and shouted.

Once again, there was a very long silence, but then the witch reappeared.

"Still here?"

"I'll give you my house. My little cottage by the whispering woods. It's my home, but it's all I have, just please, help me."

"A cottage?" The witch spat once more. "Why would I need a cottage, when I have the woods and all they provide for me? Child, your brother's blood will stain the ground before I give you aid. Come back when you can give me what I want, for my price it will be paid."

Back into the cave went the witch, and Ffion's heart sank. It had been nearly a week now since Owain had been taken. She thought of him, of his stupid little stick that he liked to pretend was a sword. She thought of how he always asked for one more story before bedtime, of how he was the only one who could get the chickens back in after a long day, because they liked him the best. She thought of how empty and cold the cottage would be without her brother. *I promised to protect him. I'll do anything for him.*

She thought of the witch, alone for thousands of years in the old forest.

When the sun rose the next morning, she went once again to the mouth of the cave and shouted.

After a long silence, the witch appeared.

"Tell me please," said Ffion, "what is your price?"

The witch opened her mouth and began to sing. She sang of the world tree. And Ffion saw everything. She saw the ancient tree and its carvings of the wild world upon it. She saw the two worlds, and how they were once connected, in the heart of the tree, and spirits moved between the two, and so did magic, and all was well and the land could be at peace. She saw the witch's own story, her great love, and her great loss.

"The worlds are out of balance," said the witch. "The way between them was broken when she left me. The way is shut. Those that are dead cannot pass to the otherworld. The magic cannot pass to our world. That is why there is such unrest, why these woods are full of whispers, why war spreads across the land. Did you not wonder why things are the way they are? There is a broken heart trapped in the tree and it is dying, and there is nothing I can do about it, no matter how hard I've tried. I can help you get your brother back, but for what? There will always be another war, there will always be fear and horror, until the way between the worlds can be opened once again."

"Name your price, to get my brother back," Ffion said, firmly.

The witch leaned in close, so close that Ffion could see that there was still one strand of red hair in amongst the grey on her head. Her eyes held the wisdom of the whole world. She spoke so low that her voice was almost lost in the sound of the wind in the trees.

“This is my price,” said the witch.