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Once Upon a Time explores fairytales and folklore, delving into their narratives and symbolism. From the Grimm Brothers to folk mythologies, the exhibition takes on familiar motifs but adds a twist to bring the stories to the 21st century, repurposing these morality tales.

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SORROW AND THE SAPLING BY SUE SHIELDS

Once upon a time Old Mother Lime Tree stood peacefully secure in the knowledge that she was loved and appreciated by the animals, humans and nature in all her majesty.

Old Mother Lime Tree had seen many changes in her lifetime and as she grew in stature, so did her wisdom and intuition. She had felt the warmth of the forest, its unrelenting beauty and understood the many lives that depended upon it. She had also seen her beautiful children grow up beneath her canopy, their tender young shoots seeking her protection whilst feeling that intricate melding of root on root, leaf on leaf in mysterious silent communication beyond our human understanding. But nothing stays the same and many of her children had fallen to the axe, one by one, felled and stripped and taken from her. A fate she herself had narrowly escaped years before and now she stood tall, the matriarch of her dark, cool and still forest.

Like all Mothers worth their salt, Old Mother Lime Tree had not forgotten her children whose wood decorated the finest interiors, furnished houses, or snugly sat on the shelf of many a library. Sometimes she would hear of their lives from passing birds who had strayed through an open window or fluttered in to buildings stacked with books: and the wood and paper would whisper, 'Please tell my mother that I am good and strong and remember her kind shade from the sun and shelter from the snow. Tell her I am contented with my fate.'

Onwards the bird would fly finding refuge in Old Mother Lime Tree's branches and would tell her, 'Your children still remember and love you. They miss your arms and protection but they have accepted their servitude and say they are content.' Old Mother Lime Tree never tired of such news but it also made her deeply sad when she considered that so many of her kind had given their all but that it would never be enough.

One winter evening when every tree was slowly being touched by night, a group of migrating starlings murmured above Old Mother Lime Tree's branches, finally roosting in her canopy.

'Good evening little birds', she said. 'Is it good Old Mother Lime Tree?' replied the birds in unison. 'We have travelled so long and feel the world can no longer house us. We have always migrated to far off places but we are no longer welcome for there are terrible things afoot. If you had seen what we have seen, you would be speechless with sorrow and rage, dear Mother'. The grand old tree shivered from root to twig and her last few crinkled leaves fell to the floor. 'Is it true then the things that I have heard? That there is a dreadful purge on my kind across the seas in a city once famous for its nature?' The little birds all trembled too. 'Indeed it is', they mournfully tweeted. 'Our ancestors talked of its beautiful parks with streets lined with trees, but no more, no more'.

One bird sobbed, 'Lilah was her name; a beautiful Lime and as I lay roosting in her branches, I was awoken by an awful noise and, and Lilah's branches were severed and her trunk discarded like rubbish; whilst all around lights flashed, people shouted and cried, dogs barked from afar, and paper hearts, poems and ribbons blew over the tarmac. Then five more Limes were cut to the ground leaving a space that three hundred trees could not fill. Six empty gaps from ground to sky; all squirrels, all birds, the owl and I sought refuge in the park. One hundred years of service, defending streets from sun, rain, pollution and flood had meant nothing, and our homes destroyed and the Dryads murdered.'

Old Mother Lime Tree bowed down her head, her twigs gently encircling the tiny starling and wept for its' friends, for Lilah, for the woods and forests, for all the creatures and for human folly.

She knew of the forests of rain and of their plunder and degradation, she knew of the ancient felling from one continent to the next, but she had foolishly believed that some places knew better! Old Mother Lime Tree raised up her whole self and bellowed in her rage. She pulled up her vast and ancient roots and walked to the city of Treefield.

It would be too long a tale to tell of all her journeys and adventures, but needless to say, trees help trees and soon the woods, forests, street, park and garden trees were whispering about the genocide in Treefield City. After many weeks, but not as many as you would imagine, Old Mother Lime Tree had arrived and she stopped in a splendid garden, crowded with the most beautiful trees she had ever seen, and she dug down her roots to take drink.

She had found the city's famous botanical gardens and once rested, began to talk to her neighbours. All the trees listened at first in amazement and then with incredulity to her story. When she had finished a large exotic specimen shook its branches before saying, 'Yes, yes we have all heard of the street trees' plight but we are the botanical trees. We are precious and special. If we get sick, we are cured; if we cannot be cured, we are kindly helped to peace. We know nothing of foreign lands; we only know this soil. We would never venture out in to a street. Street trees are not our

trees; they are not our kind. We are not frightened and you have wasted your journey'.

Old Mother Lime Tree looked steadily at them one by one. 'Foolish specimens, do you not understand you too will become inconvenient? I have heard that even the oldest and wisest of trees are threatened by the unrelenting development of humans. When all the street trees are gone, and all that is green becomes concrete and steel, your time will come. Think not only of yourselves, but of our children's future'. 'We have no children here', said another tree, 'There is no space and too many of us would be dangerous'. 'Then', replied Old Mother Lime Tree, 'Your kind will die, for the forests from whence you came no longer exist and your only seed is stored in the heart of an icy mountain, never to grow in its native soil!'

Now let us remember Old Mother Lime Tree was very old and very wise. She knew her words had struck to the core of many of the botanical trees. She had lived over four hundred years and knew when to hold her counsel. So she pulled up her old roots and walked in to the streets. Every tree she passed whispered to its neighbour until the whole city was rustling with their chatter. Finally she reached the park where the poor starling had sheltered and there she felt a great beauty and a great sadness. 'Welcome Old Mother Lime Tree,' said the park glade all together. 'The birds have told us of your journey. Please drink from our brook and soothe your tired and worn roots.' And this is precisely what she did whilst they told her of their tales of woe and betrayal. None felt protected, all had known Lilah as their friend.

'The streets are not safe,' they cried. 'So many trees have been marked for the rope and chain. Ribbons of yellow determine our fate. How will we be saved? The people have gone mad and chop the Cherry, the Lime and the remarkable Oak'. At this Old Mother Lime Tree felt weak and sick. She had heard of this city with its lush green canopy. It seemed impossible, unthinkable that this could be happening. 'Not all are bad,' said a Dryad, trying to give some hope. 'Some leave us poems, some camp by our sides, and some, some wring their hands'. But as the conversation grew, so did the realisation that since time immemorial, the axe had spared but few and time had changed nothing.

After some deliberation, Old Mother Lime Tree lifted herself once more. 'Too long have we waited for sense to prevail. We are all life: root, branch and leaf. If we are not wanted here then we shall not stay to see our slaughter. Let the war fight itself. I will ask the birds where we should go and there we will be. Lift up your roots and walk my friends. Gather your neighbour in park, street and garden. We trees are on the move'. 'The botanicals won't come,' said one. 'They will come', said Old Mother Lime Tree. 'What choice do they have?'

As I have said, trees communicate in many secret ways and soon the call was heard. From small Birch to towering Plane, the trees were on the march. People ran from their houses, cars stopped on the roads. Children peered from classroom windows. Some clapped, some cried, some waved and some tried to stop them; but on they came in glorious multitude, four million of them from every place. Some well hugged, some carved, some kicked, some beaten, some never seen, all walked and limped and trailed, through street and town and dale all gone, all gone, no tree remained. No tree, save one.

It was a small, weedy sapling but two years old, broken at the top and hemmed in by careless tarmac. It fought and struggled to release its roots as it watched the trees go by, but it was trapped and could only despair as its friends disappeared over the horizon until the city was empty of bird song and the gentle rustle of tree by tree.

At nightfall the city had fallen silent and those that cared shut their doors and wept and those that hadn't cared learned to weep also.

Some say that time is a great healer but some things cut too deep.

The solitary sapling was re-planted in the botanical gardens and gained a friend called Sorrow. Children visited the little tree and it flourished of sorts. At tree dressing time it almost forgot its sadness, until it remembered how easy it could have been to celebrate all trees.

What happened to Old Mother Lime Tree and the rest? Stories say they settled somewhere as trees cannot walk forever, but has a new and beautiful forest full of such rich diversity been discovered? No, more likely that they settled somewhere for a while, gradually to be picked off one by one: for fuel, furniture, and for development. Or maybe just for the sheer hell of it.

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