

## Wilderness House Literary Review 19/3

Erin Smola  
**Magic in Pairs**

*"Poetry is one of the ancient arts, and it began as did all the fine arts, within the original wilderness of the earth." –Mary Oliver*

I've spent my whole life looking for a touch of magic in each moment, searching every nook and cranny for something a little beyond the ordinary. I have learned the best place to find it is Away. Away from urban distractions. Away from buzzing devices. Away from crowded hallways. When I want to get Away, I go into the forest. It sounds strange—and a little anti-Christian—to admit, but perhaps my enchantment with the woods stems from some wishful connection to my pagan ancestors, the Celts with their celestial celebrations and intricate folklore of druids, fey, and other captivating creatures. Whether it be magical or divine, the natural world inspires feelings of awe incomparable to any other human experience. What is it about this world that continues to call humans from the safety of civilization into the wild unknown?

When you first enter the woods, all goes quiet... Except for you, snapping twigs and crunching dry leaves beneath your boots. Out of place and clumsy, you must stay still and silent if you want to get a peek at the forest's inhabitants. The chipmunk, scampering out from its underground hole and climbing onto a rock (more like a mountain for such a tiny climber!). The fox, darting through the trees to look for a meal—eyes wary to avoid becoming someone else's. The herd of deer, tiptoeing towards the clearing with the tallest, tastiest grass. You stand erect with the trees as you watch, hoping to find camouflage among the oaks and walnuts. You want to fit in.

### **You want to disappear.**

One autumn afternoon, I was working on homework underneath a small tree rapidly losing its leaves to the cool weather. It grew in a secluded area of the forest behind Labuda Theatre—still close to the path, but overgrown enough to keep me sheltered from the sight of any passersby. The peaceful quiet around me was broken when I heard a high-pitched *chirp* and rustling from above. There in the branches: an adorable, vibrant goldfinch looking down at me. I'm no ornithologist, but the finch's distinctive yellow feathers made him instantly identifiable. His black wings and mask struck a stark contrast against his bright chest. He flitted about in the sunlight, eyes glittering like little onyx beads. Then, to my surprise, another finch landed next to him—his mate. Her feathers were a paler shade of amber, her body softer and rounder than his. The two chased each other through the branches—a fine line between fighting and flirting—and I have to admit it was one of my more magical moments in the woods.

That same afternoon, I encountered yet another pair of creatures. I had decided to play some acoustic instrumentals on my phone, thinking it would reflect the calming mood of the woods. Seconds after the music started, I heard a mighty crash to my left. I turned, imagining a noise that loud must have come from a creature at least as large as a deer, but no—apparently, two grey squirrels careening through the treetops make a

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ridiculous amount of noise! They scampered over fallen trees, fluffy tails twitching, gripping the dead vines with their nimble paws. Closer and closer to me. Or, perhaps closer and closer to the music. They *did* appear as soon as it started playing. Do squirrels enjoy folk tunes? My question went unanswered as the pair grew enraptured with their autumn preparations. They left to collect more acorns deeper in the woods, and I pondered the significance of meeting two pairs of animals so close together on one afternoon. A reflection of my own loneliness, a wish to share the experience with another? It felt a little silly, but my mind was drawn to symbolism all the same. After all, a sign from above makes for a far more interesting story than mere coincidence.

Symbols fill Celtic mythology, and they're often tied to nature, like The Celtic Tree of Life. A depiction of a sacred oak with interwoven roots and branches, it does not have a firmly established meaning due to the inconsistency of oral tradition. Many believe The Tree of Life represents the connection between the heavens and the earth: the oak's branches reach upwards to the sky while its tangled roots remain firmly in the ground. Trees in general were highly revered in Celtic culture. Vandalism of another person's woodlands was strictly prohibited, punishable by hefty fines. The law categorized trees into four status levels—yes, trees had their own sort of moral status! Less revered trees were dubbed Commoners of the Wood, Lower Divisions of the Wood, and Bushes of the Wood. Lords of the Wood loomed highest in importance, and included culturally and practically significant trees such as the oak, hazel, holly, yew, and apple. Should some malfeasant harm a Lord of the Wood, they would owe a portion of their own valuable resources to whoever owned the tree. Lawmakers considered the season and the tree's stage of growth to judge the severity of harm. The Celts likely prized their forests so highly because of the vital resources they provided—timber, food, medicine. The forest fulfilled their needs, and so they believed in the importance of preserving it—a powerful lesson.

For all of nature's mystery, it also provides a calming consistency. My ancestors in the British Isles would have used the natural world as their reference point for the most important aspects of their lives. As an agrarian culture for much of history, farming was their main source of output. The Wheel of the Year, as it is often called, was a calendar that used the sun's position to reliably calculate the times for harvest. Good harvests led to celebrations, which grew into traditional festivals. These festivals occurred on solstices and equinoxes, which marked the movement of the Earth and Sun, determining the change of seasons and rotation of crops. Samhain, for example, was celebrated around the Autumn Equinox, and heavily influenced our modern-day Halloween traditions. I love to learn about these celebrations and their connection to our modern holidays. It reminds me that I'm still living on the same Earth as my ancestors, albeit in a different location across the world. I feel a connection, an appreciation, all the same.

I still stroke the soft leaves of the oak, feel the prickle of the holly bush.

I still enjoy the autumn harvest, celebrating the season with fresh corn and pumpkins.

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I still go into the forest to admire the stately Lords of the Woods, to fulfill my need for something wild...something magic.

### *Sources*

Hartley, Dorothy. *Lost Country Life*. Pantheon Books, 1979.

LetsGoIreland. "Celtic Tree Of Life: The Complete Guide To The Origin, Meaning And More." *Let's Go Ireland*, 23 February 2023, <https://www.lets-goireland.com/celtic-tree-of-life/>.