

The Creek

There are big ferns that grow in the thousand hills of southwestern Pennsylvania. In the summer, when the heat and evaporating rain is trapped in the thick forests, they grow larger and fatter. They cover paths and conceal the bugs and critters and biters. Blue-bottle flies feed and then land on the ferns' soft leaves. These flies clean their feet and eyes and wait for the next thing to die.

A boy runs there, on a path hidden by drooping fern leaves. He runs down a valley wall made by a river turned into a creek after years and years of withering to a piddle, now left squirting through at the very bottom.

He's passing old-growth trees and saplings that share each others' space and sometimes tangle roots. A fallen locust tree is there too, struck by lightning and collapsed under the wind. Its top, shattered to soaked pieces, rots on the forest floor. Mushrooms and termites march along its remnants at their own pace. The tall, lean stump is rotting there as well and supports a system of vines, wrapping around the tree carcass to feed on what sunlight can penetrate down through the heavy canopy of the Appalachian forest.

The boy's there, and he's running wild. He's got a paper boat in his hand and his mother's warning in his head.

"Stay close!" she yelled when he rounded their shed.

"Stay close!" was her warning.

The creek was not "close."

The paper boat, folded and creased and made of a single sheet of notebook paper, is of his father's design but constructed by the boy's hands. He holds it high, soaring the boat as if it's a kite or a model airplane and meant to fly and not sail.

The hill is mud. The black soil and brown clay meld with the constant rain, and the ground is a cake of wet concrete. Every step the boy takes kicks up clumps of mud. It

splatters the back of his shorts and t-shirt. Most of it though holds to the bottom of his shoes. His run gets trickier the faster he goes and the steeper the valley wall gets, but it doesn't worry him.

He's after the creek. He's after its water. He's going sailing.

He sticks an arm out as he nears the creek. He grabs hold of a narrow-growing maple and swings his momentum slightly sideways. He gives his other hand the paper boat and grabs another thin tree with his now free hand. He goes down the hill like this, using the trees to angle his direction, as if skiing, and slow himself down. By the time he reaches the bottom, approaching more slowly now, he's at a walk and jumps the last bit until he is standing on a dry part of the creek bed.

"Captain," the boy says to a crayoned captain standing with his legs and arms apart on the deck of the paper boat.

The captain is wearing a hat and smiling and is forest green. He goes well with this place.

"Ready to launch, Sir!" the boy says and salutes the captain.

He's eyed a port where the water is calm after slapping into two large rocks. The first rock pools the water current to a different direction and causes it to tumble. The second acts as a back stop for the chaotic surge. The water comes from the meeting with the second rock like a floating mirror.

He bends at the waist, without the smallest hindrance of age, his joints soft and protected by youth. There are no pops from his knees or elbows. He does not groan, as his father does when reaching to pick him up to swing him through the air. His body is ready for the long life ahead of him filled with many paper boat launches and maybe actual sailing.

"Ready," he says as he places the boat atop the mirroring water. He sees himself looking up at himself as the reflected paper boat is touching the real thing on the water's

surface, but from underneath. The water grows tight there for a moment. The boy can feel the tension of the water wanting to remain locked to itself. The water bows around the paper boat and snaps tight again as the boy releases the boat and the weight of his arm no longer pushes down on the water.

“Safe journey! Bon voyage!” he says, repeating phrases he’s heard from movies and cartoons.

He’s chasing the boat now and creating an adventure in his mind as the paper boat journeys down the easy creek, nudging smoothed rocks and gliding alongside leaves, in the Appalachian forest. At first, everything is fine, but then pirates come. He’s seen something on the news about Somali pirates but did not truly understand anything but the word “pirates.” The pirates he saw, wearing handkerchiefs over their faces and carrying Kalashnikov machine guns, paid no resemblance or homage to the pirates he knows.

“Arr...” he whispers to himself as the paper boat rolls into and over a small eddy.

As the boat sways in the altering current of the contorting pool, he imagines a pirate vessel smashing into his paper boat. He rushes down the creek himself, looking to see if the forest green captain is still safe from the pirates.

He’s not.

“Look out!” the boy screams.

The captain hears him and ducks the swing of a pirate’s curved cutlass. The sword lands smack into the side of the boat and is wedged into the paper. As the pirate struggles to free the weapon, the captain leaps into the air and plants both of his drawn feet into the chest of the phantom pirate, sending the cur overboard.

“Oh no!” the boy screams as more pirates board the paper boat. “Get ‘em! Get ‘em!”

The boat’s practically teeming with pirates. It’s more rum than paper at this point.

The boy’s keeping up with the ship, running through parts of the stream at times, and

the captain's doing his damn best to rid the paper boat of the pirates.

Above the scene, above it all, the clouds become gray.

The summer air turns colder as the wind comes. But in the thick, dense Appalachian forest, the wind is partially blocked, and only the canopy rumbles from the wind. The pressure in the air too has changed, but the boy does not notice it with his senses focused on the swashbuckling ahead of him.

The valley floor begins to edge steeper, and the creek is running fast now.

The boy loses sight of the boat around a bend in the creek. It emerges around a rock further down than the boy expected.

He's ramming his legs down into the shallow water as fast as he can, splashing and scaring jet black salamanders and transparent crawfish back under rocks. He's racing into areas of the creek he's never seen. He tears through a dead thorn bush, "jagger bush" as he calls it, that was ripped out in a summer storm the year before and left to decay and dry up in the creek. He's bleeding little droplets of blood from his right arm and hand.

It's an adventure. He feels the excitement and sees the forest green captain still defending his vessel.

"Yeah!" the boy yells as another pirate is knocked into the frothing creek.

The top mast of the ship bobs up and down and teeters left and right but the ship heads strongly into rougher patches of the creek. The paper boat is being thrown about larger rocks. Much of the vessel has turned clear from the water of the creek. It splashes the boat and soaks into the boat. The boy's keeping up, booking, and there is a new sound that comes to him.

Ahead of him, the narrow valley becomes a bowl. The land and the water disappear on an edge 50 yards away from the boy—a ledge. There are trunks of trees around him but in front of him, by the edge, there are the tops of trees and midsections of larger trees. The

sound in the forest now is of the creek falling onto rocks. There is a mist drifting up from a spot out of sight of the boy.

The paper boat, the captain, the adventure, is nearing the edge of the waterfall.

“No!” the boy screams.

He wants to run faster. He can't. He's too young and tiny to outrace the speed of the water and the boat floating on it.

He's only ten feet away when bottom of the boat touches open air. It tilts forward and falls below the edge of the waterfall. The boy reaches the edge to see the boat falling through the air like a heavy leaf. As it descends, it fans out to the left and right, never somersaulting, the side with the sea captain facing the water below the entire journey.

It lands, side down, and the boy watches the boat moving and is looking at his new surroundings.

The creek at the bottom of the 20-foot high waterfall is a pool being filled with water after it bashes into a large black rock bed. There is a dent in the rock where the water consistently pounds it. More rocks and tons of silt surround the deep pool, comparatively to the shallowness of the creek above it. The paper boat whirls around a minor current.

The trees, the foliage, the life at this part of the creek are no different than others, but the waterfall is something new and worth investigating again. Standing atop the waterfall he imagines himself climbing down to retrieve his boat or maybe he jumps into the pool. The pool however is not deep enough for such a high jump. He can clearly see the bottom of the pool and guesses it's no more than three feet from the surface.

It would come up to his chest.

With the boat still circling the pool, the boy picks up a stone about the size of a baseball. He aims over his head, nearly straight over it, and launches it. There is a slight arch to its trajectory. The boy wants a splash.

It flies, and he watches it fall into the pool. There is a heavy and deep *THEW* from the rock breaking the surface of the pool. Bubbles cling to it as it travels through the water, finally colliding with the bottom of the pool. The splash that followed the plunge is satisfying enough to the boy to want to try again.

A new thought enters his head, one unthinkable to him until this point in his adventure through the woods. And as with all boys, loyalty is something that is lost and gained in instants.

He eyes up his paper boat, the one he's made, the one he's rooted for to stay safe and float. It's still making a loop inside an unseen track from the unseen current. It hasn't left the pool.

He tosses stone after stone at the boat.

The captain is pleading with the boy as the projectiles inch closer to the boat.

"Arr," the boy says releasing another stone. "This be for me mateys!" he quotes from a cartoon or movie.

The air gets cooler, but he is unaware. The sky is darker, and he is unaware. He's focused on hitting the boat and he is careful on the ledge as he hurls the stones at the paper boat. He's careful but not careful enough.

The follow through on his last throw makes him unbalanced. His foot slips on the rock outcropping that is wet from the creek. He lands on his right knee, which skids against the slick rocks as well, and he smacks his face off the edge. He flails—arms out for protection, to grab a hold of something, just an automated response to his danger—but he is unsuccessful at stopping himself, and he tumbles over the waterfall.

He falls.

He sees the earth and the water below him and above him and below him again as he somersaults in the air. He lands on his back and left arm on top of the rock bed, bounces a

little, and lands again in giant pile of silt collecting on the side of the pool. His left arm is broken, bent underneath him, and stuck into the silt as is his left leg.

He becomes a heap at the bottom of a waterfall.

Seconds pass.

The air grows cooler and the sound of the waterfall is heavy and constant. There are birds calling and seeking shelter but none are heard above the roar and clashing of water on stone.

A minute passes.

The boy blinks.

He is groggy and gulping like a fish out of water. His head is pain. His leg is pain. His back is pain. He doesn't understand why he is next to this crashing waterfall. His body is moving without his will. It's reaching into the air and waving at specs of color that are as unreal as the pirates who nearly ended the good forest green captain's life.

"Mommy" he squeaks.

"Mommy," he squeaks again.

And the summer rain that comes to southwestern Pennsylvania sometimes is mighty. It can wash away boulders and reshape the earth's very landscape. And, it comes, dribbling at first, but it comes.

The dark skies above this scene grow black and lightning erupts. The thunder is loud and close behind the bright flashes of the bolts. The boy is still reaching into the air and grasping at things he thinks he sees.

His father? His mother? A pirate? A captain? Just colors. Swirls and swirls of colors.

Now, the rain begins, and the water of the creek will rise.