**Our Wondrous Monsters**

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Everyone’s past is populated with wondrous monsters: family, friends, heroes, and villains whom we’ve loved, hated, harmed or worse, became indifferent to. Moments we’ve romanticized or tried to forget, which is the same thing.

I’m not talking about the dead past of history books, but the living, vital past that is continually flowing through us like a canyon river, shaping who we are.

My past speaks with a Mississippi accent. No matter how far I’ve fled from her, she tracks me down with a bloodhound’s tenacity. Her emotional geography obeys no state lines, respecting neither Mason nor Dixon. I’ve moved as far North as one can without needing a passport. I kept running until the river gave out first.

I’ve tried getting over her, turning my back on her, denying, denigrating, and disowning her. Safely cocooned in Minnesota, I’ve rebuked and renounced my own family. I’ve changed my name and homogenized my accent. I’ve been civilized, psychoanalyzed, de-fundamentalized, liberalized, Rolfed, and rebirthed. I’ve sobered up, asserted my manhood, honored my feminine-side, and come out as gay and proud. I vote Democratic and pray Unitarian and think globally.

In other words, I’ve done my damnedest to put my past behind me.

Ah, but there’s the rub. That’s the worst of all places to keep your past—behind you. It’s from there it can wreak its havoc. Even in my adopted home of Minnesota, on the cool, clear, reasonable end of the river, the muddy Mississippi of my past still seduces me in her half-crazed voice, raspy from Camel non-filters, her breath a blend of bourbon and peppermint church candy, she whispers into my ear, “Explain me or I’ll drive you crazy.”

And instantly I am there again, hooked and reeled back through time, my senses taken hostage. I see her and smell her and hear her and taste her and I shiver as she draws a cool, moist finger down my spine like a trickle of summer sweat.

“See, I’m not dead,” she purrs, mimicking her boy, Faulkner, “I ain’t even passed yet.”

Everybody knows what Tom Wolfe said about never being able to go home again. Tom only told half the truth.

The fact is you can never leave either. I’ve been trying to escape my past for the better part of my life, only to learn that we do not have a past. The past has us. That past, unlived, becomes our future, until we answer the question, “Where does home end and I begin?”

Sometimes, like me, you need to leave home to find it. You must journey to a place where you don’t blend into the background, to a place where your sharp edges can show up. A place where you can at last define yourself instead of being defined by place. This formula is as old as storytelling itself. It’s called the Hero’s Journey. The hero leaves home, finds, and slays the monster, and then returns, transformed.

I don’t believe our hero discovers new monsters. Instead, he travels to a place where he can at last see the monsters he carries within him. Far away from the murky soup into which he was born, he can finally name his monsters and slay them.

The monsters we each must slay are different. Usually, they are the things that we were too young, too afraid, or too alone to confront. We put them safely in the past, thinking this would be distance enough. But they don’t die. That unlived past lies waiting within us to be explored like a hidden continent.

I’m not a memoirist. I’m simply a storyteller, and remembered stories are the only maps I have into the past. There is an old Italian saying that goes, “All stories are true, some even happened.” Sometimes the stories I recall don’t line up, or they may contradict, but they are nevertheless true. They shine a light. Like pointillism in art, if you remember enough stories, they can serve as points of light that when viewed together reveal a larger truth.

Ultimately, that is how we learn to master our monsters. By evoking the stories, especially the buried ones, we can at last see the truth in them.

I think this is what T.S. Eliot meant in his oft quoted verse:

We shall not cease from exploration  
 And the end of all our exploring   
 Will be to arrive where we started   
 And know the place for the first time.

When the hero at last returns home, he discovers it was not his past that needed changing. It was he who needed to become large enough to contain it.