

Christina Socorro Yovovich  
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### **The Mythology of Home**

My mother and I moved into a pleasant one bedroom apartment on North Franklin Street my freshman year of high school. She had just finished college the spring before and we were both tired of shuffling from one student neighborhood to another year after year-- this apartment, we agreed, was going to be home. I found our new neighborhood pleasant, but dull; Middle class, fifties style ranch houses with neatly trimmed lawns and a rather stolid looking Baptist church whose concrete cross towered over them all. I would have preferred a place with more character; University Heights with its twisting streets or the near east side with its brightly painted houses and ragged flower gardens. My new neighborhood didn't start to feel like a home until the day I noticed the farm house. Nestled among the cookie cutter houses, perched atop a slight hill, the farm house caught my imagination. Suddenly my neighborhood had a story, suddenly it felt like home.

I created a kind of mythology around that farm house that eventually extended to include Hoyt Park. Today the house is gray with maroon trim and its owners tend a small orchard beside it. I pictured it much like this in the past, only instead of looking upon rows of ranch houses it looked upon rolling fields of corn and perhaps a red barn. Beside it lay the ancient, untouched beauty of Hoyt Park. I imagined the house's children walking, as I often did, through Hoyt's woods to the small valley that lay between a towering cliff and steep, irregular hills. My neighborhood had once I was

sure, not all that long ago, been a kind of paradise. A pastoral landscape living in harmony with the bit of wilderness beside it.

Hoyt Park played an important role in my growing consciousness about the natural world. In its woods I felt I could escape the city, returning to something more pure and somehow more real. The woods ran in a narrow strip up the ridge of a hill, ending in an overlook to which people drove to admire the view of Hilldale Shopping Mall. Wandering through this strip I could, if I ignored the sound of the cars and the broken beer bottles, pretend to be miles away from any kind of human presence. It was here that I walked in a daze, head craned upwards towards the tree tops, after reading about Annie Dillard seeing the light in A Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, and it was here that I learned to sit perfectly quiet for hours at a time. Later I met other friends who had grown up in the neighborhood and found that they too had been coming to Hoyt to 'escape the city'. We roamed over it together, especially drawn to the cliff at the lower end of the park whose mossy rock face offered a lovely contrast to the woods around it as well as offering an excellent surface for daredevil climbing. I always assumed that Hoyt had become a park because of this cliff. In the midwestern landscape which tends towards less dramatic land forms the cliff was something special. I walked beside it with the vague notion of treading not only in the footsteps of vanished farm children but in those of the Woodland Indians who must have visited that very place long before Europeans set foot on the continent. This story, my own private folklore, made my neighborhood familiar to me. I felt I understood it and therefor had earned the right to call it home.

One day in the spring of my senior year a friend asked if I wanted to go for a walk in the old quarry. I asked him where he meant and he gave me an odd look, "Hoyt Park, you go there all the time." My ancient cliff, my natural wilderness was an overgrown abandoned quarry. My woods a mere baby of a

woods covering a place where human labor had blasted into the land and carted away rock for human use. The drama of my cliff was indeed the evidence of an old drama, but one much more recent than the one I had imagined. This might have not come as such a surprise had I only known the name of Hoyt's smaller twin two blocks to its north-- Quarry Park.

I didn't stop going to Hoyt, but I did stop telling myself stories about it. The romance of my old vision had been shattered and I choose to focus on new things rather than try to rebuild it around the new evidence I had been given. Now, two years later, I try again to build a story about my neighborhood's past; one perhaps less romantic though just as profoundly shaped by world views acquired since the last private telling.

A close careful look at the land around Hoyt's cliff revealed its true nature. Walking west along Kendall Ave to the back entrance of Hoyt I noticed that the hill along my left seemed to rise at a very sharp regular slope, leveling off to an unnaturally flat surface. Honeysuckle bushes, an European introduction to the Americas, constituted the main of the plant life growing up the slope and all the trees were at best medium sized. I could easily imagine that this bit of hill had been shaped by recent human works, not the long term work of nature. Walking up the paved road which winds up this artificial hill I found myself on level ground which stretched out in a prairie type clearing. It wasn't hard to imagine trucks and bulldozers from fifty years or more ago driving up this path, their own human driven labor creating this level hill. I stood in the knee high grasses and saw the bare pile of dirt this clearing had once been. I smelled the diesel fuel and heard the rumbling of old trucks. Turning to the right I stepped onto the narrow dirt path which lead to my favorite part of Hoyt. Again I noticed that most of the wood's undergrowth consisted of honeysuckle and that none of the trees, save a few

oaks, looked very old at all. The cliff loomed up on my left and I walked off the path to inspect its face closely. Moss and lichen coated much of the surface, softening the horizontal layers of what I guessed was granite. The surface of the cliff undulated in and out horizontally but looking up I realized that the wall shot up in a precise right angle to the ground. Remembering other rock formations I've seen in Wisconsin this didn't strike me as being very typical at all. Looking closer at the rock I saw smooth, rounded grooves running vertically up the cliff face at regular intervals, also at right angles to the ground. Had I only known what to look for before it wouldn't have been hard at all to see that this cliff was man made. I then turned to the irregular hills that rose up between the cliff and Kendall Ave. Walking up one small hill I noticed that the ground felt uneven and jagged underfoot due to the many small and medium sized pieces of granite sticking up in between the trees. Kneeling down I dug into the surface of the hill and discovered it largely consisted of loosely packed gravel, rock, and sand with thin coating of soil towards the top. The hills, though now covered by a layer of soil and plant growth, were in fact also thinly disguised piles of rubble; perhaps piled haphazardly along the cliff wall once the quarry ceased operation.

Scrambling down the steep side of the hill I stumbled back out onto Kendall Ave. and stood in the middle of the street, looking back at Hoyt and then at the apartment complex facing it. More pieces of the story fell into place. At one time the area had been a farm nestled near the side of a hill which I suspect probably was left pretty much alone except perhaps as grazing land for cattle. However, the farm soon found its existence changed a bit by the city growing to its east. The farmer's may have provided the city's people with food but as the population increased the hill beside them was commissioned to provide the city's building with another kind of food--stone. A large company from elsewhere or perhaps local entrepreneurs

bought the hill from the farmers and began the quarry.' Life on the farm must have changed somewhat then. At the very least the extra noise and dust and roads must have made their environment feel less and less rural.

Meanwhile the very city that sustained the farm and the quarry kept on increasing its boundaries-- continually creeping closer and closer to the farm. Eventually property taxes became too high for them to manage and they sold their land to developers who planned to make the area a residential district. This same pressure also shut down the quarry; property taxes and public pressure (what middle class Madisonian would have wanted to live next to such an operation?) made selling out and moving elsewhere the only profitable option. Developers moved in, cleared the quarry's refuse to either side, and built the houses that are there today. A pattern that can still be seen on the outskirts of present day Madison.

I would guess that Hoyt wasn't immediately made a city park. When the neighborhood was new those piles of dirt and stone must have been a weedy eyesore. Over time, as succession worked its magic on the human made hills and cliff people may have seen the esthetic potential of the old quarry. Hoyt Park probably became a city park at least in part because people didn't know what else to do with it. By letting the place become overgrown and eventually adding steps and shelters they made the best of what they had. Quite possibly if the quarry had never existed much of Hoyt would now be more ranch houses and lawns, not the place I came to love.

Ironically then the place where I first began to pay attention to nature, the place where I ran to escape the city and everything it meant to me, was a direct result of urban expansion. In Hoyt Park the two demands of Madison's population for places to live and for material to create those places combined and produced a kind of blip in the urban landscape. Nature has taken over much of Hoyt's woods now, but the tools it has to work with and the surface

it operates upon were changed radically by the work of humans. I may have thought I was escaping the network of connections that make up the city of Madison, but in fact I was treading in the very thick of them.

We need stories to live anywhere. We need to feel we have some kind of connection with the place we live in order to call it home. The stories don't have to be true. My friends told each other stories in grade school about the terrible Diaper Man who roamed the woods of Hoyt clad only in a pampers loin cloth, and refused to touch a certain boulder which they claimed marked the burial site of an Indian Chief whose ghost still walked at night. My old story was as false as theirs, but it, like them, made me love the place I lived. The new story may be closer to the truth, but it is still ultimately just another story. It takes into account more of the evidence at hand than my old story did, but that is all that can be said of it. Yet I think it is an important improvement for it reconnects my 'wilderness' to the city it is as much a resident in as I.

Walking through Hoyt again I made another discovery not mentioned in the new story. It is simply this: I still love Hoyt. I still love the woods even if they are mostly honeysuckle and I still love the drama of the cliff even though I know its true origin. This new story contains more elements of 'evil' than my last, but any good story should have something to fight against. As I walked along the path and saw details for the first time there was another happily naive part of me that still wanted to crane my neck upward to see Annie Dillard's lights and still felt a bit of reverence as I touched the mossy rock of the cliff. While we must, I believe, continuously strive to learn the truth as far as we can see it we must also try keep that part of us which simply wants to look and take pleasure in what it sees.