

Frozen Horses



Usually the most casual of camouflages is enough to fool the human wayfarer. We are in such a continual trance that we notice almost nothing. We rarely see what actually *is*, and settle, instead, for what we expect to find or what we are told we will find or what *seems* to be. So nature doesn't really have to try very hard to pull the wool over our eyes.

Young children, however, *do* notice things, and when they notice things they take time out to examine them and talk to them. Which is why they get on so well with faeries, and it's why faeries never attempt to conceal themselves from children.

Adults are a different kettle of fish; we live in our heads rather than in our senses or souls or hearts. We rush through our days and years without giving the present moment a second glance, and then we regret that death comes before we have even tasted life. So, whereas faeries do not attempt to conceal themselves from small children, they don't have to make any great efforts to conceal themselves from adults.

But today I caught them unawares, and they made heroic efforts to pretend that what I saw wasn't real. With all kinds of sleight of hand they shape-shifted and crossed over the animal-plant divide to confuse me. But I had seen what I had seen and I would not be persuaded otherwise. So they enlisted a whole bunch of co-conspirators to brainwash me into believing that what I had seen was an illusion, a trick of the sunlight

streaming through the redwoods, together with the gurgling of the stream. But I'm a stubborn SOB and I was unrelenting in my seeing.

So let me tell you what it was that I saw. I had been making my way very carefully down a steep ravine, a million-year-old fissure in the hillside carved by the annual flow of the rainwater. It took me 75 minutes to get from the top to the track, but instead of using the track I went straight across it and kept descending until I reached the creek, which is called, Chapman Branch. As I approached it I heard the sound of a small waterfall. I have learned to trek very quietly and, for its size, the waterfall was quite noisy, so they obviously did not hear me coming. And I, for my part, was almost upon them before I saw them. At the same instant they saw me and a look of consternation crossed their faces. They knew they'd been busted, but they leaped into action, or rather into inaction, for they froze in mid stride. There were two of them and I could actually see on their faces how their minds were working, "this is a human; humans don't really see us; this one *almost* did, but we can easily confuse him, so that he will doubt his first impressions and agree that what he *thought* he saw was, in fact, only an illusion." I read their every thought, their every intention, their every subtle nuance of deception, and I would not be fooled. I remembered the stories from my childhood in Ireland about what to do when you captured a leprechaun. Under no circumstances were you to take your eyes off him. If you did, he would vanish. And if you *did* manage to catch him, he would struggle mightily, making all sorts of promises if only you would release your grip. And when that failed, he would try to distract you with such old chestnuts as, "Oh my God, will you look at that mad bull rushing across the field!" or "My pot of gold is buried under that toadstool over there, to your left."

So, there was no way I was going to take my eyes off them, these two faery horses which I had spotted. They were rider-less and had been in the process of racing each other. Just as I had spotted them they were launching themselves into a jump across the creek from their side to mine. I had seen the quivering flanks as they sprang and the muscled chests as they stretched their front legs for the leap. But now the front legs were frozen into immobility in midair and mid-stride, while their back legs were firmly grounded in the rocky outcrop of the other bank.

It reminded me of a place name in West Cork, Keimaneigh or, in the original Gaelic, “Céim an Fhia” (the leap of the deer.) Legend has it that a mighty stag, while being pursued by the hunting dogs of the Fianna, made a prodigious jump from one hillside across the valley to the other hillside, leaving the dogs in disarray and their handlers in awe. So today I shall have to rename this spot; I’ll call it, “Céim capall na sí” (the leap of the faery horses.)

I sat down at my side of the creek and just watched as they engaged in a flurry of self-concealment. They angled their heads so that their necks were vertical and then they stretched their necks until they were giraffe-like; then they grew twigs and leaves out of these necks to give the impression that they were sapling trees. They quickly covered their sides and flanks with moss, and an invisible spider slung a single strand of silken thread from the shoulder of one horse to the boulder in which a back leg was now embedded. As I wondered at the miraculous appearance of this one strand, I noticed a movement around the two front legs of the other horse: a full, complex web had suddenly appeared there. I got the intended message immediately, “See, there wouldn’t be a fully-formed web here if I really were a faery horse who was about to jump the creek, now would there!”

That reminded me of a story that my great-grandmother “Muddy” told me when I was about five years old. It was a Christmas story about the adventures of the newborn Jesus as his parents sought to flee the murderous attention of King Herod, who had already killed off all the boy-children of Bethlehem aged two and under. Muddy told me that, as Joseph heard the hoof beats of Herod’s mounted troop, he sought refuge in a cave. He led in the donkey bearing the mother and child. Instantly, all of the spiders in the cave began to furiously spin their webs across the entrance, completely enclosing it. When the soldiers arrived 20 minutes later, some made as if to search the cave, but the captain barked, “Don’t be stupid! Can’t you see it’s covered with spiders’ webs? Nothing has entered that cave for years.”

And now, here were my faery horses, attempting the same trick. I smiled and said, “Nice try, guys.” I took one last look at the scene - two faery horses in a state of suspended animation, pretending to be young trees; their hind legs grounded in the

knobbly protruding rock-face that looked rather like the well-fed belly of a very fat giant, with a thick vine acting like a leather belt around his generous girth.

I stood up, joined my hands, bowed reverently and said, "Horses of the Faery Folk, I offer you Namasté."

Namasté,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Seán". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the left.

Tír na nÓg
April, 2014