

## *Hilda and the Wolf*

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The gnawing melancholy of growing older – to use the word loosely – is having to put aside picture books and scrub the dirt from under your fingernails, leaving lions and dragons for weasel words and graph paper. I decided that I would try to thrash this soupy misery into submission with an aggressively curious illustrated fairytale. My body of work was inspired by the charming grit of my favourite childhood stories, such as those collected by the Brothers Grimm. The simple fable follows a young knight who befriends a mouse and, through this allegiance, is able to overcome the wolf that stalks the depths of the forest. This story was an attempt at making my personal troubles more bearable. I have long identified with the image of the mouse as a meek creature belonging to the underground. However, I wanted to reclaim the mouse's sure silence as a form of power, taking pride in my gentleness and separating humility from timidity. The courage of the collective mice is enough to overpower the fear of scrutiny and the unknown, embodied by a ragged wolf. The wolf first appears as a shadowy, menacing figure, conforming to the evil archetype. The final illustration in the series reveals the wolf's inherent tenderness and vulnerability, signifying the heroine's triumph and the blooming of her enemy's heart. Although the knight – Hilda, as she came to be – and the wolf represent 'good' and 'evil' archetypes, I wanted to draw them with more humanity to rekindle a childhood love for the tattered loveliness of the Earth.

The style of my pieces is inspired by the Victorian Golden Age of illustration (1855-1875), with its distinct romantic whimsy oriented to children. A predominant influence for my illustrations was English illustrator Arthur Rackham, who depicts nature with sweeping, expressive inkwork. Heavily influenced by Pre-Raphaelite ideals, illustrations from this period lack the plodding, mechanistic structure of academic art and are instead enlivened with a sincere connection to their narrative. The sinuous curves, floral motifs and elongated forms of Art Nouveau and Japonisme aesthetics – combined with the vigour, strong emotion and striking colours celebrated in Romanticism – was a creative enlightenment that gave children an enchanting departure from the more sombre fairytales of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Pre-Raphaelite artists such as John William Waterhouse embraced Ancient Greek and Arthurian legend, focusing on naturalism and authentic emotion. I tried to capture this 'return to nature' and humanity in my illustrations, centring my illustrations in heavily forested landscapes and using animated inkwork to transfigure them into living forms.

Each piece utilises negative space and manipulates boundaries to create an immersive vignette, letting the scene reach beyond its borders and interact with the 'real world'. Coupled with deliberately imbalanced, asymmetrical compositions, this incorporation of negative space and free-flowing shapes enhances immersion and allows the characters to 'climb' out into the world, better uniting the viewer with the story. Watercolour's ability for subtle chromatic variations and spontaneity made it a medium suitable for the story's untamed, thicketed setting. The paint has a free-flowing and ambitious movement that likens it to the unbridled growth patterns of plants, which let me relax my control over the scene. The ethereal atmosphere created by these delicate hues is contrasted with the bold inkwork, which allows the vegetation to morph into a looming, threatening organism, recalling the romance and wonder of the forest

lost to urbanisation. To give salience to the heroine, I inked her hair in a solid, preternatural black. This emboldens her literally and figuratively against her environment, the audacious flat colour lending her an air of tact and courage. She is also illuminated through her accent colours red and white, which symbolise valour and compassion, and grant her liveliness through their energetic, forward presence against the deep, regressing background.

To create tension in the visual narrative, I introduced cooler hues and more pervasive shadows that contrasted my usual rustic, autumnal colour scheme. This mirrors a transition from the familiar to the otherworldly, characteristic of the Hero's Journey archetype. Compared to the dense, towering forest, the world of the mice is middling and isolated – an otherworldliness communicated through the heavy use of blues and their clash with the warm tones of the previous scene. The final illustration, bathed in orange with mellow brown inks, brings the story back 'home' and shows a newfound tenderness between the knight and her nemesis. I wanted to further mark this shift in characterisation through shape language, which the flexible dip pen gave me great control over. Sharp, juddering linework changes to a gentle flow as the narrative closes, expressing the characters' renewed gentleness. I wanted each picture to feel like an adventure, so working with dynamic visual pathways was essential. Jolts of colour and stark shadows along the meandering pathway provide pricks of excitement as the eye follows the sinuous path into the forest depths, or spirals from the tree-cradled sky into the centre of a pale moon. The hordes of mice also follow distinct curves, and by inking with a quicker, lighter touch I gave each mouse a sprightliness at odds with Hilda's meek disposition.