

# HISTORIES, REMEMBERED AND FORGOTTEN

KATIE KNOLL

---

**T**he black bear became the Teddy bear in 1902 after Teddy Roosevelt, US president and notorious sportsman, took pity on a bear. The story goes that Roosevelt was on an unsuccessful hunting trip in Mississippi when his guides tied up an old bear for him to shoot. He couldn't bring himself to do it, as weak and defenseless as it was, and they let the poor thing go. The story went around the country, popularized by cartoons of the incident, until eventually the stuffed toy "Teddy's Bear" became his namesake.

In his 2014 Ted Talk "How the Teddy Bear Taught Us Compassion," journalist Jon Mooallem explores how the Roosevelt event changed the national consciousness about bears. "In 1902, bears were monsters," he says. They had "been a shorthand for all the dangers people were encountering on the frontiers."

Overnight, bears evolved from savage to sympathetic and their trajectory was forever changed. They became a reimagined story.

\*

The word history was born originally from the Greek word *historia* meaning "a learning or knowing by inquiry."

This word is related to the Greek words for "to see" and "to know".

\*

My mother used to sing in nursing homes for people with Alzheimer's. When you have Alzheimer's, your past starts to unravel in your mind like a loose thread being pulled from a sweater. In the end, everything is lost, but the material remains. When she sang, people who could hardly remember anything were able to remember a little: their past, their music, my mother. For sixty minutes my mother could stitch together lost pieces of peoples' stories.

\*

The word *forget* comes from two root words, which, put together, mean “to lose from one’s mind”.

\*

It is hard to comprehend all the stories in the world that are lost.

\*

My love lost his father when he was four years old.

He has only ever told me one story about his father: that he owned all the *Rocky* movies. My love now watches all the *Rocky* movies, too.

The story that lives in the memory is everything that remains.

\*

In the mid-1900’s, a boy called Christopher Robin was given a teddy bear, and he called it Winnie the Pooh. His father told him stories about that bear, and eventually wrote his stories down.

That bear, now, is a household name, and with its new name the story of the bear has become childhood innocence, imagination, and friendship.

\*

The word *story* and the word *history* have the same roots. For centuries, the two were interchangeable. In some languages - like Spanish - they still are.

\*

My love and I watched a TV special from comedian John Leguizamo called *Latin History for Morons*. He tells, through history and comedy, about the Latin heroes that didn’t make it into his son’s history books, and about the European conquerors that did.

How does forgotten history hurt the Latinx child? Knowing no other story than that of a white conqueror; knowing no story that will tell you what greatness you came from?

How does it hurt my love, who had a Latin hero called his father?

My love lost everything but the stories and now has people believing the wrong ones about him.

\*

My mother, who is white, joked “You know how Mexicans are. They have a temper like the Irish. They’ll pull a gun on you without thinking twice.”

NON-FICTION

I am white, too, and am guilty of believing some of the wrong stories.

\*

On Columbus' first day in the New World, he took six native people into captivity, like animals.

Millions of the Americas' indigenous people followed those six into slavery, genocide, and death by European illness.

\*

*Remember* comes from a Latin word, meaning "to recall to mind."

\*

My mother would sing the Alzheimer's patients the songs they had always known and ask them to sing along. She did not know then about the science called Music Therapy, but she knew about music, she knew about memory, and she knew about healing.

\*

I adored Winnie the Pooh as a child, watching the TV show every morning before school. My mother used to call me to the living room by telling me my friend had come to visit.

In loving reference, my brothers gave me a collaged portrait of Winnie the Pooh for my 21st birthday. It was made of pictures cut from a book.

Stories cut from stories cut from stories.

\*

The Taíno people of the Caribbean, John Leguizamo says, were almost unbelievably peaceful. They fought wars with wooden swords.

They were among the first in the New World to be decimated by Columbus' genocide.

They are all but forgotten in history.

\*

Columbus Day: a nationally recognized holiday, celebrated on the second Monday of October, commemorating Christopher Columbus' founding of the New World.

\*

Two years after my gift from my brothers, my love gifted me two beautiful paintings: reprints of Ernest H. Shepard's original watercolor illustrations for *Winnie the Pooh*.

\*

In truth, Teddy Roosevelt didn't really let the bear go. It was so weak

and emaciated, he had his team put it down by cutting its throat.

In truth, almost 90% of native bear populations had already been destroyed by frontiersmen.

\*

Not long ago, my mother suffered a major car crash. She survived it, but sustained a tremendous concussion.

A concussion, apparently, is like an enormous bruise to your brain. When it swells like that, some things get pushed out.

It has been a year now, and her memory still gives her trouble. She worries that there are pieces that are never coming back. Lawyers are trying to figure out how much all the pieces are worth.

My mother can't stop imagining what would have happened if the conditions of the crash had been different. What more would have been lost.

\*

My love lost his father in a crash, and now has the pain of remembering it.

\*

The federal holiday of Columbus Day was long lobbied for by a group of Roman Catholic Italian-Americans called The Knights of Columbus. For them, his was the story of Italian heritage; of achievement; of their own achievements; of their own story, held precariously within his; of their ability to remember, and to become remembered.

For others, it was the beginning of forgetting.

\*

Rocky's nickname is the "Italian Stallion." The eight films of the *Rocky* franchise have created a modern day Italian-American hero. Maybe he was my love's hero, or his father's.

Maybe they just liked the story.

\*

There are entire civilizations that have been lost from the mind of humanity. Entire worlds unraveled, like a loose string pulled from the sweater.

\*

My love said he wants to know what the world would be like now, our New World, if the Tainos had not been conquered. What about the Inca? What about the Aztecs?

\*

NON-FICTION

In some places around the United States, Columbus Day is now celebrated as Indigenous Peoples' Day instead.

There are some white people in my family who think this distinction is trivial. But I can't really blame them: it is hard to comprehend all the stories being pulled from oblivion. It is hard to forget all the stories we already know.

\*

My love and I went to see the newest film in the *Rocky* franchise: *Creed II*.

The film's hero is not Rocky. The film's hero has a lost father; a dangling legacy.

\*

In my memory, my mother is perpetually youthful. She sings "You Are My Sunshine" to rows of weathered faces who have just found a thread to tie them to a long-gone past.

\*

My love's mother called and said her doctors have put her on medication for her memory.

In a bookstore, later, I found my love reading a magazine called *The Science of Alzheimer's*.

I said, "It isn't that. Remember? She said they told her it wasn't that."

He said, "I know." But he didn't put the magazine down.

\*

It is hard to comprehend all the infinite ways there are to remember. And all the infinite ways to forget.

\*

Recently, my love hung our two watercolor paintings on the wall of our new apartment. Two paintings tell a world of stories: of my family, of my childhood innocence, of the bear and Teddy Roosevelt, of Westward expansion and Manifest Destiny, of the destruction of worlds for the creation of new ones, of the killing of bears and people, from Christopher Columbus, to Teddy Roosevelt, to now.

They do not tell the story of what bears are, or were, or might have been. They tell of a story imagined and reimagined; remembered and forgotten; a story thousands of years in the making.