

Creation story

Martha Barlow

In the beginning was the end.

A junkyard. A pile of scraps. A veritable mountain of things discarded and disused. A wasteland of the failed attempts to build something meaningful, something that would last, something that would not simply be destroyed by its inhabitants. A heap of broken things, lost things, forgotten things. Rusted old machines, cogs jammed and overgrown with brown, spiky weeds, bright bits of plastic dulled to a pale grey, snapped into shards and scattered among the dirt. There were many things, yes, in the sense of objects occupying a physical space. In the sense of meaning, or significance — nothing.

And on top of this pile sat a girl, young, dressed in rags, with a tangled mess of wiry, copper hair. Dirt and soot stained her yellowed arms and legs, like a pot of ink spilt across a worn piece of parchment. Atop the mountain of rubble she perched, settled against a tepid, grey wash that was neither night nor day. Her eyes wandered vacantly across the scraps, reaching far across the lonely plains of rusting metal and shattered glass that made up her world. Not a soul stirred, not a single thing made noise. Not even a breeze flitted across the barren landscape. Alone, she was. Alone it seemed she would stay.

Until one day, the girl began to think.

What to do with all this? Where did we go wrong? And most gnawingly and pervasively of all, she thought, what could I do better?

And so, with little idea quite how she would begin, the girl set to work.

First, she decided, she would need some light; a break from the dull grey backwash she knew. So she dug around the pile and with a great heave retrieved the sun; then she hauled it back up the mountain, pausing every so often to wipe sweat from her forehead, and hung it high above her head. With old bits of cotton she stitched large, white clusters onto the blue sky, then cleared deep wells and let them fill with water. And together, the clouds, the sun and the rain turned the hard, desert sand into fertile soil, and there grew grass and flowers and trees. She held her hands, red and blistered from holding the sun, beneath the cool stream of water, digging bits of dirt and cotton from beneath her nails. Then, she took a deep breath and pondered what to do next.

Soon, the sun grew monotonous, so she dug around some more and found a great lever. She cleared a space in the junk and placed it on the floor, then pushed with all her might. Slowly, but surely, with a piercing, metallic screech, the world began to turn. The dark, however, became too dark, so she dove into the pile once more and found a large, silver disc. She dug her nails in as she pulled, leaving great craters, and when it finally came loose she again made the journey up the mountain and balanced it in the sky where it could reflect the light of the sun. She gathered together some shattered glass and rusted old wire and strung each individual shard onto it, then strung the sky with stars.

The girl stepped back and admired her work, and she began to feel lonely. So by the light of the moon she collected all the necessary parts and carefully built two small figures, then when day broke, she left them in the soil for the sun and the water to grow.

These new friends of hers she blessed with beating hearts to remind them they were alive, and great minds so they could forge their own paths through this mysterious new world. She granted them spirit and an innate need to create, and they took her world and it grew and it grew it and it grew. And thus we were born, and the girl, deciding it was time, ascended the mountain and perched herself among the clouds, where she could watch her creation flourish.

Somewhere along the way, we began to take the moon and stars for granted. We let go of the ropes that held them in place, trusting the tightly bound wires to perform their task. We lost the feeling of treading through soft grass, skimming our fingers lightly over the delicate petals of endless fields of flowers. We forgot how it felt to drag our weary bones across vast mountain ranges, lost the feeling of hauling ourselves into the highest branches of the tallest trees, scraping our skin against dry bark.

We became slaves to tyrannous metallic clanging and smog-filled cities. We abandoned the lush greenery for a world of cardboard boxes stacked so high they scraped the sky. We developed lights and strung them from the rooftops in much the same way the girl had strung the stars. We worshipped not the Earth, but men in expensive suits, oiling back their hair and clenching fat cigars between their teeth. We turned on one another; we became cold and cruel and violent. We built boats

and sailed to far and distant lands, and we built weapons with which we spattered our fertile earth with crimson blood.

And the girl watched from atop her mountain in the sky as the same mistakes were made that she had been so determined to avoid, and she wept. The world she had crafted had been pulverised, corrupted, eaten from the outside in, rotten to the very core. At the heart of this world lay not an innocent, wide-eyed girl, but towering stacks of gold and silver coins that glinted menacingly, guarded by hawk-like men and women with severe, lined faces and fists of iron. We stopped caring for what she had given us, for the life she had breathed and for the hearts that beat.

The world began with nothing but a pile of rubble. I imagine it will end in much the same way.