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Fairy Tale

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C.M.:

Fairy Tale

He collected every fairy tale from the village at the end of the valley except the one he wanted—the story of a dancing bear, a peddler, and a woman, which had haunted his dreams in childhood and dictated his course of studies at the university. Emblazoned in his memory was the image of the bear chained to an apple tree whose roots had curled around the coffin of the mayor; he could not recall any other details of the story beyond the rumor, widely circulated, that it was based on an actual incident, and still he lost sleep imagining the consequences of eating the fruit gathered from that tree; hence his resolve to record the fairy tale in full, preferably in the lilting voice of his grandmother, dead these many years. (He blamed his insomnia on her juxtaposition of tone and subject.) However, his family had long since moved away from the village, the tradition of storytelling died with the burial of the church under a wall of snow, and no one could answer his questions: Who trained the bear? Did a peddler really lock a woman in a barn and hide the key under the altar? What taboo had the mayor violated by selling off the forest that protected the village from avalanches? He died before the last stand of pines was cut down; the whereabouts of his skeleton remained a mystery—which led the folklorist to speculate that privation, not magic, was the true source of this ghoulish tale. What consolation he took in the prospect of an afterlife was tempered by the knowledge that he did not know how it ended. If it ended.