

# Honeyguide Literary Magazine

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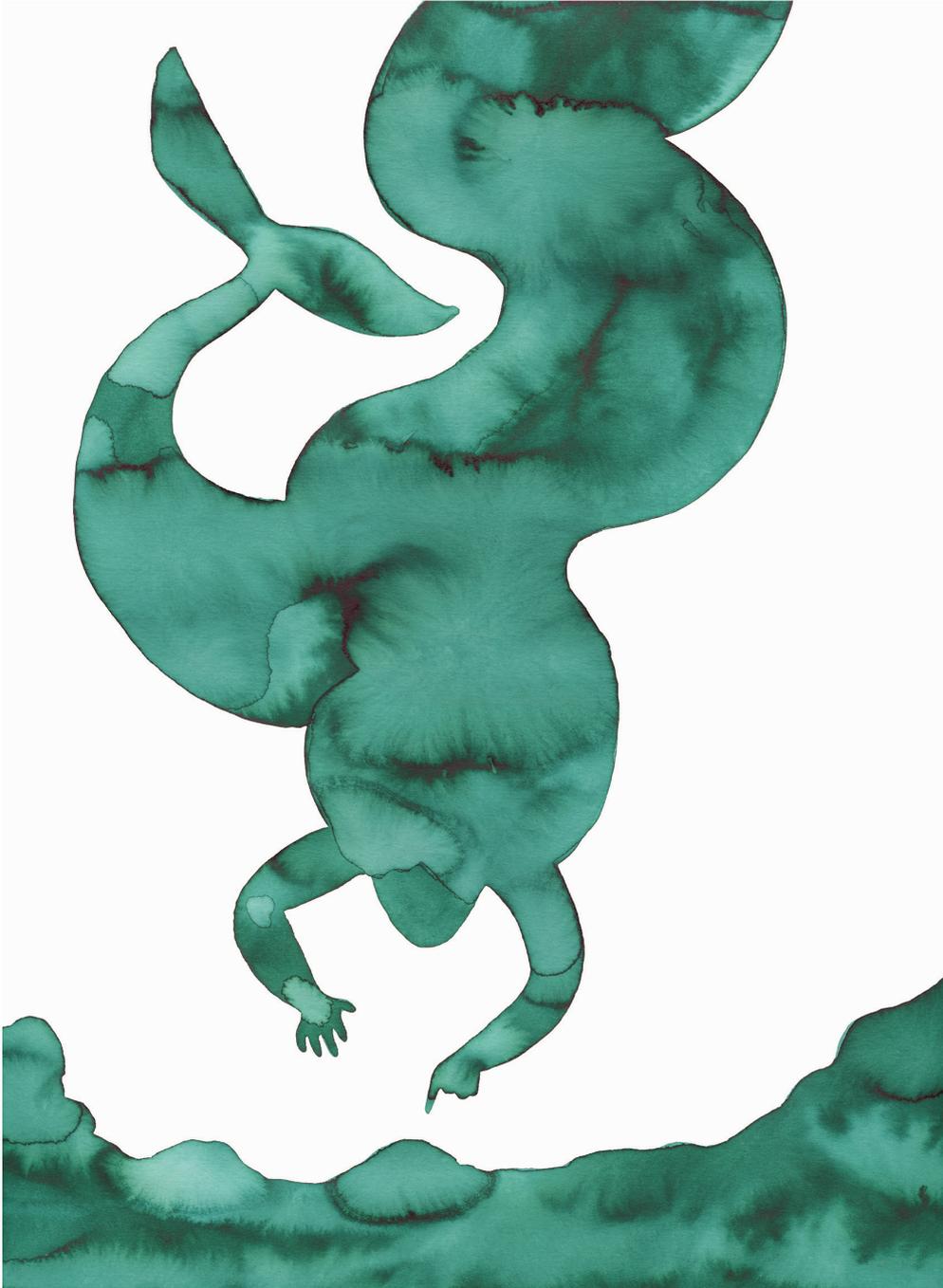


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# Contributors

“The Ichthyocentaur Beyond Marginalia” by Katherine Quevedo.....	2
“Sonnet of the South American Sphinx” by Katherine Quevedo.....	3
“To the Kingdom Within” by Karla Linn Merrifield.....	4
“Dame Dragon” by Kyla Neufeld.....	6
“The Wolves Share Hunting Tips” by Kyla Neufeld.....	8
“The Golden-Antlered Doe” by Kasey Szavai.....	10
“Living with Kappa” by Linda Gould.....	14
“The Rat’s Tale” by Pauline Gostling.....	19
“Angels for Mistreated Animals” by Anna Khazanova.....	24
“The Glass Wall Between Us” by Monika R. Martyn.....	26
“Mythical Creatures” by Marga Patterson.....	30
“The Monkey King’s advice on how to deal as a Protector of Horses” by May Chong.....	34
“Birdwatcher” by May Chong.....	36
“Goldfish Memories” by May Chong.....	37
“Chakora” by Rani Jayakumar.....	39
“Unicorn in the Park” by Lina Slavova.....	43
“A Year in COVID: What My Kin Taught Me” by Cynthia Hacker.....	48
“Just One Kiss” by Victory Witherkeigh.....	53
“Fancy Cats” by KB Nelson.....	55
“A Few Unicorn Facts You Probably Don’t Know” by KB Nelson.....	56
“In My Pocket” by KB Nelson.....	58
“Ugly Duckling” by KB Nelson.....	60
“The Dog that Talked like Brando” by Jay Abramowitz.....	62
“Owl in the Snow” by Virginia Boudreau.....	67
“All for the Love of Zodiac Animals: A Bilinguacultural Poem” by Yuan Changming.....	69
“Mythical Ritual Sound” by N.Y. Haynes.....	71
“The Night Mares” by P.D. Lyons.....	72
“Omnifauna” by Kyle Miller.....	73
“The Development” by Alison McBain.....	79

## Editor's Note

Thank you for supporting our magazine. We are so grateful to the community of animal enthusiasts and readers who help keep our work alive. Your creativity, passion, and generosity have astounded us, and we are so eager to continue publishing art and writing that speaks to the animal-lover soul.

It was an absolute joy reading the submissions for our second issue. Myth, fantasy, and speculative fiction are dear to the Honeyguide team, and each submission invited us to see mythical creatures differently. Every contributor was playful and imaginative. So many times, we forget to play as adults, but we so often do as writers, artists, and believers in magic.

A common thread binds these pieces together: discovering wonder and using it as a call to action. It is necessary to reflect on the unknown, but it is another to act upon it. By allowing the unknown to inspire us, our eyes can be opened to the larger world around us, and we can be humbled by the fact that we cannot know and understand everything. We humans are not the ones in control, and when we embrace this, we discover how many ways of being are available to us in this life.

These stories, poems, art, and nonfiction pieces reminded us that between the blurred lines of reality and fantasy, knowledge and naivety, and the logical and (seemingly) absurd, there is a new form of clarity. From this new place, we can find out who and where we are meant to be.

Happy reading,

Amanda Marrero and the Honeyguide Team

# The Ichthyocentaur Beyond Marginalia

*Poetry*

Hybridized horse-man  
with long, looping, fish-scale tail  
ornamented with frills.

Musician of the conch and viol,  
accomplished acrobat of waves.

Hands, hooves, and fins  
not vying but, rather,  
orchestrated in  
harmonious, unfathomed glory.

He lives on the edges  
of maps lovingly drawn  
in warier times, when  
we unhybridized humans  
knew so little  
about the deep  
and distant  
—but we knew  
we should  
imagine.

# Sonnet of the South American Sphinx

## *Poetry*

She spreads her condor wings and never blinks  
her talismanic, liquid copper eyes.  
Her jaguar body stretches as she lies  
beside the mighty Amazon and thinks  
about her unmet thirst. She never drinks.  
She hunts whatever traveler she spies,  
then sinks her silver fangs into her prize  
—unless they solve the riddle of the sphinx.

Her riddle lives in *quipus*, in the knots  
the Inca tied, their secret language some  
have spent a lifetime trying to understand.  
They say the answer hides among the spots  
upon her fur, a mottled, rippling crumb  
of thought, unlocking every knotted strand.

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*Katherine Quevedo was born and raised just outside of Portland, Oregon, where she works as an analyst and lives with her husband and two sons. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in NonBinary Review, Songs of Eretz, Coffin Bell, Sidequest, Pastel Pastoral, and elsewhere. Her poetry received an honorable mention in the 2020 Helen Schaible International Sonnet Contest. Find her at [www.katherinequevedo.com](http://www.katherinequevedo.com).*

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# To the Kingdom Within

## *Poetry*

When they ask me how was my journey this winter,  
I will tell them I met an elf in a hemlock forest  
one half-mile off the beaten path  
in the southern Blue Ridge Mountains.

I will tell them the truth about *Georgianus leprechauns*  
shuffling through the white pine needles, whispering  
back to the rapids, of spring on the Toccoa River  
and peeking up over at me from a granitic outcropping,  
winking just as you'd expect.

He was dressed in pale lichen green with oak-leaf epaulettes,  
had wings, mind you, of ferns, and wore a bright orange  
mushroom cap. He did not tip his hat for me;  
he beckoned with a finger from within his foggy grove  
just over the Fannin County line.

And before he said a word to me, he hooted to the owls  
and a parliament of them who-who'd in return in consultation:  
let her in.

*in memoriam Beau Cutts*

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*Karla Linn Merrifield has had 900+ poems appear in dozens of journals and anthologies, with 14 books to her credit. Following her 2018 *Psyche's Scroll (Poetry Box Select)* is the newly released full-length book *Athabaskan Fractal: Poems of the Far North* from Cirque Press. She is currently at work on a poetry collection, *My Body the Guitar*, inspired by famous guitarists and their guitars; the book is slated to be published in December 2021 by *Before Your Quiet Eyes Publications Holograph Series (Rochester, NY)*.*

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# Dame Dragon

## *Poetry*

Nídhögg rises with the red light  
stretching her feathers and climbing  
the air with her wings

away from her bower  
beneath the World Tree

where she hoards corpses  
instead of gold

where she curls her  
sinuous body around the roots  
and squeezes tight

(where she'd very much like  
to bite Ratatosk that infernal squirrel  
in half)

She tastes the air  
with her tongue  
finding the notes of sulphur  
and ash of Ragnarök  
the coming storm

and destruction

and holds them in her mouth

She grins and swings

back to her bed

There will be more

corpses to consume

soon enough

# The Wolves Share Hunting Tips

## *Poetry*

Sköll

brother wear the coat with thick fur  
warm enough to keep out  
the empty chill of space  
black and bright as the night sky

stalk your prey  
across the stars  
leaping over them  
like celestial steppingstones

howl and strike  
tear the silver wings of the Moon  
see Her limping ahead  
winking out

Hati

*and sister wear yours of bright gold  
over your shoulders feel your desire  
for the light to crack  
crescendoing down your back*

*run to the edge of the horizon  
keep your head down  
ears flat be like a whisper  
in the long grass*

*climb the sunbeam*

*snap your jaws*

*at the Sun's horses*

*snap their bones with your teeth*

when Ragnarök finally

*finally comes*

take your first bite

*make the sky run red*

*blot out the Sun*

swallow the Moon whole

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*Kyla Neufeld is a poet based in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, where she's the copy editor of Mythos & Ink Publishing. These two poems are from her "Field Guide to Norse Mythology" series, which explore the stories of lesser-known creatures from Norse mythology. Other poems from this series have appeared in The Goose, Rune Bear, and Vallum Magazine.*

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# The Gold-Antlered Doe

## *Fiction*

I walk up the hill, to the highest point. I want to see her. I have exciting news.

The sun dips lower in the sky and I raise my head, high as I can, impatient. Is it time? I see my shadow on the hilltop, stretching as the sun prepares to set, and I know the exact moment I'm finally holding the sun in my antlers because Fauna, my Goddess and the Goddess of all animals, appears in front of me. She is wrapped in her coat of leaves and her tiger eyes are shining from deep under her hair of butterflies and the majestic antlers that crown them.

I bow my head. "Fauna, it is you."

"My favourite doe," she says.

She reaches out to adjust her coat and I notice her hands are delicate antelope hooves today. They change depending on her mood, from snake heads to hyena paws, dragonflies, bear claws and fins. I like to see the variety, though sometimes, I'm curious about her real form. But between gods, it doesn't matter. My own antlers change too, depending on what gets caught in them as I wander from hill to pasture, guarding and helping deer across the world. Some nights they carry the moon, other times, stars flicker in them and some days, I shake them free and they simply shimmer with gold. This evening, they are holding the sun.

"You'll be pleased," I tell her. "You told me harrowing tales just last week, humans murdering humans for loving the same kind as themselves."

"Yes, they've turned a bit bigoted lately," she says.

"Big what?"

"They persecute, like you say, love between the same sex, as if it was a bad thing."

"Which is strange because it's truly fun," I say.

"So all animals tell me." Fauna nods. "I never even thought about any of this, when I created..." she hesitates, "...life." She doesn't say she created humans. She never says it, even though it's true.

"Well, today I was meandering," I say, "visiting the herds, checking how the fawns are doing, when I found two humans. Two men, obviously outcast lovers. I led them to the greenest pastures, the bluest lake, the lushest hills, so they could find a home."

"Did they follow you?"

"They gave chase. Not often do you see a doe with stars hanging in her golden antlers. I galloped

until I got them to the lake, then I disappeared.”

“Well, you did a good thing. Where are they?”

I nod to the distance, where two men sat by a fire.

“You fool.” Fauna bursts out laughing. “Those are two brothers, Ménrót’s sons. Hunor and Magor. Neither lovers, nor persecuted.”

I ponder my mistake. “Wanderers, then.”

“That, they are. Seeking a home.”

“I have done the right thing, still?”

“You certainly have. This is their new beginning. That is all they needed.”

We sit in silence, enjoying the cool air, and then bid goodbye, bowing our antlers. I shake the sun free, letting it drop below the horizon.

“I’ll see you soon again, my favourite doe. I’ll come see the fawns.”

She did visit the herds with me, time to time, like she did every year. The fawns came and went, herds came and went, and the rivers and hills gently moved as a thousand years passed.

It’s spring again, and I spend the day moving across continents, checking on the expectant deer and some of the early fawns as they are toddling around blinded by the first rays of sun. In the evening, I sit down on a hilltop, exhausted. The pale sun dips lower and I hold my head up to let it get a moment’s rest on top of my antlers before having to rise on the other side of the globe.

Fauna appears, her butterfly hair heavy with pupae and her coat of leaves thinned to twigs, but her tiger eyes smiling.

“Spring is back,” I say.

“It always comes,” she murmurs. “It’s good to sit with you, my doe. My sister, Flora has been away for the winter, and I get tired without her.”

“I know. But she’s coming back now,” I say. “Look around. Everything looks so alive. The hills, the trees, the river.”

Fauna looks around, too, taking in the scent of budding nature.

“This is Hungary,” she says suddenly. “You’re loved here. By humans.”

“Deer?”

“No, you. They tell stories about you. Not just stories. They make songs, paintings, statues.”

“How so?” I am amazed.

“Remember the two brothers you led to the lake, a thousand years ago? This is where their children settled. They are called Hungarian for Hunor and Magyar for Magor. They call you the

Gold-Antlered Doe and the Wondrous Doe, and they tell your tale through the generations. They remember the brothers who were lost, how they needed a home and how you helped them find one.”

“Good. Tales of kindness are worth repeating, they teach us how to live.”

Fauna scratches her head. Her hand a red fox paw today. “Perhaps. But, do you see that fence in the distance?” She points past the hills, and when I squint, I can see the glimmer of a thin, grey line snaking around the horizon. “They built it to keep out wanderers who need a home. And they built systems so gay couples cannot have children, so transgender people cannot exist, so Roma are judged and excluded.”

“What are systems?”

“Invisible fences.”

“But they talk of me with love? I took them in as wanderers. I am a doe with antlers,” I say, confused.

Fauna shrugs. “It’s no use talking to humans.”

Humans are the only ones that truly left Fauna’s world behind. Not only did they leave, they took her beloved ox, fowl, boar and shaped them beyond recognition for their own use. It makes sense that she is a little bit bitter about them.

“It must be hard for them, not having you by their side,” I say. “They have to construct their own existence.”

“Plenty of them understand the basics of decent behaviour,” Fauna grumbles. “It’s not a high bar, not hating. It’s the leaders who do all this, they drive them apart. They invent differences that aren’t there.”

“Sounds like they need to learn about leadership,” I say. “Our role is to minimise division. There’s enough fighting already in and among the herds.”

“Yes, any one of you here could teach them. Even that harvester ant over there.” She points to two hills away. I squint, out of politeness, but only Fauna can see all creatures at all times. She remembers and holds out her paw. “Or this swift.”

I see her paw turn into a tree branch. A crescent shape flies past me and a small bird with shimmering gold wings lands on Fauna’s hand.

Fauna smiles at him. “Have you led the flocks across the ocean?”

“I have.”

“What’s the secret?” Fauna asks.

“Include. Guard the slowest. Help them. Everything else is failure,” the bird says, and then nods brightly, flutters his wings and flies off in such a hurry, I only see a dash against the sky. A tiny

golden feather was left in his spot, drifting in the air and slowly circling towards the ground.

“Celebrate difference, celebrate joy,” I add. “Think together, everyone involved, you’ll do better.”

Fauna sighs. “Thinking together. That’s what the ant said, too. Ants do things you wouldn’t imagine, you know, because they’re so small, but even they think together. And they certainly don’t tell one story, then do the opposite. No one does that.”

“I’ll talk to these humans.” I stand up.

“I told you, it’s no use,” Fauna says, yawning. “Let them do their thing.”

“But it’s not their thing. You said it yourself.” Fauna doesn’t answer, so I lower my head to show determination and I add, “I have to try. We have to try.”

“How will you talk to them?”

I think for a bit. “We’ll create another story. Our conversations. Will you write them down for me?”

Fauna contemplates, and then she smiles and nods. Her hands are now lemur paws picking up the tiny golden feather from the ground.

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*Kasey Szavai was born in Hungary and now lives in the UK, working for a social housing organisation and writing stories in her free time. Her works appeared in anthologies such as *The Casebook of the Manleigh Halt Irregulars*, *Revolutions 2*, and in online journals *The Drouth* and *blankmedia*. Her Twitter is @KatSzavai and her Instagram is @DnDnHoops. She wrote this story because she loves Hungarian culture, but despairs at the far-right government being in power and inciting hatred. She thinks we could learn something from our own stories and from animals.*

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# Living with Kappa

## *Fiction*

“Don’t go down to the river,” Hiro’s mother warned him.

“Ok, mom,” Hiro called back as he went outside, then rolled his eyes and mimicked the next words as his mom spoke them: “There are Kappa there and they’ll drag you underwater and eat you alive.”

Hiro knew all about kappa because his mom was obsessed with them. She told him she had once seen a friend drowned by a kappa, and every now and then she showed him a sketch she had drawn. “Just so you know one if you see one.”

But now that he was ten, Hiro understood that his mom didn’t know everything. His friends had told him that kappa were friendly and that the cute little creatures would do anything for a cucumber. Still, he never went to the river. It was much easier than having to deal with his mom should she ever find out.

Instead, Hiro was on his way to take photos of an ant colony he had discovered a week earlier after tripping over a fallen log in his back yard. Until he’d found the ants, Hiro had no idea what he was going to do for his science project.

He pulled the camera from his bag, then kicked the log over to reveal a line of ants carrying a beetle carcass. They scurried for cover from the sudden blast of light, but never dropped their prey. He zoomed in close to snap a few photos of the insects and the trails they’d made in the decaying log. When finished, he shrouded the ants again with darkness by rolling it back into place.

A rustle in some nearby bushes caught his attention. A black cat, bleeding from claw marks in its side, limped by, then stopped.

“Awww, kitty...here, kitty, kitty.” Hiro pulled a towel from his bag and moved slowly toward the cat. His neighborhood had several cat colonies, and he sometimes caught injured or sick animals. His mom told him to let nature take its course, but injured animals *always* seemed to cross his path, and he knew, somehow, that he was meant to care for them. His mom became so frustrated with the menagerie of injured animals that he brought into her home— cats, squirrels, birds, even a tanuki, once — she converted the small shed into a shelter for him to use as a hospital.

“Here, kitty, kitty.” He inched closer to the cat, but when he took another step, the cat darted away as fast as it could on an injured leg. It ran to the riverbank where Hiro blindly followed it into a tangle of vines that were wrapped around a dead tree. The cat scuttled with ease into the undergrowth, then edged past some brambles. Hiro, though, was trapped; thorns caught at his hand, grasped onto his jacket, and tugged at his jeans.

He carefully disentangled himself, then tried retracing his steps, but the riverbank was so thick with vines and brambles he wondered how he had managed to get this deep into the foliage. There was no clear path back that he could see, but at the water's edge, the brambles gave way to pampas grass, which waved lazily in the light breeze. He made his way down the riverbank, pushed aside an overgrown clump of pampas and stepped on a foot—green, webbed, and slimy. Splayed out on the ground was a kappa, its turtle-shell back cracked, as if hit by a rock. There was a patch of mud around the kappa's head. The life-sustaining water that the creature held in the small depression in its head had spilled out.

Without hesitation, Hiro checked the kappa for broken limbs, then carried the near-dead creature to the river's edge where he propped it against a rock, filled the bowl on its head with water, wiped away the dirt from its face, then stepped back to see if his patient would revive.

After a few minutes, the kappa's eyes opened. It shook its head as if trying to focus, then found Hiro.

Hiro finally understood his mother's warning.

Lidless, red-rimmed eyes glared at Hiro. Fangs peeked from the creature's upper lip and dug into its lower. It rose on spindly legs and stalked toward Hiro, who clambered backwards up the riverbank, too terrified to turn and run, but he slipped, landing with a thump and sliding right into the kappa's legs. It grabbed his neck with one clammy hand and pulled him close, the webbing between its fingers pulsing against Hiro's neck as if it were a separate, hungry being. It leaned in and sniffed Hiro's neck, and even though he was afraid, Hiro wondered how the creature could smell anything over its own stench of dank water. When the kappa's teeth began chattering the way cats do before they attack, Hiro could control himself no longer; a warm trickle spread across the seat of his pants and down the back of his legs.

The kappa sniffed again, then glanced down at Hiro's soiled pants. Its mouth widened into what Hiro thought looked like a sneer, exposing crooked, brown teeth between its fangs. Then, it released him and dove into the water.



Hiro was only slightly less afraid of his mother's wrath than the kappa, so he never told her about his encounter, but he also never went to the river again. As he grew older, he attributed his fear of the river to a bad dream. In school, he learned kappa didn't exist, that they were simply legendary creatures. By the time he got through university and set up his veterinary practice in Tokyo, the riverbank encounter was forgotten.

Years later, Hiro went for a walk while visiting his elderly parents. It was hot and humid, so he strolled the riverbank, holding his arms out wide to let the breeze cool the wet spots under his arms. When he reached an area with a tree kept standing only because of the tangle of vines wrapped around it, a dizzying sense of *deja vu* knocked into him. His heart unaccountably pounded in his chest. Hiro peered into the foliage, willing a memory to emerge. None did. He focused on the undergrowth and vines. The surrounding bushes and grasses grew fuzzy, and a sense of curiosity pushed away his fear. Was something in there? He stepped into the brush. A bird cried out at being disturbed and darted away. Halfway down the embankment, a tangle of thorny bushes blocked his way. He would have to go back.

A branch snapped behind him.

Hiro jerked around. Nothing. He spun around again at a rustle in the bushes to his right. Again, nothing, but the hairs on his neck rose. Hiro turned to go back to the riverwalk, but his arm had gotten caught in a vine.

As he struggled to untangle his arm, a kappa crawled on spindly legs from the undergrowth. Red-rimmed eyes caught Hiro's. Another rustle in the bushes, then another. Two more kappa emerged and circled him. One dug its claws into his arm and drew blood.

"He's mine! I found him first."

"I'll fight you for him," said another.

"Stop fighting," said the third, poking at the flesh in Hiro's arm. "There's enough here for all of us."

They collectively snorted and opened their mouths wide, pushing and shoving Hiro like a cat playing with its prey before the kill. After one violent lurch, the third kappa lunged for Hiro's neck, mouth wide, fangs dripping.

It stopped.

The kappa sniffed, then drew back. It gazed at each of its fellow kappa who muttered their dissatisfaction and disappeared into the brush.

"There is one smell missing from you," the kappa said. That was all it took for Hiro's memories to come crashing back, especially the humiliation at peeing his pants.

"It's you!" Hiro whispered, still terrified by his near death, but also happy to see that the kappa he had saved was still alive. "Is...is...are those others your family?" The kappa snorted its reply. Hiro took it as a yes.

"Thank—"

"You saved my life many years ago," the kappa cut him off. "Now, we're even. Don't EVER come here again. I won't be able to protect you. Go!"

Hiro did.

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When Hiro's parents grew sick, he moved his family to his childhood home. He wasn't likely to forget or discount his experience with the kappa this time, nor was he willing to take a chance with his children's lives, so he built a wall to prevent anyone from accessing the river from his property. Over the years, people occasionally went missing, presumed drowned, and he wondered if they died at the hands of kappa. He never told anyone of his encounter for fear of public ridicule. Instead, he ran for Mayor, then erected barriers along the riverbank and organized brush clearing events.

On the wall behind his house, Hiro set out cucumbers—kappas' favorite snack— once a month and called out thanks to the kappa who saved his life. He didn't know if it was his "friend" or one of the others who ate the treats, but sometimes, fresh ginger, which grew along the riverbank, was placed on the wall in return. He bowed and said his thanks each time the ginger gift was left.

His parents died, his children moved away for university, then to Tokyo, visiting only on holidays. He traveled with his wife for a few years after retirement, but when she died, he was alone. He sometimes went days speaking to no one but the plants in his garden.

One hot day, Hiro carried a pile of grass clippings to toss over the wall and paused to let the river's cool breeze wash over him. The new Mayor had let the brush grow tall and dense again. In a moment of childish abandon, Hiro climbed up onto the wall, legs dangling over the edge, and watched the river eddies play against the rocks. He wondered if the kappa family was still alive.

As if he had willed it, there was a shuffle in the brush and a kappa emerged. Like him, it had aged; its skin was mottled, and its water bowl had sunk deeper into its head. Hiro spun around to jump to the safety of his yard, but the kappa's spindly legs shook with the effort of climbing, and he just didn't seem as threatening as before. It breathed heavily through its mouth, and only one fang was visible. The malicious glare that terrified young Hiro was now watery and focused on the uneven ground. Hiro remained on the wall, ready to jump away if need be. The kappa climbed onto the wall and sat down. Its shoulders slouched, its head dangling forward on a scrawny neck that craned upward so as not to spill the water in its bowl.

They sat in uncomfortable silence for a few moments. Hiro, nervous about his safety, was the first to speak.

"It's been a long time..."

The kappa scratched its leg, dipped a finger into the water on its head, then sucked it off the finger. "I told you never to come back here."

"I know, but...well, this isn't your territory; it's mine."

"Hm!" the kappa grunted.

“Did you get the cucumbers I left for you?”

“I got them.”

Hiro waited for a thank you, then shrugged when none came. He knew enough not to expect animals to act like humans. “Where are the other kappa? Were they your children?”

“They left this area. There are too many walls built along the river and someone keeps clearing away the bushes where we live. Besides, this water isn’t what it used to be...too many houses. The water is dirty.”

“Why didn’t you go with them?”

For the first time, the kappa let down its guard and Hiro could read its expression, a mix of nostalgia, affection and surprise at the question. “This is my home.”

“Of course, of course,” Hiro replied. “So, you’re all alone.”

The kappa bowed his head, careful not to spill its water.

“Me, too. My wife died, my kids moved away...”

The two sat for a few minutes in silence, looking out at the river. Hiro watched a bird flit from one branch to another in the tangled brush. He glanced over at the kappa, its slouch now more pronounced, as if sitting upright on a wall required too much energy. Sorrow overwhelmed Hiro.

“To tell the truth, I’m lonely,” he admitted. “You, too?” The kappa, inscrutable again, snorted. Hiro interpreted it as a yes.

He put his arm around the kappa. “Well, my friend,” he said, “I guess it’s just the two of us now.”

The kappa rested its spindly arm across Hiro’s shoulders and turned to face him, “It’s just me.”

The bird bolting away was the last thing Hiro saw.

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*As a cat lover, Linda Gould has always been intrigued with the complex relationship humans have with animals that are predators. This story explores that relationship. She’s an American who has lived in Japan for over 20 years and is an on-again, off-again writer. Recently, her work centers on incorporating Japanese ghosts, culture, and folktales into her short fiction.*

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## The Rat's Tale

### *Speculative Fiction*

I'm different. Took me a while to realise it though. Ventriloquist's dummies don't come to life but, I have.

The bump woke me. I heard Tom swear as the rubber skirt on the stage door caught his heels, propelling us into the theatre. Sliding from side to side in the old suitcase, familiar smells of damp and decay wafted through to me, confirming our venue.

"Aft'noon, Tom. See it's still chucking it down outside." Max's asthmatic wheeze evident as ever. Although I couldn't see him, I visualised his bald head craning out of his cubby hole. "Saturday though, rain always brings 'em in."

"Yeh, let's hope so."

"Parcel arrived for you. Put it in your room." Max had to shout above the hollow sound of Tom's footsteps as we made our way along the dingy stone corridor to our room. The suitcase swung wildly as Tom gave the door a hefty shove, catapulting us into the cell like space. Laying the case down, he unfastened the clips. I heard the wet slap of his mac as he hung it behind the door, then his footsteps to the dressing table and the hiss of air escaping as he slumped on the only chair in the small space. Living in my head, I imagined him sweep aside his thinning hair, lean into the mirror and confront his 52-year-old self reflected back at him by the bright lights surrounding the frame.

"Oh God, I can't do this much more." *He'd* had enough! What about me?

"Oh, yes, you can." I whispered, trying to massage his ego - *again*. Something small, metallic, hit the floor. It sounded like the nail scissors.

"Shut up, Ron. When I want your opinion, I'll ask for it."

"As you like, but don't forget I've a vested interest in us, too. Maybe I can give you some advice."

"You." He scoffed. "What can a two-foot articulated rat know?"

"I don't miss much, Tom." My voice persuasive. I liked that.

Quick, heavy footsteps approached the suitcase. Light blinded me as he lifted the lid, his narrowed eyes staring down at me. "So, what advice would *you* give *me*, eh?"

OK. I would try being helpful. "Lay off the booze for a start. Ruined your first marriage ..."

He didn't like the truth. Grabbing my neck with both hands, he dragged me out, shaking me

violently. I could feel my body expand, take shape.

“I know what goes on,” winking in my best ol’ buddies way, but he wasn’t looking.

Wrapping my tail around his arm, I yawned, trying to assert myself. The sound and feel of my teeth coming together excited me.

“Smells of bleach in here,” I said, “making my eyes water. Could we have the window open a bit?”

Sighing, and after some effort, he found a book and jacked up the sash window. The smells emanating from the skip outside made me question whether bleach would have been preferable, but I let it drop.

“Talking of eyes, don’t you think it would be a good idea to check my batteries *before* we go on stage, when I’m in character? Remember last week, when we got to the bit where they switch off the lights and my eyes are supposed to glow in the dark? Only they didn’t, did they? Because the batteries were flat. I was mortified. Whose fault was that, eh?”

“OK. Lesson learned.” His eyebrows raising as if to say, “these things happen.”

“I think the act could be improved.” I was in my stride now, expounding my theory, whiskers twitching, eyes darting around the cluttered space.

“As a London rat, I see myself living in a *metal* dustbin. Lift me out of that instead of the suitcase. Old cans in the bottom could rattle a bit, few fish heads could fall out - not real of course. More authenticity ...”

“Umh, could work ...” At least he was listening.

“What about introducing some cockney rhyming slang ... apples and pears, whistle and flute, that sort of thing?”

“No need to overdo it. You’re 21<sup>st</sup> century. We don’t want to hark back to Oliver Twist now, do we?”

“Oh, I’d like that, Tom. Give the act a new slant.” Clasp my paws together, eyes burning with enthusiasm, I said, “Gaw’d blimey, Guv.” I *knew* it would work. “Victorian London, poor sanitation, lots of scope for me there. Boats hooting through the fog on the Thames, very atmospheric ...”

“No.”

“Oh.” I shrunk with disappointment. “I thought it would be a good idea. Bring new life into the act. Let’s be honest, it’s stale now, needs something to bring the punters in ...”

“Yeh, it *does*.” His emphasis on the word concerned me.

“What do you mean?”

“There’ll be another member joining us. Shortly.”

I didn't like his tone. "Y-e-s?" I was worried now, thinking I had need to be.

"LucyFur."

"Lucifer!" I repeated uncomprehendingly. "What ... the Devil?"

"No. A cat."

"No-ooo!" Pulling away, I shook my head in denial.

"Yep. Hopefully she's in that parcel over there." I clung to his arm as we walked over to a brown package propped against the ancient radiator. "This could be a great move for us." He actually rubbed his hands together! "Let's have a look at her."

Jumping onto the radiator, peering over his shoulder, I watched him rip away the wrapping, remove the cardboard lid and delicately part the tissue paper. And there IT was.

"Ah, she's gorgeous!" Horrified, I watched him caress the thing, like a lover. "Silky, jet black fur ... huge green eyes, a real Jezebel." His new vocabulary and awed tone turned my stomach.



**"Let me suggest a win-win proposition."**

"A perfect foil to you, Ron, with your moth-eaten fur and bald tail ..." That really did it for me. I didn't need him pinpointing my shortcomings.

"Thanks very much. Shame you didn't think to discuss it with me first!"

"No. I didn't."

"Well, that's a pity. The name's naff for a start ..."

"Oh, you don't like it?" I thought it very appropriate, clever play on words."

"No, but Lucifer seems apt." Sarcasm wasted, I would try emotional blackmail.

"It's been me and you, Tom, all this time. We don't need anyone else, just fresh material." Seeing the closed look on his face, I couldn't hold it back any longer. "Certainly not a bloody cat!"

"She's not any old cat. She's ... a real statement. I'm going to expand her personality ..."

Before he waxed lyrical again, I gave him a look that said it all, but he tossed me back into the case, none too gently I might add, speaking over his shoulder so I could barely hear.

"Well, sorry, but it's a done deal. Just in time before we start our Summer season at Seascap."

Furious, I struggled to stand, claws ripping the lining of my suitcase, my eyes like organ stops,

following his every move.

“Not more bad news! You said we’d never do the holiday camps again. Not after those vile twins tried to rip my head off. Don’t you remember?”

“You’re not likely to let me forget, are you? It’s not easy to get the bookings now. Only got it because I said the act would be new, fresh ...”

“Great! So, if we get say, a six-minute slot, how much of my act will be cut to make way for Fur Ball?”

“Haven’t decided yet. I’ve got a few ideas.” As he walked away from me, I knew he hadn’t given me a thought.”

“I see.” It was a blow, but I wasn’t done yet. I would appeal to his better nature. Sinking low, my voice a whisper, my eyes orbs of self-pity.

“Me and cats don’t normally get on, you know,” I said, before innocently asking, “will she have her own suitcase?”

“Don’t know. Suppose so.”

“Good.” Pulling myself up to my full height, it was time to turn the knife. “You don’t have much of an idea when it comes to relationships, do you, Tom?”

Striding back, he shoved me down into the suitcase. “What’s that got to do with anything? What do you mean?”

Scrambling up, my claws gripping the edge, I said, “I’ve told you, I know a lot. Let’s be honest, your options are limited. When you went on that dating site and had to describe your likes and dislikes, you didn’t do too well, did you? I can’t imagine many girls being wowed by a man who spends most of his time with his arm up a large, *moth-eaten* – your words, Tom – furry grey rat!”

I moved quickly as he went to swipe me. “That’s enough. You evil, little beast. You’ve gone too far this time”

Both of us jumped at a sharp knocking on the door. “Fifteen minutes, Tom.”

“Right. Thanks, Max.” He shouted back. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched him pat down his pockets, knowing his next move would be to grab his mac and head for the Off Licence next door.

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I could smell the drink on his breath when he came back.

“We’ve got a few minutes. I’ll just have a quick peek at her before we go on.” Crossing to the bronchial radiator he knelt, lifted the cardboard lid, then gasped, “She’s not here! Where’s she gone?” Trembling fingers examining the tissue paper, he lifted the box high to peer underneath. “She’s gone!” Struggling to stand, his face was ashen, “She was right here. I wrapped her back

in the tissue paper ...” Panicked, his eyes darted around the room as if hoping for divine intervention ...

“Five minutes, Tom.”

I just knew if I went missing, he wouldn't be that upset over me, so I wasn't going to own up to pushing her through the open window, nor watching her silky, jet black body fall into the green rubbish skip at the back of the theatre. I *did* tell him I wouldn't work with a bloody cat!

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*Pauline Gostling was born in London, never excelling particularly at school, her love of reading and writing being a constant throughout her life. She is married, and lives with her husband and mad Jack Russell in the Home Counties, having worked for many years as a Doctor's Secretary. Now retired, she has the time and passion to write, drawing on her experiences and imagination to provide the backbone for her writing. She has had an article published in an American-culture global journal and has also had the honour of having a Murder Mystery play performed in a stately home in England.*

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## Angels for Mistreated Animals

*Animal Rescue*

*by Anna Khazanova, Cofounder*

Angels for Mistreated Animals, or WAMA Animal Rescue, is a Brooklyn-based, no-kill animal shelter. After obtaining a New York State 501(c)3 status in 2014, the organization's mission has always been to safeguard and rehabilitate animals who have experienced the most severe cases of abuse, neglect, and abandonment. Since its inception, AMA has saved countless sick, injured, and abused pet companions from near death, domestically and abroad.

After an incredible amount of generosity from their supporters throughout the years, AMA has achieved its long-term goal of opening its doors to a 1200sq ft space with clean enclosures and a fenced in outdoor space. Through efficient operations, adequate awareness, and public support, AMA continues to create loving futures and erase painful pasts.

Recently, we were contacted about two dogs being left outside in deplorable condition. When we received their pictures, we almost cried. Both dogs had so much matted hair that it was difficult to see what they looked like. On top of that, they were under-socialized and overly cautious in their surroundings. We could not turn them away, so we brought them to a medical boarding facility to do a more thorough assessment of the condition they were in.

It was painful to watch how two dogs that were supposed to be full of life and playfulness were, instead, guarded and on constant alert. It originally seemed that the two dogs had developed a strong bond, so we named them Bread and Butter because we felt that they were meant to be

together. After spending some time with them, we noticed that they may not love each other as much as we had originally thought. When we separated the two of them, they seemed much happier to have their own space, and we decided to adopt them separately.

As time went on, Bread and Butter started displaying some behavioral issues that concerned us. They both looked like cute and cuddly dogs, but their behavior was so severe that we decided they needed to be adopted into homes with a lot of structure and experienced owners. We had to keep the adoption screening process extremely strict to ensure that these adoptions would be set up for success and so potential adoptees fully understood what they were getting into.

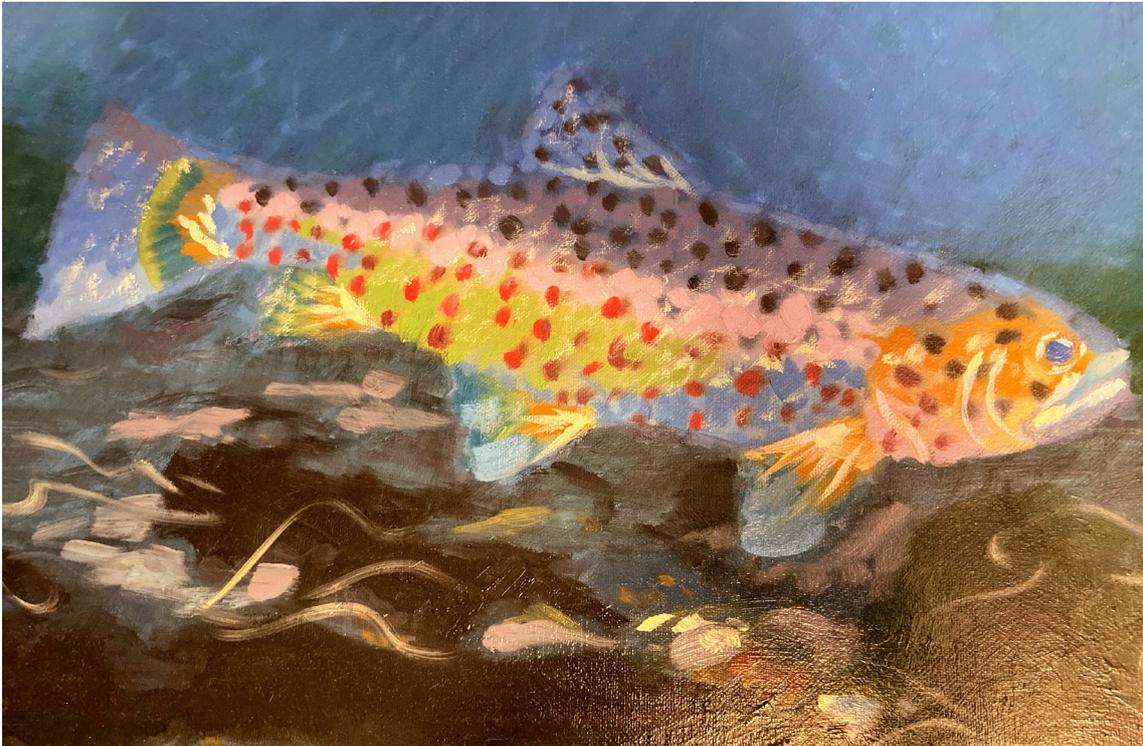
An adoption application for Bread came in first, and right away, we knew that this was the perfect fit. The potential adoptees asked all the right questions and gave all the right answers. They also prepared by consulting with a trainer and having one on standby whenever help

would be needed. We could tell that this was love at first sight, and we knew deep in our hearts that Bread had found his forever home.

Things went smoothly, and soon after Bread was no longer a homeless dog. It was not long after Bread was adopted that Butter's lucky day had arrived. Her family was extremely excited and even drove for two hours on two separate occasions to meet her. Butter was immediately attached to her new humans, and we could tell this was a match made in heaven.

## The Glass Wall Between Us

*Nonfiction*



*Marlo A. Ackerblade*

While I'm bent over in my downward-facing dog position, the tank lights spring to life. The goldfish swim to the surface, popping their fish lips to remind me that it's time for breakfast. But really—the fish don't care who sprinkles their flakey meal. For all they care, it could be the cat. Being fish in a glass sanctuary, they no longer remember that a cat is a natural and proficient enemy.

First to rise, morning feedings are my chore. The fish drifting in the two tanks don't belong to me. I'm just one-half of a housepet-sitting duo engaged for their care. The cat has a name, Charlie; the fish—I'll have to make something up.

The instructions were clear. One lethal nemesis is overfeeding, and the other is using chemicals while cleaning the goldfish tank or the larger aquarium. Easy enough solution: I put my husband in charge of the technical aspects. I can deal with cat litter, cat paws, cat fur, and pussyfooting, and I don't need dead bodies on my conscience.

Being housepet sitters is our job and our reputation, and lends itself to our self-imposed nomadic, minimalist lifestyle. This, however, is our first gig with fish. Dogs and cats are natural choices, and

our resume is rife with testimonials that we are what we claim to be. We even have a tenacious parakeet client listed in our portfolio. Fish were just something to add to our growing list of skills.

“Honeeey! Come down here.” I yell up the stairs.

“What?” Honey knows that when I call him with such urgency in my tone, it’s something serious. I hear his tread on the steps coming down four flights.

“Look at this one.” I point to one of the neon tetras drifting with a slight lean, hiding in the tank’s upper corner.

“Yikes! Look at that eyeball.”

Neon tetras are tiny slivers of electric-blue and neon-red streaked fish from tropical South American freshwater sources. They travel in shoals, and even in their captive environment, they’re difficult to count because nature propels them to be constantly moving—it seems. But after a concerted effort, we count nine sleek bodies in the tank among the Ember, Bentos, and Serpae tetras that drift with buoyancy up and down.

I instantly google the symptoms. Fish tank forums are excellent resources. People are earnest about keeping fish and offer much-needed advice. I can feel my heart thunder;

“it’s only a tiny fish,” I tell myself. The homeowners warned us that not all of the fish would survive in our care. They explained the reason behind the mistaken *replacement* goldfish trio.

One site instantly gives me the information I’m looking for, and I read aloud.

“It’s common. The little guy was either in a fight or scraped against something abrasive in the tank.” I don’t have to add that it wasn’t our fault. We both know it wasn’t. “Should clear in a week or so.”

Honey watches the fish who hides in the upper corner of the tank, also the place where the glass magnifies its affliction tenfold. We hope for the best. We want to avoid the toilet funeral.

“We’ll keep an eye on it.” Honey laughs at his pun. He says, “See ya, Frank.” An impromptu christening.

I’ve always been intrigued by wildlife and domestic animals. That ingrained moment when I saw a dolphin in the harbor at La Paz, Mexico, I cried. Or when I had a up-close and very personal encounter with a moose, my dogs at my heel, and dusk settling all around us, that left me forever enamored with the regal beast roaming the Boreal Forest. Or that time while strolling on the beach, at Playa Los Cerrito on the Baja, when something so dreadful brought me to my knees. On that brilliantly sunny day, I heard my heart shatter. When we came across a carcass entangled in nylon cording of what must have been a juvenile humpback decaying on the shore, something in me shifted. The lesson—a breaking heart makes a distinct sound and leaves a permanent scar. That it was *our fault* the whale died inspired me to write a novel and reduce our plastic consumption. There are alternative ways.

But the fish in the tank, before I stopped long enough to educate myself, were just for decoration.

However, the inquisitive creatures swimming in the oxygenated water left another permanent mark.

Frank's well-being became an obsession. His chances for surviving seemed slim; our inspections did little to alleviate his critical affliction. But we learned this from Frank and his buddies—anything is possible. Although Frank separates himself from his shoal as he recuperates, he is a survivor. He also braves swimming in the tank for part of the day among his contemporaries. The jury is still out if he gets teased and called names. I hope fish are above that sort of bullying.

But Frank also opened me up to other experiences. He taught me to be interested in where he came from and how he got inside the tank. The tetras in this tank are all from South America. Embers, Serpae, and Bentos are each species with their own distinct markings, and now I add the term personality and they are enthralling to watch. That is if you take the time to watch.

Honey teases me that he's sick of having to wipe my fingerprints from the glass, and if this were a crime scene, I'd be in big trouble. There's no way I could explain the tell-tale index fingerprint and the heart-shape I drew on the glass for the fish. The truth is, I have a crush on one of the fish in the tank. This fish is the well-fed spring of awakening within me.

To anyone walking past the tank without really stopping to think, the star of the show really is the Featherfin Squeaker, or *Synodontis Eupterus*, catfish, who slinks along the bottom and whose intricate, spotted pattern and fan-shaped fins wave in the man-made aquatic breeze.

We mistakenly named the larger catfish Grumpy. But we've since had a change of heart and renamed her more aptly. If Angel was born in the wild or in a fabricated human-built system that spawns tropical fish is impossible to know. Sadly, the tropical fish industry is mostly undocumented, hard to traffic and monitor, and often, unethical. To discover anything about this multi-million-dollar industry takes some fishing, some digging, which already makes it suspect. National Geographic sent investigative teams worldwide to understand this complex industry of which Angel and Frank are victims. Whether they were bred or captured, they traveled to this home in a baggie, a Styrofoam cooler packed inside a carton, and sold. The stressful journey and the indignation that I know they experienced on their own terms transformed them into gracious survivors.

I owe all this newly gained knowledge to Frank. And I owe him my gratitude for introducing me to Angel.

As Angel floats and coasts in the tank, she's dreaming of a place that she instinctively remembers, yet she doesn't know its name. It is a river in Africa, murky and sometimes turbulent, where she and her family swam when suddenly, it was over, and she's now a prisoner despite not understanding what that really means. Her distant past lingers, and she clings to the habits formed by her genetics, pressing herself up against the fake rockery, pretending to be invisible. She doesn't know that regardless of where she hides, I can see her feathery fins waving in the turbulence created by a pump. Nothing in her environment is real, except her companions. Even they, it can be argued, are artificial, yet alive.

Before I was introduced to Angel, I admit I was ignorant of many facts regarding fish. Now I

understand they are powerful teachers. All my life, I've been enchanted by the loving and brave loyalty of dogs, the companionship of demanding and affectionate cats, and other domesticated animals. I've lived within the animal kingdoms' magical wonder, of the birds chirping in the trees and the majesty of exotic animals living in distant lands and only visible to me on the big screen. If there is a flaw in my theory, I project my fragile human emotions onto them.

Animals intrigue me. I'm the sort of person who cries when I see a dog in distress. Any animal abused or neglected makes me tremble with indignation. I admit there is a painful sensation in my chest as if their pain has a permanent place in my heart.

But Angel surprises me. She opened me to a new experience. She made me intrigued, smarter and more aware, and more sensitive to the uniqueness of the fish swimming to and fro in a tank, all depending on me for their survival.

The price tag on her, according to Google, is roughly twenty dollars. Such a small price for a living creature that is inquisitive and brave. I say that because Angel is full of charm and character. While her genetic makeup makes her cling to her ancestral habits, like suspending herself upside down against the rock face in the tank, being somewhat territorial, and eating the crumbs that drift to the bottom of the tank, she is also interested in me. She sees me, maybe not as I'm hoping anyone will see me, but she recognizes me even after taking care of her for only a few weeks.

If there is one thing that is absolutely mesmerizing about Angel, it's that deep-seated shade of sapphire in her eyes that has that all-knowing glint. She is teaching me something about her species, information which is not plentiful on the web. And I'm grateful that she takes time from her busy schedule of hiding and swimming to come to me, to kiss the tip of my finger when we touch glass to glass. I know she sees me as I am—humbled.

As I write this, six weeks have passed, and Frank is going strong. His eyeball is still protruding, but he's copying and staying alive.

The cat, on the other hand, well, she has something to say about my divided attention and loyalty. Besides, she'd never harm the fish – she's much too sophisticated and eats from a dish that her domesticated slaves prepare when she demands something and says, "Meow."

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*Monika R. Martyn is retired, married, happy, and a minimalist. She enjoys traveling and several of her short stories are available in print and online. Her debut novel, *The Lucky Man—An Act of Malice*, is scheduled for publication in the spring of 2021. Visit her at <https://monikarmartynauthor.wordpress.com>*

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# Mythical Creatures

*Art*

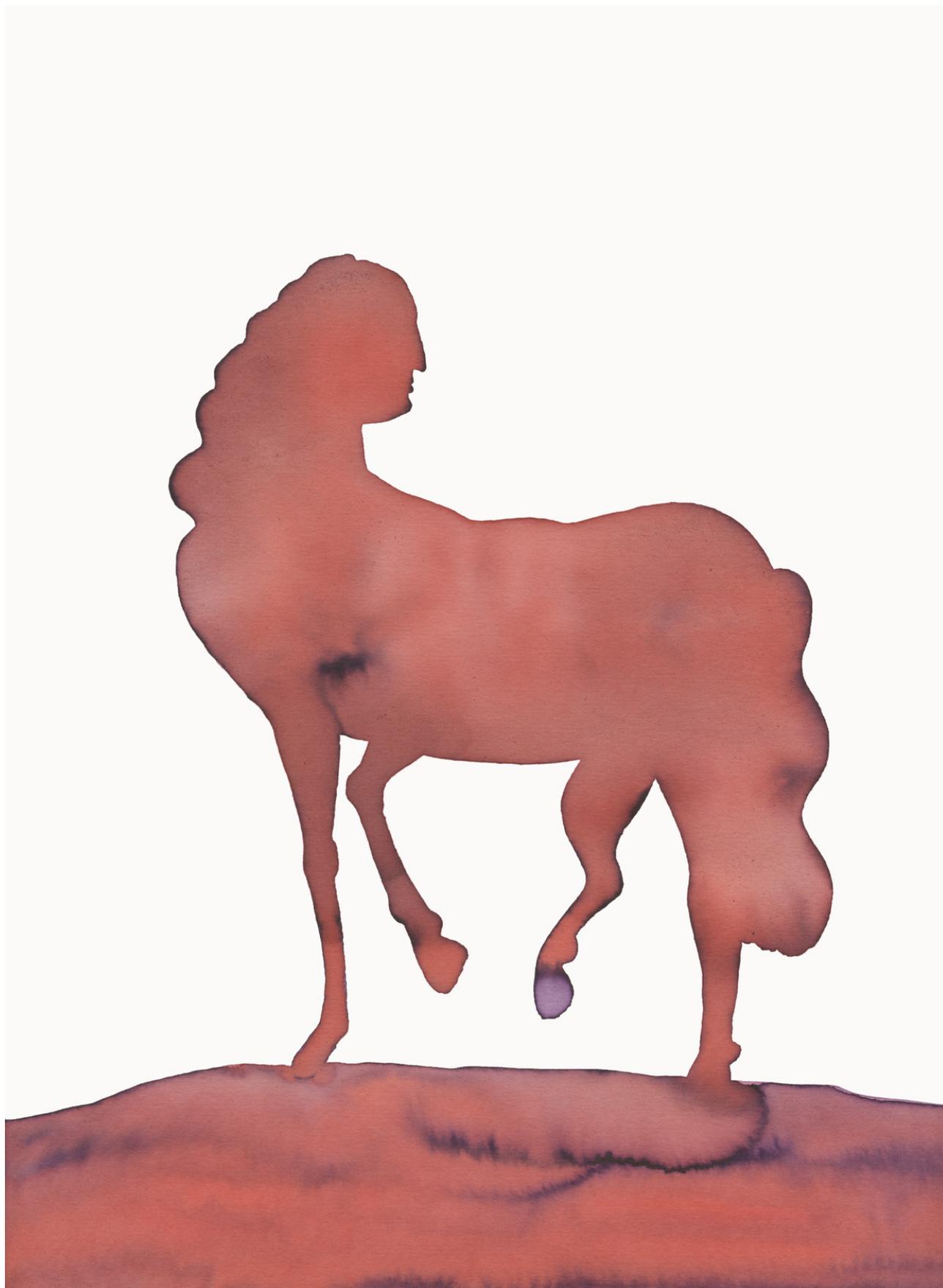
by Marga Patterson



*Deep Dive* Marga Patterson

I am a multi-media artist working with a variety of traditional materials that include ink, colored pencils, watercolor and gouache. Drawing is my first love, and I try to do it every day to stay connected to my practice. I believe in making work that ignites the imagination, awakens curiosity and empowers dreamers.

Why do I make art? To feel alive, to connect with others, and try to make sense of the world that goes on around me. My work celebrates what inspires me most: imaginary beings, fantasy, mythology and nature. I'm beyond grateful for the constant love and support of my family, friends and partner, Grey Whale.



*Centaur* Marga Patterson



*Phoenix*Marga Patterson



*HarpyMarga Patterson*

# The Monkey King's advice on how to deal as a Protector of Horses

*Poetry*

You don't. Not well.

It's a specific role,

somewhere between dogsbody  
and scapegibbon. Who keeps  
their Buddha-nature, realising  
the sweat of their brow is ignored  
when presentunmissed  
when absent?

Not I. Not then.

Fight your way out, human,

upturn banqueting tables.

At the end you may get  
swatted full-palm like a fly, but  
you won't be grooming  
horses for peachpits. You can

stand as equal to your gods,

though perhaps

not quite like

a Great Sage

Equal to Heaven.

# Birdwatcher

## *Poetry*

At the train station,  
high-tension cables thrumming  
over kudzu-smothered slopes, you

raise your binoculars,  
seeking the source  
of that muffled click  
click  
click-  
ing.

When a grey stranger plummets  
bullet-like into your view,  
look it in the eye.

See steely, rainpearled feathers  
riffle as it looks  
back. Watch  
a titanium third eyelid  
shutter closed

click  
click  
click

# Goldfish Memories

## *Poetry*

So I don't remember  
what I ate or when, but  
I remember words:  
*food water air*  
*gone.*

You in your wood-bowl,  
them looking at us  
eyes red as gills.

They say now you've gone to  
the sea. Why  
there? Why somewhere  
I can't reach you?  
The salt would burn  
the soul out of me.

Maybe next  
I will ask to be a shark.  
Not for *teeth bite strong* but  
*smell swim speed,*  
so I can find you  
again. I'll remember.

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*May Chong is a bi Malaysian poetspeculative writer with past work in The Willowherb Review, Channel Magazine and Fantasy Magazine. Away from the keyboard, she enjoys birdwatching, great stories and terrible puns.*

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# Chakora

## *Fiction*

“Mook, mook, mook!!” she heard, dimly, in the darkness.

After wading through fallen leaves in the humid night air, her bow poised, Leelavati finally heard the sound she had long sought.

“Chakora!” she exclaimed under her breath, calling to mind the legendary partridge that feasted on moonlight.

She looked carefully, watching for the glinting red eye, stepping gingerly in the direction of the sound.

A short flutter, and the mythical bird was on the wing. She raced, the ground rustling under her, until the sound of flapping wings stilled. A peepal tree ahead shivered as the bird landed.

She could see it clearly now, the red eyes, dark head, and lighter brown body. A black stripe ran across its face like a mask. It did not move.

She pulled an arrow from her quiver, her cream colored angavastram cloth tied at her waist to keep it out of the way. She softly tossed her head, her two long braids swinging behind her. Her legs were firmly planted, the sandal feet on the earth, her turmeric-dyed dhoti tied securely. Then, she notched her arrow and pulled her arm back, steadying her breath.

The moon, the bright Chandra, emerged from behind a cloud and the bird glimmered bluish silver, as if it were painted with moonbeams. It was known that the Chandra and Chakora were fated, in love, as the bird thrived on moonlight, and Chandra, in turn, lived to bring the Chakora into her arms. Each month, they brought each other love, excitement, and anticipation.

Leelavati released the arrow.

For five years, Leelavati had been chasing this bird, the mythical Chakora, the one who lived on the moon. Their parents’ dead bodies decayed bit by bit, their final rituals left incomplete, until Leelavati and her brother were driven from their village, ostracized for their refusal to cremate them properly. When they left, her baby brother grew sickly and ill, his skin pale and his fever perpetually high. Orphaned, they lived on what they could, but as the boy aged, he only grew weaker and frailer.

It was then that they’d wandered deep into the Dandaka, the darkest forest of India. No one would follow them here, because it was a place rumored to harbor monsters and untold dangers. Here, they stumbled upon the Sage’s ashram. He greeted them in his saffron robes and rudraksha-

seed necklace. He had a long beard, and his gray hair was tied in a bun. The Sage offered them food, but they respectfully slept in a cave outside the ashram, where their unclean bodies, having been touched by unpurified death, would not contaminate the ashram's daily rituals. The Sage then informed Leelavati that only performing the proper last rites of their parents would release her brother from the curse of ill-health, for all the ancestors of their past were angry, and her parents' souls were adrift.

For that, they needed this bird, he told Leelavati. Only the meat of the Chandra Chakora could satisfy her hungry ancestors and release her brother. Only she, the eldest child of her parents, could perform this task, complete the last rites, and send her parents' souls on their way to the next life. In the meantime, her brother grew more ill. Though his body was longer, it was now merely skin and bones. He shivered even in this summer heat, and his once bright eyes were vacant.

She remembered when they all lived together, when the sun glimmered off the golden fields. Her mother bent down in her sari, harvesting rice, and her father's long switch whistled in the air as he drove the cattle. Each evening, she and her brother would wait at the door, filled with anticipation, and then hurl themselves into their parents' arms as they returned, eyes full of love.

Then one hot, dry day, their mother and father failed to return. Their bodies were found halfway to the parched river, the cattle stolen, grains of rice scattered in the direction the thieves must have gone. The villagers followed but lost the trail, and soon, Leelavati and her brother were forced to make their way alone, searching endlessly for this bird.

But the Chakora only visited Earth on full-moon nights, once every month, to drink the bright moonbeams and visit the home where it was born. And here it was, after so many months and years, right before her.

Her hopes rode on this arrow; her dreams, her freedom, her yearning.

The arrow flew through the air and grazed the celestial bird's wing. "Mook!" it cried in pain.

As it tried to take flight, it fell sideways, landing far in front of her. This bird, that nearly none had seen before, lay before her, its scarlet eye turned toward her. Leelavati stopped to press her fingertips to the ground and then to her forehead, a thank you to the gods and an apology for the life she was about to take – the ritual her parents had taught her to perform before every meal.

She raced forward, pulling her knife from her belt. This was her chance - before it could get away. She could kill this bird and begin, in earnest, the rites that would free her family.

She stood over the creature, its shimmering body bleeding dark crimson onto the dirt of the forest floor. Its eyes had turned grayish, fading, and it seemed to be lifting its head toward her. Anyone in the villages where she had lived would now bow down to this bird and ask for a boon – a wish granted, a blessing. But she had a more nefarious purpose.

She brought the knife down.

"Save me, true," it pleaded in a raspy, deep voice. "And I will save you."

Her knife stopped an inch from the bird's heart. She was taken aback, having never heard a bird speak before. It was said only the purest could hear the animals. She wondered, should she save this rare being? Why? How?

As if it read her mind, the bird spoke again. "He who is ill, will be whole again. Two will be four, and seven, and ten."

Who are the four and seven and ten? What did this mean? How was this bird speaking? Would her brother be well again? Questions filled her mind.

"Take me to my home, the moon. All that is wrong will be put right soon," the bird continued in rhyme, its voice fading. Then it was still and silent.

Leelavati stood up, at a loss. A celestial bird. A talking bird! But after five years, would she lose the chance to perform the funeral? She remembered the Sage's words that only the meat of this bird could release her parents.

She looked into its trusting eyes. She remembered this same look on her brother's face, back when he was just a baby. He had put all his trust in her, pleading with her to help him in the face of their sorrow and abandonment. She knew then, if there was a chance this bird could save her brother, she had to take it.

She tore her sleeve with her knife. She gently retrieved the arrow, then wrapped the wounded wing with the cloth. Holding the bird, she made her way up the branches to the very top of the peepal tree.

There she stood, holding the Chakora in her outstretched arms, proclaiming, "Come, O Moon! Come, be not my enemy. Take this bird to moonbeams. Heal him and my family!"

The words coursed through her blood as if the bird itself had spoken through her lips.

And then, the still fowl rose through the air into the arms of the waiting, round Chandra.

Leelavati saw the bird shimmer again with a healing light, its eyes once again flashing red, and spread its wings. She thought she saw two human faces smiling down from the sky, familiar faces that brought comfort and warmth, as if they had just returned from the fields. She closed her eyes, and the moonbeams spilled over her, cool and bright. The light seemed to radiate over the whole forest.

A sudden current ran through her body. Like love, like excitement, like anticipation. She sped on her heels back to the cave where she and her brother slept. He was fast asleep, his small dhoti wrapped around his legs, and his angavastram draped over him like a blanket. But she could see his round cheeks had already filled in a bit, and his brow was smooth. He smiled while he dreamed. "Chakora," he whispered, his voice no longer trembling, his skin dry and cooled. His eyes fluttered open.

She looked into them, which gleamed again with a brightness she recalled. Together, they would make their way in the world, gathering other orphans to this forest world.

She looked up at the full, round moon. The shape of dark wings was imprinted there. The Chandra and the Chakora, unrequited for so long, were together again, just as her small family would be, one day.

“Yes,” Leelavati replied, curling around him, a deep stillness settling within her. “Chandra Chakora.”

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*rani jayakumar is a writer, teacher of mindfulness, and environmentalist. She writes essays and blog posts, as well as short fiction and poetry, soon to be published in Good Life Review and Ab Terra Magazines at [http://bmpvoices.com/ab-terra-flash-fiction\\_issue-2](http://bmpvoices.com/ab-terra-flash-fiction_issue-2).*

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## Featured Story Unicorn in the Park

### *Fiction*

Not long ago, I went out for a stroll in the park. It was the one place where I routinely cleared my thoughts. But lately, a dense fog had gathered inside my head and the frequent walks had not done much to disperse it. On that particular day, my feet, apparently without me noticing, had taken a detour from my usual route. As I emerged out of my thoughts, I found myself standing in an area that I have never seen before. I saw a clearing with a small pond covered with colorful water lilies. Dragon flies were fluttering above its surface, their translucent wings glistening in the sunshine. It felt like I had jumped right into a Monet painting. A wooden bridge led to the other side of the pond where a tall, drooping willow tree stood. Underneath its branches, a little girl, around seven or eight years old, was sitting on a bench quietly reading a book.

I felt a tug of longing for the shelter offered by the many arms of the willow tree. I hesitated for a moment, not wanting to disturb the child who seemed so engrossed in her book; however, the pull of the tree's promising hug was mighty. I crossed the bridge. As I approached the bench, the gravel on the path crunched beneath my feet. The little girl did not seem to notice my presence.

I sat on the end of the bench furthest from the girl and relaxed my head on its backrest. Closing my eyes, I focused my attention on the surrounding sounds. The light breeze shuffling through the willow tree branches, the birds singing in the trees, and the muffled laughter of playing children in the distance all rocked me gently back and forth. For a blissful moment, there was peace, and in a moment, it was gone. The little girl had clapped her book shut and was now looking sharply in my direction.

"Excuse me!" she unapologetically snapped. "What would you do if you saw a unicorn in the park?"

"How cute!" I thought to myself. "I don't know," I said as I lifted my head from the backrest and straightened. I tried to imagine a unicorn quietly grazing in the green grass by the pond and added, "I would probably look at it in disbelief."

"Are you saying that unicorns don't exist?" asked the little girl reproachfully.

Not wanting to disappoint her, I tried to explain myself. "Well, that depends very much on the meaning of the word *exist*. You see, they exist in our imaginations, in books and in stories."

The girl did not seem satisfied with my answer. She looked at her book for a moment, now laying closed on her lap, and said, "You are wrong! They are real and they can travel between worlds

because they are magic. Maybe there is one here now!" She looked around searchingly. "They are invisible, you see. They don't want to get hurt."

A sudden wave of sadness washed over me. "Maybe you are right. Maybe it is better that we can't see them after all."

"No, it's not better! It's unfair!" The little girl jumped up and stomped her foot on the ground. "I will never get to see a live unicorn because grown-ups are so stupid." Tears welled up in her eyes. but what was I to say? That there is no magic in the world, that all children have to grow up sometime, that unicorns are just like Santa Claus, cruel inventions meant to disappoint children?

Sitting back down, the girl sulked and stared at the tips of her toes. We both sat there in silence lost in our thoughts.

"What are you reading?" I asked after a while, trying to brighten up the mood.

"*Mary Poppins in the Park.*" she said.

Mary Poppins! Suddenly I remembered another little girl from a long, long time ago, reading that same book. Yes, *The Children in the Story*. Mary Poppins had taken the Banks children to the park. There, three little princes and their unicorn had jumped out of the pages of a fairy tale book.

"Is there a unicorn in your book?" I asked, feigning to ignore the answer.

"Yes. But all the adults want to catch it. All of them: the policeman, the park keeper, the zookeeper, the circus manager." The little girl was really agitated. "Even the Professor," she added, "and he is usually nice. He reads fairy tales. But now he wants the unicorn stuffed and sent to the museum. Why are they so mean?" She turned her sad blue eyes in my direction.

"Because... they... don't know better," I said hesitantly. She kept staring at me, so I added, "You see, they may act in a mean way, but they are probably not mean." The look on her face clearly indicated that I was not making any sense.

"And why don't they ..... Why don't you know better?"

"Maybe we are not reading the right books," I answered. I said this only because I had to say something, but it was apparent that she was losing patience with me.

As she stood up, she said, "I wish I was living inside this book," and she waved her book at me. "I wish Mary Poppins came to my house." And then, not waiting for an answer, she turned on her heels and ran away.

At that moment, a flash of white brushed the corner of my eye and I heard clapping of hooves chasing after the little girl. Impossible! My heart skipped a beat. Just as suddenly as it appeared, the wonderous feeling slipped away. I was not going to be played for a fool by my imagination.



The sun was beginning to set, and it was time for me to go home. Back to stifling ordinary, back to the grey haziness of days filled with chores, errands, endless emails, and phone calls. Something heavy pressed on my lungs. It was despair. I had been avoiding it for some time now, but it finally made its presence impossible to ignore. Making its way up my throat, it squeezed it mercilessly. The rising tide of tears broke down all my defense mechanisms, and it was then that I saw her. Mary Poppins sitting quite properly on the other end of the bench.

“Didn’t your mother teach you not to stare at people? It’s quite rude,” said Mary Poppins. “And can you please close your mouth, it’s not becoming of a lady.”

“Well, ladies are no longer trending in our time.” I replied defiantly.

“I see,” said Mary Poppins, “you do have a temper.”

“What if I do? Why should I care what some weirdo dressed like Mary Poppins thinks of me anyway?” As soon as the words escaped my mouth a taste of bitterness took their place. Is this what shameful regret tastes like?

Swallowing, I looked the other way. “I am really sorry.” I looked back in Mary Poppin’s direction. “I don’t know what’s gotten into me. I guess, I meant to say, you are making a particularly good impression of Mary Poppins, and I am not talking about Julie Andrews or Emily Blunt. I’m talking about the real Mary Poppins, the one from the books.”

“Actresses indeed.” sniffed Mary Poppins. “I have no patience for actresses. Narcissists, that’s what they are.” As she spoke, she pulled a small mirror out of her purse, took a look at her own reflection, and nodded with approval.

I had to admit, there was something unusual about the woman, something I could not put into words.

“Well, my day out is almost over. All good things must come to an end if they are to begin again,” said Mary Poppins in a pontificating manner.

“I guess you can put it that way.” I paused for a moment. “But don’t you wish sometimes for more than an evening out every second week?” I asked, deciding to play along with the stranger.

“To do what?”

“I don’t know... Don’t you ever get tired of taking care of children? Don’t you wish for something else sometimes?”

“Wishing is tricky, my dear! My cousin, Mr. Twigley, knows a great deal about wishes, and so does Sarah Clump. Let me tell you, she learned that the hard way.”

A vague memory of a story I read long time ago echoed through my mind. *Mr. Twigley’s Wishes* was it? It did not end well for the woman who was catering to Mr. Twigley, that much I remember; that and the music boxes.

“Anyway,” I said, “it was a stupid question. If you are Mary Poppins, then you can make all your

wishes come true, can't you?"

A satisfied smile spread on Mary Poppin's face. "Well, it's time for me to go," she said. And suddenly, I saw the parrot headed umbrella. As she opened it, the parrot handle spoke, "Ask her your question."

Now that was startling! Was the umbrella handle really talking to me? No, it certainly wasn't. It had to be some fancy trick. Again, I decided to play along. "What is your magic, how does it work?"

"How impertinent!" said Mary Poppins sternly. "And just as expected! But it is your lucky day, so I will give you a second chance. Ask the right question."

"Okay...then...how can I be more like you?"

At this, Mary Poppins burst into a loud cackling laughter. I felt hot and cold at once, and strangely enough, at that precise moment, I believed I was talking to Mary Poppins.

"You want to be like me! Goodness gracious, this is the funniest thing I have heard in ages! And why would you want that, if I may ask?" said Mary Poppins.

"Isn't it obvious? I want some magic in my life. We all want some magic in our lives," I said. "Why is this so funny to you?"

"Because no one can be like me!" Then with the blink of an eye, her face turned to stone. Mary Poppins looked at her parrot handle and said condescendingly, "Really, these people are hopeless. You show them the path, but they stubbornly refuse to get on it. Well, it turns out I cannot help you, even on your lucky day."

"Wait! Don't go! Of course, you can help me, if you really are Mary Poppins!" I cried out.

"And how do you think I can help you?"

"Maybe you can help me get some clarity."

"Well, well! This is the first reasonable thing you have said this entire afternoon. Let me tell you, clarity is the first step towards a sound wish."

"But the thing is, I can't think clearly. Not anymore, not since..." I wanted to explain my problems, but she interrupted abruptly.

"Think, think, think. All you will do is spin off your head from your shoulders."

"It does get dizzying at times," I had to admit. Sometimes, it even made me nauseous.

"Have you tried thinking less and dreaming more?" asked Mary Poppins.

"Dreaming? Who has time for that? And how is dreaming going to pay my bills?"

"Listen, you will have to make up your mind. You said you wanted magic in your life. Dreams and wishes are the only way, but you must believe they can come true. Or else, why bother

wishing?”

Then she opened her umbrella and gently glided upwards. I pinched myself to make sure I was not dreaming. But no, I was not. I was looking at Mary Poppins flying up to the sky. And I was left speechless.

“Don’t underestimate the ordinary.” She said looking down on me. “It walks hand in hand with the extraordinary. You can’t have one without the other.”

“Then, unicorns are real after all, aren’t they?” I cried out so she can hear me.

“Only you can know what is real to you. Trust. Trust your intuition.” And pouf, just like that she was gone.

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*Lina Slavova is obsessed with Mary Poppins and the creative genius of her author, P.L. Travers. A few years ago, after reading P.L. Travers’s biography, she was left wanting for more, so she went in search for it: more understanding, more depth, more nuance. At the end of 2016, a year into the project, she started The Mary Poppins Effect blog ([www.themarypoppinseffect.com](http://www.themarypoppinseffect.com)) to accompany her research and study of P.L. Travers’s life, spiritual beliefs, and literary works and She has not stopped writing ever since.*

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## A Year in COVID: What My *Kin* Taught Me

*Animal Advie*



new *ki* friend

It's been over a year now since our world changed, and many of us are still reflecting on it. March 2020 brought a threat to our shores that most of us have never experienced. For the first time, we faced our own mortality in a very real, very scary way. Being encouraged to stay away from my fellow humans, I found some new friends--the nonhuman kind. It was with them that I found a simple, life-affirming connection that helped me get through the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Biologist and author Robin Wall Kimmerer, writes in her book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, that we reserve pronouns of personhood, such as *he*, *she*, and *they*, for humans, leaving a nonhuman species to be an "it." Wall Kimmerer wanted a word for all beings—plants, animals, landscapes, even elements like rain or snow. Searching her native language, Potawatomi, for inspiration, Wall Kimmerer found the simple word "ki" to describe any living being. "So that when the robin

warbles on a summer morning, we can say, ‘*Ki* is singing up the sun,’ or ‘*Ki*’s branches sway in the pine-scented breeze,” she wrote. The plural, *kin*, is a word with which most of us are already familiar, but perhaps do not apply it outside of the human race.

My *kin* helped me to see how each season, each living creature, has an important lesson to teach

## Spring 2020

In spring, life was beginning in the outdoors, while inside, we heard the sad stories of human life waning. In my corner of the world, the Mid-Hudson Valley of NY, it comforted me to see and hear all the new life of Spring in a place called “Giant’s Ledges Pocket Park,” a parcel of land that spans the northern part of the Shawangunk Ridge to the hamlet of Rosendale.

One early April evening, when *ki*’s magic was already in full bloom, I took the gradually climbing, woodsy trail, carpeted in fragrant, soft pine needles, to an inviting rocky cliff, where one can perch and look out on the valley below. I sat on the summit listening to the sounds of *kin* around me. The first to hit my ears was the music of the peepers in the leafy green chasm below. It is one of my favorite sounds in nature. These *kin* tell you that life is renewing, and that warm weather is coming.

It’s funny, as you sit and begin to listen to the sounds of nature around you, it is as if a veil suddenly lifts, and underneath, you discover even more layers of “music.” I then recognized another familiar voice—it was the song of the red-winged blackbird, a friend I knew well from grassy flatlands. *Ki* sings a very strong, beautiful melody, easily recognized by the sharp, chirpy notes. *Ki*’s bold red and black colors also make them easy to spot for my not-so-sharp eyes.

Pretty soon, the forest was alive with song. What I have learned about these *kin* is that they have been around a long time; they are resourceful, and they know how to survive. They thrive because they persist. Their wisdom was not lost on me, as they sang out with the great spirit of life on this beautiful evening.

At this same moment, in perfect synchrony, *kin* were singing out in the human world, too—from the streets, from porches, from windows—it was the time of the 7pm “applause” for healthcare workers. It’s no secret how separated most of us have become from the natural world, but here, I could feel the two songs mixing together in one great Earth chorus. Perhaps all *kin* cry out in the same vein. We are so much more connected than we realize.

## Summer 2020

Summer came, and brought with it more lush, green growth, more achingly beautiful days, and cerulean skies with what I like to call cartoon-perfect “Simpsons” clouds. Being outside was easy, and we enjoyed a little more socializing.

This time, my attention was captured by *kin* of the six-legged variety. It began with the arrival

of the dragonflies in the late spring. On New Paltz's River to Ridge trail, hordes of them flew overhead, with gossamer wings and zigzag movements. I stood, my mouth agape, mesmerized as they danced overhead, their flight patterns reminding me of fancy airshows. They would zip through the air at full speed in one direction, then inexplicably and seamlessly U-turn toward the opposite way. I never knew they could fly so high or so fast, and I wondered what their movements communicated to each other.

At the Peterskill area of Minnewaska State Park, I was treated to more dragonfly action, seeing them land on streams, leaves, and even my arms in the warm summer sun. *Kin* were sometimes neon blue, magenta, or even green—and they stared at me with their mysterious alien eyes. It feels like a gift when a dragonfly alights near you or decides to buzz around you. You feel like you have been visited by someone special.

Being one of the oldest creatures on earth, *ki* has captured our fancy for a long time. Folklore is filled with stories of *ki* and many think they carry a kind of magic. What's most astonishing is *ki's* ability to transform. A dragonfly will molt and change an average of 17 times, with most of the changes occurring during the time they spend underwater, before they even take flight. *Ki's* amazing flight is the direct result of the ability to change. We, too, must learn to change with grace so that we may continue to evolve and thrive.

Summer continued to wow me with insect *kin* of all types—the fireflies at night reminding me there is still hope even in darkness; the monarchs, with their regal saffron-oranges and striking blacks, gracing me with their late-summer visit; and the occasional spotting of the praying mantis, reminding me that it is good to get very still and sit with my thoughts.

Like summer, these beauties are only here for a short time. Next year, we will get to know their children. Until then, we make peace with saying goodbye to the warm embrace of summer nights and learn that life is, indeed, ephemeral.

## Fall 2020

Hudson Valley, Fall 2020, was another masterpiece, and predictably brought throngs of tourists to view it. I was schooled by others not to get too angry—I mean, can you blame them? Who wouldn't want to see this marvel of color? And truthfully, it's just another reason to feel and express gratitude for being able to live here and see it every day. So, I did.

I often headed over to the Shawangunk Grasslands in Wallkill, NY. One would think miles of flatlands and grasses would be boring, but I soon learned that was not the case. Look deeper into the grass and you will see that it is not one, but a multitude of different plants, each *ki* with another shade of gold, blending together in glowing harmony, lit by the sun.

Here amongst the grasses, I found some very cool residents. Chittering on the dry ground, *boing-boing-ing* around my knees, there was Grasshopper, a new teacher and friend. Almost looking like a piece of dried grass, *ki* played among my feet, bouncing along, occasionally springing into a short flight around my face, and then landing again in the grass. I found *ki* to be a very whimsical

creature, though I knew well enough not to think the behavior was for my entertainment. Grasshoppers, I learned, are even older than dinosaurs, and have very strong survival skills.

Curious about my new friend, I began to read. I learned that *ki* has the amazing ability to catapult, jumping the equivalent of a football field. *Ki* is also a music-maker, creating individual rhythms through stridulation, or rubbing the hind legs and wings together.

Then I found something even more interesting in an article by NPR titled, “What an Insect Can Teach Us About Adapting to Stress.” Normally solitary creatures, grasshoppers only form swarms under stressful conditions. The process of stridulation not only produces pretty music for my ears, but also produces serotonin for the grasshoppers, allowing them to feel good, and thus, more social. When they cluster together, they can share resources and survive. This “new version” of themselves can literally save them. We, too, can no longer see ourselves in the same way. Like the grasshopper, we must accept and grow to survive.

## Winter 2020

Nature continued to bless me with so many gifts that this winter felt like one continuous Christmas. Early on, I got some of my old hikes back with a much less crowded Minnewaska. Now trained to really *look* at things, I delighted in noticing how, in the first month of winter, the previous three seasons were also present. When I fixed my gaze upon the forest floor, I saw autumn leaves, their now tan skins mingling with the dark soil underneath. Remnants of the first snowfall dusted the leaves and remained in patches on logs, branches, and tree roots, its fresh white contrasting with pillows of bright green mosses. I could even see summer buds, though now blackened by winter, down in the brambles by the stream. Rocks with glints of reddish orange peaked out along the streambeds, adding even more color to the unique collage. The air had a freshness like no other time of the year—with the rushing water, dripping snowmelt, and carpets of moss and lichens, everything felt *alive*. It was a wonderful time to be in the forest.

For Christmas, I received the gift of meeting my first owl at the Grasslands. One day, I found the parking lot unusually crowded. People were everywhere with big, clunky camera set ups, and most trails were closed. I was quickly informed by the photographers to be quiet, as the short-eared owls were wintering here. Since they are large birds, I spotted one within seconds, but coincidentally, I had just been gifted a pair of binoculars from a local swap group. I eagerly took them out and saw my first owl face up close and personal. Perched on one of the many posts in this popular birding sanctuary, *ki* was both majestic and strange, with a concave face that was at once beautiful and odd. I watched *ki* twitch that face back and forth, eyeing the land, until taking flight once again with a grand spread of wings.

In January, no sooner had I commented on what a nice, *balmy* winter it had been, than Winter decided to be, well, *winter*. A long stretch of snowfall kept the Hudson Valley wrapped in a powdery white blanket for much of February. As a self-professed non-fan of snow, I groaned. Winter was a long season to begin with, I thought, and now with COVID-19 numbers on another very scary rise, I worried how I would ever get through.

But soon enough, I was seduced by the beauty of the white stuff and I did something I never did before: I fell in love with winter. I couldn't get enough of it—the way the snow glistens in the sun and lets the wind create works of art on its surface. Walking in the woods on a snowy day was like entering another world, a hidden treasure. In a way, winter is the most personal of all the seasons. The quiet is so close, it feels like a friend.

On what we knew would probably be the last big snowfall of 2021, my partner and I ventured into the woods as the flakes fell and played in the Narnia-like magic that is winter. I purposely went off the trail, submerging myself in the glitter I knew wouldn't be here that much longer. I even made a snow angel and lay on my back, studying the treetops. I couldn't believe it. I would *miss* winter. *Ki* had taught me to allow more stillness, to get between the spaces of my thoughts. To be present and experience a deeper *knowing*.

## One Year

How will we emerge from this experience? I would like to think I learned a little bit more about just how precious life really is—and that there are a lot of things I thought were important that really aren't. My new friends in nature, *kin*, were my best teachers. Who were some of yours?

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*Cynthia Hacker is a writer, editor, and nature enthusiast who loves to spend time outdoors in the beauty of New York's Mid-Hudson Valley, where she lives and works.*

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## Just One Kiss

### *Fiction*

Most people would say that I'm beyond lucky. I call some of the most beautiful places my home on French Polynesia. Island paradises where I watch the eastern bright, blaring sunrises and purplish, golden western sunsets under the coconut palms' swaying branches.

The golden rays of the bright star can't seem to distract the longing I feel in my heart, the drive and unrelenting quest to touch another, to embrace all that they are in my kiss.

That's the thought that consumes my waking hours...Just one kiss, please. Just one taste...

Coming from these islands means I'm smaller than most, often overlooked because I don't carry the weight of my brethren's deadliness. I don't have the vibes of being a dominatrix. I don't think my islands can bring that kind of response with the smell of vanilla and pineapple, rum, and coconut oil wafting through the ocean breezes. Maybe I just don't see the point in coming out claws out and hissing, on guard all the time.

Being an islander, a Pacific Islander at that, comes with its own sense of pride. I live on land created by fire and water, by the chaos of waves and time and death. Thousands have perished over the rocks and coral surrounding me, even from the fruits and branches that provide peace and shelter to those who call this place home. Our coconuts are just as deadly, if not more so than any shark that swims in our reefs.

Death is part of our lives at all times on islands. Death from the sun strikes its highest with illusions of warmth while draining you of the very life force you breathe. It crashes against the shores in a delicate pattern, calling upon our ancestors who did not make it beyond their time, lulling you to sleep as the hermit and coconut crabs come out to feast upon the sand built from dead coral. The cycle of life from death surrounds us at all times. It promises a reminder amongst the constants that nothing lasts.

I wonder if times it's why the hunger for connection, the bite, the danger of the chase comes to me more than other times. It ebbs and flows, depending on who I've come across. There are those who I instantly become bothered by, raising my defenses, my armor to stop them from trying to get closer to me. Others who bring out my own fears and insecurities, paralyzing me in place as my mind seems to just curl into a ball and play dead to avoid sparking their attention or interest. Some can say I'm too picky, waiting for the right one to come, but I've hungered for this all my life.

Just one kiss... just one bite... they're the same to me. That's the rumor the people spread about me anyway as I'm the only black scorpion on these lands... and my bite feels just like a kiss they say.

I promise, it won't hurt that much...

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*Victory Witherkeigh is a female Filipino author originally from Los Angeles, CA, and is currently living in the Las Vegas area. Victory was a finalist for Killer Nashville's 2020 Claymore Award, an Honoree for Cinnamon Press's 2020 Literature Award, and Wingless Dreamer's 2020 Overcoming Fear Short Story award. Her work has appeared in both online and print literary magazines and genre fiction publications of horror and dark fantasy. She has her print publications in a horror anthology, Supernatural Drabbles of Dread, and a literary short story in Overcoming Fear, through Macabre Ladies Publishing and Wingless Dreamers.*

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# Fancy Cats

## *Poetry*

The fancy leopards move to one side,  
the cat ship lists.

The plain cats migrate to the other,  
the ship rolls right.

We write lists of the felines,

fancy and plain,

floating on the burnished

plane of the sea

in the cat ship,

cast-off ship,

feline-full,

split in two by spots,

by blotches,

by rank of fancy

and plain.

Seven cats have stripes,

no spots.

They are etched for slicing

to fit with both groups

and neither.

# A Few Unicorn Facts You Probably Don't Know

## *Poetry*



*The Unicorn Ruby Van Bendegeem*

it's hard to cuddle a narwhal on your lap  
but you can do it when they're small  
like a trout or a smelt or a mackerel

watch out for their antlers  
most people don't know  
that young whales have antlers

the narwhals decide at a very young age  
whether they want antlers or a tusk  
everyone chooses a tusk

no one has ever chosen the antlers  
which then fall off and drift down  
to the bottom of the ocean

it's very rare for humans to see  
a young whale with antlers

but when they do they're always  
surprised to note  
the antlers are the colour  
of a burnt orange

# In My Pocket

*Poetry*



*Dragons in My Pocket Ruby Van Bendegem*

Seventeen dragons nap and snap and writhe  
within my pocket lining.

They don't light it up, my pocket;  
dragons are considerate that way.

Most are white, fourteen I believe.

The rest are motley shades of green and blue  
with glistening scales like hologram  
decals on ten dollar bills or cheap souvenirs.

The dragons are all sooty.

The soot comes from hunting parties.

Coming back clean from a hunting party  
is a grave faux pas. Only a spectator  
would come back clean.

My pocket is sooty as well, of course.

It all makes me smell like a campfire.

My brave dragons keep me safe.

We never speak of it but I know they ward off  
overwhelming thoughts.

Another way they are considerate.

We have an understanding, my dragons and I.



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*Ruby Van Bendegem is retired after over three decades as a journalist and a lawyer and is the recovering mother of four. She lives and paints in northwestern Ontario, Canada. On summer days, you will find Ruby and her husband paddling a canoe or kayak on the waters of Lake Superior.*

*KB Nelson is a Canadian writer who thrives in the intersection of art and science. Her poems have appeared in a variety of journals and anthologies including Tiny Spoon, Nourish-Poetry, Sea-To-Sky Review, and Polar Borealis. She currently lives and combs the beach on B.C.'s Sunshine Coast.*

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# The Dog Who Talked like Brando

## *Speculative Fiction*

I was in the bathtub about to slide the straightedge into my wrist when I heard Marlon Brando call out, “Don’t do it, Paul.”

“Ronnie?” I called back in a voice that alarmed me when I heard it. Ronnie, the closest thing I have to a friend, is an impressionist. I thought maybe Providence made him afraid for me and sent him, like the angel Clarence in *It’s a Wonderful Life*.

“It’s not Ronnie. Come here, I want to talk to you.”

I laid down the blade on the side of the bathtub, pulled my body out and sloshed into the main room of my studio apartment. I didn’t bother drying or covering myself. If it’s Ronnie, who cares. If it’s the ghost of Marlon Brando, let me present myself as God made me.

I didn’t see Marlon Brando or his ghost in my apartment. Only Bella, gazing up at me from the kitchen area faithfully and – I knew her so well – hungrily. I stared at my dog. A mutt, delicate, pure white, forty pounds give or take, her fur hanging down her sides long and fine but, on her head and face, short. I’d almost left her alone in the world, my personal Old Yeller, to whimper endlessly over my grave. I scratched her behind an ear and sobbed as I pulled her head against mine. I’d bathed her recently and she smelled like vanilla cookies. I wondered whether I would have gone through with it or would try to again.

“I love you, too, Paul,” she said in Brando’s voice. Her mouth moved, like the talking dog in *Babe*. She glanced behind herself and added, again in Brando’s voice, “Jeez, I wish I had balls to lick.”

As an actor, I knew there’s a time to stop thinking and go with my gut to wherever it takes me. So, I went with my impulse. If my subconscious or life force or whatever you want to call it had commandeered my love and respect for the greatest actor who ever lived in order to stop me from killing myself – in other words, if I’d gone crazy – so be it. If my 4-year-old mongrel was actually talking to me, I’d earned it with my dedication to her. Either way, I felt strongly that I had nothing to lose.

“Everyone gets desperate and afraid,” said BellaBrando. “Look at *me*.”

Then *Bella* started to sob. No tears, just sounds, sounds like Brando’s character in *Last Tango* – also Paul! – made over his dead wife, laid out on that garish bed of flowers. I remembered Brando saying he’d never do a part again where he had to dredge up profound emotions like in that scene; he didn’t want to feel that kind of pain. The feelings were real to him, he wasn’t pretending, and

damn it if it didn't show. I strained for that depth of feeling in my own work and in my life, too. I'd seen *Last Tango* at least twenty times.

Now Marlon Brando, if it was him, *was* feeling that kind of pain. I hugged Bella, clutched her, consoled her, and she was consoling me, too. After a few minutes, she pulled herself together and said, "Got any food?"

Bella had gotten chubby and the extra weight threatened her joints and her health in general, so I'd had her on a diet. But along with her kibble, I now gave her a huge chunk of steak, medium rare. While she scarfed it down with masculine grunts and – no disrespect to Mr. Brando – unusual fervor, I contemplated Marlon Brando, acting, and me. In the eleven years since I'd graduated from Julliard, I'd learned to live with failure, frustration, humiliation, poverty and anonymity, at least until a few minutes earlier. I was 33 years old. I had classically handsome features and a deep voice, but was getting only small character parts for money and doing Shakespeare for love. No girlfriend, I was too focused on my craft. I still waited tables; hence the steak, left over from the previous evening's gig at an industry party. My parents were telling me it was time to take a job in my father's insurance agency – and, by the way, to think seriously about giving them grandchildren – and it was hard to argue with that. Hence the straightedge.

Bella finished her steak. Licking her chops happily, she padded from the kitchen to her bed in the corner of the apartment and lay down on her side. "Bella?" I said. Nothing. "Mr. Brando?... Marlon?" No response. I approached Bella, sat next to her on the floor, and looked into her eyes. There was no one for me to be embarrassed in front of. "I've heard you say it," I said. "Everyone thinks they coulda been a contender." I was, in fact, embarrassed and humiliated, hearing these words come out of my mouth. "You were the best," I said. "The best ever." I suppressed tears as long as I could. "I love to act. Please help me. I don't want to sell insurance. Help me be better."

Bella held my gaze but emitted no sound. I waited. One minute, two, who knows. I was despairing, pathetically so, but not surprised the talking had ceased. I might be crazy, but I was now safe, the suicidal moment was over, back to normal – walk the dog, eat, see a movie, envy, repeat. If Marlon Brando were to return from the dead, why would he return to failed actor Paul Quinlan?

I pushed myself off the floor and Bella said, in Marlon's voice, "Please walk me past trees. Palm trees."

I hugged and kissed her. I felt bad about leashing her but Brando, who I knew hated all authority, told me it was okay. We walked up Cherokee Avenue to De Longpre Park in silence. I sat on a bench near the Rudolph Valentino statue. No one else was around. Bella hopped up next to me and asked, "What's your favorite Shakespeare film?"

I'd heard Brando had hated talking about movies and acting. Now, I was talking to the greatest actor about the greatest playwright. I was trembling.

I knew he'd played Marc Antony in *Julius Caesar*. "I love the Zeffirelli *Romeo and Juliet*," I said. I hesitated, took a chance. "Probably the Branagh *Henry V*."

“*Julius Caesar* was shit. No one’s ever got the tragedies right,” Marlon said.

I laughed with relief, and at the spectacle of me and Bella having a conversation. For a moment, I pictured her as Don Corleone, with cotton stuffed in her downy white cheeks and a thin black mustache beneath her snout.

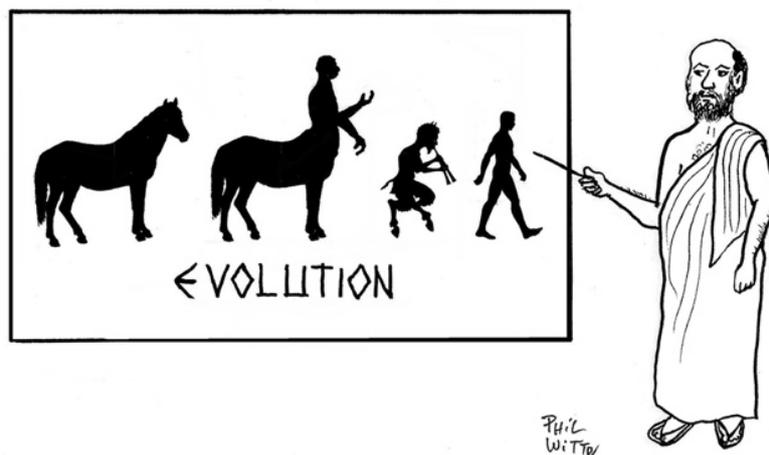
Then I saw what it looks like when a dog takes a deep breath. She said, “I died a broken man. It was Shakespearean, Paul. Fifteen kids and I never knew any of them, *really* knew them.” Brando was mumbling, but I chose not to mention it. “I was a terrible father. Cheyenne’s suicide, Christian in prison for *murder*...” He started to weep again.

I felt a jolt of adrenaline, not the good kind. Wherever Marlon Brando had been since he died in 2004, he didn’t know his oldest child was no longer in prison. Christian Brando had died four years after his father. I’m not that brave. I decided to tell him only if I had to.

Still crying, Bella continued. “I don’t know how I got here, why I’m your *dog*... You must be able to help me, help me find some peace.” A couple of teenagers walked past us indifferently, meaning that only I could hear Bella talk. “Maybe because I can help *you*. I know you’re a fucking actor.”

That took my breath away. “Be a better actor?” I said.

“Not that it matters. Want some real advice? While you still have your looks, find a producer with juice who’s in the closet, give him the best blowjob of his life and hope he gives you a part. The right parts, the right agents, maybe you’ll get lucky, if that’s what you think is lucky.”



I barely heard that, my mind was racing. *Marlon Brando would be my acting teacher.* This whole thing was insane, what was I doing, what was the catch? It didn’t matter, I had to go all-in. I looked at Bella, who gazed back with her usual reverence. That calmed me down, I grew somber, compassionate, and decided to use an acting technique that sometimes helped me with motivation. If this were all in my head, I would assume that whatever “Brando” wanted me to do for him, I would be doing for Bella. If I weren’t miraculously helping Marlon Brando “find some peace,” in my mind I’d be doing that for my dog.

“Thanks for the advice,” I said, “but I’d prefer acting tips.” I said that to Marlon, but I was looking at Bella. “What do you want me to do for you?” I asked her.

“I know my kids can’t hear me, so you have to write letters. I’ll dictate. And take me to see Christian, I have to see Christian, just see him. You know where he lives now?”

I knew he’d returned to Hollywood to die and was buried in Washington state. “No,” I said.

“Shouldn’t be too hard to find.”

Bella hopped down off the bench. “We’ve got fourteen letters to write, each different,” Brando said. “We start now, I don’t know how much time we have.” That alarmed me, and Marlon knew it. “Your dog’ll go back to being your dog,” he said, “and I go back to where I was, which is nowhere. I don’t know how I know; I just know.” Bella tugged on her leash and I rose and followed her. Brando told me to call him “Bud,” which I knew had been his nickname since childhood and had been used by only his family and closest friends.

We talked acting and wrote letters and ate and slept for three days until the letters were done. Bud clearly hated talking acting but, to his credit, didn’t complain. I tried to brush Bella once, but he asked me to stop. He preferred to be natural like Tahitians with their “unmanicured faces.” He gave me insights into my craft I couldn’t have gotten from a thousand teachers or books. I’m not going to tell you what they are.

Dearest Rebecca, Dearest Miko, Dearest Simon, Dearest Tarita, Dearest Maimiti, Dearest Raiatua, Dearest Ninn, Dearest Myles, Dearest Timothy, Dearest Stephen, Dearest Warren, Dearest Dylan, Dearest Angelique. Your loving father. And finally, Dearest Christian, which was particularly painful to write down, it cut so deep – Bud could barely get through a sentence without weeping. In fact, he labored, agonized, over each letter. They were all profoundly heartfelt and had the same gist: I’m so sorry, I really did love you, I miss you, I wish you all the happiness in the world. To encourage belief in the impossible, each included information only Brando and the child knew.

We finished the letter to Christian just before sunset on a Friday. I asked Bud if he wanted to go for a walk. Bella sat down where she stood, didn’t make eye contact, and Bud started to weep *again*. I thought, I’m getting a little tired of this.

The thought crossed my mind that my idol was acting, that he hadn’t been sincere, that he’d been playing scenes to achieve what his character needed. After all, hadn’t I heard him say in some documentary, “To act well, don’t give a fuck about anything”? Or, I thought with apprehension, anyone.

“I should’ve found Christian first,” he said. I was about to get nervous all over again about Christian being dead when Bud suddenly stopped crying and asked me, “Have you played Hamlet?”

“Someday, I hope. I’ve done Horatio and Laertes.”

“Why does Hamlet hesitate to kill the king?”

I'd grown used to this. Bud liked to teach by asking questions. I think I knew exactly where he was heading this time, but I couldn't admit it yet to him or myself. I said, "He's a man of words, not action."

"And?"

"He knows there's no sin worse than murder."

"Yeah, yeah. But who told him to do it?"

I said nothing. I was losing control, my mind was in chaos, I felt my future closing in on me. I said, "His father's ghost."

Bud softened. "Is Hamlet sure about that, Paul?"

I was silent for a long time, then said, "He's afraid his father's ghost is a devil."

Bella struggled to walk over to me. Bud said, "I don't know what I am, Paul. I do know I didn't want to hurt you." Yes, he began to cry. "I needed some peace, you helped and I'm grateful, I'm so grateful." He collected himself and said, "I'm sorry."

Bella looked calm but I felt a horrible sense of dread. My beloved dog collapsed and died before I could kneel to hold her.

I didn't leave my apartment for two weeks. Then I sent the letters anyway. I went to auditions with a new sense of purpose and hope but got nowhere. One day I was serving at a party and the producer of a major action franchise was present. Everyone knew he was gay. It was easy to seduce him, especially since I'd become a better actor. Going down on him was tough at first but I pretended I was acting, and it got better. He didn't offer me a part, but seemed promising, so the next night, I went down on him again. The third night, I understood that I liked him and it. Now I have my pick of lead roles, at least for the moment.

Was "Marlon Brando" a devil? An angel? Did he care about me or was he acting like he cared? Was he a figment of my imagination, a creation of my desperation? Was he a device my subconscious used to tell me I was wrong about the kind of person I should love?

I'm rich and I'm famous. I have a boyfriend who says he loves me and who I think I might love. Bella died before my eyes, but I have another dog. I ask myself, over and over, What is success?

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*Jay Abramowitz has written and produced a dozen situation comedies, as well as comedy pilots for Warner Bros. Television, CBS and ABC. He was head writer on the animated PBS series Liberty's Kids, an account of the American Revolution that blended fact, fiction and comedy and utilized the vocal talents of Dustin Hoffman, Annette Bening, Liam Neeson, Michael Douglas and Walter Cronkite. His novel Formerly Cool (written with Tom Musca) was published last year.*

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## Owl in the Snow

### *Nonfiction*

“What’s that?” I asked, pointing to a large brownish blob under the cherry tree on our front lawn.

“Looks like a stump, how’d that get there?” My husband scratched his head.

We’d been having some fierce winds through the month of January and the previous night had been no exception. But strong enough to roll and plant a block of wood that size? Besides, where had it come from? There was something about it that looked odd, and it was just far enough away we couldn’t see clearly. I ran upstairs to grab the binoculars.

“You aren’t gonna believe this.” I passed them over after I’d taken one incredulous look.

It was an adult brown owl! He was sitting very still, his broad head tucked. He did, indeed, look like an innocuous stump. With a magnified lens, it appeared as a stump with lovely rich graining and thickly textured bark. How peculiar.

His stillness was unsettling, so was the thought of a nocturnal creature sitting so exposed on the harsh, cold brightness of newly fallen snow. We took our posts at the living room window and sat quietly watching, willing him to move. It was reassuring to see he was at least upright.

After about thirty minutes, his head rolled up. With his ear tufts visible, there was now no mistaking what he was. One long wing lifted; a quick slice through air. It brought to mind the flipper of a breaching right whale. The other wing spread, he hopped once, trying to launch, then just as quickly, settled back into a motionless, unassuming heap.

We held our breath, watching and waiting, willing him to move again. It took longer this time. It was hard not knowing what to do. Should we intervene somehow? Instincts said no, but what if he was seriously hurt?

I called the Department of Natural Resources and described the scenario unfolding on our front lawn. The technician couldn’t have been more helpful. He suggested waiting two hours, saying that would give the bird’s brain time to reconfigure if he’d had a knock. The stillness is their way of conserving energy. It was indeed a good sign that we’d seen him move his head and attempt to fly. That’s all I needed to know. A timeline made all the difference.

I decided to make coffee. My mistake. When I returned to my post not more than five minutes later, there was only whiteness where he’d been. I noticed a shadow wavering on the ground, looked up and saw the lowest branch on the tree, black and slender against the snow, bobbing slightly under the weight of this huge mass of feathers.

I held my breath and saw with a mixture of unabashed delight and bitter disappointment that he'd flown the tiny distance from his perch on the ground and lifted himself enough to sway regally in the light wind. I'd missed it.

He remained inanimate, but upright, his tufted ears prominent. With suspended breath, I watched him swivel toward me. His eyes were tawny gold, ringed with black. It appeared he was looking directly at me, that he held my gaze. The mottled feathers, dark on top, paler beneath ruffled richly in the breeze. His talons, sienna sharp, gripped the bark, crusted in spots with a silvery lichen.

He stayed there for a long time, bobbing quietly, his body still. You could see he was gathering strength, and, quite possibly, courage. I thought how hard it must be for this proud, majestic creature to find himself unsure of what his own body was capable of doing. Would it see him through, or ultimately fail him? He seemed very human to me then.

Moments later, the lowest branch bounced in a wild vertical dance as the owl rose gracefully, in a singular fluid motion. His massive wings were perfectly aligned as he flapped four times in quick succession, and then glided in a smooth sweep to land atop the highest reach of the towering white spruce at the yard's edge.

This was his home, his treetop aerie. He'd called from there early mornings and late evenings for as many years as I could remember. His throaty hoots musing the dawn-dusk tranquility, lilac hued and lovely. All was right again.

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*Virginia Boudreau is a retired teacher living on the coast of Nova Scotia, Canada. Her poetry and prose have appeared in a wide variety of international literary publications.*

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# All for the Love of Zodiac Animals: A Bilinguacultural Poem

## *Poetry*

*It all began with an animal race Emperor Jade called to amuse  
himself and his earthly subjects...*

鼠 Rat:            yes, i admit betraying the cat as my only close friend  
                         but i won the race, with my head rather than my legs

牛 Ox:             to honor my contract with the yellow sun  
                         i eat green grass, yet give red meat to man

虎 Tiger :        as the only feared king of the thick jungle  
                         i am afraid and tired of my own timidity

兔 Rabbi:        with my cagey ears held so high  
                         i will not miss a sound of peace

龙 Dragon:        although my portraits hung lively above the clouds  
                         no human eyes have ever seen my authentic being

蛇 Snake:        the moment i sloughed off my old slim self  
                         i forgot ever seducing any manhood in heaven

马 Horse:        my body looks more masculine than a strong man  
                         and my heart feels more feminine than a tender girl

羊 Goat:         when i bleat towards the passers-by  
                         i never mean to speak in another voice

猴 Monkey:      each time i try to find any lice in the corner of my mind  
                         i act like the humans outside the fence with barbed wire

鸡 Rooster:      with my wings plumed with the feathers of night  
                         i cannot fly but to crow loudly towards dawn

狗 Dog:          given my canine camaraderie and pack mentality  
                         i feel at home before, among or behind soldiers

猪 Pig:            i spend all my lifetime wisely  
                         to guard this single moment

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*Yuan Changming hails with Allen Yuan from [poetrypacific.blogspot.ca](http://poetrypacific.blogspot.ca). Credits include 11 Pushcart nominations, 10 chapbooks and appearances in Best of the Best Canadian Poetry (2008-17) & BestNewPoemsOnline, among others across 46 countries. Recently, Yuan served on the jury for Canada's 44th National Magazine Awards (English poetry category).*

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# Mythical Ritual Sound

## *Poetry*

Every thirteenth Moon  
The sound of the Phoenix  
Circles the gateway  
Repeating its form  
Thrice before dawn;  
Cloaking, uncloaking  
In Quicksilver. When you  
Listen close you see  
The eyes of all birds taken.  
Hear their screeching screams  
As if in a blue lighted dream  
Some fates are worse than death.  
Their courageous souls could not be crushed  
Reminding us, we cannot escape  
The pain of living without  
Escaping the joys of living.  
So fifty-six cycles after Summer Solstice  
With the Blue Moon  
The voice of the wind as Phoenixes  
Seem to whisper from ancient shores.

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*N.Y. Haynes is the author of *The Space Between Seconds* (Atmosphere Press, 2020). She is a poet and playwright, as well as an avid athlete currently residing in New York. Her poetry can be found in various publications.*

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# The Night Mares

## *Poetry*

Restless In a still night  
No moon softening Sharp stars No cloud drapery.  
Against this midnight The night mares move  
Sharing colour with the darkness.  
What cannot find them is found by them,  
There are no ways secret:  
Spiralling stars leave every sky familiar,  
Foraging herds by trails of green weeds Breach every sacred sanctuary.  
The night mares Sleep standing up.  
Contain any stallion, Give birth in the middle of any weather,  
Can knock bones, eyes, internal organs out of any creature.  
Simply by their passing Men have been sucked breathless.  
The night mares  
Know where dragons come from,  
And who, mothered by seas and singing desert sands,  
The twin birthed are.  
In languages that the thunder knows, They answer one another.  
Navigating easily unbridled, No boundary deceives them.  
Yielding, the only response they know.

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*P.D. Lyons was born and raised in the USA, travelled and lived abroad, and has been residing in Ireland since 1998. The work of P.D. Lyons has also appeared in many publications throughout the world.*

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# Omnifauna

## *Fiction*

I am a good father.

I sit on this mud 'n' reed mound waiting out the war of my hunger and the collapse of bright clouds. The burnished day burns on, and still I sit. Drought, then rainshower, predators of the earth and sky, because no other dares test my beak. They would find me here dead and still sitting, food for horned lice and feather eaters, should the toothed darkness close upon me. But it won't, because I am a stalwart father, unmovable.

I snack on a moon-slick morsel, some trembling black jewel who bumbled too close. I beak away small creatures unfit for eating. And when the thieves arrive in iron plumage to plunder my mound and flee with armfuls of future feathers, I do not move. My corpse will sit where I sat. My body will only budge in the jaws of carrion lovers. Take me apart piece by piece, dismantle me, for only one road leads to nest: the path of pestilence and decay. The flesh will fall from your diseased bones and my children will crack open the dark sky and step out beneath the light sky.

I am a good father.

Peck and piss, peck and flick some dumbflight daddy. Poor sod, rootless now, all bone knots and tissue hinges, opening the door to my delight. Some ruffian lands from the kettle above, screeching hideous abuse. Move aside! I acquiesce and move aside.

You'll draw the others. He's mine.

Peck and piss!

What one can't finish, two can share. I acquiesce and piss, refreshing shower on my legs, as bald as the head where no germ can take seed, where no louse can seat himself and grow fat on my plunder. A breeze brings relief, and lo! the aroma of another unfortunate felled by the sweep of night's black blade, by the stream.

I'm full, I fly, he doesn't guess the lie, and I am alone to haunt the plate of the streambank, a wake of two. Night has served up some worm of the water full of flesh. I alight. I open my beak.

I close my maw and roll back into the stream swollen with rain, roll and gnash: all pinions and prickled feet. I lose a tooth, but it will return, rising from the mud of my gum. Rest, shunt the blood from my lungs, turn instead to the engine of my digestion. And then escape with newfound grace from this turgid stream before another sun bakes it to a trickle. Not that I am worried. Not that I am ever worried. Move, little finned ones. Outpace me, algae dash and skitter like a strider on the film of the water vein. A shame you only see the sky before death. The land is full of ridged

delights. Here, now, do not bump into me on your path down the vein to the sea.

Too close! Too toothed. Snout, hands, feet, claws, eyes like a deathbeak. Typhoon tongued leviathan, away from me! Up, up, up to the open water.

This way!

Turn left! Turn right! Bones on the floor. Right to the floorless water.

Left! Turn, anyway, and against Flow: up. Ascend through the stories of water. We're nearly at the top.

And release.

We swim, sleep, swimsleep, give ourselves over to Flow. Faith now, friends. That's my scrampy. Mine! Have faith in Flow to bring you where the rock is struck through with turquoise roads overflowing with golden scrampy. Enough for all!

Faith takes us far, no turning back now. Down, down, away.

Where are we? Where am I?

The Flow carries, and recedes. Grit and air, the hell of air! We cannot breathe without the Flow. I can flip back into the Flow if I just flip harder. And each leap cries: Help! Help! Help!

bubbles -- pebbles -- wind pull -- water push -- up -- down -- rock -- shell, empty -- jelly, full -- wind over -- water down -- cloud up -- moon, hand aspect -- colors good -- sand wet -- wood -- shell, full -- scales -- scales! -- breath -- scalepurse, full -- delicious -- moon, rising -- home soon -- clamp down -- lift -- scalepurse, heavy -- drag -- wind disturbed -- four-legged smell -- run -- drop, run -- brittle, softshell, pearl -- seawrack -- tangled -- four-legged near -- moon, rising -- shadow above --

crack

Heed the whip. Fear the hand. Cautious now. Bear the burden. Wait. Waiting is the god. The god of mountain suns. Watch the faces. Remember the faces. Listen for the crack and boom of the magic stick. There falls another. He did not bear the burden. He did not wait. Now he falls to shadowland. Under the mountain. He did not wait.

One sun-big moon. Two. Ten. Wait. Wait and watch. I remember this face from ten sun-big moons ago. A two-leg youngling. Bend the head. Heed this hand. No whip. Two hands down the neck. Gentle. Soft. Silent now. Slip away. Loosen the ropes. Buck the burden. No more waiting. The god is ready. I walk into the night. Heed the sun. Fear no mountain. Cautious, I go into tomorrow.

I drink free from the well. I drink in the shadow of the worm.

I am cutting a hole in my home with these twin scissors attached to my dull green end and turning the cuttings into nuggets that drop from my bright yellow end, my false eyes, so blind, so frightful. I am well paced today, well placed and ready to abandon my home and build a new one

with all the unburned contents of my long green gut. Spin and spittle, turn, twist, and shape, my form submits to the door of my future. I am afraid, but beckoned by the drumming song in my long green mind. I am afraid as I close the door on myself and sleep until

Open blue windows

Shape the world with my cold wings:

How long have I slept?

The bloom of wild night

The violence of color

Hark! The flaming cup!

Days I reap and sow

The golden coins of iris

And the day on fire.

Alight on the stem--

Tip the scales in my favor: Love and death are mine. As in, I love your death little rainbow scrap, descended from the green worm hanging on his skyhook. And I descend again. Into the warm embrace of roothome. Crown of roots, bed of soil. I am alone again, and better for it. Let the worms hang their skyhooks. Blow myself up, puff puff, and how about one more puff: perfect. Earth anchors me. I will not float away. My skin is warm with death. I sleep. I catch the dream of another: all wide wakeful stirrings of ecstasy and a bone meeting. A clash. Clack and snort. Hoofbeats and the long night of walking somnolence. Click...

Click click click. I am surrounded by a ring of darkness in the blind tundra. Click click. I hear my mother's step before me and my father's behind. No, my mother's sister. The black wind cuts my eyes. I do not yet have a tree growing from my head. I want one. I want one like my mother's, that stays all the long night. I am surrounded by the flesh and blood of my blood, but we are surrounded by a ring of black beasts. I see them when the wind closes my eyes. I see them when I sleep. I see them when I pull the hot milk from my mother's belly.

Click click. A flurry of feather-talkers overhead. No, ice, a wind of ice. The blind day turns away the sun. Click. The ring of black beasts tightens. I cannot breathe. My mother is no longer beside me. Click. I turn to find my mother's sister. Who is this? He has no tree growing from his head. I cannot see him any longer. I cannot see. I am blind and pelted by ice. Snow heaps upon my coat. I cannot shake it off. I cannot shake off the black beasts. Click click. It is my own step only, echoing in the blind tundra.

They are gone. I am the last of our million. The black beasts approach.

I traverse the Great Distances. I nurture civilization. I survived the Winter of Ravens. I did not whine when I lost my ear.

Why must I always be last to taste the sweet dark wine of our sacrifice?

For years I have waited while one by one or all at once they pull the tenderest shreds from the body of our sacrifice under the Moon's lordly gaze. Did I not participate in the Hunt? Did I not sound the horns as bravely as any other?

Yet I am at the bottom.

My brother sneers. My younger brother, marrow dropping from his jaw. I nipped the calf's tail, I made him drop the first jewels of his wine. Yet there will be but crumbs left for me when these barbarians are through.

I will leave. May they starve without me! Starve and rot!

The snow shrouds me in silence. I am invisible. I walk above the earth. I leave them, to begin my own Hunt and howl under a new Moon. He will protect me. The long corridors of the forest are no less lonely now. I will not join another party. The wine shall flow freely.

My heart sings: I am at the top.

Thank you for your heart, my friend. I cannot wait until we part. I'll pass through your slow decay and live to see another day. I am safe from hungry fungus, though my grief of the chill be humongous. Don't stop! I may have spent you too quick. I will not live where winter is yet so thick. Thaw and break, sun of spring, winter's daughter; cast away your weapons, cold hearted marauder!

Thump and crumble? I wake with memories of someone falling on my roof. How many moons ago. Yawn! I do not care. My bones creak at the edge of dawn as a bright gold waterfall fills the hillside. I am hungry and drowsy with silence. I gnaw on spring's bone, laid bare here in the new season. I count my ribs. The wind plays them like twigs. My body has been replaced in the night by the season's sacred minions. I think differently than I did in the old season.

Of bones. I must have dreamed of a castle of bones, I am bone hungry, bone starved, and what is this but a pile of winter-fresh bones upon my roof. A longmuzzle, grieved by winter. I do not mind a bone brought to me; a bone given. But oh, who is this wanderer? You will not have my bones, neither those inside nor out.

She is close. I see myself in her eye.

I see myself in his eye.

Boom: not this way. Circle toward the shining plate. Break it.

The drink is blessing me with cool slabs of life. Boom: farunder the hot water churns. Here, the cool. The only thing older than me: boom. The hot stones unite. Where shall I go if I cannot go here? Another shape comes to mind. Boom: that farflung field that unites field after field of drink. I am older than you, hopper. I am older than you, leecher. Boom: the swimmers that feed on the green field of my back cannot feel the farunder where the hot water churns. I escape and rove. I am not free. I follow the field. I cross all paths and some pulsing twig bounces off my armor. Two

of them, entwined. Boom.

His emerald head tastes like cold fire, and he continues thrusting into me as I move onto the delicious leaves of his wings. Once they carried him farther than I have ever flown. I love it this way. The spicy veins of his wings open me to his seeds. He is finished. I am full. I carry the wet seeds that will pour forth. I must find the perfectly sculpted branch. Five leaves and a hanging fruit: asymmetry makes me froth. I think of the diagonals of his head. I loved his partial body in the end by the pond where we loved. For the seeds I build a fortress of foam. It is full. I am finished.

I collect a case of bug berries and unzip it with my teeth. Tee hee! No one else has been inside. What sweet treasures! But who goes there? There is yet time tonight to be unzipped myself by hidden fangs, secret talons. The undergrowth is thick with tastes. Greater shadows bounce by. I am a quiet thief in the underdark. A quiet thief!

Who goes there?

Oh oh, only a ghost! Tied in a knot. A magic knot that still smells of poisonous vapors left behind when the hidden fangs slipped his skin. I do not taste his eyes upon me. I anoint my spines with his vapors. I am an imposter, a thief, a secret assassin who will escape into the earth with all the treasures of the upper realm. I will slip into the earth and join the wiggling socks of blood and muscle.

My hearts beat beat beat to the rhythm of the rain. From where does it fall? The sky is dripping again, calling my hearts up up up to the surface. My segments roll forth. Rock, root, burrowing bone case, root, tendril, mushroom egg. Grass tongues tickle my muscles and AH skywater. Flood my senses. Drown me.

I must dance.

And look, my brethren.

Snatched a snack for the long fly back home. I'll save it for later, just an earthtongue. The family is breaking apart. Oh no. The White One has come. I need my beak free. Snack, or fight? I will live to eat another day. Farewell, earthtongue.

And a long way down.

I float in a skypool. My hearts beat beat beat in terror. But I am alive. I shouldn't be. I cannot wait to tell the others. Oh. Nevermind. I won't be alive for long. Farewell, segment six. Farewell, segment five. Oh, I won't be long now. My final heart beats in terror.

And from this kernel of cosmic matter I regrow the foot lost in the grotto slowly hour by hour watching the changes in this placid reservoir, and I drift into sleep and out again and the world turns and churns its constituents, and suddenly from some deep cellar within me I feel the call of a secret wish, and it lashes me with tongues of passion and I regenerate pieces of my mind I had forgotten I had lost in an eruption of light and the sensation of falling and my breathers begin to shrink away from the cold of the water and fold up inside of my body and become as bubbles,

and I cannot breathe, and I desire more than anything to kiss the hot rocks above and breathe that liquid air--I latch onto this golden root and crawl toward the sun where a new world awaits and I already see a strange being watching my metamorphosis.

I am nothing like my parents, though we speak the same canopy tongue. But where they have limbs, I have dreams. Where they have eyes, I have nameless colors. Where they have air, I have breathless engines. I changed the rules, they said. I say I rewrote them as we all one day do.

I believe I am something new. I am leaving now. I'm going higher. Goodbye. I am already full of kin. They squirm inside my magic womb. No harm will come to them as I ascend. I'm going higher still.

Space is a dark forest, but I can climb the trees.

I am a good mother.

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*Thrown out of Fairyland for crimes against the Realm, Kyle is a naturalist living in Michigan. He can usually be found in the dunes or forests, turning up logs looking for life. Past incarnations include zookeeper, video game critic, retail manager, stablehand, and writing tutor. His fiction has appeared in Clarkesworld, Three-Lobed Burning Eye, and Honey & Sulphur. You can find more at [www.kyle-e-miller.com](http://www.kyle-e-miller.com).*

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# The Development

## *Fiction*

“My name is Kami,” she said.

Paul hadn't asked. He had barely glanced at her as he walked by the bus stop. She was sitting on a dirty bench under the straight arch of clear plastic, with graffiti covering the walls and bisecting the scene at her back.

Behind the bench was a huge hole in the ground, the detritus of roots poking the empty air, feeling with shaggy fingers for the dirt they had lost. The start of construction for the new library, it looked like they'd gotten stalled with the sudden downpour. A group of men loitered under a neighboring overhang, smoking and talking in that particular cadence men get when there are no women around. They obviously hadn't seen the girl outside the chain-link fence.

There was no time to stop and chat with her, but he had already met her eyes, so he couldn't just ignore her. Maybe some people could, but his mother's voice was in his head, lecturing him about respect. So, “Hi, Kami,” he said. “Kami – pretty name.”

“Thank you.” She smiled. When she didn't say anything else, he gave a half-wave and walked on. A little way down the block, he turned back to look at her. She was still sitting at the bus stop, staring after him.

He thought about her all through the class he was teaching. Students asked questions that he didn't hear. At the end of the lecture, one boy stopped by Paul's desk. “Professor Watanabe, you all right?”

“Sure.” He waved the boy on his way.

But the girl and her heart-shaped face lingered. He didn't know why.

He passed by the construction site on his way home, but no one was there, of course. She had probably caught her bus to wherever she needed to go.

Still, the next day walking to the university, he looked out for her thin face, her dark eyes. But it was a different day and a different time--the bench was empty.

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Tuesday again, and he was running late. From far away, he could see the orange and black diggers doing something at the edges of the hole they had made. They'd brought a crane in, although the workers seemed to be watching it sit there, rather than using it. Perhaps this time of day was always their break, he thought – smoke ran in furls up into the air, the thick scent of tobacco

blown through the chain-link fence.

He almost missed her. He was concentrating so hard on looking at the progress of the construction. When he spotted the black bob of hair and stick-thin frame on the bench, he felt shock for a moment, as if seeing someone he had thought long dead. She smiled at him, and after a moment, he smiled back.

“Hello, Kami,” he said, pausing by the bus stop. Part of his brain was counting the seconds he was tardy, and the ticking in his head sounded as if it were saying, *too late, too late, too late, too late...*

“Hello, Paul,” she replied.

“How are...” He stopped. Held her black gaze. “How did you know my name?” he asked quietly.

“I know many things,” she told him matter-of-factly.

The workers were looking over at him through the wide-open fence. A quick glance, and then away again. He wondered if they could hear them speaking, could eavesdrop on this bizarre conversation. Probably, they were too far away.

“Okay,” he said. He wondered if she had looked him up on the university’s website, googled him and come up with the articles listed under his name in obscure scientific journals. Placed name to face.

Maybe. But there was no time to ask, and there seemed little point to pursue it. What harm could she do to him, this slight stick of a girl? “I’m running behind.” As he turned away, “Have a nice day.”

“Thank you,” she said, but his back was already towards her and he didn’t glance back.

He flubbed three formulas that day. Two of them, his students caught, and he corrected the third one before they discovered it. After class, he went to his office and sat in his chair, staring at nothing. Was Kami a previous student of his? Was that why she seemed so familiar? Why could he not remember her?

Finally, he went home past the construction site. He knew she wouldn’t be there. Not at night. Not until the next week.

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Paul set off for the university a whole hour earlier the next Tuesday. He could have made the excuse to himself that he had work to catch up on, which he did. But he was a night owl, preferring to stay later after his classes rather than get up when the air was moist from the passing night and the sun still deciding whether to turn the day blue or grey.

Today, it was grey--clouds hovered overhead in the middle distance, not quite threatening rain. As he hurried towards the university, with one eye on the developing weather overhead, he could see the large machines at the construction site from far away. They reminded him of when he was a boy, and he’d had a complete Tonka Toy set, bright yellow and black. He’d played with them

for hours, digging, filling up the dump truck, winching the crane until the string broke from too much use. There was still that latent fascination with big toys, that quickening of his pulse as he saw the machines.

Or maybe it was anticipation. The men were by the fence, filling the air with the incense of rolled tobacco. And there, on the bench – there she was. An hour early, like him.

“You don’t have to be afraid,” were the first words she said to him.

There wasn’t really any way to reply to that, so he didn’t try. He had stopped walking--what was the point in ignoring her? His mother’s voice again: *Good boys--always respect to women.*

“I’m disappearing. You might say – I’m dying,” she said.

It made him look at her, truly look at her. Other than the thinness of her figure, she looked healthy. But looks could be deceiving. “I’m sorry,” he finally said after realizing the pause had gone on too long.

“There is always sorrow when things pass on. But change can’t stop.”

“That’s a very mature outlook to take on it.”

“No,” she said sadly. “I have lost many friends. Some cried and some threatened. But they all disappeared. So I am who I have always been.”

He nodded his head to her. “I see,” he said. Attempt at consolation.

But he didn’t.

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She smiled when she saw him next. He noticed her teeth were slightly crooked, and it made her look like a child.

“How are you feeling today?” he asked politely.

She waved a hand around her, as if to say, *As well as to be expected.* Behind her, the workmen talked with each other in their corner of the fence. The steel skeleton of the structure was reaching for the sky, but it was all jagged edges, incomplete. Around it, the dirt humped up in brown waves, exploding outward from the rising building.

“It was beautiful once,” she said, following his gaze. “A long time ago, there was a forest here. The trees spoke, and their conversations could take a season or more. Rabbits and badgers and foxes lived here. Deer and unicorns.”

He would have laughed at her whimsy, until she turned her serious black eyes on him.

“Unicorns?” he asked instead. She nodded.

“Among others.”

“Were you here then?” He didn’t remember a forest at this spot. In fact, he didn’t remember what

had been here before. He had lived in this neighborhood for ten years, and he suddenly realized that this space had always been a blank to him. Perhaps an empty lot? That didn't seem right.

"I hid it," she told him. "After the trees were cut down and the animals died. I hid this place from those on the outside, but I was weak and couldn't hide forever."

"What do you mean?"

"No, that's a lie," she corrected herself. "Perhaps I could have continued hiding. But I was lonely."

He half-smiled. "You're a lovely girl. Don't you have parents? Friends? A... a boyfriend?" The questions felt inappropriate.

She shook her head.

"I'm sorry."

After a hesitation, she said, "Thank you for speaking with me. All these times when others would not--thank you."

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He had so come to expect her there every week that when the next Tuesday came, he paused at the bench automatically even though he had seen from some distance off that it was empty. For once, the men were working rather than taking a break. They'd filled in the structure and were putting in drywall with spaces cut out for windows.

"Sorry," he heard behind him, and he turned to see her coming up the sidewalk. She seemed out of breath, even though she was moving slowly. She sank down onto the bench and her chest rose and fell too quickly. For the first time, he sat beside her. Put his hand on her arm. She was so small, so skinny.

"Are you okay? Can I help you? Do you have medicine?" He looked for a purse – every woman had one, didn't they? – and was stumped to see she carried nothing. Come to think of it, he'd never seen her with a bag.

"There is no medicine I could take," she finally said. Her cheeks were flushed and her face shiny with sweat. "Not much longer now."

At her words, he found there was a thickness in his throat. He swallowed past it and glanced behind her. Unnoticed by him, the men had paused in their work while he'd watched Kami walk up, and now they were eyeing him through the fence, smoke curling out of their mouths and noses. At his glance, they turned their backs, deliberately. But they didn't speak, just smoked until their cigarettes became small stubs, and then lit fresh sticks from the old embers.

"Don't worry about them," she said. "They'll be all right. None of them will die from cancer."

Paul turned back to her. He'd never seen anyone with eyes so dark, so black, that he couldn't distinguish the pupil from the iris. On a whole island of dark-eyed, dark-haired people, he had never once seen eyes consume the light like hers did. Never seen eyes with so much history.

“Is that what you have? Cancer?” he asked.

Her mouth moved, but it was not quite a smile. “No.”

“What can I do?” he said. “I *need* to be able to help you.”

“Remember me,” she said. Then, “Remember unicorns. Trees talking. Rabbits.” She laughed.

He laughed with her, but when he took her hand, it was light as air. It was as if it wasn't there anymore, even though he could feel her bones through the thin skin of her wrist and fingers. After a moment, she took her hand back and he stood up and walked away.

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It was weeks later that it happened. What he had been dreading. Weeks later when they took away the bulldozers, the diggers, the cranes, the machines. When the building was finished and sat empty, waiting to be filled. The ribbon-cutting ceremony would be next weekend, but everything else was done. The workmen were gone, their smoke was gone, the hole in the ground was gone.

And so was she – gone. He never saw Kami again.

Later, he went to the ribbon-cutting ceremony. Entered the building that had taken the place of the forest of whispering trees, the unicorns he'd never seen, the many small lives of the wild places--the badgers and the rabbits and the long-lost spirits who protected them.

He remembered Kami's stories. He remembered her black, black eyes. He remembered her.

He remembered.

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*Alison McBain is an award-winning author and Pushcart Prize-nominated author with work in Litro, Tiferet Journal, and Quail Bell Magazine. Her debut novel The Rose Queen received the Gold Award for the YA fantasy category of the 2019 Literary Classics International Book Awards. She is lead editor for the small press publisher Fairfield Scribes, and associate editor for the literary magazine Scribes\*MICRO\*Fiction.*

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