

Serrated Leaves

by Erika Byrne-Ludwig

The old man watched his cat feel the contours of his lap before settling down in its mould. It's time, he muttered, moving gently to and fro in his rocking chair. Macha had fallen ill. Arlo had been given a two-year gift. Then he had also thought the time had come, but she had stood healed in front of him, face and tail up, request in eyes. It had just been a reminder that he would one day hear her last call. Once again he pleaded in his odd way with her not to let it happen, even prayed to go first, but in the end he knew he had no say and neither did she. Death is like nature which if it wants snow, it'll snow. There, there, Macha. On the timber deck he was facing the vaguely lit dark. A habit of his to spend his evening out, sometimes also his night, during the hot summers, watching the day shades disappear and waiting for the eyes to appear.

The starry eyes ... He chose two, stared at them and asked them to light the earthly darkness in his. Confiding in unreachable beings felt right to him; stars seemed such tranquil listeners. This time it was about Macha's eyes, how they had lost their shine and their wariness. See the stars, Macha? A rib faintly moved under his hand. The brightness above spilled on the pair. Arlo knew he and his old cat were both in their final moments, she most likely tonight on his lap, he later in a feverish bed.

Just a week before he'd had another talk ... the need to share ... He spoke about his late wife, how, when he stroked her very long desert hair, her eyes would focus on a mysterious place or moment far beyond his reach. (He had asked her once where her mind had wandered, she had simply given him one of her enigmatic smiles.) And how she had left him one evening, quietly, without a sigh he could hear, lying in her own rocking chair next to his. He looked at that chair, at her cushion and scarf untouched except by his hands and his face.

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Dawn filtered in with a soft bearable warmth. The eyes above were now hiding behind the pale linen. Arlo guessed their location, told them how Macha's had stopped seeing. He cradled her long unyielding body — still graceful, he thought, and hay-scented —, carried her to the back garden, a path he had followed with others in his arms. The banksia's silhouette emerged to his weakening eyes, its serrated leaves Macha had always seemed to avoid, its yellow flowers she sniffed and bit. Arlo frequently caught her walking under it, her reasons for doing so kept to herself. At least you won't be alone and bewildered there. He shared some of his thoughts with the sun rising through the branches and playing summer games with elongated stars and rays on his hands. The banksia with its spike flowers pointing upwards was now waiting for Macha's silent roaming.

