

# Deer Doctors Black Earth

*by* Poppy Lavelikov

The doctor bargained with us enough but I kept saying “give it a thousand years and we’ll think about it.” He seemed to mean well and be smart enough to not be feeding us snakes, but he wasn’t a praying man and I couldn’t see past that look he used to give my lucky scar in the shape of the lord. It was the look that half-rich people give you in the street right before they spit, or that rich people give you right before their shock collar tells them they can’t. He acted like her coma meant that she wasn’t a part of the proceedings but I know she was strong, and in charge of her own life, and she’d got herself into that thing and she’d want to have a say in whether she got out. He said he couldn’t hear her and I said “you can’t hear that? I hear it clear as day and you have all these friggin machines and you can’t?” The hospital might not be there in a thousand years, he said, and I waited, and it wasn’t.

Two things were and one of them was a stone the size of two old cities stacked up and the other doesn’t want to be mentioned. She looked around where the hospital used to be and said “that shut ‘em up.” I told her to stay quiet until her coma was over, and the sky at night, later on, started getting really red, like with red webs between the used-to-be-white stars that were red or blue and getting dull. They were straining like how I used to strain to pee the last drop, or really feel a prayer when I was hungry or tired and praying for real was a get-to-it-later thing. I’d stopped praying pretty soon after everybody turned into humming rocks because if the rocks were like my future and invisible force that answers prayer is like the future of the remembering rocks then it was probably something to talk to invisible force with that was better than hums and words that I couldn’t guess at so I drank a lot of water. It was clear out of the sides of the rocks, always clean and tasted good. I’d say “I wish I could tell you a story but nothing has happened in a hundred years” and she’d laugh and I’d wonder if I was asleep

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instead of her and she was telling me stories and she just told them so well that a coma felt like a thousand years.

I figured out how to make music out of hydrogen, after I figured out how to see hydrogen. I'd walk ten miles away to show her how small I could get, but ten miles away was the mountain, so I'd sweep it for a day every time I got to it so it wouldn't be able to figure out that I didn't work for it. One day I came to it and I could've sworn that the two trees at the bottom of it were married and they hadn't been, before. The wind hit them both the same way and I always felt like the wind hit me kind of sideways, like it used to hit people who got splashed by puddle water every time a truck passed by their soaked blanket and they rolled deeper into the mud. Once all the red went out I couldn't see anything except the hospital gown she kept so clean. The close star wasn't around anymore and I had thought it was going to grow so big it would break the edges of the sky, for a while, so it was a surprise when it just up and got see-through or something so that the dark was there as much as at night.

I heard a deer and it asked how I could hear it and I said "if it's okay if I look at you that'd be nice because you seem nice" and it said not to because it wouldn't be a deer anymore if I turned around and it flashed my head-in the lids, in the middle-something mean that I knew it didn't want me to see any clearer than that. Once I'd seen the awful thing the deer would turn to, it wasn't the same when we kept trying to talk and it said it had to go but every once in a while I'd feel it behind me, rustling around in the darkness and I don't know what it ate or if it didn't need to eat anymore, either, like us (I'm guessing she wasn't eating- maybe she was eating something I didn't know about, maybe everything went away because she ate it, and I didn't see how). I tried to sing her awake until I grew seventeen voices and they all worked together to get friends and it was like a choir shaking on the sides of the long hollow spot we were in, and it seemed like if maybe the stars used to have themselves get seen for millions and billions of years away, maybe

now that they weren't blocking things up and there was more space in the air for other stuff to move, maybe my choir'd move through far and get to someplace totally different. So I sang harder and harder and the deer said "careful" and I could feel the outline of the presence of a bird on its back, while they stood behind me, but the bird was quiet and watched me like I was holding a gun around its kid but I didn't say anything to either of them because really I was afraid that if I got too involved and turned around and saw whatever it was the deer didn't want to become, it'd just be her, me, that bird, and a monster that made me even more sad and scared because I'd have to know how much it had been the deer who was maybe the only thing left to talk to so long as the bird was mad. Even a recluse neighbor is better to have around than a universe of emptiness and the remembering rocks who might not even remember, they might just pour water, because at least you can imagine the recluse has warmth even if it doesn't touch anything but chairs or doorknobs or they clutch their sides.

I saw an orange spot show up in the sky long after I started being the choir. It looked smaller than anything, and other spots came off of it with something attaching them, looking like cells dividing or an electric egg splitting into other electric eggs. The deer said "again" and I asked what it meant and it said that's only a privilege of knowing that things that remember have and I asked if the remembering rocks remembered and it said "don't disturb The Firmament- they need to stay still." The orange grew and grew and it started warming up the ground, but I still couldn't see the ground even though the orange was turning brighter blues and white strips of shocks across it. I decided to get up on the mountain to see it so I grabbed the broom and pointed her bed to what I thought was north so that I wouldn't get lost if I walked too far in the dark toward where I thought the mountain had been and went for it, but maybe I missed the mountain because it just kept going and finally she disappeared behind me, looking like she'd gone up and gotten curved behind the blue stuff in the sky, which was very close now,

and I still walked on black ground and went around and around and around the blue until finally I made it back to her bed like I'd walked all the way around a world that'd been turned inside out, filled with blue and shocks, with babies growing in every pocket of it. They were sometimes like people, sometimes there were whole herds of people running after something in one of the pockets, sometimes I'd see an egg in the blue that had a whole Earth or something like Earth inside of it with big pictures carved into the Earth-thing.

The blue eventually stopped spinning and buzzing so much, and there was a world egg over us that got close and had people in it who had stayed put for a while, so I jumped down to see them, and they were so scared. "You came from the sky," they said, and they said they hadn't seen me up there, hadn't known about the black Earth from however many years it had been I don't know, hadn't seen the deer or her gown. I tried to point to her, she was floating up there plain as day, and they said "that's the Moon." I pointed toward where I thought the mountain I swept had been and they said "that's the land of the strong winds." I said "it's so clear what these things really are but you see a Moon and a wind- you're like the doctors, watching her through machines that can't see her" and they wrote psalms that cursed the doctors forever and called the machines mute and deaf and whipped at the people who dragged levers in from the woods. They asked what I wanted and I asked if they knew how to wake her up, at least so I could ask her if she wanted to stay in the coma. They said that they knew the Moon had been taken from the side of the body of land, and that if it was put back in, the First Form of the World would be in place again.

I stepped back onto the black Earth and the people in the sky over it were running wild. I grabbed her from her bed and stepped back into the sky and the deer was breathing heavily in my head. It sounded like the inverse of laughter. The people gathered around and people with spears kept them back and they all shouted "The Moon Princess" and prayed and I was glad they were praying out

loud because it meant that maybe I could now too since it wouldn't be so embarrassing like it'd been around the rocks that seemed like they knew they seemed so smart. If they were so smart how come they were rocks?

While I had been getting her from the black Earth the first people I'd talked to there had built a stone box under the ground so large that if the energy they'd put into moving the stone had been put into farming then maybe I'd have felt more comfortable asking if they had anything for me to eat. They said to put her inside it quick before night found out the Moon was gone. I wondered how she could be back in the side of the body of the land if there were stones keeping her from touching the land, and I realized that I knew these stones—they were the remembering stones. They had the same cool water coming from them, and they hummed the same hm. The remembering stones, some had been people who'd known her before we all went on for so long, so I thought they'd help her too. When we set her down and came up, I thought I'd go to the black Earth and wait for a little while, but when I went to step back down from the sky, I couldn't reach. The people saw that with the Moon back in its place and no gown to give a single sight to the black Earth, there was nothing to guide my way home. They walked me back to their camp, and talked about what I'd do now that I was destined to be with them. I saw a deer across the way, staring at me with a dead bird in its teeth. Some hunters moved for it and I said “wait, come on, don't.” They were confused, and I tried to say it to them some way that'd make sense. “Deer are not doctors.”

