

Origins

by W.F. Lantry

My mother, a changeling devoted to Ishtar, loved to hold garden parties. What can I say, it was California. I have no idea if changelings exist. I certainly never saw her transform from one thing into another. But then, I only knew her when I was young. Very young indeed.

Her parties were always at liminal moments. Nights when the moon passed from one cycle to another or when the sun started a new round. Earthquakes were celebrated the day of their occurrence, whenever sunset arrived. Storms gave a little more notice, and the revelers would greet the oncoming hurricanes that blew up from Baja.

They'd put me in my crib while they danced. I watched from under the ancient eucalyptus. Eventually, the crib became a playpen my father had built. He carved elaborate reliefs of the goddess on its sides and tracing her shape with my hand became my earliest memory. Even now, my fingers can follow the form of her flesh: the curve of her elbow, her dovetailed thighs. The maple hair seemed to be caught by a wind, just as the gust moved past.

Behind her I watched the dancers dressed mostly in white linen robes. Their waists were gathered with golden ropes, their sandals were woven reeds. Sometimes I noticed ivy leaves in their hair, and red winestains on their hems. The torches often burned late, and I was forgotten. When the torches flared and went out, the dancers slept in pairs on the lawn. I slept alone among them, surrounded by carved wood.

I was sleeping the night of a hurricane party. I awoke to lightning flashes. They lit the undersides of descending clouds, and lit the shadows of scattering dancers. The hurricane must have turned inland. I saw the approaching eye. I was untroubled by rain bands, the eucalyptus branches sheltered me from the worst. The dry canyon nearby turned into a river. Through occasional bursts of light, I watched the water rise. When the eye wall arrived, the rain

increased, and wind tore my eucalyptus away. Its roots pushed me towards the stream as it fell.

Had it fallen the other way, had the wind blown another direction, I would probably still be there. But there's no use in wishing for different wind, we can only adjust our sails. I found myself wishing for a sail as my playpen became a boat. But the river's current was everywhere, and besides, I had no rudder. There was nothing to do but ride it out, and watch the seabirds whirling above me.

They were still there when the dawn arrived. Sometimes they perched on the rails. We were carried together out into the ocean, and then south along the coast. The eucalyptus hills slowly became mesquite collines. When the wind changed again, it drove us towards the beach. I still don't know how my boat survived the breakers. It should have been swamped or shattered. But it came to rest gently on the beach sand. My father knew his craft.

A man came running towards me, in a broad brimmed hat, shouting "*Aquí, Aquí!*" It sounded like Akki to me. It's strange how we reshape new things to mimic what we've known. I called him that for years. His friends called him "the drawer of waters." The irrigator, the maker of gardens. He taught me the secrets of their design. How to propagate the slips, the best incantations to use when sowing, the proper moment to prune.

But mostly he showed me how to craft the motion of water through gardens. Even still ponds collect energy. He told me it came from Ishtar, but I never quite believed him. "We see her in the waterfalls," he would say, his hand touching the stream. He was always caressing the flow, as if he drew strength from its movement. I never saw her haunting the grotto, but I learned all his designs.

I keep him in mind even now, on this distant coast, with its different occasional hurricanes, in spite of increasing ice storms. I never saw snow in my homeland, but here it's what breaks the tree limbs. I try to design around their paths, I keep the apple boughs pruned. But mostly the garden is built around water: ponds and connecting streams. A river flows behind it, changing its course on the floodplain with every summer storm. But it never quite makes it

past the sycamores at the base of the garden. They're level with the dam two miles down stream. Their roots keep the bank in place.

If you start at the top near the house there's a deck, and the gardens flow down from there. The steps lead down to a landing of stone, and give out on perennial beds. The first pond begins by their edge, and that's where I raise my best koi. A lotus rises from the center. In this climate, it only blooms two months. There are statues hidden in tall grasses behind it. You have to look a while to see them. Warriors with spears and shields, literal maidens dancing like nymphs. The water flows down between them into the next pond.

That's where I keep the butterfly koi. Its bigger: they need more room. Their fins are like dragonfly wings: diaphanous, translucent, sheer. Night blooming lilies raise their blossoms above the surface in summer, cobalt and violet and red. I've placed a bench there and torches for viewing. Its outflow moves south down the hill.

The bottom pond is much bigger, and wild. The day blooming lilies go there. I can't keep the bull frogs out, and don't even try anymore. The water is filled with comets- goldfish the size of your hand. And past that, the bamboo grove rises, hiding the small pavilion. I sit there sometimes in the evenings and think of other gardens. There's no point wishing for a distant place, but the statues are memories. In moonlight, I imagine them dancing.

