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THEREIN LIES HOPE

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By Jena Webb

Zoiryn, who works for the Wellness Strata of the Mother Rock as an inner peace steward, has been tasked with designing a 500-year anniversary tribute to the 'Molting,' triggered by the first of a series of pandemics unleashed by humans encroaching excessively on natural spaces. In accordance with their ways, Zoiryn has been given carte blanche and two years to conceive of a commemoration to the achievements in living harmoniously that came about during that period of transformation. Previous memorials had covered the grand arch of the tumultuous period, but Zoiryn has always been more interested in details, in minutia, in the seed that became their new civilization, one that learned to live with nature rather than in its stead.

Forever a book lover, Zoiryn turns to the archives for inspiration. The inner peace steward's comfort zone is words. Zoiryn knows that probably hundreds of people were given the same task, with as little direction. Not a competition, but to tap into as much creativity as possible. They would have about a year to follow their hunches and then a

collaborative process of coproduction would begin to see how the disparate elements could come together as a whole. Others would at this very moment be turning to musical scales or hues. Zoiryn would lean on words, phrases, sentences, texts. And what better place to begin than the archives, that stately repository for the wellspring of their new world.

Zoiryn's Gradient of the Wellness Strata is charged with ensuring that everyone living within their Grove has access to the essentials of being at peace, and one of those is a fossilized bone. The act of communing with a bone was considered new at the time of the Molting, but, of course, it was actually ancient. It was part of a collective process of remembering and listening to the people who had held fast to the land. All our ancestors had, at one point, had a sense that nature was beneficial, but many Indigenous people had kept their attachment to the land alive and their knowledge of its link with health active throughout the ravages of the industrial revolution and the catastrophic period of capitalism. Bones are just one component of their nature-based medical canon.

Witness trees had become another backbone of inner peace. Part of this vigilant steward's work is to care for the health of the witness trees, cultivate them to provide the perfect bouquet, ensure that they are accessible to all denizens, resolve occasional conflicts. Zoiryn's use of the word backbone coalesces a connection, a parallel. Nowadays, the fossilized bones used by the Grove inhabitants are most often suspended in a witness tree, in the fashion of the Innu ancestors. There, they could be borrowed and returned. Zoiryn's job is to make sure that there are always some available for the taking. People learn from a young age which types of distress are best attended to by sitting in a witness tree, clutching a bone, communing with animals or steeping in water.

Things had gotten worse before they had gotten better. As the wars raged, waves of climate refugees fled droughts that scorched fertile plains and what were termed 'biblical' floods that ravaged populated centres. Eventually, more and more people began to realize that the system was not working in their favour. They began to question the teachings of the Chicago School of Economics and the Bible, realizing that they were based on the musings, and ravings really, of people concerned only with themselves and those like them – their same gender, racialized-state/phenotype, culture, orientation, beliefs. If there were something like an ultimate sin in Zoiryn's time it would be exactly that – putting yourself and those like you before others.

Following the Molting, in the early days when the elders still remembered the time before, people started destroying bibles. It is only a tale after all, but the ancestors traced back our egoism to those early creation stories and realized that the xenophobia and speciesism found in them were jeopardizing our capacity to connect, to relate, and that that disconnection was making us ill. In their zeal to create new narratives they destroyed all but two of the "original" bibles, which were not original at all, but dated from a time when many people still believed that particular story. What we inherited from that episode, some 400 years later, was that whoever writes a story has a responsibility.

Having studied several novelists who were contemporaries of the pandemics – Margret Atwood, Cristiane Vadnais and Cherie Dimaline, for example – Zoiryn had come away with a rather glum vision of 21st century speculative fiction. Not that it wasn't understandable, nor that it was undesirable or unconstructive. It just seemed one-sided. The knowledge lenders taught these books as if they were warnings and always pulled out the greed at the root of the misery therein as the moral of the story. The bibliophile steward often contemplates, though, whether there wasn't more to the tales of those times than the knowledge lenders showed them. The literature of the 26th century was so rich, so varied. What might be hiding in the unopened texts from that era? Zoiryn sometimes wonders if they weren't guilty of the very thing

they reproached most in their ancestors – a lack of tolerance and an unwillingness to engage in empathy with these relatives who almost brought humanity to the brink.

Zoiryn takes the opportunity to visit the fiction section of the archives. There, a few volumes by Ursula Le Guin, unopened for centuries, are exhumed by the curious steward. The future one could put together from this collection of stories was neither dystopic nor utopic. Zoiryn thoroughly enjoys the complexity of the world created by the novelist and becomes absorbed for weeks by the tales, reveling in their potential to inspire.

Zoiryn sees in the gradients of literature a shift from perpetually seeking the infinitely vast, the grandiose – a career of fame, for example – to seeing the infinitely subtle, the intricately detailed and the immensely complex. This focal transference to the small yet numerous became the hyperlocal, the microlocal. The ancestors resolved the problem of scale that their predecessors were grappling with by changing focus. It wasn't how to scale up local solutions that was necessary. It was simply scaling back that allowed them to see the immeasurable value of their local surroundings containing therewithin their own ready-made solutions. Being able to rejoice in narrower gradations was the challenge after 600 years of looking out, over the horizon to new shores. For the people of the time, it was hard to look in again.

A body of literature that Zoiryn is intimately familiar with is the period of Deep Molting that came after system collapse. These ancestors are the ones who are usually credited with the changes that gave way to the current world, and of course their contributions were crucial. It annoys the inner peace steward, though, that so little credit was given to the dissidents who lived through that final hoorah of greed. It also irks Zoiryn that, despite having successfully refocused on the local in the day-to-day of their current lives, they still idolized a select few heroes of the Deep Molting, retelling the same legends about epic acts of change. What had always fascinated Zoiryn about the literature of that epoch were the countless descriptions of ecosystem recovery, the astute observations of species' return, seasons' recalibration, a resyncing with the cycles by ordinary people.

In the 21st century speculative fiction found on the shelves alongside Le Guin, Zoiryn discovers their ancestors' ability to see past time, to redefine territorial relationships of mutual belonging and to explore the boundaries of what it means to support. The perceptive steward carries over our ancestors' gift of imagining new therapies that harness yet-to-be-developed ways of relating, human-canine relationships or activism, while capturing the healing power of healing on the healer. Zoiryn delights in the beauty of metaphor that helped the people of the time reconstruct their concept of reciprocity and community, delves

into the fictional lives of our photosynthesizing offshoot species and marvels at the power of holistic pelvic policy. Alongside our ancestor's suicidal tendencies ran a deep vein of hope for not only survival, but thriving.

So much of what was produced in that time was intellectualised or externalized. Zoiryn had never paid attention to what it must have felt like for the people of that period to face their future, had never tried to. Modern people had been taught to disdain the people responsible for that degeneration, to fear their selfish impulses. Zoiryn now tries to pay attention to the ancestors' hopefulness. To embody the paying attention.

Closely on the heels is an uncharacteristic feeling of self-doubt about being able to represent someone from another culture, another time, any other being, human or otherwise, in fact. Is it ethical to do so? If you have some insight into their reality, though, is it ethical not to do so? Is there an accountability to the current times? To the protagonists? Or only to the reader? Oneself? What if we are only answerable to the future?

The inner peace steward has not yet decided what a commemoration with a Zoiryn signature will look like, is instead simply engaging in discovery, leaving oneself open, following opportunities and trusting intuition. What Zoiryn is sure of though, is that it will be hopeful.

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