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A Visit From the Moon

Georgia Ann Banks-Martin

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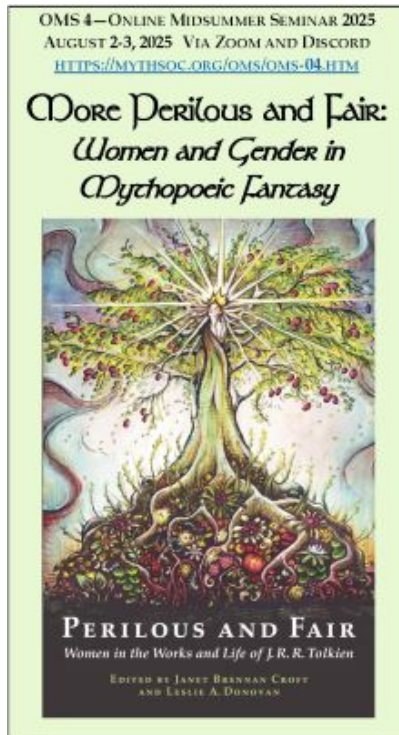
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Abstract

From the beach, you could see the island. My mother said no one lived there anymore and she didn't know why. I wanted to live there. I wanted to be a goddess and live forever.

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A Visit From the Moon

by

Georgia Ann Banks-Martin

From the beach, you could see the island. My mother said no one lived there anymore and she didn't know why. I wanted to live there. I wanted to be a goddess and live forever. Mother said there used to be a goddess and people who lived forever. From the pier, in midsummer, I could see that some of the trees had bright orange fruit hanging from their branches. I thought I could use them in an elixir. I looked up immortality drinks and found a long list of plants that used to grow in the mountains. I was sad when I found out that most of them had disappeared, and that the drinks had proven not to work. That didn't stop me from dreaming about being a goddess. That is, until the day when my mother and I left the pier just as it started to rain.

We had hoped to catch some fish, but the storm started up suddenly, and we had to go home. The winds were high and wrapped my long hair around my eyes like a blindfold, and I fell into the street. When I got up, my blue dress was too muddy to be washed. Mother made me throw it into the trash. After my bath, I went to bed while Mom made mooncakes for the Moon Festival. I wanted to help, but last year when I was supposed to be putting the red frosting on the cakes that had cooled, I started eating them. I ate almost all of them before the festival even started. Mother was mad because she had to make another batch. I couldn't help myself—they were so good, and I only got to eat them every fifteenth of October.

The Moon Festival was always fun. I loved the lanterns and the smell of the incense, but the fire dragon dance was one of the best parts. The dragon was big and red, made from thousands of sticks of burning incense. It was two hundred and nineteen feet long, and it took three hundred people to make him twist and curl like a giant python.

Some people said that many years ago there had been a typhoon a few weeks before the Moon Festival. While everyone was cleaning up from the storm, a python ate all of the farm animals. The people had no milk, eggs, or meat. Some the villagers went on a hunt, killed the snake, and hung it from the flag pole in the center of town. In the morning, everyone went to see the snake, but the body had disappeared. Arguments broke out. Shouting filled the square.

"They lied! They didn't kill the snake!"

"Yes, they did! Someone stole it!"

"The hunters took it!"

"Why would we take!"

"For the money!"

This went on until the people grew bored and left. Days passed without an answer. Soon, half of the town's people were sick. It seemed everyone had a high fever and a hard time breathing. Some had red spots on their skin. Those who had the spots died. No one understood what was happening until, one day, a wise man came along. He told the people that the python was the son of the Sea Dragon King. The only way to be healed would be to perform the fire dragon

dance during the festival for three days. So the people performed the dance, and to remember what happened, they continued it every year. Nothing that interesting ever happened anymore.

Since it was raining, band practice was canceled; my brother came home early to play his trumpet in his room. I knew he really needed to practice, but he sounded so bad I wanted to take his trumpet and smash it like a soda pop can. A couple of times in the past, I'd hidden it from him, but Daddy said that was mean. Really, the whole band was horrible. They couldn't play or march. Daddy said it was Kelvin the drum major's fault. He was always leaping and spinning, and sometimes he looked like a mime or a deranged dancer trying to win a contest.

The morning after the storm, everyone was outside. Some people were asking if the festival would be canceled. Big trees were lying on their sides with their hairy roots sticking out into the streets like the feet of people too tall for their beds. On one of the trees, I noticed some ants crawling in two lines, one coming and the other going. I decided to follow the line that headed toward the pier. When I got to the pier, I realized that the tree continued all the way to the island, where it seemed to be snowing.

I saw a lady sitting there, and I called to her, "Hi! What's your name?" The lady moved a little but didn't stand up. "Hi, over here!" The lady held her head down and tried to cover it with her arm. I made my way along the fallen tree to the island. The lady wore a long blue dress that was a little dirty; it had odd splotches all over it. I couldn't tell if the stains were grease or dirt. The wind kept blowing her long hair around her head and eyes. When I got close enough to touch her, the wind stopped blowing and the snow stopped too—only it wasn't snow. It was small pieces of clear glass, and most of it had fallen in a circle around the woman,

who whispered that her name was Chang-E. I told her my name was ChangChang.

"Hello, ChangChang. I used to live on this island, but that was many years ago. Now I live on the moon. The wind blew me out of my house through an open window. It's an interesting way to travel. It only happens when I'm needed down here. No one lives on this island anymore. We used to have a lot of fun when I lived here. Of course, the place does look a bit smaller than it did then."

As Chang-E stood up, the last of the glass dropped into the pile that circled her feet. She stepped out of the ring of glass onto the soft white sand. As she moved, her dress took on a sort of iridescent glow and the dirt disappeared.

"How did you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Clean your dress?"

"Oh, moon dust. Best dust anywhere in the heavens, it is very easy to work with. I just shake my dress a little and the dust goes away. Nothing like the dust you have here."

I looked up and saw a pretty cloud that looked like a bird. "Well look at that!"

"That's Chi and An. You will like An, she is a wonderful bird. Chi rides on An's back all the time. I hope he has my mantle."

As we watched, I could see that Chang-E was right. The cloud was getting closer; it was a bird with large, flapping wings, whiter than anything that I had ever seen, and, indeed, there was a man riding the bird as if it were a horse. The bird landed in the glass circle, and Chi slid down An's thigh. When he was on the ground, he took the piece of fabric he was wearing around his shoulders and handed it to Chang-E.

"Thank you. I was getting cold. Chi, I would like you to meet my friend Chang-Chang. We've been chatting. No one lives here anymore. What a waste of land, but it has been a long time and things in the dust

world are always changing. I bet Chang-Chang has never heard of my dear Yi, have you, ChangChang?"

"No. My mother may know him, though. I could go get her. She's getting ready for the festival, I think. The storm blew down a lot of trees, so there's a lot of stuff to clean up. I hope some of them fell on the school, right over the band room. That would keep my brother from playing his awful music! Anyway! You wait here and I will go get my mom."

"Ha-ha, no dear. I'm sure had she known him, you would know of him too. Festival? You mean the Moon Festival. Why aren't you home making mooncakes?"

"Cause I eat them all!"

"I see. Everything, even the cassia tree over here, is different. It may be a relative of the old one, but it isn't the same one, just doesn't seem to be as full as the one that was here before. No, I don't think there is anything left from back then. Let's go over to the tree and sit while I tell you both all about me and Yi."

The cassia tree hung over the circle. I found a nice patch of sand while Chang-E sat on a glass stool that Chi had unloaded from a pack strapped to An's saddle. Chi took a place near Chang-E's feet.

"There used to be ten Sun-birds who lived in a mulberry tree in the Eastern Sea. Each day, one of them would take their mother, the Mother of the Suns, on a ride around the world in her carriage. After a lifetime of doing this, the Sun-birds got bored and decided it would be more fun if all of them were to go with their mother on her ride. So that's what they did, but that made life here on the dust world very hard. The people didn't have food to eat or water to drink because all of the fields dried up and the rivers dried up too. Then the trees died, so there was no place to go to get away from the heat. That is, if you were brave

enough to even go outside. Soon, people started to die, just a few at first, the older ones and the poor ones who had nothing in their pantries to eat or drink. But after a few weeks, it became obvious that all the people were dying.

"The emperor didn't know what to do, so he prayed to Di Jun, the father of the Sun-birds. Di Jun understood and agreed that something had to be done before no one was left alive on the dust world. He sent the divine Yi to scare the Sun-birds into returning to the normal way of doing things, but when Yi saw what had happened to the dust world, he got so mad that he picked up his bow and killed all but one of the Sun-birds. This pleased Yi, but it completely displeased Di Jun. Yi had murdered Di Jun's boys, so he was banished to the dust world—no longer was he immortal.

"For a while, that didn't worry him, because the dust world people needed him to protect them from Fei Lian, the Count of the Winds, who was a big ugly bully. In fact, he looked like a bull and had only one eye and a serpent's tail. He would create these big storms that tore up the trees and flattened all the houses in the towns. So, one day, Yi went after the Count. When the Count saw him coming, he jumped into a large sack that he had in his cave. When Yi got to the cave, he looked around and didn't see anyone, but he sensed that the Count was home. Being a bull, the Count didn't have much use for furniture, so there wasn't a bed to look underneath, or cabinets or closets to open up. So the only place he could have been was in the sack that was neatly placed against the sidewall. Yi took his bow and arrow out and shot into the sack. The sack popped and the Count reappeared. He tried to run. Yi shot him in the knee with an arrow. Defeated, the Count surrendered and promised never to cause trouble again.

“On his way home, Yi came across an overflowing river. It hadn’t rained in weeks, and Yi knew that the water god had to be the cause of this. So, he shot an arrow into the foaming river. Soon, the river went back to its normal size and a man on a white horse appeared from the middle of the water. Taking no chances and not wanting to be killed by the angry god, Yi shot first and wounded the god in the eye. The god ran off as fast as he could on his horse. Then Yi noticed a girl in the water too. ChangChang? Can you guess who that girl was?”

“No.”

“Why, it was me! Yi thought I was the prettiest girl he had ever seen and asked me right then and there to marry him before some other man did. I was so impressed by Yi’s bravery that I agreed to be his wife. Years went by and Yi continued to accomplish heroic deeds. He fought a wind bird and Chilsetooth, and was awarded the title of Marquis Pacifier of the Country. As he grew older, though, he began to understand that his banishment really did matter. He would die soon, all of his heroic feats would be forgotten, and in time I would die too. One day, while he was hunting, his horse ran away from him. Yi chased the horse into the Kunlun Mountains, where he met the Queen-Mother of the Jasper Sea. ‘Yi,’ the Queen-Mother said. ‘What is the matter?’

“My horse ran away, and I must find him.’

“Is that all? Just be still for a while, he will come back to you. Why don’t you wait here with me?”

“Alright,’ Yi said, and he sat down.

“You say that you are troubled by the loss of your horse, but I sense there is more. Please tell me what this burden is that you bear.’

“Yi said, ‘I’m getting old and will soon die. I don’t want to die. I don’t want the dust world people to forget what I have done.

None of the gods are willing or able to help them. Only I can save the people. After I’m gone, who will listen for their cry for help?”

“You are right. The dust world must never be without you. Being without you would mean that they would likely die by the hand of some great evil. What about your wife? Doesn’t she want to live forever? She was once immortal. She may not remember. She was once a goddess, but was reborn as a human so that you wouldn’t be alone in the dust world. She was placed in the care of the water god, who cared for her like she was his sister. When she was old enough to be married, he was to bring her to you. But, as you know, she grew into a striking young woman, and the water god couldn’t bear to see her leave. So he overflowed the river to entice you to fight for your bride’s hand.

“I have a way to solve your problem. In my garden grows an orange tree whose fruit, when properly prepared, gives anyone who eats it immortality. I will give it to you because you have proven yourself to be of great service to the dust world. I can give you two pills made from this fruit if you think your wife wants it.’

“Yes! I want her to live forever with me!”

“Alright, I will give you two pills, one for each of you. They are to be taken after you have prayed and meditated about the matter for one week. After you have taken the medicine, you will return to Heaven and be fully restored. However, you will always hear the people’s cries for help. Please be careful, do not leave them where others will find them. Do not take them without following my directions. The outcome can result in the person becoming more than just immortal, and I will not be able to offer you more.’

“Yi began to cry. ‘Thank you, Queen-Mother.’

“Now go outside and see if your wayward horse has returned. I will bring the pills to you.’

“Yes, I will do that. Thank you.’

“And so Yi went to see if his horse had indeed returned. He looked on the side of the palace. He looked in back of the palace. The horse wasn’t there. Just as he was about to give up, he saw a white figure in a nearby valley. He went a little closer and saw that it was his horse. He ran down the side of the mountain and got him. He would have gone back to the palace, but the Queen-Mother came to the valley and gave him the pills wrapped in a red cloth.

“Once he was home, he hid the pills in a box of arrowheads and went to visit a farmer who was demanding to see him. There was a pack of wild boars and a dragon threatening the people who lived in a nearby valley. He had to leave right away, so a messenger was sent to tell me of Yi’s new mission. He was unable to return home for several months.

“One day his favorite student, Feng Meng, came by and asked if there were any arrows he might have for practice. The boy recognized the box right away. When I opened it, I found the pills and recognized what they were used for. I gave the box to the student and sent him away. I was outraged. I put both of the pills in my mouth. Instantly, I tasted the sweetest orange juice ever created. Then the sweetness turned just as bitter. I tried to drink a glass of water. Before I could finish, I began coughing and dropped the glass on the floor. It shattered in an odd ring around my feet. I stared at it for a while in amazement. Then I noticed an orb growing from the glass. It was milky white and grew quickly, like a large soap bubble, until it trapped me inside of itself. I kicked and picked at the sides, but I couldn’t get out of it. I sat in that orb for a week before the wind blew me out of my kitchen window. When Yi finally got home, I was floating

away. He tried to catch me. He jumped and jumped, but I was rising too quickly. He started to shoot arrows, but for the first time, he missed.

“Yi was deeply hurt over losing me.

Some people said he became mean, yelling at people for anything they did wrong, especially his archery students. One day, he left home and didn’t return, so a rumor began that he had been killed by Feng Meng.

“But that is not what happened. Yi went to see the immortal king Xi Wang Mu, who said to him, ‘You had regained the favor of the gods through your good works. But in your haste to care for others, you neglected your wife and yourself. You should have prayed, mediated, and taken the immortality pills together before you left on your journey.’

“So, he was only partially restored to his former place. The gods allowed him to build me a palace on the moon, but he was required to live on the sun and assist the surviving Sun-bird. I can never visit him. Instead, he has to visit me at my home on the fourteenth of each month.

“Now, I live on the moon, where the only other living beings are my servants, the white hare, who mixes elixir all day, and the three-legged toad. No one speaks to me or plays games with me, or even offers to tell me stories. When I’m needed, an orb appears and the wind takes me to my new destination. That is how things work, and this is where I draw my joy from now: the fact that Yi and I represent and help to maintain the Yin and Yang, the natural balance of life here in the dust world, and up there in the cosmos.

“You must respect your mother. She works hard on baking for the festival. She really could use your help.”

Suddenly, I heard the faint sound of school band music. They were at it again. “My, my! ChangChang, is that the marching

band? Chi, bring An over so I can get a good look. ChangChang, you come too.”

We climbed onto the back of the huge white bird and flew high up into the clouds. I was sure we wouldn't hear anything, but I was wrong. We heard every wrong note! We saw every crazy move!

“ChangChang, look at the drum major! Look at his dancing. He is great. Chi, take us back to the island. This band isn't in tune. They need help. ChangChang, I want you to go to where the band is playing. I will see you shortly.”

After Chang-E and Chi left, I walked as fast as I dared on the tree trunk until I was on the other side of the pier again. Then I ran over to the park, where the band was playing. Just as I got there, the drum major threw his staff into the sky and it became a bridge. The drum major, being the silly creature he was, just kept on dancing his nutty dance until the whole band was standing in front of the castle, on which was inscribed: “The Spreading Halls of Crystal Cold.” I ran in behind them. From the door came a sorcerer who held his hands up, and the players' instruments disappeared.

“You have been invited to a dance. Please follow me.”

The band members did so in silence. Inside, on her great crystal throne, sat Chang-E. To the drum major, she said, “You are a child of the mundane world of dust. Great is your fortune, since you have been able to find your way here!” Chang-E called for her attendants, who flew in on their white-winged horses, and the best music ever heard began to play as everyone danced under the cassia tree. When the dance was over, Chang-E gave the sheet music to the drum major, and the sorcerer returned the band's instruments. Then all of us mortals came back to the dust world, where suddenly the band played well. I stopped looking for immortality, stopped stealing the

mooncakes, and stopped asking about the island.

“The Visitor From the Moon” was inspired by a story called “The Legend of the Lady on the Moon,” retold by Yan Li in her novel *Lily in the Snow*. The story, and many like it, is told to young children during the Mid-Autumn or Moon Festival. During these events, people enjoy making crafts, listening to music, eating traditional cakes and fruits, and admiring the full moon. The primary character, Chang-E, is the Lady or Goddess of the Moon, who is famous for having stolen the elixir of life from her husband, Yi.

Yi is a divine archer who comes to Earth to defend her from various enemies, some of whom are the ten Sun-birds that keep it warm. When they begin to misbehave, their father, Di Jun, asks Yi to help him regain control over them. Instead, Yi kills all of them except for one.

Intrigued by the story, I wanted to know more about it and started to do some research. I was able to trace the story through its characters and other retellings, which were titled differently. Lin titles the story “The Legend of the Lady on the Moon.” Frederick H. Martens, in his book *The Chinese Fairy Book*, titles the story “The Lady of the Moon.” Scott Littleton, in *Mythology: The Illustrated Anthology of World Myth and Storytelling*, breaks the story into three: “The Times of the Ten Suns,” “The Elixir of Life,” and “The Death of Yi.” *Encyclopedia Britannica* offers a short retelling under the entry of “Hou Yi.” I used elements from all of these sources to create my story. I have assigned the mysterious woman the name Chang-E because she is my moon goddess, and her husband is the archer Yi. In general, the name “Chang” is a unisex name meaning “to flourish for a long time.”