

龙

The Year of the Dragon

by Elizabeth Powers '14

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缘起

The Beginning

In the beginning, Buddha summoned all of the animals before his departure from earth. He waited and waited, sunrise to sunset, but in the end, only thirteen animals stood before him. First the Rat, then the Ox, the Tiger, the Rabbit, the Dragon, the Snake, the Horse, the Goat, the Monkey, the Rooster, the Dog, the Pig, and finally the Cat. No one knows what became of the Cat. As for the other twelve animals, Buddha honored them by creating a twelve-cycle calendar, naming one year per cycle after each animal in the order they arrived; however, he was baffled why the mighty Dragon failed to arrive first. *I had to make rain*, bellowed the Dragon, his voice echoing across the corners of the earth, *I had to make rain so the people and animals can drink and bathe and eat rice*. The Buddha was pleased, and even though the Year of the Dragon would be fifth in the cycle, his months would be filled with fortune, and all the people and animals of the earth would honor him. For eleven years, the people and animals of the earth would anticipate, and on the twelfth, they would rejoice in his name.

一月

January

It began with floods of red. Imagine, he said, imagine seas of sky.

二月

February

Back home in China, the New Year celebrations last for fifteen days, he'd said, from the new moon until the full moon. It started far back in Chinese history, when on the first of every New

Year, a beast called the Nian would ravage the villages of China. He'd destroy the peoples' crops, he'd kill their livestock, sometimes he'd even eat the village children. One year, however, the Nian was scared away by a young boy in red robes, and the people understood- the beast was afraid of the color red. The next year, they decorated their villages with red lanterns in the streets, red scrolls in the windows and doorways, red firecrackers that soared through the skies to frighten away the Nian. He never returned, and the people rejoiced. To this day, the Chinese dress in red during the New Year festival to scare away evil spirits and summon good fortune.

三月

March

I watched him tear the cherry blossom in two, the halves of the once-petal fluttering to the grass like the wings of a butterfly dyed red. I longed for the golden brown of his ink-stained fingers, tracing characters on the bare of my skin. It was unnaturally warm for March. Cracked white concrete of flat library steps. Bare legs under a short floral dress, crossed against sun-streaked blades of warm grass. Exchanged glances in the dimly-lit coffeehouse, a stray smile on chapped lips. It snowed in Rome for the first time in twenty-six years, and all the water in the ancient marble fountains froze.

四月

April

When the pieces don't fit together you can play a melody on the wooden flute and charm the snakes until they slither into waltz lines and dance. Almost like a forbidden slip of the tongue, a scarlet letter on a sinner's breast. The danger is when the filaments of the imagination and of the definitive morph and mix until they're inseparable, one of the same. A childhood Christmas ornament where you fill an empty glass ball with green and white paint and shake, the swirls of green and white fusing to olive. Forgetting which came first, the green paint or the white paint, forgetting why you used green and white when you really wanted red and silver. Trying to tell a story when the pieces have already blended to blackness.

五月

May

The rain came and stained his prints and I said that's okay just list rainwater as a material alongside water-based ink and watercolor, in the end everything is water anyway. I'm water and you're water and the earth was born of water and to water we shall return. The Dragon understands the art of blackness and the music of silence, he creates where there is nothing, for

we all are children of nothing. He is the master of lakes, rivers, and seas, he brings life to the rice crops and death to the drought deadened lands of dust. The blues and greens and browns bled into a river of blackness, reflecting the light of the moon and the gleam of blackened eyes. We tilt our heads to the sky and pray to the water dragon for refreshment and rebirth.

六月

June

We moved four year's worth of oil canvases and water prints and painted woodcuts from the seventh floor to the pavement until nothing but white remained in his studio. Whitewashed walls, white linoleum floor, white-lined windowpanes, a cloud white sky.

七月

July

People born in the Year of the Dragon are said to be innovative, passionate, confident, brave, and wise, characteristics gifted by the mighty Dragon onto humans born in his year, the sign of luck. They're also said to be conceited, tactless, scrutinizing, and quick-tempered. The Dragon expects of others what he expects of himself, sometimes without realizing that the Rat cannot cross oceans by soaring through the skies or that the Goat cannot create thunderstorms by collecting clouds and willing them to deliver life to earth. I watched these traits unfold in him, one by one, the noble and the artless.

There is a traditional Chinese saying that goes 望子成龙, wàngzǐchénglóng, *hoping one's son will become a dragon.*

八月

August

The Dragon is believed to possess unlimited mystical powers that transcend even the wildest imaginations of humans. He can transform himself into water, he can shrink himself to the length of a silkworm or expand to the entire space of the universe, he can change colors to hide from enemies or glow in the dark to make his presence known to all things on earth. A human with these traits would not be a human at all, so instead of magic, the Dragon bestows upon some of his children unlimited artistic abilities. The power to transform seas into skies, clouds into rain, impossibility into truth- but only on paper, only in sculpture, only within the realms of gravitational attraction and mathematical equations and human mortality.

九月

September

There was always charcoal under his fingernails and black ink seeped into his palms, even the occasional absentminded streak of oil paint across his forehead, and I wondered if he'd ever painted with rain.

十月

October

With the potential for great joy comes the potential for great destruction. He brings water for crops to burst into growth and people to drink and bathe, but he also summons water, great masses of water, as hurricanes and tsunamis and monsoons and floods. His gift of life, with the flick of a tail, can morph into a curse of death. Some of the worst storms throughout history, according to Chinese folklore, arose from greedy mortals angering the mighty Dragon. Enraged, his bellows would rumble across the earth and water would pour from the skies, killing everything in its path. The people would beg on their knees for mercy until the winds ceased and the last of the floodwaters seeped into the earth, making way for rebirth of the crops and forgiveness of the mortals' greed.

We watched tree branches blow and water cascade from the sky for two days, and finally the roof began leaking. We moved his oil paintings of Providence away from the windows and into the hallway, away from the howling winds and angered rainfall.

十一月

November

He told me I was born in the Year of the Monkey. The Dragon is the most majestic of the zodiac and the envy of the other eleven animals, but the Monkey is the most clever. We are curious, charismatic, and creative, the sign of imagination. Imagination with the potential to manifest itself in a myriad of ways. Through business, through invention, through language. The Monkey's tragic flaw is his duplicity, even his unshameful and ruthless dishonesty. The Monkey is a storyteller- a pleaser of crowds with an endearing enthusiasm, but a teller of tales, beginning with exaggeration and fiction and ending with slander and deceit. The Monkey is the writer of the zodiac.

Supposedly the Dragon paired with the Monkey is one of the most loving matches of the zodiac. They are of the same Trine, both natural leaders, both bearers of potential for great good but great evil. Compassion complemented by imagination, arrogance coupled with storytelling. If not one of the most loving, then at least one of the most artistic.

十二月

December

It will end with floods of red, parting the seas to make way for the slithering Snake. The Monkey will play a waltz melody on the wooden flute as the Dragon assumes his celestial vigilance for eleven years, summoning rain from seas and sky.