

**Aesop – “The Tortoise and the Hare” (140 words)**

A hare one day ridiculed the short feet and slow pace of the tortoise. The latter, laughing, said: “Though you be swift as the wind, I will beat you in a race.” The hare, deeming the tortoise’s assertion to be simply impossible, assented to the proposal; and they agreed that the hare should choose the course, and fix the goal. On the day appointed for the race they started together. The tortoise never for a moment stopped but went on with a slow but steady pace straight to the end of the course. The hare, trusting to his native swiftness, cared little about the race, and lying down by the wayside fell fast asleep. At last, waking up, and moving as fast as he could, he saw the tortoise had reached the goal, and was comfortably dozing after her fatigue.

**“The Golden Mallard”, from *The Jataka*, a collection of Indian stories (420 words)**

Once upon a time when Brahmadata was reigning in Benares, the Bodhisatta was born a Brahmin, and growing up was married to a bride of his own rank, who bore him three daughters named Nandā, Nanda-vatī and Sundari-nandā. The Bodhisatta dying, they were taken in by neighbours and friends, whilst he was born again into the world as a golden mallard endowed with consciousness of its former existences. Growing up, the bird viewed its own magnificent size and golden plumage and remembered that previously it had been a human being. Discovering that his wife and daughters were living on the charity of others, the mallard thought he might give them one golden feather at a time to help his wife and daughters to live in comfort. So away he flew to where they dwelt and alighted on the top of the central beam of the roof. Seeing the Bodhisatta, the wife and girls asked where he had come from; and he told them that he was their father who had died and been born a golden mallard, and that he had come to visit them and put an end to their miserable necessity of working for hire. "You shall have my feathers," said he, "one by one, and they will sell for enough to keep you all in ease and comfort." So saying, he gave them one of his feathers and departed. And from time to time he returned to give them another feather, and with the proceeds of their sale these brahmin-women grew prosperous and quite well-to-do. But one day the mother said to her daughters, "There's no trusting animals, my children. Who's to say your father might not go away one of these days and never come back again? Let us pluck him clean next time he comes, so as to make sure of all his feathers." Thinking this would pain him, the daughters refused. The mother in her greed called the golden mallard to her one day when he came, and then took him with both hands and plucked him. Now the Bodhisatta's feathers had this property that if they were plucked out against his wish, they ceased to be golden and became like a crane's feathers. And now the poor bird, though he stretched his wings, could not fly, and the woman flung him into a barrel and gave him food there. As time went on his feathers grew again (though they were plain white ones now), and he flew away to his own abode and never came back again.

Annie McMahon, Letterpile blog

From the prompt: Write a story that includes the line, "Are you sure you weren't followed?"

**Secret Mission (97 words)**

"Are you sure you weren't followed?"

"Positive."

"Were you able to secure the equipment?"

Zeth glanced around and pulled a black bandanna off a shiny red metal box. He opened it ceremoniously.

"With this under our power," Mauricio declared, "we will be able to annihilate the enemy before complete invasion."

Zeth carefully picked one of the silver elements from the box and examined it thoughtfully.

Just as he laid the piece back in place, the ground shook, the room darkened, and a voice boomed from above:

"What are you two doing under the table with my toolbox?"

**“Mermaid” (812 words), Johnathan Schneeweiss, *Cicada Magazine***

Izam’s fingers moved on their own. They found his sunken chest. And counted his ribs.

His father would have slapped his hand away. A stupid habit of a stupid boy. A stupid starving boy who counted his ribs when he was hungry even though it only made him hungrier. Izam knew it was stupid but he could not help it. He was so hungry.

The ocean was silent. The boat was still, the fishing line as motionless as ever. A few final rays of sunlight sparkled on the waves. There would be no fish today. No food. Izam’s fingers brushed his chest and began counting his ribs again. No food for another day.

The line tugged and the rod tore from his hand.

Izam lunged and caught it. He braced himself against the gunnel. The boat quaked beneath him as he reeled in the monster at the end of the line. He gritted his teeth and pulled with his entire body. The surface rippled and broke, and the monster exploded from the waves.

Izam blinked. There was a splash, and it was gone. The line went slack. Izam fell backwards into the boat.

But he had seen it. Seventeen pounds! Maybe even eighteen! Enough to eat for how long? Enough to sell for how much? Father would have been so happy. And now it was gone.

Izam scanned the surface of the water again, but all he saw was endless blue rippling gold and orange beneath the setting sun. Eighteen pounds. Enough to eat for how long? His fingers moved to his ribs again, but he caught himself. Eighteen pounds.

A splash came from behind him, but it was small, barely even a splash. More like something coming out of the water, only...

She held the fish in scaled hands. The skin of her arms and shoulders was bluer than the water around her, growing paler at her chest and face. She looked up at him with large dark eyes.

*Mermaid.*

“Is it yours?” she said. Her voice was small and delicate and multi-toned.

“It... got away,” Izam said.

“Here it is.” She offered the fish in her hands. It flipped and wriggled, but her scaled fingers held it easily.

Izam breathed.

There was a net in the bulkhead.

How many times had his father prepared him? But he looked at her dark tangled hair glistening in the sunset rays. He saw the blue-green skin of her chest and the way she smiled at him.

The net was right there in the bulkhead, but he hesitated. The fish was forgotten. Eighteen pounds? What was eighteen pounds of fish when right before you was...?

“Do you want it?” She smiled and held the fish forward.

Izam could not speak. Her dark eyes beheld him calmly, easily. He wanted to stare forever. And he wanted also to look away and grab the net and never look again.

No one had ever told him. No one had ever said they were this beautiful. How was he supposed to use the net on such a magnificent creature?

“Do you want it?” she asked again.

Father would not have hesitated. He would have fetched the net immediately. He would be rowing home now. It was the right thing to do. Izam knew that. He thought of the houses on the hilltop that overlooked the town. Great big mansions of marble, kitchens filled with cooks and servants to wait on you day and night. Everyone would be happy. No one would ever starve again.

All he had to do...

*I'm sorry*, he wanted to say. *I'm so sorry*.

He reached into the bulkhead. He grabbed the net. “Come,” she said.

A sudden gust of wind rocked the boat and Izam stared at the mermaid’s outstretched hand. By now, the sun had dipped below the horizon though the sky still shone gold and red with its rays. Around the mermaid the water had darkened, but her skin glowed with the final flickers of crimson in the trembling waves.

A smile came to her face. Life came into her eyes. Izam grasped the net tightly.

Behind her smile, Izam saw sadness. And hesitation. And fear. He knew those feelings.

But still, she smiled. The net fell from his grip.

He took her hand and he dove into the water.

A thick rope wound around his body and wrists. He struggled against his bonds, but all he could think about was the pain in her eyes as she tied him with the dark rope. It was the same pain he had felt just moments before.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m so sorry.” She dove deep into the sea, dragging him down with her.

Izam fought for air and thrashed. As the darkness closed in around him, his gaze moved on its own. He found her sunken chest. And counted her ribs.

**“Artichoke Heart”** (583 words) by Carolyn Cheng

Claudia Ann Seaman Awards for Young Writers, 2017, Fiction, *Polyphony H.S.*, 1st Honorable Mention

When he first asked her where babies came from, she balanced him in her lap and pointed at the garden.

“They dig the children out of the soil,” she told him. “They come from the earth. Parents plant the seeds; God helps them grow. After nine months, the midwives go into the garden to see how they’ve come along.”

“You can tell what the children will be like,” she said, “by which flowers grow from them.”

His eyes widened. “Which kind was I?”

“You were a daffodil,” she said, tickling him. “My bright, sunny boy!”

He laughed and squirmed away, pointed at her abdomen.

“What about her?” he asked.

“I think she’ll be roses.” She rested her palms on her faintly blooming stomach, a mystery to him. “Or maybe plum blossoms.” In his head, the small flowers looked like bits of folded crepe paper. One breath might blow them all away.

“What about Dad?” he said.

“Not a flower at all,” she said, shaking her head. “He’s an artichoke.”

Months later, the boy learns the facts of life, of embryos and wombs. His father explains it to him very carefully, the complications that grind the cycle of life to a stop. Why his mother and the baby girl die in a failed delivery.

He turns the memories of his mother over – small, rare treasures – and embroiders them with fancy. He imagines the midwives finding the babies curled in fetal position. The bigger ones are ready to be born into the world; they cry the moment the diggers cut the roots and lift them from the dirt, wailing as they scrub earth from their eyes. Others are too small, too pale. Their skin translucent. These they shovel dirt over, leave them to sleep and grow. Sometimes they make it.

The dead ones get planted back into the earth. That’s only part of the story that’s true.

It is just him and his father now. His father extends one tendril out to him: he buys him a puppy, and the silence expands to accommodate three. At dinner, sitting across from each other, it is very quiet, save the soft sounds of chewing and the trees in the yard shaking in the early spring storms. The garden runs rampant and wild now, the flowers brown and ragged, the gardener dead. Indoors, his father becomes thorned, curling in his petals tightly. The boy learns to be careful, lest he be pricked and bleed.

Seasons pass, and the boy learns from his father to grow into armored solitude. The house splits into two thorned fortresses, ghosts of a half-family sleeping within. The boy takes his dog out on walks. He climbs to the top of the hill where she unburies her bone. He might once have imagined that it would sprout into a skeletal tree. He knows better now. His mother taught him how to boil artichokes to unearth the soft heart. But he has learned to peel away the stories, to reach that hidden center: the hardened truth.

But if his mother was right, he might go out to the abandoned garden and dig up the sunflower patch. She would be beneath, and he would lift her out, and they'd wrap their arms tight around each other. His father would enclose them in a soft embrace. In the dream, if their hands all touch, the spell would be broken – the barbed vines would shrivel, fortress walls topple. And she would emerge as whole and fiercely alive as spring.