

2021 Wind & Water Writing Contest
Winner
NON-FICTION/FICTION

Fox and Mouse

By Andrea Koehler (Fiction)

Feet, tiny ones, scurrying above the bedroom ceiling. The sound wakes Mattie, and she looks up startled, but the noise stops and all she can hear is her pounding heart. Was she hearing things? She's been doing that lately; hearing Stanley in the garden, whistling. Mattie stares up at the ceiling and spots a tributary of cracks she hasn't noticed before and her mind floods with more worry. This poor house, thinks Mattie, gripping the edge of the covers, it was old when she and Stanley bought it years ago. When exactly was that? Mattie tries to work it out but feels she is pulling on an exceptionally long root and so she gives up. The scampering feet start up again and Mattie's heartbeat quickens. There is no doubt in her mind, something is in the attic, among her things. Mattie flings back the covers and shoves her own tiny feet into waiting slippers before shrouding herself in Stanley's tartan dressing gown. As she yanks the thick belt around her thin waist and ties a firm knot, she thinks about her granddaughter's work and her upcoming exhibition and realises that is why she has been thinking of Stanley. It is like she has come full circle since Carys moved in.

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Carys got off the bus outside the museum and yawned her way up the front steps. Since moving in with Mattie she had started coming to work earlier than usual. Her body clock seemed off-kilter. Sudden change, she guessed, would do that. Carys nodded at Bob on security as she entered the building. "Morning, Bob."

"Morning, pest."

Carys cringed, wishing he would tire of that joke. “Insects aren’t pests, Bob. We can’t do without them.” And right now, Carys couldn’t do without a coffee. She made her way across the large foyer, envying her grandmother, still in bed asleep, oblivious to the ticking clock.

Time was something Carys was able to examine and manipulate. As Curator of Insects at the museum, she kept specimens in their authentic condition for scientists to study and share their research. A specimen could never age. It had to appear as it did years ago, its condition unchanged in a union of time and existence. Yet often change had occurred in a specimen’s habitat, causing a decline in the vegetation or shelter that the insect relied on. Carys thought of her own recent change in habitat now that she was single again and living with her grandmother. Their cohabiting was surprisingly straightforward compared to her recent relationship failure. Me and Mattie are like Bess Beetles, thought Carys, they thrive in family groups. Carys descended the stairs to her department to fill her mug with strong coffee.

Today she was focusing on beetles and began removing several unit trays of dry, pinned specimens of Titan Beetles from the insect drawers in the cabinet. She packaged them carefully, ready for a loan to send to a scientist who needed to study them. She liked that her work could be valuable to others, especially when it involved the Titan Beetle from the Amazon rainforest. It was her personal favourite and she loved taking these specimens out of the cabinet whenever she had the opportunity. The largest species of beetle – the size of her fist – the Titan Beetle had a jaw that could snap pencils apart, which was impressive, thought Carys.

After packing the specimens for the loan, Carys hurried down the hallway to the weekly meeting. The meeting this week, under the glare of the overhead lights, was about insect bioluminescence, and Carys was thrilled to be involved with her colleagues on this upcoming exhibition. There would be a lot of work involved for the team, but such a fascinating subject was sure to attract the public. “Bums in seats” had always been the departmental motto; the more visitors they attracted, the more chance they had of encouraging the public to not only

respect wildlife but to be responsible for a harmonious relationship. Carys rubbed her eyes, wincing from the overhead light. She thought about fireflies using light to attract mates, she thought about office blocks at night with their lights attracting birds and insects too but killing them on contact. It was something she could put in the exhibition to get people to think about human artificial light.

When the meeting was over Carys spent the rest of the day working on data labels and barcodes for new specimens. She enjoyed being absorbed in the meticulous nature of her work with the insects, gathering valuable information from them on the impact of climate change. Her data labels and barcodes recorded the facts on insect distribution and habitat description; where the species was found, what they ate, the population numbers, the other species existing in the same location, and what the weather recordings were in that part of the world and if they were changing. Carys logged data that highlighted diversity and co-existence of species.

By the time Carys left the museum at the end of her working day her eyes were feeling the effects of eye strain and an early morning start. She stepped outside and was struck by the heat after being cocooned in temperature-controlled conditions all day. All around her buildings baked in the sun and people scurried like insects, spilling across the sidewalk, gathering for after-work drinks in pubs. She found the sudden noise of people and traffic too much to bear, but it was a beautiful late afternoon and she wanted to be outdoors a while longer and so she decided to walk home to Mattie's. Sweat began to trickle down her spine and she thought of the Fog Beetle, moving across the desert, collecting fog droplets on its back. In lieu of a desert Carys cut across the park.

The footpath she took snaked through the grass and slowly the noise of the traffic dissolved behind her. A young mother inched along the path with her unsteady toddler beside her, the child was carrying a wooden painted duck. Carys guessed they were heading down to the river to see real mallards and geese and she purposefully overtook them, taking long

strides to get ahead. She much preferred the sound of quacking ducks on her walk home instead of a sobbing toddler, which she anticipated if that toy ended up in the river. Carys kept up a good pace while eyeing the slow-moving river beside her. Specks of sunlight shimmered on green water, as vivid as stars at night, and a blue and black damselfly hovered above the surface. A male azure damselfly, thinner than a dragonfly, Carys noted, and then she spotted the fox ahead of her.

It had emerged from a bush and was trotting through the grass but when it saw Carys it stopped. Carys did the same, fixing her eyes on the fox. The fox returned the stare and Carys felt pinned like she was a specimen being scrutinised by the fox. All other sights and sounds vanished, time slowed, and Carys felt a bond so deep she didn't dare blink or breathe. But a movement behind the fox broke the precious spell and the fox turned its head to look. Carys spied a litter of cubs scrambling out of the bush. Four cubs scampered about, but they didn't seem to range, they tumbled against each other in play and the smallest one wrestled with a stick. The adult fox turned its attention back to Carys and held her in another long stare before it trotted off, leaving Carys alone with its young. Carys felt a shot of pride.

She sank onto the grass and waited for the fox to return. After caring for dead insects all day and sifting through information, it felt good to keep an eye on the cubs as they huddled together in the sun. They had grown still and quiet in the parent's absence, but they hadn't hidden out of sight from her while they waited for the fox's return.

An idle breeze cut through hot air like a finger stroking a pool of water. One of the cubs raised its snout and its nose twitched. A cloud of insects hovered nearby. Ducks quacked as they landed on the river and smaller birds crossed the blue sky. After a while there was a sudden flash of reddish orange moving through the grass and Carys saw the fox had returned with food for the cubs. She couldn't tell what it was carrying but as the cubs devoured the food,

Carys slowly crept away. When she looked back the fox was watching her. “Thank you,” she whispered, “good luck.”

When Carys got home she found Mattie in the garden, sitting on the bench by the maple tree. Carys went out to join her.

“Hi, Mattie.” She kissed her forehead.

“Hello, Carys. Good day?”

“Yes, I met a fox.” Carys plonked herself on the bench. “What have you got there?”

“It was in the attic. I don’t know how it got up there.”

“Can I see?” Carys took the photo from Mattie. The image was mostly dark but Carys could make out huge ancient trees spotted with tiny lights. Carys squinted closely. “Are they fireflies?”

“Yes.” Mattie nodded. “I took that one when Stanley was ill.”

Carys heard Mattie’s voice falter and she reached out and touched her hand. “Go on,” she said gently. “Tell me.”

“He wanted to see them one more time before he died. That was his favourite place and his favourite insect.”

Carys held Mattie’s hand tight, not wanting to let go. “It’s definitely one of your best. He’d be pleased with that photo.”

Mattie nodded. “It’s a keeper.”

So are those ancient trees and fireflies, thought Carys.

“But I didn’t keep that mouse I found in the attic this morning. Dear little thing it was. I set it free.”

“Good,” said Carys. “I’m glad.”