

## WE LIVE TO BE SURPRISED

### *An Untitled Short Story*

Her daughter was waiting for her. Playing between the massive remains, she had climbed up the slime smoothed indentations to the top of a large dome. Rows of them formed a grid pattern along the length of the Eastern Side. Opposite were dark trenches, some filled with debris, others picked clean. Looking down they observed how the layout of the trenches reflected the tracery on the domed surfaces, looping and linking away from a central elliptical hollow.

She had planned to go to Murphy's Beek for supplies but the roads were impassable now. This place would never have been her first choice, but it was a relief to be out of the wet. She removed her oiled wrappings, careful not to run the rip near the wing shaped part. They had been here once before. The only treasure, right at the bottom, was a beautifully formed, breast shaped coracle.

Building materials were needed this time as their tank had sprung leaks too disastrous to tolerate. They were very proud of their homes. Lake Women before them had built the camp on a rise overlooking the mould ponds and it had never been flooded out. The towers were built from highly prized salvage lashed securely with tubing and much ingenuity. It was impossible to approach without detection and on arrival, difficult to scale without assistance. The bastards left their stuff alone.

This security was complemented by the comfort of the tanks' interiors. The inner quarters were cool and muted by awnings, dropped and lashed around deeply recessed eaves. A storage platform suspended below and a gantry projecting out from the roof like a prow doubled as a winch and a roost, the site of acrobatic activities during more frivolous times.

This was not frivolous. Already they were covered in slimy muck, picking their way across narrow walkways to find a place that held most promise.

Suddenly her body dropped, and with a signal for cautious advance they began slowly loosening the net slung over their shoulders.

Just ahead lay an elliptical hollow. It was quite large, measuring three body lengths wide, six lengths long. Depth was obscured by a mass of translucent creatures, opalescent in the light of haze and heat. The two exchanged quick grins, stealth uniting their movements as they converged on their prey. How easy! A readymade trap requiring only their finely woven net quietly set in place, secured them enough fresh snabbits to feed on for a long time.

When they had slaughtered and eaten their fill, the mother began to speak ...

*Before the Monsoon when the sun was cool and the moon could be used as a measure, when women and men spoke the same words, there were many, many different creatures inhabiting the earth. Some swam under water, some breathed air and like people, spoke their own languages – a precious gift. Other creatures walked across country and like us too, ran and hunted. Tall plants grew like water weed does, but out of the earth. Other creatures moved as though swimming through air, snapping up tiny winged bodies, all shapes and colours. Other creatures lived inside the earth. They dug dark, warm tunnels and many babies were born there where it was safe and soft.*

*Some stories tell about the sad songs they sang together on moonlit nights, their gloaming eyes and glistening bodies drawing movement lines like arterial tracks across the mosshills.*

*Other stories say the does laid sweet tasting brown eggs for little children like you. They brought them in baskets to each child's bed in the night as a token of hope for their future. Other stories tell of their capture and bewail their suffering.*

*At first they were happy, lazy, content to be stroked and fed. But a blank depression rose in them all. At night they pushed their bodies together in a wedge against the bleak geometry of their cells, bleached blue against contamination. Whiffs of chemicals drifted in taking possession of their senses. They were separated, cleaned, tagged, snipped. A shell house grew on their backs. Alive and dead, their silence was broken by a powerless keening and other sounds, sharp and final. They gave themselves up, forgot their smells, their bodies and each other, trapped in a mad stillness. Catatonic.*

*When they let them out they seemed to be able to live anywhere, all over the place. They were like they are now, legless, mute, each tasting more delicious and different to the other, their gristly ears good to chew. Swept along the floodwaters they survived the tornadoes of the Great Monsoon making their way into every lake and beek, to every mosshill and mouldpond. Since then they've become almost invisible and band together like this. Maybe a memory of the moon and the sad songs of their ancestors keep them together.*

She looked down at her stained brown hands holding the blade just used to prise the shells off and slice the succulent flesh.

She stood up in the oppressive heat, flicked the net lightly back along the edge of the ellipse. A feeling of inconsolable melancholy like the unvarying mist that even the sun cannot penetrate fell over her. She arranged the net over her daughter's shoulders, linking their transparent bodies, glistening sweat in the fading light.

