

Have you ever heard of the cloud fairies? They're quite shy, and they don't show themselves much nowadays, ever since the great storm. They're transparent, easy to miss unless you look carefully at what seems like an empty patch of sky, and then you might just see the outline of a head shaped like a glass bowl, with water swirling around inside and two milky eyes on the surface. They have huge wings, strong and graceful like a swan's and delicate, like a dragonfly's, which they'll dip into the lakes and the oceans to scoop up water into huge packs of cloud on their back. They have wispy tails like horses, and two small but strong and supple hands which they use to sculpt cloud. And perhaps if you're lucky you'll see them cupping a dash of color on their hands, but just a bit - never too much.

Sometimes they plow low across the sky, paving the gray blankets of cloud we call stratus. Sometimes on days like today when the earth is hot they soar high up into the cold sky to spin those feathery clouds we call cirrus. And when they're feeling warm and playful, they'll knead the clouds, and blow into them to make them rise like baking bread into those puffy clouds we call cumulus.

Long, long ago, when the Goddess still came down from her home among the stars every hundred years to visit the earth and the heavens and grant the wishes of the humans and the fairies, there lived a fairy queen named Caiyuna. Queen Caiyuna and her ten thousand laborers had built the most magnificent palaces like nothing we have ever seen on earth, and huge cloud-ships in the shape of dragons and whales and phoenixes, with flourishes that they had learned to sculpt and spin and blow over

millennia... But Queen Caiyuna was dissatisfied because there was one thing that her clouds lacked and it was color.

She would stare out of the windows of her palace at the lands below, the smooth green meadows dotted with wildflowers in the spring, the foam-crested waves breaking on the sandy beaches beneath sandstone cliffs, the whole mountainside forest turning yellow and orange and red during autumn, and the bright colors that the humans wore as they danced around a great big bonfire during the harvest festival.

And so, when the Goddess came down from her home among the stars to visit the heavens, when Queen Caiyuna received her in her mile-high palace, and like all the queens before her, bowed down and asked for favorable winds so they could sail their cloud-ships across the sky, the Goddess said:

“As the winds have blown, they shall blow forever more. But I sense that you are displeased.”

The queen’s face grew milky in embarrassment and she looked down at her tail as she spoke.

“It is said that the Goddess spared no effort in painting the colors of the earth. But we cloud fairies have often wondered, dear Goddess, why you have left none for us in the sky?”

The Goddess laughed, a deep laugh that echoed in the spaces between the stars, “Come, Queen of the Heavens, and take my hands,” and the queen put her small, but strong and supple hands in the hands of the Goddess, dark and speckled like maps of the galaxies. There was a light, bright as the sun, and a warm tingle spread up her arms and the arms of all the fairies.

“You shall wonder no longer,” the Goddess said. “To the cloud-fairies I grant the gift of color. From this day onward, you shall gather color in your hands as easily as you gather water. I trust you to use this power responsibly.”

At first, Queen Caiyuna herself led the expeditions, and was the first to touch any newfound treasure. She caressed the soft, round skin of a tomato until the red came off in her hands and it was left white and naked. She combed her fingers through the lavender grass and the purple dye ran in rivers down her palms. She shook the trees’ branches and collected all the greens that dripped onto her wings. She even stuck her hand in the mud, to gather the rich browns of the earth.

And with the colors that they triumphantly gathered, they started to paint the clouds. They started with the bottoms, and so vast were the clouds and so little were their paints that their efforts were barely perceptible at first. But then the humans noticed the sunrises and sunsets becoming more colorful, as the fairies splashed the colors of rose and orange and lemon across the bottoms of the clouds to greet the sun as it rose past, and poured the spoils of the day to wave it good-bye as it sailed away to warm the far side of the earth.

Every ten years, the Chieftain of the Earth and the Queen of the Heavens meet on Mt. Klai, where the land meets the sky.

Queen Caiyuna had changed since Chieftain Leio last met with her: when before she was gaunt and sickly, now she was bright and graceful and blustery, her

eyes shining like emeralds, her cheeks tinted pink like buds in April, her wings exuding the oily green of spring leaves.

“Greetings, Chief Leio. I trust that all is well? I hope that you have had time to look into the heavens recently and admire the improvements my subjects have made.”

“Yes, the sunrises and sunsets are magnificent. I want to thank Your Highness for the rains you have given our people, and ask for plentiful rains for the next ten years.”

“As the rains have fallen, they shall fall forever more. But I sense that you are displeased, Chieftain.”

Chief Leio beckoned to his attendant, who brought with him a watermelon, colored ghastly white. He broke it open on a rock to reveal its insides, also turned completely white.

“Farmer Tudio found this in his field the other day, along with several fairies.”

“But the watermelon is just as sweet, is it not?”

“The people didn’t like it, for they fear it to be the work of ghosts and spirits.”

Queen Caiyuna laughed, a tinkly laugh like spring rains on leaves.

“Dear chieftain, try to see from heaven’s perspective. It is said that the Goddess spared no effort in coloring the earth. Would you begrudge us for taking a little for our own paints?”

“No,” Leio said, because he was a reasonable man.

“But I will not have it said that we are thieves. Because I am a generous queen, I will tell my subjects to leave your villages and your farmlands alone, and take color only from the wilderness, beyond what your eye can see.”

The fairies took the colors of the flowers as they opened their buds in spring, the pale pink of the cherry blossoms, the dusky red of the roses, the sunshine of the tulip; with their callous hands they scraped the etchings off the butterflies, swiped the colors off the chests of the robins as they lay sleeping in their nests, shook off the peacock's hundred sequins until he was white and naked and too ashamed to show himself in public. They took all the different shades of green from the sunlight-dappled glens to the deep forests that the sun barely touched, but they made sure to leave enough so that they could leach the forest's autumn colors. They took even the bright red of the berries peeking out from under the snow in the winter. And every night they reveled and poured shimmering colors in a brilliant aurora onto the black canvas of the sky, so that all on earth would look up and see the glory of the heavens.

And yet Queen Caiyuna, pacing in her mile-high cloud palace, was still not satisfied.

"Is it fair?" she said, "that the earth replenishes its color, season after season, while all we have in the heavens is white? Go forth to the earth and take *all* its color. I will not rest until every cubic meter of my queendom has been painted."

And so they came to the farms and the villages; the farmers, finding the fairies infecting their fields like locusts, ran after them with their pitchforks, but they just laughed, because the tools of the earth cannot harm the creatures of the sky.

Thus again the Chieftain of the Earth went to meet the Queen of the Heavens on Mt. Klai, where the land meets the sky.

Queen Caiyuna had changed since Chieftain Leio last met with her. Before, she was bright and graceful and blustery, and now she was voluminous, heavy, and extravagant. Her eyes shone like rubies, and she was clad in cirrostratus scarves of deep violet, and a cumulus dress, heavy and dark red like aged wine.

“Your Highness,” Chieftain Leio said, “Ten years ago, you told me that you would take color only from the wilderness, beyond what our eyes can see.”

He gestured at his attendant, who brought in a wagon full of fruits and vegetables and flowers and even a squirrel, all turned white.

“Please, tell me what we have done to displease you, so that we may set your hearts at ease.”

“It is simply not enough!” She coughed. “Pardon me... Chieftain Leio, since time immemorial my subjects have sprinkled our clouds as rain over the land, so that every autumn you have plentiful harvests of soybeans, lentils, onions, and beans. Do we not always dutifully answer your rain dances?”

Chieftain Leio did not speak, because he was old enough to have lived through the great drought of fifty years past.

“As I see it, a bit of color is only fair payment for the life-giving waters that we bring to you. My subjects come to take what is rightfully their due and your people come after them with pitchforks? If you would like to keep your plentiful harvests, chieftain, then stay the hands of your people.”

Finally the Queen had raised up her cloud-palace from one mile to ten, and every cubic meter had been painted with designs the likes of which the world had

never seen. With so much color and not enough cloud to paint it on, they locked it up in great reservoirs. And when they had barely enough cloud to lock up their color, what left did they have to make rain? The land entered a great drought. The sun baked the fields and the wells dry, and the crops withered. Many a villager, delirious from thirst, following the mirages that they saw in the heavens, wandered into Mt. Klai, where the land meets the sky, and never returned.

And yet, colorless and harvestless though they were, the remaining humans did not lose hope; they still sat together around the bonfire and told each other stories of what had been and what could be.

As Chieftain Leio looked over the whitened land, he knew that he had failed his people, sat by while the fairies' greed ran unchecked. He could not fail his people again. And so, even though it had not been ten years, Chieftain Leio again climbed Mt. Klai, with only a bag over his shoulder.

Queen Caiyuna had changed since he saw her last: before, she was voluminous, heavy, and extravagant, and now she was unrecognizable. He could barely make her out, two jet-black eyes surrounded by a thick red fog.

"Greetings, Chieftain Leio," she said, "Have you come to beg for water? Well, you shan't have any!"

"I haven't come to beg. I've come with an offer."

"What can you possibly offer me, mortal?"

From his pack, Leio took out flintstone, knife, and tinder. He struck the knife against the stone until the tinder sparked and caught, and flames leapt up hungrily. Queen Caiyuna leaned in close, so Leio could see the greed in her eyes.

Fire was the only color she had not taken from the earth, because it burned her when she touched it. She wanted fire, and more than that, she wanted the spark of vitality, that laughter, of the people as they danced around their fire.

“It was a gift fashioned from bits of starlight and given to us, long long ago, from the Goddess, because she pitied us when we huddled in caves in the winter, eating raw vegetables and cold soup. I’ll teach you to make fire. I ask only for one thing in return: that you take me to see your beautiful palaces in the sky.”

“You would renounce your peoples, Leio, to join the Queendom of Heaven?”

“Yes,” he said, even though he knew that he would never come back.

She called, and her attendants came to Leio and rubbed their hands on every part of Leio’s skin, so that his color washed off and he could see through himself, until he floated off the ground, and when he tried to grab a branch, his fingers went right through.

So Queen Caiyuna led Chieftain Leio to her palace of cumulonimbus, where the Goddess had gifted her magic twenty-five years ago. Now it was ten miles tall and filled all the way up with paintings of how the earth used to be. She gathered all the cloud fairies, from all the far corners of the sky, and they circled around Leio as Caiyuna declared:

“Behold, our final victory: Chieftain Leio has brought us the secret of fire!”

The fairies pushed each other to get close to the flame. While they were so distracted, Leio took out from his bag a bow and quiver of arrows which he thrust into the fire. His arms were a whirlwind as he notched arrows to his bow and shot them across the sky.

With each shot there was a flash of light, and an earsplitting crack where it rent apart the cloud. The thunder was so loud that it traveled through space and woke the Goddess among the stars so that she came to see what was the matter. She watched as ten thousand fairies frantically tried to plug in all the leaks in their cloud palace, but they could not stop it from collapsing under its own weight. She watched as it rained for forty days and forty nights, until the last of the reservoirs finally broke and all the color returned to the earth, in a river of red and orange and yellow and green and blue and indigo and violet.

The goddess was sad that Queen Caiyuna had abused the gift that she had given her, but she was also angry, so she decreed that Leio would inhabit the clouds forever. And so, on a hot summer afternoon, when the color seems to have drained from the earth, when the cloud-palaces grow tall and dark, Leio's fire arrows will again pierce the clouds and return all the water and the color back to the earth.