

A Night with the Woods:

A SHORT STORY

by ZONGHUA AI /// EAC Volunteer

Fishing Cove, Unama'ki/Cape Breton. The place where the story happened.

PHOTO: Zonghua Ai

My walk takes me two hours downhill from the highway through the woods. At the tree's opening, a stream's gurgle molts into a sheet of serene light, feeding into the lullaby of the ocean, eventually melting into the orange semi-sphere on the horizon. I have been here several times before, each time having the whole view to myself. Today, however, there seem to be guests. No, not guests – the traditional residents; I recognize a few melodic fragments of their conversation, from years of desperately trying to learn the language of this land.

“Hey, who are you?” A young voice pierces through my internal monologue. I must have visibly startled, as now there is a huge grin on the young face.

“I, uh, my name is Dancing-crane Cobra-lily, *Arisaema heterophyllum*. Just, uh, call me Cobra... I guess.” I regret it as the words leave my tongue. What a weird name! Sounds long, funny, they're not going to pronounce it correctly. They will laugh, I will have to stand here awkwardly smiling through the whole thing. I am a foreigner stepping onto another land; now the land stares at me curiously, swallowing me deep into their eyes.

“Ari...Arisaema...Oh! You're a Jack-in-the pulpit! Jack-in-the-pulpit! I knew it! You have the same wiggly shaped flower!” A flickering voice, from a slim man, gabbles out words as fast as a machine gun.

“Spadix, that 'flower' thing is called.” I spit out some textbook reflexively; however, a sense of alienness quickly stained my voice

Zonghua (they/them) is a phytochemist and will never shut up about plants and mushrooms. From Zonghua's MSc project, they learned the importance of the relationship between plant relatives and their Indigenous names. Zonghua is learning L'nui'simk (the Mi'kmaw language) from their fiancé, as well as from classes offered through university

timid. “But, um, you know someone who is similar – do they grow up here with you?”

“Of cour-” “No they grow in YOUR nation, by the Great Lakes, dude,” A tall guy walks toward us while explaining, “they’re not all that common here in the Maritimes. However, there are some traditional usages about Jack-in-the-pulpit by L’nu’k, so that means they could have grown here, you know, like Sipekn-”

DOON! A drum quiets everyone in an instant. A strong-looking man with a *Usnea* beard, holding his drumstick like a war club, clears his throat: “Pjila’si. Welcome. We are going to drum together tonight. But before that, come and grab food!”

I finally have some breathing room to observe. Around the fire are four men. The youngest, Trembling Aspen *Populus tremuloides*, is already devouring his salmon and chanterelles. The slim and agile Spreading Dogbane *Apocynum androsaemifolium* from the Great Lakes, is talking at the scholar-looking yet quirky Sugar Maple *Acer saccharum*, who in turn is gazing eagerly at the wild berry jam still simmering on the fire. The stoic, bearded chef Red Spruce *Picea rubens*, is serving everyone; “That includes you, tu’s. Come and eat! What’s your name again?”

“Dancing-crane Cobra-lily.” I reply, “That is what I am called in the common language; my name means ‘southern star’ in my mother tongue. I came from the land of the Tea plant.” I am soaked in the surprise of those words flowing effortlessly out of my mouth. But the drum has spoken, and I am now sitting in a drumming circle.

“Here, try it.” The tall man Sugar Maple stabs a drumstick between my eyebrows. I take the drumstick and uncross my eyes. The drumstick is made from a lightweight smooth-barked branch, and a puffy moose leather head that smells a hint of goat. Maple sits beside me, “I made this drumstick! You can borrow it.” “Thank you! Is it maple wood?” I feel a bit silly asking that. “It is! Good eyes. A Norway Maple keeps bugging me so I asked my friend Ewlamnsn to take care of him.”

Meanwhile, Aspen and Dogbane are immersed in a singing battle. Dogbane’s voice is sharp but raspy, like vines crawling back after a wildfire. The fire that once scorched through his past sowed resiliency in his heart. Aspen’s voice is transparent, crispy, sometimes even seems fragile – like lake ice cracking up hearing the first whisper of spring. His face is bright red, light in his eyes. Passion permeates from their song, glowing as stars above us.

“I sing better, right?” Confidence shines in those young bright eyes. “Yeah, who has better singing skills?” The rough voice smiled mischievously. “Ooor, how about we call on our respectful ‘judge’ for a song?” Maple jumps in with an even bigger smile. My eyes fumble onto Spruce’s face, asking for help. “Sing,” he says in a motherly tone, “we will teach you.”

The song circled eight times before I gathered enough strength to make a sound. I cover my voice in the group, lower my pitch so it

TAKE ACTION

Learn about which traditional territories you live on at native-land.ca, and check out [L’nui’suti: the Mi’kmaw Language App](#) to learn the Mi’kmaw names for the plants and animals in your local ecosystems.

won’t poke through a comforting barrier. Should I initiate the solo part like the others have? The song has been thrown in the circle for so many rounds. Will it never end if I don’t try?

I raised my voice and my power squeezing the drumstick. “WEJIKTA-”

Suddenly Aspen bursts out laughing. I freeze instantly, and a wave of embarrassment consumes me.

“Aspen, be nice to our guest. Southern star, it’s ‘wejkwita’jik’. Let’s try again.”

I smiled at Spruce. The drum speaks again. I take a huge deep breath –

“WIGGLY-”

I start to laugh, over the silliest mistake my panicked brain spat out. Aspen starts to laugh too. All of us laugh, uncontrollably. Maple is roaring up to the Milky Way, Dogbane is wheezing like a whistle, while Aspen and I are rolling on the ground, snorting, bubbling out of our noses. Even Spruce gets a smile on his bark-hard face. “We are not laughing at you,” he stares lovingly into the fire, “we are laughing with you. Hope you enjoy our songs.”

How many hours did we sing through? The night full of laughter slipped away in a blink. When the first drop of fish-belly color smears across the border of sky and ocean, my eyes are allured by a pod of pilot whales dancing in the dawn. “If,” a deep voice rises behind me, “if only humans ever see us as equal, maybe they will hesitate for a heartbeat before clear-cutting us away.”

Wondering which of my new friends gifted us the wise words, I turned around to seek them. However, behind me there was no face or drum, only layers and layers of never-ending green folding onto a steep moose trail, reaching up the shiny home of the three-legged crow. In my grasp lies a lanky Norway Maple uprooted by wind, the last yet still green leaf covered in Tar Spot.

The story ends.