

Embers of Moonlight

By Ela Banerjee

The moon was sitting on my roof. Yet it wasn't really that bizarre. After all, it was the last night of the month, the Night of Rebirth. The night when the sky trickled down and the plants shriveled and the tiny creatures of Wood shuddered with one last heartbeat. The night when all things east of The Mountains died, waiting for a new birth at dawn.

A few falling stars had landed earlier on the top of my rickety house, which nestled precariously on the highest, most eastern edge of The Mountains. They had only lasted for a handful of moments, giggling uncontrollably, and then crumbling in a sudden spark of gold.

But the moon had never landed upon my roof. I had sat there, high in The Mountains, on the border of a strange world, every month as long as I could remember. I would watch, mesmerized, as the place no one else ever entered began to rot away. I watched the animals retreat and the stars tumble down, but when the feeling of death became overwhelming, I slipped back into my bed, thinking of the world on the other side of The Mountains.

I had heard rumors of the moon herself landing, but they were mangled and debated. But here she sat with poignant patience, her ivory dress delicately rippling like shattered lake water over her willowy arms and legs, a collection of folded limbs that shone with a strange and pallid luminescence. Her hair glinted like polished glass as two perfect sapphire spheres studied my face.

An expectant silence tinged with the distant flickering of literally dying stars followed.



Anne Horst

"So, what was it like in the sky?" I began awkwardly.

"Like how you feel up here." Her voice was odd. Musical and elegant, yet strangely hoarse and low. "Like why you come up here each month."

Not sure how to respond, I looked out over the jagged ledge of The Mountains and into the realm where the moon came from and I did not.

I watched as the world died with simultaneous

regularity. The trees yawned with their branches and collapsed heavily to the ground. Their cracked leaves fluttered to the grass, which itself curled from bright green to aged brown before my eyes.

Flowers savored one last brilliant hue, and then turned to ashen dust, while rich patches of soil withered into cracked gray.

As the moon continued, I closed my eyes, her voice melting with the diminishing call of a nightingale. "I know you and your kin hide in these peaks. Yet you are the only one who ventures out to witness these nights. It is a strange thing how this world passes on each month, how each thing so carefully sculpted is suddenly destroyed. I know you wonder why it happens.

"I have died many times. I fall with the sky each month, with the stars and the clouds and the air. Is it an ending? Or is it a beginning?"

Something touched my arm, a surface as cold as bitter metal. My eyes snapped open to see the moon's chalk-white hand gently touching my own. I looked into her face—and stifled a gasp. Her once-ivory skin was now crumpled in a bed of sagging wrinkles; her arm, I now noticed, was thin and interrupted by bruised veins. Yet her eyes were still pierced with sudden blue and now held my own.

"But there is no difference, is there? I see this night as you do. It is destruction; it is hope—a revision, a new view. But it continues, on and on. You see this, I know. This is why I have alighted on your roof, on The Mountains tonight. You always go back before the night is over—before it really ends. Now you will finally see."

As she broke away from my arm, I suddenly realized that I was surrounded by a cloud of utter and endless darkness. All the stars had long since burnt out; all the creatures had been forgotten. The only light was the moon herself, her pale glow a single flicker in the dead night.

But she was dimming. . . . Slowly, she began to fade, her skin gaining transparency, her eyes only a twinkle of indigo. Soon, I could only see a shimmer of white.

I closed my eyes as the moon died, unwilling to watch her disappear.

After many moments, I dared to watch the world again. Blackness, lifeless and silent, enveloped me. No moon, no stars, no Wood.

I sighed, and was about to settle to the ground, when a glinting caught my eye. I looked down and saw a sprinkle of silvery, sparkling dust. I smiled.

That night, I closed my eyes to the embers of moonlight.



Take Me Away Contest

Judge's Comments

"The moon was sitting on my roof." What a great first line! Ela's story is outstanding in two ways: First: The language is unexpected, yet exactly right—the narrative is unpredictable, but not arbitrary. You don't know what's going to happen next, or why things happen as they do, but you feel that the story is true. This is how things are at "the edge of The Mountains."

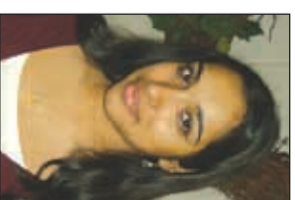
And second: The symbolism is thoroughly contained inside the narrative. It doesn't have a "message." It would be wrong to say "what it means." Yet it means a lot that it doesn't say—about life, death, youth. . . . And best of all, it makes you smile as you read it.

—Ursula K. Le Guin

Winner

Ela Banerjee, 13, is an eighth grader at Farnsley Middle School in Louisville, Ky. She loves the fantasy genre because she enjoys

"the feeling of how words can defy our stubborn sense of reality." Her story, she says, "shows that though this world is never clear, the present must be accepted while the future can always be waited for."



Kudos ★ to our Junior Fiction runner-up:

Kevin Valente, 13, from Skaneateles, N.Y. Read his story at readandwriting.com on April 12, 2007.

Your Turn

In "Embers of Moonlight," Ela Banerjee uses personification to breathe human traits and moods into an inanimate object—the moon. Try writing a poem or a story about an object of your choice (the sky, a scarf, or even a coffee cup) by using personification.

WRITE ABOUT IT.