

House in the Trees

Foster Douglas

HOUSE IN THE TREES

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Summary: Two unlikely companions share
an adventure of Love, growth, and reverie.

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[1. Children's literature]

Text and display type for this book set in Gelica.

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Audio reading and PDF of this draft is available:

www.house-in-the-trees.com/draft01

Any images used in this draft are placeholder.

for Hannah Mae

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Note to Friends: First Draft!

Friends!~ Perhaps you know, I wrote a children's novel...!? In June, I took a few months away from everything- for a complete re-orientation of my self, my life, and priorities. I wrote this draft at that time- late nights on my patio with endless mugs of chamomile, and early mornings on the wet grass at Lake Merritt, *hours just to write*.

36,000 words later, here's the completed first "draft." My caveat, of course- as with any draft, it's a total mess. It's unfocused, choppy, too long. There's so much yet to do! Soon it will get edits, re-writes, and revisions; I suspect much of it will change. But, generally, the soul is here. I hope to have illustrations in it, eventually. I've never written anything- for a draft, I'm pleased! The copyright page has links to a .PDF, and recorded audio.

The book follows two friends as they grow and change, together and apart, side-by-side. To me, it's about not being afraid to *give* and *embrace* Love from those around us, and how to ask forgiveness. It's also about loss, delusion, and letting go.

I want to publish it someday. And, I have an ambitious concept for a two-person stage play. I hope to read it out loud to children eventually. I *wish* I had a book like this when I was younger. I hope others can hear it, and that it can help them develop the courage to Love without fear.

Over hundreds of hours- this book is the most important thing I've done. It's freed me of so many hidden, negative parts of myself- I've flourished in unexpected ways, and opened up creatively and spiritually. I'm amazed how much Love has come into my life from this. I hope each of you has felt that change in me, *for you* and toward you!

This new chapter of life is my rekindled fire, it's all the Love I've found in myself to give, and it's the monumental ideas I reach relentlessly for. It's reignited my roots in theatre, and a new focus on what *community* and *belonging* mean to me- complete with my usual whacky-ambitious (perhaps delusional) dreams and ideas to realize it all. As I've always lived, the sky's the limit.

I hand-bound a few copies of this special early draft, just to you from me. I hope you'll enjoy a little sneak peak adventure up into my house in the trees. It's just a little world, made with great big Love, and it's *for you*. I'm so grateful for *your* Love and support! This wouldn't exist without you. <3

Foster Douglas
Oakland, California
Autumn 2023

House in the Trees

*A Story of The Chameleon
and The Rainbow-Shell Turtle*

Act I



Picnic in Autumn

In a little green park far from his home, The Chameleon read a silly play about lighthouses, and his mind wandered down into the grass, and out to the trees, and up into the clouds.

“I w-wonder what color I am... when I’m *not* hiding–” He blurted it out, to nobody at all.

It was a seriously big thought to have, and so casually. The Chameleon wondered about that question much of his life.

“Well... you’re... a pale Pacific blue!–like the color of a perfectly overcast day, I think. Mostly. There are little blueberry speckles here and there, too.” The voice spoke with warmth and energized delight.

The Chameleon startled and jumped, like his own mind spoke back to him.

“Furthermore! Your toes are sandstone like *potatoes*, your eyes are pea-green, and the ridges down your spine glow like purple petunias. And, and! Your underbelly... it’s a... a crisp bright green! Like fresh celery.” The voice paused for effect. “I really love colors. And vegetables.”

The Chameleon was shocked, and a little bit embarrassed that somebody noticed the color of his toes. He spoke the first obvious question on his mind.

“Well, h-how does s-s-someone know all of that?” He would often stutter with words, more so when he was nervous.

The question suspended in the air between them, and when The Chameleon turned to look, he saw in front of him a magnificent and small turtle.

Before anything else, he noticed her eyes, bright and bold green like an endless fir tree forest, with starburst irises of golden wheat. He was stunned to silence by her.

“I can see you, of course!” The Turtle looked up and gave a little wink.

The Chameleon had never been winked at before and he was embarrassed again, his face glowed warm and turned sky blue.

“O-oh!” He was shocked to realize he was not hidden or blended in at all. “That’s s-s-strange, this hasn’t happened to me before.”

“You’ve never been *seen* before...?” The Turtle was amazed. “Wow! You’re a really good chameleon!”

The Chameleon let out a big laugh. “Of course, I have!” He looked at his arms and legs in awe. “But I’ve n-never been this color b-before.”

The Turtle wondered why that was, and The Chameleon wondered why that was, and the two caught one another in wonder at the other.

“It f-f-feels like... home...” The Chameleon admitted something much too serious for someone he just met. “Or, like...”

It was the fourth day of autumn, and a crisp breeze tossed the leaves about the park. His body shivered and his words trailed off, and The Turtle sat down on the picnic blanket next to him.

“Could I join your beautiful, perfect picnic?” The Turtle asked, and the September wind brushed over her shell. She adjusted herself close to him, and comfortably. A poem came to her mind, which often happened.

*(chilly winds bite my shell,
but my little heart melts
the seasons and seasons of frost)*

Together they sat, new company. The Chameleon looked down again at his skin. He loved the color blue.

“What’s... w-whats that?” The Chameleon looked curiously at the notebook she kept with her.

The Turtle carried it with her everywhere, her black and white notebook. It was everything she thought of and dreamt of and lived and Loved.

“I always think of little poems. So I keep them in here. Someday... I want to perform them!” She flipped through the notebook quickly and picked a poem and spoke:

*A crustacean creeps across the ocean floor to find for
itself more chores*

*A sea urchin rolls along the ocean floor with all its being,
and also unknowing*

While a sea anemone clings to the ocean floor

"That's just a part of it." The Turtle closed the notebook and set it aside.

The Chameleon was speechless and his heart skipped.
"T-that's... s-so b-beautiful."

A dogwood tree swayed gently nearby, and the branches shuddered and shed its coat of pink-stained white flowers. Each bloom held four velvet teardrop petals, cinched at the end into heart shapes, with a messy cluster of small pale green flowers in the center.

One floated gently down, and rested between them on the blanket. The Turtle picked up the bloom, and twirled it around and she handed it to The Chameleon.

"You can plant it! You'll always remember me by it." She giggled and her shell bounced up and down a little.

The Chameleon caught the scent of the dogwood flower. "It's s-sweet. Th-thank you!"

She blushed a little. "I Love flowers. Love, Love!"

The Chameleon thought of his neighborhood across the water, and its vast diversity of flowers and plants there, and he wanted to show it to her.

"Have you ever b-b-been to the heart-shaped lake, on the other side of the w-water?" The Chameleon, in his own strange way, invited The Turtle to visit him. "The flowers there are m-magnificent..."

Time disappeared and the two talked endlessly, even after the light dimmed, and the warmth faded, and the wind stilled. The two voices lingered in the night, and they laughed beneath the dotted constellation sky, visible through the dogwood canopy above.

The Rainbow Shell

The heart-shaped lake was just vaguely heart-shaped. Around the water, gnarled trees and bushes and beautiful flowered plants were overgrown and wild. The lake was circled with a well-used path of soft dirt.

The Chameleon and The Turtle walked the trail, and he paused at his favorite wooden park bench. He took out some paper from his cloth satchel and drew a map for her of the area, best he could. At the top, he titled it:

THE HEART-SHAPED LAKE

“And over h-h-here is a cozy bookhouse, and r-right next to that, *that’s* where I live, this r-rooftop patio...” He gestured to various parts of the map and drew it carefully for her. “And j-just past that, The Ox lives in her patchwork tent. She’s a doctor, she t-takes care of us.”

“I Love it! I really do! I want to explore it.” The Turtle jumped up, and spun around in a circle. “Now! Let’s!”

Together, The Turtle and The Chameleon marched, giddy, along the dusty, winding path, and they watched around them all the lively activities. They talked and walked side-by-side, with

a magnetic stride. Further ahead, lush foliage from a giant oak tree provided shade off the path.

“What’s s-something you love... the most?” The Chameleon liked to ask questions.

“Well...” She considered for a moment. “I love poetry. Poetry, and performing! And... and... *petunias*...”

He laughed, and his heart skipped again. “And other *P*’s? I r-really enjoy the theatre, too!”

“When I’m on stage, everything else fades away.” She gestured slowly with one leg. “It’s a magical feeling.”

Two giant birds dove from above, straight down into the water nearby, and splashed mist up and onto them.

“ AHhhhhk!” The Turtle reared onto her back legs, waved her front legs around in the air and giggled. The Chameleon laughed, and wiped the water off of her shell, then shook his own body clean.

“If... if I can captivate an audience, it’s such a glorious feeling! To imagine another world, the narratives where anything is possible... exhilarating!” She was expressive and witty, and she spoke quickly and poetically.

The Chameleon listened intently. He admired her, and he soaked in all of her language. He absorbed each syllable carefully, and contemplated each sentence.

He wondered about her, and she thought of him, and they approached a giant oak tree, and sat at a spot in the shade of the branches, on a soft grassy mound. Out ahead of them the heart-shaped lake was calm.

Tiny ripples in the water bounced off one another, and left unexpected patterns and The Turtle studied them carefully. She opened her black and white notebook and flipped to an empty page, and she spoke aloud with beautiful rhythm and she wrote at the same time:

A paper boat with a solitary candle

gliding along a pond

at dusk in autumn,

reflecting the dark trees

speckled with amber sunset

between the fallen

canary yellow leaves

afloat the glassy pool.

The Chameleon was in stunned silence with unexpected emotion. “Wow! I c-can’t describe... it’s made me feel s-something new. Something w-wishful, quiet... w-wondering? A reflection.”

“A reflection...” She gave a light smile, and felt the raw energy of the poem linger inside her. “Whenever I look down into water, I see my blurry reflection ripple back toward me, and I wonder sometimes when I catch a glimpse of...”

A family of plump ducks quacked past, and interrupted her thought. Next to them, on the shore, was a small grove of

bushes with dozens of flowered blooms, each unfurled and reached to the sky.

The Turtle stood up in the shade of the giant oak tree, stretched for a moment, and adjusted her shell. As she did, The Chameleon watched. It occurred to him that turtles, being how they're shaped, can't see very much of themselves. He thought of her blurry reflection.

"You h-have a Rainbow-Shell." The Chameleon was a little bit too casual about it.

The Turtle was intrigued. "I have a *what*...?"

"Your s-shell. It's rainbow-colored! I haven't s-seen one like that... ever b-before!" The Chameleon was captivated by so much of her, including her shell.

The Turtle looked down at her own stubby front legs. They were scaled and dry, and tan with specks of dark brown and green. She loved her entirely normal turtle legs. She craned her neck to one side, and then the other. As she expected, she could not see any other part of her turtle body, and certainly not her shell.

He sensed her curiosity, and The Chameleon described the shell. "Each s-section... of your shell is a d-different color, really... like a rainbow! I think it's rare, probably one-of-a-kind. To m-me, it's m-magical."

And suddenly The Turtle, *The Rainbow-Shell Turtle*, felt the enormity of everything around her, the intensity of her Love toward the world, and every other emotion all at once came in a rush. Her eyes welled, and The Chameleon looked at her intently and smiled.

Next to them, a small bunch of African daisy blooms sprouted upward to flaunt vibrant purple petals with deep indigo pollen circled with a short crown of gold. He picked a small one, a perfect one, and placed it gently behind her left ear.

Distance of the Stars

“Just... n-nine more m-minutes...!?” The Chameleon pleaded playfully, for the fourth time, and The Rainbow-Shell Turtle laughed.

“I’ve been over here twice today... I must really like you!” Her attempt at some casual flirtation went noticed.

She quickly changed the subject. “It’s my birthday next week! I’ll be... be... well, older, of course! It’s not appropriate for a turtle to share...”

“Certainly n-not.” He smiled.

The Chameleon lived on the rooftop patio, a concrete tree top centered in the busy city. That night, if the busy city was busy, neither of them noticed.

It was a cool clear evening, and The Chameleon relit the bonfire and the two stood toward one another near its radiance. The deep black coal color sky was painted visible with hundreds of specks of life, in their familiar patterns.

The Chameleon put music on, and a flowing, twinkling piano played quietly, with a comforting energy. He set it to repeat.

“Which one... is your f-favorite?” He looked up to the sky.

"See there?" She gestured with her leg up and to the north. "That one! It's my favorite. It's a perfect lily shape, see the petals?"

The Chameleon looked and nodded. "Mmhm."

She traced the outline of the constellation. "It's so beautiful! Flowers give me joy. Sometimes I think this one looks more like a Faerie if you turn your head, a little. Like *this*."

An ember flickered off the bonfire, danced chaotically in the cool breeze, and landed on the wood nearby, and extinguished slowly.

She still pointed, and The Chameleon touched her gently, to guide her to the west. "See th-this one? To m-me it looks like t-two giant redwood trees, all t-tangled up. See the b-b-branches? And the t-trunk, there."

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle blushed from his touch. "The trees- wait, or! Or... it looks like lions. Two lions, dancing, playing, laughing together in a some great open plain."

"Maybe it's one lion, c-climbing a redwood t-tree." They cooed, in unison.

"You can be the lion, I'll be the tree." The Rainbow-Shell Turtle blushed at how sweet that sounded.

Overhead, dozens of fireflies blinked in rhythm, and The Rainbow-Shell Turtle smiled. "When I was a young, on dry and hot summer nights, around the granite rocklins, I would play in the fields behind our pond, and climb trees with my sister."

The Chameleon listened closely.

"I was much better at it than her, my dad said so anyhow." She boasted a little. "I really was! I could always reach the tops of the branches."

She continued. "He would always say '*The higher you go...*' and I'd yell down to him '*...the better the view!*' He teased that I was a Tree Turtle."

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle paused, and thought of her family, and laughed a little and looked over. "Long story, long- the trees had lots of fireflies, just like these!"

She pointed up at the fireflies above and continued. "And we would chase them around, and we'd jump up, and try to catch them in our mouths!"

The Chameleon responded to her with a look of playful horror. "What!"

"Not to *eat*, of course! We didn't eat them. But, it tickles when they land on your tongue." The Rainbow-Shell Turtle giggled sweetly and stuck out her tongue.

She looked up to the fireflies, and The Chameleon looked toward her instead, in awe. Another golden ember crackled from the fire, floated up beside the fireflies and past, and glowed in the ocean of stars and cinder.

He looked up to the lily constellation. "Do you know the myth of the Fireflies and The Faerie?"

"Uhhh... hmmm! No, tell me." The Rainbow-Shell Turtle waited.

The Chameleon cleared his voice, and performed confidently. "Well... in the beginning, before fire was created, each night

our world plunged into an icy cold darkness, with only our Mother Moon to illuminate us. On the brightest of those nights, when Mother Moon was her most vibrant and round, the fireflies would ask her for the blessing of her light. She would give it willingly, always. The fireflies carried the gift of glowing around with them proudly, blinking rhythmically into the night, until the dawn arrived."

"Wait, they would carry it around? In their tiny little firefly arms?" The Rainbow-Shell Turtle smiled, wondering. "Or... on their butts?"

"Yes. Yes, they c-carried it *on* their b-butts." The Chameleon looked blankly at her, and they both laughed.

He continued the story. "When dawn arrived, Mother Moon would ask for her light back, and the fireflies would graciously return it. However! On one of these nights, three beautiful Faerie spirits arrived in the valley. They were persuasive, and asked the fireflies to lend their fiery glow to the Faerie spirits."

"Uh oh..." The Rainbow-Shell Turtle gave all of her attention.

"Uh oh, indeed. When the fireflies agreed, the Faerie spirits gathered up all the light and carried it off and away without a word, and the valley plunged into inky darkness for a time." The Chameleon lifted his arms up in a performance, and looked over at The Rainbow-Shell Turtle for reassurance.

"Oh, no. No! Not the inky darkness... *anything* but that!" She was captivated.

The Chameleon continued. "Three days and nights passed in the valley- without light! Even Mother Moon was absent from the sky. The fireflies cried out every night for her, and for the

light. At dusk on the fourth day, the Faerie spirits returned to the valley. With them they carried the gift of fire. A great tool that the fireflies could use every night from then on, giving an unending warmth and light to the valley."

"So, fire butts. They invented fire butts." The Rainbow-Shell Turtle expected a better end.

"Okay... t-that's *one* interpretation!" The two of them laughed loudly, up into the night sky.

The Chameleon and The Rainbow-Shell Turtle fell into a gaze with one another, directly, for a moment, and a bond of the heart formed between them, a closeness, a magnetism.

The flickered embers of the glowing bonfire faded, and the last of the hovering fireflies went dim, and only the two of them remained, with bodies close, and the distance of the stars above.

Slow and Steady

“You m-move a little bit slowly...” The Chameleon said playfully, without judgement, to The Rainbow-Shell Turtle. “...c-comparatively.”

A spectacle of activity bubbled up near the busy city and around the heart-shaped lake, and others were walking and talking and singing and listening, and doing other things besides those things. Together they stopped to rest on a bench, and watched and listened to everything.

“I don’t *feel* slow.” She said it offhandedly, and confidently.

The words ignited something in The Chameleon and he paused, like some hidden truth was unveiled to him about the world. He admired her.

“And anyway, turtles aren’t as slow as everybody thinks. We’re just not!” The Rainbow-Shell Turtle was convinced.

“Could you p-prove it?” The Chameleon was mostly joking.

“*One hundred.*” It was her way of saying absolutely. “Race me. Now.”

“A r-race... of course! A completely fair and b-b-balanced race.” The Chameleon was not competitive, but he was always open to a challenge. “Okay! Where will it s-start, and end?”

“See that pier over there? Right there! See?” The Rainbow-Shell Turtle gestured with her front leg toward a rickety wooden pier straight across the heart-shaped lake. “First to that pier is the *champion*. And champions will not be called *slow*!”

“I accept the t-terms of your ch-challenge.” The Chameleon smiled and they slapped their legs together in official agreement.

“Oh, this will be great. A Race, a race, a race!” The Rainbow-Shell Turtle danced around, and sang out in a sweet voice.

The commotion caused a small crowd of curious race enthusiasts to gather near them. One of them crafted a sign already, written in mud, and held it up:

GO TORTUS GO

Others muttered and murmured their predictions about the outcome:

“A silly little tortoise couldn’t win a race, unless the opponent was a snail!”

“I think it will be a narrow victory, my bet is on that lizard fellow.”

“Something dramatic always happens at things like these, you know. Always!”

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle noticed the crowd, and took the opportunity for some theatrics. “The great race will begin soon! And it starts...”

She moved forward a few steps dramatically. “...right...”

And she took her foot and dragged it perfectly straight across the dirt on the path. “...here!”

The crowd erupted in cheer. The Chameleon stepped forward to the dirt-drawn starting line, shyly. The crowd roared again, and the one with the sign growled loudly in opposition. As The Chameleon waved out to them awkwardly, some of the crowd broke out in chant:

“LIZ-ARD! LIZ-ARD! LIZ-ARD!”

He was not offended. He knew the speed that The Rainbow-Shell Turtle moved at, and he was confident of his chance at victory.

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle was nonchalant, and stepped up to the line. In the same rhythm, and noticeably quieter, came a meek rally cry from just a few:

“TOR-TUS! TOR-TUS! TOR-TUS!”

She was offended.

The Lizard and The Tortus stood side-by-side at the starting line. The crowd grew rowdy, and a silent anticipation grew between the two.

“ON YOUR MA-RROOOOOO-K...” A voice boomed loudly, and began the countdown.

The crowd gasped. Politely at one end of the dirt-drawn starting line sat The Beagle, tongue out, and her tail wagged vigorously.

“Hello lovelies...” She looked over and winked. “GET SET...”

“GOOO-AWWOOOOO!” She began to howl, involuntarily.

They were off, and The Chameleon bolted forward, and looked back only to wave sheepishly at the crowd, The Beagle, and to his slow opponent.

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle was in deep focus. She took a few slow steps forward past the dirt-drawn line, and her mind already formulated a better plan. She unbuckled her black and white notebook and handed it to The Beagle.

“Awwoooo-lovie! What will you do, little turtle? Your short legs! They are too much stubby-ubby little for this!” Her ears flopped around her head and she spoke wildly.

Not waiting for an answer, The Beagle launched into a full sprint down the path, to be there to judge at the finish line. The crowd clambered along behind, some chanted, most grumbled and laughed. They expected a more dramatic showing.

“That iguana isn’t even that fast!”

The Chameleon, ahead already, wiggled along quickly, and put in all of his effort despite a clear and inevitable victory. He was not sure what else to do.

A crowd member, the one with the sign, pointed suddenly at the heart-shaped lake, and exclaimed:

“Look! The tortoise! The tortoise! She fell into the water! Look!”

The crowd stopped and gasped in a panic. The Rainbow-Shell Turtle didn’t fall in, she dove in, and she glided along the water at full speed toward the finish line.

“AWOOOO, Lovelie!” The Beagle howled even louder.

Everyone watched from the shore and The Rainbow-Shell Turtle moved swiftly and gracefully. She slipped through the water at surprising speed with her stubby-ubby legs to propel her forward. She enjoyed being in the crisp cool water and it tingled and flowed over her sun-warmed shell.

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle had a much shorter distance to the finish line. And she moved with incredible quickness. The crowd sprinted too, and tried to keep up. Even her biggest fan the sign holder was in shock.

She was surely moving much faster than The Chameleon could. She wondered for a moment if he liked to swim, too, and she smiled. Beneath the surface, she kicked her legs just a little harder.

The Chameleon was on the path, much too focused on his waddle to notice the commotion. His breath was heavy, and he exerted himself, determined to give his best effort to the race.

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle lifted her head, and saw him in the distance, and he exerted himself. She liked him, quite a lot.

She approached the finish line and gave a final push with her back legs, and launched herself up out of the water and landed dramatically onto the pier.

The crowd was wild with excitement, The Beagle released her loudest howl, and the sign-holder ran out to congratulate her:

"I knew you could! You're the fastest tortoise ever! No one believed me!"

As The Chameleon came around the final bend in the path, he saw the pier and The Beagle in sight ahead, and he knew triumph was inevitable. His adrenaline spiked, and he pushed his wild legs even harder. He could hear the crowd, and they cheered wildly. The must started a chant for his arrival and victory.

As he crossed the finish line, he heaved in exhaustion, and he looked to the crowd and saw only their backs, gathered around. The Chameleon pushed through the crowd to see the commotion.

"WUH-HOOF. Now now now, Lovelie, that was some doggy-dog swimming, it sure was!" The Beagle hopped to the side and The Rainbow-Shell Turtle stood proud on the pier.

"But... how d-did..." The Chameleon was amazed.

"No. More. 'Slow.'" She gestured to the rowdy crowd. "They were saying I'm the fastest turtle ever... ever, ever! The best!"

"And the m-most humble." The Chameleon joked.

"It's okay. I saw you! You were *really* fast... your legs were really wiggling, wagging, waddling!" She caused him to blush bright blue.

The two moved away from the crowd and the excitement, careful not to draw attention. Down the path of the heart-shaped lake, they found a small hill to rest on.

They sat, bodies close, and their hearts raced still, and they looked toward one another. The soft earth was warm to touch, and the last golden rays from the afternoon sun danced through tree leaves down onto the grass.

"I like you." The Rainbow-Shell Turtle said exactly what The Chameleon thought.

Entangled

“What color do you feel today?” The Rainbow-Shell Turtle asked on a bright winter afternoon. She could see that he was the color of leafy green parsley, mixed with splashes of pomegranate red. She touched his skin and felt the roughness, and she wondered what it felt like inside when he changed his body color.

They rested together near an expansive field of golden grasses, along the edge of the water. It was quiet there, and they spoke between the wild wheats and busy buzz of flies.

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle opened her black and white notebook and wrote something short and sweet:

*Brought with them islands upon islands of it
with mouths never dry,
rainbows shone their kaleidoscopic
enchantments day after day.*

The Chameleon thought for a while, and he didn't know how to answer the question. “Well... I s-suppose... you know, precisely s-speaking... I feel I'm a little bit... b-brown?”

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle giggled quietly. She felt her senses strongly, and she was in tune with everything inside of her and around her. She could express herself openly and proudly.

The Chameleon, in contrast, needed to learn much more about his emotions.

Around them, the kangaroo paws and whirling butterflies bloomed and the purple sage flowers were overgrown in every which way, tangled with milkweed and white jasmine.

“But what color do you *feel*, you know, inside. Underneath all your crackly colorful skin... what’s beneath?” She asked it, carefully.

A moment passed. “I haven’t a c-clue.” He said this with a little embarrassment, yet he knew that she would not think low of him.

“Let’s play a little game!” The Rainbow-Shell Turtle had a flash of an idea to help The Chameleon understand his own colors more clearly. “Climb atop my shell. Quickly. Now!”

The Chameleon obeyed without hesitation. He liked games. He clambered quickly on top of her shell. It was awkward, and it was not a place he had been before or ever considered he would visit.

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle began to speak meditations and affirmations. “Now relax yourself– *feel* yourself inside, listen to it– think of something that brings you true joy– let that feeling well up inside...”

When she spoke, her voice was strong and she encouraged him. “It’s okay... just feel however you feel. Be yourself, *be open*, be honest...”

The Chameleon was uneasy with his feelings, but he trusted her. He listened, and at first he heard only her voice and the busy city in the distance. He thought and thought, and could only think of his own thoughts.

“Don’t worry... it’s just me here with you...” The Rainbow-Shell Turtle gave all of herself.

When The Chameleon absorbed the words, everything faded away, and he looked and felt inward. As he stopped the thoughts and started to feel, a beautiful something swelled up in him. He sensed an obvious presence that brought his heart true joy. It was her, The Rainbow-Shell Turtle. Then, it was easy.

Atop her shell he let himself go and a flood of transformation came. Parts of his body relaxed first, and it revealed his true color, that pale Pacific blue. Then, a cascade washed across his body and dozens of gradient rainbow colors faded and wrapped and flowed in and out and all along his cracks, curves, and crevices.

The ridges of his body lit with energy, saturated in a hue of perfect petunia purples, stormy sunset yellows, and glowing ember reds. Ocean crest blues and ripe peach pinks emerged. All around his eyes turned orange, and his underbelly was burnt crimson and saffron red. Each leg burst into neon greens and blues, and his tail washed away into the purest white. For the first time, The Chameleon felt free.

“It’s you.” He said, too quietly for her to hear.

The grass all around the lake ignited with color, and changed in a flash to rainbow hues. Something glowed and appeared, just above them. A translucent technicolor ribbon of light and static charge formed around them, and it twisted and twirled energetically into a spiral.

It was The Rainbow-Shell Turtle and her shell and it was The Chameleon and his hue, together. The wide ribbon danced majestically in the sky, and it became solid and continued to ascend. It reached the clouds above, and it dissipated and sprawled-out into a multi-colored mist. The two watched, and a shower of tiny rainbow confetti particles blanketed them and the heart-shaped lake.

She was completely still. Around her, the static pulsed in the air, and the grass tingled and the flowers buzzed brightly, and the tiny hairs on her stubby legs stood on end. She let out a sigh of exhaustion and relief.

The Chameleon climbed down, and The Rainbow-Shell Turtle saw him, his body still vibrantly colored, painted in her marvelously radiant rainbow hues. For the first time, she saw the colors of her own shell.

The Fox and The Magnolia

The crisp cool air breathed energy into The Rainbow-Shell Turtle and she walked briskly around the heart-shaped lake, and greeted new friends and absorbed the sunny light on her clean shell.

“Hello! Your flowers are lovely.” The Rainbow-Shell Turtle noticed a small fox in the busy crowd, with a crown woven of red hibiscus flowers and eucalyptus leaves. The Fox looked up at her, interested.

“Not many here see The Fox.”

The Fox had a beautiful cream-colored tail that split at its base and fanned out into dozens of sections, and it swayed all about and The Rainbow-Shell Turtle couldn’t quite count them each. Around the neck of The Fox there were two yarn bracelets that caught her eye, each identical and vibrantly colored.

“Ohh! You’re not so hard to see- why do others miss you?” She sat back on her hind legs to talk, and The Fox walked in a tight circle and sat too.

“The Fox only is. The Fox is now, and The Fox can not be other- not before, or then, or later.”

“Oohh...” The Rainbow-Shell Turtle thought on this, and understood. “You... *are!* You won’t be here tomorrow, or the next day, or yesterday...”

“The Fox is when The Fox is.”

She laughed. “I like you!”

“Who is this ‘You’? The Fox is The Fox.”

“Yes, ok! *The Fox*, okay, okay. I’m going on a walk, would you join me?” The Rainbow-Shell Turtle waved her leg around in a friendly gesture.

“The Fox does.”

They walked in stride, and The Fox moved effortlessly along the path, and barely touched the ground. The Rainbow-Shell Turtle smiled with content, and walked next to The Fox.

Behind a bend in the heart-shaped lake was a path unfamiliar to The Rainbow-Shell Turtle, hidden, cut away from the water and in toward a patch of golden wheat.

“The Fox sees a path.”

It was a long and faintly matted path. Small trees and bushes covered it from being easily discovered. She walked ahead slightly, and arrived at the base of a large mound, covered in lush unkempt grass.

Beneath her, she stood within a great round shadow. She lifted her head to follow the shape of the shadow, and at the crest of the mound stood the most magnificent old magnolia tree.

“The Fox knows this tree.”

Even from a distance, she noticed the scent, and the beautiful soft and fuzzy-sweet fruit. All around was a fluffy snowfall of fallen blooms, some fresh and bright ivory fuchsia, others dried and smushed from the seasons. She noticed the waxy, long triangle leaves were two-tone colored, and each reflected bright green on top, and rusty underneath.

“It’s absolutely... *perfect!* And you know it... how? This tree?” She looked over, and The Fox was gone.

Leaves rustled where The Fox once sat and she heard a call, far in the distance.

kon kon, kon kon

“Thank you!” The Rainbow-Shell Turtle did a spin and dance with rapture.

Where The Fox had stood, in the leaves, she saw the two yarn bracelets were left behind. She felt the soft yarn and the perfectly woven braid of vibrant colors. Distracted by thoughts of the tree, she placed them both around her front left leg and looked up.

She was in awe of the enormous tree, and approached it cautiously, like it were a dream. She touched its bark. It was solid, coarse and a little sticky from sugary sap, and she tasted it. The crooked branches sprawled out and up toward one side with a lopsided and wind-swept slouch. She knew it would be perfect to climb.

“I’ve... *found* you!” She threw up her legs and the leaves around her swirled. She knew it had to be the tree, the one that The

Chameleon searched for. And, she desperately wanted to climb it.

Without hesitation, The Rainbow-Shell Turtle clambered up the crooked part of the base easily. In a flash came memories of her sister again, when they would climb carefree in the shallow buckeye trees where she grew up. Her heart fluttered for a moment, and she remembered when they played together in the fields and atop the giant rocklins and around the granite quarries.

Determined to move further upward, she mounted her two front legs onto a steeper part of the trunk, and attempted to pull her weight up. Her grip couldn't hold, and she slipped backward, upside-down onto her shell.

"Ugggh! These... *legs!* They're not what they used to be." She shimmied herself around and flipped over. The Rainbow-Shell Turtle looked longingly, up further into the old magnolia. "I want to get up *there!*"

She knew she would conquer its heights someday, and she left in haste to tell The Chameleon of her discovery. She had never moved so fast on dry land, and her stubby legs worked double-time in perfect rhythm. She reminded herself of a majestic horse, and giggled, and pressed on.

She was in such a rush, she approached the heart-shaped lake and passed over the path and leapt straight into the water, the fastest way back. She needed to tell him.

"I've found it!" She burst in with energy, still a little wet from her swim. "Quickly, quickly! Come with me *right now*, there's no time to wait!"

"Found what..." The Chameleon couldn't finish, and he was dragged down to from the rooftop patio to the courtyard, and The Rainbow-Shell Turtle was already breathless, and explained too fast for him to keep up.

"...and there was The Fox and then I saw a big shadow but then there *wasn't* The Fox and I tried to climb to the top but I was upside-down and my *sister* was there too and I tasted the *sugary* sap..." She stopped to breathe, and The Chameleon laughed.

"Well..." She was out of breath. "I found a tree, *your* tree! The one... for your new house!"

The Chameleon couldn't contain his surprise. "Really?! But how do you..."

"Trust me... it's the one!" The Rainbow-Shell Turtle pulled him up the secluded path and through the thicket of golden grasses.

Together they approached the grassy mound. She saw the round shadow on the ground was more elongated, and she pointed up. "There."

The tree towered high and proud above the others. The Chameleon knew the branches could easily support a dwelling, the thing he dreamt of since he was young. He moved toward The Rainbow-Shell Turtle and held her close and they looked in awe at the old magnolia together.

"You're going to build the best home.... really! The best! I know it already. You can!" She danced and sang her encouragements.

“Thank you...” The Chameleon admired the old magnolia, and he admired The Rainbow-Shell Turtle, and her words, and the delicate scent of the tree petals. He thought of the home he would create, and he was ready to build.

Moon Shadow

Dusk darkened the sky on the rooftop patio, and The Rainbow-Shell Turtle flipped on the radio and picked out a lively jazz tune.

“Dance with me, darling?” She asked it sweetly, and twirled around energetically.

His heart skipped at the word. “I’m n-not very...”

“Just *move* your body! Take my arm. Come on, you can certainly do it!” The Rainbow-Shell Turtle grabbed him and didn’t wait for an answer.

She spun, and flung about with a grace that was uncharacteristic of her shape. The Chameleon tried his best to keep up. “Like... th-this...?”

“Wait... wait wait, ok... now *DIP!*” She stumbled, and they tumbled together onto the floor and laughed.

“I think I need some p-practice...” He wanted to learn.

The two looked up at the candy-colored clouds, and each floated on, lit by a sun gone down. Together their breaths slowed and they let the light above dim.

The half-moon crept slowly across the sky. “Do you know w-why the moon is s-sometimes in shadow?”

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle breathed heavily and stayed quiet.

“The moon hides itself. It c-covers itself in its own cast shadow.” He paused. “It n-needs time. Sometimes it n-needs time, to be alone.”

They watched the moon, carefully.

“And when it comes b-back, it’s twice as bright, and beautiful and p-perfectly whole.” He pointed up at the moon and made a circle gesture.

She understood the moon intimately. She thought of her family again, and she missed them with all her heart, and The Rainbow-Shell Turtle cried quietly to herself.

The Chameleon lifted himself a little, and looked out at the intricate houses and structures around the busy city, and thought of the life and Love inside each one.

“I always wanted to b-b-build. To be an architect of some great structure. Something b-beautiful and m-meaningful, and useful.” The Chameleon thought and waited.

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle was quiet, and listened.

“And n-now it’s *all* I can th-think about since you found the tree! The magnolia, it’s j-just going to be a little home, a perfect spot in the trees. I’m so excited! And... to sh-, to sh-, to sh-share...” He paused his stutters, embarrassed.

“...to share that dream, and with...” He trailed off quietly and blushed, and stood and meandered over to his green garden.

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle watched him. She thought about what he said, and didn’t say, and how he said it.

“Remember the flower you g-gave me, when we met? I planted the s-seeds from it, look.” He gestured to the beautiful, tiny dogwood branches. “It’s only a s-sapling.”

“I think... it’s beautiful.” She sounded distant, and she moved away from him to the other end of the rooftop.

As twilight faded, the stars eased out into the darkness. The Chameleon looked up, then out, from the rooftop patio. He looked closely, and the faint outline of the heart-shaped lake showed in the distance.

He turned back to The Rainbow-Shell Turtle, and she was perched on a pillow, quiet. She looked up to the sky, again. His eyes adjusted to the darkness, and The Chameleon saw that she cried.

“I think... I’ll leave now.” She searched for something in the stars.

“Is e-everything... okay?” He saw that she carried something heavy inside her heart.

“I’m fine.” She said it unconvincingly. “I just... need to be alone.”

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle got up to go, and The Chameleon reached for her gently, with an open gesture, and then he embraced her and wrapped her in a warm hug.

All at once, everything melted away. The two warm bodies together formed a cocoon for each heart, a protection against the world and against any hurt. Their eyes closed

together, their breath shared rhythm, and their heartbeats synchronized. Everything else went silent.

Their hug stretched on for a time, without boundary. Then, The Chameleon moved away slightly, and placed his leg softly on her chest, and noticed their heartbeat aligned. "I can feel you. *Here.*"

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle opened her eyes and saw him. She felt softly, and something new between them formed, like their first night together on the rooftop patio.

He Loved her. He couldn't tell her, yet The Chameleon knew it. No matter how she was; the ups and downs, the lefts and rights. He Loved her sparky energy and her quiet contemplations– her eruptive laughs and her deep cries– her sweet voice and her complex turtle mind.

The Chameleon had no idea how to tell her. He was not a poet, but he remembered a part of a song from an old friend of his. So he spoke, in his natural low tone, with a sing-song sweet sincerity:

It's not the things you wear

It's not the way you do your hair

But it's you I like

The way you are right now

The way down deep inside you

Not the things that hide you

He watched her carefully, and spoke again. "*Exactly* who you are, h-however you feel... when you grow and ch-change... that, d-darling, is all I ever want you to be."

It was, for The Chameleon, the first time he had ever expressed himself to somebody with his entire heart.

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle didn't know what to say. She was filled with warmth and in awe of him.

"I want to give you something..." She rummaged in her satchel. "...us, something."

She pulled out the twin woven bracelets, given to her by The Fox. They were identical, each with two thick pieces of smooth yarn, one rainbow-colored, wrapped intimately around the other, a pale Pacific blue color. The Rainbow-Shell Turtle tied one bracelet around her leg.

"Entangled." She said it quietly, and then she wrapped its twin gently around the leg of The Chameleon.

They stayed close in the thick darkness and The Chameleon curled his tail gently around the back of her shell, and wrapped them together. They looked up toward the half-moon, and The Chameleon counted the stars dotted around, and The Rainbow-Shell Turtle cried again, quietly to herself, and wondered about everything.

The Lighthouse

The Chameleon spent many days at the magnolia tree, and he built and built and thought of new ideas. He knew a hundred different things he needed to do, and there was not enough time to do it all.

He had this dream of his own dwelling among the treetops somewhere and with the old magnolia, he could build it. He made construction plans, he thought about the furniture, and he considered every small detail. He was an architect at heart.

The Chameleon unrolled the plans he had drawn on large pieces of blue paper. The first piece of the plan was the floor of the house, and he started. Cut pieces and planks were placed down and nailed together and arranged to fit together perfectly, one after the next.

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle leaned up against the base of the magnolia and looked at her notebook, the front cover bright white, and the back cover ink black. She flipped through the pages, and the words inside held everything between. She found an empty page, and she began to write something:

*shining far away, a singular point
on and off and off and off and on
and closer, and brighter, and
off and off and off and on and off
in a dream, or in a fog,
The Lighthouse stays strong!
The Lighthouse does not cease!
and off and off and on, it goes
The Lighthouse calls out!*

“Okay! We need to go!” The Rainbow-Shell Turtle announced it out of nowhere, and grabbed her notebook and swung it around her shell.

The Chameleon was reluctant to stop his work. “Oh! Okay... okay! Just *one* q-quick adventure. Then I m-must... I r-really m-must get back to work...”

On the main street of the busy city, a wooden board with wheels sat abandoned and she jumped onto it and laughed. She planted her four legs firmly on the board and lifted her head proud. “Come on... let’s go, let’s go!”

He laughed. “Go... h-how?”

“Just climb on my shell!” The Rainbow-Shell Turtle squealed with joy and she invited The Chameleon on top of her sparkly dome.

The Chameleon laughed and shuffled his way up the board and on top of her shell. He remembered the first time he stood on her shell and smiled.

They looked out to the bright blue sky and the sun blinded them both and The Chameleon squinted. The Rainbow-Shell Turtle lifted one leg off and placed it on the ground and pushed back with a great force. The board with wheels moved. It rolled along, and down hill it gathered speed.

“Weeeeeeeee!” She let out a scream. “The *speed!*”

The Chameleon took in everything that sped past him and he smiled. “This is a g-great way to travel!”

“What!?” The Rainbow-Shell Turtle yelled. “I don’t know how to *stop* this thing!”

“I said...” He yelled back, but was interrupted.

The board with wheels drove itself up onto an uneven patch of grass and the two bounced up and down and held on tightly, out of control. The Rainbow-Shell Turtle lost her balance and tipped to the side, and the board flipped over and together they both tumbled and rolled onto the grass.

She looked around, dazed. “That... was... awesome!”

“Oh! Look, th-there...” The Chameleon pointed up to the sky.

Directly in front, exactly where they tumbled to, a tall white lighthouse loomed over them, at the edge of the sea. They stood together at the bottom, and faced it and in awe they traced its length up into the sky. At the crown of the tower, inside the glass, a massive and beautiful brown bat hung upside down from the ceiling.

“Let’s... go up?” The Rainbow-Shell Turtle was drawn to the lighthouse, she knew at the top was something important.

A spiral inner staircase took them up and up, and they looked out of the tiny windows on the way to the top. A small hatch opened at the top, and through it they arrived into the glass dome. They waited in silence underneath, and the magnificent beast dangled above. It sensed them, and it spoke:

Sense..... a pure Love, entangled, perennial.

It used dense, poetic fragments to communicate, and together they listened carefully to understand.

Sense..... turtle- poet, with colorful light, sensitive of heart.

Sense..... lizard... no, chameleon- architect, with distraction, hidden of heart.

The Chameleon was embarrassed, and he changed his outer color to be more noticeable. “Oh, s-sorry...”

The Bat understood everything; all the questions, the needs, and the desires they each had. It shuffled its massive wings to adjust itself, and spoke again:

Sense..... together- trust change and swell with the storm.

Sense..... apart- flourish too, with grace each to find your ways.

Sense..... in dreams- Love and do not fear the waves.

Sense..... beyond- beyond... this cannot be sensed.

The Bat stopped, and the glass dome was silent. They waited, and bowed, and left through the opened hatch that they arrived through.

Behind, her sash caught on the hatch, and The Rainbow-Shell Turtle didn’t notice her book of poetry dropped down and tumbled to the floor. They continued on, and there the notebook would stay, to be missed.

“Perennial.” She whispered, and they descended the spiral staircase and thought about everything The Bat said.

The Chameleon laughed lightly. “Well, w-what do you suppose that meant?”

“I think it means... well, it means that we are *destined* to change! There’s growth, and a magnificent bloom... and then it fades and it changes.” The Rainbow-Shell Turtle let her thought linger in the air between them. “Then, seasons pass, and it’s new again. It’s a cycle. And it’s *always* growing...”

“O-ohhh...” The Chameleon was lost in thought and distracted. “I should get b-back... t-to the tree! I need to w-work on the floors.”

He waved to The Rainbow-Shell and he walked up the path toward the magnolia and she pointed in the opposite direction, toward her tangerine pond home in the flower valley. She thought of The Chameleon, and the two of them, and she was uneasy then. The lighthouse pulsed above her, on and off and off and off and on, and she made her way home by the reliable light.

Little Loneliness

In the mornings, when the temperature was coolest, The Chameleon built and he built, until his body gave out. Then, during lunch, he thought only about what he had built, and then he would build more in his mind. He would build long into the nights, after the rest of the community fell sound asleep.

He focused all his attention on the magnolia tree. The Chameleon was so intent on building his new dwelling, he began to neglect every other part of his life. Each day that passed, he spent more time in thought about the house, and less time with other important parts of his life. He had not seen The Rainbow-Shell Turtle in many weeks.

Some days, exhausted, The Chameleon would write a letter to The Rainbow-Shell Turtle, with details about the progress of his home. Always, she would write back, and ask to visit him, to see him again, to see his work at the old magnolia. The responses were distracted.

A thin twig crunched and snapped, and The Rainbow-Shell Turtle jumped and startled herself out of a daze, and looked down at it. She was on a walk, and she was thought of her missing notebook and all the places it could have gone.

She arrived near the busy city and she was excited to see The Chameleon. She wanted to surprise him, and she hoped to see the progress of the house.

"Hello!" The Rainbow-Shell Turtle arrived in the afternoon.

The Chameleon was stuck to the underside of the structure, upside-down, while he attached some piece or another to some other piece or another. The tools made a raucous, and he didn't hear her.

"Hello...!! *Hi!*" She raised her voice excitedly, and looked forward to a warm greeting from him.

"Oh!" He didn't look away from his work. "I d-didn't expect a visitor."

"Well, I just thought... I haven't seen you in a few weeks... actually, since spring started! I thought you might want to go..." She was interrupted by a loud crash, and a metal toolbox slipped from the branches and dropped onto the grass below, with hammers and rulers and bolts tossed in every direction.

"...to go on a walk... around the lake... with me." She finished her question, dejected.

"Oh, well maybe... let me f-f-finish up this piece here, f-first, and make s-sure this is s-secure..." The Chameleon would not stop his work. "...and just... readjust this..."

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle looked up The Chameleon and was overcome with an empty loneliness she hadn't experienced before. She turned away, and went on a walk alone, and she thought.

(Little loneliness

has my attention.

Little loneliness needs me,

doesn't leave me,

or leaves me be.)

The heart-shaped lake was alive with great energy from the community, and after a long while on the path, she found a patch of grass on a small hillside to stop at. She sat, and she looked around her, and she felt.

She was hurt. She didn't understand why The Chameleon was distant. The Rainbow-Shell Turtle knew that something had to change. She heard a faint sound from a far distance.

kon kon, kon kon

Her head perked up and she looked straight across the heart-shaped lake to the source of the call. Beyond the busyness in the trees, she caught a glimpse of The Fox, sitting proud on a patch of grass like her own.

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle looked down at her bracelet and touched its soft braided and woven fibers and she remembered many things. When she looked up, The Fox was gone, and her heart wrenched a little and she let out a soft cry. Her tears dropped down and soaked quickly into the ground, and she let them fall freely to the dry cracked dirt.

The tears flowed and a pool of muddy muck formed beneath The Rainbow-Shell Turtle and her eyes welled more until she

couldn't stop, and the hillside became a river of salty sooty little loneliness that led straight down and into the heart-shaped lake.

She cried until she couldn't breathe, and her body slipped underneath on the muddy clay, and she flipped back onto her shell and into the saddest river. She spun around and slid down the hillside and across the path at the bottom and she splashed straight into the heart-shaped lake.

The cool water soothed her shell and her cries stopped but the source of the river continued and the saddest river would never run dry.

In the tree, The Chameleon hammered a nail into a board and thought only of his house in the magnolia, and The Rainbow-Shell Turtle floated along the heart-shaped lake and thought only of her little loneliness.

Summer Heat

The scorched air dripped with heat, and the summer arrived abruptly. The Chameleon persisted with work, and he thought only his house atop the magnolia. It began a season of muggy mornings, sticky hot drawn out days, and warm still nights.

He waited at the base of the magnolia and felt the heat on his back. It was early, and the sun was relentless. His skin was uncolored, and it reflected some of the light and warmth.

The floor of the house was his priority. Each board was first cut down, then lifted up, placed carefully, and hammered in. His mind focused only on that board, and then on the next. His breath was strong and uneven with the repetition of the work.

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle waited, behind him, and looked down at a patch of dead grass. She traced the shape of the patch with her eyes, and she looked at the bracelet on her leg and she couldn't hold it in any longer.

"Can I..." Her voice cracked and she cleared it.

"I... I *need* to say something." She said it loudly, to reach him.

"O-Oh! Sure, go ahead." The Chameleon was startled by her presence, and he didn't turn to see her.

The sky kept without clouds, and the heat blistered her, and only eased beneath the shadow of the magnolia tree. She stepped back, out of the shadow of the tree and into the sun.

*(Hot heat on browned leaves
leaves me– dead leaf weather
whether or not I'm ready.)*

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle watched him and inside her shell she sensed an intense burn, and she felt pushed away. Tools and boards were spread all across the grass beneath the tree.

“Why... don’t you *see* me now...?” The Rainbow-Shell Turtle said to herself first, and then raised her voice loudly, and stomped her leg with anger. “*Where are you!*”

Her voice echoed in the trees nearby and the crows that perched above scattered with a cry. The Chameleon turned to her, shocked. The words hung in the air still, and his skin turned dark grey, and the sun seared him.

“I’m... I w-was just...” The humid air was unbearable, and he stopped, and climbed down from the tree but he didn’t look at her directly. “I was j-just working on...”

She didn’t recognize him, and her eyes drifted to the withered magnolia blooms and the insects that crawled along the bark of the trunk. Her mind wandered and she thought of the slow summer days when she was young, and the clear cloudless skies and the little ladybugs on the logs in the shadowed woods.

“What happened to you? You’ve...” The Rainbow-Shell Turtle couldn’t finish, and she turned away disappointed.

“I... d-don’t know wh-wh... wh-what to...” His voice cracked and he couldn’t finish a sentence.

The Chameleon thought of answers, and excuses to his answers, and reasons to justify his answers and excuses. He wanted to explain himself to her.

She didn’t wait for a response. Her heart ached with confusion, and her breath was constrained, and she was ready to be finished. Without another word, The Rainbow-Shell Turtle turned herself around, and started down the path, straight away from The Chameleon.

He watched after her, and called out, but she didn’t stop. He moved to follow her, and he tripped over a bucket of paint and dropped to the ground. A splash of red stained the dead and golden summer grass.

The Chameleon looked up from the ground and reached out, and his voice strained with every effort, and The Rainbow-Shell Turtle grew more and more distant from him.

“*W-wait....!*” He expelled all of himself to say one last word.

She would not stop, and she would not look back at him. Her thoughts moved onward and forward faster than her legs could take her.

The Chameleon didn’t follow her. His eyes fell shut and burned bright orange. The summer sun scorched his cracked skin, and the heart-shaped lake and the birds and the wind fell completely silent to him.

Act II



Silent Storm

A dogwood sapling reached up to the sky, and bent, pushed down under a furious wind. The Chameleon stirred, restless, and the dirt and the dogwood roots crumbled and the leaves and branches disintegrated into dusty nothing. A tremendous wind whipped around, and carried the soot and crumble in a whirlwind, far up into the sky, and a bolt of thunder clapped with a roar.

The Chameleon jumped awake with a gasp. His eyes squinted from the new morning light and he took quick and short breaths, and he looked over at his dogwood sapling. The little tree quivered in the stormy morning winds, underneath the swirl of a grey and mucky sky.

He remembered the day before, and The Rainbow-Shell Turtle, and his thoughts filled quickly with questions. He looked down at his leg and saw the braided bracelet. He removed it hesitantly, and placed it in his cloth satchel.

“Wh...wh-wh a nightm...” The Chameleon croaked out the words.

To his surprise, he couldn't speak. He tried again, this time no sound produced at all. He had lost his voice.

The Chameleon checked the colors of his skin, and wondered what was wrong. He opened and closed both eyes, and flexed his tail long, and he stretched his arms and legs out. Everything worked, only, he could not speak. Even the smallest word emerged barely a whisper, graveled and strained.

The wild wind whipped on the rooftop, but without a sound. His blankets flapped, and the wooden boxes shook, and the pillows tumbled about, and the chairs slid around, but the storm was completely in silence.

The plants of his green garden quivered, and a strong gust pulled on the base of the dogwood sapling and toppled it over suddenly.

"Ahhhgg!" The Chameleon grunted in distress.

He rushed over, and quickly swept up the soil, and placed the sapling upright again and straightened it. Two small branches had snapped off, and a third was injured and dangled.

The Chameleon quickly mended the branch with a cloth wrap. He moved back and looked at the dogwood sapling, and his mind filled with memories. He lifted the sapling from its prominent spot at the front of the green garden, and moved it to a shady part in the back, where it would be less visible and more protected.

His focus shifted back to the urgent priority, his lost voice, and he left the rooftop patio to find out what happened to it. He needed to see The Ox right away.

The Chameleon rushed along the path of the heart-shaped lake toward the doctor. The winds around the water were

blustery too, but he noticed again that the storm made no noise at all. The violent winds were quiet.

At the south end of the heart-shaped lake, an oversized tent stood made of patchwork fabrics and thick yarns stitched together carelessly. The home looked like it might blow away in the wind at any moment.

He walked up to it, and it looked abandoned. He wanted to announce himself. There was a metal pole stuck into the ground nearby, and he grabbed a branch to hit the pole with, and it made a muted clang and a reverberation.

The Chameleon waited, and nothing happened. He clanged the metal pole louder, over and over. A strange grunty noise came from inside, and The Ox strolled out from her tent. She had been asleep soundly, and looked disappointed and groggy.

"What... do you need..." The Ox spoke incredibly slowly.

The Chameleon didn't know how to communicate without his words. He used all of his strength to push out one word along with some coughs. "...voice..."

"Speak... up... little dragon..." She almost fell asleep between each word.

He drew hastily into the dirt with the branch:

NO VOICE

The Ox looked down at the dirt and blinked for a very long time and fell asleep for a moment.

Around them, the speed of the winds grew, and a piece of the patchwork tent ripped off and flew up and off into a nearby tree. The Chameleon could perfectly hear the birds nearby and the splashes of the water, and the storm kept silent.

He grabbed the branch again and clanged it on the metal pole and woke The Ox again. She opened her eyes slowly, and stared down at the dirt, unable to decipher the message. "I... don't really... read..."

The Chameleon dropped to the ground, desperate, and he flailed his arms around.

"Let's... look... at you..." She ambled over to her tent and retrieved her medical kit.

The Ox took her time with an assortment of strange tools, and she pressed and poked and pulled at parts of his body. The Chameleon opened his mouth and expected her to see something terribly wrong inside.

"You... seem... just fine..." The Ox put her strange tools away slowly, each one back into the bag.

She returned to her tent. "Go home... and... rest..."

The Chameleon looked at her in disbelief, defeated. He gave a small wave, and turned to leave The Ox.

The dust of the path swirled, and his eyes stung with dirt and he cried. The storm gathered, and the birds around the heart-shaped lake found refuge in the trees, and the wind blowed still without sound.

When he arrived back at the rooftop patio, he slouched down on a pillow, exhausted. The air dropped colder, and he shivered.

With his voice silenced, he was immediately overwhelmed with a compulsion to write. Out of his satchel he took his pencil and paper, and began at once to write, and he furiously scribbled words.

Every emotion, every question The Chameleon had, came out and onto the page in a flurry of desperation. He pleaded, he wrote, and he was irrational and impatient in every sentence.

When he finished, he felt worse. He folded the paper hastily, and scribbled on the front:

THE RAINBOW-SHELL TURTLE

He went in a rush down to the courtyard, beneath his home, and approached the postbox. It was a quaint wooden box painted red and white, with the word **POST** written large on the front in bold black script. Below it was a wide slot for letters.

The Chameleon took his letter and shoved it into the slot, then promptly turned his back to it. A bolt of lightning flashed and surprised him, and the wind picked up again suddenly and violently.

Behind him, the postbox shuddered, and inside the letter tossed and flapped around, and the wind pushed in through the open slot.

Suddenly, the silent strong winds gripped his letter firmly and ripped it out of the postbox, and carried it up in a spiral until it vanished into the smokey clouds. The storm took it.

Unaware of the fate of his letter, The Chameleon scurried up to the rooftop, and he worried about the storm intensity. He hurried around with his tarps and coverings, and the sky broke and the rain descended in heavy blankets.

He knew he would rather not sit out in the rain, even under a tarp, and he decided to spend the evening at a favorite neighborhood place, the cozy bookhouse down and around the block.

The Chameleon dashed through the rain to the shop. The rain of the storm drenched everything, and still the storm couldn't make a sound and his small voice was lost in the silence.

The Cozy Bookhouse

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle rushed along. She was just a little bit late on her way to a poetry event in the afternoon. It started precisely when it started, and she didn't want to miss any of it. She planned to perform a poem, and she had prepared herself for it confidently.

She moved briskly down the busy path along the heart-shaped lake. She passed the pier, and remembered the afternoon with the race. She felt the sensation again, the water that rushed over her shell, and she heard The Beagle howl and The Chameleon and his laugh. She hurried along quicker.

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle burst in through the front door of the cozy bookhouse, exhausted and triumphant. She caught her breath and looked around to an empty room.

"Did I... miss it?" She slumped over, disappointed.

"Oh hoo-hoo! You're not late, in fact you're *early*!" A bright and energetic business-owl, tall and chocolate-colored, approached her, and patted the top of her shell with his wing.

She looked up at him, and was relieved to hear it. "Do you own this shop? It's *cozy* here!"

"I do—hoo! Isn't it a *beautiful* thing? The smell of the books, the rows and rows of pages, such energy and wisdom and Love, all together in one little room." He gestured broadly around and spoke with gusto.

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle liked The Owl. "I feel the same! I'm going to look around a little."

She shifted between towers of books and stacks of magazines and narrow aisles of shelves, and she looked up high to admire the vast variety of options. She turned her head to read the titles on the edges of each volume and she touched the spines gently.

The Owl watched, and The Rainbow-Shell Turtle shuffled through the books on the lower shelves. She searched for a certain play.

"...I'm just looking for..." She mumbled to herself. "Say, have you heard of... *The Mongoose*?"

"Of course! Yes, yes! She's a very close friend, actually, years ago she came into the store and of course I was here, I was standing right over *there* shelving books, when..." The Owl had his story interrupted by the dling-dling bell of the shop door.

"No, no it's okay! Actually, it's the name of a play I've been looking for..." The Rainbow-Shell Turtle kept on her search.

She squeezed through a stack of dusty books, and stumbled into a small forgotten corner of the shop. On the floor of the nook was one book alone and she picked it up to read the side:

LETTING GO OF FEAR

The book was small, and The Rainbow-Shell Turtle opened the cover curiously. She flipped through and stopped on a page:

Lesson 2: Forgiveness is the key to happiness.

She laughed a little to herself, and The Owl overheard.

"That's a special one." He chimed in from atop the stacks and startled her. "Above all, we must Love *fiercely*, and open ourselves... and learn when to forgive. Oh-hoh-ho! Even *I* need that lesson! As long as I've been around, and I still forget."

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle looked up to The Owl, and she had so many questions that she didn't know how to ask. "I don't know... what if I can't? What if... well, there's something that's too difficult to forgive."

"Oh-hoh! *That's* the most important." He rustled his feathers in a shiver. "Everything we give is given back to us. Hoh! It takes time, and we all find our way eventually. To understand all is to forgive all, little one."

She listened to him closely. The shop door bell rang again, and The Rainbow-Shell Turtle turned quickly to the front to see a small crowd gathered near the stage. "Thank you. I'll hold onto this."

She placed her new book into her cloth satchel and found a spot near the stage to watch the show. She would be first to perform, and she felt a shiver of excitement. She shifted in her seat, and The Owl appeared on stage.

“Hoh! Beautiful! Magical! It’s so-hoh-oh *wonderful* to see all of you here tonight!” The Owl gave a performance of his own and introduced the evening.

“First, our special guest tonight... hoh! It’s her first time sharing with us. In all her vibrance and radiance, please welcome...” He trailed off, shushed by audience that clapped excitedly for The Rainbow-Shell Turtle.

She felt the warmth, and hurried up to the stage. She hadn’t yet written down her poem yet, she knew its content intimately. She quietly cleared her throat, and began confidently:

You broke me with your gentleness—

Your voice of white beach sand, or—

*That hollow sound of low reverberation when moving
through that big metal tunnel you’d explore when
young,*

Which now you stroll past, remembering.

That feeling, is your voice. But also—

*Your voice is a mountain trail; ascending, & descending,
winding methodically—*

*yet not without play—over and around its bends and
across its rivers.*

Your voice is a canyon valley and

A bowl of steaming white rice; neat and

Always a comfort.

Your voice speaks with all of these.

There was a dense silence, and the audience didn’t clap or snap or move at all. They were captivated, and even the geese had goose-pimples. One quiet listener was camouflaged in the back of the room; The Chameleon had wandered in, unaware, at the start of the poem.

He listened to her sweet voice and her confident performance, he felt the vastness of her heart saturate the cozy room, and his heart wrenched at the beauty, at the words, at her. The cracked skin around his eyes turned a bright orange, and he cried softly.

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle didn’t see him there, and yet she felt a something in the room. She looked through the audience, and searched among the strangers for an explanation.

The room burst into an uproar with applause and she jolted back from distraction. The Owl stood proud to the side, and she smiled lightly and gave a small wave, and stepped down from the stage. Her heart twisted in every direction and she buzzed with new sensation and Love. The Rainbow-Shell Turtle was ready.

Wild Wood Iris

The Chameleon loved every type of plant, and he had grown a fresh interest in flowers. His green garden on the rooftop patio was full of plants and flowers that he cultivated since spring. He carefully tended to their growth cycles and needs.

Among his plants was the place that he found true peace. No matter how hard things got, how much he missed his friends or The Rainbow-Shell Turtle, or how anxious he was, he would spend time in his green garden and feel quiet and good.

The Chameleon loved to find new flora, and he learned about the old language of the flowers. Each flower carried a meaning. His calla lily, for example– *modesty*.

A wind brushed past him and he looked to the shaded corner of his green garden, to the small dogwood tree– *love undiminished by adversity*– it had not yet bloomed.

The Chameleon would often pick some of his own fresh flowers from his green garden, and mix them together with others foraged from around the heart-shaped lake and orchestrate them together into bouquets. He sought unique combinations, and mixed colors, scents and textures together to speak an entirely new language of the senses.

The Chameleon went down from the rooftop patio in search of new flowers. Instead of his routine path, he decided to venture toward the old magnolia, a direction he had avoided recently. He stopped under the shade of the giant oak tree, and sat in the same spot that he had with The Rainbow-Shell Turtle. He indulged in the memory and smiled.

After a time, The Chameleon stood to leave, and noticed across from him a great shrub full of wood iris flowers. He got close to one.

It was a beautiful and complex flower, with a triad of distinct petal groups overlaid atop one another. The base of the bloom had three broad and strong white petals, each with a splash of golden-orange. The middle layer had three more petals, subdued, also white but dotted with small unpredictable streaks of gold. Crowned on top, three delicate feathery lilac-purple petals burst open. All together, it was both dramatic and subtle, perfectly sweet, and perfectly wild.

The stalks grew in pods of two, which The Chameleon found romantic. The scent was gentle and earthy and it was not a typical flower. He knew, its blossom perfectly mirrored The Rainbow-Shell Turtle. Her complexities and vibrancy and strength and independence, and her sweet soul. It was all the uplifting joys of Love she offered to the world, contained in a single bloom.

"...wild wood iris." He reached out and gently held one, and strained his lost voice. "...encouraging." For some special flowers, he would make up his own meanings.

He thought of her closely and he shivered and his skin flashed brightly, suddenly, into a rainbow array. He chose three of the flowers, and picked each at the base of its long stem. He placed them gently in his cloth satchel.

"HEHLOOH LIHTTLE RHAINBOW LIHZARD." The Chameleon jumped back, completely frightened.

He turned to see a massive bird, proud and broad. The Pelican spoke with great volume, but the words sounded soft somehow. "DID I SCAHRE YOU!"

The Pelican looked magnificently eccentric, with a saggy orange storage pocket hung from an elongated beak, and splashes of pink dotted around each eye, with bright white feathers contrasted against wing tips of midnight black.

"WHAT BEAUHTIFUL FLOWHERS! COME TO THE FLOWHER MARKHET?" The Pelican gestured a wing upward.

"I..." The Chameleon forgot that his voice was missing.

"GREAHT! IT IS OHHHH-KAY. I WILL TAHKE YOU THERE, NOW." Without permission, The Pelican scooped him up into the big orange gullet, and they lifted off the ground and into the sky with just a few wing flaps.

"AHG...!" The Chameleon made a noise that he was barely able to.

He poked his head out from the strange pouch, and looked down to see the entire heart-shaped lake, all at once from above. He saw familiar landmarks, the cozy bookhouse and his rooftop patio, all the treetops and the magnolia proud above.

He noticed the paths he walked every day, from an entirely different perspective, and he felt small.

“WE’RE FLHYING.” The Pelican took care with The Chameleon on board, and then descended from their short flight toward the flower market.

They landed softly and The Pelican dipped down to let him out. All around, vendors sold buckets and bouquets of every flower he could imagine, and many he couldn’t imagine. The Lamb owned the market, and she stood sheepishly outside, and offered her quiet suggestions to customers.

They approached the shop, and The Lamb trotted over quickly to The Pelican. They embraced and held close, and The Chameleon felt their Love and his heart warmed.

“I FOUND A RHAINBOW LIHZARD!” The Pelican looked to The Chameleon and noticed he was not rainbow colored.

“Hello. Welcome to my flower market.” The Lamb looked around her. “The Pelican and I design and deliver flowers all around the area.”

The Pelican was committed to deliver flowers for The Lamb, any where they might need to go, to any one that might ask, any time they might want them. It was a job of great excitement and passion.

The Lamb was quiet in contrast, and strange and sweet. She spoke carefully, and would often impart unsolicited wisdoms to her customers.

“A broken branch shan’t grow back a tree...” The Lamb waved her hoof. “...but the seeds it bares can sow the forest.”

It wasn’t clear exactly what that meant, but The Chameleon took it for a metaphor on Love, or growth, or simply horticulture advice for him.

He decided finally on flowers; passionflower—*faith*—and sweet pea—*delicate pleasures*. With his voice absent, he gave a nod to them both.

The Chameleon prepared the bouquet, adding the three iris blooms from his satchel, and other small fillings to give it balance. He moved back from it, viewed it from each side, and knew it was ready.

He handed his masterpiece carefully to The Lamb and wrote a note:

**THE RAINBOW-SHELL TURTLE:
TANGERINE POND – FLOWER VALLEY**

“It has been so many sunsets since The Pelican traveled so far to the flower valley. It may take one day to fly there.” The Lamb placed the bouquet safely inside the deep orange pouch.

“CARGOOOOOOHH.” The Pelican shrieked with joy.

The Pelican shivered and spread their impressive wingspan, perfectly suited to commute great distances. They launched gracefully upward, magnificently above, and headed north toward The Rainbow-Shell Turtle in the flower valley. The Chameleon watched The Pelican until he couldn’t see them anymore.

He nodded again to The Lamb, and returned home, apprehensive and confused still. The only thing he could do

was wait and hope that his gesture, his bouquet, would be received.

Afterward, when The Chameleon walked the path of the heart-shaped lake and saw a wild wood iris, he thought of The Rainbow-Shell Turtle, and his heart would flood with emotion. He felt at home again, briefly. His cracked skin tingled, and a rainbow hue spread across him in waves, to his legs and back, and all along his tail, and then faded away slowly.

Her Meadow

In the bright afternoons, The Rainbow-Shell Turtle would sunbathe atop a certain rock in the middle of her pond, on the outskirts of the beautiful flower valley. The rock, and the pond, were a cozy home to her.

A giant tangerine tree stood at the edge and loomed lazily over the water and little orange treats dangled and teased her. Clumps of wheat and cattails circled the pond, and it was protected from the wind and dust of the valley. She loved her home.

And yet, she was restless, and knew she needed to be away from everything. She collected some of her favorite objects into her satchel. Her most cherished place was far off, a day-long hike at least, and she'd be gone for a few sunsets.

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle knew the way by heart. She would hike north first, and then straight on east. She left, ready for an good adventure.

Moments later, The Pelican arrived in the flower valley, high in the sky, carrying a beautiful bouquet gently in their mouth. It was a long way from the flower market in the busy city to deliver a bouquet.

“TURHTLE? HEHLLO, IT IS THE PELICAN.” The Pelican looked around for anybody, and checked again the sheet of paper:

**THE RAINBOW-SHELL TURTLE:
TANGERINE POND – FLOWER VALLEY**

The Pelican knew it was the right pond, and yet there was no turtle in sight. “I HAVE FLOWHERS...”

The pond was silent. The Pelican was disappointed to think they would return the flowers back to The Chameleon. Instead, they decided to leave the bouquet by the pond, and assumed it would be found later.

“GOODBYE BOUQUET.” And The Pelican launched again gracefully into the sky to return home to The Lamb and the flower market. “SQUAAHHHW...”

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle perked up, and she heard a bird call far in the distance behind her. Her mind wandered and she hiked away from her home.

*(One rock somewhere
in a field of eight hundred fire-orange poppies,
and the crisp morning droplets slide
down the stems and the poppies they drink;
and the rock keeps close watch.)*

The tall hills gave way to even taller craggy mountains, topped with white caps. The air cooled and thickened with fresh pine

wood. It was late in the afternoon when The Rainbow-Shell Turtle arrived.

She was somewhere again, in a distant forest, at something like a wooden cabin. The wooden cabin had a shed, and above the shed was a sign, with a name she knew. Beyond the shed there was a dusty path, and down the dusty path was a creaky wooden bridge, and she crossed it and remembered. Over the creaky wooden bridge at the end of the dusty path was her place.

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle stood at the mouth of the path. She closed her eyes and she remembered, and then she forgot, and she took a long inhale of the familiar pinewood air and damp marshlands. A gust of cool wind brushed her olive speckled skin, and a jolt traveled up through her shell and all the way back down to her tail.

Many minutes passed before she opened her eyes again, before she allowed the soft setting sunlight to gently enter. A broad clearing ahead illuminated, and was splashed with dusky warm colors. The Rainbow-Shell Turtle arrived at her place, her meadow.

She listened to the winds and they sifted through the branches, and the soft sound of the grasses swished. The coniferous trees around her awoke with life and the sun dropped behind the ridge fully. Countless points glowed and faded in and out, and the fireflies came to life. She thought of their story and their fire butts, and she watched them blink in and out of rhythm with one another.

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle released her worry. She curled up in the fields of yellow buttercups, and she drifted away quietly into a restful nothingness.

When her eyes opened again, the sun was asleep, still hidden, and the grasses around her were damp with cold dew. A call came in the distance.

kon kon, kon kon

She jumped awake. “The Fox!?”

When she scanned the meadow, she didn’t see The Fox, just the yellow blooms, the tall pines, and the open sky. She looked around and stopped, and peace washed over her.

kon kon, kon kon

She perked up again, and she knew exactly which direction it came from. The Rainbow-Shell Turtle galloped toward it, and she surprised herself with her own determination.

The sound led her underneath the canopy of trees. She pushed deeper into the forrest, and looked carefully all around her. The dense trees continued, but a small ground clearing opened up and in front of her on the trunk of a fallen tree sat The Fox.

“Hello, The Fox!” She danced around in a circle.

“The Fox greets in return.”

“But... what are... why is The Fox... *here?*” The Rainbow-Shell Turtle was excited and confused.

“The Fox is here to be here.”

She gave a little laugh and then sat down next to The Fox, on the tree trunk. She looked down at her stubby legs and they dangled off the log, and she noticed the braided bracelet, the twin of the one she gave to The Chameleon. In the weeks since, she forgot about it.

She knew it was time. “Here, remember this? It’s for The Fox to have back. To have it, again.”

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle took off the braided bracelet and placed it gently around the neck of The Fox where it first came from, and she smiled sadly.

“The Fox feels.”

She watched The Fox shiver from top to bottom and glow brightly with new colors. The leaves and small grass patches around The Fox burst into a bright rainbow-color. The Fox spun around in a tight circle and shook with new Love.

“It... sure is *dark* under here...” The light faded beneath the cover of the dense forest canopy, and she squinted and looked carefully in every direction.

“The meadow nearby... it’s my favorite place, ever!” When she looked over next, The Fox was gone, and she gasped. “Goodbye! Goodbye to The Fox!”

kon kon, kon kon

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle hopped off of the log, and she looked back at it, and it crumbled and decayed into a pulpy pile of dust. “That’s weird. It didn’t *seem* that fragile...”

She scanned around the woods, and she didn't know which way she came from, so she picked a direction to walk. "I *might* be lost."

She was dazed, and again in the distance she heard something, yet it was not The Fox. "Is that a... whistle... or..."

The sound was soft and breathy and musical, and she followed it intently. Dense darkness filled the woods, more than nighttime, and she pursued the music and felt her way through the trees and stumbled around the plants and sticks and stumps.

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle emerged in a small and perfectly round clearing, and the soft whistle of music faded. In the center, a large tree stump waited, and on top, a single fuzzy golden mushroom grew out of a crack in the wood. It glowed with a dim soft light.

"Oh... it's a golden scruffy..." She approached it cautiously. "Not to be eaten... *not!*"

She plucked the golden scruffy carefully from its home, and it immediately lit up bright, and the entire clearing was illuminated with a golden soft light. "Well, and *wow!* This should help..."

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle held the golden scruffy proudly and she navigated the woods and listened to the mushroom carefully and followed the golden light and she was led out of the deep of the woods and toward the meadow.

When she emerged into the open, she left the golden scruffy on a log nearby, and noticed the sun had set behind the ridge. "I was... gone... *that* long?"

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle waited out in the meadow, and she felt herself, the lightness, and she noticed the burden that lifted from her. She looked up to a thousand scattered stars, and she traced the patterns and let her mind wander.

Between the ponderosa pines and wild sweet strawberry bushes, beneath a cut-out crescent moon amid growing lotus blooms- there she was.

The Desert Camel

Each day when the sun was precisely a little bit beyond overhead, The Chameleon, while lightly asleep for his nap, popped awake ready for his routine.

First, he stretched his tail long, and all four legs curled inward and his neck reached up to the sky. He would always say his mantra “*What a beautiful day!*” just how The Rainbow-Shell Turtle inspired him to.

“W-what a...” His absent voice stunted the routine.

Then, he took a lap around the rooftop, and passed by his green garden and the dogwood sapling, and greeted it with a wave. Each day since it was blown over, it looked worse, and The Chameleon tried to ignore it.

Then, he ate a snack, a delicious bug, a piece of fruit, or something ripe and tasty from the crops he kept. When he ate something especially delectable, his skin would shiver and change bright pink briefly.

Finally, after he was prepared for the afternoon, he scurried down to the courtyard where he would wait patiently for the mail to arrive.

The Desert Camel delivered the mail. It was the service he provided to all the residents around the heart-shaped lake. It had been many weeks since any mail had arrived for The Chameleon, but he liked to check, just in case. Each day, he waited patiently, on his favorite wooden bench in the courtyard. And each day there was The Desert Camel, and there was no mail.

As the season passed, his daily routine faded into a weekly one, and the weekly one into an occasional one. On one occasional day, The Chameleon sat on the wooden bench, and let his mind meander anywhere it pleased. Next to him, he looked to an overgrown crop of lilies—*majesty*. He heard a familiar clop-clop of hooves and the swish of papers and looked up.

As always, right on time, The Desert Camel sauntered up to the base of the building and into the courtyard. He was sandy colored, with a seriously smug face, and two steep humps on his back. The fuzzy canyon between held a large basket with all the post to be delivered that day. A satchel hung across one of the humps with more letters inside. He took his responsibilities seriously.

The Desert Camel rarely spoke to anyone, and that seemed no different, until The Chameleon saw that he held something.

“Today is your lucky day.” He said it with no enthusiasm, and he produced a brown parcel and then he turned to leave. “Bye.”

The Chameleon looked down at the parcel with great anticipation. All the weeks he waited were worth it. He couldn't contain his excitement and he flipped over the parcel and

read the top corner hurriedly. It was addressed from Mother Chameleon. It was not exactly what he hoped for.

He spent the afternoon in the courtyard, and he thought all of his big thoughts, and he took many long breaths. His mind wandered to the day he first met The Rainbow-Shell Turtle, and a warm smile arrived, and it slowly faded, replaced with an ache in his heart.

The Chameleon had not received a response to the letter he sent to The Rainbow-Shell Turtle. His expectation had become a dream, and his dream became a hope. Then, he wondered, and wished, and wanted.

His mind danced around. His thoughts went to the magnolia tree, which he hadn't worked on once since that day. He stared down at the dry dusty dirt beneath the bench, and then up to the wind and the clouds, where his mind lingered. Next to The Chameleon on the bench sat the unopened parcel.

"Sometimes there is silence." A familiar voice spoke, with calm wisdom. Across the courtyard stood The Desert Camel, again, and his mail bag was loose and empty from a long day of work. "It doesn't mean there will always be silence."

The Desert Camel sat down next to The Chameleon on the wooden bench, and the parcel waited between them, and they both looked ahead. "It's not always supposed to be easy, Love."

His thoughts swirled and churned, and his skin hue muddled into a smokey grey.

"I n-never told..." The Chameleon admitted something he had been thinking about for weeks, in the strongest hoarse whisper he could manage. "She... d-doesn't... *know*..."

A cloud moved to cover the radiant sun, and they both looked up to the shadowed sky.

"Love is not always perfect." The Desert Camel knew some great truths. "But, always beautiful. Always worth it."

They sat together in silence for a long time after that. The Chameleon had comfort to hear such profound and simple thoughts from The Desert Camel.

The courtyard air was warm and stale, and the busy city nearby was subdued in the afternoons. A fly buzzed past, and The Chameleon felt no urge to eat it.

The sun lowered in the sky, and The Chameleon nodded with great respect. "...t-thank you." He had a sense of hope again in him.

The Desert Camel got up to leave, and glanced back toward him. "What makes the desert so beautiful... is that somewhere it hides an oasis."

He walked slowly down the path and The Chameleon watched the empty mailbag wave about behind. Then, on the bench, he waited and he focused until his heart warmed again, until he felt it was enough.

The parcel sat next to him on the bench still, and he picked it up, and he unwrapped it. It was filled with the knick-knacks that Mother Chameleon would often send. It contained a silver pocket watch, a blank journal with a sticker of a giraffe, and twelve freshly baked oatmeal cookies.

As The Chameleon shuffled through it, something caught his attention at the bottom of the parcel. It was a pink envelope

with a pattern of flowers, African daisies– *patience*. A faint breeze flowed through the courtyard and lifted fragrant particles of a chamomile bush up into the air.

He flipped over the envelope and opened it, and pulled out a single item. It was a photograph of The Chameleon and The Rainbow-Shell Turtle together. Around his eyes, the cracked skin burst into orange, his throat swelled, and he let himself feel.

The tears rolled down and away and dropped beneath him onto the dirt, and each one soaked in, and then from that place a flower sprouted instantly, with a pop. Soon, there were a hundred teardrops and a hundred small flowers beneath the bench in the courtyard. Each flower was a different color of the rainbow, and each was a different shape and size. The garden of rainbow flowers grew beneath The Chameleon, unaware of him and he of it, and he cried until he couldn't.

Driftless

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle hiked and trodded along slowly, back toward her pond, away from the respite of her meadow. When she approached the flower valley, she stopped next to a small stream to forage for flowers to eat.

*(water and sky reflect in brilliant blues,
and a partial moon hides bright in plain day view)*

In the summer months, she would forage early to avoid the harsh heat that blanketed the fields in the afternoons. She would adventure through the dense thicket of wheat and into the tree groves, and forage for fresh ingredients for her meals.

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle loved the wild green lettuces, the spicy dandelion leaves, and the tiny black olallieberries found in the shade beneath the young redwood trees. Always, she would search for at least one purple petunia, her favorite decadent dessert to munch.

"I'm so hungry! I could eat this beaut'. Right here... *right now!*" Her stomach gurgled loudly.

It might have been the largest petunia in the entire flower valley, and it was bigger around than her shell. It had five round and wide petals, closely arranged, and a vibrant dark purple center that faded slowly outward into a pale pink. She picked it carefully from the base of the bloom and decided to eat it later. She added it to the bundle strapped on top of her shell and continued on.

On the path, from a distance, she could see the giant tangerine tree and she skipped along a little faster.

When The Rainbow-Shell Turtle arrived back to her home, she was surprised to find a turtle that was not herself, on top of her rock in the sun. She knew many turtles lived around the flower valley, but she had never seen one in her tangerine pond. She had never seen one splayed out on her rock. She wondered who The Stranger was.

"Hello." The Rainbow-Shell Turtle was always friendly, and after a moment, she cleared her voice and repeated herself louder. "*Hello, there!!*"

"I'm resting." The Stranger said coldly, lifted one leg, and waved it about slowly. "*See?* What do you need?"

"Well, it's just... you're on my rock. It's where I live." She stood at the shore of the tangerine pond. "I quite love it! And... well... it's too small to fit two."

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle looked over to the opposite end of the pond, and she saw a beautiful bouquet of flowers, wilted, on the ground.

"Is that your bouquet? Over there. It's beautiful... it needs some *water!*" She gestured to it, and hoped to lighten the conversation.

"I've never seen you around here before." The Stranger ignored her, and spoke lazily. "Anyway, how should I know *which* rocks belong to *which* turtles?"

"But... but, but I've lived here nearly *three* seasons. It's my spot!" The Rainbow-Shell Turtle raised her voice so that The Stranger heard her.

"Calm down." It was clear that The Stranger had no intentions to move. "Maybe it's time for you to find a *new* spot."

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle was furious. She dropped her bundle of foraged vegetation in the sand at the edge of the pond, stepped forward, and dove into the water, and glided quickly out to the center, and climbed atop the rock, her rock, and got close. She wanted to yell and she wanted to push The Stranger off, into the water. She wanted her home back. The Rainbow-Shell Turtle took a deep breath.

"...fine!" She said loudly and close to The Stranger. It was louder than intended, and she didn't regret it.

The Stranger startled a little, and squinted at her, annoyed. The Rainbow-Shell Turtle slid down the rock in a rush and swam the other direction. She stomped out of the water and onto the shore, and she was resolved to leave the tangerine pond for good. She found a break in the wheat stalks and pushed herself through. She left her bundle of foraged flowers behind.

The disappointment and shock lingered with her, and she wandered away down hill into the flower valley. Her mind raced, and she was upset with thoughts, distracted and furious.

*(I'm throwing stones
at this rock
until this rock breaks into stones
over and over
until this rock is one thousand stones
pieces and pieces
until this rock it's not)*

She bumped suddenly into something solid and looked up to an old wooden welcome sign.

Fertile ground for the good life.

“No... no it's... *NOT!*” She pulled back her leg and kicked the sign with all her force. Dust puffed off of it, down onto her shell and she held her leg. “AHhhooww...ch!”

The wood boards squeaked, and the last nail that held it together snapped off and the sign dropped to the ground in front of her. The Rainbow-Shell Turtle slumped down next to the broken sign, disoriented, and she let out a cry. She was isolated, frustrated, and she was without a home.

Tangerine Pond

The Chameleon carefully packed a few important items inside his cloth satchel. He added a map and a book to read, and slipped a sheet of folded paper safely inside the pages of the book. And, just in case his tummy rumbled, he tossed in a pouch filled with tasty treats like almonds and grapes.

He wanted to travel to see The Rainbow-Shell Turtle. It would be the first time in many days and days. It had been so many days, he convinced himself that he stopped count.

Eighty-six days, he thought.

With his satchel prepared, The Chameleon was ready. He checked the plants in his green garden, and tended to each of them carefully. The dogwood sapling withered in the corner of the garden, and his heart sank to look at it. Almost every leaf on every branch had turned pale yellow, and it looked unhealthy. He gave it water, and propped it up carefully with some sticks.

He departed on his journey, beyond the heart-shaped lake and north toward the flower valley. His plan was to see The Rainbow-Shell Turtle, and to offer her a gift. He hoped to talk with her, and then leave before dusk. It would be just perfect.

His path north started to curve to the west. The Chameleon opened his cloth satchel and removed the map he had packed. It was hand drawn on the back of a white handkerchief. He had drawn various natural landmarks and notable destinations on it. At the top, depending on how he held it, were a few carefully drawn flowers with a big blue circle around them. He pointed, and traced a path from his location, and he determined that he was not yet lost.

The Chameleon thought of the other piece of paper in his cloth satchel, the folded letter. He had written a poem, and he hoped to read it to her. He didn't need the paper, the words he knew by heart. The lines of it came in and out of his thoughts on his walk, with one of his favorite parts on repeat:

*your soft olive cheeks,
radiant in sun-
eyes of starburst wheat nebula
when you look up at the stars...
your speckled constellation*

The Chameleon had not been quite so nervous before. He walked with purpose along the paths and junctions, and his thoughts bounced between old memories and new possibilities. The damp salty air near the bay harbor gave way to dry golden fields and rounded hills, and the sun warmed his back and his skin shifted white. The cloth satchel bounced against him with each step, and each hit punctuated his anxious mind.

His distracted thoughts were distracted when he heard in the distance a symphony of bawks and clucks. The path arrived to

an overlook, and in the distance The Chameleon saw hundreds of cacophonous chickens. Some roosted beneath the shade of the occasional tree, some strut their stuff around the pastures, and others peck-pecked at the ground for seeds and bugs.

Beyond the fields of cacophonous chickens, he saw something like a flower valley, packed with brightly bloomed fields, and framed perfectly between the tallest mountains he had ever seen.

He approached a lone stake in the ground at a divide in the path. On the ground in front of him, a dusty plank of wood was broken:

Fertile ground for the good life.

He picked up the plank and dusted it off. He found a few large branches nearby, and dug them into the dirt, and propped the wooden sign up again.

Good as new, he thought.

He stood at the edge of the valley and looked down into it. It was exactly how The Rainbow-Shell Turtle described, with a breathtaking natural beauty, fields of wheat, and brightly painted flowers filled with busy honeybees. He couldn't contain his anticipation.

The Chameleon started to look for the tangerine pond. He wasn't sure where to look for it in the wide flower valley, but he knew that he would know it when he saw it, if he saw it.

He looked in every direction, and he searched the fields and the among the beautiful flowers. He looked beneath things and around other things, and he asked the trees and the bushes.

The afternoon sun was lower in the sky, and two empty snack bags later, he had not found the tangerine pond. The Chameleon decided, reluctantly, he must depart soon if he wanted to return home before dusk.

As he turned to leave, a patch of wheat brush of a nearby clearing shifted in the wind and caught his eye. Through the grasses, he saw a shimmer, and in a delusion he noticed a glimpse of a faint rainbow in the sky that lead down into the clearing. Arched over the clearing was a giant tree dotted with hundreds of tiny specks of bright orange.

The Chameleon approached the orange speckles, and parted the stalks of wheat to discover a warm and comfortable oasis. A single prominent rock emerged in the center of the clear and still water. At the shoreline of the pond was a bundle of foraged leaves and lettuces on. On top was a large purple petunia.

"Her f-favorite..." He whispered it, then stooped down to the pond for a drink to soothe his voice.

He knew that he had found her place. What he hadn't found was The Rainbow-Shell Turtle. The tangerine pond and the rock contained no turtles. He searched around him and behind him to be sure. The Chameleon thought she might be out to forage for more plants.

He looked up at the giant tangerine tree that dangled over the pond. He stared in awe at the lush fruits and he salivated and he wished deeply that he could eat every single tangerine.

As he wished it, a tangerine plucked itself off of its branch with a pop and dropped with a plop into the water below. It bobbed up and down until it came to float gently on the surface.

That's strange, he thought.

A moment later, another tangerine popped away and fell from the tree and dove into the pond water. Then, another with a pop. And another, plop.

First dozens and then a hundred tangerines flung themselves from the tree, and it rained fruit from the sky with splashes, and some bounced off the rock and landed all around the pond. The Chameleon watched, wide-eyed, until the very last tangerine dropped off its branch and with a thud landed on top the blanket of orange treats and rolled along and stopped right in front of him.

He reached down, and laughed to himself and picked up the last tangerine. He ate it with joy. The tart sweet juices sprayed out and he was happy and covered in a sticky mess.

Dusk approached, and he didn't have time to wait longer. The Chameleon swam out to the rock, and he waded through the sea of tangerines, and he was careful to keep his cloth satchel and its contents dry. He climbed up onto the rock, and he stood for a moment to absorb his surroundings.

The Chameleon carefully pulled out the flowers he had brought, and then from his book he slipped the poem out from between the pages. He placed the folded poem on the rock, and he placed the two flowers on top of it. The wood iris, his favorite, and the magnolia bloom, her favorite. His heart was suddenly full of such Love. Everything he wanted to say he put

into the poem to her. He wasn't sure how poetic it was, but it came from the deepest part of him. The Rainbow-Shell Turtle would finally know his heart.

He packed his bag and waded back to the edge of the pond, and looked once more with hope at his gift and at the pond filled with tangerines. He reached down and picked up a few, and placed them in his cloth satchel.

Just a few for later, he thought.

He parted the wheat stalks and pointed in the direction home. Down the path, a turtle walked lazily in his direction and toward the pond. The turtle did not have a rainbow-colored shell. They neared and then passed one another, and The Chameleon gave a silent wave of greeting. The strange turtle didn't notice.

He left the flower valley with a new, satisfied bounce in his step. Inside, he bubbled with hope and anticipation to speak again with The Rainbow-Shell Turtle and to have her energy, and her conversations, and her warmth. All he could do was wait.

His tummy grumbled, and he looked forward to dinner excitedly. He focused on the journey back to the heart-shaped lake and the rooftop patio. He wondered about his green garden, and his flowers, and he thought of the great big sky above, and its dusky pink colors darkened slowly just, and his skin matched.

With Joy

The harsh wind out in the open rustled and it was another restless night for The Rainbow-Shell Turtle. She drifted into and out of sleep, with no place to give her quiet. Her eyes flickered open, and adjusted to the darkness with a perfect view of the starry blanket above, and she closed them again and shivered.

The night was cold in the field and she curled up tightly. She missed her rock, she missed her pond and the sweet tangerines, and she craved her petunia blooms and she drifted away and dreamt of their soft sweet petals.

*(Island paradise
off the sea coast,
field of petunia blooms—
warm winds,
calm waves,
cloudy skies,
I could cry, and I can cry for it,
and I cry.)*

The next time her eyes opened, it was in a bolt of surprise.

“BRRRAWWWK.” She spun around, and then completely over, onto her shell.

“BR-BR-BR-BRRRAAAAAWWWWK.” It repeated, then quickly grew into a chorus.

Beary-eyed and upside down, The Rainbow-Shell Turtle was surrounded by hundreds of blurry chickens. She mistakenly fell asleep in a fertile green grass pasture.

She spun and flipped herself over and the chickens brawked and strutted and grazed with pecked beaks around her. She walked on from the chicken pasture, toward the sunrise in the east.

Many sunsets she spent in search of a new place to call home, and each night she rested somewhere new, and ate anything she could find, and searched for her peace.

Toward the east she hiked, and in an area on the edge of the flower valley was a quiet redwood grove filled with young trees and a dense ground cover of ferns. She entered it from the edge, slowly and curiously, with a sparkle in her.

“This might... be the place...” As she spoke, The Rainbow-Shell Turtle looked down and noticed something etched deep into the dirt. She looked closely at the faintest hint of worn out bold letters:

J O Y

“Well... if that’s not a sign, *nothing* is!” Above her was a complicated and intricate structure of branches and grasses and cottons tangled across multiple young redwood trees.

It was the home of somebody, and she moved closer to the impressive structure. “Helloooooooo... is anybody... home?”

A passerine bird swooped past and gave a shrill squeal, and it landed on a branch nearby. It looked curiously at The Rainbow-Shell Turtle.

“Are you Joy?” She thought the bird was beautiful.

“Who!? Lalala-who!” The Jaybird was quick to respond.

Her feathers were a pleasant soft tan, with patches of dark browns and stark blacks on her back. Each wing was striped and smooth with a vibrant sky blue. Her beak was black in contrast to her light head feathers. She pecked twice at the branch beneath.

“I saw your name... over there dug into the ground!” The Rainbow-Shell Turtle moved a little closer to The Jaybird. “The *color* of your wings... they really are quite a magnificent blue.”

“Thanks! Oh! I carved that many, many, many years ago, I can hard-lala-ly believe it’s still there!” She spoke in flitters of accent, up and down. “I was young and wild and full of lala-Love! And all-lala the other birds used to call me Joy. Joy, Joy.”

The Jaybird looked surprised and nostalgic. She was an old Jaybird.

“Then... can I call you Joy? It’s a beautiful name.” The Rainbow-Shell Turtle gestured and touched her own heart.

"Of course, dar-lala-ling dear." The Jaybird flapped over to land on top of her shell and admired her. "My my, lala-look at you! Has anyone told you how lala-lovely and colorful you are? Body *and* soul!"

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle looked down at the leaves beneath her, and warm tears swelled up tightly inside her chest and she released them with a soft wail. She suddenly thought of The Chameleon, and she hadn't in many days, not since she returned her bracelet to The Fox.

"Oh dearie darling, lala-Love." The Jaybird flapped off, and landed on the ground nearby to embrace her.

"Yes, yes. Someone *has* told me." The Rainbow-Shell Turtle gladly accepted the comfort and they kept close, and together they formed a bond.

"It's okay to remember. Lala! This wide wonderful world has lala-lovely ways of bringing to us exactly what we need... when we need it just the most!" The Jaybird sat still with her. "And *all* we need! This life happens *for* us, lala-lovely little one. It does not happen *to* us."

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle knew that The Jaybird would not understand her heart truly, and she wondered if she understood it herself, either. "Perhaps, that's true..."

The Jaybird fluttered up a ways and landed onto one of scraggly branches of her tree palace.

"You know, I built this entire place, all-lala by my little-lala self. Just me!" She gestured with her wing dramatically around and The Rainbow-Shell Turtle laughed a little. "You lala-laugh. Not easy!"

"Do you live here alone?" She loved talking with The Jaybird.

"We all live alone, in our little-lala heads." The Jaybird giggled. "I do, *now*. I shared it once. That is a story for another time."

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle looked up to The Jaybird, and was inspired by her and relieved, and wanted again to find a new home of her own.

"I think it's time for me to go. I'm looking for something." She looked out into the trees in the distance.

"We're all-lala looking for something." She glided back down to the ground. "And something is lala-looking for us, too!"

"I'm afraid I might never find it." The Rainbow-Shell Turtle looked down and kicked at the ground.

"Lala! You must never let fear turn you against your own playful heart, lala-little turtle." The Jaybird waved a wing and flapped off and up into the trees. "Take care of your heart! Lala!"

"Goodbye, Joy!" The Rainbow-Shell Turtle called after her.

She left The Jaybird and the intricate home, and she was drawn south through the redwood grove to follow her senses and her natural intuition.

The forest floor was filled with branches and crisp fallen leaves, and the sharp dry aroma was nostalgic to her. The crunch of the leaves gave her comfort and she heard in the distance a trickle of water.

A quiet creek snaked through the grove, and clear water passed along lazily over some rocks and twigs. She approached it and then followed it curiously in the direction it flowed.

Across, on the opposite bank of the quiet creek, The Rainbow-Shell Turtle noticed a lovely large rock and her heart jumped. She swam across, and approached the shoreline rock.

She knew it was her new dwelling. It was short and wide, and misshapen, with a top that was perfectly flat for a good place to rest. Above her, the redwoods gave protection from the rain, with some gaps where the sky would show through. She knew already how beautiful it would be at night. It reminded her of her place, her meadow.

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle stood next to her new shoreline rock, and looked down into the quiet creek and found her blurry reflection. It was, still, too distorted to discern her vibrant rainbow-colored shell through. She looked up again, and touched the rock.

*(she's finally home!
another perfect place—
the pine trees will sing with her
the quiet creek will listen to her
and the bold wind will push her along
to do anything she dreams of,
anything I dream of)*

She climbed up, and found comfort in the gritty texture of the rock surface on her feet. She bowed down to rest, and her eyes fell shut and her mind spun round with thoughts, and she settled into her new and perfectly cozy corner in the woods. The elk of the forrest stirred nearby, and The Jaybird called out softly, far off. Her mind quieted and her heart warmed and she knew everything would be okay again, just there.

Color of the Heart

Each day was the same, with a dawn and a dusk and the parts between, and The Chameleon moved through them with routine. Each sunset dropped a little further south, each night the winds howled a little bit louder, each sunrise shined a little weaker.

In the afternoons, The Chameleon would go for a walk around the heart-shaped lake. He would take with him his cloth satchel, containing a pencil and paper sheets, and a book.

He would find himself at the giant oak tree, up on the hill that overlooked the water. He sat and studied the water, and remembered The Rainbow-Shell Turtle and her paper boat poem.

The Chameleon would ponder, and he would think his big thoughts and reflect and wonder and try to grow. He inhaled loudly then slowly exhaled, and he closed his eyes, and he absorbed all the scents and sensations around. He would let him self be, and he would consider himself and think of his emotions and how he showed Love to those around him. It took him time to find his peace.

The sky was brilliant blue and he looked out through the sprawled oak tree branches, and he saw a single cloud, shaped something like a whale, or a dinosaur. He took out a piece of paper and a short black pencil, and he looked again up at the giant oak above. He began to write:

I don't expect you to forgive me...

He stopped, scratched out the words vigorously, and took out a fresh sheet of paper.

You are in my heart...

He looked at it, made a grunt, and crumpled up the page dramatically and took out a fresh sheet of paper.

I will always be here, for you...

None of it was right. He had so much he wanted to say, and he didn't know how to start. He was overcome with disappointment in himself. He couldn't understand why he had pushed The Rainbow-Shell Turtle away from him.

"I want..." The Chameleon said, strained in voice, and he couldn't finish it.

He couldn't speak his emotion with a lost voice, and he couldn't write either. He couldn't express his heart honestly if he didn't understand himself.

The Chameleon felt trapped and cornered in his own mind, and he wanted to escape. He pushed all the doubt and

disappointment out, completely. His mind went blank for a moment, and then the gentle warmth of Love came in.

She brought out his light, and his true color. He thought about her vibrant shell, how it glowed in the moonlight. He thought of the nights they shared together when they danced, when they laughed, when they entangled with one another.

He started again to write, this time in lines of poetry. The words flowed out of him easily and quickly, and he was surprised at how good it felt to express himself.

The Chameleon finished, and he read it again, and his eyes lit up bright orange. He took his front leg and dipped it into the soft clay nearby, and stamped his print at the bottom of the letter. He folded the sheet of paper carefully, and wrote her name on the front in perfect letters.

He stood, and he began his walk back toward the busy city. His thoughts were scattered with a dozen different things at once. The Chameleon arrived back at the rooftop patio and he took the letter out from his satchel and held it close. It said everything he wanted it to say, all contained on just one piece of paper.

The afternoon clouds cleared, and he squinted at the sun. He looked over at the dogwood sapling, and it was dead and dejected and secluded in a shaded corner. Something in the soil caught his attention, and he approached it and looked closely. At the base of the dead sapling was a tiny bright green sprout that pushed up out of the dirt. It searched desperately for more sunlight.

The Chameleon grabbed the pot, and hurried with it over into the afternoon sun. He rushed to find his watering can and gave the sprout life again. He stepped back and admired the sprout, and watched it drink in the sunlight and the water. He was amazed that new and beautiful life emerged from something so hopeless.

The Chameleon descended from the rooftop and waited in the courtyard, and he stood transfixed at the postbox. For a long time, he eyed the slot in the box that was meant for outgoing letters. He looked at the four black bold characters on the box, and one by one he traced the edges in his mind. He remembered the first letter he sent.

He looked up past the rooftop patio to the sky to see the sun setting beyond the other buildings and trees and mountains. The Chameleon thought about his lost voice, and he tried to remember how it sounded out loud. His voice carried the power to give himself to the world, and still he hadn't used it. Only once it disappeared had he understood that.

As the sun light faded further, instead of twilight, the sky, and the busy city, dropped into an eerie pitch black. The Chameleon waited for his eyes to adjust and he rubbed them, and the entire cosmos revealed itself above. He saw every constellation and in each one he saw The Rainbow-Shell Turtle, and in every other star he knew his friends and his passions and his Love. Above all, he was a part of everything.

"I can... *Love!*" The Chameleon concentrated everything inside of him and released the words proudly, and his voice burned with a sharp pain. He hurt, and then he felt it, and knew something different in his heart.

His voice couldn't say it, but finally he could express himself. He knew he could offer his heart, his Love for everybody around him, and for the stars and the moon, and for The Rainbow-Shell Turtle. He needed only the courage to do it, and he would find freedom.

A crescent moon reflected in the puddles nearby, and his skin tingled, and a wave washed over The Chameleon, and his entire body transformed again to mirror her brilliant rainbow colors. He illuminated himself and every bit of Love inside of him went out into the world. He let himself breathe deeply, and he knew his Love.

When his body faded slowly, the color of his chest didn't change. It flickered instead with new life, and it remained painted forever, with a proud splash of rainbow hue— every vibrant part of her, onto his heart.

In the courtyard, The Chameleon stood still, and he held the letter, and he looked at the postbox slot. Instead, he opened his cloth satchel and placed the letter carefully back inside, and buttoned it shut. He climbed up to the rooftop patio, home again, and found quiet rest near his green garden. To Love without fear, he knew he had to let go.

The Paper Boat

On the shore of the quiet creek, The Rainbow-Shell Turtle sat and washed the dirt off of her stubby legs in the chilly water. She splashed playfully and watched the ripples dance, and her reflection blurred with dulled rainbow colors, and she sang:

Rainbow-shell, clear as day

My rainbow-shell, here to stay

I'm beautiful, it's true

I'm funny, it's true

When I'm sad, that's okay

And I'm beautiful, it's true

Rainbow-shell, clear as day

My rainbow-shell, it's here to stay

She continued her song, and she played around near the shoreline. A new bundle of purple petunias sat stashed next to her rock, and she eyed it for later.

The creek flowed slowly beneath her, and she moved toward the middle, and let the gentle, fresh water wash over her shell. She dipped her neck and head down and moved to the deepest part in the center. Her head and body were entirely submerged and her shell poked up above the water. Everything went quiet.

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle looked up through and to the surface, and she watched the branches and leaves above against the sky. She watched the clouds morph and wobble and she wondered and found joy in the funny shapes.

Time slipped away. On the surface, a white paper boat floated down the river, and it caught her attention from beneath the water. It moved quickly, more than the slow current of the water suggested. The boat passed directly over her head, and it bumped into her shell and drifted around it. She popped up, and she gasped for air and turned around to look. It was already far downstream, almost out of her sight.

“Hnh... well that’s...” She turned around upstream, and she saw three more in a row swiftly float toward her. “...strange.”

She moved out of the water to let them pass, and she watched them go. Her curiosity led her, and she walked to follow the shoreline away from her rock upstream.

“Who... is *making* all of these...?” The Rainbow-Shell Turtle kept on, and the boats increased in number and floated past. She counted them, and she noticed that each boat was different than the next. In the distance, she saw an unfamiliar figure on a small bridge by the water.

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle knew it was the source of the paper boats, and she approached cautiously. “Hello...! Are you... the boat maker?”

“I make boats.” A ghostly spirit was there, much taller than her, with a strange translucency and a body that glowed orange with a radiant warmth.

She watched The Spirit continue to make paper boats, one after another with great precision. “But.. what do they mean? The boats. How many will you make? Do you ever get *tired*?”

“Every time somebody shows Love– or feels it, or thinks it, or speaks it... I make one. That is my faith.” The Spirit made another. “My faith in the Love.”

“Where... where do they go?” Another boat set off down the creek and The Rainbow-Shell Turtle felt sure that it must be a dream.

“I give them to the stream, to take them where it will.” The Spirit made one and pushed it along faster than any others. “Every Love is unique, in some way. Two Loves cannot be the same.”

“Kind of like snowflakes?” She interrupted The Spirit.

“Yes. And much more.” The Spirit made four more, back-to-back, effortlessly.

The Spirit created with such precision that The Rainbow-Shell Turtle moved close to watch the strange hairless paws with long digits move rapidly.

“These...” The Spirit made eight boats and placed them in the creek in a row. “...these might seem familiar.”

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle looked down at each one that floated past. Compelled, she reached in to grab the last one in the line, and held it close. It had perfectly creased folds, and an unconventional oval-shaped hull. She turned it over, and discovered the bottom was decorated with a brilliant rainbow gradient.

"That's special. Not every Love expresses itself quite so... *brightly*." The Spirit stopped making for a moment and looked over. "You can keep it."

"Ooh!" She held it closer. Still mesmerized, she watched the seven others float down the stream until they were too small to see. She looked down again at the colorful hull of the paper boat, and she tilted it to see the sun reflect a perfect rainbow ribbon.

She turned back to The Spirit, and she was alone.

She thought first of Joy the Jaybird and she rushed further up the stream to find her at her home. She knew she needed to talk to Joy right away.

"Joy, Joy, Joy!" The Rainbow-Shell Turtle arrived and called out in excitement and searched for her.

The trees all around were motionless and her voice echoed around the enormous and intricate bird home. "...Joy...?"

The Jaybird was not there. She stopped at the base of one tree, struck by what she saw. Above, a thousand cream-colored yarn strands hung from the tallest redwood tree in the grove. Each strand was tied precisely to a branch, and each held perfectly still in the windless woods.

*(this stillness– and my heart paused
without which how could I
really breathe)*

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle watched the yarn strands, and she cried and she knew the strength of her own powerful emotions. She looked at the paper boat again and at the rainbow hull, and she knew what to do next. From the lowest branch, she took one piece of yarn and untied it carefully, and she tied it gently to the mast of the paper boat.

"I have to go..." She whispered up to the redwood tree, and she set off from the quiet creek through the flower valley, and on the long trip south.

The busy city and the heart-shaped lake had a lively energy. The Rainbow-Shell Turtle moved confidently along the familiar perimeter path. The overgrown thicket was dense, more than she remembered, and she pushed through it. She thought back to The Fox and the day they first discovered the old magnolia.

Memories came to her, and she approached. The tree looked no different than when she last saw it. In the time since, it had not been touched. The Chameleon was nowhere to be seen.

"It's completely... abandoned...?" She stopped and wondered what happened, and a dozen crows surrounded her in the branches of the other trees and kept a quiet watch.

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle held the paper boat close to her heart, at the base of the tree. The old magnolia was in full bloom above with the sweet scent of flowers, and she placed the boat on the soft dirt, and she walked away.

Act III



Sunset (Reverie)

A season passed and The Chameleon had not worked again on the magnolia tree. Instead, he would visit the tree occasionally, for a quiet place to ponder his thoughts and his heart.

The summer afternoons were shorter and he hiked to the old magnolia, and the day light faded. The thicket on the path up to the tree was completely overgrown and he pushed himself through and crushed the tall grass beneath him.

He arrived at a distance from the tree, and his eyes were heavy suddenly, and he drifted away, for a moment. A fog passed over his vision and he rested on the warm grass, and he was confused about his senses.

Through the fog in his eyes, he looked up, and at the base of the old magnolia, The Rainbow-Shell Turtle sat, her tail to him. She was ethereal, and she looked quietly up into the branches, and thought to herself.

The Chameleon was stunned and surprised. His heart raced and his skin turned bright pink and everything fell silent around him.

“Hello.” She knew he was there.

“Hi... ” He was lost, and his voice had become so distant that she barely heard it.

She turned around, not surprised. The Rainbow-Shell Turtle met his eyes, and he saw her again in her starburst wheat irises. She thought of him entirely, for the first time in a season.

She stepped forward. “You hurt me.”

Time stopped for The Chameleon. He knew it, and he knew there was nothing he could say to change it. He cared for her, with a certainty he knew more than anything before.

His attention wandered to the green freckle constellation that spanned across her neck down across her underbelly. He looked at her shell, at each individual section, and traced the edges and the colors with his eyes.

“I k-know.” He could barely speak, and his throat was tight with emotion and his voice was still lost. “I’m s-s-s... s-s-sorry.”

She wondered why he seemed quiet, hoarse, and small. She noticed in his eyes, something completely different, a confidence that didn’t match his craggy voice. It was an honesty and warmth she hadn’t remembered from him.

“C-can y-you... f-f... f-f-forgive...” The Chameleon choked on the spaces between each word. “Can we... ?”

She moved closer, and she looked at the paper boat she had placed at the base of the tree. “It’s us.”

He picked it up and held it carefully, surprised at how strong it was despite the delicate paper. He turned it over, and the sunset reflected off the brilliant colors of the hull.

“Can we talk?” The Rainbow-Shell Turtle moved past him and started down the path.

They went together in a thick silence, along the path of the heart-shaped lake, and sunset faded. The sounds of the busy city were absent, and the quiet it left was strange. At the garden, he placed the paper boat on the soil next to the dogwood sprout. They sat together, each of them looking up. The Rainbow-Shell Turtle broke her gaze from the sky and looked over.

“What if... well... what if our Love isn’t *meant* to be?” The Rainbow-Shell Turtle asked it sincerely. “Who *I* am, and who *you* are...”

The word Love was scary to The Chameleon. Not because he couldn’t feel it, he had never been so sure of something like his Love for The Rainbow-Shell Turtle. The word *Love*, though, was difficult for him to say aloud.

He wanted to say it. He wanted to say it to The Rainbow-Shell Turtle on each occasion that he had been with her. He wanted to, yet he was afraid.

The stars tried to reveal themselves, and the scattered clouds obscured their clarity. The moon strained to break through and show itself.

The Chameleon felt overwhelmed by his fear. A light breeze picked up and washed over them with the sweet honeysuckle scent of dogwood– *Love undiminished by adversity*. All that prevented him from his of Love was fear, and it held him back.

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle watched the darkened sky and the clouds slide between each other, and she waited patiently for the moon to show itself.

His mind reeled in the silence between them. The Chameleon thought of all that he had done, and the ways he had changed with the seasons. He remembered every difficult day and quiet night, every new friend and the support they gave, and he remembered the color of his heart. He summoned it, and pushed away every fear that lingered in his mind. The doubt and questions he had of himself he set aside, and all that remained was Love.

The moon looked more beautiful than he ever remembered and yet the same, and he thought of her, and the air felt clean and clear and there was a new expansive warmth inside him. The stars flickered just the same, and in each one was himself and her and everybody else too, and it was all he could do to keep himself on the ground.

The Chameleon looked down away from the sky at The Rainbow-Shell Turtle. He wanted only for her to be exactly what she was, and he knew true Love, and his heart nearly burst with it. He treated his new emotion carefully, and then he was ready.

"I Love you." He said it clearly, with confidence, and it surprised him how sweet and perfectly round it sounded.

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle stayed silent, but her body shivered and she left the sky and met his eyes.

"I... don't know why it took me so long to say that. I've felt it since..." The Chameleon stopped, and he was shocked to suddenly find his lost voice again, after everything.

"I Love you...!" He repeated it, louder out to the world, and The Rainbow-Shell Turtle gave a short and quiet giggle.

His comfortable and familiar voice was completely new and confident in expression, and his voice and his heart connected for the first time. "I've felt it, every day."

The little grasshoppers in the distance chirped loudly, and the crescent moon emerged finally from the clouds, and The Rainbow-Shell Turtle didn't notice.

"I... but... why..." She couldn't understand. "...why didn't you *tell* me?"

"I was scared. I'm sorry." He touched her leg, gently. "I'm not anymore. I'm not afraid."

Her shell tingled, and she was overwhelmed, and she took her breaths slowly, and thought at each emotion that arrived, one by one. "I don't know what to say..."

"I think... that Love is actually everything. And it's all in me to give. Right *here*." The Chameleon adjusted himself and the moonlight illuminated the cracked skin on his chest, the bright and prominent splash of rainbow, every hue imaginable, her color.

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle had a rush of sensations and she looked to The Chameleon and responded with her eyes, kind and bright and curious. "I..."

“With you, I am who I’ve always hoped to be.” The rest of his skin changed, again, to a pale Pacific blue, and he spoke with new confidence to her. “I believe... everything is going to be okay.”

She looked at him, then jumped up suddenly and embraced him, and squeezed him tightly. The Rainbow-Shell Turtle was speechless, and she wanted only to be present, and to keep that moment forever within her.

He stood back and saw her, and he understood himself, and his heart, better than he ever thought he could, and they stayed close, and he spoke softly. “The *color* of my heart...!”

A warmth rekindled between them, and they stayed together, with the bright crescent moon, and laughed again from the heart, beneath the cool cloudy blanket of just infinite stars and possibility.

Garden Wagon

A rusty old wagon rolled down the path. It was faded red from the sun, with a long handle at one end made of wood and metal. The Chameleon pulled it proudly, filled with plants, and The Rainbow-Shell Turtle sat inside it.

“Faster! Please, *faster!*” She begged him. “This really is so much easier than walking everywhere...”

He laughed, and started to run at full speed with the wagon in tow. The wheels squeaked and wobbled chaotically and some dirt dropped out of the back with each bump and crack in the concrete.

“TOO FAST! TOO MUCH!” The Rainbow-Shell flailed her arms around in desperation to stop the ride.

The Chameleon laughed and continued, but slowed down slightly for her. They rode up the path, through the grass thicket freshly trimmed, and stopped at the base of the magnolia tree.

Together, they removed the cargo from the wagon, one by one. They used the old wagon to bring everything from the rooftop patio over to the magnolia tree, which included all the plants from his green garden.

“Done, done! There’s one more wagon full... I’ll go get it!” The Rainbow-Shell Turtle offered excitedly to help.

“If you’re sure... thank you! I need to work on the floor upstairs, and sand it, and paint it...” The Chameleon hugged her tightly in thanks. “It’s the last thing left to do, up there...”

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle nodded and grabbed the handle of the wagon. “It’ll just take a minute.”

She returned to the rooftop patio and she carried each plant down the building staircase, and arranged each carefully into the red wagon. Last, she took the small dogwood sapling, flourished and tall, and added it to the bunch. She stopped to admire it, and the scent from its small new blooms.

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle took the handle of the wagon again, and pulled it carefully along the paths toward the magnolia tree. The wagon rolled, and one wheel bounced more than the others. Down the path, the joint loosened fully, and the black wagon wheel slid off of the axel and rolled away and the wagon crashed to a halt. The dogwood sapling launched out of the wagon.

“Oh! Oh oh oh oh oh!” The Rainbow-Shell Turtle watched in horror.

The tree crashed and crumbled onto the hillside and rolled down and the roots and the dirt crumbled apart. At the bottom of the hill, it rolled across the path, and dropped over the grassy embankment into the heart-shaped lake. It floated there momentarily, and then quickly sank into the dark depths of the water.

“NO!” She couldn’t believe it. “No...”

She ran up to the magnolia. “Quick, quick! Come help, it fell in! Quick!”

The Chameleon dashed down and followed The Rainbow-Shell Turtle to the water. They stopped and stared out at the peaceful heart-shaped lake.

“What... fell in?” The Chameleon noticed the broken red wagon, and no dogwood sapling, and he knew already what happened. “Ohhhh... no...”

“I’m so so so sorry!” The Rainbow-Shell Turtle cried deeply. “It was just an accident...”

“I know. I know.” He took her close and hugged her and they comforted one another. “It’s okay.”

The surface of the water looked peaceful, and he imagined it, and it sank to the bottom in his mind. He remembered the dogwood and all it had been through and his eyes faded orange. The Rainbow-Shell Turtle spoke:

*Leaves of the dogwood,
perfect little petals
white as snow.
Sink below,
and flourish in the depths
with the fishes and the kelp.
And forget not
your home with us, with Love
on the soil above.*

Together they stood in silence and reverence.

Up the path, The Desert Camel walked toward the two of them, and stood behind them and looked out too at the surface of the water. "What are you looking at?"

"Ahhg!" The Rainbow-Shell Turtle jumped in surprise at the voice, and The Chameleon jumped in surprise at her surprise.

"I heard you're moving. Here." The Desert Camel handed a small envelope to The Chameleon. "Okay, bye."

"Oh! Uh... bye!" The Chameleon laughed a little and turned the letter over and read the front. "I wonder what this is?"

**FOR - THE CHAMELEON
FROM - JOY**

"It's from Joy!" She was ecstatic. "My friend! Open it, open it!"

The Chameleon opened the letter and read it out loud:

*Dearest chameleon,
A lala-little turtle told me you've built a home!
Enclosed are tree seeds from my forest, for you.
Plant them, and cultivate them, lala!
Tend to them, tend to your lala-Love together, tend to
yourselves each.
With Love,
Joy*

"Seeds!" The Rainbow-Shell Turtle laughed at the irony of it. "What a perfect coincidence..."

The Chameleon held the seeds and felt all the potential and all the life in each small pod.

Together, they fixed the broken red wagon and moved the plants to the base of the magnolia and the work was done. The heart-shaped lake was quiet again.

In the flower valley, The Rainbow-Shell Turtle returned and splashed around in her quiet creek and it wasn't quiet at all. She ate her late-night petunia with joy, and she laughed out loud, and she thought of The Chameleon and her heart swelled with warmth. She washed her muddy legs and she made up a little song:

*Muddy legs, not for long
muddly, muddly, muddly*

*With a clear heart,
in a clearly quiet creek,
on a cleary skies night...
with a clear heart!*

*muddly, muddly, muddly
Muddy legs, but it won't be for long.*

Down at the heart-shaped lake, the magnolia tree was alive again with the mid-night sounds of construction and hammers and boards. The Chameleon worked hard, and he didn't think too much of the construction. He thought of his friends, and he thought of The Rainbow-Shell Turtle, and his rainbow heart illuminated the leaves of the tree tops in every color imaginable.

Ups and Downs

Exactly forty-nine baby ducks waddled past the magnolia tree, and The Rainbow-Shell Turtle took curious notice on her walk to the magnolia tree. She counted The Yellow Ducklings each to find out how many there were. They walked in a perfectly straight line, and at the start of the line was the mother, The White Duck.

As they marched in perfect step, The White Duck would quack once, and then the first of The Yellow Ducklings would quack, and then the second of The Yellow Ducklings would quack behind it, and it would continue in rhythm down the line, all the way until the last of The Yellow Ducklings quacked. Fifty steps, and fifty quacks, and they'd start again.

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle approached The White Duck. "Hi! Hi, hi there, your family is so... so... *organized!*"

"Of quorce we are! We quould turn quacky otherwise!" She turned around to face The Yellow Ducklings and commanded them to stop.

After every fifty steps, she stopped and counted her family. They quacked, again, one by one for her, and they were counted.

quack...

quack...

quack...

"Your shell, little turtle... it is quorious and quite beautiful. I have not seen such a thing. *Marvelous*. I suppose we will be moving on now." The White Duck conducted her family to begin the ritual again. "Quickly, little ones!"

"Okay...! Goodbye!" The Rainbow-Shell Turtle waved and laughed, and she watched them march in quacks of fifty along the path of the heart-shaped lake.

She kept on, toward the magnolia to see The Chameleon. She arrived up the path to the tree and stopped at the base. She looked up and way up in awe at the old magnolia, and at the house he built up in the trees, nestled in the branches. She moved around the base of the tree, and admired it curiously from each angle, and wondered what it was like inside. She marveled up at The Chameleon and watched him work diligently.

"Can I see inside... *finally!*?" She asked excitedly.

"Of course, of course! I just finished this morning. I'll show you around!" The Chameleon was ecstatic, and he crawled up the side of the great magnolia, and anticipated his grand moment of reveal.

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle looked up after him. "So! How can I join you?"

The Chameleon was stunned. After a moment, his mood shifted drastically. He constructed and considered all the details of the house, and yet he had forgotten to think of how anybody else would visit. His skin glowed bright blue, embarrassed and upset, and he skittered back down to the ground level.

"I can't *believe* I didn't..." To share the space and welcome her into it was one of the most important things to him.

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle waved and laughed. "Don't worry! I have an idea, I know exactly what to do."

She dashed over to the pile of leftover construction materials nearby, and grabbed an empty burlap sack. "First... this!"

Up to the balcony, she pointed. "And I need... *that!* No, no, not that..."

She waved her leg over to the other side of the deck. "That bucket! What a perfect bucket."

The Chameleon ran around and found the things that she asked for. The Rainbow-Shell Turtle took the burlap sack down the path to the shore of the heart-shaped lake. She began to scoop sand furiously into the bag, until it was so full that it spilled out. She gripped the sack and dragged it with great effort back along the path, through the thicket, and to the base of the old magnolia. The Chameleon stood there confused, holding a bucket and a rope.

"Okay! Okay, those! You tie that *there* and... this goes here, and then I'll wrap this..." She produced a beautiful and simple mechanism.

“TAH-DAH! I call it a... a... *elevationer!*” She spun around in a circle and gestured broadly to the device.

“How... does it...” The Chameleon enjoyed the enthusiasm despite his confusion.

“Just take this rope up to the balcony.... here!” She instructed him carefully. “Toss it over the branch there, and *pull* on it!”

The Chameleon obeyed, and hoisted the burlap sack of sand upward, and watched the other end fall slowly toward The Rainbow-Shell Turtle on the ground. She climbed into the perfect metal bucket.

“Okaaaaay...! Now... DROP IT!” She braced herself.

He pushed the sack off of the balcony, and the Rainbow-Shell Turtle, in the bucket, whisked upward at a speed that surprised them both. The sand hit the ground with a thud, and she was launched up and out of the bucket, forward onto the balcony right next to The Chameleon.

“ELEVATIONER!” She made a triumphant dance.

“It’s perfect!” They hugged and the colors lit brightly on his chest. “Come, here! Come see the home...!”

He designed the interior into three distinct spaces. On the two sides of the structure were large round rooms. The back room on the east side was for The Chameleon, a small and cozy space. The front room on the west side he intended something special for. It faced toward the heart-shaped lake, with a perfect view of the sunset. He had it blocked off until it was finished.

The round room, between, was airy and misshapen, made with numerous cozy nooks and corners in which to relax or read. The sun filled the massive room with life in the afternoons. Against one wall, there was a long table and next to it a pantry with the foods The Chameleon enjoyed and prepared. On another wall, two wide shelves ran all the way up to the ceiling, filled with all his books.

Out from the round room was a balcony that wrapped around the front half of the structure. On one end of the balcony, the dozens of plants from his green garden thrived.

She absorbed everything with wide eyes and gasps and laughs and other sounds of joy. “It’s so perfectly... *cozy!*”

“And, and, *and!* Look!” The Chameleon rushed over to the long table in the round room.

There he showed her a small wooden pedestal with a perfectly carved and smooth hull-shaped relief. The paper boat sat snugly in it.

“Ohhhhhhh...!” She cherished it. “Darling...”

They sat together in the round room and felt the energy of the space together, and each of them thought of all its potential. Out from the front window, the sun dropped, and they moved to the balcony to watch it set over the water.

“I could sit here every night. It’s so peaceful...” The Rainbow-Shell Turtle looked out, and they watched together the final moments of light fade.

“You are *just* like this old magnolia. Strong and resilient, and delicate. And unique.” The Chameleon spoke his heart with confidence and he knew it clearly. “And absolutely beautiful.”

“Ohhh... Thank you...” Her shell tingled.

The Chameleon leaned back and The Rainbow-Shell Turtle rested her head against him. The two relaxed together, until one, and then both, drifted off.

The Good Pirates

A large bundle of cardboard towed and tugged itself down the dirt path, and ahead attached to it, marched The Rainbow-Shell Turtle. She had a rope tied around the bundle at one end, and around her rainbow shell at the other. It dragged and scraped loudly, and she was focused.

“So... close... yet...” She huffed and puffed her way up the path, through the grass thicket, and stopped at the base of the magnolia tree, exhausted.

The Chameleon stopped his work and greeted her warmly and then with confusion at the bundle of cardboard. “Color of my heart! Welcome... back...?”

“I want to build a *ship*. Today!” The Rainbow-Shell Turtle unwrapped the bundle of cardboard and let it fall open onto the grass. “You can make the ship mast, that’s the big pole in the middle! And the wheel. Okay? Okay, and I’ll build *this* part, and *this*, and the sides.”

She pointed intently around at various parts of an invisible ship, and The Chameleon followed along perfectly. He was excited to build something again. He started to think of the

perfect shape for a ship wheel, and how he could make the tower mast. He had questions, but was interrupted.

“First! We need to build the hull, together. It’s the most important part.” She gestured over to an open space on the grass near the base of the tree.

Through the morning they assembled and glued together cardboard bits and used the extra wooden planks from the construction of the house in the trees.

“I’ll hold these pieces together... if you can just...”

“Will you keep this up... and I’ll glue the edges here...”

“No no no! Yes, lift it up, right there!”

Together they worked to build the foundation until the hull was finished, and The Chameleon started on something extra. “I want to paint the hull. Can I?”

“Yes! Of course, paint it!” The Rainbow-Shell Turtle was distracted with the sides for the ship.

He painted each section of the hull a different color to match her vibrant shell and he spent considerable time so it was just right.

The sides were assembled, and the mast was placed upright. The wheel of the ship was attached with a clever mechanism to let it rotate. All the pieces were ready, and they stood back and admired the ship.

“Wait! The *flag*! Did we make one? The FLAG!” The Rainbow-Shell Turtle hopped over to the construction supplies and tore off a piece of burlap.

She grabbed some paints and quickly outlined something and filled it in with detail and great skill. It was a simple illustration of herself and The Chameleon. Each shape was distinct but wrapped together and flowed elegantly. She attached it to the rope of the mast and raised it up. The two watched in awe at the flag, and it blew gently in the wind.

They moved in unison and stepped up into their magnificent creation, and The Rainbow-Shell Turtle took hold of the wheel of the ship instinctually. She was called to captain it, and she was destined to take it to the farthest ends of the oceans.

“Brump... brum buh brump... brum buh brump...” She hummed a pirate theme song. “Welcome... to the H.M.S. Philippa!”

“Brump... brum buh...” The Chameleon continued the melody underneath her monologue. “...wait, what’s a *Philippa*?”

“It’s the SHIP! It’s Her name...” The Rainbow-Shell Turtle stood proud at the wheel of the ship, and gestured broadly and delivered the ship manifesto:

This ship, this shining jewel is true!

An explorer of the big ocean blue.

A vessel, a Queen, to traverse this day

and explore the vastest oceans, in play–

May she finally soar free?!

Gleaming in all Her Maejesty,

*ship cast in pure white,
masts of rainbow light!
A crew of two, you and me,
it's the Good Pirates at sea.*

She waited for applause.

"We're... sea pirates...?!" The Chameleon jumped up elated and hurried to the other side of ship and looked out.

She laughed and hopped down from ship helm, next to him. "But, the friendly kind? Can we be... generous, *charitable* pirates?"

The Chameleon and The Rainbow-Shell Turtle prepared themselves with hats and peg-legs and eye-patches and other appropriate attire for the high seas.

"The H.M.S. Philippa... disembarking... (*is that the word?*)!" She looked over for assurance. "Set sail, swabby, for the open seas! The ocean welcomes us, the Good Pirates!"

"Yes, sea captain!" He didn't know what a swabby was, so he took the sails and raised them quickly. "Sails... *sailed!*"

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle rang the giant brass bell next to the wheel to announce the departure. She squinted into the sun, and pointed forward out to the horizon beyond the heart-shaped lake.

Next to her, The Chameleon looked out too, at the calm waters. "(Uhm)... where to first, sea Cap'n?"

"Forward!" The Rainbow-Shell Turtle gestured. "Let us explore."

The two sat together and looked out to the vast and wide ocean ahead and they sailed, and the air tasted salty and the gentle sea waves reflected brightly from the white sun overhead.

A flock of birds flapped past, and The Rainbow-Shell Turtle pointed toward them. "That way... (*I guess?*)!"

The Chameleon squinted too. "There! I see a harbor in the distance! We'll meet the locals."

The ship rocked and swayed and the wind billowed in the wide white sails and tears formed in the eyes of the crew, and the breeze stung their faces. The ship skipped swiftly forward and the sea mist sprayed up onto the deck with each wave hit, and the cargo boxes shifted from port to starboard.

"It's a port... land... aye, Portland...?!" The Rainbow-Shell Turtle announced the arrival. "Let us dock there! Swing the mast bridge, swabby, and ahoy, and starboard and such!"

They approached the lively port town, and The Chameleon shouted out. "Portland... ho!"

"Swabby, we've arrived! Let's meet the mayor, and gather provisions from the town stockpile. Here, take this doubloon!" She flipped a golden coin in the air.

He caught the coin, and hopped out of the cardboard ship, and slipped up into the unfinished house. He scrambled around and collected some snacks and foods for lunch.

On the way back, on the path beyond, he spotted a small black and white panda walk past the magnolia.

“(Excuse me, hello... we’re playing!) ...pardon me. Do you have a moment, m’lady? We’re the Good Pirates (*I’m the swabby*) and we’ve docked nearby (*over there, see?*). In this fine harbor of... Portland... we’re looking for the town mayor!”

The Panda understood, and joined. “Aye! Thas’ me, silly. I *am* the major of this scrappy little harbor. What d’you want from us. You be a ‘good’ pirate you say? *A likely* story!”

“We simply need... uhm... a map! *Please*, good mayor! Take this doubloon coin in exchange!” The Chameleon pleaded and flipped the coin in the air and they laughed together.

The Panda caught the coin, and glanced up at the magnolia behind him and looked at him slyly. “Do you know about the island of the Paradise Tree of Eden?”

“No! Do tell!” The Chameleon shifted colors in anticipation.

She took out a piece of paper and a pencil and she drew a map of the vast open seas, and the nearby islands and the treasures. “Here, swabby, take this. You’ve done good to visit this harbor. Go forward, find your way, and find the island!”

The Panda giggled and danced around, and left on her way down the path. The Chameleon scurried over to the ship and returned to The Rainbow-Shell Turtle with the map and the provisions.

“Aye! A meal *fit* for the crew!” He spread the foods across the deck of the ship.

Together they ate, and talked about the open seas and their new life on the ship, and they used important ship words like

sloop and boatswain and poop deck, and talked about the honorability of the Good Pirates.

“It’s truly honorable, to be a part of your crew, Cap’n...” The Chameleon bowed to The Rainbow-Shell Turtle, and nearby the skies changed suddenly, and a storm menace brewed. “But uhm... Cap’n... ahead I’m seeing...”

“A *STORM!*” The Rainbow-Shell Turtle screeched, and jumped up to the helm and rang the brass bell eight times quickly in a panic.

They braced themselves for the rough waves, and the harsh water slammed against the side of the H.M.S. Philippa. “SHE CAN’T TAKE IT!”

“We must find respite from this storm! Swabby, swab the sails!” The Rainbow-Shell Turtle commanded with confidence. “On the map, *here!* To the island of the Paradise Tree of Eden! It’s just ahead!”

The ship crashed forward into the waves, one by one, and the hull took the stress without a break. The sails shuddered and whipped around, and nearly ripped from the mast with the great storm winds.

“We’re almost there Cap’n! We can make it together!” The Chameleon tied some ropes and shifted some things and spun a wheel somewhere.

The ship crashed and slid at full speed onto the shore of the island and came to a halt, and The Rainbow-Shell Turtle rang the ship bell loudly. “Land-ho! We’re beached!”

“Cap’n, we’ve made it to the island of the Paradise Tree of Eden.” The Chameleon pointed up at the magnolia tree.

The hot sun burned overhead, and the railing around the H.M.S. Philippa unglued and dropped over onto the grass, and the ship mast pole tipped over slowly to one side, and the flag fell off. Together they stopped and stared, and looked at one another and then laughed loudly.

“At least we’ve still got our *hull!*” The Rainbow-Shell Turtle collapsed to the deck and The Chameleon joined.

The Good Pirates laughed and played together on the sturdy hull of the ship until sundown, until the cold air took them back home, back up into the tree, and back to the island of the Paradise Tree of Eden.

House in the Trees

It was autumn again, and The Rainbow-Shell Turtle searched around the woods near her home, and gathered materials of wood and colored clays. She had assembled and painted diligently since sunrise to create the perfect housewarming gift for The Chameleon. She strapped the oversized gift to her shell, and left the shoreline rock on the long hike through the flower valley into the busy city.

The Chameleon worked diligently up in the magnolia, and he put final touches on the front room of the home. He usually kept the door to the room covered, but today he had big plans to gift it to The Rainbow-Shell Turtle for a surprise. “The first day of autumn... it’s the *perfect* day for a gift.”

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle arrived up the path to the old magnolia and she looked up at the yellowed autumn leaves and joy bubbled up inside of her. She removed the gift attached to her shell and hid it in the thicket of weeds nearby. “It’s the *perfect* day to gift this!”

She approached the tree, and stopped to smell the fallen flowers from the old magnolia, and all the wildflower bushes around. Some blooms still lingered from the summer, and soon the cool nights and shortened days would change everything.

She saw that her bucket was not lowered for her. “Ohhh, hellloooooo...!”

The Chameleon ran out to the balcony and grabbed the rope to lower the bucket.

He raced to the bottom to greet The Rainbow-Shell Turtle and they held one another tightly. “You! The *color* of my heart!”

They looked at one another, and she jumped into the bucket excitedly and launched herself up to the balcony. He raced her, and he moved quickly to re-cover the entrance to the front room.

She sensed something was different, and moved toward the room. “You know.. I’ve never been in *this* room...”

“Yeah! It’s just... it’s *still* under construction!” He laughed sheepishly and stepped in front of it. “In fact, I need to run and gather... something... for it. I’ll be back in *just* a minute!”

She laughed, and The Chameleon scurried out. He waddled down the path, and out to the heart-shaped lake. He returned to the spot with the overgrown bush of wood iris blooms, where he first met The Pelican.

He picked one, a perfect one, and placed it carefully in his satchel, and scurried back in anticipation. He wanted everything to be perfect. He was going to offer her the front room of the home, just for her.

In the magnolia, The Rainbow-Shell Turtle explored around the house. In the drawers and the cabinets inside, there were many things. The Chameleon kept many small-sized objects and big-sized objects and in-between sized objects, all

organized by shape and color and weight and other strange categorizations that he invented.

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle was struck suddenly with inspiration, and opened a drawer nearby to look for a sharp pencil to write a poem with.

She was lost in thought and startled when she heard The Chameleon trodding back up the path.

“Wait! Stay down there!” The Rainbow-Shell Turtle finished her poem first.

She jumped onto the rope of the elevator, gripped it and rode it down to the bottom and dashed over to the thicket to retrieve the gift for him.

“Close your eyes!” She brought it near the base of the old magnolia, and set it up, just to the right side of the trunk. She stood next to the gift. “Okay, okay! Come over here!”

The Chameleon walked up slowly and was surprised that he was about to be surprised. He stopped, stunned, when soon he saw the sign stuck in the ground.

“It’s... for you! It’s a name, a *great* one! For your home, your house in the trees.” The Rainbow-Shell Turtle waited.

It was her own creation, two perfect wooden planks attached horizontally to a square pole and stuck into the ground. The edges of the sign were painted in bright rainbow stripes, and the front was a cream color with brown bold lettering:

↑ House in the Trees!

The Chameleon couldn't believe how beautiful it was. His eyes turned bright orange and he ran up closer to the sign, with curiosity.

"It's perfect! Hello, nice to meet you *House in the Trees!*" He touched the sign and marveled at the care she took to make it. "Thank you, thank you thank you!"

He danced around in a circle, and laughed to himself a little. He thought it was funny they would give their gifts on the same day. "Okay, this is a silly coincidence...! I have a gift for *you* today also! Stay here, just a moment?"

"Surprises!" The Rainbow-Shell Turtle kicked at the dirt, and waited and thought about perfect petunias and plays and parades and her daydreams got away from her.

"Okay, it's time... it's *time!*" He called down to her with excitement.

She took the elevationer back up, and launched out of the bucket to reach the deck at the top. "WheeEEeEEe!"

"Come on in..." The Chameleon stood near the door to the front room, prepared perfectly and finished with the wood iris bloom placed on a cushion in her room. "The room... I've been working on it. I wanted it to be exactly right. It's... well, it's for *you!*"

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle was confused, and her heart skipped. "What.. do you mean?"

"The room. It's yours." The Chameleon spoke confidently.

"Mine? I can't believe..." She did a dance of joy and spun about, and knocked some books and things about. "It's *mine!*"

"Yes! If... if you'll have it." He laughed and gestured toward the door.

"Of course...! Yes! I'll have it! Really, it's for me?" She ran to The Chameleon and embraced him and then broke away and explored the room more carefully.

It was full of everything that The Rainbow-Shell Turtle loved. On one wall, a great selection of paints and papers and glues and tools that she could use to create, write, and collage anything her heart could imagine. The other end had a few books, and open space for more of her own. There was a wide and long desk along the window that he made for her, and a big fibrous round rug in the center of the room for her to play and lay on. There was plenty of open space for her to make, rearrange, and add whatever she wished into the space. The bed and cushions were perfectly comfortable to read, relax, and sleep on.

She looked out the window, out to the heart-shaped lake, and the sun sat low in the sky. "The sunsets will be amazing!"

"I knew even before I started building the house that I wanted this space to be for you. I... can't wait to see how you grow into it." The Chameleon shifted his color.

She picked up the wood iris, and twirled it a little. "This is so beautiful."

The Chameleon came into the room and stood beside her. He wrapped his tail comfortably around her shell and pulled her closer. "It's you."

Schatzie and Mouschi

“Let’s make a play!” The Rainbow-Shell Turtle exclaimed one day, and they nestled in the house in the trees, up in the branches of the old magnolia.

Outside, the sky drizzled. Rain was uncommon, and The Chameleon stood on the balcony and watched the heart-shaped lake, and he listened to the distant drip-drop sounds on the surface.

“A play, *yes!* Let’s shall!” The Chameleon enjoyed the stillness of the steady morning mist.

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle listened to the rain from inside, and she loved the uneven sounds of the drops, each splash-splashed and danced down on the waxy magnolia leaves. She loved the smell, *petrichor* was the word she remembered for when it hadn’t rained for some time.

She joined him on the balcony, in the damp heavy air. Rainwater collected in a few big metal buckets that dangled from the thick tree branches. One bucket, their favorite one, had a big hole in the bottom, and they left it hang still.

“Ok, ok. *I’ll* be Schatzie, *you* be Mouschi...” The Rainbow-Shell Turtle declared the roles for the play.

"I'm a *who-schi*?" The Chameleon laughed, and they moved together inside and out of the rain.

"Do you know the old fairy tales... of The Dog and The Cat? When I was little, I made up my own stories about them, with new names!" She found a brown and fuzzy blanket and draped it over her shell. "The Dog is Schatzie- that'll be me."

"And The Cat... is Mouschi." The Rainbow-Shell Turtle was wide-eyed with anticipation. "That's *you*!"

He tried to keep a very serious expression. "I'm getting into character."

"She's not serious!" She giggled a little.

She draped an oversized white sheet over his body for costume. He laughed and pushed it aside, enough to see. Together they set out props and made a scene with books and chairs and small decorations.

"Ok, ok. No, ok... are we ready? Follow my lead!" The Rainbow-Shell Turtle pointed to The Chameleon, and then to herself.

Schatzie the dog moved forward into the staged scene, and she began dramatically. "How could we ever be together, you and I! You are the finest kitty cat of beauty, and I'm a ragged little doggie. What would people say! The neighbors! We can't possibly."

The Chameleon shuffled anxiously, and looked blankly, and wondered what to do next. He could only think of how he could not think of anything to say.

"(I said...) We can't possibly!" She nudged him. "(Just say... a line!)"

Mouschi the cat dropped to the floor, and cried out. "The course of true love never did run smooth!"

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle giggled, and recognized the line from her books.

Schatzie the dog ran over to him. "What ever can we do!?"

The Chameleon looked desperately around the room for inspiration and he saw a drawing of the moon that The Rainbow-Shell Turtle had made.

Mouschi the cat jumped up from the floor. "Let's escape! We can fly to the moon. Up there!"

Schatzie the dog looked confused. "(Um, what...!)" Yes! Of course! That's the only solution there could possibly be to this problem we have. Let's go now!"

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle swept everything around them out of the way and made a large empty space for the moon.

Mouschi the cat reached up with both arms and spread them across the vast emptiness. "Now we're on the moon."

Schatzie the dog adjusted the outfits. "Here, put your helmet on. You can't breathe."

Mouschi the cat gave a look of despair. "Thanks. I really like being with you. But it's kind of sad and lonely here, without all the others. And all this cheese..."

Schatzie the dog coughed and coughed. "I'm allergic to cheese."

The Chameleon started to laugh uncontrollably and The Rainbow-Shell Turtle smirked.

Mouschi the cat made a motion of determination to leave the moon. "Let's go home!"

Schatzie the dog got close for a hug. "Let's tell everyone about our Love!"

Mouschi the cat hugged back. "No matter what they say or think..."

Schatzie the dog stood tall and proud. "In spite of everything, I still believe we are really good at heart!"

Mouschi the cat kneeled, and looked up to her with teary eyes. "You are a dream, and I am a dreamer! At least we have each other."

Schatzie the dog pointed out into the distance. "It just goes to show when you think positive thoughts and you concentrate on the good, you can get through anything."

Mouschi the cat looked out too. "You said it!"

"And... end scene! Fin!" The Rainbow-Shell Turtle made a slash gesture.

The two laughed together and they exhaled. The round room of the house in the trees was disjointed and messy, and props and costumes were thrown everywhere. Outside, the rain trickled still.

"That was fun! You *really* shined! Really! Some of the lines I took from other plays..." The Rainbow-Shell Turtle rested on a soft pillow.

"I was kind of nervous..." The Chameleon laughed and hugged her. "But you're really so incredible with words!"

"Well... I'm a dramatist at heart! A tireless tragedian, a true thespian, and a troubadour turtle!" The Rainbow-Shell Turtle giggled and walked out to the balcony and he followed her.

The drip-drop rain intensified to a downpour, and it washed the dirty magnolia leaves and it saturated the dead grasses beneath the tree. It drained and pooled at the bottom of the little hill, and a new rainfall pond formed. Some frogs croaked and leaped into it and out of it, and together they watched the storm grow and rumble from the safety of the house in the trees.

Magnolia Playhouse

The rain went on, and for days it hadn't stopped once. The Chameleon worked diligently anyway, on a new project. He pictured an ambitious addition to the magnolia tree, a space for The Rainbow-Shell Turtle to express herself. It would be a stage and a platform just for her. A theatre and space to discover and perform the wonders of the heart. He crafted and built and the rain went on.

"It's raining Schatzies and Mouschis!" The Rainbow-Shell Turtle called out from the balcony in the house in the trees, and looked down at the drip-drops in the puddles. "Wait, that's *backward!*"

She waved hello to the lilies in the garden on the balcony, and she loosened the rope and jumped into the metal bucket and descended slowly from the tree top and hummed a little hum about the lilies:

Little lovely lilies...

(la la, la la, la la)

Laughing luscious lilies!

(la la, la la, la la)

Lazy looking lilies...

(la la, la la) lilies

She sang, and The Chameleon was mesmerized by it and he nearly forgot about his surprise and he rushed to cover it quickly with a large piece of canvas.

“La-la *lilies!* Oh... what’s that?” She jumped out of the bucket and approached it curiously.

“What’s... what...” He stood in front of the massive covered structure.

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle laughed loudly. “Okay! Well, I’m off to the bookhouse...”

“Okay good luck! I’ll be... here!” The Chameleon blushed in yellow color and smiled.

She tossed her cloth satchel around her shell, and with her pencil and some loose paper she headed down from the house in the trees toward the water.

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle walked diligently, and thought of poetry, and performance and words. She had always been drawn to words, like word games, word play, and unique words; books with words, words without books, words in other languages, poetry in words, and words spoken. Above all, she had a Love of a performance of words, with her voice on stage.

She walked up to the cozy bookhouse, and the tiny silver bell on the door rang, and she walked inside. The room was quiet.

The Owl stood behind the counter, and he looked up and removed his glasses. “*My stars*, little turtle! Oh-hoh! How fortuitous it is to see you. Dry yourself!”

“Hello, hello!” The Rainbow-Shell Turtle rushed over and hugged him tightly. “I’ve missed you dearly, I think.”

The two stood close, and she dried her shell with a cloth, and The Owl fluttered his feathers and gestured around his shop. “It’s a little... *slow...* today! Hoh!”

“Perfect.” She got even closer to him. “I’ve got a *secret* to tell you...”

“Oh-hoh-hoh! Do!” He leaned in. “Say it!”

“I’m... going to write a play!” The Rainbow-Shell Turtle stood back and spun around and released her joy in a dance.

“Fabulous! Absolutely wonderful! Beautiful words on the page, magnificent! The performance, the spectacle, the *emotion!* The uplifting spirit, the soul and body and voice of the heart!” The Owl made it into a performance of his own. “Hoh-hoh-hoh! Little turtle, you are much more than you seem.”

“Thank you... thanks.” She blushed. “I don’t know what it’s going to be about yet.”

“Who knows! Hoh! You, little one, have the fire of a thousand suns in your heart. That’s all you need.” The Owl hooted. “That, and of course, a place to write it. Here!”

The Owl reached underneath the bookhouse counter, and produced a beautiful new notebook, with deep purple cover swirled in black. She gazed at it in awe and it reminded her of the cosmos and the stars and the constellations.

"Ohhh... my!" She took it carefully and held it close. "This is so... so so... gorgeous!"

The Owl smiled, and he placed his glasses on again and returned to his bookshop duties and his papers and numbers.

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle sat, determined and inspired to write, like she often would with poetry. She placed down the empty notebook on the wooden table, and set a pencil next to it, and she took one big and deep breath.

Then, she took another breath. And, she had no idea what to write.

She stared at the blank white page, and her fear and hesitancy sounded even louder in the quiet room. The bookhouse was filled with endless books and words across their pages, on every topic she could imagine. The Rainbow-Shell Turtle was frozen, paralyzed with doubt at the enormity of possibility.

Her anxious mind circled itself, and the more she thought about the words she couldn't find, the further she felt from them. She reached for them, and pushed them away.

The pencil twisted around, and she chewed on it a little bit, and she bounced her leg, and waited for the words to form. She placed the tip onto the page and a small dot formed. She moved the pencil forward, and the lead cracked and snapped, and the tip broke.

"Aghh!!" She threw it to the ground, and then mumbled to herself. "I can't *do* this..."

The Owl looked up over top his glasses, and he didn't say anything.

"I'm going home, now..." Defeated, she waved to The Owl.

"Hoh! Go easy on yourself, little one. The anxious mind is a closed heart." He flapped and waved. "Hoh!"

She left the cozy bookhouse, and the silver bell dinged again, and she walked back with no more words written than when she arrived, and even less confidence.

At the base of the old magnolia tree, The Chameleon toiled and worked, and finally finished the last pieces of the new structure. The Rainbow-Shell Turtle approached slowly, and said nothing.

"Color of my heart!" He ran to her, and noticed already her sadness. "Ohhh... how was it, your day?"

"I *don't* want to talk about it." She was short in words.

The Chameleon understood, and he quickly changed the topic. "Well, I have a surprise for us!"

She forgot about the mysterious construction, and she perked up a bit. "Oohh... what..."

"Yeah! Yeah, yeah, yeah." He could barely contain himself. "Here! Just look."

The Chameleon skipped over to the sign at the base of the magnolia that she had made for him. He pointed to a second sign, newly made, just beneath it:

← Magnolia Playhouse

The sign arrow pointed to the large, canvas covered structure beneath the magnolia tree.

"What's..." The Rainbow-Shell Turtle followed the arrow.

"Right, look here! Look!" The Chameleon removed the large fabric that covered the playhouse. "It's a stage!"

Before them, at the base of the magnolia tree, stood a round wooden stage, raised slightly, with a floor made of long smooth maple planks. It faced out from the tree, and at the back, a large wood arch spanned from the left side up and over to the right. Along the curved arch, a thick white velvet curtain hung, and attached on one side was a rope woven with rainbow-colored cord.

The Chameleon dashed over to the rope, and pulled it and drew open the curtain dramatically. "Your stage!"

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle was completely stunned and silent. She sat back on her legs and absorbed it. She noticed each detail he put into the stage, the color of wood stained, and the smooth round stage edge, and the beautiful arch.

The Chameleon smiled wide, still. "Do you like it? Welcome to *Magnolia Playhouse!*"

"I... can't believe it..." She wasn't looking at the stage anymore and her eyes welled with tears.

"Me either! I can't wait to hear your perfect poetry performed, *right here.*" He hopped down from the stage and they hugged and laughed together.

"It's... it's... everything. It will be the beauty behind my words, the breathtaking backdrop to my poetry. All your beautiful architecture, brings out even more to my words... my words..."

the *words...*" The Rainbow-Shell Turtle trailed off, and gazed off.

"The words..." The Chameleon waited for her to finish.

"THE WORDS! I've got to *write!* An idea, I've found it! Or it's found me! It's come to me!" She dashed away and looked back. "Thank you, my darling. Thank you, thank you. It's perfect!"

She launched herself up to the balcony of the house in the trees, and she hurried into the front room. She pulled out her new notebook and tossed it onto the thick round rug and she grabbed her pencil and she threw herself onto the floor. The Rainbow-Shell Turtle flipped open her notebook, and at the top of the first page she wrote with great excitement the title of her play:

THE POET & THE ARCHITECT

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle spent many more hours in her front room, deep into the night, and she wrote furiously on pages and in notebooks. Her heart raced at each new idea and scene, and she crafted funny sentences, and serious sentences, and characters.

The Chameleon admired her from the next room, and he was inspired by her spirit, and he welled with emotion. He whispered something out loud and she didn't hear it. He smiled, and his colored heart glowed a little brighter, and the rain outside tip-tapped lightly on the leaves above the house in the trees.

Opening Night

The relentless rain of days and days ceased finally, and the clouds surrendered to the warm sun, and The Rainbow-Shell Turtle looked out from the soggy balcony. “Oh! Oh, how *perfect*.”

“But you *love* the rain!” The Chameleon chimed in from inside the house in the trees, and he read some fancy book about flowers.

She joined him inside. “Yes! But... but! Come over here, I have something to show you...”

The Chameleon paused and placed a marker in his book and met her in her front room. “What could it be *this* time...”

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle lifted up a large piece of paper from her desk and held it in front of her.

“It’s... beautiful...” He looked at the blank sheet, and he was not a good liar.

“That’s the *back*! Hold on!” She maneuvered the large piece of paper, and flipped it around. “Ta-da!”

It was a poster, hand-drawn, with two familiar figures displayed prominently. At the top, there was a title in large type:

**THE POET & THE ARCHITECT:
A spectacular play
by The Rainbow-Shell Turtle**

"And I've decided that opening night is... tonight!" She braced herself for a reaction.

"TONIGHT!" The Chameleon gasped, and danced. "We have so much to do! Opening night *and* the grand reveal of *Magnolia Playhouse!* And I barely know my lines!"

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle did a giddy dance and a spin. "Yes! It's okay, okay. Let's get ready! I made small cards, *here*, just like the poster. Can you... deliver them?"

"Yes! Right away, *Cap'n!*" The Chameleon left and delivered the cards to all their friends around the heart-shaped lake.

On the Magnolia Playhouse stage, she prepared the furniture and the sets for the show. She asked The Beagle to help with food concessions at intermissions, and to help with the curtain.

"Awooo-woo-woo, whatever you *need* lovelie!" The Beagle rushed around the stage, and helped the guests when they arrived.

The Chameleon returned, and backstage he nervously prepared himself for the show. "I've never been on stage before..."

He peeked his head out, and in the audience he saw many familiar faces. The Desert Camel and The Owl and The Lamb and The Pelican and many others were all out there. He felt butterflies inside himself.

"It's easy! Just think only of me, and the scene. *It's us!* Be free and let everything else go quiet. Like the day you went atop my shell..." The Rainbow-Shell Turtle touched him and his heart shined its brilliant colors bright.

He was at ease again, and stood back to admire the stage arrangement, and he fell into her wheat-colored eyes. "I'm proud of what you've made. *Really.*"

Her tail wiggled a little. "Thank you... thank you! That's..."

"And, break a leg out there." The Chameleon joked. "In fact, break all four legs!"

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle snorted. "I'm ready... are you ready?"

They hugged and stood together, and their hearts synchronized again. They each thought of the words, and the scenes, and the motions they would perform.

The Beagle peeked behind the curtain. "Lovelies! Awwwooooo! You look beautiful! It's time, time time!"

The set around them was arranged carefully, with chairs and a table, and a small balcony to the side. A cardboard painted moon hung in the back, and on its reverse side was a sun. Many of the plants from the house in the trees were scattered around the stage for decoration.

Together they took their positions on stage, The Rainbow-Shell Turtle played *The Poet* and stood by the balcony, and The

Chameleon played *The Architect* and faced toward her from the other end. Off to the side, in front of the curtain, The Beagle was ready, and addressed the crowd.

“Awwwoooo! Welcome Lovelies! Today is a *very* specially special day, it is, it is!” The audience cheered, and her ears flopped around, and she bounced about on stage in front of the curtain.

“Welcome, welcome, welcome! Tooooo-awoooo, the opening of this little stage, *The Magnolia Playhouse!*” Everybody clapped and howled and whistled, and The Ox was already sound asleep at the back of the crowd.

“Okay, here we go! Act... *one!*” The Beagle howled over the applause, and she pulled open the curtain excitedly, and the play began.

THE ARCHITECT. What hinders thee? My muse, the sweetest moon.

THE POET. I cry! All my words have left me, wherefore I cannot say! The rhythms drift, I am without, and again, wherefore I cannot say.

THE ARCHITECT. What wherefore can't thou say? Thou therefore did!

THE POET. Any thing! The sweet syllable sounds whence my heart sang, that which my voice gave as freely as breath! I seek and I seek, yet I find them not.

THE ARCHITECT. But there! Thy see! And look no further more.

THE POET. Furthermore, where?

THE ARCHITECT. There, on thy breath is where! That which thou speak giveth light to the sun! And warmth to the flame! A bless'd sound what giveth such wings to the wind, from thy mouth, pure. Who knows thy voice has known a perfect thing.

THE POET. Yet I cannot say.

The Beagle howled, and she closed the curtain quickly.

The Chameleon and The Rainbow-Shell Turtle shuffled around quickly and quietly to rearrange the scenery, and the moon was turned around to show the sun. The audience applauded loudly out front and murmured:

“I can't believe it! What will she do?”

“I don't really understand most of these words...”

“I'm going to get more popcorn.”

The crowd mulled around the stage, and found the concessions and snacks, and The Beagle ran about, and gathered them all together again to be seated.

“Act...” A small squirrel ran past and The Beagle was distracted and watched it. “Awwwooo!... act... *two!*”

There was a polite applause and the curtain opened again.

THE ARCHITECT. Arise fair sun, my muse awaits her words!

THE POET. My head and heart confuse my heart and head. The sun cannot give me what I now seek. And nor the moon her beauty mirrored be, and nor the

perfect flowers frag'rance be, and nor the restless ocean endless be. It is of not I've found myself in these.

THE ARCHITECT. Wait! Thou must hear it, for in thy heart thou have all you seek! Listen and look there. I beg of thee!

THE POET. I cry, for me.

THE ARCHITECT. And I, for thee.

The audience gasped and cried too, and the curtain closed. Nobody moved and they spoke quietly and wondered what would happen next. The Chameleon and The Rainbow-Shell Turtle giggled backstage and prepared for the next act, and flipped the cardboard sun back to the moon.

"Awooooo-wooo-wooo! Okay lovelies! The finale! Act.... *three!*" The Beagle howled loudest of all and opened the curtain, and the audience was captivated.

THE POET. What song doth I feel in my chest again! Fruits of this tree cannot compare thy sweetness in me. A fire, a storm, a Love rages within.

THE ARCHITECT. Tell me! Give to me thy voice.

THE POET. Consider the lilies of the field, how bless'd they grow to the sun, reach him thus, his light liberates life! Consider the stars of the sky, how bless'd to glow beside the moon, our luscious lady of the night. Consider the oceans and beyond, how bless'd to flow free with naught to stop the deep. Look upon each, thy must! For I am overcome with words again! I must say.

THE ARCHITECT. Thy words are thine own! My heart soars and my hands tremble. But listen, for thou with thy words, or without, thou are my muse, and my light still.

THE POET. And thou, mine! I see that what thou built, it is of grandeur and spectacle. I see that what thou built, it is everything to the dampened skies and to the quiet moon, a subtle moon she is. I see that what thou built, it is Love, of a perfect heart shape.

THE ARCHITECT. And it is for thou, my heart is shaped.

The curtain swished closed, and the crowd clapped and cheered wildly, and even The Desert Camel cried from the back row. Everybody stood, and applauded louder, and The Chameleon came out in front of the curtain, to a great noise.

The Pelican squawked above everything, and cheered loudly for him. "LIHTTLE RHAINBOW LIHZARD! YOU DHID IT!"

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle appeared too, and the crowd went wild in a ruckus and tossed stemmed roses onto the stage and handfuls of petals.

The Jaybird fluttered around and called out. "Lala! You shine so lala-lovely up there! I've *cried* and cried!"

Together they bowed in gratitude to the everyone, and they waved out to the crowd and smiled and laughed. They tucked back behind the curtain, alone, and the applause slowly faded.

"You did it. You were amazing!" The Chameleon encouraged her, and he knew how special she was. "I could barely

remember my lines... but *you!* You were spectacular. I can't believe it!"

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle blushed, and they hugged. "Thank you, thank you, *thank you!* For this stage, and all the help. It's all I've dreamed of..."

"Wait here!" He ran behind the round stage and produced a wrapped bundle of flowers and brought it back. "For you. The color of my heart! For this opening night, and for..."

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle jumped in excitement and danced in a circle. She took the bouquet and she smelled it and twirled with it. The bundle of blooms burst with a dozen different flowers, each The Chameleon picked himself from all around the heart-shaped lake.

They left the stage together, and in twilight, near the Magnolia Playhouse, some friends from the audience stayed. The Lamb gathered together some sticks and hay, and built a small bonfire. Together, everybody sat and talked and laughed.

The Jaybird perched on top a hump of The Desert Camel and chatted with him. The Owl stood straight and tall by the warmth of the fire and talked with The Ox and she fell asleep between his sentences. The Pelican laughed loudly and tried to count all forty-nine of The Yellow Ducklings, and The Lamb spoke in riddles with The White Duck and they learned much from one another. The Bat hung from a branch nearby, and The Beagle looked up curiously and listened. The Panda stayed too, and laughed together with The Chameleon and The Rainbow-Shell Turtle about their adventures of the Good Pirates.

The light from bonfire dwindled slowly, and one-by-one the friends said good-bye and returned home to sleep. Up in the house in the trees, The Rainbow-Shell Turtle stirred in her sleep, and the ocean called out to her, and she laughed and watched the patterns swirl in the sea foam.

Starlight

The winter skies closed, and a quiet storm brewed outside of the house in the trees. Within the clouds of the moonless dark, the dense air and the static gathered, excited, and charged up in secret.

The Chameleon and The Rainbow-Shell Turtle kept close, and it was pitch black too underneath the blanket they shared. They whispered and giggled and told silly jokes, and made up stories and recited entire books from memory. They remembered the night before, their first performance at the playhouse.

“Let’s go for a walk! Can we?” The Rainbow-Shell Turtle pleaded with him, and she felt magnetized suddenly toward the sea. “Down to the ocean edge?”

Together, in the dark, they strolled along the heart-shaped lake and south down to the sea. Above, in a cloud, hidden, particles continued to buzz and jolt and grow and dance.

“I can’t seem to stop thinking of... the water, *the ocean*. I’ve been dreaming of it.” The Rainbow-Shell Turtle admitted. “Every night!”

The Chameleon noticed her shiver, and he walked closer beside her and they approached the empty nighttime beach.

"I wonder what it means? Maybe we should go ask The Bat, at the lighthouse."

"No... no, I don't think so." The sand crunched beneath her and they arrived at the edge of the water, and she stepped forward slightly, into the cold black sea.

The static above built to a climax in the clouds and released finally with force. A sizzle of thunder crackled and broke the silence, and a hot bolt of lightning lit up the sky and struck somewhere nearby, behind them.

The Chameleon jumped in surprise, and somehow The Rainbow-Shell Turtle expected it. The clouds drifted and dissipated quickly, after only one strike, and a stark black moonless sky showed itself. She looked forward out to the sea, and cleared her voice and she spoke in rhythmic flow, her sonnet:

*Of only starlight, soul has eyes to see
I disappear, I sing each night I sleep
Thy wants, thy needs, this ocean breathes for me,
The waves crash waves, my sinking dreams of deep;
Of only moonlight, heart does stop for naught
Her shape, her changes, round and round and round'
I cry and Love and sing, for not too fraught,
My Queen, thy glow becomes thy perfect crown;
Of only sunlight, body bring thy time
To drink the fire without the burning lips,*

I break without this endless reach of mine

Await the moon thy covered in eclipse;

This form not real, I know not what I am,

I've gone, become the sea, all that I can.

The Chameleon listened, and he cried softly with her words and he didn't understand them all, yet he knew something changed.

The words lingered in the dense cold air. They both laughed a little, and felt some lightness again.

"How many others are out there? Looking up to the stars like this, right now?" He wondered, sincerely, and the ocean crashed down into white foam ahead.

"A few! A few, *at least*." The tide beneath her rushed in, and it seemed to pass straight through her legs.

The Chameleon stepped forward and joined her at the edge of the water. He held her close and she nuzzled in return, and they watched out and up.

Far above, visible without the cloud cover, dozens of tiny streaks formed and died in the blackness, and some stars stretched into strands in the sky. Over and over it repeated, and they watched in wonder at it. They tried to count the unpredictable streaks and wish upon each and every one. Both of them, separately, felt a soft sadness and wondered what it meant.

"I've... well, just before..." The Chameleon stopped and gathered his words. "I've felt as if you're... slipping away from me. As if... a dream nears its end."

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle looked distant to him, and she stayed quiet and watched the star streaks and listened to the lull of the ocean rhythms.

The Chameleon continued. "I think... together, we can be anything. *Anything!* It's just... well, it's up to us. As long as we look out for each other. Right?"

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle felt her heavy heart, and the weight of the dense ocean waves pulled on it, and her physical form wavered, and she smiled still. "Anything..."

She kept quiet. Her attention was focused only on the water and the star streaks. She sank a little more into the soft beach sand and let herself be still.

The Chameleon stirred, restless. "Should we? Go home, I mean."

She wanted to stay, she wanted to live there at the edge of the ocean, between not quite real and not yet gone. She couldn't move herself, and The Chameleon reached to her gently and she broke free.

"Okay... yeah, yeah. Let's go." She relented, and they walked back toward the house in the trees.

Beneath the sky of wishes, they were quiet. The trees kept still, and the owls flew above without a sound, and the wind kept to a whisper, and the star streaks continued in silence.

Close to the house in the trees, a scent of charred and burnt wood drifted near them, and without hesitation they sprinted up the path through the thicket and stopped together in shock at the scene in front of them.

The magnolia glowed with faint red embers and the branches were splintered and scattered around on the hill below and burnt brown leaves blanketed the grass, and The Chameleon fell to the ground. "No..... no... no. What *happened...*"

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle moved closer to touch some of the bark of the trunk, and felt it splintered in a jagged pattern. "I think... it was a lightning strike..."

They went up together, into the house in the trees, and stood together in the doorway, among the wreckage of broken branches and loose crumbled leaves. Dirt and dust and wood pieces were thrown everywhere around the house. The books and chairs and pillows were dirty and scattered and bent, and yet still in tact.

The Chameleon ran over to the table in the round room first and searched frantically for the paper boat display, and beneath the table, on its side, he found the paper boat unharmed. "Oh... thank the starry skies..."

They walked along the balcony and cleaned some of the dirt and set the plants upright. Many of the branches surrounding the house were maintained, and were healthy and lush still.

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle looked up and took in a sharp breath. "Look...look, *look!* Up!"

Above them, where once there was a ceiling and a canopy of branches, instead the entire night sky was visible through the open top of the magnolia. They gazed in awe.

“It’s kind of... like your old rooftop patio now! The stars, they are so magnificent, still from here!” The Rainbow-Shell Turtle watched them form and streak and die, each with a short and sweet life.

“It’s beautiful, you’re right! We’ll need something for the occasional rain...” The Chameleon thought first of the practical problems.

“Yes!” She laughed a little and didn’t look away from the sky. “I *really* like this, even better! I think so...”

The room glowed and the starlight illuminated each of them in new colors and shadows. They cleaned the mess in the round room, and they rested again. Together they found comfort under the blanket, with bodies and warmth they stayed closed, two hearts of the cosmos.

The Chameleon listened, and then he heard, and he felt her heartbeat thump strongly and he thought of nothing else, only her heart, until he couldn’t keep his eyes open any longer.

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle dreamt of an endless ocean, waves churned and mixed, and she spoke and she laughed in her sleep. Her body faded a little more, and she was pulled away again, in her dream and in his, toward the ocean harbor.

Sunrise (Reverie)

At the harbor, The Rainbow-Shell Turtle stood alone, in ghostly form, on a creaky wooden dock, and she looked west across the water. It was early, and she shuddered in her shell without the sun to warm her. The ocean bay was calm and quiet, and she felt awake. She waited for the dawn.

In the distance, she could see a lush, green island of land, a distant utopia. “There... *that’s* where...”

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle was drawn there, or pushed there, or pulled without choice. She needed to leave, and she had to let go. She was ready to move forward.

The daylight began to show beyond her, stretched with long rays onto the mountains across the water. She waited there at the dock, and the sun cast itself through her a little, onto the old decayed wooden planks.

A gust of wind drew over the water, through her, and it rushed toward the heart-shaped lake and up into the house in the trees. The smooth shadowed leaves of the old magnolia shifted, and billowed the fabric window coverings playfully in the back room. The Chameleon awoke with a shudder, and he

knew he was alone in the tree. He moved slowly from his room onto to the balcony and looked out.

The leaves on the wind skated along the grass, and switched direction all at once, and he left the tree and followed them. He moved automatically, and he found himself down at the ocean harbor, and the wind dropped suddenly.

The water was quiet ahead of him and the little waves splashed gently up to the edge of the harbor. A white gull drifted past on the surface of the water, in search of food in the light morning fog.

The Chameleon scanned along the docks. At the far side of the harbor, at the end of a pier, he saw The Rainbow-Shell Turtle waited. He walked along, and out toward her.

The dock swayed beneath them, and a raft was tied to one side at the end. The Chameleon noticed, and he hesitated, and his color adjusted suddenly to match the wooden planks below.

"I have to go now." She turned, but she didn't look at him directly, her attention drawn instead toward the low and hungry growl of the water.

Her body flickered in form, and The Chameleon looked at her, confused. "Is it... another adventure! I should have brought a snack..."

"No. It's time for you to wake." Her sweet voice reverberated in the fog.

In the silence, the dock beneath them creaked and squeaked a little, and the sea foam swirled and collected along its edges and the little bubbles in the foam popped.

"I... I d-don't..." The Chameleon stuttered, and The Rainbow-Shell Turtle turned toward the ocean.

The raft was tied loosely to the dock, and she stepped down onto it and set her cloth satchel on its planks. She looked up to him on the dock once again, and said nothing.

"I believe... I'm going to miss you." The Chameleon touched his heart, and showed the rainbow color on his chest.

The Rainbow-Shell Turtle smiled softly, and untied the rope from the dock post. She pushed herself away. The tides grabbed her raft without hesitation and dragged her out. She held onto the ropes between the planks, and floated without control on the current and out into the unknown waters.

Behind her, the golden-red sun rose past the hills of the flower valley. The light traced the land with a fiery outline, and the cold blue ocean churned rhythmically between them. The Chameleon and The Rainbow-Shell Turtle watched one another drift away, smaller and smaller. She turned away, and faced the sunrise.

"Everything... is going to be okay." He said it softly out to her, or to himself, or to the sun and to the ocean.

The Chameleon moved forward and sat on the edge of the dock and it swayed gently and lulled him awake. The amber light turned to morning and the raft disappeared and she disappeared beyond the horizon, and he watched, and he too disappeared.

Timeless

The ocean crashed and folded in on itself and the sharp white wave crests grew taller and stronger, and the clear surface reflected the midnight crescent moon. A delicate paper boat danced dangerously on the water, and it was ripped under by the churn of the storm waves, and it swirled and spun beneath and it fought to raise above again. The current pulled it deeper into the cold darkness.

The Chameleon stirred, and he awoke in a daze, on the cold and damp grass near the magnolia tree. It was well before the sun would show, and a misty melancholy blanketed everything around the tree.

He was confused, and he looked up at the tree, undamaged, and at the unfinished house in the branches, and at the tools and the boards sprawled across the grass. His mind was groggy, and foggy and hazy.

His eyes moved slowly around the construction, the emptiness and the potential, and the beautiful strong branches and the waxy leaves of the tree.

At the base of the tree next to the trunk, the paper boat waited, untouched, and The Chameleon approached it. He picked it up and flipped it over and admired the brilliant rainbow hull.

A wispy white pollen bloom drifted past and caught the breeze upward and jumped about until it settled on a branch. The Chameleon felt lost, unsettled, and tired. He set the paper boat down.

Near the tree, he found some kindling, and he put together a small bonfire, and he sat near it.

He didn't leave the magnolia, and sunset arrived and he sat still and watched quietly and smiled. His heart twisted and pulled inside of him, and his skin turned slate-colored and stayed.

Twilight came, and The Chameleon waited for the fire to dwindle into embers. He stood to leave, toward his rooftop patio. In a short distance, he heard an echoed sound and looked back again to the tree.

kon kon, kon kon

He stopped, and turned, and returned. At the base of the magnolia, a fox sat politely.

"Hello..." The Chameleon approached the tree, and noticed right away around the neck of The Fox was a familiar braided bracelet. "Who are *you*? And where'd you get that..."

"The Fox greets in return. The turtle is where?"

"I'm... not exactly sure." The Chameleon admitted his confusion.

"The Fox understands."

The Chameleon looked again at the braided bracelet around the neck of The Fox, and he knew what to do. "Can you wait here for just a moment?"

"The Fox is here."

He hurried up into the magnolia and found his cloth satchel. From it, he pulled out his braided bracelet and held it up. The weaved cords entangled still, and he felt the soft fibers once more, then quickly returned down the tree trunk.

"Here. I think this... this is for you." The Chameleon placed the braided bracelet gently over the head of The Fox.

It rested next to the other bracelet, and they wrapped one another each and twirled and entangled. He watched intently, and the two shined brightly in rainbow color, and together turned into one magnificent and thick woven scarf, wrapped around the neck of The Fox.

kon kon, kon kon

kon kon, kon kon

kon kon, kon kon

The Fox called out in a strong low song, and repeated the call eighteen times, and all around the magnolia tree, young kits appeared. Smaller in size, each glowed with the same fur of pure white like The Fox.

Together they stood at the base of the magnolia, and the eighteen kits arranged themselves around the tree and they mimicked The Fox with a symphony of low chirps and growls.

kon kon, kon kon

The chorus continued, and he watched and his heart filled with reverence and colored light. One after another, the kits hopped along away from the magnolia tree and started down the path.

The Fox nudged the paper boat that sat at the base of the tree, and it rocked back and forth. The Chameleon picked it up and he held it close. Together with The Fox, he followed the eighteen kits down along the heart-shaped lake.

The chirps of the kits pierced the hushed evening, and he approached the ocean harbor. He followed them to the last dock, at the far side of the harbor. It looked familiar to him and yet it seemed different. It swayed and drifted up and down on the gentle waves like a dream. Each kit in a line jumped from the end of the dock and hopped along on top of the water. The next followed the next. They all moved in a line in the direction of a small island far in the distance.

The Chameleon walked out onto the dock and stopped at the end and watched the kits disappear. The Fox sat quietly next to him, and looked up at the paper boat that he held.

He dropped down to the surface of the dock and reached over the edge and toward the water. His hands were steady with it, and without hesitation he released the paper boat onto the surface of the sea.

On the waves, the paper boat surfed up and down, and it didn't sink under. It was steady, and it flowed out into the ocean. The Fox watched next to him, and The Chameleon stood, and his heart filled again with more than he could contain, and he watched the paper boat and it grew smaller and it faded from view. The colors of his heart, his chest, shined brightly again, more than ever before.

He was overcome with it suddenly. His body shivered, and The Fox watched, and called out to him in chirps, and the rainbow color from his chest spread outward across his arms and legs and back and tail. The Chameleon opened himself to it, and he transformed into the perfect and vibrant rainbow hue pattern. Just above, a ribbon of light formed and danced out from around him, and lifted up into the black night and illuminated everything around.

The ribbon waved and flowed and spun, and it grew in size and brightness until it finally erupted into a persistent rainbow mist against the constellation sky.

His breath slowed, and his body calmed. All about his cracked skin the brilliant rainbow hue remained still, there forever, and he became all of his Love inside and out, and he was free.

The Chameleon watched the brilliance in the sky linger, and his heart sang out. Somewhere, far across the water, on a lush utopia island, or next to a quiet creek, The Rainbow-Shell Turtle watched the color dance in the darkened night, too, and she felt the song. The stars trembled, and a luminous streak of cosmos spread across the sky with great certainty, and their tiny hearts entangled again, and they knew everything would be okay.

Gratitudes

To all the Love that surrounds me, you have my eternal gratitude, my Love, and this book in return:

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Afterword: On Love and Writing

"What's the scariest thing you've ever done?" The Canadian astronaut Chris Hadfield posed this question during his 2019 TED talk– no doubt floating in space is *terrifying*. For the rest of us, it's something more grounded. Public speaking. Skydiving. A career change. Childbirth. For me, it was writing this book.

I can hear you from here, *what's so scary about a children's book?* you ask– *and it's about Love!*? you exclaim!

It is! In subtext, or perhaps blatantly, it's an admittance and exploration of my own deep-rooted apprehension with the emotion of Love. I've had what I've come to discover this season as *an ignorance of the heart*, and a realization that it has defined me unknowingly for most of my adult life.

So, *you can imagine*, it's not all sunshine and rainbows when I set out to write a silly children's book, and instead each chapter led to some unexpected earthquake of self-realization, some loud truth of personal flaw, and the repressed awareness of the *unwillingness* of my heart to give Love.

This summer, I woke up one morning upside-down in my bed, flipped head-to-toe, reversed, with no small dose of irony. That day, I felt myself bifurcated, split in half or doubled, with faulty duplication. I was face-to-face with my very own stranger– two emotional beings, *two selves*, present in the same body at the same time, opposed, *and completely unsettled*. A few weeks later, most of the first draft of this book was written.

Somehow, after millennia, there are yet new ways to effuse Love. But it's not trivial, *of course we know*, to write about it! It's an authentic offering of our most sacred emotions, packed tightly and stuffed into these little word packets. Deep fears and lofty desires and true Loves, the things we keep close, the bits that actually hold us together– the intangibles of life; it's hard to talk about. Or for me *it was*. So, I wrote about it, and now I can.

It's compulsion I think, to write and to tell stories when we find ourselves within a state of change. *The words are for you* equally as they are for us, the "writer." It's something about the turbulence that draws us, the allure of the drama, or the call-to-action, or the siren song just off in the distance, with the promise of *understanding*.

We set out in some direction, we follow the ethereal music, and we become spelunkers and we delve into the cavernous depths of our little hearts, and we look for some meaning– something true and beautiful among the bleak. We fumble around in the darkness of the cave, and eventually we find a broken dying piece-of-junk flashlight and we flicker it on, and it barely illuminates the shadows in the quietest corners of our private souls. *Surprise! Nothing's there, anyway.* We persist, and we hold the flashlight in our mouth, and we dig frantically with our hands in the cave dirt like confused archeologists until our fingers ache, and we scrape and search desperately like *where is it!?*, although we're not sure what it is, anyway– *you'll know it when you see it* we heard once.

Our confusion, our despair, and our compulsion work as opposing forces and comrades, to restrain us and to motivate us to continue. We keep on and dig, still without a shovel, and the useless flashlight died hours ago, and we become animalistic and incessant and ravenous, like nothing else matters. *Like your life depends on it...* and sometimes it feels like it just might. It's why we're down here.

But lo! Behold! We discover something, a soft and round and beautiful essence. *There it is!* The warmth in a radiant golden sphere of perfect clarity. Our buried treasure. It shines with a twilight moonlight! We've unearthed it, and we raise it up to our cheek and touch it gently. It's the softest silk cloth, or it's the coldest and clearest mountain stream water, *and you are parched.* It's a newborn baby cry, and it's the longest hug, and it's the sweetest chocolate and the juiciest fruit, and it's our last first kiss. *We've found it!*, the Sweet stuff. Something so deeply human, so mutual and fundamentally true about our being that we're drawn to do anything to *show it to you, too.*

So, we clean it off and wrap it up, the Sweet thing, and we strap it to our back with a few old bungee cords we brought with, and we toil and clomp our way back up and out of the depths. And we're disoriented, like *this isn't the way I got down here...* but we emerge back into the fresh open air, and we discard the broken flashlight *because who needs that thing.* We unwrap our treasure, and we covet it and care for it and we stare at it and hold it with our dry cracked fingers. *Precious.* And we remember the journey, and maybe we conflate the journey with the treasure, the Sweet, and suddenly we can picture it all again, and we search manically for a napkin to draw some "map" onto.

This crudely drawn journey of the journey of the journey is to show *to you*, to desperately give you, too, a chance to find your own Sweet nectar, your own Elixir. But, a map to *my own* invisible place is kind of beautiful in its uselessness to you.

Instead, we roll up our pants, and wade through the mud and the muck of our own confused consciousness and we stumble around in the swamp just to find some clarity, some words we can use to *tell it to you straight.* The grey swamp darkness takes us, and we nearly drown in there, but never really, not quite. We cannot swim, and the thickness suffocates, but the surface calls us back, the Sweet reminds us, and we reach and grasp and gasp for just a breath. We drip with the muck, and our eyes sting and we cry for days, and not just from the muck. *But we're out!*, hopefully sane enough to wash our boots off and sit down around the camp fire and tell the tale beneath a starry sky. *What was it like in the cave?* Story time, gather 'round. *You'll never believe what I found.*

With melty marshmallows on sticks, we tell and retell our story, and we embellish it and dramatize it with alligators and quicksand and heartbreak and triumph. Our fellow campers are entranced by it, *captivated*, so we tell it again the next night, with humor, and more alligators, and deeper quicksand. Before we know it, our story has replaced our reality, and we step back and wonder which one matters more anyway.

It's a storied truth, and through that we risk being *seen, by you.* We offer these truths about ourselves, these little Sweets, obscured in myth and fiction, and we say them reluctantly or proudly sometimes, and maybe everybody around us cringes.

Except, we really really mean it, so earnestly, with such unrelenting passion, so maybe, *you listen a little closer, instead.*

Now you read the words, and now you become the spelunker, too. Maybe these words create the tiniest flicker of empathy *in you*, and in us too– together. Something that didn't exist before, some bright sharp pin-point feeling of understanding, like *I* feel what *you* feel, so *we* feel. Just through words.

Oh the audacity!– to think that these little words on this page could alone change *your perspective*. But, with things complicated and raw and improbable, like Love, it drives us crazy, and we think maybe... *maybe!*... somebody else on this earth has experienced that exact same thing.

And if I can just write that thing down... that Sweetness, maybe we can all understand it, together.

All this, in a children's book!? Just think about it, the books in your life that you remember most, those that might define you or that you can recite from memory. Those are probably childhood stories. *And we know*, it's not just for children, it's a doorway and a beacon of truth and a lighthouse in the fog. It's a reminder of where we came from. It's our playful hearts let loose. When we let our imaginations run free, *we are free.*

That's the reason we're here. I took that flashlight and pointed it at the darkest corners, and I became that desperate archeologist, and I trudged around in the swamp, and I wrote down my Sweetness, *for me, and for you.* To be free, to let go.

Then, we know Love, *and we open ourselves to it*, and we feel it together.

All I've discovered, all the unearthed Sweetness, has led me here– to reiterate that *perhaps* the most consequential thing we can do as emotional beings of this infinite cosmos is to Love another. It's not profound, and still it's in everything we do– to give Love with honesty, with fervor, with everything we have of ourselves. *And it's worth it.*

Once we know Love, once we let go of control, we can ask the question... what self remains? *Scary! Existential!* But it's the most courageous, and invaluable, thing any of us can seek– *the truth of the self.* That truth, *my truth of self* that I've hid from myself, is simply this Love.

So, "What's the scariest thing you've ever done?" And much more importantly, "Why did you do it?"

Was it worth it? I bet it was.

Seek your Sweetness, with intention, and show it to the world. Then, we can all find our way, together.

Foster Douglas
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About *Foster Douglas*

Foster Douglas is a first-time writer. He hasn't even written his bio yet. Hopefully somebody else will do it for him.

House in the Trees

Children's literature · Fiction